GENGHIS KHAN

THE INTOXICATION OF KHAN'S BLOOD

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Steppe, dust and the first slap in the face

The steppe was no mother, no father, no friend. It was a dirty innkeeper who let you into his tavern, filled you with cheap booze, and then threw you out the door in the dust in the morning, half dead and with an empty stomach. Endless ground, a wind that cut sharper than knives, a sun that burned so mercilessly you could barely keep your eyes open. And at night, a cold that seemed to freeze your bones. Those who grew up here learned very quickly that no one would save them. Not the spirits, not the ancestors, not even their own family.

Temüjin didn't come into a crib full of blankets, but onto a floor that smelled of horse dung. His father was a warrior who had taken too many blows, and his mother was a woman who had given birth to too many children to be affectionate. There were no hugs. There were only orders, hunger, and the occasional hand that struck faster than you could duck.

The first slap in the face came from his mother. It wasn't a big drama, not a scene sung about in songs. She stood there, sweaty, tired, with eyes burning like two dark holes in her face, and he dared to reach for a second piece of meat. It was nothing more. A reflex born of hunger. But on the steppe, hunger was no excuse. Hunger was always there, and whoever took what wasn't theirs got a slap in the face.

She hit him hard enough that his head flew sideways, and he fell into the dust. No scream escaped his lips. The dust crept into his mouth, sharp and dry, and he tasted iron in it, as if he'd swallowed blood. Above him stood his father, unmoving, like a stone. No pity, no intervention. Just that look: stand up, or stay down and rot.

He stood up. Not because he wanted to. Not because he was proud. But because he knew that in this world, no one would reach out to pull him up. On the steppe, you only lay down once—when you were dead.

The days that followed were the same. He woke up to the crackling of firewood, the neighing of horses, and the constant hunger in his stomach. His brothers wrestled, but it wasn't a game. It was always a fight, always a snarl, always the question: who is weaker, who will lose today? His mother divided the meat, small, scant, as if she were cutting it with a scalpel. Every bite was war.

His father told stories, but not the kind you tell children. They were stories of blood feuds, of heads being impaled, of clans being burned. Stories meant to

teach him: This is the world, boy. Prepare yourself. The steppe devours the gentle, and the gods remain silent.

When the wind whipped through the yurt at night, he heard the wolves. Their howling wasn't far away; it was always there, sometimes so close that he thought he could feel their breath. The steppe was full of hungry mouths, and he was just one of them. No guardian angel, no salvation. Only the crackling of the fire and the cold eyes of his parents, who never seemed weaker, never softer.

The slap stuck in his memory. Not as the greatest torture, but as the first lesson. The world hits you first before you learn how to hit back.

His father took him out early. No gentle pointing, no "This is how you hold the bow, my son." Just commands, short, harsh, impatient. "Draw. Draw. Shoot." He shot, he missed, and his father's backhand flew faster than the wind. Pain was his teacher, mistakes his punishment. He learned that it wasn't enough to draw the arrow. He had to hit. If he missed, he died.

There were nights when they ate nothing. Then he slept with a growling belly, while his brothers cursed quietly, each grinding his teeth in the dark. The steppe held nothing back. It showed no mercy. And yet, precisely in this hunger, in this constant threat, something grew within him that was stronger than fear. He accepted everything, not because he was born strong, but because he had no choice.

And yet, when he looked up, when he saw the endless sky, when the wind swept over him, he felt something he couldn't name. It wasn't comfort, it wasn't hope. It was just this feeling: that everything that weighed him down now would one day be crushed by him.

The slap was the first reminder that he was alone. But it was also the beginning of something else. A fire burning, quietly, almost invisibly, hidden beneath dust and hunger. And this fire was just waiting for the time when it would devour the entire damned steppe.

He got used to the dust. He got used to the pain. He got used to the way the steppe always had the last word. A boy not even old enough to rule his own feet, but old enough to understand: the world had no place for the hesitant.

His father took him with him when they stole cattle or hunted horses. There was no watching, no "look first." He had to ride along, tremble, tremble, and, if

necessary, fight along. Once, he fell from his horse. The ground knocked the air out of his lungs; he lay there like a fish thrown ashore. He hoped someone would stop. But no one stopped. Not his father, not his brothers. Only the cloud of dust from the horses disappeared, and he crawled, panting, back onto his horse. So he learned: if you fall, you stay behind. No one waits.

And this hunger was always there. It grew like a second shadow. Not a day went by without this ache in his stomach that almost drove him mad. When there was meat, the brothers fought over it as if it were a kingdom at stake. Knives flashed, hands struck, and even the mother had to intervene, harder than one would think of a woman. She shared, and whoever asked for more felt her hand again. Temüjin learned to hold back, to wait for the right moment. Patience. Cunning. Not always to be the first. But when he took, he took, without remorse.

The slap, the first one, remained like an echo in his skull. It was more than just skin on skin. It was the law. No one here had time for weakness. No one wasted energy explaining to a child why things were the way they were. You hit, and the child understood. Or they didn't—then they died.

He sometimes thought of the other clans they met. There, too, the same hard faces, the same children with dirt in their hair and scars on their faces. No one was soft. No one had soft hands. It was as if the steppe itself were a blacksmith, wanting to make everyone into the same tool: hard, blunt, brutal.

One day, men came into the camp, riders who smelled of old blood. They had spoken with the father, louder, more heatedly, their voices like the clang of metal. Temüjin didn't understand every word, but he understood the tension that hung in the tent. At night, he heard his mother whisper, heard his father's anger, and in the morning, he knew: once again, a fight was brewing, once again, blood was about to be shed.

It was always like this. Life wasn't organized; it wasn't a house with a solid roof and solid walls. It was a yurt in the wind, ready to blow away at any moment. And everyone knew that. That's why they beat them, robbed them, and killed them as if there were no tomorrow. Because sometimes there really was no tomorrow.

The slap in the face, he later reflected, was nothing other than the first battle of his life. No sword, no spear, just a hand that taught him: you are not welcome here unless you fight for your rights.

And he fought. At first, with small things. He learned to grab his brothers at the right moment, to knock them off balance with a quick tug. He learned to be quiet, to listen, to pick up words. He learned that the steppe didn't reveal its secrets to those who asked too loudly.

Sometimes he dreamed. Dreams of another world, where the sun didn't always burn, where there was water that didn't taste of rust. Dreams of warmth that didn't come from a fire that could go out at any moment. But when he awoke, there was the dust again, the stench of the horses, the growling of his stomach. Dreams were worthless. Only what you could touch with your hands mattered.

He saw his father drinking. No wine, no beer—fermented milk that burned like fire as it ran down his throat. Sometimes he drank too much, and then he roared, then he hit, then he was a storm that made everyone in the tent tremble. Temüjin watched, remained silent, and learned from it, too. Men were weak when they drank. Men betrayed themselves when they drank. Men were only as strong as their discipline.

His mother was the opposite. She didn't drink, she didn't laugh. She worked, she gave birth, she beat. Her harshness was cold, sober, relentless. But there was something else in this harshness—it kept them alive. Without her, they would all have starved, he knew that. But affection wasn't her currency. Her currency was order, harshness, control.

The steppe tested them every day. There were years when the cattle died, when winter was like an enemy that wouldn't leave. Then dead bodies lay in the snow, then children screamed with hunger. He saw how neighboring clans grew weaker, how their faces turned into skulls that were still alive. And he knew: this was no place for those who wept.

He remembered being sent out alone once, barely older than seven. He was supposed to round up the cattle. The sun was high, the wind biting. He got lost, saw nothing but the horizon. No sound but the wind. He thought he was going to die. But he fought through, holding on to the horses, who knew the way better than he did. When he came back, dirty, half-choked by dust, no one laughed. No one said he'd been brave. They gave him meat because he came back. Nothing more. But that was enough.

The slap, the first one, was the beginning of it all. A sign that he lived in a world where nothing was given for free. He would never forget it. And he swore to himself, even though he couldn't put it into words at the time: one day he

would strike back. Not his mother. Not his father. But the whole damned world that had left him lying in the dust.

He often thought about the moment the hand touched his cheek. It was as if the world itself had greeted him for the first time—not with a smile, but with a slap. And the older he grew, the more clearly he saw that it was no accident, no slip-up. It was a ritual. Every boy who lived on this steppe had to take that slap at some point to understand that there was no tenderness here.

He spent the following nights awake, eyes open, while the wind outside tugged at the yurt. He felt the cold creeping through the cracks, the steamy breath of his brothers, the snorting of the horses. Everything was a struggle. Even sleeping was a fight against hunger, cold, and fear. And when sleep came, it was filled with images: hands beating him, wolves hunting him, dust suffocating him.

But every time he woke up, he had become harder. A child who learned not to cry. A child who learned to grit his teeth. A child who understood that pain was not an end, but a beginning.

His father often observed him. Not a word of praise, not a pat on the back. Just that scrutinizing look, as if he wanted to see if the boy would break or not. And when he saw that he wouldn't break, he let him carry more, ride more, do more. Responsibility didn't come with age; it came with toughness.

His mother didn't hit him often. It wasn't necessary. One blow was enough to show him where he stood. After that, her eyes, her silence, her coldness were enough. He knew that love wasn't involved here. Love was a luxury one couldn't afford. One lived, one survived. Nothing more.

So the first slap in the face didn't mark the end of his childhood, but rather its beginning. A beginning that showed him that he was alone. But also a beginning that taught him something else: that he couldn't rely on anyone. Not on his mother, not on his father, not on his brothers, not on the steppe. Only on himself.

And as he grew older, as he learned to ride, to hunt, to fight, this knowledge remained with him. It was like a scar, unseen but felt. A scar that reminded him: the world strikes you first. If you don't strike back, it will eat you.

He remained silent about it. He never spoke of the slap, never of the night in the dust. But a silent vow grew within him. A vow he never spoke, but one he

felt in every bone: that one day he would strike back. Not small, not quietly. But big, loud, definitive.

And no one on this steppe, neither father nor mother, neither brothers nor enemies, had any idea that in this dirty, hungry boy lurked the beginning of something greater than all of them put together.

He got up, every time. He got up again and again. And someday, many years later, the world would experience for itself what it felt like when Temüjin struck back.

A father who drank poison

His father wasn't a man you could love. He was one you could fear. One who smelled more of old sweat, fermented milk, and blood than of anything human. He was the khan of a small clan, a leader not born of strength, but made of toughness. A man who knew that on the steppe, no one lives long if he doesn't strike first.

Temüjin knew him only with anger in his voice and hardness in his eyes. He never showed love. Care wasn't a word in his vocabulary. Everything he gave his son was command, duty, punishment. Yet somewhere in that iron core was also something that resembled pride—a dark pride that only showed itself when the boy didn't break.

The father drank. Not wine, not beer—the steppe had no such thing. He drank airag, fermented mare's milk, sharp, bitter, and biting. He drank it in large quantities, as if he needed to drown his hunger, his fear, his cold. Sometimes he came into the tent with a red face, his eyes glazed over, and his voice rolling like thunder. Then he was unpredictable. He could laugh, roar, and hit—all in one breath.

One evening, when Temüjin was barely ten years old, he saw him drink, longer, deeper than usual. His mother was silent, his brothers were silent. Everyone knew that words would add fuel to the fire. They ate in silence, they waited, they held their breath. And his father spoke. Not to them, but to the spirits, to the steppe itself. Of wars he had fought, of enemies he had slain. He boasted of his deeds, but there was also bitterness, a poison that ran deeper than alcohol.

He spoke of betrayal. Of men he had trusted who had turned their backs on him. Of alliances broken, of blood spilled uselessly. And as he spoke, he continued to drink. Until his body swayed, until his voice broke, until only a hoarse murmur remained.

Temüjin looked at him, and in that look, for the first time, there was something that resembled fear. Not of his father's hand, not of his anger—but of what it would mean if a man like him were to break. A man who was the shield of the family, the leader, the hunter, the fighter. If he fell apart, what would remain?

The mother saw it too. Her eyes were dark, hard, but there was a spark of panic in them that she never showed. She knew that everything they had depended on this man—and that he was destroying himself, sip by sip.

Temüjin didn't understand at the time that it wasn't just the alcohol. It was poison, political poison, that was slowly consuming him. He had more enemies than friends, and he knew they wouldn't hesitate when the opportunity arose.

And the opportunity came.

One day, the father went out, strong as ever, proud on his horse. He returned sick, weak, foaming at the mouth. Poison, the old men said. An enemy had poisoned his drink, an old act of revenge, a blow he hadn't seen coming. He lay in the tent, writhing, screaming, spitting. His children stood there, helpless; their mother held him, but nothing helped.

Temüjin saw the man he had feared, and perhaps even admired to some extent, crumble like a rotten piece of wood. He was no longer the warrior, no longer the Khan, merely a body fighting against the poison and losing.

The nights were filled with screams, the fire burned low, the family watched their leader die. No doctor, no healer, no god intervened. The steppe watched as it always watched—cold, indifferent, unmoved.

Then he was dead.

It was no great death, no heroic exit. No fight, no battle, no songs. Just sweat, poison, foam, and silence. A man who had drunk too much, a man caught up in betrayal.

The family was alone.

With his death, they lost more than a father. They lost protection, prestige, security. The clan he had led turned away. No one followed a woman, no one followed children. They were like driftwood in a river, without support, without direction. Outcast, cursed, damned.

And Temüjin realized: the steppe wasn't just harsh. It was treacherous. It didn't just strike you with hunger and cold, it also took what little you had. Her mother's blow had been the first lesson. Her father's death was the second.

He swore to himself that he would not forget this blow either.

After their father's death, the yurt hung heavy in the air. The smoke from the fire smelled of ash and decay, even when the sun was shining outside. The mother barely spoke. The brothers looked at each other like dogs, unsure who had the right to eat first. There was no law left in this tent, except hunger and bare survival.

The men of the clan came, saw, and left again. No one wanted to take responsibility, no one wanted to protect a widow and her children. On the steppe, a dead khan was a dead dog. His meat might still attract vultures, but his name no longer meant anything.

Temüjin understood early on that her life now hung in the balance. Every day was a roll of the dice. Who would steal their cattle, who would raid them, who would wipe them out—it was only a matter of time. Her mother held them together with an iron hand. Tighter than before. Tighter because she knew that any giving in, any weakness, would bring death.

The children gathered wood, hunted mice, and ate roots when there was nothing else to eat. Hunger devoured them, making them thin as skeletons. But no one complained loudly. They had learned: complaining wasted breath. Breath that was better spent fighting for the next piece of meat.

Temüjin often thought of his father. Not with love. With anger. With the feeling that this man had abandoned them. That he had allowed himself to be poisoned, that he hadn't been strong enough to save the family. He swore to himself that he would never end up like that. Never. If he died, it wouldn't be from poison in his throat. If he died, it would be in the dust, with blood in his mouth and the screams of his enemies in his ears. But not like a sick animal in a tent.

He began to go out at night. He saw the stars, the countless cold dots in the sky. No roof, no shelter, just this endless blanket of light. Some spoke of gods, of spirits watching up there. But he felt nothing. Only emptiness. Only infinity. And he knew: if anyone was there, they were laughing at them, at their need, at their weakness.

Thus, a different religion formed within him. One with prayers, one with altars. His religion was survival. His prayer was the arrow that struck. His altar was the horse that carried him. Everything else was useless.

The brothers became restless. Without their father, they began to fight each other. Each wanted to be first, the strongest. They argued, they hit each other, sometimes with fists, sometimes with knives. Blood flowed, not much, but enough to make it clear: each of them would sacrifice the other if necessary.

Her mother tried to maintain order. She screamed, she hit, she threatened. But she was alone against a world that wanted to tear her apart. Her harshness wasn't always enough. Temüdschin saw it. He saw how her eyes sometimes grew tired, how her body bent when she thought no one was looking. But he saw it. And he knew: she, too, was mortal. She, too, could break.

The steppe laughed. It laughed in the form of storms, cold, and hunger. Once they lost almost all their livestock to robbers. Another time they were chased away by a stronger clan. They wandered like beggars, like shadows, like rats searching for scraps in the darkness.

For Temüjin, this was another lesson. There was no protection. No name, no title, no blood ties that lasted forever. There was only strength. Those who were strong took. Those who were weak lost. His father had shown strength, but he had also shown weakness. And weakness had killed him.

Temüjin began to seek his own strength. He trained with his bow, longer, harder, until his fingers bled. He rode until his legs burned, and he fell, and he got up again. No one praised him. No one watched. But he did it for himself. For the promise never to end up like his father.

He told himself stories while he trained. Stories in which he would one day return, bigger, tougher, more powerful than all who now mocked him. Stories in which he would burn down the clans that had cast them out. Stories in which he would conquer the steppe itself.

But when the wind hit him in the face, when hunger lured him to sleep, he knew there was still a long way to go. A path that grew longer with every slap, every blow, every hunger pang. But he walked it. He had no choice.

His father's death was the poison that continued to burn within him. He absorbed it, he made it his own fire. And while his brothers crumbled in hatred and envy, while his mother fought for every day, something else grew within him. Not a simple will to survive. But a hunger greater than flesh. A hunger for power.

Outcast, cursed, damned

After their father's death and the slow disintegration of the family, they believed for a while that they could continue as before. But the steppe does not forget. It has no compassion, no nostalgia. A clan without a strong leader was like a horse without legs: useless, soon carrion.

The other families noticed it immediately. Men who had once ridden alongside their fathers lowered their gazes when they met Temüjin's mother. They no longer greeted her. They offered no advice, no meat, no wood. They didn't see a woman and her children; they only saw baggage. And baggage is shed on the steppe when survival becomes difficult.

It didn't take long for the decision to be made. They abandoned her. Not with loud screaming, not with blood. Simply with cold. They packed up, moved on, and the family was left behind. The yurt in the dust, the few animals they had left, and the emptiness.

So they were cast out.

The mother stood there, rigid, as if made of stone. Her eyes were dry, her hands firm. But there was something broken in her voice as she said, "We will survive." It wasn't a promise, it was a command.

The children didn't cry. One doesn't cry on the steppe. They only saw that they were fewer, weaker, vulnerable. They were no longer a clan family. They were just a group of starving people, easy prey for wolves, for enemies, for the cold.

The days that followed were a constant struggle. They carried water, searched for roots, and hunted small animals. Every breath was labor. Every bite was

fought for. The mother hunted herself, a woman who did what men had to do on the steppe. Her hands were bloody, her eyes empty, but she persevered.

The brothers argued. More than ever. Each wanted to dominate, each wanted the last word. Knives flashed, voices broke, and sometimes drops of blood flowed, unnoticed. Temüjin was in the thick of it. He fought, he held his ground. But he saw that they were devouring each other, while outside the steppe laughed.

They felt cursed. Not just by the others, but by the steppe itself. Every day brought a new misfortune: an animal died, a storm destroyed their fire, a robber took what they had. It was as if their father's death had not only weakened them, but also branded them. As if the steppe itself had said: they no longer belong here.

Temüjin heard his mother praying at night. Not to a god he knew. She murmured names, ancient words, as if she could appease spirits with them. But nothing changed. The steppe remained harsh. The hunger remained. The cold remained.

He realized: Curses aren't words. Curses are the way the world looks at you when you're weak. And they were weak.

But while his brothers crumbled in hatred and his mother remained in silent defiance, he felt something else. A defiance that wasn't silent, but loud. A defiance that said: I will return. I will not remain cursed. I will force the damned steppe to know my name.

Outcast, cursed, damned—that's what they were now. But he swore to himself: things wouldn't stay that way.

The days without a Clan turned into weeks, and every hour wore on them. Without protection, without allies, they were fair game. Other Clans rode by, some stopped, and gave them looks that oscillated between mockery and pity. No one offered help. Help was a luxury no one could afford.

The mother held the bow like a man, drew the string, and hunted small animals. She brought back rabbits, sometimes nothing. Her hands were sore, her eyes burned, but she didn't talk about it. Talking helped no one. Food helped. Fire helped. Toughness helped. Everything else was a waste of time.

The brothers began to split even further. Kazan, the eldest, shouted the loudest, wanted to give orders, but no one really listened. Everyone had their

own hunger, their own anger. Temüjin watched them. He spoke less, he fought more. With each day, he understood better that it wasn't the loudest who survived, but those who bit the longest.

Sometimes robbers came. Small groups who knew that an outcast family was easy prey. They killed cattle, they took meat, sometimes they beat people to show they could. Temüjin stood there, bow and arrow in hand, trembling with fear, but also with rage. He couldn't do anything yet. He was still too small, too weak. But he swore to himself: one day he would no longer tremble.

The mother knew they couldn't survive forever. She didn't say it out loud, but it was in her eyes as she stared across the steppe. Every day was borrowed. Every breath was a coin that would soon be counted.

And then winter came.

Winter on the steppe wasn't weather; it was an enemy. It came with snow, with cold that cut like knives into the skin. It came with hunger that devoured everything. The yurt creaked in the wind, the fire consumed the last wood. The horses died first, then the goats. Soon they had hardly anything left.

Temüjin felt hunger consuming him. His ribs protruded, his hands trembled. But he didn't give in. He gritted his teeth, he held on. When his brothers screamed, when his mother cursed, he remained silent. Silent like an animal that knows every sound could be his last breath.

Once he found a dead animal in the snow, half-rotting, half-frozen. He ate it, despite the stench, despite the disgust. He ate because it was meat, because it meant life. He vomited afterward, but he lived. That was the rule. Not dignity, not pride—just life.

They survived the winter, barely, almost broken, but they survived. When the sun returned, when the ice melted, they were thinner, weaker, but alive. And sometimes, when he looked at the stars at night, Temüjin wondered if that was precisely the curse: not being allowed to die. Having to keep living, no matter how hard the steppe trampled you.

The brothers now openly hated each other. Each was an enemy in his own tent. Knives flashed, words became wounds. Temüjin knew: they would kill each other, someday. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow. But it was inevitable. The steppe demanded sacrifices, and sometimes it took those closest.

But something else was growing within him. Not hatred for his brothers, not a curse for the steppe. But a hunger that was greater. A hunger for more than survival. He didn't just want to breathe, not just see the next day. He wanted to rule. He wanted to take, not beg. He wanted no one to ever cast him out again.

The mother saw it. In his eyes, in his posture. She said nothing, but sometimes when she looked at him, there was something like fear. Not because he was weak. But because she knew: this boy would one day grow up to be greater than all of them.

The steppe was their enemy, hunger was their curse, the cold their doom. But in Temüjin, all of this became a fire that could no longer be extinguished.

And so the journey began. A journey that lay in dust, in hunger, in betrayal. A journey that began when they were cast out, when they lived cursed, when they continued to breathe damned. A journey that turned a boy into a wolf.

Hunger as a constant companion

Hunger was not a guest. It was not a visitor who came and went. It was a roommate who had lodged in their bodies, a shadow that haunted every hour, every breath. It woke with them, it went to sleep with them. Hunger was the invisible ruler of their days, stronger than any khan, more merciless than any army.

Temüjin knew him better than any of his brothers' faces. He felt him in his bones when he got up in the morning, his legs like wood. He felt him in his teeth when he chewed without anything there. He felt him in his dreams when he saw meat, whole animals roasting on the fire—only to wake up to see the empty ground again.

The steppe was harsh, but hunger made it cruel. It robbed people of their dignity, turning them into thieves, into animals. Brothers who had once hunted together stole the last piece of meat from each other's hands. Children grabbed bones that had already been boiled three times. Women chewed grass to fill their stomachs, even if it didn't do any good.

Temüdschin realized early on that hunger was more than pain. Hunger was a teacher. It revealed who was weak, who gave up, who begged. And it revealed who persevered, who gritted their teeth, who drew strength from nothing.

His mother was the toughest person he knew. She ate last, sometimes not at all. She gave her children what she had, and he knew she was dying for it, bit by bit, every day. Her eyes hollowed, her cheeks sharp as knives. But she persevered. And she made it clear to them: Complaining means death. Those who cry lose energy. Those who lose die.

Not all of the brothers understood this. Sometimes they complained, screamed, and hit out. Temüjin remained silent. He learned that words were not bread and butter. He learned that silence made one stronger. While the others burned off their anger, he conserved his strength.

He hunted as often as he could. Hares, foxes, birds—anything with meat was life. Sometimes he came back with nothing. Then his mother's look was like a second slap in the face: silent, hard, disappointed. He hated that look more than hunger. So he swore to himself to be better. Every missed shot was a blemish, every missed prey a disgrace.

Once he stumbled upon a pack of wolves eating a dead horse. He saw the blood, he smelled the meat. Hunger screamed within him; he wanted to go, to tear himself a piece of meat. But the wolves growled, their eyes gleaming in the twilight. He drew his bow, trembling, the string creaking. He knew he couldn't kill them all. But he also knew he would starve if he left now. So he shot. One wolf fell, the others howled, scattered. Temüjin ran, cutting meat from the carcass so fast his hands bloodied. He fled with the meat, heard the wolves behind him, felt their teeth on his neck. But he ran, ran, until he reached the camp. They ate this meat, tough, savage, with traces of fur. It tasted of blood and victory.

Hunger taught him: Fear is nothing if your stomach is empty. Fear can be swallowed. Hunger cannot.

The nights were the worst. When the fire was small, when stomachs were empty, when the growling in his stomach was louder than the wind outside. Temüjin lay there, awake, listening to his brothers' panting, his mother's soft whimpering. Hunger was in the air, in his breath, in the entire tent. He rarely slept. And when he slept, he dreamed of food—only to wake up again, even hungrier than before.

Once, in the depths of winter, he found a dead child in the snow. A child from another clan, frozen, rigid, with its eyes open. Temüjin looked at it, feeling nothing but hunger. He knew he could have eaten it. The thought didn't shock him. It was there, clear, logical. Meat was meat. But he didn't. Not because he

felt pity, but because he knew: once he ate human flesh, he would no longer be Temüjin. He would be a wolf. And he swore to be a wolf in spirit, not in his gut.

Hunger made him stronger. Tougher. While others were broken by it, he made him into iron. He learned that you didn't have to be full to fight. That you didn't have to look strong to be strong. That an empty stomach was sometimes hotter than a full one.

His mother looked at him, sometimes when he brought meat, when he was silent, when he didn't complain. And in her eyes was a sparkle he didn't understand. It wasn't a smile, not praise. It was something else. Perhaps fear. Perhaps pride. Perhaps both.

The hunger remained. It was always there. But Temüjin learned not to see it as an enemy. He made it a part of himself. It was the constant companion that never left him. And he knew: as long as he knew hunger, he would never stop reaching for more.

Hunger wasn't just a feeling in their stomachs. It crept into their bones, their skin, their heads. It slowed their thoughts but sharpened their instincts. Everything revolved around: where would the next bite come from? There were days when they barely spoke. Words were draining. Instead, their eyes spoke, their gazes that cut like knives: Who has more? Who has taken too much? Who is weak enough to be sacrificed?

The brothers became like predators. They ate hastily, holding their hands over their bowls as if afraid someone would snatch their food. Sometimes one would grab the other's meat, and fights would break out. Fists, blood, screams. Their mother would hit them when things got too far, but even she couldn't always stop everything. Hunger made them all enemies.

Temüjin saw this, and he learned. He took what he needed, but never more. He knew that greed was more dangerous than emptiness. Those who were greedy stood out to others. Those who were greedy became targets. So he was patient, waited, and observed. He was never the first, but he was never the last either. This way, he remained invisible enough to survive.

One day, as he set out again, he found a deer in the snow. Large, strong, but dead—fallen, perhaps already eaten by wolves. He saw the blood, saw the fur. Hunger tore at him; he cut out meat, ate it raw, still warm. The blood ran down his chin; he felt it on his tongue. It tasted of life, of victory, of something

greater than himself. He took as much as he could carry, dragged it back, stumbling, panting, but he brought it back to camp.

They ate like wolves. Pieces of meat, hot, raw, cooked, it didn't matter. The brothers argued, but this time Temüjin won. He had found it, he had brought it. And in his mother's eyes, that look was there again—not soft, not friendly, but something he understood: recognition.

Hunger also made him do things he never thought possible. He stole. From other camps, from other clans. Secretly, quietly. He knew he would die if caught. But he did it anyway. Once, he took a piece of dried meat meant for an entire clan. He brought it home and shared it, without a word. No one asked where it came from. They ate, and they lived.

So he became a thief, a robber, a survivor. Not out of malice, but out of necessity. Hunger excused everything. He was the voice that said: take or die.

Sometimes he wondered if he would ever be full. If there would be a day when his stomach was still, when he didn't think about meat, when he didn't dream of roasted animals in his sleep. But the longer he lived, the more he understood: being full was an illusion. Even when his stomach was full, hunger remained in his mind. He wanted more. Always more. Not just meat. Not just food. But everything.

Hunger became his nature. It was no longer just pain; it was drive. It made him ride harder, shoot longer, fight harder. It made him someone who never got enough. And he knew that this very hunger would one day make him greater than all those who now mocked him.

My mother once said that hunger was the true test of the steppe. Not the cold, not the enemies, not the battles. But that empty feeling in your stomach that either breaks you or strengthens you. Many broke. Many died. But those who endured it, those who lived with hunger, those who took it not as a curse but as a teacher—those could achieve anything.

Temüjin absorbed these words as he absorbed the raw meat. He made them his law. He knew he could never forget what hunger felt like. Even if he were satiated one day, even if he had mountains of meat before him, he could never believe he had conquered it. Hunger was a part of him. His constant companion. His shadow. His fire.

And so he grew up, thin, hungry, and tough. A boy cast out by the steppe, cursed by fate, damned by hunger—but who, precisely because of this, learned to want more than anyone else dared to imagine.

Brothers in strife, brothers in blood

The brothers weren't brothers in the sense of blood that bound them together. They were brothers in the sense of knives lying in the same sack: pressed against each other, blunt, always on the verge of slicing each other open. Hunger, cold, and the death of their father hadn't united them. They had turned them into enemies in their own tent.

Kazan, the eldest, was loud, proud, and full of anger. He believed he had the right to be in charge simply because he was born first. He yelled, commanded, and threatened. But orders were worthless if no one obeyed them. And no one really listened to him.

Bekter, the other older brother, was quieter, but no weaker. He gathered his hatred, held it back, let it grow like a knife honed in the shadows. His eyes were cold, calculating. He knew that the steppe was no place for loud voices. It was a place for silent stabbing.

The younger brothers wavered. Sometimes they sided with Kazan, sometimes with Bekter, sometimes with no one. They were like dogs, not knowing which pack leader to follow.

And then there was Temüdschin.

He was younger than the two of them, but the dust, the beatings, the hunger had made him older than he was. He saw the strife, the poison brewing within the family. He knew: things couldn't go on like this. They were weak enough, rejected enough. If they tore each other apart, they would die. But words were useless. No one listened. So, the only option left was the knife.

The argument escalated one day over meat. There was little, as always. A rabbit, barely enough for everyone. The mother had distributed it, fairly, as best she could. But Kazan reached for more. Bekter snarled and grabbed his hand. Fists flew, knives flashed. The yurt became a battleground.

Temüjin watched, his eyes narrowed, his heart hardened. He knew: this was the moment. It was no longer about flesh. It was about who ruled. Who lived. Who died.

Later, as night fell, when the fire was only dimly lit, he made his decision. He went out with Khasar, his younger brother, who was closer to him than the others. They crept up to Bekter. Bekter sat alone, his knife beside him, his eyes suspicious, as always. But this time he wasn't suspicious enough.

The arrows came silently, swiftly, deadly. One from Temüjin, one from Khazar. Bekter gasped, fell, and spat blood. He didn't curse, he didn't scream. He just looked at them with a look that said: you have betrayed me. But on the steppe, betrayal was nothing new. It was everyday life.

Bekter died there, in the dust. No grave, no tears. Just a body that soon grew cold.

The mother remained silent. She knew what had happened. She said nothing, but there was pain in her eyes, dark, deep, hidden. Yet she did nothing. Perhaps because she knew it had been necessary. Perhaps because she knew that Temüjin carried more within her than the others.

Bekter's murder was no accident, no oversight. It was a decision. A decision that made Temüjin harder, older, more merciless. He had learned: blood is no guarantee. Brothers are not brothers when they stand in the way. Blood can flow, whether it's from someone else or from one's own family.

From then on, the air in the yurt was different. Heavier, denser, more dangerous. Kazan was often silent, but his gaze was filled with hatred. He knew he could be killed if he wasn't careful. The younger brothers clung closer to Temüjin, sensing his toughness, his determination.

The steppe had done something again: it had broken the family bond. But it had also created something new—a leader born of betrayal, of blood, of hunger.

Temüjin carried this murder with him. Not with guilt, but with clarity. He knew now that it made no difference who you killed. Whether brother, enemy, stranger—in the end, it was always the same. Blood in the dust. One less body to eat flesh. One more bite for those left behind.

And so he understood: brothers in conflict are brothers in blood. And sometimes, brothers in blood doesn't mean sharing blood—it means shedding it.

