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Wolf of the Plains**

Written by Conn Iggulden

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THE CONQUEROR SERIES

WOLF OF
THE PLAINS

CONN IGGULDEN

HARPER

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This book could not have been written without the people of Mongolia who allowed me to live among them for a time and who taught me their history over salted tea and vodka while the winter eased into spring.

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‘A multitude of rulers is not a good thing. Let there be one ruler, one king’ Homer, *The Iliad*

PROLOGUE



The snow was blinding as the Mongol archers encircled the Tartar raiding party. Each man guided his pony with his knees, standing on the stirrups to fire shaft after shaft with withering accuracy. They were grimly silent, the hooves of their galloping ponies the only sound to challenge the cries of the wounded and the howling wind. The Tartars could not escape the whirring death that came out of the darkening wings of the battle. Their horses fell groaning to their knees, blood spattering bright from their nostrils.

On an outcrop of yellow-grey rock, Yesugei watched the battle, hunched deep into his furs. The wind was a roaring devil on the plain, tearing at his skin where it had lost its covering of mutton grease. He did not show the discomfort. He had borne it for so many years he could not have been sure he even felt it any more. It was just a fact of his life, like having warriors to ride at his word, or enemies to kill.

The Tartars did not lack courage, for all he despised them. Yesugei saw them rally around a young warrior and heard his shouts carry over the wind. The Tartar wore a chain-mail vest that Yesugei envied, lusted after. With curt words of command, the man was preventing the raiders from scattering and Yesugei saw the moment had come to ride. His arban of nine companions felt it, the best of his tribe, blood brothers

and bondsmen. They had earned the precious armour they wore, boiled leather inscribed with the leaping figure of a young wolf.

‘Are you ready, my brothers?’ he said, feeling them turn to him.

One of the mares whinnied excitedly and his first warrior, Eeluk, chuckled.

‘We will kill them for you, little one,’ Eeluk said, rubbing her ears.

Yesugei kicked in his heels and they broke effortlessly into a trot towards the screaming, roiling battlefield in the snow. From their height above the fighting, they could all see the full stretch of the wind. Yesugei murmured in awe as he saw the arms of the sky father reach around and around the frail warriors in great white scarves, heavy with ice.

They moved into a gallop without the formation changing and without thought, as each man judged the distances around him as he had for decades. They thought only of how best to cut the enemy from their saddles and leave them cold on the plains.

Yesugei’s arban crashed into the centre of the fighting men, making for the leader who had risen in the last few moments. If he was allowed to live, perhaps he would become a torch for all his tribe to follow. Yesugei smiled as his pony hammered into the first of the enemy. Not today.

The impact broke the back of a Tartar warrior even as he turned to meet the new threat. Yesugei held his mount’s mane in one hand, using his sword in single strikes that left dead men falling like leaves. He refused two blows where the blade of his father might have been lost, instead using the pony to trample the men down and the hilt as a hammer for one unknown soldier. Then he was past and had reached the knotted core of the Tartar resistance. Yesugei’s nine followers were still with him, protecting their khan as they had been sworn from

birth. He knew they were there without looking, guarding his back. He saw their presence in the way the Tartar captain's eyes flickered to each side of him. He would be seeing his death in their flat, grinning faces. Perhaps he had also become aware of all the bodies around him, stiff with arrows. The raid had been crushed.

Yesugei was pleased when the Tartar rose in his stirrups and pointed a long red blade at him. There was no fear in the eyes, only anger and disappointment that the day had come to nothing. The lesson would be wasted on the frozen dead, but Yesugei knew the Tartar tribes would not miss the significance. They would find the blackened bones when the spring came and they would know not to raid his herds again.

Yesugei chuckled, making the Tartar warrior frown as they stared at each other. No, they would not learn. Tartars could starve to death deciding on a mother's tit. They would be back and he would ride out to them again, killing even more of their dishonest blood. The prospect pleased him.

He saw that the Tartar who had challenged him was young. Yesugei thought of the son being born to him over the hills to the east and wondered if he too would face a grizzled older warrior across the length of a sword one day.

