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**Conqueror 3:
Bones of the Hills**

Written by Conn Iggulden

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THE CONQUEROR SERIES

BONES OF
THE HILLS

CONN IGGULDEN

HARPER

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To my son Arthur

PROLOGUE



The fire roared at the centre of the circle. Shadows flickered around it as dark figures leapt and danced with swords. Their robes swirled as they howled over other voices raised in ululating song. Men sat with stringed instruments across their knees, plucking out tunes and rhythms while they stamped their feet.

At the edges of the fire, a line of Mongol warriors knelt bare-chested with their hands bound behind them. As one, they showed the cold face to their triumphant captors. Their officer, Kurkhask, had been beaten savagely in the battle. Blood caked his mouth and his right eye was swollen shut. He had known worse. Kurkhask was proud of the way the others refused to show fear. He watched the dark-skinned desert warriors shouting and chanting to the stars, waving curved blades marked with the blood of men he had known. They were a strange breed, Kurkhask thought, these men who wore their heads bound in many thicknesses of cloth and loose tunics over wide-legged trousers. Most were bearded, so that their mouths were just a red slash in black bristles. As a group, they were taller and more heavily muscled than the largest of the Mongol warriors. They reeked of strange spices and many of the men chewed at dark roots, spitting brown clots on the ground at their feet. Kurkhask hid his distaste for them as they jerked and yelped and danced, building themselves into a frenzy.

The Mongol officer shook his head wearily. He had been too confident, he knew that now. The twenty men Temuge had sent with him were all seasoned warriors, but they were not a raiding party. By trying to protect the carts of gifts and bribes, they had reacted too slowly and been caught. Kurkhask thought back to the months before and knew the peaceful mission had lulled him, made him drop his guard. He and his men had found themselves in a hard land of dizzying mountain passes. They had passed valleys set to straggling crops and traded simple gifts with farmers as poor as any they had ever seen. Yet game was plentiful and his men had roasted fat deer on their fires. Perhaps that had been a mistake. The farmers had pointed to the mountains in warning, but he had not understood. He had no quarrel with the hill tribes, but in the night a host of warriors had overtaken them, coming out of the darkness with wild cries and slashing at the sleeping men. Kurkhask closed his eyes briefly. Only eight of his companions had survived the struggle, though he had not seen his oldest son since the first clash of arms. The boy had been scouting the path ahead and Kurkhask hoped he had survived to carry word back to the khan. That thought alone gave him pleasure to set against his vicious resentment.

The carts had been looted of their trinkets, the silver and jade stolen by the tribesmen. As Kurkhask watched from under lowered brows, he saw many of them now dressed in Mongol deels with dark splashes of blood on the cloth.

The chanting intensified until Kurkhask could see white spittle gather at the edges of the men's mouths. He held his back very straight as the leader of the tribe drew a blade and advanced on the line, screaming. Kurkhask exchanged glances with the others.

'After tonight, we will be with the spirits and see the hills of home,' he called to them. 'The khan will hear. He will sweep this land clean.'

His calm tone seemed to drive the Arab swordsman to an even higher pitch of fury. Shadows flickered across his face as he whirled the blade over a Mongol warrior. Kurkhask watched without expression. When death was inevitable, when he felt its breath on his neck, he had found all fear could be put aside and he could meet it calmly. That at least gave him some satisfaction. He hoped his wives would shed many tears when they heard.

‘Be strong, brother,’ Kurkhask called.

Before he could reply, the sword took the warrior’s head. Blood gouted and the Arabs hooted and beat their feet on the ground in appreciation. The swordsman grinned, his teeth very white against dark skin. Again, the sword fell and another Mongol toppled sideways on the dusty ground. Kurkhask felt his throat constrict in anger until he could almost choke on it. This was a land of lakes and clear mountain rivers, two thousand miles west of Yenking. The villagers they had met were in awe of their strange faces, yet friendly. That very morning, Kurkhask had been sent on his way with blessings and sticky sweets that gummed his teeth together. He had ridden under a blue sky and never guessed the hill tribes were passing word of his presence. He still did not know why they had been attacked, unless it was simply to steal the gifts and trade goods they carried. He searched the hills for some glimpse of his son, hoping again that his death would be witnessed. He could not die badly if the boy watched. It was the last gift he could give him.