After Bekter's death, an invisible rift hung over the family. No one spoke of it, no one said his name. But every breath was heavier, every silence louder. Kazan pretended he hadn't seen anything, but he wasn't stupid. His eyes burned every time they fell on Temüdzhin. He knew he could feel the next arrow in his back.

The mother spoke even less than before. Her hands worked, her eyes were empty, her voice harsh. But sometimes, when she thought no one was looking, she gazed into the distance, as if searching for someone who would never return. Bekter was gone, and a part of her had gone with him. But she said nothing. On the steppe, silence was the only way to mourn.

The younger brothers stood by Temüjin. Not because they loved him, but because they sensed he wouldn't hesitate. Khazar was at his side; the arrow in his brother's body had bound them together. Two boys who had understood that blood was the harshest law.

But Kazan became wilder. He screamed more, hit more often, and demanded obedience. But his anger was empty. No one followed him, no one believed him. He was like a dog that barked but no longer had any teeth.

One evening, as the fire flickered and the wind whipped the yurt, another argument broke out. Kazan accused Temüjin of killing Bekter. His voice echoed, loud, angry. The mother was silent, the brothers looked away. Temüjin stood there, his shoulders straight, his eyes cold. He didn't deny it. He said nothing. His silence was a confession, louder than any words.

Kazan reached for the knife. But he did so hesitantly, half in anger, half in fear. Temüdzhin didn't reach for his weapon. He just stared at him, hard, unmoving, and the silence in the tent was heavier than the storm outside. Finally, Kazan lowered the knife. Not because he wanted to forgive. But because he sensed he was losing the fight.

From that moment on, it was clear: the balance of power had shifted. Kazan was the oldest, but Temüjin was the strongest. Not in muscle, not in years—but in will.

But the conflict continued to devour them. Every day was a duel of glances, a game of threats, silence, and unspoken hatred. Brothers in blood—brothers in strife. They were prisoners of the same mother, the same steppe, and each knew: one of them would have to die at some point so the others could live.

The steppe had no room for half measures. No room for shared power, for brotherly love, for romantic tales. It demanded clarity, and clarity meant blood.

Temüdschin felt the hardness growing within him. Bekter's murder had opened a door that could no longer be closed. He had understood that one didn't have to wait for gods, spirits, or fate. One had to act. Those who hesitated died. Those who acted survived.

He began to take on more responsibility. He hunted, he fought, he organized. Kazan yelled, Temüjin did. And the brothers followed the one who did. Thus, he gained power bit by bit, not with words, but with deeds.

But the blood clung to him. Bekter's gaze never left him. He saw him in dreams, saw him in the dust, in the smoke, in the water. Not as guilt, but as a reminder. A reminder that he was ready to do anything. That he would keep going, no matter how many more brothers fell.

The steppe had no regard for morality. It didn't ask if it was right. It only asked: Are you strong enough? And Temüjin was strong enough.

Kasan stayed for a while. He lived, he screamed, he fought. But he was a shadow. Everyone knew that he would disappear someday, just as Bekter had disappeared. And if he disappeared, no one would cry.

So they were brothers—brothers in strife, brothers in blood. They shared the fire, they shared the hunger, they shared the misery. But they knew they didn't really have each other. Each was alone, each was an enemy.

And in this hardness, in this blood, Temüjin became what he had to become: not a brother, not a son, but a fighter. One who knew that blood was the only contract the steppe would accept.

A horse, a bow, a beginning

A horse, a bow, a beginning—it was so simple, yet so deadly. On the steppe, a boy was nothing as long as he didn't have a horse beneath him and a bow in his hands. Only then was he more than a hungry mouth. Only then did he matter.

Temüjin knew this. He had seen it in the eyes of the men they had left behind. A boy without a horse was dust, a boy without a bow was prey. He had eaten enough dust, seen enough prey. He wanted more.

The horse came first. It was not a proud steed, not an animal destined for a khan. It was young, stubborn, untamed. An animal that kicked, bit, and shied. His mother said it was too wild for him. But he knew: that was precisely why he needed it. Only he who could break a wild animal could break the steppe.

The first attempts were hell. He climbed up, was thrown off. Again and again. The ground pounded him, the dust ate into his throat. His brothers laughed, his mother shook her head. But he climbed again and again. Not because he believed he would soon succeed. But because he knew that giving up was worse than any fall.

After weeks, the horse broke. Not because it wanted to, but because it understood: this boy was more stubborn than the wind. It accepted him, let him ride, let him lead. And when Temüjin raced across the steppe for the first time, the wind in his face, the world beneath him, he knew: he was no longer just a child. He had become part of the steppe.

Then came the bow.

The bow wasn't a toy. It was life and death in a single piece of wood. His father had shown him the first moves before the poison took him. Draw, flex, release—it seemed so simple. But the steppe laughed at simplicity. Temüjin's fingers were sore, his arms burned, the string cut into his skin. He missed, again and again. Arrows flew into the void, animals escaped, and hunger remained.

But he practiced. Every day, every night. He shot at stones, at birds, at shadows. He shot until his fingers bled, until his arms stopped shaking. And eventually, he hit. First a bird. Then a rabbit. Then a deer. Every hit was a victory, greater than any blow, greater than any argument with his brothers. Every hit was a step out of his father's shadow, a step into his own power.

The horse and the bow—they became one with him. When he rode, he drew. When he shot, he hunted. He was movement, he was power, he was aim. He

was no longer a boy who swallowed dust. He was a warrior, albeit only in his infancy.

His brothers saw it. Some with envy, some with fear. His mother remained silent, but her eyes betrayed that she knew: this boy was different. He wasn't the loudest, not the strongest, but he had something the others didn't have. Something greater than hunger, greater than hate. He had the will.

And in the steppe, in this sea of dust and blood, willpower was the only thing that really mattered.

The horse carried him further, the bow gave him strength, and Temüdschin knew: this was only the beginning.

The horse was more than just an animal. It was the heartbeat of the steppe, the pulse that kept them all alive. Without a horse, you were dead, even if you were still breathing. With the horse beneath you, Temüjin felt for the first time that the world didn't just give him blows. It also gave him speed, freedom, a power that transcended hunger and dust. He was no longer the boy lying on the ground, dust between his teeth. He was the one who flew above the dust.

He got used to the rhythm—to the galloping beat, to the shaking in his bones. His body adapted, becoming one with the animal. Soon he could ride without thinking. He could let go of the reins, raise his arms, and yet the horse held him. It was as if it had become a part of him.

And with the bow in his hand he became something else: a hunter.

At first, he barely hit the target. Arrows whizzed by, ricocheted, and missed. The animals laughed at him with their quick leaps and their nimble wings. But he didn't stop. He pulled the bowstring until his fingers blistered. He shot until his muscles burned. He shot until the pain disappeared and only the target remained.

And at some point, the first hit came. A rabbit, small but real. The blood dripped into the dust, and Temüjin felt something he hadn't known before: pride. Not pride that someone had bestowed upon him. Pride that he had earned himself.

With each successive hit, he grew. He brought home meat, and his brothers looked at him differently. No longer just with mockery, but with a hint of respect. His mother looked at him and sometimes nodded barely noticeably. No praise, not a word – but he understood.

The horse, the bow—they didn't satisfy him, but they gave him power. Power greater than that of his brothers. Power that grew, quietly, invisibly, but unstoppably.

He began to ride further. Not just to hunt, but to feel the steppe. He rode out, alone, far away, until the camp disappeared behind him. The wind whipped his face, the horizon stretched, and he knew: the world was vast, and it belonged not to the gods, not to the spirits, but to the men who had the courage to take it.

In those moments, alone with horse and bow, he felt free. Free from hunger, free from his brothers, free from his father's shadow. Just him, the animal, the sky.

But the steppe was unforgiving. Once, he was confronted by a pack of wolves. He was alone, his horse shied, the animals' teeth flashing. He drew his bow, shot, hit, again and again. Blood spurted, the wolves howled. The horse reared, he held on, he fought. In the end, he was bloody, panting, his fingers sore—but he was alive, and the wolves lay dead in the dust.

When he returned, he was wearing her fur. His brothers saw him, his mother saw him. No one said anything. But in that silence lay recognition. He was no longer just a boy. He was a fighter.

The horse, the bow—they had shown him that he wasn't powerless. He could kill, he could protect, he could live. He was no longer the one struck by the steppe. He was the one who struck back.

And he knew: this was only the beginning. The first step on a path that wouldn't end with hunting rabbits. The path would continue—to people, to clans, to armies. The bow was only a tool. The horse only a means. The true beginning was within himself: the will to never be a victim again.

The first murder tastes like iron

The first murder doesn't come with drums or fanfare. It comes quietly, quickly, so suddenly that you hardly comprehend what has happened. And yet it remains in your memory louder than anything else.

Temüdschin had seen blood, enough to know it. Animals, wolves, brothers at war. But human blood – that was something else. It smelled stronger, tasted more bitter, and stuck harder to his hands. And when he tasted it for the first time, he knew: the line had been crossed.

It began like many things on the steppe—with an argument. A neighbor boy, older, taller, more sarcastic. Someone who stole Temüjin's meat, who took his horse, who beat him whenever he had the chance. An enemy born of hunger and proximity.

Temüjin remained silent for a long time, endured blows, endured ridicule, and endured humiliation. But the anger grew within him, day by day, like a fire smoldering beneath the ashes. And at some point, it was big enough, strong enough, that he knew he could no longer bear it.

The argument escalated at the river. The boy pushed him into the water, laughed, and spat. Temüjin stood up, dripping, his eyes dark. It wasn't a plan, not a command, not a divine spark. It was instinct. His hand reached for the knife.

The fight was short. A blow, a grip, a cut. The scream echoed across the river, then there was only bubbling, gurgling, blood in the water. Red spread, flowed, mingled with the river. Temüjin gasped, his hands wet, his heart pounding. He saw the life drain from the boy's eyes, his body go limp, the water carry him away.

He stood there, staring at his hands. They trembled, they were red, they were heavy. He raised them to his lips, tasted the blood. Iron. Bitter. Sharp. Like the dust, like the steppe. No wonder they called it that: the iron in the blood.

He felt no shock, no panic. Only clarity. Clarity that he had survived, that the other man hadn't. Clarity that he had crossed the line from which there was no return.

When he returned to camp, he said nothing. No one asked. No one needed to know. But there was something new in his eyes. Something that silenced his brothers, that alerted his mother. A darkness, a harshness.

He had killed. And he knew he would do it again.

The first murder was no accident, no coincidence. It was the first real act that shaped him. He understood that the steppe didn't listen to words, prayers, or wailing. It only listened to blood. And he was now someone who could give it.

The taste of iron remained. For weeks, he felt it in his mouth, in his sleep, in his dreams. It never left him. But it wasn't a curse. It was a sign. Proof that he had the courage to do what others shied away from.

From then on, the brothers saw him differently. No longer just as the younger one, no longer just as the one who swallowed dust. They saw him as someone to be feared. Not because he was loud, but because he was quiet. Quiet—and ready to strike.

The mother remained silent, but sometimes her gaze slid over him, longer than before. Perhaps she knew. Perhaps she suspected. Perhaps she had even wanted it. For on the steppe, a son who could kill represented hope. Even if it meant that someone else had to die for it.

So it began. With a boy by the river, with a knife, with blood that tasted of iron. It was the beginning of something greater than himself. The beginning of a life not lying in the dust, but built on blood.

After the murder by the river, nothing was the same anymore. Temüjin didn't notice it immediately—the steppe didn't allow anyone time to reflect. But in the days that followed, he noticed something had shifted. Not outside. Inside.

He saw the faces of the other boys, and he knew: if he wanted to, he could kill any of them. It wasn't boasting, it wasn't megalomania. It was a cold knowledge. A knowledge that gave him security. He had crossed the threshold, and now he was one who shed blood.

The night after the murder was difficult. He lay awake, hearing the wind shaking the yurt. He saw the boy's eyes before him, wide, frightened, empty. He tasted the iron again. It burned in his mouth as if he had swallowed metal. But the longer he thought about it, the calmer he became. Not guilt, not remorse. Clarity. He had done what had to be done. He had been stronger. And on the steppe, that was all that mattered.

The brothers sensed it. They looked at him, more cautiously, as if they were really seeing him for the first time. Not a word was spoken, but their attitude

changed. Temüjin was no longer just one of them. He was someone willing to do what they feared.

Kasan, the eldest, avoided him. Perhaps out of fear, perhaps out of anger, perhaps both. Khazar, on the other hand, clung even closer to him, sensing that in Temüjin lay the strength they all needed. It was as if the blood they had shed together—first Bekter's, now that of a stranger—was an invisible bond that bound them more tightly together.

The mother said nothing. She never said anything when it came to blood. But her eyes revealed more than words. A quick glance, a nod, a silence that was consent. She knew her son had become a murderer. And she knew that this could secure his fate.

From that day on, the bow was different in his hands. The horse was different beneath him. He no longer rode just to hunt. He no longer drew just to gather meat. He trained to kill. Not animals. People.

He practiced shooting at a gallop until he hit without looking. He practiced drawing his knife until it was as fluid as breathing. He practiced moving silently, hiding in the dust, waiting, striking. Every day was a step deeper into the role he now had: no longer a boy, no longer a son, but a warrior.

And the steppe noticed. Men who met him gazed at him more briefly. They sensed that he was no longer just a child. That he carried within him an animal that had bitten and would bite again.

The first murder was like a seal. A brand that never went away. There was no more innocence, no more childhood. Only dust, blood, and the iron taste that accompanied it.

Sometimes, when he was alone at night, he thought of the boy. Thought of the gurgling, the water, the eyes. Not with regret, not with guilt. But with a silent thank you. For this boy had been the stone on which he sharpened his knife. Without him, he would never have known he was ready.

And he was ready. Ready for more. Ready for whatever the steppe would still bring.

The first murder had tasted of iron. The next ones would taste no different. But Temüjin knew now: this was the taste of his life.

Captivity and bone chains

The years that followed blurred. No great victories, no songs, no advancement. Only dust. Dust in the eyes, dust in the lungs, dust in the heart. They were years that no chronicler later recorded in ink, because they seemed like nothing. But it was precisely these years that shaped Temüjin.

The steppe was not a place of peace. Every day brought something new, but nothing pleasant. A storm that extinguished the fire. Robbers who came, took, laughed, and disappeared. A winter that was harder than the last. A summer that burned everything. And in the midst of it all, a family that had long since ceased to be a family, but a handful of survivors who no longer trusted each other.

Her mother kept her alive, but nothing more. She was no shield, no comfort. She was a stone, cold, immobile, hard. Her hands worked, her eyes looked right through her. She had learned that feelings were a luxury, and she had buried that luxury.

The brothers grew older, but not wiser. They quarreled, they stole from each other, they hated each other. Each saw the other not as an ally, but as a competitor for the last piece of meat, the last drop of milk, the last favor of their mother.

Temüjin saw all this and remained silent. He remained silent more than ever before. Not out of fear, but out of calculation. Words were knives—you only drew them when you were sure you'd hit the mark. And most of the time, silence was the sharpest knife of all.

He rode, he hunted, he learned. The steppe became his teacher, harder than any human. It struck him with hunger, battered him with storms, and tested him with loneliness. And he endured, again and again. He fell, he rose. He lost, he took again. He endured, and he grew stronger.

But those years also had something else: emptiness. No advancement, no clan, no glory. Only survival, day after day, night after night. Temüjin felt time gnawing at him, growing older without anything changing. Sometimes he looked up at the sky, saw the stars unchanged above him, and he thought: Damn, maybe I'll stay like this forever. A nobody, swallowing dust.

But then he gripped the bow tighter, urged his horse faster, and gritted his teeth harder. No. These were lost years, yes. But not wasted ones. Every day in

the dust was a training exercise that made him steelier. Every hunger pang was a chisel that struck him harder. Every blow from the steppe was a promise he would one day repay.

The lost years didn't make him smaller. They made him dangerous. A wolf who had waited too long in the shadows. A fire that glowed beneath the ashes until the wind came and fanned it.

He didn't know, but deep inside he felt: the dust wasn't the end. It was just waiting. And he wouldn't wait forever.

The years stretched like the horizon. One looked like the next. Sometimes Temüjin didn't know whether one day had passed or ten. Morning was dust, midday was dust, evening was dust. In between, hunger, strife, silence.

Sometimes they rode, looking for a better spot for the yurt, a river, a bit of grass for the few animals they had left. But no matter where they went, the steppe remained the same. Indifferent, cold, without compassion.

Temüjin got used to disappointment. He learned to expect nothing. No good weather, no mercy, no help. He prepared for the worst and was grateful when things "only" turned out bad.

His brothers wore him out. Kazan with his shouting, the younger ones with their envy. Everyone wanted more, no one begrudged anyone anything. When Temüjin went hunting and returned, they fought over the meat as if they had killed it themselves. Sometimes his mother had to intervene, but even her strength wasn't always enough. It was a miracle they didn't kill each other.

He kept his distance. He gave them what they needed and took what he needed. But he no longer invested in them. Blood was a weak chain. There was no trust.

The horse and the bow remained his only true companions. With them, he could escape the camp, ride out into the void. He hunted not just for his stomach, but also for his mind. The whistle of the arrow, the dull thud in his flesh—that was music. The rhythm of the hooves—that was comfort.

He learned patience. He could lie motionless on a hill for hours while observing an animal. He waited until it stood at just the right moment, and then he struck. Not an arrow too early, not one too late. He learned that power lay not in quick movements, but in long endurance.

During these years, the steppe shaped him into someone unseen until he struck. Like a shadow, like a knife in the dark.

But in the silence, something else also grew. A restlessness. A fire that wouldn't go out. He wanted more than to hunt, more than to survive. He wanted to rule. The steppe made no promises, but it whispered to him in the nights: "If you are strong enough, you can take everything."

Sometimes he imagined what it would be like if he no longer lived in the dust. If he had a camp with many horses, with men following him. He imagined what it would be like if he were no longer hungry, but had mountains of meat. If he no longer fought alone, but commanded entire armies. These images seemed like dreams to him—but dreams so sharp they tasted like reality.

He never spoke about it. But the images burned into his memory. They kept him awake, they gave him strength. Every bite, every arrow, every breath was just a step toward those dreams.

The lost years were like forging a sword. Again and again into the fire, again and again struck, again and again cooled. No glamour, no glory, just hammering. But in the end, something remained that would never break.

Temüdschin was this sword.

As the years passed, he saw others die. Friends he could barely call friends. Children he had known remained lying in the snow or dust. Men who had seemed strong just a moment ago were suddenly nothing but bones. The steppe took them all. But it didn't take him. He stayed. Thin, hungry, hard—but he stayed.

And that was his victory. Not a victory with songs, not a victory with glory. But a victory over the steppe itself.

For those who survived the lost years were no longer simple people. They were something else. Harder. Darker. More dangerous.

Temüdschin knew: this wasn't the end. It was just the waiting. The dust was the school. Hunger was the teacher. Pain was the book. And he had read everything.

The lost years weren't lost. They were the beginning of everything.

Escape into the night

The night was black, thicker than the smoke of a burning camp. No moon, only wind, only the cracking of branches, the panting of animals. Temüdschin lay awake in the yurt, his eyes open, his hunger there as always. But this time it wasn't just hunger in his stomach. It was hunger for something else. For a beginning.

His brothers snored, his mother slept like a rock. But something stronger than tiredness raced inside him. He felt he couldn't stay here any longer—in this dust, in this emptiness, between strife and hunger. If he waited, he would end up like his father: rotten, forgotten, a nothing.

He stood up quietly, pulled the bow, the knife, the horse toward him. The animal snorted softly, as if it knew something was beginning. Temüjin stroked its neck. "Now," he whispered, "now it begins."

The escape wasn't a plan, not a long thought. It was instinct, like the first murder. The steppe had kept him small long enough. Now he wanted to go out, into the night, into danger, into the unknown.

He rode off. Not a word to his mother, not a glance at his brothers. Just the horse, the bow, the darkness. The steppe opened before him like a black abyss. And he plunged into it.

The wind ripped open his face, the dust bit his eyes. But he felt no fear. Only freedom. For the first time, he felt that he wasn't trapped in the dust, not cursed, not damned. He was a rider, and the world lay open.

The night was full of sounds: the howling of wolves, the rustling of grass, the crack of hooves. He knew that every shadow could be an enemy. But he also knew: he was ready. He had tasted blood, he had survived hunger. What could frighten him now?

Somewhere that night, a name began to grow. No one whispered it yet, no chronicler wrote it down. But in his head, in his heart, a sound formed, rough, hard, as if hammered from iron:khanNot yet Genghis. Not yet ruler of all the steppes. But Khan – the one who rules, the one who takes, the one who no longer waits.

The stars above him looked like eyes. Eyes of spirits, of ancestors, of enemies. They gazed down, and he gazed back, defiant, wild, hungry. "I'm coming," he murmured. "You will learn my name. All of you."

The night took him in. And with it began something greater than a boy, greater than a family, greater than a clan. It was the escape into the night, the first step on a path that led him out of dust and hunger—to the name the world would never forget: Genghis Khan.

The night swallowed him, but he didn't feel lost. Every breath was new, raw, full of danger—but that was precisely what freedom was. He was no longer a boy waiting in his yurt for the next hunger pang. He was a rider in the dark, alone, but not weak.

The horse beneath him was hot and restless, but he kept it under control. Every jump, every hoofbeat sounded like a heartbeat, louder than the wind. He wasn't riding anywhere—he was riding away. Away from the past, away from his brothers, away from the confines of his home.

He didn't know where he wanted to go. But he knew what he no longer wanted: to stand still.

The steppe was an open wound, and he was the knife that continued to tear it open. He felt it in his bones: out here, there were no rules except the one he set for himself.

He stopped, sometime, somewhere, far away. The horse was steaming, his breath was hot, his heart was racing. Temüjin looked up at the sky. The stars sparkled, cold, mocking, endless. He felt their gaze, but this time he didn't flinch. He raised his hand, bloody, calloused, and clenched it into a fist.

"I will be Khan," he murmured. The word tasted foreign, dangerous, but right. "Not now. Not tomorrow. But one day."

Khan. Ruler. Leader. This was more than a title. It was a promise to the steppe, to the spirits, to himself.

Later, much later, he would be called Genghis. The mighty one. The one who tramples everything down. But that night it was just a germ, a whisper. An eruption.

He spent the hours until morning alone, his horse by his side, his bow at the ready. Every shadow was an enemy, every movement a threat. But he felt no terror. Only hunger. No longer the hunger in his stomach—but a hunger for power.

When the sun rose, red like a bloody eye over the horizon, he knew there was no turning back. Even if he returned to camp, even if he entered the old tent again, he would no longer be the same. He had broken out.

The steppe had given birth to him, had tormented him, had almost broken him. But that night he had broken his shackles.

The boy who rose from the dust, the son of a poisoned father, the brother who had shed his brother's blood—he was no longer just Temüjin. He had become something else.

Not Genghis Khan yet. But the beginning of one.

The night had transformed him. And when he heard the first cry of an eagle, high, wild, free, it sounded to him like confirmation. He was no longer a nobody. He was an eruption, a storm, a threat.

He rode on. Not back, not to the side, but forward. Always forward.

For the steppe was large, the world was larger – and his name would be larger than both.

Genghis Khan. It was still just an echo in his head, a dream among the stars. But he knew: one day it would become thunder, louder than any storm.

Friends who are more wolves than humans

Friends on the steppe—that was a word that sounded almost ridiculous. Everyone stole, everyone lied, everyone wanted more meat, more horses, more power. Friends existed only as long as it was useful. And yet, sometimes, amidst the dust, you found someone who didn't immediately draw a knife. Someone who stayed, even when everything else disappeared.

Temüjin didn't meet them in a tent, not at a feast, not at a peaceful meal. He met them in the dust, in strife, in the wilderness. Men just as hungry as he was, just as hunted, just as lost. They came like shadows, but they stayed like wolves.

One was named Dschalme, a giant with scars all over his body. He rarely laughed, and when he did, it sounded like an animal growling. He was more hungry than decent, but also had a loyalty sharper than a sword.

Another was Boorchu, quick with an arrow, quicker with his mind. He could hit a hare at a hundred paces and, in the same time, devise a plan to steal the cattle of a stronger enemy.

There were others—men without a home, without a clan, outcasts like Temüjin. They found each other not because they liked each other, but because they had no chance alone. Everyone was a wolf, but wolves know: alone you starve, in a pack you hunt.

Thus, what one might call a "friendship" was born, but in reality, it was a pack. Temüjin was the one who bit when necessary. The others followed because they sensed that this boy had more hunger, more fire, more will.

They set out, at night, quietly, taking what they needed. Horses, meat, weapons. Small raids, quick, hard, deadly. They were not yet an army, not yet a power. But they were more than dust. They were a shadow that grew.

The steppe looked at them and mocked them. "A handful of outcast dogs," said the clans. But dogs that become wolves are more dangerous than any khan.

Temüdschin felt it. He was no longer alone. He had found brothers, brothers he hadn't received through blood, but would keep through blood. Brothers who were more wolf than human.

And he knew: something greater could emerge from this pack.

There weren't many of them, and yet it felt to Temüdschin as if he had a real weapon in his hand for the first time in years: not made of iron, but of flesh and blood. Men who didn't flinch when things got tough. Men who laughed when the knife was drawn. Men who didn't care about clan or blood, but only whether you could fight.

The pack had no rules except one: strength. Those who were weak were left behind. Those who stole from their own flesh received the knife. Those who stood their ground became brothers. Simple. Brutal. Clear.

They lived like wolves. They slept in the dust, ate raw meat, and hunted at night. They attacked small camps, not large enough to attract armies, but large enough to feed them. They came quietly and disappeared quickly. No glory, no stories—only loot and the laughter of the men as they sat by the fire with full bellies.

Yet there was something genuine in that laughter. Not the fake laughter of brothers fighting over a piece of meat. But the laughter of men who knew: you are one of us, because you have swallowed the same dust, endured the same hunger.

Jalme, with his scars, was the first to truly call Temüjin "brother"—not out of duty, but out of respect. "You bite like a wolf," he once said, his face half in the shadow of the fire. "That's why I follow you." That was all it took.

Boorchu was different. Sharper, wiser. He sometimes wondered where this was all leading. "We can't live like robbers forever," he murmured. "Someday the great clans will come. Someday they'll crush us." Temüjin looked at him with those dark eyes that promised more than words could ever deliver. "Then we'll be greater when they come," he said. Boorchu was silent after that—not because he was convinced, but because he knew: this boy believed it, and that alone was dangerous enough.

The nights were filled with blood and fire. They raided, they took, they ran. Sometimes one of them died, sometimes they returned wounded. But no one complained. In their pack, death was no surprise, just a bet: today you, tomorrow me.

And slowly, imperceptibly, their name grew. Not yet great, not yet fearsome. But whispers around the fire told of a small band led by a boy who bit harder than any man. Some laughed, others listened, still others began to travel more cautiously.

Temüdschin sensed that this was just the beginning. That these men, these wolves, were more than hunger. They were the seed from which something could grow. Something the steppe had never seen before.

And deep down, he knew that he was the one who led this pack. Not by birth, not by age—but by hunger, will, and toughness.

Friends? Perhaps. But in truth, they were wolves. And wolves only follow the strongest among them.

A bride stolen, a woman saved

Women on the steppe weren't romantic figures in songs, nor princesses in towers. They were prey. Just like horses, like meat, like weapons. Those strong enough took them. Those weak enough lost them. So simple, so brutal.

Temüjin knew this. He had seen it as a child, when clans clashed. Women were screamed at, dragged, and hauled like cattle. No one spoke of love. No one spoke of choice. It was about possession.

But then she came. Börte.

He didn't meet her at a festival, not at a market. He saw her in a moment that knew more dust than hope. And yet she burned into him like fire on cold iron. Not because she was gentle, but because she was firm. Her eyes didn't have the look of prey. They looked like his own—hard, defiant, unbroken.

She was promised to him, according to ancient custom, as a bride for him if he was strong enough to keep her. A promise that was worth as much on the steppe as a rope in a storm: useful as long as it lasted.

But the steppe didn't keep its promises for long. Rivals came, took her, stole her as if she were just a piece of livestock. For most men, that would have been the end. "That's just how it is," they would have said, "the stronger ones took." But Temüjin wasn't like most men.

He swore to bring her back. Not just because she was his bride. But because she was the first person to truly look at him, not as a child, not as a nobody, but as a man.

He set off with his pack. Jälme, Boorchu, the wolves—they rode with him. They gained nothing from it, no prey, no gain. But they followed him because they sensed: this fight was greater than a woman. It was a fight for pride. For proof that Temüjin would not leave anything that belonged to him to anyone.

The night was black, the fire of the enemy camp glowed like a heart. They waited, they watched, they attacked. Arrows hissed, knives flashed, screams ripped through the darkness. Temüjin fought like an animal, his eyes full of rage, his knife covered in blood.

And he found her. Börte, bound, but not broken. Her eyes shone when she saw him, not with tears, but with fire. He cut her loose, pulled her onto his horse, and rode out with her, while chaos raged behind them.

As they left the camp, Temüjin knew he had done more than just bring back a woman. He had proven something. To himself, to his wolves, to the steppe.

He could take what was taken from him. He could defend what he claimed was his.

Börte wasn't just a woman. She was a symbol. Proof that he wasn't a victim, but a robber, a master, a khan in the making.

And that night, as he held her in his arms, he felt something like peace for the first time. Not the peace of the steppe, not the peace of death. But the peace of a man who knows: he has done something greater than himself.

A bride stolen, a woman saved—it was a contradiction, like so many things on the steppe. But it was his contradiction. And he would defend it with blood.

The ride back with Börte was no triumphal procession. It was a flight, breathless, blood on the neck. Behind them, men shouted, horses neighed, arrows hissed through the night. But Temüdschin held the horse tight, pressing Börte to him, while his pack rode beside him like shadows with teeth.

They made it out, over hills, through grass, into the darkness. Only when the screaming behind them faded did he stop. The horse trembled, his hands trembled, Börte breathed heavily. But her eyes were awake. No tears. No wailing. Just a look that said:*You did it.*

His men grinned, bloody and bruised. "We robbed them like children," laughed Jälme, "but children with knives." "No," said Temüjin quietly. "Not like children. Like wolves."

They built a small fire and shared the last of the meat. Börte sat there, not like a prisoner, not like a stranger. She was calm, strong, and her presence made the men quieter, more serious. She was not just a woman. She was prey, yes—but prey that wouldn't yield quietly. And that made her more valuable than any meat, than any horse.

That night, Temüdschin understood that there was something greater than prey. Something he had to hold on to, not just with force, but with loyalty. Börte was not just flesh; she was an ally, a mirror, destiny.

The days that followed were hard. They knew the enemy wouldn't let up. Every ride was a risk, every shadow an ambush. But the pack held together. And

Börte was at the heart of it all, not silent, not broken. She spoke, she advised, sometimes she even laughed, raw, clear, fearless.

The men respected her, which was rare on the steppe. Women rarely became more than property. But Börte sat by the fire, drank the schnapps, and listened to the plans. She was part of the prey—and at the same time more than prey.

Temüjin sensed that she was changing him. Not weakening him, but strengthening him. There was no adoration in her gaze, but rather scrutiny. She looked at him as if she wanted to know if he was truly the man he thought he was. And he knew: he had to be, or everything would fall apart.

The enemies did indeed come. Nighttime attacks, arrows in the wind, burning tents. But each time, Temüdschin fought them off, with bow, with knife, with sheer stubbornness. His pack fought, bit, almost died – but they held on. And each time they survived, it was Börte who looked at him and nodded. That nod was worth more than any praise, more than any horse.

Börte wasn't a bride in the sense of the songs, not a woman waiting to be rescued. She was a companion. One he had brought back, yes – but one who wouldn't simply let himself be carried away. She fought with looks, with words, with an inner hardness that simultaneously challenged and strengthened him.

He began to understand that it wasn't just about the title "Khan," not just about power. It was about having something greater than dust. A core, a center, something for which the wolves would be sent. Börte was that core.

The steppe soon spoke of it. Some whispered that Temüjin had stolen a woman, like any robber. Others said he had saved her, like a hero. In truth, both were true. But more importantly, people talked about him. His name wandered from fire to fire, from yurt to yurt. Temüjin, who took what was taken from him. Temüjin, who didn't give up. Temüjin, who brought back a woman like one brings back a horse—not out of love, but out of pride.

But he knew it was more than that. Börte wasn't just a symbol. She was the first piece of the future he could hold onto. And he would hold onto her, no matter how much blood he shed for it.

The Oath by the River

The river wasn't calm water. It was a boundary. Between clans, between life and death, between past and future. On the steppe, rivers were more important than all the gods combined. They provided water, and with it life. They provided food for the animals, and with it meat. But they were also places where blood flowed, faster than the water itself.

Temüdschin stood on the shore. His men, the pack, the wolves, were with him. Dschalme, Boorchu, the others, each marked, each with scars, each with hunger in their eyes. Börte was there, silent, but with looks that were stronger than words. They all knew: today something greater than a simple raid, greater than a ride in the night, would happen.