'What is your name?' Yesugei said.

The battle had finished around them and already his Mongols walked among the corpses, taking anything of use. The wind still roared, but the question was heard and Yesugei saw a frown pass across the face of his young enemy.

'What is yours, yak penis?'

Yesugei chuckled, but his exposed skin was beginning to ache and he was tired. They had tracked the raiding party for almost two days across his land, going without sleep and surviving on nothing more than a handful of wet milk curd each day. His sword was ready to take another life and he raised the blade.

‘It does not matter, boy. Come to me.’

The Tartar warrior must have seen something in his eyes that was more certain than an arrow. He nodded, resigned.

‘My name is Temujin-Uge,’ he said. ‘My death will be avenged. I am the son of a great house.’

He dug in his heels and his mount surged at Yesugei. The khan’s sword whipped through the air in a single stroke of perfect economy. The body fell at his feet and the pony bolted across the battleground.

‘You are carrion, boy,’ Yesugei said, ‘as are all men who steal from my herds.’

He looked around him at his gathered warriors. Forty-seven had left their ger tents to answer his call. They had lost four of their brothers against the ferocity of the Tartar raid, but not one of twenty Tartars would return home. The price had been high, but the winter drove men to the edge in all things.

‘Strip the bodies quickly,’ Yesugei ordered. ‘It is too late to return to the tribe. We will camp in the shelter of the rocks.’

Valuable metal or bows were much prized for trade and to replace broken weapons. Except for the chain-mail vest, the pickings were poor, confirming Yesugei’s thought that this was simply a party of young warriors out to skirmish and prove themselves. They had not planned to fight to the death on earth as hard as stone. He draped the bloody metal garment over his saddle horn when it was thrown to him. It was of good quality and would stop a dagger’s blow, at least. He wondered who the young warrior had been to own such a valuable thing, turning his name over in his mind. He shrugged. It no longer mattered. He would trade his share of their ponies for strong drink and furs when the tribes met to trade. Despite the cold in his bones, it had been a good day.

* * *

The storm had not eased by the following morning, when Yesugei and his men returned to the camp. Only the outriders moved lightly as they rode, staying alert against sudden attack. The rest were so bundled in furs and weighed down with looted goods that they were shapeless and half-frozen, rimed in dirty ice and grease.

The families had chosen their site well, against the lee of a craggy hill of rock and wind-blasted lichen, the gers almost invisible in the snow. The only light was a dim brightening behind boiling clouds, yet the returning warriors were spotted by one of the sharp-eyed boys who watched for attack. It lifted Yesugei's heart to hear the piping voices warn of his approach.

The women and children of the tribe could hardly be stirring yet, he thought. In such a cold, they dragged themselves from sleep only to light the iron stoves. The time of true rising came an hour or two later, when the great tents of felt and wicker had lost the snap of ice in the air.

As the ponies came closer, Yesugei heard a scream rise like the grey smoke coming from Hoelun's ger and felt his heart beat faster in anticipation. He had one baby son, but death was always close for the young. A khan needed as many heirs as his tents could hold. He whispered a prayer for another boy, a brother for the first.

He heard his hawk echo the high note inside the ger as he vaulted from the saddle, his leather armour creaking at each step. He barely saw the servant who took the reins, standing impassively in his furs. Yesugei pushed open the wooden door and entered his home, the snow on his armour melting instantly and dripping in pools.

'Ha! Get off!' he said, laughing as his two hounds jumped up in a frenzy, licking and bounding madly around him. His hawk chirruped a welcome, though he thought it was more a desire to be off on the hunt. His first son, Bekter, crawled naked

in a corner, playing with curds of cheese as hard as stones. All these things Yesugei registered without his eyes leaving the woman on the furs. Hoelun was flushed with the stove's heat, but her eyes were bright in the gold lamplight. Her fine, strong face shone with sweat and he saw a trace of blood on her forehead where she had wiped the back of her hand. The midwife was fussing with a bundle of cloth and he knew from Hoelun's smile that he had a second son.

