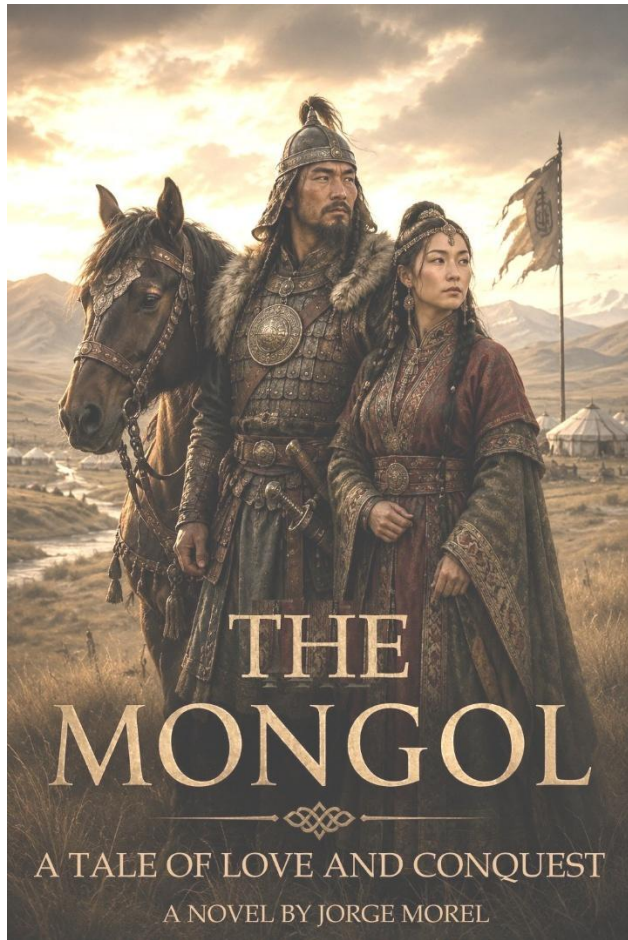




THE MONGOL

A TALE OF LOVE AND CONQUEST

A novel by Jorge Morel

1st. Revision.

This book is a work of fiction. Some of the places and events described are based in real historical events.

The people and their actions, as mentioned in this book, are the result of the author's imagination. Any similarity to real people, facts, or objects is a simple coincidence.

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EPILOGUE

The workmen expected to find stone.

For months they had been restoring the ancient monastery that clung to the hillside of Taormina, in Italy, above the Mediterranean sea. The building had endured wars, earthquakes, and centuries of neglect. Now, hidden beneath layers of plaster and dust, its past was slowly emerging once more.

On a warm spring morning, a laborer's pick struck wood. The sound was so unusual that he stopped immediately. Within an hour, a small crowd had gathered around the shallow excavation. Buried beneath the floor of what had once been a storeroom lay a wooden chest, blackened with age but remarkably intact.

The lock had long since rusted away.

Inside they found several objects reduced almost to dust, a tarnished silver cross, and three bundles of parchment wrapped in oilcloth.

The documents were taken to the Vatican and delivered to scholars for examination. Handwriting styles, spelling, language, and historical references were compared with known documents from the same era. Scientific techniques such as radiocarbon dating, ultraviolet light examination, and multispectral imaging helped to detect later alterations, hidden writing, or modern forgeries.

After a few weeks, the parchments were declared to be genuine. The ink, the handwriting, and the materials all pointed to the thirteenth century. Most remarkable of all was a faded inscription found on one of the wrappings:

Father Nicolas.

The name was known to historians. Records spoke of a priest who had traveled far beyond Christendom, into lands reached by few Europeans of his age. Yet no

account mentioned the extraordinary treasure hidden beneath the monastery floor.

The parchments contained a story. Not the chronicle of a king, a pope, or a conqueror.

The story of a Mongol.

Page after page described the endless steppe, the thunder of hooves, the rise of great armies, distant deserts, forgotten cities, and a journey that carried one man farther than he had ever imagined possible.

Again and again a single name appeared.

Temür.

And beside his story appeared a women's name, written with unusual tenderness.

Layla.

No historian had heard of him. No monument bore his likeness. No chronicle celebrated his deeds.

Yet across seven centuries his voice had endured, preserved by the hand of a friend who had believed his story deserved to survive.

Far away, beyond mountains, deserts, and the passage of time, the grasslands of Mongolia still stretched beneath the Eternal Blue Sky.

And at last, after centuries of silence, Temür spoke again.

CHAPTER 1

TEMÜR'S STORY

The steppe had no borders.

It unfurled in every direction, an endless ocean of grass. The wind moved across it like a living breath, bending the tall yellow blades into long, whispering waves. There were no walls, no roads, no villages—only the open land and the wandering herds. Above all stretched the Eternal Blue Sky, the great heaven of the steppe.

The year was 1216. A *mor'ton* (rider) crossing alone that open sea of grass in Mongolia was rarely doing so without a purpose. Such a rider might bear a message for his khan, or ride ahead as a scout, or be trying to reach a known destiny. But children did not wander alone in such a place.

Temür rode alone.

He was eleven years old, and he had no destination, only the purpose of surviving.

Cast out from his tribe, he rode now through lands he did not know. He wasn't aware of his chances. Perhaps he would find a nomad tribe willing to take him in. Perhaps the steppe would claim his life first.

Only a week before, he had known a different life.

Temür had lived since birth in a *khot'ail*¹, a group of *gers* that formed the tribal community.

The *ger* was the traditional habitation of the Mongols. It was a tent made of a wooden frame, covered with sheep's wool. It was strengthened with ropes made from horsehair that held everything tight against the

¹ Khot'ail. A group of tents belonging to the same clan or tribe.

strong steppe winds and kept it warm in winter and cool in summer.

Temür's father, Al-Lamir, was the khan of the clan², so, as young child, he lived a semi-privileged life.

He had a father who stood like a pillar among men, a mother whose voice carried warmth, three sisters, and a brother—Altan—two years his elder, strong and unyielding.

Temür had grown in his brother's shadow, guided by his strength, protected by his presence—the steadier hand, the firmer voice, the one their father trusted when judgment was required.

Temür's was a small tribe—no more than a dozen families, scarcely two hundred souls—yet bound together by the laws of the steppe. Among them, every man between twelve and sixty was a *dainchin*, a warrior for life.

When Temür was born, the *ekh barigch* (mid wife) was surprised to see that he had a clot of blood clenched in his fist; a sign the elders spoke of in hushed voices—a mark of destiny. For among the old people, it was said:

“A child who grasps blood at birth, will one day take hold of the fate of men, and never release it without a price.”

Few suspected that the prophesy would turn true in the end.

His father named him Temür, which means ‘iron’ in Mongol language.

² The terms “clan” and ‘tribe’ have different meaning. a “clan” refers to a family, an ancestral kin group, normally formed by a few dozens of people. A ‘tribe’ defines a large group of members with common politics or ethnicity.

At the age of three, following the tribal custom, he was given a pony, which he named Salkhi (wind), and from that day forward he rode it as though he had never walked.

But it was not his riding that set him apart.

At six, he was given a bow. Smaller than a normal bow, but not less deadly.

And with it, something in him awakened.

He learned not as a child learns, but as if remembering something already learnt but forgotten. Before long, he could perform the three feats that seasoned warriors struggled to master:

The Wolf's Rise, standing high in the saddle to shoot his arrow.

The Falcon's Turn, twisting fully at full gallop to strike those who pursued him.

And the *Shadow's Descent*, hiding behind his horse's flank to fire from beneath its neck.

Temür moved with a calm and a certainty that did not belong to his years. And those who watched him began to wonder—not whether he would become great, but what kind of man such a boy would become.

But precisely because he was so well known, his life was often disturbed by those who looked at him with envy.

There was a boy from a neighboring clan, older than Altan by three years, broad-shouldered and already carrying himself like a young warrior. His name was spoken with irritation among the younger boys and with indulgence among the elders, for he was the son of a respected man.

He came often to their khot' ail, and when he came, trouble followed.

He would take what he wanted—meat, tools, small trophies of pride—and laugh when challenged. Among boys, strength was their own law, and he was obeyed without question.

Altan did not fear him.

Temür did.

Eventually, something had to crack, and it was by the river that it happened.

The water ran cold and clear over smooth stones, and the two brothers had worked together since morning, patient and silent, until at last they caught a fish large enough to feed their family. It thrashed in Altan's hands, silver and strong, a rare prize wrested from the current.

They were laughing when the other boy appeared.

He said nothing at first. He only looked.

Then he stepped forward.

Altan moved to block him. They fought, but the fight was brief.

The older boy struck first—hard, fast, without hesitation. Altan staggered but did not fall. He answered with his own blow, but the difference in strength was too great. A second strike drove him to the ground.

Temür stood frozen, unable to look. He heard the dull sound of fists hitting, and his brother struggling beneath a stronger weight. The fight stopped as suddenly as it had started. For a while, the three boys stood in a silence broken only by the sound of their breath. When he looked again, it was over.

The boy stood above Altan, holding the fish. He gave a short, satisfied laugh and walked away without a word.

Altan remained on the ground for a long moment before pushing himself upright.

He walked to Temür and held him, trying to discard what had happened. But he could not conceal his disappointment, and Temür noticed. In silence, they returned to their khot ail.

Word spread quickly, as it always did among the gers. By the time they stood before their father, the story had already taken shape—sharper, harsher than the truth.

Altan had fought.

Temür had not.

His father, Al-Lamir Khan, listened without expression.

When Altan finished, bruised and bleeding, the judgment came not as anger, but as something colder.

Temür expected to be harshly reprimanded, perhaps even physically, but his father just told him.

“A man does not leave his brother.”

The words fell heavier than any blow.

Around them, others murmured. Some spoke openly.

Coward.

The word passed from mouth to mouth, quiet at first, then louder. Temür was only eleven years old; the words settled over him, impossible to brush off, like dust carried on the wind.

That night, he slept outside, the fire burning low beside him, and the steppe stretched out into darkness without end. He heard the word again.

Coward.

He decided: he would cleanse his name and his family's, or he would die. *Tengri*, the supreme god of the sky, would judge him.

At dawn, he rode out alone.

He knew where to find the boy.

Not by chance—but because he had watched him before. Learned his paths, noticed where he rode, where he hunted, where he believed himself to be alone.

Hidden behind a low rise of the land, Temür lay still, his bow already in his hand. His breathing slowed, his thoughts narrowed until there was nothing left but the moment.

The boy came into view, walking his horse without caution, his attention elsewhere, as though the world held no threat to him.

On the flat steppe, Mongol riders can see from very far away. To be able to see a *bar* (tiger) hiding hundreds of feet away, or a *cherig* (enemy warrior) waiting in ambush, is a matter of survival.

When the boy was about four hundred yards away, Temür revealed himself.

The boy stopped his horse and immediately understood. The small boy was ready to die rather than live with the insults.

He grabbed his bow and set an arrow. Then he measured the distance. It was a very dubious shot. He would shoot at two hundred yards. He would have his kill. He laughed loudly and took off at full gallop.

Temür straightened himself, the bowstring came back to his ear. For an instant, everything became still.

Not fear. Not anger. Only certainty.

When the boy's horse was at three hundred yards, he released. The arrow struck clean in the center of the boy's chest.

The boy's body jerked once, and he fell from the saddle into the grass below.

The horse ran on without him.

Silence returned to the steppe.

Temür lowered the bow. The boy had died, but nothing else had changed. The wind passed over him, as it always had. The sky remained the same.

When he came back to his ger, he told his father. The khan knew the consequences of Temür's action.

"I will protect you," he told Temür. "I take his blood into my own hands."

The small boy's voice came out clearly:

"No, I will answer for what I have done."

They found the boy's body before nightfall. He lay where he had fallen, the arrow still lodged deep within him. His horse had returned without a rider.

That alone was enough to bring men searching across the steppe, and they did not need long to understand what had happened.

And they did not need to ask who had done it.

By dusk, the neighboring clan came.

They rode hard, their anger carried before them like a storm wind. At their head was the boy's father, his face carved from grief and fury, his eyes fixed on the camp of Temür's people.

No one spoke lightly that night. Weapons were near at hand. The air itself seemed to hold its breath.

Both khans sat in front of Temür's family ger.

The men from the tribes gathered in a wide circle, silent, waiting. Some comment that Temür had the right so seek justice but agreed that he had gone too far.

Temür stood before them. No chains bound him. None were needed.

For a long time, Temür's father said nothing. The he rested his gaze on his son—not as a father, but as a judge.

"You killed him," he said at last.

It was not a question.

Temür did not lower his eyes.

“Yes.”

A murmur passed through the gathered people.

The khan’s expression did not change.

“Why?”

Temür’s voice did not tremble.

“He beat my brother. He took what was ours.”

A pause. Temür continued:

“I did what I could not do before.”

“Was it an honorable kill?”

“Yes, father. He was approaching with an arrow already set in his bow.”

The wind moved through the camp, stirring the edges of the felt tents.

The khan closed his eyes briefly, as though listening—not to the voices around him, but like trying to hear the advice of the gods.

His gaze lifted toward the gathered tribe—and beyond them, to where the opposite clan and the other riders waited in the dark, expecting his dictamen of justice.

When he spoke again, his voice carried across the circle, steady and unyielding.

Blood called for blood. And if it was not justice done, war would follow.

The khan looked back at his son.

“You are my son,” the khan said. “And because of that, I cannot kill you.”

A ripple passed through the crowd.

“But you have shed blood that was not yours to claim. You understand that you must leave.”

Temür answered.

“I know there is no place for me in this khot’ail anymore.”

“You will take your horse and what you can carry. From this night forward, you are no longer of this tribe.”

No one moved.

“You will not return. You will not call yourself my son. And no man here will ride beside you.”

Temür stood without showing his feelings.

The world did not break, and the sky did not fall. Only something within him was crashing his heart. Suddenly, his world was not the same, he was now a pariah.

Altan stepped forward. He looked at Temür and held him in a long embrace. His mother gave him a thick wool blanket and turned hiding her tears, without saying anything.

The khans rose. It was the final sign. Judgment had been given.

That night, Temür did not sleep among his people.

Before dawn, he mounted Salkhi. No one came to see him off. No voice called his name. Only the wind moved across the steppe, as it always had, indifferent to the destiny of men.

Temür did not look back.

And so, the son of a khan rode out into the open world. Alone.

CHAPTER 2

THE STEPPE³

His pony Salkhi⁴ ran low and swift over the uneven earth, its hooves beating a steady rhythm. The animal's dark mane streamed in the wind, and a plume of dust followed in their wake as they crossed the rolling plains.

Temür leaned forward, his body one with the motion of the horse, his gaze fixed on the herd ahead.

Three gazelles fled across the grass, light and fleeting as shadows cast by clouds. They moved in long, effortless bounds, scarcely touching the earth.

Temür pressed his heels gently against Salkhi's sides, and the small horse surged forward.

The distance between hunter and prey began to close.

Without breaking stride, Temür reached behind his shoulder and drew an arrow from the leather quiver at his back. In the same motion, he raised his bow—a short, curved weapon of wood and horn, polished smooth by its long use.

Temür rose slightly in the stirrups and the world narrowed to the living target ahead.

He drew the bowstring to his ear.

For a heartbeat, he became still, unmoving, aiming at his prey. Then he released.

The arrow sang through the air and struck the rearmost gazelle behind the shoulder. The animal

³ Steppe: a vast open grassland with very few trees. It stretches across parts of Mongolia, Central Asia, southern Russia, and Ukraine.

⁴ Salkhi: "wind" in Mongol language.

stumbled, turned once upon itself, and fell into the grass. The others vanished into the distance.

Temür slowed his horse and turned back.

When he reached the fallen animal, he dismounted and knelt beside it. He placed his hand upon its neck, not in triumph, but in acknowledgment; a silent honoring of the life that had sustained his people since the first days.

Temür lifted his eyes.

“Eternal Blue Sky,” he murmured, his voice no more than a breath, “I give thanks for the hunt.”

It was a simple Mongol prayer, older than memory, passed from father to son across generations of riders and dust.

An hour later, the sun had fallen behind the distant Khentii Mountains, and the steppe burned with the dim glow of dying light, its grasses turned to bronze below the coming night. The wind flowed over it like a dark tide.

Far across the vastness, a small fire flickered, hardly perceptible within the immensity of the land.

Temür had made his camp. He had staked his pony, laid his saddle against the wind, and kindled a fire of dried dung, over which a strip of fresh meat turned slowly, its scent rising into the night air.

After eating, before lying down, he took a small piece of meat and cast it into the flames. Then, in a low voice, he spoke the words his father had taught him long ago, calling to the spirits of those who had come before him.

*“Blue Sky, hear me.
Spirits of my fathers, ride near.
I give this to the flame.
Guard my sleep,
and keep my soul upon its path.”*

The fire cracked softly. In the dim light of the fire, his small figure seemed almost unreal.

The fire had burned low.

Temür lay on his side, his cloak drawn tight against the cold, watching the last embers breathe their fading light into the darkness. The steppe stretched around him without end; no voices, no laughter, no tribe. Only the wind, and the slow, steady sound of his pony tearing at the grass nearby.

He closed his eyes. Then, quietly, almost ashamed of the words, he whispered a prayer into the night:

"Tengri, supreme god of the sky... I know that my destiny is just and I am in your debt for having allowed me to live until now. My only desire is to redeem myself by doing good. But I am alone... if you hear me...help me... send me a friend in need."

He listened, but there was no answer, only with more silence.

The child let out a slow breath and turned onto his back, staring at the stars until sleep took him.

Hours later, he woke with a jolt.

Something was wrong. The air had changed.

Temür did not move at first. His hand slid slowly toward the knife at his belt.

Then he saw an eye. Watching him from the darkness beyond the embers.

His breath caught in his throat. For a moment, he could not move. The stories came rushing back—spirits of the steppe, hunters in the night, things that watched men as they slept.

The eye did not blink.

Temür swallowed, forcing himself to sit up, though every instinct screamed at him to run.

“Go,” he whispered to the darkness, his voice dry.
“I have nothing for you.”
The eye shifted.
And then—slowly—the creature stepped forward.



It was not a spirit.

It was a dog... or perhaps a wolf that had been forced to leave its pack. Just like it had happened to him.

The animal fur was rough, matted by travel and old wounds. One side of its face was scarred, the eye there gone, sealed into a pale, twisted line. The other eye, sharp and yellow, never left Temür.

The animal stood just beyond the reach of the firelight, ribs faintly visible beneath its coat.

Alone, like him.

Temür let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

“You're no ghost,” he murmured.

He thought about offering him some of the gazelle meat and looked at the fire. But there wasn't any. He always put the meat left into his satchel, wrapped in leaves, to prevent its scent from attracting wolves or other wild animals during the night.

Slowly—very slowly—he reached for his satchel. The animal tensed.

Temür knew that look and put one hand on the handle of his knife. With the other hand, he pulled out a strip of dried meat and held it up for a moment, letting the scent carry.

Then he tossed it; not too close, not too far. A fair distance.

The animal did not move at first. Then, very carefully, he approached. In a fast move, he snatched the meat and retreated just as quickly, never turning its back.

Temür smiled.

“You fight for every bite,” he said. “Good. That means you live.”

The animal chewed the piece then stayed, watching him.

The second piece he threw closer.

This time, the animal did not retreat as far.

By the third, it stayed within the edge of the firelight.

Temür lowered his hand to the ground, palm open.

“I asked for a friend,” he said quietly. “I did not think the sky would send me one with wild teeth.”

The animal's ear twitched.

For a long moment, neither moved.

Then, slowly, it stepped forward. Close enough that Temür could hear its breathing. Close enough that he could see the reflection of the fire in its single eye.

It did not touch him. But it did not leave.

That was enough.

The first light of dawn crept over the steppe, pale and cold. The animal still lay a short distance from the fire, curled but watchful, as if ready to vanish at any moment.

Temür rose, stretching, and glanced at his pony, who snorted softly at the newcomer but did not shy away.

They were three now.

He looked back at the dog/wolf.

“One eye,” he said, tilting his head. “But you see more than most.”

He thought for a moment, then nodded.

“Yes; I will call you *Suld*.” (spirit.)

The animal lifted its head, its tail did not wag, but it did not leave.

Temür smiled faintly.

“Good,” he said. “Then we’ll ride together.”

CHAPTER 3

THE CARAVAN

Several days passed. Temür and his two friends kept going west. He had heard that there were the routes frequented by travelers and merchants who come from the east on their way to Baghdad.

One early morning, he woke up at the sound of voices. The wind had died sometime before dawn, he noticed, the moment he opened his eyes, that the grass no longer whispered. The steppe lay still, as if holding its breath beneath the pale morning sky.

For a moment, he did not move. Then he heard them again. Voices.

At first, they slipped into his mind like a dream; familiar in shape, but wrong in substance. Men speaking. Someone calling. The faint rhythm of conversation.

Temür's heart began to pound.

His dog Suld had also been alerted. He started to move towards the voice, but a strong glance of Temür made him laid down again.

Temür kept his body flat against the earth and opened his eyes only a fraction. He saw a large caravan crossing slowly over the crest of the nearest slope.

They flowed differently; soft, rounded, like water passing over stones. Not the sharp, clipped sounds of his people. Not the language of command and survival.

Strangers.

He raised his head slightly.

The figures moved along the ridge of the next slope, outlined against the brightening sky.

The caravan formed a column nearly a hundred paces long. Horses at the front, camels behind them, and a long line of goats and servants on foot following them.

Their garments fluttered in the breeze, that had begun to return. Their silhouettes were wrong; too loose, too layered. Their heads were wrapped in cloth.

Not Mongols.

Temür's fingers tightened around the small knife at his side as he watched.

At first, in the distance, they were a wavering line against the pale horizon, the wind carrying their voices so Temür could hear them.

Eventually, they passed by him close enough for Temür to distinguish their features. Some of the shapes grew into strange forms. Temür had seen camels only once before, far off, like creatures from another world.

Now they came closer—long-legged, swaying, their movement unlike any animal of the steppe. Not the quick, sharp rhythm of horses, but a rolling, patient motion, as if the earth itself carried them forward.

A caravan.

At its head rode a man mounted in a beautiful black horse. He sat high, wrapped in layered robes that caught the light in quiet flashes—fine cloth, deep in color, edged with subtle embroidery.

His posture was upright, effortless, as though the movement of the saddle did not touch him. A short, curved blade hung at his side, its hilt worked, not plain. Even from a distance, Temür could see it was built not as an arm, but a symbol of power.

Behind him came three men, also mounted in horses. There were large men, and, even in the distance, Temür could see that their skin looked darker than the rider in front. In their waists hung large curve blades and

they had large bows and quivers held to their saddles. Temür thought that they were possible bodyguards.

Behind, came the woman.

Her camel bore a structure Temür had never seen.

A cage, arched, enclosed, draped with fabric that moved gently with the animal's stride. A cage, but a luxurious one. Its sides were patterned, layered in cloth of red and gold, with openings veiled in fine weave that allowed her to see without being seen. Inside, her shape shifted only slightly, still, untouched by wind or dust.

Behind her rode a servant woman, seated more simply on a large saddle, her hair and her face covered, her eyes alert.

Behind them came the line. Men and beasts, stretched in a long, deliberate chain.

Camels laden with goods moved in steady rhythm, their backs burdened with bundles wrapped in cloth and leather. Some loads were tightly bound chests. Others were long, balanced packs—silk, perhaps, or spices, or things Temür did not yet have names for.

The men walked or rode beside them. Each carried a blade. Some had bows. Their movements were relaxed. They spoke among themselves in low tones, the same flowing language Temür had heard before, rising and falling like a river's current.

The caravan did not seem to be in a rush. It moved like those who knew how to travel in the desert. The rich man in front. The guarded woman behind him. The servant. The goods. The men. Each in place.

The wind shifted, carrying a scent not only animal and leather, something unfamiliar to him. something sharper.

Spice. Sweetness.

The group moved in his direction, passing close to the hollow where he lay.

"Run!", he first screamed inside, but he knew that it was too late, they were too close.

The group continued by, indifferent to his presence. He watched them pass, his eyes moving from one detail to the next. They were from another world, not from the steppe he knew.

After a while, they disappeared behind a slope. When the voices banished, Temür finally relaxed. He remained still a long time, like seeing the shape of them still lingering in the air.

He felt mortified. He had been anxiously expecting to meet people and now that they were gone he wondered what to do. He had seen enough and heard enough stories to know that they were not guarantees when meeting strangers.

Temür had learned the truth of the steppe, sometimes, death came easily. There were dangers. Men who rode without names. Without honor. Men who watched from away and came at night. And did not hesitate to kill for their benefit.

Robbers.

But although he had not seen strangers like those before; to him, they did not look threatening. And he was hungry, not for food, but for human contact.