Temüjin had called them together. Not for battle, not for plunder. But for an oath.

The night before, he had lain awake for a long time, the sound of the river in his ears. He thought of his father, poisoned and rotting, of his childhood, of hunger, of the dust, of brothers who were more enemies than family. He thought of Bekter, of the blood he had shed. He thought of Börte, whom he had brought back. Everything led to this point.

He was no longer a child, a refugee, or a nobody. He was a man, and men who wanted something had to make it loud.

So he stood by the river, the sun burned, the dust stuck, the men looked at him.

"We are nothing," he began, his voice rough but firm. "Nothing but hunger and dust. We have no yurts, no herds, no rich clans to protect us. We are outcast dogs. But dogs who have become wolves."

The men nodded. Some grinned. They knew he was telling the truth.

"Alone we are weak," he continued. "But together we are stronger than any clan. Together we are a pack that can destroy anything. Horses. Flesh. People. An entire empire, if necessary."

He paused, looked at them. Their faces showed tension and anticipation. He raised his hand and pointed at the water.

"Here, by the river, we swear. Not like children throwing words into the fire. But like men giving blood. Everyone who swears today belongs to me—not just for a ride, not just for a prize. Forever. We share flesh, we share blood, we share death. There is no betrayal. Betrayal means the river—but with a stone around your neck."

The men laughed, raucously, in agreement. But it wasn't idle laughter. It was a sound that reeked of seriousness.

Temüjin drew the knife. Without hesitation, he cut his hand so deeply that blood dripped. He held his fist over the water and let the blood drip into it.

"I swear," he said. "I will become Khan. Not just any Khan, but the Khan the steppe fears. And you—you who are here—you will go with me. To the end. Your blood is my blood, your death is my death, your victory is my victory."

Silence. Then Dschalme stepped forward. Tall, heavy, scarred everywhere. He drew the knife, cut his hand, and let the blood flow. "I swear. Because you bite when others whine."

Then Boorchu. Quickly, with a cold gaze. He cut himself, letting the blood drip. "I swear. Because you're not lying when you say we can take anything."

One by one, they stepped forward. Every cut a promise. Every drop of blood a bond.

In the end, the water was red, as if the river itself had accepted the oath.

Börte stood there, her eyes dark. She didn't swear, but she watched, and there was more weight in that look than in any other cut. Temüdschin knew: she was already bound, without a knife, without blood.

When the last drop fell, they fell silent. Only the sound of the river spoke, as if it wanted to carry the words further, out into the steppe.

It wasn't a great moment for the world. No chronicler recorded it, no song was sung. But for her, it was birth.

The oath by the river turned a band of wolves into something else. A nucleus. A seed. An army in the making.

And Temüdschin knew that from that day on there was no way back.

The men were still standing on the bank, the blood dripping into the river, and for a moment it was as if the world itself had held its breath. No bird called, no wind blew. Only this red, slowly fading into the water.

Temüjin looked at the faces of his companions. Men he hadn't won through blood, but through hunger, fighting, and robbery. Each of them had reasons to hate him, to distrust him, to turn their backs on him. But they didn't. They were here, they had cut him off, they had sworn.

There were no treaties, no scrolls, no gods to serve as witnesses. Only their own blood. And that was stronger than any words.

Jälme approached him and placed his bloody hand on his shoulder. "You are not a khan, not yet. But you are one I follow. If you say we ride, I ride. If you say we kill, I kill." Temüjin nodded. He needed nothing more.

Boorchu smiled coldly. "You know what we've loaded ourselves with, right? Clans ten times stronger will come if we go any further. They'll hunt us like wolves." "Then we'll bite their throats out," Temüjin replied. It didn't sound like a threat. It sounded like a statement.

The others said little. Words were superfluous. Each of them knew that this oath would either make them great or send them to the dust. But on the steppe, there was no middle ground. Either you ruled, or you died like a dog.

They stayed by the river, the sun set, and lit a fire. The meat sizzled, the smoke rose, the smell mingled with blood. They drank liquor, crudely distilled, sharp as fire. They laughed, they shouted, they told stories of battles, of lost brothers, of women they would never see again.

But beneath all the laughter lay something else: seriousness. Everyone knew this was no longer a game. They were bound, not by power, not by possession, but by a promise that was harder than anything else.

Börte sat at the edge, her eyes fixed on the fire. Sometimes she raised her gaze, met Temüdschin's, and he felt that she understood more than either of them. She remained silent, but her silence was acquiescence.

In the dead of night, when the men were drunk, when the fire was dying down, Temüjin stood up. He walked to the shore and looked into the black water. He saw his own reflection, distorted, bloody, illuminated by flames. "Genghis Khan," he murmured. For the first time, he spoke the name quietly, just to

himself. Not yet aloud, not yet real. But he tasted the word. Heavy, strange, yet true.

A name greater than Temüjin. A name greater than the river, greater than the steppe.

He was still just a boy with a pack of wolves. But the oath by the river marked the beginning of something that would shake the world.

The days that followed were different. They were no longer just a band riding at night. They were a brotherhood. Every ride, every raid, every piece of loot was now not just a hunt—it was a test, proof that their oath was true.

And they prevailed. They took horses, they stole cattle, they fought back when attacked. Sometimes they were few against many. But they fought like a pack that had learned to bite the stronger one in the leg until he fell.

Their reputation grew. People no longer spoke only of Temüjin, the outcast. They spoke of him and his men, who had sworn blood by the river. The clans sensed it: something was growing here that wouldn't just disappear like a band of robbers.

The oath by the river had turned dust into iron.

And Temüjin sensed that this was only the beginning. He was not yet a khan, nor was he yet the ruler of all the steppes. But he had a core. A circle of men who would go with him, no matter where. An oath that was stronger than hunger, stronger than fear.

He had an army in its infancy.

The Mongols smell of blood

Blood always had the same smell. Whether from a rabbit or a man, whether freshly shed or already clotted—it was that heavy, metallic stench that hung in the air, bit into the skin, and burned the throat. And on the steppe, blood was not a rare aroma. It was the perfume of power.

The Mongols – that was a collective term for all the clans scattered like stars, each for itself, each against the other. No unity, no great flag, only small tents,

small leaders, and great enmities. But one thing united them all: the hunger for blood.

A clan that didn't fight died. A clan that didn't raid starved. Children grew up with bows in their hands, women carried knives under their robes, old men told stories that tasted of blood. There were no Mongols without violence.

And Temüdschin knew: if he wanted to become Khan, he had to smell this blood, he had to bathe in it, he had to drink it, until his own name bore the same stench.

It began with small-scale fighting. An attack on a camp too weak to defend itself. Horses were stolen, men were slain, women were dragged away. The blood ran into the dust, and the wolves around Temüjin drank it like liquor.

But that wasn't enough. Blood evaporates quickly when it's just drops. He needed streams.

The first major battles came when stronger clans felt threatened. They had heard of Temüjin, of the Oath by the River, of the wolves who followed him. They laughed at him—a bastard, an outcast, a nobody. But they didn't laugh for long.

His men were few, but they fought like ten. They were hungry, and hunger makes you cruel. They attacked when others were asleep. They chased horses, drove them into the heart of the enemy camp, and caused panic to break out. They shot out of the darkness, disappeared, and reappeared.

And there was always blood left behind. Not enough to destroy entire clans—but enough that their names were whispered.

“The Mongols smell of blood,” people said, and they didn’t mean everyone, they meant Temüjin and his men.

Blood became their symbol. Blood on the knife, blood on the arrow, blood on the hands that fed the fire. They almost drank it, they laughed at the stench, they lived off it.

Temüjin himself was quieter than the others. While Jälme roared and Boorchu plotted, while the men divided their loot, he often sat at the edge, his face hard, his eyes dark. He inhaled the scent of blood, and he felt it fill him. Not like wine, not like liquor—but like a promise.

Every time he caught the scent, he thought: this is my path. Not peace. Not tranquility. Blood.

And so it began that he was no longer called simply Temüjin. Not yet Genghis Khan. But his opponents spoke of him with a new connotation. Temüjin, the blood wolf. Temüjin, whose men smelled more like beasts than like men.

The Mongols smelled of blood – and it was a smell that never went away.

The fighting became fiercer. Small raids turned into skirmishes, and skirmishes turned into battles. Temüjin was no longer just a robber who came and went at night. He became a name that set tents on fire even before his men appeared on the horizon.

The steppe whispered:*Temüdschin is back. Temüdschin is coming.*Some said it with fear, others with mockery, but everyone said it. And every time his name was mentioned, someone smelled blood.

His men were still few, but they were a pack that had learned to appear larger. They didn't attack head-on like foolish clans that relied on their numbers. They bit at the flanks, they tore apart, they disappeared and returned. An enemy could have twice as many warriors, and yet suddenly find himself in chaos, because horses fled, because fire burned, because arrows came out of the darkness.

And after the chaos came the blood.

Sometimes it flowed in torrents when an entire camp fell. Sometimes it was just a few men left behind on the steppe, slashed, their throats open so the crows could feed. But it was enough to spread the smell.

Börte sometimes rode along, not as a warrior, but as a witness. She saw what was happening, she smelled it, and she knew: this was the price of power. When she sat by the fire, she spoke little, but her eyes betrayed that she understood why her husband was doing this.

For Temüjin himself, it was more than just survival. It was a ritual. Every time he saw blood, every time he smelled it, he felt it sharpening him. It was like a forge fire, making him harder, darker, clearer. Other men drank liquor to find courage. He only needed the smell of blood.

Once, after a battle, he knelt on the bank of a river. His hands were red, the wind carried the stench away. He looked into the water and spoke softly: "This is the way. No god, no fate. Only blood. Blood is my fate."

His men began to look at him differently. No longer just as the leader of a pack, but as someone greater. Someone who not only gave orders, but whose eyes conveyed something deeper than hunger. They still called him Temüjin, but their gaze already contained the other word, one that hadn't yet been spoken: Khan.

And the enemies? They sensed it first. They smelled it before they saw it. Every time smoke hung in the sky, when horses became restless, when men disappeared into the night, they knew: it was him. The one whose men smelled of blood.

The steppe knew many clans, many names, many small khans. But none smelled as strongly of blood as this one.

And so it became a curse, a promise, a prophecy: The Mongols smell of blood.

Not like a swear word. But like a warning.

And Temüdschin accepted it. He knew this smell wouldn't go away. He didn't want it to either. Because blood wasn't just a smell. Blood was power.

The first followers and the intoxication of power

The first followers didn't come with flowers and songs. They came with hunger, with scars, with rage in their bellies. Men who had been cast out by their clans for being too wild, too brutal, too ambitious. Men who no longer had a home, only horses, bows, and the desire not to die alone.

They heard of Temüjin, of the wolves, of the oath by the river. Some laughed, calling him a boy who made himself bigger than he was with blood. But others listened more closely. They said: "There is one who takes back what is stolen from him. One who doesn't wait, but bites." And these men came.

At first, there were only isolated figures. A hunter without a clan, a thief fleeing his own brother's revenge. An old fighter who had already served three khans and seen them all die. They approached cautiously, kept their distance, scrutinized him. And Temüjin let them. He forced no one, he promised nothing.

He let only his eyes speak—dark, steady, unmoving. And after a while, they swore, without words, without knives. They rode along, and with that, the matter was settled.

Soon, it wasn't just individuals anymore. Small groups joined, sometimes entire families. Women, children, old men, seeking protection. Not out of love, not out of hope—out of sheer necessity. But Temüjin took them in. Not because he was soft, but because he understood: power can be made out of people. Even the weak are useful when they tend the fires, cook the meat, and carve the arrows.

And so the pack grew. From a few wolves, an entire tribe grew in embryo. And for the first time, Temüjin experienced what it felt like not just to survive, but to rule.

With the followers came something else: the intoxication. Power tasted sweet, sharper than liquor, sweeter than meat. He realized that he only had to raise his arm, and men would follow. That he only had to raise his voice, and others would fall silent.

At first, it almost frightened him. But then he got used to it. Fast. Too fast. He rode in front, the men behind him. He spoke, and they nodded. He commanded, and they did. No hesitation, no questions.

The rush was dangerous, he knew that. But he enjoyed it. Anyone who had ever felt a hundred men waiting simultaneously for a sign from you knew: there was no turning back.

His first followers weren't a shining army. They weren't an army marching in rank and file. They were a wild bunch, more wolves than men, just like him. But there were many of them. And many wolves together could destroy anything.

They raided larger clans, not just the weaker ones. They took herds of horses and drove them away. They stole women, they slaughtered men. They set fire to yurts and let smoke drift across the steppe. And every time the smoke rose, the people knew: Temüjin was there.

With every victory, his reputation grew. With every man he killed, the number who came to him grew. For on the steppe, might was the only law. Whoever shed blood attracted blood.

And Temüdschin bathed in it.

Temüjin felt the reins tighten in his hands. It was no longer just the leather around the horse's neck—it was the invisible reins that guided men. Each person who joined him made him heavier, bigger, more dangerous.

And yet, it wasn't easy growth. Some of the newcomers were fickle, some full of greed. They came because they smelled power, and power attracts not only wolves but also rats. Temüjin quickly learned to differentiate. Some he let close, some he kept at bay. Some died faster than they could even comprehend why.

He began to set rules. Not written, not proclaimed—but demonstrated. Anyone who stole from a brother lost his hand. Anyone who showed cowardice in battle was left behind. Anyone who contradicted him had to use the knife against himself. And whoever survived was allowed to stay.

Thus, he forged order out of chaos. Not like a king, not like a priest. But like a wolf, building pack structures. Everyone knew who was above them. Everyone knew there was no room for weakness.

With order came more excitement. Temüjin began to sense that it wasn't just about killing. It was about shaping. Men who had previously been like dust became weapons in his hands. He could forge them like one beats metal in fire. Every raid, every battle wasn't just plunder—it was training. A lesson for those who wanted to survive.

Boorchu saw it first. "You make them more than they are," he said by the fire. Temüjin just shrugged. "I make them what they must be." "And what is that?" "Followers."

The word sounded new, foreign. On the steppe, a man usually kept to himself, or followed the bond of blood. But here it was different. These men didn't follow because they were brothers, not because they were sons of the same father. They followed because they wanted to share the thrill of power with him.

And this intoxication grew.

With each victory, the camp grew larger. More yurts, more horses, more smoke rising into the sky. Women and children joined them, and suddenly it no longer looked like a band of robbers—it looked like a tribe. A new tribe, without old names, without old stories. A tribe that had only one face: that of Temüdschin.

The steppe began to react. Other clans grew restless. Some sent messengers, with gifts, with words of caution. Others attacked to break him before he grew too big. But each attack only made him harder, made his men more determined.

The rush of power was like a torrent sweeping him along. He knew that at some point it might tear him apart. But as long as it held, it would carry him on, on and on, to the end of the steppe.

And the first followers, these wolves and rats, were the foundation. He would build on their blood, on their oath, on their fear and their hunger.

Not just a pack. Not just a tribe. But an empire that began in dust and would be drenched in blood.

The intoxication was dangerous because it was addictive. Temüdschin knew this, even if he didn't say it out loud. Every victory, every new horse, every man who joined him, made him grow. But he also felt it eating away at him inside. Sleep became shorter, thoughts darker, dreams louder. He woke up with a racing heart, as if he had smelled blood in his sleep.

But he allowed it. He wanted it. Without this intoxication, he would be no different than the men who had joined him—just one more in the dust. The intoxication was his difference.

His followers became something he hadn't expected: They began to worship him. Not openly, not kneeling. But they spoke of him as if he were more than a man. They said, "When Temüjin rides, we ride to victory." They said, "When Temüjin is silent, the steppe is silent."

Some painted his mark—a simple pattern, a wolf's head, roughly carved—on their bows or on their tents. No order from him, no plan. It simply happened because men needed a focal point, and he was that focal point.

As the number of followers grew, so did the loot. It was no longer just small herds of cattle, no longer just a few women. Entire tribes were plundered, their yurts burned, their children abducted. Temüjin's camp grew like a tumor, spreading until it could be seen from afar.

Other khans began to take him seriously. At first, they mocked him: "A bastard, an outcast, a nobody." But then they saw the number of his men, the number of his horses, the size of his camp. And the mockery subsided.

Boorchu warned him. "The bigger we get, the more enemies will come. The steppe doesn't tolerate new stars in the sky." Temüjin just grinned. "Then we'll tear down the old stars."

He began to introduce structures. Groups of ten, led by a man he himself chose. Not by age, not by background, but by strength and loyalty. The tens became hundreds, and the hundreds soon became more. Everyone knew their place. Everyone knew they were only as strong as the men beside them.

This was new. The clans knew only blood ties, only ancient lines. But with Temüdschin, it was different. Blood played no role. Only strength. Only loyalty.

That made him dangerous. Because suddenly anyone could rise to the top—even the poorest, even those without families. All he needed was courage. And that attracted men like flies to blood.

Temüjin saw the effect and felt the intoxication more intensely. He was no longer a leader of wolves. He was a blacksmith who made soldiers from dust. And every soldier was a brick in the structure he had in mind: an empire.

The first followers weren't heroes. They were thieves, murderers, outcasts. But in his hands, they became something else. They became the nucleus of a power greater than any clan, greater than any ancient law.

And when they rode, when they fought, when they returned covered in blood and laughing, he knew: this was just the beginning. The intoxication was still young, and he hadn't even drunk half yet.

The nights in the camp had a new sound. Before, it was just the howling of the wind, the crackling of fires, the snorting of horses. Now there were voices. Many voices. Men singing, men arguing, men telling stories. The camp lived, grew, and breathed like a giant animal.

Temüjin sometimes wandered among the yurts, quietly, unrecognized. He heard the men talking about him. "He doesn't sleep," some said. "He dreams of victories while we drink." "He sees further than we do," others said. "He thinks not only about the next hunt, but about the next year."

He remained silent. He listened. And he knew they were right. He saw further. He saw more than just blood in the dust. He saw flags. He saw empires. He saw the steppe kneeling.

But he didn't say it out loud. Not yet. The men should drink, should laugh, should feel the rush of power, without realizing how big the dream truly was.

Sometimes he sat off to the side with Börte. She looked at the camp, at the fires, at the men who were shouting and laughing. "They follow you like a god," she said. "I'm not a god," he replied. "No," she said. "You're worse. A god forgives. You don't."

He smiled. It wasn't a warm smile. It was the smile of a man who knew he was right.

The first followers began bringing him gifts. No gold, no treasure—they were unfamiliar with that. They brought him what mattered on the steppe: horses, bows, knives, meat. Some brought him their sisters or daughters, hoping to become part of his family. He took what was useful and rejected what weakened him.

And every time he took, his influence grew.

But power always comes at a price. The larger his camp grew, the more eyes were on him. Enemies plotted to break him before he grew too strong. Former friends sensed the danger and prepared for battle. Old khans cursed the bastard who defied their order.

Temüjin saw it coming. And he wanted it. The more enemies, the more proof of his strength. He knew the intoxication wouldn't last forever if it wasn't fed. Blood was the bread of these men, and he would give it to them.

So he rode with them, again and again, out into the dust. Each victory brought more men, each victory more euphoria. His followers no longer fought merely for plunder—they fought because they felt they were part of something greater.

And Temüjin drank this intoxication like liquor. Every drop made him clearer, harder, wilder. He was no longer just Temüjin, the son of a poisoned father. He was the center of a storm.

The steppe had seen many men, many khans, many battles. But she had never seen one make so much out of nothing.

And at night, when the blood dried and the smoke settled, he knew: this was just the beginning.

Intoxication also had a downside. Some men lost themselves in it. They drank too much, boasted too loudly, and forgot the hardship that had brought them there in the first place. And Temüjin saw this. He intervened, not with words, but with actions.

One night, when a young warrior stole a horse that wasn't his, Temüjin made him line up before the entire camp. No long speeches, no talk of gods or laws. Just a short command. The man was pushed to the ground, and one of the Ten Leaders cut off his hand. The screams echoed through the night as the fire crackled. No one laughed. No one objected.

From that day on, everyone knew: intoxication was allowed. But it was never allowed to weaken the pack.

That made the difference. Other clans collapsed under their own greed, but Temüjin's group grew. Not because he was stronger, but because he was wiser. He understood that men needed rules—not out of morality, but out of necessity.

Börte watched him, silent, alert. Sometimes, when he looked at her, he wondered if she was afraid of him. But there was no terror in her eyes. Rather, there was something else: recognition. Not love in the sense of the songs, but respect.

The first followers were still a ragtag bunch. But slowly, they became more. When they rode, they rode in order. When they fought, they fought as one. When they died, they died side by side. And that made them stronger than most of the ancient clans, which relied on bloodlines and fell apart at the decisive moment.

The rush of power was no longer just a feeling in Temüdschin's chest. It hung over the entire camp. The men spoke of belonging to something greater than themselves. They didn't know exactly what—but they felt it.

Temüjin knew. He saw it in the flames, he smelled it in the blood, he heard it in the stamping of the horses. It was what he had first felt that night by the river: the promise that the steppe would yield.

The first followers were just the beginning. A pack that would become an army. And the euphoria they felt now was just a drop in the river that was yet to come.

As the sun rose over the camp one morning, Temüjin stood at the edge and gazed out. Over the grass swaying in the wind, over the plumes of smoke drifting into the sky. He smiled. Not warmly, not softly. But like a wolf with blood on its teeth.

“This is just the beginning,” he murmured.

And the beginning tasted of blood and power.

Betrayal like foul breath

Betrayal was as commonplace on the steppe as dust in the wind. You couldn't share a piece of meat without someone eyeing it out to see if they could pull off the larger piece. Brothers betrayed brothers, sons betrayed their fathers, wives betrayed their husbands. It wasn't an exception—it was the actual law.

Temüjin knew this. He had grown up in betrayal, swallowed it like milk. His father had been poisoned, his brother had treated him almost like a dog, his family had been abandoned by clans sworn to protect them. All he had ever learned was: trust no one who hasn't shed their blood with you.

But now, as he grew, as his camp grew larger, as men came in droves, as the fires burned brighter—now the betrayal returned, like a stench rising from the ground.

It began quietly. A missing horse here, a poisoned meal there. Whispers in the yurts, quiet laughter that died down as he approached. His eyesight became sharper, his sleep lighter. He knew: rats had once again nested among the wolves.

Jälme smelled it first. "It stinks of lies," he said, chewing meat. "One of us thinks he can grow bigger by making you small." Temüjin nodded. "Then let him try."

Boorchu was more suspicious. "Betrayal eats quietly. If you don't cut it out, it will eat all the flesh." "Then we'll cut it out," Temüjin replied.

The first traitors weren't great men. A few who secretly sent messages to other clans, hoping to look better in the eyes of the stronger. Temüjin had them caught. It wasn't a long trial. They were dragged to the fire, their tongues cut out so they could never lie again. Their heads were placed on spears, right at the entrance to the camp.

The message was clear: betrayal is like bad breath – you smell it immediately and you cut it away.

But it didn't stop at these small gestures. The bigger he grew, the more men came. And the more came, the more of them had their own ideas. Some had never truly sworn. They were only there because there was meat, horses, women. They wanted the thrill of power without paying the price.

One of the new Ten Leaders—a man named Arbaghai—was the first to object loudly enough. He was tall, strong, a fighter, but too proud. One evening, by the fire, he laughed and said, "Why should I follow that bastard? I could be Khan myself."

The men laughed nervously, but Temüjin remained silent. He simply stood up and walked out into the darkness. The next morning, he called the entire tribe together. Without a word, he had Arbaghai brought forward.

Then he stepped forward himself, knife in hand. No orders, no soldier, no executioner. He slit his throat himself, slowly, while everyone watched. The blood spurted, the man gasped, and the fire crackled as if in applause.

Temüdschin looked at the crowd. "This is the end of everyone who thinks their breath is stronger than mine."

No one laughed anymore. No one objected.

But that was only the beginning. The betrayal crept deeper. Clans that had once welcomed him began to fear him—and fear always leads to deceit. Some sent messengers with empty promises while gathering weapons in the background. Others offered daughters, only to later stab them in the back.

Temüjin learned to read faces. A smile too broad, a promise too quick, a look that lingered too long—all of this was the stench of betrayal. And he began to strike faster, before he could even smell the breath.

"Betrayal," he said to Börte one night, "is like bad breath. Those who have it don't notice it. But everyone else smells it. And if you don't remove it, you'll suffocate from it." Börte nodded. "Then keep your teeth sharp."

And he kept them sharp. With blood, with fear, with fire.

After Arbaghai's death, the camp had become quieter. But silence didn't mean peace. Silence was only the sound betrayal made when it held its breath.

Temüjin knew this, and that's why he hardly slept anymore. Every night he listened, heard the voices, heard the whispering.

One night, they caught two men trying to escape—on horses that didn't belong to them. They had sneaked away in the darkness, but the dogs were barking, and Boorchu rode after them. By the fire, they confessed that they wanted to go to an old khan who offered them more.

Temüjin didn't let them down. He let them float down the river alive, with stones tied to their legs, until the water swallowed them. "This is the end of those who think the river is lighter than my anger," he said. His men were silent, but respect—and fear—flickered in their eyes.

Betrayal was everywhere, and the more followers came, the more poison came with them. Some were truly loyal, others were just fed. Some wanted power, others wanted protection. But everyone knew: one false breath, and the bastard would strike.

And so something strange began to change. It wasn't just fear that held the men together – it was also pride. They boasted that no traitor lasted long at Temüjin. They told it around the fire when new men arrived: "There's no foul breath here. Here, there are only clean cuts."

Temüdschin himself noticed that he was becoming harder. Every betrayal made him feel less human, more like a wolf. He hardly laughed anymore, he spoke less. But when he spoke, everyone listened.

Once, a messenger came from a great clan. He brought gifts, words of friendship, sweet as fermented milk. But Temüjin smelled their breath—rotten, rotten to the core. He took the gifts and let the messenger eat and drink. In the morning, he was found with his throat slit, the flesh still undigested in his stomach. "That's how much their words are worth," said Temüjin.

Dschalme growled in agreement, Boorchu nodded coldly. And the men knew: this was the right thing to do.

The more betrayal he crushed, the purer his core became. The followers who remained were no longer just starving dogs. They were men who understood: there was no room for games here. There was only room for loyalty or for blood.

The steppe saw this and began to speak differently. They had once called him the bastard, the outcast. Now they said: "With Temüjin, there is no betrayal. He who breathes lazily does not breathe for long."

That wasn't an insult. That was praise. A dreaded compliment, but praise nonetheless.

And on quiet nights, when he sat alone, Temüjin thought of all the blood he had shed, not in battle, but in the name of loyalty. He sometimes wondered if he himself didn't reek of betrayal—betrayal of his own humanity. But then he smelled the wind, the fire, the blood, and he knew: humanity was just another word for weakness.

The betrayal made Temüjin sharper, but also lonelier. He felt the distance between him and the men growing. He had once sat with them by the fire, laughing, drinking, listening to stories. Now he often sat alone, his eyes fixed on the flames, his knife beside him. He couldn't afford to be one of them. He had to stand above them, like a wolf who bites even his brothers when they question the hierarchy.

The men accepted it. Some with fear, some with respect. But no one dared to examine it. They knew that every breath they took could be their last if it sounded lazy.

Once, during a raid, a new follower shoved another at the crucial moment, causing him to fall. An arrow struck the fallen man—dead. No one saw it, except Temüjin. After the fight, he called everyone together and pointed at the man. "His breath stinks," he said simply. Then he grabbed his bow, drew it, and shot the arrow through his neck. No more words. The rest understood.

Such gestures were brutal, yet they acted like iron rings around the pack. Everyone knew: betrayal might taste like a brief sting, but it was deadly. And slowly, bit by bit, the fear turned into a kind of pride. They said: "We have no rats. Only wolves."

But the price was high. Blood flowed not only in battle, but also in the camp. Men he had seen coming like brothers died like enemies. Temüdschin knew he had to be like this – but sometimes, at night, when Börte was asleep and he lay awake, it ate away at him. He wondered if one day he would see only blood and no more faces.

Börte seemed to sense it. She sometimes placed her hand on his arm, without words. Just this pressure, firm, clear, as if she wanted to say:*You have to do this. I know it. I can handle it.*And maybe that was the only thing that kept him from turning completely to stone.

The steppe smelled it. Betrayal was everywhere, but with Temüjin, it was shorter, harsher, more definitive. Other khans were consumed by intrigue, their own men overthrew them. With Temüjin, it was different. He cut out the poison before it could weaken the body.

And so his name grew. Not just as a fighter, not just as a robber. But as someone who brought order to the steppe—an order of blood, but an order.

"Betrayal like foul breath" – that's how people spoke of him. Some said it as a warning: Don't go to him, he'll kill you if you so much as breathe wrong. Others said it as recognition: With him, you're safe as long as you're faithful.

And Temüjin himself? He accepted it, as he accepted everything that came. He knew: foul breath is the first thing you smell in the morning when you live like a dog. And he didn't want to be a dog. He wanted to be the one who bites before he smells.

The harshest betrayal came not from strangers, but from men whom Temüjin had considered almost brothers. One of them was Altan, a warrior who had been with him since the early days on the river. Strong, swift, with a tongue that made men laugh. Temüjin had often let him ride at his side.

But one evening, Boorchu arrived with news: Altan had secretly met with messengers from another khan. It was said that he intended to defect—with a dozen men loyal to him.

Temüdschin remained silent for a long time. He had thought Altan was one of the wolves, not one of the rats. But the smell was there. Rotten, unavoidable.

He summoned Altan, in front of the entire camp. Altan came, his chin raised, as if he could deny it. "Brother," he said, "who told you this nonsense?" Temüjin just looked at him. "The river knows. The fire knows. Your breath stinks, Altan."

Altan laughed, uncertainly, then angrily. "I fought for you, shed blood. You don't want to believe me?" "I believe the blood," said Temüjin. And he drew his sword.

The fight was short. Altan attacked desperately, but Temüjin dodged, hard and cold. One blow, one cut, and Altan's head rolled into the dust.

The crowd fell silent. No one moved. Only the fire crackled, and the smell of fresh blood rose—sweet, heavy, familiar.

"This is how treason ends," said Temüjin. "He who stinks no longer breathes."

For a long time afterward, no one dared to take even a peek. The camp was cleansed, like a mouth after a strong liquor. The taste was bitter, but it burned away everything rotten.

Börte looked at him later, silent, her eyes dark. He knew what she was thinking: that he had lost a brother. But he also knew that he had gained something greater—clarity.

For the lesson was now seared into everyone's mind: With Temüdschin, there were only two paths: loyalty or death.

And so, while the steppe remained full of betrayal, his camp became different. Solider. Harder. Purer. The men there knew: as long as they were loyal, as long as they didn't smell of foul breath, they were safe. And on the steppe, that was worth more than gold, more than flesh.

But Temüjin himself carried the scent with him. Not in his nose, but in his heart. He knew: betrayal would never disappear. It would always return, like dust in the wind. But he would be ready. Every time.

For he had learned: The Khan the world would one day fear had to be more than a fighter. He had to be the one who could smell betrayal before it was even spoken—and end it with the first cut.

The battle no one wanted to forget

Battles were nothing new on the steppe. Every clan, every pack, every band of men had shed blood at some point. Sometimes it was ten against ten, sometimes a hundred against a hundred. Then a few died, the horses were divided, and life went on. Dust, blood, dust, blood—such was the cycle.

But the battle that followed was different. It was bigger, harder, deeper. It was one that was not easily forgotten, because it tore apart not only bodies but souls.

It began with a dispute over horses. It was always horses. Without horses, you were nothing. Without horses, you were dead. Temüjin's men had taken a herd, large, strong, full of animals that could feed entire tribes. But the owners wanted them back—and they didn't come alone.

There weren't just a few dozen warriors, as usual. There were hundreds. A clan larger than any Temüdschin had ever encountered. They came with banners, with drums, with shamans invoking their gods. And they came to break him.

Temüjin saw it on the horizon, a cloud of dust growing, rolling like a storm. His men fell silent. Some whispered, others swallowed hard. They knew: this was no raid, no small fight. This was a battle that would decide everything.

He called them together. "Today," he said, "blood will flow. Much blood. More than you've ever smelled. They are many, we are few. But they are only one clan. We are more—we are a pack sworn to stick together. And wolves will also bring down horses if they're hungry enough."

Jälme growled in agreement, Boorchu drew his bow, the men nodded. Fear was there, yes – but it was masked by hunger, by intoxication, by the oath.

Morning broke. Fog lay over the steppe, heavy, damp, and sluggish. But above the fog, one could already hear the thunder of hooves and the beating of drums. The enemy came, like a wave, large, unstoppable.

Temüjin lined up his men in rows. Not randomly, but in order—tens, hundreds, everyone knew their place. It was new for the steppe, almost unnatural. But it worked. The men stood, bows drawn, horses snorting.

Then they collided.

