



Age of Dragons

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Annotation

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This world is not at all like the one you are used to. Lots of amazing creatures live here: huge insects with intelligence, magnificent dragons and other monsters. All these creatures have a mind, a bad temper and their own view of the world around them. They are trying to decide how everyone else should live. The book begins with a story about the main character. The young man feels tired, because the day was very long. But it is not too important, because he is looking at the amazing subject and forgets about everything else. In his hands there is an arrow of skillful work. He saw many arrows and weapons in his life, but this one is truly beautiful. His father is a Khan and has always had many good weapons in his house. This book will tell about the adventures of a young guy who is to face exciting adventures.

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CHAPTER ONE

Brothers in Oath

It has been a long day and Timucin is very tired, but that is unimportant. He looks at the arrow he has just been given and tries to remember if he has ever seen anything as beautiful before.

The arrow is far more decorated than all the others he has seen. And he has seen a lot of arrows. After all, his father is the khan - and not just any khan, but the most powerful and feared for many days' ride. His yurt is full of the most splendid bows and arrows hanging on the walls. Often, other tribes come to visit. These tribes have beautiful weaponry too. Not just spears, shields and glinting swords, but artfully carved bows and even more exquisite arrows.

So far, he has never seen an arrow like this one. It is longer than his arm, not as long as the arrows the men use, but at least two hands longer than the ones he and the other boys use to practise - and the carvings are so detailed that he is almost afraid to touch it. The arrowhead is not made of iron, but of bronze. This makes it weak and practically useless against anything with even thick fur, let

alone against hardened leather or plate armour. Then again, this kind of arrow is not intended to be used like that. The soft metal has been engraved with artful lines and symbols, and the edges have been so carefully polished and sharpened that it could probably split a hair in half.

As he looks at it, Timucin is ashamed.

"It is... it is beautiful," he says. "I've never seen anything so beautiful. You are a true artist."

Chuzir pulls a face as if Timucin has just said something indecent or spoken badly of the gods. He too holds an arrow in his hand, the one that Timucin has given him in return for this stunning work. He is almost convincing as he pretends to admire it, even if there is very little to admire. It is a completely normal arrow, short and not even entirely straight. Timucin has polished the iron head as much as he can and added a few simple carvings with as much skill as his clumsy fingers allow. Chuzir is kind enough not to say anything about it.

"I am no artist," answers Chuzir after a noticeable pause and in an almost offended tone of voice. "Soon, I shall be a warrior," he adds with a sideways glance in Timucin's direction, "although I shall never be a khan, of course." He says these last words reproachfully.

"But this arrow..." says Timucin.

"I did not make it," interrupts Chuzir. "It was old man Schezen who did the carving. In return, I helped him collect firewood and peat for three moons." He looks at Timucin. "Do you not like it?"

"Of course," says Timucin quickly, "it's wonderful. But my own arrow is so..." He stops, embarrassed, but Chuzir just laughs and jabs him in the ribs so hard that Timucin will start crying if he does not stop himself with all the strength he has.

"That's not the point," says Chuzir, laughing, "because you probably needed just as much time to carve it as I spent helping that rip-off merchant Schezen carry wood whilst he sat by the fire keeping himself warm."

Perhaps that is true, thinks Timucin. Nevertheless, he is ashamed of the gift. If this were someone else, he would suspect them of trying to embarrass him by making such an exaggerated gift; but not Chuzir. Chuzir is his best friend, his only friend even - despite the fact that he is the khan's son. Or perhaps it is because he is the khan's son...

"Come on," says Chuzir, jabbing him in the ribs again, "let's go and try them out!"

Just the very idea of shooting this exquisite arrow and perhaps damaging it fills Timucin with horror, but Chuzir has already turned on his heels and run off, so Timucin follows him.

He runs as fast as he can, but he just cannot keep up with Chuzir and will probably lose him. Chuzir sees that his best friend is having trouble and slows down, then stops entirely. Nevertheless, Timucin is completely out of breath when he too gets to the top of the hill. Chuzir does not say anything, but he cannot stop himself from grinning. Not that he tries for one moment, either.

"I bet I get to the trees before you!" Chuzir says. He is not even breathing heavily, while Timucin's lungs are burning like fire and his heart is beating so hard he thinks it might burst.

"What a cheek!" thinks Timucin to himself, and then he turns to Chuzir.

"Why don't you just tell me what I have to do for you?" he asks grumpily. "After all, I shall have to do it anyway when I lose the bet. So I might just as well save my strength."

Chuzir grins and makes as if to jab him in the ribs again, but he just runs around and starts strolling towards the woods. Timucin follows, cursing himself for what he has just said. Of course, Chuzir will never tell anyone anything about it. Timucin is his friend, after all, and they are about to become brothers in oath. Yet if one of the other boys has heard what he has said, then it will just lead to more rumours in the village. And his father will not like that at all! He will have to be more careful about what he says.

The two young warriors reach the trees at the same time. Chuzir takes his bow from his shoulder, loads it with Timucin's arrow and, inspecting it closely, draws it halfway back. There he holds it, waiting until Timucin too has cocked his bow. He nods the signal to shoot and then draws back his bow in a movement as smooth as it is strong.

"Forever," he says.

"Forever," echoes Timucin.

Their arrows fly off with a twin crack. Despite being too short, bent and warped, Timucin's arrow, sped by Chuzir's bowstring, flies almost twice as far as the richly decorated work of art that he himself has shot off. It must have flown at least two hundred paces, perhaps even three hundred, before burrowing into the ground halfway between the trees and the riverbank.

"Forever", says Chuzir once again; and this time, too, Timucin echoes him.

Chuzir is beaming. A warm feeling comes over Timucin, accompanied nevertheless by a strange feeling of emptiness, almost of disappointment. So now they are brothers in oath. They have been talking about it since last summer and have made preparations accordingly, and somehow, he expected it to be... well, more dramatic. Taking an oath together is more than being brothers by birth; it means being bound together forever, being two parts of a whole who just happen to live in two different bodies. From this day forth, he will be willing to

give his life to protect his brother if need be, and he expects this thought to be somehow... elevating. Shouldn't the earthquake and the heavens open? Shouldn't there at least be a thunderclap and a few flashes of lightning?

Yet there is nothing, of course. Chuzir embraces him briefly and then turns away brusquely. "Let's go and get the arrows."

They do not run this time, but Chuzir has almost twice as much ground to cover as Timucin to reach his arrow and, for some reason, Timucin does not want to follow him.

He pulls the precious arrow from the ground and wipes it down carefully. Suddenly he has an intense feeling of being watched. Perhaps the other young warriors had found out what they were doing?

Timucin turns round and stiffens. His hunch is true. Except that he is not just being watched, he is being stalked.

It's a dog, almost as big as a foal, but far heavier. It is a shaggy-coated monstrosity with huge teeth, dripping with yellow slaver. And it is standing about ten paces behind him at the edge of the forest, staring at him.

Timucin can feel his heart faltering. He hates dogs and is afraid of them more than anything else in the world. He grips the arrow tighter, but, although his life might now depend on it, something seems to be stopping him from drawing the bowstring. The dog might kill him. Perhaps it does not want to, but it can - and this thought is more than he can bear.

"Timucin, shoot!" cries Chuzir at almost the same moment as he releases his bowstring. The arrow whizzes past Timucin's cheek, stroking him with its feathers. As the arrow hits the ground just over a man's length away from the dog, it lets out a frightened yelp and runs off with its tail between its legs.

"Timucin, shoot!" shouts Chuzir again, "What are you waiting for?" Timucin hears Chuzir's steps and sees the huge dog bolting like a hare towards the trees and disappearing into the undergrowth. Chuzir reaches him, tears the arrow from his fingers and, faster than Timucin's eyes can follow, loads it into his bow. He draws the string back behind his ear and then... He lets out a moan as he drops the bow. The dog is gone.

"Why did you do that?" he asks angrily. "Why didn't you shoot?"

"Because, er, because the arrow..." stutters Timucin. Chuzir looks at him with a frown and Timucin continues to speak, with a nervous smile.

"I was afraid of breaking it, as it is so valuable..."

This only makes Chuzir angrier, but he says nothing more, pressing his lips together out of rage and stomping off past him to fetch his dart.

Timucin knows what will happen in the night. The dragon will come to him and show him what he has missed.

CHAPTER TWO

The Dream Dragon

Timucin goes to bed unusually early this evening. Most evenings, his mother has to tell him to go and leave the men to sit round the fire in peace, as is their right. All too often, he stays up until his father puts his foot down. Only then does he do as he is told and goes into his little yurt, pitched right next to his father's tent. He has been sleeping alone here since last summer. Today, however, he cannot wait to go. He gulps down his dinner, makes an excuse and goes to bed before sunset.

As is always the case when trying to sleep, it takes a long time for him to sink into slumber. He has barely fallen asleep when Sarantuya comes to him. Just like every time, Timucin feels her presence more than he sees it. Well, in the first moments in any case. It is something big, infinitely soft but also infinitely old and strong that steals into his dreams and only slowly takes on a form.

"I haven't seen you for a while," he says.

"I didn't feel that you needed me," answers Sarantuya. The shadowy figure in his dream starts to become clearer. At the edge of his consciousness, something big, something ancient stirs, glinting like moonlight on silver scales. It touches his soul. He feels warmth and comfort and thinks he almost sees something. Almost.

"Why did you do that?" asks Timucin.

Sarantuya squints, as the moonlight in the dream breaks on her scales and then flows down her flanks, jingling lightly as if, somewhere far away, a thousand cymbals are being struck. It is always night in Timucin's dreams when Sarantuya comes to him, and there is always a full moon. He has stopped being surprised by it. "What did you say?" she asks him.

Timucin has to force himself not to get angry; despite her huge claws and sharp fangs, Sarantuya hates strong feelings like anger and fury. She is the most peaceful creature Timucin has ever come across.

"You know very well what I mean," he says, just managing to keep control of himself. "That dog! Why did you stop Chuzir killing it?" "Did I?" replies Sarantuya, pretending to be surprised. Then she laughs quietly. It sounds like thunder rolling in the mountains on the horizon.

"What if your friend Chuzir just missed?"

"Nonsense!" replies Timucin. "Chuzir is the best shot I know. He never misses his target!"

"Not even with a bent arrow?" says Sarantuya mockingly.

Timucin ignores this comment.

"He never misses his target," he insists.

"Well then, it must be that somebody wanted him to miss," says Sarantuya, smirking.

"You."

"No," says the dragon, suddenly in a very serious tone of voice. "I would never do anything you do not want, and you know it."

Timucin says nothing more. Chuzir said nothing after missing. He simply walked on for a few moments, offended. The way he looked at Timucin showed that he knew exactly who he blamed for his unusual failure. Perhaps Chuzir actually knows that it is Timucin's fault. Timucin has already told him once about his dream dragon, but Chuzir's reaction was such that Timucin has never mentioned it again. It was years ago now, and Timucin does not know if Chuzir remembers it at all, but you just never know.

"You didn't really want to kill the dog," continues Sarantuya after a while.

"But I was afraid of him", answers Timucin.

"I know," says Sarantuya with a sigh, "but you don't need to kill every-thing you are afraid of. Do you remember the first time you saw me?"

"Of course I do!"

"You were afraid of me, too."

"No, I wasn't," claims Timucin, although this is a downright lie. He almost died of fright the first time the dragon appeared to him in a dream.

"So," continues Sarantuya, "did you want to kill me because of that?"

"Of course not!" answers Timucin, outraged. "I would never..."

"... kill anything that hasn't done you any harm," says Sarantuya, finishing his sentence for him. "I know. If it were any different, I would never have come to you."

Timucin does not really understand what she is saying, but he isn't in the mood to ask questions. Sarantuya says many odd things that he does not understand.

"What do you want?" he asks reluctantly.

For once, Timucin's anger seems to amuse Sarantuya, perhaps because she too feels that, in reality, it is only directed against himself.

"Really, it should be me asking you these questions," she answers. "If I remember correctly, you were the one who called me, and not the other way round. Since I'm here anyway... Tomorrow is a big day for you. A very important day."

Timucin thinks as hard as he can. Tomorrow? Tomorrow?

"How so?" he asks, skeptically.

"It's a surprise!" says Sarantuya, teasing him. "You will meet someone. Someone who will become very important to you."

"Who?" asks Timucin.

Yet Sarantuya does not even answer. She disappears with a silvery, bright laugh.

CHAPTER THREE

The Warrior

His father Tamer wakes him the following morning before the sun has come up. This is nothing unusual: most people in the village get up before dawn, and only very rarely does Timucin sleep past sunrise. If he does, it is mostly when his father has been up too long drinking or discussing matters with the other men - both of which have the same result. What is unusual, however, is his father's grumpy mood and his even grumpier face. This is the first thing Timucin sees as he opens his eyes. Tamer is a great warrior, no doubt, who has killed many enemies and brought the tribe to respect and riches. But at the bottom of his heart, he is a friendly man, a gentle one, especially where his son is concerned.

This morning, however, he is not at all gentle. In fact, he seems furious as he grasps his son's shoulder and shakes him roughly to wake him. If Timucin were not as sleepy, he would understand that his father really is furious.

He rubs his eyes and looks astonished as his father goes back to the small entrance to the tent and motions him to follow.

Just like every morning, they look after the horses and drive the sheep onto the pasture without saying a single word to one another. Then they go down to the river to wash themselves in the icy waters of the Omon. Then his father breaks the uncomfortable silence.

