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The Memories of Chingiz Khan

Around 1226- Heisui

Chingiz and a few men swept out of camp. It was late afternoon and he knew that his arban, composed of ten of his most faithful warriors, would probably be unneeded. It was still better to be cautious and bring them. The landscape around the camp called to him. Chingiz was older than sixty, but he still had the same urge to explore as when he was a child. Some areas on the journey to Heisui, in Western Xia, reminded him of his home in Delun-Boldaq. Ever since he saw those steep rock slopes a few days ago, he had been experiencing an irresistible urge to climb. He wasn't sure what it was about scaling rock faces. Maybe the required combination of agility and strength, the ability to see your enemy, or that feeling of welcome given off when one gets closer to the Blue Mighty Eternal Heaven. Whatever it was, it had always captivated him. Chingiz steered his horse to one large slab of rock that struck his eye. It was about two hundred and fifty feet to the top, and there was a section of steep overhang in the middle of the climb. Chingiz looked at his men and called, "Anyone want to get closer to the Blue Sky? Now's your chance." They seemed paralyzed. All of them wanted to show the khan their strength, but they also didn't want to embarrass themselves, and many felt uncomfortable with heights. After all, they were a people of the steppe, not of the mountain. Chingiz' eyes settled on Koke, a man known for his loud talk. "Koke," Chingiz said, "It looks like you want to speak. What is it?" Koke stood up straight. "Yes, uhmmm. I would love to climb this rock with

you, my Khan, but someone must stay with the horses, and I am willing to sacrifice adventure for practicality. In fact, it would be my honor.” Chingiz smiled. He knew that Koke was scared to climb. He could see it on his face. Chingiz had always exhibited a remarkable ability to read people. “Alright men,” he said, “If no one will climb with me, I’ll go alone. After all,” he noted with a hint of sarcasm, “we need people to watch the horses.” At this, Koke looked down at his feet. Chingiz made his way towards the rock. He threw off his brown deel (his heaviest piece of clothing) and started climbing. The other men stood there, looking both entranced and ashamed. Chingiz saw the best route almost immediately. One handhold led to the next and before he knew it, he was a third of the way up. At this distance, a fall would be deadly. Chingiz muttered to himself, “This would be an odd way to end it all. Probably a hundred battles, countless enemies slayed, and the mighty Chingiz falls from a rock to his death.” He chuckled and kept climbing, knowing that these thoughts would make him more prone to error. With some nimble maneuvers of his body, he passed the overhang and made it to the top. From this height, he could see all the way back into camp. He turned around and faced the opposite direction, remembering a similar moment from his childhood. He had climbed a similar route with his brother, Khasar, and stood on top of the rock for a long time. He couldn’t quite remember, but he thought that they had talked about mountains and the Blue Sky, and why the two always tried to reach for each other. A wave of nostalgia hit Chingiz. So many memories flooded his mind. He had to sit down to keep from stumbling. “Easy Chingiz,” he said to himself, “It’s easier to embrace the past than to fight it. Let it come. All of it.” The memories overtook him and he closed his eyes.

The Beginning- 1162

It was turning dark when Yesugei came back into the ger. He thought he saw one of the outer skins coming loose, but it was just a trick of the moonlight. His ger was always immune to the strong winds of the steppe. That was one thing his father had made sure to teach him. Yesugei yawned and looked up at the full moon. He didn't love the moon; in his mind, it blocked out the true beauty of the night- the constellations. He was able to decipher all the patterns since the time of his childhood. The Great Bow was his favorite. It looked very similar to his own compound bow, and he imagined being able to control the Great Bow- unleashing its awesome power on those who challenged him. An unfamiliar wailing ended his musings, and he opened the flap into his ger. Hoelun was inside, sprawled out on many skins. She was holding a baby in her arms. Hoelun said, "He is new to this world, Yesugei, and he has brought with him a sign from another." Yesugei sighed a breath of relief. With all his might he had wanted another boy. He took a step closer. "What is this omen you speak of, Hoelun? Show me." Hoelun lifted the boy's right arm into the air and unfolded his fingers. In his palm laid a black and red object, shaped into a sphere. Yesugei recognized it at once- it was a blood clot. He took a step back and looked at Hoelun. "Do you know what this means?" he said, "This boy is meant to be a leader. His future has been plotted by the gods." Yesugei looked back at the child, but this time in a new light. The child stopped crying for an instant and looked into Yesugei's eyes. Yesugei proclaimed, "I will call him Temüjin, after a captured but noble

enemy. He will become a leader one day. He is my son.” A smile sprouted from Yesugei’s face and he embraced Hoelun and Temüjin.