He took notice of the direction they took when they left. He would meet them tonight, after they had set camp.

The sun was almost hidden when Temür stopped Salkhi. He'd seen in the distance the reflection of a fire. He dismounted and walked slowly towards the light.

He stopped one hundred yards from the fire, let go of the reins and hunched down behind some bushes. Suld looked at him intensely with his one eye, like asking for instructions. Temür signaled him to lay down and be still.

Evening settled slowly over the steppe, as if the sky were reluctant to disappear.

Temür lay flat along the spine of a low ridge, the grass brushing his cheek. He had chosen the place carefully; high enough to see, low enough not to be seen.

Below him, the strangers had made a camp, not like the ones Temür had visited before. And not like his former camp, with a quiet fire and small circle of order.

This was something else. Larger. Louder. Alive.

At the center stood a tent unlike anything Temür had ever seen. It rose from the earth like a figure of many colors: deep reds, burnished gold, strips of blue and green that caught the last light of the sun, edged with tassels that stirred in the wind.

Temür thought that the tent was too large for a single family. Around it, smaller tents formed a loose ring. The fire burned brighter there, higher, its smoke rising in large columns. He knew that it was not a fire made from dry dung, the Mongol way. It was made with real wood, carried from far away.

Shapes moved through the light; men in long robes, their garments clean, layered, heavy with decoration. Metal glinted at their belts.

He watched the horses.

They were tethered in a line slightly apart from the camp. Strong, beautiful horses, strong-necked, well-fed, holding a dignified posture. They were not very tall, just a hand taller than his pony Salkhi, but their fur shined and they look refined, compact.

And their saddles were not the rough, worn leather of the steppe. These were worked, detailed, cared for. Valuable.

“In that camp,” Temür thought, “there is wealth.”

And where there was wealth, they would be people ready to protect it. There would be danger.

Temür shifted slightly, careful not to break the rhythm of the grass.

The wind carried voices; again, that flowing language. But now it was different. Faster, louder, layered with laughter and command. Orders passed between men. A sharp call. The clink of metal. Somewhere, a stringed instrument began to play, soft at first, then rising.

Music.

Temür frowned. Who made music in the open steppe? Who showed themselves so clearly?

Fools. Or men who believed no one would dare touch them.

His gaze returned to the great tent. The entrance flap was open. Inside, he saw light that glowed warm and steady, not flickering like fire. Lamps. Oil, perhaps. More than a tent, it was a moving house.

A laughter rose from the great tent, bright and careless. Above, the first stars appeared.

The smell of food cooking made Temür’s stomach tightened. Food. Rich food, he guessed. Meat cooked with spices. Bread. Sweet things, perhaps.

Temür decided. He got up, grabbed Salkhi reins and looked at Suld, who seemed to nod. Then they walked slowly towards the camp.

A younger child saw him first. A cry split the quiet. The group stopped instantly in attention.

The man at the front raised his hand; not in threat, but in control. He spoke quickly, calmly. The others remained silent.

Temür stopped and stood there; small, dust-covered, eyes sharp and ready.

The man approached him slowly. Temür grabbed his knife and tracked his every movement. The man placed a hand against his chest.

“Yusuf,” he said.

It was an important gesture; in the steppe, names were not given lightly.

The man waited. Then he pointed, gently, toward the boy.

Temür hesitated. His throat felt dry. He said:

“...Temür.”

Yusuf nodded once, as though something important had just been established.

Temür noticed that the man carried a *Jambiya*, the short, curved knife typical of the Arabs. The knife’s hilt was beautifully decorated with ornaments of silver and carved bone.

Yusuf reached into a satchel and offered him a piece of flatbread. Temür stepped forward and, very slowly, reached for the bread. Then he ate it carefully.

Behind the man, the woman stepped forward; she was carrying a jar with water. She set the jar on the ground between them and stepped back.

He drank the water and it felt good down his throat, cold and sharp, pushing his tiredness away.

The older man lifted his face toward the sky and began to speak. It sounded like a prayer. Temür watched as everybody lowered their heads.

Strange people, he thought, strange customs.

When the words ended, Yusuf gestured toward the fire. Temür evaluated the invitation.

Behind him: nothing. No tribe. No past. Ahead: strangers. Unknown.

He stepped forward. Everybody seemed to be waiting for him. All at once, people moved, some entered the tent, some went around.

The woman came towards him.

Her garments were unlike anything Temür had seen. Layers of fabric flowed around her, deep in color: dark crimson, touched with threads that caught the firelight and held it. Gold, perhaps. The cloth moved as she walked, not stiff, not heavy, but alive.

At her wrists, several thin bands of metal chimed softly when she moved. Not loud. Not meant to be heard from afar. Only enough to mark her presence.

Her head was covered but not hidden. A veil of fine cloth framed her face, sheer enough to reveal, and to suggest distance. Beneath it, her features were calm, composed. Her skin carried the warmth of the sun, but without the harshness of the open steppe.

Temür could not avoid thinking that, even though she was not a young woman, her whole appearance was beautiful.

She made a gesture, and a servant approached her, head lowered. She gave a small instruction, barely a movement of the hand, and left.

The servant nodded; he turned and enter the tent, to appear seconds later carrying a rolled carpet. He extended the carpet close to the fire and signal to Temür to make his place there. Then he moved to the front of the tent entrance, apparently to remain all night in guard.

Temür noticed that besides his jambiya, he carried a long curve saber. Temür did not know that the curve

saber, the sword that eventually will be adopted by all the cavalries around the world, was invented by the Mongols, the masters of the attacks on horseback.

Temür guided Salkhi to a pasture and removed his saddle. Nearby there was a container with water, and both animals drank. He gave the rest of the bread to Suld, who devoured it immediately. Then he walked back to the carpet and lay down, resting his head on the saddle.

The woman exited the tent, said a few words to the guard and turned back. Her movement was final, and the camp became silent. The last voices faded into the soft breathing of night. The wind moved lightly through the ropes, brushing the great tent. Inside, the lamps had been lowered, their light dimmed to a warm, steady glow.

That night, the sky burned with stars and the eleven-year-old Mongol lay down, looking at them.

He'd been scared, now he felt that he needed to analyze the situation. The child tried to look at what was happening thinking with the mind of a man.

These were rich people, but more important, they seem to be civilized people. The camp was small and orderly. A low fire flickered, controlled, contained; nothing like the wild flames of his people.

He felt that perhaps the Eternal Blue Sky had heard his prayer and had pity on him.

"Yes, that has to be it," he thought.

Sleep took him at last, his small body curled on the carpet, one hand still wrapped around the knife.

Every day since leaving his tribe, he had been dreaming about his mother and his brother; but tonight was different. He dreamt that he was riding Salkhi in green fields, flying over rivers, and he carried the big bow of the real Mongol warriors.

While Temür slept, at the far end of the tent, separated by a hanging cloth, the man and his wife were still awake.

Sultan Al-Samir sat on a low cushion, leaning forward slightly, his hands resting on his knees. His beard was neatly kept, his robe uncreased despite the travel. A man who carried order with him, wherever he went.

She sat opposite him, openly watching him. For a long moment, neither spoke. Then, quietly, he said,

“He cannot remain as he is.”

Zubayda, the first wife of the sultan, the second most important person in the clan, looked at him.

Zubayda was elegant, aristocratic, associated with refinement, intelligence, and influence. The sultan's orders had to be approved by the first wife. Her voice did not rise. In a quiet but decisive voice, she said:

“The Turks took many things,” she said. Still calm. Still controlled. “But they did not take my desire to have a son.”

She gestured toward the boy and said,

“Allah did not guide him to us by chance.”

The man's jaw tightened.

“Do not find meaning where there is none,” he said. “The world is not guided by such things.”

She leaned forward slightly. Not pleading. Never pleading.

“We have no children. Allah has sent you one. He's a barbarian. The law says that we can adopt it if we promise to convert him to our faith.”

He exhaled slowly, as though something within him resisted even to speak.

“We are not wanderers without burden,” he said. “We trade. We travel with purpose. Every weight must justify itself.”

His eyes moved, briefly, to where Temür lay.

“A boy who speaks no word we understand. Who watches like a cornered animal. Who may run at any moment... or turn against us.”

She did not answer immediately.

Instead, she turned her head slightly, her gaze drifting toward the sleeping boy.

Temür had not moved. The knife was still in his hand.

Her voice, when it came again, was softer.

“My Sire, give me one month. If Allah wants us to take him, it will be probed in that time. My soul tells me that he is especial.”

The man conceded.

“You have one winter. When the new moon sighting begins, his time would had pass.”

“Allah will reward you for your mercy. If the child were to ride off alone, chances are he would die.”

He did not answer. They both looked toward the boy. Temür shifted again, his breathing uneven for a moment before settling. Unaware and unknowing that his life had just changed.

The next morning, Temür was summoned by the sultan.

The camp had already shed the softness of night. Fires were ashes, the air sharp with dust and the faint sweetness of spices packed in leather sacks. Men moved with purpose, tightening straps, checking loads, speaking in low voices that did not welcome interruption. It was a world awake and already in motion.

A guard came for him, and Temür followed.

He was led through the ordered chaos of the caravan to a large pavilion of woven fabric. Outside, two

armed men stood like carved figures. Inside, the air was cooler, dimmer, scented with incense.

The sultan sat upon layered rugs and cushions, his presence calm but solemn, like a man accustomed to obedience. Beside him stood an old man, dressed in a long brown cloth, from his belt hung a rosary with a small cross at the end.

It was a priest, thin, past middle age, his hair and beard splashed with white. His eyes were alive, watchful.

Temür stopped a few paces away. He was not sure of how to proceed, so he placed on kneed on the floor and lowered his head. The sultan and the priest smiled; the sultan gestured and a guard came with a cushion for Temür to sit on.

The sultan spoke first, his voice low, measured. The words, expressed in a strange language, meant nothing to Temür.

The priest listened, then, speaking in Mongol with careful precision, he told Temür who he was and why he was there.

“My name is Father Nicolas, and I am a Franciscan missionary. I travelled from Rome, with the 4th Christian Crusade. I left the crusaders after they sacked Constantinople. After them, I lived with the Mongols of the Ogedei Khan army, the son of Genghis Khan, for two years. After I left the Mongols, God guide me to Sultan Al-Samir, and I’ve been with him for three years. The sultan is a man of great courage and compassion. God has favored you by bringing you to him.”

The priest looked at the sultan, who nodded him to continue.

“The sultan, in his infinite grace, has welcome you to his expedition and has asked me to explain to you who we are.”

The father paused for a moment and continued talking in a teacher's patient style:

"This caravan is formed by several merchant houses and desert clans traveling under the direction of the sultan. We are merchants, our homes and the sultan's palace are in the city of Aleppo, and we are now in our way back there."

Temür moved his body closer to the priest, fascinated by his words. The priest continued:

"We are returning from the city of Mosul, a great city about 30 days of march from Aleppo. Mosul is an important center of textiles, jewelry and spices and we have acquired precious goods there. We are going back to Aleppo, where we will sell our merchandise... and acquire goods in return. We are trading under the protection of our supreme ruler, the caliph Al-Mustansir."

Mosul, Aleppo, merchant travelers, the words sounded fantastic to Temür. He had never been more than a few miles from his tribe; he now was beginning to understand that there were other worlds beyond the steppe. Trade. Exchange. No wars. A different kind of conquest.

The sultan watched him as the translation unfolded, studying not just his understanding, but his reaction.

"Our journey is long," the priest went on. "Dangerous but rewarding."

The sultan said a few words to the priest and he translated them.

"The great Al-Samir has noticed your confusion and ask me to tell you that things will be understood in due time. He wants you to notice that the fact that a Cristian priest is living under his tent is a proof that they

are compassionate, educated and tolerant people, willing to welcome all religions and all men of pure intentions.”

The words tranquilized Temür somehow, and he got the courage to ask:

“Why am I here?”

Father Nicolas smiled.

“The Sultana has chosen you. She has received a signal from Allah, telling her to adopt you,” the priest added. “You will belong to her household.”

The child remained in silence. So much happened so fast that it was hard to assimilate.

Then the priest spoke again, softer now, as if the next words required care.

“There is a condition.”

Temür’s gaze turned to him.

“Before the next winter, Allah must send a signal.”

The words landed like a stone in still water.

“If the signal comes,” the priest continued, “you remain.”

A longer silence.

“If it does not...”

The old man hesitated, just briefly, before finishing.

“You will be sold as a slave.”

The words settled heavily in Temür’s mind.

The sultan said something further; short, final. The priest translated:

“This is not a threat. It is an arrangement.”

Temür thought “*Adopted... or sold. Chosen... or traded.*” He had heard the name Allah before, the god of some far away tribes. But it meant nothing to him. If the Eternal Sky had brought him here, It will take care of him.

The priest watched him closely, as though measuring whether the boy understood not just the meaning, but the truth beneath it.

Temür inclined his head, just slightly. It was acknowledgment.

Outside, the caravan continued its preparations. Camels groaned under their loads, men called to one another, and somewhere in the distance, a bell rang—soft, rhythmic, inevitable.

His journey to Aleppo had begun.

CHAPTER 4

THE ARABS

After his meeting with the sultan, Temür left the tent beside Father Nicolas, his mind restless, wondering what might come next.

The priest glanced at him and gave a faint, knowing smile.

“I am old, and you are very young,” he said. “You hunger to know what lies ahead. That is natural. And I—being old—have gathered enough years to offer you something to ease that hunger.”

They walked slowly through the camp. Men tightened straps on camels, women sorted bundles of cloth and spices. Here and there some curious eyes followed Temür, making him feel somehow uncomfortable.

“Don’t worry,” the priest told him, “Some of them have never seen a Mongol before. They’ll get used to you.”

Temür nodded, resigned.

“The sultana,” the priest continued, “has entrusted me with your instruction. You will learn to speak our tongue, and to set words upon a page. That will be your chief labor.”

He paused, letting the weight of it settle.

“It will not be easy. But it will shape your future more than any blade you might carry.”

Temür listened in silence.

“I am a Christian,” Father Nicolas went on, “yet in my years among these people I have come to see something clearly: the Arabs are keepers of knowledge. They have taken the wisdom of many lands, Greek,

Persian, Indian, and carried it further. In their hands, numbers have been made more powerful, the movements of the stars better understood, the reckoning of time more exact. They build places they call 'hospitals', where the sick are treated with care and learning."

Temür did not grasp the meaning of these words, not fully. But something in the priest's voice—steady, certain—told him they mattered.

They walked on for some time, speaking at length. The priest explained that once Temür had learned to write, the sultana wished him to keep a record of his days.

"A diary," he said. "A faithful account of what you see and live."

He turned to Temür, his gaze suddenly intense.

"In this way, you will honor her."

Then, after a pause, he added more quietly:

"And consider this—what you write may be read long after we are dust. You stand, my son, in a privileged position. You may yet become a witness to this age... perhaps even one of its chroniclers."

Prophetic words.

At first, even though he had been treated nicely, Temür was still afraid that there could be danger hidden in his new world, and that this new danger would soon reveal itself. By his own experience, it always did.

On the steppe, nothing hid for long. The wind carried truth. Hooves announced themselves. Hunger spoke plainly. Even enemies came with the sound of breath and iron.

But here, nothing.

The sultana watched him without him noticing. She ordered that he had all he needed. And everyone obeyed.

The days passed, and with time, Temür learned about the life and the routine of the merchant caravan.

Temür's nights began and ended within the breathing hush of the great tent—a world of silk and shadow that seemed to exist apart from the steppe itself.

He slept in the big tent, on a thick, soft carpet laid close to the ground. It was a place reserved for special guests, members of the privileged class.

Beyond him rose the sultan's quarters, a chamber within the tent that seemed almost like a palace disguised in cloth. Heavy draperies of embroidered silk fell from above layered in folds, stitched with delicate patterns of vines and stars. Cushions were scattered around the low divan where the sultan rested. Brass lamps hung from slender poles, and the air carried the mingled fragrances of incense, leather, and spices.

A curtain of finely woven fabric marked the boundary between the sultan and his closest servant.

At the entrance, a guard remained through the night, unmoving as a carved figure. His silhouette cut against the faint light outside, a constant presence. It meant protection, vigilance, and the unspoken warning that no one came or went unnoticed.

Not far from the sultan's tent stood another, nearly as large—the dwelling of the sultana. It, too, was richly adorned. Inside, the women of the household slept together, their space divided by a curtain that preserved the sultana's privacy. In these quarters, when the camp was silent, the sultana and her servants often stayed awake until late hours, gossiping about the latest fashions and the men they had met in the town they left behind and the ones they were going to meet in the next one.

In the quiet hours before dawn, when the desert wind pressed gently against the tent walls and the lamps

burned low, the entire encampment seemed suspended between worlds. Temür would lie awake at times, listening to the murmur of fabric, the breathing of men, the distant shifting of camels, and the strange pull of his new life.

The caravan lived by a rhythm as steady as the desert horizon—each day unfolding like the one before.

At first light, before the sun had fully risen, the camp stirred. The air was still cool then, touched by a faint blue that softened the harshness of the land. Servants moved quietly among the tents, rekindling embers, heating water, preparing a simple meal. Flatbread warmed over coals, dates passed from hand to hand, and sometimes a thin broth or spiced milk. The sultan ate apart, served with greater care, while the others gathered in smaller circles, speaking in low voices or not at all. Morning was not a time for words, but for readiness.

As the sun climbed, the transformation began. The great tents, those fragile palaces of silk and rope, were brought down with practiced precision. Curtains were drawn, poles lowered, fabrics folded and bound. What had been, only moments before, a place of comfort and hierarchy became bundles of cloth and cord, loaded onto waiting camels. The animals groaned softly as the weight was secured: chests of goods, rolled carpets, brass utensils, water skins, and all the hidden wealth of the caravan.

Temür brushed Salkhi, a habit he had acquired from the other riders and that his pony seemed to enjoy. Then he fed and watered Salkhi and Suld. His dog was considered impure and was not allowed inside the tents, but his one-eye condition inspired compassion and he wasn't mistreated.

All thru this, Temür watched and learned.

One evening, the sultana approached, surrounded by her entourage. She spoke a broken Turkic, a language spoken across much of Central Asia and the steppes. Temür had learned it from some Mongols original from Western China.

"Do you need anything, my son?" She asked him.

The words caught him by surprise. He remembered the priest's instructions and kneeled, lowered his head, and said:

"I am very well, mother, your kindness is infinite."

The sultana smiled.

"Rise, my son. You look good dressed as an Arab."

Temür's heavy sheepskin and boiled leather had been traded for a tunic of fine white linen and a vest of embroidered silk.

"I selected your clothes myself. But you could never pass for one of us; your eyes would give you away." They heard a chuckle from the maids behind them. The sultana looked at them and they stopped laughing.

She continued:

"I notice confusion in your eyes. What troubles you?"

He asked,

"Is it always like this, mother?"

"Is what always like this, my son?"

"The noise. The colors. It is as if the world is trying to shout all at once."

Zubayda smiled, beckoning him over. "The desert is silent, Temür. So we must bring the music with us. In your lands, you move to find what you need. In the caravan, we carry what we need so that the world comes to us." She turned around, saying, "I will see you in the dunes, take care."

Temür remained bewildered by the encounter. Every day seemed like a dream.

In the camp, each knot had its purpose, each movement its place. There was no wasted gesture. Even the servants, though many, moved as if guided by a single will.

When they set out, the caravan stretched across the land like a slow-moving line. At its head rode the sultan, upright and composed, his presence symbolizing the essence of the whole caravan. Behind him, the faithful guards, the sultana's entourage, the servants, the laden camels.

They traveled through the long hours of the day. Eventually, the steppe turned into the desert. The horizon did not end in a line of green grass and blue sky, as it always had. Here, the world was a shimmering haze of gold and bronze, a land where the heat rose from the earth in trembling waves that blurred the shapes of the men and beasts ahead.

Temür's liked his new clothes. The wind, when it blew, moved through the fabric rather than against it. He felt naked, yet strangely cool.

He watched the dromedaries with a mixture of awe and suspicion. To a Mongol, the horse was a brother. These "ships of the desert" were grumbling, haughty creatures that looked at him with half-lidded disdain. They didn't run; they swung their weight with a rhythmic, sea-sick heave.

Eleven-year-old Temür rode beside the sultana's palanquin, Salkhi's hooves sinking into the fine, powdery sand. Suld running excitedly from one end of the caravan to the other, biting the rear legs of camels that he seemed to think were getting too far behind.

Back on the steppe, the earth was firm, a platform for a horse's gallop. Here, the ground felt like it was trying to swallow his pony hooves.

"Temür," a voice called, melodic and heavy with the scent of jasmine. A hand, decorated with intricate swirls of reddish-brown henna, parted the silk curtains of the litter. Zubayda looked down at him, her dark eyes brimming with a warmth that Temür still didn't quite know how to return. She was the wife of a Sultan, a man who traded in mountains of spice and oceans of silk, and she had taken Temür under her protection when the tides of war had swept him far from the Great Khan's shadow.

"The sun is a hammer today, little falcon," she said, switching to the fractured Turkic she used to bridge the gap between them. "Come. Drink."

She handed him a silver cup. Temür took it, his small fingers brushing her soft skin. Inside was water, but not the cold, metallic draught of the northern streams. This was sweet, flavored with honey and rose petals. It tasted like wealth. It tasted like something he hadn't had before.

By late afternoon, the light softened, and with it came a quiet relief. The pace slowed. Eyes lifted more often toward the horizon, waiting to see the proper place to set camp.

When at last the order was given, the caravan came alive again.

The servants moved swiftly, loads were unfastened and camels relieved of their burdens. Poles rose once more, ropes were pulled taut, and the tents took shape as if remembering themselves. The sultan's quarters were always the first to stand, their rich fabrics catching the last gold of the sun. Nearby, the sultana's tent was raised with equal care, its space prepared in respectful distance.

Fires were lit. Water was poured in cooking pans. The scent of cooking returned to the air, mingling with the cooling dust of evening.

By nightfall, it was as though the journey had never happened. The camp stood complete, ordered, luminous, alive.

Temür, carefully observing the whole process, understood the quiet miracle of it: a moving world that vanished each morning and was reborn each night, carried on the backs of beasts by the work of disciplined men.

Day by day, Temür noticed the difference between the two peoples.

The way these people spoke to one another; not in sharp bursts, but in measured tones, as if words were chosen, not thrown. Even anger moved differently here. It did not explode. It pressed, controlled, contained.

Temür listened, though he understood nothing.

The sounds settled into him anyway.

Soft syllables. Repeated phrases. Names spoken with care. Always, beneath it, something steady. A rhythm.

He found himself getting used to that rhythm.

They prayed. At first light. At the height of the sun. When shadows lengthened. At dusk. At night. Five times and always the same.

They stopped what they were doing—whether eating, speaking, walking—and turned in the same direction. They washed their hands, their faces, their feet. Cleanliness before devotion.

Then they bowed, lowering themselves, foreheads to the ground.

Temür watched intensely. He did not understand. To bow was to yield. To lower your head was to invite death.

And yet...

No one took advantage, no one struck them down. The act did not seem to weaken them, on the contrary, it seemed to revitalize them.

Temür felt a strong desire to join in whatever benefit this act bestowed on them.

When it was time to eat, Temür found that Arab food was very different to Mongol food, that was heavy in meat and mare's milk. Arab food was much more varied. Furthermore, food came in abundance, without struggle. Food was not fought over. Just given.

The caravan carried animals with them, including camels, goats and sheep, especially on long journeys across desert regions.

Camel and goat milk was especially important in desert travel because camels continue producing milk even in harsh conditions. Fresh milk did not last long in desert heat, so the caravan relied heavily on fermented milk, yogurt, dried cheese, clarified butter⁵, and preserved foods.

Hard cheese balls were preserved in oil or cloth. These lasted much longer than fresh cheese. Bread was plenty, in the form of flatbread, hard travel bread, or dried loaves baked before departure. Dates were also one of the main caravan foods. A traveler could survive for days on dates and milk.

A wealthier caravan like this also carried rice, barley, bulgur, or wheat, and the servants cooked

⁵ Clarified butter is butter that has been melted so that the water, milk solids, and impurities are removed, leaving mostly pure butterfat. It keeps much longer than normal butter, especially in hot climates, which made it extremely useful for caravans and desert travel.

porridge, soups, or stews and also dried or salted lamb or goat meat. The elite travelers also enjoyed honey with almonds or pistachios nuts after their meals.

At night, caravan servants often prepared large communal stews containing lentils, onions, chickpeas, herbs, bits of meat, and clarified butter. The smell of cumin, coriander, roasting onions, and butter would drift through the camp. Bread passed from hand to hand. Bowls shared. Water offered before being asked for.

Temür ate quickly at first, guarding every bite, expecting it to be taken.

It never was. No one reached for his food. No one tested him.

