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Written by Conn Iggulden

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CONQUEROR



CONN IGGULDEN

HARPER

While some of the events and characters are based on historical incidents and figures, this novel is entirely a work of fiction.

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1

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To Clive Room

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MAIN CHARACTERS



Mongke, Kublai, Hulegu and Arik-Boke

Four of the grandsons of Genghis Khan.

Guyuk

Son of Ogedai Khan and Torogene.

Batu

Son of Jochi, grandson of Genghis. Becomes Russian lord.

Tsubodai

The great general of Genghis and Ogedai Khan.

Torogene

Guyuk's mother, who ruled as regent on the death of Ogedai Khan.

Sorhatani

Mother to four grandsons of Genghis – Mongke, Kublai, Hulegu and Arik-Boke. Wife to Tolui, the youngest son of Genghis, who gave his life to save Ogedai Khan.

Baidur

Grandson of Genghis. Son to Chagatai, father to Alghu. Ruler of the Chagatai Khanate based around the cities Samarkand and Bukhara.

PART ONE



AD 1244

CHAPTER ONE



A storm growled over Karakorum city, the streets and avenues running in streams as the rain hammered down in the darkness. Outside the thick walls, thousands of sheep huddled together in their enclosures. The oil in their fleeces protected them from the rain, but they had not been led to pasture and hunger made them bleat and yammer to each other. At intervals, one or more of them would rear up mindlessly on its fellows, forming a hillock of kicking legs and wild eyes before falling back into the squirming mass.

The khan's palace was lit with lamps that spat and crackled on the outer walls and gates. Inside, the sound of rain was a low roar that rose and fell in intensity, pouring as solid sheets over the cloisters. Servants gazed out into the yards and gardens, lost in the mute fascination that rain can hold. They stood in groups, reeking of wet wool and silk, their duties abandoned for a time while the storm passed.

For Guyuk, the sound of the rain merely added to his irritation, much as a man humming would have interrupted his thoughts. He poured wine carefully for his guest and stayed away from the open window where the stone sill was already dark with wetness. The man who had come at his request looked nervously around at the audience room. Guyuk supposed its size would create awe in anyone more used to the

low gers of the plains. He remembered his own first nights in the silent palace, oppressed by the thought that such a weight of stone and tile would surely fall and crush him. He could chuckle now at such things, but he saw his guest's eyes flicker up to the great ceiling more than once. Guyuk smiled. His father Ogedai had dreamed a great man's dreams when he made Karakorum.

As Guyuk put down the stone jug of wine and returned to his guest, the thought tightened his mouth into a thin line. His father had not had to court the princes of the nation, to bribe, beg and threaten merely to be given the title that was his by right.

'Try this, Ochir,' Guyuk said, handing his cousin one of two cups. 'It is smoother than airag.'

He was trying to be friendly to a man he barely knew. Yet Ochir was one of a hundred nephews and grandsons to the khan, men whose support Guyuk had to have. Ochir's father Kachiun had been a name, a general still revered in memory.

Ochir did him the courtesy of drinking without hesitating, emptying the cup in two large swallows and belching.

'It's like water,' Ochir said, but he held out the cup again.

Guyuk's smile became strained. One of his companions rose silently and brought the jug over, refilling both their cups. Guyuk settled down on a long couch across from Ochir, trying hard to relax and be pleasant.

'I'm sure you have an idea why I asked for you this evening, Ochir,' he said. 'You are from a good family, with influence. I was there at your father's funeral in the mountains.'

Ochir leaned forward where he sat, his interest showing.

'He would have been sorry not to see the lands you went to,' Ochir said. 'I did not . . . know him well. He had many sons. But I know he wanted to be with Tsubodai on the Great Trek west. His death was a terrible loss.'

‘Of course! He was a man of honour,’ Guyuk agreed easily. He wanted to have Ochir on his side and empty compliments hurt no one. He took a deep breath. ‘It is in part because of your father that I asked you to come to me. That branch of the families follow your lead, do they not, Ochir?’

Ochir looked away, out of the window, where the rain still drummed on the sills as if it would never stop. He was dressed in a simple deel robe over a tunic and leggings. His boots were well worn and without ornament. Even his hat was unsuited to the opulence of the palace. Stained with oil from his hair, its twin could have been found on any herdsman.

With care, Ochir placed his cup on the stone floor. His face had a strength that truly reminded Guyuk of his late father.

‘I do know what you want, Guyuk. I told your mother’s men the same thing, when they came to me with gifts. When there is a gathering, I will cast my vote with the others. Not before. I will not be rushed or made to give my promise. I have tried to make that clear to anyone who asks me.’

‘Then you will not take an oath to the khan’s own son?’ Guyuk said. His voice had roughened. Red wine flushed his cheeks and Ochir hesitated at the sign. Around him, Guyuk’s companions stirred like dogs made nervous at a threat.

