

Khakhanate

Book I

The Raven

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For Deena

Chapter 1

Cuauhnahuac

71st Year of the Khanate
(Cuernavaca, Mexico, 1440)

Cuauhnahuac is a beautiful place. The climate is temperate, none of the searing heat of the central desert, the bitter cold of far north, the humidity of the coastal areas or the damp fetid smells of the city. The air is fresh, lightly tinged with the delicate but changing scent of many flowers and warm during the day and cool and silken at night. The view is of green hillsides dotted with colors and mottled with light and shadows during the day and shining ethereally in the muted light of the moon or barely visible in the dim light of the endless stars on moonless nights. Yes, I picked the perfect place to end my days.

And yet, in all this perfection, I am, for the first time in my life truly alone. Of course, I've been by myself many times, but I was always on a mission or a journey to or from somewhere and consumed by that purpose. Now, while I am not exactly by myself, for there are servants and family about, I am alone. I have nothing to do and nowhere to go. I suppose this is the inevitable fate of anyone who lives long enough, achieves an exalted position, and has the grace to step down before he becomes senile, but that is small comfort. There is the occasional visitor, but I have outlived almost all of my contemporaries, and the few remaining are too decrepit to travel all the way down here. My grandson drops by when he comes here to get away from the capital much like I used to do, and he's gracious enough to ask my advice as though he really needed it. Very rarely I see my other children and grandchildren, and they always bring their children with them. Last spring, my youngest son, John, came back from the north with a new wife and to everyone's surprise because of her age, she delivered a healthy baby boy in the winter.

He then told me that he had decided to name the child Karl after me. I warned him about the consequences, but he insisted it was time for another Karl. So I started thinking about the past and the many events that brought me to this place at this time. I reread all the books in my library in their many strange languages, including the now-fragile book in this ancient language. Finally it came to me—I can have one more mission in my life! I can set down my story for my family in this ancient tongue so no strangers can read it. It will enable me to relive my life, and I needn't worry about anyone taking offense, to my family's detriment. And who knows, perhaps one of my descendants will be moved to carry the tale forward, for I know there is still much adventure ahead in this wonderful new world. Maybe the tale will interest this newborn Karl when he is old enough, and maybe he will outdo me, but I doubt it.

Since there is no written family history for me to build on, I'll have to start at the beginning. Most of you have noticed we do look a bit different from our fellow Mongols, although that difference is diminishing with intermarriage. Our ancestry is, strictly speaking, not Mongol. There never really was a tribe called the Mongols, but the Tungus tribes that coalesced into the core of what became the Mongols could be given first priority to the title. As time went on, many different tribes were taken into the Mongols even though they were not related. Some, like the Tatars, only provided women and children, but others came in fully and freely or were recruited

to fill out the ranks. The Hanjen resisted joining since they always felt superior to Mongol “barbarians,” and in the end drove us out of what they called the Middle Kingdom. Our “tribe” was never in a position to choose to join or not join the Mongols, so our allegiance requires a bit more explanation.

According to my grandfather, our ancestors were, perhaps fortunately, obscure and forgettable until the first Karl wandered out of the primeval forest and into a no-longer-remembered village in an area called Schwabia far to the west. His apparent source led to his surname, Waldmann, Man of the Forest in the dialect of that place. This Karl was, not surprisingly, a woodcutter, and since he had considerable skill at carving, he was welcomed to the village. The family continued in modest obscurity until the next Karl, some few generations later, who was bored with wood but fascinated with iron and bucking the family traditions, moved to a city named Regensburg to learn the blacksmith trade. Being a perfectionist, he spent a long time working for many masters throughout what was called the Holy Roman Empire, the obscure if pretentiously titled principality that governed his “tribe.”

When he was admitted to the Guild as a master blacksmith, he had become a legendary sword maker, and settled in Innsbruck, a city in the same empire which was incongruously ruled by a bishop, a type of leader of the Christian religion prevalent in the far west. His descendants remained there continuing in the trade uneventfully until the next Karl came to maturity. This Karl, my great-great-grandfather, did continue the family skill of sword making, but being the second son left Innsbruck, and began to ply his trade eastward. He happened to be at the court of King Bela of Hungary, when a certain minor Christian cleric named John came to the court on his way back from performing an embassy from the pope, the leader or high priest of the Christian religion, to the Great Khan in Karakorum, Kuyuk, the second successor of the immortal Chingis. Karl managed to talk to this cleric and his companions and was fascinated by their tale. His curiosity got the best of him, and he decided to pack up his wife and two young children and go visit this Karakorum and offer his not inconsiderable talents to the Khan.

The story of his journey is a long, sometimes amusing, and sometimes sad saga, but it is of no significance to this history. Suffice it to say, after some three very eventful years, he arrived at Karakorum just in time for his wife to be delivered of a son, my great-grandfather, whom he named John for the cleric who was responsible for the trip. Whether Karl regretted his journey, my grandfather couldn't say, but his acceptance at the court of the Khan was immediate, and he was soon hard at work at his first love, sword making. My great-grandfather John moved to Khanbalikh when the Great Khan Kubilai moved the capital there.

My great-grandfather, his brother, one of his sons, and both of his brother's sons met an untimely end during the ill-fated second invasion of Yapon uls (a group of large islands east of the old Khanate). Of course, the first invasion was also ill-fated, but the losses incurred were considerably less. My grandfather George decided to ply his trade more humbly to avoid the dubious honor of being invited on any more such fiascoes. He moved to the outskirts of Khanbalikh, and although he continued to make swords, he also made many other things as well, catering to the tastes of the Khan's subjects rather than the court. My father, Henry, also followed in my grandfather's footsteps and continued the general ironsmith business, and married Christina, the daughter of a Nestorian Christian priest, Peter. In the next ten years he had three sons and three daughters. Only two of the former and one of the latter survived infancy. These were the eldest son, Henry; the second daughter, Mathilde; and the youngest son, John. Curiously, the family always used the old tribal names rather than more Mongol names. Even more curiously, we still generally do.

Father happened to befriend an officer in the Khan's army who greatly admired his skills and frequently called between campaigns. He had confided to my father his pessimism about the future of the Khanate since much of it was in revolt and most of the army's energy had been wasted in the fratricidal power struggles since the death of Kubilai. This officer, Kaidu, rose through the ranks and finally came to be commander of a tumen. When Dorji, the Chancellor of the Right (yes, there was also a Chancellor of the Left, and between them they ran the Khanate for the Khan) was forced from power, he invited Kaidu to join him in the north and take command of the tumen then guarding the northern border of the Khanate along the Karamuren River between the ancient home of the Khitans and the frozen lands of the reindeer-herding Tungus tribes. Since a tumen was like a self-contained mobile city with skilled artisans as well as soldiers and their families, Kaidu invited my father to join him and, of course, bring along his family. Because my father shared Kaidu's pessimism about the future and feared for his family's safety should the revolts reach Khanbalikh, he agreed to join him as soon as his wife had been delivered of their latest child.

Late in the winter, the child, a boy, made his appearance, and over the grave misgivings of my grandfather, my father decided it was time for another Karl in the family to commemorate the definite change the family was about to experience. My grandfather elected to remain in Khanbalikh rather than finishing his years as a nomad. It seems my mother too had misgivings of undertaking a very new and strange lifestyle but trusted my father's judgment and went along. So it was that soon after birth, I was whisked away from the great capital to the very different northern landscape and the Ordu of Kaidu.

Chapter 2

Karamuren River,

Chapter 20-8th years of Toghon Temur

(Amur River, N. Manchuria, 1350-8)

How can I describe a place so strange and so foreign to all your experiences? My earliest memories are of the clear, blue sky spreading overhead like the vaulted roof of a great yurt, the wide, cold, blue and white Karamuren River, dotted with islands and sandbars in the spring and early summer, a vast lake after the monsoon rains of late summer and frozen over during the long cold, dry winters. I remember visiting the small fishing villages of the native tribes, the Nanai on the tributaries of the Karamuren and the strange Nivkh in the delta. I remember studying the fantastic carvings of masks and animals in the stone of the riverbank on the lower river. I remember the dark green forested mountains and the interspersed grasslands where we camped and moved about with our herds always in the same pattern: winter in the lee of the coastal mountains sheltered from the bitter northwest wind, spring moving slowly upriver along the Karamuren until we reached the Sungari in early summer, up the Sungari a short way then east across the Ussuri to the highlands for the monsoon season, then to the designated hunting ground for the annual fall hunt, and back to the coastal mountains for winter.