The swordsman needed three blows to take the third head. When it finally came free, he held it up by the hair to his companions, laughing and chanting in their strange language. Kurkhask had begun to learn a few words of the Pashto tongue, but the stream of sound was beyond him. He watched in grim silence as the killing continued until, at last, he was the only man still alive.

Kurkhask raised his head to stare up without fear. Relief filled him as he caught a movement far beyond the firelight. Something white shifted in the gloom and Kurkhask smiled. His son was out there, signalling. Before the boy gave himself away, Kurkhask dipped his head. The distant flicker vanished, but Kurkhask relaxed, all the tension flowing out of him. The khan would be told.

He looked up at the Arab warrior as he drew back the bloody length of steel.

‘My people will see you again,’ Kurkhask said.

The Afghan swordsman hesitated, unable to understand.

‘Dust be in thy mouth, infidel!’ he shouted, the words a babble of sound to the Mongol officer.

Kurkhask shrugged wearily.

‘You have no *idea* what you have done,’ he said. The sword swept down.

PART ONE



CHAPTER ONE



The wind had fallen on the high ridge. Dark clouds drifted above, making bands of shadow march across the earth. The morning was quiet and the land seemed empty as the two men rode at the head of a narrow column, a jagun of a hundred young warriors. The Mongols could have been alone for a thousand miles, with just creaking leather and snorting ponies to break the stillness. When they halted to listen, it was as if silence rolled back in over the dusty ground.

Tsubodai was a general to the great khan and it showed in the way he held himself. His armour of iron scales over leather was well-worn, with holes and rust in many places. His helmet was marked where it had saved his life more than once. All his equipment was battered, but the man himself remained as hard and unforgiving as the winter earth. In three years of raiding the north, he had lost only one minor skirmish and returned the following day to destroy the tribe before word could spread. He had mastered his trade in a land that seemed to grow colder with each mile into the wastes. He had no maps for his journey, just rumours of distant cities built on rivers frozen so solid that oxen could be roasted on the ice.

At his right shoulder rode Jochi, the eldest son of the khan himself. Barely seventeen, he was yet a warrior who might inherit the nation and perhaps command even Tsubodai in war. Jochi

wore a similar set of greased leather and iron, as well as the saddle packs and weapons all the warriors carried. Tsubodai knew without asking that Jochi would have his ration of dried blood and milk, needing only water to make a nourishing broth. The land did not forgive those who took survival lightly and both men had learned the lessons of winter.

Jochi sensed the scrutiny and his dark eyes flickered up, always guarded. He had spent more time with the young general than he ever had with his father, but old habits were hard to break. It was difficult for him to trust, though his respect for Tsubodai knew no limit. The general of the Young Wolves had a feel for war, though he denied it. Tsubodai believed in scouts, training, tactics and archery above all else, but the men who followed him saw only that he won, no matter what the odds. As others could fashion a sword or a saddle, Tsubodai fashioned armies, and Jochi knew he was privileged to learn at his side. He wondered if his brother Chagatai had fared as well in the east. It was easy to daydream as he rode the hills, imagining his brothers and father struck dumb at the sight of how Jochi had grown and become strong.

‘What is the most important item in your packs?’ Tsubodai said suddenly. Jochi raised his eyes to the brooding sky for an instant. Tsubodai delighted in testing him.

‘Meat, general. Without meat, I cannot fight.’

‘Not your bow?’ Tsubodai said. ‘Without a bow, what are you?’

‘Nothing, general, but without meat, I am too weak to use the bow.’

Tsubodai grunted at hearing his own words repeated.

‘When the meat is all gone, how long can you live off blood and milk?’

‘Sixteen days at most, with three mounts to share the wounds.’ Jochi did not have to think. He had been drilled

in the answers ever since he and Tsubodai had ridden with ten thousand men from the shadow of the Chin emperor's city.

'How far could you travel in such a time?' Tsubodai said.

Jochi shrugged.

'Sixteen hundred miles with fresh remounts. Half as far again if I slept and ate in the saddle.'

Tsubodai saw that the young man was hardly concentrating and his eyes glinted as he changed tack.

'What is wrong with the ridge ahead?' he snapped.

Jochi raised his head, startled. 'I . . .'

'Quickly! Men are looking to you for a decision. Lives wait on your word.'

Jochi swallowed, but in Tsubodai he had learned from a master.

'The sun is behind us, so we will be visible for miles as we reach the crest.' Tsubodai began to nod, but Jochi went on. 'The ground is dusty. If we cross the high point of the ridge at any speed, we will raise a cloud into the air.'

