

Lords of the Bow

Conn Iggulden

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1

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PART ONE



‘Behold, a people shall come from the north, and a great nation. They shall hold the bow and the lance; they are cruel and will not show mercy; their voice shall roar like the sea, and they shall ride upon horses, every one put in array, like a man to the battle.’

– Jeremiah 50: 41, 42

PROLOGUE



The khan of the Naimans was old. He shivered in the wind as it blew over the hill. Far below, the army he had gathered made its stand against the man who called himself Genghis. More than a dozen tribes stood with the Naimans in the foothills as the enemy struck in waves. The khan could hear yelling and screams on the clear mountain air, but he was almost blind and could not see the battle.

‘Tell me what is happening,’ he murmured again to his shaman.

Kokchu had yet to see his thirtieth year and his eyes were sharp, though shadows of regret played over them.

‘The Jajirat have laid down their bows and swords, my lord. They have lost their courage, as you said they might.’

‘They give him too much honour with their fear,’ the khan said, drawing his deel close around his scrawny frame. ‘Tell me of my own Naimans: do they still fight?’

Kokchu did not respond for a long time as he watched the

roiling mass of men and horses below. Genghis had caught them all by surprise, appearing out of the grasslands at dawn when the best scouts said he was still hundreds of miles away. They had struck the Naiman alliance with all the ferocity of men used to victory, but there had been a chance to break their charge. Kokchu silently cursed the Jajirat tribe, who had brought so many men from the mountains that he had thought they might even win against their enemies. For a little time, their alliance had been a grand thing, impossible even a few years before. It had lasted as long as the first charge and then fear had shattered it and the Jajirat had stepped aside.

As Kokchu watched, he swore under his breath, seeing how some of the men his khan had welcomed even fought against their brothers. They had the mind of a pack of dogs, turning with the wind as it blew strongest.

‘They fight yet, my lord,’ he said at last. ‘They have stood against the charge and their arrows sting the men of Genghis, hurting them.’

The khan of the Naimans brought his bony hands together, the knuckles white.

‘That is good, Kokchu, but I should go back down to them, to give them heart.’

The shaman turned a feverish gaze on the man he had served all his adult life.

‘You will die if you do, my lord. I have seen it. Your bondsmen will hold this hill against even the souls of the dead.’ He hid his shame. The khan had trusted his counsel, but when Kokchu watched the first Naiman lines crumple, he had seen his own death coming on the singing shafts. All he had wanted then was to get away.

The khan sighed. ‘You have served me well, Kokchu. I have been grateful. Now tell me again what you see.’

Kokchu took a quick, sharp breath before replying.

‘The brothers of Genghis have joined the battle now. One of them has led a charge into the flanks of our warriors. It is cutting deeply into their ranks.’ He paused, biting his lip. Like a buzzing fly, he saw an arrow darting up towards them and watched it sink to its feathers in the ground just a few feet below where they crouched.

‘We must move higher, my lord,’ he said, rising to his feet without looking away from the seething mass of killing far below.

The old khan rose with him, aided by two warriors. They were cold-faced as they witnessed the destruction of their friends and brothers, but they turned up the hill at Kokchu’s gesture, helping the old man to climb.

‘Have we struck back, Kokchu?’ he asked, his voice quavering. Kokchu turned and winced at what he saw. Arrows hung in the air below, seeming to move with oily slowness. The Naiman force had been split in two by the charge. The armour Genghis had copied from the Chin was better than the boiled leather the Naimans used. Each man wore hundreds of finger-width lengths of iron sewn onto thick canvas over a silk tunic. Even then, it could not stop a solid hit, though the silk often trapped the arrowhead. Kokchu saw the warriors of Genghis weather the storm of shafts. The horsetail standard of the Merkit tribe was trampled underfoot and they too threw down their weapons to kneel, chests heaving. Only the Oirat and Naimans fought on, raging, knowing they could not hold for long. The great alliance had come together to resist a single enemy and with its end went all hope of freedom. Kokchu frowned to himself, considering his future.

‘The men fight with pride, my lord. They will not run from these, not while you are watching.’ He saw a hundred warriors of Genghis had reached the foot of the hill and were staring balefully up at the lines of bondsmen. The wind was cruelly cold at such a height and Kokchu felt despair and anger. He

had come too far to fail on a dry hill with the cold sun on his face. All the secrets he had won from his father, surpassed even, would be wasted in a blow from a sword, or an arrow, to end his life. For a moment, he hated the old khan who had tried to resist the new force on the plains. He had failed and that made him a fool, no matter how strong he had once seemed. In silence, Kokchu cursed the bad luck that still stalked him.

The khan of the Naimans was panting as they climbed and he waved a weary hand at the men who held his arms.

‘I must rest here,’ he said, shaking his head.

‘My lord, they are too close,’ Kokchu replied. The bondsmen ignored the shaman, easing their khan down to where he could sit on a ledge of grass.

‘Then we have lost?’ the khan said. ‘How else could the dogs of Genghis have reached this hill, if not over Naiman dead?’

