

# City of Tears

Eric Balkan

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## Preface

More than a few times, I was asked: why did I write a novel about medieval Central Asia? Who's going to buy it? My response is probably the same as that of most writers: I wanted to write the kind of novel that I'd like to read. I think I succeeded doing that. Whether it's the kind of novel you want to read, you'll have to answer for yourself. :-)

I did a lot of research for *City of Tears* – and a book list appears in the back for those who are intrigued by what's described here and want to learn more. But I undoubtedly made some mistakes. And subordinated some part of realism to the higher priority of telling a good story. (Another reason for including a list of non-fiction books at the end.)

If you need specific information, or would just like to chat, I can be reached via email at [balkan@patriot.net](mailto:balkan@patriot.net), and via my Web site: [www.twobrads.com](http://www.twobrads.com).

I'd like to thank everyone who answered by questions, and my wife Freda for putting up with me while I was writing.

It was fun to do. And I hope you find it fun to read.

- Eric Balkan – Jan 6, 2000



## City of Tears

*In the Central Asia of the Middle Ages, before gunpowder weapons, before the Mongols, before Islam became widespread, nomad tribes warred with each other and with settled peoples. It was a time when the boundary between good and evil shifted with the perspective of the observer, a time of heroes but not of saints. Perhaps, in truth, it was a time like any other.*

*Among the stories and legends of that time is one of the death of a city. Perhaps there really was a D'nar, perhaps the story did not get corrupted over the centuries, perhaps it really happened. Or perhaps not.*

## **Major Characters**

### **The Kaskir nomads**

Orin - son of the chief

Ailana - Orin's wife

Jinji - friend of Ailana, sister of Eder

Eder - friend of Orin

Kurguz - young man

Arslan - an elder

Alban - chief

### **In D'nar**

General J'nost - commanding the Imperial army

J'nine - age 16, daughter of General J'nost

Chodura - age 14, J'nine's personal slave

H'vise – a young soldier, in love with J'nine

R'kenor - a merchant

R'kina - R'kenor's daughter

Ziyan - friend of R'kenor

Chandrapida – the Governor

### **Other Nomads**

Turan Khan - Jersak nomad ruler

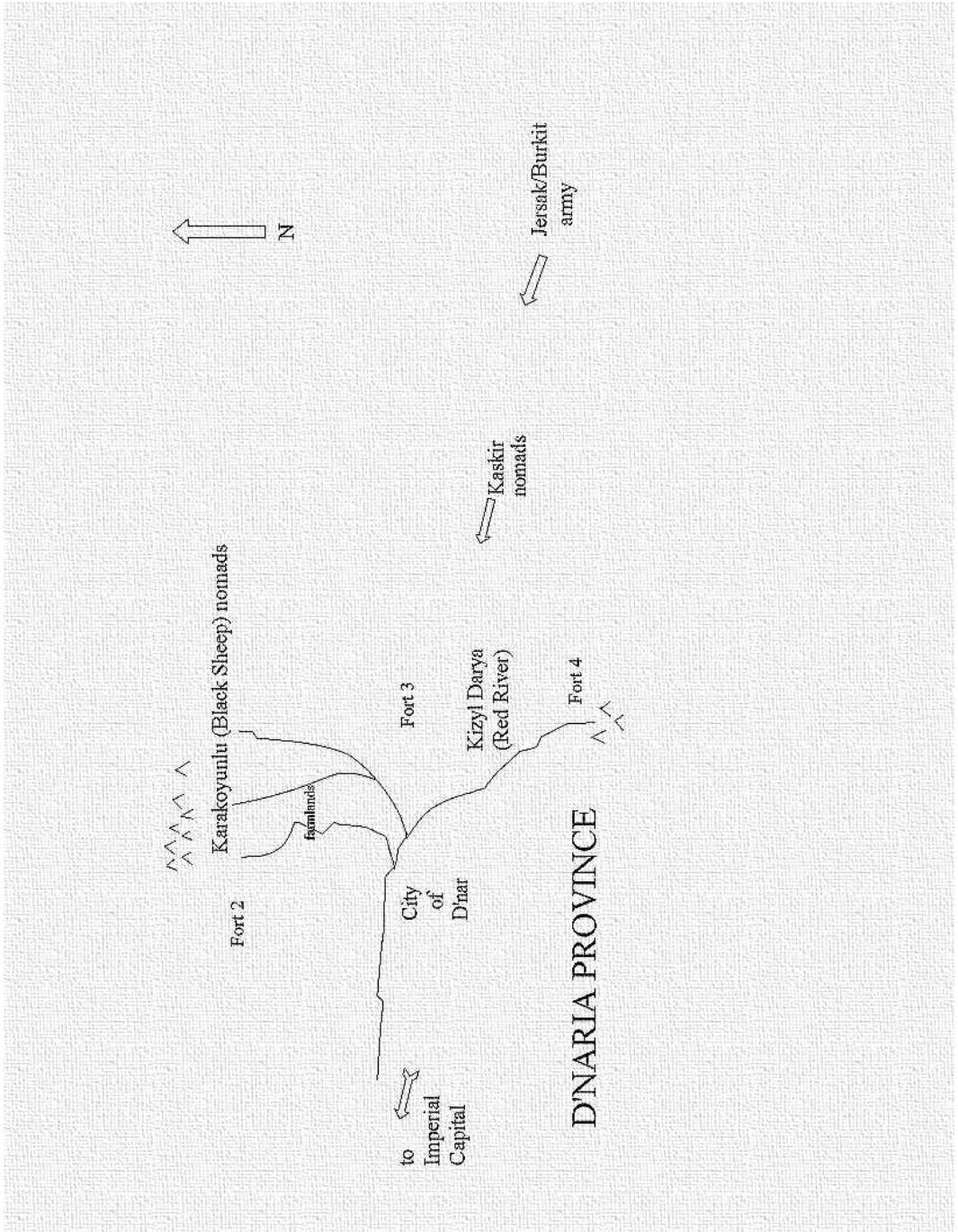
Sebuk - military chief under Turan

Dayar - soldier under Turan

Aywan - commanding the Burkuts, under Turan

Tekin – chief of the Karakoyunlu (Black Sheep) nomads

Bakar Khan - former ruler of the Burkuts





## *Chapter 1*

The boy had lain on the rise for hours. Before him the vastness of the Steppe spread out like a huge carpet. Behind him, his pony, hidden by a swell of the ground.

And then he saw something. It was what Ailana was hoping he would not see when she had sent him out. Now he was glad his vigil had been worth it, but also scared at the sight. It was a party of riders. Jersaks! They had come up over another small rise, moving slowly. He strained his eyes. They had no wagons, they had no camels. They were not on a migration. They were hunting. And they had no spare horses! A sure indication there were even more of their kind nearby.

He slithered down off the rise. Quietly unhobbled his horse. Shaking so much his foot missed the stirrup the first time, he mounted, gently urging his horse away from the Jersaks. And then, when he was sure they could not hear him or see his dust, he let his reins go slack. And the pony, always attuned to the pressure on the reins, immediately went to a full gallop.

He knew that time was short. He knew he had to warn the camp. And without being followed. Using his whip, calling to her, the boy urged the pony on. He could feel the sides of the mare getting hot. Her nostrils widening, her mouth foaming. He had never ridden a horse this hard before. An image of his father flashed through his mind, telling him not to ride so fast, that he would ruin the horse.

But then this image faded into a new one: one where he saw himself as a hero of legend, riding a horse so fast its feet must have wings. Even that most-feared enemy of his people, Turan Khan of the Jersaks, could not catch him now. As his pony sped across the rolling plains, kicking up dust on the dry ground, he could almost forget no pony could outrace an arrow.

●

Ailana stared out at the graying *yurts* of the *auls* of the Kaskir nomads, her people for the last several years. The round, felt-covered tents, really soft-sided huts, had all been white once, more or less, but the dirt of time had turned them a dingy gray. Her own yurt was whiter than most, as it had been made new for her wedding just a few years before. Still, despite the drab look, the sight was not unimpressive, especially as there were so many yurts. There were 50 in her own aul. And there were many other auls nearby. Perhaps 300 yurts all together. About 1500 people, and more than 10000 livestock: mostly sheep and horses, but also some goats, and a few camels.

Normally, the auls, the individual villages, would travel separately. But in this time of trouble -- a migration into unknown territory -- they were huddled close together. So the numbers might be seen as large when taken in total, but they had been larger the year before. In truth it was the smallness of those numbers that had forced this migration. Had their numbers been larger, they could have stayed in their homeland and fought the Jersaks for their winter pastures.

The past year had been a bitter one. And it was the feelings produced by that past year that now held Ailana in their grasp. Despite the scene around her, Ailana's mind was elsewhere, adrift somewhere on the sea of grass and scrub-land they had crossed.

She felt disconnected. She hadn't seen her parents for a long while. And now that the Kaskir had migrated so far away, she wondered how long it would be before she saw them again. Ever? Nor had she seen her brothers nor her sisters nor any of her old friends and relatives of her birth clan. Like any bride, she'd had to give all that up upon getting married and moving to her husband's aul and his *uru*, his clan.

The new *uru* was supposed to become her new family, her husband's father would become her father, and so on. But Orin's father was not her father, Orin's mother was dead, he had no brothers or unmarried sisters still living at home.... Ailana felt cut off from the past. Still, she had submerged those feelings over the years, as her own children were born. And particularly the birth of her son had given her great joy. And much joy to Orin as well, as his line would now be continued for another generation.

But then, last winter, both of her children had been taken from her. On a dark, moonless night, with Orin and many of the men off on a hunt, raiders -- Jersaks? -- had come. They had killed and they had stolen. And in stealing Ailana's children, they had stolen Ailana's tie to the future. Nor had she become with child since then. The shaman had told her no soul of an unborn child dwelt in her yurt. And despite his best efforts to summon a soul, despite the great gifts offered, none came.

So she felt cut off from the future as well as the past. There were Orin and new friends among the Kaskir.... But if a woman's life was a web of relationships, hers was hanging by a few very tenuous threads.

The rational part of Ailana's mind told her to shake off these feelings. She had responsibilities. The old patriarch of the clan, Orin's father Alban, had been sick off and on for a long time. And, each time he fell ill, the shaman had journeyed to the underworld and retrieved Alban's soul from the evil spirits that had stolen it, and Alban had recovered. But his mind was not always clear. New leadership was needed. But it was difficult to make the break while Alban lived. Orin had been forced to take on more and more responsibility, but in a surreptitious way.

And now Orin and most of the men were off hunting. Some of the *aksakals*, literally white-beards, the elders of each aul, had remained behind. And these men would be responsible for the fate of their own auls in ordinary times. But these were not ordinary times. And so before Orin left, he had told Ailana not to worry about protocol, but to protect the camps by whatever means it took. Though she was young, she was of noble birth and her manner and her position as Orin's wife commanded respect among the Kaskir. The uru would listen to her. Still, Ailana wondered if Orin's motivation in giving her that assignment had not been partly a means for her to take her mind off the lost children. If so, it wasn't working.

Jinji was talking to her, Ailana realized, as she came out of her reverie. Ailana looked at the younger woman. If an outsider had glanced at the two women at that moment, seeing the similarity in dress, they would first think the two were blood relations. And they both had braided hair, as did all Kaskir, both men and women. But a second look would tell them apart. Jinji was

shorter, stockier, darker, with coal-black hair and eyes. Ailana's striking blue-gray eyes were set in a face not as round as Jinji's, and her hair was reddish-brown.

As Kaskir men, like most nomads, married outside of their uru, the result was a racial mixture. It was difficult, in fact, to look at the Kaskir and identify the Kaskir tribal origin as either that of the eastern Turks or the taller, thinner tribes indigenous to Central Asia that had adopted Turk ways. But race was never an issue, as family was what tied the Kaskir together. All of the Kaskir uru, which included most of those in the auls, were related within several generations. And those joining the Kaskir by marriage were as much a part of the clan as those born into it. Their common culture and common experiences glued the Kaskir together even further.

Both women were young, Ailana a few years older. And both were toughened by the precarious life of the nomadic herdsman. A life that could be turned upside down by bad weather, illness, war.

Their clothes were similar to what all the women wore -- in fact, almost the only clothes they owned besides their feast-day clothes. They had on trousers, boots of a sort, silk shirts, brightly dyed sheepskin coats, leather belts, and a sort of cap that came down in the back to protect the neck. The women's caps and coats were individually and gaily decorated with silver coins and other pretty things. And Jinji had also added something to her cap.

Ailana noticed this and asked, "Bird feathers? In some tribes, that's the mark of a champion archer."

Jinji laughed. "Well, I can shoot well enough, but that's not why Eder gave them to me."

When Ailana continued looking at Jinji quizzically, waiting for the rest of the answer, the younger girl finally responded:

"It was just Eder making a jest." Ailana couldn't help notice that Jinji's voice held more than a touch of affection when she mentioned her older brother. Jinji continued, "He said that when he was gone, I should fly from danger and he gave me those feathers to help me fly." Jinji laughed again at the thought.

Ailana smiled with her. It was good to see Jinji laughing, she didn't often -- not after the raid that had taken Ailana's children a

year ago. Jinji had been hurt in a different way, in a way that Ailana had never pressed her about. And Ailana's smile was a fleeting one as well, her mind never far from her children though now they were far from her. Would she and Orin ever see them again?

But now something caught her attention. There was something off in the distance: a tiny dust cloud. Before she could see its cause, she could guess its origin: a lone rider, at full gallop, coming towards them. The rider was coming from the East, from where she had posted a young boy as a scout. A chill began creeping into her heart. The boy was only 12, but he wouldn't leave his post without permission. And so, if it was him, and he was riding to warn of danger, then every moment might count.

Jinji following her eyes, saw the same. They looked at each other and then both shouted a warning to the rest of the aul. Other voices picked up and repeated the alert. Riders quickly left to warn the other auls.

It had only been moments, but the whole character of the aul changed. Gone were the normal routines. Instead, everyone prepared for moving. It would take longer with most of the men gone, but not much longer, as the task of dismantling the yurts and packing up was largely left to the women even in normal times.

Ailana and Jinji quickly saddled their ponies, hurriedly throwing on saddle blankets, then lashing the wood-frame saddles in place. To the knife at her waist, Ailana added a bow case, with the bow already strung, a box of arrows, and a round horsehide shield that she slung across her back.

By the time the rider reached the camp, Ailana and several other women were already mounted and ready to ride. It was indeed her scout, but Ailana still hoped she had guessed wrong about his haste.

The boy broke the news to Ailana and the others. Speaking breathlessly in his excitement, gasping for air in between his words, he managed to get out: "Riders... maybe 30... no spare horses... heading this way... moving slowly, but not far... looked like Jersaks... I'll ride with you and we'll hold them off...."

"No, no," Ailana told the 12-year old. "Help your mother with your brothers and sisters."

Seeing the look of disappointment on the boy's face, a boy already disappointed because he'd been sick when the other boys had gone off hunting with their fathers, Ailana added, "You've done well. Now you're needed here to help defend the camp should it be necessary." But to herself, she thought, if those 30 see the camp, and especially if there are other Jersaks nearby, defense would be difficult at best. She continued shouting instructions to the other women and the few men in the camp. To two of the women riders she said: "Find the hunting party and tell them the situation. And tell them I'm going to try to lead the Jersaks off to the south."

Before riding off, Ailana looked once more over the aul. It had been so peaceful just moments before. Now all was frantic movement, as the yurts were being dismantled and possessions packed onto the wagons, camels, and packhorses. Ailana sadly watched her own yurt being dismantled by her new cousins.

To the usual noises of camp dogs and children, who probably found all this exciting, were added all the noise of people shouting commands at their animals and at each other. Ailana wondered if the noise could be heard from far off. She wondered, too, if the dust cloud raised by moving the herds would be seen by the Jersaks.

Conceivably, the aul could have set up a defense and fought where they were. They had encamped with their carts, wagons, and yurts in a circle, but with most of their livestock outside. They could bring more of their ponies inside the circle, but the rest of the ponies, and all of the other livestock, would have to remain outside where they would be driven off by the raiders. And, as poor as the Kaskir had become, they couldn't afford the loss of any more animals. Neither could the women in the camp put up a very hard fight and prevent raiders from taking everything. No, Ailana thought, their best bet was to move the auls out of harm's way. Her task would be to provide her clan – and they were indeed her clan -- with enough time for them to do that.

They had talked about doing this before, but Ailana had dreaded the day they'd have to do it for real. The men should be here! Why had they thought the camp would be safe? But Ailana knew the answer: the Kaskir had gone far to the west to find new

winter pastures and to get away from the raids of the Jersaks, even giving up -- temporarily, Ailana hoped -- the search for the lost children. But for some reason the Jersaks had come this way, and were here, now.....

With a half-dozen riders behind her, Ailana took off at a gallop to the southeast. Coming to where the Jersaks were heading, but by approaching from the south instead of the west, Ailana hoped to misdirect the raiders as to the location of the camp. She could see them now....

Ailana slowed her group to a walk. She could clearly see at least 30 Jersak men. And, as the boy had said, no spare horses. That meant they were not by themselves, but had another force further back. Straining, Ailana looked for another cloud of dust in the distance, behind these, but there was none. At best, this group could be simple raiders, men from a single aul. But why would a small group of Jersaks travel this far west, when they had just taken over the best pastures in the east? What they could be, Ailana feared, the thought chilling her, was an advance reconnaissance party for a much larger force, a force led by Turan Khan and his military commander Sebuk. A force intending to extend Jersak dominance far beyond their original homeland.

But in either case, her task at hand was the same: to lead these Jersaks in a direction away from the Kaskir, for at least as long as it took the auls to move further north and out of the way, hidden in the vastness of the Steppe.

Ailana waited till she was sure the Jersaks had seen her. Then she turned her pony around. The others following her example. They slowly moved off, heading south. The raiders followed, first at the same pace, then with a little more speed. Ailana and her group picked up their speed to match. When the raiders went to a full gallop, Ailana called to her group to do likewise. They were off!

It would be a race now, thought Ailana. Their ponies were fresh, the women's weight less than that of men, and these should give them the advantage. But, so far, when Ailana turned to look over her shoulder, that advantage had yet to show up, as the raiders had not lost any ground on the women.