'That is good, Jochi,' Tsubodai said. As he spoke, he dug in his heels and rode hard at the crest ahead. As Jochi had predicted, the hundred riders released a mist of reddish grit that billowed above their heads. Someone would surely see and report their position.

Tsubodai did not pause as he reached the ridge. He sent his mare over the edge, the rear legs skittering on loose stones. Jochi matched him and then took a sharp breath of dust that made him cough into his hand. Tsubodai had come to a halt fifty paces beyond the ridge, where the broken ground began to dip to the valley. Without orders, his men formed a wide double rank around him, like a bow drawn on the ground. They were long familiar with the firebrand of a general who had been placed over them.

Tsubodai stared into the distance, frowning. The hills surrounded a flat plain through which a river ran, swollen with spring rain. Along its banks, a slow-moving column trotted, bright with flags and banners. In other circumstances, it would have been a sight to take the breath, and even as his stomach clenched, Jochi felt a touch of admiration. Ten, perhaps eleven thousand Russian knights rode together, house colours in gold and red streaming back over their heads. Almost as many followed them in a baggage train of carts and remounts, women, boys and servants. The sun chose that moment to break through the dark clouds in a great beam that lit the valley. The knights shone.

Their horses were massive, shaggy animals, almost twice the weight of the Mongol ponies. Even the men who rode them were a strange breed to Jochi's eyes. They sat as if they were made of stone, solid and heavy in metal cloth from their cheeks to their knees. Only their blue eyes and hands were unprotected. The armoured knights had come prepared for battle, carrying long spears like lances, but tipped in steel. They rode with the weapons upright, the butts held in leather cups close behind the stirrups. Jochi could see axes and swords hanging down from waist belts and every man rode with a leaf-shaped shield hooked to his saddle. The pennants streamed back over their heads and they looked very fine in the bands of gold and shadow.

'They must see us,' Jochi murmured, glancing at the plume of dust above his head.

The general heard him speak and turned in the saddle.

'They are not men of the plains, Jochi. They are half-blind over such a distance. Are you afraid? They are so large, these knights. I would be afraid.'

For an instant, Jochi glowered. From his father, it would have been mockery. Yet Tsubodai spoke with a light in his eyes. The general was still in his twenties, young to command so many.

Tsubodai was not afraid, though. Jochi knew the general cared nothing for the massive warhorses or the men who rode them. Instead, he placed his faith in the speed and arrows of his Young Wolves.

The jagun was made up of ten arbans, each commanded by an officer. By Tsubodai's order, only those ten men wore heavy armour. The rest had leather tunics under padded deels. Jochi knew Genghis preferred the heavy charge to the light, but Tsubodai's men seemed to survive. They could hit and gallop faster than the ponderous Russian warriors and there was no fear in their ranks. Like Tsubodai, they looked hungrily down the slope at the column and waited to be seen.

'You know your father sent a rider to bring me home?' Tsubodai said.

Jochi nodded. 'All the men know.'

'I had hoped to go further north than this, but I am your father's man. He speaks and I obey; do you understand?'

Jochi stared at the young general, forgetting for a moment the knights who rode in the valley below.

'Of course,' he said, his face showing nothing.

Tsubodai glanced back at him, amused.

'I hope you do, Jochi. He is a man to follow, your father. I wonder how he will respond when he sees how well you have grown.'

For a moment, anger twisted Jochi's face before he smoothed his features and took a deep breath. Tsubodai had been more like a father than his own in many ways, but he did not forget the man's true loyalty. At an order from Genghis, Tsubodai would kill him. As he looked at the young general, he thought there would be some regret, but not enough to hold the blow.

'He will need loyal men, Tsubodai,' Jochi said. 'My father would not call us back to build or rest. He will have found

some new land to tear to pieces. Like the wolf, he is always hungry, even to the point of bursting his own stomach.'

Tsubodai frowned to hear the khan described in such a way. In three years, he had seen no affection when Jochi spoke of his father, though sometimes there was a wistfulness, which showed less and less as the seasons passed. Genghis had sent away a boy, but a man would return to him, Tsubodai had made certain of that. For all his bitterness, Jochi was a cool head in battle and the men looked on him with pride. He would do.

'I have another question for you, Jochi,' Tsubodai said.

Jochi smiled for an instant.

'You always have, general,' he replied.