Kokchu did not meet the eyes of the bondsmen. They knew the truth as well as he, but no one wanted to say the words and break the last hope of an old man. Below, the ground was marked in curves and strokes of dead men, like a bloody script on the grass. The Oirat had fought bravely and well, but they too had broken at the last. The army of Genghis moved fluidly, taking advantage of every weakness in the lines. Kokchu could see groups of tens and hundreds race across the battlefield, their officers communicating with bewildering speed. Only the great courage of the Naiman warriors remained to hold back the storm and it would not be enough. Kokchu knew a moment’s hope when the warriors retook the foot of the hill, but it was a small number of exhausted men and they were swept away in the next great charge against them.

‘Your bondsmen still stand ready to die for you, my lord,’ Kokchu murmured. It was all he could say. The rest of the

army that had stood so bright and strong the night before lay shattered. He could hear the cries of dying men.

The khan nodded, closing his eyes.

‘I thought we might win this day,’ he said, his voice little more than a whisper. ‘If it is over, tell my sons to lay down their swords. I will not have them die for nothing.’

The khan’s sons had been killed as the army of Genghis roared over them. The two bondsmen stared at Kokchu as they heard the order, their grief and anger hidden from view. The older man drew his sword and checked the edge, the veins in his face and neck showing clearly, like delicate threads under the skin.

‘I will take word to your sons, lord, if you will let me go.’

The khan raised his head.

‘Tell them to live, Murakh, that they might see where this Genghis takes us all.’

There were tears in Murakh’s eyes and he wiped them away angrily as he faced the other bondsman, ignoring Kokchu as if he were not there.

‘Protect the khan, my son,’ he said softly. The younger man bowed his head and Murakh placed a hand on his shoulder, leaning forward to touch foreheads for a moment. Without a glance at the shaman who had brought them to the hill, Murakh strode down the slope.

The khan sighed, his mind full of clouds.

‘Tell them to let the conqueror through,’ he whispered. Kokchu watched as a bead of sweat hung on his nose and quivered there. ‘Perhaps he will be merciful with my sons once he has killed me.’

Far below, Kokchu saw the bondsman Murakh reach the last knot of defenders. They stood taller in his presence; exhausted, broken men who nonetheless raised their heads and tried not to show they had been afraid. Kokchu heard them calling farewell to one another as they walked with a light step towards the enemy.

At the foot of the hill, Kokchu saw Genghis himself come through the mass of warriors, his armour marbled in blood. Kokchu felt the man's gaze pass over him. He shivered and touched the hilt of his knife. Would Genghis spare a shaman who had drawn it across his own khan's throat? The old man sat with his head bowed, his neck painfully thin. Perhaps such a murder would win Kokchu's life for him and, at that moment, he was desperately afraid of death.

Genghis stared up without moving for a long time and Kokchu let his hand fall. He did not know this cold warrior who came from nowhere with the dawn sun. Kokchu sat at the side of his khan and watched the last of the Naimans go down to die. He chanted an old protective charm his father had taught him, to turn enemies to his side. It seemed to ease the tension in the old khan to hear the tumbling words.

Murakh had been first warrior to the Naimans and had not fought that day. With an ululating yell, he tore into the lines of Genghis' men without a thought for his defence. The last of the Naimans shouted in his wake, their weariness vanishing. Their arrows sent the men of Genghis spinning, though they rose quickly and snapped the shafts, showing their teeth as they came on. As Murakh killed the first who stood against him, a dozen more pressed him on all sides, making his ribs run red with their blows.

Kokchu continued the chant, his eyes widening as Genghis blew a horn and his men pulled back from the panting Naiman survivors.

Murakh still lived, standing dazed. Kokchu could see Genghis call to him, but he could not hear the words. Murakh shook his head and spat blood on the ground as he raised his sword once more. There were only a few Naimans who still stood and they were all wounded, their blood running

down their legs. They too raised their blades, staggering as they did so.

‘You have fought well,’ Genghis shouted. ‘Surrender to me and I will welcome you at my fires. I will give you honour.’

Murakh grinned at him through red teeth.

‘I spit on Wolf honour,’ he said.

Genghis sat very still on his pony before finally shrugging and dropping his arm once more. The line surged forward and Murakh and the others were engulfed in the press of stamping, stabbing men.

High on the hill, Kokchu rose to his feet, his chant dying in his throat as Genghis dismounted and began to climb. The battle was over. The dead lay in their hundreds, but thousands more had surrendered. Kokchu did not care what happened to them.

‘He is coming,’ Kokchu said softly, peering down the hill. His stomach cramped and the muscles in his legs shuddered like a horse beset with flies. The man who had brought the tribes of the plains under his banners was walking purposefully upwards, his face without expression. Kokchu could see his armour was battered and more than a few of its metal scales hung by threads. The fight had been hard, but Genghis climbed with his mouth shut, as if the exertion was nothing to him.

‘Have my sons survived?’ the khan whispered, breaking his stillness. He reached out and took hold of the sleeve of Kokchu’s deel.

‘They have not,’ Kokchu said with a sudden surge of bitterness. The hand fell away and the old man slumped. As Kokchu watched, the milky eyes came up once more and there was strength in the way he held himself.

‘Then let this Genghis come,’ the khan said. ‘What does he matter to me now?’