Slowly, so slowly he did not notice it at first, he began to eat less alert, without worrying that his food might suddenly be taken away from him.

In the caravan were some children of about his age. They spoke to him spontaneously, unfazed and curious. They laughed, they made gestures and repeated words, trying to pull him into their language.

And Temür learned from them. Fast. His young mind was a vacuum that stored everything and forgot nothing. And each day Father Nicolas was surprised by the new phrases Temür had learned from his younger friends.

Temür had no other duties than to take care of Salkhi. The only thing that the sultana demanded from him was that he learnt. When the caravan stopped for the day, the sultan tent was the first to be erected. As soon as it was, Temür sat inside beside Father Nicolas for his daily evening lesson.

While the wind sighed across the sand and the other boys chased one another outside, the priest opened books filled with strange symbols and distant stories.

The sultana emphasized the need for Temür to learn Arabic, but Father Nicolas, foreseeing that Temür may one day end up somewhere in Europe, took to himself to teach him also Latin.

At first, Temür learned the letters of Arabic and Latin, tracing them carefully on scraps of parchment until his hand obeyed his mind. Soon he was reading simple texts and copying passages under the priest's watchful eye. Father Nicolas possessed an endless patience and demanded accuracy in all things.

But languages were only the beginning.

At that time, the Arab and broader Islamic world possessed the most advanced mathematics knowledge in the world. The priest taught him Algebra⁶, the art of numbers, showing him how merchants calculated their profits and how scholars measured the land and the heavens.

In geography time, the Father unfolded maps of lands so distant that they seemed like legends, explaining the courses of rivers, the heights of mountains, and the boundaries of kingdoms.

History fascinated him most of all. Father Nicolas told him of emperors and caliphs, of great battles, fallen cities, and mighty realms that had risen and vanished long before Temür's ancestors had crossed the steppe. Through those lessons, the young Mongol came to understand that no empire, however powerful, lasted forever.

Years later, Temür would remember those evenings with gratitude. The bow had taught him how to

⁶ The word "algebra" comes from the Arabic *al-jabr*, from the work of the scholar Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi (9th century).

survive, but Father Nicolas had taught him how to learn to see the world.

At night, Temür lay on the carpet, thinking. No longer worried about survival.

The world had grown larger than the steppe, and Temür stood at its edge, still as a child, but changing. Slowly. Like iron placed in fire, not yet shaped... but no longer what it had been.

The end of the moon cycle was approaching, and the sultana prayed fervently to Allah to send to his husband the signal that would permit Temür adoption.

And that day, the signal finally came.

The sultan never moved alone. Wherever he went, through the caravan, among the tents, or beneath the burning desert sun, three men followed him like silent shadows.

These three were different to the Arabs. They had come from beyond Egypt, from the lands of Morocco.

They were big, taller than the men in the caravan, their bodies broad and muscular with powerful arms and thick necks. Their skin was darker, like polished obsidian. In their torsos they wore only sleeveless leather vests reinforced with bronze studs.

Old scars crossed their chests and arms. Their hair was long and tightly braided, gathered behind their heads into heavy ponytails bound with leather cords. Beads of brass and bone decorated some of the braids, clicking softly when they moved.

Each carried a curved scimitar, so large and heavy that Temür doubted many men could wield them with speed. These were the chosen protectors of the sultan.

That evening, after his daily lesson with Father Nicolas, Temür sat cross-legged beside his dog Suld,

polishing his composite bow⁷ with a cloth lightly soaked in oil. The afternoon sun slid over the curved layers of horn and wood; compared to the long Arab bows carried by the guards, the Mongol bow looked small.

The camp was quiet under the heat of the day until movement stirred among the tents. The Sultan was taking one of his habitual walks through the encampment.

Servants and guards moved aside at once. Conversations died immediately. The Sultan advanced at a calm pace, wearing a white robe embroidered with gold thread, followed by his armed bodyguards.

Temür lowered his eyes respectfully and rose to one knee.

The Sultan's gaze stopped upon the bow.

"What kind of bow is this?" he asked through Father Nicolas, who accompanied him as translator.

"A composite bow, my lord," Temür answered quietly.

The Sultan extended his hand.

"May I see it?"

Temür offered it with both hands and bowed his head.

The Sultan examined the bow with curiosity, turning it slowly in his fingers.

"It is much smaller than ours."

"Yes, my lord," Temür replied. "But it is stronger than it appears."

A faint smile touched the Sultan's lips. He turned toward one of his guards.

⁷ A composite bow was a short but powerful recurved bow made from layers of wood, horn, and animal sinew glued together, allowing Mongol archers to shoot with great strength and range even from horseback.

“Youssef al-Marrakushi,” he said, “what do you think of this Mongol weapon?”

The Moroccan stepped forward. He was a broad-shouldered man with sharp black eyes and a trimmed beard streaked with gray. He inspected the bow briefly, then gave a dismissive snort.

“My Sultan,” he said, “I cannot tell if this is a weapon or a child’s toy.”

Several guards laughed softly.

Temür remained motionless.

“With respect to your mighty warriors,” he said calmly, “my bow can strike anything their bows can strike.”

The laughter stopped.

The Sultan’s eyes brightened immediately.

“A challenge?” he asked.

Temür bowed his head.

“If my lord wishes.”

The Sultan clapped his hands once.

A servant hurried forward carrying a glazed ceramic water jar wrapped in damp cloth.

The Sultan pointed toward an open stretch of desert.

“Place it one hundred steps away.”

The servant obeyed quickly.

Youssef smiled with confidence as he unstrung his larger Arab bow and prepared an arrow.

But before he could raise it, Temür spoke.

“My Sultan... permit me one request.”

The Sultan gestured for him to continue.

Temür walked silently across the sand toward the jar. Reaching it, he lifted it and continued walking.

And walking.

The camp grew quiet.

Then more walking.

At last, Temür reached two hundred feet.

He set the jar down, so far away it seemed little larger than a bird upon the earth.

Murmurs spread among the guards.

Youssef frowned.

“That is impossible,” he muttered. He spat upon the sand in disdain and lowered his bow.

“No man can make such a shot.”

The Sultan looked toward Temür with visible interest.

“And you?” he asked. “Can you strike it from here?”

Temür met his gaze.

“Yes, my lord.”

The Sultan studied him for several seconds.

“And if you fail?”

The desert wind passed softly through the camp.

Temür did not answer.

The Sultan finally said:

“If you fail, you will be flogged ten times. Arrogancy is a sin in eyes of Alah.”

Several men exchanged uneasy glances. Such a punishment was extremely harsh.

Temür bowed once.

“So be it.”

He reached calmly into his quiver and selected an arrow tipped with narrow steel. The camp became silent.

Temür planted his feet in the sand and raised his bow. Its limbs bent backward like the horns of a wild beast as he drew the string to his ear.

Far in the distance, the tiny jar remained barely visible.

Then, unexpectedly, Temür tilted the bow upward toward the sky. Some guards exchanged confused looks. Youssef laughed under his breath.

Temür released the arrow and the bowstring snapped like a whip.

The arrow soared upward in a great arc, climbing high into the burning sky until it became almost invisible beneath the sun.

For a long moment, nothing happened. The camp waited.

Then—

Far across the desert came the sharp crack of shattered clay and the water jar exploded into fragments.

A collective gasp swept through the caravan.

Youssef stared speechless into the distance.

The Sultan hid his amazement at first, then he slowly smiled. *"This has to be the signal I expected from Alah,"* he thought.

The Mongol boy was no longer seen merely as defenseless child.

He was seen as somebody to be respected.

For days the caravan had crossed the dry lands beneath a burning sunlight. Temür had begun to think the world was made only of sand, stone, and endless horizons. Then, one morning, the desert changed.

At first he saw a line of white, indistinguishable figures, far ahead. But as the caravan climbed a rocky ridge, the line rose into walls, towers, domes, and countless flat rooftops shining beneath the sun.

Aleppo.

To Temür, the city was magnificent, almost impossible to believe.

He had known only the open steppe, where a man could ride for days without seeing more than a handful of yurts. Even the camps of the Mongol armies, vast as they were, disappeared with the wind after a few days. But this... this was stone made permanent. A mountain built by human hands.

Tall walls stretched farther than his eyes could follow. Watchtowers stood above them like silent guards. Beyond them rose minarets⁸, their slender forms piercing the sky. Smoke curled upward from hundreds of fires. The distant murmur of thousands of voices floated through the air like the roar of a river.

Beside Temür, one of the Arab merchants smiled at his amazement.

“First city?” the man asked.

Temür nodded and the merchant laughed warmly.

“Then prepare yourself. Aleppo contains more people than all the clans you have ever seen together.”

Aleppo location was ideal as a center of trade. It's proximity to the main ports of the Mediterranean Sea, like Samandag, Tartus and others, allowed the Italian merchants from Venice, Genoa, and Pisa to trade their goods with wares from Persia, India, Arabia, Central Asia and merchandise coming from places as far as China.

Their ships returned to Italy loaded with Silks from China, rolls of cotton, delicate perfumes like myrrh and rose oil, precious stones like rubies, turquoise and pearls, fine glassware. Sugar and paper were important exports. Sugar was at that time considered a luxury in the noble palaces of Europe, and the Islamic world had more advanced paper production than Europe.

⁸ A minaret is a tall, slender tower attached to or built beside a mosque in Islamic architecture.

And in exchange, from those ships, the muslim word received, among other things:

Metal goods, like iron bars, steel armor, and tools. Timber. Good wood was scarce in many Middle Eastern regions. Silver and gold. Europe often paid in bullion because Eastern luxury goods were so desired.

And slaves. Sadly, slave trade existed in both directions.

And even wine. Muslims did not drink, but cities like Aleppo contained a plethora of races: Christians, Jews, Armenians, Greeks, Europeans, and other minorities who enjoy it.

As Temür caravan approached the gates, the road became crowded. Donkeys burdened with sacks of grain pushed between camels loaded with spices and silk. Armenian traders rode beside Turks. Kurds walked with flocks of sheep. Dark-skinned merchants from the south spoke languages Temür had never heard before. Greek sailors argued loudly beside Jewish jewelers wrapped in fine robes.

The constant plethora of colors, put together in infinite forms, was enough to make Temür dizzy.

And the smell... not the clean winds of the steppe but a thousand scents battling together: sweat, roasting lamb, animals dung, incense, leather, smoke, cinnamon, dates, and unfamiliar perfumes.

The noise was even more overwhelming.

Men shouted prices in different tongues. Blacksmiths hammered glowing iron. Children ran laughing through the streets. Somewhere nearby a mule screamed angrily while its owner cursed at it. Above all

of it echoed the haunting call of the muezzin⁹ from a distant minaret, summoning the faithful to prayer.

Temür lifted his eyes toward the sound.

The entire city seemed alive.

The caravan passed the great entrance door, crossing the enormous nine feet wide walls that protected the city and finally entered the great market district near the center of Aleppo. Temür had never imagined such wealth could exist in one place.

The bazaar stretched like a maze beneath long covered streets of wood and stone. Colored fabrics hung overhead, filtering the sunlight into red, gold, and blue shadows. Merchants sat behind mountains of goods from every corner of the world.

There were tables overflowing with saffron, pepper, cloves, and cinnamon worth their weight in silver. Jewelers displayed necklaces of emerald and ruby that glittered like captured fire. Swordsmiths showed curved Damascus blades whose steel cut into wood like butter. Silk from Cathay hung beside heavy Byzantine cloth embroidered with gold thread.

Temür saw cages filled with exotic birds. He saw ivory tusks taller than a man. He saw scribes patiently copying books by hand while scholars argued over religion and philosophy.

Everywhere men bargained loudly.

Hands moved constantly — weighing coins, examining jewels, touching fabrics, counting spices.

⁹ A muezzin is the man who calls Muslims to prayer from a mosque. He recites the adhan, the Islamic call to prayer, traditionally five times each day:

The merchants of the caravan quickly transformed from weary travelers into sharp-eyed businessmen. Servants unloaded the camels while scribes recorded every crate and bundle. The sultan's traders opened polished wooden chests filled with precious stones, incense, and rare eastern goods gathered during months of travel.

Almost immediately buyers gathered around them.

Rich men in embroidered robes inspected the jewels studying the reflection of the sunlight. Spice dealers opened sacks and inhaled deeply before naming their prices. Arguments rose, laughter followed, then bargains were struck with solemn handshakes.

Temür stood at the edge of it all, overwhelmed.

For the first time in his life, he understood that the world was far larger than the endless grasslands of his childhood. Here in Aleppo, the roads of many nations crossed like threads in a great tapestry.

And somehow, by fate or by God, he had been carried into its center.

CHAPTER 5

ALEPPO

Even though the winter winds blew cold against the walls of the palace, a perfumed warmth filled the private chambers of the sultan. Three years had passed since Temür, dusty from the desert and astonished by the sight of his first caravan, had joined the clan of the sultan Al-Samir. Three years among merchants, guards, scholars, and servants. Three years living under the protection of the sultan and his household.

Yet he still did not know exactly how old he was.

Among the Mongol people, years were remembered through winters, migrations, battles, and famines. Men spoke of the year the rivers froze solid or the year the horses starved. No one had ever marked the day of his birth. Time had flowed across the steppe like wind over grass.

That evening, however, the sultana would force him to think about it.

His adopted family had returned only days earlier from another caravan journey, and the palace breathed with the heavy comfort of rest. The chamber where they gathered was vast and glowing with the fire of many lanterns. Thick carpets from Persia covered the marble floor, so soft beneath the feet that Temür sometimes still felt uneasy walking upon them. Cushions embroidered with golden thread lay scattered around low cedar tables.

A great fireplace burned against one wall, its flames cracking and shifting like spirits trapped behind iron grilles. The warmth carried the scent of cedarwood and amber resin through the room. Near the fire, a young slave girl softly played a string instrument, her fingers

plucking gentle notes that floated through the chamber. On a silver tray beside her rested the remains of the honey-and-dates cake the family had shared moments before. Crystal cups still held traces of dark sherbet flavored with mint.

The sultan reclined comfortably upon a mound of cushions. In one hand he held a long ornate pipe decorated with silver rings and tiny turquoise stones. The sweet, bitter scent of burning tobacco mixed with opium rose lazily from it as he inhaled and exhaled in thoughtful silence.

Across from him, the sultana sat beside a carved chessboard resting upon a low table between them. The firelight danced upon her bracelets as she moved one of the ivory pieces with calm confidence.

“Your horse grows reckless, my lord,” she said with amusement, referring to the chess piece.

The sultan narrowed his eyes at the board.

“Reckless men often win kingdoms,” he replied.

Temür sat several steps away near a brass oil lamp, absorbed in his work. Before him lay sheets of paper weighted by a polished stone. In his hand he held a *qalam*¹⁰, the reed pen Father Nicolas had first taught him to use years earlier. Every few moments he dipped it into a small inkpot before continuing his notes.

At first, writing had seemed like sorcery to him. Now the black symbols came naturally beneath his hand.

The sultana lifted her eyes from the chessboard and studied him quietly for a moment. Then she exchanged a glance with her husband.

The sultan gave the slightest nod.

¹⁰ Qalam. A pen made of bamboo, the reed sharpened carefully with a knife, its tip shaped for the flowing curves of Arabic script.

The sultana turned toward the servants.

“Leave us.”

The musician and the servants left the room silently. Sandaled feet whispered across the carpets as one by one they disappeared behind the curtains. Temür looked up from his writing.

For a moment no one spoke.

Then the sultana smiled gently.

“Temür,” she said, “you have now lived with us for three years.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“And when you first came to us, Father Nicolas believed you were perhaps eleven years old.”

Temür frowned faintly. He had never worried about such thing.

The sultana leaned back slightly, studying him with almost maternal warmth.

“That means,” she continued, “you are now fourteen.”

The words settled strangely inside him.

Fourteen, a number, an age, something determined. He had never truly imagined himself becoming older. On the steppe, boys simply became men one season without warning.

“And fourteen,” the sultan said without looking up, “is no longer a child.”

Temür wondered what his lord meant but say nothing.

The sultana’s smile deepened with quiet amusement as she watched the boy’s face.

“It is time,” she said, “for us to begin looking for a suitable wife for you.”

The qalam nearly slipped from Temür’s fingers.

Blood rushed into his face so suddenly that he feared they would notice it even in the firelight. His heart began pounding harder than it ever had during battle practice or horseback racing.

A wife. He stared at them speechlessly.

Part of him felt nervous. Another part, a new part he barely understood, filled with excitement so sharp it made his chest tighten.

The sultan finally looked up from the chessboard and allowed himself the shadow of a smile.

“You look as though we have sentenced you to death,” he said.

The sultana laughed softly behind her hand.

Temür lowered his eyes, trying unsuccessfully to regain composure while the fire crackled warmly beside them and the scent of smoke, roses, and ink lingered in the air around him.

The celebration began shortly after sunset, when the last red light faded beyond the walls of Aleppo and hundreds of oil lamps transformed the palace into a place of a thousand flames.

Servants moved through the halls carrying silver trays loaded with roasted lamb, saffron rice, figs, almonds, pistachios, and honey cakes dripping with syrup. The perfume of incense floated through the warm air beneath painted ceilings supported by slender marble columns.

Musicians sat upon embroidered carpets near a fountain at the center of the great hall. The water reflected

trembling lights while players of *oud*, *rebab*¹¹ and flute musicians filled the palace with soft melodies.

Temür had attended many gatherings since joining the sultan's household, yet such splendor still marveled him. Part of him remained the boy from the endless steppe who had once slept beneath rough felt tents and belonged to a family which counted its wealth in horses.

Now he stood dressed in dark silk robes fastened with a silver belt gifted by the sultan himself. Though taller and broader than when he had first arrived, there remained something unmistakably foreign about him. His posture carried the alert stillness of the grasslands. His eyes watched rooms the way an alert rider watches the horizon.

That evening, however, he felt unusually uneasy. The sultana had spoken little during the day, yet her knowing smiles had followed him everywhere.

The guests arriving that night were no ordinary visitors.

Near the entrance of the hall, servants announced the arrival of the merchant family with elaborate formality. Heads turned respectfully as the visitors entered.

The merchant, Hassan al-Rashid, was among the wealthiest traders connected to the caravans that crossed Syria toward the Mediterranean ports. Like the sultan Al-Samir, his caravans carried silk from the East and spices worth fortunes in Europe. Beside him walked his wife,

¹¹ Oud. A pear-shaped lute with a deep, warm sound. Perfect for noble gatherings.

Rebab (Rababa) — an early bowed instrument, ancestor of the violin.

veiled in deep blue silk embroidered with silver thread.
And between them walked their daughter.

For an instant, Temür stopped breathing.

Her name was Layla.

She could not have been more than thirteen or fourteen years old, yet she carried herself with calm grace. Dark hair framed her face beneath a light embroidered veil, and her black eyes possessed the deep softness of polished amber. Gold bracelets rested delicately upon her wrists, chiming softly as she moved.

The sultana welcomed the family warmly.

"My honored friends," she said, "your presence brings joy to this house."

The merchant bowed respectfully.

"The honor belongs to us."

Servants guided the guests toward the cushions surrounding the fountain while musicians continued to play quietly in the background.

Temür remained standing beside one of the columns, uncertain whether he wished to disappear or remain exactly where he was.

The sultan observed him with hidden amusement.

At last, the sultana turned.

"Temür," she called gently, "come forward."

He obeyed immediately.

The marble floor suddenly felt very large beneath his feet. When he approached, the sultana placed one hand lightly upon his shoulder.

"This is Temür," she said to the guests. "He has lived with our family for several years and has become dear to us."

The merchant studied the young Mongol with intelligent curiosity.

“So, this is the rider from the eastern grasslands,” he said kindly. “I have heard much about you.”

Temür bowed respectfully, still uncomfortable with the elegant customs of city nobility despite years among them.

“You honor me.”

Then the sultana turned toward the girl.

“And this,” she said carefully, “is Layla, daughter of our beloved friends.”

For the first time, the girl lifted her eyes fully toward him.

Temür suddenly became aware of every sound in the hall: the fountain, the music, the crackling torches, the distant laughter of guests. He had faced wolves as a child. He had ridden through sandstorms. He had trained beside armed guards. Yet none of those things had prepared him for the quiet panic of a young girl’s gaze.

Layla lowered her eyes almost immediately, though not before a faint smile touched her lips.

The sultana noticed everything.

Of course she did.

Conversation resumed around them while servants poured sweet sherbet into crystal cups. The merchant discussed caravan routes with the sultan, speaking of Genoese ships and rising dangers along eastern roads. Yet beneath all the polite conversation hid another purpose.

This evening had been arranged for them.

Several times during the feast, he caught brief glances from Layla across the room. Never long enough to become improper. Never bold enough for others to remark upon. But enough.

Enough for curiosity, enough for hope.

Later in the evening, the musicians began playing a different, more lively music and dancers entered the hall

with silver bells around their ankles. Guests applauded gently.

Temür had moved near one of the carved windows overlooking the moonlit gardens when he heard soft footsteps approach beside him.

Layla.

For a moment neither spoke.

“You are very quiet,” she finally said.

Her voice was softer than he had imagined.

Temür searched desperately for something intelligent to say.

“On the steppe,” he answered awkwardly, “there is often only silence.”

To his relief, she smiled.

“I think I would like to see the steppe someday.”

He looked at her then — truly looked at her — and felt something strange move within him. Something gentler and still more frightening than battle.

Far across the hall, the sultana quietly observed the two young figures beside the window and exchanged a satisfied glance with her husband.

The game had begun.

CHAPTER 6

A YOUNG LOVE

The spring winds crossed the great grasslands with the smell of wild thyme and fresh rain. Across the camp, white felt *yurts* (tents), scattered upon the earth, shone beneath the morning sun. Horses grazed peacefully near the river, and the laughter of children was heard everywhere.

It was a joyful season.

For three years, peace had blessed the families of the tribe. Three years in which Temür and Layla had grown together like two young trees rooted beside the same stream.

The boy who once followed her shyly among the grazing horses had become tall and broad-shouldered. At seventeen, Temür already carried himself like a warrior. His arms were hardened by archery and riding, and his dark eyes held the calm confidence of a young man who believed that a magic world was expecting and inviting him.

Layla, now sixteen, was living under the tutorial of the sultana, and had become the quiet beauty of the camp. The women smiled knowingly whenever she passed. Her long black hair reached her waist, and when she laughed even the old men softened their expressions.

Their marriage had finally been arranged.

The wedding would take place before the next full moon.

For days, the camp prepared for celebration. Women embroidered garments with silk thread brought by merchants from distant lands. Older men argued cheerfully over horses and gifts. Children ran wildly

between the yurts, pretending to shoot arrows from imaginary bows.

Every evening, Temür sat beside their tent, sharpening a knife upon a whetstone. Though he tried to appear calm, his hands betrayed him slightly.

The sultan noticed.

“You are nervous,” the older man said with amusement.

Temür smiled faintly.

“I would rather face wolves.”

Al-Samir laughed deeply.

“That is because wolves are easier to understand than wives.”

Nearby, Layla carried folded fabrics with her mother and aunts. Though she tried to avoid looking toward Temür, her eyes betrayed her again and again.

At one moment their gazes met, they smiled but said nothing. Their love had become quieter now.

One evening, as the sky turned golden, Layla found Temür seated outside the sultan yurt with several sheets of parchment spread across his knees. A small pot of ink rested beside him, and he held a reed pen with surprising care for hands more accustomed to bows and reins.

She stood next to him and watched quietly for a moment before speaking.

“You hold the pen like a sword.”

Temür glanced up with a smile.

“Father Nicolas says writing could be even more dangerous.”

Layla knelt beside him, careful not to disturb the parchment. Strange symbols flowed across the page in elegant black lines.

"These are beautiful," she whispered. "Like vines."

"Arabic writing," Temür said. "The father says that not only is beautiful, but it is also the most civilized of the world."

On another parchment, the flowing symbols were sharper letters written in Latin.

Layla frowned slightly.

"These look like tiny spears fighting each other."

Temür laughed softly.

"The priest used them when he marched with the Crusades. The merchants sent messages to a country called Italy, on the other side of the sea.

She pointed at the page without touching it.

"And you can read both?"

"A little."

"What are you writing?"

Temür hesitated.

"A diary."

Layla looked surprised.

"Warriors keep diaries?"

"The sultan says that one day they will be more valuable than gold. He says memory disappears like smoke unless someone traps it."

She smiled at that.

"What did you write today?"

Temür looked down at the parchment.

"That the spring smells of rain."

"That your hair is longer than last year."

"And that I am afraid."

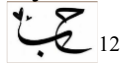
Layla's eyes lifted slowly.

"Afraid of what?"

"That happiness disappears when a man speaks of it too loudly."

For a moment neither moved.

Then Layla gently took the reed pen from his hand and added a single awkward symbol beneath his writing.