With her horse in full gallop, Ailana took her bow from its case and nocked a signal arrow. She let fly. The high-pitched whistle,

produced by holes bored into the bone arrowhead, was audible over the sound of the ponies' hooves. The women split up when they heard it. As they took off in different directions, Ailana kept on straight ahead. Another woman rode ahead and on her right. Without seeing her face, Ailana recognized Jinji's pony and the feathers on her cap. They had joked about those bird feathers, about flying like a bird -- but there was no time for amusing thoughts now. Every part of her being must be attuned to escape. The alternative would be death. And worse.

For what seemed like forever, Ailana and Jinji urged on their ponies, across the rough surface of the grasslands, up and down the depressions in the earth, around and through the scrub brush that marked the land. Ailana took another peek over her shoulder and saw about 8 riders spread out behind them. Some seemed to be falling back, but a few were closer than they had been before.

She needed to give these something to discourage their pursuit. She nocked another arrow in her bow. With her full weight on the stirrups, she half-stood, keeping her upper body nearly motionless even though the pony bounced up and down below her. Twisting around to the left, and pulling the bowstring back with her thumb-ring, all in one movement, she let fly. Not waiting to see the results, she settled back down in the saddle and tried to make up whatever time she had lost with that shot.

Another peek behind her told her that her shot had some effect. She still didn't know if she had actually hit anyone, but now the laggards among the raiders had given up the pursuit and she could see only three behind them. Jinji peeled off to the right and Ailana saw two of the raiders follow Jinji. There was just the one behind her now. But he was too close! Ailana's breathing came fast and jerky and she had to concentrate on keeping calm and staying in control. The men had told her how different practice was from the real thing -- but she hadn't quite understood till now. As she fought for control over her own emotions, she nocked another arrow, trying to keep her fingers from fumbling.

With arrow ready, she was about to turn for the shot when she felt a sharp pain in her chest. Its suddenness made her lose her grip on the bow. She didn't see it fall but she knew it had clattered to the ground behind her. The left side of her chest seemed on fire, though when Ailana looked down, at her coat,

there was no indication of anything wrong. She looked behind her and could see the shaft of an arrow protruding from her shoulder. It had gone right through her horsehide shield! The sight of it, more than the pain, made her feel queasy and faint. It probably looks worse than it is, she thought. But no mistaking it was not good.

Ailana forced her attention back to her pony. But too late! The pony had entered a gully shallow on one side, but too steep to get up on the other. She frantically fought with the pony to get it up and over, but the pony couldn't quite make it. Weak and queasy, she was no help to the pony's balance. It began to topple over. With her last bit of energy, Ailana stood in the stirrups again and jumped clear of the falling horse, landing hard on the ground. A new wave of pain hit her as her fall broke the arrow in her body and moved it to a new angle. A nasty wound, but did it matter? I may be dead soon anyway, Ailana thought.

Her bow lay on the ground somewhere. A throwing stick and a lasso were in the saddle but they were now out of reach. A knife was on her right hip and her hand felt for it. She could at least try to inflict some damage on her attacker. She pulled out the knife. Holding it in her right hand, she lay on that hand. Flat on her back, legs apart, one knee up in the air, she looked like how she felt, half-dead. She lay there, as time passed, trying to control her breathing and get her strength back, all the time hoping no rider would appear.

But a rider did appear. A helmeted rider with arrow nocked. He saw Ailana on the ground, spread out, and he smiled. He put the bow back in its case and dismounted. He stood over her. The ride had been hard, he thought, and the she-demon had wounded one of his friends with an arrow, perhaps seriously. But now he had his prize. He would enjoy taking her, defenseless as she was, and when he was done, he would end her life. This was what he had joined the Jersak army for: to take whatever was there to be taken, to rule the Steppe as its master. He only wished this woman's mate could be here. He would have liked to show the Kaskir how weak they were, that they were not men, that they could not even protect their women.

He knelt down between her outspread legs and began to undo his belt. But, in an instant, Ailana's legs grabbed him around the

chest, pinning his arms to his body. He cursed in fury, then shifted his weight and began to rise. When her hand flew in front of him, just below his face, he began to tell her how much she was going to suffer -- but no words came out. His eyes caught a reflection of the sunlight in her hand, and he realized she had been holding something -- something red -- no, something silver, dripping red.... It was at that instant when the pain hit him, a terrible pain in his throat, that he saw the woman's coat was covered with blood where there had been no blood before. His blood.

He weakened, lost his balance, and toppled over backwards, helped by a kick from Ailana. Ailana staggered to her feet. Now it was her turn to stand over a defeated enemy, but this one would die soon enough without any additional help from her.

Then she realized she was not alone. Two other riders had pulled up just yards away. Ailana stood there, still holding her knife, but dizzy, her vision blurry, while the riders dismounted, drawing their deadly, curved swords. Ailana shook her head as if to clear her thoughts. This was it, then. She'd been lucky with the other attacker -- he'd been careless. These wouldn't make the same mistake.

As they slowly advanced on her, she heard a "Thwack!" Ailana saw the expression of one of the men change, turning from menace to confusion and pain. He began to slowly turn away from her. As he turned, she could see an arrow protruding from his back. The other also turned, pulling his bow from its case. But an arrow took him down. Not dead yet, he got up again and made another attempt to draw his bow. But again, an arrow hit him in the chest, and again he went down. Like a repeating nightmare, the man got up yet again, but a third arrow from the distant archer took him down for good.

The archer rode up. Through her blurred vision Ailana couldn't at first make out who it was. Then she saw something sticking up out of the archer's cap. Ailana smiled weakly. "You came back."

"Yes," answered Jinji, "but we can't stay here. That other one will get help."

Ailana didn't know who Jinji meant till she realized the rider with the arrow in his back had made it to his pony and taken off.

"Let's get rid of this first." Jinji sat Ailana down. "The arrowhead is inside you – I can't pull it out from the front. And there's not enough of the shaft to grab onto in the back. But it doesn't look like it's in too deep. And I don't think the arrow pierced the silk. Hold on. This will hurt a bit."

Jinji pulled off the shield, still affixed with the arrow. Then, firmly grabbing the back of the shirt over the wound, she twisted the shirt up and away. The arrow came out with the shirt, through the wound, as Ailana screamed in pain. Jinji made a quick bandage as best she could and helped Ailana back on her feet. The two women mounted Jinji's pony and headed west.

Ailana was drifting in and out of consciousness when she saw a party of riders ahead. Oh no, she thought, and her body tensed. But the riders were upon them before she knew it. She was again fading from consciousness as she heard a familiar voice call in anguish, "Ailana!"

"Don't worry, Orin, she'll be all right. Most of that blood isn't hers."



## Chapter 2

Two men on horseback looked out across the endless Steppe. A third horseman was behind them. A harbinger of winter, a chill wind, suddenly blew from the north, coming down off the mountains. But none of the men noticed.

“Two dead, two wounded, my khan,” said the third man.

Turan Khan did not turn around. A charismatic figure, he was always conscious of his effect on his men and how to manipulate that effect, always conscious of his destiny, of his yet-to-come place in history.

“By women?” he asked.

The soldier hesitated, more than a bit afraid of delivering this particular piece of information, but deciding, after all, that the Khan already knew. “Yes, my khan.”

Turan Khan’s companion, Sebuk, turned to Turan. “We should find the Kaskir and smash them.” As Turan’s military commander, his *sirdar*, Sebuk was anxious for action, to prove the abilities of the army – and himself.

“In time, Sebuk, in time,” said Turan.

Turan turned in his saddle, looking back at the men behind him. Two thousand warriors, mounted, armed, and eager for action.



“We can't stay here,” Ailana had told Orin privately. “And you know I don't like moving around. Migrating between our summer and winter pastures is one thing, but traveling for so long is quite another. I like living in a yurt and not in those little *makhans* we've had to use when we're on the move. But now it looks like the Jersaks are heading in this direction -- and so we should be sure to get out of their way.”

Orin, son of the chief, Alban, was a man in his 20s, taller than average, apparently considered charming and good-looking by Kaskir women as he had never lacked for female companionship

prior to marrying Ailana. Orin had considered what Ailana had said, and had suggested to his father that perhaps they should not set up the yurts again, but instead continue moving. But Alban would do no more than agree to hold a council.

Now Orin sat near the hearth in the center of the Great Yurt, his father Alban's tent. It was large as yurts go. As the residence of the chief it was traditionally the largest in the aul, some 40 feet across, about 12 feet high. From the wooden lattice framework hung storage bags of varying sorts, including bags of the fermented mare's milk, *kumiss*, the favorite drink of the nomads. The felt covering of the yurt, which could be doubled in very cold weather, kept out the wind.

Alban, as owner of the yurt, sat towards the back, facing the entrance. With him were many others who had come to offer advice on what to do. Among these were Eder, Jinji's brother and Orin's closest friend. And Arslan, a large, burly, red-bearded man.

No man was refused participation in this council, but how his input was received depended on his status.

Ailana and Jinji were also present, sitting on the sidelines.

Ailana got up to throw some more *kizyak*, dried horse dung, on the fire to keep it going, the smoke spiraling out through the central opening in the roof. The nights had begun turning cool, but the yurt was cozily warm. Jinji stirred the kumiss and then poured it out in bowls. Alban's servant could have done this, but Ailana and Jinji wanted the excuse to listen to what was going on.

Ailana's shoulder was still sore and would have to stay bandaged for a while, but she was strong enough to travel. Which was probably more than could be said for Alban. The old chief was very ill. He had been ill for a long while, but now he looked much worse. Orin and Eder had to carry him from his bed and prop him up in a sitting position. He'd be unable to ride a horse and would have to be either carried in one of the carts, like so much baggage, or tied onto a camel like a child. The old warrior wouldn't much like that.

"This is a good location for the uru," said Alban. "We are close to the city of D'nar where we can trade, the pasture here is not too bad, the hunting is good, isn't it Orin?, and we don't know

where the Jersaks are bound, so we don't know if they're coming here.”

“How about moving further west?” Orin asked. “You've told me there is excellent pasture land inside D'naria province, around the river valleys. Better than here. And if we decided to raid the villages, it would help to be closer,” Orin responded.

“No, no, no raids. The Arasida Empire is very powerful and, even though D'naria is on its fringes, they will consider it an insult and come after us. No, we will.... send a trade delegation to D'nar. You, Orin, will go talk to their Governor, I recall his name was Balash, and arrange for permission to use their pasture land and for us to trade for what we need for the winter.”

“Teacher,” said Eder, addressing the old man respectfully, using a nickname given Alban by Ailana, “your dealings with the Empire were a very long time ago. The Empire may have changed, there may be a new governor... things may not be the same as they were.”

But Alban was unmoved by this argument, though talk continued. Then Arslan spoke. The red-bearded aksakal, a friend of Eder's late father, was well renowned as a warrior. But there had been little of such need for many years. And Arslan missed it.

“And so we keep running. Away from Turan Khan, going ever further from the Homeland. Further away from our grazing lands. Further away from the children that were abducted last year. Your own children, Orin. When do we stop running?”

Orin's face shadowed at Arslan's mention of the stolen children, as did Ailana's. He glanced at his father. The old chief had fallen asleep.

Orin answered for him. “Turan is too strong to confront. Since his defeat of the Burkut, Bakar Khan, Turan has consolidated his power over both the Jersak and the Burkut. But when the Imperial Governor gives us permission to enter D'naria, we can find winter grazing for the herds and safety from the Jersaks.”

“In another day, the Kaskir would have just taken what they needed and not asked for permission!”

“The Kaskir have enough enemies without creating more. No, we will seek permission as my father has said. I will go to talk to the Governor,” Orin told him.

“I will go with you,” said Eder.

“And I too,” added Jinji.

The men’s heads turned to look at Jinji. A few laughed. But Eder was not amused. Nor was Orin.



The next morning, Ailana sat cutting up strips of horsemeat for smoking. One of Orin’s horses had broken a leg and had to be killed. For people who measured their wealth in livestock, this was an unhappy occurrence. But none of the horse would go to waste. And the horsemeat would be a nice addition to the mostly milk-product diet of the Kaskirs. Jinji sat with her, whittling an arrow.

“I was surprised when you spoke up in that meeting. You were only invited to watch, not participate,” said Ailana.

“That’s hardly fair. Any Kaskir man can come speak, why not me?”

“Tradition? Anyway, why do you want to go to D’nar?”

“Ailana, you had a choice of what path to take. Do you regret it?” Jinji asked.

Ailana stared off into the distance. In her mind, she could see the yurt of her father.... And she was sitting there, with her father and Orin....

Her father was talking, “Ailana is promised to Bakar Khan. And Bakar Khan has already begun paying the *kalim*. An amount far higher than you have offered, as is befitting a rich and powerful khan. Your offer is appreciated, but it is not enough and it comes too late.”

Orin looked at her, a look that made her heart beat faster. Orin stood up.

“I have asked politely and with all respect. That is all I am bound to do,” Orin said, bowing. “May your herds prosper.” And he left.

“I detected more than a touch of impertinence in that one,” said her father.

“Yes, Father. More than a touch.”

“Yes, I did have a choice,” Ailana told Jinji. “But what...”

“I’ve been thinking... and I’ve thought about it a lot,” Jinji began. “I’m good with a bow, I can ride well, and.... I have no chance of ever finding a husband and having a family. It makes more sense to me for me to become a warrior than to stay in the yurt alone, growing old, childless.”

Ailana looked at her friend, trying to find the right words, trying to understand. “I know you were hurt that time when our camp was raided....”

“That man who attacked me with the knife, he cut me... to where I cannot lie with a man... nor ever have children.” Jinji looked briefly down on the ground for a moment, then into Ailana's eyes. “For a long time, I didn't want to accept it, but I finally have now. I no longer wish to wait for what will never happen, but to take a different path.”

“I understand.... but you know what the men do when they go hunting or raiding.... It's a life of fighting, drinking, raping, stealing... it's not a life for a woman, is it?” Ailana asked, hoping for an answer other than what she expected to hear.

“Well, there are some things I won't be doing,” Jinji said with a faint smile. “I'm not going to be like a man, I'll be a warrior in my own way.”

“You have nimble fingers,” Ailana persisted. “If you worked on your weaving, you could perhaps become a weaver as legendary as Uzana. Wouldn't it be better to add more beauty into the world, rather than just to compete for what there is?”

Jinji smiled. “I can see you don't give up easily. But I can be a warrior same as the men. And going to D'nar will give me a chance to show Orin he can depend on me.”

“Your brother is not going to be happy to hear this.”

“Just the same, once Orin lets me go, Eder will just have to accept it.”

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Later, Jinji corralled Orin. But the look on Orin's face was of someone who'd have rather been somewhere else, anywhere else.

Finally, Orin said, "Enough! I don't want to hear any more."

"You're not being fair."

"Am I talking into the wind? Has the word 'enough' not reached your ears?"

"Are you forgetting I saved Ailana's life?"

Orin looked at her. "You don't have the arm strength of a man. You shoot well, but how many arrows did it take you to stop that Jersak? Three?"

"Just one," lied Jinji.

"Three?" said Orin.

"Well, two."

"Three?"

"All right, three," responded Jinji, realizing Ailana must have given him all the details. "And there are other women who have chosen this path. There was Altun, for instance."

"Altun disguised herself as a man and joined the army of a khan where she was not known. The men would not have accepted her otherwise," Orin said.

"Orin, you owe me."

They stared at each other.

Orin made a growling sound in his throat. "If Eder says you can come, then it's all right with me." He stomped off.

"Thank you.... I think."



But handling Orin was easier than handling her brother.

"There is men's work, and there is women's work," Eder told her. "Someone needs to stay and watch our animals. And we also need some new bags which you had promised to weave."

"Ailana will take care of our herd. And the bags can wait."

"Besides, a trip like this could turn dangerous. No Kaskir has been to D'naria in years and we can't be sure what we'll find."

"I'm not afraid of the trip. I can take care of myself. And you as well. I can shoot better than you, in truth."

"No, you can't," Eder told her.

"Yes, I can."

"No, you can't."

“We'll compete! If you beat me, I'll stop asking to go. If I beat you, you'll stop objecting. Fair?”

“I suppose,” said Eder, wondering if this was what Jinji had planned all along. “We'll set up the 10 targets as on a feast day. Then we'll go through on a gallop and see who hits the most targets.”

“I know how it works,” responded Jinji.

“And mark your arrows. I don't want you claiming one of my shots as yours.”

“I won't need to claim any of your shots as mine, because mine will be better. But, all right, sure, I'll put a red circle on the shaft.”



The targets were set up. Orin would officiate in case of disputes. Eder went first. He urged his horse into a gallop. By the time he reached the first target, his horse was moving at full speed and Eder had an arrow ready to fly. It made a satisfying thwack as it hit the target. Let's see her beat these shots, he thought. And then he missed the second target. He cursed, and was more careful when the third came up. Then the fourth, then the fifth. But the sixth came too soon and he was already past it when he had nocked his arrow. He knew he could probably hit it by turning in the saddle and shooting behind him, but then he'd be late for the seventh target. So he let it pass. And hit the seventh and eighth. The same thing happened on the ninth. This time he did turn and shoot, but he hurried the shot and missed. Then the tenth was upon him, then past him, but he did another reverse shot and made that one. Score: 7.

“Need some practice, huh?” asked Jinji.

“The targets were too close together. My horse was too fast for the course,” answered Eder.

“Uh huh. Perhaps you'd like to shoot from a donkey cart?” Jinji teased.

“Just go ahead. See if you can do better.”

Jinji readied herself at the start. She took a deep breath. Despite her teasing about his 7, she had not expected him to score that high. She knew that Eder was fascinated by swords, but she

had no idea he was also good with a bow. Jinji had practiced shooting when she had time, but she had never gotten higher than 7 on a course like this. She'd have to have her best run ever to beat him.

She kicked her horse's flanks, and, as the horse galloped towards the course, she let fly the first arrow. Thwack into the target. Thwack into the second target. But she missed the third target. Was it nerves or was the mare less sure-footed than she should have been, upsetting Jinji's balance and causing the shot to go high?

Then Jinji missed the fourth, as the horse sped across the rough ground. Jinji could be dead-on from a stopped position, but shooting from a moving horse was another thing entirely. Four targets, two misses. She just had to pull herself together. If she couldn't, she not only would not go on the trip, but Eder would probably never let her forget it. Thwack into the fifth target, and Jinji breathed a sigh of relief. Thwack. Thwack. Only two more. But her shot at #9 was off. For #10, she took careful aim and hit it dead on. Score: 7.

"Not too bad," Eder admitted. "But your horse wasn't as fast as mine, so your score really isn't as good as mine."

Jinji was indignant. "Your horse is only fast enough to keep ahead of the cooking pot."

Orin called her over.

