

ASCENT: THE RISE OF CHINGGIS KHAN
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HEAVEN'S  FAVORITE

BY TOM SHANLEY

Ascent



The Rise of Chinggis Khan

A Novel

by

Tom Shanley

Heaven's Favorite, Book One

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To Nancy Jean, my wife, companion and greatest supporter.

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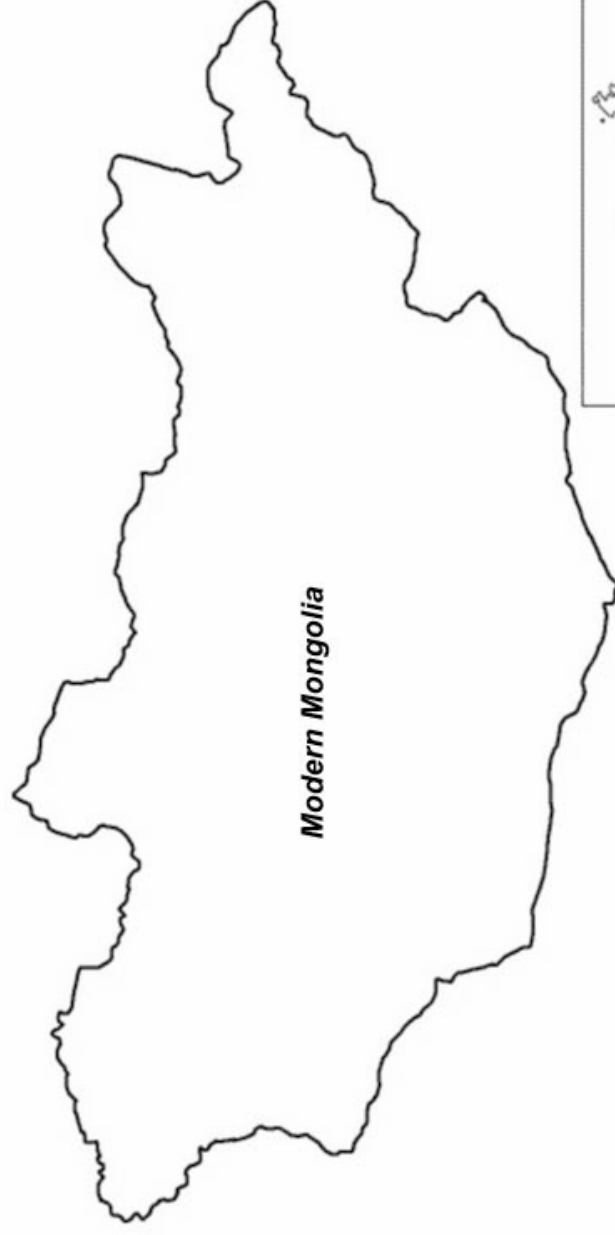
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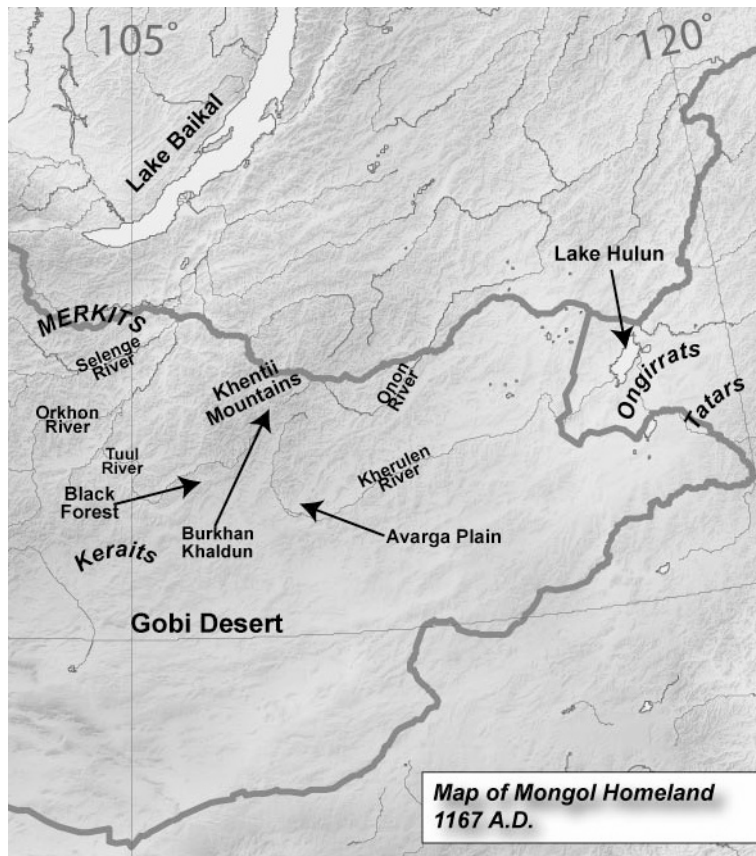
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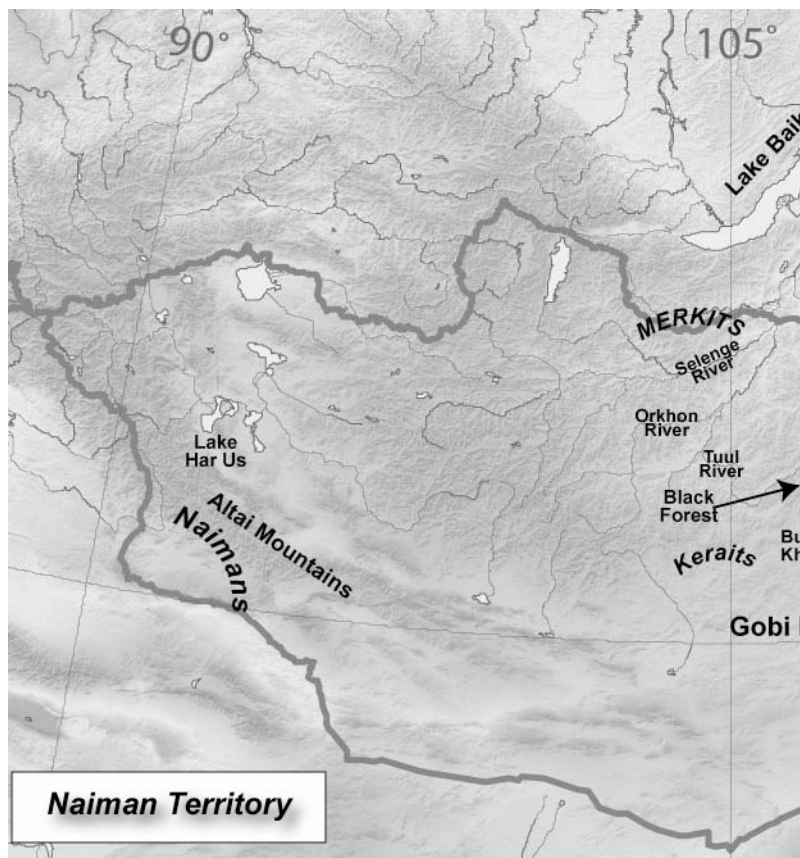
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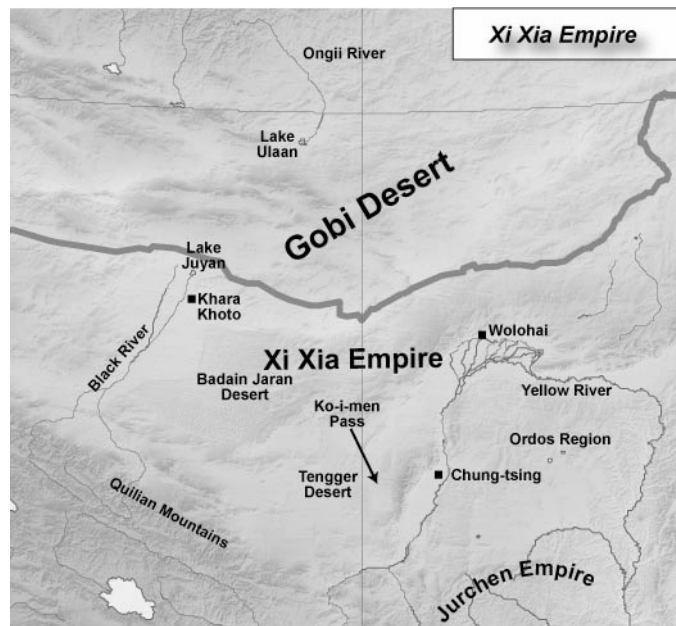


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1

Present Day, Northern Mongolia

Wolves had attacked the herd earlier in the day, downing a foal and sparking the remainder of the herd into chaotic flight across the steppe. As the day drew to a close, Lkhagvaa had yet to locate the last of the strays. Although tired and knowing that the wolves would have to be dealt with the following day, he decided to check the valley that lay below before returning home. Letting his horse carefully pick its own way down to the valley floor, he continued on to the banks of the stream that coursed through it. Detecting the fresh imprint of horse hooves in its muddy bank, he turned upstream and followed them towards the stream's source. The walls of the valley drew gradually closer together as he progressed until he found himself in a steep-walled canyon carved from the bones of the earth by the persistent flow of water over the passage of time.

As the sun settled behind the hills, an errant beam found its way through a notch and struck the canyon floor before him, kindling a transitory but brilliant spark of light from something embedded in the crumbling stream bank. Dismounting, he walked to the spot and crouched down to study the object revealed by the sun's last light. Only partially exposed, he freed it from the bank and carefully brushed away the dirt that encased it, laying bare what appeared to be a small, tarnished piece of jewelry. Stepping down to the stream, he carefully washed away the remaining dirt to find a small, elegant earring lying in the center of his palm. Placing it carefully on a flat rock adjacent to the stream bed, he went back and searched the area for any additional artifacts, but this lone earring appeared to be the solitary testament to a woman's seemingly small loss at some time in the distant past.

#

1166 A.D.

Chiledu led the way on horseback while his new wife, Hoelun, guided the small wagon carefully through a rock-strewn stream bed swollen by the melting snow. They had broken camp at dawn to resume the journey west towards the homeland of his people, the Merkits. Like all of the steppe tribes, the Merkits

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were nomadic herders and were currently camped on the Selenge River overshadowed by the extinct caldera of Tulga Mountain. It was late May and, although a light snow fell on the travelers, the sun shone from the blue vault of heaven just to the west. Their journey had begun in the homeland of Hoelun's tribe, the Onggirats, far away to the southeast of Lake Buir.

#

A young, seventeen year old Merkit warrior of noble lineage, Chiledu had come to their lands seeking a wife. The Onggirat women were highly prized as brides throughout the tribes, both for their beauty as well as their ancient steppe lineage. He had come bearing gifts to be offered as a bride price and with the promise of continued tribal friendship strengthened by the ties of inter-marriage. As was customary throughout the nomadic tribes, guests were treated as honored visitors and the news and stories they brought to the hearth were eagerly anticipated. It was on one such evening that the first seeds of desire were planted when they had first seen each other on opposite sides of the fire. A princess, she was the fifteen year old daughter of a clan leader. Even in a tribe famed for the fairness of its women, her beauty set her apart. He spent the winter with her family, helping with the hunting and protecting their herds from raiders. Over time, it soon became clear to those around them that the couple favored each other and that Chiledu had proven his worth both as a warrior and a provider. When the first hint of spring touched the land, filled with a mixture of confidence and apprehension he approached her father and requested her hand in marriage. To his surprise and dismay—and the surprise of just about everyone else—the match was refused and, when pressed, her father would offer no reason for his refusal. Instead, he ordered Chiledu to leave their camp never to return. The following morning as the eastern sky was first brushed by the light of the day to come and the angry and heartbroken Chiledu prepared to leave, he was approached by Hoelun's maid as he performed a final check on his horses and supplies.

After a furtive look to make sure she wasn't being observed, she whispered, "Lord, my mistress bids me say that her heart cannot continue beating without you and she pleads that you take her with you."

He was aghast at the suggestion. "Without her father's blessing? He'd disown her and she would be left without family. No. It is too much to ask that she give up her family and friends."

Although the handmaiden secretly agreed with him, she had promised her lady that she would convince him and so, she persisted. "My lady's will is strong and once her mind is made up nothing can move her." Chiledu knew only too well the truth of her words. "She is determined to be your wife. Knowing what you would say, she has already sent another of her servants into the eastern hills with a wagon load of supplies. My lady then left camp last night as soon as everyone had settled down for the night and rode to meet him. Since the

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land of your people lies to the west, she believes they will not think to look in the opposite direction. She requests that you leave camp as soon as possible and start west towards your home. When her father discovers her missing later this morning, he will naturally ride after you, but upon discovering that she isn't with you and that you know nothing of her whereabouts, he will have no recourse but to return to camp."