"Chuzir told me about the dog," he says, his voice full of reproach. Timucin looks at him. He is not quite sure what Chuzir has told his father, and so saying nothing is probably the cleverest thing to do. His father sighs deeply.

"When are you going to finally become a man, my son?" he asks. "You are my only son, Timucin, and one day you will take my place and become khan. But how will you be able to do that if you are still a mere boy?" Timucin does not answer. His father does not want an answer, he can feel this, and this is not the first time they have had this talk. Tamer may not yet have said it as directly as he has now, but Timucin knows very well that it is a great source of pain to him that his only son will not grow into the great warrior he wants him to be. Timucin may be a passable bowman, may be good rider, and may just about know how to handle a sword and shield, but that is not enough. The other boys

are better than he is, even the younger ones. It is not so much a question of his ability, his skill or even his courage. It is just that he doesn't like weapons. He has never really understood where the glow in the eyes of the warriors comes from when they speak of all the enemies they have slain.

"Chuzir told me," says his father, picking up where he left off, "that you were scared stiff of the dog as it stood in front of you."

"It was a very big dog..." answers Timucin, "and it was very dangerous."

This must have been the wrong answer, because Tamer's face becomes even darker.

"Did it attack you?" he asks.

Timucin keeps silent. His father turns suddenly and walks back towards the village with such big strides that Timucin has to struggle not to fall back. His father does not look at him as he starts talking again.

"Dogs, Timucin, are, after horses, our most loyal friends. They help us to watch our sheep, to keep our food supplies free of rats, and they warm us in winter when the fire no longer burns enough. There is no need to be afraid of them!"

"But it was growling at me!" says Timucin in his defence. He is not sure if this was actually the case, and it is clearly not the answer that Tamer wants, because now he is really furious.

"But it didn't attack you, did it? And even if it had, you would have had to have killed it like a warrior. You had your bow with you, didn't you?"

"Yes," answers Timucin dejectedly, "I am sorry, father."

"Be silent!" shouts Tamer. "You are the son of a khan! You shall never say you are sorry to anyone about anything! Not even to me! If you make a mistake, be sure not to do it again. But never apologise!"

"Yes father," replies Timucin. He almost adds "I am sorry".

They cover the rest of the way back to the village in silence. As they reach it over the hill, the village is now wide-awake and busy at work. They hear children shouting, an ox mooing and, in the distance, the thunder of horses' hooves. When they get to Tamer's yurt, which, as is his right, is the biggest in the village, big enough to take in all the men in the entire tribe, they find it empty. This is unusual, and Timucin wants to leave the tent and go about his daily work, which he has now neglected too long. But Tamer calls him back with a lordly movement of his hand and gestures to him to stand in the middle of the tent.

Timucin is confused, but obeys his father. His heart is beating hard. He has been hoping that this is all over, but it seems that his father has not finished yet. Perhaps what Tamer has just said is only the beginning? His heart starts to beat even faster, and he clenches his fists so that his father does not see how badly his

fingers are shaking.

Tamer is moving around behind him, and Timucin asks himself what he is actually doing. He does not dare to turn around, but keeps staring at the ashes of the fire. Finally, his father returns and throws something to the ground in front of him. It takes Timucin a while to recognise it as the full outfit and weaponry of a warrior. There is a leather tunic and belt, a fine-woven chainmail shirt, boots with artfully engraved metal plates, a breastplate and shield, a precious bronze helmet and a broad, decorated weapon-belt, wrapped around a beautifully forged sword. There is everything he needs to be a warrior.

"Put it on!" says Tamer.

Timucin obeys his father, but he is becoming more and more nervous. He knows of the existence of warriors' clothing because Tamer has told him about it. His father always stresses that it is reserved for very special occasions, and Timucin has never seen it before. He does not dare ask questions but looks quizzically at his father while putting on the outfit. Finally, Tamer breaks the silence himself.

"Today is a special day," he begins and watches closely every movement Timucin's nervous hands make, "and I want you to make a good impression. Behave yourself and do not bring shame upon our clan or upon me, your father. And do not worry: I have told our warriors to chase all the dogs out of the village until our visitor has left."

Timucin feels his ears going red and sinks his head in shame.

"Who is coming to visit?" he asks nonetheless.

"My brother in oath, Belmin, the khan of the Voshon tribe," answers Tamer. "Have you heard of them?"

"Yes father," answers Timucin quietly. The Voshon? Of course, he has heard of them, as well as of Belmin, their wise and mighty khan. Belmin became his father's brother in oath when he and Tamer were the same age as Timucin and Chuzir are now.

The Voshon tribe has far more land than Tamer's tribe and is much, much richer. It is told that their herds are so big that, if all their horses were to be driven together at once, they would cover the steppe from horizon to horizon. The khan's yurt is said to be covered in pure gold.

Despite this wealth and power, it is told that they are a very peaceful tribe, and many warriors laugh at them - as long as Tamer is not around to defend the honour of his brother in oath.

Timucin buckles his sword-belt and then reaches for the last item, his helmet. He thinks for a moment about whether to put it on now, but then decides against this and puts it under his left arm. His father eyes him for a moment,

looks him up and down and then nods his approval.

"And what is so important about this visit for me?" asks Timucin. "Who am I meeting?"

Tamer looks at him surprised, and Timucin wants to slap himself in the face for having asked this question. It is Sarantuya who has told him that he will meet somebody who will affect his future, not his father. He has said nothing. He looks at Timucin for two or three heartbeats in a way that makes Timucin really very uncomfortable. Then, however, he answers his son's question: "You are old enough now, my son, and soon you will be a man. It is time to find you a wife."

"A wife?" Timucin is beyond surprised. He was ready for anything, just not that. "But..."

"You are old enough, my boy," interrupts Tamer, "at your age, I was already married. Belmin is bringing his daughter, Arbessa. She is just one year younger than you and, so I have heard tell, very beautiful. And of course a link between our tribes would be to everyone's advantage."

"But I don't know this girl at all," protests Timucin.

As he has expected, his father's face darkens. Moments later, however, a sudden and unusually gentle smile spreads across his face. "Son, I would never force you to marry anyone you do not want to, but have a look at her at least. I ask for no more than that, and perhaps you will like her. She will definitely like you, I'm very sure of that."

Timucin looks quizzically as Tamer stops talking and bends down to pick up a polished silver plate left from the previous evening's feast. There are streaks of dried sheep's milk and bits of food stuck to it, but Timucin can still see his own reflection in the mirror and understands what his father means. He really does look like a warrior, magnificently equipped and wild, with his hair braided his strong features and his lively, light blue eyes. Who would be able to resist him looking like this?

Timucin is about to make a jokey remark about this when he thinks he feels movement behind him. It is a kind of golden shimmering, like moonlight breaking on polished scales. He quickly checks behind himself, but sees nothing. When he looks back at the plate, however, he sees Sarantuya reflected behind him, this time even more clearly than in his dream. She looks at him and she too sees the warrior, which this wonderful armour, sword and helmet have made him into.

The big gold dragon looks sad.

CHAPTER FOUR

New Arrival

Belmin does not come until the sun is well past its highest point. Nevertheless, as befits someone of his rank, he travels with a large entourage. Several riders have arrived before him to give advance notice of his arrival. The whole village gathers to welcome him fittingly. Timucin of course has a place in the first row, right next to his father and the other warriors.

However, Timucin does not start towards the group until the baggage train can be seen on the hills in the West. He is not in much of a hurry to get there, and in even less of a hurry to meet either his father's brother in oath, or his daughter. He has got nothing against girls and knows as well as the next man that the children of tribal chiefs get married to each other in order to increase their power and to secure an often all too insecure peace. He should not be surprised that his turn has now come. He has simply believed that he has a little more time - perhaps another summer, maybe two.

Of course, he will not dare to defy his father. But he has mixed feelings about this meeting with his father's brother in oath and, above all, the daughter.

As befits their status, the other boys, including Chuzir, wait at an appropriate distance behind the warriors and the elders, yet in front of the women still. Timucin has to walk past them in order to join his father on time. He ignores the other boys as usual, but greets Chuzir and is about to set off even faster. Yet he notices Chuzir's dark expression of face and turns round to him, his brow furrowed quizzically. Chuzir avoids his gaze and turns away.

"What is wrong?" asks Timucin bluntly. He is confused.

"Nothing," replies Chuzir curtly. Timucin stretches his hand out so as to seize him by the shoulder, but Chuzir steps back quickly and Timucin pulls back his arm. He feels a faint but deep stabbing pain in his chest: Chuzir is his brother in oath!

"You must hurry, Timucin," says one of the other boys, "otherwise you, our future Khan, will arrive too late to greet your bride."

Timucin flashes his eyes at the boy, but does not say anything. Ilhan, the boy, is two heads taller than him and doesn't like him. Timucin dislikes him too, and feels that he will have to fight him one day. Yet he does not want it to be now, so he offers Ilhan nothing more than a contemptuous look and makes to go on. Ilhan, however, continues in a mocking tone.

"Don't you worry! We will make sure that nothing else gets in the way of our future khan and his bride. Woof woof!"

This comment was followed by laughter from all around, and Timucin feels a sudden fury, so strong that he wants to jump at the bigger boy and pummel him.

Yet his fury dies away as quickly as it comes, and gives way to something very different and much, much worse. His eyes fill with burning tears, and he turns back to Chuzir. He steps so close to him that no one else can hear him speak.

"Why did you tell them about it?" he whispers. His voice is shaking.

Chuzir avoids his gaze again. Timucin waits for him to answer the question, but he says nothing, so Timucin turns away angry and walks away as quickly as he can without running. Behind him, the boys are laughing and a few of them bark again. Timucin keeps his back turned to them, but it costs him all the strength he has to hold back the tears.

His father seems very angry when he arrives next to him, but he does not have the time to say anything to him because, in that moment, the baggage train is coming by. Tamer simply looks at his son angrily in a way that seems to promise punishment later. Then he straightens his shoulders and gets ready to greet his guests.

Belmin is an older, white-haired man with a white beard that reaches his chest. He has a weather-beaten face and exudes an aura of dignity and power that you can almost reach out and grasp. Timucin has often met men who have great power (including his father, of course), but Belmin differs from them in one important point: he is the first chief he has ever met who does not carry a weapon. His large entourage, too, is mostly unarmed. Just the two knight's right and left of him have spears held upright in their hands, and it looks to Timucin somehow as if they only have them to tie their pennants to, which are fluttering above their heads in the wind.

Tamer greets his noble guest effusively, using the complicated and wordy greetings common to his people. Timucin uses this time to have a closer look at the many people accompanying the khan of the Voshon. Of course, there is a very particular person he is looking for, and he finds her a little behind Belmin, flanked by two knights who, contrary to his first impressions, are heavily armed. She is slender, wrapped up in exquisite garments, and about a hand shorter than him. She has to be Arbessa, his future wife. Her face is veiled, so he cannot quite recognise its features, but he thinks he sees her keen stare through the material and quickly looks away.

The greeting ceremony goes on for quite some time, but eventually it is over and Belmin makes a brief gesture, allowing his entourage to sit. Milk as well as other, stronger drinks are offered, along with a meal, and suddenly the ceremonial silence, previously broken only by the exchange of formalities between the khans, gives way to general laughter and pats on the shoulder as the more than thirty riders start to mix with the population of the village. Arbessa,

too, slips down from her horse with a smooth movement, yet Timucin does not find the right moment to approach her or even to look at her. Tamer puts his hand on his shoulder and pushes him in between himself and Belmin.

"This my son, Timucin," he says.

The old khan looks at him with his strangely soft eyes for a few instants. Despite the tangible aura of softness and goodness he exudes, Timucin - who is already very uncomfortable - is almost afraid of him. Then the khan smiles suddenly.

"So you are Timucin," he says, "I have heard a lot about you. I am told that you are a son who is every bit as honorable as his father. Is this true?"

Timucin does not know what to answer and simply lowers his head in shame. In this situation, this is almost an insult. Tamer is horrified and sucks in air sharply past his teeth. Belmin, however, just laughs, quietly and benevolently.

"Well, I see he really is his father's son. My brother in oath was never one for too many words."

Tamer laughs, but even his laugh sounds hollow, and he puts another hand on Timucin's shoulder. It is as if he is showing Timucin off as his own property, and Timucin finds this degrading. He does not say anything, however, and keeps looking for Arbesa. The girl has already gone past him, without even looking at him, as it seems to him, and is now talking with the women. The men of the tribe, too, have mingled with the village people, and are eating, joking and drinking with them. The big reception has dissolved into nothing. Only his father and his father's brother in oath are still standing, trying to look important, but they are clearly not succeeding. Tamer clearly finds the situation embarrassing; Belmin looks amused by it all. Finally, he clears his throat and gestures towards the big yurt in the middle of the village.

"It was a long and tiring journey, old friend, and I am thirsty. We have not seen each other for many years and have much to talk about."

And talk they did.

CHAPTER FIVE

Arbesa

Having gone to bed so early the evening before, Timucin ends up going to bed very late tonight. A huge feast is being given in honour of the guests, starting just before sundown and going on until far past midnight. Almost all of the clansmen are in Tamer's tent, eating, talking and drinking. The women are barely able to keep up with serving food and drinks. With all the delicious food, and with the hours that pass, the feasting becomes ever more boisterous, and the

men's tongues become looser. The camp echoes to the sounds of laughter and music and the happy voices of the men as they try to outdo each other with amazing stories. Everyone knows that only half of the stories are actually true, but that does not stop them being listened to intently and greatly enjoyed.