Kokchu did not respond, unable to tear his gaze from the warrior who climbed the hill. The wind was cold on his neck and he knew he was feeling it more sweetly than ever before. He had seen men faced with death; he had given it to them with the darkest rites, sending their souls spinning away. He saw his own death coming in the steady tread of that man and for a moment he almost broke and ran. It was not courage that held him there. He was a man of words and spells, more feared amongst the Naimans than his father had ever been. To run was to die with the certainty of winter coming. He heard the whisper as Murakh's son drew his sword, but took no comfort from it. There was something awe-inspiring about the steady gait of the destroyer. Armies had not stopped him. The old khan lifted his head to watch him come, sensing the approach in the same way his sightless eyes could still seek out the sun.

Genghis paused as he reached the three men, gazing at them. He was tall and his skin shone with oil and health. His eyes were wolf-yellow and Kokchu saw no mercy in them. As Kokchu stood frozen, Genghis drew a sword still marked with drying blood. Murakh's son took a pace forward to stand between the two khans. Genghis looked at him with a spark of irritation and the young man tensed.

'Get down the hill, boy, if you want to live,' Genghis said. 'I have seen enough of my people die today.'

The young warrior shook his head without a word and Genghis sighed. With a sharp blow, he knocked the sword aside and swept his other hand across, plunging a dagger into the young man's throat. As the life went out of Murakh's son, he fell onto Genghis with open arms. Genghis gave a grunt as he caught the weight and heaved him away. Kokchu watched the body tumble limply down the slope.

Calmly, Genghis wiped his knife and replaced it in a sheath at his waist, his weariness suddenly evident.

‘I would have honoured the Naimans, if you had joined me,’ he said.

The old khan stared up at him, his eyes empty.

‘You have heard my answer,’ he replied, his voice strong. ‘Now send me to my sons.’

Genghis nodded. His sword came down with apparent slowness. It swept the khan’s head from his shoulders and sent it rolling down the hill. The body hardly jerked at the tug of the blade and only leaned slightly to one side. Kokchu could hear the blood spattering on the rocks as every one of his senses screamed to live. He paled as Genghis turned to him and he spoke in a desperate torrent of words.

‘You may not shed the blood of a shaman, lord. You may not. I am a man of power, one who understands power. Strike me and you will find my skin is iron. Instead, let me serve you. Let me proclaim your victory.’

‘How well did you serve the khan of the Naimans to have brought him here to die?’ Genghis replied.

‘Did I not bring him far from the battle? I saw you coming in my dreams, lord. I prepared the way for you as best I could. Are you not the future of the tribes? My voice is the voice of the spirits. I stand in water, while you stand on earth and sky. Let me serve you.’

Genghis hesitated, his sword perfectly still. The man he faced wore a dark brown deel over a grubby tunic and leggings. It was decorated with patterns of stitching, swirls of purple worn almost black with grease and dirt. The boots Kokchu wore were bound in rope, the sort a man might wear if the last owner had no more use for them.

Yet there was something in the way the eyes burned in the dark face. Genghis remembered how Eeluk of the Wolves had killed his father’s shaman. Perhaps Eeluk’s fate had been sealed on that bloody day so many years before. Kokchu watched him, waiting for the stroke that would end his life.

‘I do not need another storyteller,’ Genghis said. ‘I have three men already who claim to speak for the spirits.’

Kokchu saw the curiosity in the man’s gaze and he did not hesitate.

‘They are children, lord. Let me show you,’ he said. Without waiting for a reply, he reached inside his deel and removed a slender length of steel bound clumsily into a hilt of horn. He sensed Genghis raise his sword and Kokchu held up his free palm to stay the blow, closing his eyes.

With a wrenching effort of will, the shaman shut out the wind on his skin and the cold fear that ate at his belly. He murmured the words his father had beaten into him and felt the calm of a trance come sharper and faster than even he had expected. The spirits were with him, their caress slowing his heart. In an instant, he was somewhere else and watching.

Genghis opened his eyes wide as Kokchu touched the dagger to his own forearm, the slim blade entering the flesh. The shaman showed no sign of pain as the metal slid through him and Genghis watched, fascinated, as the tip raised the skin on the other side. The metal showed black as it poked through and Kokchu blinked slowly, almost lazily, as he pulled it out.

He watched the eyes of the young khan as the knife came free. They were fastened on the wound. Kokchu took a deep breath, feeling the trance deepen until a great coldness was in every limb.

‘Is there blood, lord?’ he whispered, knowing the answer.

Genghis frowned. He did not sheathe his sword, but stepped forward and ran a rough thumb over the oval wound in Kokchu’s arm.

‘None. It is a useful skill,’ he admitted grudgingly. ‘Can it be taught?’

Kokchu smiled, no longer afraid.

‘The spirits will not come to those they have not chosen, lord.’

Genghis nodded, stepping away. Even in the cold wind, the shaman stank like an old goat and he did not know what to make of the strange wound that did not bleed.

With a grunt, he ran his fingers along his blade and sheathed it.

‘I will give you a year of life, shaman. It is enough time to prove your worth.’

Kokchu fell to his knees, pressing his face into the ground.

‘You are the great khan, as I have foretold,’ he said, tears staining the dust on his cheeks. He felt the coldness of whispering spirits leave him then. He shrugged his sleeve forward to hide the fast-growing spot of blood.