Temür stared at it.

“What does it say?” he asked.

She smiled shyly.

“I know. Father Nicolas taught me. You must discover it by yourself.

Temür put his writings and his tools in a leather bag, and both begin to walk along the creek.

I dreamed of our yurt last night,” Layla whispered.

Temür looked at her.

“What did you see?”

“A small one,” she said softly. “With blue cloth hanging at the entrance. And many horses nearby.”

Temür smiled.

“I shall give you the finest horses in all the steppe.”

“I do not care about horses.”

“Then what do you care about?”

Layla lowered her eyes.

“That you return to me each evening.”

The words struck him and, for a while, he became deep in thought.

“I will always return to you,” he said.

Years ago, he had asked the Great Blue Sky for a companion. Now, it had been more than generous with him. He had nothing left to ask, the cup of his desires was flowing over.

¹². The Arab symbol for love.

He reached carefully for her hand. Even after all these years together, such gestures still felt new between them.

They climbed a nearby hill overlooking the camp. Above them, the sky was turning deep blue and stars began to appear.

“When I was little,” she said, “I believed the stars were holes in the sky where Heaven watched us.”

“And now?”

“Now I think they are roads.”

“Roads?”

“For souls trying to find each other.”

The wind moved gently around them.

Temür looked upward for a long moment.

“My father once told me that men spend their lives searching for the place where they belong.”

Layla turned toward him.

“And have you found yours?”

Temür looked at her quietly.

“Yes.”

No other words were needed. With the care of handling a bouquet of delicate flowers, Temür held her close to him and kiss her. She just closed he eyes and pressed her lips against his, wishing that time would stop, just for that moment.

The wind moved softly through the grass. Far away, thunder murmured. They didn’t noticed.

CHAPTER 7

THE MONGOLS

The first rumors arrived with frightened traders from the east. They entered Aleppo exhausted, their camels foaming at the mouth, speaking of smoke on the horizon and entire villages emptied before the advance of a vast Mongol army.

At first, the people of the city dismissed the stories as exaggerations born from desert fear. But soon more caravans arrived carrying the same tales.

The Mongols were coming.

Inside the palace of Sultan Al-Samir, unease spread like a sickness through the marble halls. Servants whispered in corners. Guards sharpened spears late into the night. The musicians who once filled the courtyards with melodies now played softly, as if loud music itself might invite disaster.

Temür heard the rumors while training with the palace guards. Every word struck his heart with strange force.

The Mongols. His people.

For years he had traveled far from the endless grasslands of his childhood. Aleppo had begun to feel like home. And now the storm of the steppe had followed him there.

First, it was the tremor of thousands of horses hooves hitting the desert soil at a gallop.

A day later, the Mongol army appeared.

From the high walls of the city, the people watched the horizon darken beneath thousands of horsemen. Their banners moved like black waves in the desert wind.

Columns of mounted archers stretched farther than the eye could see.

At their head rode General Qadan, commanding one of the armies of Batu¹³ Khan.

Batu was the grandson of the man who had united all the tribes from the steppe and whose name already terrified half the world: Genghis Khan. Batu sought new conquests to honor the memory of his grandfather.

The Mongols did not attack. They camped not far from the city. The next day, General Qadan sent envoys beneath white banners to the palace of Al-Samir.

The great hall was silent when the envoys entered. Nobles, imams, merchants, and military commanders stood gathered around the sultan's throne.

The Mongol officer entered at the head of his escort, followed by two of his soldiers.

The confidence of a Mongol warrior came not from the number of warriors around him, but from the knowledge that tens of thousands waited beyond the horizon, ready to act on his command.

The envoy walked straight as a spear. He was a broad-shouldered man in his middle years, weathered by countless campaigns from the plains of Mongolia to the deserts of Persia. His face was hard and wind-burned, the skin darkened by sun and dust. A trimmed black beard, streaked with gray, framed a mouth that rarely smiled.

Over a dark blue deel—a long Mongol riding robe fastened across the chest and cinched with a broad leather belt—he wore a cuirass¹⁴ of lacquered lamellar armor.

¹³ Batu: "Strong" in Mongol language.

¹⁴ A cuirass is a piece of armor that protects the torso, the chest and back. Usually made of metal plates or hardened leather.

Hundreds of hardened leather and iron plates overlapped like the scales of a great beast. This protected his chest, shoulders, and back while allowing him to move freely in the saddle. The armor bore scars from old battles: scratches from swords, dents from arrows, and the polished wear of years of service. Upon his head rested a conical iron helmet edged with fur. An iron guard descended behind his neck, and narrow cheek plates framed his stern features. From beneath the helmet, strands of dark hair escaped and fluttered in the desert breeze.

His belt carried the tools of a Mongol noble warrior. A curved saber hung at his left hip, its hilt wrapped in black leather.

The men of Aleppo could see at once that this was no mere messenger. Everything about him—his armor, his weapons, the calm certainty in his gaze—spoke of a man accustomed to giving orders that decided the fate of cities.

The leader of the envoys spoke calmly through an interpreter.

“The General Qadan, in the name of the great Ogedei Khan, offers Sultan Al-Samir two paths.”

He raised two fingers.

“The first path is peace. Open the gates of Aleppo. Swear loyalty to the Great Khan and become his vassal. No harm shall come to the people. No soldier shall be killed. Your markets shall remain open, your mosques untouched, and your palace preserved. In return, the Mongol Empire shall take thirty parts of every hundreds of your production in tribute.”

Murmurs spread through the court.

Then the envoy lowered one finger.

“The second path is war.”

The hall became still.

“If you resist, every man, woman, and child shall perish. Your walls shall be broken. Your markets burned. Your treasures carried away.”

His dark eyes moved across the room.

“You have heard of Nishapur.”

Many faces paled. Travelers spoke of pyramids built from human skulls and rivers running black with ashes. Entire cities had vanished beneath Mongol wrath.

The envoy bowed slightly.

“You have three days.”

Then he departed.

That night, the city did not sleep, anxiously waiting for the sultan’s decision. He gathered his advisers in secret council.

His generals demanded battle.

“Our walls are strong,” one insisted. “Aleppo has never fallen.”

Another struck the table with his fist.

“To surrender without a fight is cowardice!”

But the older advisers spoke differently.

“The Mongols are unlike any enemy we have faced,” said an elderly merchant whose caravans had crossed Persia. “Cities greater than ours have disappeared before them.”

A merchant spoke, his voice trembling.

“My lord, it does not matter how tall or how strong the city walls are. Some of my slaves escaped the siege of Nishapur and talk about machines built by Chinese workers recruited from east Asia, unlike anything fashioned by Arabs or Franks. Towers of timber as tall as walls, plated with wet hides against fire. Upon them stood Mongol archers shooting down into the streets themselves.”

The room became silent. Father Nicolas stood among the counselors. The priest spoke quietly.

“A ruler’s duty is not glory. It is the survival of his people.”

The debate continued until dawn. At last Sultan Al-Samir rose from his seat. His face looked suddenly older.

“I will not sacrifice Aleppo to pride.”

Silence filled the chamber.

“We will surrender.”

Three days later, the gates of the city opened.

The head of the Mongol army entered in disciplined silence. There was no looting. No screaming. No fires.

The people watched fearfully as thousands of horsemen filled the streets like a river of iron and leather.

General Qadan himself came to the palace to receive the sultan’s oath of submission. He did not humiliate the sultan, he treated him with intelligent respect. Everything proceeded peacefully.

The next day, a fast rider would part to deliver to Batu Khan the news that the gran city of Aleppo belonged to the Mongol Empire, which now stretched from the east of China to the Balkans.

Resigned, the rich merchants of the city started to count and separate a third of their wealth to be loaded into the Mongol four-wheeled wagons pulled by oxen, waiting at the door of the city.

None of them dared to cheat; the general had warned that the penalty would be to bury the cheater on the sand up to his neck and leave him there until only his skull remained.

Temür had no intention of joining the Mongol army and much less of leaving his dear Layla. He

remained out of sight, hoping that the moment would pass and everything would remain the same.

But it was not to be.

Not far away from the sultan stood Youseff, the Moroccan captain of the sultan's personal guard.

Years earlier, during a competition, Temür had humiliated him before nobles and servants alike in an archery contest. The memory still burned inside him like poison. Since that day, Youseff had watched the young Mongol rise in the sultan's favor. And now hatred whispered opportunity into his ear.

That evening, while Mongol officers occupied the palace courtyard, Youseff approached one of General Qadan's captains.

He spoke quietly in broken Turkic.

"There is a young warrior here," he said. "A Mongol by blood. His aim with his bow is extraordinary."

The captain narrowed his eyes.

"A Mongol?"

"Yes. And he's better than any archer in Aleppo."

The officer did not believe him at first, but the Moroccan seemed to be telling the truth. The next morning, soldiers arrived at Temür's chambers.

"General Qadan summons you."

Temür immediately understood the danger that had found him. He followed the guards through crowded corridors until he entered the palace training grounds.

The entire courtyard had been transformed into a Mongol encampment. Horses stood tethered beside fountains. Warriors sharpened arrows while servants carried armor and supplies.

At the center, upon a carved wooden chair, sat General Qadan.

He saw that Layla stood nearby by, confusion written across her face.

Youseff, the man who had crossed him, watched silently from the shadows.

Qadan studied Temür carefully.

“They say you are skilled with the bow.”

Temür bowed respectfully.

“I am only a servant of the sultan.”

“That is not what I asked.”

The general pointed toward several targets placed across the courtyard.

“Show me.”

A servant brought Temür his composite bow and a quiver with arrows. The familiar touch of polished horn and wood filled him with memories of the steppe.

He took position and the courtyard became silent.

Temür drew the bowstring and released.

The arrow struck wide, and murmurs spread among the Mongol soldiers.

Temür fired again.

Another miss.

Then a third.

General Qadan did not move, but his eyes hardened slightly.

“A mediocre archer,” he said calmly, “does not miss in the same way three times.”

Temür remained silent and Qadan rose slowly from his chair.

“You insult me.”

“I speak only truth, General.”

“No,” Qadan replied. “You hide it.”

The Mongol commander looked toward Layla.

“Bring the girl.”

A wave of fear passed through the courtyard and Temür's heart froze. Two soldiers gently but firmly guided Layla forward. Though frightened, she lifted her chin proudly.

Qadan removed a red apple from a silver tray beside him and placed it carefully upon her head. The soldiers walked away with her until Qadan nodded.

The courtyard erupted in whispers.

Temür stepped forward instinctively.

"No!"

Instantly several Mongol archers raised their bows toward Layla.

Qadan's voice remained cold and measured.

"If your next arrow misses, one of mine will not."

Layla's eyes found Temür's. He had faced wolves in the winter plains. He had crossed deserts and mountains. But never had his hands trembled as they did now.

Slowly, he raised the bow. The world seemed to disappear. No soldiers. No palace. No crowd. Only Layla standing alone beneath the sunlight with death balancing upon her head.

Layla lips draw a phrase.

"Release the arrow, my love. If they take you away, I have no reason to remain alive."

Temür drew the string. Every muscle in his body tightened with fear.

If his hand shook, or If the wind changed...

He released the arrow. It flew across the courtyard like lightning and the apple exploded into fragments. Layla gasped as pieces of red fruit scattered across the marble stones.

For one heartbeat, the entire palace stood frozen, then murmurs spread through the Mongol ranks. Several

warriors smiled openly while others nodded in admiration. Even hardened veterans looked impressed.

General Qadan walked slowly toward the shattered apple. He picked up the arrow and examined it. Then he looked at Temür.

“At last,” he said quietly, “the truth.”

Temür lowered his bow without speaking.

Qadan approached until they stood face to face.

“You were born for the saddle and the bow,” the general said. “Not for palace gardens.”

Temür’s voice was low, but defiant.

“I belong here now.”

“No,” Qadan replied. “You belong to the Mongols.”

Then his expression hardened and he talked loudly, for everybody to hear.

“At dawn, Temür rides with my army.”

The words struck Temür like a blade, he understood that he was lost.

“My lord—”

The Mongol general turned away.

“It is not a request. The Great Khan has need of warriors.”

The audience was over.

Around them, the courtyard slowly returned to life, but to Temür the palace already felt distant, like something fading into a dream.

Dawn had barely touched the towers of Aleppo when the Mongol army began to move.

The palace courtyards echoed with the sounds of saddles tightening, horses snorting, and wheels creaking beneath heavy wagons. Black banners stirred in the cold morning wind.

Temür stood beside his horse Salkhi in silence, dressed now in Mongol armor once more. His one-eye dog Suld looked at him, impatient, sensing that big changes were upon them.

Behind him, footsteps approached softly.

Layla approached him quickly and buried her face against his chest, her body trembling. Temür held her carefully, as though she was something fragile enough to break beneath his hands.

"They cannot take you," she whispered.

He closed his eyes, knowing they could. The Khan's command was stronger than sultan's, stronger than promises, stronger even than love.

"I must go," he said quietly.

Layla pulled away from him, tears shining upon her face.

"You promised."

The pain in her voice cut deeper than any blade he had ever touched. Temür searched desperately for words, but none came.

At last, he said only:

"I will return."

Layla looked at him for a long time.

They were still so young.

Young enough to believe that war was temporary. That love alone could protect them. That destiny could still be persuaded.

Finally, Layla reached beneath her sleeve and removed a thin blue ribbon embroidered with delicate silver thread.

"My mother gave me this when I was little," she said softly. "For luck." She tied it around his wrist. "Keep it with you." She placed her forehead gently against his.

“When the spring returns,” she whispered, “you must return with it.”

For the first time, Temür felt fear. Not fear of battle. Not fear of death. But fear that the world awaiting him beyond the horizon would change him into someone Layla would no longer recognize.

A Mongol horn sounded across the courtyard. The army was departing.

Layla suddenly pulled him close and kissed him with desperate passion, as though trying to leave part of her soul within him.

When they finally parted, both were trembling.

She stepped back before her tears could break her strength. Temür mounted his horse and, very slowly, started to move away.

“I will wait for you, Temür,” she whispered to herself, knowing that Temür could not hear her.

And as the Mongol army rolled out through the gates of Aleppo beneath the rising sun, Layla remained standing alone in the palace courtyard, watching until the last glimpse of him vanished into the dust of the eastern road.

The endless Mongol sky stretched cold and silent over the steppe. And somewhere far away, war was already coming.

CHAPTER 8

THE WESTERN CAMPAIGN

For the last forty days, Temür had ridden west with the army of Batu Khan.

Each morning began before sunrise. The camps vanished almost as quickly as they had appeared, thousands of felt yurts disappearing into wagons while endless columns of riders advanced beneath gray skies toward lands Temür had never imagined existed.

The further they traveled, the more he felt the distance from the peaceful life he had once known.

At night, beside the fires of the camp, he often remembered the warm smell of bread from the sultan's tent, the quiet laughter of Layla among the women, and the soft sound of horses grazing beside the river of his homeland.

Those memories now seemed impossibly far away. The Mongol army moved like a living force of nature.

From the moment Temür joined its ranks, he had been overwhelmed by its enormous size and organization. He had seen tribal wars before, but nothing compared to this vast machine of conquest stretching across the steppe like an endless river of men, horses, carts, and banners.

Everything possessed order.

Every warrior belonged to an *arban*, a unit of ten men.

Ten arbans formed a *jagun* of one hundred warriors.

Ten jaguns created a *mingghan* of one thousand.

Above them stood the mighty *tumen*, armies of ten thousand horsemen commanded by veteran generals whose names were feared across the world. No man rode alone.

Each soldier depended upon the others with absolute obedience. If one warrior deserted, the entire *arban* could be punished. If one failed in battle, all shared the shame.

Discipline among the Mongols was harsher than iron. Orders were obeyed instantly. Horses were inspected daily. Weapons were maintained with endless care. Even during storms, the columns marched with relentless precision. A warrior who neglected his duties could be whipped publicly or executed without mercy.

Temür quickly understood why kingdoms trembled before them.

Yet the Mongol army was not formed only of Mongols. The man who united the scattered tribes of the steppe, first known as Temujin and later feared across the world as Genghis Khan, did not simply exterminate every enemy he conquered.

He absorbed those whose talents could strengthen his empire. The empire devoured nations and then used their strength to conquer others.

Skilled riders were added to his cavalry. Blacksmiths forged weapons for his armies. Scribes kept records in many languages. Engineers from distant China built siege machines capable of destroying the walls of mighty cities.

As the great empire expanded across Asia, countless people had been absorbed into its ranks. And the conquered peoples were often allowed to keep their religions, customs, and traditions. Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and shamans, all lived beneath Mongol rule.

The empire demanded only two things:

Absolute loyalty.

Absolute obedience.

Temür heard dozens of languages spoken beside the campfires at night.

There were Turkic riders from the western steppes, broad-shouldered and deadly with curved sabers. Persian scribes traveled with the commanders, recording supplies, tribute, and messages between distant generals. Chinese engineers accompanied the army with strange carts filled with tools, ropes, powders, and pieces of enormous siege machines capable of destroying city walls. There were even captured Russians and Muslims serving as guides, interpreters, or craftsmen beneath Mongol supervision.

Nothing useful was wasted.

For many days, Temür remained little more than another young rider among thousands.

Then fate changed his path unexpectedly.

One evening, while camping near the banks of a frozen river, an officer entered Temür's tent and ordered him to report immediately to the command pavilion of Batu Khan himself.

Temür followed silently through the enormous camp, passing rows of guards and tethered horses until he reached the great command tent.

Inside, the air smelled of smoke, leather, and ink.

Several commanders stood around a large table covered with maps and written reports. Oil lamps flickered softly beside them.

At the center stood Batu Khan.

Temür immediately lowered his eyes.

The grandson of Genghis Khan was not physically imposing like many of his generals, yet his presence dominated completely. His face remained calm and

unreadable, while his dark eyes studied everything with cold intelligence.

Without greeting, Batu spoke.

“You are the boy raised among the Muslims.”

Temür bowed his head carefully.

“Yes, my Khan.”

One of the officers handed Batu a parchment covered with Arabic writing.

“They say you can read this.”

Temür hesitated only briefly before answering.

“Yes.”

“Read.”

The young warrior stepped closer to the lamp and began translating slowly into Mongolian. The message contained trade reports gathered from merchants traveling westward toward the Christian kingdoms.

The tent became silent.

When he finished, Batu Khan watched him thoughtfully.

“And Latin?” the Khan asked.

“A little.”

Another parchment was placed before him, this one covered in strange western symbols.

Temür translated again.

Several commanders exchanged surprised glances. Batu Khan showed a sign of interest.

“A rider who reads is useful,” he said calmly. “A rider who understands many tongues is worth more than many others.”

He turned toward one of his generals.

“The boy will remain with the command staff.”

With a few simple words, his life had changed once again. When he left the tent, the cold wind swept across the endless sea of fires belonging to the greatest

army on earth. And somewhere far behind him, beyond rivers, mountains, and grasslands, Layla waited, beneath the same sky.

Temür left his yurt and moved with the staff of Batu Khan. He was well received. His companions were assistants to generals and high officers. All were at least three times his age and carried scars earned in countless battles.

At night, sitting around the fire, they drank the favorite drink of the troops, Kumis, a drink made of fermented mare's milk. That loosened the warriors' tongues and the reunion turned into a nonstop telling of stories about heroic battle feats.

During the first nights, the veterans ignored him. They just considered him a *bichigchi*, or scribe, a soldier dedicated to writing messages or keeping records, lucky enough to have earned the favor of the khan.

The second night, one of the officers sat next to him.

"My name is Agun," he told him. "And I am a *mingghan*. Do you know what that is?"

"Yes," answer Temür. "You command one thousand men."

"Well," said Agun loud enough for all the men to hear, "our young soldier knows something about the army!"

He offered Temür a leather flask, saying,
"You must drink with us."

But Temür was still a follower of a different god, and Muslims did not drink alcohol. He looked at Agun.

"I appreciate your offer, but I do not drink."

The group had stopped talking and was now paying attention.

“So, our young soldier cannot drink.” Somebody said. “We know he can write, but can he fight?”

Temür looked at the officer.

“I can fight as well as you.”

A general laugh broke up from the group. The officer got up and approached Temür.

“Are you ready to prove that?” he asked.

Somebody from the group called him.

“Jochi, leave the young man alone!”

But Temür was already on his feet. The officer seemed to be close to 40 years old, and a couple of deep scars highlighted his penetrating dark eyes. Even though it was warm, he was still wearing his lamellar armor. Temür was concerned, but he knew that he needed to establish his position from the beginning.

He asked Jochi,

“Are you saying that you want me to fight you?”

Laughter erupted again around the fire. The conversation was becoming far more interesting now.

Somebody joke:

“No fighting! We can lose Jochi, but if we lose a scribe, Batu will kill us all!”

At that moment, Batu Khan entered the gert. The men jumped unsteadily to their feet, still swaying from the effects of the alcohol. The khan ignored them and ask, smiling,

“What are you, uneducated animals, doing to my scribe?”

Agung, the worrier who had talked to Temür first, bow deeply and explained the situation. The khan smiled again.

“There is nothing wrong with probing what the young scribe can do. Lets test him.” He looked at Temür.

“Do you know what a ‘falcon turn’ is?”

“Of course, my lord”

“Well, we all meet tomorrow at dawn at the training field. Bring you horse and your weapons. We’ll have some fun. Now, everybody to sleep.”

When Temür laid down, he was thinking that perhaps he had been too impulsive to accept the challenge. But then as it happened every night, his thoughts changed to Layla, and everything was again all right.

The next morning appeared fresh; dew covered the grass and the air was clear. At the command of the khan, servants had set flags with the bright color in the field, marking a course one thousand yards long. A large number of warriors had taken positions on both sides of the track, anxious to watch the test.

At the far end stood a raised platform with a canvas roof over the khan’s throne.

When Temür arrived with his horse at the beginning of the course, a loud clamor was raised from the expectant soldiers, some of them yelling his name, although he had no idea of what the challenge consisted of.

Agung, the officer that had talked with him the night before, came over to him, smiling.

“My young scribe, I knew that you’ll attend. A noble soldier of the Khan would never risk being called a coward.”

He inspected Temür equipment.

“You can leave your saber and you lance, you won’t need them. Now listen to me.”

Agung pointed to the place where they were standing and the to the end of the course.

“You will take off from here, at full gallop. Three of my fastest riders will follow you a moment later. Each

will carry a large wooden shield before him, with the drawing of a bird the size of a fist in the center. They will try to reach you. The course is three arrow-shots in length. You must place one arrow in each one the shields, before they catch you and before the end of the course.”

Agung paused.

“What happens if I fail.”

Agung smiled.

“For each shield that you do not hit, you will brush that raider’s horse for a whole moon change. So you better be right on target.”

“What happens if I hit a raider?”

“Then it would be his fault, for not using the shield right.”

“I understand. Anything else?”

“Wait, you have not heard the best part yet. If you hit a bird on one of the shields, the raider will take care of your horse until the next moon.”

“They seem to be sure that I’d lose. They do not take any chances.”

“No, they don’t. I’m with you, have courage.”

Temür saw the flag of the khan raised at the end of the course. A loud horn sound broke over the noise. Temür mounted Salkhi and the crowd yell louder. He glanced back and saw the three riders mounting their horses, with the shields in their hands. He took the blue ribbon and kissed it.

A minute later, the horn blew again and Salkhi leaped forward at full gallop. The three riders followed fifty paces behind him.

The thunder of hooves shook the field.

Wind lashed against Temür’s face as Salkhi stretched into full speed across the grass. The world around became a blur of motion and noise.

He heard the pounding hooves behind him.

Coming fast. Very fast.

Temür twisted slightly in the saddle and saw the first rider gaining ground, holding the shield firmly before him. Painted at its center was the small black bird.

The target looked impossibly tiny.

The soldiers lining the course roared and shouted wagers to one another.

Temür rose slightly in the stirrups and reached for an arrow.

The motion came naturally, like breathing itself. In a perfect demonstration of the difficult maneuver the Mongol warriors called a “Falcon Turn”, he left the reigns go and turned backward while still galloping forward, drawing the bow in one smooth movement.

Gasps erupted from the crowd. The rider behind him bounced violently with the movement of his horse, the shield shaking constantly.

Impossible shot, many thought.

Temür released.

The arrow vanished through the morning air, a sharp crack sounded across the field and the shield jerked backward. The arrow had pierced directly through the painted bird.

An enormous roar exploded from the warriors.

The rider immediately pulled aside, laughing and raising the broken shield above his head.

“One bird!” somebody shouted.

But Temür barely heard them.

The second rider was already approaching.

This one came faster than the first, leaning low against his horse’s neck. His shield moved constantly from side to side to make the shot harder.

Salkhi was breathing heavily now beneath him, muscles straining with effort.

The second rider closed the distance rapidly.