The first arrow flew, hissing, piercing, and then there were a thousand. The sky darkened, arrows rained down, horses fell, men screamed. Dust rose, mingling with blood, with smoke, with the stench of fear.

Temüjin rode in front, sword in hand, eyes cold. He struck, he cut, he thrust, ever further, ever deeper. He was not just a leader—he was Sturm. His men saw him, and they followed, like shadows, like beasts.

The battle raged for hours. Lines broke, reformed, men fell, screamed, died. Blood soaked the ground, so deep that the horses slipped. The noise was like thunder, endless, merciless.

And at some point, amidst the chaos, everyone sensed: this was no longer an ordinary battle. This was a mark that would burn into memory. Men who survived would tell their grandchildren about it. Men who died would live on in songs, even if their names faded away.

In the end, Temüjin was still standing. Many of his men weren't. But neither were many of the enemy. The ground was littered with bodies, the sky full of ravens.

He rode slowly across the battlefield, blood dripping from his sword. His eyes were empty, exhausted, but also filled with something new: certainty.

He now knew he could do more than just raid. He could fight battles, big, decisive ones. He could not only survive—he could win where others collapsed.

And the men who looked at him knew it too. They no longer saw him as just the leader of a pack. They saw him as someone who made history out of battles.

The battle that no one wanted to forget wasn't just blood and dust. It was the beginning of a new name.

Not yet spoken. But already there.

The sun was high when the fighting finally faltered. Bodies, horses, and weapons lay scattered everywhere, as if a god had torn the steppe itself apart. Men gasped, blood on their faces, dust in their throats. Some crawled, others lay still.

Temüjin rode slowly through this sea of death, sword still in hand. His men followed him, exhausted but alive. They had survived where many should not have. They had held on where others would have broken.

He stopped, dismounted, and knelt in the dust. He took a handful of earth, heavy with blood, and ran it through his fingers. "This is the price," he murmured. "This is what memory smells like."

Jälme stepped beside him, limping, his face covered in blood, but grinning. "There were many of them," he said. "And now there are fewer." Boorchu

laughed briefly, coldly, a sound without joy. "They'll tell stories. They'll say we're mad. That we'd rather die than retreat." "Let them," Temüjin replied. "Fear is an arrow that always hits home."

They gathered the survivors and bound the prisoners. Some begged for mercy, some cursed, some spat in his face. He had most of them killed. He spared only a few, sending them back—as living witnesses, as tongues to carry on his story.

For he had learned: Fear was mightier than any sword. Fear rides faster than any horse.

His own camp was quieter in the days following the battle. Many were dead, and everyone felt the void. But those who remained were different. Tougher. They had seen something they would never forget. They had stood in a fire and not burned.

Börte looked at him on those nights when they were alone. "You've become different," she said. "Different?" "You smell of more blood than there is in your body." He remained silent. Because she was right.

The battle reverberated. Men who had survived it spoke of it as if it were a dream—horrific, bloody, endless, but also sweet, intoxicating. They told how they thought all was lost, and then fought on because Temüjin rode in front, unstoppable, like a demon.

And so the battle took on a second life—not only in the dead, but also in the words. Everyone who heard about it knew: Temüjin had not only fought, he had made history.

His enemies became more cautious. Some kept their distance, others sought alliances. But in every conversation, in every glance, lay the memory of that battle no one wanted to forget.

For Temüjin himself, it was a slash through his soul. He knew he had left something behind: the remnants of the boy who once only wanted to survive. Now he was more. A man who not only survived, but ruled. A man who forced the steppe to learn his name.

Not yet Genghis. But already more than Temüjin.

The battle had shaped him, harder than any knife, deeper than any scar. And he knew it wouldn't be the last. But it would be the first one to remember.

After the battle, the steppe was silent, but it wasn't the silence of peace. It was the silence of a space where blood evaporates, where death still lies among the blades of grass. Ravens flew over the battlefield, raising their cries into the air, and then pounced on the dead.

Temüjin had the corpses of his own men honored with fire. No graves, no stones. Only flames that turned them into smoke so their spirits could ride freely across the steppe. He left the enemies lying there, for the birds, for the wolves. "So shall they end," he said. "Unforgotten, but unmourned."

The men who had survived watched as the flames rose into the sky. Some wept, some stood silently, others sang fragile songs. But in all their eyes was the same expression: pride. They had been part of something greater than a single battle.

In the days following the battle, new men came, lured by rumor. They had heard how Temüjin stood with few against many and was not broken. They had heard that he lived while other khan sons rotted on the steppe. And they wanted to be there.

Temüjin took them, but cautiously. Every newcomer was a potential stab in the back. He tested them, made them swear, made them give blood. Some passed, some died on the spot.

So his power continued to grow, like a wound that never heals.

The battle, which no one wanted to forget, was his first major mark on the steppe. It made him visible. It made him dangerous. It made him inevitable.

His followers talked about it for a long time. "He rode as if he were the storm itself," they said. "He cut through men as if they were blades of grass." "He didn't laugh, he didn't scream—he just did it," others said.

And everyone who listened felt the pull. The name Temüdschin was no longer just dust, it was thunder.

But for him, the battle was also a shadow. He knew it had shaped him, but also that it had made him colder. He had seen more men die than he could count. And yet he felt hardly any pain anymore, only this dull throbbing:*More. More.*

One night he sat alone, the battlefield still fresh in his mind. Börte came and placed her hand on his shoulder. "You'll never be the same again," she said. "No," he replied. "But the same person won't bring the steppe to its knees."

The weeks following the battle were like a never-ending echo. Men across the steppe spoke of it. Some said Temüjin had smashed entire ranks with his bare hands. Others swore they had seen him in the dust, his face so cold that even the horses steered clear of him.

The stories grew, became bigger, harder, wilder. And that was precisely his victory. Not just the blood, not just the horses, not just the dead – but what was being told.

The steppe lived on words. And now his name was on everyone's lips.

But fame was a double-edged sword. For every one who came to follow him, there were two who came to test him. Old khans felt insulted that a bastard outshone them. Young men wanted to build their own name by challenging him.

Temüjin accepted it. Every attack, every trial, every small battle after this great one was just further proof. His men saw that they were part of something greater than any individual victory.

The battle that no one wanted to forget became its foundation.

Years later, when fire swept through entire cities, when walls fell, when emperors knelt, the old men still said: "It all began there. In that dust. In that blood."

And Temüjin himself, who would one day be called Genghis Khan, sometimes thought back to that morning, when the fog hung heavy over the steppe and the drums roared. He remembered the first arrow, the first sword, the first scream.

He remembered the feeling when he realized he was more than a man. That he could be a storm.

And he knew: The steppe had seen it, felt it, tasted it back then. That's why it never forgot it.

The battle no one wanted to forget wasn't just a battle. It was a moment of birth.

And she gave birth to the man who would soon no longer be a bastard, but the Khan of all khans.

Heads roll like dice in the dust

In the morning, the steppe was so quiet that even the horses pricked up their ears, as if they wanted to devour the silence. The wind held its breath. Only the sun, cold as a sharp blade, lay on the men's shoulders. Temüjin stood as if someone had driven him into the ground like a stake. The camp behind him smelled of ash and sweat, leather and old blood. Before him lay a long, flat strip of earth, trodden smooth, ready for something that could no longer be undone.

He knew this strip. Everyone knew it. This was where decisions were made that lasted longer than bones. This was where people fell from life like ripe fruit. This was where heads fell.

The men stood in a semicircle, quiet, not out of pity, not out of fear, but out of habit. They had seen what happens when a herd grows: Rats come. Lies come. Men come, lulled in the shadows, believing they can sell the storm that had made them great. Temüjin didn't hate rats. He understood them. But understanding was no excuse. It was just looking at the knife before it struck.

Jälme stood to his right, tall, scarred, his face a map of old wounds. Boorchu to his left, his eyes narrowed as if he had squeezed the world into an arrow's crack. Börte stood further back, still as a stone, but everyone knew that she saw everything and that her judgment could be harsher than any sword.

Four men knelt in the dust. Hands tied. Heads bowed. Each had once been a wolf, or at least pretended to be. Now they smelled sharp, so sharp that even the wind turned its head away: the breath of betrayal. You didn't need ghosts to recognize it. You only needed the nose of a man who had lived long enough.

Temüjin raised his hand, and the silence deepened. "You thought," he said, "you could play with different dice." He saw them raise their eyes, one after the other, as if seeking another sun. "You thought you could buy the wind and move on, while we remain in the dust. But the wind belongs to no one. The dust belongs to us."

He nodded. Two men stepped forward, one with a sharp, short sword that looked more like a tool than a weapon, the other carrying a basket. No ritual, no chanting. Just work. Removing heads from shoulders. Prying blood from flesh. Establishing order.

The first man was dragged forward. He began to speak, that thin, glassy voice all traitors get when they realize words are nothing more than air. Temüjin

raised his hand. "Just one thing," he said. "Tell me when you realized you were smaller than your hunger." The man wept. The sword answered. The head fell, heavy, round, rolled two steps, three, struck a stone, and remained there as if it had always been there.

The second tried to run, even though his legs were bound. Men laughed dryly, not in mockery, but with that bitter realization that running away also becomes a habit if one escapes too often. The sword caught up with him. The head gave a short lurch, as if it were a thrown stone, landed, bounced, rolled. Dust flew. Someone muttered, "Dice," and then fell silent, frightened by the word.

The third nodded before the sword came, as if he understood. The fourth cursed until his tongue fell out of his mouth like a poorly tied flap. Four basket cases. Four lives that no longer needed to be told to the end.

"Collect the heads," said Temüjin. "Not as trophies. As a keepsake."

Boorchu bent down, picked one up by the hair, and examined it, as if searching for some final meaning in the frozen features. "Dice in the dust," he murmured. "Sometimes the wrong hand wins. Not today."

The men turned away, not solemnly, not with relief. Just soberly. These things didn't eat anyone who stayed here. They only ate those who sharpened their teeth in the shade of the yurts. Today, the shadow had been torn out.

In the evening, they sat by the fire; the smoke drifted straight up, a good sign, the old people said. Temüdschin wasn't sitting in the middle. He was sitting at the edge, where the light was already fading. Börte sat down next to him and handed him a piece of meat, barely seasoned, hard on the teeth, but warm. "It was necessary," she said.

He nodded. "Necessary is rarely beautiful."

“Beauty is never necessary,” she replied.

He bit, chewed, tasted fat and ash. "Heads roll like dice in the dust," he said quietly, half to himself. "But I don't want to play. I want to count."

“Then give men rules they can count on.”

He looked at them. "I gave them tens. Hundreds. I'll give them more. Thousands. Tens of thousands. Rows that don't break if one falls."

“And what if the one who falls is you?”

“Then no one should notice that I have fallen until it is too late to be happy.”

She placed a hand on his forearm. Not comfortingly. Obligingly. "Then give them something that goes beyond you."

He nodded. The flames briefly reflected in his eyes and then disappeared, as if they had realized they had no business being there.

The next morning, he had the men line up. Not to boast, not to give speeches that were longer than necessary. He stopped between them, measured the distance from horse to horse by eye, and drew lines in the air with his hand as if he were spreading an invisible net. Tens under a hundred-man leader, a hundred under a thousand-man leader. The strong hands found the straps, the weak hands found the loads they could carry without trembling.

"You stand like this," he said, "so that we don't fall if one stumbles. No star burns alone. Our stars stand close together. If one goes out, you see further. If one shouts louder, you listen to the one who speaks more quietly. If one bares his teeth for no reason, I'll pull them out."

His voice wasn't loud, but it carried. Men shifted in their saddles, feeling something within them—that old, steppe-typical restlessness—take a step back. Rules had never been popular on the steppe. But the rules that kept you alive suddenly had a different name: Meaning.

After starting, he rode far out with Boorchu. The air was sharp, the sky a wide scar. "We need dice," Boorchu said suddenly.

“Dice?” Temüdschin raised an eyebrow.

"The children's toys made of knucklebones. I don't mean for playing. We paint a symbol on each side. When we discuss the next hunt, or the next fire, or what to do with prisoners, the Ten Leaders are supposed to throw dice—not to leave the decision to chance, but to show that chance doesn't rule us. The dice only show what we've already decided: that everything that rolls stops with us."

Temüjin laughed once, short, dry. "You want them to touch the dust and feel something they understand."

"Yes."

"Good," said Temüjin. "Bring me the ankles. I'll paint the symbols on them."

And so they sat at night with knives and soot, carving lines into dried bones. No shamanic magic, no gods. Just symbols: one line for obedience, two for quelling hunger, three for fires on the enemy's periphery, four for sharing prisoners, five for using prisoners, six for burying prisoners. The men laughed at the strange seriousness with which these dice were treated, until they realized that each roll only confirmed what had long been law. The intoxication of power suddenly had a cup from which it was drunk.

The dice rolled into the dust. So did the heads. Both rested on the same man.

Days came when the sky hung low and the horses scratched restlessly with their hooves. Scouts brought flat words: An old khan in the east spoke of an alliance. A younger one in the north spoke of a trap. A third, who drank too much, spoke of his daughter, whom he would trade for peace. Temüjin dropped the news like dead fish. Alliances were hunger with a fresh coat of paint. Traps were only traps if you walked into them. Daughters were people. People who talk, eat, dream. He didn't buy dreams.

"We don't go into their yurts," he said. "We let them come to us. Anyone who kicks without greeting has had enough. I'll knock them out."

They came. A line of men with lowered spears, and behind them a slender man with a fur collar that was too white and hands that were too smooth. He was smiling. He had teeth like those that would be filled with silver. He smelled of salted meat and false courage.

"Temudsin," he said, and even the softness of his pronunciation was insulting. "We want peace. We bring you horses and a daughter."

Temüjin looked at the horses. Good flanks, alert eyes. He didn't look at his daughter. He saw the man's hands, which had never seen cracks. He saw the eyes of the men behind him, who squirmed because they knew this peace would only last as long as the meat wasn't in their bellies.

"You want peace because you are greedy," said Temüjin. "You want peace because you hope we will tire while you eat your fill. Peace is not a word for full stomachs."

“Then… what do you want?” the man asked, his smile becoming more rigid.

"That you throw the dice." Temüdschin nodded to Boorchu, who took the bones from his saddlebag and threw them into the dust. They rolled, bounced, and landed. Four and five. "Share prisoners. Use prisoners." Temüdschin raised his eyes. "We'll share your men. Half go where I say. The other half stays with you, so you know what obedience can do. You give me your spears and take mine. Then we'll talk about food."

The smile died. The man talked, talked, talked, until the words grew stale. Temüjin didn't listen to words. He listened to the twitching in the corners of his eyes behind the fur. One messenger whispered to another. Boorchu saw it, Jälme saw it. One false move was enough. Arrows were drawn, voices were stifled. When the air was still again, three men lay in the dust, and one of them had turned his white fur red.

"Peace is a knife," said Temüjin. "You only hold it as long as you know which side the blade is on."

They left smaller than when they arrived. The dice lay in the dust, and men picked them up, examining the carved symbols as if they were small, silent laws that could fit in their hands. Word spread: At Temüjin, you don't roll against fate. You roll with it.

Sometimes, when the wind blew from the west, it brought the smoke of large camps, the noise of many horses. Other times, it brought only the sweet stench of carrion. It brought no gods. It never brought justice. Only news in smells. Temüjin smelled what he needed. He interpreted the rest away.

A young warrior, barely a beard on his face, stood before him one day, trembling. "I..." – he swallowed – "I have defeated my Ten Leader."

“Why?” asked Temüdschin.

“Because he took the meat I had hunted.”

“Did he take it for himself?”

“For a wounded man.”

Temüdschin nodded. "Then you made two mistakes. The first, because you didn't see that the wounded man was your second eye. The second, because you struck the hand that might pull you up from the ground tomorrow. Throw."

The boy took the dice and threw them. The bones danced and stayed. Three. Fire to the edges.

"You ride with the Night's Watch today. On the outside. Where the wolves come first. If you stay, you're a knife. If you fall, the darkness will eat you."

The boy bowed, rigid, not grateful, but alert. Rules turned trembling hands into teeth.

At the edge of the camp stood stakes. No magnificent image, no monument. Just wood, rough, hard, with notches. On some hung old sinew, made sing by the winter wind. On some, nothing. Sometimes, when heads rolled, they were leaned there for a while, not as a threat, but as a reminder, just as he had said. Men walked by, sometimes placing two fingers to their foreheads and then to the stake, not out of piety, but to reassure themselves that their heads were still holding.

“You turn death into a tool,” said Börte as they looked at the stakes in the evening.

"Death has always been a tool," he replied. "It's just that most people used it like a toy."

"And you?"

"I don't play," he said. "I reap."

There were nights when the camp was so quiet he could count the horses' breaths. There were others when the sky hung in tatters and the men panted as one. On both nights, Temüjin thought about what lay ahead. Not the next raid. The next order.

He appointed leaders of the Thousands—men who weren't the loudest, but those whose horses smelled of work, not celebration. One was small, wiry, with a voice that carried no further than the nearest shoulder. But his Hundred stood when others wavered. Temüjin gave him the Knot of the Thousand. Another was tall, tough, with hands like shovels, but he listened before he shouted. He, too, got the Knot.

“Why him and not me?” asked a man who wanted to raise his fists to the sky.

"Because you're wondering why you're not," said Temüjin. "Those who are don't ask that."

The man bit his lip until blood came. Then he nodded, slowly, as if he had understood the direction of the sun.

Once, on a long ride with Jälme, they stopped at an old battlefield. Not the one they never forgot, but another, smaller one, one the steppe had already half-digested. Bones protruded from the earth like white blades. In a hollow lay a skull, half buried, half exposed. A gust of wind rolled it, just a little bit, just enough to blow sand from the eye sockets.

“He’s still rolling the dice,” said Dschälme, grinning.

"No," said Temüdschin. "He's already fallen. It's the living who are rolling the dice without realizing it."

"And you?"

“I’m holding the cup.”

They rode on, and the skull remained where it was, as if waiting for one last throw that never came.

The wolves in his camp—the real ones, not the men—had learned to come and go on soft whistles. A boy who heard faster than he spoke had trained them, without words, only with movement, only with hunger. They roamed the edges in the evenings, eating what they were supposed to, leaving what they had to. It was good for the men to see their shadows beside them, alive, with eyes that knew no betrayal. A wolf raised higher next to a man in the saddle: both belonged here.

"They're simpler than us," said Börte, as they watched a pack sniff the baskets and move on. "They don't know dice."

"Yes," said Temüdschin. "Only their dice are teeth."

“Then their dice are more honest.”

He nodded. "That's why I like her."

There was a man named Jelmi who believed he could grow in the shadows like a mushroom. He gathered the discontented at night, speaking of spoils that must be distributed fairly—fairly meaning: to him. He spoke of Temüdschin's tranquility as weakness, of his rules as shackles. Two nights later, Jelmi stood there, bound, his lips chapped but sharp. "You're strangling freedom," he spat.

"Freedom is a nice word for hunger," said Temüdschin. "Hunger devours children."

“You eat men.”

“Only those who eat children.”

The dice rolled. Six. Buried. Not as an honor. As an end.

The men saw it, and something like relief went through them. Not because they hated the man. Because they knew where the line was, and that it had been drawn again. Lines on the steppe rarely held. But these lines held because they were made of decisions, not sand.

Genghis Khan. The word was still a rumor, a stone in the mouth that no one dared to suck. But it surfaced in the evenings, when the liquor burned too close to their tongues. One whispered it, another laughed it off, a third looked into the shadows to see if anyone was listening. Temüjin didn't listen. Or pretended to. In him, the word was not a title, not an ornament. It was a burden one bears only when one's own feet cease to leave traces, because the earth itself submits.

He slept little and woke hard. In his dreams, heads rolled, not like threats, but like rules that had finally been understood. Each head was a die, each roll a judgment that settled on the right one. In his dreams, an army grew, not as a poem, but as a tool. A tool like the short sword, which needed no ornamentation to cut cleanly.

In the early hours, when the sky was just a pale rim, he walked through the camp, heard the horses, saw the men wrapped in blankets, one hand on their weapons, even in their sleep. He once stopped by a ten-leader whose cheek bore a chapped mark from old burns. The man slept with his lips open, breathing calmly, as if he had learned to await orders even in his dreams. Temüjin pulled the blanket up a bit, not caringly, but functionally. A man who isn't cold loses less strength when the sun demands it.

Later that morning, he called the leaders of the Thousands. He placed stones in the sand, one hundred each, and pushed them until paths became visible. "We are not just arrows," he said. "We are hands. A hand has fingers. The fingers grip better when they know which one closes first and which one closes last. This"—he tapped the stones—"is our hand. If one breaks, the others make a fist."

One man nodded and didn't ask. Another nodded and asked anyway: "And if your hand gets tired?"

"Then our teeth will bite," said Temüdschin. "And when our teeth break, we don't play dice. We grow back."

They laughed, that short, harsh laugh that doesn't mean joy, but agreement.

A rain came, which, for once, didn't beat sideways but fell vertically, thick and heavy, as if the sky were pouring water from hoses. The earth became soft, horses trampled deeper than usual, and for a few hours the camp suddenly smelled not of ash and leather, but of wet grass. Men stood, faces up, having their foreheads washed. The stakes gleamed, the dice were freed from their first coat of dust, and the markings on them appeared fresher, sharper.

“The steppe washes your teeth,” said Boorchu.

“And we keep the bite,” replied Temüdschin.

As the rain fell, a group of prisoners came in who did not look like warriors. Hands full of calluses, not from bows, but from drawing. Eyes not used to blood, but to the lines of a rope. Traders. Priests. People who talk instead of ride. The chapter for them would come later. Not today. Today, all that mattered was that these men, too, needed dice if they were to live. He placed them on the edges, made them learn to carry water, to save fire, to read paths. Some broke. Some stood. Rules kept. Dice fell. Heads stayed where they belonged.

Towards evening, a thin mist drifted over the grass, one that made the world seem smaller. Men moved closer to the fires. In the hollow behind the large tent, someone—perhaps one of the boys—laid out the old knuckle cubes in a pattern, as if they were stars. Six, five, four, three, two, one. Boorchu saw this, placed his toe, and pushed the six into the middle. "That's right," he said. "Buried remains in the core."

"No," said Temüdschin. He pushed the number one into the middle. "Obedience. Otherwise, it's all noise."

Boorchu nodded as if he had been given back an old truth that he had forgotten because it was so simple that it was overlooked.

Later, as night laid its great hands on the camp, Temüjin heard a distant laugh that did not belong to his men. Not an ambush, not a war cry. A single, pale

sound, like someone talking to himself. He took his bow, walked along the shadows until the sounds became clear. An old man sat by the stakes, laughing, crying, laughing again. Before him was a head, old, almost black with air, perhaps one of the first they had ever leaned there.

“Do you know him?” asked Temüdschin.

The old man looked up, not startled. "I know them all. I know none. I'll roll the dice with them."

"And?"

“They always fall the way you want them to.”

“Because I keep the floor smooth.”

"Because you made it hard," said the old man. "In soft dust, dice stay where they will. On hard ground, they stay where you throw them."

Temüdschin nodded. "Then stay seated. And keep laughing if you want. As long as you breathe like a man, not like a carrion."

The old man laughed, this time quieter, more sincere. Temüjin stepped back, bow in left hand, her right hand free, open, as if waiting for a sword to be placed there without warning.

In the distance, where the steppe was merely the edge of something that could be called the world, another fire smoldered. Not large, not dangerous. But there. Temüdschin looked at it as if it were a sign. Perhaps it was one. Perhaps it was just a person who was cold. Both amounted to the same thing: tomorrow they would ride.

He didn't lie down. He leaned against the poles of his tent, closed his eyes, not sleeping. No more heads rolled in his head. Dice rolled in his head, bets, stands. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Signs, not fates. Tools, not miracles.

At the edge of the night, a voice inside him said, so quiet that it was almost no longer a sound:GenghisNot as a name, not as a noise, but as a weight. He placed it beside him, as one places a knife beside the mats—reachable, ready, but not yet in his hand.

The wind began to breathe again. The horses moved, snorted, and pawed, as if already practicing the next day's first steps. Men turned, pulled up blankets,

murmured, and remained silent. The wolves circled the outermost fires, like furry watch flames.

Temüdschin opened his eyes. The sky was still black, but not completely. A thin, pale seam stood over there, where the ground cuts through the night. He stood. He needed no shout, no horn. He needed only his breath. He breathed in, cold, clear. He breathed out.

“Up,” he said.

There was riding. And the dust that rose looked like the air when dice rolls. Except that today none fell. Today, all heads stayed where they should. Today, only the distance between what was and what was to come fell. And the dust that settled wasn't just dirt. It was the thin layer over rules, over signs, over a hand that had learned to hold the cup.

The steppe understood. Not in words. In sounds. In snorts. In silence. In the kind of agreement that isn't agreed upon. Heads would continue to roll if necessary. But not because chance rolled the dice. Because chance rolled the dice—and kept the ground firm.

Thus began the day. Thus began what would later, when the songs were finally no longer lies, be called a cut: the cut that transformed a bunch of starving men into something that devours a world without chewing.

And somewhere, beyond the next ridge, the next chapter was already beginning to breathe. For the dice had long since decided, though no one saw it: The ascent would no longer come in small leaps. It would fall like a blade dividing the dust. And when it fell, the steppe would no longer be as silent as it was this morning. It would scream. And it would remember what it sounded like when a name was driven into it, like a stake.

Until then: ride. Breathe. Sharpen the rules. Form the hands. And let the heads that must roll fall in such a way that every throw remains a score and never again a game.

The Rise: Khan among Khans

The night before the climb was no celebration. It was that tough, silent evening when every man has the same taste in his mouth: metal, dry as a lie. The camp was breathing shallowly. No one knew what would happen in the morning, but everyone acted as if they had known for a long time: that something would tip, that the air would grow heavier, that some ancient law would stretch his bones and then break. Temüjin sat there, the knife beside him, not as a threat, more like a nail holding a planked wall together. He didn't think in speeches, he thought in lines. Tens, hundreds, thousands. Paths that closed like a fist. Men made not of bloodlines, but of courage. And above all, the word that haunted him like a dog that has learned to smile with its teeth: Khan.

The morning came cold. No wind, only light that lay like a rope across the steppe. Men stepped out, pushing horses into the sun, shaking dust from their fur and hair. In the distance, a line of dark dots grew—envoys, enemies, relatives, all the same as soon as they dismounted. In the center, a man who carried too many years on his back and still felt heavy. A man who let himself be called father until his own age consumed him. They called him a khan, because in the steppe, that's what they call anything that floats on the surface. But he was water, wearily settling down on the banks.

They spoke sentences that had been spoken so often that the words stuck to their boots: alliance, peace, hunting rights, marriage, hospitality. Temüdschin let them speak. He listened to the spaces, the stuttering, the twitching of the fingers when a sentence became too long. Then he said little, letting his little sink into the ground like a hoe: "Law before whim. Prey according to merit. Rank according to deed. Blood is silent. Courage speaks."

The elders twisted their mouths as if they'd bitten into a sour fruit someone had slipped into their pockets. A young man laughed too loudly and fell silent when he realized no one was joining in. Boorchu stood half a horse behind Temüjin and looked at the elder so calmly that it seemed cheeky. Jälme tested the hardness of his ribs with the heel of his hand, as if to reassure himself that there was still something there that could withstand a blow. From the rear circle, a sentence fell like a stone: "Who are you to make laws, boy?"

"The one whose men don't die because you yawn," said Temüjin. And the air cleared.

There was no drum to signal the beginning. There was only the wandering of glances. An old man who had once ridden with Temüjin's father spat in the dust

and stepped aside, leaving only a trace that looked like a ditch. A young leader put his hand to his chest, not solemnly, more as if feeling for the rope that held him. A woman who had lost two brothers to two different khans raised her brow: Yes, do it. And when enough eyes said "yes," the old name-calling broke. The men lifted the felt blanket on which they usually wash the dead. They lifted it like a flat, gray wave, and Temüjin stepped onto it, not lightly, but more with concentration, as if walking over a frozen puddle that was about to burst at any moment.

They raised it three times, four times, five times, until their arms burned and the words in the circle found the same rhythm. "Khan." Not shouted. Spoken. A word that cut through the sound like a post. There were no golden bands, no singing children, just this blanket, this circle, these men whose faces looked as if their skin had just been rubbed with cold water. Someone started to say "Great Khan" and swallowed the "Great," as if realizing that greatness is not an ornament to be worn, but a weight to be carried.

Temüdschin saw Börte. She wasn't standing at the front. She was standing where you see the work: at the edge. Her gaze was steady. No smile. A nod. He stepped down, and when his boots hit the ground, it was the same ground as before, only now he took his weight without swaying.

They called him Genghis because words need a form if they are not to slip away. Genghis: hard, with a sharp tooth in the middle. Not what the ancestors would have whispered, but what a cold morning does to your breath when you speak through your teeth. Genghis. He let it stand, and it stood.

The rise wasn't the ceiling. The rise was what came after. There stood khans who had never been able to imagine seeing anyone other than themselves, and suddenly there was one who wasn't of their own making. He had to bind them together, not with braids and customs, but with something that wouldn't float away in the rain. So he gave them order that didn't fluctuate around his whim. He cut the clan ties where they were a hindrance and re-tied them where they were firm. He gave the man without a father a rank above the son with five uncles, when the first one scored and the second only talked. He placed the tens among the hundreds, the hundreds among the thousands, and suddenly the camp no longer felt like a heap, but like a hand that could close.

The old men growled, quietly. The young men stood there longer than they thought. A khan in the north sent meat and mockery. Another in the west sent salt and a question. One in the east sent a daughter and a knife, and both shone equally. Genghis didn't take the salt and the mockery. He took the

question, answered with men. He took the daughter and blunted the knife, following rules that spared the fingers needed for shooting.

There was Jamukha, who was like a mirror you don't like to look into. Ancient blood brotherhood, the kind of oath you speak at too young a age, when the night is great and you think brothers feel like two hands lifting the same stone. Jamukha had a taste for things that smelled of goat fat and old stories. He liked the way the world was, as long as he could tilt it the right way. Genghis liked the world when it fell forward, not back.

They faced each other once, not with arrows, but with gazes. A comb between them, old, with quilted folds that looked as if a thousand horses had already had the same idea. Jamukha wore feathers that actually belonged to birds. Genghis wore dust. Jamukha spoke of honor that is inherited. Genghis spoke of honor that is done. Jamukha smiled like a man smelling a fine wine for which he doesn't want to pay. Genghis responded by loosening the reins of his men.

The battle that followed reeked of hot fur and cold iron. Jamukha's men sang as if the sound must guide the arrow. Genghis's men didn't speak, they marched. One of his commanders did what later crept into the songs as a trick: He pretended to retreat, but in reality only tore a hole into which the enemy fell. A pile of feathers in the dust quickly looks like a dead bird. Jamukha saw it, too late, like all who learn too soon to admire themselves.

He escaped because the steppe never takes everyone it wants. Perhaps Genghis let him go because you don't chase a mirror. Perhaps the steppe let him go because it loved a story that could be retold later. In the nights that followed, the men in Genghis's camp didn't talk about Jamukha's feathers; they talked about the hole that had suddenly appeared in the enemy and then wouldn't close again.

There was also the old man they called On Khan, a father who was only a father as long as no one asked for help. He had held out his hand once, when Temüdzhin was still more bone than flesh. Later, he withdrew it as if he had held it to a flame. It was the kind of betrayal that doesn't bang, but whispers: "Not today." The steppe loves "not today"—it softens men. It only made Genghis harder. He didn't try to improve the old man. He let him die of old age, even if the sword was pointed elsewhere. If you hesitate long enough, you die of hesitation.

The climb was a humming sensation that was in their bones. The ten-year-olds returned in the evening and reported on villages that had never seen order

except on a drunkard's saddle. They reported lies the size of a yurt and debts the size of horses. Genghis didn't just send arrows. He sent scribes who couldn't write and turned them into counters. Who had how many horses, who had how many hands, who had how much hunger. Numbers are knives, if you hold them correctly.

He set up the messenger squadron, horses that waited, men who didn't tell the story, but carried it. News became arrows that didn't break in the wind. A word printed in the East in the morning—and "printing" back then meant "to the air with your mouth"—could find the right man in the West that evening. This turned rumors into orders. And orders into paths that not everyone saw, but everyone felt when the sound of hooves sounded.

He didn't write laws in stone. He wrote them on the hands of his thousands. Yassa, said those who collect names like feathers. Genghis called it: "That which works." No theft in the camp. No woman by force from a house already paid for with blood. No lies that kill men in their sleep. The meat is shared until the one who brought it wants to hunt again. He who falls gets it first. He who knows how to save fire gets more wood. He who holds another's waders in battle receives his thanks in horses, not words. And if someone thinks he can make the noise and then rewrite the rules—then his head only writes a dot in the dust.