Timucin spends the feast sitting at his father's right-hand side, listening to the stories that the clansmen are so happily embellishing, but he cannot fully concentrate on the proceedings. His gaze keeps wandering over to the veiled girl next to Belmin, and when he is not looking at her, he thinks he can feel her eyes on him.

At the beginning, it is an unpleasant feeling. He does not like being stared at without being able to see the face of the person staring. After a while, however, it just feels slightly odd. He is curious to have a look behind the veil. But apart from the fact that this is not the done thing, he doesn't allow himself to make such a request.

It is long past midnight when, from outside the yurt, they hear the typical sound of swords clashing. Tamer stops talking to his brother in oath without finishing his sentence and then jumps up and hurries out of the tent. Everyone else, including Belmin and of course Timucin, follow suit.

Outside the tent, a fight is going on between one of Arbesa's bodyguards and a man from the village; at least, that is the way it seems at first. Swords clash and spray sparks, light breaks on shimmering metal and the links in chainmail vests. The two men seem to be carrying out a bizarre and speedy dance around each other, exercising themselves in sword-fighting techniques like parries and feints whilst the blades smash into their shields. No blood has yet been spilled, as Timucin quickly recognizes, and none will be: the two men are laughing as they fight. Arbesa's bodyguard could land a hit on the leg of the man fighting him, but turns the blade at the last moment so that it hits him flat. This hurts, but is not dangerous. The onlookers whoop and clap whilst Ilhan's father - as Timucin recognizes him, uncomfortably - hops around on one leg swearing, and then lunges at his opponent all the more bitterly.

Timucin too suddenly hears himself cheering on the two fighters as he hears a high-pitched voice next to him.

"What do you men find so exciting about playing war?"

"Well, because it's just..." says Timucin. Then he stops himself in mid flow and turns round to see who has said this.

It is Arbesa. She has removed her veil and is looking down at the two fighters with an expression somewhere between quizzical and derogatory. She has the most beautiful face that Timucin has ever seen.

"Yes...?" she asks, turning round to him. Timucin looks into her crystal-

clear, almost uncannily light eyes. These eyes awaken something in him whose existence he has not known until that moment. It is as if his throat has been tied up.

"Well, because it's... er..." he stutters.

Arbesa's eyes flash in a way that can only be described as scoffing.

"I understand. 'Because men just do that kind of thing', right?" She laughs. "We all know that. The question is why?"

"In order to measure their strength and be ready when they come up against the enemy," answers Timucin automatically. He feels stupid, and Arbesa probably thinks he is stupid too, because the scorn in her eyes continues to grow.

"The enemy?" she repeats. "Which enemy?"

Before Timucin has the chance to answer, she does it herself.

"It doesn't matter much. There's always an enemy around, isn't there?" Her eyes look at Timucin as intently as if she were looking at him for the very first time. Something in her gaze stabs at Timucin's heart like a thin needle.

"You too look like a real warrior, but perhaps a little small," she says and covers her face back up with her veil, turns around abruptly and walks back to the yurt with quick steps.

Timucin looks confused and hears a cheerful peal of laughter behind him. A hand comes down on his shoulder and, as he looks up, he is looking directly into Belmin's bearded face. The old khan smiles, almost mischievously.

"Yes, well, you've met my daughter now, then," he says. "Do you still like her?"

Timucin says nothing - what can he say? - and just looks up at Belmin, taken aback. He takes his hand off of Timucin's shoulder and motions with his head for Timucin to follow him.

"Come, let us step together."

Timucin looks helplessly at the two fighters; they have not come anywhere near finishing, and yet it is a question of the honour of the tribe. That does not seem to bother the old khan, however, who walks off slowly, away from the light and shouts and noise of the friendly tussle. Timucin is not sure how long it will stay friendly. He knows Ilhan's father well, and he does not like losing.

"Please do not be upset at Arbesa," says Belmin once they have walked a while. "She is still young and speaks freely and from the heart. She will soon learn to consider her words better."

"I am not upset at her," says Timucin hurriedly, "she is a girl, after all." "And very pretty one, eh?" adds the father. Timucin feels himself going red. He does not know why, but he lowers his head and hopes that Belmin does not notice.

"She is still a child," continues the old khan in an amused tone of voice, from which Timucin understands that he has noticed his blush, "but we can see that she will soon be a good-looking young woman. If she takes after her mother, she will be a real beauty. By the same token, she will be fiercely independent." He laughs. "You can think yourself lucky to get a woman of her calibre. If you want her." He stands still and examines Timucin with a changed, but still not unfriendly gaze. "So, do you want her?"

"But of course!" answers Timucin hastily. "My father..."

"... has told you how important this alliance is for our two tribes, and how I am his oldest and best friend and his brother in oath. The important thing, however, is what you and Arbesa want. Do you want this to happen?"

Timucin does not answer straight away and, when he does, he answers so openly that he surprises himself.

"I do not know, my lord. I mean, I do not know her yet. She is very pretty, but..."

"I understand," sighs Belmin. He does not seem upset at all. In fact, he almost sounds relieved, even if Timucin does not quite understand why. "Then again, this is the reason we are here." He gestures towards the tent to which his daughter has walked back. "Arbesa is waiting for you in your tent. Go to her and get to know her better. We shall stay for a few days, and if you still think she is the right one for you - and she thinks you are the right one for her - then you will return with us and spend the rest of the year at our village." He smiles warmly. "Now, get going. If I know my daughter, she doesn't like being kept waiting..."

CHAPTER SIX

The Prophecy

He does not go straight back to his tent, but stops by the fight to see how it ends. It lasts for some time and gets ever more bitter. Well, at least Ilhan's father becomes more bitter. There is some blood too, even though the wounds are only small, harmless cuts. But Timucin is pleased when Tamer and Belmin step in and declare the fight a tie. Belmin's warrior looks happy and laughs as he embraces his opponent. Ilhan's father is clearly unhappy, however, and Timucin sees that he would quite happily take his sword and finish the fight if the two khans were not there.

The first fight is followed by others between Belmin's men and village warriors, most are just harmless tussles. The two khans, as well as most of the men, return to the fire to continue the celebrations, and Timucin sits down with them without having been asked. To judge by the look his father gives him, he

does not like this, but he says nothing and lets Timucin sit next to him for far longer than usual. Not long before morning, Timucin finally gets up and goes to his yurt. He can almost feel the strange looks Belmin gives him like a warm hand between his shoulder blades.

It is dark and warm in his tent as he enters the tent. He has been hoping he will find Arbesa asleep, and her regular, shallow breathing seems to confirm this hope. Timucin does not make a light, and tries to undress without making any noise. The metal on his suit of armour makes this impossible, however, it clinks and rattles. Arbesa's breathing does not change. But when he slips under the warm sheepskin and carefully lies down back-to-back with her, she raises her head and speaks.

"So, all the fights are over and the great warrior returns tired from battle." Her voice is quiet, derogatory and not at all sleepy.

Timucin grounds his teeth in anger, not so much at Arbesa's words, but at himself for actually believing that, he would get off so lightly. His reason tells him to say nothing and pretend to be asleep; but this is perhaps the first, and definitely not the last time he realizes how pointless it is to use a word like reason when talking to a woman.

"It was just a bit of fun," he answers, without raising his head.

"Yes, of course. I think it's great fun to watch two men going at each other with sharp iron blades and hitting each other until they bleed," she replies.

This makes Timucin very angry, but he does not really know with whom he is so angry. He remains silent for a few moments, then he sits up, shoves the sheepskin to the side and feels around in the dark until he finds a flint and the small oil lamp. He is so angry that his hands are trembling and it takes him five or six attempts to get the wick. Once he has finally succeeded, he is still clumsy enough to burn his fingers on the tiny flame. Arbesa's eyes glint with disdain as he turns to her. She too has sat up and pushed the cover down to her knees. She is wearing nothing more than a very thin dress, through which Timucin can see almost everything. It embarrasses him. He looks down.

"Why are you so shy, great warrior?" asks Arbesa tauntingly. Timucin says nothing in reply, but feels himself going red again.

"You are not embarrassed, are you?" continues the girl, pretending to blink in surprise. "I mean, I don't know much about the customs of your people, but isn't it usual for the warrior to return to his woman after a successful day's battling and lie with her?" He does not answer.

After a brief pause, she adds: "Well, if they've survived and have more to do than just bleed in silence."

"You do not have to sleep here," says Timucin, annoyed. "If you do not like

my company, I can quite happily ask my father to provide you with your own quarters."

Arbesa keeps smiling. The yellow light of the oil lamp makes her face appear even more beautiful than before, and despite his growing fury, he is incapable of turning away from her. Moreover, there is a brief moment in which she seems to realise that she may have gone too far and is frightened. It was, however, just a very brief moment, then her beautiful face becomes just as scornful as ever, if not worse.

"Then again," she continues, as if he has not said anything, "you look far better without those silly clothes. It must be awfully uncomfortable to walk around with more than your own weight on your body in iron."

Timucin instinctively looks down at himself, and Arbesa says quietly and, although he would not have thought it possible, more scornfully: "Just don't you go getting any ideas."

"Ideas? I don't know what to think at all," replies Timucin sharply. Well, he means it to sound sharp, but it sounds more pathetic than anything, even to his own ears. He is so red that he does not really need the lamp to light up his yurt.

Arbesa stops talking and, although Timucin is not looking at her directly, he can feel that her facial expression has changed. After what seems like an eternity, she speaks again.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you." Timucin is surprised.

"You didn't hurt me," says Timucin, lying without much conviction. "And you need not apologise to anyone", he adds.

"Why?" says Arbesa with a furrowed brow.

"Because you might be the wife of a khan one of these days," he says, "and the wife of a khan never apologizes to anyone for anything."

The girl looks at him thoughtfully for a long moment.

"And who taught you such rubbish?" she asks in a soft but confused tone of voice.

"My father!" answers Timucin loudly. "And it is not rubbish! It is the truth!"

"Because your father is the khan, and because the khan always speaks the truth, even if what he says is not true, you mean?" asks Arbesa.

In that instant, her words make Timucin so angry that he would like to grab her and shake her until she takes them back and says she is sorry. Then he realizes what he has just been thinking and laughs at himself against his own will.

"You're probably right," he says.

Arbesa is quiet again for a while. She sits up again, pulls her knees to her

body and wraps her arms around them, and Timucin finds it more and more difficult not to blatantly stare at her. He manages it somehow, but he is relatively sure that the girl knows what is going on inside him. Not that he understands it himself.

"I didn't want to offend you," says Arbesa finally.

"You haven't offended me," replies Timucin and realizes only as he speaks these words that they are the truth. She has not offended him.

"But tell me, why are you so hostile?"

"Am I so hostile?" asks Arbesa. She leans her chin on her knees and looks up at him, amused. Then she shrugs her shoulders. There is something about the mischievous glint in her eyes that makes Timucin remember something vaguely, but he does not know what. Whatever it is, however, it is familiar and fills him with a feeling of sudden warmth. The feeling is so strong that he has to stop himself from just hugging her. "I'm just not used to all of this, you know."

"All of what?" asks Timucin.

"All these warriors and weapons and fun you have fighting."

"I understand," says Timucin, "I've heard tell that your tribe is very peaceful." He does not think that he has said anything wrong, but suddenly Arbesa raises her head and an angry crease appears between her thin eyebrows.

"That's right, just go ahead and say what you think!" she snaps. "You think we are tribe of cowards, don't you? That we don't like fighting." Timucin is about to contradict this, and will probably end up apologizing to her again, but the girl does not let him speak a word. She continues speaking, louder than before and more angrily.

"You needn't have any qualms about speaking freely. I may still be a child, but I know very well what other tribes think and say about us."

"I did not say that I thought your people were cowards," says Timucin in his defence, "but what kind of khan has a tribe without warriors?"

"A very wise khan, perhaps?" asks Arbesa. Her fury disappears as quickly as it came. Yet something has changed. The tender bond between them that appeared a few moments back has been torn.

"But how do you expect to defend your land and your property against enemies who may want to rob you of it?" asks Timucin half-heartedly.

"No one has tried as yet," answers Arbesa softly.

"Yes, perhaps because there is no honour in winning against an enemy that cannot defend itself," replies Timucin. He regrets having said these words as soon as he has said them. Arbesa is not offended though; she simply shrugs her shoulders and nods in the direction of the entrance to the tent.

"How odd. I thought I just watched my bodyguard win against your man.

Simply because my people do not enjoy fighting, we are not defenseless. You should try to listen to her."

"To her?" asks Timucin, not understanding what Arbesa means. She does not answer, however, and lies down, pulls up the cover to her shoulders and turns herself in it so that there is nothing left for Timucin to protect himself from the cold of the night.

He sits silently for some time looking at the girl as she pretends to sleep before he puts out the light. He lies straight and waits for either sleep or the cold, whichever comes first.