1171- Yesugei’s Death

Temujin was tired. It had only been four days with the Khongirad people, but they had given him the full responsibility of a man- that meant hunting game, fixing gers, and looking after the horses. He had come here to find a wife. Borte had been presented to him immediately after he arrived with his father. She was the strongest, tallest, and most confident of the girls her age. Yesugei approved of her. Temujin was a bit more skeptical. He wanted to see that her confidence was not a façade, that it was a real part of her character. Of course, that was the type of quality that only time could bring to the surface- so Temujin accepted her. It would be a horrible insult to the Khongirad tribe to reject Borte based upon a premise as abstract as that. Temujin knew this. He was not only marrying, he was strengthening tribal allegiances.

“Temujin,” Dai Setsen called, snapping him out of his reverie, “I need you over here. This ger needs strengthening before tonight. I sense that there will be mighty winds.” Temujin ran to the ger, proudly showing off his eagerness. He had been assigned to work under Dai Setsen. Temujin didn’t mind. Dai was an affable man, especially once you took into account all the conflict he had been through, whether it had been with other tribes or nature itself. Dai Setsen had already told Temujin many stories of his own past, and the boy yearned to hear more. Temujin sat down next to Dai, who was examining a yurt, looking at an old interior pole. “What happened to it? Why is it so bent?” Temujin

asked. Dai responded, "It looks like this bamboo isn't as tough as the other pieces in our yurts, although I couldn't tell you why. Well, it could be because of the..," Dai stopped mid-sentence and stood up. There was some commotion towards the center of their village where most of the meetings took place. Temujin got up and looked in that direction. People were pointing and shouting. In the distance, he could see a lone rider galloping toward them at full speed. There was something both oddly familiar and disturbing about his attire. He was certainly a member of his father's Clan- the Wolf Clan. Temujin could tell by the pattern on his tunic. But he was surprised to see a red streak on his leg, a place where, usually, there wouldn't be any dye at all. In fact, red was unusual anywhere; it was an expensive and rare dye. As the rider moved closer, a crowd started to gather in the village center. Temujin suddenly had an intuition that the rider was injured or in distress. It was only a few more moments before Temujin realized that it was Ganbaatar, one of his father's closest friends. Temujin ran towards him, worrying with all his might, quickly coming to the realization that the red streak was blood: human blood. "Ganbaatar!" Temujin yelled, "Are you alright? What can I do to help?"

Ganbaatar shook his head as he approach Temujin. For a long time, all the man could do was shake his head and breathe, not able to say anything. Dai Setsen gave Ganbaatar's horse some water. It looked like it could topple at any moment. "Temujin," Ganbaatar said, "your father has been killed. He was poisoned by the Tatars. We had dinner with them, assuming that they were credible and could be trusted. We were wrong. I came back here to tell you, because I felt you must know, even if you are young. The other men left your father as he was becoming sick and rode back to the village. They might already

be there.” After Ganbaatar said this, he fell off his horse and flopped to the ground. Dai was right there to buffer his fall, but he still hit hard. Temujin’s stomach twisted and churned, rebelling against the words he had heard. He felt tears coming but held them back. He knew he couldn’t let his emotions control him, not even in this situation. Everyone was looking at young Temujin. “I will go to avenge my father’s death,” he proclaimed, “I have no other choice but to leave, for now. Borte, I will be back for you. I trust you can wait.” He went over to Ganbaatar and shook him until he awoke, while calling to Dai, “We must exchange horses, Dai. You give me one of your best and you get this one. It is a fair deal, and I must act now.” Dai nodded and went to get one of his fastest horses for the boy. While Temujin still squirmed at the idea of his father being poisoned, he also felt an unprecedented feeling of calmness and control. He felt in charge and alive. Only one words rang in his ears, “Tatar.”