‘I am,’ Genghis replied. He looked down the hill at the army waiting for him to return. ‘The world will hear my name.’ When he spoke again, it was so quiet that Kokchu had to strain to hear him.

‘This is not a time of death, shaman. We are one people and there will be no more battles between us. I will summon us all. Cities will fall to us, new lands will be ours to ride. Women will weep and I will be pleased to hear it.’

He looked down at the prostrate shaman, frowning.

‘You will live, shaman. I have said it. Get off your knees and walk down with me.’

At the foot of the hill, Genghis nodded to his brothers, Kachiun and Khasar. Each of them had grown in authority in the years since they had begun the gathering of tribes, but they were still young and Kachiun smiled as his brother walked amongst them.

‘Who is this?’ Khasar asked, staring at Kokchu in his ragged deel.

‘The shaman of the Naimans,’ Genghis replied.

Another man guided his pony close and dismounted, his

eyes fastened on Kokchu. Arslan had once been swordsmith to the Naiman tribe and Kokchu recognised him as he approached. The man was a murderer, he remembered, forced into banishment. It was no surprise to find such as he amongst Genghis' trusted officers.

'I remember you,' Arslan said. 'Has your father died then?'

'Years ago, oathbreaker,' Kokchu replied, nettled by the tone. For the first time, he realised he had lost the authority he had won so painfully with the Naimans. There were few men in that tribe who would have looked on him without lowering their eyes, for fear that they would be accused of disloyalty and face his knives and fire. Kokchu met the gaze of the Naiman traitor without flinching. They would come to know him.

Genghis watched the tension between the two men with something like amusement.

'Do not give offence, shaman. Not to the first warrior to come to my banners. There are no Naimans any longer, nor ties to tribe. I have claimed them all.'

'I have seen it in the visions,' Kokchu replied immediately. 'You have been blessed by the spirits.'

Genghis' face grew tight at the words.

'It has been a rough blessing. The army you see around you has been won by strength and skill. If the souls of our fathers were aiding us, they were too subtle for me to see them.'

Kokchu blinked. The khan of the Naimans had been credulous and easy to lead. He realised this new man was not as open to his influence. Still, the air was sweet in his lungs. He lived and he had not expected even that an hour before.

Genghis turned to his brothers, dismissing Kokchu from his thoughts.

'Have the new men give their oath to me this evening, as the sun sets,' he said to Khasar. 'Spread them amongst the others so that they begin to feel part of us, rather than beaten enemies. Do it carefully. I cannot be watching for knives at my back.'

Khasar dipped his head before turning away and striding through the warriors to where the defeated tribes still knelt.

Kokchu saw a smile of affection pass between Genghis and his younger brother Kachiun. The two men were friends and Kokchu was beginning to learn everything he could. Even the smallest detail would be useful in the years to come.

‘We have broken the alliance, Kachiun. Did I not say we would?’ Genghis said, clapping him on the back. ‘Your armoured horses came in at the perfect time.’

‘As you taught me,’ Kachiun replied, easy with the praise.

‘With the new men, this is an army to ride the plains,’ Genghis said, smiling. ‘It is time to set the path, at last.’ He thought for a moment.

‘Send out riders in every direction, Kachiun. I want the land scoured of every wanderer family and small tribe. Tell them to come to the black mountain next spring, near the Onon river. It is a flat plain that will hold all the thousands of our people. We will gather there, ready to ride.’

‘What message shall they take?’ Kachiun asked.

‘Tell them to come to me,’ he said softly. ‘Tell them Genghis calls them to a gathering. There is no one to stand against us now. They can follow me or they can spend their last days waiting for my warriors on the horizon. Tell them that.’ He looked around him with satisfaction. In seven years, he had gathered more than ten thousand men. With the survivors of the defeated allied tribes, he had almost twice that number. There was no one left on the plains who could challenge his leadership. He looked away from the sun to the east, imagining the bloated, wealthy cities of the Chin.

‘They have kept us apart for a thousand generations, Kachiun. They have ridden us until we were nothing more than savage dogs. That is the past. I have brought us together and they will be trembling. I’ll give them cause.’

CHAPTER ONE



In the summer dusk, the encampment of the Mongols stretched for miles in every direction, the great gathering still dwarfed by the plain in the shadow of the black mountain. Ger tents speckled the landscape as far as the eye could see and around them thousands of cooking fires lit the ground. Beyond those, herds of ponies, goats, sheep and yaks stripped the ground of grass in their constant hunger. Each dawn saw them driven away to the river and good grazing before returning to the gers. Though Genghis guaranteed the peace, tension and suspicion grew each day. None there had seen such a host before and it was easy to feel hemmed in by the numbers. Insults imaginary and real were exchanged as all felt the pressure of living too close to warriors they did not know. In the evenings, there were many fights between the young men, despite the prohibition. Each dawn found one or two bodies of those who had tried to settle an old score or grudge. The tribes muttered among themselves while they

waited to hear why they had been brought so far from their own lands.

In the centre of the army of tents and carts stood the ger of Genghis himself, unlike anything seen before on the plains. Half as high again as the others, it was twice the width and built of stronger materials than the wicker lattice of the gers around it. The construction had proved too heavy to dismantle easily and was mounted on a wheeled cart drawn by eight oxen. As the night came, many hundreds of warriors directed their feet towards it, just to confirm what they had heard and to marvel.