She then described where he was to meet Hoelun in the hills to the east of her father's camp. She had left him little recourse. He would have to go through with her plan.

#

Before the first light of day, armed with his bow and favorite hawk, Yesugei had ridden from the hunting camp that he shared with his two brothers on the Onon River. As he worked his way along the wooded slopes of the mountain in hopes of flushing game, he thought he spied a flash of movement ahead on the valley floor. Reining in his horse and dismounting, he remained perfectly still and focused his concentration on the area while awaiting additional movement that would allow him to pinpoint the prey. For several minutes, no further movement disturbed the quiet of the morning. Then he saw a horseman cautiously move out of the tree line into the stream bed and stop. He was obviously scanning the surrounding countryside for any sign of menace before finally turning and giving the come-ahead signal to someone still sheltered by the foliage. A small wagon occupied by a lone woman appeared and she slowly began to negotiate it through the turbulent water. Yesugei secured his horse and stealthily worked his way down the hillside while keeping a ridgeline between himself and the subjects of his hunt. Encumbered with the wagon, they could not move quickly. Arriving at the stream, he quietly worked his way towards his quarry until, finally, he could see the wagon as it was about to reenter the forest on the far side of the watercourse. For just a moment, he was afforded a clear view of the woman and, with it, all thoughts of the day's hunt evaporated. A young warrior as yet without a bride, Yesugei decided to take her as his own. A pragmatist, he recognized that, although he was an accomplished warrior in his own right, the other warrior might best him or might out-run him and then return to take his revenge from ambush. To sweeten the odds, he decided to race back to camp and return with his elder and younger brothers. Confronted by the three of them, the lone warrior would not stand a chance.

Yesugei quietly worked his way down the stream, back up to his horse and then walked the horse far enough away so that he would be neither seen nor heard by his quarry. Mounting, he rode swiftly back to camp and explained the situation to his younger brother, Daaritai, and to Nekun, his older brother. Using their intimate knowledge of the area, the three decided on a likely spot for an ambush, quickly saddled their horses and left camp. Yesugei separated from them and took a longer route to set up an ambush ahead of the travelers.

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Daaritai and Nekun would approach from the rear, but would not make themselves known until Yesugei had confronted the quarry.

It was sometime later that he reached the place chosen for the ambush, a point where, for a short way, the valley became a narrow, winding canyon through which the stream flowed. He had approached from the far end of the canyon walking his horse through the stream to avoid leaving any tracks and arriving early so as to provide more than sufficient time for his brothers to take up their position shadowing the traveler's path. They were to signal with a whistling arrow once they were in position. Mounted, he awaited his prey just around a turn.

About twenty minutes later, Yesugei heard the first, faint sounds of the wagon's wheels echoing from the canyon walls and readied himself. As the wagon and its solitary guard rounded the turn, Yesugei waited in the center of the trail. At the same moment in which he saw Yesugei, Chiledu heard the shriek of a whistling arrow and realized he was surrounded. Wheeling his horse, he raced back around the turn to the wagon in order to protect Hoelun. He arrived back at her side and saw the two Tayichiud warriors approaching from the rear as the other warrior appeared in front of them. Even if there were only the three, the odds were against him and the wagon was slow and cumbersome. While he knew they could double-up on his war horse, the added weight would make his mount too slow to outrun the enemy. Although they had not uttered a word to each other, both knew the only viable choice was for Chiledu to attempt to escape alone on horseback. If he attempted to fight his way through the attackers, he would almost certainly lose and die. Either way, they both knew it was her their assailants wanted and, of course, they wanted her alive.

Hoelun, her heart breaking with grief, said, "Take my heart and my memory with you, husband. Fly while there is still a chance and know you are always in my heart."

With that, she tore off her scarf, an earring falling to the ground in the process, and thrust it into his hands. "Keep this and remember my scent!" To the people of the steppe, a person's scent embodied the essence of the soul.

With tears of rage and grief, Chiledu grasped the scarf, gave her a last look, cut his horse across the stream and disappeared into the brush that crowded the far wall of the canyon. Immediately, the three brothers joined in pursuit. He led them on a running chase through the narrow canyon, finally making it to the point where the canyon walls fell back from the stream's course exposing a wider valley. Rather than proceeding down onto the open valley floor, he climbed the heavily wooded wall of the valley to the ridge and disappeared into the adjoining valley as darkness fell. At this point, the brothers decided to break off the chase and return to the wagon.

In the mean time, the sounds of the chase had receded and the silence of the

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canyon was broken only by the sound of her sobs and that of the stream rushing over the rock-strewn canyon floor. Barely controlling her grief and fear, Hoelun unharnessed the horse from the wagon and began riding as fast as she could back the way they had come. She didn't know the country and was certain their attackers did. Nonetheless, she must try and escape.

After losing their quarry and upon arriving back at the site of the ambush, the brothers found that the woman had fled on horseback, but were neither surprised nor greatly alarmed. They knew the direction of her flight, they had detailed knowledge of the surrounding terrain while she did not, and they also knew that the horse was a draft animal rather than a war horse. She didn't know where she was going and her mount would be slow moving and easy to exhaust. A moonless night had fallen, however, and tracking her at night was not an option. After stripping the wagon of any useful items, they made camp and awaited the dawn. A light snow was falling and, as long as the snow did not increase during the night, tracking her at first light would not present a problem.

#

Although Hoelun had driven the cart horse as fast as she dared short of foundering it, she still had not made good time. Perhaps six hours had passed and it was almost completely dark. The horse stood perfectly still, its head hanging nearly to the ground in complete exhaustion. Knowing she would get no further on horseback, after filling her water skin from the stream, she started out on foot, left the stream and the valley floor and climbed the valley wall towards a saddle she hoped would lead to an adjacent valley. The night was moonless, the darkness almost palpable. She proceeded cautiously, feeling her way upward through the trees towards where she estimated the saddle was.

#

At the first light of day, Yesugei and his brothers mounted up and began tracking the woman. The light snow having stopped during the night, her tracks were still clearly visible. After just a few hours of riding, they found the spot where she'd left the horse, still dejectedly standing in the same spot, and her clearly visible tracks led up the hillside towards the saddle. For the most part, the valley walls in the area were crowned by cliffs, making it impossible to climb out. The saddle was the only obvious place where a person might do so and, coincidentally, it led to their camp on the Onon River. Smiling, they followed her.

They came upon her about a mile from the saddle up against the cliff wall formed by the caprock. Disoriented in the dark, she had drifted off course, missed the approach to the saddle, and was currently making her way back towards it. In a state of exhaustion and surrounded by the three men on horseback, she slumped to the ground and lost consciousness.

#

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When she awoke, it took a moment before the reality of recent events flooded in to overwhelm her. Her blood rushed and her vision blurred as she struggled to contain her grief and fear. When her vision cleared, she found herself lying on the floor of a ger, a round steppe hut insulated by felt made from wool. It was a small, transportable ger of the type typically used as temporary shelter on hunting expeditions. As custom dictated, the door faced south, there was a makeshift altar against the far wall, and the fire was located in the center directly below the smoke hole. The area to the right of the door was traditionally set aside for women and servants, while the other half was reserved for males. Hoelun lay on the right side while her kidnappers sat opposite eating their evening meal. With only darkness showing through the smoke hole, she knew it was night.

As they continued talking among themselves, it was obvious that the men had not yet noticed she was awake. Closing her eyes, she feigned unconsciousness so she could listen and perhaps learn something regarding the fate of Chiledu or of their plans for her. For a while, the conversation offered little useful information, but eventually turned to her area of interest.

"This may have started out as a hunting trip, but the spirits have chosen to end it with a wedding! Heaven has smiled on you, Yesugei. We'll break camp at dawn and head back to the ordu," one of them said, referring to the tribe's main camp. "We will have to wake her and see she eats so she'll be strong enough to travel."

Another of the men spoke, "She's a rare beauty, Yesugei, and the escape attempt showed spirit. I didn't think she would make it so far. She was hoping her man would escape and return for her, but he's long gone now. Got to admire his riding, though. I would have bet we'd run him down. He knew he wouldn't have a chance in our territory. I would have made the same choice if it were me. Better to live and fight again than to die needlessly."

Hoelun found herself simultaneously overcome by both despair and elation; despair that her fate appeared sealed, and elation that Chiledu had successfully eluded his pursuers. Unable to contain her boiling emotions, her sob alerted them that she was no longer unconscious.

"Well, my bride has decided to rejoin the living!", said the one called Yesugei as he came over, knelt by her head, and smiled down at her. Glaring, she remained quiet, but all the while the tears coursed silently down her cheeks. She knew with a deep certainty that she could not escape. She was in an unknown land with no aid close at hand. Her only hope, a slim one at best, was that Chiledu would find her and wrest her from these men.

#

Two days journey to the west, Chiledu huddled around a small fire gnawing on the small remaining scrap of jerky, all that remained of his meager supplies. He hadn't slept in two days and had run his horse dangerously close to

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the point of no return. He'd ridden at a more conservative pace this day, stopping as often as he dared to let the horse graze and rest. If a warrior still had a horse, he still had hope. Without a horse, he was as good as dead.

He had considered his options endlessly last night while struggling through the dark forest and had continued to do so throughout the day. As much as he did not want to admit it, he knew he didn't stand a chance of getting Hoelun back on his own and, with his people still so far to the west, there was no chance of help in the foreseeable future. He had lost the woman who had become part of his soul over the past winter. While he was resolved to wreak vengeance on the Tayichiud warriors that had stolen his heart, he knew it would not be soon. He must first return to his people and work out a plan of attack. Despondently, he doused the fire, saddled his mount and wearily began the long journey west.

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2

1166 A.D.

After breaking camp the next morning, the three brothers and their wretched captive made their way back to the ordu. The round, white gers blending into the snowy background, the Tayichiud tribe's main camp was located on the plain where the Onon River flowed past Delugun hill. The tribe consisted of approximately fifteen thousand families, and their herds of horse, sheep, cattle, camels, goats and yak were widely spread over the surrounding hills and plains.

It was only on their arrival that Hoelun discovered that her new husband, Yesugei, was, in fact, the tribe's leader—unlike many other cultures, Mongol tradition did not restrict inheritance to the eldest son. Dismounting, their horses taken by grooms, they retired to his ger trailed by those curious about the exotic woman walking disconsolately, head down, behind Yesugei and his brothers. Alerted to his return by the outlying guards, the clan leaders were already assembled at the entrance to the ger.

Entering through the felt doorway, Yesugei assumed the leader's position directly facing the door as his two brothers and the clan leaders retired to the left side of the fire and Hoelun took her place on the women's side to the right. The walls and floor were covered in richly embroidered tapestries and raised beds lined the east and west walls of the ger. During the day, the beds doubled as seating for guests. A large cauldron of milk slowly simmered over the fire in the process of being rendered into the rich, light butter that was one of the staples of the steppe diet.

Ladling airag, the fermented milk of a mare, from an ornate porcelain urn into a silver bowl, the servants respectfully passed the drink to Yesugei. As the tribe's leader, he performed the blessing. Dipping the finger adjacent to his smallest one into the drink, he flicked an offering to the north, south, east and west and then a final one towards Heaven. After taking a long drink, a servant refilled the cup before passing it to the man seated to his left. This done, he introduced their new mistress to the servants after which he instructed her to supervise the meal preparation. Although hundreds of miles from her own

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home and among strangers, she found herself in familiar territory. No matter the tribe, custom dictated the layout of the ger and, as an aristocrat herself, she was accustomed to managing servants.

While the meal was prepared, Yesugei and his brothers related the story of the hunt to the assembled clan leaders, leaving the story of the woman's acquisition until last. Yesugei finished with, "The Merkit's loss is my gain. The Onggirat princess is now my wife and will bear many fine sons. I have much to thank the spirits for." Looking at her as he said this, he found his throat tightening with emotion as her beauty filled both his eyes and his heart.

#

1167 A.D.

A little over a year had passed and, though Chiledu had not come for her, the gods had granted her another life to replace the one she lost—the child growing within her for the past eight moons had become the focus of her existence.

Although her life soon settled into normal rhythms as the days passed, the losses she had suffered remained her constant companion. Her elopement with Chiledu had separated her from family, friends and all things familiar, but her love for him had more than compensated for her loss. Her subsequent abduction, however, had separated her irrevocably from him as well, leaving behind only loss and fear.

Although they would never be bound by love, she found Yesugei to be a fair husband. He accorded her all of the honor and respect that a wife could hope for. Moreover, it was obvious that he was deeply in love with her. He courted her with exquisite gifts, brought her flowers and generally showed all of the signs of having lost his heart to her. At first, he even let her sleep in her own bed to give her time to become accustomed to her new status.