Temujin and Ganbaatar rode on Dai’s horse for three days and two nights. Temujin did most of the correcting and steering, while Ganbaatar rested and attempted to get his leg to stop bleeding. At the end of the third day, the man and boy arrived in Yesugei’s former camp. When they rode towards the center, some of the dogs started barking and soon, men came flying out of the gers, wanting to see who or what was causing the commotion. A few of the men stepped forward to engage the two dark figures- one small and one large. The small figure hopped down from the horse. Young Temujin called, “I demand to know why you abandoned my father in his sickness. Is it because you are not loyal? Is it because you are selfish? Or scared? Which one of these is

it?” Nergui, one of the tallest men in the Wolf Clan spoke up, saying, “Young Temujin, it is good to see you. But you have no place to insult us. Your father was a fool for eating those Tatar milk curds.” “Stop right there,” Temujin said, and just then, he saw something that startled him- his family. His mom and brothers were staring at him. He could tell his mother, Hoelun, looked unwell- she was obviously mourning. Seeing her sparked something in him, something that was starting to kindle in Temujin’s spirit. “You have insulted my father, Nergui,” Temujin spoke, the boy’s face calm amongst the presence of men. “You will face a wrath only second to the Tatars. I am only a boy, but I am now this clan’s leader.” Nergui shook visibly with anger. “Boy, you know not what you say!” Nergui ran to Temujin and lifted him with rage. Ganbaatar tried to stop him, but his leg quickly gave out. Soon, other men were at Nergui’s side, all beating the boy. Hoelun cried while she held her other sons back. Nergui yelled, “Stop! We must not kill him. One death in their wretched family is enough. Send them off, all of them. Yesugei was poisoned but his family will not poison us.” Men from almost every ger came and cast Temujin, his mother, and his brothers into the vastness and emptiness of the steppe. Amongst them all were four animal hides, one compound bow, and no horses. The remnants of a once-powerful family, now abandoned. There was nothing else to do but walk.

1178- Nomadic Camp in Dornod Province

In the night, Temujin and his brothers raided a Tayichi'ud camp in hopes of taking a sheep. He had only needed food. His family had been without it for three days and

every moment their mother was on the verge of collapse. Temuge, the youngest and clumsiest of his brothers, had been too loud upon arrival to the camp. Someone in a ger heard the noise. Temujin told his brothers to take off, and he stayed behind in hopes of giving them some time to escape. More men came than Temujin expected. His counter-attacks, carried out in hopes of escape, were thwarted. That night he was put in the cangue.

Today was Temujin's fourth day carrying the cangue. For the first two days, the large block of wood weighed heavy on his neck, back, and shoulder muscles. The hole in the middle was only big enough for his head to slide through. Now, he was just feeling sharp pains in his bones. He knew it wouldn't be long before they would break. He wondered how his brothers were doing. Was his mother even alive? Temujin tried to look down at his feet, but he couldn't; his Adam's apple pressed against the rough wood. The man assigned to watch him was called Ozbeg. He was a rough man, continuously humiliating Temujin by yelling insults and throwing food in his face. Temujin knew that Ozbeg didn't have a merciful bone in his body.

That night, the Tayichi'ud settled in for camp. Gers were planted, sacks emptied, and animals fed. They chose that particular location because of its proximity to Herlen Gol River. From the prisoner's ger, Temujin could actually see the river. He loved its sound. He was so close, but not so close as to drink water on his own accord. Ozbeg fed him all his meals through the hole in the cangue. During the day, Temujin was put outside in a position where he had to stand, legs tied together in a way so he could be

upright but not move about. If he were to fall, Ozbeg would beat him until he stood back up.