I learned to ride the steppe horse almost before I learned to walk. Many an hour was spent with the other children charging across the plain, the wind rushing around us as we were choked by dust or covered with mud according to the season. I also learned to use the bow and like a good Mongol became quite proficient with it. When I was five years old, a pestilence swept the camp and many died including my mother, my one sister and my middle brother, John. My older brother, Henry, and I also caught the disease but were spared. I have little memory of the time, but my brother told me we were cured by the shaman, Givevneu, whom Kaidu brought in after our own shaman proved to be ineffective.

Givevneu was from a tribe of people far to the north called the An'kalym. He fascinated me as a child, and I often followed him around, and he would kindly tell me stories. He told me I was very close to the sky god, Tengri, because my eyes reflected the sky. This was because I had dark blue eyes like my mother while my brother and father had gray-blue eyes. Givevneu had come to our camp apparently by accident. It seems he was resisting his "call" to be a shaman and had left his home and wandered along the forests near the coast of the great ocean. He stayed to himself and struggled with the spirits for some years until he finally gave in and then spent more years communing with the spirits. The spirits taught him during meditation and in dreams. Over time he learned how to heal the sick by finding and then overcoming the ke'let or evil spirit that caused the sickness. He told me the ke'let who had attacked our camp was one of the harder ones to defeat. He had used his "ship" (as he called his drum) to find the ke'let, and he forced the spirit to leave the encampment after a mighty struggle. This victory had been in the nick of time to save my brother and me, but too late to save the others. I never quite understood what he was talking about, and what I learned from the Hanjen treatises on disease was quite different, but it was clear to me then as it still is that Givevneu was a wonderful man who could indeed heal the sick. We were very fortunate that he was nearby in our time of need, and some of the local people sent him to us more out of fear that the pestilence would spread to them than desire to help us. He told me that he had agreed to stay with us because of the dream that had guided him south in the first place. In it he saw a walrus leave the rest of his herd and swim south until it reached the mouth of a great river. It then swam up the river until it found a herd of horses. It got out of the river and found that many were sick and dying, so it helped them and was invited to join. He said he finally understood the dream when he saw all our horses and

knew that the spirits wanted him to stay. Unlike many shamans he never tried to frighten anyone or impress anyone with his powers. He was loved and respected by all and was always honored by Kaidu while he lived. As it turned out, he had a profound affect on our future.

My mother's death greatly affected my father. Even though I was quite young, I remember how happy he had been before she died. He would always hum or whistle little tunes as he worked, and his cheerful mien was so infectious, people loved to hang around and talk and laugh with him while he worked. After Mother's death when I fully recovered from my illness, I found him a changed man. He seldom smiled, he sat for hours staring into space, his job seemed to be a burden to him, he drank too much kumis, and he barely noticed my brother and me. My brother, Henry, was also greatly affected by Mother's death. He had always been happy and carefree much like my father. He had a lot of friends and always had time for his younger brothers. It was he who taught me how to ride and use the bow. He became very quiet and serious spending all his time working at his forge. A year after Mother died, Kaidu insisted that my father take another wife. Her name was Yesui, and she was related to Kaidu, making it impossible for my father to refuse. She was a small wiry woman, much stronger than she looked. She also had been widowed by the pestilence, but she had never had any children. She was a remarkable woman. She took us all in hand and tried to turn us back into a family again. No stranger to hard work, she made sure we all ate well and were well clothed. She got my father back to the forge and was even able to make him laugh on occasion with her raunchy Mongol humor. She encouraged my older brother's blacksmithing interest and got him and my father working together again. She got me out from under Givevneu's feet and turned me over to her brother, Katan, to work on my hunting skills.

Yesui had been born and raised near Khanbalikh, but her family had always clung to the old Mongol ways, and she had readily adjusted back to the life of a nomad. Taking us over required more adjustment, but she was game up to a point. The long influence of the Hanjen and the surfeit of water in the Middle Kingdom had weaned away the Mongols from their almost manic fear of wasting water. In the old days, a Mongol only bathed or washed his clothes to the degree this could be accomplished by crossing a river or stream or being out in a rainstorm. According to my grandfather, George, our ancestors thought bathing was unhealthy but did wash clothes. It was only his father who got us on a regular cleanliness regime, and then only because his wife insisted. Yesui thought we overdid the cleanliness, but adjusted. She was also puzzled by our possession of and interest in books, as she could neither read nor write and couldn't be bothered learning either skill. She did insist on bringing in her ongons or domestic gods (little idols made of felt) and rearranged our yurt so that my father's bed was on the north side opposite the door, her bed was on the east side, and my brother and I slept on the west side. The little felt gods were over her and my father's beds as well as between and above the "bed gods." Also she put two protective figures on either side of the entrance to the yurt, to watch over the herd. We did have a few goats as well as about twenty horses. We had to patiently wait before eating while she smeared some fat on the idols' mouths and poured a little broth out the front door to feed the spirits. But in spite of all the nonsense, she was cheerful, respectful, honest, kind, fun, and full of energy, and I still think of her very fondly.

I should explain that my mother was a strict Christian and, I was told, had tried to encourage our adherence to that particular sect, but my father and my grandfather, George, considered all religions to be an obstacle to one's relationship to the one God. It seems this attitude dates back to an old tradition before the family came east. All good craftsmen strove for perfection in their work and were greatly offended that the religious "craftsmen" or priests betrayed, in general, no such striving. Disgust over the apparent hypocrisy led to a gradual disinterest in the religion, but they always believed in God and felt it was important to pray to him and dedicate their work to him. In any case, Yesui never presumed to tell us what to believe, but simply stated her beliefs as if they were facts, and my father instructed us to respect her and her beliefs but not accept them unless we personally agreed with them. My brother never did, but I might have if I had stayed with the Ordu.

Yesui's brother, Katan, took my training very seriously. He was also short but rather broad shouldered and very strong, although no longer young. His children were grown, and being a born teacher, he welcomed the chance to get a new pupil. Once he was satisfied with my use of the bow, he introduced me to the sword and the knife, getting my brother to make me a small sword. He drilled me endlessly. Once he was satisfied with my progress, he taught me how to hunt. We would be gone for days at a time during all four seasons. His favorite hunting grounds were the river valleys and the low densely forested hills east of the Ussuri River. This was a beautiful area. It was almost tropical, with lianas climbing among the oak, hornbeam, maple, elm, willow, and

lime trees. Shrubs like ginseng, honeysuckle, mock orange, peonies, and wild pepper covered the ground, making movement—and tracking—very difficult and dangerous. Colorful butterflies and beautiful birds often distracted me until Katan had me identify the various birds by their songs or just their flight. Not just the common buntings, flycatchers, cuckoos, and thrushes, but also the white eyes, minivets, drongos, plovers, and mergansers. Then there were the hunting birds, the eagles, hawks, falcons, osprey, owls, and especially the tiny screeching sparrow hawk. Here we hunted leopard, boar, bear, tiger, and on occasion marten, forest cat, and the small sika deer. While we were often successful, we would also have to settle for a rabbit or grouse on bad days. I still preferred the open plain where you could see what you were hunting and chase it down on horseback. Of course, such areas were limited along the Karamuren, and Katan taught me skills, which, fortunately, stayed with me for life.

When I was seven years old, I was allowed to participate in the annual fall hunt. In full battle regalia, the whole Ordu went out and surrounded a large tract of land and then began moving in on the great circle they had formed, driving all game before them. It was a matter of pride to let no animal, large or small, escape the ring. I and the other youngsters on their first hunt were with Kaidu advancing slowly on horseback, with more experienced hunters nearby to make sure we did not disgrace the Ordu. Over the next two days as the circle became smaller, we could see all sorts of different animals, deer, reindeer, bears, wild dogs, wolves, antelope, wolverines, boars, mink, sable, hedgehogs, even rabbits, pheasants, ptarmigan, grouse, and other small game. At night the surrounding fires kept the trap intact, and we could see the glowing eyes balefully staring at us from a safe distance and hear their roars, hisses, and snorts. No prey evaded the trap. Finally in the early afternoon of the third day, the circle was perceived by Kaidu to be small enough, and he signaled a halt. Then, as was the custom, he moved forward alone and entered the wooded hills before us armed only with a bow and a sword. We sat on our horses and quietly waited while the game could be heard crashing around in the wood. After a short time, Kaidu emerged from the wood riding calmly and pulling behind his horse a tiger and a boar. Over the rump of his horse lay a huge silver wolf. Each animal had only a single arrow in it. On reaching us, he instructed some of the men to retrieve the bear and three deer they would find in a small clearing just into the wood. When these were brought out, he gave the signal for the other leaders to move into the wood. After a short pause, Kaidu greased the middle finger of the bow hand of each of us first-time hunters according to the custom and then sent us in with the rest of the hunters while he took a good vantage point from which to watch the hunt and his women set to work on his game.