The old khans grumbled, "He's taking what's sacred to us." In truth, he was only taking away the time they wasted counting their ancestors while horses starved to death outside the yurt. What remained sacred remained. The rest was burned, a crackling sound that sobers men.

By a large bonfire that burned so brightly the stars shrugged, he hung the nine white standards, yak tails that hung in the air like silent threats. Not for show, but so that the men who got lost would have something to follow when smoke closed in on the world. They saw the nine tails and knew: This is the center. No god spoke, no priest shouted. The tails waved, and the horses calmed down. Sometimes that's enough.

He didn't share the spoils because he was good. He shared because shared spoils last longer. He turned trembling enemies into neighbors who ate silently. He took children from men who remained in the dust and set them by fires that never grew cold. From orphans he made horsemen. From horsemen he made tens. From tens he made the beginning of something greater than the steppe was accustomed to thinking.

"Khan among Khans" – it was a phrase that first grew in the minds of others, not in his own. One doesn't say phrases like that about oneself when one is in one's right. One forces them into other people's mouths by doing whatever prompts their mouth to say it. This is how it happened: One whispered it because he wanted to avoid naming his own Khan. A second repeated it because he realized it flattered him to know the real Khan. A third said it aloud because the word suddenly hung so heavily in the air that quietly wasn't enough. Khan among Khans. The one who doesn't displace the others, but makes them superfluous.

On a day that looked like yesterday and felt like morning, he called the khans who still wanted to be khan. They came, not all of them, but enough to turn the ground dark. Meat, liquor, salt, arguments. He let them talk. Then he let them ride. A race, but not one that begins with whistles and ends with laughter. A race in which everyone had to understand that riding is not about speed, but about duration. At the end stood the horses of those who had kept their tongues in their throats. The others lay, tongues out, eyes white. "That's how it is with your clans," he said. "You ride, you shout, you sink. I ride. Period."

He gave the men signs they could drag along without hurting themselves. One knot on the reins means: You listen. Two knots: You speak. Three: You command. No knot: You do what you're told, and you do it as if you'd always done it. The signs didn't stick; they held. The wind couldn't blow them away. Rain only darkened them.

A messenger carrying camel dung in his shirt brought news from a clan crossing a river in the west, who believed that rivers were laws. Genghis didn't send arrows. He sent trackers who read the water like a text. As the clan on the other bank shook its feet, Tens stood beside them as if they had sprung up from the ground. "There is no other bank," Genghis later said. "There are only paths where one no longer believes that water decides."

There were men who wanted to sleep with the title. They rubbed it against their browbands, as if the writing would shape their heads. He let them play until one tried to exchange the title for coins. Then the game turned back to work. The head fell quickly. The others knew that words need to breathe. And that they are not a hut to be sold.

Jamukha met him once more, later, when the dust already carried stories heavier than both of them combined. Jamukha was no longer colorful. He was gray, like everything that sees the sun for too long. There is a kind of end that the steppe finds beautiful: quiet, with a knife that tastes not of vengeance, but

of order. Jamukha asked for a death that wastes no blood. Genghis gave it to him. No spectacle, no singing to himself, just the end that befits a man who was once a mirror. Afterward, the face that remained was a single one: Genghis's.

He placed men by rivers, by ridges, by old paths known only to animals. He placed them not to wait, but to measure. How many hoofbeats between two fires? How many breaths between a command and its movement? The climb is not a banner. It is a measuring tape.

The steppe began to sound different. One heard less "My grandfather" and more "My tenner." One heard less "We have always been" and more "We are from now on." One heard fewer gods and more rules that sounded dry, like wood that burns well. Khans who still wore roxwood on their hats suddenly looked old, as if someone had turned the light out of their faces. Khans who understood that greatness doesn't boom, but repeats, stood longer.

Börte walked through the rows of women who cooked, fed, and sewed while the men sold their heroism. She didn't talk to them about greatness. She talked about salt, water, and wood. An army dies of want, not of the enemy. Genghis heard her and understood that being a khan meant knowing how much salt a tenner needs a week so he doesn't steal. Men who are well fed are less likely to die for lies.

Later, when the sun was so high that shadows fell like spears, he raised the black standard, the tail that doesn't beg, but simply exists. "This isn't magic," he said. "This is a reminder. When you run, run toward the tail. When you fall, fall so that the tail stands between you and the enemy. When you seek victories, seek them where the tail is dirtiest."

They lifted him, and the wind took him, not like a child being taken for a walk, but more like something the wind had always wanted. The horses snorted. The men looked on, as if they had finally been able to rest their foreheads on something that didn't smell of gibberish.

"Khan among khans" – the phrase was no longer a whisper. It stumbled from men's lips when they drank too quickly. It was on the tongues of envoys who no longer brought silver, but questions. It fell into the dust like a shadow and remained there, even when the sun had set. Genghis didn't speak it, because he knew that some words die when the wrong person kisses them. But he let it work. And work makes words come true.

In the evening, he sat there, a little behind the fire, where the smoke no longer bites. Börte sat down next to him again. "You wanted to do the math," she said. "Are you doing the math?"

"I'm counting," he said. "With horses, with breath, with roads. With the impatience of the young. With the weariness of the old. With the hunger that doesn't go away just because there's meat on the fire."

“And you?”

He looked into the embers. "I'm counting on having to be replaceable so that the cause stays alive if I fall."

She nodded. "Then you are Khan."

The night lay flat. Within it, a new noise: not shouting, not prayer, but an orderly panting. Tens, hundreds, thousands. A hand that doesn't tremble. A tail that waves. A law that doesn't rustle. A message that arrives. A knife that doesn't speak. A title that one doesn't wear like amber, but like a weight on one's back, straightening the body.

There was no celebration in the morning. It was work. Men saddled, women counted, children brought water, wolves ran, scouts disappeared, messengers appeared, hooves beat, the tail stood still, the dice lay. And somewhere in the east, a city rose up, believing it was safe because walls were thick. The phrase "Khan among Khans" was already making its way to its gates, without feet, only with breath.

The ascent wasn't loud. It was consistent. It was a sum of cuts, of gestures, of shared flesh and shared sleep. It was a new rhythm in an old landscape. It was the no to everything that persists only through habit. And it was the yes to everything that persists because it persists.

Genghis stood as if he'd never sat down. He didn't raise his hand. He nodded. It was enough. The tens moved as if they'd been waiting for a long time, the hundreds pushed forward, the thousands settled beneath them like sturdy wood. "A Khan among Khans," no one said. Everyone pretended they didn't care. And that's precisely why it was true.

The climb continued, up the slope, which wasn't really a slope at all, because the steppe is flat and you only notice climbs in it by the air becoming thinner, even though the ground doesn't rise. In this thinness, the army breathed calmly. That was the climb. Not the word. Not the felt blanket. Not the

cheering. The calm breathing of a crowd that knows where it's going without asking what the area is called. And if the area had names—old, bold, with stinging stories—then it very quickly learned a new one: Genghis. And the other one right away, the one she felt in her teeth when she woke up in the morning and realized there were no more excuses: Khan. Among Khans. In the order that counts.

Fire over yurts

The wind blew from the north, hard and dry, as if it had sand in its teeth. It didn't take much to make a flame grow. One false spark, one angry look—and the fire, like an idea, ate through felt and wood, through flesh and memory. Genghis stood at the edge of the hill and looked down at the valley, where the yurts lay like scattered skulls. Dogs barked, horses pawed, children's voices fluttered in the air like thin flags. A quiet evening. A false one. The men behind him smelled of grease, wool, riding dust, cold iron. Dschalme weighed the wick spear in his hand, Boorchu tested the flame in a bowl that stank of tallow. Börte stood a few steps further back, his coat tight, his gaze straight, as if the horizon were a calculation.

"Today we'll talk to the wind," said Genghis. No growling, no roaring. A statement. "He should help us, and even if he doesn't want to, he'll help us anyway."

The plan was as simple as it was brutal. No ramming, no crowned heroic feat that would later fall into the singers' mouths. Fire. Wind. Night. Three things that didn't love songs, but were hard work. Four ten-horsemen had already ridden ahead, the wicks under their saddles, the bowls tied to their horses' flanks. No glory in it, just timing. The sky was greasy with twilight, a gray-blue plate in which the first stars clung like crumbs.

"Kids out, horses out," he added. "The rest belongs to the wind."

They slid down the edge, no noise, just that soft, flat whirring sound when tendons are ready. The first dogs sniffed, began to bark, and stopped again when the men lured them with dry morsels. A dog that eats is, for a moment, no longer a guard. A man who is full is also no longer a guard.

Jälme placed the first wick on the leeward side of a yurt, right where the wind took the flame without asking. The felt purred, shriveled up, as if suddenly

afraid of itself. A spark jumped, two, three. Then the hem, that poor, shaggy edge, stood up, glowing like a wound. Boorchu had already moved on, sending his flame over a bundle of brushwood lying by the horse line. It smelled of hair, fur, old fat. The wind did what wind always does when it senses work: it didn't blow out, it blew on.

A scream arose, somewhere in the middle of the camp, the sound that comes when someone realizes the world suddenly has two lights, and both are wrong. A man rushed out of a yurt, his arms full of clothes no one needed anymore. A woman ripped the door inward, pulling out two children whose hair already tasted of smoke. A horse broke free, bounding blindly into a line of posts, clanging, splashing, rising, falling. The camp became a circle of little hells staring at each other.

"Get the horses!" Genghis shouted, but it wasn't a command into chaos. It was a memory. His ten men knew the dance. Two rows of bowmen shot inward, at men with buckets who wanted to save their own houses. Not into the chest. Into the knees, into the buckets, into the arms. A wave of panic is enough; there's no need to let it swell once it's already breaking.

Börte rode with three women toward the children's voices, pulling, pushing, carrying. She wasted no time consoling them. "Breathe," she said, "walk," she said, and anyone who wanted to complain realized that complaining was hard to vent. The children stumbled, coughed, but still held their small fists closed, as if they still had something to hold on to. One had a wooden spoon. Perhaps that was enough.

Fire is unfair. It devours fields that no one has tilled, and sometimes spares the manure that people wanted to get rid of. A yurt collapsed, emitting a soft sighing sound, as if the sky had crushed the felt. Three men plunged into it, emerged burning, danced, rolled, and burned on. A fourth stood and watched until he realized that watching also warms one—too much.

"Pull the horses out," Genghis said, more to himself than anyone else. He hated dead horses. They were the only innocence the steppe knew. Two ten-year-olds cut the reins, slapped the reins, and drove the animals into the wind so their manes wouldn't immediately flare up. A foal stumbled and screamed. Boorchu jumped from the saddle and lifted it by his chest, so clumsily you wanted to laugh, yet so firmly that it survived.

The men of the camp tried to find a line, as men always try to find a line when the world is burning: they set up buckets. They called on gods who never came.

They cursed the women who were already running. Jälme shot the water from their hands, not out of sadism, but out of physics. Water belongs to the fire today, not to you.

A khan, too well-fed to run, stumbled into an open space where the wind was as fair as a judge. He had this leather band on his arm that said, "I may command." He raised his hand as if ordering the wind to stop. An arrow pierced his arm into the yurt behind him. The wind laughed. Genghis didn't. He rarely laughed.

"Gather outside," he said. "Don't hunt. Don't lose."

Fire was not a victory. Fire was a tool, used only as long as it did its job, and then you let it do its work. His men drove the herd, drove the children, drove the dogs that hadn't gone mad yet, and let the rest turn to ash. No picking under flames, no heroism that ends up looking like stupidity in a song. Just that tough, hard patience with which you see things through to the end.

In the middle of the camp stood a large yurt, double-lined, its poles made of good wood, the kind you don't find on every corner. At its entrance stood a standard, too long for the wind, with a tail of black hair. A man jumped with a wet rug underneath it, holding it high like a flag, and shouting encouragement to himself. Genghis signaled to Boorchu: not on the man. On the edge, right where nails grow old. Two arrows, one breath, the felt lifted like a lid, and the wind took the middle. The man didn't die. He just grew small. That's worse, but more useful.

"Take him alive," said Genghis. "He'll see what the rules are when the smoke clears."

False gods don't die in the ashes. They merely cower. A shaman leaped through the haze, his feathers black, his face painted with a trace of paint that now looked as if someone had ripped the laughter right out of him. He held a rattle that today sounded like a cough. He shouted words that once had worked when spoken on quiet nights. Not today. Jälme yanked him over by the legs, digging his stick into his rattle-hand. "The spirits like fire," he said, "but they don't like lies."

Börte rounded up a group of women, their faces gray, their hair covered in glowing spots. "Water, here. Grass, there. Breathe short, shoulders back, no coughing, no spitting, go." Someone asked about the man who was never on

time and wasn't now either. Börte looked past her. "If he's alive, he'll come. If not, you need other hands."

Outside, behind the camp, where the meadow still acted as if it were morning, they gathered the rescued horses together. A ten-leader went through the rows with a piece of glowing coal, letting the animals sniff it so they would learn the scent. Horses with memories don't run blindly at the next fire. Men with memories, too.

The camp collapsed. It crackled, groaned, and fell. A roof began a small, almost gentle rotation before it hit the ground. A child laughed briefly at the dance of a burning cowhide, then cried, because laughter takes too much air. The wind pushed streaks of smoke into parallel lines, as if they were lines in a book no one had written and now everyone had to read.

"Enough," said Genghis. It wasn't pity. It was economy. Fire has a point curve: first usefulness, then revenge. He didn't like revenge. It eats away at discipline. He rode along the edge, marking with the point of his sword where to stop. The men held fast. Not out of sentimentality. Out of obedience, out of the only obedience he accepted: the kind that works.

When the flames died down and the wind grew sated, they rode through the ruins. Not to plunder—the wind had already done that—but to count what would remain tomorrow. A burning camp is a map. You can see who built how, who hid where, who skimped on the meadow, who on the stake. You can see in which corner the quick-drying herbs hung. You can see the paths you otherwise never see because they're buried under habit.

"Look here," said Boorchu, bending down and lifting out a bundle: arrow shafts, fine, smoother than any they knew. "They trade with people who believe wood can talk."

“Then we’ll talk to them,” said Genghis, “but not today.”

A man lay, half under the fence, half under the sky. He wasn't dead, he just had that kind of life you smell more than see. Genghis jumped off, turned him on his side so he would spit, not swallow. The man blinked, saw a figure that looked like his god, because anyone who pulls you out of the smoke is, in short, god. "Why?" he wanted to know. It wasn't a word, it was a sound.

“Because the wind was hungry today,” said Genghis, “and you got up too late.”

The man laughed, then he coughed, then he cried, then he breathed. That's enough for one day.

They rounded up the prisoners, not with blows, but with lines. A line that no one sees: men at the edges, their horses silent. Nothing breaks faster than a herd when beaten with a stick. Nothing lasts longer when led with emptiness. They gave water, counted heads, put the old people to sleep in the shade, the young to work. "You live because you will be needed tomorrow," said Genghis. "Not for me. For order." One spat. Genghis looked at him as if he were a horse with a small splinter from his hoof. "Water is more beneficial than spit," he said. The man slowly understood, like everything that lives.

When the embers turned into a wide, red wound that no longer hissed but merely breathed, Genghis summoned the leaders of the ten. No speech. He set the dice in the dust, those small, roughly carved bones with symbols that now weighed more than old oaths. "One," he said, "those who survived count. Two, whoever has horses, lends. Three, each leader of the ten names two who will leave tomorrow, two who will stay. Four, whoever lies, hangs. Five, whoever finds, brings. Six, whoever asks, gets an answer." He threw. One and five. "Count. Bring." He nodded. Work doesn't scream.

Börte returned with the women she had let go when the flames were high. They carried things that cannot be burned: knives, spindles, images in their heads that tell them where a well was. They sat down, not together, not separately, simply where the air hurt the least. "Your fire is out," said Börte. "Not ours." There was no consolation in her words. Consolation wastes time. But her hands placed cups in fingers, and the fingers steadied.

A boy stood before Genghis, his gaze too fixed because he wanted to learn how to make men's eyes. "That was my house," he said. It was information, not a complaint.

“Now it’s ashes,” said Genghis.

"Who are you?"

“The one who decides what the ashes will be tomorrow.”

“And what is it?”

"Place."

The boy nodded, as if he'd received an answer that could be swallowed without gagging. "Can I have a horse?"

“If you can hold one.”

"I can."

"Then get one. Ask Boorchu, which one won't kill you."

Boorchu grinned. "No one will kill him. Not today." The boy walked, his back straighter than before. You don't become great because you see fire. You become great because you stop after it.

Jälme stepped over to a charred pole protruding from the ground and placed his hand on the wood, as if checking for life. "They'll say we're animals," he muttered.

"Let them," said Genghis. "As long as we're the only animals that can draw lines."

The wind shifted. Not much. Just enough so that the smoke no longer hit people's faces. Men breathed more deeply, horses bowed their heads. The steppe let out that small, weary sigh it makes when it realizes a job no one liked, yet necessary, is done.

"Fire over yurts," Börte finally said, as dryly as if she were reading a knot that was tying itself. "Tomorrow, water over their heads. Otherwise they'll go stupid from soot."

"Tomorrow, rules about hands," said Genghis. "Otherwise, we'll become stupid with power."

He climbed into the saddle, not hastily, not solemnly. Just the way one climbs into the saddle when there are still two hours of night and morning is already asking if one has time. He rode along the edge, counting in his head, doing harm in his head, saving in his head, forgetting nothing in his head. The men followed him, not close, not far, just enough so that they seemed like a second, dark line next to the light of the ash.

Above them, a shooting star, too fast to make a wish. Genghis saw it, but said nothing. Wishes are like damp wool. They stink when you touch them. Better to leave them alone.

Below, the camp smoldered. It wasn't dead, it had moved. Ashes are only what remains when a story changes its skin. Tomorrow, the ashes would become stakes. The day after tomorrow, reins. And in a week, one would see an order there that no longer smelled of felt, but of a path.

Fire talks faster than men. It speaks rudely. But those who listen learn what remains when everything combustible is gone. Genghis listened. He heard the wind calming down. He heard the children finally growing tired. He heard the horses testing the new grass that had never seen the sun under the old yurt.

“Enough for today,” he said, more to the night than to his people.

The night nodded. The wind died down. The ash vibrated briefly, as if it needed to cough once more, and then fell silent. Men slept in the saddle, women sitting, children in the hole between two shoulders, where you can briefly forget who will die if you let go.

Fire over yurts. Tomorrow, lines over dust. And then on, on and on, until even the cities realized that felt burns faster than stone—but that stone cracks if you breathe in the right place long enough.

The cities burn more beautifully than steppe

The steppe consumes quickly. A tent, a horse, a few bones—and the wind does the rest. But a city? A city dies slowly. It has teeth, walls, gates, granaries. It rears up, like an animal that believes its size will save it. And that's precisely what makes burning beautiful. Because beauty is nothing other than resistance that falls anyway.

Genghis squatted in his saddle and saw the first town in his path. No yurts, no felt blankets, no nomadic misery. Stone, clay, gates with iron fittings. Behind the walls, he could already smell the market: bread, goat fat, dried fish, cheap perfumes sold to women who aren't women. Cities were filled with the stench of a life that had become too comfortable. And that was precisely what he couldn't stand.

"Look at this," murmured Boorchu. "They think walls are stronger than hunger."

Dschalme spat on the ground. "Walls are just dust that has become too proud."

Genghis grinned, barely visible. He liked it when the two of them talked like that. They saw it the same way he did: cities are a pile of excuses piling up.

The messenger rode to the gate, as it always began. Offer or threat, that was clear in his tone. "Open, give what you have, live. Or keep quiet and die. Your choice."

The answer was an arrow stuck in the dust.

Genghis nodded. "Then they'll die more beautifully."

He waited. Patience was his knife. Cities are like women who hold back too long – eventually, you'll break down the door. He had the men roll the catapults, those gnarled wooden monsters that groan when you pull them. Baskets full of stones heavier than heads. Jugs of oil and rags already flapping in the wind. The first stone flew and shattered a piece of the wall, not much, just enough for the men on the battlements to realize how fragile their pride was.

Then came the fire. Pitch, oil, cloth—the jugs flew, burst, and stuck to the wood and beams. Smoke crept up the walls, black, thick, and sticky. A scream. Another. And then that sound that comes from cities when they first realize they might die: not loud, not heroic, but that deep groan, as if the entire wall were realizing it was just a facade.

“More beautiful than the steppe, isn’t it?” murmured Genghis.

He rode closer as the gates fell, not from his men, but from his own people, who wanted out before they burned. They ran like animals, women with bundles, children with bowls, men with nothing but panic on their faces. He let them go. Not all of them, not far. Just enough so that the fear was great enough to make them submissive.

Inside, everything that could burn was burning: beams, roofs, granaries full of grain. The heat was no easy opponent. It consumed the air. Arrows became useless because they flew blind in the smoke. Men stumbled through narrow alleys that became chimneys. Those who didn't die from fire suffocated in their own city.

And Genghis rode right through the middle. Not drunk with blood, but clear as stone. He wanted his men to see: Walls don't hold. Cities aren't safe. Anything can burn if you have patience.

The city khan was brought to him, fat, red-faced, and with a beard that was better groomed than his men. He stank of wine and burnt carpet. "Why?" he wheezed.

Genghis looked at him as if he were a piece of cattle. "Because you thought you were more than the steppe. But everything is steppe when it's burning."

He left him standing at the gate, bound, so he could watch his city collapse. No beheading, no stab in the back—punishment was on display.

When night fell, the city was nothing but embers. The walls stood, but inside everything was dead. Horses snorted, men carried loot, women gathered the children who were still breathing. Börte walked among them, calm, strong, like someone who knew: The fire was not the end, it was the beginning of order.

Genghis sat down at the edge, looked into the embers, smoky the dust. And he knew: yurts burn like grass, quickly, forgotten. But cities—cities burn like stories. They scream, they sing, they die louder. And that's precisely why they burn more beautifully.

The morning after the fire no longer smelled of smoke, but of ash, that dull gray that clings when something is dead forever. The steppe absorbs fire, but a city retains the smell, as if to remind everyone that it once believed itself immortal.

The men stood silently by the walls. Some of them had never seen stone before it broke. They marveled at how different the sound was when a city died. No cracking of wood, no hissing of felt—but that deep, mournful crash that sinks into your gut. Boorchu spat into the embers as if to offer the city one last scorn.

"So many walls," he murmured. "And none of them held their breath."

Genghis just nodded. He had seen cities die – and he knew: This was only the beginning.

A few weeks later. Further south, where the soil was richer, where the rivers churn the sand. There lay a city, larger, more bulging, with walls twice as high. Towers at the corners, painted gates, merchants milling around markets full of silver and voices.

This time the envoys arrived smiling. Golden cups, horses with decorated reins, women with slanted, black eyes. "We'll open the door for you," they said. "But only if you swear to protect us. Only if you call us brother."

Genghis looked at her, drank from the cup, and poured the rest into the dust. "Protection doesn't come through oaths," he said. "Protection comes through order. And that is non-negotiable."

They returned, without a yes, without a no. And the gates remained closed.

So the work began again.

The men built dams in the river, diverting the water to the foundations. For days, they worked like ants. And the city above laughed. They saw only shovels and thought, "That can't break a wall." But walls don't break through strength, but through patience. And water has more patience than any human.

After days, water crept into the stones. Clay crumbled. Limestone swelled. And then the crack appeared, first small, then large, then a scream so loud that even the merchants stopped praising their wares.

The wall collapsed. Not with thunder, but with that offended sigh, as if it were tired of even standing.

The riders stormed in. Arrows rained down, men screamed, children screamed louder, women threw jugs from the windows. Fires were set, deliberately, not blindly. Storehouses first, then the merchants' halls. A temple, its roof plated with gold, burst into flames, and the gold dripped like hot rain.

"Look," said Genghis. "This is how pride burns. Liquid, worthless, sticky."

The city didn't last long. Because no city ever lasts long.

In the steppe, a yurt burns in minutes. You wipe away the ashes, and the space is clear. But cities? Cities burn for days. They don't give up easily. They crack, groan, scream, and resist one more time. Every beam wants to tell a story, every granary wants to curse, every wall wants to at least pretend it's eternal.

That's why they burn more beautifully. Because they make a scene when they die.

For the men, it was a celebration. Not just because of the loot. But because of the realization: Walls are not gods. They are merely obstacles. And obstacles are there to be broken.

"They say cities are immortal," said Dschalme, wiping soot from his face. "But when I look into these embers, all I smell is meat. Cooked meat."

"That's exactly what they are," Genghis replied. "Flesh called a wall."

They came to a place where a river forked and flowed together again, and in the middle stood a city. Two bridges led into it, thick as spears of stone. Merchants from three worlds traded there: wool from the west, salt from the south, jade from the east.

They offered tribute. Silver, horses, women. But Genghis had learned: whoever pays tribute is planning treason. And traitors burn the most beautifully.

The men didn't cut the bridges immediately. They set fire to the houses along the shore, letting smoke rise into the sky. The wind carried it away, and suddenly the city was an island in a sea of smoke.

The residents ran to the walls, screamed, begged, and offered more. But words don't extinguish the fire.

As the bridges burned, the city screamed like a caged animal. It was trapped, in the middle of the river, in the middle of the embers. And when it finally fell, the ash floated on the water. Weeks later, black flakes could still be seen on the river, refusing to dislodge.

Börte simply said: “The water retained more than we did.”

Genghis knew that the steppe would retain these images. Not the names of the cities, not the faces of the traders—but the flames, the screams, the walls that collapsed. Stories travel farther than caravans. And every city that fell was a warning to the next: Walls do not save.

The men celebrated in the evening. They drank, laughed, and talked. But Genghis remained silent. He sat by the fire, stared into the embers, and thought:

Yurts burn like grass. Quickly, silently, forgotten. Cities burn like gods. Proudly, painfully, unforgettable.

And he knew: This was only the beginning. Cities would still fall. Flames would still rise higher. The world would still understand that even stone is not eternal if a khan wants to break it.

The nearest town wasn't on a river, or at an oasis. It lay in the middle of the plain, like a rotten tooth in the sand. Its walls were old, crooked, and full of

cracks, but the granaries within were full, brimming with grain. A place that never went hungry.

Genghis saw this immediately. He knew: hunger is stronger than any weapon. So he didn't set fire. He built a wall of flesh around the city—his men. Day after day, week after week. No merchant could get in, no farmer could get out.

Inside, they screamed for bread. Inside, they smelled the grain they refused to share. Inside, they died slower, harder, dirtier than in any fire.

After four weeks, they opened the door. They crawled out, pale, thin, with hands that trembled more than they held. They gave the keys, they gave the attics.

"That's fire too," said Dschälme quietly. "Just a cold one."

Genghis nodded. "And sometimes cold burns more beautifully than flames."

Then came a city that refused to fall. Walls doubly reinforced, towers with catapults, wells so deep that no thirst could drain them.

For three weeks, arrows bounced off their shields, for three weeks, catapults fired stones back. For three weeks, the suburbs burned, but the city itself held.

The men became restless. They cursed, they wanted to move on, they wanted to see blood, not stones.

But Genghis remained calm. He knew: A city that holds its ground is a city that burns more proudly.

On the 24th day, he had a breach made, not at the front, not at the back, but diagonally at the corner where no one expected an attack. At night, he had men carry ladders, make noise, sing—so that the defenders would think the storm was coming from there.

But the storm came from somewhere else. In an alley that looked like a gutter. His men climbed up, silently, like wolves creeping into a stable. They opened the gate from the inside. And when morning came, the city was no longer proud.

"There," said Genghis. "Now they're really burning."

The flames consumed towers, granaries, and warehouses. They consumed the hope of the other cities who believed they could hold out.

In every city stood a temple. Some made of wood, some of stone, some with gods so fat they had cost more meals than prayers.

Genghis saw them crumbling in the fire, statues crashing to the ground, faces melting, eyes blinded by flames.

"You see," he said to Börte, "that's the difference. Our spirits travel with us. But these gods are stuck. When their houses burn, they burn with them."

Börte nodded. "Then they're not gods. Then they're furniture."

A city, larger than any before it, with three rings of walls. Behind the walls, a market as large as a field, full of fabrics, spices, and silver.

Here, Genghis didn't let the catapults speak first. He had his men build fire dragons—long wooden frames soaked in oil, tied to wagons. At night, they rolled the wagons to the walls, lit them, and let the flames shoot into the sky.

From afar, it looked as if the sky itself were on fire. People in the city screamed. Children ran, women cried, men prayed.

Then came the stones, then the arrows, then the gate broke.

The city burned for three days. The sky was red, day and night.

"You see?" said Boorchu. "Cities produce more light than steppe."

"Yes," said Genghis. "And more shadows, too."

After each town, he gathered the survivors. He divided them into tens, hundreds, and thousands. He took their children and made them horsemen. He took their wives and gave them work. He took their men and put them into service.

He knew: Cities aren't just stone. They're also people. And they don't burn—they remember.

Some hated him, some feared him, some obeyed him. But everyone talked about him. And that was exactly what he wanted.

Months later, cities burned before he arrived. Merchants whispered his name. Priests trembled even before they saw him.

"Cities burn more beautifully than steppes," people said. "Because when Genghis comes, it's not just wood that burns. The world burns."

China, the Wall and the Arrogance of the Emperors

The steppe was vast, but beyond it began a realm that seemed even grander. There stood walls that no yurt, no wind, no fire had ever seen before. No goatskin, no felt, no beams that could be quickly erected and quickly torn down again. But stone, layer upon layer, stretched over hills and rivers, as if humans had decided to shackle the horizon itself.

Genghis stood on a hill and saw the line stretching out, gray, silent, relentless. A scar across the land. He spat into the dust. "They think they can divide the earth," he murmured.

Boorchu laughed dryly. "The wall is just a long back. Every back breaks if it bears enough weight."

But inside, behind this wall, lived emperors. Men who considered themselves gods because no one had ever tested them with fire. They sat on thrones of lacquered wood, with silk draped over their shoulders and eunuchs whispering songs to them. They believed the steppe was just dust that stuck to their shoes.

But Genghis had learned: Dust creeps everywhere. It suffocates. It rubs. It penetrates walls, breaths, dreams.

The envoys rode out. Chinese men in colorful robes, their hands soft, their voices honey-sweet. They carried scrolls longer than their swords. On them were sentences that read: "We are heaven. You are earth. Earth bows to heaven."

Genghis took the scroll, held it up to the light, and saw the ink glisten. Then he threw it into the fire. "The sky burns like any other substance," he said.

The envoys returned, pale, staggering, with eyes that understood for the first time that words are not always stronger than arrows.

His men rolled out siege engines, larger and heavier than anything they had built before. Towers that stretched over the walls as if they were trying to grasp the stars themselves. Catapults that hurled boulders as big as yurts.

The wall held. It creaked, it cracked, but it held. Arrows rained from above, hot oil poured, stones crashed down. Men died, screamed, fell back.

But Genghis stood there, unmoved. "No stone is eternal," he said. "Not even if it is supported by a thousand hands."

He didn't let the attacks stop. Night after night, day after day, the machines hammered away. And eventually, after weeks, a piece broke. Not large, not far – but it was enough. His riders charged through, burning torches in their hands. And for the first time, China smelled of the steppe.

The cities of China were different. No yurts, no markets in the dust. Streets were straight and wide, with walls of wood and stone, with roofs that curved like shields. Merchants offered silk, tea, and porcelain. Everything was orderly, everything was tamed.

And that's precisely what made them so sweet to the fire. Because order burns more beautifully than chaos.

His men ran through the alleys, set fire to granaries, and tore down temples. Porcelain shattered, silk consumed the flames faster than any wood. Entire roofs collapsed, and priests burned beneath them, still singing hymns.

“Look,” said Dschalme, “her beauty makes her softer.”

"Yes," Genghis nodded. "They're building too high. The higher, the further it falls."

But behind their palace walls, the emperors sat, still safe. They sent gifts, they sent threats, they sent new scrolls that said: "Heaven laughs at you."

Genghis didn't answer with words. He answered with smoke that drifted up to their palaces. Entire provinces blazed, entire markets disappeared. Peasants fled, merchants knelt, officials remained silent.

The emperors remained silent. But their silence was only fear, which kept them shut.

Genghis knew: The Wall wasn't the end. It was only the beginning. Every empire that claims to be greater than the steppe must one day kneel. And if it doesn't kneel, it will burn.

The men from the steppe had seen many things—fires over yurts, cities falling like straw—but when they reached the Great Wall of China, their breath caught in their throats. A line stretching so far that even the clouds couldn't leap over it. Towers, enormous, like sentinels, that had stood there for centuries.

Boorchu whistled softly through his teeth. "If this were a yurt, it would be the largest the earth has ever seen."

Dschälme growled: “And yet she still needs fire, otherwise she’ll freeze.”

Genghis remained silent. He saw the stones, he smelled the wall. It smelled of fear, not of security. Because no one builds something like that if they aren't afraid.

They started crudely. Catapults, fire arrows, scaling ladders. The guards above laughed, poured oil, and fired arrows back. Men died, fell, and screamed. But Genghis didn't let up. Every night, every day, the same thing: pressure, noise, fire.