Inside, the great ger was lit with mutton-oil lamps, casting a warm glow over the inhabitants and making the air thick. The walls were hung with silk war banners, but Genghis disdained any show of wealth and sat on a rough wooden bench. His brothers lay sprawled on piled horse blankets and saddles, drinking and chatting idly.

Before Genghis sat a nervous young warrior, still sweating from the long ride that had brought him amongst such a host. The men around the khan did not seem to be paying attention, but the messenger was aware that their hands were never far from their weapons. They did not seem tense or worried at his presence and he considered that their hands might always be near a blade. His people had made their decision and he hoped the elder khans knew what they were doing.

‘If you have finished your tea, I will hear the message,’ Genghis said.

The messenger nodded, placing the shallow cup back on the floor at his feet. He swallowed his last gulp as he closed his eyes and recited, ‘These are the words of Barchuk, who is khan to the Uighurs.’

The conversations and laughter around him died away as he spoke and he knew they were all listening. His nervousness grew.

‘It is with joy that I learned of your glory, my lord Genghis Khan. We had grown weary waiting for our people to know one another and rise. The sun has risen. The river is freed of ice. You are the gurkhan, the one who will lead us all. I will dedicate my strength and knowledge to you.’

The messenger stopped and wiped sweat from his brow. When he opened his eyes, he saw that Genghis was looking at him quizzically and his stomach tightened in fear.

‘The words are very fine,’ Genghis said, ‘but where are the Uighurs? They have had a year to reach this place. If I have to fetch them . . .’ He left the threat dangling.

The messenger spoke quickly. ‘My lord, it took months just to build the carts to travel. We have not moved from our lands in many generations. Five great temples had to be taken apart, stone by stone, each one numbered so that it could be built again. Our store of scrolls took a dozen carts by itself and cannot move quickly.’

‘You have writing?’ Genghis asked, sitting forward with interest.

The messenger nodded without pride.

‘For many years now, lord. We have collected the writings of nations in the west, whenever they have allowed us to trade for them. Our khan is a man of great learning and has even copied works of the Chin and the Xi Xia.’

‘So I am to welcome scholars and teachers to this place?’ Genghis said. ‘Will you fight with scrolls?’

The messenger coloured as the men in the ger chuckled.

‘There are four thousand warriors also, my lord. They will follow Barchuk wherever he leads them.’

‘They will follow me, or they will be left as flesh on the grass,’ Genghis replied. For a moment, the messenger could only stare, but then he dropped his eyes to the polished wooden floor and remained silent.

Genghis stifled his irritation.

‘You have not said when they will come, these Uighur scholars,’ he said.

‘They could be only days behind me, lord. I left three moons ago and they were almost ready to leave. It cannot be long now, if you will have patience.’

‘For four thousand, I will wait,’ Genghis said softly, thinking. ‘You know the Chin writing?’

‘I do not have my letters, lord. My khan can read their words.’

‘Do these scrolls say how to take a city made of stone?’

The messenger hesitated as he felt the sharp interest of the men around him.

‘I have not heard of anything like that, lord. The Chin write about philosophy, the words of the Buddha, Confucius and Lao Tzu. They do not write of war, or if they do, they have not allowed us to see those scrolls.’

‘Then they are of no use to me,’ Genghis snapped. ‘Get yourself a meal and be careful not to start a fight with your boasting. I will judge the Uighurs when they finally arrive.’

The messenger bowed low before leaving the ger, taking a relieved breath as soon as he was out of the smoky atmosphere. Once more, he wondered if his khan understood what he had promised with his words. The Uighur ruled themselves no longer.

Looking around at the vast encampment, the messenger saw twinkling lights for miles. At a word from the man he had met, they could be sent in any direction. Perhaps the khan of the Uighurs had not had a choice.

Hoelun dipped her cloth into a bucket and laid it on her son’s brow. Temuge had always been weaker than his brothers and it seemed an added burden that he fell sick more than Khasar or Kachiun, or Temujin himself. She smiled wryly at the thought

that she must now call her son 'Genghis'. It meant the ocean and was a beautiful word twisted beyond its usual meaning by his ambition. He who had never seen the sea in his twenty-six years of life. Not that she had herself, of course.

Temuge stirred in his sleep, wincing as she probed his stomach with her fingers.

'He is quiet now. Perhaps I will leave for a time,' Borte said.

Hoelun glanced coldly at the woman Temujin had taken as a wife. Borte had given him four perfect sons and for a time Hoelun had thought they would be as sisters, or at least friends. The younger woman had once been full of life and excitement, but events had twisted her somewhere deep, where it could not be seen. Hoelun knew the way Temujin looked at the eldest boy. He did not play with little Jochi and all but ignored him. Borte had fought against the mistrust, but it had grown between them like an iron wedge into strong wood. It did not help that his three other boys had all inherited the yellow eyes of his line. Jochi's were a dark brown, as black as his hair in dim light. While Temujin doted on the others, it was Jochi who ran to his mother, unable to understand the coldness in his father's face when he looked at him. Hoelun saw the young woman glance at the door to the ger, no doubt thinking of her sons.