We youngsters tried to stay together as we entered the woods but were soon separated by the irregularity of the terrain, for it was broken by ravines and there were rocky outcrops interspersed with thickly wooded hillsides. Soon I found myself with only one companion as we moved deeper into the wood. The shouts of the hunters and the screams and grunts and thrashings of the hunted could be heard on all sides. I saw some small game, rabbits, mink, an otter, and a wild dog scurry to evade us, but in my childish arrogance I disdained them, for I wanted a noble prize for my first hunt. My companion rushed after a wild dog he thought was a wolf, and I went on alone urging my horse into the din. Finally, I saw a young stag hiding motionless behind a screen of birch. Taking careful aim I dropped him with one shot right to the heart. Swelling with pride I walked my horse over to my prize and jumped off and tied a rope around its neck so that my horse could drag it out. I remounted, secured the other end of the rope, and started slowly moving back to the starting point. Then out of all the noise around me I distinctly heard a nearby menacing growl. I fit an arrow to my bow as I carefully looked around peering into the bushes from where the sound had come. I started moving forward again keeping my bow ready, but my horse snorted and shied away from the path in which I was directing it, so I halted again and tried to see what was in the low brush ahead. Suddenly a figure hurled itself out of the brush toward me and only the instinct born of constant practice enabled me to fire off an arrow before it was on me, but the arrow hit its mark, and my frightened horse lashed out with its hooves to finish off what proved to be a young tiger. Badly shaken, I fit another arrow into the bow lest the limp figure should spring back to life. Just then Katan came out of the woods and stared in amazement at my prizes. Without a word, he jumped down and tied the tiger to the stag for me, then remounted and went back into the woods muttering something about the student trying to show up the teacher. I could tell he was pleased.

Uneventfully, although slowly because of the underbrush, I dragged my prizes back to the encampment and encountered some of the other returning hunters on the way. Some of the men were dragging much more formidable prey than I was, but I could see that they were impressed with my success. The others my own age

had much less to show for their first hunt, and by the time I cleared the wood, I was feeling rather puffed up with pride. My brother rushed up to greet me only to look in awe at my catch. His stag was bigger, but he had only bagged a fox not a tiger and besides he was nine years older than me and had only gotten a wild dog and two rabbits on his first hunt. Word got around and Kaidu himself came over to see my kill. He praised me and gave me a cup of kumis. My very proud stepmother took over the game while I basked in the glow of all the praise as well as the glow of the kumis. As more of the men came in, more toasts were drunk to my first hunt, and soon my head was swimming. I don't recall much about the feast that followed the hunt, except I do remember retching uncontrollably at one point. Eventually my brother found me and hauled me home dropping me off at the entrance to our yurt and throwing a skin over me because of my condition. The next day I spent trying to keep my head from exploding, while receiving no sympathy from any of my family. I suppose that ended any enthusiasm I might have had for kumis, and I have never had the stomach for the stuff since.

In the spring of the following year my stepmother managed to make my father aware that his second son was becoming quite the Mongol, except for my curious interest in reading the family books. He decided my future needed to be considered and called me in for a talk. He first asked if I had any interest in the family skill, sword making, and was not at all surprised to hear I had none. He then asked if I wanted to be a soldier like my stepuncle, Katan, and again I said no. "What then?" he asked.

I wish I could get back into my head at the time and understand my reply to him, but I have no recall of what I was thinking when I answered simply, "Learning things." I did indeed enjoy reading the family books and liked the strange language in which one of them was written and the beautiful illuminations or pictures made out of the first letter on each page. I liked the feel of the pages, so unlike the Hanjen paper I would later get to know. It was a strange book I couldn't really understand until I was much older. Father couldn't really understand it either and had no idea how or which ancestor acquired it. He speculated that someone probably gave it to one of our ancestors in lieu of payment. It was called, *De Politica* and was written by an Aristotelis. We all used it to learn the written language—as we called it. I also liked the Mongol books in the Uighur script I had laboriously learned. But I really liked knowing how things were made and why they were made that way. In general I was quite a nuisance to anyone who would make the mistake of letting me ask them a question. After some thought, my father decided that it would be best if I returned to Khanbalikh to live with my grandfather, and perhaps with more options available, I could learn a skill that would make me of use to the Ordu. My stepmother was upset to lose me, but didn't feel she had a right to interfere, so she got my things ready for the trip.

I had never been away from the camp before for more than a few days while on a hunt and was a little apprehensive about living with strangers (for I had no memory of my grandfather). Still the idea of returning to my birthplace and seeing many of the wonderful sights my brother had told me about excited me, and I looked forward to the adventure. In early summer I set off with some men Kaidu was sending to the capital after first promising my stepmother and Katan to keep up the skills he had patiently imparted.

At the time of my departure our camp was near where the Karamuren River is joined by the Sungari and turns northeast to empty finally into the Great Sea some fifteen hundred li away. At this point, the few "tribal Mongols" among the Ordu, especially Kaidu, would be seen staring westward along the river toward Mongolia. For it was along the Onon River which flows into the Karamuren, way upstream from this point, that the tribes which became the first Mongols arose. My own origins being far too distant to even contemplate, I could never get into the idea. In any case, Kaidu and his few fellows were so engaged when I left that morning. I remember the sight of them as we moved steadily southwestward up the muddy Sungari River, which drained the Manchurian plain into the Karamuren. It occurred to me looking at the water flow by that soon it would pass the Ordu and everything I had known so far, and I began to understand the behavior of the old Mongols. Little time was allowed for dreaming however, since we moved very steadily in order to reach the first yam by nightfall, and no one was going to be held up by a boy—I had to keep up or make it on my own. The others were especially anxious to make good time because the monsoon season was approaching and the rivers would become impassable and the ground marshy if we tarried.

The yam system established long ago by Chingis was still in fairly good condition in the north, but by now had fallen into great disrepair to the south and west of the capital. I was, of course, blissfully unaware of the fact that the great Khanate of the Mongols was slowly being torn apart. At this time, the Great Khan, Toghon Temur, held sway over only a fraction of the Khanate of Kubilai. But here in the rugged and sparsely populated

north, there was no rebellion seething under the surface of the scattered nomad herders and farmers we encountered on our way. The yams were about ninety li apart, and so we moved just that distance each day. Nights were spent in the yurts of the yams. These were not very fancy and were often rather dirty and foul smelling, but after a day in the saddle and the fresh air, I, at least, was too tired to press the issue and simply ate what was put before me and promptly lay down on whatever sort of rug was provided and quickly fell asleep. In the morning we ate millet gruel, were given dried milk or meat to eat on our way, received fresh horses, and continued on to the next yam.

Our path followed the Sungari until it turned southeastward, where we crossed it, and moved due south for a while to avoid a desert, finally turned southwestward again following for a time a tributary of the Liao River, although we never saw the Liao itself. On we moved threading our way along the low mountains that separated Manchuria from the Han Plain. Finally, almost a month after our departure, we came to the Great Wall. In spite of my companions' disdain for the ineffective barrier, I was awestruck and wanted to explore it carefully. They refused, but suggested that my grandfather could take me to it since part of the wall came very near Khanbalikh. For the next four days the Wall slipped tantalizingly into and out of our view. Then we saw it no more but began to see the sprawling suburbs of Khanbalikh and beyond them, the outer earthen walls of the city itself. While I gaped in wonder at the increasing concentration of people as we moved through the suburbs and the corresponding increase in traffic on the road, the people we encountered showed no particular interest in us. Soon we had to wind our way through merchant caravans of camels and asses laden with trade goods, vendors' carts, wagons drawn by horses or yaks, and many, many individual men and women carrying burdens on their backs. Through all our journey, we had skirted by the larger cities, and I had only seen towns and villages which, while the larger ones were like nothing I had ever seen along the Karamuren, had hardly prepared me for the teeming cacophony of noise, the riot of color, and the barrage of odors that assaulted my senses as we approached the steadily looming city walls. Finally we entered the gates and found ourselves on a broad, paved street stretching out before us. Shortly, we turned aside and soon stopped before a house from the back of which could be heard the unmistakable sound of a smithy. My companions told me that this was my grandfather's house and bidding me farewell, went on to complete their mission.