One day when the winds were whipping especially fiercely, Temujin noticed a young boy, probably no older than six, walking towards the Herlen Gol River. This seemed odd for two reasons. Firstly, children were almost never left alone. By custom, they had to be with their siblings or mothers. Secondly, children are not typically allowed to play in rivers, even when they're in large groups. Days like today explained why this was so. The wind had a way of enraging the river, making large waves crash against the banks. Temujin watched as the child kept getting closer to the Herlen Gol. The child took one step closer than he should have, a wave hit him, and he fell, stumbling into the rapids. Temujin yelled, "Someone come here! A child has fallen into the water, he might die!" No one seemed to be around to hear. Many adolescents would have stopped at this point, allowing emotion to take over, but Temujin's rare combination of empathy and coyness saved the child's life, and ultimately Temujin's own. Temujin called with all his might, "Damn the Tayichi'ud! You people are worse than bastards! You won't dare hit me again! Come over and do something to me, you cowards!" By the time he finished that last word, Ozbeg strode over and slapped Temujin hard in the face. Temujin, with all the strength he could muster, said to Ozbeg, "Ozbeg, you must listen, there is a child drowning in the river." Ozbeg looked skeptical, but took a few steps toward the river while keeping an eye on Temujin. As Ozbeg got closer, he was able to hear screams over the rush of the water. Ozbeg sprinted the last few ald, dove in the water, and pulled the

child out- who at that point was being slammed into a rock by the force of the rapids. The child's face was blue. Ozbeg looked utterly horrified. He smacked the child on the back, trying to get water out of his lungs. The child did nothing for a long time, just lying there completely limp. All of a sudden, the child sputtered up water and started breathing again. Ozbeg slung him over his back and carried him back to camp. Temujin could tell that Ozbeg was looking at him in a new way, with gratitude substituted for hatred.

That night, as Temujin was trying to fall asleep, he heard a noise come from behind him. He spun around as fast as he could, moving slower than usual because of the cangue around his head. To his surprise, he saw Ozbeg standing there, looking at him. "Ozbeg, this is your time to sleep, you can beat me tomorrow," Temujin said. Ozbeg came over to Temujin and whispered, "That was my son, Chilaun, who was drowning today. Without your altruism, he would have died." Temujin never foresaw this, but he gasped and thanked the gods with all his heart. "I will let you go," Ozbeg said, "It is my duty and I owe you this. You must hide tonight. Do not take to the steppe. Since you have no horse, they will catch you. Hide in the river until you are safe and then go in the opposite direction of the way I take them." At this, Ozbeg led Temujin out of the cangue and walked back to his ger. At first, Temujin was too stunned to do anything. Then he got up and tried to stretch his strained neck muscles. Next, he looked for reeds. His plan was to take the reeds, fold them in a tube-shape, and use them to breathe while he was underwater. About an hour later, once Temujin collected his reeds and was hiding in the river, a large commotion rose from the village. Men and horses were preparing for

something. Temujin knew they were looking for him. The men, led by no other than Ozbeg, conveniently ‘glossed’ over the river and went south. Temujin swore that Ozbeg looked at his lonely reed sticking up out of the water when he was leaving. What Temujin didn’t know, though, is that the clumsy boy he saved from the rapids would one day become one of his greatest generals.

1206- Quriltai

Temujin, now officially Chingiz Khan, lay in his ger, reflecting on the events of the three previous days. He had come to the quriltai expecting to be declared Khan, but since it had actually happened, he felt no different. He asked himself, “Do I not embrace my title because the gods haven’t approved of it, or because a title in itself is a meaningless thing?” He thought out about this for a while and muttered, “A title is not truly bestowed, it is earned by acts of leadership and courage.” He ate a sweet milk curd, a guilty pleasure of his since his childhood, and thought about the way he wanted to govern. That was a tough place to start, he thought. It’s easier to outline what you don’t want to do. Anyways, he thought to himself, I have plenty of time to think about this. He went out of the ger and towards the large fire. Men were telling stories of past battles, laughing loudly, and roasting meat. The atmosphere was generally relaxed, but Chingiz noticed two men talking to each other rapidly and with passion. He tried to stay unnoticed as he walked towards them. If anyone saw him, conversation would be loudly shifted to

himself, and he didn't really want that right now. He got within hearing distance and listened. The men were arguing over whether the sky god knew the thoughts of the other gods. Chingiz scoffed at this, wondering why men worried over such abstract things. But then, something came to him. If this is how men of the same religion argue, it must be amplified even further for those of different religions. "And can men ever get along with one another when faiths collide?" Chingiz thought. At that moment, he knew that one of the key elements of his conquered land would be an acceptance of all religions. "Why argue with each other when we can learn and grow instead?" he thought.

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