'Give him to me,' Yesugei ordered, stepping forward.

The midwife drew back with her wrinkled mouth puckering in irritation.

'You will crush him with your big hands. Let him take his mother's milk. You can hold him later, when he is strong.'

Yesugei could not resist craning for a sight of the little boy as the midwife laid him down, cleaning the small limbs with a rag. In his furs, he loomed over them both and the child seemed to see him, launching a ferocious bout of squalling.

'He knows me,' Yesugei said, with pride.

The midwife snorted. 'He is too young,' she muttered.

Yesugei did not respond. He smiled down at the red-faced infant, then, without warning, his manner changed and his arm snapped out. He gripped the elderly midwife around the wrist.

'What is that in his hand?' he asked, his voice hushed.

The midwife had been about to wipe the fingers clean, but under Yesugei's fierce gaze, she opened the infant's hand gently, revealing a clot of blood the size of an eye that trembled with the tiniest movement. It was black and shone like oil. Hoelun had raised herself up to see what part of her newborn boy had caught Yesugei's attention. When she saw the dark lump, she moaned to herself.

'He holds blood in his right hand,' she whispered. 'He will walk with death all his life.'

Yesugei drew in a sharp breath, wishing she had not spoken.

It was reckless to invite an evil fate for the boy. He brooded in silence for a time, considering. The midwife continued nervously with her wrapping and cleaning, the clot quivering on the blankets. Yesugei reached for it and held it in his own hand, glistening.

‘He was born with death in his right hand, Hoelun. That is fitting. He is a khan’s son and death is a companion for him. He will be a great warrior.’ He watched as the baby boy was handed over at last to his exhausted mother, suckling ferociously on a nipple as soon as it was presented to him. His mother winced, then bit her lip.

Yesugei’s expression was still troubled as he turned to the midwife.

‘Throw the bones, old mother. Let us see if this clot of blood means good or evil for the Wolves.’ His eyes were bleak and he did not need to say that the child’s life depended on the outcome. He was the khan and the tribe looked to him for strength. He wanted to believe the words he had used to avert the sky father’s jealousy, but he feared that Hoelun’s prophecy had been the truth.

The midwife bowed her head, understanding that something fearful and strange had come into the birthing rituals. She reached into a bag of sheep ankle bones by the stove, dyed red and green by the children of the tribe. Depending on how they fell, they could be named horse, cow, sheep or yak, and there were a thousand games played with them. The elders knew they could reveal more when cast at the right time and place. The midwife drew back her arm to throw, but again Yesugei restrained her, his sudden clasp making her wince.

‘He is my blood, this little warrior. Let me,’ he said, taking four of the bones from her. She did not resist, chilled by his cold expression. Even the dogs and hawk had grown still.

Yesugei threw the bones and the old midwife gasped as they came to rest.

‘Aiee. Four horses is very lucky. He will be a great rider. He will conquer from a horse.’

Yesugei nodded fiercely. He wanted to hold up his son to the tribe, and would have if the storm had not raged around the ger, searching for a way into the warmth. The cold was an enemy, yet it kept the tribes strong. The old did not suffer for long in such bitter winters. The weakling children perished quickly. His son would not be one of those.

Yesugei watched the tiny scrap of a child pulling at his mother’s soft breast. The boy had gold-coloured eyes like his own, almost wolf yellow in their lightness. Hoelun looked up at the father and nodded, his pride easing her worry. She was certain the clot was a dark omen, but the bones had gone some way towards calming her.

‘Have you a name for him?’ the midwife asked Hoelun.

Yesugei replied without a hesitation. ‘My son’s name is Temujin,’ he said. ‘He will be iron.’ Outside, the storm roared on without a sign of ceasing.