Chapter 3

Khanbalikh

Chapter 28th to 37th years of Toghon Temur

(Beijing, China 1358-67)

I stared after my traveling companions for a while as they disappeared among the throng along the road. Then with some misgivings, I dismounted and approached what appeared to be a horse shed next to the main house. I entered the shed, tethered the horse next to the two horses already there, and taking my pack, slowly walked up to the house. Not sure what to do, I opened the door and peered in. Seeing no one, I entered the house and looked all around the large airy room with glass windows, colorful wall coverings, and rugs. The walls and floor were made of polished wood, as were the benches I could see about the room. There were also doors that led to other rooms. This was nothing like a yurt! Curious though I was, I stopped staring about and moved toward the hammering sounds I knew so well from my father's forge. The sound led me through the house and out another door into an enclosed backyard with trees, bushes and flowers, and in the center, a forge. At the forge lost in his work so much that he did not detect my approach was a white-haired replica of my father. Before I left the Ordu, my father assured me that I would have no trouble recognizing his father—he was right. I put my gear down and squatted down to watch just as I sometimes watched my father, and the sounds transported me home for a while, until my grandfather finally noticed me.

“Who might you be, child?” He peered at me as if he was trying to recognize me, “And how did you get in here?”

“I'm Karl,” I stammered, “and I came through the door there.” I pointed back to the door from which I had entered the garden.

“Karl?” My grandfather seemed puzzled. “What Karl? Should I know you?”

It was foolish of me to think the poor man would recognize a grandson he had only seen as a babe some eight years before, and, of course, no one warned him I was coming, since our family's business hardly rated a dispatch rider. In fact, I carried with me my father's announcement of my advent in a hastily scribbled note, which I thoughtfully produced from my pack at this strategic moment. The light was fading so my grandfather took the note near the forge to read. Finishing the note, he again studied me as if to see if there was any family resemblance to give credence to the note. Finally, he burst out laughing, a loud, raucous, infectious laughter, which I finally joined in, puzzled but relieved.

"So, you are Karl," he chuckled. "I finally see it. You look just like your mother, although you smell like a Mongol from the old days—after a long campaign. Come, we'll clean you up and then decide what to do with you."

So it was that I came to live in Khanbalikh with my grandfather George. He was not a bit surprised at my not wanting to be a blacksmith, (after all I was named Karl, wasn't I?) and was glad I didn't want to simply be a soldier. He decided, and I agreed, that since I wanted to learn, he would see that I was taught. He also had some books that I could read, but more importantly, my maternal grandfather, Peter, a Nestorian priest, who was immersed in things of the Hanjen, could teach me to speak, read, and write in that language and perhaps also in his native Farsi. With these two languages along with Mongol under my belt, I could learn all there was to learn in Khanbalikh.

Grandfather Peter, a pale, short, and thin man with a long white beard, a large nose, and bright blue almost feverish eyes, bawled like a woman in mourning when he first saw me, because I reminded him of his daughter, my mother. Soon, he decided the resemblance was purely superficial, and he was scandalized by my "crude Mongol manners" which were all because my father had dragged his poor gentle baby girl off into the wilds to live as a barbarian. He also held my father responsible for her untimely death. When he wasn't carrying on so, he did try to teach me Hanjen and Farsi over the next few years as my grandfather George had requested. Fortunately, I was allowed to live with Grandfather George and go to Grandfather Peter only for lessons. I was much more comfortable with the former as he was more easygoing—more of a Mongol than the latter. I was also subjected to both sides of a debate on the merits of Grandfather Peter's religion. Grandfather George warned me not to clutter my brain with Grandfather Peter's "religious puffery," but to learn only the languages, so I could learn useful things. Grandfather Peter was incensed at my imperviousness to his religion and was certain that I would end up in an unpleasant place called hell, where I would no doubt find my grandfather George. Since I had grown quite fond of the latter, I wasn't too concerned by the prospect. Grandfather Peter also tried to introduce me to Hanjen "culture." He would first read to me, then help me read his Hanjen books (implausible accounts of old heroes overcoming devils, dragons, and other insurmountable obstacles), and he would haul me to what proved to be completely incomprehensible formal entertainments, which he greatly enjoyed. These latter consisted of skits and rather tedious songs—long and in one key. I hated these and didn't really like his poetry and tales either, but I very much enjoyed the less literary works. These were compendiums of history, medicine, science, warfare, geography, and technology. I devoured all such that he had and was allowed to read some owned by his friends since I always treated the books with proper reverence. He never could understand my interests, but was pleased that I had impressed his friends with my questions. He would also take me far out of our way all over the sprawling city of Tatu (as he and most of the Hanjen insisted on calling Khanbalikh) to show me some painting or piece of crockery he greatly admired. The former tended to be landscapes and somewhat nice, but no match for the real thing—not nearly enough color. The latter were quite attractive, bright blues, yellows, reds, and greens with imaginative decorations like dragons, flowers and animals on them, but the porcelain was thin and fragile, not very practical for the Ordu. He did not cry when Grandfather George decided it was time I had a new teacher.

My next teacher was Ibrahim, a chemist and a Muslim, fortunately in that order. A tall, thin, quiet man with a sallow complexion, a large hooked nose, small hazel eyes topped by bushy black eyebrows and a long, rather unkempt black beard. He always wore a turban, even indoors, and he was rather stoop shouldered. He taught me what he knew about the elements of the earth, where they could be found and isolated and how they could be used. He also tried to teach me his religion, but he wasn't as pushy about it as Grandfather Peter had been and didn't appear to be offended by my intransigence. Again, I still lived with Grandfather George and each day we went over whatever I had learned. He always encouraged me to question until I fully understood and was very supportive. After two years with Ibrahim, I knew where and how to find all metal-bearing ores and how to smelt

the metal free from the slag. I could make the various strengths of gunpowder and poison and smoke bombs, knew how and when to use acids and various salts, and could recognize many gases by their smell. I could detect many poisons and salts by simple tests and could distill petroleum and alcohol. He only showed me the last skill, because, like him, I didn't drink alcohol. One could make a very potent drink called strong beer by distilling ordinary beer. I can imagine what could be done with kumis!

My next teacher was Kuang Tung, a Hanjen engineer. He was a short, rather portly Han, with intense dark eyes, a thin wispy beard, and a broad mouth usually smiling with enthusiasm. He explained to me the various ingenious inventions the Hanjen had developed over the centuries to make their lives more comfortable or their wars more successful. Some of the former were clever but impractical in the Ordu, but the mechanics were interesting, and I paid close attention. The war machinery was quite intriguing, especially if one was to engage in siege warfare, either offensively or defensively, which seemed to be the main application. It was the development of a very strong brass that was 70 percent copper, which enabled such creations as the "flying fire machine." This weapon had a clever double acting piston bellows enabling it to deliver a continuous directed flow of fire. The fire came by holding a lighted fuse in front of the nozzle while pumping out the lighter petroleum distillates. He also showed me the designs for various sizes of cannon made of cast iron. Grandfather made one of the handheld-sized ones for me, and it actually worked for many years. I also learned the intricacies of fireworks both as show and as weapons. Kuang Tung belonged to an odd Tibetan religion, Buddhism. As warlike as the Tibetans were I was curious about their beliefs, but they proved to be rather passive and too reflective. Perhaps that was why their incursions into the Middle Kingdom were always beaten back. In any case, he was a most patient teacher, tirelessly explaining the inner workings of his machinery until I could actually get a feel for how they were developed—a skill that would serve me well later on.