'You have servants to put them to bed,' Hoelun chided. 'If Temuge wakes, I will need you here.'

As she spoke, her fingers drifted over a dark knot under the skin of her son's belly, just a few fingerbreadths above the dark hair of his groin. She had seen such an injury before, when men lifted weights too heavy for them. The pain was crippling, but most of them recovered. Temuge did not have that kind of luck, and never had. He looked less like a warrior than ever as he had grown to manhood. When he slept, he had the face of a poet and she loved him for that. Perhaps because his father would have rejoiced to see the men the others had become, she had always found a special tenderness for Temuge. He had

not grown ruthless, though he had endured as much as they. She sighed to herself and felt Borte's eyes on her in the gloom.

'Perhaps he will recover,' Borte said. Hoelun winced. Her son blistered under the sun and rarely carried a blade bigger than an eating knife. She had not minded as he began to learn the histories of the tribes, taking them in with such speed that the older men were amazed at his recall. Not everyone could be skilled with weapons and horses, she told herself. She knew he hated the sneers and jibes that followed him in his work, though there were few who dared risk Genghis hearing of them. Temuge refused to mention the insults and that was a form of courage all its own. None of her sons lacked spirit.

Both women looked up as the small door of the ger opened. Hoelun frowned as she saw Kokchu enter and bow his head to them. His fierce eyes darted over the supine figure of her son and she fought not to show her dislike, not even understanding her own reaction. There was something about the shaman that set her teeth on edge and she had ignored the messengers he had sent. For a moment, she drew herself up, struggling between indignation and weariness.

'I did not ask for you,' she said coldly.

Kokchu seemed oblivious to the tone.

'I sent a slave to beg a moment with you, mother to khans. Perhaps he has not yet arrived. The whole camp is talking of your son's illness.'

Hoelun felt the shaman's gaze fasten on her, waiting to be formally welcomed, as she looked at Temuge once more. Always he was watching, as if, inside, someone else looked out. She had seen how he pushed himself into the inner circles around Genghis and she could not like him. The warriors might reek of sheep turds, mutton fat and sweat, but those were the smells of healthy men. Kokchu carried an odour of rotting meat, though whether it was from his clothes or his flesh, she could not tell.

Faced with her silence, he should have left the ger, or risked her calling for guards. Instead, he spoke brazenly, somehow certain that she would not send him away.

‘I have some healing skill, if you will let me examine him.’

Hoelun tried to swallow her distaste. The shaman of the Olkhun’ut had only chanted over Temuge, without result.

‘You are welcome in my home, Kokchu,’ she said at last. She saw him relax subtly and could not shake the feeling of being too close to something unpleasant.

‘My son is asleep. The pain is very great when he is awake and I want him to rest.’

Kokchu crossed the small ger and crouched down beside the two women. Both edged unconsciously away from him.

‘He needs healing more than rest, I think.’ Kokchu peered down at Temuge, leaning close to smell his breath. Hoelun winced in sympathy as he reached out to Temuge’s bare stomach and probed the area of the lump, but she did not stop him. Temuge groaned in his sleep and Hoelun held her breath.

After a time, Kokchu nodded to himself.

‘You should prepare yourself, old mother. This one will die.’

Hoelun jerked out a hand and caught the shaman by his thin wrist. Her strength surprised him.

‘He has wrenched his gut, shaman. I have seen it many times before. Even on ponies and goats have I seen it and they always live.’

Kokchu undid her shaking clasp with his other hand. It pleased him to see fear in her eyes. With fear, he could own her, body and soul. If she had been a young Naiman mother, he might have sought sexual favours in return for healing her son, but in this new camp, he needed to impress the great khan. He kept his face still as he replied.

‘You see the darkness of the lump? It is a growth that cannot be cut out. Perhaps if it were on the skin, I would burn it off, but it will have run claws into his stomach and

lungs. It eats him mindlessly and it will not be satisfied until he is dead.'

'You are wrong,' Hoelun snapped, but there were tears in her eyes.

Kokchu lowered his gaze so that she would not see his triumph glitter there.

'I wish I was, old mother. I have seen these things before and they have nothing but appetite. It will continue to savage him until they perish together.' To make his point, he reached down and squeezed the swelling. Temuge jerked and came awake with a sharp breath.

'Who are you?' Temuge said to Kokchu, gasping. He struggled to sit up, but the pain made him cry out and he fell back onto the narrow bed. His hands tugged at a blanket to cover his nakedness and his cheeks flushed hotly under Kokchu's scrutiny.

'He is a shaman, Temuge. He is going to make you well,' Hoelun said. Temuge broke into fresh sweat and she dabbed the cloth to his skin as he settled back. After a time, his breathing slowed and he drifted into exhausted sleep once more. Hoelun lost a little of her tension, if not the terror Kokchu had brought into her home.

'If it is hopeless, shaman, why are you still here?' she said. 'There are other men and women who need your healing skill.' She could not keep the bitterness from her voice and did not guess that Kokchu rejoiced in it.

'I have fought what eats him twice before in my life. It is a dark rite and dangerous for the man who practises it as well as for your son. I tell you this so you do not despair, but it would be foolish to hope. Consider him to have died and if I win him back, you will know joy.'