"Shorten your stirrups," he told her. "If you stand higher, you'll be less affected by the horse's movements during your shot."

"But if I shorten them any more, won't I fall off?" Jinji asked.

"You're not herding sheep now. You won't fall off. Try it," Orin insisted.

"Oh, all right."

Eder gave Orin a what-are-you-doing and whose-side-are-you-on look. But Orin ignored him. Jinji ran the course again. Score: 10.

"Why did you do that?" Eder asked Orin. "Now she'll be trailing behind me wherever I go."

Orin let that pass and only remarked, "You know, she can nock and shoot an arrow as fast as anyone I've ever seen."

Eder made some growling noise in his throat as Jinji rode back to them and asked, “Well Eder, are you going to take a second run?”

“No. I could only get a 10 if I spent the next month here practicing. You've earned yourself a trip to D'nar, Jinji. I hope we don't regret this.”



### *Chapter 3*

D'nar was an old city. Just how old was anyone's guess. But old enough to have been conquered by Persians, Greeks, Persians again, Sogdians, Turks, and probably others lost to history. This produced a people of largely Iranian stock, who practiced a Persian religion, Zoroastrianism, but who wrote Sogdian script and spoke Turk. And their new governor, appointed for them by their latest conquerors, the Arasida Empire, was a Kushan. And, as a trading city, they were also home to Chinese, Arab, and Indian merchants. But, through all that, or perhaps because of it, the culture of D'nar was unique.

One of the best houses in the city belonged to General J'nost. Actually more of a compound than a house, its walls enclosed the living quarters of the General and his children, the girl J'nine and the little boy J'naris, separate quarters for the slaves, plus stables and a courtyard with gardens.

An unlocked gate guarded the entrance to the compound. Unlocked during the day, because it was rare in D'nar for someone to enter a house uninvited.

Walking up to this gate, a young soldier, H'vise, took a deep breath and struck the bell. H'vise might admit to being a little nervous at this moment if you asked him, as he was about to lie, and he didn't like doing that -- but he was also the type of person who wouldn't let an obstacle keep him from his goal.

After a few moments, Lebenor, the short, fat, head slave, came to the gate. He stood in the gateway staring at the young visitor with an annoyed look.

"Yes?" he asked. Lebenor knew what H'vise wanted -- J'nine -- but it was his job not to let him have her.

"I have a message for J'nine," said H'vise. "From her father."

"Then give it to me and I will take it to her," returned Lebenor.

“No, it's a personal message and can only be delivered to her, um, personally,” said H'vise.

Lebenor made a face, but couldn't see how he could refuse to let H'vise in. H'vise was, after all, a soldier under the command of General J'nost, who was J'nine's father and master of the household. If General J'nost did indeed have a message for J'nine, it wouldn't do for Lebenor to refuse delivery. Still, he wasn't going to let himself be pushed over all that easily.

“Mistress J'nine is occupied right now. You didn't mean for me to disturb her, did you?” he asked.

H'vise hesitated, a little put off by Lebenor's manner. “Um, well, I'll just wait inside until she's, um, no longer occupied.”

And he pushed open the gate and strode through the entrance, nearly knocking over Lebenor, who stepped aside at the last second. Lebenor looked at H'vise. Well, Lebenor thought, I need to keep an eye on him while he's here, but I don't want to spend the rest of the afternoon doing it.... “I'll go find out when mistress J'nine can see you.”

Lebenor walked through the *dalar*, the covered passageway, and out into the courtyard. J'nine was there, in the garden, with two of her girlfriends, and her slave girl Chodura. At 16, J'nine was mistress of the household, her mother having passed on, and her father never remarrying, though he kept some slave girls for companionship. And, at 16, J'nine was promised in marriage, to a prince of the Empire, in fact -- and therefore forbidden ground to any other potential suitors. And, Lebenor knew, it would be his head if anything untoward happened.

“Mistress, H'vise is inside. He says he has a message for you from your father.”

“You may bring him out here, Lebenor,” said J'nine.

“Ah ha,” said J'nine's friend T'lima. “What do we have here?”

The girls turned as H'vise appeared.

“Why hello H'vise,” said T'lima. “I didn't know soldiers got time off for courting.” The girls all giggled.

H'vise was momentarily confused, having expected J'nine to be alone. It was hard enough to talk to one girl, much less to a group. But then they're almost always in groups, he realized.

“Hello J'nine, T'lima, S'riah.” He knew them all from before he had become a soldier, which was only a few months ago.

T'lima was the pretty flirt, S'riah the reserved one, J'nine the one who had stolen his heart. "J'nine, I have a message for you."

"Let's see," said T'lima, "I'll bet the message is: forget all your marriage plans and run away with me." The girls all giggled again.

"T'lima," said J'nine, "you're terrible." She got up and walked with H'vise to a corner of the garden where they wouldn't be overheard.

"You have a message from my father?" asked J'nine.

"Well, no, not really. I just needed to talk to you. I may be sent out to Fort 4 and then I won't be able to see you until...." And he paused, unable to get the next words out.

"Until I'm married, is that what you meant? You shouldn't even be here talking to me now. I'm promised to Prince Bahram and that should be the end of it. You should court T'lima. She told me she thought you looked very handsome and brave in your armor. Or S'riah. She has not yet been betrothed to anyone. I know S'riah is shy with men, but she'll talk to you more as she gets to know you. Or any girl, really. You shouldn't have trouble finding someone."

"Even if I believed T'lima really said that, I'm not interested in any other girls, just you."

J'nine shook her head. "That's hopeless, H'vise. When you go to war, would you similarly fight for something hopeless?"

H'vise didn't answer and J'nine changed the subject. "Are you really going out to one of those awful forts? Is there a problem with those dirty nomads?"

"I see your father does not talk to you of politics.... There was a trade delegation here from some eastern nomad tribe, the Jersaks I think they were called -- and the Governor dealt with them.... well, he had them executed as spies."

"Executed? Were they really spies?"

"We'll never know now. It may not have even mattered. I've heard the Governor wants subjects, not trading partners. If any of the nomads want anything from D'nar, they'll have to subject themselves to the Governor. Maybe he's short of money...."

"Well, all this politics is boring. But what about you, why are you going? Will it be dangerous?"

“It's just a precaution in case the nomads get mad and want to get revenge on any of the outlying villages. With more soldiers in the forts, larger patrols can be sent out, and that will scare them off.”

“I'm glad that's all it is. But I'm a terrible hostess, I haven't offered you anything!” She turned around and clapped her hands. “Chodura! Bring some fruit juice.”

Chodura, sitting on the ground, struggling with a book, looked up at the sound of the clap and then sprang up at the sound of her mistress's voice. She brought them the juice and then stood off to the side while they continued talking in low tones. The little round-faced 14-yr old was J'nine's personal slave and devoted to her mistress. Chodura knew that life as a slave girl could be a lot harder than it was serving J'nine.

J'nine had even taught her how to read, something the other slaves couldn't do, and something Lebenor didn't really approve of. She read when she got a chance and wished now she could go back to her book. But she didn't dare. She knew Lebenor was watching from inside the house. Mostly watching that H'vise didn't do anything foolish, but also keeping an eye on Chodura to ensure she wasn't shirking her duties.

Eventually, H'vise had to leave and J'nine rejoined her friends, who had been chatting merrily away in her absence. “So, tell me everything, J'nine,” said T'lima.

Chodura saw H'vise to the gate. When they got to the entrance, H'vise turned to her. “Chodura, you were once a nomad. What do you think the nomads would do if some of them were murdered in the city?”

“Oh, sir, that was so long ago, I'm sure I wouldn't know,” she answered. But when H'vise had left and Chodura had shut the gate, she thought, what they'll do is want revenge on the murderers, and if the Governor doesn't satisfactorily punish them, they'll take revenge on the whole city. Slaves included. She wondered if she should have told that to H'vise or would that just worry him. Perhaps he was just asking idly.

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Inside the high walls of D'nar were the even higher walls of the Citadel. Dominating the NW quadrant of the city, the Citadel contained the Governor's Palace with its treasury, harem, and government offices, plus a prison and army barracks.

Both the outside and the inside of the Palace gave the visitor an impression of age and decay. But an impression somewhat ameliorated by female attempts to cover up the cracks in the walls with brightly colored murals and tapestries.

"Another winter will soon be upon us," sighed Raukshana, the Governor's #1 wife. "And again, we're stuck here in D'nar, far away from the Capital. Far away from my friends, from the court, from all the gaiety of life in the Capital. D'naria is so dreary in the winter, not that it's really any more than a forgotten, and forgettable, province the rest of the year."

The Governor of D'naria Province looked at her with a mixture of annoyance and exasperation. He was a middle-aged man, his hair and carefully maintained beard beginning to gray. Once, when younger, he had seemed to be on the inside track to high position in the Capital. But something had gone wrong and his career had taken a long detour, a detour to D'naria. "Well, then, why don't you go to the Capital and spend the winter with your friends?"

"With hardly anything to wear, with few slaves, bringing only poor gifts? I would be laughed at. 'Here comes Raukshana, the wife of what's-his-name. Raukshana, I've heard you share your home with the sheep herds. Raukshana, I've heard your slaves only eat once a day. No, wait, those were your courtiers.'"

"Come, Raukshana," said the Governor, "I give you more money than the rest of my wives put together. And you spend as much as anyone in the city."

"Which says something about the wealth of the city, or rather its lack. And you wouldn't deny me the money I give to the Temple, would you? The Lord is listening to your answer, Chandrapida." Hearing no answer from her husband, she continued, "We should ride to the Capital and enter it triumphantly. We should show everyone in the Capital that we are not poor, that D'naria is not poor."

"The way you spend money, the richest man would become poor," the Governor mumbled.

“What's that you say?” asked Raukshana.

“I was just saying we're spending more money than we're collecting in taxes. The reserve in the treasury continues to drop, and won't last forever.”

“Then raise taxes! And stop supporting that big army of the General's. If the General wants a big army, he should ask the Emperor to pay for it. What his name, ‘J'nost’? That's a D'narian name. He probably just wants to impress his local friends with how many men he commands.”

“Raukshana,” the Governor began patiently, “taxes are about as high as we can make them without causing a revolt. And if there were a revolt then we'd need the General's big army. Besides what would your friends here in D'nar say if they found out you were encouraging me to raise their taxes?”

“Oh, well, I didn't mean *those* taxes. I meant taxes of... other people. Aren't there other people you can tax? How about all those nomads that have settled in D'naria? They're always getting drunk. I see them staggering around on the streets of D'nar. If you take away their wine money, you'll actually be helping them!”

“Those nomads were invited into D'naria by my predecessor, Balash, to provide them sanctuary against raiders, and also to keep them from raiding us. They haven't taken well to the taxes I've levied on them so far. They'll be extremely displeased when we raise them further.”

“Then let them complain! And if they do more than complain, you can send the army against them -- make the soldiers earn their pay. And what about the nomads outside of D'naria? You said you would get money from them.”

“That hasn't gone well either. There was that delegation from the Jer-something confederation that we had to kill after they refused to submit. And we haven't been able to frighten anyone else either.”

“You can't do this, you can't do that.... Husband, you are the law here in D'naria. Start acting like it. The nomads don't make the law, you do. If you tell them what to do, with the army behind you, they'll have no choice but to obey.”

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H'vise marched through the grasslands in a troop of some 50 soldiers. Another 50 cavalry rode ahead. And ahead of them, the tax collector and his wagon. The weather was pleasant, and if he'd been back home, H'vise might have asked J'nine to go walking with him. But this was no pleasure walk, with J'nine's servants behind them carrying refreshments. As they left the river behind them, H'vise thought perhaps he should have taken a longer fill, as there was no telling when they'd reach the next source of drinking water.

H'vise coughed from the dust kicked up the hooves of the cavalry horses. The summer had been dry, as it usually was, and any disturbance of the ground caused a dust cloud to form. The damn cavalry should ride behind us, he thought. And, in fact, he could see the infantry troop's officer arguing with the cavalry officer. This went on for several minutes, during which time several of the men around him began grumbling. I wonder if the infantry and cavalry ever come to blows....

Finally, the cavalry officer gave way and moved his men to the rear. Now only the tax collector's wagon rode in front of them. But there'd be no talking the tax collector out of riding anywhere but in front.

After a couple of hours of marching through completely monotonous country, a soldier near him asked, "Isn't it time for a rest stop?" It wasn't said loud enough for the officer to hear, that would be out of place, it was said more in the hope that someone with more nerve, and less brains, would pick up the cry.

H'vise was thirsty and tired as everyone else undoubtedly was, but he figured that was the soldier's life – to put up with hardships until the task was done, often without even knowing why. And he was eager to show that he could put up with as least as many hardships as anyone else. They had started out singing a few songs, but as throats became dry, enthusiasm for that had waned. And not much to look at but grass and the occasional small herd of sheep. They hadn't even been told where they were going. Someday, I'll be a sub-officer like my father, he thought. Then I'll be able to find out what was going on.

H'vise could take a good guess at their mission, though. He had recognized the man in the wagon. N'linux, rug merchant turned tax collector. H'vise had never liked him. As a rug merchant, the man had priced his rugs without regard for the quality of the merchandise, but only based on what he could get from the customer. Well, perhaps nearly all the merchants did that, thought H'vise. As the son of a soldier, he had the military's disdain for people in the commercial world.

And now the man was a tax collector. And H'vise figured he knew why. As a rug merchant, N'linux could only sell the merchandise he had on hand. As a tax collector, he had severed the relationship between goods provided and money taken. As a tax collector, he provided no goods to the customer, but just took in money. And not all of the money would find its way to the Treasury. It was a dream job for someone with no scruples.

H'vise could see more herders now, men and women, with sheep, goats, ponies. They must be getting closer to a nomad encampment. The smell of the sheep and their dung hit him in the face.

N'linux, the tax collector, was the first to see the nomad "villages" ahead. This tribe was called the Karakoyunlu, literally black sheep, and he could see why. The tents were of black felt, and very temporary looking. In fact, N'linux figured, they might not even be here much longer. The nomads might be using this land as autumn pasture, preparing to migrate further south for the winter.

If taxes were to be collected, they would have to be collected soon -- today -- or he would come back empty-handed. And to tell the Governor that there was no money to be had, well, it was said the prison was so large that sometimes prisoners would be lost within it and never found.

H'vise and the soldiers followed N'linux as he headed for the center of the largest of the 10-15 auls, this one with about 10 tents. People gathered around, an interesting interruption to their daily routine. N'linux stood up in the wagon, "Who is the headman?" he asked.

"I am Tekin. What is it you seek?" The speaker was a man about 60, with an intent look, but otherwise no different from the others in the encampment.

“I am N’linux, emissary of Governor Chandrapida of D'naria. I bring you great news. The Governor has declared that this land is now part of D'naria and therefore part of the Empire. As citizens of the Empire, you are entitled to all the rights and privileges that the Empire provides. You will be under the protection of the Imperial Army who will protect you from nom... bandits, you may send your sons to school in D'nar, your poor can receive free bread from the city's millers, your spiritual needs will be seen to by the city priests....”

H’vise could see that N’linux was making his best sales pitch. Perhaps it was his skill as a salesman that had gotten him this job. But it didn’t look like the nomads were buying it. And why should they? They could probably guess that N’linux wasn’t bound to keep any of the promises he was making.

When N’linux had finished, Tekin spoke up. Eyes turned to him as he said, “We thank you and your Governor and your Emperor for their kind offer. What is it that you ask of us in return?”

“To pay for the many, many services that the Governor provides, he asks his citizens to contribute a small amount of money, or goods....

It was hard for H’vise to keep from laughing. These people would never see any services. But H’vise’s duty was to behave as a soldier, to follow orders, to uphold the rule of the Governor and of the Emperor. And decidedly not to contradict the words of an official tax collector.

For his part, Tekin was trying to politely stall, to get the tax collector to come back in a month. But N’linux was adamant, countering with a bribe, though he didn’t put it quite that way.

“Let’s go into your tent,” N’linux had said, “and discuss the means of the tax collection. I’m sure you will find it a personally worthwhile discussion.”

To H’vise, these were military actions he’d heard his father talk about, but with words instead of swords. He wondered if N’linux had ever been in a nomad tent. H’vise had never been in one either, but he’d heard about them. And how bad they smelled. From where he was standing, he could just peer inside one. It looked smoky from the hearth. A hearth fueled with horse dung. He could smell it even now.

He could see a dog inside, and some other animal? The smells of milk souring and meat rotting drifted towards him. And the smell of unwashed bodies as well. He imagined what that combination of smells would be like in a small, enclosed, windowless space. He watched a nomad woman pick lice out of a child's hair. And a nomad man turned upside down a leather bag, out of which a scorpion fell. I'd like to see N'linux actually go inside the tent, thought H'vise. But H'vise was to be disappointed, as Tekin drew the discussion to an end, trying one last time to get N'linux to accept his promise, even if it bought the Karakoyunlu just one more day.

"I am truly sorry, but tomorrow is impossible. I have other villages to visit. I must make the collection today," N'linux countered.

That was a lie, H'vise knew. N'linux must be afraid of the nomads simply picking up and disappearing. So that's why the army was waiting by the river. In case the nomads made a run for it.

He listened as Tekin and N'linux continued their verbal sparring. N'linux was beginning to make military threats, punishment for nonpayment of taxes. Meanwhile Tekin was trying to explain that he had kept his people outside the borders of the Empire exactly so that they would not be involved with Imperial affairs. They were at an impasse.

"Next week," N'linux was saying, "there will be an Army here and they will not be here for discussions. They will make an example of you to the other villages. I very much regret this, but you brought it upon yourselves.

"Turn around, let's go," N'linux commanded his driver.

As the soldiers trooped out of the village, H'vise was tense. What if the nomads attacked? H'vise had trained for combat, but had never actually seen any. Would he handle himself well?

Tekin stood and watched them go. This was an unexpected development. Just a few days ago he had sat in his tent with a stranger and had agreed that the Karakoyunlu would join this man in his plans to sack D'nar. For a poor people like the Karakoyunlu, the sack of a rich city was a dream. And Tekin had agreed. And now, things were reversed. Now it was D'nar that was threatening him, bringing an army against him in a week. A

week? D'nar wasn't that far. They had a border fort that was even closer. And they must have known that at least one of the nomad encampments would resist the thought of paying taxes to a city government. If I were their general, Tekin thought, I would be ready to strike.

Tekin began getting nervous. He turned to the crowd of people still standing where N'linix had addressed them. They were talking among themselves.