At last I came to my final teacher, the formidable Tsu Chi'a. He was of moderate height for a Han, and rather thin, but ramrod straight, rather than the typical stooped posture of the Hanjen. His small dark eyes were heavily lidded and perversely expressionless. His thin, clean-shaved face was almost cadaverous with its pale, parchmentlike skin. He proposed to teach me history, geography, cartography, navigation, tactics, philosophy, and most important, manners. He was a remarkable teacher. He could actually answer all my questions and demanded and received my complete attention at all times. This was simple for I was fascinated by everything except the manners. These were tedious and, to put it mildly, excessive. Still, if I didn't put on his manners for him, he wouldn't go on to the interesting things. It was blackmail, but a small price to pay for all he taught me. I wish I could say that the manners were a help to me as years went by, but I can't. No other people I have encountered were that silly about interpersonal encounters. As Grandfather George said, the Hanjen have a flair for complicating the mundane. Everything else he taught me, however, proved to be very useful. Most importantly, he taught me how all these subjects were synergistic, and if applied that way the potential was unlimited. For example, if I decided to be a general, from history I would know what had been tried before and how successfully, from geography I would know how to shape the lessons of the past to the problem at hand, from cartography I could be secure in my knowledge of the terrain in detail, from navigation I could explore the unknown and find my way back home safely by studying the stars, or should they be obscured by means of the lodestone (a marvelous discovery that always pointed north), from tactics I would understand how others used the strengths and limitations of their forces to best advantage, and from philosophy I would be able to think clearly and logically to bring all my knowledge to bear on the problem at hand. I was with this last teacher the longest and was a young man of seventeen years when he dismissed me. I suspect that under his cold, impassive front he was as fond of me as I was of him.

By now I have managed to give the impression that I spent my youth in hard study with never a thought to frivolity or diversion. But the truth is, that while I did apply myself to my studies, my grandfather George was not too old to remember what it was like to be young. And, I suspect having me around made him feel younger. We dedicated one day a week to what he called my bookless education. We explored the city, both the new part where we lived and the old part across the river. We always steered clear of the palace, however, not wishing to be noticed, or by any accident be drawn into the constant intrigue there. It was like a city within the city, large and imposing, but Grandfather George had an exaggerated fear of getting too close. Whenever the current Khan, Toghon Temur, or his chancellors deigned to wander forth, we would always stay far out of their path. I still think it was unlikely we would have been of any interest to the Khan or his court, but Grandfather was right in keeping me away from the very empty court life, and, in truth, it really didn't interest me at all.

We also explored beyond the city, taking day trips on horseback, for my grandfather also loved to ride. As my traveling companions had suggested, I got him to take me to the Great Wall. In fact it was one of his favorite sites, and we spent hours studying it and speculating on what it must have taken to build it. While most Mongols saw it as a monument to Hanjen folly, to me it was rather a monument to ingenuity, determination, and engineering skill. It always comes to mind when I think of the Hanjen, and I think it is a good symbol for them, strong, enduring but not impermeable or as forbidding as they first appear. It was during our excursions outside the city that I would practice with the bow both on foot and from horseback as well as hunting and tracking. It was also during one of these outings that I met my first and only love, Paula.

Paula was the niece of a Polish (from Poland, a large kingdom east of the Holy Roman Empire) merchant who had found himself trapped in Karakorum during the disintegration of the Empire of Kubilai. Unable to return home, he moved to Khanbalikh and continued his trade. His brother, Paula's father, had been with him but died when she was still a child. She was just my age and breathtakingly beautiful. Her eyes were as blue as mine, but her hair was lighter and her skin fairer. Her cheekbones were visible but not overwhelming, and she had a good nose like my family, not the nubbins of the rather flat-faced Mongols and Hanjen. She was tall and sturdy for a woman, but was still very feminine. She could ride a horse as well as most men (who were not Mongols), but had never used a bow until I taught her. To my great relief and joy she also found me attractive and loved my company. I had no real experience with women since coming to live with my grandfather, for his wife had died long before and his only servants were two older men. When we first met, I was somewhat in awe of her and painfully shy, but she was so self-assured that she ignored my shyness and befriended me anyway chatting freely and confidently. While I had always been interested in the use or structure of things, she helped me see and enjoy their beauty. She would take us out of the way to see a view she found particularly beautiful. She would stop suddenly and point out a flower, a tree, a stream, or even an animal she found arresting. It was a whole different view of the world, and I was much amazed by it and her.

We met a scant six months before my education was complete and in that short time I was totally smitten. We pledged to be married and were greatly relieved to find that her uncle and my grandfather were not opposed and in fact seemed altogether unsurprised by it all. I often wondered later if they had planned it all along, but if they had, they did us both a great favor. We all agreed that she and I would marry as soon as I decided what I would do with myself after all this training.

When I returned home after Tsu Chi'a told me he had no more to teach me, my grandfather and I sat down to discuss my future. By now I had been longer with him than with the rest of my family and indeed felt much closer to him. Knowing my training was winding down and anxious to start my life with Paula, I had been thinking about the future, but had still not come to any firm decision. We sat in silence for a while after our meal, me weighing options for the future, him perhaps thinking of our time together. Finally he broke into our reveries.

"Karl," he began, "I cannot express how much I have enjoyed having you here with me all these years. I could not love you more if you were my own son, even if you are nothing like my own son. Still, you are a credit to him and your mother, and, to some degree, me. Now your training is over, and it is time for you to become a man and decide your own fate. It was for this that you came here and were trained. God knows you have 'learned things' as you wished. You do have some options and have no doubt given them much thought. I would only caution you not to make remaining here one of your options. I am quite old, and will likely not see it, but there is no way the Khanate will survive your lifetime. We are semujen (non-Mongol foreigners) and as such are resented by the Hanjen for our privileges under the Mongols. When they take Khanbalikh, they will not be merciful to us or the other non-Hanjen. I can't really blame them for their resentment, but I do fault their racism, a most un-Mongol trait. There is a whole world out there. I would urge you to pick a direction other than south and go."

"Grandfather," I replied, "I would have to be a fool not to see what is coming here. My future definitely lies away from Khanbalikh. I'm still not sure where to go, but I do think I should try to find the Ordu and report back to father. It was he who sent me here, and I owe him that much. I do think of them all and wonder if they are well. Besides, it would be interesting to hear what Kaidu plans to do with the Ordu—if, indeed, it still exists."

"I'm proud of you, Karl," he smiled tenderly. "You are indeed a dutiful son, and to return to the Ordu is the right thing to do. I suspect, however, that you will find you have outgrown the Ordu and the nomad's life and

want something more. You will be the most educated man there—if not among all Mongols. Still, I remember Kaidu to be a most wise and thoughtful man, there are few such men around, and you could serve far worse. You were named ‘Karl.’ In our family history that always meant change. Indeed, we have never had anyone in the family trained as you have been. It also has meant travel, and I see no alternative to that now. Perhaps you will lead the remnants of the family to new lands. It should be exciting.”

“I don’t know, Grandfather,” I shrugged, “I have not traveled much except for the nomadic wandering about the Karamuren and my journey here. I have often dreamed about seeing the places I have read about—even the place from which we originally came, far to the west. It could be quite an adventure, especially with Paula by my side.”

“Indeed, my boy,” he chuckled, “and youth is the time for adventure. Paula is a fine strong girl, the perfect companion for adventure. I will greatly miss you, but you will soon find your way back here to gather up your bride. As to the journey home, you had best leave soon before the rains make your trip truly miserable.”

Paula agreed that I was doing the right thing checking up on my family but urged me to be very careful and return to her as soon as possible. Two days later, I left Khanbalikh behind, and returned over much the same course I had come by, this time guided by maps and signposts to the still-operational yams along the way. There were a few nights I spent under the stars but most of the time the yams were still in use although meaner than I remembered them with more meager rations and rather sorry-looking mounts. Not much seemed to have changed along the way, the same small towns and villages, the same farms and huts; it was not until I approached the Karamuren from the Sungari that I saw a change. Not only had I not run into the Ordu, but also there was no sign that they had ever been here this year.