The cold is the first of the two, and it stops him sleeping. After a while, however, Timucin finds himself once again in the silvery moonlight of his dream world. Usually (not always, but almost always), he has difficulty making out exact forms in his dreams, but tonight he can see more than just vague ghosts under a starry sky. It is still a dark, nighttime world, but not quite as impenetrable as usual. Behind Sarantuya, he can see hills on a distant horizon covered by woods, and a silver, winding river. No steppe, and no traces of people. Timucin can feel that this is a world untouched by the hand of man. He has an almost physical sense of great age and of indescribable power, and this comes not only from the huge dragon, but from the fabric of this world itself, a world which Sarantuya does not often let him see.

"Now, did I promise too much?" asks Sarantuya. She is in a cheerful mood - well, as cheerful as a dragon the size of ten oxen can appear, at least. There is a glint of mischief in her eyes, and her long, scaly tail seems to thump on the floor to the rhythm of some silent music.

"Wasn't that an exciting day? Well? Wasn't it?"

"Yes," admits Timucin. Then he pulls a face. "Well, at least it was for some of us here."

"Oh, don't be like that about it!" answers the dragon in a jovial tone, which Timucin just does not understand.

"Come on! Every man in the village would give his eye teeth to share his yurt with the daughter of such of a mighty khan!"

"Yes, but she is a pain in the neck!" says Timucin.

"Pain in the neck? We have heard those words spoken before about the son of certain khan in your village..." The dragon lays her head sideways.

"So why is she such a pain? Because she says the truth?"

Timucin is offended, but does not say anything; he knows there is no use. When Sarantuya has decided to talk about a certain topic, then she talks about it - and that is that.

"Yes, but she laughed at me," he says after some time, "and insulted my

father."

"No, she didn't," says Sarantuya, shaking her head so that he does not start to contradict her. Her smile disappears and her face looks worried, quizzical.

"Nevertheless, I feel resentment in you, my young friend. What went wrong?"

At first, Timucin wants to deny everything, but that would be pointless. Even if Timucin tries to hide things, Sarantuya can read his thoughts and he knows it. Nevertheless, she always insists on him saying them out loud.

"Chuzir," he admits.

"Your friend or, I beg your pardon, your brother in oath now. That makes him more than just a friend, doesn't it?"

"Some brother in oath!" says Timucin. "He told everyone about it!"

"About what?" asks the dragon, pretending not to know.

"About the thing with the dog," he answers angrily. "Now everyone in the village knows that I am afraid of dogs. Not just my father, but all of them."

"And what is so bad about that? I know that you know this already, but I shall say it again: even the heart of the bravest warrior is not free of fear. Only the most stupid people have no fear of anything, and these people do not live very long. But that is beside the point. Even we dragons know fear."

"Fear of what?"

"You would not understand it," answers Sarantuya mysteriously. "And this is not what we are talking about. Now, tell me, what is so bad about everyone knowing you are afraid of something?"

"Not just something," answers Timucin, "but dogs! Mangy little mutts! Everyone will laugh at me." Well, to be precise, they are already laughing, he thinks.

"No one will laugh at you when you are khan," says Sarantuya. "And what takes more courage? To face the scorn of your tribesmen because of who you are, or to fight with - what did you call it - a mangy little mutt? You could have beaten it to death if you had wanted. You are strong." "No, I am a coward," says Timucin bitterly.

"No, you are not!" says Sarantuya, almost angrily. "You were afraid of this dog, but you were even more afraid of people finding this out and laughing at you. A real coward kills what he fears, so that no one finds out about his fear."

Timucin thinks about the mighty teeth and the wild look in the dog's eyes. He doubts whether the animal really was all that harmless, but does not say anything for the moment.

"I still don't understand why he did it, though!" he continues. "He is supposed to be my best friend, and he betrayed me! Why?"

"Because, unlike you, in the depths of his heart he really is a coward!" answers Sarantuya quietly. "And he is furious."

"Furious? At me? But why me? I have never done anything to him!" "He missed the dog. For the first time ever he missed a target, and he blames you. And he is not entirely wrong, if you think about it a moment."

"Why? Because my arrow was bent?" says Timucin.

"Well, that is certainly what he thinks," says Sarantuya, winking conspiratorially, "but you and I both know why he really missed."

Timucin keeps quiet. What Sarantuya says does not make anything better. In any case, it is unimportant why he is to blame for Chuzir's failure.

"He is already regretting having told everyone," says Sarantuya, "so don't be angry with him. You are friends after all, right?"

"Well, that's what I thought until now, yes," says Timucin, upset.

"Friendship also means forgiving," says Sarantuya. "In fact, that is what it means above all."

Timucin is about to make a nasty comment when he notices movement in the corner of his eye and turns round, frightened. Something rushes away. It is big, scaly and snake-like, and disappears so quickly that he cannot make it out. Was it perhaps a...?

Surprised, he turns back to Sarantuya, who answers his question before he has asked it.

"Don't ask, my little friend. I can't answer, and he won't talk to you either. We only talk to the people we belong to."

It takes a moment for Timucin to understand what she means.

"So... you mean that somebody else here is speaking to a dragon right now?" he murmurs. A moment ago, he would never have believed that dragons could grin. But Sarantuya can, and she grins almost shamelessly.

"Yes. For some time, too!"

It takes Timucin even longer to understand, then he turns around half-terrified to Arbessa. She is not there, of course, because this is just a dream. Sarantuya giggles.

"Arbessa?" he murmurs skeptically. "You mean... she too has a dragon?"

"Well, actually it's us dragons who have you and not you us," says Sarantuya, a little offended, "but yes, she does."

"Oh," says Timucin.

"Oh. Yes 'oh' indeed" says Sarantuya, making fun of his tone of voice.

"So you thought you were the only one?"

"If I'm honest, yes I did." In fact, if he is completely honest, he is not even sure whether Sarantuya actually exists at all.

"Well, in that case, I'm going to have to disappoint you," says Sarantuya, teasing him, "you're not as special as all that, my little Khan!"

"But why did Arbessa not say anything about it?" mumbles Timucin.

"Why should she? She doesn't know you at all." Timucin thinks back: in fact, she did say something about it.

"Anyway, it's nothing special to her. Almost everyone in her tribe has a dragon-friend."

"The whole tribe?" says Timucin, astonished.

"Well, almost all of them," answers Sarantuya, "because they are a very peaceful people, and dragons love peaceful people."

"What? Dragons, of all creatures!" he says. He regrets this immediately, but of course, Sarantuya would have heard these words even if he had just thought them. She looks offended, upset and ever so slightly angry.

"You think that, just because we are big and strong, we are dangerous?" she asks. Timucin discovers that it is possible to blush in a dream too. He keeps silent.

"We are big and very strong," continues Sarantuya, sounding suddenly very serious and still slightly angry, "so no one can be of any danger to us, but why should this make us into beasts? We are not like you people!"

Timucin wants to say something, but Sarantuya motions him to keep quiet with an astonishingly human movement of her right paw.

"I know what people say about us. You all think we are monsters, horrible monsters who eat people and animals and burn land with our breath of fire." She winks at him before continuing. "That's about the size of it, right?"

"Hm," says Timucin.

"But that is not the way it is. We are just as big and strong as you think, even stronger - just one of us could wipe your tribe off the face of the earth. But why would we do that? No dragon has ever killed a person, and we never shall, as long as you are in existence."

"I'm sorry," murmurs Timucin, "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I know," says Sarantuya in her usual, softer tones. Suddenly, she starts giggling.

"Did I just mishear something, or did you just say sorry to me, son of the khan?"

Timucin is silent and Sarantuya is serious again.

"Well, you would have asked that question at some point, and I've just answered it. Perhaps this was the right moment, now that you have met your wife."

"We are not married yet!" objects Timucin, but Sarantuya shakes her head,

her scales jingling lightly as she does.

"She will be your wife, young Khan. You will live a long and happy life together, even though you will betray her one day."

"Me? Never!" says Timucin, outraged.

"Yes, yes, you will," says Sarantuya softly, "but don't worry - she will forgive you."

"You can see into the future?" says Timucin, eyes wide open.

"Not everything," says Sarantuya, "We dragons do not see into the future, not in the way you think."

"Well, you did predict that I was going to meet somebody who would be of great importance to me."

"That wasn't the future, my little friend that was just one day. But we do see a lot, that is true. Some of the paths into the future are clear and wide, some thin and blurred, or even forked. I can tell you that Arbessa will become your wife and that you will live long and happily together. What you do in that time is up to you. I can't see that."

"And even if you could see it, you wouldn't tell me," says Timucin.

"That's true," answers Sarantuya cheerfully, "but you will find the right way in any case. I'm almost sure!"

"Almost?"

"Almost," insists Sarantuya, "because even we dragons don't know everything. We have neither the right nor the power to get involved in your lives. But you have a good heart and I believe in you. Otherwise I wouldn't have chosen you1."

"Chosen?" repeats Timucin.

"We dragons choose the people to whom we wish to offer our friendship, and we choose very carefully. Only those who are pure of heart and who do not go the way of the sword will ever know us." Sarantuya hesitates for a moment, as if she is not sure if she should continue talking or not, but she does.

"You have never spoken of me to your father, am I right?"

Timucin answers with a shake of his head, and Sarantuya continues.

"And perhaps you shouldn't. Did you know that he too once had a dragon companion?" Timucin's eyes open wide.

"What? My father? The khan?"

"Before he was khan," answers Sarantuya, "at about your age." She laughs good-temperedly. "I shouldn't tell you of course... but... but he too was afraid."

"Of dogs?"

"No, of horses!" chortled Sarantuya.

"Of horses?" gasps Timucin. "My father the khan was afraid of horses?!"

"He was not khan back then," answers Sarantuya, "and he faced and conquered his fear." Timucin needs a while to get used to this idea.

"And? What happened then?" he asks.

"He went the wrong way," answers Sarantuya in a way that makes it clear to Timucin that it is pointless to ask any further questions. She changes the subject.

"Back then, many of us had friends in your tribe. There was even a time when all of you had dragons. Why else do you think that so many of your tribe can remember us, without ever having seen us?"

"What happened?" asks Timucin.

"The same thing as almost always," answers Sarantuya sadly, "too many of you chose the wrong path." Timucin can feel the dragon's sorrow and he realizes that he has hit upon a subject that she does not want to talk about. Nevertheless, he asks another question, quietly.

"And which path is the wrong path, exactly?"

"Later," answers Sarantuya, clearing her throat loudly, "perhaps I've already told you enough for one day. Just be patient, my little Khan. We will have plenty of opportunities to talk again, perhaps your whole life long. But that is your decision."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Bodyguard

Arbesa has already gone when Timucin wakes up. It is at least an hour after sunrise, he has a horrible taste in his mouth and a throbbing headache. It is as if he hasn't just sat with the men, but also drunk the spirits made of fermented sheep's milk that they sometimes take to excess. Moreover, he still has the strange dream in his head - something to do with the dragon and Arbesa, although he cannot remember any precise details. He's probably breathed in too much smoke from the fire, which would explain both the headache and odd dreams, he thinks.

Where is Arbesa, though?

Timucin looks at the empty bed next to him and is almost annoyed, until he remembers that he is behaving like an old married man. Sarantuya has said that they will get married, but only at some point, and that is assuming that Timucin understood correctly, and assuming that she has actually spoken to him and that this is not all just some strange fantasy that he has experienced. That was no fantasy, though. His father used to be afraid of horses? How pathetic is that?!

Timucin curls his lip in scorn at the very thought of it, and stands up. The noises of village life penetrate into the tent, at once muffled and yet somehow

urgent, too. He just manages to stop himself shaking his head to dispel his sleepiness - it would probably explode. He feels this bad without even having tasted a drop of the fermented sheep's milk. This is not the first time he asks himself what the warriors see in drinking themselves into unconsciousness night after night.

Anyway: his father used to be afraid of horses? Pathetic!

Timucin steps out of the tent, crouching as he goes. He feels like a grown warrior with a hangover as the bright morning sun stabs at his eyes, and he does not just blink, but has to grind his teeth to avoid groaning out loud. Normally, his father and the warriors behave like this in the morning when the night has been too short and too festive. He understands the attraction of drink less than ever this morning. What he does understand, though, is why the men are often so anxious to get down to the river. He feels dirty, his whole body is sticky, and his clothes and hair smell so badly of smoke that he almost feels ill. He wants nothing more than to get to the river, but before he sets off, he remembers that his father has asked him to make sure he is always dressed properly as long as there are guests in the village. So he gathers up all his armour and weapons into a bundle that he slings over his shoulder. As he makes his way to the hill, he groans under the weight of it. Arbesa was right: it weighs more than he does. Suddenly he is no longer angry at her for having gone; at least she does not have to see him in this miserable state.

He drags his feet up the hill without replying to any of the tribespeople who greet him. Then he crosses the patch of woods where he and Chuzir gave their oath, yawning and even stopping a couple of times to regain his strength. As he passes the bush into which the dog disappeared, an un-pleasant memory tries to break into his mind, but he ignores it and forces himself to think of nothing - which is not hard in his current state.

After what seems like an eternity, he can see the river shimmering through the undergrowth in front of him. He sets off faster towards the water and then throws his bundle of clothing and armour to the ground so that it rattles and jingles for a few moments. He reaches for his underwear and is about to pull it off over his head, when he sees something out of the corner of his eye and stops.

Something or someone is splashing in the water. Timucin looks closely and notices that he is blushing again; someone is swimming in the shallow waters of the Omon. That someone is Arbesa. She is wearing less than the night before. Well, nothing. And the water is so clear that it hides nothing. If she finds it as embarrassing as Timucin, she hides it masterfully as she kicks around in the water lying on her back and looking up at him with her glinting eyes. She does not even have the decency to pretend to be embarrassed, and is having a lot of

fun at Timucin's expense.