After several weeks, however, she awakened in the middle of the night with the overwhelming feeling of being watched. Opening her eyes, she saw Yesugei gazing down at her, his form illuminated by the flickering of the fire. When he, in turn, saw the firelight reflected in her eyes, he began to raise the quilt that covered her but found himself stumbling backwards as her scream cut through the stillness of the night.

Clutching the covers to herself, Hoelun fought to regain control after the sudden fright of seeing him looming over her. For his part, Yesugei, equally shaken, surged back to his feet from where he'd fallen and attempted to recover from the fright she had given him.

"Quiet woman! You'll wake the entire camp! I'm your husband, not an evil spirit come to kill you!"

Seeing that he was easily as frightened as she was, Hoelun, without thinking and driven by the adrenalin that had flooded through her, began to laugh at the expression on his face. This proved the wrong thing to do as his injured

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pride quickly transformed his initial fear into a mixture of shame and outrage. His fists clenched and shaking with anger, he stood over her for a brief time before finally returning to his own bed. Realizing that her reaction had placed her in jeopardy, Hoelun remained awake for some time before exhaustion finally won out and sleep once again overtook her.

The next morning, they both went about their morning routine as if nothing had happened, but both knew their relationship had entered new territory. Although they had been living under one roof as husband and wife and he was in love with her, he had yet to consummate the marriage. Even had he not been the tribe's leader, if it became known that he hadn't yet slept with her after all this time, he would be the laughing stock of the tribe. The fact that he was the leader only compounded the problem.

After he had left the ger to attend to the tribe's business, the problem consumed her for the remainder of the day. She knew that she could not keep him away forever. It was a minor miracle that he hadn't forced her on the very first night. As a woman living in a world ruled by men, she would have to be a pragmatist.

That evening, soon after the servants had departed and they had settled down for the night each in their separate beds, she took a deep breath, silently asked Chiledu for forgiveness, rose from her bed and slowly walked over to Yesugei's. Still tense after the previous night's debacle, awake and wrapped in humiliation and anger, he started when she suddenly appeared over him. Seeing that he was awake and staring at her, she slowly undid the sash around her waist and slipped her silk sleeping shift from her shoulders. As it silently fell to the floor, she bent, raised his covers and slipped into bed with him.

#

Three moons after her abduction, Yesugei returned from a successful raid on a neighboring tribe flush with booty that included a captive woman. Roughly the same age as Hoelun, Koagchin became his second wife. This wasn't a surprise to Hoelun as it was common practice for a man, especially a leader, to have more than one wife. It would relieve some of her burdens, as the junior wife would now assume most of the responsibility for supervising the servants. As the senior wife, Hoelun's children would inherit, but she wasn't yet with child.

Each having suffered a similar loss, a natural bond was quickly forged between the two. Knowing nothing she could say could diminish the loss Koagchin had so recently experienced, Hoelun did the only thing she could, holding her while, trembling with loss and fear, she cried. As time passed, Koagchin proved to have a sweet and trusting nature and was easy to get along with. Hoelun welcomed her friendship.

#

Now Hoelun was about to bear her first child. It was not Yesugei's first,

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however, as Koagchin had proven the more fertile of the two, becoming pregnant almost immediately and giving birth to a baby boy, Bekhter, two moons earlier. Although first-born, he would not inherit unless Hoelun, the senior wife, proved barren or bore only daughters.

Not long after she became pregnant, Hoelun drifted into sleep after a most satisfying sexual encounter with her husband. Although she still did not love him, she had accepted her new status and had soon found to her grudging enjoyment that he was an enthusiastic, patient and creative partner in bed. Falling into a deep sleep, she soon found herself in the midst of a most realistic dream. She was reclining on a resplendent dais set on top of a high mountain beneath the endless, deep blue vault of Heaven. With her on the dais stood a man, an emperor, his gaze turned to look down upon an endless sea of people at the foot of the mountain spreading out in all directions to the ends of the earth, all abasing themselves before him. Looking up at him, she instinctively knew that this was her son, the son that would be born from her womb. From where she lay, the brilliant orb of the Sun stood immediately over his head and the sacred mantle of the deep blue sky seemed as a cloak enfolding him in its protection.

When she awoke the following morning, she vividly recollected every detail of the dream. Visited by this same dream on a regular basis, she became convinced it was a message sent by the gods. Her son was to rule the world—not just the constantly warring Mongol tribes, but all the peoples of the world.

#

Yesugei and his warriors had been away in the east for some time conducting a raid. Crushed by the Tatars in the great battle of Lake Buir some five years earlier, the Mongol tribes sought vengeance whenever the opportunity presented itself. Receiving word that a Tatar war party had raided the eastern Mongol territories, Yesugei joined with two other Mongol tribes to launch a surprise attack on the raiders as they returned to their own territory. He was quite sure their counter-attack would succeed. The Tatar forces had been weakened by the loss of life and injuries sustained during their raiding foray and the baggage train carrying the captured booty would slow their return to their own territories. While the enemy could correctly presume that the tribes they had already defeated could not mount a new offensive, tribes like Yesugei's further to the west were fresh and hungry for revenge.

#

In the hour before dawn, Hoelun was awakened by the pressing need to relieve herself, a need experienced with increasing frequency as her pregnancy progressed. Quietly, she arose and left the ger. As she made her way through the snow, her water suddenly broke and, in the surprise of the moment, her bladder also found release. Suddenly finding herself drenched and shivering in the pre-dawn snow, she made her way back to the ger and woke her sister-wife

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Koagchin.

"It is time, sister, and I find myself a sodden mess."

Jumping up and rubbing the sleep from her eyes, Koagchin woke the servants, ordering some of them to quickly change their mistress into warm, dry clothes while she dispatched others to fetch the mid-wife and the shaman.

Three hours later, with a final, brutal push, a baby boy entered the world and, without any urging, loudly declared his displeasure with the change in environment. All present were startled to see a large blood clot clutched in his right fist. No one had seen anything like it before and none could venture a guess as to what it might mean. The shaman studied the child and the object he clutched. Although the child was well-formed with brown hair and eyes and appeared healthy and unmarked by any bad sign, the shaman decided to consult the spirits to be sure. Retiring to the fire, he tossed a sheep's shoulder blade into the coals and called the spirits. After completing his prayer, he carefully extracted the bone from the fire and studied the cracks the heat had produced in order to divine the spirits' message.

Offering thanks, he turned to those gathered around the mother and child. "The spirits tell me that the boy is smiled on by the Eternal Blue Sky. When he grows into a warrior, he will bring vengeance to our enemies and wealth to our people." Expelling a collective sigh, everyone began talking at once, expressing their relief and joy at the tidings. Of them all, only Hoelun had known what the message from the spirit world would be. Her son would rule the world, but she hugged this thought to herself. She hadn't shared it with anyone, not even her husband.

#

Several days after the birth, Yesugei and his victorious warriors returned to the ordu trailed by the captured baggage train. He led three captured Tatar princes whom he would hold for ransom. Alerted to their approach by signal fires ignited by the outlying scouts, the entire tribe turned out in force to welcome them home. Warily dismounting, Yesugei's tired eyes spied Hoelun and the baby and, striding over to her, held out his arms for the child. Handing him to Yesugei, she answered his unspoken question, "You have a healthy boy and the Holy One says the Eternal Blue Sky smiles on him."

He proudly hoisted the boy over his head. "My son! I have a son!" The crowd responded with cheers and congratulations. Later, in the privacy of the ger, Hoelun asked, "Have you decided on a name, husband?"

His eyes narrowing, he thought of the recent battle before replying, "I was very nearly killed by a Tatar prince who fought as if possessed by a powerful spirit. Temujin. His name was Temujin and my son will have the same name."

#

It had been over forty years since the days when the great Kabul Khan had unified the Mongol people, leading them to glory and humbling the mighty

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Jurchen emperor in northern China. Although those days were long gone, the people had not forgotten and still longed for their return. That hope was personified by the khan's descendents and was renewed on the occasion of each new male child's birth. When news that Yesugei, Kabul Khan's grandson, had a new son and heir reached the reindeer people in the north near Lake Baikal, an itinerant blacksmith decided to offer Jelme, his own new-born son, as a life-long servant to the infant princeling. If accepted, he would be assured a good upbringing and a chance to advance himself. Traveling south to the Tayichiud encampment with his wife and son, he presented himself to the young chieftain.

Hoelun had spoken to Yesugei before they entered, expressing her concern for the couple and offering him a graceful way to send them home with their son without insulting their honor. Receiving the blacksmith and his wife in his ger, Yesugei could see the pain in their eyes at the prospect of leaving their new-born son behind when they returned home.

"You honor both my son and myself deeply, my friend, and I gladly accept your generous offer. I would make a suggestion, however. I would prefer that your son know his mother and father and that you are able to enjoy the years of his youth. Take Jelme home with you and send him back to join my son when he has grown into manhood."

As he said this, he could see relief dawning in the blacksmith's eyes and, on the women's side of the fire, the blacksmith's wife bit a trembling lip while tears coursed down her cheeks. Resting her hand on the woman's shoulder, Hoelun smiled warmly at her own husband. She might not love him, but he had her respect.

#

1167 - 1171 A.D.

The next four years were relatively quiet, interrupted only periodically by the inter-tribal feuds and raids so common on the steppe. Hoelun gave birth to two more sons: Khasar was born two years after Temujin, followed by Kachun two years after that. Temujin also gained another step-brother when Belgutei, one year his junior, was born to his father's second wife, Koagchin.

3

1171 A.D.

Southwest of the Mongol tribal areas lay the Kerait empire, a large and powerful kingdom ruled by Kyriakus, the Universal Leader, or Gurkhan. Unlike the shamanist Mongol tribes, the Keraites were Nestorian Christians. The empire's royal family was torn by intrigue and infighting with no love lost between family members. Never a sentimental sort, Kyriakus had played his sons against each other, supposedly to make them strong, but, in reality, to keep each of them weak so none would be strong enough to overthrow him. Not surprisingly, upon his death open warfare erupted among the brothers as each attempted to kill the others and seize power. With the support of two of his uncles, Erke and Jagambu, Kyriakus' son Toghrul succeeded in crushing the others, but just as he was about to mount the throne another of his uncles launched a surprise attack forcing him and his army to retreat.

Withdrawing to the northern border with the Mongol Tayichiud tribe, he sent an emissary to request a meeting with its chieftain, Yesugei. Aware of the Ghurkhan's death as well as the subsequent struggle for power, Yesugei, intrigued by the possibilities, agreed to the meeting. If Toghrul was successful at seizing the reins of power, he would rule a nation substantially larger and more powerful than any of the Mongol tribes. Recognizing the advantages associated with having such a powerful leader as a friend rather than as an enemy, Yesugei rode to the Kerait encampment on the far bank of the Onon River. As he and his men crossed the river on horseback, he could see Toghrul seated on a makeshift throne atop a dais and surrounded by his captains. As he slowly advanced across the river, he took the opportunity to study his potential ally. Like Yesugei, he was twenty years old. Richly arrayed and of medium height and dark complexion, he had a carefully trimmed beard, a flowing mustache and his long hair was bound in a queue. As Yesugei rode ashore in advance of his men, the Kerait pretender stepped down from his dais and strode forward to welcome him. Yesugei dismounted and Toghrul, treating him as an equal, extended his hand in friendship. Accompanied by Toghrul's two uncles, they strode to his tent and made themselves comfortable while a meal was prepared. Drinks were poured

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as Yesugei waited for Toghrul to reveal the reason for the meeting.

Putting aside the customary form of extended Asiatic greetings, Toghrul came right to the point. "I have eliminated my brothers and only my uncle stands in the way. His forces and mine are equally matched and he was only able to prevail by virtue of a surprise attack. With the weight of your forces behind my own, I can eliminate him and take back the throne, but I have to move quickly before he can consolidate his hold on power. If you support me, you may consider me your brother and I promise to support you whenever you may need aid."

Yesugei was surprised at the bluntness of the request and also understood the implied threat. The die had already been cast for Toghrul and he was going to proceed with or without Yesugei's help. If Yesugei withheld his aid and Toghrul ultimately triumphed, the refusal would not be forgotten. Toghrul would have vengeance, sooner or later.

Such discussions were usually lengthy, meandering affairs with the actual purpose not being aired until a substantial amount of small talk and pleasantries were first exchanged. The elimination of the superfluous pleasantries highlighted Toghrul's precarious position but also showed his assertive nature.

Yesugei was not surprised at the actual request itself, however, and had already considered the advantages and disadvantages. If he agreed and they failed, his people would be destroyed by the much larger nation. If, however, the gamble paid off, Toghrul would be in his debt and his power and prestige would be greatly enhanced by an alliance with the Kerait ruler. Like any steppe warrior, Yesugei loved a gamble and, even better, a gamble for high stakes. He had supreme confidence in himself as a leader and in the prowess of his men. Toghrul was watching him intently.