“Karakoyunlu, hear me. I do not trust this Empire tax collector. I believe there is an Imperial army readying to attack us. Gather up your herds and possessions, fold your tents, we are breaking camp.”



H'vise was glad when they arrived back at the main body of the army. And those soldiers were glad too. Not to see N'linix nor his escort, but to see his empty wagon. H'vise knew why. The soldiers would rather fight than collect taxes -- because of the plunder. Army pay never amounted to much. It was only plunder that made Army life worthwhile. While most of the nomads' possessions and livestock would be delivered to the Treasury, the soldiers would take a good share.

A scout brought in the news that the Karakoyunlu were leaving. Rather than head south directly towards their winter pastures, they were heading directly east, across the farmlands that lay in the river valleys. Apparently, they wanted to put as much distance between themselves and the Empire's domain as they could, and as quickly as possible. The General was prepared for this. The General, middle-aged, square-shouldered, orderly, methodical, was a man who preferred leaving nothing to chance.

The nomads were on the west side of the Karasu, a tributary of the Kizyl Darya. In the spring, as the winter snows melted, it would be a raging torrent as it came down off the mountain. But now, in the fall, it was more of a stream than a river. It could be forded at several points, but the General could guess, as the nomads would be in a hurry, where they would ford. And that was where he had positioned his army.

But would the nomads see the troops from a distance? They'd probably send out scouts, the General figured. So he gave them an incentive. He sent a cavalry group to appear behind the nomads -- but not to attack.

And, again, the General had figured correctly. The nomads saw the Imperial cavalry in their rear and so sped up their progress. They hastened for the river crossing to try and take up a defensive position on the bank opposite from the cavalry they'd seen. The same bank where, unbeknownst to them, the Imperial infantry waited. In their haste, they didn't wait for the report of their scouts to tell them the way was clear. And it would have well been a long wait, as the two scouts who crossed the river were immediately cut down by Imperial archers.

And then they came. The nomad wagons and pony herds began the river crossing. The General let them come. By the time the first of the nomads saw the Army, several wagons had crossed. The warning was given, and the nomads stopped crossing. Those who had already crossed tried to turn back around.

But the infantry moved in on their position. Arrows flew back and forth between the Army and the nomads. The wagon drivers were among the first to die -- their wagons remaining in odd positions as if God had angrily tossed them there.

H'vise watched from the riverbank as women tried to protect their children, men tried to protect their families. But the nomad arrows were largely unable to penetrate the soldiers' armor.

Some of the mounted nomads, women and children as well as men, were able to cross back over the river. Some fled away to the north. Others, cut off by the Cavalry from making the crossing, fought where they were. But even those nomads who evaded the archers' arrows fell when the Cavalry charged.

The cavalry soldiers, heavily armored and armed with lance and heavy sword, and riding horses larger than the Steppe ponies, crashed into the disorganized nomads and made quick work of many of the warriors. There was nothing for those on the east side of the river, the women and children, and the remaining men, but to surrender.

H'vise felt exhilarated. Could there be anything more exciting than being in a battle? True, the General had sent him and the rest

of N'linix's escort to join the reserve in the rear, giving them a chance to rest, but H'vise had moved up to better see what was going on.

The Army had now cut its opposition by about a third. With the laden wagons, the ponies, the new slaves, the Governor would be pleased with the results. Most of the nomads' animal herds were now wandering over the countryside, and these could easily be rounded up. But the bulk of the nomad warriors were still on the other side of the river. These would try and take back what they had lost. There would be no end of trouble till the job was finished.

The nomads had circled their remaining wagons. They were watching the Army carefully, but H'vise could see that their options were limited.

The cavalry now moved into position behind the infantry. The infantry formed up into groups with lanes between so the cavalry could charge through on command. To the cavalry already on the opposite side, the group that had hurried the nomads into the river, the General sent a messenger telling them to hold their position. Then he ordered the infantry to cross the river, with only the reserve held back. The water was not deep at this ford, no more than 2 feet, just enough to slow progress.

H'vise continued watching from the riverbank. As did Tekin from his position amidst the nomad wagons. Tekin's feelings mixed frustration, anger, and fear for his people. He had been at the rear of the column when the crossing had been made. He had figured the attack would come from the rear, and this was where he and his best warriors had positioned themselves – to protect the tribe as it crossed the river. It had been a terrible blunder. He couldn't afford another, else his tribe be destroyed.

But what choices was he left with? The best he could do now was to attack the infantry as it was crossing. The soldiers' movements would be slowed by the river. He would not get a better chance at them. And so he gathered his warriors and they sallied forth from the encircled wagons.

As Tekin quickly approached the first infantry soldiers who had crossed, he saw that the Imperial Cavalry had also been quick. They had charged through and around the infantry ranks

and were now mounting the riverbank. But it was too late for Tekin to turn back.

A few arrows from archers began to land among the nomads. Fortunately, they weren't good shots, Tekin thought with some relief. The nomads had bows as well, but the armor of the soldiers made effective shooting difficult. And then the two sides crashed together and mingled, making the bows even less effective, making the battle lance versus lance, sword versus sword.

The nomads fought valiantly, as any will do that are protecting their families, but their swords were lighter than the cavalry's swords, their ponies smaller, their armor no more than sheepskin coats. Results were swift and terrible.

Tekin was one of the few nomads who wore a metal helmet. And this saved his life. A vicious blow stunned here, but it was fortunately one with more of the flat of a sword than the edge, otherwise the iron sword would have gone right through his bronze helmet. He pitched forwards on his horse, but, though only half-conscious, managed to hold on. One of his men grabbed the reins and led him away, back to the wagons. Upon seeing their leader out of the fight, the other warriors began to pull away and seek the relative safety of the encircled wagons.

And now came the crushing blow. The cavalry took its place behind the infantry as the infantry resumed its advance on the wagons. Arrows flew from the nomads, but did little damage to the metal breastplates, helmets, and large shields of the oncoming infantry. The General held his archers back, sending in only the pikemen. And to the nomads, the pikemen presented an impenetrable, unstoppable, moving metal wall. It was the stuff of nightmares: an inescapable doom approaching unrelentingly, ready to wreak a cold, unremorseful havoc.

"What do we do? What do we do?" His men asked as Tekin struggled to regain his senses. But there was little, in fact, to do. As the infantry reached the wagons, they simply passed over and through them as if it was no barrier at all. Their pikes prevented most of the defending nomads from even getting close enough to make a sword strike.

Tekin, watching the death of friends and relatives in a hopeless struggle, threw up his hands. He cried out to his people to

surrender, to drop their weapons, and to raise up their hands to show they were unarmed. His head hurt, but the tears he felt in his eyes were from a different sort of pain.



## *Chapter 4*

Orin packed up the things he figured they'd need for the trip to D'nar -- mostly gifts, food, water. He looked up to see Eder making towards him. An unhappy Eder.

"Kurguz? Why bring Kurguz?" asked Eder. "First you want to bring my sister, then you want to bring a boy who was raised by his mother. Boys should be raised by their fathers, girls by their mothers. Else how do they learn?"

Orin answered, "Kurguz is indeed not like other 16-year olds. Yes, his mother was a Buddhist and his father, well, let the mother have too much control over his upbringing. As a consequence, true, he's missed out on some of the things that a Kaskir boy his age would know. But he's smart. Do you know he can tell where we are by looking at the plants on the ground? He knows things the rest of us don't. He will learn things in D'nar that the rest of us would miss. And, we promised his father, before he died, to keep an eye on him and help him along."

Eder's sense of foreboding grew. He thought the whole trip a bad idea. Take what you want, then apologize later if it causes a problem. And, if you have to ask for something, ask with an army at your back, not a girl and a scholar.

Orin looked at the surrounding plains as they rode to D'nar. Ailana had been right, they couldn't stay here. If there were Jersaks coming West, the Kaskirs should move on. They could go south or north -- and south sounded like a better idea for the upcoming winter -- or continue west and pass into the Empire.

To pass the time, they told stories and poems.

"I know the longest story in the world, the story that never ends," offered Kurguz.

"Every story comes to an end sometime," said Eder.

“Not this one.”

“I don't believe it.”

“Then wager with me,” Kurguz challenged.

“All right. What do you want to wager for?”

“Do you have any more of those dried apricots you bought from that merchant back East?”

“Yes,” said Eder. That'd be no loss, he thought, I never did like them.

“That'll do.”

“In return, you will owe me 2 days of watching my sheep, as the one who used to watch them probably thinks she's too good for that any more.” Eder said.

Jinji made a face at him.

“There was a group of travelers on the way to D'nar,” Kurguz began. One of them asked another for a long story. So, the second traveler began telling the story, and he said: ‘There was a group of travelers on the way to D'nar. One of them asked another for a long story. So, the second traveler began telling the story, and he said: ‘There was a group of travelers...’”

Jinji began laughing, as a packet of apricots sailed through the air and hit Kurguz in the head.



As they rode, Kurguz scanned the countryside around him. Jinji dropped back, letting Orin and Eder ride on ahead.

“You collect plants don't you?” she asked. “Here's an interesting one I found.” She handed him a small sprig.

“Find this north of our camp?”

“Oh, if you know that, you must already have it.”

“I appreciate it anyway.” He put it in a pouch around his waist.

Jinji and Kurguz were from different auls, but there weren't so many Kaskir that everyone didn't know of everyone else. Yet she had never really talked to him. He was younger than she was, plus she had always thought him a bit strange.

“You're different than the other boys.”

“My mother was a Buddhist,” Kurguz said. That didn’t really explain anything, but he said it as if it did, and that usually kept people from asking further questions.

“Oh, yes, I know,” said Jinji. “My father was a metalworker. When I was a child I liked to help him more than I liked helping my mother with the household chores.” She added, “some people thought that was strange.”

“Oh,” said Kurguz, “I wouldn’t have.” He paused. “Does that have something to do with why you want to... do what the men do?”

“Maybe so. But Eder doesn’t understand.”

“Well, you know, men want to... protect women. They, we, don’t like to see women in danger, or put themselves in danger. That’s what... men are for.”

“That’s sweet. And most women are grateful for that. Most women I know don’t like taking risks. And you have to do that sometimes when you’re in a dangerous situation. Plus, most women don’t like violence. Though,” and here she laughed, “we mind not the horses and slaves the men bring back nor ask how they were obtained.” She paused, thinking. “Sometimes, sometimes, for her own reasons, a woman knows she can do what the men do, knows she wants to do what the men do, and she doesn’t want to be protected or kept from doing it. Do you understand?”

“Oh. Yes, I think so.”

Jinji looked at him and thought, in a fight, I would probably have to protect him rather than the other way around.



The four Kaskir finally reached the Kizyl Darya, the river that marked the edge of the Empire, and also the edge of D’naria Province. . It being autumn, and the river level low at the crossing point after the hot Steppe summer, they had no difficulty fording. A day later they saw the city rise up before them, like some huge enchanted aul. And there was a road there too. Well, to be honest, Orin thought, just wagon tracks and earth beaten down by the feet of pack animals, but it was a sign of settled peoples.

As Orin and the others came up to the walls and passed through the great Gate, they were all struck by its size. The height of the city walls, their thickness, the towers that stuck out from the walls offering archers an opportunity to shoot in any direction....

Unconsciously, Orin found himself analyzing the city militarily. No part of the walls, that he could see, were unprotected. And the large gated entrance did not sit directly on the road, where the gate could be rammed and broken by determined attackers -- it sat at the end of a twisted path formed by more walls. To attack the gate, an army would have to follow the twist before they could reach the gate, all the time under arrow attack from the archers in the towers and high up on the wall. And, upon arriving at the gate, the ram would be forced to hit the gate at an angle because of the twist. An impregnable fortification.

They were challenged just inside the gate. A man in white but unarmed -- though backed up by several armed guards -- put up his hand. "Halt!" Orin's D'narian language skills were negligible -- but fortunately there were enough similarities among the Steppe dialects for each to understand the other. Of course, this man's "halt" and the palm out stance needed no translation. "You are nomads from outside the Empire. You may go no further."

"We have gifts for the Governor," Orin told him. That seemed to make the city man hesitate. He turned to one of his guards and the guard took off running to one of the buildings, a low white structure with a commanding position of the square just inside the gates.

"You will wait," said the city man.

It was a few minutes before the guard emerged. He ran back to the group and whispered to the man in white. The man in white looked disappointed and then told Orin, "You and your group may talk to Official F'daris. Follow me."

He led them to the building. They tied up their ponies, leaving Kurguz to keep an eye on them.

"You will need to leave your weapons outside," said the man.

A guard began collecting the weapons. But Jinji wouldn't give hers up. The guard tugged on her bow, but Jinji held on.

Orin interjected, “She’s just a woman, you’re not afraid of a woman are you?”

“Well, give us your swords and knives then,” the man in white said. “I’ll give them back to you later.”

“You may have the swords, but these knives are just ceremonial. They’re not really weapons. By the customs of our tribe, we’re not allowed to be without them,” Orin lied.

The man in white scowled, but didn’t argue. Perhaps he was glad to have nothing more to do with people of this kind.

Once inside, Orin felt a sense of being closed in. He looked up at the roof, wondering if the roofs of these buildings ever fell in on their occupants. The nomads were led to a room off the center hallway. It was a large waiting room. People of different sorts sat and stood around. As the Kaskir entered, a merchant rushed up to the man in white.

“I have been waiting here since noon. My time is valuable. I demand to see F’daris.”

The man in white ignored him. To Orin, he said, “Wait here with the others.”

Hours passed. As nomads herding livestock, the Kaskir were used to long hours of patient observation, doing little more than looking out for wolves, or imagining shapes in the clouds, or making up poems in their heads. Orin looked around once more at the people in the waiting room. They all had dead expressions, as if they had been consigned here as punishment for some transgression.

Orin began to realize that the delay was intentional. By not seeing them promptly, F'daris was telling them that his time was more important than theirs, that he was a more important person than they were. Orin rose from his seat and walked out. Eder and Jinji looked at each other, then followed him.

In another room, a well-dressed man, F’daris, sat dictating to a scribe, while eating from a basket of fruit. Several guards and servants were in the room as well -- the guards being armed with swords and spears. F'daris looked up as Orin stomped in. The guards tensed.

“I have brought gifts for the Governor. Am I to be prevented from presenting them to him?”

“Not at all,” replied F’daris.

Eder and Jinji entered the room as well, followed by the man in white, bringing some additional guards. F'daris waved the guards away. He motioned the three Kaskirs to sit.

“I am a busy man, but I will allow you some time. Why have you come to D’nar?”

The scribe then turned over a small sandglass. Orin noted the lack of apology for keeping them waiting and how much “some time” was to be -- not very long at all.

“We are the Kaskir,” Orin began. “We have come far with gifts of our best ponies for the Governor. Even from far away we have heard of the Governor, and indeed too of those who serve him so faithfully, and for whom we have brought a gift as well.”

F'daris seemed pleased. He clapped his hands twice. “Wine for our guests,” he announced to the room, and the servant on the left responded. The wine was offered first to F'daris, who declined in favor of Orin, who did not decline it, then it was passed around to the others, all of whom partook. The wine was exceptionally good – D’narian wine was famous -- and Orin took some more before continuing. “We seek permission to bring our herds into the Empire and graze them on your pasture lands. We would also like to trade in D’nar. We have ponies, wool, hides, rugs, and leather crafts that the people of D'nar may find useful. In return, my people can use raw metal, wine, salt, sugar, jewelry and so on.”

“Yes,” said F'daris. “your goods may be useful, though there is a surfeit of ponies and rugs this year. And other nomads have already brought us wool and hides. However, you may seek to trade if you like. The Governor reserves first right of purchase on all goods brought in by nomads, at a fair price, of course.”

And then, as Orin’s eyes glazed over, the man explained all of the taxes that were levied on nomads. And the necessity of having a residency permit. And then the worst part: that the pastureland had been claimed by farmers. Even though the farmers weren’t using all of it, the new law required nomads to pasture outside of D’naria – for a fee.

The words rebounded within his mind. *The only pasture land they’re offering is outside D’naria? And we’d even have to pay for that?* Orin wasn’t ready to give up, but his initial optimism at

the beginning of this trip was well faded. *And taxes on every trade?*

“Your Excellency, we are poor nomads just looking for pasture land and some simple trades. We own too little to pay a tax on it. And we need to find winter pastures.”

F'daris put on a sympathetic expression, which Orin could see was totally lacking in sympathy. “I'm sorry, but that is how business is done here. In order to best protect the civilized people of the city from barbarians -- and oh, of course I don't mean you -- the Governor has decided it is best that he be involved in all transactions. And all tax moneys are put to good use for the benefit of the city.”

Orin was exasperated. “You and your governor are thieves!”

“That borders on sedition. If you don't like it here, then go somewhere else.”

F'daris unconcernedly bit into a peach.

“There is nowhere else. I demand to see the Governor himself.”

“Demand? No. You may *request* to see the Governor.”

Orin drew a deep breath. “All right, I request to see the Governor.”

“Request denied. The Governor is an even busier man than I am, and has no time for nomads. He has an Imperial province to run!”

Orin stood up, his hand reaching towards his knife.

“Be not upset,” said F'daris, noting for the first time that the nomads were armed, and mentally cursing the guards for letting that happen. “Here, have some more wine.” He clapped three times and a servant came forward. But Orin hadn't yet drunk so much he failed to note this new wine came from a different flask.

Orin answered, “Of course, I do not mean to say anything critical about the governor. Please,” he said to the servant, “offer his Excellency the first glass.”

The servant looked confused and turned towards F'daris for instructions.

F'daris said, “Oh no, I am the host, the guest always partakes first.”

“I am too wounded by your words to drink,” said Orin. And the two men stared at each other for several seconds.

The three nomads looked at F'daris, realizing this was a critical moment. Orin tensed.

F'daris continued, “You are being obstinate and unreasonable. Perhaps the next group of nomads from your tribe will understand the situation better. Guards!” he shouted, and reached for a bell by his side. But Jinji was faster.

An arrow sang out and pierced F'daris' wrist, pinning it to the wall behind him. F'daris screamed in pain, while Jinji nocked another arrow. A guard charged and thrust his spear at Jinji. Jinji sidestepped. At point-blank range, Jinji shot the guard in his face, above his armor. The other guard, momentarily confused about which nomad to attack, hesitated for a second too long – and Jinji dropped him too.

Orin and Eder, knives out, evaded the spears of two other guards, then stabbed them with their knives.

F'daris and the scribe, overcoming their initial confusion, headed for a back door.