"My, oh my, our great warrior is already awake!" she says teasingly, picking up last night's conversation as if there has been no interruption.

"Astonishing! Don't you need more time to recover from the great battle?"

"Good morning to you, too!" growls Timucin. Last night, when Sarantuya told him about his future with Arbesa, he still liked the idea despite their misunderstanding, but perhaps one should not believe everything dragons say, especially female dragons.

He is close to taking off his clothes and jumping into the water, but then he reconsiders and wades into the icy water, his teeth chattering as he goes. Arbesa moves a little aside but doesn't let him out of her vision for an instant. She looks even more scornfully in his direction, but what else can he expect?

"Does your tribe always wash with its clothes on?" she asks.

Timucin looks at her angrily, dives under and stays below the waterline until his lungs are crying out for air and his heart is about to burst. He resurfaces, spluttering and gasping for air, runs his hands through his long, wet hair and then answers.

"Only if the water is dirty or full of vermin." Arbesa looks at him confused, shrugs her shoulders and then paddles away on her back using only her hands and feet. Then, however, she turns back in order to circle around him, getting closer and closer, like a predator around its prey.

He dives again, swims underwater back to the bank and wades back out of the water, soaking wet. If Arbesa were not there, he would have taken his underwear off now and wrung it out, but she keeps looking at him. So he runs his hands over his undergarments and bends down to pick up his bundle. He threw it carelessly, so he spends quite some time untangling it before he can put his clothes on. His wet underwear makes every movement more difficult, however, and sticks to his body as he goes. He is annoyed when he thinks about how long it will take to dry under all this leather, and his skin already feels cold enough as it is.

Arbesa must be thinking the same; even without turning to her, he can feel her scornful gaze. Sarantuya might have predicted he would betray her, but perhaps the dragon was wrong: he feels more like drowning her than anything else.

Without saying a word, he finishes dressing himself, not because he really wants to or because his father has asked him to, but more than anything because of what Arbesa said to him last night. He even puts on his belt and weapons as well as his shield and helmet. Only then, does he turn to the water and see that Arbesa really has been watching him the whole time. Her eyes are still as wide

and defiant as ever. Suddenly, he remembers what they remind of him: of Sarantuya. Arbesa has Sarantuya's eyes!

It is almost as if he does not want to, but he asks her a question.

"What is she called?"

"He." She keeps smiling, and something comes into her eyes that touches and warms him for a brief instant. "I'm a girl, and our dragons are always male. Just like yours are always female."

"Now I understand what the warriors mean when they talk about their wives," he replies, grinning. Arbesa smiles back, but her eyes keep their strange new expression.

"Tselmeg. His name is Tselmeg." She paddles around in the water a little more as if she is waiting for an answer, and when she does not get one, she turns her back to him. Timucin clears his throat awkwardly, starts to turn around and stops still.

His good mood disappears again instantly and his face darkens. He is no longer alone; just a little behind him, four or five boys climb out of the bush into which the dog had disappeared the day before yesterday. One of them is Chuzir, another is Ilhan, and the other three are Ilhan's most trusted friends - and the worst bullies in the tribe. At first, they just stand there staring at him; all except Chuzir are smiling threateningly and Timucin's heart starts to beat faster.

"Uh oh," sneers Arbesa, "now our big, strong warrior has a bit of a problem. But it won't be too bad - I mean, he is armed, at least."

Although she is only saying this to rib him, and he knows it, Timucin does not feel like laughing right now. The sight of the five boys scares him. They too are armed, Chuzir with his bow and arrow, the four others with clubs that they have clearly just cut from the trees. What use is his sword now? He is not going to run at them with a bare blade.

If fighting is at all necessary. Timucin thinks for a moment, and although his heart is still beating fast, he realizes that he does not yet know what they want. Perhaps they are just here by chance, and he remembers what his father has often told him: if you show fear, your enemy will see it too. Don't show fear, and they will avoid a fight.

"And who is saying anything about fighting anyway?" whispers someone to him from behind his forehead. As he steps towards the boys, he realizes it is Sarantuya's voice and stops again. The dragon is there, invisible to all except him. It is strange that she is there: this is the first time he has heard her voice whilst awake. Something very important must have happened. Without even being aware of it, he looks left and right. The dragon is nowhere to be seen, of course, but Ilhan and his friends notice the move and a wide, sneering grin

spreads across Ilhan's face.

"Don't you worry, oh mighty Khan," he scoffs, "there aren't any dogs around."

Timucin sucks air through his teeth and then walks on, holding his shoulders as straight as he can. His right hand is on the hilt of his sword, as if it had just landed there, but this does not have the effect he expects and Ilhan's grin just gets broader.

"Well, look at that! Our future khan has put on his sword and shield in order to defend the honour of his bride. Then again," he continues, looking lewdly in the direction of the river, "it does not seem like there is much to defend in this case."

For an instant, Timucin sees red. For a short moment, he must stop himself actually pulling his sword and cutting Ilhan's stupid smile out of his face. Then, however, he calls himself down. He and Arbesa have done nothing dishonorable, and nakedness is not a taboo in the tribe.

Men, women and children often wash in the river together, and they never wear clothes like he just has. Ilhan is just trying to get him angry.

"What do you want?" he asks in a strong voice. He is careful not to look at Chuzir as he says this, but his brother in oath licks his lips nervously and looks away quickly nonetheless. Timucin thinks back to what Sarantuya told him last night and sees that it was the truth. Chuzir is already regretting his mistake, but why is he here with the others, then? Timucin is confused.

Sarantuya answers him silently: Because he cannot go back. One mistake all too often leads directly to another if the person making it does not have the courage to face it.

"Oh, we just wanted to make sure that our future khan and his bride are not in any danger," answers Ilhan.

"Woof woof!" adds one of the other boys. Timucin ignores this and replies coldly.

"Well, everything is fine, thanks. It is good to see, however, that you already know the debt you owe your future ruler."

Chuzir takes a small, nervous step backwards; Ilhan's hand grasps his club tighter.

His eyes flash with fury.

"Don't be too sure about that, Timucin," he growls, "you are not yet khan."

"And if I were, that shouldn't stop you," answers Timucin defiantly. "Just imagine that I am some boy, any boy, from the village."

"Hm, I'm having trouble doing that," answers Ilhan icily, "because all the other boys in the village have the heart of a true warrior."

He is only trying to provoke you, whispers Sarantuya, and there is no shame in avoiding a fight that you cannot win.

His father has already told him this more than once, and it always sounded obvious and convincing. Oddly enough, however, it does not sound so obvious or convincing now. In fact, Timucin feels pure rage welling up inside him, but fear at the same time. There are four of them - not counting Chuzir - and Ilhan on his own is stronger than him. So he says nothing.

Suddenly, the bigger boy smiles a broad and unmistakably dirty smile.

"We do beg your pardon, oh most noble Khan," he says in a smutty tone, "if you want to be alone with your bride, we'll happily turn round. Unless you need help..." The other boys, except Chuzir, greet this comment with dirty laughter.

"Take that back!" hisses Timucin.

"What if I don't?" asks Ilhan. Timucin looks down at the club in Ilhan's hand. Ilhan shrugs his shoulders and sends it flying into the bushes.

"Just so you can't say we were unfair about it. You are welcome to use your sword, however, great Khan - at least then we would be about even."

"I don't want to fight you," says Timucin, who is almost surprised as he hears his own words. "We have one blood; why should we strike one another?" Ilhan pulls a mock-disappointed face.

"Hmm, why? Perhaps because I do not want to serve a khan who is a coward?" he suggests.

Timucin does not reply to this, but suddenly feels a tension in his thoughts that does not come from him. Sarantuya is looking at him and clearly expects a certain reaction, but he does not know which. Besides, he is terribly afraid. He has understood that there is no way he can avoid this fight. Ilhan and the others have come to fight him here and now, and have chosen this moment so that Arbesa will see - for whatever reason.

Instead of answering, he takes off his shield, slowly lays it down on the floor and then removes his sword and belt. Ilhan stops his pretend surprise, shrugs his shoulders, and then nods at his friends.

"Well, what do you know? Our little khan shows courage! Now, show us what you've got!" This is the cue for one of the boys to go into the bushes and come back with a string on which a dog has been leashed.

On closer inspection, however, it appears to be something that thinks it is a dog, because it smaller than most cats, has a mangy coat, and is slobbering so badly that it has left a wet trail behind it. One of its ears has been torn off. It growls quietly when it sees Timucin.

"Now don't be afraid, oh great Khan," smirks Ilhan, his three stooges laughing spitefully, "and if this terrifying beast gets too dangerous, just say the

word and we'll do what we can." On this, the boy lets the dog loose and it runs straight at Timucin, barking furiously as it goes. It is a pathetic creature, and not even Timucin can be afraid of it. Nevertheless, he takes a step back, perhaps out of reflex, and Ilhan laughs loudly. Meanwhile, invisible and silent, Sarantuya stretches her wings and, just as it about to reach Timucin, the dog jumps back in fear, runs around looking scared and then runs back with its tail between its legs, squeaking as it goes. Ilhan looks surprised, truly, but then his face darkens.

"Fine," he growls, "but let's see if you can scare off something that isn't ten times smaller than you!" He lunges at Timucin with his fists curled.

It is more a reflex than anything else that helps Timucin to fend off his first punch, but the sheer force of Ilhan's wild attack throws Timucin to the ground and Ilhan rams his knee so hard against his chest that it is probably only his armour that saves his ribs from being broken like little twigs. The air whistles out of his lungs and, for a second, his vision is clouded by red pain. His heart explodes in fear and he would scream if he had enough air. Ilhan bellows triumphantly, punches him a few times in the face and knocks his arms back without any effort at all, as he tries to hit back. The next punch splits his bottom lip; then his nose starts to bleed; the punch after that almost sends him into unconsciousness.

Sarantuya! Help me! In his mind, he is screaming for help.

Nothing happens. The dragon's wings do not come to save him this time, nor does fire rain down from the heavens. Ilhan just keeps hitting him, perhaps with even more strength than before. Timucin is afraid; as the punches get stronger, he starts to worry that he may die. He blindly feels around for anything hard and heavy that he can use to defend himself, and finds the hilt of his sword. It sits neatly in the palm of his hand, it is heavy and sharp and gives him a feeling of safety. Even as Ilhan sits astride him raining down blows, he knows he can stop it all with just one movement. Then the blood flowing to the floor will not be his anymore.

Instead of using the sword, however, he drops it again and calls desperately in his thoughts for Sarantuya. Help me!

The dragon remains silent. Timucin can feel her presence so clearly, as if she were right behind him, but she says nothing.

"Stop!" shouts a furious, high-pitched voice. Ilhan punches him in the face again, even harder, but then his weight disappears from Timucin's chest and Ilhan's mad laughter is replaced by surprised shouts.

Timucin pushes himself up onto his elbows, screws up his eyes to get rid of the blood and tears and then opens them wide as he sees who has come to help him. He has been counting on Chuzir, desperately hoping for him, but his brother

in oath is standing looking lost and confused. Now it is Ilhan who is lying on his back covering his face with his hands;

the form who is kneeling on him, smacking him in the face again and again, is about a head shorter than Timucin, has hip-length, raven-black hair clinging to its skin in wet streaks, and is wearing nothing except this hair - and water.

"Leave him alone!" screams Arbesa and every word is accompanied by another slap. Ilhan's face is starting to turn red with all the smacking, despite Arbesa's hands being small and slim.

"You call that courage? Four on one? You really are very brave warriors, aren't you?!"

Ilhan finally overcomes his surprise and throws Arbesa off him with a rough movement. His face is glowing red and is contorted with shame and fury; murderous rage is burning in his eyes. Timucin is almost completely sure that he will lunge at him again, but instead Ilhan takes a step back and spits blood and phlegm on the grass.

"Yes," he says contemptuously, "I should apologise to my khan; I did not know that his bodyguards were so brave." With this, he turns on his heels and marches off, followed by his three stooges. Chuzir stands still, not sure what to do, but does not look Timucin in the eyes. After a moment, he too goes, almost as fast as the others.

Timucin tries to get up, but everything is spinning; his face hurts badly, every breath he takes causes him pain. It feels like Ilhan may well have broken one of his ribs. He feels Arbesa kneel down beside him, stretch out her hand to him, but she does not dare to touch him. Then she does something, which surprises him completely: she bends down to his face and blows a kiss on his cheek.

"You were very brave, Timucin," she whispers in his ear.

Timucin looks at her, confused. He does not understand what she means. Brave? He has been a coward.

"What?" he murmurs.

"It was brave of you not to do it." Arbesa nods towards the sword. She smiles, warmly and honestly, in a way she has not smiled at him yet. Then she stands up and, in one flowing movement, puts out her hand to help him to his feet. He is embarrassed, but he needs the help to get up. He starts to thank her and is about to make a jokey remark to try and play down his weakness when he notices movement behind him and jumps round, convinced that Ilhan and the others have come back to give him another drubbing.

Instead, he sees his father.

Tamer stands before him, silent and stony-faced between the trees. Timucin

understands that he has been there for some time, has seen everything. His father's stare cuts him like a knife. It is a look of contempt.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Wisdom of the Dragons

Why didn't you help me?" says Timucin to Sarantuya as soon as he has closed his eyes and slid over into his dream world. "I thought you were my friend!"