Temür remembered Layla's face, the blue ribbon, her voice.

I will wait for you.

Calm returned to him. He inhaled deeply and the sounds of the crowd faded away.

Again he twisted in the saddle, farther this time, until it seemed impossible he could keep his balance. Some of the watching soldiers shouted, encouraging him.

The bow bent. The arrow flew. For one instant, nobody could tell whether he had missed. Then, the shield spun violently from the rider's hand and the arrow stood buried directly in the painted bird.

The crowd erupted louder than before.

Batu Khan raised halfway from his throne.

"By the Eternal Heaven," he shouted, "the boy truly is a Mongol!"

Only one rider remained. He was the fastest. He came like a storm across the field, gaining rapidly. He held his shield low and close, half hidden behind his horse's neck.

Temür's fingers tightened around his last arrow. Ahead, the end of the course approached quickly.

The rider was nearly upon him now. Temür could hear the animal's breathing behind him. The soldiers were screaming for him to shoot.

Suddenly, Temür pulled hard on Salkhi's reins and the horse veered sharply sideways.

A collective cry burst from the crowd. The pursuing rider instinctively adjusted course for a heartbeat and for a single instant the shield lifted slightly.

Temür drew and released almost in the same motion and the arrow struck with the sound of splitting wood, directly through the center of the bird.

For a moment there was stunned silence across the entire field, then the crowd exploded into thunderous celebration. Men shouted, laughed, and struck one another with excitement. Several riders lifted their bows into the air.

The last horseman slowed beside Temür, staring at the arrow buried perfectly in the painted bird.

“You ride like Subutai¹⁵ himself,” the man said breathlessly.

Temür finally slowed Salkhi to a stop, his heart hammering inside his chest. Across the field, Batu Khan stood smiling broadly and raised his arm toward Temür.

“No more talk of scribes,” he declared. “This young man rides with warriors.”

A roar of approval answered him.

Agun approached laughing and seized Temür by the shoulder.

“Well,” he said, “it seems three men shall be caring for your horse this month.”

Temür laughed with them. And as the cheers echoed around him, his hand quietly moved beneath his armor until his fingers touched the blue ribbon hidden near his heart.

The months that followed carried Temür farther west than he had ever dreamed he could travel.

¹⁵ Subutai (c. 1175–1248) was the most brilliant general of the Mongol Empire and one of the chief architects of its conquests. He served under Genghis Khan and later helped plan the campaigns of his successors.

The army crossed endless grasslands that seemed to have no end. Rivers wider than any he had seen in his homeland yielded before Mongol ingenuity. Engineers constructed bridges where none existed, while scouts rode ahead like shadows, gathering information from villages, merchants, and frightened refugees fleeing before the advance.

As part of Batu Khan's staff, Temür witnessed the campaign from a privileged position. He translated messages, copied reports, and occasionally accompanied envoys sent to demand submission from local rulers. Everywhere the army went, the same choice was offered: surrender and live, or resist and perish.

Most chose surrender.

Temür soon learned why the Mongols feared no city. He watched Chinese engineers assemble enormous siege machines from wagons that carried hundreds of wooden beams, ropes, and iron fittings. He saw commanders calculate distances and supplies with remarkable precision. Scouts returned daily with maps and descriptions of roads, rivers, and fortifications. Nothing seemed left to chance.

The empire advanced like a giant hand slowly closing around the world.

Victories followed one after another. Fortresses that local rulers had believed impregnable surrendered within days. Others were stormed after brief resistance. In those cases, the results were always tragic.

News of Batu Khan's advance spread faster than the army itself, and entire regions trembled at the mention of his name.

Yet amid the triumphs, Temür noticed something else unsettling.

After every battle, long columns of captives joined the march. Some became laborers. Others were assigned to transport supplies or construct siege works. Entire families followed the army under guard. The Mongols called it necessity. Temür tried to believe them.

Then, one evening, word spread through the camp. Ahead lay Kyiv.

The name passed from fire to fire among the officers.

Kyiv, the Mother of Rus' Cities.

Kyiv, whose churches possessed golden domes that shone like sunlight and whose merchants traded with lands as distant as Constantinople and the northern seas.

Even veteran commanders spoke of it with respect.

When Temür first saw the city several days later, he understood why.

Rising above the snowy banks of the Dnieper River, its walls stretched across the hills like the work of giants. Towers crowned the heights. Golden domes glimmered beneath the pale winter sun. For a moment, Temür forgot he was looking at an enemy. The city seemed too beautiful to be destined to be destroyed.

Beside him, an older officer followed his gaze.

"A magnificent prize," the man said.

Temür nodded.

But deep within him, a strange uneasiness stirred, and he wondered what would remain when the conquerors finally moved on.

CHAPTER 9

KYIV¹⁶

Winter had wrapped the city of Kyiv beneath a sky of iron-gray clouds. Snow rested upon rooftops, towers, and church domes like white ash after a fire.

One of the greatest cities of Eastern Europe, the Orthodox Christian city was the spiritual heart of the Eastern Slavic world, and the cradle of Orthodox Christianity in the Rus' lands.

Its harbor on the Dnieper river bustled with ships from Genoa, Venice and Pisa bringing goods, pilgrims and soldiers. Its streets echoed with dozens of languages, Latin, Old French, Arabic, Greek.

The city stood proud and ancient, protected by six-foot thick walls and wooden ramparts reinforced with earth and stone. Watchtowers rose above the walls like silent guardians, their sharpened palisades dark against the pale horizon.

The people of Kyiv believed their city was unconquerable. It made sense. Its defenses were formidable. Deep trenches surrounded the outer walls, and massive gates reinforced with iron bands protected the entrances. Archers watched from elevated platforms while soldiers patrolled the ramparts wrapped in heavy cloaks of fur and wool.

Yet, fear had already begun to travel through the city.

For weeks, refugees from eastern villages had arrived with terrifying stories. They spoke of entire towns

¹⁶ Kyiv, the actual city capital of Ukraine, is named as Kiev in some literature.

burned to the ground, of horsemen who moved like a storm across the steppe, and of warriors who showed neither exhaustion nor mercy. Some claimed the invaders were demons sent by God to punish mankind. Church bells rang more often now, calling the faithful to prayer as fear tightened its grip upon the city. Women lit candles before painted icons while priests prayed for deliverance from the eastern invaders.

Others whispered a name with dread:

Batu Khan.

Inside the citadel, Prince Dmitri of Kyiv sat beside a great fire while advisers discussed rumors from the east. The prince was a proud and experienced ruler, broad-shouldered despite his age, his beard streaked with silver. He had fought wars before and trusted the strength of Kyiv's defenses.

Suddenly, the doors of the hall burst open.

A guard hurried inside, kneeling immediately.

"My lord," he said breathlessly, "a messenger has arrived from the eastern road."

"Bring him," Dmitri of Kyiv ordered.

Moments later, two soldiers supported a man so exhausted he could barely stand. His cloak was frozen with snow and mud, and his horse had collapsed outside the gates moments after arriving. The messenger fell to one knee before the prince.

"My lord..." he gasped. "The Mongols are coming."

Silence filled the hall.

"How far?" asked the Prince calmly.

"Three... perhaps four days away. Batu Khan leads them himself."

Murmurs spread among the advisers.

The messenger continued, struggling for breath.

“They travel without stopping. Villages burn behind them. Their scouts are everywhere. No army has slowed them.”

The prince rose slowly from his seat.

“How many?”

“At least thirty thousand riders... perhaps more.”

The ruler exchanged glances with his generals, but fear did not appear on his face.

“Then they shall find thirty thousand waiting for them here,” Dmitri declared firmly.

That same evening, the great council gathered inside the fortress. Generals, nobles, veteran captains, and trusted advisers surrounded a massive wooden table covered with maps of the surrounding lands.

Oil lamps flickered while snow beat softly against the narrow windows.

General Yaroslav, commander of the city guard, struck the table with confidence.

“The Mongols are riders of the open plains,” he said. “Let them come against walls and stone. Kyiv has never fallen.”

Several men nodded in agreement.

“Our army equals theirs in number,” another commander added. “We possess strong defenses, food reserves, and superior position. We can endure a siege for months.”

One elderly adviser spoke more cautiously.

“Other cities believed the same.”

The room fell silent for a moment.

But pride was stronger than fear.

At last, the prince raised his hand.

“We will not surrender,” Dmitri declared. “We will fight.”

The decision spread quickly throughout Kyiv.

Church bells rang through the streets as soldiers prepared for war. Blacksmiths worked day and night forging spearheads and repairing armor. Archers carried bundles of arrows to the walls while laborers reinforced the gates with timber and iron. Cauldrons of boiling oil were prepared atop the ramparts.

Every tower became a watch post.

Every man capable of carrying a weapon was summoned.

Nevertheless, panic slowly spread among the people. Merchants loaded wagons with food, gold, and whatever belongings they could carry. Noble families prepared caravans to flee westward before the Mongol army arrived. Mothers held crying children while Orthodox priests prayed openly in the streets.

Some still trusted the city walls, others trusted only distance.

As night descended upon Kyiv, torches burned across the mighty ramparts, illuminating soldiers standing guard against the frozen darkness beyond the walls.

Far away upon the endless steppe, unseen beneath the winter storm, Batu Khan's army continued its relentless march toward the city.

The battle.

At dawn on the fourth day, the watchmen upon Kyiv's ramparts saw movement upon the frozen horizon.

At first it appeared like a dark stain spreading slowly across the snow-covered plains. Then shapes emerged through the morning mist: horses, banners, and endless columns of riders advancing beneath the gray winter sky.

The Mongols had arrived.

The thirty thousand men army that descended upon Kyiv did not look like a single nation. It looked like an omen of the end of the world.

At its head rode the Mongols of Batu Khan, hard-faced riders wrapped in fur and leather, their bows hanging beside curved sabers blackened by use.

Their horses were tireless creatures of the steppe, capable of crossing impossible distances without rest. The riders seemed born in the saddle. They could release arrows at full gallop with deadly precision, turning their mounts with their knees while their hands rained death upon the enemy.

And the mass that followed Batu was no longer purely Mongol.

Among the riders marched Turkic warriors from the endless grasslands, fierce Kipchaks and Tatars absorbed into the armies of the Great Khan. There were hardened veterans from conquered tribes of Central Asia, grim men speaking dozens of tongues beneath banners stitched with wolf tails and horsehair.

Chinese engineers traveled with the army, masters of siege warfare, whose machines had shattered the cities of Cathay and Persia before being brought westward into Europe. They built enormous trebuchets from timber cut in nearby forests, towering engines capable of hurling stones heavier than a man across the walls of a city. The great machines could thunder day and night like the wrath of God, smashing towers, crushing roofs, and breaking the courage of those within the walls.

Alongside them came Muslim craftsmen and engineers from conquered lands beyond the deserts, men who understood crude explosives, fire, and the construction of siege towers. Slaves and prisoners were

driven before the army to dig trenches, fill moats, and drag timber beneath enemy arrows.

The Mongols themselves remained the core of the force: disciplined, relentless, and terrifyingly organized. Units moved with mechanical precision. Signals from drums, horns, and black banners carried commands across the battlefield faster than any messenger could ride. Retreats became ambushes. Confusion became slaughter.

Behind the cavalry came foot soldiers gathered from subject peoples of the empire. Some carried spears and shields, others axes or captured European swords. Many were forced into service after the destruction of their own cities, marching beneath Mongol banners because refusal meant death.

And always there were the scouts.

Days ahead of the main host rode silent horsemen who mapped rivers, counted defenders, and spread terror through rumor long before the army arrived. Villages often fled at the mere sight of them, abandoning homes before the true horde appeared on the horizon.

When the full army finally came into view before Kyiv, it seemed endless.

The earth trembled beneath thousands of hooves. Fires stretched across the plains at night like a second sky of red stars. Smoke rose from burned villages behind them, while before them stood the golden domes of the holy city.

Many inside Kyiv believed no force on earth could take their walls.

They had not yet seen what the Mongols had become.

Church bells rang wildly throughout the city.

Men rushed toward the walls while frightened citizens gathered in the streets below, staring eastward in

terror. Upon the distant plains, Batu Khan's army spread with frightening discipline. Thousands of riders moved silently into position, separating into vast arcs that slowly extended around Kyiv like the closing jaws of a trap.

Prince Dmitri stood atop the ramparts beside General Yaroslav, watching the enemy through the falling snow.

"So many..." whispered one of the younger soldiers.

The Mongol banners fluttered in the icy wind. Drums echoed faintly across the plains while mounted scouts rode in every direction, swift as hunting wolves. Some disappeared into nearby forests while others galloped along the roads leading westward, cutting every possible escape.

No one would enter Kyiv.

No one would leave.

Throughout the day, Mongol patrols captured farmers, hunters, and refugees hiding in the countryside. Prisoners were dragged before Mongol officers and questioned relentlessly about the city's defenses, its gates, its wells, and the number of soldiers guarding the walls.

Temür watched silently as one trembling prisoner described the positions of the city guard upon the western ramparts.

The young Mongol warrior had seen many cities before, yet Kyiv felt different. Above the walls rose magnificent church domes crowned with golden crosses that glimmered weakly beneath the winter sun. Bells echoed constantly through the cold air while black-robed Orthodox priests walked along the ramparts carrying painted icons and burning incense among the defenders.

The entire city seemed to pray.

By midday, Batu Khan himself rode to a hill overlooking Kyiv. Wrapped in thick furs atop his black horse, he observed the city without emotion while his generals gathered around him.

“The Rus prince has deployed soldiers in front of the gates,” one commander reported.

Batu studied the distant defensive lines. Several thousand armored warriors stood before the city walls carrying shields, spears, and banners marked with Christian crosses. Behind them, archers crowded the ramparts above.

A direct assault would place the Mongol riders at the reach of the deadly arrows of the crossbows of the defenders.

Batu narrowed his eyes thoughtfully.

“They want us close to the walls,” he said calmly.

No one questioned him further.

Shortly afterward, three Mongol emissaries rode slowly toward the city beneath a white banner. Snow crunched beneath their horses as they approached the outer lines of Kyiv’s defenders.

Prince Dmitri himself rode forward to meet them, surrounded by heavily armored members of his *druzhina*¹⁷. The cold wind carried clouds of frozen breath between both sides.

One of the emissaries spoke firmly.

“Thus speaks Batu Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, ruler of the Eternal Blue Sky.”

The Mongol pointed toward Kyiv.

“Open your gates. Lay down your weapons. Submit, and your people shall live.”

¹⁷ Druzhina; the personal staff of a prince, formed by knights, household guards, or noble cavalry.

Silence followed, while snow drifted softly across the frozen plain.

Prince Dmitri stared coldly at the envoys.

“Kyiv does not kneel before invaders,” he answered.

The emissary showed no anger.

“Then Kyiv shall burn.”

Without another word, the Mongols turned their horses and rode back toward their army.

General Yaroslav exhaled deeply beside the prince.

“There can be no peace now.”

Dmitri’s gaze remained fixed upon the distant figure of Batu Khan.

“There was never going to be peace.” He said.

As darkness descended, fires appeared throughout the Mongol encampment. Thousands of tents covered the plains beyond Kyiv while mounted patrols continued circling the city without rest.

Yet Batu did not attack.

The following morning, the Mongols advanced toward the Christian lines outside the walls. Drums thundered across the frozen earth as clouds of horse archers approached at full gallop.

The defenders tightened formation.

“Hold!” General Yaroslav shouted.

Arrows suddenly darkened the sky.

The Mongols released their volleys from a distance before turning away almost immediately.

Christian archers upon the walls answered with their own storm of arrows while Dmitri’s soldiers advanced several steps across the snow. From the ramparts, the Rus soldiers saw several of the Mongol riders being hit by arrows and falling from their horses.

“They retreat!” shouted one of the Rus captains.

Indeed, the Mongols appeared to withdraw. Their riders scattered backward across the plains as though unable to break the Christian lines.

Excitement spread among Kyiv’s defenders.

General Yaroslav raised his sword eagerly.

“Forward!”

Hundreds of Rus cavalry surged ahead, pursuing the retreating Mongols. The armors and the steel plates protecting the horses heads and chests resembled a river of steel flowing across the snow. The soil exploded beneath the charging horses while triumphant cries echoed across the battlefield.

Prince Dmitri suddenly frowned.

Something felt wrong.

They were pursuing the retreating Mongols far away from the protection of the archers on the city walls. The Mongols were retreating too cleanly... too quickly.

Then horns sounded across the plains.

From behind frozen hills and hidden ravines, thousands of Mongol riders emerged like shadows rising from the earth itself.

The trap closed instantly.

Mongol cavalry swept around both flanks while mounted archers surrounded the advancing Rus warriors in a widening circle. Arrows poured relentlessly into the trapped soldiers from every direction.

Horses neigh in pain. Men fell into the snow clutching their throats and faces.

The Rus cavalry attempted to regroup, but the Mongols never allowed them close enough to strike. Whenever the Christian warriors charged forward, the horse archers retreated smoothly while continuing to fire with terrifying precision. Experienced Mongol riders fired

calmly at full gallop, having practiced these movements since childhood.

Wave after wave of arrows descended over the Rus cavalry.

General Yaroslav shouted desperately for retreat, but confusion had already spread through the Christian ranks. Men and horses collided while Mongol cavalry closed around them like tightening chains.

When some the arrows bounced against the knights armors, the Mongols used the terrible mace to crush them.

From the walls of Kyiv, thousands watched helplessly as their soldiers died upon the frozen plain.

Church bells rang wildly across the city. Orthodox priests raised icons toward the battlefield while women wept openly upon the ramparts.

Beside Batu Khan, one of the generals smiled grimly.

“The prince took the bait.”

But Batu remained expressionless as he observed the slaughter unfolding before the walls of Kyiv. Then he turned to Temür.

“Escribe! Write carefully about this glorious day! History will declare Batu Khan, commander of the Golden Horde, as the warrior who brought Rus to its knees and forged the Western Mongol Empire! As the great Genghis Khan foretold, let it be no doubt that the Eternal Blue Sky has destined the Mongols to conquer all lands beneath Heaven!”

Because Temür now served among Batu Khan’s general staff, he did not ride into the slaughter below. From a distant hill beside the Mongol commanders, he watched the battle unfold upon the frozen plains and felt

a strange heaviness within him, as if each scream carried away a fragment of his soul.

The siege of Kyiv lasted three terrible weeks.

Batu's engineers constructed massive siege machines brought from distant eastern lands. Day after day, enormous catapults hurled stones against the walls while heavy rams pounded the gates day and night.

Each sunrise revealed new destruction.

Great cracks slowly spread through the wooden ramparts as fires burned endlessly beyond the city gates.

The people of Kyiv endured hunger, exhaustion, and fear.

Church bells rang constantly across the frozen streets while Orthodox priests carried icons through the crowds, praying for salvation that never came. Women melted snow for water while wounded soldiers filled the churches and monasteries. Every night, the citizens listened to the distant thunder of Mongol drums echoing across the plains.

The Mongols never rested.

Their riders surrounded the city without pause, cutting every road and hunting down anyone attempting escape. During the nights, fires from the vast Mongol encampment glowed red upon the horizon.

Temür remained beside Batu Khan's staff upon the snowy hills overlooking the city. From there he could see the golden domes of Kyiv slowly disappearing beneath smoke.

Even during bombardments, the bells continued to ring. The sound unsettled him.

One evening, after another section of the wall collapsed beneath the assault, Batu summoned his generals.

“The city weakens,” he said calmly. “Soon desperation will open the gates for us.”

And he was right.

By the third week, Kyiv had become a starving city. Food had nearly vanished. Hundreds of wounded crowded the churches while fear spread faster than fire through the streets.

Prince Dmitri understood the truth at last.

The walls would not hold much longer.

If the Mongols breached the city while the defenders remained trapped inside, the slaughter would become even worse. Therefore, in one final act of desperation, the prince ordered the gates opened.

At dawn, the bells of Kyiv rang louder than ever before and the gates swung open.

Hundreds of Rus soldiers emerged into the snow carrying spears, axes, swords, and banners marked with the cross. Orthodox priests walked among them holding icons high above their heads while the defenders shouted prayers to God.

Upon the distant hills, Batu Khan watched silently. He raised one hand and Mongol horns echoed across the plains.

The riders advanced like a dark tide, and the battle lasted less than an hour. The exhausted defenders of Kyiv fought bravely, but hunger and despair had already defeated them long before the first Mongol arrow flew. Horse archers surrounded them from every side while waves of cavalry shattered their broken formations upon the frozen ground.

Prince Dmitri disappeared beneath the chaos of battle, still fighting as the Mongol riders closed around him. By noon, the army of Kyiv no longer existed, and the Mongols entered the city.

Smoke rose into the gray winter sky as the streets filled with screams, fire, and panic. Doors were broken open. Churches overflowed with terrified families seeking refuge beneath painted icons and candlelight.

But refuge did not exist anywhere.

In a methodical and ruthless operation, the Mongol soldiers emptied the houses, the churches, the halls, and every place where the petrified population had sought refuge.

The people were herded outside the city walls like cattle. Officers walked among women clutching their children, frozen with fear, and among the old men too frail to have taken part in the battle. A few hundred strong men and women were selected to be sent to Karakorum and sold as slaves.

The rest were condemned to die.

No cries for mercy changed the sentence. No prayer softened the hearts of the conquerors. One by one, families disappeared beneath sword and spear while smoke drifted over the ruins of the fallen city.

When the army finally departed, the burned and blackened bodies remained unburied beneath the sky, a silent testimony to the futility of resisting the most powerful army in the world.

For generations, the fall of Kyiv would be remembered as a symbol of the terrible ruthlessness men are capable of inflicting upon one another.

Temür rode slowly through the shattered streets beside several officers from Batu's staff. Around him, flames consumed homes while soldiers dragged treasures from palaces, churches, and markets.

Yet it was not the fire that disturbed him most.

It was the silence that followed behind it.

By nightfall, entire streets stood empty beneath the falling snow. The bells had finally stopped ringing. Abandoned icons lay broken upon frozen ground stained black by ash.

Temür looked across the devastated city and felt something inside him begin to break.

This was no longer war.

It was annihilation.

The city had fallen.

For three days, smoke drifted above Kyiv like a dark cloud visible for miles across the frozen plains. Entire districts had been reduced to blackened ruins. The great gates lay shattered. Churches stood roofless under the gray winter sky, their golden domes broken and scattered among the debris.

Temür rode slowly through the silent streets. The Mongols had been victorious once more, yet it felt nothing like victory.

The snow beneath Salkhi's hooves was stained black with soot and red with blood. Here and there, survivors emerged cautiously from cellars and collapsed buildings, searching among the ruins for relatives who would never answer their calls.

The bells of Kyiv had fallen silent. Only the harsh cawing of crows echoed across the streets.

As he passed the ruins of a church, Temür saw a group of women kneeling among the stones. They were gathering fragments of painted icons from the rubble as carefully as if they were collecting precious jewels.

One of them looked up briefly and their eyes met.

Temür lowered his gaze and rode on.

That evening, a messenger summoned him to the command pavilion.

Inside, Batu Khan sat with several officers reviewing reports from across the conquered city. The commanders discussed casualties, prisoners, supplies, and tribute with the same calm voices they might have used while counting horses.

When Temür entered, Batu handed him a bundle of parchments.

"You will prepare the official record," the Khan said.

Temür bowed.

"Yes, my Khan."

"The empire must remember what happened here."

The words followed him long after he left the pavilion.

The empire must remember.

Near midnight, he sat alone beside a small oil lamp inside his tent. Before him lay fresh sheets of parchment. Outside, the sounds of the camp continued as always. Horses snorted. Guards exchanged challenges. Somewhere, warriors laughed around a fire.

Temür dipped his pen into ink. For several moments he stared at the empty page. Then he began to write. First, a description of the battle.

The city of Kyiv resisted the authority of Batu Khan and refused surrender. Following the breaching of the walls, the city was taken by force. Enemy resistance was eliminated. Captives, supplies, and tribute were secured according to the laws of the empire. This was a great victory of our leader, the great Batu Khan, greatest strategist of all times, and will be remember for ever in the history of the gran Mongol Empire.

Then, the homage:

To the Most Noble Batu Khan, grandson of the Great Genghis Khan,

Following the successful reduction of the city of Kyiv and the submission of the surrounding territories, I submit this account of the present reach of the Mongol Empire.

Never before has a single ruler commanded so vast a dominion.

From the shores of the Eastern Sea, where the sun rises beyond the lands of Cathay, to the forests and rivers of Rus', the authority of the descendants of Genghis Khan now extends across the breadth of the world.

The empire embraces the grasslands of Mongolia, the deserts beyond them, the kingdoms of northern China, the mountains of Central Asia, the cities of Transoxiana, the lands of Persia, and the great western steppes. Countless tribes and nations now serve beneath the Eternal Blue Heaven and the banners of the House of Genghis.