'We have drawn these iron knights after us for hundreds of miles, exhausting their horses. We have captured their scouts and put them to the question, though I do not know of this "Jerusalem" they seek, or who this "white Christ" is.' Tsubodai shrugged. 'Perhaps I will meet him one day over the length of my sword, but the world is large and I am but one man.'

As he spoke, he watched the armoured knights and the trailing baggage lines behind it, waiting to be seen.

'My question, Jochi, is this. These knights are nothing to me. Your father has called me back and I could ride now, while the ponies are fat with summer grass. Why then are we here, waiting for the challenge?'

Jochi's eyes were cold as he replied.

'My father would say it is what we do, that there is no better way for a man to spend his years than at war with enemies. He might also say you enjoy it, general, and that is all the reason you need.'

Tsubodai's gaze did not waver.

'Perhaps he *would* say that, but you hide behind his words. Why are we here, Jochi? We do not want their big horses, even

for meat. Why will I risk the lives of warriors to smash the column you see?’

Jochi shrugged irritably.

‘If it is not that, I do not know.’

‘For *you*, Jochi,’ Tsubodai said seriously. ‘When you return to your father, you will have seen all forms of battle, in all seasons. You and I have captured towns and raided cities; ridden desert and forests so thick we could hardly cut our way through. Genghis will find no weakness in you.’ Tsubodai smiled briefly at Jochi’s stony expression. ‘I will be proud when men say you learned your skill under Tsubodai the Valiant.’

Jochi had to grin at hearing the nickname from Tsubodai himself. There were no secrets in the camps.

‘There it is,’ Tsubodai muttered, pointing to a distant messenger racing to the head of the Russian column. ‘We have an enemy who leads from the front, a very brave man.’

Jochi could imagine the sudden dismay among the knights as they looked into the bowl of hills and saw the Mongol warriors. Tsubodai grunted softly as an entire rank peeled off the column and began trotting up the slopes, the long spears ready. He showed his teeth as the gap began to narrow. They were charging uphill, in their arrogance. He longed to teach them their error.

‘Do you have your paitze, Jochi? Show it to me.’

Jochi reached behind him to where his bow holder was strapped to the saddle. He lifted a flap in the stiff leather and pulled out a plaque of solid gold, stamped with a wolf’s head. At twenty ounces, it was heavy, but small enough for him to grip in his hand.

Tsubodai ignored the men rising doggedly up the hill to face the eldest son of Genghis.

‘You have that and the right to command a thousand by my hand, Jochi. Those who command a jagun have one of mere

silver, like this.’ Tsubodai held up a larger block of the whitish metal. ‘The difference is that the silver paitze is given to a man elected by the officers of each arban below him.’

‘I know this,’ Jochi said.

Tsubodai glanced back at the knights labouring closer.

‘The officers of this jagun have asked to have you lead them, Jochi. I had no part in it.’ He held out the silver paitze and Jochi took it joyfully, passing back the plaque of gold. Tsubodai was solemn and deliberately formal, but his eyes were bright.

‘When you return to your father, Jochi, you will have known all ranks and positions.’ The general gestured, cutting the air with his hand. ‘On the right, the left and the centre.’ He looked over the heads of the straining knights cantering up the hill, seeing a flicker of movement on a crag in the distance. Tsubodai nodded sharply.

‘It is time. You know what you have to do, Jochi. Command is yours.’ Without another word, Tsubodai clapped the younger man on the shoulder and rode back over the ridge, leaving the jagun of riders in the care of one suddenly nervous leader.

Jochi could feel the combined stares of the hundred men on his back as he struggled to hide his pleasure. Each arban of ten elected one man to lead them, then those men elected one of their number to lead the hundred in war. To be so chosen was an honour. A voice in his mind whispered that they only honoured his father, but he crushed it, refusing to doubt. He had earned the right and confidence swelled in him.

‘Bow lines!’ Jochi called. He gripped his reins tightly to hide his tension as the men formed a wider line so that every bow could bear. Jochi glanced over his shoulder, but Tsubodai had truly gone, leaving him alone. The men still watched and he forced the cold face, knowing they would remember his calm. As they raised their bows, he held up a clenched fist, waiting while his heart thumped painfully in his chest.

At four hundred paces, Jochi dropped his arm and the first flight of arrows whipped into the air. It was too far and those that reached the knights splintered on their shields, now held high and forward, so that almost the entire man was protected. The long shields showed their purpose as a second flight struck the ranks without a single rider going down.