"I am," says the dragon, fluttering her eyelids, "and you should count yourself lucky, too, if I may say so."

"How so?" asks Timucin, annoyed.

"Because you don't want me as your enemy, little Khan. No one does." For just a moment, there is something in her eyes that he has never seen before, that he has never felt in her before and that makes him go ice- cold to the depth of his soul. This feeling disappears too quickly for him to become frightened, however, and Sarantuya resumes her usual, wide dragon-smile.

"And besides," she adds in a changed, almost cheerful tone, "I did help you!"

"Ha!" snorts Timucin.

"Did I not repel that bloodthirsty beast that wanted to tear you to pieces?"

"Do you mean that yapping little piece of scum?" replies Timucin with a dismissive tone. "That was great of you, but I think I would have just about been able to handle it, thanks."

"Are you sure?" asks Sarantuya, mock clueless.

"You know exactly what I mean," snarls Timucin, "although I didn't even want you to tear off their heads or anything like that."

"What did you want, then?"

"Perhaps if you had just frightened them off a bit. You know, filled their hearts with fear or something of that nature."

"They are already so afraid that there is no more room for fear," answers the dragon, "but I know what you mean. It would have been just lovely if they had run off scared and then thought that, they were scared of you. Would you have liked that?"

"Yes," answers Timucin.

"So you like people to be afraid of you?" asks the dragon. Timucin is about to nod automatically, but then he is not sure whether he really does want people to be afraid of him.

"I think you fought very bravely - well, for a man. Not by dragon standards,

of course..."

"What? I just got punched the whole time!" growls Timucin resentfully.

"Well, if I remember correctly, Ilhan got the odd smack too! And believe you me, they hurt him far more than the punches he gave you hurt you," says the dragon, giggling, "because that kind of lad really dislikes getting beaten up by a girl!"

Not as much as I dislike being saved by one, though, thinks Timucin. Instinctively, he turns to the left, where Arbessa is sleeping next to him. He cannot actually see her in his dream world, but he can still feel her presence. He feels warmth and comfort like he has not felt since lying in his mother's arms as a small boy, but this is different. It is more intimate and much, much sweeter.

Sarantuya does not try to even pretend that she is not reading his thoughts.

"You are ashamed of being helped by a girl, but you accuse me of not having helped, too!"

"Yes, but you're a dragon, not a girl!" hisses Timucin.

"But I was one, once," answers Sarantuya snappishly, "and that wasn't all that long ago either. Those millennia just fly by..." she giggles again, then sighs deeply and is suddenly very serious again.

"You did not need any help, little Khan. You did everything right!"

"Right? You mean I got a right beating!"

"You could have killed him. But you didn't."

Timucin thinks of the sword he held in his hand, thinks of the short but intense temptation; the power it exercised for a brief moment sends a shiver down his spine. Perhaps this is the first time he has realised just how thin the boundary is between life and death.

"It was right," repeats Sarantuya heavily, "because a few scratches and cuts will heal, but you cannot give back a life you have taken. And sometimes the person who has taken it becomes the person who is pursued."

"Is this supposed to be the Wisdom of the Dragons or something?" he asks angrily.

"No," answers Sarantuya, "just my experience after a long life. Nothing would have happened if you had killed that boy, because you are the son of the khan, and he challenged you; but you may have never forgotten him. Ever."

"And what if I had forgotten him?"

"That would only have been worse," says Sarantuya mysteriously, "because sometimes it is only a tiny step that puts a life onto the wrong path. But you did right."

Timucin is not in the mood for another round of dragon wisdom. Not that Sarantuya is not in the right; he knows she is.

"Yes, well... whatever the case, I learned something important today."

"What did you learn?"

"That it might be nice to have friends, but that's all there is. When it comes down to it, you're on your own."

Sarantuya looks at him silently for a while, and in such a strange way, that Timucin feels more and more uncomfortable. He only said what he just said to annoy her slightly, but he realizes he has really hurt her. He did not mean to do that.

"I meant Chuzir," he claims.

"No," says Sarantuya, "no, you didn't."

Timucin is silent.

"I understand," says Sarantuya, sighing.

"What?"

Instead of answering his question, Sarantuya just stares straight past him, as if the answer is somewhere out there in the grey twilight surrounding them.

"There is something you should know, little Khan," she says after a long while, "I did not finish my story last night. I know that you beseeched me to help, but I chose not to hear you."

"Why?"

"I have not yet told you why so few of us chose to befriend your tribes-people and make you into companions."

"Companions? It sounds like we're married!" He tries to laugh, but his joke does not have any effect on Sarantuya, who stares at him with a serious look.

"Well, we do marry you, in a way," she answers, "because we enter into an eternal bond with you. If we choose to bind ourselves to one of you, then we stay with you for life. Unless, that is, you take the wrong path; even then, we have to grant you a last wish, whatever it may be." "Whatever it may be?" says Timucin, making sure. "You mean, I can wish for whatever I want and I'll get it? Whatever it may be?"

"Whatever it may be," repeats the dragon. She sounds sad. "Be careful what you wish for, though. You would never see me again, and you might have to pay a terrible price."

What she says scares Timucin, and he is quite sure that she means to do so, too. Suddenly, however, Sarantuya bares her teeth in a wide dragon-smile.

"Well, enough Wisdom of the Dragons for one night?" she asks cheer-fully. Timucin is serious, however; he is still scared, and Sarantuya's fake joviality just makes it worse. He can tell that she is hiding something behind it, and he can sense that he does not want to know it.

"You haven't told me why you only reveal yourselves to so few people," he

says.

"We have been responsible for too much bad in the world," answers the dragon, "because you humans are clever. You're all incredibly stupid, but very clever too. After a while, too many people knew about the last wish, and we had to grant them. The temptation of unlimited power is great, any only very few can withstand it. Your world and your tribe have experienced boundless suffering, wars and terrors and death, and we presents. So most of us have chosen to avoid people, and only very few of us seek human companions."

"But you did," says Timucin. "Why?"

"Because I saw that you have real greatness inside you, Timucin," she replies. "Do not disappoint me, little Khan; the consequences for your people would be grave."

CHAPTER NINE

Friendship

Belmin and his entourage stay for ten days. As befits his rank and position as a great khan and brother in oath to Timucin's father, a feast is given every evening in Belmin's honour. The fire in his father's tent often burns so long that its last light mingles with the first rays of the rising sun. Arbesa and Timucin spend every night in his yurt, and although she then passes most of the day avoiding him, either busy doing something or chatting with the other women, they become a lot closer to each other in this time. They haven't touched each other at all, the fleeting kiss as he lay on the ground that first morning remains their only kiss. She even seems afraid of any other contact, although she does not seem to be prudish. Something happens between them, however. Timucin is not sure whether it is friendship or love, but he feels good when she is there. After a while, he misses the continual nagging and frequently unfriendly scorn when she is not there. At first, what Belmin said about him spending a year in his village frightened him - Timucin has never been away from his home for more than a couple of days at a time - but now he is more afraid of not seeing Arbesa for more than a day. Not only does he now know that he will have to spend the rest of the summer and the winter to come in the Voshon village, but he is actually looking forward to being there together with Arbesa.

And so it comes to the last day. Arbesa is already gone when he wakes up (Timucin has not yet found out how she always manages to get up before him, even when he tries to get up earlier), so Timucin leaves the yurt and runs to the river to wash without his armour hoping to find her there. Instead, he finds Chuzir there.

His brother in oath is sitting on a rock on the riverbank, his bare feet dangling in the water. Timucin does not need to ask him to know that he has

been waiting for him for some time. He wants to say something, but it is like his throat has been sewn shut again. Chuzir has avoided him over the last few days with the same success as Arbesa.

Finally, however, Chuzir says something to break the uncomfortable silence.

"Hello," he says, without turning round or even looking up.

"Hello," replies Timucin, just as curtly. He has not admitted it to himself, but he has greatly desired to see his brother in oath one more time before leaving the village. Now that he sees him, though, he does not know what to say. He wants to slap himself until the words he has so carefully considered over the last days come out, but they don't.

"Today is the big day," says Chuzir after the silence threatens to become too heavy. He is still looking away from Timucin with his feet in the water and has something lying on his thighs that Timucin cannot see. Timucin wants to step closer, but for some reason feels, he cannot.

"Yes," he answers.

"They are already saddling up the horses," continues Chuzir. To be exact, they had already started saddling them yesterday evening, and both of them know it.

"We are starting off early. It is a long ride."

"Yes, long indeed. You won't be back until next spring, if at all."

"What do you mean?" asks Timucin. "I will come back, of course I will come back."

"And what if the girl does not want to?" asks Chuzir.

"The girl" he replies, a little strongly in tone, "is my betrothed. I shall return with her before the year is out."

"Unless she does not want to leave her people and persuades you to stay," says Chuzir. "Women are good at that sort of thing."

"Nonsense!" replies Timucin. "My father would never allow it." Chuzir stares at the river for a while. The starlight is dancing on it. "Yes," he sighs, "you are right. He would never let that happen." His voice is full of bitterness, and at first Timucin does not understand it. Then he sucks air through his teeth.

"I do not believe it! You are jealous of Arbesa!"

"Rubbish!" replies Chuzir flatly. "It's just that..." He needs a moment to find the right words, and keeps looking at the river. "It's just that I don't want to lose you. We are friends."

Timucin is as relieved as he is confused by this statement. In fact, he is so confused that he is slightly angry.

"I shall return before a year is out," he replies sharply, "and we are more

than friends: we are brothers in oath." Well, I hope we still are, he adds in his thoughts. On this, Chuzir turns round to face him and says something that scares Timucin.

"Are we still brothers in oath?"

"What do you mean?" responds Timucin roughly.

Chuzir takes his feet out of the water and turns slowly towards him until Timucin can see what he has in his lap. His eyes widen.

"I've been waiting for you because I wanted to speak to you alone and to give you this, if you want it back." He holds up the arrow to Timucin.

"Have you lost your mind?" gasps Timucin. "We swore our oath on this arrow."

"I am not worthy of it," replies Chuzir quietly. "I betrayed you and did not stand by you when you needed my help. I would understand if you want to undo our oath."

For a moment, Timucin wants to grab the arrow out of his hands - not to break it and so to undo this oath made for all eternity - but to slap Chuzir in the face for being so stupid.

"You have gone mad," he says. "I will go mad with anger if you do not put away this arrow right now. How did you betray me?"

"I should not have told the others about your fear of dogs."

"That is true," says Timucin, "so you owe me one, then?" He grins. Chuzir looks up at him uncertainly. His hand, in which the arrow is resting, is trembling ever so slightly, but a faint glimmer of hope comes into his eyes. It is still quite dark, so Timucin cannot be sure, but he thinks he sees tears glinting in the starlight.

"And there was no point trying to help against Ilhan," he says, grinning even wider, "because I had a great bodyguard... and if you say any more stupid things about our friendship being over, I'll set her on you!"

"So you forgive me, then?" asks Chuzir shyly.

"There is nothing to forgive," says Timucin fiercely. Then he takes the arrow out of Chuzir's hand and lays it carefully on the ground. Chuzir looks closely at Timucin, as if he is looking for traces of malice or a grudge in his face.

"And what about Ilhan and the others?" he asks.

"You keep an eye on them for me until I return," replies Timucin, mock strict and winking conspiratorially.

"Can you keep a secret?" he asks Chuzir, who nods. "When I come back with Arbesa, we won't be alone."

"What do you mean?" asks Chuzir, wide-eyed.

"I've already spoken with Arbesa's father, and he is going to help me,"

continues Timucin. Chuzir's eyes get even wider and his jaw drops.

"There are lots of puppies in his village and he has promised to give me one that I can raise," says Timucin. "When I come back, I will have the biggest, wildest dog you can imagine!"

Chuzir looks at him in surprise for a moment longer, then he starts to laugh loudly. Finally, they hug and return hand in hand to the village. The others are already waiting for them; a few moments later, Timucin leaves the village.

CHAPTER TEN

Bajar and Batu

Almost nine months later to the day, Timucin returns, just as he has promised his brother in oath he will. This time, there is no huge baggage train approaching the dozen yurts of his home village, nestling next to the hill on the banks of the Omon; it is just he, Arbesa and their two loyal bodyguards. Despite his tribe's peaceful nature and the fact that there are no animosities with any of the neighboring tribes, Arbesa's father insists on these two accompanying the couple. Two further bodyguards are present, too - Bajar and Batu, the two huge black dogs that Timucin has raised in the preceding months and which follow him everywhere he goes.

Their arrival does not go unnoticed. Timucin's sharp eyes and ears tell him that they are being followed by lookouts, but they have not come with bad intentions. They are just watching them, not planning to ambush them.

When they are about two arrow-flights away from the village, a small troop of riders approaches them. Timucin sees from a long way off that his father is not one of them. He is a little disappointed, but not too badly, and the feeling goes as quickly as it has come. After all, they saw each other but ten days ago. As is custom in the two tribes, his father visited the father of the bride at the end of the engagement period to discuss the final details of the wedding. Then he returned earlier in order to prepare the great feast in Timucin's village. Belmin and the great men of his tribe are to arrive later, at which time Timucin and Arbesa will marry and the bond between the two tribes will become official.