Chapter 4

Karamuren River

Chapter 37th year of Toghon Temur

(Amur River Valley S.E. Siberia 1367)

It was troubling to find no sign of the Ordu along the Sungari, but as I proceeded down the Karamuren and still saw no sign of them, I became alarmed. Grim thoughts raced through my mind, another plague, an uprising by the locals, an invasion from the north, the south, or the west, a flash flood? Mongols did not panic, I reminded myself and began to sort things out. A plague never wiped out everyone, and besides we had heard nothing of any plagues in the north back in Khanbalikh. The locals had neither the means nor the inclination to attack the Ordu—besides, they liked us as much as anyone could like a pack of outsiders, for we did always treat them fairly, and we both benefited from trade, their fish for our game or herd meat. Invasion was possible, but not from the north; there was no group strong enough, not from the west. Why would they come here? The south was the only possibility, the Koryo. But even there, why would they bother to come all the way here to take out a single Ordu? Besides, I had not run into any foreign military along the way, and if they had attacked, wouldn’t they have moved on afterward toward the capital? After all, they had attacked before. Of course, there were also the remnants of the Jurchids. They had actually conquered the Hanjen, but Chingis had greatly scattered and absorbed them, and it was unlikely they would be ready to do anything yet. Again, I had not seen any soldiers or signs of battle. Nor had there been any apprehension at any of the yams along the way. I closely looked at the river, but I couldn’t tell if there had been a flash flood. After all, it flooded every summer and would be starting to rise soon. I continued downriver with more puzzlement than anything else. It was fairly obvious that no one had been near here with herds since at least early spring, for the grass was untouched. I decided the easiest way to find what happened would be to ask at the nearest local village. There had been a Nanai village not too far downstream from my current position. I would have to see if it was still there.

It was with no small relief when the village finally came into view. It looked much the same as I remembered it, although it seemed smaller. The Nanai summer villages were simply a scattering of conical huts that were covered with strips of birch bark. I had forgotten how “fishy” their villages smelled. Everywhere, one saw the fruits of their labor, racks of fish drying or being smoked, seines being repaired. Even the clothes they wore were made of fish skins. Not surprisingly, my approach was noted but since I was alone, I was soon ignored, as I made my way to the largest hut, which was usually the headman’s hut. The headman, a large, beefy fellow,

more than a little long in the tooth, was actually the same one as before, and I could see he was shocked when I greeted him by name in his own tongue. It took a while for him to realize who I was, but once he did, he received me warmly and asked for stories about the great capital. Politeness demanded that I comply before asking my questions, so I patiently described the capital for them over dinner, then asked about their health and luck with fishing, expressing all due admiration with the large sturgeon we had eaten for dinner, talked about the weather, the imminent monsoon season, then finally I felt I could ask them what had become of the Ordu and when they had last seen it.

They smiled broadly and pointed north, across the Karamuren! The Karamuren had always been our northern border. On occasion a few of us would venture across and look around, but the whole Ordu had never crossed. It must have been quite an undertaking for the river is wide and deep and swift. It seemed that the winter before last, the Ordu did not go to their usual winter camp east of the mountains, but stayed on this side near the village and braved the brutal northwest winter wind. In late winter when the Karamuren was frozen hard, they had crossed not far downstream from the village. It had been quite a spectacle, and many of the villagers had watched. All had made it safely across, headed away from the river, and no one had seen them since anywhere along the Karamuren.

The next morning, I got the villagers to help me get across the river in one of their boats while my horse swam alongside guided by his reins, which I held securely. They gave me some food and directions to another Nanai village no more than two days' ride away, where I might hear more of the Ordu since they likely passed that way. The ride was not an easy one, forcing me at times through dense underbrush, but I finally reached the village shortly after noon on the third day. Mongols rarely ride the same horse two days in a row, usually taking up to six mounts with them. I was not so equipped, however, and wisely spared my horse as much as I could. After a few tense moments, the village accepted me as a guest, mostly (I suspect), because I could speak their language. I've always been blessed with a facility with languages, and it has come in very handy. In this case, of course, my vocabulary was that of a boy, but I was quickly recalling the language and becoming quite fluent with practice, only occasionally needing to have a word explained. Of course, my hosts demanded stories over dinner. I remembered one of the silly hero tales from Grandfather Peter's books, and regaled them with that much to their enjoyment. That night the storm that had been brewing all day long finally broke and after softening us up with barrages of lightning, a torrential downpour was unleashed which continued well into the morning and then only tapered off to a steady downpour for the rest of the day. The necessary layover was very good for my horse, and it enabled me to get a feel for where I was as I began a crude map of the area north of the Karamuren. This was of great interest to my hosts, and they eagerly offered suggestions and corrections, over which they argued extensively. While all this help was probably more enthusiastic than useful, I encouraged it hoping to get some bearing on the whereabouts of the Ordu. They were fairly unanimous that I would likely find the Ordu camp near a large lake about ten days' ride to the northeast. They also suggested that I should go north up their river for about four days, then cross the mountains to another valley which heads northeast right to the lake. When the river turned north, I should continue northeast between a high hill on the north and a swamp to the south, right to the western shore of the lake. The Ordu should be on the west, south, or east side of the lake, since the north side was too swampy. They had been there early in the spring.

This last piece of intelligence, dropped in their usual offhand manner greatly excited me, and I was eager to set off. The villagers loaned me a second horse, which I promised to return, and gave me enough food for ten days. I followed their directions and corrected my map as I went along. As usual, they underestimated how long the journey would take, especially with all the rain I encountered. It took five days to get up their valley, and then it took almost two days to negotiate the crossing of the very slippery mountains to the other valley. Fortunately, they also overestimated how much I would eat, so I still had some food left some thirteen days later when the lake came into view. I couldn't see the Ordu from the lake's shore, but it was a very large lake, so I decided to ride up the lakeside of the tall hill from where I should be able to see much farther. As I climbed the mountain, I kept looking back but could see no sign of them. Finally I reached the top of the eastern ridge of the hill and could still see nothing around the lake. Blessed with a rare clear day, I started to look around and to the south, beyond a swamp, I could just make out the glassy reflection of another lake, possibly as large as this one. I went back down the hill and rode southward until nightfall, skirting around the swamp as much as possible.

The next morning, I continued south and soon reached the slope of another hill. I rode up the north side to the top of its eastern ridge, and there on the southwestern shore I could see the Ordu, for the sun was reflected

off the white lime coating of the felt yurts and above them smoke from their morning fires escaped through the smoke holes and hung wraithlike in the still air. As I descended the hill toward them, it was obvious that I had also been seen, as a group of horsemen was coming toward me. By the time I got down the hill and crossed a small stream, they were upon me.

It took me quite a while to convince my “escort” who I was, but a few of the boys with whom I had played just barely recognized me, especially after I enumerated where their birthmarks were. On the way into camp, they told me that my father had died three years before, but my brother was still with them. In fact the latter was married and had children. They also warned me that there had been many changes in the Ordu, and after I had seen my family, I should report to Kaidu right away. They would tell him of my arrival. As we arrived at the camp, I could see that it did seem smaller than before. I turned aside to my father’s old yurt and watched the others ride up to Kaidu’s yurt in the middle of the encampment.

My brother came out of the yurt as I drew near, and we both stopped and stared at each other. He was the image of father only much younger. His children crowded out and peered curiously around him at me. Then his wife, a Turk from the look of her, came out to see and finally an older Mongol woman waded through the others and gasping her surprise, grabbed me in a bear hug.

“Kahh! My Kahh!” my stepmother screeched, “You have finally come home. Look at you, all grown, with a beard already, all that education and you smell like a Mongol, you weren’t ruined! You can still ride, but can you still shoot the bow? You are not very big; did not your grandfather feed you? Are you at least strong? How did you find us? Where is your wife? Much has changed since you left!”

“Mother, stop for a minute.” My brother rescued me. “Karl, you look so much like mother Christina, I thought I’d seen a ghost. Welcome! Meet the family. This is my wife, Doqus, remember her? Ussu’s sister? These are my boys, Henry and John, and my daughter, Christina. Come in, come in. This is still your home.”

“Kahh, you must be hungry,” My stepmother could not be put off for long. “There is still some porridge left. Come, sit by the hearth, eat, and tell us all.”

“Mother Yesui,” I laughed, “I knew you would not change. But before I do anything else, I want to wash two months in the saddle off and get presentable, for I’m supposed to present myself to Kaidu as soon as possible.”

“First,” Yesui jumped up from the fire, “you must pay your respects to your father. Come.”

I followed her to the little shrine she kept and there silently greeted my father’s memory. I tried to see him as he was when I left, but found I could only picture my grandfather George. My memories of Father were few and tinged with sadness, while those of Grandfather were many and happy. I quietly thanked Father for sending me to Grandfather and felt sure he would not be offended if I thought about the latter for a few moments. After a while, I returned to the hearth. Doqus had readied a tub of water for me to wash and set out one of my brother’s outfits for me to wear since all my things were dirty.