The powerful horses were not fast, but still the gap closed and Jochi only watched. At two hundred paces, he raised his fist once more and another hundred arrows waited on creaking strings. At such a distance, he did not know if the knights' armour would save them. Nothing ever had.

'Shoot as if you have never owned a bow,' he shouted.

The men around him grinned and the arrows snapped out. Jochi winced instinctively at shafts that went clear over the enemy heads, as if loosed by panicking fools. Only a few struck and, of those, still fewer brought a horse or man down. They could hear the thunder of the charge now and saw the front ranks begin to lower their spears in anticipation.

Facing them, Jochi smothered his fear in a sudden bloom of rage. He wanted nothing more than to draw his sword and kick his mount down the slope at the enemy. Shaking with frustration, he gave a different order.

'Retreat over the ridge,' Jochi shouted. He wrenched at his reins and his horse jerked into a run. His jagun shouted incoherently, turning in chaos after their general. Behind him, he heard guttural voices yelling in triumph and acid rose in his throat, though whether it was from fear or anger, he did not know.

Ilya Majaev blinked sweat out of his eyes when he saw the Mongols turn like the filthy cowards they were. As he had a thousand times before, he took a loose grip on his reins and

tapped himself on his chest, praying to St Sophia to bring enemies of the faith under his hooves. Beneath the chain mail and padded tunic lay a fragment of her fingerbone in a locket of gold, the most precious thing he possessed. The monks at Novgorod had assured him he would not be killed while he wore it and he felt strong as his knights hammered over the ridge. His men had left the cathedral city two years before, carrying messages east for the prince before they finally turned south and began the long trek that would take them to Jerusalem. Ilya had pledged his life with the others to defend that holy place from the unbelievers who sought to destroy her monuments.

It should have been a journey of prayer and fasting before they brought their skill in arms against godless men. Instead, they had been stung over and over by the Mongol army raiding the area. Ilya ached to have them close enough to kill and he leaned forward in the saddle as his mount lunged after the fleeing riders.

‘Give them unto me, O lord, and I will break their bones and trample on their false gods,’ he whispered to himself.

The Mongols were racing wildly down the far slope, but the Russian horses were powerful and the gap closed steadily. Ilya sensed the mood of the men around him as they snarled and called to each other. They had lost companions to flights of arrows in the darkness. Scouts had vanished without a trace, or worse, been found with wounds to make a man vomit. In a year, Ilya had seen more towns burned than he could remember, the plumes of black smoke drawing him in desperate pursuit. The marauding Mongols were always gone by the time he arrived. He urged his mount to gallop, though the weary animal’s sides were already heaving and clots of white saliva flicked up to strike his arms and chest.

‘On, brothers!’ Ilya shouted to the rest. He knew they would

not tire with the tribesmen at last within reach. The Mongols were an affront to everything Ilya valued, from the peaceful streets of Novgorod, to the quiet calm and dignity of the cathedral to his blessed saint.

Ahead, the Mongol warriors raced in disarray through a cloud of their own dust. Ilya snapped orders and his men closed into a solid column, fifty ranks of twenty abreast. They tied their reins to the saddle horns and leaned forward over the horses' necks with shield and spear, urging the animals on with just their knees. Surely there had never been such a force of men and iron in the history of the world! Ilya showed his teeth in anticipation of first blood.

The route of the fleeing Mongols took them past a hill shrouded in ancient beech and elm trees. As Ilya thundered by, he saw something move in the green gloom. He barely had time to shout a warning before the air was filled with whining shafts. Even then, he did not hesitate. He had seen the arrows break on his men's shields. He bawled an order to hold formation, knowing they could smash their way through.

A horse screamed and thumped into him from his left, crushing his leg and almost unseating him. Ilya cursed in pain, taking a sharp breath as he saw the rider hanging limp. Flight after flight of arrows came from the dark trees and, in horror, he saw his men falling from their saddles. Arrows passed through chain mail as if it were linen, punching out in a spray of blood. Ilya shouted wildly, kicking his exhausted mount on. Ahead, he saw the Mongols wheel in perfect unison, their commander staring straight at him. The Mongols did not stop to bend their bows. Their ponies lunged forward as one, the warriors loosing shafts as they rode.

Ilya felt an arrow pluck at his arm, then the two forces clashed together and he braced himself. His long spear took a warrior in the chest, only to be wrenched from his grasp so quickly he

thought he had broken his fingers. He drew his sword with a hand almost too numb to grip. Red dust was everywhere and, in the midst, the Mongols rode like devils, calmly sending arrows into the packed ranks of his men.