“Stop them!” yelled Orin.

Jinji shot them both down. There were now at least 6 bodies in the room.

Other guards appeared in the doorway. Jinji shot the first and the others ducked back out of sight.

“This way!” cried Orin.

He led them out the room's back entrance. They were now in a room with multiple exits.

“This way leads outside,” cried Jinji, running for it.

“Wait. Slow down!” called Orin. Eder and Orin followed her.

Jinji burst outside, bow at the ready. In front of her were 8-10 soldiers, archers, poised to shoot. Jinji halted abruptly, off-balance. For an instant, no one moved. The air was still. And then Jinji was hit with five arrows, knocking her backwards. She was dead before she hit the ground.

“Jinji!” cried Eder.

In the doorway, Orin held Eder, keeping him from running out. He pulled him back into the room. Orin looked around. Kurguz appeared at another doorway. With a bow.

“This way! Where's Jinji?”

Kurguz led them outside, Orin pulling on Eder who looked like he wanted to go back and single-handedly attack Jinji's killers.

An outside stairway led to the roof. The three Kaskirs ran up the stairs. Orin grabbed the bow from Kurguz, just as some soldiers came around the corner of the building. Orin shot the first soldier he saw. The others scrambled for cover.

From the rooftop, Kurguz jumped to another. Eder and Orin followed. From there, Orin took the lead, jumping to yet another rooftop, then another. At another stairway, they climbed down.

They came out upon a street, with passersby going about their normal business. The three Kaskirs merged into the flow, calmly walking off, then ducking into an alley. A few soldiers appeared on the rooftops. These looked around, but saw no one.

The three Kaskirs stood in the alley, Orin peeking around the corner. Then he turned back to the other two. Eder was distraught, Kurguz just beginning to understand.

"I should never have let her come. I should never have agreed to that stupid contest."

"She wanted to come...." Orin began.

"Did she really know what she wanted?"

"You know she did. And she saved us. If she hadn't been there with her bow, we'd all be on the way to their prison right now, probably to rot there forever." The thought of imprisonment, of not being out under the open sky, of not being around to take care of Ailana, of not getting the chance to fight and die in battle....

"I should have protected her." Eder broke into Orin's thoughts.

"She didn't want to be protected," Kurguz told him. "She told me, on the way here, that she wanted to find her own path."

"A path that led to...."

"I'm the one at fault here. I should have brought more men. I thought if I brought only a few companions, the D'narians would not feel threatened...."

There was silence for a moment, as all retreated into their own thoughts.

"But we'll have to grieve later," Orin continued. "Now we need to save our own lives. If we stay here, they may find us. And if we stay together, we'll be more likely noticed. We'll have

to separate. We'll each look for refuge and then make our way out of the city as best we can."

"There may be a crowd of people trying to get in and out of D'nar when they open the gates in the morning," Kurguz noted. "Perhaps we can slip out amongst them."

"One thing I know," said Eder. "The D'narians will pay 100 to 1 for her life."

## *Chapter 5*

Chodura walked through the city's main bazaar, trailing behind J'nine and her friends T'lima and S'riah. Chodura never failed to be impressed by the market. Countless shopkeepers' stalls, closely spaced, selling everything imaginable: food, slaves, horses, fabrics, crafts, tools.... People milled around, some selling, some buying, some just looking. Some lead horses and camels loaded down with goods.

They stopped in at a fabric shop owned by a merchant named R'kenor, and run by his daughter R'kina. Partly because of the lure of the fabrics, including silks that R'kenor had just brought back from China on his caravan. And partly because they might catch sight of Ziyar, a new merchant in D'nar. Ziyar had saved R'kenor's caravan from nomad bandits – making him a hero and an object of interest to the local girls.

“These are nice,” announced J'nine, examining some silks.

“My father just brought those in on the caravan. But they're selling fast.”

“Hello R'kina,” J'nine said, seeing the shopkeeper. R'kina was older than J'nine, perhaps about 20, but not yet betrothed – though there was talk of some incident in the past. She was attractive, cute some would say, but would probably go unnoticed in a crowd.

“Oh, R'kina,” said T'lima, with a musical lilt in her voice, “have you seen Ziyar today?”

R'kina looked at T'lima, and the look was not quite friendly, J'nine noted. Uh, oh, she thought. Was R'kina taking a proprietary interest towards her father's friend and rescuer?

“He is rarely here. But he has entrusted me with his goods. I can show them to you if you like,” R'kina answered.

“No thank you. It's the goods he has with him I'm more interested in,” answered T'lima.

S'riah's face turned redder than the carpet she was standing on, while J'nine tried unsuccessfully to keep from laughing. Chodura took a second to get it and then said, "Oh."

"That's very funny, T'lima," said R'kina. "Sorry I forgot to laugh. I'll be sure to tell him of your interest." She turned away.

"Great. Be sure to give him my address as well. Do you have it in your records?" asked T'lima.

"T'lima!" exclaimed J'nine. "You really *are* terrible!" In a lower voice, she said, "I know Ziyān is the big hero now, but can't you see that R'kina is interested in him? This could be her big chance, while you can easily get someone else."

Going over to R'kina, J'nine said, "She just talks. She doesn't mean anything by it."

J'nine had once met Ziyān herself, and while he had a commanding manner, he didn't really do anything for her: too short, too old, a foreigner with an odd accent, probably not a Mazdan.... An image of H'vise popped into her head. No, Ziyān didn't compare to H'vise. But what matter that, as she was betrothed to Prince Bahram anyway. She changed the subject. "These are pretty silks. Too bad we can't grow silk right here in D'naria."

R'kina lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, drawing both J'nine and Chodura in closer.

"Chodura!" said J'nine. "Would you go get us some bread and fruit for later? Here's some money. You can meet us back at the house."

A disappointed Chodura went off on the errand, while R'kina continued.

"One day we will have silk, just like in China," agreed R'kina. "Because of Ziyān. You know how my father met Ziyān right before returning to D'nar?"

"Of course," said J'nine. "Everyone has heard about Ziyān, how it was lucky he had joined the caravan when he did – and then seeing signs of nomad bandits, how he rode day and night for the border fort, bringing back the cavalry just in time to drive off the bandits as they were attacking...."

"What they don't know," and here R'kina lowered her voice even further, "is that Ziyān had stolen silkworms from China."

He's raising them and one day we'll have all the silk we want.

"Silk comes from worms?" J'nine asked. "Ugh!"

"Well, they're caterpillars actually."

"Can I see them?" asked J'nine.

"Oh, no! I shouldn't have even mentioned it. Ziyen keeps them in a secret place. I only knew where they were because I followed him once. He'd kill me if he knew I'd told you.

"No, I don't think he'd kill you," J'nine said, laughing. "He really likes you, you know.

"I wonder. Sometimes I think....



Kurguz walked through the bazaar. While he was awed with the variety of things for sale, he was yet unable to put out of his mind what had happened earlier. From his pouch, he pulled out the sprig Jinji had given him. As he looked at it, his eyes misted up. He rubbed them self-consciously and put the sprig away. Just in time to avoid bumping into two soldiers walking nearby.

Kurguz continued walking, nervously looking around. As he passed a string of horses, a merchant called out to him, "Hey nomad, you look like you can use a horse. Look at this fine beast here. Why, when the Saviour comes to D'naria, this is the horse he would want to ride into the City on."

Without breaking stride, Kurguz called out, "Thanks, perhaps I'll be by later to look at him more."

"Don't wait too long. An animal as fine as this will be quickly sold."

Some of the other vendors called out to him. Kurguz thought, they must look at me as a dumb nomad boy in the big city for the first time, with a money pouch theirs for the taking. But, in fact, he had no money. He had brought some small items to trade, but they were in a pack on the pony he'd been forced to abandon. Well, anyway, he thought, I should just be figuring on how to slip out of the city unnoticed.

Kurguz paused before a fruit-vendor's stall. He could see piles of melons, several different kinds, fresh peaches, apricots, and more. Generally, the Kaskir ate no fruit or vegetables. They

didn't grow any, of course – they had no agriculture at all, never traded for any, hardly even bothered to steal them from orchards. But for some reason, perhaps just hunger – Kurguz's food was also in his pack, still on his pony -- the sight of the peaches had a hypnotic effect on him.

“Hey, hey you!” A shrill voice interrupted his attention. “Either buy something or move along.” It was the fruit-vendor, a paunchy man in his late 30s. The fruit-vendor half-turned to another customer, saying, “These nomads are all thieves. Whenever they have some money they spend it on wine. They'll look at the fruit, but they'll never actually buy any.”

This one wasn't anywhere as friendly as the other vendors had been. Less desperate for a sale, perhaps. Well, Kurguz thought, the part about not having any money is true. And he grabbed a peach. Amid the fruit-vendor's angry shouts, he ran off into the crowd. That probably wasn't the smartest thing to do, he thought. But no one was chasing him. As he took a huge bite, he figured it was worth it.

The bazaar was crowded, but Kurguz had caught the eye of Chodura, running her errands for J'nine. She looked at Kurguz with some amusement. She wandered over to him.

“There's a special punishment for peach-stealers, you know. They cut out your tongue so you can never taste one again, or anything else. SNIP!”

Kurguz turned and saw her. He stood frozen, half-biting the peach.

“I wasn't serious. But you must be poor indeed to not have the money to buy a peach.”

Kurguz lowered the peach. “I'm... new here. I... don't have any money.”

“Where are you from?” Chodura asked, always curious about new nomad tribes. “The East? So am I.”

Kurguz hesitated.

“Don't worry. I don't bite. Have you ever heard of the Naiman?”

“I don't think so. Why?”

“That was my tribe, once. I always ask that question of travelers, especially nomads.”

“How did you end up here?” Kurguz asked.

“I was abducted by raiders, some nomads from another tribe. They put me in a sack and carried me off. I ended up being sold to an Imperial General, as a personal slave for his daughter.”

“That must be hard for you.”

“It could be worse. I’m treated all right. There are just some things I miss: my parents, my pony, weaving, being out in the open without walls. Someday I’ll find a way back.”

“How are you called? I’m Kurguz.”

“Chodura. Where are you staying in D’nar?”

“Uh, nowhere... actually, there are soldiers looking for me....”

“Oh, you ARE bad. Come with me. You can stay in the General’s house. I’ll tell my mistress you’re a friend. She won’t mind.”

“In the General’s house!?”

“Soldiers won’t look for you there. And the General is out with his troops. He won’t be back for several days.”

“Is it far? I’m not used to walking. Among the Kaskir, we never walk when we can ride. And my feet already hurt from all the walking I’ve done today.”

“That’s probably because you don’t have decent shoes. What *are* those things?”

Chodura asked, looking down at his feet. “They don’t have any shape at all. But come, your feet won’t fall off if you use them.”

As they walked, Chodura thought about the teachings of the priests in D’nar. That nomads who don’t settle down are *daevayasna*, people on the side of the demons who assist Ahriman, the Devil, in trying to overthrow the good works of Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord. Yet despite the religious training that J’nine had provided her with, she had singled Kurguz out of a crowd as a reminder of something that had once been. And when she looked at him as they walked, it was with a deep yearning for a time she had lost, a time of riding her pony over the Steppes with the wind in her face, a time spent with her own mother and father, a time of freedom.



## *Chapter 6*

Eder approached the South Gate of D'nar. Figuring it might be easier to get out somewhere other than the East Gate where he and the others had come in, he had been doing a lot of walking. He realized, seeing the South Gate, that its construction and layout was a duplicate of the East Gate. And that it was probably the same on the west and north sides as well. But perhaps the warning to look out for three stray nomads hadn't made it here.

What he probably should have done, Eder realized, was steal some clothes so that he wouldn't be so readily recognized. But his feet hurt, his mood was black, and he wanted to just leave this place as quickly as he could. Kurguz had suggested slipping out in a crowd, but there was no crowd here, and Eder didn't care to wait.

He strode right up to the Gate as if it was something he did all the time. Up to the Gate, through it, and....

"Hey, hey you! Stop where you are!" someone called.

If Eder had been mounted, he would have just galloped off and that would have been the last of it. But on foot.... Cursing that he had not had the presence of mind to retrieve his horse, or at least steal another one, he turned his head in the direction of the voice, slowing his steps but not stopping. There were three soldiers there, armed with swords and spears, and one of them was indeed talking to him. The other two were conversing among themselves, which finished with the taller one shrugging, and then both also turned to Eder.

"Come here! What tribe are you?" the first asked.

Eder warily approached them, running through his options in his mind. There were few.

"We've been ordered to check all nomads leaving the city," the one who had shrugged said apologetically.

“I’m of the Jersak tribe,” said Eder, picking the first tribal name that came to his mind. A better lie would have been the name of a local tribe, but he didn’t know any. But “Jersak” should be safe, he figured.

The three soldiers looked at each other in surprise. The middle one said, “Wasn’t that the name of that trade delegation we had that trouble with?”

The soldier who had shrugged, less apologetically than before, said, “You’d better let us see your papers.”

Papers? “Of course,” said Eder, “I’ll show you some papers.” But instead of reaching for papers he didn’t have, he drew his sword and cut down the first soldier. The other two instinctively backed up, leveling their spears and keeping out of range of Eder’s sword. One began yelling for help, while both began jabbing at Eder with their spears, attempting to force him back against the city wall.

Eder parried and ducked. Using his sword to block the spear jab of the tall soldier, he managed to grab the spear of the other soldier with his free hand. He braced himself and pulled, but the man pulled back. Then Eder shifted suddenly, all of his weight going forwards, towards the soldier, surprising the man, who stumbled backwards. His grip on the spear loosened, and Eder took it from him.

Blocking another spear jab from the tall soldier with his sword in his right hand, the soldier pressing his weight on the spear so that the two became locked in position, Eder realized that he could not thrust his own spear at either his attacker nor the man on the ground with enough force to make a killing blow. Instead, he swung the spear around in an arc, hitting the man on the ground with the iron blade end, denting the man’s helmet. The man cried out, holding his head in his hands. Then Eder swung the spear around again. But the tall soldier realized that, with both of his own hands on his spear, there was no way for him to block the strike, and so backed off. The soldier stood there, spear level, eyeing Eder with anger and determination.

Meanwhile, Eder realized, archers on the walls had nocked arrows and were only holding off for fear of hitting their own. And, there were other soldiers on the ground running towards

him. Eder took off, running, back into the city, arrows landing around him, back to the shelter of anonymous alleys.

The tall soldier had bent down to help his friend, but the others ran after Eder. And they caught up with him. But, still holding the spear in his left hand, and the sword in his right, he whirled, making a low strike with the spear that tripped up the first of the soldiers. Another soldier stumbled on his comrade and fell on him. A third soldier neatly avoided the pileup, but the momentary distraction was fatal, as Eder cut him down with his sword.

A fourth's spear was blocked by Eder's spear, while Eder parried the spear jab of a fifth with his sword, quickly deflecting it, and then striking the man down. Moving quickly out of the way of the spear of the fourth soldier who was the only one still standing, Eder struck down the two fallen soldiers who had begun to rise. The fourth soldier looked at his four fallen comrades, lost his nerve, and took off. Eder looked around, then slowly backed into an alley, while watching the street. More soldiers were way down the street, but by the time they got to where their comrades lay, Eder was gone.

Eder wandered through the alleys and streets. His excitement ebbed, his breathing returned to normal. He had killed five. Ninety-five more and he'd have fulfilled his promise to his dead sister. But, he suspected, 95 might not be enough to satisfy him.



It was late afternoon when R'kina looked up from re-arranging her fabrics to see the shop empty except for Ziyān standing, watching her. She smiled at him, and he smiled back. Ziyān was not physically imposing, but had a commanding manner. The look in his eyes was both intense and far-away, as if he lived in two worlds.

“You're a riddle, Ziyān. Sometimes I think you're going to be gone on the next caravan, disappearing as suddenly as you arrived.”

“Which makes me more intriguing to you. If you were looking to marry an ordinary merchant, you'd have done so by now.”

R'kina made a face. She approached him closely, but not so close as to touch.

“You don’t let anyone close to you, do you? What is it, some deep dark secret? Something you did in that mysterious past you never talk about?”

“My heart can be read like a book.”

“Yes, a book like the Avesta, that I could spend a lifetime studying without fully understanding.”

Ziyan drew her close and gave her a long, passionate kiss.

And then he said, “Sorry to run off, but I’ve got to go take care of some pressing business.” And he was gone.

R’kina stood there, feeling frustrated, unfulfilled, and wondering if she wanted to love Ziyan or throw a rock at him.



Orin stood in the shadows of an alley. He was watching a corral, the corral where the Kaskir horses had been taken. If the horses were still there after nightfall, he figured he’d go in and steal them.

But now there was a merchant in the corral looking at the horses and talking to an officer. As Orin watched, one of the large cavalry stallions tried to mount one of the nomad mares. But she gave him a good kick with her hind legs and discouraged him. Orin grinned, seeing that as an omen.

The merchant appeared to hand some money to the officer. Then the merchant led the four saddled Steppe ponies out of the corral and on down the street.

Orin moved around to get behind him. He approached closely, pulling out his knife. The merchant paused, but didn’t turn around.

“If you want your horses, you could just ask first,” said the merchant, over his shoulder. Then he turned. The merchant was of about average height or a little shorter, not remarkable looking in any way except for a dimple in his chin. But he had a certain presence, Orin noted, as if he was used to being obeyed.

“You’re not.... Who are you?” the merchant asked.

“A stranger here, who has been unjustly attacked and had his horses stolen.”

“Yes, I heard about that. And figured you’d want your horses back. But I thought you’d be of a different tribe. A tribe I’ve, uh, had dealings with before.”

“I am... Jaglan of the Jazik,” lied Orin.

“I don’t believe I’ve heard of that tribe before.... I am Ziyen, a merchant originally from Ordubaligh. Tell me Jaglan, what do you plan to do?”

“Take my horses, find my friends, and put distance between us and D’nar.”

“I can perhaps help you do that. I could, if I wanted to, allow you to stay with me tonight. In the morning, I could loan you some city clothes and you’ll be able to slip out when the gates open.”

“What are you looking for in return?”

“Your promise to assist me should I ever need it.”

“Can you be less specific?”

Ziyen smiled slightly, as if the smile had forced its way up from some deep black wound in the man’s soul.

“All right, my friend. I will do it for you anyway, as a favor to a stranger. There have been times, and not long ago, when I was alone and friendless in strange country. Similar experiences can make friends out of strangers.”