"I can field ten thousand horsemen, but I'll need time to prepare." Toghrul was dismayed on hearing this; time was of the essence. Yesugei's next words, though, proved welcome, indeed. "We can meet you here seven days from today."

Toghrul expelled the breath he had been holding and a slow, pleased smile spread over his face. "Let's drink to brotherhood, friendship and victory. But, before we do, let us seal our kinship with blood."

With that, he unsheathed his knife, swiftly drew it across his palm and held his bloodied hand out to Yesugei. Likewise, Yesugei slit his palm and, clasping hands, they mingled blood.

"We are brothers from this day forward, Yesugei. In me, you have a friend and brother you can depend on. Now, let us share drink and a meal and then set our venture in motion."

With that, the women were summoned to serve the meal while the two leaders toasted each other with the traditional nomadic drink, airag—fermented mare's milk. Afterwards, Toghrul escorted Yesugei back to his horse,

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clasped his hand once again and urged him to waste no time. Yesugei and his escort rode swiftly back to the ordu to begin the preparations.

#

Arriving home, Yesugei immediately dispatched messengers to the outlying areas with the call to war. The horses had to be gathered in from the far-flung pastures and it would take most of the time allotted to prepare the needed foodstuffs and to ensure a sufficient supply of arrows for the battle ahead. Other than that, the tribe's warriors were always in a state of battle readiness. After the conclusion of any battle, one never knew how soon they might be forced to fight again, so their equipment was immediately cleaned and repaired. The steppe was a dangerous place and an attack could come at any time from any of a number of quarters. The days rapidly passed and the preparations were completed five days later.

#

Training in the martial arts, consisting mainly of archery and riding lessons, began at the age of four and Temujin and his half-brother Bekhter were no exception. They had been given their first bows and horses a few moons earlier and, as the chieftain's sons, received their instruction directly from their father.

Two months apart and evenly matched in the physical sense, the two boys had very different temperaments. While Temujin was quiet and serious, Bekhter had already proven himself a troublemaker. Temujin often found himself being punished for transgressions perpetrated by his half-brother and Bekhter frequently goaded and harassed Temujin until a fight erupted between the two.

With the entire camp embroiled in war preparations, the over-excited boys, diminutive warriors with their small bows and wooden swords, dogged Yesugei's heels as he prepared for battle.

After inspecting his forces, Yesugei and his commanders entered his ger for a final strategy meeting, the two boys following along. As the meeting started, Bekhter tried to engage Temujin in a wrestling match while Temujin sat quietly, appearing to listen intently to the battle plans as they were reviewed. Irritated by Bekhter's distracting presence and noting Temujin's quiet attention, Yesugei told Koagchin to take Bekhter outside but permitted Temujin to remain. Sitting on the women's side of the fire, Hoelun had noted her son's attentiveness and saw with satisfaction that her husband did as well.

When the briefing was finished, Yesugei turned to one of his most trusted commanders, Monglik. "We form up at daybreak and move out for the rendezvous." With that, Monglik and the other commanders filed out.

Early the following morning as an opalescent dawn touched the eastern horizon, Yesugei donned his battle gear with the aid of Hoelun and Koagchin. He wore thick, embroidered, felt boots with upturned toes into which his trousers were tucked. Over this he donned a blue, calf-length tunic covered by a long sheepskin deel, or coat, with the wool-side in and belted with a yellow

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sash. The sash was tightly wrapped to provide protection for his kidneys and other vital organs while riding. Finally, they assisted him in putting on his upper body armor. It was made from thick leather that had been soaked in water to make it malleable, attached to a wooden form, boiled to harden it, dried, painted and ornamented by his wives, and finally coated with lacquer to waterproof it. They then belted on his sword and dagger. He would not don his battle helmet until combat began. For now, he wore a fur-lined, round leather hat with ear and neck flaps of fur, encircled with black sable fur denoting his rank. At the center of the hat, a peak was drawn sharply upward and capped with a knot. This was meant to focus his thoughts towards Heaven.

Leaving the ger, he strode to the front ranks of the mounted force and performed a final check of his saddlebags, long and short-range bows, and two quivers, each containing thirty arrows. Satisfied, he returned the bows to their protective cases, mounted and, after a last critical look at the troops, turned and signaled the departure. Each warrior had three spare mounts and carried his own supplies, so they were not encumbered with a baggage train.

As the women, elderly, children and the home guard looked on, the battle force of ten thousand along with their thirty thousand remounts rode for the rendezvous point on the far side of the Onon River.

#

After the army had disappeared into the distance, Hoelun returned to her ger and pensively stared into the fire. Her husband had tied his own fate and that of the tribe to the role of the dice that this alliance represented. If he succeeded, the tribe would prosper, Yesugei's star would be on the ascendant and her son's future would be more secure. If, on the other hand, the spirits ruled against them, they would all be destroyed. Rather than leave it to fate, it would be wiser to beg the intercession of the spirits.

The soaring mountains brought man closer to Heaven. She decided that, with her eldest son, she would go to the God mountain, Burkhan Khaldun, at the headwaters of the Onon, Kherulen, and Tuul Rivers in the Khentii mountains to fast and ask a favor of the gods. The snows from the mountain gave birth to the three major rivers that bestowed life throughout the Mongol lands.

They left the next morning with a small troop of guards, following the Onon River upstream towards its source at the foot of the mountain. As they rode she reminded her son, as she had so many times, that he was destined to rule the world. Although only four years old, his mother had told him this so many times that he knew it to be true. Heaven told her so in her recurring dream and the shaman had confirmed it at his birth.

Only men were permitted to climb the sacred mountain. Women could approach no closer than a ridge—referred to as the Doorway—overlooking the valley that ran up to the foot of the mountain. Just before the crest of the ridge, she ordered the guards to wait for them in camp while she and Temujin

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ascended to the apex to pray for success in battle. The ridge was crowned with a sacred ovoo consisting of a conical tower of rocks and small pieces of wood, as well as offerings made up of personal items such as small statues and carvings. At the ovoo's peak, a center pole was festooned with hundreds of swatches of blue and yellow silk left as offerings to the Eternal Blue Heaven and to the life-giving Sun. As custom dictated, Hoelun and Temujin each picked up three rocks or small pieces of wood from the ground and then walked around the ovoo three times in a clockwise direction, each time tossing a symbolic offering onto the ovoo. With each circumlocution they contemplated the lessons of the past, the challenges of the present and their hopes for the future. This concluded, Hoelun then poured a jar of airag on the ovoo to thank Heaven and earth for the bounty that fed the people.

Mother and son then knelt at the foot of the ovoo and unwound their sashes from their waists and hung them around their necks. Representing the focal point of a person's spirit, the sash's removal acknowledged the individual's powerlessness before the gods. They also removed their hats, placed a hand on their breasts and kowtowed nine times to the Sun and to the sacred mountain. They fasted all that day and night and returned to camp the following morning. The visit to the mountain's doorway made a strong impression on the boy and he would return to the mountain many times during his life to converse with the gods and ask their advice and blessing.

#

Midway through the seventh day, the Tayichiud army arrived at the rendezvous where Toghrul's forces awaited. Leaving his men to set up camp adjacent to the Kerait encampment, Yesugei and his commanders joined Toghrul in his tent for a strategy session. After drinks and food were served, Toghrul immediately got down to business.

"While my uncle has been attempting to consolidate his power base, my agents have been assessing the loyalties of the clans and cultivating dissension among those whose attachment to my uncle are less than solid. While many of the northern and eastern clans remain reluctant to take sides and sit indecisively on the sidelines, the majority of the southern and western clans are with me."

"And what is our part?" Yesugei inquired.

"My uncle almost certainly expects me to make a direct thrust at the capital and has therefore concentrated his troops around its perimeter on the banks of the Tuul River in the Black Forest. I propose to take my army to the far south and then swing west. Along the way, I'll pick up the troops promised by the southern and western clans at pre-arranged locations after which we'll attack from the south on the first day of the new moon. Meanwhile, I want you to take your troops east from here and stage them on the border just north of the capital. Unless you receive a message to the contrary, two days prior to the new moon you move south across the border. My uncle and his advisers will assume

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you're taking advantage of the unstable situation to stage a raid into our territory and will have no choice but to move a goodly portion of his troops against you. Don't confront him, however. When he approaches, appear to flee and engage his force as little as possible. As soon as my scouts report that his troops have been drawn north towards you, we'll attack from the south, west and east. On receiving word of my attack, they will turn back south to reinforce the capital. You follow them at a distance, wait until they have encountered my troops and are engaged in battle and then attack from the rear. We will crush them between us."

As the plan unfolded, Yesugei admired its audacity and the shrewdness of the mind behind it.

"I am betting my people's future that your uncle's days are numbered, but I'm not worried. As gambles go, this seems a good one, my lord. I see a bright future for both of us."

Clasping hands, they smiled resolutely into each other's eyes.

Toghrul stood and, after taking the measure of his own commanders and those of his ally, said, "The game starts tomorrow morning."

In the growing light of the new day, Yesugei's Tayichiud army started its journey east at a leisurely pace, while Toghrul's Kerait force headed south. If all went according to plan, when next they met the battle would already have been won, Toghrul would ascend to the Kerait throne, and Yesugei's star would be in the ascendant.

#

Staying well within the bounds of his own territory, Yesugei moved his army west until they were due north of the Kerait capital; the territory of the Merkits lay to his northwest and the Kerait empire to the south. Once there, they set up camp and settled in to await the arrival of the new moon. The journey Toghrul's army had embarked upon was substantially longer and would necessarily be slowed as he assimilated his allies along the way. The days of forced inactivity passed slowly until the appointed day finally arrived.

Divided into four divisions of twenty-five hundred men, each unit consisting of both heavy and light cavalry, the Tayichiud army advanced into Kerait territory arrayed across a wide front. Preceded by advance scouts, the units were spaced at two mile intervals and were kept in constant communication via messenger. While Yesugei gave strict instructions there was to be no raiding, he made no effort at concealment so as to make it clear to the local population that an enemy force was traveling through Kerait lands. He knew the panicked locals would immediately dispatch messengers to the capital with news of the incursion.

On the first day, they proceeded without incident and set up camp within a ring of outlying scouts to detect any enemy movements. The night passed and they then resumed their slow, southward progress towards the capital, leaving

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the local villages along the way untouched. At mid-morning, the forward scouts reported the rapid approach of a large enemy force.

As planned, Yesugei, appearing to retreat in a northerly direction, led the enemy on a meandering retreat through the Kerait countryside. His men changed mounts on a regular basis while the army remained on the move, never slowing down. This went on until early in the evening when the scouts reported that the enemy had suddenly begun withdrawing southwards. Yesugei laughed aloud when he received the news. The plan was working perfectly.

They pitched camp and settled down to await the next phase. Yesugei dispatched scouts and messengers to track the progress of the enemy towards the capital, but they were under strict instructions to keep a very low profile so the Keraites would believe that his army had continued its flight northwards. In the morning, he resumed moving southward, shadowing the rear of the enemy force.

At mid-day his scouts reported that the enemy was engaged in a major battle just north of the capital and he ordered the attack. His heavy cavalry smashed into the unsuspecting enemy's rear, then pivoted to the sides enabling the light cavalry to gallop to and fro across the enemy lines while pouring rapid arrow fire into the beleaguered ranks. All the while, Toghrul's troops continued savaging them from the front and on both flanks. The enemy's front lines remained unaware of the threat from the rear until Yesugei's heavy cavalry drove a fast-moving wedge formation into their rear, effectively dividing the enemy force. The now fragmented enemy ranks were surrounded and systematically destroyed by the combined forces of Yesugei's Tayichiud and Toghrul's Kerait warriors. By nightfall, the mopping up was all but done and the victorious forces swept into the capital to take control. After having his uncle and his supporters summarily slaughtered, Toghrul, wasting no time, donned the mantle of leadership.

At the victory feast held the next day, Toghrul stood, raised his drink and gave thanks to Yesugei. "We are truly andas, blood brothers, and the might of the Kerait empire is your right arm in time of need, Yesugei. You have but to ask."

Raising his own cup in response, Yesugei replied, "It was my pleasure, my lord and seeing how neatly your plan worked only confirmed that is far better to have you as a friend than an enemy."

Although Toghrul also thanked his uncles Erke and Jagambu for their support in the earlier elimination of his brothers, he still didn't trust them. If they had turned on Toghrul's brothers, they clearly weren't bound by any loyalty to family, but rather were solely motivated by ambition. The day might come when one or the other might turn on him. He would keep his eye on both of them.