Couriers carrying the commands of the Khans ride from one end of the world to the other through stations maintained solely for their passage.

The peoples of the empire speak many tongues and worship many gods, yet all acknowledge the supremacy of the Great Khan and the laws established by his illustrious grandfather.

With the taking of Kyiv, the frontier of conquest now stands at the threshold of the western kingdoms. Beyond lie Poland, Hungary, Austria, and the lands of the Franks, whose rulers have not yet felt the full strength of Mongol arms.

The empire has become so vast that a rider traveling at great speed could spend an entire year crossing it and still remain beneath the authority of the descendants of Genghis Khan.

Thus has the Eternal Heaven favored the Mongol nation above all others.

He stopped. The words looked neat. Orderly. Precise. And utterly false.

The city of Kyiv had resisted. No mention of the burning homes. No mention of the children crushed beneath fallen stone. No mention of the terrified refugees he had seen fleeing through streets filled with smoke.

Temür set down the pen.

For a long time he listened to the wind moving outside the tent. Then he pulled another sheet of parchment from his satchel.

This one would not be part of the official archive. This one would be his alone for the time being. The truth about the tragedy of Kyiv will be known by the world after his death.

He began writing again:

These words are not part of the official record.

I write them because truth deserves its own witness.

Let no man who reads this in years yet unborn believe that Kyiv fell as a mere line in a chronicle or as a number written beside the name of a victorious Khan.

The fires of Kyiv are still burning.

The city died slowly.

Not with the fury of battle anymore, but with the slow, smoldering breath of a dying city. Smoke drifts above the shattered rooftops and broken churches like dark spirits ascending toward a silent heaven. Ash floats through the streets and settles upon corpses, armors, splintered doors, and pools of frozen blood.

Today Kyiv died.

I saw churches burn and towers collapse. I saw brave men defend walls they could not save. I saw mothers searching the ruins for their children and children searching for parents who would never return.

The conquerors will record numbers. They will count horses, prisoners, and tribute. But numbers do not weep. Numbers do not bleed. If these words survive me, let whoever reads them know that Kyiv was once beautiful. Its bells rang across the river. Its markets were full of life. Its churches shone like gold beneath the sun.

Now only ashes remain.

All these things perished in Kyiv.

If these pages survive when I am dust, let it be remembered that before its destruction Kyiv was a city of beauty, faith, and life.

And let it also be remembered that those who defended it fought with a courage equal to any I have witnessed among the Mongols.

I was there.

I saw it.

And because I saw it, I cannot allow silence to become the final victor.

Temür paused. He found himself unable to continue. The lamp flickered. Beyond the tent walls was sleep the greatest military force on earth.

Yet as he stared at the unfinished page, he could not stop thinking of a single question.

If this was greatness, why did it cause so much grief?

CHAPTER 10

DESERTION

Temür rode slowly through the ruins beside a column of Mongol horsemen returning from the lower districts. No songs of victory rose among them now. Only exhaustion. The horses snorted clouds into the bitter winter air while wagon wheels crushed charred timbers beneath them.

A dead child lay half-buried under snow near the remains of a market stall.

Temür looked away.

For weeks the siege had consumed everything. Hunger, disease, fear, and finally slaughter. Kyiv had fought like a wounded beast refusing to die. Even after the walls were breached, the defenders had resisted street by street, church by church.

And the Mongols had answered with fire and steel.

Ahead of him, two warriors laughed while arguing over a silver icon torn from a church altar. One of them spat on it before tying it to his saddle.

Temür felt something twist inside him. Once, such things had not troubled him. Or perhaps they had, and he had learned to bury the feeling beneath obedience. Since boyhood he had been taught the same truth every Mongol knew:

Mongol conquest of the world was the will of Eternal Heaven.

The strong ruled because Heaven favored them. The weak existed to kneel or perish.

He had believed it, but the tragedy of Kyiv refused to leave his mind.

The screaming women trapped inside burning houses. The old men cut down in the streets. The

desperate faces pressed against church doors before the final assault. A young Rus soldier no older than sixteen charging with a broken spear although he knew death awaited him.

And worst of all, the children. Temür closed his eyes briefly and the memory returned immediately.

A little girl crouched beneath a cart beside her dead mother, too terrified even to cry. One of the Mongol soldiers had raised his saber.

Temür had seized the man's arm before the blade could fall.

"She is nothing," Temür had said.

The warrior frowned. "Then why protect her?"

Temür had no answer.

In the end the child fled into the smoke while the others mocked him for his softness.

His horse carried him past the ruins of a church whose great dome had collapsed into itself. Blackened bodies still lay frozen near the entrance. Ravens hopped between them.

Temür stared at the shattered cross protruding from the snow. Was this truly the will of Heaven?

The question tormented him. For years he had marched west beneath the banners of the Great Khan. He had crossed endless rivers and forests. He had watched kingdoms crumble before the thunder of Mongol hooves. Everywhere the army went, the same terror followed.

At first he had endured it for honor. Then for survival. Then because there seemed no road back. But now something inside him had begun to break.

He suddenly thought of Layla.

The memory came like a warning: her laughter beneath the apricot trees near her father's house, the sunlight upon her dark hair, the warmth of her hand in his

before he rode away to war. So many years had passed that sometimes he feared he had invented her.

Was she forever lost? He could not accept it, no matter how many winters went by. His life had no other purpose than to find her again.

Yet in Kyiv, surrounded by death, her memory felt painfully alive. He tightened his grip on the reins.

Ahead, the Mongol banners snapped in the cold wind. Around him rode men who feared nothing beneath the sky. Men who believed utterly in conquest and destiny. But Temür no longer knew whether he belonged among them. And deep within his heart, still faint as a dying ember, a forbidden thought began to grow.

He will leave.

If captured, desertion meant death.

The Mongols hunted traitors without mercy across mountains, forests, and deserts alike. No man simply abandoned the army of the Great Khan.

Yet as Temür rode through the ashes of Kyiv, he realized something with terrible clarity:

If he remained, whatever humanity still lived inside him would perish there as surely as the city itself.

Several days after the fall of Kyiv, Batu Khan assembled his commanders within the great command pavilion. Large braziers mixed with the smell of leather, horses, and parchment warmed up the air.

Generals, officers, and scribes filled the tent. Temür stood among them.

Batu Khan sat upon a raised platform, reviewing reports from across the conquered territories. At length he set one parchment aside and looked toward Temür, saying,

"The report of Kyiv has been completed."

Temür bowed.

"Yes, my Khan."

Batu nodded.

"It is thorough. Precise. Future generations will know what was accomplished here. You are not only skilled with your bow, but also with a reed pen."

The words struck Temür. *If only you knew*, he thought.

The Khan continued.

"There is another matter."

His expression brightened slightly.

"A new army has arrived from the East."

A murmur passed through the officers.

"Their commander has distinguished himself repeatedly in campaigns beyond the Volga. He brings nearly two tumens of cavalry and joins our western advance."

The tent entrance opened.

A tall warrior stepped inside.

He wore dark lamellar armor decorated with silver scales. Though still young, scars crossed his face, giving him the appearance of a veteran twice his age. Wolf fur hung from his shoulders. The gold tassels attached to his helmet marked his rank.

Every officer present rose in respect.

When the warrior removed his helmet, Temür froze.

The man's eyes. The shape of his face. The old scar above his left eyebrow.

Suddenly, he was no longer standing inside Batu Khan's pavilion. He was eleven years old again, running across sunlit grasslands, following an older brother who always rode faster than everyone else.

"Altan..." he whispered; but nobody heard him.

The officers surrounded the new comer and saluted him respectfully, clasping forearms briefly or placing a hand on each other's shoulder.

Temür felt an urge to embrace his brother, but his intention of deserting came to his mind. He thought better not to be recognized. He joined the others briefly, hiding his face behind his heavy fur collar.

The meeting continued. Batu Khan spoke enthusiastically of future campaigns, while the officers listened with growing excitement.

When his brother exit, Temür was waiting at a short distance from the tent and followed him until he was sure nobody could see them.

Then, he called him. The general turned. For a heartbeat neither man moved. The years seemed to disappear. Then Altan's eyes widened.

"Temür?"

Silence fell across the pavilion. The brothers stared at one another in disbelief.

"You live," Altan said softly.

Temür felt his throat tighten.

"I live."

A smile spread slowly across Altan's face. The hardened general crossed the distance in three strides and embraced him.

"So, the Eternal Heaven reunites brothers." Altan said, and pulled Temür towards him, locking him in a strong embrace.

For the first time in many years, Temür felt something he had almost forgotten.

Family.

An invisible connection of love surged between the brothers.

Temür saw other officers approaching and felt that they should not be seen together. He told his brother.
"I'm sorry, I must leave. I'll look for you tonight."

After dinner, Temür met Altan and the brothers sat together beside a small fire beyond the main camp.

Neither wished to waste time sleeping, there was too much to say. They spoke of their childhood, of their parents, of the tribe, of friends long dead.

Altan listened with disbelief as Temür described his years among the Muslims and his life in the Sultan's household. And he told him about his love for Layla.

More than once, the older brother shook his head.

"I searched for you," he admitted quietly, "for years."

Temür stared into the flames.

"I thought everyone had forgotten me."

"Never."

Altan smiled at his brother.

"I knew that you would do well. You still are the best archer I ever met. In the east, I heard rumors of a rider who could hit three pursuing shields in their birds. I thought it may be you."

"I rather write than fire my arrows."

Altan knew his brother and could tell that something had changed within him.

For a while neither spoke.

Finally Altan broke the silence.

"You are troubled."

Temür looked at him.

"What makes you say that?"

"You were never able to hide your thoughts from me."

The words struck home, Temür sighed, and told him everything. The destruction of cities, the slaughter, the captives to be sold as slaves. The things he had witnessed at Kyiv.

When he finished, only the crackling of the fire remained.

Altan's expression was grave. He was familiar with everything his brother had described. He was devoted to the Mongols and had directed many operations like the ones his brother related. He said,

"You question the will of the Khans."

"I question what we are becoming."

"We are building the greatest empire the world has ever known."

Temür shook his head.

"Perhaps."

He looked toward the silhouette of Kyiv on the horizon. A few fires were still glowing.

"But I cannot watch another city die."

Altan remained silent.

Then Temür spoke the words he had carried inside him for weeks.

"I am leaving."

The general stared at him.

"You intent to desert?"

"Yes."

Altan immediately rose to his feet, his face hardened.

"Do you understand what you are saying?"

"Perfectly."

"If they catch you, they will kill you."

"I know."

"And anyone who helps you will share your fate."

Temür nodded.

"I know that too. That is why I did not let you recognize me during the reception."

The firelight danced between them. Altan turned away and for several moments he said nothing.

Temür could almost hear the battle raging inside his brother.

On one side stood duty. Honor. The oath sworn to Batu Khan. The laws of the Mongols.

On the other stood blood. Family. The little brother he had believed lost forever.

At last Altan spoke.

"When Father died, he made me promise something."

Temür looked up. Altan said,

"He told me that no matter where life carried us, I was to protect you."

Then he laughed bitterly.

"I thought that promise impossible. Then tonight Heaven placed you before me again."

He stared into the darkness for a long time. When he finally turned back, his decision had been made.

"I do not agree with you."

Temür remained silent.

"I believe in Batu Khan. I believe in the empire. I believe we are changing the world."

He stepped closer.

"But you are my brother."

The words hung between them.

"And I will not hand my brother to the executioner."

Temür felt his eyes burn.

Altan placed a hand upon his shoulder.

"I will help you leave."

The fire crackled softly.

Above them, the winter stars shone over the endless steppe. For the first time since Kyiv had fallen, Temür felt a glimmer of hope.

The road ahead would be dangerous. But he would not walk it alone.

Somewhere in the darkness beyond the fire sat a man who was willing to risk everything for him.

His brother.

The following night, submerged in his thoughts, Temür had wandered far from the city when a rider he had not noticed before approached at a gallop. The man leapt from his saddle before his horse had fully stopped and dropped to one knee beside Temür's mount.

"My lord," he said breathlessly, "my name is Suyuan. I belong to the Left Army."

My lord? Temür thought. Then he remembered the standard attached to his horse: the black banner of the imperial staff of the supreme commander, Batu Khan. To any common soldier, that banner alone placed him among the highest officers of the army.

From atop his horse, Temür studied the man. He wore the insignias of a *jagun*¹⁸ commander, an officer of low rank.

"Rise, soldier," Temür said. "Explain your purpose."

Suyuan stood immediately, though he kept his head respectfully lowered.

"My lord, my men are escorting a large group of prisoners to the city of Bukhara, where they are to be sold

¹⁸ Jagun: in the Mongolian army, an officer who commanded 100 men.

as slaves. Two of them attempted to escape. In the struggle, one of my guards was killed.”

He hesitated before continuing.

“I seek authorization for their execution.”

Temür contemplated the absurdity of the situation. Thousands had been slaughtered without mercy during the taking of Kyiv, yet now, with the massacre over, every healthy slave possessed value. The killing of the two captives required the approval of a superior officer.

“Where is your company, Suyuan?”

“Beyond that hill, my lord. We are too far from the city to present the matter before the council.”

Temür glanced toward the horizon.

“Mount your horse and take me there.”

When they rounded the hill, Temür saw the prisoners.

A long human column stretched across the frozen plain: men and women bound together in groups of ten by ropes tied around their necks. Most were young, still in the strength of their lives. Yet their lives as free human beings had already ended. From this moment onward, they would be bought, sold, beaten, and traded like livestock. A dozen Mongol soldiers guarded them on horseback.

The moment Temür approached, the guards dismounted and knelt in respect before the banner of Batu Khan.

Suyuan barked an order. Two prisoners were dragged forward and thrown into the dirt before Temür’s horse.

One of them, man with a bloodied face, still clung stubbornly to a leather satchel pressed against his chest.

“Are you certain these men killed your guard?” Temür asked.

“Yes, my lord,” Suyuan replied firmly. “The younger one attacked him with a chain while the old one tried to flee.”

Temür looked down at the prisoners.

The younger captive glared at the ground in silence, breathing heavily through swollen lips. The other man trembled but said nothing.

“And how do you intend to execute them?”

“Decapitation, my lord.”

Temür remained silent for several moments, as if considering the matter carefully.

Then he spoke coldly.

“No. Decapitation is too merciful.”

A nervous murmur spread among the captives.

“Bury them to the neck,” Temür continued. “I will blind them with my arrows before they die.”

The prisoners recoiled in horror. Some of the guards nodded in approval.

Suyuan, however, seemed uneasy. He knelt again, lowering his head.

“My lord, your judgment is just. Far be it from me to question it. But such a punishment would take time, and we are already delayed. I spent precious hours searching for authorization to execute them.”

Temür allowed the silence to linger.

Finally, he nodded.

“You are right. Your mission is more important.”

He pointed at the two prisoners.

“Bind them securely. I will take them with me. After their punishment, their bodies will be displayed as an example.”

Relief washed across Suyuan’s face.

“At once, my lord.”

The soldiers quickly tied ropes around the prisoners' necks and fastened them to Temür's saddle.

When all was prepared, Temür turned once more toward the officer.

"You acted correctly in waiting for authorization, Suyuan. Obedience preserves the order of the army."

The young officer straightened visibly with pride.

"I will speak well of you before the Great Khan."

Emotion flashed across Suyuan's face. He bowed deeply.

"You honor me, my lord."

He rose at once and shouted orders.

Slowly, the long column of captives resumed its march across the plain, while Temür turned his horse away, leading the two condemned prisoners behind him.

Followed by the two captives, Temür moved slowly toward the burning ashes of the city. When the column of slaves and its guards disappeared from view, he dismounted, saber in hand.

The two prisoners retreated in fear as he approached.

With a swift movement of his blade, Temür cut the ropes tied around their necks and wrists.

"Now," he said in a dry voice, "tell me who you are and what your story is."

A moment earlier, the men had believed themselves doomed to a horrible death. Now they were suddenly free. They stared at Temür with fear and bewilderment, unable to understand why.

A few seconds later, the younger of the two reacted first. He turned and tried to run.

But both men were exhausted, weakened by hunger and captivity. He had barely taken a few steps when Suld sprang after him. The one-eyed dog bit into the

man's leg and leapt onto his back, throwing him into the dirt. Growling viciously, Suld held him there, his jaws inches from the prisoner's face.

Temür laughed softly.

"Enough, Suld."

The dog immediately released the man but remained beside him, baring his teeth.

Temür gestured toward the ground.

"Sit."

The two men obeyed at once.

Temür removed a leather waterskin from his saddle and handed it to them. They drank desperately while he studied them in silence, waiting for them to calm down.

One seemed to be around twenty years old, the other slightly older. Both were clean-shaven. Their skin was olive-toned, though not dark enough to be mistaken for Arabs. Despite the dirt and damage of captivity, their clothing revealed wealth: embroidered silk tunics, short fitted trousers, long stockings, and fine leather boots utterly unsuited for the frozen plains around Kyiv.

"All right," Temür said calmly. "If you attempt to flee again, I will not call back my dog."

The younger brother glanced fearfully at Suld.

"Now answer my question. Who are you, and what are you doing here? Your clothing tells me you are not from these lands."

The older man stood first and bowed slightly before speaking in careful Arabic.

"My lord, my name is Marco, and this is my brother Emilio. We are sons of the Corsini family of Venetia. Our family trades through many ports of the Mediterranean. We traveled to Kyiv seeking trade with

the Rus princes, but we were caught by the attack of your army. We mean no harm,” he added quickly.

Temür noticed the younger brother examining the bloody bite marks on his leg.

“And you?” Temür asked. “What else have you to tell me?”

Emilio swallowed nervously.

“What my brother says is true, my lord. Forgive me for trying to escape, but terrible things happened in that city.”

His voice trembled slightly.

“And it would be a mistake to sell us as slaves. Our family would pay any ransom demanded for our return.”

Temür studied them carefully.

Though weakened and filthy, the brothers were clearly educated men. Their speech was refined, and even in misery they carried themselves differently from ordinary merchants.

“Which road did you follow to reach Kyiv?”

Marco answered.

“We sailed from Venetia across the Adriatic Sea and landed at the port of Acre, in the Holy Land. From there we joined a merchant caravan north through Antioch and the lands of the Armenians until we reached Constantinople.”

He paused to drink.

“After crossing the Black Sea by ship, we landed at Caffa in Crimea. From there we traveled north with Rus traders through the steppe and eventually reached the territories protected by the Teutonic Knights.”

“The Teutonic Order controlled roads and fortresses used by merchants,” Emilio added. “Their lands were safer than the forests farther east.”

“We continued through Poland and the Rus territories until we finally reached Kyiv.”

By the time Marco and Emilio finished their story, daylight was fading.

Temür led them to a secluded hollow between two hills and told them to light a small fire.

He removed strips of salted dried horse meat from his saddlebags, and the three men sat around the flames to eat. The Italians devoured the meat voraciously.

Temür remained silent for several minutes, lost in thought. These men, who knew the way to the Teutonic Knights, might be exactly what he needed to carry out his plan to desert.

But he realized that if they were to travel together, fear alone would not be enough. He needed their trust.

“How did you communicate with the Teutonic Knights?” he asked.

Marco answered.

“The Order speaks mostly German among themselves, but many of their priests and commanders understand Latin.”

Emilio hesitated before gathering enough courage to ask,

“You are a Mongol, my lord... how did you learn Latin?”

Temür stared quietly into the fire.

“It is a long story. A Franciscan priest taught me when I was a child.”

His expression darkened slightly. He continued in a lower voice, almost as if speaking to himself.

“Father Nicolas was a good man. But that was many years ago. He is probably dead by now.”

At the mention of the name, the brothers exchanged a quick glance.

The movement did not escape Temür.

“What is it?”

Emilio looked uncertainly toward Marco before the older brother finally spoke.

“When we passed through the lands of the Teutonic Order, we heard mention of a priest with that name.”

Temür’s heartbeat quickened.

“We heard he was staying among the Teutonic Knights when we traveled through their territory. Perhaps it is only coincidence.”

For a moment Temür said nothing.

“Did they say where he came from?” he asked quietly.

Marco shook his head.

“No, my lord. Only that he was a foreign priest who had arrived from the east.”

“Was the father traveling alone?”

“We are not sure. The word around was that he was part of a distinguished entourage.”

Temür’s heart was ready to jump out of his chest. He breathed deeply and stared into the flames again. If Father Nicolas was there... then perhaps Layla could be there as well.

The thought struck him with such force that it almost frightened him. Had the Mongols attacked Aleppo, forcing the father and Layla to fly?

Images crashed through his mind.

He saw Layla smiling beneath the gardens of Aleppo and then disappearing into the chaos of war.

Could she have crossed half the world into the lands of the western knights?

Temür remained silent for a long time.

The brothers watched him anxiously, uncertain what thoughts moved behind the young Mongol warrior's expression.

Finally, Temür spoke.

"Listen carefully."

Both men straightened immediately.

"I have a proposition. We will travel west, back along the road you came from. I must reach the lands of the Teutonic Order."

He looked directly at them.

"When we arrive there, I will set you free. How long is the journey?"

"About three days by horse, my lord," Marco replied.

Temür looked around. Darkness had almost fully fallen.

Temür mounted Salkhi and Suld came running toward him, already sensing movement and travelling ahead.

"You will remain here," Temür ordered the men. "I will return within the hour with provisions and two more horses."

His voice hardened.

"Do not attempt to leave. If you are captured again, I will not be able to help you."

"Of course, my lord," Marco said quickly. "We have no intention of leaving."

Temür rode Salkhi slowly toward Batu Khan's camp.

He needed two horses and provisions. Obtaining food would not be difficult, but horses were another matter. They were the most valuable possession in the entire army, guarded more carefully than gold or jewels.

Even his position among the Khan's staff would not allow him to acquire two mounts without raising suspicion.

As darkness settled over the camp, he dismounted and searched for his brother.

The camp was unusually quiet. Most of the warriors had already retired to their tents, while the sentries paced silently between rows of tethered horses.

After a while, Temür spotted the standard of Altan's army fluttering beside a large command tent.

He entered.

Altan sat alone beside a lantern, studying a map spread across a low table. He looked up immediately.

The older brother needed only a single glance to understand why Temür had come.

"Is it time?" Altan asked.

Temür nodded.

"Only if you still wish to help me."

A faint smile crossed Altan's face.

"I expected you."

He rolled up the map.

"Tell me what you need."

"Two horses and provisions for three days."

Temür hesitated.

"But I will accept your help only if it places you in no danger."

Altan laughed softly.

"Then you will accept no help at all."

The brothers exchanged a look.

Finally Altan stood.

"Do not worry about me. We will not take the horses from Batu Khan's stables. I shall get them from my own army. My officers are loyal men. No one will question my orders."

Without another word, they left the tent.

They mounted their horses and rode quietly into the darkness beyond the camp. The lights of Batu Khan's pavilion gradually faded behind them until they appeared no larger than distant reflections.

At last Altan stopped.

"Wait here," he said.

Temür nodded.

"I will return within the hour."

Then the general turned his horse and disappeared into the night.

Silence settled over the steppe.

Temür sat alone, he thought about the price his brother may have to pay. If the truth were discovered, Altan could lose everything. His command. His honor. Perhaps even his life.

And all because of him.

Temür lowered his head. *"Eternal Heaven,"* he whispered, *"protect my brother. If suffering must come from this night, let it fall upon me. Whatever happens is my doing, not his."*

The wind carried his words away.

Less than an hour later, he heard the distant thunder of hooves.

A rider emerged from the night.

Altan.

Two spare horses followed obediently behind him, laden with saddlebags and supplies. Relief flooded through Temür. The brothers met beneath the pale moonlight.

Neither dismounted. Altan handed him the reins. For a moment neither spoke. Then the general smiled.

"Go now, little brother."

Temür took the reins.

"I do not know if we shall ever meet again," Altan continued. "But I know you will survive. You always have."

Altan reached forward and gripped Temür's forearm.

"The Eternal Heaven watches over you."

His voice softened.

"I thought you were lost forever. Then Heaven returned you to me."

The older warrior looked away briefly.

"And I was given the chance to see you one last time."

Temür felt a lump rise in his throat.

"Altan..."

His brother shook his head.

"No. Do not make this harder."

For a long moment they remained in the dark, two brothers standing at the crossroads of their lives.

Then Altan released his arm.

"That is enough for me."

He pointed toward the western darkness.

"Now go."

Temür nodded. There were no more words to say.

He turned Salkhi and took hold of the spare horses.

After a few paces he glanced back. Altan remained where he was, motionless beneath the moonlight, watching him ride away.

Temür raised a hand and Altan did the same. Then the darkness swallowed the distance between them.

The road ahead would be long and dangerous.