“You have honored your father’s memory well, my son,” Yesui hovered about. “To think of him and smile that way shows you are a good son, full of happy, loving memories of your father. I am very pleased with you. I feared you would have become a Hanjen in Khanbalikh.”

She spat out the word “Hanjen” like it was the worst insult she could think of. But this was not the time to point out that she was more closely related to them than she was to me, anymore than that I was smiling about my grandfather’s memory, not my father’s. She took my soiled clothes and blatantly eyeing my privates, congratulated me on growing up completely, before going out to wash them, cackling all the way. While I cleaned up and got dressed, I reminded myself how crude her humor had always been and wondered what my poor Paula would think of her. All through my toilet, I was subjected to the rapt attention of my nephews, who stared up at me with their big hazel-brown eyes. Meanwhile, my brother tried to tell me a little of what had been going on while I was away.

It seemed that about five years earlier, Kaidu began sending some of the people away. No one was sure why, but when he had finished, almost half of the tumen was gone. He had picked up a few new members over the years, but as I had noticed, the Ordu was much reduced. Kaidu had over the course of two years personally talked to each member of the tumen who was head of a yurt or an unmarried young adult and on the basis of that interview either sent them away or allowed them to stay. There was no pattern to the division that was discernable to my brother. No tribes were excluded, age didn’t seem to matter, and even health didn’t matter. My father had been accepted, and after he died, Henry had also passed the test. He supposed that was why I had to report to Kaidu, for a belated interview. He wasn’t sure if my being in Khanbalikh would work against me,

but feared it might, since Kaidu had not reported to the capital or even the nearest governor for some years. He had no idea what Kaidu planned to do, but here, north of the Karamuren, was out of the Mongol Khanate, so perhaps it was for safety. Henry's information was rather puzzling and obviously incomplete, so it was with great curiosity and an open mind that I went to meet the leader of the Ordu.

Kaidu was no longer a young man, but he looked strong and vigorous, his dark eyes bright and sharp. He was shorter than I remembered him but just as imposing. He was broad but not fat. His complexion was ruddy and healthy like that of most of the Ordu. He was sitting on a wooden chair set on a platform slightly above the level of the floor. I presented myself, bowing three times as I entered according to the custom, and he nodded in response. Soon some of the awe in which I had always held him came back for he seemed to be reading me with his deep, dark penetrating eyes. At his side was my old friend the shaman, Givevneu. He also watched me, but smiled at me as he had always done. Finally Kaidu broke the silence.

"So," he barked eyeing me carefully and waving me to sit on the floor, "the youngest son of my late sword maker has returned."

"I have, sir," I replied lowering my eyes with good Hanjen manners.

"Look at me when I talk to you, Ferengi!" he hissed.

"Yes, sir!" My head shot up and my eyes met his.

It had been a long time since I had been called Ferengi, but it was no insult, merely the Mongol term for all western people. We stared each other down for some minutes, until Kaidu smiled, then broke eye contact and laughed uproariously in the Mongol fashion. I continued to look at him for a while puzzled by his behavior, but Mongol laughter is irresistible, and I finally joined in.

"I like you, boy," he said, wiping his eyes. "What is your name?"

"Karl, sir," I replied.

"Kaahhr? It sounds like the song of a crow," he smiled, pleased with himself. "Perhaps I should call you 'The Crow.' Would you like that?"

"Could you at least make that 'Raven'?" I winced. "A crow is thought clever but a thief, while a raven is respected and admired."

"The Raven! That sounds impressive," he looked at me mockingly. "Do you deserve an impressive name?"

"Not yet," I replied, "but perhaps it will give me something to which to aspire."

"So be it, Raven." His tone turned serious. "But now that you are named, perhaps you can tell me what use you will be to this tumen. Have you any skill?"

"I have been trained in history, geography, cartography, navigation, tactics, engineering, chemistry, and philosophy, sir," I answered. "I can both read and write the Mongol script, Farsi, Hanjen, and our old family language."

"Very presumptuous training," he darkened. "Were you planning to become vizier to the Khan?"

"No, sir," I shook my head. "I have no interest in entering the Khan's service, those were the subjects that interested me. I really had no thought about what I would do with the knowledge, but I'm sure it will be helpful to me in the future, and I am very willing to continue learning."

"Hmmm," he mused. "We'll see. Meanwhile, whose history, what geography, and whose tactics did you study?"

"The Mongol and Hanjen history, geography, and tactics, sir," I eagerly replied.

"Mongol history is short, Hanjen endless, Mongol and Hanjen geography are constantly changing, and Mongol tactics are far superior to that of the Hanjen. Would you agree?" He smirked.

"Well," I began, "I suspect that Mongol and Hanjen history are equally long, depending on how you define Mongol and Hanjen, but the latter is better recorded since they have used writing longer. As to geography, the borders do indeed change frequently, but the land itself changes much more slowly. Mongol tactics are superior if one is blessed with Mongol warriors in a fairly open terrain, but the Hanjen are very effective at siege warfare and are quite creative when it comes to weaponry and engineering."

"Why did you study philosophy?" He shot at me.

"It helps one think logically, examine motives and, in short, understand the entire picture or situation before you," I replied.

"What about religion?" he looked at me steadily. "Did you also study religions?"

“Not really,” I replied thoughtfully. “My first teacher was a Christian, my next one a Muslim, then I had a Buddhist teacher, and the last never mentioned it. The first three told me about their beliefs with varying fervor, but none convinced me.”

“Why?” he asked.

“The first two are too dogmatic, and I distrust anyone who has all the answers because he hasn’t asked half the questions.” I was warming to this subject, but puzzled at his interest. “Further, I resent the way they exclude from God’s benevolence anyone who doesn’t adhere to their particular and peculiar set of rules. As to the latter, it seems too fatalistic, denying that we are the masters of our fate. Its adherents seem irrationally passive.”

“I thought all Ferengi were Christians,” he seemed surprised.

“My Mother Christina was,” I replied, “but she died when I was quite young. My father always said if Christianity had anything to do with Christ he might adhere to it, but it didn’t. While I was in Khanbalikh, my grandfather George, with whom I lived, did his best to keep me free from all such ‘misunderstandings of reality’ as he called religions.”

“You have answered well, Raven,” he smiled warmly for the first time. “Or perhaps I should say you have been trained well. Some of your skills could be of great use, but it would depend on how good you are. You found us, that shows some skill, but you claim to be a cartographer. Did you have the foresight to map your way here?”

“Yes, I did.” I brought out my map, which I had brought along just in case my cartographic skill was challenged. “It’s a bit crude, but I think you can easily follow it. I came up from the Karamuren along this river to a village I have marked here, and then proceeding up the same river, I crossed the mountains here to this other river and followed it to that lake just north of here.”

“Yes, yes,” he nodded, “I know that lake, and you have also put in this lake and the rivers emptying into it. Very good, I can use you in my tumen. Would you stay?”

“Would it be presumptuous to ask what you plan to do here in the north?” I boldly asked.

“It would indeed be presumptuous to ask,” he smiled, “and stupid not to, eh shaman? I rejoice you are no fool, but I must first ask you, why do you hesitate? Is it loyalty to the Great Khan? Or fear of adventure?”

“No, sir,” I protested. “It is rather a fear of no adventure. It appears that you have some grand design in mind, and if it involves an adventure, I would gladly be a part of it. If, on the other hand, you merely want to become a Tungus clan leader and herd reindeer in the icy north, I would not be a part of it.”

“Hah!” Kaidu roared with laughter. “Herd reindeer, indeed. No, you insolent boy, you will have your adventure, perhaps more than you wanted. Are you prepared to never see Khanbalikh or even the Karamuren again?”

“Yes, sir, but not until I retrieve my bride from there,” I blurted out.

“You can get her early next summer,” he shrugged. “We will remain here a little longer. But meanwhile, it is fortunate that you have come today, for you will accompany my grandson Juchi on an important adventure tomorrow and put to good use your mapmaking skills.”

“Tomorrow!” I exclaimed. “Where do we go?”