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Yesugei and his army left for home the next day laden with the rich rewards—horses, gold, silver and much-coveted Chinese silks—that Toghrul had so generously heaped upon them. Yesugei was well satisfied. The tribe was richer and the alliance with the Keraites would enhance his power within the fractious Mongol power structure.

4

1177 A.D.

Six years had passed uneventfully and in addition to his two half brothers, Bekhter and Belgutei, Temujin, now ten years of age, had a total of four siblings: his younger brothers Khasar, Kachun and Temuge were eight, six and four years of age, respectively, and his sister, Temulun, was one.

Temujin himself had reached the age of ten, the age of betrothal for a Mongol male, and Yesugei decided that his son would marry a woman of Hoelun's tribe, the Onggirat. Since tradition dictated that the boy's father must personally request the bride's hand in marriage, Yesugei was preparing to take his son to the Onggirat territory which lay about four hundred and fifty miles to the southeast on the far side of Lake Buir. Because a larger force could be viewed as a threat, Yesugei and Temujin would be accompanied only by his most trusted commander, Monglik, and ten hand-picked warriors.

Although Hoelun had been separated from her son before, this time would be different. The earlier separations were short, consisting of either hunting trips with his father or other sojourns associated with his training. If Yesugei found a good match for Temujin, he would leave him with the girl's family for an extended period of time during which Temujin would be one of the family, working for them and spending time with the girl. This would allow the family time to determine his worthiness and would also afford the girl time to decide if she was willing to be bound to him for life. The girl was typically a little older than the boy and, as they became more comfortable with each other, would gradually initiate the boy into the pleasures of a sexual relationship. If all went well, the boy would spend between one and two years with her family, after which they would marry and return to his home to set up housekeeping.

After a final wave to his mother, Temujin resolutely turned forward in the saddle and rode beside his father as they traveled over the steppe towards the rising sun. As she watched them diminish into the distance, Hoelun was understandably assaulted with a mixture of pride, worry and sadness.

#

All boys shared the dream of becoming a warrior, of riding to victory and

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coming home bathed in glory. Although he loved to hunt, fish and play as much as any boy, Temujin was atypically serious. Like other boys, he worked hard to perfect his battle skills, but unlike most, he was uncharacteristically interested in the planning that preceded a battle. Battle tactics and strategy fascinated him and he would sit quietly but intently while his father and his commanders discussed battle plans and also, after the battle was over, as they dissected the reasons for its success or failure. Although his father had noted this and always ensured a place at his side during the strategy sessions, the boy's presence irritated some commanders who thought it was no place for a boy. They couldn't fathom what was going on behind his quiet, watchful eyes. This was especially true of Yesugei's two brothers, Daaritai and Nekun, and Temujin could not help but sense their unfriendly feelings towards him.

Throughout his childhood, his mother had told Temujin the story not only of her own abduction, but also that of his step-mother, Koagchin. He saw the grief and anger that always rose to the surface as the story was told and the pain suffered by the two women made a lasting impression on him. Listening to the strategy sessions and the stories the men told when drinking, he inwardly noted that the purpose of many of the raids between the tribes was either to steal women or to avenge the theft of a woman. He also quietly noted that the theft of goods and herds from each other was a constant cause of enmity between the tribes.

When he listened to stories that told of the power of the tribes when they had been unified under the rule of his great-grandfather, Kabul Khan, he couldn't help but compare those days to the current, fractious state of the Mongol world. Although he'd had very little contact with other Mongol tribes in his short life, he learned much from the stories told by the men.

In the old days under Kabul Khan's rule, it seemed to him that the noble families who ruled each tribe assumed responsibility for the welfare of the people. From the stories, it was also obvious that in the old days, the tribes cooperated with each other against outsiders. After the crushing defeat suffered at the hands of the hated Tatars, though, things had changed for the worse.

Temujin kept these observations to himself, but silently vowed that things would be different when he one day assumed the role of chieftain of the Tayichiud tribe.

#

Yesugei, Temujin and their small escort party crossed the Onon River, continuing on southeast until they reached the Kherulen River and then following the river valley east towards Lakes Hulun and Buir. They left the river about seventy-five miles southwest of the southern tip of Lake Hulun and continued southeast around the lower end of Lake Buir. Crossing the marshy lands southeast of the lake, they continued in a southeasterly direction while keeping a wary eye to the north towards the lands of their ancient enemies, the Tatars.

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It wasn't long before Monglik spotted a small group of hunters moving along a game trail. Keeping their hands visible and away from their weapons, Yesugei's party stopped and waited for the hunters to acknowledge them. Their dress identified the hunters as Ongirrat, the tribe they had come to see, and the Ongirrat had friendly relations with the Tayichiud. The hunters slowly approached in a cautious but friendly manner and reined in their horses within speaking distance. Noting their dress and the black sable trim on Yesugei's hat, one of the hunters spoke.

"To what honor do we owe a visit from the Tayichiud chief?"

Gesturing towards Yesugei and Temujin, Monglik replied, "Lord Yesugei seeks a bride for his son Temujin and, recognizing the superiority of Ongirrat women, has come to find one."

Smiling at Monglik's flattery, the spokesman for the hunters looked at his companions and then back at Yesugei.

"Then you have come to the right place, lord. The hunting camp of our chief, Dai the Wise, is just over the rise and you are, of course, welcome to share our hearth."

With that, he wheeled his horse about and led Yesugei's troop to the camp. As they approached, a pack of snarling guard dogs rushed towards them, their ruffs stiff with menace. Yesugei's group halted while the hunters lashed at the dogs and drove them back to camp. Only then did they approach and rein in their horses.

As grooms took their mounts away, they were led to the ger of the clan leader, Dai, and waited outside while one of the hunters entered to announce their arrival. Temujin attempted to conceal his excitement and nervousness as he studied the Onggirat camp. There were about a hundred gers and the attendant herds of horse, cattle, goats and sheep could be seen spread out across the surrounding countryside. The alarm raised by the dogs had attracted all of the inhabitants within earshot and they were openly studied as they waited to see Dai. Temujin could see the resemblance the women bore to his mother and he found them beautiful like her. Knowing that his future bride would likely be an Onggirat and might even be a girl from this very clan, he tried to appear relaxed as he strove to mask his anxiety.

It was only a few minutes later that Dai stepped through the open door of his ger and approached Yesugei. Advanced in years, he nevertheless moved with grace, the glint in his eyes reflecting a sharp intelligence. While he had not met Yesugei in person before, he knew much about the leaders of all of the tribes and found that he did not approve of this one. He knew Yesugei had abducted his Onggirat bride, Hoelun, years ago rather than approaching the Onggirat in an honorable manner. Although stealing wives was a widely accepted practice these days, he himself considered it nothing short of banditry. He kept his thoughts to himself, however.

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"What brings you to our village, Lord Yesugei?"

"My son is of age and I seek a bride for him, Lord Dai. My wife is Onggirat and has proven a worthy companion to me. I would have the same for my son. While on our way to the Onggirat ordu, we happened upon some of your hunters and they were good enough to offer hospitality."

Dai kept his ill feelings hidden. "You, your son and your men are welcome to share our homes and hearth. You honor us with your company."

As Monglik and the Tayichiud escort were led away for refreshment, Dai held open the door for Yesugei and Temujin.

#

Dai's eleven year old daughter Borte, his wife and his sixteen year old son Alchi stood as the guests entered. Borte's eyes glanced off Yesugei and came to rest on the boy who, still blinded after coming in from the sun, had not yet noticed her. About her own age with brown hair and eyes to match her own, he noticed her as his eyes became acclimated to the light, giving her a tentative smile and seeing it returned. Slightly taller than him, she had intelligent eyes set in an arresting face framed by high cheekbones.

Entering last, Dai introduced his family and invited the guests to pay their respects at the family altar as the servants poured airag for them to sprinkle on the earth and in the air as an offering to the spirits of earth and sky. Their spiritual obligations completed, Dai invited them to be seated on the men's side of the fire and told his wife the purpose of their visit as she supervised the servants in preparing a meal and refreshments.

While awaiting the meal, the men drank and exchanged news regarding the tribes and kingdoms that surrounded them. When the meal was served, Borte and her mother joined them and the talk turned away from politics. Try as he might, Temujin could not stop staring at the girl. Never had he seen anyone who reminded him so much of his mother. Sensing the intensity of his gaze, Borte's head turned his way and, seeing this, his eyes darted away. When next he looked her way, the warmth of her smile bathed him in a warm glow and he found his earlier tension melting away. Finding his voice again, he said, "Please forgive my rudeness. It's just that you remind me of my mother. She must have looked much like you when she was your age." Caught off guard by the solemnity of his tone, a flush stole over her features and now it was her turn to drop her eyes. Her mother had overheard the exchange and sensed the warmth between them.

After the meal Dai and Yesugei resumed their talk of politics as they drank, the women cleaned up, and Alchi and Temujin left the ger to walk around the camp. Dai's son had made the transition from childhood to manhood and become a warrior two years earlier at the customary age of fourteen. Since then, he had participated in a number of raids and helped fend off raids by other tribes. He had also been involved in a number of clashes with the hated Tatars

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whose territory bordered on their own. At Temujin's urging, he described a number of these attacks and was taken aback by the insightful questions the younger boy asked as well as his observations regarding strategy and tactics. The boy obviously had a keen mind and, unlike most his age, took the subject of warfare seriously rather than as a source of excitement. Alchi found himself drawn to this intriguing youngster and was fascinated by the strength of personality he projected. Temujin, in turn, appreciated the serious consideration with which the young warrior listened to him.

When they returned to Dai's ger, Yesugei and Temujin were shown to their quarters and turned in for the night. After they had left, Alchi, having noticed a troubled look on his father's face, asked, "Is everything alright, Father?"

Although his son had only recently become a man and a warrior, he had a level head and Dai both respected his judgement and valued his advice. "I think the Tayichiud chief is interested in Borte as a bride for his son, but I do not care for him. His wife is one of our people and he stole her. It doesn't speak well of his character."

"Perhaps you should consider Temujin on his own merits, Father. I had a chance to talk to him apart from his father and found him extremely intelligent and serious. If you take the opportunity to talk to him alone, I think you will see what I mean."

Surprised by the conviction in his son's voice, Dai looked thoughtful. "I see no harm in it, Alchi. I will talk to him tomorrow."

The next morning, Dai suggested a hunt. Dividing them into two groups, he kept Temujin by his own side and assigned Alchi to accompany Yesugei.

While Temujin rode at his side, Dai asked him about his aspirations for the future. Anticipating a typical boyish response, the boy surprised him by lapsing into quiet thought before he ventured an answer.

He then fixed disconcertingly intense eyes on Dai and responded. "As long as the tribes continue to fight each other, we accomplish our enemies' goals for them. We will remain weak and disorganized and will never again see the power and respect enjoyed during my great-grandfather's time. When leadership of my tribe passes to me, I will ensure the noble families serve the good of the people and not just their own well-being. The people deserve this. I'll change the way in which we wage war. Now, there is no discipline. The emphasis is on grabbing as many spoils as possible, rather than on destroying the enemy's ability to conduct war. We allow the enemy warriors to flee while we descend on the wealth left behind like flies on carrion. Allowing the enemy warriors to escape permits them to attack us on another day of their own choosing. After reorganizing my people, I will work as my great-grandfather once did to weld the tribes into a single nation whose enemies are outside rather than amongst ourselves."

Dai tried to hide his surprise. "What does your father say of this?"

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"My father has never asked me this question and, if he did, I would of course respond differently. It is not my place to criticize his leadership."

A brilliant intellect resided behind those eyes, thought Dai. Here is a boy with no actual experience in battle who has formulated these ideas based solely on second hand stories and information heard around the fire.

"I think you would be a formidable friend or foe, Temujin, and I would like you to be a friend to my son."

"I would value his friendship, my lord."

When the hunt was over, they returned to the encampment in time for the evening meal. Catching Alchi's eye, Dai gave a subtle but affirmative nod. As they sat down to the meal, he made sure Temujin and Borte were seated next to each other and watched them exchange shy glances when each thought the other wasn't looking. When the meal was over, the women supervised the servants with the cleaning up and, in order to have a private conversation with Yesugei, Dai suggested to Alchi that he show Temujin a prized new foal that had been born just a few days before.

When they had left, Dai turned to Yesugei and said, "Your son and my daughter appear drawn to each other. I think they might prove a good match."

Yesugei was caught off guard. When he had hinted at such a match just the night before, Dai had avoided answering and gave every appearance of not favoring the proposal. He had no idea what could have caused the turn-about.

Quickly recovering his equilibrium, he responded, "She is a tribute to your house, Lord Dai. My family would be honored to be linked with yours."

"If you are for it, let the boy stay, become part of my family and we will see if they indeed grow close or if it is only a fleeting attraction to someone new and different."

Relieved that such a good match had been found so quickly, Yesugei put out his hand and Dai grasped it to seal the agreement.