He knew: A wall is not a god. A wall is a body. And every body tires if you hit it long enough.

The first cracks appeared after weeks. Small, inconspicuous. But they were enough to show his men: Even stone bleeds.

The emperors sat in their palaces, in halls draped in silk, with jade guards and scribes who poured ink like blood on paper. They heard of the attacks, of cities falling, of flames blazing in the sky.

But they laughed. "The barbarians ride dust," they said. "We sit in heaven."

They sent envoys with long scrolls inscribed with proverbs meant to sound like thunder: "The Middle Kingdom will not bow. You are only wind."

Genghis had the scrolls burned in front of his men. "The wind carries smoke," he said. "Now we'll carry it over their rooftops."

A city behind the wall burned first. Storehouses full of rice, alleys teeming with merchants, temples with golden roofs. The flames licked at silk, which consumed faster than wool. Porcelain shattered, splinters flying like arrows.

“More beautiful than the steppe,” said Boorchu, as he watched an entire street collapse.

"And louder," added Jälme. "The gods of these people scream when they die."

People fled. Farmers, merchants, officials—they ran, dropped everything, knelt, screamed. And yet, deep in their palaces, the emperors still believed in their inviolability.

Genghis knew: Not every city falls to the flames. Some cities starve. So he placed rings of horsemen around the settlements. No one could get out, and no one could get in.

Weeks passed. Inside, they ate their stores empty, then their dogs, then their dead. Screams faded, doors remained closed, smoke no longer rose.

When the gates opened, people came out who were more shadows than bodies.

"You see," said Genghis, "stone doesn't protect against hunger. Walls don't keep a full belly."

One after another they fell. Some burning, some starving, some in chaos. And each time the emperors sent new messages: "We will not tolerate you. You are dust. We are heaven."

But each time, the answer came in smoke. Provinces centuries old suddenly lay like ash on the earth.

"You are heaven?" Genghis cried into the embers one night. "Then we burned you today."

In the evenings, when the noise died down, he sometimes sat by the fire with Börte. She could see that he wasn't just seeing cities, but something else.

“You don’t just see walls,” she said.

"No," he said. "I see their heads encased in silk. And I see how silk burns just like felt."

Börte nodded. "Then the wall is just a dress. And dresses tear if you pull on them long enough."

Soon, even the Chinese were whispering his name. Merchants who fled, officials who knelt, farmers who entrusted their children to him. "Genghis," they said, "who came from the steppe and showed us that stone is not eternal."

The emperors heard it. They said nothing. But their silence wasn't pride. It was fear.

Further east, they came across a city called "the city of 100 gates." Of course, there weren't 100, but eight. But eight gates are already 100 on the steppe, because no nomad would ever have needed more than two.

The gates were iron-clad and painted with dragon patterns, as if paintings would save the world. Jälme saw them and snorted. "Just because you paint an animal doesn't mean it's strong."

The city fought back. They sent archers to the battlements, drums boomed, flags fluttered. They believed they were greater than their fear.

Genghis had his men dig deep and wide trenches around the gates. Then he filled them with wood and pitch. "They'll think we're going to set them on fire," he said.

And that's exactly what they did. The city shifted its defenders to the gates. They waited for flames. But that night, Genghis had ladders placed against the furthest section of the wall, where the towers were low. His men climbed up, quietly, with knives in their teeth. A gate opened—not the painted one, not the iron one, but an inconspicuous one, narrow, forgotten.

In the morning, it wasn't the moat that was burning. In the morning, the city was burning.

The emperor heard about it in the palace. A man who had never felt a saddle, who had never had dust in his mouth, sat on a throne, lacquered, shining, higher than all the others. His eunuchs read him reports. Entire provinces lost. Entire cities burned.

He just smiled wearily. "The sky is big," he said. "The barbarians are small."

But his eyes betrayed him. They flickered. For even an emperor knows: fire knows no greatness.

The wall was strong, yes. But every wall has weak points. Passes, valleys, rivers. Places where the guards dreamed, believing the enemy was far away.

Genghis sent scouts for weeks. They rode in the shadows, they observed, they counted the guards' footsteps. And then they returned.

"Here," one said. "A weak section. A valley they couldn't close properly."

Genghis nodded. "Then their great wall is just a net. And every net has holes."

They rode through. No catapults, no siege. Just horses, dust, and arrows. They were inside, in the Middle Kingdom.

The first cities they saw were larger than anything the steppe had ever known. Markets where you could buy anything—horses, jade, women, knowledge. Houses with roofs that curved like waves.

“So much wealth,” whispered Boorchu.

"So much stupidity," muttered Genghis. "Because the more they have, the easier it is for us."

And he took it. Fire in the storehouses, fire in the markets. Gold flowed, silver fell, porcelain shattered. The merchants screamed, the priests prayed, the women wept. But nothing could stop the flames.

"Look," said Jälme, holding a brocade fabric in his hands. "Even silk burns. And it burns faster than wool."

News of the burning cities reached the imperial court. Officials knelt, generals trembled, and reports piled up like corpses.

“Should we negotiate?” asked one of the ministers.

"With barbarians?" The emperor spat the word out as if it were poison. "We are the Middle Kingdom. They are mere dust."

But the emperor was mistaken. The dust had long since settled in the palace. Merchants brought stories, women brought fear, children cried in their sleep.

The emperor could remain silent as much as he wanted. But the empire had long since listened to Genghis.

For the first time, a large army confronted a city so large that it took two days to circumnavigate it. Lines of soldiers, spears, shields, drums, and flags.

It was a sight that even the men of the steppe had never seen before: order formed by thousands of men.

But Genghis laughed. "The greater the order, the easier it is to break when you strike at the heart."

He had his men mount a mock attack—first to the right, then to the left, then back. The Chinese ranks wavered, thinking they had won. But just then, the blow came to the center. Riders, wild, fast, unstoppable. The ranks broke, the flags fell, the drums fell silent.

The steppe had swallowed the order.

In the evening, while the fires were still burning, Genghis said to his men:

"They have walls. We have wind. They have emperors. We are hungry. They have gods who live in houses. Our spirits ride with us. Who will win? Always the one who moves."

Wherever they went, the name was heard: Genghis. Some spoke it with fear, some with hatred, some with admiration. But everyone spoke it.

"The one from the steppe who overcame the wall. Who burned the sky. Who made the emperors tremble."

And with that, Genghis knew: He had won. Not just cities. Not just battles. But his reputation. And a reputation burns longer than fire.

Storm against stone and porcelain

The rain fell heavily from the sky, thick drops that turned the dust into mud. Men on the steppe didn't like mud, nor did horses. But Genghis grinned. "Good," he said. "Stone softens in the rain. And porcelain slips when it gets wet."

Before them lay a city, larger than any they had seen before. Walls of gray stone so wide that three wagons could drive abreast. Towers with red roofs that gleamed like fresh blood. And markets so crowded that the very air tasted of spice and iron.

"Porcelain," murmured Boorchu, pointing at the merchants stacking plates and vases higher than men. "What a foolish material. Hard, but breaks like a bone."

Dschälme laughed. "Just like her."

The catapults were pushed forward, enormous behemoths that seemed like monsters in themselves. Ropes taut, wood creaked, men pulled. Stones flew, heavy, roaring, crashing against the walls. Pieces fell, dust rose, screams echoed.

But the city held firm. For days, for weeks. Every breach was patched with timbers, every fire extinguished with water.

"They're tougher than I thought," murmured Genghis. "But that just makes it more beautiful when they fall."

He had jugs of oil hurled, bundles of cloth and fat. They flew over the walls and burst in the markets. Fire devoured merchants' stalls, leaping from tent to tent, from house to house. Vases shattered in the fire, plates scattered through the alleys like a shower of broken glass.

The merchants screamed, trying to save their wares. But how do you save porcelain when the world is burning? Every pot, every bowl, everything shattered. The steppe laughed as it watched wealth shatter into fragments.

"So ends beauty," said Genghis. "It becomes scrap when fire kisses it."

Then came the day of the storm. Rain, thunder, wind—all at once. The walls were wet, the beams slippery. Genghis had ladders built. His men climbed, slipped, fell, and climbed again.

From above, the defenders poured hot water, threw stones, and pushed away ladders. Men shouted, horses neighed, and arrows sang.

But in the midst of the chaos, when everyone thought the storm would repel the attackers, a small ten-leader, barely more than a boy, climbed over the wall. He jumped in, stabbed like a wolf, and opened a gate from the inside.

Suddenly the city was open.

The streets were narrow, full of noise, and full of splinters. Broken porcelain lay in piles; men slipped on it, fell, and died. Houses collapsed, roofs creaked, and fire and rain battled each other.

"Storm against stone and porcelain," muttered Boorchu, trudging through an alley with blood on his face. "And we are the storm."

Genghis rode in front, his sword wet with rain and blood. "Stone falls. Porcelain breaks. Storm remains."

And so the city fell.

As the rain subsided, the streets steamed. Shards and smoke were everywhere. Men stood exhausted, women cowered, children screamed. And in the midst of the chaos, Genghis sat silent, his gaze fixed on a shard bearing a pattern—a dragon, now shattered.

"So this is what their gods look like," he said quietly. "Nice, until the storm comes."

He dropped the shard into the mud, crushed it with his boot, and looked ahead.

"Even more cities. Even more walls. Even more porcelain. But in the end, only the storm remains."

For three days, the rain didn't stop. The land was muddy, horses stood up to their knees in the brown swamp, men cursed, arrows stuck, tendons bulged. The Chinese behind the walls laughed, believing the heavens were on their side.

"The sky only spits water," said Genghis, biting into a piece of hard flesh. "Water softens stone. It works for us."

And indeed: the walls, once as hard as bone, began to crumble. Joints bulged, clay cracked. Genghis waited, like someone who knows that patience kills more than any sword.

The first city in this chapter was a sea of porcelain. Merchants had stacked it, entire halls full. Plates, vases, figurines of dragons, gods, animals. Precious, beautiful, shining—and yet as fragile as eggshells.

“All their pride,” said Boorchu, “is on tables.”

Dschalme kicked a vase standing by the gate. It shattered, and he grinned. "So simple."

As the catapults hurled fire into the city, the stacks of porcelain shattered like explosions. Shards flew, cutting skin, slashing eyes. Merchants wept not for their dead, but for their broken wares.

"Now they learn," murmured Genghis. "Beauty is not armor."

When the gate fell, it wasn't as usual. There was no orderly entry. It was chaos. Rain lashed, the ground was slippery, horses slipped, men fell. Broken porcelain lay everywhere, turning the streets into traps. Every step cut, every hoof splintered more.

The defenders fought doggedly, but they had underestimated the onslaught. The Mongols were not organized; they were wild, fast, unstoppable. They didn't need paved roads. They only needed space to kill.

The city fell as rain and blood mingled.

At night, the men sat around the fire, wet, tired, with cuts on their feet. Shards of porcelain lay among them, glinting in the flames.

“So much effort for something that breaks at the first blow,” said one.

Genghis nodded. "That's exactly their empire. Large, shining, magnificent. But hollow inside. And we are the storm that shatters them."

The next city wasn't a merchant town, but a city of scholars. Schools, halls full of books, rolls of paper, ink, drawings of stars and gods.

When it fell, not only houses burned. Libraries burned. Paper blew up like dry grass. Black smoke, sweet, sticky, full of words no one would ever read again.

“They write their strength on paper,” laughed Dschälme, “and paper burns faster than anything else.”

But Genghis remained silent. He saw the smoke rising. He knew: words are powerful. But fire is more powerful.

Then came the city that truly wanted to hold its ground. Walls doubly reinforced, towers filled with soldiers, storehouses full of food. They believed the storm would end here.

But Genghis let the skies work for him. The rain lashed down for days. He had ditches dug, filled them with water, and directed it against the walls. The ground became soft, and the foundations gave way.

On the fourth day, amidst the thunder, when the heavens themselves roared, he sent his men. Ladders, catapults, fire. All at once.

The walls slid, the towers fell. Fire met rain, water met oil, stone met dust. It was chaos, noise, an apocalypse in the middle of a city.

"This is the storm," Genghis shouted over the thunder. "And we are its heart!"

The city collapsed.

The next morning, the walls were steaming. Porcelain lay in shards, paper in ash, stone in ruins. Men gathered what was left—silver, women, children.

Genghis stood still and looked at it. "Stone falls. Porcelain breaks. Paper burns. But the storm remains. And we are the storm."

The nearest town lay on a river, with two wide bridges leading into it. Each bridge was decorated with stone lions, their mouths open as if they could devour enemies.

"Beautiful animals," murmured Boorchu. "But they don't bite stone."

Genghis nodded. "Then we'll break their teeth."

He had the bridges set on fire. Wooden scaffolding was stretched underneath, oil, pitch, and rags were used. At night, the lions burned. Their stone mouths glowed red until they collapsed.

The city was cut off. No traders, no supplies, no escape. The inhabitants shouted from the walls, threw stones, and fired arrows. But without bridges, they were like animals in a cage.

After days, the Mongols stormed in. Rain lashed, fire crept, and the bridges that had made them so proud lay black and toothless in the river.

This time the emperor sent not just words, but men. A massive army, rows of spears, flags so high they scratched the sky. Drums thundered, gongs struck, and the earth shook.

The Mongols stood still. Boorchu bit his lip. "So many..."

But Genghis grinned. "The more they are, the harder they stumble."

He staged a mock retreat—one of his favorite tactics. His riders charged, fired, turned, and fled. The Chinese pursued them in orderly ranks. They believed they had routed the barbarians.

Then, in the middle of the mud, the ambush broke loose. Arrows from both sides, horsemen emerging from the fog, blades in the rain. The ranks broke. Drums fell silent. Flags fell into the mud.

When the sun rose, the imperial army was nothing but a pile of corpses.

“This is how arrogance ends,” said Dschalme, kicking a fallen drummer’s gong into the mud.

Later, they came across a city known for its festivals. Masks, brightly painted, made of wood, porcelain, and gold. Dancers, musicians, and singers.

When the Mongols stormed it, the residents ran through the streets wearing masks, in panic and terror. Some screamed, some laughed hysterically, some stumbled because they could no longer find their own faces.

"They hide behind wood and paint," said Boorchu. "But wood burns. Paint peels."

Genghis nodded. "And in the end, all that remains is the naked face. And that is always fear."

The masks burned with the houses. Ashes from laughter and tears rose into the sky.

After battles, Genghis often sat silently in the rain. Börte came to him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“You see far,” she said.

“I see the end,” he replied.

“Whose end?”

"Maybe hers. Maybe mine too. Every storm eventually passes. But as long as it rages, it sweeps everything away."

Börte remained silent. She knew he was right. But she also knew: He was still the storm.

At the end of this chapter came the largest city yet. Walls so high that clouds clung to them. Towers that frightened even horses. Markets as large as entire steppe fields.

The Chinese believed nothing could fall here. They had supplies for years, soldiers by the thousands, and weapons in abundance.

But Genghis smiled. "The bigger they are, the more beautifully they fall."

The siege lasted weeks. Catapults thundered day and night. Fiery arrows flew like stars. Rain and storms mingled. Men died, horses collapsed.

But in the end, this city, too, fell. A gate collapsed, fire consumed the granaries, and screams echoed through the night.

“Stone,” said Dschälme, “paper, porcelain—everything burns if the storm is strong enough.”

"Exactly," nodded Genghis. "And we are the storm."

As the men moved through the ruins, everything was silent. Only the crackling of wood still burning. Shards of porcelain were everywhere, glittering in the rain, like the bones of an empire.

Genghis stopped and picked up a shard with a dragon on it. He turned it in his hand and saw how the pattern was broken.

"The dragon has fallen," he said quietly. "And if the dragon can fall, then the emperor will fall too."

He threw the shard away. It shattered, as the empire itself would one day shatter.

Traders, priests and other rats

They always crawled out of the holes when the dust settled. Traders sifting through the smoke to gather the remains, priests searching for voices in the rubble, and others who could do nothing but talk. Rats, thought Genghis. Some with silver on their fingers, some with crosses or prayer beads, some with greed in their bellies. But all the same: they survive by adapting.

After every burned city, they crept up. One lugged a bundle of silk, another a few pieces of brocade that hadn't quite gone up in the flames. They smiled broadly, their eyes flickering like candles in the wind.

"Great Khan," they said, "we bring you goods. Spices, iron, horses. Only in exchange for protection."

Genghis looked at them the way a wolf looks at a mouse. "You want to act? Fine. But you won't get protection through words. You get protection when you're useful."

He had them delivered—clothes for the wounds, salt for the flesh, iron for the arrows. But he never completely set them free. Merchants are like fire: If you don't control them, they eat more than they give.

Boorchu growled, “They smell like fear.”

Dschälme laughed. "And fear is cheap. We can afford it."

Then came the priests. Some in black robes, some with golden chains, some with drums that they beat as if they could awaken the heavens.

“Great Khan,” they said, “the gods want you to forgive.”

Genghis spat in the dust. "My gods ride. Yours sit in houses. If their houses burn, they burn with them."

The priests screamed, prayed, and pleaded. Some tried to save women and children, some only their temples. But Genghis saw them all the same: rats that change their burrows whenever the fire comes.

"A priest," he said to Börte, "is just a merchant. He doesn't sell goods, but hope. And hope burns just like cloth."

Even worse were the others: scribes, officials, small men with soft hands who suddenly emerged from the ruins. They knew the routes, the granaries, the shortcuts. They offered knowledge as others offered gold.

"I know where the grain is hidden." "I know where the children fled." "I know where the treasure chamber is."

Genghis used them while they were talking. And when they were finished, his men threw them away.

"You can't build an army on rats," he said. "But you can find supplies with them."

Börte often visited the women the priests left behind. She talked to them, helped them, carried water, and washed the little ones.

“Your husband is tough,” they said.

"My husband is the storm," she replied. "And the storm doesn't care about priestly words."

She knew the rats would always come back. But she also knew that only those who stand firm will survive.

After weeks, months, burning cities, dead traders, and silenced priests, Genghis knew: Rats never disappear. They adapt, they crawl on.

"Good," he said. "Then we'll let them crawl. As long as they show us the way."

And the world understood: merchants, priests, officials – all were just fodder for the storm.

After a siege, when smoke still hung over the ruins, a caravan arrived. Camels, heavily laden, bells on their necks that sounded like fake laughter. At the front was a man wearing a turban, silver rings, and a smile too big for his face.

“Great Khan,” he cried, “I bring you what you need: pepper, cinnamon, salt, silk.”

Boorchu spat. "He smells of fear."

Dschälme growled. "Or spices. Hard to tell."

Genghis let the caravan in. He took the salt that preserved meat, he took the pepper that kept the men in good spirits, he took the silk for the wounds. The merchant grinned wider, sensing profit.

But the next morning, he was found missing his fingers. He had tried to falsify the scales.

“A rat with rings is still a rat,” said Genghis.

Once a priest came. A fat man, carrying a golden gong. He pounded on it until the ground shook, and shouted: "My gods are stronger than your horsemen! Whoever kills me will be cursed by heaven!"

The men laughed. Some hesitated—superstition, fear. But Genghis rode forward, snatched the gong from the man's hands, and placed it in the fire. The gold melted, dripped, and flowed.

"Your gods don't scream," he said. "They boil."

The priest fell silent.

A minor official, inconspicuous, dirty, with watery eyes, crawled out of a cellar. He immediately knelt and pressed his forehead into the dust. "Great Khan, I know where the treasure is hidden. I know where the keys are."

They followed him. He led them to a room hidden behind a wall. Inside were boxes full of silver, rolls of silk, and stacks of porcelain.

The men cheered. The officer grinned, trembling. "I served."

Genghis nodded. "Yes. You served."

The next morning, the man was hanging from the gate with a shard of porcelain in his mouth. "So he never sells words again," said Genghis.

Börte saw more than the men. She saw the women the priests left behind, the merchants selling out, the officials forgetting. She spoke with them, helped them, and brought order.

“Why is he destroying everything?” they asked.

"He doesn't destroy," Börte replied. "He cleans up. And what he leaves standing is stronger than before."

She knew that many of them hated. But she also knew: hatred binds. And bound women talk. They revealed where supplies were, where men were trying to escape, where children were hidden.

Börte smiled. "Even rats have mothers. And mothers talk."

Once, traders tried to deceive Genghis. Three of them joined forces and offered him tribute trains with silver and horses. But the sacks contained more sand than metal.

When the deception was discovered, Genghis didn't have them killed immediately. He forced them to make a deal in front of his men. They had to sell their own wives for the price of a hair he picked up from the ground.

"That's what your value looks like," he said. "A hair in the dust."

The men collapsed. The rats had thought they were foxes. But in the end, they were just prey.

Other priests tried curses. They drew symbols on the ground, burned incense, and sang songs in languages no one understood.

A young warrior asked Genghis: “And if they are right?”

Genghis looked at the priests, who were screaming and sweating. "Then their gods can take my breath away tomorrow. But today I'll take their tongues."

And he had their tongues cut out and nailed them to the gates.

No curse came. Only silence.

In the end, Genghis knew: traders, priests, officials—they were all the same. They crawled out of the rubble when the storm passed. They begged, lied, bargained. But they were useful.

"Let them live," he said. "But keep them few and far between. Like rats in a camp. They eat the garbage, they show you the holes. But if there are too many of them, burn them."

His men nodded. They had learned: Rats never disappear. But they could be controlled.

One morning, a caravan came through the fog. They had heard about the fires, but they still wanted to trade. Perhaps they thought greed was stronger than fear. Fifty camels laden with cloth, copper, and dried fish.

The leader, a man with long fingernails and a beard that smelled too strongly of oil, stepped before Genghis. "Great Khan," he said, "I bring you wealth. Just let my caravan pass."

Genghis rode around the camels once, looked into the loads, saw the men, saw the children running among the animals. "Why are you walking through the middle of the steppe?"

The dealer grinned. "Because this is where the profit is now."

By evening, the goods lay in the Mongols' warehouses. By morning, the merchant was hanging from a stake. "A man who puts profit above life," said Genghis, "is a rat with gold in its mouth. And gold doesn't make a rat any more noble."

Later, a group of priests arrived, beating large drums so loudly that even horses were scared. "We call upon the heavens!" they cried. "We call upon thunder to drive you away!"

The men laughed, but some became uneasy. Thunder was no small matter to them.

Genghis dismounted, walked over to the drums, and beat them with his own hands. A dull, heavy sound, like a heartbeat. Then he had them thrown into the fire. The skins stretched, cracked, and burst.

"See?" he said. "You only sold heartbeats. But we take hearts with arrows. Your gods are just drums."

The priests fell down. Some prayed, some wept. But no voice came from heaven. Only the smoke rose.

Even worse were the scribes. Men with ink stains on their fingers, with eyes that saw too much and said too little. They offered Genghis their services: lists of supplies, maps of cities, family names.

Some were useful. Others tried to play a double game—for Genghis and for the emperors.

They caught one with two rolls of letters, one for the Khan, one for the Emperor. Two truths, two lies.

Genghis didn't have him killed immediately. He had him read aloud. First one letter, then the other. The men laughed, then they spat, then they fell silent.

"A scribe," said Genghis, "is a rat that eats ink. And ink doesn't fill the belly."

He drowned him in his own ink.

Some traders were more astute. They offered not only goods but also information. They told of routes, of secret caches, of wells that weren't poisoned.

Genghis used them, but he never trusted them. "A merchant," he said, "will sell even his own father if the price is right. And I never pay more than necessary."

So he drew them to himself, absorbed their knowledge, and threw them away. Like rags.

There were cities where the priests tried to incite the people against him. They stood on the walls, shouting: "Heaven will save us! The gods will send their arrows!"

The men fought more fiercely because they believed.

But when the walls fell, the priests were the first to flee. They threw off their robes, disguised themselves, and crawled into cellars.

Genghis had them searched for. "A priest who flees is worse than one who lies."

They found them, dragged them out, threw their garments into the fire, and made them run naked through the streets until no one thought of gods anymore.

One evening, after a particularly long day of lies, Genghis stood before his men. Traders, priests, and scribes lay bound in the dust.

"Look at them," he said. "They're rats. Some shine, some sing, some write. But all of them are rats. And rats don't die. They keep crawling. So use them. Eat them. But never believe them."

The men nodded. And they realized that the storm destroyed not only cities, but also the lies that lived within them.

News traveled faster than horses. Surviving merchants whispered of a khan who plucked them like fish, but let them live if they were useful. Priests who still had tongues murmured prayers with broken faith. Surviving scribes drew maps in which no god appeared, only smoke and blood.

In the cities, people said: "The Khan is like the plague—he'll either eat you or make you his tool." "He's silenced the priests." "He's left the merchants naked in the dust." "He knows everything. Even rats betray their holes to him."

Genghis heard about it. He didn't smile, he didn't laugh. He just nodded. Because that was exactly what he wanted: for them to fear him, not just on the battlefield, but in every word they exchanged, in every bargain they ventured, in every prayer they said.

He knew: Cities fall. Walls break. Porcelain shatters. But rats? They never go away. And if he didn't eradicate them, he would use them.

By the fire, he said quietly to Boorchu and Dschalme: "A sword kills once. A rat betrays a hundred times. And I want to win a hundred times."

They nodded. For they had learned that the storm rages not only through walls, but also through words, markets, and prayers.

And so, after the flames, there was not only ashes left – but a lesson that even the rats passed on.

An empire of burnt flesh

The steppe smelled of blood, but the empire Genghis was now building smelled of burnt flesh. Not just of enemies, not just of horses, not just of the cities he had burned—but of everything together. A stench that settled over his people like a blanket. Some hated it, some became addicted to it. But everyone breathed it.

In the past, if you asked the steppe where the Khan's empire began, no one could tell. No stone, no border, just grass and sky. Now it was simpler: Where there was smoke, there was Khan. Where flesh burned, there was his power.

Villages, towns, camps—everything that disobeyed was set ablaze. Everything that didn't pay smelled of ash. The men rode through burned streets; the children knew the smell of charred grain better than that of fresh bread.

"This is what order smells like," said Genghis. "For whoever cannot bear the stench will fall."

The riders became strange. Some laughed in the smoke as if drunk, others fell silent as if in a dream. Fire hardened them. Meat crackling on the spit reminded them of cities that had screamed like animals.

“We eat with the same flames with which we kill,” said Boorchu.

Dschälme tore a piece of meat with her teeth and grinned bloodily. "And it tastes the same."

They were no longer men who stormed cities. They were fire itself.

Börte walked through the camps when the smoke was at its worst. She saw the women, the children, the elderly. Some coughed, some cried, some stared blankly into the embers.

"It makes you strong," she said. "But you must know: meat that burns too long becomes bitter."

She wasn't afraid of the enemy. She was afraid that her men might lose themselves in their intoxication.

But Genghis only half heard. "Bitterness is also a weapon," he murmured.

A city refused to pay. No tribute, no gates, no bow. Genghis didn't simply storm them. He had them burned, house by house, slowly, deliberately. He let the meat roast in the alleys until the smoke became a wall.

The survivors fell into his hands like roasted animals. Their skin burned, their voices hoarse, their eyes red.

"Look," he said to his men. "This is what resistance looks like. Charred, painful, useless."

Soon, people stopped calling it the steppe and started calling it "the realm of burnt flesh." Because wherever Genghis was, granaries burned, temples burned, and bodies burned.

And yet the empire grew. Because the smoke didn't just kill—it brought order. Everyone knew: those who obeyed kept their lives. Those who didn't became flesh.

You could burn down a yurt, and the next day the air would be clear again. But a city that perished in fire would smell of burnt flesh for weeks. The wind carried the stench far across the steppe, so that even horsemen camped days away knew: Khan had been there.

People whispered. "Where there's smoke, there he is. Where flesh burns, there his kingdom grows."

The steppe had no flags, no walls. But the smell became the border.

One day he reached a city rich in markets, full of silver, silk, and spices. The merchants there were proud. "We'll buy our freedom," they said. "No fire can touch us if we pay."

They paid. But they lied. Behind the gates, they stored weapons, secretly armed men, and sent messengers to the emperor.

Genghis smelled the betrayal.

He had the granaries set on fire. First the full ones, so the smoke smelled rich and sweet. Then the stables, so the horses screamed like people. Then the houses, so everyone huddled together.

The merchants fled, screaming, offering silver, offering daughters, offering tears. But the stench was stronger.

"Now you have the bargain," said Genghis. "Your flesh for my order."

The riders moved through the streets, surrounded by fire, and they became different. Their eyes glowed, their breath smelled of smoke, their hands no longer trembled. They tore meat from the spit and laughed, while women screamed in the background.

Some said, "Fire makes them immortal." Others said, "Fire turns them into animals."

But Genghis knew: It turned them into tools. Men who can endure the stench no longer fear anything.

Once, a prince sent his army against Genghis. Thousands of men, freshly armed and determined. They fought bravely, were defeated, and fled.

Genghis didn't let their bodies rot. He had them burned in piles. For days, the smoke rose, thick, black, heavy.

The survivors who fled to the villages smelled it. They believed their brothers, their fathers, their sons weren't ascending to heaven, but were trapped in the smoke. They collapsed, refusing to fight.

"See," said Genghis. "Fire kills twice. First the body, then the will."

Börte saw children coughing in the smoke, women recognizing their burned husbands, entire villages falling silent.

"You are building an empire," she said, "but you are building it on ashes. What remains when the wind carries them away?"

Genghis looked at her, his eyes hard. "Then the name remains. An empire is not stone, not grain, not flesh. An empire is a word. And words don't burn."

Börte remained silent. But there was a sadness in her eyes that Genghis didn't understand—or didn't want to.

Sometimes he chose cities not because they resisted, but because they were too proud. He burned them down as if they were offerings to the spirits of the steppe.

"Look," he said, "I'm feeding the spirits meat. They should see that we're not stingy."

The men nodded, ate what they had roasted themselves, and believed that the spirits were riding with them.

Soon, people didn't just call him Khan. They called him "Lord of Fire" and "Master of Burnt Flesh." Children wept when they saw the smoke on the horizon. Old men spat when they smelled the stench. Women prayed that the wind wouldn't carry the stench to them.

But everyone knew: The smell meant order. The smell meant the storm had come.

There was a city full of temples, with towers pointing to the sky like fingers. Priests chanted day and night, sacrificial smoke rose, golden gongs struck. They said their gods would protect them.

Genghis rode up to the walls, looked at the smoke from the sacrifices, and laughed. "You already have the sky full of smoke. Then we'll give you even more."

He had catapults lit, oil thrown over the walls, and piles of wood placed against the gates. Soon, not only houses but also temples were ablaze. Priests screamed, idols melted, and golden gongs shattered in the fire.

"Your gods only smell of burnt flesh," he said as he watched the towers collapse.

Sometimes he came to areas where people were so afraid that they burned themselves before he arrived. Entire villages were already ablaze when his riders appeared. Women jumped into the embers, men stabbed their children to prevent them from ending up in the hands of the Khan.

Genghis watched without emotion. "Good," he said. "Then we'll save firewood."

But his men were quieter than usual. Even they, accustomed to blood, didn't know the smell of burning flesh.

But they learned: fear could kill, even before the storm came.

Genghis soon began to use the smoke for his own purposes. He had piles of corpses set on fire whenever he knew an enemy army was encamped nearby. The wind carried the stench, and the men in the camps became sick, vomited, and hallucinated. They dreamed of burned faces and eyes staring at them in the smoke.

"Fire kills three times," said Genghis. "Body, will, and then dreams."

His men nodded. They knew: Wherever there was smoke, the enemy would be destroyed without an arrow flying.

His own men changed. Young warriors who burned a city for the first time returned different. Their eyes had a glow that never went away. Some laughed louder, some became speechless, some ate meat that others wouldn't touch.

"They're no longer just riders," said Boorchu. "They're flames."

"Good," replied Genghis. "Then my kingdom will burn, even when I sleep."

But Börte saw how the stench haunted her children. They coughed when the wind was unfavorable, and they screamed in their sleep.

“An empire made only of fire will consume itself,” she said quietly.

But Genghis didn't listen. For him, fire was not just a weapon, but a language. Every burning city spoke for him. Every stench told his story.

“When they smell my name, they don’t need to hear anything else,” he said.

It was said that one of the last cities before the border was untouchable. Huge walls, full granaries, a thousand warriors. Genghis didn't besiege it with catapults. He ordered all the surrounding forests cut down, wood piled on mountains, and the city surrounded by fire.

The flames burned for days, a ring of embers. The inhabitants suffocated in the smoke before an arrow flew. By the time his men entered, they were already dead.

"This is how you make a sacrifice out of a city," said Genghis. "For the spirits, for heaven, for my name."

Soon it was no longer an image, but a saying: “He who feels the Khan, smells him first.”

The empire stretched like smoke in the wind. No map could depict it, no official could count it. But everyone knew where it was: where the sky was black, where flesh burned, where silence remained after the fire.