‘I did not say that,’ Ochir replied carefully. He felt a growing discomfort in such company and decided then to get away as soon as he could. When Guyuk did not reply, he continued to explain.

‘Your mother has ruled well as regent. No one would deny she has kept the nation together, where another might have seen it fly into fragments.’

‘A woman should not rule the nation of Genghis,’ Guyuk replied curtly.

‘Perhaps. Though she has done so, and well. The mountains have not fallen.’ Ochir smiled at his own words. ‘I agree there

must be a khan in time, but he must be one who binds the loyalties of all. There must be no struggle for power, Guyuk, such as there was between your father and his brother. The nation is too young to survive a war of princes. When there is one man clearly favoured, I will cast my vote with him.'

Guyuk almost rose from his seat, barely controlling himself. To be lectured as if he understood *nothing*, as if he had not spent two years waiting in frustration!

Ochir was watching him and he lowered his brows at what he saw. Once again, he stole a glance at the other men in the room. Four of them. He was unarmed, made so after a careful search at the outer door. Ochir was a serious young man and he did not feel at ease among Guyuk's companions. There was something in the way they looked at him, as a tiger might look on a tethered goat.

Guyuk stood up slowly, stepping over to where the wine jug rested on the floor. He raised it, feeling its weight.

'You sit in my father's city, in his home, Ochir,' he said. 'I am the first-born son of Ogedai Khan. I am grandson to the great khan, yet you withhold your oath, as if we were bargaining for a good mare.'

He held out the jug, but Ochir put his hand over the cup, shaking his head. The younger man was visibly nervous at having Guyuk stand over him, but he spoke firmly, refusing to be intimidated.

'My father served yours loyally, Guyuk. Yet there are others. Baidur in the west . . .'

'Who rules his own lands and has no claim here,' Guyuk snapped.

Ochir hesitated, then went on. 'If you had been named in your father's will, it would have been easier, my friend. Half the princes in the nation would have given their oath by now.'

'It was an old will,' Guyuk said. His voice had deepened

subtly and his pupils had become large, as if he saw only darkness. He breathed faster.

‘Then there is Batu,’ Ochir added, his voice growing strained, ‘the eldest of the lines, or even Mongke, the oldest son of Tolui. There *are* others with a claim, Guyuk. You cannot expect . . .’

Guyuk raised the stone jug, his knuckles white on the heavy handle. Ochir looked up at him in sudden fear.

‘I expect *loyalty!*’ Guyuk shouted. He brought the jug down across Ochir’s face with huge force, snapping his head sideways. Blood poured from a line of torn flesh above Ochir’s eyes as he raised his hands to fend off further blows. Guyuk stepped onto the low couch, so that he straddled the man. He brought the jug down again. With the second blow, the stone sides cracked and Ochir cried out for help.

‘Guyuk!’ one of the companions called in horror.

They were all on their feet, but they did not dare to intervene. The two men on the couch struggled. Ochir’s hand had found Guyuk’s throat. His fingers were slippery with blood and Ochir could not keep his grip as the jug came down again and again, suddenly shattering so that Guyuk held an oval of the handle, jagged and rough. He was panting wildly, exhilarated. With his free hand, he wiped blood from his cheek.

Ochir’s face was a red mash and only one of his eyes would open. His hands came up once again, but without strength. Guyuk batted them away easily, laughing.

‘I am the khan’s son,’ Guyuk said. ‘Say you will support me. Say it.’

Ochir could not speak. His throat was closed with blood and he choked violently, his body spasming. A gargling sound came from his broken lips.

‘No?’ Guyuk said. ‘You will not give me even that? That small thing? Then I am finished with you, Ochir.’ He shoved the jagged handle down as his companions watched, appalled.

The noise died away and Guyuk stood up, releasing his grip on the shards of stone. He looked down at himself in disgust, suddenly aware that he was covered in blood, from spatters in his hair to a great slick down his deel robe.

His eyes focused, coming back from afar. He saw the open mouths of his companions, three of them standing like fools. Only one was thoughtful, as if he had witnessed an argument rather than a killing. Guyuk's gaze was drawn to him. Gansukh was a tall young warrior with a claim to being the best archer in Guyuk's command. He spoke first, his voice and expression calm.

'My lord, he will be missed. Let me take him away from here while it is still dark. If I leave him in an alley of the city, his family will think he was attacked by some thief.'

'Better still they do not find him at all,' Guyuk said. He rubbed at spots of blood on his face, but without irritation. His anger had vanished and he felt completely at peace.

'As you say, my lord. There are new sewage pits being dug in the south quarter . . .'

Guyuk raised his hand to stop him.