On the other side of the fire, Borte and her mother could not help but overhear the interchange between the two men. While Borte was thrilled at the sudden change in her status, her mother was alarmed. Just last night, her husband had told her that Yesugei had hinted at a match, but that he didn't care for the Tayichiud chief. Clearly, something must have changed his mind during the hunt today, but she had not had any time alone with him to learn what that might be.

Dai believed that although Yesugei seemed to be a good enough father, he did not seem to understand what a treasure the boy was. It would not be the first time that a formidable spirit had been sired by an uninspired man. He went to bed well-satisfied and took some time to explain his change of heart to his wife.

On the way to his sleeping quarters, Yesugei found Temujin and Alchi, bid Alchi good night and told Temujin the news as they settled down for the night.

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Exhilarated, Temujin did not get to sleep until very late that night. He had taken an instant liking to the girl and her father and brother had both treated him as an equal and appeared to respect his opinions. Although his own father had never treated him badly, neither had he ever solicited his opinion on any serious matter. He knew he would succeed in carving out a place for himself with these, his mother's people, but also knew he would miss his mother—she who had always been there to guide and encourage him—terribly.

The next day when Dai called the people together and announced the engagement, the news was greeted with good cheer. He was a popular leader and his daughter well-loved. There would be a feast that night and hunters were dispatched to fill the larder while the women busily went about the meal preparations.

The celebration started early and lasted all night. Copious amounts of airag were consumed, songs sang, wrestling matches held and pledges of friendship made between the two groups. Sitting between his new family and his father, Temujin and Borte were the object of many good wishes as well as many ribald jokes which were almost entirely lost on them. A good time was had by all.

The next morning dawned bright and clear as the people, somewhat worse for the wear, slowly recovered from the evening's revelry. By mid-morning, though, the Tayichiud riders were already mounted up and ready to start home—Mongols never let a hangover stop them for, if they did, nothing would ever get done. Yesugei exchanged a final farewell with Dai and privately told his son to be a dutiful prospective son-in-law. Temujin would not be returning to his tribe with his new bride for a year or two and would be on the threshold of manhood when next they saw him.

#

Rather than taking the same route back, Yesugei decided to save a little time by skirting closer to the informal boundary of the Tatar territories. All went well for several days, but with evening approaching as they neared the southern edge of Lake Buir, a plume of smoke was spied rising over the next ridge. Cautiously approaching from a vantage that would permit them to spy out the situation without themselves being seen, they saw a group of Tatars camped in the meadow below. While technically this wasn't Tatar territory, their tribal lands lay just to the northeast and this area was more or less a no-man's-land. Yesugei counted eight of them and noted that their gear and lodging suggested there were no others. They were roasting a haunch of meat and had obviously had somewhat to drink already.

Although the Tatars and the Mongols were sworn enemies, steppe etiquette demanded that a stranger's arrival during the evening meal was always welcome and they were to be treated as honored guests. Deciding to test the Tatars' adherence to this widely-accepted protocol, he ordered the men to drop back behind the ridge line where they removed all indications of their tribal affilia-

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tion before approaching the Tatar encampment. They then rode back up to the ridgeline, sheathed their weapons and kept their hands where they could be seen while they waited to be noticed. Eventually, one of the Tatars spotted them and alerted the others, whereupon they all sprang to their feet and grabbed their weapons. Using gestures, Yesugei indicated they meant no harm and were hungry. After a quick consultation, one of the Tatars indicated they were welcome to share the meal and, as a sign of good faith, the Tatars placed their weapons on the ground on the far side of the camp site.

The Tayichiud riders responded in kind, stacking their weapons in plain sight and then moving slowly down the slope towards the camp while being careful to remain in sight the entire time. Dismounting just outside the camp, they strolled slowly towards the fire ring.

The Mongol warriors outnumbered them, but the sanctity of the stranger at the evening meal was deeply ingrained. The leader of the Tatar group stepped forward.

"What is ours is yours. There are no enemies around the fire, only honored guests."

Yesugei replied, "May the spirits bless your hospitality. We have had a long ride and were about to set up camp when we spotted your cooking fire."

"Our meal is yours."

As their hosts invited them to be seated and passed them a skin full of airag, it appeared that the Tatars respected the sanctity of the guest after all. Quenching their thirst as the drink was passed around, the men relaxed and the evening meal progressed without incident. The Mongols retrieved their own airag from their packhorse and shared it with the Tatars in return for their hospitality.

One of the men had just finished a well-received humorous story and all of them, including Yesugei, laughed, but something about his face at that moment triggered a memory in one of the Tatars. At first he wasn't able to place it but then it suddenly came to him—he recognized Yesugei as the Tayichiud chieftain who had killed his cousin, a well-respected Tatar prince. Getting up as if to relieve himself, he stumbled against one of his comrades and quickly whispered that he was to follow him. They stumbled into the dark pretending to sing a hunting song, but once outside the light cast by the fire, the one told the other of his discovery. The murdered prince had been very popular and his death had come as a blow to the Tatars. As their anger at the discovery of Yesugei's identity washed away their respect for their guest, they decided to avenge his murder.

Returning to the camp fire, one of them appeared to stumble into their ger to get more drink. When he returned with the drink, he also had a few pieces of jerky, one of which he had coated with a slow-acting, tasteless poison that would take at least twelve hours before taking effect. Dropping into an open

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spot immediately next to Yesugei, he took a bite from a piece of jerky while passing Yesugei the poisoned one. Accepting the offered jerky, Yesugei ate it, washed it down with a swig from the offered airag and noticed nothing amiss. As the evening finally wound down, the Mongols unrolled their bed rolls and retired for what was left of the night.

Nothing untoward was noticed in the morning as the two parties parted ways without incident, but by mid-morning, Yesugei had begun to experience some intestinal problems he assumed were but the wages to be paid for their drinking bout of the previous evening. By noon, however, they were forced to stop for a fairly extensive period of time while he relieved himself. His stool was loose and he was experiencing sharp stomach pains as well. As his discomfort continued through the afternoon and into the evening they began to realize that something was seriously amiss. He was unable to keep anything down at the evening meal and was vomiting blood. Morning found him too weak to sit his horse and a travois was constructed to carry him as they resumed the trip home at a necessarily reduced pace.

#

By the time the Tayichiud ordu was in sight, Yesugei had already been unconscious for several days. During a brief lucid period the night before, he had told Monglik he knew he was going to die and instructed him to return to Dai's encampment and bring Temujin home. Hoelun would assume the role of regent until he came of age at which time he would assume his rightful role as the tribe's chieftain.

They were met by a pack of guard dogs whose baying alerted the inhabitants to their arrival. Even from afar, seeing the travois behind Yesugei's horse alerted them that something was amiss and their arrival was met by a quiet and sober group of people that included Yesugei's wives Hoelun and Koagchin.

When they drew to a halt, it became clear that the unconscious form on the travois was indeed Yesugei; bad news for the entire tribe and particularly bad news for his wives. Hoelun signaled to the servants to move him into his ger immediately, while Koagchin dispatched one of them to fetch the shaman. Dismounting, Monglik approached Hoelun, respectfully knelt, and brought her up to date on the state of her husband's health. She listened tensely, indicated she understood and then asked the question that was foremost in her mind.

"And Temujin?"

Although he answered quickly, time seemed to move slowly while she awaited his reply.

"Your son is well, lady. We had already left him in the care of his betrothed's family and were headed home when my lord came down with the sickness."

Rather than badger him with questions about Temujin, she left it at that and she and Koagchin followed the servants taking Yesugei to the ger.

After they had settled him on his sleeping palette and the shaman had

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started his examination, Hoelun took Monglik outside and questioned him more closely as he told her about the betrothal to Borte and related the story of the trip home.

"In looking back, I believe the Tatars somehow either put a curse on him or poisoned him. If it is a curse, perhaps the shaman can nullify it and my lord will survive. I think he is too far gone, however."

She pondered his words and followed them to their inevitable conclusion.

"If our lord leaves this world, Monglik, my son will have to return and lead the tribe."

Monglik nodded his head in affirmation. "During a period of wakefulness last night, your husband ordered me not to wait for his death but to go immediately, fetch Temujin and return him here to lead the tribe."

Sighing, she responded, "It's late and you've had a difficult trip. Stay tonight and, if the shaman doesn't succeed in turning the tide by morning, go and retrieve my son."

#

In another ger, Yesugei's two brothers Daaritai and Nekun sat by the fire questioning a warrior who had accompanied Yesugei to the east and learned that Monglik had been ordered to fetch their nephew back from the Onggirat encampment. This meant Temujin was to assume leadership of the tribe in the event of Yesugei's death; a death that appeared all but certain. The boy was still underage and would not reach manhood for four more years during which time the tribe would be ruled by Hoelun. It wasn't the possibility of being ruled by a woman that disturbed them. Unlike many other cultures, the Mongols didn't subjugate women and it was not unusual for a woman to rule. But she was not of their tribe and this is what rankled.

One of us should rule, they both thought as they glowered into the fire.

#

Hoelun, Koagchin and the shaman kept watch through the night, but Yesugei never regained consciousness. His labored breathing was increasingly shallow and it was only a matter of time before he passed through the veil that separates the living world from that of the spirits. With an effort, Hoelun rose and exited the ger. She sent a messenger to fetch Monglik and, when he arrived, instructed him to proceed with speed to fetch her son home. Respectfully taking his leave of her, he sent for the warriors he had designated to accompany him. Already saddled up and provisioned, they departed as soon as Monglik swung into the saddle.

#

Temujin watched the mounted figures of his father and his escort diminish into the distance until he could no longer see them. As it unfolded day-by-day, this new chapter in his life proved quite to his liking. Dai and Alchi continued to treat him as an equal, including him in the deliberations of the men of the

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tribe and the entire community went out of their way to make him feel at home. Around the fire in the evening, they asked him to tell stories of his tribe and, in an effort to make him feel at home, played practical jokes on him.

Each evening when the camp settled down at the end of the day, though he and Borte slept together, at their ages of ten and eleven, respectively, sex was not yet part of the equation. They were comfortable with each other as only children can be, becoming close and sharing their innermost thoughts. Looking on, Borte's parents and brother could see that the boy and their Borte were, indeed, compatible.

Temujin proved himself a hard worker, never complaining no matter what task was set before him. He continued to work on his hunting and fighting skills under the tutelage of Dai, Alchi and the other men of the clan and proved himself a quiet and skillful hunter. Although he had fished in rivers before, Alchi taught him how to fish in a lake using a small boat, a pastime he thoroughly enjoyed.

The days passed until one day, three weeks after his arrival, a lookout rode into camp reporting that a group of riders approaching from the northwest appeared to be Tayichiud warriors.

Temujin riding with them, the Onggirat warriors swiftly mounted and went to meet the approaching riders. It soon became clear they were indeed Tayichiud and it was obvious they had been riding hard. Dai and Alchi exchanged a look. This could not be good news. As the riders drew closer, Temujin could see Monglik in the lead and, since there had been no plan for a visit anywhere in the near term, Temujin could not imagine why he had returned so soon.

The Tayichiud reined in their horses, dismounted, and knelt before Temujin as if he were the tribal chieftain. Without thinking, he said, "Where is my father?"

Keeping his head bowed, Monglik replied, "He is gravely ill and sent me to accompany you back to the ordu, my Lord Temujin." Temujin was rattled to his core as much by Monglik's calling him lord as by the news. His father had never been sick in his memory. What could have happened?

Wheeling his horse around, Dai spoke up, "Bring your men to camp, Monglik, and let's get you fed and rested while you tell us your news. Temujin, don't worry. We both know everything is being done to restore your father's health."

With that, they rode back to camp and Dai, Monglik, Alchi and Temujin entered Dai's ger. Like the men, the women were startled to see Monglik and Dai quickly explained what little he knew. The servants brought refreshments and while a meal was started for the hungry travelers, Monglik filled them in on the details.

When he had finished, Temujin said, "We'll start back as soon as you and the men are rested, Monglik."

Turning to Dai, he once again demonstrated his level-headed nature, "I am

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sorry to cut short my stay, Dai guai, but I know you understand," using the term of respect reserved for an elder male. "I will return as soon I can and ask that my engagement to Borte continue in the meantime."

"Do not worry, son. Go home, tend your father and Borte will be here waiting for you whenever you return." Dai meant what he said. During the boy's short stay with them, he had become convinced Temujin would someday rise to greatness and was determined that his daughter would be at his side when that day came.

The next morning, Temujin saddled up with Monglik and the others, bid farewell to what had become his second family and rode for home.

As they rode, Monglik retreated into his own thoughts and considered the situation. Yesugei's brothers had never made a secret of their aspirations to rule should Yesugei ever prove unable to fulfill his duties. Monglik had warned him about this more than once, but Yesugei was a young man and could not envision the possibility of his own death any time in the near future. He felt he had plenty of time to deal with the problem posed by his brothers, but now the worst had happened.