With night having fallen, Chodura got J’naris, J’nine’s little brother, ready for bed. Kurguz watched her. J’naris watched Kurguz.

“Who’s that?” J’naris asked Chodura.

“Oh, that’s Kurguz. He’s a friend of mine.”

“Are you going to marry him?”

Chodura laughed. “Oh, slaves only marry other slaves. Good night, J’naris.”

“I saw a camel in the marketplace today,” said J’naris.

Chodura smiled. This was J’naris’ way of staying up later, by getting her to tell him a story.

Chodura looked up at Kurguz.

“I have nowhere else to go,” he said.

J’naris continued, “I tried to say hello to him but he just kept looking off, like he was looking for something far away.”

“Yes, he was looking for his antlers,” said Chodura.

“Antlers? But camels don't have antlers!” cried J'naris.

“Ah, but they did once.”

“It's true,” said Kurguz. “I've heard the story.”

“Good,” said Chodura to Kurguz. “Then you can be the deer.”

Chodura began: There was a time, long ago, when the camel was not bare-headed as he is today. He had a beautiful set of antlers on his head. And everyday he went to the waterhole, he would admire his reflection in the water. Oh, he was very proud of those antlers. But the other animals were jealous.

Kurguz: And the most jealous of all was the deer. The deer had nothing on his head at all. And so the deer thought and thought and thought. And because the deer is a sly animal, he came up with a plan.

Chodura: The next morning, when the camel went to the waterhole to take his drink and admire his antlers, the deer went over to him and...

Kurguz: (pretending to sniffle) Hello, Camel.

Chodura: Why, Deer. Whatever is making you so sad?

Kurguz: (still sniffing) Tonight is a big party for all the animals in the forest. Everyone will be looking their best to impress everyone else. But I have nothing to show off. I am the plainest animal there ever was. I am too embarrassed to go.

Chodura: But Deer, I'm sure there are plainer animals than you.

Kurguz: Not a one. Oh, if I had a set of beautiful antlers like yours, I would really show them off and be the envy of all the other animals. Could I borrow your antlers? Just for tonight? I'll return them the very next morning when you come here for your drink.

Chodura: Oh, my, I don't know. I've never thought of loaning them out before.

Kurguz: It would just be for tonight. They would look so good and I promise you'll get them right back tomorrow. Please, oh please.

Chodura: Well... all right. And so the camel loaned his antlers to the deer. The next day, the camel went to the waterhole to get his drink and get his antlers back from the deer. But the deer didn't come. The camel looked and looked and looked, but there

was no deer. The next day, the same thing happened. The camel went to the waterhole for his drink but there was no deer. And again the camel peered into the distance to see if he could spot the deer. But there was still no deer. And the deer never came.

Kurguz: And that's why the camel is always looking off into the distance -- he has never given up hope of sighting the deer.

Chodura: And that is also why, when a deer sees someone coming, he runs away. He's afraid it's the camel coming for his antlers.

"Good-night, J'naris," said Chodura.

"But Chodura, the girl-deer don't have any antlers. Why do they run away?" asked J'naris.

"Ah, they run to tell their husbands and fathers and brothers there may be a camel coming. Go to sleep now, J'naris, and tomorrow, I'll make you a toy camel out of felt, like my mother made for me."

Kurguz and Chodura again bid him good-night and left.

They went to the main room, a sort of living room, with a sitting area for guests. Kurguz stood close to Chodura, his heart beginning to beat faster. He put his hand on her shoulder and turned her to face him. He leaned down to her, surprised that he had to do. Their lips touched. Then she pulled back with a little smile -- and a little poke in the chest.

"I think it's time to put you to bed... alone."



Having given up on the South Gate, Eder walked all the way back to the corral by the East Gate. As he walked, he figured: If I can get my horse and steal some D'narian clothes, I've got a good chance of getting out of the city. In the moonlight, Eder scanned the corral for his horse.

"*Boq!* Shit! What'd they do with her?" he muttered under his breath.

All right, he thought, if my horse isn't here, I'll steal one. Or... or, if I stole a wagon, I could take Jinji's body out in it.

Eder continued around the corral, coming to a row of bodies covered by blankets. He lifted up the blankets one by one. There

were all the soldiers and others they had killed. But no Jinji. In a black mood to begin with, Eder's mood turned absolutely inky.

In the darkness, he could make out a soldier on guard. He crept up behind them. Then held a knife to the man's throat.

The man squirmed, then thought better of it. "I have no money."

"I don't want money. Where is the body of the nomad girl who... died today?"

"All the bodies are here, waiting to be taken for the funeral service."

"Hers is not. I've already looked. Where is it?"

"They must have already taken it to the Tower of Silence."

"What? What is that?"

"The Tower.... is... is where bodies are taken."

"You mean, before burial?" Eder asked.

"No. The dead are not buried. That would defile the ground..."  
The man hesitated.

"Go on," Eder told him.

"Bodies are brought to the Tower of Silence where birds peck off the flesh. When the flesh is gone and only bones are left, the bones are crushed. Then they are buried."

"What madness is this?"

"It is our religion, the teachings of Zoroaster as written in the Avesta."

"To avenge the death of my sister, I will litter the ground with the bodies of D'narians."

The air was still as Eder held the knife increasingly tighter to the man's throat. "Where is this Tower of Silence?"

"You can see it if you look behind you. It is easily the tallest structure in D'nar."

And, indeed, Eder had not failed to notice it while walking through D'nar. His grip tightened on his knife. *This will make #6....*

"Please, please, don't. I haven't killed anyone. I can help you get out of the city."

Eder considered this. And lowered his knife hand. The soldier turned to face Eder. Then he took a step backwards, drawing a sword. "I meant, I haven't killed anyone tonight."

He struck at Eder, who sidestepped. In one fluid movement, Eder drew his own sword and cut off the man's head. And then, without once glancing back, he headed for the Tower of Silence.

At dawn, the city came alive again. People began going about their tasks for the new day. At a merchant's storehouse, a man loaded a wagon. He was more than a little surprised when Eder came up behind him and put a knifepoint to his back.

"Come with me. I have something else for you to load."

When the West Gate opened a little later that morning, a steady stream of people began entering and leaving. On foot, on horseback, on wagons. In one of those wagons a driver and another man, both dressed in city clothes. As they passed through the Gate, the second man said something to the driver and they both waved to the guards as they passed through.

It was almost too easy, thought Eder. What was not easy was getting out of his heart the pain he felt over Jinji. Pain, and a deep sadness mixed with a cold resolution. Before re-uniting with Orin and Kurguz at a campsite east of the city, he turned around to take one more look at the city in the distance. The next time he visited D'nar, he swore, it would be with a sword in each hand.



## Chapter 7

Ailana sat on her horse, herding the sheep. For as long as there had been Kaskir, there were sheep. And women to herd them. Cooking, weaving, and maintaining the yurt were also tasks that fell to the women. Ailana liked weaving best, but she didn't mind the sheep herding if there were other women around to talk to. The herds would get mixed up, but each sheep was marked on the ear with its owner's *tamga*, so it was not hard to separate them out again.

But today, she felt like being alone, as if she wanted to enjoy her depression, her loneliness with Orin and Jinji gone. She wrapped her coat tighter against her body to keep against the wind. And she played a what-if game with herself. Lately, she had begun to wonder, more and more.... Had she made the right choice? Had she taken the right path after all? Unlike most women whose marriages were arranged, Ailana had not only chosen for herself, but she had chosen in defiance of her father. She let her mind wander back....

They had been on their summer migration when her Oghuz clan had camped near the Kaskir, who were also on their way north. It had been the first time their paths had crossed in years, and some of the Kaskir women had come from Oghuz auls, so there had been a little *toi*, a celebratory feast. That was the first time she had seen Orin. When their eyes met, she had known he was the one. And Ailana could sense he felt the same.

Another image came to her mind. It was a few days later, as she lay on her bedding, in the father's yurt. It was late and everyone was asleep, but Ailana could not sleep, did not want to sleep. She was waiting, hoping. And then she heard him.

"Ailana! Ailana! Come outside."

Ailana rose, fully dressed under her blankets. She stealthily moved towards the doorway. And then jumped as her father

snorted. She looked over to his bed, but the curtain was drawn and she could see nothing. When his regular snoring resumed, she continued moving. As she got to the felt flap that served as the yurt's door, it lifted up in front of her. It was Orin coming in. She motioned him out. Then they were both outside looking at each other. Orin took her hand....

And yet another image, brief years later, flashed into Ailana's mind. She was in her own yurt, feeding her two young children, and looking up at Orin who smiled at her. It was an image burned into her mind. An image of what was, but would never be again.

Ailana looked back again at the sheep she was herding. They were contentedly grazing. They thought nothing of her problems nor of any problems of the world. They might go into an absolute panic if a wolf appeared, and if ice covered the ground they might die from being unable to get at the grass, but they weren't worried about it. They had no choices to make. They just took it one moment at a time.

But Ailana had made a choice, as an earlier memory came rushing back to her....

Ailana stood, dressed in her best clothes, outside her father's yurt. Her father and other close family members stood with her. It was a bright, sunny day, an auspicious day her father hoped.

"Now remember, child, Bakar Khan is an important man, a very important man. Your betrothal to him will not only result in a very rich *kalim* for us, but he can provide well for you." her father told her.

A party of riders came up. They wore fine clothes. All wore droopy mustaches, as was Burkut custom. The lead rider dismounted.

"Welcome, Bakar Khan," said Ailana's father.

She could still see him in her mind. She had not seen him before that day, though apparently she had come to his attention. She had known he'd been married before, his wife dying in childbirth, and would marry again – a man of his wealth could afford to pay the *kalim*, the bride-price, for more than one wife.

But Ailana would be senior wife. She would even have a title, khatuna.

And Bakar had a touch of something that marked him a leader. More than that, she had been able to sense he was a good man who would treat her well. And while she felt no spark when she looked at him, this was common in an arranged marriage – the affection between the partners would grow over time. Ailana knew many old couples whose relationship was warm and tender. And, she admitted, some who fought all the time, but those probably would have fought with anyone.

And the kalim that Bakar offered was huge. It was a point of respect for a man, or his father, to offer the highest kalim he could afford. And Bakar apparently could afford quite a bit.

But after she had met Orin, after she had gone away with him, she gave no further thought to the short man with the droopy mustache.

And Bakar? She'd heard he was furious at her abduction. He had sworn a death threat against Orin. He had even stuck a lance in the grave of Orin's grandfather, challenging Orin in front of Orin's ancestors. And Orin was about to return and accept the challenge when Bakar had been attacked by Turan Khan of the Jersaks. When it was over, Bakar lay dead. His head stuck on... well, she didn't want to think about that.

Was she responsible for that? If Bakar had not been so concerned with her and Orin, perhaps he would have noticed the threat from Turan.

Orin had laughed when he'd heard about this enemy whom he'd never met. "Fate!" he'd said. But then the Kaskir had been forced to run from Turan as well, so no one was laughing any more.

If, if, if, if.... She could wonder about it all forever.

A rider approached and Ailana snapped out of her reverie.

"Alban is dying," said the woman. "His sister has asked that you come. I can watch your herd for you."

"Of course." Now it was her husband's father.... What else can get worse? Ailana wondered.

●

As the three travelers made it back to the Kaskir camp, it was the dogs that noticed them first. Several began barking, then quieted as the familiar scent was recognized. Pretty soon there was a crowd around the three men. And the questions started. Why have you returned so soon? Where is Jinji?

In an unusual public display of affection, Ailana threw her arms around Orin.

"I was lonely. I missed you," she admitted. But when Orin seemed uncomfortable, she knew something was wrong.

"Jinji?" she asked. Orin shook his head. Ailana closed her eyes and a flash of pain crossed her face. When she opened them again, they were moist. Orin held her close. He'd thought of her often while away, and now that she was close, he wanted to pick her up and carry her back to their yurt. He'd comfort her and tell her, and show her, how he had missed her. But as he started to do so, she pushed away and looked in his eyes. Now, in a soft voice, she said, "There's more bad news."

Orin looked at her, wondering, half-expecting....

"It's your father. He's dying."

Orin looked away. Then back at Ailana. "Is he in his yurt?"

Ailana nodded. "I'll come with you."

"It's not completely unexpected. After all he's been sick for years," said Orin.

Ailana began, "The shaman has made the trip to the spirit world, and was able to find the spirit that had stolen Alban's soul, but he was unable to convince the spirit to give it up, though many gifts were offered."

Orin nodded and Ailana didn't continue. She walked with him, not saying anything till they got to Alban's tent. Then she stayed outside while he went in.

The old man -- was he really as old as he looked? -- lay on his blankets by the hearthfire in the center of the yurt.

Several female relatives were in the yurt, attending on Alban. One had been beating Alban with the lungs of a sheep, a well-known remedy for sickness, though to no effect. As Orin entered, they backed away from Alban's bedside, to give Orin some privacy. Orin stood and looked at his father.

“Come close, Orin,” said the old man. The voice was soft, but still resonant. The old man had been chief for a long time, from before Orin had been born. It was a voice of command, a strong-willed voice, and one that Orin had learned to respect. They'd had their differences -- if a boy was to learn to command, a father would have to learn to give him his head. Well, sometimes he did, Orin remembered.

Orin knelt down by Alban. Alban motioned him closer and Orin leaned forward. “It is your time now. You will become chief. Now listen to me, even if you hadn't before. Do you remember what I've told you about a chief's responsibilities?” Alban asked.

“Yes, of course,” answered Orin. How could he forget? “The duty of a chief is to his people. He is their guide, their father. A chief who puts anything else above his duty to his people will lead them to destruction.”

“And?” asked his father.

Orin continued, falling back into the old role of student to that of his father as teacher.

“For the chief, the tribe comes first, above all others. And the tribe's prosperity depends on its people and its animals. The more animals, the more people, then the more animals, and so on, producing more prosperity. The more men, because then the more warriors, the more women because they make the babies who will grow into warriors, the more animals because then there is food and clothing for all.”

“Yes, and every other tribe wants the same,” continued Alban.

Orin knew what was coming, had heard it before, but now felt he was hearing it for the last time, which made it different somehow.

Alban went on, “Because the other tribes all want the same things, they will try to kill your warriors and youth, and steal your women and animals. The chief must always be on guard against this....” Alban faltered, perhaps remembering his own shortcoming in that area -- when raiders had attacked their nearly undefended camp, killed some, and stolen others. Alban continued, “The chief must always remember that those of other tribes are the enemy.

“Every adult male is an enemy. Every male child will grow up to be an enemy. Every female will give birth to an enemy. In war,

we kill our enemies. We kill or capture their women and small children so that their children will become our children. And we leave no enemy free. That is the way," Alban finished.

An image popped into Orin's mind. An image of brave warriors returning with plunder and slaves, returning to the acclaim of fat-bellied wives and the admiration of young, pretty girls.

Orin nodded. "That is the way."

Alban looked away for a moment, then back again. "I have not always done well. There was a time when the herds of the Kaskir were much larger than they are now. We had more ponies, more sheep, more goats, more camels.... We even had some cattle. Perhaps I should have stepped aside sooner, when I first began getting sick. But I always thought I would recover...." Alban paused. Orin was quiet. When he began again, Alban said, "But now I see that my horse is ready to carry me to the next world. Orin, when I die, I want you to bury me astride Kun Chikish, with my bow in my hand. Will you see to that?"

"Yes, of course," answered Orin.

"Now leave me. You cry like a woman and it will depress me." Orin started, realizing for the first time there were tears on his cheeks. He leaned over and kissed his father on the cheek. Then he got up and went outside, to sit by the yurt door.

As he sat there, he let his mind drift back to times he'd spent with his father....

Orin's childhood memory formed into a Kaskir hunting party, hundreds strong, spread out into a huge circle. As the drums beat, the men moved in, getting closer together, reducing the size of the circle, driving the game to the center. And then, when the circle was drawn tight, when the animals were at bay, Orin saw his father dismount, leave his bow behind, and advance on a big cat with a sword and knife. He saw Alban provoke the cat, saw it attack, and, with his own heartbeat loud in his ears, saw Alban plunge the knife into the animal's chest. There were a few others who would do the same on that day, and on other hunt days, but it was this image that would stay with him forever.

Another memory came. He was a few years older this time, and by himself. He had gone out hunting with his falcon, though it was winter and game was scarce. But despite the snow on the ground, the days had turned warmer again, and the snow had begun to melt.

As his pony pawed through the snow to get at the grass underneath, he let his falcon fly off. The falcon had yet to bring anything back, and the prepared food Orin had brought with had run out. But he didn't want to return empty-handed. As another day faded into night, he still hoped for success.

When he awoke in the morning, it was to discover that the weather had turned cold with a fury. What was wet, snowy grass the day before, was now ice. A sheet of ice covered the grass. As he watched his pony unable to break through the ice to get at the grass, he felt the first pangs of fear. Fear for his horse, and fear of being caught days away from his aul with a dying horse.

Orin broke some of the ice cover with his knife. The pony quickly ate the brownish grass. But it was tiring work, and there was no way he could uncover enough grass to keep the pony fed.

He headed back for the aul. And into a blizzard. He could make only limited progress. Mercifully, the blizzard ended, the weather got warmer, the snow and ice began to melt... and then it got cold again, the ground refreezing.

After two days of slow travel, occasionally stopping to break the ice for his pony to feed, the horse was in better shape than he was. He felt weak from lack of food. And he cursed himself for bringing a stallion rather than a mare whom he could milk.

He knew he had to do something. And, so, as he had once been shown, he cut a blood vessel in the pony's neck, drinking the blood as it flowed out.

It was enough to keep him going for yet another day. A day when a search party spotted him. A search party with Alban at the head.

Orin grinned at his father. Alban looked at him. Even after Alban leaned over and hit him in the head, Orin continued grinning.

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Alban was dead. The funeral would last several days, and be repeated again in one year's time. And, as it was the death of a chief, everyone would participate. Had they been back in the Homeland, even people from other urus would come, to pay their respects.

The shaman led the ceremonies. The first ceremony was held in the Great Yurt, Alban's yurt, which would now become Orin's. People came and filled up the yurt, even overflowing outside, leaving space only at the back of the yurt for Kam Ulkan to move around in. It would be the shaman's job to travel to the Underworld, retrieve Alban's soul from the evil spirits who had stolen it, and escort it to the Upperworld.

An assistant helped arrange things to Ulkan's liking. The assistant also told the group of Ulkan's past exploits. Finally, Ulkan was ready to begin. The assistant helped him on with his headdress and robe. Then he took up his drum and a padded drumstick. The Kaskir all knew the drum stood for a horse, and the drumstick for a whip.