PART ONE



CHAPTER ONE



On a spring day in his twelfth year, Temujin raced his four brothers across the steppes, in the shadow of the mountain known as Deli'un-Boldakh. The eldest, Bekter, rode a grey mare with skill and concentration and Temujin matched his pace, waiting for a chance to go past. Behind them came Khasar, whooping wildly as he moved up on the two leaders. At ten, Khasar was a favourite in the tribe, as light-hearted as Bekter was sullen and dark. His red-mottled stallion snorted and whickered after Bekter's mare, making the little boy laugh. Kachiun came next in the galloping line, an eight-year-old not given to the openness that made people love Khasar. Of all of them, Kachiun seemed the most serious, even secretive. He spoke only rarely and did not complain, no matter what Bekter did to him. Kachiun had a knack with the ponies that few others could match, able to nurse a burst of speed when the rest were flagging. Temujin glanced over his shoulder to where Kachiun had positioned himself, his balance perfect. He seemed to be idling along, but they had all been surprised before and Temujin kept a close eye on him.

Already some way behind his brothers, the smallest and youngest of them could be heard calling plaintively for them to wait. Temuge was a boy with too much love for sweet things and laziness, and it showed in his riding. Temujin grinned

at the sight of the chubby boy flapping his arms for more speed. Their mother had warned against including the youngest in their wild tournaments. Temuge had barely grown out of the need to be tied to the saddle, but he wailed if they left him behind. Bekter had yet to find a kind word for Temuge.

Their high voices carried far across the spring grass of the plain. They galloped flat out, with each boy perched like a bird on the ponies' backs. Yesugei had once called them his sparrows and looked on with pride at their skill. Temujin had told Bekter that he was too fat to be a sparrow and had been forced to spend a night hiding out from the older boy's bad temper.

On such a day, though, the mood of the whole tribe was light. The spring rains had come and the rivers ran full again, winding across plains where dry clay had been only days before. The mares had warm milk for drinking and making into cheese and cool yoghurt. Already, the first touches of green were showing through the bones of the hills and with it came the promise of a summer and warm days. It was a gathering year, and before the next winter, the tribes would come together in peace to compete and trade. Yesugei had decreed that this year the families of the Wolves would make the trip of more than a thousand miles to replenish their herds. The prospect of seeing the wrestlers and archers was enough to have the boys on their best behaviour. The races, though, were what held them rapt and played across their imaginations as they rode. Except for Bekter, the boys had all seen their mother privately, asking Hoelun to put in a word with Yesugei. Each of them wanted to race the long distance or the sprints, to make a name for themselves and be honoured.

It went unspoken that a boy who returned to his gers with a title such as 'Exalted rider' or 'Master of Horse' might one day win their father's position when he retired to tend his herds.

With the possible exception of fat Temuge, the others could not help but dream. It galled Temujin that Bekter assumed he would be the one, as if a year or two of age made a difference. Their relationship had become strained ever since Bekter had returned from his betrothal year away from the tribe. The older boy had grown in some indefinable way and though Temujin was still the tallest of the brothers, he had found the new Bekter a humourless companion.

It had seemed an act at first to Temujin, with Bekter only pretending at maturity. The brooding boy no longer spoke without thinking and seemed to weigh every statement in his mind before he allowed it past his lips. Temujin had mocked his seriousness, but the months of winter had come and gone with no sign of an easing. There were moments when Temujin still found his brother's pompous moods amusing, but he could respect Bekter's temper, if not his right to inherit their father's tents and sword.

Temujin watched Bekter as he rode, careful not to let a gap grow between them. It was too fine a day to worry about the distant future and Temujin daydreamed about all four brothers – all five with Bekter, even – sweeping the board of honours at the tribal gathering. Yesugei would swell with pride and Hoelun would grip them one by one and call them her little warriors, her little horsemen. Even Temuge could be entered at six years of age, though the risks of a fall were huge. Temujin frowned to himself as Bekter glanced over his shoulder, checking his lead. Despite their subtle manoeuvring, Yesugei had not yet given permission for any of them to take part as the spring came.