And amidst this stench rode Genghis, calm, confident, with eyes that saw more than any other. For him, the smoke was not the end, but the beginning.

"A kingdom that smells of flesh will not perish," he said. "For even when we are dead, the stench remains in the world."

The world bends or it dies

The world had already burned, it had screamed, it had bled, and yet it had not yet broken sufficiently. Genghis knew that fire and blood were only the first tools. The empire could not stand on ashes forever. An empire needed something else, something that would last longer than smoke. It needed the gesture of submission, the knee in the dust, the gaze that no longer looked straight but only downward.

He wanted men, women, cities, entire nations to submit before they died. He wanted them to know that resistance was not only futile, it was foolish. It began small.

A prince, seeing the storm coming, lay face down in the dust. He brought a white horse, a silk scarf, and his children as if they were offerings. Genghis looked at him, cool as the morning wind, and said simply: "Good, you live. And because you submit, your children will not die."

The men who saw this spread the word, faster than arrows flying across the steppe. Soon everyone knew: There was a choice. Knees or ashes. Life or smoke. Some cities opened their gates before the Mongols even appeared. Merchants rushed with keys, priests with incense, women with veils. They knelt, they begged, they trembled, and sometimes Genghis let them live.

But sometimes not. For submission was more than a gesture. It had to be genuine. And he smelled lies like a wolf smells blood. Cities that pretended to submit but secretly sent messengers, hoarded weapons, or whispered that they were only buying time were punished more harshly than those that proudly fought to the last man. He didn't want actors, he wanted slaves. Those who knelt and lied died twice: in fire and in shame. And so the steppe spoke: A knee in the dust does not always save, but pride never saves. Still, there were men who would not bend.

A prince, his eyes burning, said: "I never kneel, not before a bastard, not before a wolf in human skin." He fought, he fell, and his city burned until even the stones burst.

The women screamed, the children suffocated in the smoke, and in the end, nothing remained but ash and the bitter smell of burnt pride. Genghis rode through the ruins and said: "This is pride. It smells like charred flesh, and flesh rots." His men nodded, and the news moved on. But Börte saw the others.

She saw the cities that were alive but broken. She saw men who no longer spoke because they had lain in the dust one too many times.
She saw women looking at their children and knowing they would never walk upright. She whispered: A kingdom that knows only knees has no more voices.
But Genghis replied with a cold smile: A kingdom without voices is quieter.
And quiet rich people don't die so quickly.
It was a truth that hurt, yet worked.

Sometimes people spoke of him in Persia, sometimes in Russia, sometimes in the cities of Europe, who could not pronounce his name correctly and yet tasted it like poison on their tongues.
It was said that a man came from the steppe before whom even emperors tremble, a man to whom cities bring keys and daughters, a man who hears no prayer except the sound of knees striking the dust.

And the world began to tremble without ever having seen him.

On nights when the fire burned in the distance, Genghis stood at the edge of the camp, looking up at the sky.
His men drank, laughed, slept, Börte sang songs to the children, but he stood still and thought. He knew that fire was fleeting. Smoke dissipated, ashes blew away.

But the image he now burned into the world was stronger: the image of a man to whom one must bow. He wanted even kings who never met him to one day lie in the dust because the wind had carried his name across the mountains.

And he swore, quietly, firmly, like one who doesn't dream but commands: The world will bend. And if it doesn't, it will die.

Of rivers full of corpses

The rivers had once been clear; they had watered horses, bathed children, and fed fields. Now they were different. They smelled of iron and decay. They carried not only water, but also bodies. Some floated, some sank, some drifted for days until villages downstream pulled them from the water.

Genghis once stood on the banks of a great river. His men had just defeated an army, so many dead that the bank was insufficient. They threw the bodies into the water, and the current did the rest. The river, which usually glittered, was black and red, a moving grave. He looked at it, the horse snorted restlessly, but he himself was calm.

"This is better than fire," he said. "Because fire is only seen in the sky, but water carries it everywhere." And he knew: everyone living downstream would receive the message. Not through words, not through riders, but through the stench of corpses in the water, through arms caught in the stream, through eyes still open.

The rivers became messengers. Entire countries heard of him without him having to send a man. Children fetched water and found fingers in their buckets. Women washed clothes and saw faces floating beside them. Men drank and tasted blood.

And so the world learned a new language: rivers full of corpses.

The current was merciless, and it swept everyone away. Some bodies spun, bumped against rocks, and broke bones again, even though they were long dead. Horse bodies became entangled in branches, shields and swords floated like pieces of wood. Ravens followed the river, flying from branch to branch, swooping down and pecking out eyes.

Villages along the riverbanks fell silent as soon as the first corpses arrived. No one dared to speak aloud. Children were kept away from the water, wells emptied as if they were suddenly safer than the great river. Women tied cloths over their mouths, but the stench crept through every fabric. Old men stared into the water and muttered that heaven itself was defeated when rivers become graves.

Genghis knew he had created something that transcended any fire. Fire consumed and was gone. But water carried. A body falling here could bring terror a hundred miles away. A farmer who had never seen a Mongol might

suddenly stumble upon a corpse while fishing and know immediately that the Khan had long since reached him. There was nowhere to hide.

His men made a sport of it. They didn't just throw the dead into the water; they sometimes tied them together in small piles to keep them from drifting. Whole groups of bodies floated like boats. Once, they attached shields and flags to the corpses, making it look as if another army was coming downstream. The farmers ran when they saw it, screaming, leaving their fields behind as if living soldiers had arrived.

“Even the dead fight for us,” said Dschälme with a crooked grin.

"No," replied Genghis, "they don't fight. But they preach. And every river is a pulpit."

It was a bitter truth no one could deny. Rivers that had once carried trade now brought terror. Merchants loading their boats had to push corpses aside with poles before loading goods. It was said that even fish grew leaner because they didn't like blood, or fatter because they ate it. No one knew for sure, but everyone passed it on, and so the fear grew, greater than any battle.

But Börte saw it differently. She stood at the water's edge, held her hand over her mouth, and wept silently. "Rivers were life," she said. "Now they are death. And a kingdom that only drinks from death will eventually die of thirst." But Genghis just looked at her, his gaze hard. "Water flows," he said. "And so does my power. Whoever wants to drink it, drinks me with it."

His men heard this and felt the pride. They no longer felt pity for what was swimming there. For them, every body in the water was another victory, further proof that they were unstoppable. They began to sing when they camped by the river, songs in which the current was described as an ally, a river that rode with the Khan.

The world heard about it. Persian traders wrote in their letters about rivers that smelled of corpses. Russians around the fire told stories about rivers filled with Mongol corpses, even though it wasn't true – but the lie had the same effect as the truth: It instilled fear.

And so the image was born that never disappeared: The Mongols don't just come by land. They also come by water. You can't build a city that isn't touched by rivers. You can't dig a well without fearing that your neighbor will poison it. You can't see a stream without thinking of corpses.

The world bowed not only under swords, but also under currents.

It was after one of the great battles in which the opposing army didn't simply disintegrate, but fell into the hands of the Khan. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of men stood chained on the banks of a wide river. The rain had caused it to swell, the current was strong, the water lapped against stones as if it wanted to wage war itself. The men trembled, not only with fear, but also because they sensed that it wasn't a swift sword that awaited them here, but something else, something longer.

Genghis rode slowly through the ranks. His horse pounded, the ground was soft, and the prisoners held their heads bowed. They expected mercy, or perhaps a clean end. But the Khan spoke in a calm, cold voice: "Your emperor sent you to kill me. You have failed. Now you will preach for him."

The men didn't understand. Some raised their eyes, confused. Preaching? But soon they understood. The Mongols began tying them in groups, three or four bodies together, arms and legs linked with ropes as if they were cargo. Then they drove them to the edge, and one by one they toppled into the water. Screams, splashes, the tug of the current. Some tried to swim, but the shackles pulled them under. Others twisted helplessly, bumped against rocks, and fractured their skulls.

The river took them, one by one, dozens of them. After just an hour, the surface was littered with bodies spinning, arms sticking out of the water, heads sinking, legs floating like broken branches. The stream was no longer blue, but brown and red, with white bubbles rising from the bodies.

Farmers downstream later recounted hearing screams in the water even before the corpses arrived. When the first bodies began to cling to the banks, they fled the villages as if the dead themselves were alive. Women screamed, children were dragged away, men abandoned their fields. Some believed the river was cursed. Others said it had become a warrior, fighting for the Khan.

Genghis stood on the bank, his horse steady beneath him, and watched as the river swallowed the prisoners. His men were silent. Even the loudest ones didn't laugh. It wasn't an ordinary killing; it was bigger, more intangible. It wasn't the sword arm that killed, but the water itself.

"Look," said Genghis. "This is an army that still fights, even though it is dead. Every body is seen. Every body is feared. They will continue to travel, continue to fight, without us firing an arrow. The river is now our warrior."

The men nodded, some shuddered. But they understood. They saw the current carrying the dead away, for miles, until they disappeared. And they knew that somewhere, days away, people would see the same faces, the same bodies, the same stench. They wouldn't know where from, only that the Khan had sent them.

Thus, the river became the longest weapon Genghis ever wielded. No border stopped him, no mountain, no wall. Water flowed, and with it flowed fear.

But Börte saw the waves crashing over the bodies, and she thought of her children. She thought that they, too, would drink, that someday they, too, would have to draw from the same water. "When water turns to blood," she said quietly, "who will still be alive?" But Genghis didn't listen. He was too busy teaching the world that rivers no longer only gave life, but also death.

And so the world learned that the Khan had not only riders, not only arrows, not only fire. He also had rivers. And when they were filled with corpses, it wasn't just punishment, but a message: The world will submit. Or it will die.

The traders were the next to curse the river. Once, it had been their way, faster than any cart, easier than any path across the steppe. Boats carried silk, salt, iron, spices. But now they carried something else. When traders set out in their boats, they had to keep poles ready, not just to test the water, but also to push bodies away. Sometimes corpses floated beneath the boats, banging against the hulls so that the wood reverberated like a heartbeat. Sometimes they became tangled in the ropes, forcing men to cut with knives while the eyes of the dead stared at them.

One of the traders, an old man with a gray beard, later recounted that he had brought a boat full of porcelain down the river, and the bodies were so dense that he could have used them as bridges. He said: "I've never seen the Khan. But I know he rules the river. He sits somewhere in the north and throws people into it like stones. And we drift along."

It wasn't just bodies that came. With them came disease. Wells were avoided, rivers avoided, children died of thirst because no one wanted to drink the water. Villages dug holes in the ground to collect rain and prayed that there would be enough. But the rain, too, smelled of smoke, blood, and corpses. The steppe itself seemed to be dying, not just the people.

And yet, that was exactly what Genghis wanted. He understood that one couldn't just defeat armies, but also rivers. He knew that no prince, no

emperor, no king could fight against a river that had itself become a weapon. Fires could be extinguished, swords could be blocked, horsemen could be repelled. But what do you do against water that carries corpses? You can't flee, you can't dodge, you can only live with the stench.

Sometimes, when they camped on the bank, the men sat and watched the bodies. They threw stones to see them sink and resurface. Some laughed, some fell silent. One once asked, "Khan, what happens if we end up in the river ourselves?" Genghis looked at him for a long time, coldly, and replied, "Then you will continue to fight, like them. For even in death, you obey me." And the man remained silent, but he understood.

The news spread. In Persia, people told of rivers so blocked that boats could no longer navigate them. In Russia, they whispered that one could no longer see the water, only the faces of the dead. In Europe, it was said that the Mongols themselves had cursed the rivers, and no one dared to cross them.

Thus, the image became immortal: the Khan who fought not only with arrows and fire, but with water that carried corpses. A man who made nature itself his army. And everyone standing on the banks knew there was no escape. For if the river was already full of the dead, how could anyone hope that the land on the banks would survive?

But one evening, Börte stood by the water again. She held the children close to her; they smelled the stench, they coughed, they cried. She said: "You build your kingdom on corpses, and the river carries it away. But what does it carry back? Perhaps one day it will bring you death as well." Genghis remained silent. Perhaps he heard her, perhaps not. But his gaze remained on the water, and it seemed as if he saw in it not the dead, but the world that had long since belonged to him.

And so the river flowed on, unstoppable, like his will. An empire on horses, on fire, on smoke—and now also on water, which carried death itself like a message across the land. The rivers sang his name. Not with words, but with stench. Not with songs, but with corpses. And all who lived bowed down, because they knew: Those who do not bow down will drift.

Women, liquor and the eternally empty hole

The war filled the days, but the nights were a different battlefield. Men who had screamed, killed, and burned by day lay in the dust by night, drunk on cheap liquor, grasping at anything warm and tangible. Women who had been brought like plunder. Girls who swallowed their tears in the darkness. Widows who saw no way out except to do what the victors demanded.

There was no romance, no stories of heroes and love. There were only bodies that were used the way you use a sword: as long as it was sharp, as long as it gave strength, as long as it filled the hole inside for an hour.

The Mongols knew they were gods of war, but at night they were animals, and they knew it too. They laughed, they clinked cups, they poured liquor down their throats until they vomited, and in the morning they rode on as if nothing had happened. And yet there was this hole. Everyone felt it. This eternally open hole in the chest that had no name. You could fill it with blood, with fire, with women, with liquor. But it remained empty, always.

Genghis himself was no different. He had Börte, yes, and she was his wife, whom he never truly let go of. But even he fell into this hole at night. He, too, drank, he, too, took, he, too, knew that what he was seeking lay not in a woman, not in a cup, not in a burning city. It was something else. Something that devoured him like a wolf. Perhaps power. Perhaps immortality. Perhaps just nothingness.

The men sang songs, off-key and full of roar, while women lay beside them, silent, their eyes open, staring somewhere. One laughed: "The liquor makes you blind, but at least then you don't see that life is nothing anyway." Another fell over, vomited into the dust, wiped his mouth, and laughed again.

And Genghis walked among them, his steps hard, his gaze cold. He let them. He knew they needed it. Not because it was beautiful, but because it would put them back in the saddle the next day. Women, liquor, the hole—they were weapons. Perhaps dirtier than arrows and swords, but weapons. Because as long as his men had them, they would follow him, onward, ever onward.

But in quiet moments, when the fire was almost out and the chants had died down, when only the wind blew across the steppe, he looked into the women's faces, and sometimes something twitched in his eyes. Something he immediately pushed away. Because he wasn't allowed to see what they saw.

Not the grief, not the despair, not the emptiness. He was only allowed to see that the empire was growing. Everything else was for the weak.

But deep in the night, when he was alone, he felt it himself. This hole. This eternally hungry hole that was never satisfied. And he knew: He would always keep riding, always burning, always drinking, always taking. Because standing still was worse than death.

The liquor came from anything that could burn. Fermented horse milk, stinking like an old sheep's sack, or stolen from towns where merchants hoarded barrels of wine. Sometimes so sweet it gave you a toothache, sometimes so sharp that the men around the fire coughed, laughed, and spit in each other's faces. It didn't matter. The main thing was that it burned down your throat, the main thing was that it numbed the roaring in your head, the main thing was that it made everything easier for a moment.

The nights were full of chaos. One rode into the middle of the camp, naked, with a woman slung over his shoulder, both half-drunk, and fell off his horse laughing. Others lay in their skins, snoring, while one shouted by the fire that he was the new god. Some fought while drunk, knocking each other's teeth out, only to share the saddles again the next morning.

And always the women. Some wept silently, some cursed, some bit, some gave in because it no longer made a difference. It wasn't a fairy tale. It wasn't a court full of noble ladies. It was filth, it was violence, it was sheer survival.

Börte saw it and remained silent. She was more than just a woman among women. She was the Khan's wife, and that meant no one was allowed to touch her. But she saw the others, and she knew their faces could also be mirrors. "The hole is eating us all," she sometimes thought, "and they're just filling it as they can."

Genghis himself drank. Not always, not as much as the others, but enough to drown the taste of the steppe for a few hours. He took women, he took wine, and in the morning he was the Khan again. The hole inside him was bigger than the one inside any of his men. But he knew how to hide it. And that made him more dangerous.

The men said, "The Khan is insatiable." They laughed, but deep down they knew it was true. No fire was enough, no victory was enough, no cup was enough. Everything was just a drop in a hole that couldn't be filled. And

because he was like that, he drove them on. "Drink, take, burn," his gaze said, even as he remained silent. "Fill yourselves before the hole consumes you."

Sometimes, in cities, it was worse. There were cellars full of wine, full of women, full of gold. The men plunged into them like wolves into a flock of sheep. They ate, they drank, they groaned, sometimes even dying. Entire nights were lost in a frenzy that claimed more victims than a battle. But the next morning they rode again, their mouths dry, their eyes red, and they laughed because they knew: As long as the hole didn't swallow them whole, they still belonged to the Khan.

And yet, the greater the empire grew, the greater the emptiness. Genghis could burn cities, make kings kneel, and fill rivers with corpses—and yet he sometimes lay awake at night, feeling only the gaping blackness in his chest. He knew he would never be satisfied. Not with women. Not with liquor. Not with power. And that was precisely what made him dangerous: he was chasing something that didn't exist.

The steppe smelled of sweat and liquor, and the nights were filled with voices singing, screaming, moaning, and praying. But no matter how loud it was, the hole remained. Silent. Always hungry. Always open.

There were nights when the camp transformed into a bazaar of madness. Horses neighed between tents, men snatched cups from each other's hands, one played an out-of-tune lute until the strings broke. Voices slurred everywhere, and the smell of cooked meat, cheap alcohol, sweat, and semen filled the air. A smell that lingered like smoke after a fire.

Sometimes men got so drunk that they confused women—one was a daughter, another a widow, a third an enemy, and in the end, it didn't matter. They took what was there and convinced themselves it was their right because they rode under the Khan's banner. And it was. It was their right because Genghis allowed it. He knew: a full belly, an empty cup, a woman under the hide—that's what kept them with him. Morality was a word for priests, not for horsemen.

The women were the quietest in the camp. They barely spoke, they walked stooped, they carried water, they gathered wood, they carried children who didn't belong to them. Some had long since stopped crying. Tears were useless when you were devoured every day. Others prayed, quietly, but they knew no god came. The only gods who spoke here were men with swords and bellies full of liquor.

Börte kept her distance, but she saw everything. She saw how some women didn't even get up in the morning. How they lay in the dust, their eyes open, their lives long gone. She saw how men didn't even bend down to carry them away. "The hole will eat us all," she sometimes murmured in the darkness. But when Genghis heard her, he simply said: "Then we'll feed it. Every day, until there's nothing left."

Genghis himself was like a shadow amidst the excesses. He didn't drink like the others, not to the point of fainting. He didn't take like the others, not to the point of disgust. He watched, he tasted, and he knew he was doing the same as them—only more controlled. But the hole inside him was bigger. Much bigger. Sometimes he rode out alone in the middle of the night, away from the camp, away from the noise, just to breathe in the wind. But even there it was there, that hole that ate away at him. He couldn't defeat it; he could only feed it further, with wars, with cities, with people, with women, with wine.

The men told each other stories while drunk. One said, "If we drink enough, we'll see the ghosts of our enemies dancing." Another laughed and replied, "Then drink more, maybe your wife will dance too." Laughter, a punch, blood in the dust. And in the end, they lay next to each other, snoring. In the morning, they didn't even know what they'd fought about. But it didn't matter. They lived on, rode on, fought on.

In the cities they conquered, it was worse. There were cellars full of wine, full of women, full of gold. The men plunged into them as if there were no tomorrow. Some nearly drowned in their cups, others in the women's thighs. Entire nights were lost, and sometimes more Mongols died from too much alcohol than from swords. But the next day they got up again, staggered into their saddles, laughed with cleft lips, and rode as if nothing had happened.

And again and again this hole. It was there, in each of them, in every woman, in every cup, in every scream. Genghis knew it. He saw it in their faces when the intoxication wore off. This emptiness. This nothingness. And he knew: this was his true kingdom. Not the cities, not the rivers, not the steppe. His true kingdom was this hole that everyone wore. And he, the Khan, was the only one who made it big enough for them to follow him.

Sometimes, when the night grew too quiet, he thought of something he never said out loud: that he himself couldn't fill this hole. That he could ride, drink, take as much as he wanted—and it would stay. He would die, and the hole would be bigger than his name. And perhaps that was precisely his motivation:

If he died empty, he wanted the world to remember that he had devoured everything.

It was a night the steppe would never forget. The moon hung like a tilted plate over the horizon, the wind carried the smell of blood and liquor through the tents, and the men were already beyond anything one could call intoxicated. One sang a song with a broken voice that he couldn't finish because he fell vomiting into the dust. Two others fought naked, daggers in their hands, not out of hatred, but out of a drunken desire to feel. A third slept in the middle of the fire, the embers eating away at his boots, grinning in his dreams as if drinking with the spirits.

Women were passed from hand to hand, like cups, like prey. Some screamed, some were silent, some even laughed, a laugh that was hollow, like the cracking of dry wood. Children whimpered in the corners, clinging to one another, while outside men babbled and howled. There was no order anymore; it was a maelstrom of flesh, alcohol, and madness.

Genghis stood at the edge. He saw it, and he said nothing. His gaze was cool, his breathing steady. He wasn't drunk, he wasn't faint, he wasn't lost. He knew this was necessary. Men who knew nothing but violence needed nights like this to climb back into the saddle the next day. It was an outlet, a sacrifice, a feast of darkness. But in his eyes, it was also a test. Whoever fell, fell. Whoever stood, rode on.

He approached a man lying unconscious in the dirt, his beard covered in vomit, his belt unbuckled, his hand still on a woman who was trying to break free. Genghis nudged him with his boot, looked at him briefly, then turned away. "Leave him there," he said. "If he gets up tomorrow, he's ours. If not, he'll belong to the dust." No pity, no punishment, no morals. Only consequence.

The fire in the camp grew larger because no one was paying attention anymore. A tent caught fire, the flames licked high, and for a moment it seemed as if the entire camp was burning up in a drunken stupor. Men laughed, one even poured more liquor onto the embers, and the sparks flew like a second starry sky. Women screamed, children ran, horses broke free. It was chaos, it was the apocalypse.

And in the middle of it all stood Genghis. He raised his hand, just once, and the men saw him. Even drunk, even half-dead, they recognized his figure, his gaze. And suddenly it was quiet. The fire continued to burn, but no one dared to feed

it. Women stopped screaming, children cowered, men paused, as if they had just realized they had gone too far.

Genghis spoke softly, but each syllable cut like steel: "Drink until you die. Take until you're empty. But tomorrow you'll ride again. Those who don't ride will remain in the dust." Then he turned away, as if everything had been said.

The men nodded, some laughed again, some coughed, some lay down. The fire was extinguished, somehow, by hands that would never remember. The women withdrew as far back as they could, and the camp sank into a sleep that was more unconscious than rest.

Only Genghis remained awake, his gaze on the stars, his body still. He thought of the hole that was bigger than all the tents, bigger than the entire steppe. He knew that neither women nor liquor could fill it. It was a hole that only the world could fill. And even then, it would remain empty. But he would try. With fire, with blood, with cities, with rivers full of corpses. And as long as he rode, the hole would ride him.

Sons who already craved power

The steppe had given him sons, strong as young wolves, greedy as hungry dogs. They were his blood, his heritage, his pride—and his curse. For they saw him not only as a father, but also as an obstacle. Every victory he won was a promise to them, one they themselves wanted to fulfill. Every cup he drank, every woman he took, every head that rolled before him was also an invitation: one day, it would be theirs.

Even as boys, they grabbed swords as if they were toys. They wrestled, they hit, they bit, and when one cried, the others laughed. Börte saw it and knew: These weren't children. These were little khans who already smelled the steppe like blood.

Genghis was proud, yes. But he was also vigilant. He knew the hunger in their eyes. He knew it because he carried it within himself. Power wasn't water that could be divided. It was fire, and fire burned when it split.

His sons tested him, even at a young age. One openly contradicted him, another held himself up in front of his brothers, a third tried to gather his own men around him. They were small gestures, but they were enough. Genghis

saw them, he smelled them. He knew: one day they would see him not just as a father, but as prey.

And on quiet nights, when he looked at Börte, he said: "You are my blood. But blood wants to flow. Mine too."

The sons grew up in a world that knew nothing but violence, victory, and intoxication. They saw no fairy tales, no peaceful winters by the hearth. Their games were wrestling, their games were arrows, their games were riding on barely tamed horses. Everyone wanted to be faster, everyone wanted to be stronger, everyone wanted their father's gaze.

And Genghis rarely gave that look. He wasn't a man who held his children on his lap, told them stories, or rocked them to sleep. He was a man who checked with his eyes whether they had any bite. And if they didn't, he turned away. That was worse than any slap.

The brothers began to distrust each other early on. A cup of wine turned into an argument, a girl in the camp became the cause of fistfights. Whoever saddled a horse first was already the boss for the day. They were like puppies wrestling with each other, but behind their teeth lay the greed of grown wolves.

Börte tried to tame them. She spoke to them, held their hands when they bled, placed herself between them when they fought. But she knew their words were only wind. She couldn't stop the blood that cried out for power. She saw it in their faces: the same sparkle that once lay in Genghis's eyes, when he was young, when he himself was just a son in the dust, hungry, despised, and already ready to chew the world apart.

Genghis was proud, yes, but his pride was suspicious. He saw one of his sons begin to gather men around him. Small gestures: a smile, a pat on the shoulder, an extra piece of meat on the fire. Men noticed. Men followed instinct. And instinct told them: This boy bears the shadow of the Khan in his eyes.

Another son was wiser. He didn't openly contradict, but he asked stinging questions. "Why do we have to move on? Why not stay?" Or, "Why should I kneel when I'm your blood?" Words that sounded like daggers, even when spoken softly.

Genghis heard everything. He remained silent, but he remembered it. In his nights, when he stared at the fire, he thought not only of his enemies outside.

He also thought of the enemies within his own flesh. "They are my blood," he once said to Börte, "but blood will flow. Mine too."

The steppe understood this. Stories circulated: of brothers who killed each other before they were men; of fathers who slew their own sons because they sensed their power; of clans that rotted within while enemies still stood outside. Everyone knew: family was not security. Family was a fire that either warmed or burned.

And it was no different with Genghis. His sons grew up, strong, wild, hungry—and they set their eyes on the throne before he had even taken his seat.

It started harmlessly. A fight over a horse. A younger brother wanted the fastest animal, the older one said it belonged to him. Voices rose, hands flew, and before anyone could intervene, both lay in the dust, blood on their faces, teeth locked in the other's fist. Men stood around, laughing at first, then saw that things were getting serious. One drew a knife, the other reached for a stone. Then Genghis came, silent, with the gaze that broke everything. He didn't separate them. He just watched, arms folded. Only when blood dripped to the ground did he intervene. "Enough," he said. "One of you will lie in the dust one day. But not today." The sons stared at him, their breathing heavy, their eyes full of hatred—not at him, but at each other.

So every day became a test. Who could ride the longest without dismounting? Who could drink the most without vomiting? Who could stand in a fire without screaming? Everything was a competition, everything was power. And they were always looking to him. Did they want his approval? Or did they just want to see when he would weaken?

Börte tried to put out the fire. At night, she sat between the brothers and told stories from the past, from the time when they were all younger, when there were still games that didn't smell of blood. But the stories faded away. The brothers listened, but their eyes were already elsewhere. On swords. On horses. On the place occupied by their father.

Genghis saw all this and remained silent. He wasn't blind. He knew that a day would come when one of them would be not only a brother, but also an enemy. And he wondered if he would be strong enough to make the right decision then. Because a khan couldn't afford a weak son. But he couldn't afford a traitor either.

Once, in a besieged city, the brothers stood side by side. One wanted to storm, the other to wait. The argument became so loud that the men in the camp turned their heads. It was no longer a childish quarrel. It was politics, it was power. One drew his weapon. Genghis stepped between them, his hand on his sword. "If you kill each other now, you will both die," he said. "Because neither of you is ready to take my place." They lowered their weapons, but not their gazes.

The men murmured afterward. They had seen what the sons were: not just blood, but shadows of something to come. Everyone sensed that the empire was threatened not only by enemies, but also by themselves.

And Genghis felt it most keenly. At nights when he was alone, he thought that the world was too big for one man—but perhaps also too big for brothers. He knew they were greedy, that they wanted power before they were even old enough to bear it. He knew that his greatest war would not be against foreign kings, but against his own blood.

The brothers were like knives in the same sheath: always rubbing against each other, always on the verge of cutting each other. It began quietly. One of them, the eldest, spoke to men in the dark, gave them meat, promised them horses, and the men listened to him. Not because they loved him, but because he bore his blood. The Khan's blood, that was power in itself.

Another, the second-born, crept up on the women. He didn't just take them, he listened to them. He heard their whispers, their complaints, and from them he gathered a different kind of power—the voices in the camp, the stories that were passed on. Some women later said, "He sees us, while the Khan only uses us." They were small words, but words that grew.

And the third, the fiercest, openly tested his brothers. He trampled them into the dust, laughed when they wavered, and beat them when they looked at him, as if they were already khans. He wanted to force his way, not through cunning, not through words, but through brute force.

Genghis saw all this. He said nothing, but he felt his own blood rising against him. He knew: this wasn't just the hunger of youth. This was the hunger for power, and it could not be satisfied.

The men in the camp began to choose sides. Some sided with the eldest because he spoke calmly and looked as if he could one day carry the banner. Others whispered that the second was wiser, that he could hold an empire

while their father only destroyed. And the young men followed the wildest because he made them laugh, because he drank like them, because he fought like them.

Börte saw the camp fray, like an old rope breaking under tension. She begged Genghis: "Talk to them. Remind them that they are brothers." But Genghis just shook his head. "Brothers," he said, "are only brothers while they're small. After that, they're wolves."

And he treated them that way. He tested them, each in his own way. He put the eldest into battle, gave him men, let him lead, and watched how he sweated, how he hesitated, and how he ultimately led them home victorious. He let the second negotiate with princes, with merchants, with priests, and he heard how he shot words like arrows, how he smiled and stung, and he knew: this one could kill tongues. He let the third fight, pit him against the strongest in arenas on the steppe, and he laughed while spitting blood, but never fell.

And so Genghis saw what he had: three sons who were more than just children. Three sons who wanted to be khans even before he himself was dead.

The men murmured, "There will be war if the Khan falls." They spoke it quietly, but they knew it was true. Even in triumph, even in power, there was already the shadow of brothers who would tear each other apart.

Genghis knew better than anyone. At night, as he lay awake, he heard his sons breathing in their tents, and he knew: One of them will kill me if I don't kill him. But he was also proud. Proud that they were greedy. Because what could be worse than sons who are full?

And so he let it happen. He let them grow, let them crave, let them fight. For he knew: A Khan could only be born of blood. Even if it was his own blood.

Europe trembles without knowing why

They had never heard his name, and if they had, they pronounced it incorrectly. Genghis, Tschingis, Gingis—to the kings in the West, he was merely a rumor that drifted through the corridors like smoke. But nevertheless, they slept restlessly. Not because they knew him, but because they sensed that something was burning in the East that could reach them.

Merchants brought stories. A whole river of corpses. Cities that burned as if they were built of straw. Children who had learned to kneel in the dust before they could walk. Men who rode faster than any messenger. And above it all, a name, half whispered, half feared: the Khan.

In Paris, they drank wine and laughed at the barbarians. In Rome, priests preached that no pagan would ever reach the walls of the Holy See. In the castles of Germany, knights tested their swords and said they had already slain Saracens, so they would slay these riders too. But at night, when the torches went out, when the fire grew quiet, they felt something else: a trembling they could not explain.

For rumors are stronger than armies. And Europe smelled the ashes before the wind reached them.

The merchants were the first to feel it. They traveled the long routes, bringing silk, furs, and spices, and suddenly their voices fell silent. One recounted in Nuremberg that he had met men on the Black Sea who rode faster than the wind. Another swore in Venice that he had seen with his own eyes how a city in the East was burned to the ground without a single stone remaining standing. But when asked for proof, they shrugged. "The wind brings smoke," they said. "And smoke doesn't need paper."

In the castles, knights sat at long tables, meat in their mouths, wine in their jugs, and they laughed. "Asian hordes," they said, "like the Huns of old. We will defeat them as our fathers defeated the Saracens." They pounded on their breastplates, but at night they dreamed of riders who needed no swords, only fear. They woke up drenched in sweat and didn't talk about it.

The priests preached that God would protect the Christians. They beat their altars, they raised crosses to heaven. But in silence, when the bells fell silent, they murmured prayers that sounded fragile. For they, too, had heard that the horsemen from the steppe spared no churches, respected no holy images, and feared no relics. That they burned everything as if it were worthless.

And in the cities—Florence, Cologne, Krakow—people whispered. Women whispered in the markets that children in the East were already telling stories of black riders who came at night and took everything. Men looked to the East when the wind was cold, as if they could already hear the sound of hooves. No one knew anything, but everyone felt it: something was coming.