Ilya raised his shield and was knocked backwards as an arrow struck it, the head showing clearly through the wood. His right foot came out of the stirrup and he swayed, all balance lost. Another shaft hit him in the thigh before he could recover and he cried out in pain, raising his sword as he rode at the archer.

The Mongol watched him come, his face blank of any emotion. He was little more than a beardless boy, Ilya saw. The Russian swung his blade, but the Mongol ducked under the blow and shoved him as he passed. The world spun in silence for a moment and then Ilya crashed to the ground, stunned.

The nosepiece of his helmet was jammed in with the impact, breaking his front teeth. Ilya rose, blind with tears and spitting blood and fragments. His left leg buckled and he fell clumsily, desperate to find the sword that had fallen from his hand.

He heard hoofbeats behind just as he saw the weapon lying on the dusty ground. He reached for the relic at his chest and murmured a prayer as the Mongol blade came down on his neck, almost severing his head. He did not live to see the rest of his men slaughtered, too heavy and slow to defend against the warriors of Tsubodai, general to Genghis Khan.

Jochi dismounted to examine the dead, once he had ordered a dozen of his men to sweep the area and report the movement of the main column. The Russian chain mail had not saved them. Many of the sprawling bodies were struck through more than once. Only the helmets had held. Jochi could not find a single man brought down with a shaft to the head.

He picked up a helm and rubbed a finger over a bright slash of metal where an arrow had glanced away. It was a good design.

The ambush had gone just as Tsubodai had planned, Jochi thought wryly. The general seemed to read the minds of their enemies. Jochi breathed deeply, making an effort to control the trembling that beset him after each battle. It would not do for the men to see him shake. He did not know they watched him stride with clenched fists and saw only that he was still hungry, a man never satisfied no matter what he had achieved.

Three other jaguns had taken part in the ambush. Jochi saw the officers ride out of the trees where they had lain in wait all night. After years with Tsubodai, he knew each man like a brother, as Genghis had once told him to do. Mekhali and Altan were solid men, loyal but unimaginative. Jochi nodded to them both as they trotted their ponies to the field of the dead. The last of them, Qara, was a short, sinewy warrior with a face scarred from an old wound. Though he was faultlessly formal, Jochi sensed a dislike he could not understand. Perhaps the glowering man resented him for his father. Jochi had met many suspicious of his rise in the ranks. Tsubodai was not subtle in the way he included Jochi in every plan and stratagem, just as Genghis had once done with the young boy from the Uriankhai who had become his general. Tsubodai looked to the future while men like Qara imagined they saw only a spoiled young prince, promoted beyond his skill.

As Qara rode up and grunted at the sight of the dead knights, Jochi realised he was no longer the man's superior. He had accepted the silver with a battle looming and still felt the honour of being trusted with a hundred lives. Yet it meant that, for a time at least, Qara no longer had to watch himself around the khan's son. One glance told Jochi the wiry little warrior had already thought it through.

‘Why are we waiting here?’ Qara said suddenly. ‘Tsubodai will be attacking as we smell the grass and stand idle.’

Jochi resented the words, but he spoke lightly, as if Qara had merely greeted him. If the man had been a true leader, he would already have begun the ride back to Tsubodai. In a flash of insight, Jochi understood that Qara still looked to him for orders, despite his drop in rank. Glancing at Mekhali and Altan, he found they too were watching. Perhaps it was just their habit, but he felt an idea begin to form and knew he would not waste the moment.

‘Do you see their armour, Qara?’ he said. ‘The first piece hangs from the helmet, covering their faces except for the eyes. The second cloth of iron rings reaches right to their knees.’

‘It did not stop our shafts,’ Qara replied with a shrug. ‘When they are unhorsed, they move so slowly it is easy to bring them down. We do not need such poor protection, I think.’

Jochi grinned up at the man, enjoying the confusion it brought.

‘We do need it, Qara.’

High in the hills above the valley, Tsubodai waited on foot, his pony snuffling among dead pine needles. Almost five thousand men rested around him, waiting for his decision. *He* waited on the scouts he had sent out. Two hundred had ridden in all directions, their reports allowing the general to form a picture of the area for many miles around.