Hoelun was pregnant again and close to the end of her time. The pregnancy had been hard on her and quite different from

the ones before. Each day began and ended with her retching over a bucket until her face was speckled with spots of blood under the skin. Her sons were on their best behaviour while they waited for Yesugei to cease his worried pacing outside the gers. In the end, the khan had grown tired of their stares and careful silence, sending them off to run the winter out of the horses. Temujin had continued to chatter and Yesugei had picked him up in one powerful hand and tossed him at a stallion with a white sock. Temujin had twisted in the air to land and launch into a gallop in one movement. Whitefoot was a baleful, snappy beast, but his father had known he was the boy's favourite.

Yesugei had watched the others mount without a sign of his pride on his broad, dark face. Like his father before him, he was not a man to show emotion, especially not to sons he could make weak. It was part of a father's responsibility to be feared, though there were times when he ached to hug the boys and throw them up into the air. Knowing which horses they preferred showed his affection, and if they guessed at his feelings from a glance or a light in his eye, that was no more than his own father had done years before. He valued those memories in part for their rarity and could still recall the time his father had finally grunted approval at his knots and ropework with a heavy load. It was a small thing, but Yesugei thought of the old man whenever he yanked a rope tight, his knee hard into the bales. He watched his boys ride into the bright sunshine, and when they could no longer see him, his expression eased. His father had known the need for hard men in a hard land. Yesugei knew they would have to survive battle, thirst and hunger if they were to reach manhood. Only one could be khan of the tribe. The others would either bend the knee or leave with just a wanderer's gift of goats and sheep. Yesugei shook his head at the thought, gazing after the dust trail of his sons'

ponies. The future loomed over them, while they saw only the spring and the green hills.

The sun was bright on his face as Temujin galloped. He revelled in the lift in spirit that came from a fast horse straining under him, the wind in his face. Ahead, he saw Bekter's grey mare recover from a stumble on a loose stone. His brother reacted with a sharp blow to the side of the mare's head, but they had lost a length and Temujin whooped as if he were about to ride past. It was not the right moment. He loved to lead, but he also enjoyed pressuring Bekter, because of the way it annoyed him.

Bekter was already almost the man he would be, with wide, muscular shoulders and immense stamina. His betrothal year with the Olkhun'ut people had given him an aura of worldly knowledge he never failed to exploit. It irritated Temujin like a thorn under his skin, especially when his brothers pestered Bekter with questions about their mother's people and their customs. Temujin too wanted to know, but he decided grimly that he would wait to find out on his own, when Yesugei took him.

When a young warrior returned from his wife's tribe, he was given the status of a man for the first time. When the girl came into her blood, she would be sent after him with an honour guard to show her value. A ger would be ready for her and her young husband would wait at its door to take her inside.

For the Wolves, it was tradition for the young man to challenge his khan's bondsmen before he was fully accepted as a warrior. Bekter had been eager and Temujin remembered watching in awe as Bekter had walked up to the bondsmen's fire, close to Yesugei's ger. Bekter had nodded to them and three men had stood to see if his time with the Olkhun'ut had

weakened him. From the shadows, Temujin had watched, with Khasar and Kachiun silent at his side. Bekter had wrestled all three of the bondsmen, one after the other, taking terrible punishment without complaint. Eeluk had been the last, and the man was like a pony himself, a wall of flat muscle and wide arms. He had thrown Bekter so hard that blood had run from one of his ears, but then to Temujin's surprise, Eeluk had helped Bekter up and held a cup of hot black airag for him to drink. Bekter had almost choked at the bitter fluid mingling with his own blood, but the warriors had not seemed to mind.

Temujin had enjoyed witnessing his older brother beaten almost senseless, but he saw too that the men no longer scorned him around the fires at night. Bekter's courage had won him something intangible but important. As a result, he had become a stone in Temujin's path.

As the brothers raced across the plains under a spring sun, there was no finishing line, as there would be at the great gathering of tribes. Even if there had been, it was too soon after winter to really push their mounts. They all knew better than to exhaust the ponies before they had a little summer fat and good green grass in their bellies. This was a race away from chores and responsibilities, and it would leave them with nothing but arguments about who had cheated, or should have won.