Europe didn't tremble loudly. It trembled in the cellars, in the beds, in the alleys. A trembling that was like a fever. It couldn't be explained, it couldn't be cured. It was just there.

And while they were still laughing, drinking, praying, preparing – the storm came closer.

In a castle in Thuringia, knights sat at a long table. The hall was filled with smoke, wine flowed, and they laughed loudly. "Barbarians from the East," cried one, his cheeks red from drinking, "they'll never see our walls. If they dare, I'll cut them down like a pig in the courtyard." Laughter, mugs clashed, pieces of meat flew through the air. But that same night, when the torches went out, the same knight lay awake. He heard the wind outside, and in his mind, he was not wind, but the sound of hooves. He saw riders in his dream whose eyes were not human, and he awoke, his shirt wet, his hands trembling. The next morning, he told no one about it. He laughed again, he drank again, but his eyes were tired.

In Rome, a priest preached on the steps of a church. "Do not fear the East," he cried, "for God is with us." The crowd nodded, murmuring "Amen." But later, when the people had left, the same priest knelt before the altar, alone, and whispered, "Lord, when they come, will you save us? Or are you also just an image melting in the embers?" His fingers trembled as he held the cross, and he felt it was cold. Too cold.

In Venice, merchants met in a harbor tavern. The room stank of salt, wet ropes, and cheap wine. One, a man with a scar above his eye, slammed his fist on the table. "I've seen them," he said. "They ride faster than the wind. Their arrows find you before you even hear them. They're demons." The others stared at him. One laughed uncertainly. "You've drunk too much." But there was no mockery in their faces. They wanted to laugh, but they couldn't.

In Krakow, in the market square, women whispered. "They take the children first," one said. "They tie them to horses and drag them through the alleys." Another shook her head. "No, they drink blood. My brother-in-law heard it." Yet another raised her hands: "They're not people. They're shadows. They

come when the sun goes down." The children listened, their eyes wide, and in the night they cried, not knowing why.

Europe began inventing stories to explain the trembling. Some said the riders were sent by the devil. Others said they were the Huns returning. Still others claimed they were God's punishment for the sins of the Church. Everyone had an explanation, and none made the trembling less severe.

Meanwhile, the Mongols rode on. Far away, still invisible to Europe. But like smoke, their reputation was already creeping over mountains and rivers.

In Paris, by the candlelight of the great halls, the king listened to tales from merchants. They spoke of horsemen who never dismounted, of arrows that fell like rain, of cities that no longer existed. The king raised his cup, pretending it was all just talk. "We have walls," he said, "we have knights, we have God." His voice echoed through the hall. But later, alone in his chambers, he placed his hand on his chest, felt his heart beating like a nervous animal, and wondered if walls could help against something one did not understand.

In London, the merchants on the Thames laughed. "They tell tales of the East," they said. "Wolves that eat people and men who ride faster than the wind." But one, an old sailor, remained silent. He had seen boats that hadn't returned. He had heard that the rivers in the East were red. He spat into the water, murmured a prayer, and knew: the sea was no limit once terror struck.

In a monastery in Bohemia, a monk lay awake. He had read ancient writings about the Huns, about demons coming over the world. He heard the bells outside in the wind and wondered if one day they would no longer ring for mass, but for the alarm. He wrote in his book: "Something is coming. I don't know when. I don't know how. But the East is not silent."

Farmers were the first to truly feel it. Not through words, but through the soil. When they plowed the earth, they said it was restless. "There's something," they murmured, "coming." Women washing clothes by the river sometimes saw the water flow differently, as if it were carrying something they couldn't see. They crucified themselves, looked east, and hurried home.

Then the first messengers arrived. Men with emaciated horses, faces covered in dust, voices hoarse. They rushed into castles, town halls, and monasteries. "They're on their way," they cried. "They've burned cities, destroyed armies, and filled rivers with corpses." The courts listened, the lords hissed for more

wine to steady their throats, saying, "That's far away." But they knew that "far away" on the steppe was just another word for "tomorrow."

Thus, Europe trembled. Not loudly, not openly. But in the cellars, in prayers, in dreams. And the trembling spread like a disease.

In Vienna, princes sat in a hall, the torchlight reflected on gold and silver. They discussed loudly, but no one said what they thought. One pounded his fist on the table: "We must wait until we have proof." Another murmured: "Perhaps it will already be too late by the time the proof is here." Their voices overlapped, but no one wanted to be the first to call the disaster by its name. Because speaking out made it real.

In Prague, the bells rang as they did every day, but the monks rang them faster, harder, as if trying to drive something away. A young brother whispered, "We call upon God, but perhaps he won't hear." The abbot looked at him sternly, but there was doubt in his eyes, too. He had heard from merchants that entire monasteries had been burned in the East, and he knew: prayers don't extinguish fires.

The farmers in Eastern Europe began to build earthen walls. They piled stones, they dug ditches. They said it was only for robbers, for wolves. But their wives knew they were lying. For the men felt fear in their hands as they shoveled. Fear that came not from robbers, but from something that wasn't there yet—but was already hanging in the air.

In German cities, new songs were being written. Ballad singers sang of horsemen with black eyes, of arrows that flew faster than thought. People listened, shuddered, tossed coins, laughed nervously, as if they were just stories. But at night, when the wind rattled the shutters, they heard the melody again, and they knew: no song is born without a spark of truth.

And in the royal courts, whispers echoed behind doors. "What if they really come?" one count asked another. "Then we pray," he replied, "or we pay." But both knew: praying didn't help, and gold burned as quickly as wood.

Europe trembled without knowing why. It was a trembling that was embedded in walls, in prayers, in children's songs. The storm hadn't arrived yet—but it was already there.

Ambassador beheaded in the dust

They came in the dust, not with swords, but with words. Men with flowing robes, with beards that gathered the wind, with voices that flattered. They carried letters, seals, promises. They said they came in the name of kings, emperors, caliphs. And they believed that words were walls, that paper meant protection.

But on the steppe, no seal, no fine speech, counted. On the steppe, only blood mattered. Genghis listened to them, the ambassadors, their polished words, their false smiles. Then he asked: "And if I kill you now—what will your king say?" The faces paled, the voices faltered, and in that moment, everything became clear. Ambassadors were just men, too. And men could die like everyone else.

It wasn't a murder in the dark, no dagger in the back. It was open, bright, in full view. The order came quietly, almost casually, and heads rolled into the dust. Men who had come to negotiate peace lay in the dirt, their blood seeping into the ground, carried away by the wind. The steppe accepted no lies.

And the message was clearer than any seal: those who did not respect the Khan lost not only men, but faces.

They came in caravans, with silk flags and proud horses. Ambassadors – men who believed their breath was worth more than a sword. They bore gifts: golden chalices, embroidered carpets, scents from the Orient. They spoke of alliances, of trade, of peace.

Genghis let them come into the camp, let them talk. He sat there, his legs wide apart, his face motionless, his fingers on his cup. He listened, but he didn't hear. For he saw how they looked at him: not as a ruler, but as a savage. There was mockery in their eyes, even when their mouths flattered.

One dared to call him "brother." A word that tasted like poison. Genghis's gaze turned cold. "I am not your brother," he said. "I am your judge." The ambassador laughed nervously and continued talking, but by then the decision had already been made.

The men in the camp fell silent. The wind carried dust across the square, and when the order was given, it was merely a nod. Swords flashed, heads fell. No scream lasted long, only the dull rolling of skulls on the hard ground.

Ambassadors who considered themselves untouchable lay in the dust like cattle.

That was the true message. No writing, no seal, no oath. But blood in the sand.

When the heads were impaled and placed at the edges of the camp, everyone who saw it knew: There was no diplomacy here. There was only obedience or death.

The news spread quickly. In Persia, there were murmurs that the Mongols were slaughtering ambassadors like sheep. In Russia, princes said they had never heard of barbarians beheading diplomats. In Europe, kings stared at letters and wondered if they should ever send any.

But Genghis laughed. "A letter burns," he said, "a head speaks forever."

The heads stood on stakes, right at the edge of the camp. The wind played with their beards, the sun cracked their skin, and their eyes gazed blankly into the steppe. The men walked past, some laughing, some silent. For them, it was an image that spoke louder than a thousand seals. It said: The Khan won't negotiate.

A young rider, barely twenty, stopped before it and asked, "But sir, why do we kill men who don't carry swords?" Genghis looked at him for a long time, then answered, "Because words are more dangerous than swords. A word can split a warrior before a blow can strike." The boy nodded, even though he didn't fully understand. But he memorized the lesson.

In the faraway cities, the news came like a thunderbolt. In Samarkand, merchants whispered that even envoys weren't safe. In Baghdad, the caliphs frowned: If ambassadors could die, who was holy? In Constantinople, an emperor sat on his throne, his hands heavy with gold, muttering, "These men know no laws."

But in Europe, the echo was loudest. There, ambassadors were almost like kings. When an envoy arrived, he was a mirror of the ruler, untouchable, almost holy. When the news came that the Mongols had beheaded ambassadors, the courts froze. "They are not people," said a bishop. "They are demons."

And yet, in the taverns, people laughed. "Finally, someone who talks by letting heads roll," cried a blacksmith, raising his beer. But deep in the night, when the

beer no longer helped, they asked themselves: If a head is worthless, what is a king worth?

Genghis knew exactly what he was doing. He wanted the world to see that he didn't tolerate masks. Ambassadors were masks. They came with words that weren't theirs. He wanted faces. True faces. And when they had fallen, he showed them to everyone so no one would forget.

"A beheaded ambassador," he said to Börte, "speaks louder than a thousand letters." She remained silent. But she knew he was right.

One of the messengers, the last one, knelt in the dust. His voice broke as he pleaded, "I am only a messenger. My master knows nothing, I know nothing. Do not kill me." Genghis stepped closer, bent down, his eyes dark as night. "Precisely because you are only a messenger, you die," he said. "For if the messenger falls, so does the message." Then he nodded, and his head rolled.

The men didn't cheer. They watched in silence as the blood seeped into the earth. Some were proud, others had goosebumps. For they, too, knew: Today, men who had believed themselves untouchable were dying. And if the world saw that not even envoys were safe, what could save them?

The news spread like fire in summer grass. Caravans retold the story, each time larger, each time bloodier. In Persia, it was said that the Mongols had beheaded not three, but thirty ambassadors. In India, traders whispered that they not only impaled the heads, but preserved them with salt to make them last longer. In Russia, the rumor was that the Mongols made cups from the skulls and drank from them. Everyone added something, and so the horror grew.

In Europe, it was a thunderclap. In their castles, princes suddenly held their envoys more tightly, giving them more protection, but they knew that if the Mongols caught them, no escort would help. In Paris, the king asked: "If we can't send messengers, how do we talk to them?" A courtier whispered: "Perhaps not at all." And the silence following these words was more difficult than any war.

In Rome, a cardinal cried out: "This is the handwriting of the Antichrist!" He swore that the Mongols were sent by the devil, that their heads were merely harbingers of the end. The Church trembled, not because it believed God was weaker, but because it knew that those who disregard the laws are more dangerous than any unbeliever.

And in the streets, among the common people, the rumors took root. A shoemaker told how the Mongols used their enemies' heads as balls. A farmer swore he'd heard the steppe was full of eyes peering out of impaled skulls. No one knew if it was true, but everyone believed it.

But Genghis sat by the fire, drank his cup, and smiled. He hadn't sent an army to Europe. Not yet. He hadn't burned a city there. But he had left it trembling—with only a few heads in the dust.

"That is power," he said quietly, almost to himself. "Not fighting, and yet already having won."

No God, only blood in the beard

The men sometimes prayed quietly, when they thought no one could hear. They murmured the names of gods, of ancestors, of spirits in the wind. But the Khan laughed. He said: "No god rides with you. Only I. No prayer keeps you alive. Only your sword."

He had seen priests holding crosses to the sky, shamans trying to summon the spirit with drums, mullahs chanting the Koran. And he had seen their heads land in the dust, their books in the fire, their drums trampled by hooves. No god had intervened. No god had stopped the blood.

Genghis felt it in his own body. When he fought, when he murdered, when he let cities burn, there was no divine arm. Only his own flesh, his own muscles, his own will. His beard, matted with blood, was more honest than any prayer. "This is my God," he once said, clutching the strands that still glistened red. "Not one up there. But the blood that sticks and never comes off."

The men heard this and nodded. Some laughed, some spat into the fire. But the truth lay in their eyes: They knew that their God did not dwell in churches or temples, but in the fist, the bow, the sword. And in the beard of their Khan, who always smelled of blood.

In Bukhara, the mullahs stood on the walls as the horsemen came. They chanted verses from the Koran, raised their hands to heaven, and shouted Allah's name into the wind. But the wind brought only the stench of horses, smoke, and death. Arrows whistled, men fell, and the verses turned into

screams. And as the city fell, so did the books. Pages swirled in the air, black ash falling to the ground like snow. No angel came. No God. Only Mongols.

In Samarkand, priests in golden robes stood in the temples. They held statues aloft, invoking their ancient gods. The statues melted in the fire, and the priests fell beside them. No lightning struck, no miracle occurred. Only smoke, only blood, only silence.

And again and again, Genghis stood there, sword in hand, beard red from battle. He saw the priests praying, despairing, and he laughed. "Your gods don't drink your blood," he said. "I do. And I ride on."

His men began to believe in nothing but him. They saw him standing, invincible, while walls fell. They saw his beard plastered with blood, day after day, battle after battle. For them, that was a sign, stronger than any cross, stronger than any writing. "The Khan is our God," some whispered, not out of reverence, but because they believed it.

And Genghis let them. He needed no heaven, no church, no temple. His temple was the steppe, his altar was dust, his holy water was blood. And he knew: This god was stronger because he was real. You could feel him, taste him, smell him.

Once, a Christian priest came to him with a cross in his hand. "My Lord," he said, "if you acknowledge Christ, he will open heaven to you." Genghis took the cross from his hand, turned it over, and looked at it. Then he laughed. "Your Christ was weak. He allowed himself to be nailed. I won't allow myself to be nailed. I nail others." Then he threw the cross into the fire. The priest wept, but he too knew that no God would save him.

And so the army marched on. Every city had its priests, its gods, its prayers. Every city fell, and no god intervened. Only the blood continued to flow. And again and again the Khan's beard, red, shining, hardened with clotted blood. For his men, it was a talisman. For his enemies, it was a curse.

"No God," he said, "just blood in my beard. And that's enough."

In Nishapur, the dervishes carried their drums out. They beat the rhythm that had summoned the spirits for centuries. Dust rose, voices sang, dancers spun as if their dance could enchant the riders. But the horses didn't stop. They trampled through the circle, bones broke, drums shattered. The songs fell silent. Only the squeaking of blood in the dust remained. One dervish lay still

twitching, his arms raised as if to continue praying, but a hoof crushed his chest. No god came.

In a Chinese temple, monks held incense sticks and knelt before the golden figure of Buddha. They said that wisdom brought peace, that no barbarian could destroy the path of Dharma. But as the arrows flew, the wood burned, the gold melted, and the monks were suffocated in the smoke. Genghis rode through the ashes, saw the statue crumble, and said: "Your Buddha is sitting. I ride. And whoever rides wins."

An Orthodox priest from Russia brought icons, shining, painted, with stern eyes. He held them high as the Mongols approached. "The Mother of God will burn you," he cried. Genghis took the icon from him, threw it into the dust, and his horse trampled on it. "Your mother isn't crying for you," he said. "She's not crying for anyone." The priest died with a broken neck.

And his men saw all this. They saw that everywhere, in every land, the gods were silent. No lightning came, no miracle, no angel. Only smoke, only death, only the Khan's beard, which grew darker with every victory. They began to regard him as a god himself, not because he demanded it, but because he was. A god of flesh and blood, a god who didn't sit in heaven, but rode beside them, who drank, who fought, who killed, who laughed.

Once, one of his generals asked him, "Lord, what should we say to the prisoners when they ask about your God?" Genghis replied, "Tell them my God rides a horse, holds a sword, and devours cities. If they don't believe that, let them kiss my footprints in the dust."

For his men, that was enough. For his enemies, it was despair.

And so the image was born that spread in all directions: the khan with the bloody beard, who said no prayers, who needed no altar, who laughed at gods because he himself was greater than them.

It was a great city, far in the south, told like a fairy tale: high walls, minarets, golden domes, and prayers in every street wafting through the air like smoke. The people there believed that its holiness would protect them. "God will save us," they said, "he gave us these walls, he gave us this light. No barbarian can break us."

When the Mongols stood at the gates, the mosques, the churches, the shrines filled. Men beat their foreheads on the ground, women wept, children held up

crosses or verses. Priests preached loudly that Allah, Christ, or the ancient spirits would surround their city like a shield. Bells rang, muezzins called, incense burned. The air was heavy with prayer.

But the horses didn't stop. Catapults hurled stones, fires burned at the gates. The walls creaked, the howls of men drowned out the ringing of the bells. Arrows rained down, prayers fell silent in screams. The domes fell, the shrines collapsed, the priests died on the steps of their altars, the mullahs with verses on their lips that no one heard.

And as the city burned, Genghis rode through the streets. His beard was dark, damp with blood that still dripped. He saw the people kneeling, hands raised to the sky, and he laughed. "Your sky is empty," he cried. "Look—no God, only blood in my beard. That is the only truth."

The men of his horde roared, drank, and murdered. And the city that had believed itself holy was, in the end, nothing more than a pile of ash, bones, and smoke.

From then on, the survivors everywhere said: The Mongols have no gods. Their god is blood. Their prophet is their khan. And their prayer is the sword.

An old wolf on hard ground

The years were eating away at him too. Not as visibly, not as quickly, but they were eating away at him. His beard was grayer, his eyes heavier, the scars deeper. He was still the Khan, still the storm that burned the world, but at night, when he lay alone, he felt his bones creak, his breath tremble.

He was like an old wolf, still able to bite, but aware that his teeth were getting blunt. He saw his sons, hungry, greedy, young, and he recognized in them what he himself once was. But he also knew: They wouldn't wait. Wolves don't kill because they hate. They kill because they must.

The ground had become harder. He used to sleep on earth, and it was soft. Now he felt every root, every stone. He used to be able to ride for days without rest. Now he needed the cup, the fire, to warm his muscles. And yet, none of his men dared to call him old. For he was only old in silence. When he spoke, when he rode, when he killed, he was still the storm.

Börte noticed it first. She saw how he sat for longer periods, how he sometimes placed his hand to his side as if trying to hold on to his pain. She remained silent because she knew he didn't want pity. A Khan who receives pity is already half dead.

And yet, when he looked up at the sky at night, he thought, "How long?" The wolf inside him growled, but the ground beneath him was cold.

The nights grew longer. Before, he was awake at every sunrise, ready to mount the saddle, ready to let arrows fly. Now he often woke before the men, yes, but he stayed seated longer. His bones creaked, his muscles burned. He got up more slowly. No one said anything, but everyone saw.

He drank more. Not because he was weak, but because he needed to compensate for the pain with bitterness. The cup became his tool, like the sword once had been. And when he drank, the men looked away, the way one looks away when an old wolf is still growling, but one senses that it can no longer bite like it used to.

He still won battles, but no longer with ease. He sat more firmly in the saddle, rode shorter, and held his bow more often, even if he was just observing. And when the men spoke of victories, they did so loudly, exaggeratedly, as if they had to prove to him that he was still the Khan.

His sons looked at him differently. They used to look up to him, but now they regarded him as an obstacle. Their eyes held not only admiration, but also calculation. They saw how his hands trembled when he held his sword for too long. They heard how his breath shortened when he spoke. And they thought: soon.

Genghis knew. He wasn't blind. He saw the greed in their eyes, the same greed that had once driven him. But he wasn't ready to be eaten. "Not yet," he murmured at night. "Not yet. I'm still biting."

Börte saw him in his sleep, turning restlessly, like a wolf who can't find a place. She wanted to hold him, to give him peace, but she knew he wouldn't allow it. A Khan who is held is already broken.

And so he lay there, an old wolf on hard ground, knowing that his pack was already eyeing his flesh.

Sometimes he sat alone by the fire at night. He stared into the embers and heard the bones crack, not in the wood, but in his own body. He remembered

the days when he was young, when he fought for horses with his bare fists, when he rode across the steppe with a dry throat, not knowing if he would survive the evening. Back then, the ground was soft because he himself was hard. Now the ground was harder because it had become soft.

He thought of his father's slap in the face, of the first arrows, of Börte, whom he had brought back, of the first men who swore to follow him. All of that was like smoke: beautiful, but intangible. Today, he was no longer the boy with the arrow and the horse. Today, he was the Khan, the old man, whom they already called Wolf behind closed doors—not out of respect, but out of the suspicion that wolves also die someday.

His sons smelled it. They were like young dogs sniffing blood in the wind. One asked openly, "Father, how long do you want to ride?" Another remained silent, but his look spoke louder than words:*Not forever.*

Genghis didn't answer. He grinned, but the grin was cold. "As long as the ground is hard, I'll stay harder," he finally said. But he knew that words were just words. His body didn't lie.

The men in the camp noticed it too. They saw that he stayed in the tent longer, that he rested more often in the saddle, that he laughed less. They didn't say it, but they whispered. Some wondered if his sons were already in charge. Others said, "No. The Khan isn't dying. Not now. Perhaps never."

And what about him? He felt torn. Part of him finally wanted to rest, finally leave the dust behind. Another part was still growling, hungry, angry, greedy. The wolf inside him was alive, but he was limping.

Börte placed her hand on his chest. "You're tired," she said softly. He swatted her hand away, not harshly, but firmly. "A tired wolf is dead," he growled. But for a moment, something flickered in his eyes that she had never seen before: fear.

It was a battle like many before: dust, hoofbeats, arrows, screams. For the men, it was routine; for the enemy, a nightmare. But for him, it was a mirror. He felt it even before the first sword clanged: his lungs burned faster, his arms heavier, his vision slowed. Before, he could see ten men in the dust, even before they drew their bows. Today, he saw only three—and the fourth arrow came as a surprise.

He rode into the ranks, his beard already matted with blood, but this time it was different. Every blow hurt, not only in the enemy, but also in his bones. He felt his arm weaken, his legs grow heavy. An enemy leaped at him, sword raised. For a moment, he thought:*That's it.*But the old wolf bit. He raised his sword, faster than his body would allow, and cleaved the man from shoulder to belly. Blood spurted, he gasped, and he knew: He could still bite.

The men saw it. They saw how the Khan swayed, how he held himself in the saddle as if he were melting into the horse. But they also saw that he didn't fall. One cried, "He is immortal!" Another roared, "Look at him, the wolf!" And the horde raged, rode even wilder, murdered even harder, because they believed that their Khan was still fire, even in his years.

But at night, as the dust settled and the men slept, he sat alone. He held the cup, his hand trembling. He felt the pain in his bones, the tear in his chest, his breath no longer flowing smoothly. He threw the cup into the fire, the metal clanged, and he growled into the darkness: "Not yet. As long as the ground is hard, I'll stay harder."

And so he remained, an old wolf who knew that the steppe would eventually swallow him too—but not today. Today he had bitten once more, and the world had trembled.

Death without regret, grave without name

It wasn't a quiet death. No peaceful falling asleep, no gentle disappearance. It was the end of a man who had lived like a storm – and like a storm, he collapsed. His bones were tired, his breath short, but his gaze remained hard until the end. No confessor, no priest, no shaman was allowed to whisper in his ear. He laughed everyone away. "No god will take me," he said. "I go as I lived – with dust in my mouth and blood in my beard."

The men didn't cry. They didn't dare. They saw him lying there, his hand still on his weapon, and they knew: even in death, he looked stronger than most in life.

His grave was not meant to be a grave. No stones, no statues, no name in the wind. The steppe took him as it had once given birth to him. It swallowed him, without a trace, without a sign. A wolf who finally fell silent—not because he wanted to, but because the ground took him.

But the legend remained. And the men whispered: "He rests without a name, but the world bears his scars."

The last few days weren't dignified, not beautiful, not like in songs. He didn't lie on soft pillows, but on the hard ground. The yurt smelled of smoke, of sweat, of medicine that didn't help. He coughed, spat blood, cursed, but drank anyway. "If I die," he growled, "then I'll die with fire in my throat."

His sons stood around him, their eyes greedy, their hands clasped. They saw not only their father, they saw the throne. Each calculated, each waited. And he knew it. "You are like wolves," he gasped. "You wait for my flesh." One wanted to protest, but he raised his hand, heavy as it was. "Be silent. I am not dying for you. I am dying for nothing. And that is more than you will ever understand."

Börte sat with him, holding his hand. He allowed it, only in these last hours. He looked at her, and for a moment he was not the Khan, not the storm, not the wolf. For a moment he was just a tired man. "You were the only thing that was soft," he said quietly. She wept, but he smiled.

When night came, he didn't sleep. He didn't want to. He wanted to see death, wanted to look into its eyes, just as he had looked into the eyes of all his enemies. "Come," he murmured, "take me. But I won't go quietly."

By morning he was dead. No scream, no struggle—just a silent end, as if the storm had finally passed. The men entered and saw the body. No one dared to speak.

His burial was not a royal feast. They took him out to the steppe where he was born. No statues, no stones. They buried him in the dust, secretly, without a mark. The riders who brought him there killed everyone they met on the way, so no one would ever know the location. The grave was not a grave, it was just earth.

The steppe took him back. No name, no cross, no stone. Only wind over grass, only dust over dust.

But the world knew it nonetheless. People in Persia, in China, in Russia, in Europe, said: "The Khan is dead." And yet, no one really believed it. Because a man who had burned so much couldn't just disappear.

The sons remained standing in the yurt after his death, each silent, each staring at the body. They no longer saw their father; they saw an empty shell. And each thought the same thing:*Now.*They didn't say it out loud, they kept it to themselves, but the air was thick with suspicion. One moved closer to the weapon lying next to the body. Another clenched his fist.

Börte saw it and despised them. "It's still warm," she hissed, "and you're already thinking about yourselves." But no one listened to her. For she was the Khan's wife, and they were the Khan's sons. And each believed he was the strongest.

The men outside waited. They were afraid, but also greedy. Because if the Khan was dead, everything could collapse—or everything could grow even bigger. No one knew what would happen. They knew only one thing: if they spoke, if they betrayed the grave, the curse of the steppe would take them.

The burial was like a murder. Secret, hasty, brutal. They buried the body in the ground, in the middle of the steppe. No sign, no stone, nothing. The men who carried him there knew they would not return. For the grave was not meant to be a grave; it was meant to remain a secret. They killed everyone they encountered so no one would see the trace. In the end, they themselves were dead, so that the place would disappear with them.

Thus the Khan became dust. No temple, no monument, only grass growing over him.

But the legends began immediately. Some said he hadn't died, but still rode in the night. Others swore they had seen his face in the smoke when cities burned. Still others said he had ascended to heaven, as a wolf, a star, or a storm.

And so he lived on, without a grave, without a name. Because the world didn't forget him. It couldn't.

But the sons began to quarrel. As soon as the earth was above him, the words began, like knives. Each wanted more, each wanted everything. The old wolf was gone, and the pack fell upon one another.

But on the steppe, the wind blew over his grave—invisible, nameless, untraceable. And that was his final victory: No enemy could desecrate his body. No king could carve his name in stone. He was greater than that. He was dust itself.

The Khan blood continues to flow

He was dead, yes. Dust in the dust, flesh in the earth, without stone, without a name. But blood doesn't stop just because the body falls. His blood lived on in the sons, in the grandchildren, in the hordes that rode on. Every arrow that flew still had something of him in its shaft. Every scream on the battlefield sounded as if he were the one uttering it.

The world breathed a sigh of relief when it heard that the Khan was dead. But it was a brief sigh of relief that immediately stuck in the throat. For there were already others taking his place. His sons, his grandchildren, each with the same eyes, the same hunger, the same intoxication.

And so the blood rolled on like a river. It flowed through China, through Persia, through Russia, until it crashed against the gates of Europe. No more name, only an echo: Khan, Khan, Khan.

The steppe itself seemed unable to let him go. At night, as the men sat by the fire, they swore they heard a howl that sounded like a wolf, but louder. Some said it was the Khan himself, still riding, invisible, just wind and dust.

The Khan's blood continued to guish. Not only in the flesh of his children, but in the soil, in the smoke, in the horror of the world. A man was dead. But an empire, built like a storm, lived. And it never stopped biting.

The steppe was not silent for long. No sooner had the old wolf disappeared beneath earth and dust than his sons rose up. They bore the same gaze, the same greed. One held the banner, one the bow, one the sword. Each believed that the kingdom belonged to him, that the Khan's blood flowed purer in his veins than in any other.

The men followed them, not out of love, but out of habit. They knew only riding, burning, and killing. And as long as someone kept the fire burning, they rode on. They swore that the Khan's blood would still flow, even if the body had long since rotted away.

And it did indeed roar. It roared over China, where new walls were built and torn down again. It roared over Persia, which had already been burned three times but was still not empty. It roared over Russia, which cowered but was never safe.

Europe continued to tremble. They had heard that the Khan was dead, but they didn't believe it. "A man like him doesn't die," they said in the castles. "He'll come back." And so he lived on, in people's minds, in their nightmares, in their prayers.

In the Mongolian yurts, the elders told stories. They told the children: "Your grandfather was the storm. He broke the world. His blood flows in you." The children listened, wide-eyed, and they knew: they too would ride, they too would kill, they too would burn. For the blood demanded it.

The steppe itself was his monument. No stone, no temple, just wind, dust, and grass. But every time the wind swept across the plain, the men said: "That is him. That is the Khan."

And so it roared on. Not quietly, not slowly. It roared like a river full of corpses, like a storm full of ash, like a heart that never stopped beating. The man was dead. But the Khan's blood – that didn't stop.

The sons quarreled, as he had known they would. As soon as the earth was above his body, they leaped at each other like dogs over a bone. Each wanted the reins, each the kingdom behind them. But no matter how much they fought, they rode anyway. Because riding was the only thing they knew.

Ogedei, the moderate one, took the seat. He drank a lot, sometimes too much, but the empire rolled on anyway, because the Khan's blood burned through his veins. And when he wavered, generals stood ready, men who still swore they would have followed their old master's beard even if he had been lying in the dust.

The armies moved on, like a river that knew no sea. They overran cities that had already been burned, they slew men whose fathers had already lain in the dust. They tore down castles that had been called "impregnable," only to take them like one slaughters an animal.

And Europe felt it again. Letters came, full of panic, from Russia, from Poland, from Hungary. "They're here," they said. "They're riding, they're burning, they're taking everything." In Vienna, the bells rang, in Rome the cardinals cursed, in Paris the king sweated in his bed. They still called him*the Khan*, even though he was dead. For the name was greater than the man.

Merchants sang songs that were passed down from generation to generation. They told of a horseman who never dies, of a wolf who devours the world. Children in villages that had never seen a steppe played games in which one could play the khan, and the others the cities he destroyed.

And in the yurts of the steppe, the elders said that the khan had not died. "His grave is empty," they whispered. "He still rides, in the wind, in the dust, in the blood." And the young warriors believed it because they wanted to believe it. For once someone had such a man, they could no longer accept any other god.

The Khan's blood continued to flow. It flowed through the veins of sons, grandchildren, men who rode, cities that fell, and women who wept. It flowed through the centuries, and even as Europe grew strong, built castles, and cast cannons, the roar remained in the ears.

Because blood never stops. It finds new ways, new bodies, new hands, new swords. And the Khan's blood wasn't just any blood. It was Stormblood. It was Wolfblood. It was blood that continued to flow even in the dust.

Decades passed, and his shadow still lingered. When the grandchildren's riders appeared on the borders of Europe, the castles trembled. Men swore they had seen his face in the dust, even though he was long dead. In the churches, priests preached against him as if he were the devil himself. In the songs of the minstrels, he wasn't dead, but merely "ridden away to return someday."

In Russia, children were told that the Khan came in winter, when the wolves howled the loudest. In Persia, women said that the wind that carried dust into the eyes was sent by him. In China, emperors feared for generations that somewhere beyond the mountains a horseman was still waiting to tear down their walls.

Even those who had never seen a Mongol spoke his name. Not because they knew him, but because they feared him. A man without a grave, a wolf without end, a blood that flowed through the world like a disease no one could cure.

And that was his greatest victory. Not the cities he burned, not the heads he let roll. But the trembling that remained long after he had turned to dust.

The sons fought, the grandsons murdered, the empire shattered and grew again. But whenever blood was shed, people said, "That's the Khan." And so he became immortal, not in heaven, not in stone, but in dust, in the wind, in the heartbeat of fear.

The Khan's blood continued to roar—on the steppe, on the streets of Europe, in the songs, in the curses, in the dreams. One man died without a name, but his blood gave birth to many. And everyone who ever rode against the wind swore they heard it: the rushing, the growling, the laughter.

And the steppe that had given birth to him was not silent. It whispered his name again and again, softly, in the grass, in the dust, in the howling of the wolves. Not Genghis. Not Khan. But something greater. An echo that never ceases.

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