Hoelun felt a chill as she looked into the shaman's eyes. He smelled of blood, she realised, though no trace of it showed on his skin. The thought of him touching her perfect son made

her clench her hands, but he had frightened her with his talk of death and she was helpless against him.

‘What will you have me do?’ she whispered.

He sat very still while he considered.

‘It will take all my strength to bring the spirits to your son. I will need a goat to take in the growth and another to cleanse him with blood. I have the herbs I need, if I am strong enough.’

‘What if you fail?’ Borte asked suddenly.

Kokchu took a deep breath, letting it shudder from his lips.

‘If my strength fails as I begin the chant, I will survive. If I reach the final stage and the spirits take me, then you will see me torn out of my body. It will live for a time, but without the soul it will be empty flesh. This is no small thing, old mother.’

Hoelun watched him, once more suspicious. He seemed so plausible, but his quick eyes were always watching, seeing how his words were received.

‘Fetch two goats, Borte. Let us see what he can do.’

It was dark outside and while Borte brought the animals, Kokchu used the cloth to wipe Temuge’s chest and belly. When he pressed his fingers into Temuge’s mouth, the young man woke again, his eyes bright with terror.

‘Lie still, boy. I will help you if I have the strength,’ Kokchu told him. He did not look round as the bleating goats were brought in and dragged to his side, his attention fully on the young man in his care.

With the slowness of ritual, Kokchu took four brass bowls from his robe and placed them on the ground. He poured grey powder into each one and lit a taper from the stove. Soon, snakes of white-grey smoke made the air chokingly thick in the ger. Kokchu breathed deeply, filling his lungs. Hoelun coughed into her hand and flushed. The fumes were making her dizzy, but she would not leave her son alone with a man she did not trust.

In a whispering voice, Kokchu began to chant in the most ancient tongue of their people, almost forgotten. Hoelun sat back as she heard it, remembering the sounds from the healers and shamans of her youth. It brought back darker memories for Borte, who had heard her husband recite the old words on a night long before, butchering men and forcing slivers of burned heart between her lips. It was a language of blood and cruelty, well suited to the winter plains. There was no word in it for kindness, or for love. As Borte listened, the ribbons of smoke seeped into her, making her skin numb. The tumbling words brought a rush of vicious images and she gagged.

‘Be still, woman,’ Kokchu growled at her, his eyes wild. ‘Be silent while the spirits come.’ His chant resumed with greater force, hypnotic as he repeated phrases over and over, growing in volume and urgency. The first goat bleated in desperation as he held it over Temuge, looking into the young man’s terrified eyes. With his knife, Kokchu slit the goat’s throat and held it while its blood poured and steamed over Hoelun’s son. Temuge cried out at the sudden warmth, but Hoelun touched her hand to his lips and he quietened.

Kokchu let the goat fall, still kicking. His chant grew faster and he closed his eyes, reaching deep into Temuge’s gut. To his surprise, the young man remained silent and Kokchu had to squeeze the lump hard to make him cry out. The blood hid the sharp twist as he undid the strangled piece of gut and shoved it back behind the wall of muscle. His father had shown him the ritual with a real tumour and Kokchu had seen the old man chanting while men and women screamed, sometimes yelling back over their open mouths so that his spittle entered their throats. Kokchu’s father had taken them so far past exhaustion that they were lost and they were mad and they *believed*. He had seen obscene growths shrink and die after that point of agony and faith. If a man gave himself utterly to the shaman, sometimes the spirits rewarded that trust.

There was no honour in using the craft to fool a young man with a torn stomach, but the rewards would be great. Temuge was brother to the khan and such a man would always be a valuable ally. He thought of his father's warnings about those who abused the spirits with lies and tricks. The man had never understood power, or how intoxicating it could be. The spirits swarmed around belief like flies on dead meat. It was not wrong to make belief swell in the camp of the khan. His authority could only increase.

Kokchu breathed heavily as he chanted, rolling his eyes up in his head as he pushed his hand deeper into Temuge's belly. With a cry of triumph, he made a wrenching movement, pulling out a small piece of calf's liver he had hidden from sight. In his grip, it jerked like something alive and Borte and Hoelun recoiled from it.

Kokchu continued to chant as he yanked the second goat close. It too struggled, but he forced his hand past its yellow teeth, though they gnawed at his knuckles. He pushed the foul meat down the gullet until the animal could do nothing but swallow in jerking spasms. When he saw the throat move, he stroked it hard, forcing the liver into the goat's stomach before letting it go.

'Do not let her touch the other animals,' he said, panting, 'or it will spread and live again, perhaps even get back into your son.' Sweat dripped from his nose as he watched them.

'It would be better to burn the goat to ashes. She must not be eaten as the flesh contains the growth. Be sure with this. I do not have the strength to do it again.'

He let himself slump as if his senses had left him, though he still breathed like a dog in the sun.

'The pain has gone,' he heard Temuge say wonderingly. 'It is sore, but nothing like it was before.' Kokchu sensed Hoelun lean over her son and heard him gasp as she touched the place where his gut had come through his stomach muscle.

‘The skin is whole,’ Temuge said. Kokchu could hear the awe in his voice and chose that moment to open his eyes and sit up. He was dull-eyed and squinted through the haze of smoke.