He knew Jochi’s ambush had been a success almost before it was over. One thousand fewer of the enemy left only ten, but it was still too many. The column of knights moved slowly through the river valley, waiting for the attack group to return victorious. They had not brought bowmen into the wilderness, a mistake that would cost them dearly. Yet they were large men and so

strong that Tsubodai could not risk a simple frontal assault. He had seen knights stuck with arrows who had still fought through to kill two or even three of his. They were warriors of great courage, but he thought it would not be enough. Brave men come forward when they are attacked and Tsubodai planned accordingly. Any army could be routed in the right conditions, he was certain of it. Not his own, of course, but that of any enemy.

Two of the scouts galloped in to mark the latest position of the Russian force. Tsubodai made them dismount and draw on the ground with sticks so he could be sure there was no misunderstanding.

‘How many scouts do they have out?’ he asked.

The warrior drawing with a stick replied without hesitation.

‘Ten in the rear, general, on a wide sweep. Twenty to the front and flanks.’

Tsubodai nodded. He knew enough to move at last.

‘They must be killed, especially the ones behind the knights’ column. Take them when the sun is highest and do not let even one escape. I will attack as soon as you signal by flag that the scouts are down. Repeat your orders.’

The warrior spoke quickly, word-perfect as he had been trained to be. Tsubodai allowed no confusion in the field. For all the use of flags to communicate over vast distances, he was still forced to rely on dawn, noon and sunset as the only markers for time. He looked up through the trees at the thought, seeing that the sun was not far off midday. It would not be long and he felt the familiar flutter in his stomach that came before a battle. He had told Jochi it was to train him and that was true, but not the whole truth. Tsubodai had held back that the knights travelled with portable forges in their baggage train. Blacksmiths were more valuable than any other artisan they could capture and Tsubodai had been intrigued by reports of iron carts belching smoke as they rolled.

Tsubodai smiled to himself, enjoying the rising excitement. Like Genghis, he could find no love for the sacking of towns and cities. It was something that had to be done, of course, as a man would pour boiling water on a nest of ants. It was the battles Tsubodai wanted, each one proving or increasing his mastery. He had found no greater joy than out-thinking his enemies, confounding and destroying them. He had heard of the strange quest the knights were on, to a land so distant that no one knew its name. It did not matter. Genghis would not allow armed men to ride his lands – and all lands were his.

Tsubodai scuffed the drawings in the dirt with the toe of his boot. He turned to the second scout who waited patiently, in awe of the general.

‘Ride to Jochi and find what has delayed him,’ Tsubodai ordered. ‘He will sit at my right hand for this attack.’

‘Your will, lord,’ the scout said, bowing before he scrambled to his horse and went careering through the trees at breakneck speed. Tsubodai squinted through the branches at the sun. He would move very soon.

In the thump and thunder of ten thousand horses, Anatoly Majaev glanced over his shoulder at the ridge little Ilya had disappeared behind. Where had his brother gone? He still thought of him as little Ilya, despite the fact that his brother outweighed him in both muscle and faith. Anatoly shook his head wearily. He had promised their mother he would look after him. Ilya would catch up, he was certain. He had not dared halt the column now the Mongols had shown they were in the area. Anatoly had sent scouts all around, but they too seemed to have vanished. He looked behind again, straining his eyes for the banners of a thousand men.

Ahead, the valley narrowed in a pass through hills that could

have been part of the Garden of Eden. The slopes were green with grass so thick a man could not hack through the roots in half a day. Anatoly loved this land, but his eyes were always on the horizon, and one day he would see Jerusalem. He muttered a prayer to the Virgin under his breath and at that moment the pass darkened and he saw the Mongol army riding out against him.

The scouts were dead then, as he had feared. Anatoly cursed and could not help but look back for Ilya once more.

Shouts came from behind and Anatoly turned completely in the saddle, swearing at the sight of another dark mass of riders coming up fast. How had they gone around him without being spotted? It defied belief to have the enemy move like ghosts through the hills.

He knew his men could scatter the Mongols in a charge. Already, they had unhooked their shields and raised them, looking to him for orders. As the eldest son of a baron, Anatoly was the most senior officer. Indeed, it had been his family who had financed the entire trip, using some of their vast fortune to earn the goodwill of the monasteries that had become so powerful in Russia.

Anatoly knew he could not charge with the entire baggage train and rear ranks exposed. Nothing unnerved fighting men more than being struck from before and behind at the same time. He began to shout an order for three of his officers to take their centuries and wheel around to charge the rear. As he turned, a movement on the hills caught his eye and he grinned in relief. In the distance, a line of Russian heavy horse came back over the ridge, banners flying lightly in the breeze. Anatoly judged the distances and made his decision. He called a scout over to him.