Ulkan began chanting, began calling to the spirits, began slowly beating on the drum. He was off on his voyage to find Alban's spirit. The birds outside the yurt took his message up to the spirits of Heaven, entreating friendly spirits to help him in his quest. He beat the drum faster, whipping on his spirit horse.

Faster and faster, chanting the whole time, conversing with the spirits, changing voices to denote the answers of the spirits, Ulkan reached a state of rapture and exaltation. And many of his listeners, his congregation so to speak, reached that state with him. As he chanted, he called out, and they responded. And finally, he had reached his destination. He bargained with the spirits, offered them gifts, cajoled them, threatened them, and finally convinced them to give up Alban's spirit. When it was done, when Alban was safe in Heaven, Ulkan collapsed in a heap on the carpeted ground.

Ulkan lay there, unconscious, while his breathing returned to normal. His assistant ministered to him as people began leaving. Orin continued to watch him. He realized as he did so, that he had heard the calls of birds and the flapping of birds' wings

during Ulkan's journey, but all was silent now. Finally, Ulkan awoke and sat up. He gave Orin a re-assuring look. "Your father is safe."

The next day came the burial ceremony. Ulkan had told a myth-poem about Alban while another Kaskir accompanied him upon a lute. He had apparently been working on it for a long time, though he said it was the spirits telling him what to say. It was well received by the Kaskir.

The ritual lamentations that had begun with Alban's death continued. Amidst the wailing of the women and the general sorrow – a group sorrow that extended to everyone in the uru as each participated in the ritual -- Orin, as was the custom, slashed his own cheeks with his sword.

The mourning for Alban comforted Orin. He saw it as both homage to his father, to his father's effect upon this world, and also as an indication that when it was his turn to depart this world, the uru would similarly honor and remember him. And then that started him thinking about the future. Was he ready to be chief? The trip to D'nar had been a disaster. They had lost Jinji, they had lost the ponies and other gifts they had brought, and they had failed to obtain the right to graze their herds within the Empire. But he would learn from his mistakes. He knew he would make more mistakes in the future, but he promised himself never to make the same ones.



In front of the entrance to the shaman's yurt, Eder stopped and called to him.

"*Kam* Ulkan, it is Eder, I need to see you."

"You may enter," Ulkan answered.

Eder lifted the felt flap that served as a door to the yurt and went inside. Ulkan was sitting on the carpet by the fire, mixing something in a bowl. "Sit," he said, without looking up from what he was doing.

"I have brought you a gift," said Eder, laying a parcel of dried horsemeat on the carpet between them.

This got Ulkan's attention. "And what is it you want me to do?"

"My sister Jinji lies buried, with no burial service, and no guide to show her the way to the spirit world. I ask you to find her spirit and guide her."

"She died in battle, did she not? No evil spirit took her. Her spirit would have flown up to Heaven."

"I understand, but I must make sure. This has troubled me since her death. I cannot rest till I know for certain."

"Eder, I am still tired from my long journey to retrieve Alban's soul...."

"There is no one else. You are the shaman."

"I never wanted to be shaman. It is a curse, not a gift."

Whether this was really true or not, Eder did not know. But, as was Kaskir custom, he accepted it.

"No one ever wants to be shaman," Eder said. "But a shaman was needed by the tribe and so your gift manifested itself. And now I need you. Please do this for me. I cannot rest till I know she has found her way."

Ulkan looked at him and sighed. "Of course. I will come to your yurt tonight."



Sitting in Eder's yurt, again watching Kam Ulkan journey to the spirit world, listening to the shaman converse with the spirits, Ailana took what comfort from this that she could. Jinji's death in combat was what she had feared. *Was that fate?* Jinji had saved Eder at the cost of her own life. Perhaps Eder was meant by Tangri, the Great Khan of the Sky, to go on to do great things. Perhaps, at the very least, without Jinji to cook his meals, weave his bags, and herd his sheep, Eder would have to get married. Well, that was looking at the best side of things. And that was what she needed to do, she told herself, because to do otherwise would make her really, really depressed. And all this, the loss of her children, the death of Jinji, was due to one man above all. But it had been dark when the raiders had come last winter, and Jinji

had never gotten a good look at her attacker. Best to put it out of her mind and just help Eder through this bad time.



With Alban's death, leaving no brothers, and with no objections from the aksakals, Orin became chief of the uru.

His first act was to call a general meeting of all men old and fit enough to serve as warriors. About 500, all told. And nearly all familiar faces. He could see Kurguz standing with Eder, and also another figure. For an instant, that figure looked like Jinji. But when Orin blinked his eyes and looked again, there was no one else there. *Shadows thrown by the campfires?* He addressed them from horseback.

“Kaskir warriors, we have come a long way from our homeland. Too far to go away empty-handed. We asked for permission to graze on Empire land. We were denied. We asked to trade freely. We were denied. We offered the open hand of peace. They responded with the fist of war. But now we are through asking. We will take what we need! Kaskir warriors, braid your horses' tails. We go to war!”



## *Chapter 8*

Even the most casual traveler to D'nar could not help but be awed by the Citadel. A truly massive stone structure, in a land in which stone was not readily available, it dominated the city. From the outside, it was as if the stone were issuing a challenge: "To attack me will be fatal. The Devil Ahriman himself cannot damage me."

When Tekin, the Karakoyunlu chief, was taken with his defeated people inside the Citadel, when he heard the main gate close behind him, his spirits sank to the lowest they'd ever been. And when he was brought inside the Citadel prison, a legendary prison from whom no one had ever escaped....

"Let me show you something, nomad," the prison captain said, spitting the word "nomad" out like a curse. "Just to let you know that while you and your people are here, waiting to be taken to the slave markets, we do not permit prisoners to make any trouble."

Tekin's feet were chained together, so the guards had to half-drag the Karakoyunlu over to the captain. Tekin looked at the floor of the great cell. There was a circular opening in the floor. The guards forced Tekin's head over the opening. He looked down – and saw nothing. Just blackness, blacker than a moonless, starless night. The captain dropped a stone into the opening. Then he looked at Tekin. The two men looked at each other for what seemed like an interminable period of time, though less than 2 seconds actually passed. Then the sound of the stone hitting the bottom reached them, making Tekin start.

"If I dropped you down there," the captain said gleefully, "it'll be like you've disappeared from the world. If you're lucky, the fall will kill you. If not, you will slowly die from lack of water or food."

Tekin shuddered. For a nomad used to being under the open sky, on the vast Steppe, it was bad enough to be locked in a cell. Worse to be trapped deep underground. "I understand," he said.

“I suppose you do.” To the guards, the captain said, “Chain him close by the hole. Give the chain enough slack so that if he gives us a problem, we can stick his head down the hole and remind him of oblivion.”



J'nine stuck her head in the kitchen -- not a place she normally visited. It was fine by her that the slaves prepared the food while she did other things. But right now she needed to talk, and Chodura was always a good listener.

And Chodura was indeed there, cleaning a fish. Probably Lebenor had seen her idle -- or reading -- which was the same to him -- and sent her to the kitchen to be useful.

“Chodura, come outside with me. Torgie, you can finish that for her.”

Chodura looked up, pleased to be rescued. She didn't much like fish, cleaning it or eating it. In fact, she remembered, no one in her tribe would even think of eating a fish. What they prized was a nice piece of mutton fat. While mutton fat didn't appeal to Chodura as much as it used to, ever since she had begun eating D'narian food, fish still didn't appeal much to her either. She wiped off her hands and went outside.

The girls walked over to the pistachio tree and sat down,

“Chodura, I was curious.... When you were a nomad, if you can remember, did you know anyone who was about to get married? How did they feel about it? Did they have to leave their friends and family?”

Chodura realized immediately that, as the date of her marriage to Prince Bahram drew closer, J'nine had begun getting anxious.

“It was not easy for us. We never married within the clan, so when a girl took a husband, she had to move to her husband's aul, become part of his family -- leave all her friends and her own family behind. The brides who came to our aul were often sad, at least at first. I often wondered how I would feel when it came my turn.”

The girls sat quietly for a moment. Then Chodura said, “I remember a bit of one of the songs the brides would sing. It went something like,

“You have wounded me in the heart, dear father,  
You have sold me for a herd of horses, dear father,  
You have more room in the tent now, dear father,  
But there is no room for me anymore, dear father.”

“That's sad,” said J'nine.

“It was a sad occasion for the women. I remember that. But the brides would get happier when their first son was born.”

“Not when a daughter was born?”

“Oh, sons are different. Sons carry on the family line. If a woman bears no sons, her husband's line dies out.”

“What does it mean in the song, about the herd of horses?” J'nine asked.

“That was often the kalim, the bride-price. The man, or his father, pays the bride's father for her, usually in horses. For her part, the bride provides the tent and the necessary household goods, like all the woven storage bags. But the kalim is worth much more, because then the husband can't discard his wife, unless he's rich, because he wouldn't be able to raise the kalim for another wife.”

“I think I've been traded for something too. For status, perhaps. I know I'm going to be one of the sad ones,” J'nine said. “Before I was betrothed, my friends and I all played that game -- you've probably seen us play it -- in which we try to foretell the future and determine what our husbands will be like. When I played, it always turned up that I would marry a prince. It was so exciting! And when my father arranged my marriage, I was happier and more excited than you can imagine. But I think now my friends will be luckier, because they will marry men in the city and not have to say farewell to everyone.”

Chodura was silent, not knowing what to say. J'nine was sad, but at least she would be married and have children. Who would marry Chodura, a slave girl? Another slave? Lebenor? Ugh! And what would their children be? Not slaves, they would be free, but they would be people of little respect, the lowest of freemen. Or perhaps she would never have a husband and would just have children by her master? By the General? He was more

like a father to her than anything else. But if she kept thinking about these things, she'd become sad. And she should cheer up J'nine. J'nine deep in her own thoughts, didn't really notice how somber Chodura had become. Chodura tried inserting a cheery note in her voice.

“It could turn out to be a lot better than you expect. The prince may be handsome, he certainly is rich and powerful, you'll be living in the Capital which you've always said is so exciting -- you've always wanted to live there. You'll be able to buy the prettiest clothes, listen to the most romantic poets and storytellers, listen to the best music -- you can probably hire musicians to play for you all the time so that you'll always have music.... And your children will always have the best of everything. So, who knows, you may be much happier than you think.”

“Thanks Chodura.... Maybe you're right. In any case, it seems to be written that this marriage occur.” And again, as she found herself doing more and more lately, J'nine tried to push any thought of H'vise out of her mind.

For her part, Chodura thought back to Kurguz. There were nomads in and around D'nar, but for some reason Kurguz reminded her of her past life: plaiting her hair, going hunting with her father, weaving, the smell of wild flowers on the grasslands. The things you don't appreciate till they're gone.



The young Jersak soldier Dayar looked out over the plain as he rode amidst the Jersak army. They were on their way to what they all hoped would be a very exciting, rewarding visit to D'naria.

Dayar liked being out in the open. The Steppe always impressed him with its vastness. He'd heard of bodies of water like the Steppe, so large you couldn't see the other side. Just water everywhere. But he knew that was just a story for children. There couldn't possibly be that much water in the world. But the grasslands, he could see their great expanse.

“Dayar,” Koloko, the rider next to him asked, “are you glad you came out here with Turan Khan instead of staying in the aul with our families?”

Dayar didn't have to think about that one for even a moment. “You mean spend the rest of my life herding a few poor ponies and sheep? Never amounting to anything? Taking years to save up the kalim for a wife? No excitement? No danger? Too boring! There must be more to life than that.”

“Well, you might build up your herd and become rich.”

“And what are the chances of that happening? My father has herded sheep all his life and still has only 100 head. No, if you start out with nothing, chances are you'll end up with nothing. Do you remember what Turan Khan said when he came to our aul? ‘Follow me and I will lead you to riches, women, and glory. Whatever you want will be there for the taking. The enemy's possessions, the enemy's women, they will all be yours. And you will have the opportunity to test yourself in battle, to prove that you are the best warriors. Your victories will be remembered for the ages. Storytellers will tell stories about you, poets will create myth-poems about you. Bid farewell to your sheep and come with me!’”

“Yes, I remember well, but....”

“But what? You miss your mother? Does the little baby cry for the nipple?”

“Stop it! Say any more and I'll cut out your tongue!”

“Wah, wah, wah,” Dayar taunted, knowing that Koloko would never even attempt to carry out the threat. He was having fun, this being virtually the only interesting break in days of uneventful riding. Koloko grimaced, turned his horse, and found someone else to ride with. And Koloko said no more about his doubts. He had determined to leave, to return to his family, and the less said about it the better.

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The Jersak soldiers threw Koloko to the ground. He was one of their own, but he had broken the rules. Koloko's arms were bound behind him, but he struggled into a kneeling position. He

tried to stand but a blow from behind brought him back to his knees. As he looked up again, he saw the Jersaks had gathered in a crowd around him. And Turan Khan himself was standing in front of him.

“Aha,” said Turan. “What have we found? We have someone here who tried to desert. We are preparing for a great battle, a great conquest, and this marmot wants no part of it. He seeks to flee before the enemy is even engaged. While you,” and here he looked around at the men, “endure the extremes of heat and cold, suffering storms, getting by on little food, little kumiss, and no women, this one was deserting you. He was caught taking food, ponies, and other supplies.”

Koloko tried to protest that he was only taking what he had brought with him, enough for the trip back to the homeland, but another blow from behind quickly silenced him.

“Are we,” Turan was asking, “soft like city-dwellers? Are we too soft to be out in a hailstorm or a sandstorm? Are we going to ride home when it starts to rain?” Some of the men laughed. That's enough for humor, time to get serious, Turan thought. “Why are we undergoing these hardships?” Not waiting for anyone to answer, Turan continued, “Because we must be hard when we go into battle. We must be hard as rock. A rock feels no hail, feels no hunger. And a Jersak warrior feels no hail, no hunger. A rock endures. And a Jersak warrior endures. A rock feels no pity, feels no mercy. And a Jersak warrior feels no pity, feels no mercy. A Jersak warrior is hard. A Jersak warrior is unforgiving.”

And here he looked down at Koloko. “Do you understand that a bow is only as strong as its weakest part? Do you understand that the Jersaks can tolerate no weakness? That any weakness must be removed? Do you understand this?”

Koloko nodded, his eyes getting moist.

Drawing his sword, Turan said: “A Jersak warrior knows that he has to cut out any soft parts that keep him from being hard. You,” and he looked at Dayar, “You're from his aul, are you not? Come here. Do you too want to leave?”

“Oh, no, I am a true warrior and will follow you wherever you go.” Dayar approached Turan Khan, but the slowness of his step belied his words.

“Then you know what you must do.” And Turan handed his sword to Dayar.

Dayar took the sword, but a confused, scared look came over his face.

Turan said to the men, “To kill an enemy is easy. To kill a friend is harder.” Turning back to Dayar, Turan continued, “Show us that you can be hard, that you are indeed a true warrior who feels nothing, who is stopped by nothing.”

As if by unspoken command, a chant went up, starting with Turan’s *nokers* standing behind Koloko: “Death, death, death.”

Dayar raised the sword, looked at Turan who stared back at him and nodded, then looked at Koloko who had averted his eyes. Then Koloko looked up and said, his eyes moist, “Make it a clean strike.”

The blow came down on Koloko's neck. But it was a weak blow, off the mark, and Koloko screamed out in pain. Dayar hit him again, and then again. Finally, the head separated and rolled on the ground. Turan took the sword from him and looked him straight in the eye. “You have done well. You are a true warrior.”



Dayar lay on his bedding, in a tent amidst the Jersak army. He felt sick. But he wasn't physically ill. Well, no more than usual. He had intestinal problems because of some evil spirit that had spoiled his food, but everyone had that from time to time -- that wasn't what was bothering him. He was thinking about what he was going to say to Koloko's mother when he returned home. She would ask how her son had died. And what could he tell her? That he had taunted Koloko till her son had tried to leave? And that Koloko was dead by Dayar’s own hand? At least Turan Khan could have killed Koloko himself without making him do it.

It didn’t help, also, that Sebuk had summoned him for a talk. Sebuk was military commander and subordinate to Turan. But the gist of his conversation could be taken otherwise. He had hinted that Turan Khan was wrong to have Dayar kill Koloko. That

Turan had an evil streak, that the Jersak soldiers needed to be protected from Turan, that Sebuk was the one who could protect them. And Dayar should assist Sebuk as was necessary. Dayar doubted all of this. If anyone was evil, it was Kam Eeren, the shaman who was Sebuk's closest associate. A black shaman, capable of controlling the evil spirits of the underworld.

Dayar had pretended to be too simple to understand what Sebuk was implying. And so Sebuk had made no further attempt to enlist him into what Dayar suspected was a secret force within the Jersak army.

It was night, and he lay in bed thinking about this. Bori, who was also from his aul, lay next to him in the tent. "Bori," he whispered. "Are you awake?"

"I am now."

"Have you heard anything about some sort of secret conspiracy of Sebuk's against Turan Khan?" Dayar asked.

"No," Bori said crossly. "But if there *is* a secret conspiracy, you probably shouldn't go around asking people if they know the secret. Understand?"

"Oh, yes, of course." And Dayar lay back on the felt.



With each night the Jersak-Burkut army was closer to D'nar. But they were in no hurry, seemingly waiting for things to happen before making their big push. And again, in a well-used routine, Sebuk, as military commander, had sent out advance patrols to survey the ground in front of the army, to prevent any surprises. Every hill, every creek, and particularly any defile, were well covered. And then, additionally to prevent surprises, sentries were posted, and other soldiers assigned to periodically make the rounds to see that the sentries were not asleep. And then, besides that, the men each kept one of their horses saddled at all times, in case rapid movement was necessary.

Only when Sebuk was satisfied that the camp was secure would he enter his tent for the night. And then he would anticipate victory with an enjoyment that was only second to

actually achieving victory. The conquest of an empire. It would make him a legend, as Kam Eeren had foretold. And the first step would be the subjugation of the Kaskirs.



## *Chapter 9*

Two hundred Kaskir men sat on their horses awaiting commands. They had been divided into two groups, one to be commanded by Eder, the other by Orin personally.

“I know that you want revenge for Jinji, but this is more than a personal feud. We need to carry off whatever we can. I’ve given you 100 men, as I gave Arslan, no fewer than I’ve taken for myself.”

“Leaving 200 at the camp?” Eder asked.