'I do not need to know. Make him vanish, Gansukh, and you will have my gratitude.' He looked at the other men. 'Well? Can Gansukh manage on his own? One of you must send my servants away. When you are asked, you will say Ochir left us earlier.' He smiled through the smeared blood. 'Tell them he promised me his vote in the gathering, that he gave his solemn oath. Perhaps the fool can benefit me in death as he would not in life.'

His companions began to move and Guyuk walked away from them, heading to a bathing room he could reach without crossing a main corridor. For a year or more, he had not washed without servants, but the blood was itching his skin and he wanted to be clean. The troubles that had enraged him earlier

that evening seemed to have fallen away and he walked with a light step. The water would be cold, but he was a man who had bathed in freezing rivers from a young age. It tightened the skin and invigorated him, reminding him he was alive.

Guyuk stood naked in an iron bath of Chin design, with writhing dragons around the rim. He did not hear the door open as he upended a wooden bucket and poured water over his head. The cold made him gasp and shudder, his penis shrivelling. As he opened his eyes, he jumped at seeing his mother standing in the room. He glanced at the pile of clothes he had thrown down. Already the blood on them had mingled with the water, so that the wooden floor ran with red-tinged lines.

Guyuk put the bucket down carefully. Torogene was a large woman and she seemed to fill the small room.

‘If you wish to see me, mother, I will be clean and dressed in a few moments.’ He saw her gaze fall to the swirl of bloody water on the floor and he looked away, picking up the bucket and refilling it from the pink water in the bath. The palace had its own drains, specially constructed in fire-hardened tile by Chin experts. When he removed the stopper, the incriminating water would vanish under the city, mingling with the night soil and filth from the kitchens until no one would ever know. A canal ran by Karakorum and Guyuk supposed the water would empty into that, or into some pit where it could soak. He didn’t know or care about such details.

‘What have you *done*?’ Torogene said. Her face was pale as she stopped and picked up his tunic, sodden and twisted.

‘What I had to,’ Guyuk replied. He was still shivering and in no mood to be questioned. ‘It does not concern you. I will have the clothes burnt.’ Guyuk raised the bucket again, then

tired of her scrutiny. He let it fall back and stepped out of the bath.

'I called for fresh clothes, mother. They should have been brought to the audience room by now. Unless you are going to stand and stare at me all day, perhaps you could fetch them.'

Torogene didn't move.

'You are my son, Guyuk. I have worked to protect you, to gather allies for you. In a night, how much of my labour have you undone? Do you think I don't know Ochir was invited here? That he has not been seen leaving? Are you a fool, Guyuk?'

'You have been spying on me, then,' Guyuk replied. He tried to stand tall and unconcerned, but the shivering grew worse.

'It is my business to know what happens in Karakorum. To know every deal and argument, every mistake, such as the one you made tonight.'

Guyuk gave up the pretence, exasperated at her lofty tone of disapproval.

'Ochir would never have supported me, mother. He is no loss to us. His disappearance may even be a gain, in time.'

'You think so?' she demanded. 'You think you have made my work easier? Did I raise a fool, then? His families, his friends, will know he came to you unarmed and that he disappeared.'

'They have no body, mother. They will assume . . .'

'They will assume the truth, Guyuk! That you are a man who cannot be trusted. That alone among the nation, your offer of guest rights cannot make a man safe. That you are a wild dog capable of killing a man who has drunk tea with you *in your own home*.'

Overcome with anger, she left the room. Guyuk barely had time to consider what she had said before she was back, thrusting dry clothes at him.

'For more than two years,' she went on, 'I have spent every

day courting those who might support you. The traditionalists who might be approached on the grounds that you are the eldest son of the khan and you should rule the nation. I have bribed men with lands, horses, gold and slaves, Guyuk. I have threatened to reveal their secrets unless I receive their votes at a gathering. I have done all this because I honour your father and everything he built. His line *should* inherit, not Sorhatani's children or Batu or any of the other princes.'

Guyuk dressed quickly, pulling the deel robe roughly over a tunic and tying a belt around his waist.

'Do you want me to thank you?' he said. 'Your plans and schemes have not made me khan yet, mother. Perhaps if they had, I would not have acted on my own. Did you think I would wait for ever?'

'I didn't think you would kill a good man in your father's house. You have not helped me tonight, my son. I am so close. I do not know yet what damage you have done, but if this gets out . . .'

'It will not.'

'If it *does*, you will have strengthened the claims of every other man in line. They will say that you have no more right to this palace, this city, than Batu.'

Guyuk clenched his fists in frustration.

'It is *always* him. I hear his name every day. I wish he had been here tonight. I would have removed a stone in my path then.'

'He would never come to you unarmed, Guyuk. Whatever you said or did to him on the trip home has made it harder for me to bring you your inheritance.'