‘Ride to my brother and tell him to hit the force at our rear. He must prevent them from joining the battle.’

The young man raced away, unencumbered by armour or weapons. Anatoly turned to the front, his confidence swelling. With the rear secured, he outnumbered those who were galloping towards him. His orders had taken only moments and he knew he could punch through the Mongols like an armoured fist.

Anatoly pointed his long spear over his horse's ears.

'Charge formation! For the white Christ, onward!'

Anatoly's scout raced at full gallop across the dusty ground. Speed was everything with two armies converging on the column. He rode with his body pressed as low as he could go, the horse's head lunging up and down by his own. He was young and excited and rode almost to Ilya Majaev's men before pulling up in shock. Only four hundred had come back over the crest and they had been through hell. Brown slicks of blood showed on many men as they approached and there was something odd about the way they rode.

The scout suddenly understood and heaved at his reins in panic. He was too late. An arrow took him under a flailing arm and he tumbled over the horse's ears, making the animal bolt.

Jochi and the other Mongols did not look at the prone figure as they galloped past. It had taken a long time to pull the chain mail off the dead, but the ruse was working. No force rode out to cut them off and, though the Russians didn't know it, they were being attacked on three sides. As the slope lessened, Jochi dug in his heels and brought the heavy spear out of its leather socket. It was a cumbersome thing and he had to strain to hold it steady as he and his men thundered towards the Russian flank.

* * *

Anatoly was at full gallop, more than half a ton of flesh and iron focused on a spear point. He saw the front ranks shudder as the Mongol archers loosed their first shafts. The enemy were fast, but the column could not be held back or even turned at that speed. The noise of shield impacts and hooves was deafening, but he heard screams behind him and wrenched himself back to clarity. He was in command and, as his mind cleared, he shook his head in horror. He watched Ilya strike the main flank, cutting into the very men who had pledged themselves to the Majaev family on the pilgrimage.

As he gaped, Anatoly saw the men were smaller and wore bloody iron. Some had lost their helmets in the first clash to reveal yelling Mongol faces. He blanched then, knowing his brother was dead and the twin attack would crush the rear ranks. He could not turn and, though he bawled frantic orders, no one heard him.

Ahead, the Mongols let them come in, loosing shafts by the thousand into the Russian horsemen. The shields were battered and the column jerked like a wounded animal. Men fell by the hundred. It was as if a scythe had been drawn across the face of the column, cutting through living men.

Behind, the Mongols rolled up the baggage train, killing anyone on the carts who raised a weapon. Anatoly strained to think, to make out details, but he was in among the enemy. His spear ripped along a horse's neck, opening a great gash that splattered him in warm blood. A sword flashed and Anatoly took the blow on his helmet, almost losing consciousness. Something hit him in the chest and suddenly he could not breathe, even to call for help. He strained for just a cupful of air, just a sip, but it did not come and he collapsed, hitting the ground hard enough to numb his final agony.

At the fires that evening, Tsubodai rode through the camp of his ten thousand. The dead knights had been stripped of anything valuable and the general had pleased the men by refusing his personal tithe. For those who received no pay for their battles, the collection of bloodstained lockets, rings and gems was something to covet in the new society Genghis was creating. A man could become wealthy in the army of the tribes, though they thought always in terms of the horses they could buy with their riches. The knights' forges were of more interest to Tsubodai, as were the spoked cartwheels themselves, ringed in iron and easier to repair than the solid discs the Mongols used. Tsubodai had already instructed the captured armourers to demonstrate the skill to his carpenters.

Jochi was examining the forehoof of his favourite pony when Tsubodai trotted up to him. Before the younger man could bow, Tsubodai inclined his head, giving him honour. The jagun Jochi had commanded stood with pride.

Tsubodai lifted his hand to show Jochi the gold paitze he had taken from him before noon.

'You had me wondering how Russians could come back from the dead,' Tsubodai said. 'It was a bold stroke. Take this back, Jochi. You are worth more than silver.'

He tossed the gold plaque through the air and Jochi caught it, struggling to keep his composure. Only the praise of Genghis himself would have meant more at that moment.

'We will ride home tomorrow,' Tsubodai said, as much for the men as Jochi. 'Be ready at dawn.'