Studying the boy riding by his side, Monglik contemplated the enigma he represented. Although only ten years of age, Monglik had always been impressed by the uncharacteristic seriousness with which the boy listened to and studied his elders. Unlike other boys his age, he only spoke when he actually had something to say and Monglik had frequently made note of the intelligence that shone from his eyes. Deciding that Temujin must be told what he was riding into, he spurred his horse forward, signaled for the boy to join him and for the remaining riders to fall back. The stiff wind blowing from the rear would carry their words away from the others.

"As I indicated yesterday, your father was poisoned by a group of Tatars with whom we shared an evening meal. I don't know what was used, but it is clear to me now that is what happened. He may or may not survive until we return, but I think he will die before long."

There was no sign of an emotional response on the boy's face. Rather, he showed no surprise and appeared to be thinking intently. Monglik tried to pick his words carefully as he prepared to tell the boy the hard facts. Above all a loyal man, he owed it to Yesugei to safeguard his son.

"I have thought about what *should* be as well as what *may* be, Temujin. As it was your father's wish, you should rule when he passes, but you are not yet a warrior. By custom, your father's younger brother should marry your mother and she will then rule until you are of age. Although this is what should happen, it is not what I believe will happen."

The boy held his tongue and continued to listen.

"I think it likely your uncles will foment unrest at the idea of a member of another tribe ruling the Tayichiud until you reach the age of manhood. They

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will argue that the tribe should be ruled by a Tayichiud warrior rather than by your mother."

Shock replaced the intent look on the boy's face as he continued to listen.

"We must have a plan for each of the possible forks in the road. If your father manages to hold onto life until some time after we return, we may yet be able to rally support for you and for your mother. Your uncles cannot make their power play until he dies. If, on the other hand, he dies before we return, I do not believe your mother will have a good chance on her own."

Monglik's words severely challenged Temujin's world view. Family was the bedrock on which his world was built and family did not betray family; they supported each other and his uncles would therefore support him. Monglik was wrong!

His passion bringing the boy in him to the fore, he shouted, "You are a traitor to speak so, Monglik, and I will see you punished when we arrive home!"

"If I am wrong, have me killed, my lord. I will deserve it. In that case, may you rule long and wisely. But, unfortunately, I don't think I'm wrong."

Temujin whirled his horse about and rejoined the troop behind them. After a brief pause, Monglik did so as well.

They did not speak again for the remainder of the journey home.

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1177 A.D.

Eleven days after setting out to bring Temujin home, Monglik and Temujin approached the Onon River valley and home. Leaving the shelter of the trees and entering the open steppe, their progress was suddenly arrested by the whistle of a signal arrow followed quickly by the sight of a small group of riders approaching fast from the direction of the ordu. Drawing to a halt, each notched an arrow and none relaxed their guard until Monglik was able to positively identify them as men loyal to both himself and to Temujin's mother. Even then, he didn't relax his vigilance until the riders came to a halt, dismounted, and bent the knee to Temujin. No words had been spoken, but the message was crystal clear.

"Welcome home, Prince Temujin", the leader said. "I wish I brought good news, but the news I bear is terrible."

"If you are referring to my father's death, Enkhee, that news would be unwelcome but not entirely unexpected."

Bowing his head, Enkhee replied with regret, "Your father died scarcely two days after sending for you, my lord."

Absorbing the news with a subdued sigh, Temujin cut immediately to the heart of the matter.

"And the succession? Everything is proceeding smoothly?"

Only Monglik detected the edge in his voice. The boy had been quiet and withdrawn ever since their heated discussion.

Jarred by the swift change of subject, Enkhee hid his face as he once again bowed low. "Therein lies our reason for meeting you before you enter the ordu, my lord. As many of us expected, your uncles refuse to recognize you as leader due to your age. But contrary to tradition, because your mother is from another tribe, they also refuse to recognize her right to rule as regent until you come of age."

With a lot of time to think since his falling out with Monglik, Temujin had been forced to face the possibility that his father's loyal retainer had been right in his astute assessment of the situation. Although it now appeared that Mong-

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lik's prediction of treachery had indeed been proven correct, Temujin had been unable to come up with a viable plan to deal with it. What after all could a ten year old boy do if the adults in his life proved powerless or turned out to be enemies?

The only thing he could think to ask was, "Who do they propose to take my father's place, then?"

"Your uncle, Nekun."

"Why doesn't my father's younger brother, Daaritai, marry my mother as is customary?"

"They are claiming this is more custom than law and they are therefore not bound by it."

No longer able to contain himself, Monglik asked, "And how have the people responded to their proposal?"

Looking vastly discomforted, Enkhee directed his reply to Temujin. "Most of the clan leaders have sided with your uncles, lord."

"And my mother? How is she taking all of this?"

"Needless to say, she is furious and has been haranguing the clan leaders without mercy, but to no avail. To make matters worse, your grandfather Ambakai's widows have refused to allow her to participate in the ancestor worship ceremonies because she is of another tribe."

For the first time, Temujin's despair was transformed into anger. He worshipped his mother and the tribe's mistreatment of her infuriated him. Barely controlling himself, he said, "Thank you for your loyalty and courtesy, Enkhee." He then turned his horse to face them all. "Let us go face the traitors."

#

As they crested the last ridge, the ordu was sprawled out beneath them and, in the space of a heartbeat, it became clear that the tribe was preparing to move. Most of the gers had been torn down and prepared for transport and the tribe's far-flung herds were being assembled in preparation for relocation.

As Monglik, Temujin and their companions swiftly made their way down to the plain and headed directly for his father's ger, Temujin could not help but note that his father's banner no longer flew. Dismounting and handing their horses over to the grooms, Monglik noted they had been greeted only by silence and that many of those present avoided eye contact. When they entered the ger, Hoelun rushed to Temujin, crushing him in her embrace and inhaling his scent. Returning her gesture of affection, he took stock of her state. Although it had only been four weeks since he had last seen her, he was struck by the change in her. In that brief time, she appeared to have visibly aged and her entire demeanor projected a sense of desperation and anguish. The tears that streaked her face reflected both her relief at seeing him as well as her fear for the future of her family. His three younger brothers Khasar, Kachun, and Temuge as well as his sister, Temulun, were arrayed behind her. Also present were his father's sec-

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ond wife, Koagchin, and his two half-brothers, Bekhter, a year older than Temujin, and Belgutei, a year younger.

Turning back to Hoelun, Temujin said, "How bad are things, Mother?"

"When even your own family betrays you, my son, how can you expect the support of the clan leaders? We have been abandoned by everyone except those most loyal to us. The camp is being moved to new pastures and we have been expressly forbidden to move with them. Although you are a threat to your uncles, they dare not kill you without alienating their support within the tribe, so they have done the next best thing by exiling us. Without the tribe's protection and resources, it is as good as a death warrant."

"How many herd animals are they leaving us?"

"Effectively, none. We are only permitted to keep our personal mounts and a few goats."

Without herd animals to sustain them through the harsh steppe winter, she was right—this exile was the equivalent of a death sentence.

"When does the tribe move?"

"Tomorrow", she said, her voice flat with resignation and finality.

#

The following morning dawned clear and calm as the assembled tribe mounted up to begin the trek to fresh pastures, but had no sooner begun moving when Hoelun suddenly leapt on her horse and kicked it into motion as she shouted her rage and anger at their betrayal. Accusing her husband's brothers of murdering their own family and the people of betraying the legacy of Kabul Khan and his Mongol confederation, she called down curses from all of the gods that ruled over the world. It was to no avail, but she was not about to let them abandon her family without bringing the most dire curses down on their heads.

Eventually, the last of the people disappeared over the horizon leaving only their small band in that vast empty space. Besides her own family and that of her sister-wife, Koagchin, only a small band of stalwart followers had remained to share their fate. Consisting of the family's servants and slaves, Monglik's family, Enkhee and a handful of others along with their families, these loyalists were deeply ashamed of their tribe and the perfidy of its leaders.

#

Without herd animals and the protection of the tribe, they could not remain out on the open steppe and survive. They would have to retreat to the shelter of the Khentii mountains at the source of the Onon River where the rugged country would provide them with strategic shelter as they struggled to subsist as best they could by fishing, trapping and hunting. It would be a hard life, one deemed unworthy by proud steppe warriors.

The despondent group set out the following morning following the river west towards its source. Temujin was deeply affected by the betrayal of his fam-

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ily at the hands of other family members and, in a larger sense, by the tribe, an extension of the family. He had always been taught and believed that family was the bedrock on which safety was predicated. Although you might not like some blood relations, family supported each other in crisis. It was the one thing you could always depend on.

He now knew that this was not so...certainly not among the Mongol tribes. While it may have been true before the crushing defeat at the hands of the Tatars, honor and loyalty had been another casualty within the remnants of the once great Mongol nation. He was learning painful but valuable lessons that would mold his approach to future situations. Custom and tradition did not define the rules by which a society lived; rather, those rules were forged by those holding the reins of power. He had also learned that blood ties did not automatically make someone trustworthy or deserving of one's loyalty; trust and loyalty had to be earned.

Another source of great pain for Temujin was the loss of Borte. He missed her greatly and silently vowed to one day reclaim her as his bride.

Finally, he would never forget nor would he ever forgive those who betrayed him.

#

As they approached the foothills of the Khentii mountains, Temujin remembered the occasion of his first visit to Burkhan Khaldun, the God Mountain, when his mother had taken the four year old boy there to pray. Looming over the landscape, the mountain represented the very heart of the Mongol homeland, the Land of the Three Rivers, the place where the headwaters of the Onon, Kherulen, and Tuul Rivers first gathered, cascading through their respective mountain courses, bearing their life-giving waters to the lands beyond. This sacred ground would be his new home for the foreseeable future and the mountain his personal protector.

#

1179 A.D.

Two years had passed during which the family and its small band of supporters struggled to eke out a living beneath the towering mountains. Never particularly strong, Temujin's younger brother Kachun was an early casualty of their exile after he came down with a coughing illness the year before and passed away. With no friends other than each other and so few hands available to make ends meet, everyone including the children found themselves condemned to a life of hard labor just to make it from one day to the next. Now twelve, Temujin's closest companions were his ten year old brother Khasar and his eleven year old step-brother Belgutei.

#

Armed with his fishing gear and bow, Temujin strapped on his snow shoes and trudged through the woods down to the banks of the Kherulen River. Mak-

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ing his way to a small, deep pool formed by a sharp bend in the river's course, he made himself comfortable, cast his line into its still depths and leaned back against the bank. The warmth of the sun and the quiet sounds of the river soon lulled him into a light doze, carried away in light dreams, until he was suddenly wrenched back to wakefulness not by a jerk on his line but rather by the unexpected sounds of approaching horsemen. Quickly retrieving his fishing line, he concealed himself in the brush growing along the river's edge and quietly made his way in the direction from which he thought the sound had come. As he burrowed through the thick undergrowth, the unmistakable sounds associated with a group of people on the move—the sounds of riders and wagons accompanied by occasional fragments of conversation—grew steadily louder. Peering through a veil of willow branches, he spied the band as it moved up the valley towards him; warriors protecting a caravan of people, some on horseback, others—the very old and young—riding on the cattle-drawn wagons bearing their disassembled gers and, bringing up the rear, a small herd of horses, cattle, sheep and goats accompanied by a small group of herders on horseback. It was obvious that they were planning on staying awhile.

Fading back into the willows, he broke into a run and swiftly made his way back to camp to warn the others. Spying him as he ran across the meadow towards his mother's ger, the lookout, sensing his urgency, spread the alarm. By the time he skidded to a breathless stop before Hoelun, everyone was gathered and anxiously waiting to find out the cause of his agitation. After a moment or two to catch his breath, he rapidly described what he had seen and, led by Monglik, all of the men and boys grabbed their arms, mounted up and rode to intercept the intruders. Hoelun and the others remaining behind armed themselves and retreated back into the tree line at the meadow's edge to hide and await further developments.

Leading his small band to a heavily forested hill overlooking the valley floor, Monglik dismounted and waited for the interlopers to come into view. Lying on a rock ledge that projected out over the valley below and afforded a clear view, he shielded his eyes from the sun's glare and, before too long, the warriors riding point entered his field of view.

"Jadarat," Monglik murmured to himself thoughtfully, watching until the entire column came into view. It appeared to be a small band of Jadarat tribesmen preparing to winter in the mountains and, if all was as it seemed, they almost certainly represented no threat to the exiles. The mountains were plenty large enough and there was grazing aplenty for a group of this size. Maintaining his low profile, he cautiously slid back off the rock, returned to where the others were waiting for him in a copse of trees and proceeded back to camp. Seeing that the scouting party appeared to have come to no harm and had not been pursued, Hoelun and the others left their concealment and returned to the encampment.