“You of course remember our shaman,” he began. “Some years ago, he and I began to reflect on the future of the Mongol Khanate. It was clear to us that it would soon die, and we searched in vain for a way to save my tumen. Givevneu had an idea. I saw the wisdom of his suggestion and began to pare down the tumen with his help, trying to avoid all the problems which beset the Khanate. I weeded out any who might be disloyal to me for any reason even if they had an indispensable skill like your brother, and you, for that matter. It was disloyalty that destroyed the Khanate of Chingis. His heirs fought among themselves and soon were cutting the Khanate into weak pieces, which have fallen one by one. Next, I weeded out those who thought themselves better than others, whether because of a religious or tribal affiliation. I exempted your bigoted stepmother because she will not live much longer and, of course, she had nowhere to go. Next, I weeded out the faint-hearted, for our adventure will not be an easy one. So, what you have here is an Ordu of fearless, strong, loyal, tolerant, and undistracted Mongols. Of course, not many of us are tribal Mongols anymore, but if you recall, the word Mongol means ‘the brave,’ and that is why we are the true Mongols. Now as to what this journey is about, I’ll let Givevneu tell you.”

“I rejoice that you will be with us, ah... Raven”—he smiled broadly at me—“for have I not always said Tengri shines through your eyes making them the color of his abode.”

“You honor me too much, Givevneu,” I replied quietly, “for it is through your eyes that the goodness I believe to be God shines, not mine.” I had always dearly loved the shaman who was so kind and patient with me. As a child I was fascinated by his appearance as well as his powers—for he had round eyes, curly hair, and a rounded head like my family had. I would tell him he had to be my relative, but he would deny it saying, “Only in spirit in this life, but surely closer in another.” It was good to see him again.

“You have grown in Khanbalikh, my son,” he said, “but have not become jaded. I congratulate your grandfather, no doubt a great and wise man. Your mission is simple and difficult. It is simply to deliver a message to my native village. It will be difficult, because I cannot precisely tell you where it is. I can tell you that it was on the coast of the Great Sea, and I have drawn a rough outline of the coast as I remember it. I can also tell you that you must go north and east but never south along the coast, for there is a very large peninsula that would take you far out of your way. Juchi has the drawing, and I have told him how the stars should appear when he is near my village. So, as you can see, a simple task, but a difficult one to perform.”

“Indeed,” I replied nodding. “Can you give me some idea how far away this village is?”

“Not really.” He shook his head. “I venture to guess, however, that it is about three months’ journey on horseback.”

“Will that not take us there in the dead of winter”—I was incredulous—“and is that not a rather imprudent time to head north?”

“To be sure,” he agreed pleasantly, “but it is necessary to be there in deep winter to fulfill the mission.”

“I don’t understand.” I was beginning to think it was a mistake to get involved with these people. “What possible difference does it make which season it is when a message is delivered? And, for that matter, what is the message?”

“Juchi has the message memorized,” he replied. “There is no need for you to learn it as well. Besides, since it is in my native language, you probably wouldn’t understand it anyway. As to the season, when and if you succeed in delivering the message, you will understand the reason for delivering it in the winter. Until then, we would prefer if you both know no more than you have been told, because our future depends on the success or failure of your mission.”

“But if your people only understand their own language,” I asked, “how will we communicate?”

“In the Tungus tongue, of course,” he smiled. “All the northern tribes understand it well enough and if you do not remember it, Juchi does.”

“Also,” Kaidu interjected, “and the main reason you accompany Juchi, you must draw very good detailed maps on the journey. Maps that can be easily followed, and on your return, if you find a better route, correct the maps. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” I was beginning to be intrigued by all this. “This should indeed prove to be quite an adventure.”

“A mere beginning, if all goes well,” he shrugged. “But as Givevneu told you, the very future of our Ordu depends on your success. Will you take on that responsibility?”

“I will,” I answered with more enthusiasm than conviction.

“Good,” Kaidu waved my dismissal. “Tomorrow morning early then.”

“Yes, sir!” I bowed my way out and, head swimming, returned to my brother’s yurt.

5

The Far North,

Chapter 37th year of Toghon Temur

(E. Siberia, 1367)

After leaving Kaidu, I returned to my brother’s yurt and told him the news. Yesui immediately set about getting things ready for the trip. My clothes would not be warm enough for the far north so she set about modifying some of my father’s warmer clothes. Doqus helped her with this effort. My brother and I selected horses for the trip, and he promised to send back the horse I had borrowed. I checked out my bow and arrows, and Henry gave my sword a good sharpening. Things seemed to be well in hand so I set out to find Juchi.

By now it was midafternoon and leaden sky began to disgorge its cargo, but steadily rather than torrentially for a change. I found Juchi in his father’s yurt and was pleased to find that he not only remembered me, but also was glad that I was going with him. He was no taller than me but like his grandfather was broad. He had

Kaidu's dark eyes, but was more easygoing and fun loving. He had always been quite the tease when we were children, but he seemed not just pleased, but relieved about my coming along.

"Not just because of your fine company," he teased, "but because I was most uneasy about the mapmaking. How fortunate that you have become an expert in this most difficult task."

"More tedious than difficult," I corrected him, "but as I recall, you were never one overburdened with patience."

"Indeed!" he seemed surprised. "You remember that, do you? Well, I can assure you my father has curbed my ah...enthusiasm in your absence."

"He is to be commended, then," I rejoined. "No doubt great poems have been written about the deed. But moving on to the task at hand, did you get any partial maps of our path?"

"Sort of," he answered unfolding a piece of paper and handing it to me. "This is the area between here and the Great Sea and over here is Givevneu's drawing of the coastline near his village. I'm afraid the former will only serve us for a few days and the latter might be difficult to use. Most coastlines look the same to me."

"Well, it depends." I shrugged as I studied the maps. "Looking at his drawing, I would say we have a chance of finding it. For one thing, it appears to be on a deep narrow inlet surrounded by mountains and there is a spit of land near the mouth of the inlet where the actual village is. That means it would likely be a safe harbor for ships if it were deep enough, although I doubt if any ships would stray that far north. Also it looks like this is a southern terminus of a landmass, for you can see that the shore around the inlet tends generally northward."

"You see all that in the shaman's scratches?" Juchi shook his head. "Now, I think we might actually succeed in completing this mission. You came back just in time, Kahhr. Do you mind being called Raven? It's easier than that odd name of yours."

"I prefer it to Ferengi." I looked up accusingly. "I believe that's what you used to call me."

"I was easier to pronounce," he shrugged.

"How reliable is this other map?" I let him off the hook. "Can it be trusted or is it just a rough outline?"

"It was made by Arughtu," he replied. "He was a good mapmaker in his day, but he is older now, and his vision is weak and his hand unsteady."

"I'll probably only need to refine it a bit," I said. "But one thing troubles me. Why are we going now in the middle of the monsoon season? It won't make mapping very easy, nor will it help navigation."

"I know," he nodded, "but Givevneu said he didn't think the monsoon reached very far north, and he felt we needed the extra time to find his village by midwinter. I don't know how much he told you, but it seems it will take about two months to get to where there are no more trees and then another month to reach his village. This assumes we can travel at a rather quick pace, with no terrain or native problems. And then we're supposed to map the path, hunt when we run out of food, endure the polite necessities in every village we enter, or fight our way out. And we still have to brave the monsoon for at least a while, followed closely by the full force of winter in the far north. Until you came along, Tengri be praised, I was supposed to do this all by myself."

"Kaidu must have a lot of faith in you," I reassured him. "You must be proud."

"Hmm," he mused, "or perhaps he just finds me expendable."

"That's ridiculous," I scolded, "You're the first son of his first son! Besides, he greatly emphasized the importance of the mission to the tumen's survival. And he wouldn't have us making maps if we weren't supposed to return. The smallness of the 'expedition' must be for speed and secrecy. Still, I just can't imagine why were going north in winter. Did you make any sense out of the message we're supposed to deliver?"

"None." He shook his head and handed me another piece of paper. "I wrote the sounds down in the Mongol script so I could read it to Givevneu's brother. Does it mean anything to you?"

"I don't think so." I puzzled over the strange note, sounding out the words. "But this sounds a little like the language of the Nivkh. Unfortunately, I never mastered it. Did you?"

"No," he replied, "we hardly ever dealt with them, so why bother? There are a few of them in the tumen, but we better not show this note around. Givevneu said we'd understand when we delivered it."

"Yes, you're right," I agreed, returning the note. "Anyway, we'll be too busy to worry about it. I had better finish getting ready for tomorrow."

I took my leave and returned to Henry's yurt. I compared Arughtu's map to mine and reconciled the two to the degree possible. While working on the maps, I asked Henry for a waterproof container for the maps and told Yesui that I would need about four months' worth of provisions or as near to that amount as was possible, since

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