His long fingers hunted in the pockets of his deel, pulling out a piece of twisted horsehair stained with old blood.

‘This has been blessed,’ he told them. ‘I will bind it over the wound so that nothing may enter.’

No one spoke as he took a grubby ribbon of cloth from his deel and made Temuge sit up. Kokchu chanted under his breath as he wound it around the young man’s gut, covering the stiff piece of hair with line after line of cloth and heaving each one tight until it was hidden from view. When he had knotted it, Kokchu sat back, satisfied that the gut would not pop out and spoil all his work.

‘Keep the charm in place for a turn of the moon,’ he said wearily. ‘Let it fall and perhaps the growth will find its home once more.’ He closed his eyes, as if exhausted. ‘I must sleep now, for tonight and most of tomorrow. Burn that goat before you leave her to spread the growth. She will be dead in a few hours at the most.’ Given that he had laced the liver with enough poison to kill a full-grown man, he knew he spoke the truth. There would be no suspiciously healthy animal to spoil his achievement.

‘Thank you for what you have done,’ Hoelun said. ‘I do not understand it . . .’

Kokchu smiled tiredly.

‘It took me twenty years of study to begin my mastery, old mother. Do not think to understand it in a single evening. Your son will heal now, as he would have done if the growth had not begun to writhe in him.’ He thought for a moment. He did not know the woman, but surely she would tell Genghis what had happened. To make certain, he spoke again.

‘I must ask that you do not tell anyone of what you have seen. There are still tribes where they kill those who practise

the old magic. It is seen as too dangerous.’ He shrugged. ‘Perhaps it is.’ With that, he knew the tale would spread right through the camp before he woke the next day. There were always some who wanted a charm against illness, or a curse on an enemy. They would leave milk and meat at his ger, and with power came respect and fear. He longed for them to be afraid, for when they were, they would give him anything. What did it matter if he had not saved a life this time? The belief would be there when another life hung in his hands. He had dropped a stone in the river and the ripples would go far.

Genghis and his generals were alone in the great ger as the moon rose above the host of his people. The day had been busy for all of them, but they could not sleep while he remained awake and there would be yawns and bleary eyes the following day. Genghis seemed as fresh as he had that morning, when he had welcomed two hundred men and women from a Turkic tribe so far to the north-west that they could not understand more than a few words of what he said. Still, they had come.

‘Every day brings more of them, with two moons left of summer,’ Genghis said, looking round proudly at men who had been with him since the first days. At fifty years of age, Arslan was growing old after the years of war. He and his son Jelme had come to Genghis when he had nothing but his wits and his three brothers. Both had remained utterly loyal through hard years and Genghis had let them prosper and take wives and wealth. Genghis nodded to the swordsmith who had become his general, pleased to see the man’s back as straight as ever.

Temuge did not attend their discussions, even when he was well. Of all the brothers, he had shown no aptitude for tactics. Genghis loved him, but he could not trust him to lead others.

He shook his head, realising that his thoughts were wandering. He too was weary, though he would not allow it to show.

‘Some of the new tribes have never even heard of the Chin,’ Kachiun said. ‘The ones who came this morning dress like nothing I’ve ever seen. They are not Mongols, as we are.’

‘Perhaps,’ Genghis said. ‘But I will make them welcome. Let them prove themselves in war before we judge them. They are not Tartars, or blood enemies to any man here. At least I will not be called to untangle some grudge going back a dozen generations. They will be useful.’

He took a draught from a rough clay cup, smacking his lips at the bitterness of the black airag.

‘Be wary in the camp, my brothers. They have come because *not* to come invites us to destroy them. They do not trust us yet. Many of them know only my name and nothing else.’

‘I have men listening at every fire,’ Kachiun said. ‘There will always be some who seek an advantage in such a gathering. Even as we speak here, there will be a thousand other conversations discussing us. Even whispers will be heard. I will know if I have to act.’

Genghis nodded to his brother, proud of him. Kachiun had grown into a stocky man with an immense breadth of shoulder from his bow practice. They shared a bond that Genghis could claim with no one else, not even Khasar.

‘Still, my back itches when I walk through the camp. While we wait, they grow restless, but there are more to come and I cannot move yet. The Uighurs alone will be valuable. Those who are already here may test us, so be ready and let no insult go unpunished. I will trust you in your judgement, even if you throw a dozen heads at my feet.’

The generals in the ger met each other’s eyes without smiling. For every man they had brought to the great plain, two more had come. The advantage they held was that not one of the strongest khans knew the extent of their support. Anyone riding

into the shadow of the black mountain saw a single host and gave no thought to the fact that it was composed of a hundred different factions, watching each other in mutual mistrust.

Genghis yawned at last.

‘Get some sleep, my brothers,’ he said wearily. ‘Dawn is close and the herds have to be moved to new grass.’

‘I will look in on Temuge before I sleep,’ Kachiun said.

Genghis sighed.

‘Let us hope the sky father makes him well. I cannot lose my only sensible brother.’

Kachiun snorted, throwing open the small door to the outside air. When they had all left, Genghis rose, cracking the stiffness out of his neck with a swift jerk of his hands. His family ger was nearby, though his sons would be asleep. It was one more night when he would thump into the blankets without his family knowing he had come home.