Bekter rode almost upright, so that he seemed peculiarly motionless as the horse galloped under him. It was an illusion, Temujin knew. Bekter's hands on the reins were guiding subtly and his grey mare was fresh and strong. He would take some beating. Temujin rode as Khasar did, low on the saddle, so that he was practically flat against the horse's neck. The wind seemed to sting a little more and both boys preferred the position.

Temujin sensed Khasar moving up on his right shoulder. He urged the last breath of speed from Whitefoot and the little

pony snorted with something like anger as it galloped. Temujin could see Khasar's pony out of the corner of his eye and he considered veering slightly, as if by accident. Khasar seemed to sense his intention and lost a length as he moved away, leaving Temujin grinning. They knew each other too well to race, he sometimes thought. He could see Bekter glance back and their eyes met for a second. Temujin raised his eyebrows and showed his teeth.

'I am coming,' he called. 'Try to stop me!'

Bekter turned his back on him, stiff with dislike. It was something of a rarity to have Bekter come riding with them, but as he was there, Temujin could see he was determined to show the 'children' how a warrior could ride. He would not take a loss easily, which was why Temujin would strain every muscle and sinew to beat him.

Khasar had gained on both of them, and before Temujin could move to block him, he had almost drawn level. The two boys smiled at each other, confirming that they shared the joy of the day and the speed. The long, dark winter was behind, and though it would come back too soon, they would have this time and take pleasure in it. There was no better way to live. The tribe would eat fat mutton and the herds would birth more sheep and goats for food and trade. The evenings would be spent fletching arrows or braiding horsetails into twine; in song or listening to stories and the history of the tribes. Yesugei would ride against any young Tartars who raided their herds and the tribe would move lightly on the plains, from river to river. There would be work, but in summer the days were long enough to give hours free to waste, a luxury they never seemed to find in the cold months. What was the point in wandering away to explore when a wild dog might find and bite you in the night? That had happened to Temujin when he was only a little older than Kachiun and the fear had stayed with him.

It was Khasar who saw that Temuge had fallen, glancing back in case Kachiun was staging a late rush for the grass crown. Khasar claimed to have the sharpest eyes of the tribe and he saw that the sprawled speck was not moving, making a decision in an instant. He whistled high-low to Bekter and Temujin, letting them know he was pulling out. Both boys looked back and then further to where Temuge lay in a still heap. Temujin and his older brother shared a moment of indecision, neither willing to give the race to the other. Bekter shrugged as if it did not matter and reined his mare into a wide circle back the way they had come. Temujin matched him exactly and they galloped as a pair behind the others, the leaders become the led. It was Kachiun now who rode first amongst them, though Temujin doubted the boy even thought of it. At eight, Kachiun was closest in age to Temuge and had spent many long evenings teaching him the names of things in the gers, demonstrating an unusual patience and kindness. Perhaps as a result, Temuge spoke better than many boys of his age, though he was hopeless with the knots Kachiun's quick fingers tried to show him. The youngest of Yesugei's sons was clumsy, and if any of them had been asked to guess at the identity of a fallen rider, they would have said 'Temuge' without a moment's hesitation.

Temujin jumped from his saddle as he reached the others. Kachiun was already on the ground with Khasar, lifting the supine Temuge into a sitting position.

The little boy's face was very pale and bruised-looking. Kachiun slapped him gently, wincing as Temuge's head lolled.

'Wake up, little man,' Kachiun told his brother, but there was no response. Temujin's shadow fell across them and Kachiun deferred to him immediately.

'I didn't see him fall,' he said, as if his seeing would have helped.

Temujin nodded, his deft hands feeling Temuge for broken bones or signs of a wound. There was a lump on the side of his head, hidden by the black hair. Temujin prodded at it.

‘He’s knocked out, but I can’t feel a break. Give me a little water for him.’

He held out a hand and Khasar pulled a leather bottle from a saddle cloth, drawing the stopper with his teeth. Temujin dribbled the warm liquid into Temuge’s open mouth.

‘Don’t choke him,’ Bekter advised, reminding them he was still mounted, as if he supervised the others.