Timucin is looking forward to this day. In the months past, they have not been apart for a single day, and he now knows Arbesa as well as anyone can know another person. Yet it will be different once they are married, the only son and the only daughter of two khans.

Timucin has learned a lot from Arbesa and her people, and perhaps Arbesa has learnt the odd thing from him. Although they have never said it, they both know how their future together will be. After many years, hopefully very many

years, Belmin and Tamer will be called to the gods, and then they will unite their two tribes and make a new and more powerful one, one which is not ruled by a man of the sword, but by a man of wisdom. It will be a tribe of prosperous farmers and artisans, not of warriors and pillagers.

But this is a long way in the future.

Arbesa steers her pony closer to Timucin's horse and points to the riders approaching.

"Your father is not coming to welcome us?"

"He is the khan and a very busy man," answers Timucin with a touch of mockery, "and we are only children."

"Yes, and your mother will probably tear his head off if he doesn't bring you home as quickly as possible. I certainly would, if I had not seen my only son for so long."

"Yes, well," sighs Timucin, "my mother is an obedient woman and knows to respect her husband."

"Then maybe you should marry her," says Arbesa with a straight face. Timucin is about to reply with a jokey answer, but now he sees the riders come closer and recognizes Chuzir. He shouts out his name and dashes off towards him. The two dogs follow him, barking excitedly. Arbesa falls back, although Timucin knows that she could ride just as fast if she wanted. The three riders also increase their speed, and Chuzir waves at Timucin, who sees that his brother in oath has his bow on the saddle and the arrow in his quiver - just their arrow. His two companions hold their horses back as they draw nearer, so that only Timucin and Chuzir are approaching one another, like two knights dueling. Indeed it seems that neither wants to be the one to stop, and it is only at the last minute that both of them tear their horses out of the gallop and pass by each other closely enough for Timucin's left knee to touch Chuzir's. He yanks so hard at the bridle that the horse neighs angrily and stands on its hind legs, turning round instantly. Chuzir does exactly the same.

They approach each other like two warriors, but embrace as friends, bending in their saddles. Timucin almost falls from his, due to the force of Chuzir's embrace. His two dogs run around yapping and growling, but seem to have understood that this was not meant to be a fight and wag their tails. For a while, the two friends just laugh happily, pat each other on the shoulder, or prod and poke one another until Timucin notices that their friendly exchange of blows threatens to become less friendly, and stops.

"And so this is how you greet your future khan?" he asks, laughing.

"No, this is how I greet an old friend! An old friend who can still ride a horse as well as ever!"

"I let you off lightly," replies Timucin. "It wouldn't have been fair to put you to shame after we haven't seen each other for so long!"

Chuzir's horse starts to get restless and he has to calm it back down. Timucin uses the time to have a good look at his old friend. He has not been away for a full year, and yet his friend seems to have grown up a lot. His shoulders have got broader, he is quite a bit taller and he is also far more muscular. Then he sees that he too must look different to Chuzir; even he himself has noticed changes in recent months. He too has grown - a lot more than Chuzir - and his shoulders too are broader. He is far better built than he was, and his voice has become a lot deeper. That is almost certainly due to the way he has been living. Belmin's tribe is not just peaceful, but very wealthy. They eat well every day, their yurts are never cold, and he has learnt to eat other things than lamb and mutton that he would never have tried before - even if he was reluctant at first. And once he got used to them, these new foodstuffs not only tasted good, but did him good, too.

That is only one reason behind the change, though, another being Arbesa, in whose presence he really comes into his own. The third, and perhaps most important thing, is something that he cannot put his finger on, something that cannot be described. It is the peaceful life of the Voshon, a life free of fear and fighting and war and blood. It soothes his soul, and affects his body in a good way.

In just a few days, you will be a married man, a silent voice says, teasing him, but don't overdo it. Enjoy the time that you are still a boy. Later, you will wish you still were!

He is about to turn in his saddle and give Arbesa a look, he is used to her little speeches, but he has asked her to leave off a little for the first few months. It has taken him some time to realise that her apparently rude way of talking to him is her manner of showing her affection, and he knows that his friends and people in the tribe will not understand this straight away. He suddenly realizes that the voice is Sarantuya's, though. Recently, the dragon has started talking to him more often during daylight hours as well as in his dreams. And her voice seems to be getting more and more similar to Arbesa's. Well, it is becoming as sarcastic in any case.

Behind him, he hears a high-pitched and mildly scornful laugh and, as Chuzir gets his horse back under control and looks up, he is looking directly at Arbesa's face. Unlike for her first visit, Arbesa has not worn a veil, and Timucin is visibly amused by the effect Arbesa's face has on Chuzir. He is looking at somebody he has last seen as a girl, and who is now a woman.

"Don't believe a word this silly boy says," jokes Arbesa, "my father found

the most peaceful horse in the whole tribe; otherwise, he probably wouldn't have made it here!"

So Arbesa is clearly not going to play the obedient wife, not even on her first day. Timucin sighs silently to himself and hears a silent laugh behind his forehead.

Chuzir laughs and, for a moment, Timucin has the impression that a shadow has come over his face. It disappears again very quickly and he is not sure it really was there.

"Arbesa," replies Chuzir, "I am pleased to see you again."

Arbesa replies pleasantly and then she and Chuzir exchange polite greetings. Arbesa starts to tease him too just like she does Timucin, who uses this time to size up the rest of the group. He is overjoyed to see his arrow in Chuzir's quiver; perhaps Chuzir took it with him deliberately, and Timucin is angry at himself for not having thought of taking his oath-arrow, too. Yet Chuzir is bound to understand this. In any case, if the look in his eyes is anything to go by, he is too happy to see Timucin to think about little details like that.

He tears his gaze away from Chuzir and looks at the other two riders, who have stayed back at a respectful distance. He is surprised to see that one of them is Ilhan, and is not sure whether this is a good or a bad thing. In contrast to Chuzir, he does not seem to have changed at all and still looks how Timucin remembers him: a thin, tall fellow with a mean face and malicious eyes. The only difference, however, is that he is looking at Timucin with respect; no trace of friendliness at all, but respect nonetheless. The other rider with him was also at the riverbank that day, and he is not looking at Timucin at all, but is staring wide-eyed at his two huge dogs. They are weaving in and out of the horses' legs, wagging their tails when they look up at Timucin, Arbesa and Chuzir and growling and baring their tremendous teeth when they look at Ilhan and the other boy. Timucin briefly grins, but does not think any further about what he might do; he will have plenty of time to pay them back for what they did. For the moment, there are more important things to do. And do you really need to pay them back? adds Sarantuya silently.

No, not really.

Timucin decides that Chuzir has spent enough time suffering his future wife's cheerful teasing - for now, at least - and pushes his horse in between their steeds, pretending to be strict with his friend.

"If I did not know better," he growls, "I should think you were courting my future wife! But you would never do a thing like that, would you?"

"Never!" says Chuzir, making an injured face and adding with a loud whisper: "Well, not when you are around!"

Arbesa - and Sarantuya too - find this funny and laugh; Chuzir too starts to laugh out loud, and Timucin pretends to be even stricter and turns to the two riders.

"Accompany my bride to the village. I have some business to take care of with this utter rogue here!" He follows this little joke with a fully overdone commanding gesture. Chuzir grins at him, but the other two immediately start off on their horses and try to flank Arbesa's pony. Ilhan makes an almost ridiculously low bow.

"As you wish, my Khan."

Timucin frowns. They must have said that to make fun of him. Yet they are frightfully respectful about it; in fact, they seem almost afraid of him. The second boy still will not look at him. Something is not right here.

He remains silent, however, until Arbesa and her bodyguards - all four of them - have started for the village and are a good distance away. Then he turns in his saddle to Chuzir and, with a puzzled expression, asks him something.

"What did you do to them to make them so friendly to me all of a sudden?"

Chuzir does not answer. The elation of the morning melts away with the first rays of the sun. Timucin repeats the question, now very seriously.

"What is going on here, Chuzir. Why is he calling me... khan?"

Chuzir avoids his gaze, lets three, maybe four heartbeats go by that seem like an eternity, and then speaks.

"Because you are khan, Timucin."

"What do you mean?" Timucin's voice sounds more frightened than he actually is; he does not really understand what Chuzir's answer means. Or maybe he does not want to understand it. His thoughts are suddenly more tense than ever, and the tension is not coming from him. Something else is inside him, listening, terrified, and scared of what is to come.

"Where is my father?" asks Timucin once he realizes that Chuzir will not answer of his own accord. His brother in oath is still avoiding his gaze.

"He is not here," Chuzir says then.

"Not here?!" Timucin sits up in his saddle, straight as an arrow. "What do you mean? He rode out before us just ten days ago."

"I know," interrupts Chuzir, turning slowly in his saddle to face his brother in oath. Timucin can see how difficult this is for him.

"He did not arrive, Timucin. I'm sorry."

"Not arrived? What's that supposed to mean? Do not talk to me in riddles, Chuzir! What happened?"

"The Tatars," answers Chuzir. An icy hand takes hold of Timucin's heart and seems to crush it, slowly but mercilessly. He tries to say something, but

cannot speak a word. He is horrified.

"The Tatars?" he whispers back, after a while. "But... why? I mean... how?" Chuzir holds his gaze, but it costs him strength.

His voice trembles as he talks.

"We don't know exactly how. He has been taken prisoner; that is all they have told us."

"But he is alive?" asks Timucin.

Chuzir hesitates too long for his answer to sound as convincing as Timucin would like.

"Probably," he says after some time. He tries a laugh.

"You know what cowards they are; they are hoping that we will pay a great ransom, and as long as they think that we will give them gold and livestock, they will not touch him."

Timucin stares at him. A feeling of strange, crippling pain starts to spread inside him. His father? Prisoner? That is impossible! And it is not... right, either! Suddenly, it is as if he is waking up from a dream, a dream that has been long and sweet, a dream in which the world was peaceful. It is too beautiful to be true, and his awakening is all the more painful.

"Why did you not tell me? You should have sent a messenger!"

"We only heard yesterday," answers Chuzir, not defensively, but quietly and sympathetic.

"The elders came together and sent a messenger to the Tatars to ask about their conditions. He has not yet returned - but this is no reason to worry", he adds hastily, almost frightened. "It is a long way to travel. He will be here at sundown at the very earliest."

Timucin closes his eyes. The feeling of having left a beautiful dream for an equally horrible nightmare is still there. He is filled with cold horror, and with something else that he recoils from, something that he does not want to recognise. Something is stirring in his thoughts, something big and powerful, whispering to him in an inaudible and comforting voice. Yet he does not want to hear the words that are being spoken. He tries to think of his father, but this makes him shiver. They spoke to each other just a few days ago, yet the picture in his mind is of Tamer's face as it appeared to him that morning on the riverbank, his face as he watched his only son being saved by a girl.

Don't do it, little Khan, whispers the voice behind his forehead, don't let it happen.

Timucin ignores the voice. He opens his eyes and sits bolt upright in his saddle; his fingers grip the bridle so hard that it hurts.

"We ride."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Khan

It has grown very quiet in the great yurt. The air is stuffy from all the people and the fire, and Timucin does not know whether it is his head or his throat that hurts more. Something invisible seems to be in the tent, too. It is something without a body, something that crackles and hovers between them. It turns the silence between their words into something acrimonious and makes the small hairs on the back of the men's hands and necks stand on end. Timucin closes his eyes and refuses to understand the excited words directed at him by one of the men. Ilhan's father, who else?

He is tired like he has never been tired before. It is as if he is carrying an invisible heavy burden on his shoulders, and his shoulders no longer feel as broad and strong as he thought they had become just a few hours back. His mouth is dry from speaking for too long and too loudly. His thoughts have been replaced by a chaotic emptiness behind his forehead that not even Sarantuya's words can escape. Her whispering is different, almost unpleasant. Without realizing that he is doing it, his hand is feeling around for something to hold onto. He feels lost.

A thinner, cooler hand that is somehow filled with wonderful warmth takes his and holds it. As he opens his eyes, he is looking at Arbesa's beautiful face. It looks very serious, yet in the depth of her eyes, those eyes into which he likes to dive, he can see a look of sorrow and endless empathy. It is not necessary for Arbesa to say anything to him, or even to smile at him. He can just feel the strength that she is trying to give him, and is very thankful for it.

"We must decide now, Khan!"

Timucin turns to Ilhan's father with a tired movement and only notices as he is doing so that Ilhan's father is not saying these words for the first time, and that he has said them louder and more strongly each time. He also notices that the confusion of shouts, words and nervous movements is slowly dying down. He becomes uncomfortably aware that at least a dozen pairs of eyes are staring at him and listening to every word he says. The two dogs, who have been sitting still as two statues hewn of black basalt at his sides, listening and looking alertly, have begun to whimper. He gestures with his left hand and they return to silence. Two or three of the men who have perhaps come too close retire respectfully, their eyes filled with fear.

He does not want this. He has returned from the happiest time of his life to date to celebrate the happiest day, not to hold a war council, and certainly not to

get involved in this useless and dangerous struggle for power.

Yet it is precisely this, which he must do, he realizes sadly. Ilhan's father has never been a friend of his father's, and does not like Timucin either. In fact, Timucin has always seen Ilhan's father as one of those who is most likely to challenge his father for his position as khan.