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"I don't think they represent any threat to us, lady. With your permission, I will approach them and see what I can find out. If they prove hostile, only one of us will be lost."

There being no other course of action, Hoelun reluctantly nodded her assent. "Be careful, Monglik. We can not afford to lose you."

Bowing to her, he remounted and galloped off to meet the Jadarats. Hoelun, meanwhile, detailed one of the other men to follow at a discrete distance and report back immediately if things appeared to go amiss.

As he approached the warriors in the van of the Jadarat column, he slowed his horse to a walk and kept his hands where they could be seen. When he knew he'd been seen, he stopped and waited while one of their number separated from the rest and cautiously approached him.

"How goes the day for you, friend?," the Jadarat outrider inquired politely.

"Heaven has been good to us and our herds prosper. And yours?" The use of the plural *us* was not lost on the Jadarat.

Recognizing the Tayichiud insignia on both Monglik's clothing and his horse's tack, the Jadarat put two and two together and replied, "The summer and fall have gone well for us and now the time has come to move the herds to winter pastures here in the sheltering mountains. Can you recommend a likely place that would not interfere with the Lady Hoelun's people?"

At the mention of the lady's name, Monglik stiffened imperceptibly in the saddle. The Jadarat was signaling that he knew who they were and, if he read him correctly, that they had no quarrel with them. After a brief pause, he responded. Pointing ahead, he replied, "Continue on for another two hours at your current pace and you will come to the narrow mouth of a valley on your right. Pass through it and you'll find that the valley broadens out into good pastures with a stream to supply water for your people and herds."

Monglik's reply verified that the Jadarat had guessed correctly. The lady and her small band were here as they had heard they might be. He and his people had been allies of the Tayichiud under Temujin's father and a change in the Tayichiud leadership was no business of theirs. Knowing that the lady's band was small and posed no threat, the two groups could coexist for the winter with no problem. "Thank you, friend. May Heaven smile on the lady and her people."

"And on yours as well."

With that, Monglik turned his horse's head and rode back to the encampment to report to his lady. Standing by her side, Temujin felt a rising tide of excitement. For two years, his universe and that of everyone in their small band had been populated solely by each other and the constant threat of a clash with hostile outsiders. Now, suddenly, there existed the possibility of friendly contact with others. To a twelve year old boy starved for broader horizons, the possibilities that now loomed before him were intoxicating.

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#

Not by chance, several days later found Temujin hawking in the hills overlooking the newly established Jadarat camp in the valley just to the northeast of their own. With his hawk hooded and its jess tied to his wrist, he studied the camp below where he could see people moving among the gers as well as the herders and dogs among the small herds. The sudden sound of someone clearing his throat abruptly snapped his attention away from the valley below and back to his own immediate vicinity. Someone was behind him and, as he slowly turned, that someone spoke.

"I doubt you'll find the prey you look for down there. Perhaps we would have better luck further back in the hills away from the sounds of camp."

Trying his best to conceal his surprise and agitation, he turned to fully face the voice's owner. About twenty feet away stood a boy about his own age, a small smile on his lips and bow in hand. His clothing identified him as someone of import, a member of the nobility. Although Temujin was also a noble born, one would not identify him as such by his current dress. During the hard life of the past two years, the rich arrayment that befitted the son of a Tayichiud chieftain had gradually given way to a patchwork collection of homespun furs and leathers.

Surprised and not having conversed with a stranger for two years, he took a moment to gather his wits before responding. "Do you make a habit of sneaking up on others?"

The smile on the other boy's face broadened. "I apologize, though you were studying our camp so intently that I could have tapped you on the shoulder before you realized you had company. If I had done so, though, in your surprise you might have stabbed me. I decided it would be wiser to announce myself from some distance."

Though embarrassed, Temujin could not help but return the other boy's infectious smile as he responded candidly, "We haven't seen any other people for such a long time. It takes some getting used to."

Familiar with the story of the Lady Hoelun's exile, the boy considered his reply before answering, "From what I've heard of the events of two years ago, your lady and her son Prince Temujin were greatly wronged by your chieftain's brothers. They not only violated the rules of succession dictated by tradition but proved themselves traitors to their own flesh and blood. The gods will surely punish them."

Jarred by these unexpected words of solace from a complete stranger, Temujin's eyes filled and his throat constricted, preventing him from answering immediately. Noticing the effect of his words and not wishing to embarrass him, the boy averted his eyes and pretended to study the camp below. In a moment, Temujin had once again gained command of his emotions and his voice. "While, as you say, the gods will almost certainly punish them, it is even

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more certain that I will punish my uncles for their crimes. They and everyone who supported them will die for the dishonor visited upon my mother and their betrayal of me."

It was the other boy's turn to be caught off guard. In his surprise, he stated the obvious aloud, "You are Temujin!"

"I am. And you are?"

"Jamuka. I am Jamuka. My father is chief of the Jadarats. I...I didn't recognize you."

Looking down at his own somewhat ignoble clothing, Temujin looked up and smiled at the other boy's gape-mouthed surprise. "I am traveling in disguise."

At that, both boys erupted in laughter. Having almost forgotten what it felt like, Temujin continued laughing until he found himself prostrate on the ground as his hawk shrieked in confusion and alarm. As he regained control of himself, he stroked the agitated bird until it once again sat calmly on his wrist guard. By that time, Jamuka had also regained control of himself and both of them had returned to their feet.

After brushing himself off, Temujin became serious and extended his hand. "I would be your friend, Jamuka. Would you hunt with me?"

With equal gravity, Jamuka grasped the offered hand briefly and the two boys then headed into the hills to hunt.

#

Winter of 1179 - 1180 A.D.

Jamuka and Temujin were inseparable that winter, hunting and fishing together whenever the opportunity presented itself. Temujin had found a soul-mate in the Jadarat prince, one who believed he would have his revenge on his uncles and vowed to help him do so when the time came. Over time, he also recognized that if Jamuka's interest in tactics and strategy were any indication, his friend would almost certainly someday prove to be a great general.

At the end of that winter as Jamuka's people prepared to return to their spring camp on the steppe, the two boys, with great solemnity, declared their intention to become andas—blood brothers. To lend weight to their bond, they insisted on holding a public ceremony before the combined populace of both camps. They exchanged gifts, vowed eternal friendship and brotherhood and swore to be there whenever his anda might be in need. To seal their pact, Temujin unsheathed his knife, drew it across his palm and held his bloodied hand out to Jamuka. Likewise, Jamuka slit his palm and, clasping hands, they mingled blood.

The following winter, the Jadarat again camped nearby and the boys' friendship only grew stronger with the passage of time.

#

1181 A.D.

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Four years into their exile and the family's struggle for survival continued. While Temujin, his brother Khasar and his step-brother Belgutei hunted and worked well together, his step-brother Bekhter proved to be of little or no help to anyone and was generally regarded as a burden. While his aversion to work was a constant source of irritation to the other members of the camp, everyone recognized that it was his vicious and abusive nature that might one day require the others to take action against him.

The relationship between Temujin and Bekhter, adversarial since their days as small boys, had only become more hostile over the years. During their years in exile, Bekhter had proven lazy, frequently bullying his younger brother, Belgutei, as well as his half brothers, often stealing the game and fish they had worked hard to catch.

At fourteen, both Temujin and Bekhter had reached the age of manhood and although Temujin was slightly younger than Bekhter, he was the first-born son of Yesugei's senior wife, Hoelun, and as such was the Tayichiud chieftain's legal heir. Since the tribe's repudiation of Temujin and the family's exile, however, Bekhter increasingly acted as if he were the heir and Temujin merely his younger half-brother. Acting on this self-serving and patently counterfeit belief that he was the eldest son with all of the commensurate rights and privileges over his younger brothers, Bekhter repeatedly claimed as his own game and fish caught by Temujin and his brother Khasar. Temujin's faith in his family and tribe had been severely damaged by the tribe's—and, more specifically, his uncles'—repudiation of him as the rightful heir. Bekhter's presumption of superiority over him only compounded his growing belief that family ties were not necessarily the ones that bind. Temujin's feelings of alienation from his family were further aggravated by what he perceived as his mother's lack of support. Whenever he had brought his complaints about Bekhter to her attention, she advised him to let it pass without incident in order to maintain peace in the family.

On a cold spring day when Temujin and Khasar were returning from a successful day of fishing, Bekhter stopped them and demanded the biggest fish they had caught. When Temujin objected, Bekhter tripped him and, picking up a stone, knocked him unconscious. Soon afterwards, Temujin struggled back to consciousness as Khasar wiped the blood from his eyes. Furious, he decided to put an end to his half-brother's depredations once and for all. Returning to camp, he retrieved his bow and quiver and set out to track him down. Finding him lounging on a sunlit rock with the fish, he confronted him and demanded its return and an end to Bekhter's delusions of seniority. When Bekhter laughed and spit contemptuously on the ground at Temujin's feet, he notched an arrow and once again issued his demand. Responding with derisive laughter, Bekhter rose to his feet and, when he suddenly lunged, Temujin let fly the arrow and ended Bekhter's pretensions forever. Gazing down at the lifeless husk that was

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all that remained of his treacherous half-brother, he resolved that he would also someday punish his uncles for their betrayal. Family or not, his enemies would pay the ultimate price for betrayal and disloyalty.

#

On his return to camp, Temujin immediately went to Hoelun, told her what he had done and attempted to explain why it had been necessary. Their betrayal by both the family and the tribe had broken something inside Hoelun and her anger had eventually burned itself out to be replaced by a fatalistic acceptance of their reduced station in life. She wished only to be left in peace. Appalled by his news, she was beside herself with grief and anger. Beating him with her fists, she screamed and called him a murderer. Although she had no love for Bekhter, he was nonetheless the son of her sister-wife, Koagchin, her closest and only friend and she didn't know how she could face her. Retreating from her blows, Temujin left his mother in this inconsolable state and went to tell Bekhter's mother and his brother, Belgutei, of his death, an act he felt had been forced on him by Bekhter's repeated and unpunished violent acts.

Sitting in their ger which was situated in close proximity to Hoelun's, Koagchin and Belgutei could not help but overhear as Hoelun had railed against Temujin. As a result, when Temujin requested permission to enter, he was greeted by the sound of a mother sobbing for her lost son. Before long, however, Belgutei opened the felt door and gestured for him to enter. Removing his hat, Temujin entered and remained standing with it clutched in his hands as Koagchin continued quietly crying. At last, after what seemed an interminable period of time, her sobs gradually quieted and, looking at him from red-rimmed eyes from which her tears continued to quietly fall, she held out her hand to him. Stunned, he hesitated before he advanced and tentatively placed his hand in hers. She gestured for him to sit. When he had done so, she gathered what composure she could, opened her mouth to speak, stopped—unable to proceed—and then, after a while, finally began speaking in a low, tired voice.

"I heard what he did to you—knocking you down and striking you with the rock. I know about all the other times that he mistreated all of you. There was something missing in him." After taking a shuddering breath, she continued, "I don't know why. You were all raised in the same way, but he seemed to have a darkness in his soul that caused him to strike out at those close to him." She paused to regain her composure before continuing. "I do not blame you, Temujin. You have always been good to your brothers, to your sister and to my sons, even to him when all he gave in return was meanness and spite. I will miss the boy and the man he could have been but was not. I will remember the baby I held and nursed." With that, she once again began quietly sobbing and rocking to and fro. Not knowing what else to do, Temujin fell to his knees and cradled her in his arms. After a while, he felt Belgutei slip his arms around both of them and all three of them cried for what could have been as well as for the real-

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ity of what was.

#

Until this time, although the family had been exiled, they had not been accused of any crimes. Now this had changed. When word of Bekhter's murder eventually reached the Tayichiud tribe, Temujin and, by their continued association with him, his immediate family, were henceforth considered outlaws subject to punishment by tribal law. While the tribe didn't go so far as to mount a punitive expedition to bring him to justice, Temujin knew they would now have to actively avoid any contact whatsoever with the tribe. After consulting with his mother and Monglik, they decided to move their camp. In addition, it was agreed that in the event any of them were ever captured, those left behind would once again move to an even more remote campsite and remain there to await the possible escape of whoever had been captured. In that event, a secret marker pointing to the family's new camp would be left at an agreed upon location on a rocky ridge overlooking the steppe.

#

Several moons later while Temujin was fishing on the banks of the Onon, a Tayichiud hunting party stumbled upon him by chance, gave chase, and captured him. Hands bound behind his back and dragged behind a horse, the prisoner was brought back to the clan's camp and led before Tarkutai, a clan leader. Forced to his knees, Temujin silently glared at his captor.

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