But as Temür rode toward his uncertain future, he carried with him a gift more valuable than the horses, the provisions, or even his freedom. He carried the knowledge

that somewhere rode a man willing to risk everything for his sake.

His brother.

The distant glow of the burning city still stained the horizon red behind him like an open wound upon the earth. He guided Salkhi carefully between the hills while Suld ran ahead through the darkness, vanishing and reappearing like a ghost.

Night had already covered the ruins of Kyiv when Temür returned to the waiting Italians.

Marco and Emilio stood immediately when they heard the approaching horse.

Temür carried two spare mounts behind him loaded with provisions, waterskins, blankets, bows, and quivers full of arrows.

Without speaking, he dismounted and handed the reins to the Italians.

“We ride now,” he said. “From this moment onward, we travel fast and we travel silently.”

Neither brother dared ask questions.

They rode west through the frozen plains beneath a moonless sky. They kept them away from the roads and villages, choosing instead narrow valleys, frozen riverbeds, and abandoned shepherd trails invisible to ordinary travelers. Suld walked ahead, checking for strangers and chasing rabbits or other animals. He’d disappeared for a while, returning a few minutes later, excited about something he’s seen.

When the dog met a farmer or somebody walking on riding, he would run back in a special way, warning the group. Then they would wait until the path was again clear.

The winter was in full rage, and the cold worsened as the night deepened. By dawn Emilio could barely remain in the saddle. "We should stop," he whispered through trembling lips.

Temür did not agree.

"We stop when we are safe."

"Will they follow us?" Marco asked.

Temür's silence answered the question.

The Mongols had discovered the desertion before sunrise. Temür knew the camp would find out as soon as it awakened: the missing horses, the vanished prisoners, the empty place beside Batu Khan's staff. He could almost hear the furious shouting. And worst, the anger that would turn into fury.

A man from Batu's own retinue had deserted.

The pursuit would be relentless.

That afternoon the fugitives reached a frozen stream hidden between forests of dark pine. Temür finally allowed the horses to rest.

The Italians collapsed beside the water.

Suld remained alert, sniffing and exploring around the camp.

Emilio looked at Temür with exhaustion and disbelief.

"You abandoned the greatest army in the world... for a rumor? Because of what we told you about the priest?"

Temür sat sharpening one of his arrows.

"For hope," he answered quietly.

Two days later, the pursuit posse nearly found them. Temür was riding ahead when he suddenly raised

his fist. The brothers stopped instantly. Across the snowy plain, three riders appeared atop a distant ridge.

Mongols.

Even from far away Temür recognized the movement of their horses and the shape of their helmets.

Scouts. An advanced group.

The riders had not seen them yet.

“Hide among the trees,” Temür ordered.

Marco stared at him in horror.

“There are three of them.”

Temür checked the string of his bow calmly.

“Yes.”

“You cannot fight three Mongols alone.”

“Don’t worry. Do as I say.”

The brothers watched from the forest edge. The three riders descended the hill cautiously, scanning the snow-covered plain. Temür rode directly toward them.

One of the scouts saw him and shouted something in Mongolian. Another immediately reached for his bow. The first arrow flew, missing its mark.

At the last possible instant Temür dropped sideways from his saddle. The brothers gasped. Temür had vanished completely beneath his horse. A second arrow struck empty air.

Salkhi continued galloping forward while Temür hung pressed against the horse’s flank, shielded by its body.

Then suddenly an arrow flew upward from beneath Temür’s horse’s neck. One of the scouts jerked backward and fell from his saddle with the shaft buried through his throat.

Before the others could react, Temür swung himself back upright and fired again. A second rider

collapsed into the snow. The last Mongol wheeled his horse around and tried to flee.

Temür pursued him across the plain like a wolf. The distance between them closed rapidly. The fleeing rider turned in his saddle to fire backward, but Temür released first and the arrow struck the Mongol between the shoulders. The rider tumbled lifeless into the snow.

Silence returned to the plain.

Marco realized his hands were trembling. Emilio whispered hoarsely: *"God protect us..." Not from the Mongols. From the man traveling with us."*

That evening a storm descended upon the land.

Snow and wind swallowed the world completely. The horses struggled forward, guided purely by instinct. When it started to get dark they found a shelter of abandoned ruins half buried beneath ice.

Inside, the brothers huddled beside a tiny fire while the blizzard screamed outside like demons. Temür remained awake near the entrance with his bow across his knees.

"You do not sleep?" Marco asked.

Temür shook his head.

"I know they are close."

One hour later, the storm had subsided.

Suld raised his head and growled softly into the darkness. Every man inside the ruins froze.

Far away, through the storm came the faint sound of horses. The pursuers were closing in.

Temür's order was decisive.

"We need to go. Right now."

They rode again into the night. After riding for a short time, Temür listened carefully to the distant sounds carried by the wind. The Mongols were gaining.

Turning south, he led the group into a narrow valley where a frozen creek wound between snow-covered banks. For nearly a mile they followed its icy bed, leaving no clear trail upon the hard surface. Then, under cover of darkness and falling snow, Temür guided the horses up the opposite bank and into a stand of pines. By dawn, the storm had erased the few traces they had left behind. Whether by skill, luck, or the favor of Eternal Heaven, the pursuers never appeared again.

The land slowly began to change as they traveled farther west. The rocky terrain turned into forests and frozen hills.

Villages appeared among the trees: wooden houses and churches with crosses, fenced fields buried beneath snow. Some villagers fled indoors at the sight of Temür's Mongol clothing, slamming the doors shut.

Temür noticed everything silently. This was another world.

One evening, when the daylight was starting to disappear, they saw the fortress.

It rose above the frozen forest like something carved from winter itself: stone walls, watchtowers, black crosses upon white banners snapping in the wind. Torches burned along the battlements.

Marco exhaled in relief.

"The Teutonic Knights, finally."

As Temür stared at the fortress in silence, uncertainty touched him. Ahead waited strangers who hated his kind. But he did not doubt. Somewhere beyond those walls maybe was Layla.

CHAPTER 11

THE TEUTONIC ORDER

The imposing fortress that rose before Temür was called Falkenberg.

Built upon a rocky hill surrounded by dark forests and frozen rivers, the fortress dominated the land like a stone beast guarding the frontier of Christendom. Massive walls of gray rock surrounded the stronghold, interrupted by square towers crowned with black banners bearing the emblem of the Teutonic Order: a dark cross upon white cloth.

Snow accumulated over battlements and rooftops while torchlight flickered behind narrow windows.

The fortress was unlike anything Temür had left behind. There were no tents. No wandering herds. No endless movement beneath the open sky. Everything here was fixed. Heavy. Permanent. Different. The Mongols carried their world upon horseback. These men carved theirs into stone.

As they approached the gates, armored figures appeared above the walls. Crossbows pointed downward immediately. Voices shouted in German.

Marco raised both hands.

“We are merchants from Venetia!” he yelled in Latin. “We seek refuge!”

The great wooden gates remained closed and for several long moments nothing happened.

Then Temür noticed movement among the defenders. Some of the men above pointed toward him angrily. One knight made the sign of the cross upon seeing Temür’s Mongol armor.

Finally, with a deep groan of chains and iron, the gates slowly opened. Mounted knights emerged first. Temür observed them carefully.

The Teutonic warriors looked enormous upon their horses. They wore long white cloaks over chainmail armor, black crosses sewn across their chests. Their helmets concealed most of their faces behind steel, making them appear less like men than iron statues.

Unlike Mongol riders, who moved with fluid speed, the Teutonic Knights advanced with terrifying discipline.

A knight at the front raised his gauntleted hand and they stopped instantly.

His eyes fixed upon Temür.

“Dismount.”

Temür obeyed slowly.

The moment his boots touched the snow, four crossbows aimed directly at his chest.

Suld growled.

One of the knights immediately drew his sword halfway from its sheath.

“Control the beast,” he warned in broken Latin.

Temür placed a hand upon Suld’s neck, and the one-eyed dog reluctantly fell silent.

The knight continued staring at Temür with naked hatred.

“You are Mongol.”

It was not a question.

“Yes.”

Murmurs spread among the soldiers.

Marco stepped forward desperately.

“He saved our lives!” he said quickly. “The Mongols were taking us as slaves. He deserted them to help us escape.”

The knight remained silent for several moments. Finally, he turned toward two soldiers.

“Take the Italians to the guest quarters.”

Then he pointed toward Temür.

“And take him to the Komtur¹⁹.”

Twenty minutes later, Temür sat alone inside a solemn chamber deep within Falkenberg fortress.

The room was not a prison cell, but neither was it a place of comfort.

Massive stone walls surrounded him. Heavy wooden beams crossed the ceiling overhead. A fire burned inside a wide hearth, filling the chamber with the scent of smoke and pine resin.

Candles illuminated shelves filled with books and scrolls written in Latin and German.

Temür immediately noticed the silence.

No laughter. No music. No servants moving about. Only the distant echo of bells somewhere within the fortress.

A long wooden table occupied the center of the room. Upon it rested maps, sealed letters, an iron crucifix, and a half-finished cup of wine.

Temür remained seated while two armed guards stood beside the door watching him without blinking.

At last, the door opened.

An older man entered accompanied by another knight.

The newcomer removed his gloves slowly before approaching the fire.

He was tall, broad-shouldered, perhaps fifty years old. His gray beard was neatly trimmed, and scars marked one side of his face.

¹⁹ Komtur: a high-ranking commander within the Teutonic Order.

Unlike the others, he wore no helmet. Over his white cloak rested a heavy silver cross. The guards immediately lowered their heads while the man studied Temür carefully.

“So,” he said at last in fluent Latin. “The Mongol deserter.”

Temür rose slowly. The older man gestured toward the chair.

“Sit. You are among enemies, but not among savages.”

Temür sat again.

“I am Komtur Heinrich von Falkenberg,” the man continued. Commander of this fortress and servant of the Teutonic Order.”

He walked slowly around the table as he spoke.

“You stand within one of the frontier strongholds of the Order. Our brotherhood was founded to defend Christendom and wage war against the enemies of the faith.”

His eyes narrowed slightly.

“Recently, that has included your people.”

The Komtur gestured toward the walls around them.

“Within these fortresses live warrior-monks, priests, knights, scribes, blacksmiths, physicians, and servants. Some among us were born noblemen. Others surrendered wealth and titles to serve God beneath the black cross.”

Temür listened silently.

“The men you see in white cloaks are knight brothers,” Heinrich continued. “They pray like monks and fight like soldiers. Many have spent their lives battling pagans, raiders, and invaders along these frontiers.”

He stopped beside the fire.

“And after what happened in Poland and Hungary... hatred for the Mongols runs deep here.”

Temür nodded once.

“I understand.”

The Komtur studied him quietly.

“I have already spoken with the Italian brothers. They told me how you saved them from execution and fled your own people.”

He paused.

“They also told me you are now a deserter.”

“I am.”

“That makes you useful to some... and dangerous to others.”

Heinrich moved toward the table and lifted several books bound in leather.

“We found these among your saddlebags.”

Temür immediately recognized them.

His writings.

The Komtur opened one carefully. The pages contained writings in Arabic, Latin, and Mongolian script.

“You surprise me, Temür.”

The Komtur pronounced the foreign name carefully.

“A Mongol warrior carrying books.”

He looked directly at him.

For the first time since entering the room, something softer crossed the Komtur’s expression.

“Who taught you Latin?”

“A Franciscan priest named Father Nicolas.”

The Komtur raised an eyebrow.

“You also write Arabic.”

“I was raised among Muslims for many years.”

The older knight stared at him for a long moment.

“You are a strange man.”

Temür almost smiled.

“I have been told that before.”

The Komtur closed the book slowly.

“There is another matter.”

Temür immediately felt tension tightening inside his chest.

“We currently host a Catholic priest traveling through these lands. After hearing your story, I thought perhaps he should speak with you.”

Hope exploded through Temür so suddenly it almost frightened him. Could he be Father Nicolas? After all these years?

The Komtur turned toward the guards.

“Bring the father.”

Temür’s heart pounded while footsteps echoed beyond the corridor. The door opened. But the man who entered was not Father Nicolas. Temür’s hope collapsed instantly.

The priest who stepped into the chamber was Father Matthias. He was younger, thin, with tired eyes and snow upon his robes. He looked curiously toward Temür.

“Is this the Mongol?” he asked softly.

“Yes,” Heinrich answered. “He claims to know a Franciscan priest named Nicolas.”

At once Father Matthias’ expression changed.

“You know Father Nicolas?”

Temür rose from his chair.

“Where is he?”

The priest looked surprised by the urgency in his voice.

“He was here,” Father Matthias replied. “Not long ago.”

Temür felt his pulse quicken.

“He traveled with a young Arab woman and several servants,” the priest continued. “The woman was called Layla, if I remember correctly.”

Temür could barely breathe.

“They left Falkenberg twelve days ago.”

“Where did they go?”

“Toward Vienna.”

The Komtur and the priest both watched Temür carefully while emotions crossed his face too quickly to hide hope, fear, disbelief, and longing.

After years of war and death...Layla was alive.

When Temür recovered from the storm of emotions that had shaken him, Father Matthias was standing near the table, carefully holding one of the parchments.

“Are these your notes?” the priest asked.

“Yes, Father.”

“Did you write all this?”

“I did.”

Father Matthias looked genuinely astonished.

“May I examine them?”

“Of course, Father.”

At that moment a servant entered the chamber carrying a wooden tray with a steaming bowl of soup, dark bread, and a clay jar of wine.

Temür suddenly realized how exhausted he truly was.

While the Komtur and Father Matthias examined the parchments beneath the candlelight, Temür sat quietly near the hearth and ate in silence. The warmth of the room slowly overcame him. His body, hardened by years of war, could endure hunger and cold; but now that danger had briefly passed, exhaustion claimed him completely.

Without noticing, his eyes closed.

He fell asleep sitting against the stone wall.

An hour later, a hand touched his shoulder gently.

Temür opened his eyes immediately, instinctively reaching for the knife at his belt, then feeling that it wasn't there and realizing where he was.

Komtur Heinrich stood beside him.

"You ate, but you haven't drank the wine."

"I am sorry, my lord. I continue being guided by the dictamens of the muslin religion. No drinking of alcohol."

The Komtur shook his head.

"A faithful believer." He smiled. "The Christians would never agree with that. The wine is supposed to be the blood of our Lord."

Father Matthias remained near the table, surrounded by open parchments. He intervened:

"Your writings are extraordinary, young Mongol," the priest said softly.

Temür straightened slowly, still half asleep.

"They describe the customs of the Arabs in remarkable detail. Their cities, their learning, their faith..." Father Matthias continued while turning pages carefully. "Then suddenly the writings change and begin describing the organization of the Mongol army—the decimal structure, the discipline, the tactics, the methods of communication..."

The priest looked at him with fascination.

"And between all those observations are reflections, fragments of poetry... expressions of longing toward an Arab woman."

Temür lowered his eyes briefly and the Komtur crossed his arms.

“These writings are valuable,” Komtur Heinrich declared. “Perhaps invaluable. Future generations will wish to understand these convulsing times.”

He rested one hand upon the parchments.

“I am tempted to retain them and send them to the Franciscan libraries. They could be preserved and copied to be useful for centuries.”

Temür remained silent. What could he possibly say? The writings were his only remaining link to the life he had lost, yet he possessed no authority there.

But Father Matthias intervened.

“We should not do that, my lord.”

The Komtur turned toward him.

“As much as I would personally wish to deliver these writings to our Minister General in Assisi,” the priest continued, “I believe they should remain with their author.”

He looked toward Temür.

“This young man protected them through war, slaughter, snow, and pursuit. He writes not for glory, but because memory is all he has left.”

Silence filled the chamber.

“Sooner or later,” Father Matthias said quietly, “those writings will find their way into the libraries of the Church. Monks will copy them. Scholars will preserve them. But not yet.”

The Komtur exhaled slowly.

At last he nodded.

“You are right, Father. We are servants of God before we are collectors of knowledge.”

He looked toward Temür.

“You may keep your books.”

Temür bowed his head slightly.

“Thank you.”

Temür was grateful for the decision of the Komtur that allowed him to keep his writings. The leather-bound pages were all that remained of the young man he had once been, before war and conquest had consumed his life.

Yet even those precious manuscripts no longer occupied his thoughts. Only one thing mattered now.

Vienna.

When he was allowed to walk around, the thought followed him everywhere through the fortress and haunted him from dawn until the final watch of the night.

Layla was there.

In dreams he saw her standing beside the gardens of Baghdad beneath the orange trees. Sometimes walking through smoke and snow beyond the ruined walls of Kyiv. Sometimes turning toward him in a crowded street he could never quite reach.

He would wake before dawn with his heart pounding, the darkness of the barracks pressing around him.

For years he had survived because survival itself had become instinct. March. Fight. Obey. Endure.

Now, he had only one desire. He needed to reach Vienna. At any cost.

Even if the roads were filled with bandits, starving refugees, and Mongol patrols. Even if the Teutonic Order refused to let him go.

Even if the Khan himself had placed a death sentence upon deserters. Nothing else mattered. Not the war. Not the empire. Not even Heaven's judgment.

Only Layla.

The realization strengthened him. For her, he would walk willingly into death.

CHAPTER 12

MEANWHILE, IN VIENNA

While Temür was building his resolve for leaving towards Vienna, miles away, an important reunion was taken place in the great hall of that city.

Snow melted from cloaks and boots near the entrance, while servants hurried silently between the long tables carrying wine. Outside, winter winds battered the walls of the city, but inside another storm had gathered—one born far beyond the limits of the Holy Roman Empire.

Duke Leopold sat beneath the banners of his palace, his face pale in the light of the iron chandeliers. Around him stood nobles, bishops, merchants from the city council, and the captains of the Austrian armies. Voices murmured anxiously until the duke finally struck the table with his hand.

“Enough,” he said. “Tell me plainly. Where are they now?”

A knight stepped forward. From his boots, mud from the eastern roads stained the carpet.

“The Mongols have crossed the plains beyond Hungary, my lord. Refugees flee before them. Entire villages are abandoned.”

The room darkened with silence.

One of the merchants crossed himself.

“I heard they destroyed Kyiv,” he whispered. “Destroyed it completely.”

“They did,” answered another man quietly. “The churches burned. The walls collapsed. Few survived.”

A bishop lowered his eyes and muttered a prayer.

Europe was civilized region, The wars between the states had ceased years ago and peace had taken over.

The noble knights kept sharpening their swords, wearing their shining armors and displaying their fighting skills only in tournaments dedicated to impressing the ladies and entertain the people.

The tales about an unknown army subduing countries in far Asia were considered nonsense by most people. For years these stories had sounded impossible, like tales carried by drunken travelers. An army from the ends of the earth? Riders who could cross entire kingdoms in days? Cities erased from the world? It sounded like children's fantasies.

At first, many in Europe had welcomed the rumors.

"When they attacked the Muslims in the east," an old counselor said, "we believed they were Christians fighting for the cross."

Several men nodded.

"There were stories," the counselor continued, "that they served the great priest-king beyond Persia."

"Prester John," said the bishop softly.

"Yes. Some men thought God had finally sent an eastern Christian army against the enemies of Christendom."

A bitter laugh escaped one of the generals.

"Prester John never existed, those who believe that were fools."

The messenger continued,

"But when they reached Rus, we knew they were not Christians."

A knight stepped forward carrying a damaged shield. Deep cuts marked the wood.

"This belonged to a Teutonic knight," he said.

"Their order fought the Mongols in Kraków, near the eastern borders. They were defeated in a single day."

A tremor went through the hall.

“They are not Christians,” the knight continued.
“Nor Muslims. They are something else entirely.”

“And now?” asked the duke.

The messenger hesitated before answering.

“Now they come west. Travelers affirm their conquered territory extends from Han China to the Volga. Their empire is greater than anything that existed before.”

That was declaration of enormous effect, and it shook everybody. No one spoke. The fire cracked softly in the enormous hearth. One noble finally broke the silence.

“How can horsemen destroy kingdoms with armies with tens of thousands of men and keep fighting?”

No one had an answer.

The duke slowly rose from his chair and walked toward the narrow window overlooking Vienna. Beyond the walls, snow covered the city roofs like burial cloth.

“What do they want?” he asked quietly.

The bishop answered.

“Perhaps,” he said, “the Lord is testing us.”

The duke stared into the dark horizon beyond the city walls. Or perhaps, he thought, Europe was about to end.

CHAPTER 13

WAITING

The following days passed slowly within Falkenberg fortress. Though Temür's body rested, his mind remained restless. Layla was alive. The thought haunted every waking moment.

Somewhere beyond the frozen forests and mountains, beyond rivers and western kingdoms, she traveled toward Vienna beside Father Nicolas.

Every hour spent within Falkenberg felt unbearable, but the Teutonic Knights had quickly realized the value of the man who had arrived among them.

Word spread through the fortress: a Mongol warrior who spoke Latin and Arabic, a deserter from Batu Khan's army, a man who had ridden with the conquerors of the East.

Each day more men came to question him.

Knights, priests, scribes. Messengers from neighboring fortresses.

Some came openly curious. Others came with visible hatred. Temür answered them all patiently.

He explained the structure of the Mongol army, the decimal organization of tens, hundreds, and thousands, the speed of Mongol horse relays, their methods of communication with flags and horns, the feigned retreats, the use of terror, the discipline enforced by death.

The Teutonic commanders listened with grim attention.

Several times Temür saw scribes copying every word he spoke.

One afternoon Komtur Heinrich asked quietly,
“If the Mongols marched west again... could Europe stop them?”

The room became silent. Temür answered honestly.

“If the Mongols remain united under a great Khan... perhaps not.”

The room stayed silent.

Father Matthias questioned him as well, though about different matters.

The priest wished to understand Islamic law, and was surprised about the advance of the Arab learning. Mathematics, medicine, philosophy. Scientific Arabs have developed formulas and theories way ahead of west, where science investigation was subjected to the dictamen of the church.

Sometimes the conversations lasted late into the night and Temür found himself strangely comfortable speaking with the priest. Father Matthias reminded him of quieter years long lost beneath war and conquest.

Yet always his thoughts returned to Layla.

Each night he imagined her: crossing snowy roads toward Vienna, perhaps believing him dead, perhaps remembering him still.

Marco and Emilio recovered quickly within the fortress.

The Italians were eager to continue their own journey westward, but they understood the dangers that still surrounded the roads.

Bandits, mercenaries, starving deserters, and perhaps even Mongol scouts still roamed the frontier.

Traveling beside Temür offered a safety few men could hope to possess. So they waited patiently for the Komtur's permission to depart. And even they noticed the growing tension within Falkenberg.

Some knights openly despised Temür and refused to eat in the same hall as him. More than once Temür heard the word "demon" whispered behind him in German.

Komtur Heinrich eventually summoned him once again.

"Temür, you are a very special man. Even though I'd like you to remain with us, you cannot be here longer. It may be unfair, but I understand my men. Just your sight inspired fear."

Temür nodded.

"I understand."

Heinrich looked at him carefully.

"I believe you saved those Italians justly, for compassion, not for self-interest."

The Komtur walked toward the window overlooking the snowy courtyard below.

"So I will allow you to leave."

Temür felt relief washing through him.

"You will travel west under Teutonic protection for part of the road. After that, God will decide your fate."

Temür bowed respectfully.

"You have my gratitude, Komtur."

The older knight gave a faint smile.

"Try not to make me regret my mercy, Mongol."

CHAPTER 14

VIENNA

Two mornings later, the gates of Falkenberg opened once more and Temür walked out a free man.

Snow still covered the forests beyond the walls. Somebody had taken good care of Salkhi and Suld and, like him, they were anxious to leave. So, all together, Temür, Marco and Emilio, departed for Vienna under a pale winter sky.

Several mounted Teutonic sergeants escorted them for the first part of the journey. As they traveled farther west, the world slowly changed again.

The harsh frontier lands gave way to richer territories. They passed frozen rivers crossed by stone bridges, villages clustered around churches, a monastery surrounded by vineyards sleeping beneath snow, windmills rising above white fields, and roads crowded with merchants, pilgrims, and soldiers.

For the first time in years, Temür saw lands untouched by war. His warrior attire was covered by a large dark cape, but his helmet denounced him as a Mongol. In some towns children stared at him in fear before hiding behind their mothers.

He met travelers gathered quietly around fires to exchange rumors about the Mongols: cities burned, armies destroyed, what it seemed the end of the world approaching from the east.

Temür listened silently.

At night, beneath unfamiliar western stars, he sat awake beside the fire while the Italians slept. And always his thoughts traveled ahead of him toward Vienna. Toward Layla.

The journey toward Vienna lasted five days. But it was not without problems.

Being seasoned travelers and well aware of the demands of a long journey, Marco and Emilio had borrowed a sum of money from the Komtur before departing. They would need it for lodging, road tolls, permits, and the countless fees imposed by the many lords whose lands they would cross on their way to Vienna.