Do not let him provoke you, little Khan, whispers a voice in his thoughts. Sarantuya has not said much since he entered the camp and began this council, which has now been going on all day and will certainly continue into the night, but Timucin has felt her presence the whole time. She has listened attentively to every word that has been said - especially to the words, he has said.

It is as if he is afraid of what is to come, he is worried about what will happen. He does not know what it is, but it frightens him. I know, he thinks silently. Arbesa looks at him briefly, a look that no one else notices, but which lets him know that his conversation with himself in his head has not escaped her notice. Perhaps she has been listening. More probably, she too has been speaking with her own dragon. He speaks, loudly.

"We must all of us keep a cool head. If we react too hastily, we may further endanger Tamer's life, rather than save it."

The tall, thin warrior pulls a scornful face and grunts, which would have been enough to cost him his head if Tamer were in Timucin's place. And in a way, it is as if he is in Timucin's place, despite the hours he has spent now being told by many of the warriors that he is the de facto khan, that this is de facto his yurt, that these are his warriors who have sworn loyalty to the khan, even if he does not want to be it. It is a grotesque situation. Yes, it is true that he has returned in order to move into this yurt, one day, to take his father's carved throne, one day, to become khan - one day. But not now. And not like this.

The tense silence holds and, despite the fact that they have now had the same conversation perhaps a dozen times, Timucin starts to feel a change. The day is drawing to its close, and everyone here is exhausted. More than this, the men are ready to hear a decision. He asks himself how many of them would openly rally to an opponent, should one come forward to dispute his decision. Not many, whispers Sarantuya behind his forehead, because most of them are loyal to you. But you must make the right decision nonetheless.

That has never happened before. Timucin cannot remember Sarantuya ever having given him such a direct piece of advice before, let alone telling him, what other people are thinking. She must be very worried.

He is too. If he could only know, which decision is the right one. Yet it will become clear in just a few moments.

"Timucin, you..." Ilhan's father stops himself mid-flow as he realizes that he

has chosen the wrong tone of voice and that several of the men are looking at him darkly, almost threateningly. He strokes his chin with the back of his hand nervously and then continues, in a changed tone, more respectful and yet non the less defiant.

"My Khan, I do not wish to seem disrespectful, but do let me speak openly."

"Go ahead," says Timucin.

Ilhan's father remains silent for far longer than everyone expects; Timucin can see that he is considering every word carefully.

"I do not wish to offend you, Khan..."

"Timucin," interrupts Timucin, "you are welcome to keep calling me Timucin."

Is this the wrong decision? A flicker of triumph surges into the man's eyes.

"Timucin," nods the warrior, "you know your father better than anyone here, so I do not need to tell you how he would have reacted if you had been taken and he were standing here."

Timucin tries not to, but he can see his father's face again, the sorrow and contempt as he sees his son being beaten on the riverbank.

"Well, how would he have reacted?" asks Arbesa.

The rage that surges into the eyes of the warrior cannot escape notice, yet Timucin is not able to say if this is due to what Arbesa has said, or just due to the fact that she has dared to enter the fray. Apart from her, there are only men in the yurt, and women are not allowed in the war council. Yet Arbesa followed him into the tent as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and he only now realizes that this must have felt like a slap in the face to many men like Ilhan's father. Yet it is too late to do anything about this now.

"Be quiet, child!" hisses the warrior. "When men are talking, women are..."

"Arbesa," interrupts Timucin, not loudly but sharply, "is my bride and will soon be your ruler. You shall speak to her in a more respectful tone!" The dogs growl in agreement and bare their teeth. Timucin does not hold them back this time.

The man stares at him, the smouldering rage in his eyes burning brighter, and Timucin sees that it is probably nothing more than the presence of his huge fighting dogs that is keeping Ilhan's father from acting on his impulses. What if, thinks Timucin angrily, I were to just let them loose and watch them do their job, which is to protect me and to tear my enemies to shreds?

At this moment, however, Chuzir stands on the other side next to Arbesa and lets his hand fall loudly onto the handle of his sword, hanging in his belt. It is just a gesture, nothing more, yet it suffices to fill Timucin's heart with warmth and strength.

"Our khan," answers Ilhan's father in a deliberate and carefully respectful tone, "would have done what any true khan would do. He would have called his men to arms and let these cowards have the answer they deserve."

"And what would be this answer?" asks Timucin.

"We must go and free our khan!"

"Yet did you not yourself just call Timucin 'khan'?" asks Arbessa. Timucin does not say anything, but he sighs inside. She may be right, but she is walking on thin ice. "Who is your new khan, the man to whom you owe allegiance..."

"As long as Timucin's father is not here, yes," answers the warrior, "and I shall obey him." He then turns to Timucin.

"We are talking about the life of your father here, my Khan. And the honour of our tribe. Tamer will not be happy if he returns to find that we have behaved as cowards."

The men in the yurt murmur in agreement, and Timucin can almost feel the change in what they now expect him to decide. Whether he is a boy or not, Timucin has just been insulted by Ilhan's father, and he cannot accept that.

"It is no sign of cowardice to avoid a fight that one cannot win," he says, quoting his father. "The Tatars are great in number and they will know that we are coming." He raises his hand to stop Ilhan's father contradicting him, and continues in a deliberately commanding tone.

"We all know how weak the Tatars are - they are no match for us and we could win against them. Yet they would kill my father. Is that what you want?"

Two or three of the men make frightened noises, and Timucin's opponent drops his hand to his sword, and then relaxes it. He speaks respectfully despite the fury inside him.

"No, of course not, my Khan," he whispers. "So what do you wish to do?"

"I have decided," answers Timucin loudly and in a clear voice so that everyone may hear him, "that we shall wait until the messenger returns whom you sent to the Tatars. We shall hear their conditions. Should they demand a ransom, then we shall pay it if we are able."

"And if we are not?" asks the warrior.

"Then I shall go to them myself and negotiate his release personally," replies Timucin. Not only Ilhan's father, but also Chuzir and many other warriors look at him, astonished and almost incredulous; only the warmth in Arbessa's eyes seems to grow.

"Should I not return," he answers after a short, pregnant pause, "then you will have to decide what to do."

"My Khan," shouts one of the men, his voice sounding more disbelieving than angry, "that will not help your father!"

"This is the coward's way!" adds another.

"We are warriors, not wenches who can be traded like pawns!"

There is a brief moment when it looks as if the mood may turn. Timucin can almost feel people rallying to Ilhan's father, and he can almost see his father's disapproving look. His father has not only seen his son beaten, but now how he is losing his tribe. This has never happened for as long as there have been khans.

"Silence!" he shouts. Is he tricking himself, or can he hear the roar of huge, invisible wings throwing their shadow over the men?

"I know what you are thinking; I too feel it. Yet there is no honour in spilling innocent blood when there is another path to take. I am no more a coward than any of you, and if there is no other choice, of course we shall take our weapons and free Tamer. Yet we shall try the way of the word, before we take that of the sword. I have decided so, and you shall obey me!"

The invisible wings spread further; something is stirring in him, the power of the dragon that is part of him. It is the legacy of his father, which he now understands for the first time not to be the strength in his sword-arm nor the accuracy of his bow, but something different and far more important.

Once again, there is an unpleasant silence. Everyone stares at him, most of them disbelieving, astonished or angry, a few of them perhaps in agreement. Then Ilhan's father speaks quietly, disdainfully, and looking at Arbessa out of the corner of his eyes.

"Now we are ruled by women and children."

Timucin slaps him in the face.

It is absurd. The warrior is more than a head taller than him and ten times as strong, and a part of him knows that this is just the moment his opponent has been waiting for. Several men suck their teeth and others lower their hands to their swords and daggers. Ilhan's father takes a step back and begins to draw his sword. Suddenly, a big black form growls, leaps and sinks its teeth into his arm.

The man screams, roaring as he falls back, and tries to use his other arm to hit the dog, but it is no use, as the second dog has taken his other hand. Deep in Timucin, the dragon stirs, stretches its claws and, for a moment, Timucin is sure that the warrior can see her. He is sure that he can see into her eyes and can see something that shakes him to the depth of his soul and fills his heart with fear, a fear so dark that it makes him forget the black beasts biting at his arms. Time seems to become slower as Timucin sees in fantastic clarity how one of the dogs lets his arm drop and goes for his neck.

He wants the dog to bite; for a moment, for a short terrible moment, he wants it to bite, wants nothing more than to see his fighting dogs tear this man to

pieces, this man who has dared to challenge him, the khan, the ruler of this tribe; this man who has dared to insult him and his bride. He can see his father again, the expression in his eyes as he watched his son's most shameful moment, and perhaps this is what he owes his father, what his father expects of him. Perhaps he should spill the blood of his enemy, let the entire tribe see his life be taken, see that the rule of the stronger is still law. It is in him, this power that is almost the power of a dragon, an ancient power that seeks blood and triumph and knows no mercy. This is what Sarantuya means when she has talked about the paths he can take. He does not even have to do anything: he must only wait one more heartbeat and the fangs of his dogs will do it for him - he will be khan.

"No!" he shouts. "Heel!"

The dog's teeth close on the man with a noise that sounds like a bear- trap snapping shut. Yet it is not his throat that the dog bites, but a patch of skin just under it. The second dog lets go of the man's bleeding arm and returns to Timucin.

"No," says Timucin, now more quietly, almost to himself. "No, that is not our path."

Once again, it is as if time has slowed. Countless eyes are staring at him. Many of the men are astounded, shocked, completely helpless. Each one is waiting for him to draw his sword and finish it himself. Instead, Timucin does something that surprises himself more than anyone else. He stops the tempting, dark whispering inside himself, drops his hand from his sword, and goes to the man to help him up.

Ilhan's father looks at him, confused and scared, yet he takes his hand and stands up, swaying on his feet. His eyes no longer burn with triumph and fury, but are a sea of uncertainty. He stands there for a moment, looking down at Timucin, before picking up his sword. He returns it to his sheath, tired. He sinks his head and speaks with real respect.

"Yes, my Khan, I shall obey you."

And one day, you will understand me, too, adds Timucin in his thoughts. He tries to smile at the man in his eyes, but the warrior avoids his gaze; he seems shocked. Perhaps he understands before Timucin that it is this moment that has made the boy into the khan, whether his father returns or not.

"You may go now!" he says to everyone loudly after a pause. "Keep watch for the messenger and tell me the instant he arrives."

It has been a long day and we all need peace and rest." The sound of huge beating wings and sharp claws accompanies his every word, but he can feel the tension dropping at the same time. One after another, the men turn and go. Finally, Ilhan's father is almost alone with them. He looks at Timucin, then at

Arbesa, then again at Timucin and goes, leaving the couple to themselves. The dogs are at Timucin's side.

Only Chuzir is left. He looks at Timucin in a way that makes him shiver.

"Thank you," says Timucin.

"What for," asks Chuzir. The sound of his voice frightens Timucin even more than the look in his eyes.

"For being on my side," he answers. "I do not know what would have happened without you."

"You are my brother in oath," replies Chuzir.

This is not the answer that Timucin wants to hear, but he also feels how pointless it would be to say another word. He nods silently, and Chuzir understands that he now wishes to be alone with Arbesa. He turns away obediently, but stops after a few paces and turns to them.

"Was he right?"

"About what?"

"That you have been too long with the other tribe," says Chuzir. These words hurt Timucin deeply, but he does not show it. Instead, he shakes his head and smiles as if Chuzir has said something silly, but forgivable.

"No," he replies. Nothing more. Chuzir seems even more disappointed, but turns and leaves.

"That was incredibly brave of you," says Arbesa.

"Was it? Or is he right?" Arbesa lays her hand softly on his shoulder.

"One day, he will understand you. He is your brother in oath and, more importantly, he is your friend. Give him time." Timucin is almost ashamed and is just able to stop himself from pushing away her hand.

"I hope I am wrong, but I feel like I have destroyed what makes my people special." Arbesa laughs strangely at this.

"You have only destroyed what makes them bad. They will understand you. You will become a great khan, who rules not by the sword, but by wisdom."

Yet is this really wisdom? Timucin takes a few steps back from her and Arbesa lets her hand drop. She is disappointed, yet her eyes still smile at him.

"You need time, too," she says.

"Your people are known for their peaceful nature," he answers, "which I admire and envy, but my people are not like this, not like yours."

"Yet we too were once like you," replies Arbesa, "until the dragons showed us the right way. Have you never asked yourselves how we were able to live in peace with our neighbours? Why your father and mine are friends, despite the fact that Tamer has attacked so many other tribes and robbed them of their women, their animals and their treasure?" As he tries to answer, she talks further.

"I know what you want to say: there is no honour in attacking a tribe of cowards," she says, quoting him in scornful tone, "but we are no more cowards than you. That is what you have felt, Timucin; it is the power of the dragons that protects us. You have just learned something very important, my love, and I am happy for you."

"What have I learned?" asks Timucin. Arbesa does not answer, but the silent voice of Sarantuya answers him for her. If you had done what the men wanted and drawn your sword, you would have lost me.

Yet you won the fight for me, not I, answers Timucin silently. He did not just imagine the dragon's powerful force in his heart; he really has her power, her invincibility, just as much as anyone else here, including Ilhan's father. Sarantuya bent the will of the men, not him.

That is not true, answers the dragon. Her voice sounds as if she is slightly amused, but it is warm and proud, too. It was your power that they felt. You have always had it. I only showed you how you can best use it, and I am proud of you, my Khan.

- THE END -

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