'I did nothing. And it is not my inheritance!' Guyuk snapped. 'How much easier would all this have been if my father had named me in his will. There is the source of it all! Instead, he left me to scabble around with all the others, like a pack of

dogs fighting over one piece of meat. If you had not assumed the regency, I would be out there in the gers, looking at my father's own city in envy. Yet still you honour him. I am the khan's first-born son, mother! Yet I must bargain and bribe to gain what is mine by right. If he was half the man you seem to think, he should have considered that before his death. He had enough time to include me in his plans.'

Torogene saw the pain in her son's face and relented, her anger vanishing. She took him into an embrace, moving to ease his distress without thought.

'He loved you, my son. But he was obsessed with his city. He lived with death on his shoulder for a long time. Struggling against it exhausted him. I do not doubt he wished to do more for you.'

Guyuk rested his head on her shoulder, thinking sharp and unpleasant thoughts. He needed his mother still. The nation had learned to revere her over the years of her regency.

'I am sorry I lost my temper tonight,' he murmured. He forced a breath like a sob and she gripped him tighter. 'I just want it all too much. I cannot bear it, mother. Every day, I see them looking at me, wondering when we will call the gathering. I see them smiling at the thought of my defeat.'

Torogene stroked his damp hair, smoothing it with her hand.

'Shh. You are not the same as them,' she said. 'You have never been an ordinary man, Guyuk. Like your father, you dream of greater things. I know it. I have sworn to make you khan and it is closer than you know. You already have Sorhatani's son, Mongke. You were so clever to take his oath in the field. His brothers will not disobey their mother. That is the heart of our position. Then in the west Baidur has received my envoys. I am confident he will declare for you in time. Do you understand now how close we are? When Baidur and Batu name their true price, we will call the nation.'

She felt him stiffen as she mentioned the name he had grown to hate. 'Be calm, Guyuk. Batu is just one man and he has not left the lands he was granted. In time, the princes who look to him will see he is content as a Russian lord, that he has no ambitions for Karakorum. Then they will come to ask you to lead them. I promise it, my son. No other man will be khan while I live. Only you.'

He pulled away and looked down into her face. She saw his eyes were red.

'How much longer, mother? I cannot wait for ever.'

'I have sent messengers to Batu's camp, once again. I have promised him you will recognise his lands and titles, for his lifetime and the generations to come.'

Guyuk's face twisted into a snarl.

'I do not recognise them! My father's will is not written in heaven! Should I leave a man like Batu to roam free on my borders? To eat rich foods and ride white mares in peace? Should I leave his Golden Horde warriors to grow fat and make children of their own while I fight wars without them? No, mother. Either he is under my hand, or I will see him destroyed.'

Torogene slapped him across the face. The blow was heavy and it rocked his head to one side. As a bloom of red grew on his cheek, he looked at her in stunned shock.

'This is why I told you not to court the princes on your own, Guyuk. I told you to trust me. Listen. And hear with your heart and head, not just your ears. Once you are khan, you will have all the power, all the armies. Your word will be law. On that day, the promises I have made for you will be dust, if you choose to ignore them. Do you understand now?' Though they were alone, her hissing voice fell so she could not be overheard. 'I would promise Batu *immortality* if I thought it would bring him to a gathering. For two years, he has sent excuses to Karakorum. He dares not refuse me outright, but he sends me

tales of injuries or sickness, saying he cannot travel. All the time, he watches to see what will come out of the white city. He is a clever man, Guyuk, never forget it. Sorhatani's sons do not have half his ambition.'

'You are bargaining with a snake, then, mother. Be careful he does not bite you.'

Torogene smiled. 'There is a price for all things, my son, for all men. I have merely to find his.'

'I could have advised you,' Guyuk said peevishly. 'I know Batu well. You were not there when we rode into the west.'

Torogene tutted under her breath. 'You do not need to know everything, Guyuk, only that if Batu agrees, he will come to a gathering in the summer. If he accepts the offer, we will have enough of the princes behind us to make you khan. Do you see now why you should not have acted on your own? Do you see what you put in danger? What is the life of one family head compared to this?'

'I'm sorry,' Guyuk replied, lowering his head. 'You have not kept me informed and I was angry. You should have included me in your plans. Now that I know more, I can help you.'

Torogene regarded her son, with all his weaknesses and flaws. Still, she loved him more than the city around them, more than her own life.

'Have faith in your mother,' she said. 'You will be khan. Promise me there will be no more bloodstained clothing to burn. No more mistakes.'

'I promise,' Guyuk replied, his mind already on the changes he would make when he was khan. His mother knew him too well for him to be comfortable around her. He would find her some small house far from the city to live out her last days. He smiled at the thought and she took heart from it, seeing again the young boy he had once been.