One evening they sought shelter at a roadside inn. The innkeeper seemed willing enough at first, but the moment he caught sight of Temür, with his broad shoulders, weathered face, and foreign features, his expression changed. Fear replaced hospitality. Muttering excuses, he refused them a room and sent them on their way.

Temür insisted that the brothers remain at the inn while he spent the night outside. Emilio shook his head.

"No. We will be safer with you. The people we have met in these parts make me uneasy."

He was right.

They rode a short distance into a forest and made camp beneath a stand of tall pines. The horses were watered and unsaddled. A small fire was lit, and they warmed a simple meal before turning in for the night.

The brothers, exhausted from the day's travel, quickly fell asleep.

Temür remained awake.

Lying beneath his blanket, he stared into the dying embers of the fire. His thoughts drifted to Layla. Somewhere beyond the mountains and forests ahead, she waited for him. Each day carried him closer to her, yet each day also carried him farther from everything he had ever known.

Suddenly, Suld lifted his head.

The dog stood motionless, staring into the darkness between the trees.

Temür immediately became alert.

He wrapped himself in his blanket and rose quietly. He was about to investigate when three hooded figures emerged from the shadows.

As they approached the camp, moonlight glinted off the daggers in their hands.

The first was a giant of a man, thick-necked and broad as an ox. A jagged scar ran from his left ear to his jaw, and his beard looked as though it had been hacked off with a knife.

The second was tall and gaunt, with narrow shoulders and a face so sharp it resembled a fox's. His restless eyes darted constantly from one traveler to another.

The third was younger than the others, but no less dangerous. He had crooked teeth, a broken nose, and the nervous impatience of a man eager to use the blade he carried.

The giant pointed his dagger at Temür.

"Don't move."

The shout woke Marco and Emilio. Startled, they scrambled to their feet and hurried to Temür's side.

The skinny robber grinned.

"You look like wealthy gentlemen, my lords. Educated men. Surely you know better than spending the night in the open."

His grin widened.

"There are dangerous vagabonds around these woods."

The three thieves laughed.

The youngest stepped forward and raised his dagger.

"Enough talking. Hand over your money and valuables if you don't want your blood soaking this ground."

The brothers had removed their coats and were already shivering from the cold. Now fear made them tremble even more.

The giant suddenly struck Emilio across the face, knocking him to the ground.

Temür did not move.

Marco reached for his purse and began handing it over, but Temür shot out his hand from beneath the blanket and seized it.

The giant frowned.

"What are you doing?"

"We need that money," Temür replied calmly. "Without it we cannot travel."

The robber raised his dagger.

"Then perhaps you prefer dying."

Temür nodded toward Salkhi.

"I have something far more valuable in my saddlebag. Take it."

The giant gestured to the skinny thief.

"You. Go look."

The thief approached Salkhi cautiously and opened the saddlebag. After a moment he pulled out a folded piece of black silk.

He tossed it aside.

"Nothing here but this rag."

He searched again, then turned angrily toward his companions.

"They're mocking us!"

Enraged, he strode toward Emilio.

"Let's gut one of them. The others will learn."

Before he could take another step, Temür moved.

He placed himself between the robber and Emilio.

"One moment, my friend."

His voice remained calm.

"You are throwing away the most valuable thing I own."

The thief frowned.

Temür bent down and picked up the black silk.

With a sharp motion he unfurled it.

The banner of Kublai Khan spread wide in the night breeze. At the same moment Temür cast aside his blanket.

Moonlight flashed upon the metal fittings of his armor. His hand rested on the hilt of his dagger.

Silence fell over the clearing.

The robbers stared at him. Their faces drained of color. One dropped his knife. The second followed. The third stumbled backward.

"It's a Mongol!" he screamed. "Run!"

Temür drew his dagger.

"The first man who takes a step will have this buried in his spine."

No one moved.

"My lord," the giant stammered. "We did not know. We swear it."

Temür slid the dagger back into its sheath.

"Take off your clothes."

The thieves stared at him in disbelief.

"My lord..."

"You struck my friend when there was no need for it. Take them off."

The command left no room for argument.

Terrified, the robbers obeyed.

Soon they stood barefoot in the cold night wearing only their undergarments.

Temür bound their wrists and ankles with a length of rope from his saddle. The three men lay shivering on the ground.

Temür turned to the brothers.

"Emilio was right. This place is dangerous."

Marco laughed.

For the first time since the robbers had appeared, Emilio managed a smile.

They packed their camp and mounted their horses.

As they prepared to leave, Temür looked down at the trembling thieves.

"Tomorrow we will inform the authorities where to find you."

He glanced toward the dark forest.

"If the wolves do not find you first."

Winter slowly loosened its grip over the land as Temür and the Italians rode farther into the heart of Europe. Snow still covered the forests and mountains, but rivers had begun to thaw, and the roads grew increasingly crowded with merchants, pilgrims, soldiers, and nobles traveling under colorful banners.

For Temür, every day revealed another unfamiliar world. He saw enormous cathedrals whose towers pierced the clouds, villages surrounded by vineyards instead of endless grasslands, stone bridges older than anything he's seen before, monasteries filled with bells and chanting monks, and castles rising from the hills like mountains carved by men.

Nothing moved like the steppe, everything here was permanent, even the forests felt ancient.

Marco and Emilio often explained the land they crossed: the domains of princes, the rivalries between

nobles, the authority of bishops, the taxes demanded at every bridge.

Temür listened silently, absorbing everything. Yet beneath all those discoveries lived only one thought: Layla.

At last, one cold morning, Vienna appeared before them. Temür stopped Salkhi atop a hill overlooking the city.

Massive walls surrounded Vienna like a stone sea. Towers rose everywhere above red rooftops while church bells echoed endlessly through the morning mist.

The city dwarfed anything Temür had ever imagined. Marco smiled proudly.

“Welcome to Vienna.”

But Temür immediately sensed danger.

Before they even reached the gates, mounted guards intercepted them. The soldiers wore chainmail reinforced with steel plates, heavy cloaks, and helmets crowned with noble insignias. Their horses alone seemed gigantic beside Salkhi.

The captain’s eyes fixed instantly upon Temür’s Mongol armor.

“Surrender your weapons.”

The atmosphere changed at once. Within moments crossbows pointed toward Temür.

Marco intervened immediately.

“He is under our protection!”

The captain ignored him.

“A Mongol enters Vienna only in chains.”

Temür slowly handed over his bow and saber. Suld growled low beside Salkhi. The guards surrounded Temür and separated him from the Italians.

Emilio protested furiously in Latin while Marco demanded to speak with local authorities, but it changed

nothing. Temür was marched through the streets beneath hostile stares.

People whispered in fear at the sight of him. Some crossed themselves. Others spat on the ground. To them, the Mongols were not men.

They were the punishment of God.

Temür spent the next two days imprisoned inside a stone tower near the city walls.

The cell was small but clean. A narrow window allowed him to see part of the city below: church towers, snow-covered rooftops, and distant castle walls rising above Vienna.

Each day officials came to interrogate him. They asked about the Mongol armies, Batu Khan, numbers, tactics, routes, and intentions toward Europe.

Some questioned him calmly. Others looked at him with naked hatred.

One old nobleman finally asked:

“How many Christians have you killed?”

Temür answered honestly.

“I stopped counting years ago.”

The man left without another word.

Meanwhile, Marco and Emilio had been welcomed into the residence of an influential Austrian noble family connected to powerful merchants throughout northern Italy. The brothers' father had traded with them for years through the ports of Venetia.

The head of the household was Prince Leopold von Altenburg, a wealthy lord whose lands and influence extended across the region.

Leopold received the Italians warmly inside his castle overlooking the city. But when he learned they had

traveled beside a Mongol, the atmosphere changed immediately. Marco explained everything: their capture near Kyiv, their condemnation, Temür saving their lives, the escape, the pursuit across the snow, and the Teutonic experience.

By the end of the story, the prince sat in silence.

“He deserted the Mongols for a woman?” Leopold finally asked.

Marco nodded.

“And because he still possesses honor,” Emilio added quietly. “He stopped being loyal when he witnessed the unnecessary cruelty of their armies.”

The prince stared into the fire for a long moment. Europe had heard only monsters described in tales of the Mongols. Yet the men before him spoke of courage, loyalty, and mercy.

At last Leopold rose.

“I will speak to him. If the Mongols are threatening us, he may have valuable information.”

The next day Temür was brought once again before city officials.

But this time the Prince himself stood waiting beside them. Leopoldo wore dark velvet robes trimmed with fur and a silver chain marking his rank. Beside him stood armored knights whose size immediately drew Temür’s attention. Their armor was astonishing.

Unlike the lighter mail and lamellar used by Mongols, these western knights looked encased in iron. Their armors of shining steel covered their heads, shoulder, arms, knees and chests.

Their swords were massive.

And their horses...

Temür had never seen such animals.

The enormous destriers stood nearly a head taller than Salkhi, bred not for speed or endurance but for crushing charges in battle. Temür immediately understood why western cavalry terrified infantry armies.

Prince Leopold approached him calmly.

The prince influence carried enormous weight within Vienna. After long arguments, heated accusations, and furious objections from several knights, the prince finally obtained Temür's release into his personal custody.

Temür emerged from the experience thinner and exhausted but alive.

The next morning, he was taken to his horse; Suld was next to it and run excited to meet him.

When Temür exited the castle, prince Leopold stood waiting beside several guards, all mounted on their horses.

"You are fortunate, Mongol," the old prince said calmly. "Most men here would gladly hang you from the walls."

Temür bowed respectfully.

"I know."

The prince studied him carefully.

"Come. My family wishes to meet the man who crossed half the world chasing a woman."

On the way, the prince asked about Layla and Father Nicolas, and Temür explained the situation. After a careful reflection, the prince told him,

"I have many relations around Vienna, I will look for this woman. I understand how important it is for you to find her."

Temür smiled gratefully.

The castle of House Hohenberg stood above Vienna upon a rocky elevation overlooking the river.

Temür was astonished by everything inside: great halls illuminated by chandeliers, painted ceilings, colored glass windows, musicians, servants, and noblewomen dressed in rich silks and furs.

But what impressed him, again, were the knights. Never had he seen warriors so heavily armored.

The knights of Austria seemed gigantic beside ordinary men. Their warhorses were enormous creatures bred for battle, covered in embroidered caparisons and reinforced leather armor.

Temür watched one group training in the courtyard below. The ground itself trembled beneath the weight of the charging horses.

Their armor shone like silver beneath the sunlight: chainmail, steel plates, great helms, massive shields, and heavy lances longer than any Mongol spear.

Prince Leopold noticed Temür observing them.

“Our knights fight differently than your people.”

Temür nodded.

“A Mongol horse moves like the wind,” he said. “But these...”

He looked again toward the armored riders.

“These fight like mountains.”

The prince laughed deeply.

“A fair description.”

Days later, Prince Leopold finally returned with the news Temür had desperately waiting for. The prince entered Temür’s chamber carrying a sealed letter.

“We found them.”

Temür rose instantly.

“Where?”

“They stayed briefly within Vienna under the protection of the Church. But they departed again.”

Temür’s heart tightened.

“Where did they go?”

The prince unfolded the letter.

“Do not worry, not too far. They are in Castle Rheinfeld, west of the city. A noble family loyal to the crown granted them protection there.”

Temür barely waited for permission.

“I must leave immediately.”

Prince Leopold raised one hand, detaining him.

“You will leave tomorrow at dawn. The roads are dangerous, and you will travel under my protection.”

Temür bowed deeply. No words could express what he felt. After years of believing Layla had disappeared forever, she was finally close.

Castle Rheinfeld stood among green valleys and forests touched by the first signs of spring.

When Temür finally rode through its gates beneath the banners of House Hohenberg, his heart beat harder than it ever had in battle.

Servants and guards turned nervously toward the Mongol warrior crossing the courtyard.

In a moment, the whole universe collapsed into the garden.

Layla was there.

The first thing Temür noticed was not her face. It was her voice.

He had just crossed the inner courtyard of Prince Rheinfeld’s estate when he heard a woman speaking in Arabic beneath the stone arches of the garden gallery. The words were simple—speaking to a servant—but they struck him harder than a spear.

For an instant, he stood motionless.

The memory of years passed vanished from his mind. The tragedy of Kyiv. The blood running. The endless roads going westward. The prison cell in Vienna. All disappeared. Gone. Only her voice remained.

He entered the garden. Layla had her back towards him, but, instantly, she froze.

She turned around and the tray she was holding slipped from her hands and shattered against the stones.

Neither moved.

She was no longer the girl who had walked beside him beneath the warm skies of the Sultan's gardens. Time had refined her beauty into something quieter and deeper. Her dark hair was partially veiled in the fashion of noble households, and her dress carried the colors of Prince Rheinfeld's court, yet her eyes were unchanged.

Those same eyes. Eyes that had once watched him leave for war.

"Temür..." she whispered.

He tried to speak, but no words came.

Layla crossed the courtyard almost running.

When she reached him, she stopped suddenly, as if afraid he might disappear if she touched him.

"You are alive..."

Then she wept.

Not with loud cries, but silently, trembling as years of grief broke apart inside her. Temür took her gently in his arms, like a man touching a dream.

When he hugged her, they realized that they were no children anymore, they had grown. The contact of their bodies felt different to the way they remembered it. They were flooded with a passion so intense that nothing they felt before could be compared to it.

The kiss lasted a long time, and they stood embraced there, beneath the winter roses, pale flowers that bloom sometimes in cold weather, and that seemed to be there just for them.

That evening they walked together beyond the walls of the estate.

Spring had begun to touch the countryside around Vienna. Thin green shoots pushed through the earth, and the Danube reflected the last red light of sunset.

So many years stood between them, so much heart ache. But little by little their talk softened the sorrow.

Layla told him of the fall of her father's caravan after the Mongol invasions shattered the eastern trade routes. She spoke of flight, hunger, and desperate journeys westward under the protection of merchants loyal to her family. Eventually they had reached the lands of Prince Rheinfeld, who had offered refuge in exchange for her father's knowledge of eastern commerce.

"My father died two winters later," she said quietly.

Temür lowered his eyes.

"I should have been there."

"But what matters is that you are not dead."

Still, guilt settled heavily inside him.

Layla asked about him. Temür spoke little at first. He told her of the Mongol army, of frozen rivers crossed beneath banners of horsehair, of cities burning beneath the thunder of siege engines. He spoke of Kyiv only briefly.

"I still hear them sometimes," he admitted.

Layla took his hand gently.

"You are not that man, she said firmly. "That was war. What you are now... is what you always were."

Temür felt something inside him loosening the grip that had been constricting his heart for so many years. Not completely, just the beginning of it.

Over the following days they walked together constantly. Through the gardens, along the river, beneath cathedral towers that Temür still found strange and intimidating.

Sometimes they spoke for hours. Sometimes not at all.

Once, while snow fell lightly over the estate, Layla laughed at the way Temür struggled to pronounce German words.

“You conquered half the world,” she teased, “yet this defeats you?”

Temür smiled faintly.

“The Germans are even more strict than the Rus.”

She laughed again.

A whirlwind of joy took over his mind. For years he had believed he would never hear her laugh again.

Temür had found Layla and both were living the dream they have had every night for years. Nothing else seemed to be important. But a cloud of despair reigned in the city.

Vienna still lived — its markets crowded, its churches full, its nobles feasting behind stone walls — yet beneath the noise and splendor moved a quiet fear, as if the city already heard distant hoofbeats approaching from the east.

The inns overflowed with refugees from Hungary and Poland. Strange dialects filled the streets near the markets. Wagons stood abandoned beside churches where entire families slept beneath blankets and animal skins.

Everybody was conscious of the possibility that, suddenly, without warning, the Mongols would appear.

But the joy Temür and Layla were feeling had pushed the somber reality out of their minds. They were together, and that was all that mattered.

Still, destiny had one more test for them.

One evening Layla led Temür into a quiet chamber lit only by candles. Her face was troubled.

"There is something you must know."

Temür immediately sensed danger.

"Prince Rheinfeld has treated me honorably," she said. "But it happens that his second son... Lord Matthias..."

She hesitated when she said his name.

"He's in love with me, and he wishes to marry me."

Temür's expression hardened.

"Have he made any advances towards you?"

"No. Their etiquette would not allow it. But Matthias insists. He swears he loves me."

"And you?"

Layla stepped closer.

"There has only ever been you."

Temür closed his eyes briefly.

She whispered:

"He knows who you are and what I feel about you."

Temür looked at her inquiringly.

"He has heard the stories. The Mongol warrior from the east. The man who survived Kyiv."

"And?"

Layla hesitated.

"He says no foreign wanderer will take what belongs to his house."

Somebody knocked at the chamber door. A moment later, as if he has been aware of the conversation, Lord Matthias entered.

He was tall, even for a German knight; broad-shouldered, wrapped in expensive wool and exuding confidence. His blond beard was carefully trimmed, and the sword at his side was richly decorated.

His eyes fell immediately upon Temür.

"So," Matthias said coldly, "the barbarian truly exists."

Layla stepped forward angrily.

"Enough."

But Matthias ignored her.

"You wear silk now," he told Temür, "yet beneath it you are still one of the Khan's dogs."

Temür remained calm.

"I served because I had no choice."

"And now you come to steal a woman sheltered by my father's house?"

Layla spoke sharply:

"I am not property."

But Matthias had already made his decision.

"I challenge you," he declared.

Silence filled the chamber.

"A duel," Matthias continued. "Before witnesses. Horse and blade."

Layla turned pale.

Temür smiled.

"I accept."

"No!" Layla cried.

Matthias departed. She seized Temür's arm.

"Please... do not do this."

Her voice trembled now with genuine fear.

“We can leave tonight. We can go south—to Italy, to Venice, anywhere. Please.”

Temür touched her face gently.

“If I flee, they will hunt us forever.”

“I do not care!”

“But I do.”

His eyes darkened.

“A man who abandons honor abandons himself.”

Layla’s eyes filled with tears.

“I already lost you once.”

Temür rested his forehead against hers.

“You will not lose me again.”

The duel took place three mornings later outside Vienna’s walls. Nobles gathered beneath fluttering banners while priests murmured prayers into the cold air.

Matthias appeared in full plate armor atop a massive destrier armored in steel and leather. He looked invincible. His shining steel helmet covered his face almost completely; only his eyes were visible.

Temür wore his Mongol lamellar armor of lacquered plates and fur-lined leather. Beside the German horse, Salkhi looked almost small.

The crowd murmured, some laughed openly.

Then the horns sounded and the riders separated. Across the field Matthias appeared like an iron tower ready to descend upon him.

Temür lowered his spear. Layla watched from the crowd, pale with terror.

The ground thundered beneath the horses.

Closer.

Closer.

At the last possible instant, when the sharp end of Matthias lance was just feet from his chest, Temür pulled

Salkhi sharply sideways. The Mongol horse moved sideways with astonishing speed.

Matthias's lance missed him completely.

Temür's spear reached to strike the knight's shield and bounced away harmlessly—but the maneuver revealed something important.

The great German horse could not turn quickly. Temür understood immediately.

As the riders reached their ends of the course, Matthias immediately charge again. The second charge came harder. This time Matthias aimed not at Temür, but at Salkhi.

Again Temür turned away at the last instant—but instead of retreating, Salkhi circled sharply around the heavier horse.

Fast. Precise. Like a wolf around a bear.

Before Matthias horse could fully turn, Temür's horse was next to him. Temür's rose in his stirrups, in his hand he had a mace, the arm Mongols used to crush armor.

He struck, not at the man but at the horse's armored headpiece. The frightened destrier reared violently.

Matthias lost balance and the knight, unbalanced by the weight of his heavy armor, crashed to the ground with a roar of metal.

The crowd gasped.

Before Matthias could rise, Temür dismounted and placed his curved blade against the knight's throat.

The crowd, paralyzed by the speed of everything, kept silence.

Matthias glared upward, humiliated. Temür had won the right to kill him. Everyone knew it. Instead, the Mongol stepped back.

"I did not come here for blood," he said.

The prince himself rose slowly from his seat.

Prince Rheinfeld hurried to declare Temür victor and left, followed by his entourage.

CHAPTER 15

PEACE

Spring bells rang wildly through Vienna.

People poured into the streets laughing, shouting, embracing strangers as though a great plague had suddenly disappeared from the world. Windows opened above the crowded roads while church bells thundered across the city.

“The Mongols are retreating!”

“The eastern armies are leaving!”

“They are gone!”

The news had arrived shortly before dawn with a rider from Hungary whose horse nearly collapsed beneath him at the city gates. Within hours the rumor had spread through every market, church, and tavern in Vienna.

In the great hall of the palace, nobles and captains gathered around the exhausted messenger.

“It is true,” the man said between breaths. “The Mongol princes are withdrawing eastward. Their armies are abandoning the advance.”

“How?” one of the generals demanded. “Why?”

The messenger wiped sweat from his face.

“The Great Khan is dead.”

Far beyond the endless plains, beyond rivers, deserts, and mountains no Austrian would ever see, the ruler of the greatest empire that the earth would ever know, had died in his distant capital.

“The commanders have been summoned back,” the messenger continued. “A council will choose the next Great Khan.”

Several men stared at one another in disbelief.

“So Europe survives,” whispered a bishop.

“For now,” answered another quietly.

Outside, the celebrations only grew louder. Church bells shook the air while people knelt openly in the streets thanking God for deliverance. Wine flowed freely. Soldiers embraced one another like brothers returned from war.

Yet not everyone rejoiced without fear. One old knight stood near the palace window watching the crowds below.

“They could have destroyed us,” he murmured.

No one answered him. Because everyone in the hall knew he spoke the truth.

The Mongols had swept across the world from the farthest reaches of Asia to the gates of Europe itself. Kingdom after kingdom had fallen before them like dry grass before a fire.

And now, suddenly, by their own will, they were gone.

Not defeated, neither destroyed. Simply called away by the death of a single man thousands of miles to the east.

The old knight crossed himself slowly.

“If that messenger had arrived a year later,” he said, “all Europe might be speaking their language now.”

The years had bent Father Nicholas's back and silvered the last strands of hair that remained beneath his hood. The father loved to talk about this Monastery located in one of the most beautiful places of Italy, where the air was always fresh and thru all the windows one could see the sea.

When at last he announced his decision to return to Italy, neither Temür nor Layla was surprised. The old priest had spent a lifetime on distant roads and among

foreign peoples. Now he wished to end his days in the quiet monastery where his journey had begun.

"I have buried too many friends in too many lands," he said with a gentle smile. "It is time for this old pilgrim to go home."

On the morning of his departure, the three stood together outside the city gates. A small cart waited beside the road, carrying the priest's few possessions. For a time none of them spoke.

Then Temür disappeared into the house and returned carrying a wooden chest.

"What is this?" Father Nicholas asked.

"My life," Temür replied.

Inside were the parchments he had written over the years. They told of the steppe, of his family, of battles and journeys, of loss and friendship, of Layla, and of the strange path that had carried a Mongol warrior to the heart of Christendom.

The old priest looked up in surprise.

"I want you to take them."

Father Nicholas gently shook his head. "They belong to you."

"They belong to the future," Temür said. "You once taught me that memory is fragile. Men die. Cities fall. Empires vanish. But words can travel farther than horsemen."

The priest's eyes glistened.

"And if no one reads them?"

Temür smiled.

"Then they will sleep until someone does."

For a long moment Father Nicholas held the chest in both hands. Then he nodded.

"I will guard them as faithfully as I have guarded their author."

The old priest embraced Temür and Layla one final time. Then he climbed into the cart and turned toward the west.

They watched until the road carried him beyond the horizon.

Neither of them knew that the chest would survive kingdoms, wars, and centuries of silence.

But Father Nicholas knew.

That was why he never let it leave his side.

Temür and Layla were married before summer.

Not in the grandeur of eastern palaces nor beneath Mongol banners, but in a quiet chapel overlooking the river. Marco and Emilio attended proudly. Layla wore a white embroidered dress with patterns from her homeland. Temür wore dark silk beneath a wolf-fur cloak.

Finally, Temür no longer felt like a man wandering between worlds. When the ceremony ended, Layla took his hand as the bells rang across the valley.

“Where shall we go now?” she asked softly.

Temür looked toward the western horizon. For once, there was no war waiting there. Only a future. And at last...Peace.

THE END



Jorge Morel, an engineer by profession, lived for 25 years in Europe and Asia. He often brings to his book the places where he has lived. He wrote about his experiences in the book *"7 Years in Japan, India and Indonesia"*, published in Spanish.

Another of his works of non-fiction is the book *"Seduction Begins When the Woman Says 'No'"* written under the pseudonym 'Jorge Armando'.

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"Two innocent creatures",

"Flora, the woman with the knives",

"The Ranger"

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"Revenge"

"Gina"

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