Temujin didn’t trouble to reply. He was filled with dread as to what their mother Hoelun would say if Temuge died. They could hardly give her such news while her belly was filled with another child. She was weak from sickness and Temujin thought the shock and grief might kill her, yet how could they hide it? She doted on Temuge and her habit of feeding him the sweet yoghurt curds was part of the reason for his chubby flesh.

Without warning, Temuge choked and spat water. Bekter made an irritable sound with his lips, tired of the children’s games. The rest of them beamed at each other.

‘I dreamed of the eagle,’ Temuge said.

Temujin nodded at him. ‘That is a good dream,’ he said, ‘but you must learn to ride, little man. Our father would be shamed in front of his bondsmen if he heard you had fallen.’ Another thought struck him and he frowned. ‘If he does hear, we may not be allowed to race at the gathering.’

Even Khasar lost his smile at that, and Kachiun pursed his mouth in silent worry. Temuge smacked his lips for more water and Temujin passed him the bottle.

‘If anyone asks about your lump, tell them we were playing and you hit your head – understand, Temuge? This is a secret. The sons of Yesugei do not fall.’

Temuge saw that they were all watching his response, even

Bekter, who frightened him. He nodded vigorously, wincing at the pain.

‘I hit my head,’ he said, dazedly. ‘And I saw the eagle from the red hill.’

‘There are no eagles on the red hill,’ Khasar replied. ‘I was trapping marmots there only ten days ago. I would have seen a sign.’

Temuge shrugged, which was unusual in itself. The little boy was a terrible liar and, when challenged, he would shout, as if by growing louder they would be forced to believe him. Bekter was in the process of turning his pony away when he looked thoughtfully at the little boy.

‘When did you see the eagle?’ Bekter said.

Temuge shrugged. ‘I saw him yesterday, circling over the red hill. In my dream, he was larger than a normal eagle. He had claws as large as . . .’

‘You saw a real eagle?’ Temujin interrupted. He reached out and held his arm. ‘A real bird, this early in the season? You saw one?’ He wanted to be certain it was not one of Temuge’s idiotic stories. They all remembered the time he had come into the ger one night claiming to have been chased by marmots who rose up on their hind legs and spoke to him.

Bekter’s expression showed he shared the same memory. ‘He is dizzy from the fall,’ he said.

Temujin noticed how Bekter had taken a firmer hold on the reins. As slowly as he might approach a wild deer, Temujin rose to his feet, risking a glance to where his own pony cropped busily at the turf. Their father’s hawk had died and he still mourned the loss of the great-hearted bird. Temujin knew Yesugei dreamed of hunting with an eagle, but sightings were rare and the nests were usually on cliffs sheer enough and high enough to defeat the most determined climber. Temujin saw that Kachiun had reached his pony and was ready to go. A nest

could have an eagle chick for their father to keep. Perhaps Bekter wanted one for himself, but the others knew that Yesugei would be overcome with gratitude to the boy who brought him the khan of birds. The eagles ruled the air as the tribes ruled the land, and they lived almost as long as a man. Such a gift would mean they all could ride in the races that year, for certain. It would be seen as a good omen that an eagle had come to their father, strengthening his position with the families.

Temuge had made it to his feet, touching his head and wincing at the speck of blood that showed on his fingers. He did seem dazed, but they believed what he had said. The race of the morning had been a light-hearted thing. This one would be real.

Temujin was the first to move, fast as a dog snapping. He leapt for Whitefoot's back, calling 'Chuh!' as he landed and startling the ill-tempered beast into a snorting run. Kachiun flowed onto his horse with the neatness and balance that marked all his movement, Khasar only an instant behind him, laughing aloud with excitement.

Bekter was already lunging forward, his mare's haunches bunching under him as he kicked in and went. In just a few heartbeats, Temuge was left standing alone on the plain, staring bemusedly after the cloud of dust from his brothers. Shaking his head to clear his blurred vision, he took a moment to vomit a milky breakfast onto the grass. He felt a little better after that and clambered up onto the saddle, heaving his pony's head from its grazing. With a last pull at the grass, the pony snorted and he too was off, jolting and bouncing behind his brothers.