“To protect it. After a day or two, return to camp so that those men can go out.”



Eder looked out over the farmland, recently harvested. Behind him were his 100 men, whom he had sent off in small groups, riding in different directions.

To no one in particular, he announced, “They’ve ruined the grazing land with these farms!”

And then he took 3 men and headed for the nearest farm.



In the north of D’naria, amidst the river valleys, lay the farmlands. Good lands, thought the farmer, T’set, as he looked around at his wheat field. A good crop, a very good crop, he thought. This was rich soil. Next year he would plant barley as well. And he would put in more irrigation and have a sorghum crop. He reached down and scooped up a handful of the soil, as he had done many times before. The feel of the earth comforted him. It had been nothing but grassland for many, many years.

The grass had grown waist high, in fact. What a waste of land! It had all been lying here, just waiting for the hand of the farmer. And now, with his hand, it had produced. Well, it had taken more than his hand, actually.

He'd had to have a metalworker in the city make a steel blade for his plow because the sod was so tough from never having been turned. But it had been worth it. Tomorrow, he and some of the villagers would begin harvesting the crop. Even though he had moved from the village, to be closer to this land, he was still of the village. Perhaps his wife did indeed regret not being with the other women, and not having the safety of numbers. But, it was safe here. There were few dangers in D'naria, no enemies and only the occasional mountain cat. He had indeed once seen such a cat in the fields, but it was a small one -- and he could take care of one like that with his spear.

The whinny of a pony broke his reverie and made him turn towards the sun. Directly in the sunlight, making him squint to see them clearly, were four horsemen. Soldiers, he thought at first. No, no armor. Travelers? They had pack horses behind them.

Traders perhaps. If so, they were early, he would have something -- much -- to trade in a few days, after the harvest. But no, the sacks thrown over the pack horses were empty. They had nothing to trade with. But they had weapons. Each of the horsemen had a lance sticking up behind him. And he could see bows, 2 or 3 quivers of arrows apiece, swords in scabbards....

They were here to take, not trade. His spear would be little use against such as these.

A chill was creeping towards his heart. But, he forced a friendly note into his voice, and said: "Welcome, travelers, can I get you some water to quench your thirst?" There was no answer. "Some wine perhaps?" And then one spoke, and T'set knew he spoke a death sentence.

"How many in the house?"

Keeping his voice on an up note, T'set answered, "Oh, we have a full house today. There's a squad of soldiers quartering here. Come back with me and we can all share a bottle of wine and listen to tales of your travels."

One of the strangers, younger than the leader, looked over at the house. But the one who had spoken before never took his eyes off T'set, fixing him with a cold stare. "You are a poor liar," he said.

T'set's mouth felt dry. In a voice whose pitch was made higher by fear, he said: "I'm just a poor farmer, doing no one any harm, causing no trouble for anyone."

"I have no use for farmers."

As the fear began overcoming him, T'set said: "Please, please, I have two young children in the house, babies really, please don't hurt them."

And then the words from the nomad that chilled him to the bone, "I have no use for the children of farmers."

And the four horsemen started forwards. T'set turned and ran. But he got no more than a couple of steps before a terrific pain lit up his neck and back. And the soft, rich, black soil rushed up to embrace him.



In the northern part of D'naria, the youth M'bok had gone out hunting. And just now he was feeling pretty good. He had killed two birds and had them tied together and slung over his shoulder. Farming was not for him, he was a hunter. Farming was boring. His father had been a farmer. Tilled the earth all his life, from dawn to dusk -- and now he was buried in his precious earth, just another victim of some sickness that Ahriman randomly visited upon farmers. He was not going to end up like that. He would live in the bush, making his way by hunting. And stealing chickens. He had to laugh, remembering old W'mar's face when the donkey realized two chickens were missing. W'mar had suspected him instantly, but had no proof. And of course, his mother believed him purely good and would never believe that he could do wrong.

But then, instinct, or practice, forced him to drop to the ground. Riders! From the hill where he lay he could see them below. Perhaps 100 men, traveling in rows of 4, heading towards his village. What crime had he committed that soldiers would be

after him? No, that was silly. They were just out on a patrol or a maneuver or whatever it was that soldiers did. He had thought once about joining the army – the idea of hunting not animals but people appealed to him, but the idea of having to take orders didn't.

Why aren't they wearing their armor, he wondered. Then at some command, the riders reformed, the neat rows of 4 spreading into a single row. Then still moving towards the village, the outermost wings spread even further, as if to encircle the village. At the same time, eight men, in two groups of four, detached from the others, and rode off in another direction.

As he lay there, he could hear the alarm bell sound in the village. But that was only sounded for fires, and M'bok didn't see any fire. Then he realized, of course, that these riders were bandits. The riders had now completely encircled the village and were moving in, while some of their number were galloping down the main -- the only -- street. *How did they get into the walled village?* But then he remembered that the wall had been in disrepair for years. There were numerous gaps where riders could ride through, tumbled down parts where they could jump over.

Neglected, unneeded, the villagers had relied for security on being part of the Empire. They had been fools, he thought, forgetting that he had been one of those who laughed at anyone who suggested the wall be repaired.

He wasn't close enough to the village to pick out faces, but he knew where everyone lived, of course, and he could see a boy -- his friend B'jin? -- running towards the fields, then falter and fall. He could see some of the riders dismount, enter B'jin's house, and drag out two figures, who fell to the ground under quick blows from the riders. As he watched in stupefied wonder, he saw a rider leave B'jin's house carrying a torch, probably lit from their hearth fire. He used this torch to set B'jin's house on fire and to light the torches of some of the other riders.

There's old W'mar, the fat donkey, he thought, trying to waddle away. As M'bok watched, one of the riders turned towards W'mar, did something, and W'mar collapsed on the ground. *Oh Mazda* thought M'bok, *what's happening? Do they hate farmers so much they're going to kill everyone?* And then the riders were in front of his house. Frozen totally, he watched as several burst in. As

they did so, two small figures -- his little sisters! -- jumped out of the windows and began to run, but were quickly picked up by the riders and thrown into sacks. Then another, larger figure – his older brother? -- ran, faltered, and fell to the ground. Come on, get up, get up, thought M'bok. But he didn't.

Nothing happened for what seemed like eternity. Then the riders emerged from the house, one of them adjusting his clothing, and setting the house on fire as they left. He wanted to yell to his mother, who must have still been inside the house, to get out before it burned down around her. But he was too far away. She did not emerge.

M'bok's senses began to return to him. As soon as the riders leave, he'll go down and check on his family, he told himself. His mother and brother can't be... dead. Could they? And his sisters abducted? To become slaves? Could his entire village have been destroyed so quickly, so totally? All except him. Had he been saved by Mazda for some special purpose? He began to get up. As he turned around, he caught a glimpse of four riders -- four of those who had detached themselves from the others -- they must have been sweeping the area -- and they saw him! But he stayed calm. He threw up his hands, holding his birds up high. One of the nomads held a bow in ready position. The four approached.

"Looks like you're a fair hunter," one said. "But I'll take them.... and you."

"No, wait," M'bok beseeched. "I can help you. I can... show you where the villagers have hidden things... I can guide you through this area... I know it very well. I will help you if you let me go."

The nomads looked at each other. Finally, one said, "Show us these hidden things then."

M'bok thought quickly. It was either help them or be taken away as a slave, to live in servitude forever. He had to decide, right here, right now. "All... right. I'll show you."

M'bok breathed a little bit easier, as one of the nomads pulled him up behind him on the pony. They were quickly joined by a party of other nomads and M'bok was given one of the spare ponies. He led them back to the village. Dismounting by a small shed that the raiders hadn't bothered to burn, he turned to the nomads, "Below the floor of the shed is a secret pit. You will

find many items of value there that the villagers have hidden away. They thought I didn't know about it, but I secretly watched them one day.”

Several nomads dismounted. They quickly found the trap door in the floor. “You down there, come on out,” one cried. From out of the pit came four villagers, old people. They were ordered to stand aside while the nomads brought up food stores and silver plate from the pit. The four were questioned by the nomads as to whether there were any other secret locations. There were none. Few villagers had believed there was any danger and so few had taken any kind of precautions.

The nomad leader, Arslan, then turned to M'bok. Arslan asked the same questions, and M'bok answered truthfully. And then an order was given and 4 bodies lay slain on the ground, pierced by arrows. M'bok turned his face away. But when he looked back, his breathing had come easier.

Arslan looked at M'bok. “Is there anything else that we've missed?”

“No, you've gotten everything. But I can help you find things at other villages in the area,” answered M'bok, half wishing they'd let him go now and half wishing that he could join them and raid the local villages.

“You've been helpful, but we don't need you any more,” said Arslan. And he nodded to one of the other nomads, who nocked an arrow in his bow. M'bok's breath now came more sharply.

“They...they told me I could go if I helped you out.”

“Yes, you may go.” And Arslan waved his arm to the hills. M'bok needed no further encouragement and took off on the borrowed pony.

“But not very far,” said Arslan. A second later an arrow struck M'bok full in the back. The now riderless pony returned to the group. Lying on the ground fatally wounded, but still conscious, M'bok could hear Arslan's voice, “Anyone who would betray his own people can never be trusted.”



The *seraibashi* B'nabik looked out from his doorway. “They've finally come,” he said to his wife. “They took their

time, but now they're here.” And to himself, he muttered, “And now we find out if it's life or death for us.” For several days there had been nomad raids in the valleys. Nomads unknown to the farmers, carrying a wolf standard. For B'nabik, there had been nowhere to run. And, anyway, his life was the *caravanserai*. If he couldn't take his inn with him, how could he run?

He took one last look around him. As if he was seeing his place for the first time. Or maybe the last. A walled enclosure, with a courtyard, stables, well, and apartments within. Were there a caravan here, and caravan men ready to defend their camels and goods, a *caravanserai* like this could hold out for quite a while. But there were no caravans here now. There was just him, the stable boy, his wife, and a beggar who had bedded down in the powdered horse dung of the stable. Better to offer a friendly welcome than try to resist.

There looked to be 100 of them. He supposed it was the same group that had burned the nearby farming village. B'nabik could only wonder what hatred of farmers – or was it D'narians in general – could make them so cruel. Or had the farmers angered the forces of Heaven and it was all divine retribution?

B'nabik came out and hailed the riders. His wife and the boy remained in the doorway. “I am B'nabik and I greet all travelers. I offer food and quarters for all hungry, thirsty, and tired travelers. What can I offer you?”

“A torch, so we can burn this place more quickly,” answered their leader. It was Orin, who was enjoying himself more than he had thought he would.

The Kaskir group continued on, through the gate, coming to a stop at the main building.

“Oh no, you don't want to do that,” shouted B'nabik, trailing behind them. “This is a *serai*, a place of refuge for riders such as yourself. Perhaps some food or some wine. Or some nice hot tea. Why don't you come inside and let me provide you with some refreshments.”

Orin, still mounted, and with a faint grin, made as if to do so. But the innkeeper quickly said, “Uh, I meant, um, you should get off your horse first. You can tie them up here or put them in the stable and the boy will get them some hay.”

Orin answered, "We don't really have time to stop, we have a few other places beside yours to burn, you know, but we'll be by later to take you up on your offer. Except the wine, why don't you bring some out now?"

"Certainly, certainly. Wife, some wine!"

Two flasks were brought, one of which Orin drank from and passed around, the other which he stuck into a pouch at his waist. "More," he said.

B'nabik motioned to his wife, and she brought out two more.

"Thank you, seraibashi, and here is a drink for you in exchange. Orin passed him a leather bag. When B'nabik hesitated, Orin said, "Go on, try it."

B'nabik looked at it uncertainly, then thought the nomads might consider it an insult if he didn't drink, so he took a pull. It was unexpectedly sour, with pieces of something floating in it, and it was all he could do to avoid spitting it out. But he forced it down and said, "That is very good. Thank you. Do you make this yourselves?"

B'nabik wondered how long he would have to be polite. He was beginning to feel sick, whether it was from fright or the kumiss, he didn't know.

"Glad you like it," said Orin. "When I next stop by, I will bring a full bag and we can pass it around as we talk."

"Great," said the seraibashi.

The nomad pulled a cloth from a pouch and tied it around the gate. "If any other Kaskir stop here, point them to this and tell them this house is under Orin's protection."

And he turned and left, leading off his troop, undoubtedly going off to raid someone else. B'nabik watched them go, then threw up.

## *Chapter 10*

Kurguz sat on his horse, watching some birds in a small patch of trees. The auls had moved a few times to keep the Imperial Army guessing – and now they were camped in some mountain foothills. Kurguz appreciated the change in plantlife from the treeless Steppe.

Ailana rode up to him.

“You haven’t been on any of the raids, have you?” she asked.

Kurguz shrugged.

“Are you afraid?”

“Some. But I would fight if I had to.”

“But you don’t feel you have to.”

“Not really, no. My mother was a Buddhist. The taking of a life is something I would have trouble doing. I would... prefer not to be in a situation where I’d have to.”

“Have you told Orin of this?”

“Do you see those birds there?” he asked, pointing to the trees. “That one bird there is like the chief. And those other birds around him, those are like the aksakals. They’re in charge. They get the largest territories. All the other birds obey them. And see that group there? They’re young, I’d guess about the same age, and they always fly together. Some of them may become aksakals or even chief when they get older, but most won’t of course, they’ll always be just ordinary birds. One of those birds started acting oddly the other day. Can you guess what happened then? The other birds pecked at him till he again started behaving like the others. So, no, I haven’t said anything to Orin or anyone else.”



The Kaskir had started with the easier places. Poorly defended villages, small parties of travelers, small army patrols. It had not been difficult at all. Even a cavalry patrol or escort of 5-10 or

even 20 soldiers had not put up much resistance. The ferocity of the Kaskir attack, with the nomads shooting as they charged, yelling their battle cries, put nearly all defenders into a fright -- and started them riding or running for their lives. But no one could outrun an arrow.

Those who resisted were quickly dispatched into the next world.

With success, the Kaskir had become bolder, more confident. The poor herdsmen who had defeatedly made the long trek to D'naria had turned into cocky warriors. And Orin, too, had become more confident in both leading raids and in overall administration.

Now, Orin felt, it was time to raise the difficulty level of the targets they would hit. In their raids to date, they had consistently bypassed the larger farmhouses. These farmhouses were more like small forts than houses, with high walls, home to a wealthy class who had the men and the weapons to defend what they owned.

The Kaskir would start fires in the fields surrounding these farmhouses, but the slaves and workers would run for the security of the farmhouse, returning when the nomads had left. And the Kaskir could chase them no closer than arrow range from the walls. They could do no more than watch as the metal gate of the farmhouse closed before them. But Orin doubted that these little forts could defend against a true attack. And he determined to test them. He came up with a strategy that he had not seen tried before, but which he figured would work.

Orin liked being on the offensive. He could examine the defensive preparations and then prepare an offense to take advantage of whatever part of the defense was weakest. In effect, the attacker could always put his strongest force against the defense's weakest force. But, like throwing bones, Orin knew that in battle you would often have to just wait and see what happened and take it from there. He decided to give the raid order as soon as omens were positive.

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The Kaskir approached to where the farmhouse was just out of sight. Having kept their dust to a minimum, Orin felt reasonably sure that the farm people would be unaware of the nomads' presence. One more time, he ordered the ropes checked. They were ropes that had been made up especially for a raid like this: thick, with a large hook on one end that the uru metalworker had fashioned, with 6 other, separate ends.

Orin gave the signal to attack. Ignoring the workers in the fields, the Kaskir made straight for the farmhouse. As the raiders rode past the workers in their fields, they could see the confusion on the workers' faces. Unable to run to their usual refuge, the workers took off in all directions. Today there would be no additional support for the defenders behind the walls. Those defenders would have to make do with whatever manpower had remained behind.

One party of Kaskir headed directly for the large metal gate barring the way into the little fortress. One man carried each hook, while the others each had one end of the coiled lines attached to their saddles. As they got closer to the farmhouse, arrows began to fly from those defenders alert enough to recognize the danger. But most of the people in the farmhouse were slow to react. They'd seen several bandit raids before, and it had become more of an annoyance to live through than a matter of life and death. But this time it would be no ordinary bandit raid. This time lives would be lost as well as fields.

The arrows from the walls and the gate were answered by arrows both from the first Kaskir group and from another Kaskir group shadowing the first. The defenders arrows halted momentarily, as they ducked behind whatever cover was available. Additional Kaskir circled around the farmstead, firing at any available target or just blindly over the top of the walls. The speed and suddenness of the attack enabled the men with the hooks to reach the gate. Quickly attaching the hooks through the gate's iron bars, they gave their signal and then moved to flatten themselves along the walls, or as much as a man on horseback can.

Meanwhile, the remainder of the rope carriers had changed direction. Their movements were not quick, for they rode not war horses, but the workhorses used for pulling the Kaskir wagons. These were the strongest of the Kaskir horses and, in seconds, the lines carrying the hooks were drawn tight. Someone inside moved to undo one hook, but he was met with a flight of arrows from the covering party. The hook carriers were still by the walls, but had with no direct view of the gate because of their angle. They watched for signals from the covering party in case their assistance was required to put back a hook that the defenders had knocked off. But their assistance was not required.

As 16 horses pulled on 3 attachment points -- 2 of the Kaskir rope carriers had been felled by the defenders -- the metal gate groaned and shrieked as if it had been alive and in pain. Then with a loud noise, the gate was pulled completely out of the wall. The covering party, along with the three hook men, now rode through the gateway. Once on the inside, they found it easy to shoot down the defenders on the walls. Some inside the main house continued to shoot, but these were quickly silenced by the nomads' arrows. And just as quickly, the door to the farmhouse was broken down, and the occupants dragged outside.

"Please, please don't hurt us," one of the women pleaded. Another was shrieking continuously, whether from the loss of a loved one or from fright, the nomads didn't know, and didn't care. When Orin rode up, he interrogated the oldest among them.

"I am T'mith. I own these lands, this house. This is my family, except for... except for my other son whom you've killed. Please, just take what you want, and go."

"We come and go at our own pleasure," Orin answered tersely. One part of him was pleased that the operation had been successful. But another part was displeased that two of the Kaskir had been killed and two others wounded. It annoyed him on some basic level that people who were so greatly outnumbered, so clearly unable to defend their property, would still put up a fight. And then would ask that their lives be spared.

If these people valued life so much, thought Orin, they should have offered to pay tribute or surrendered. And if they preferred resistance to surrender, then these men should have fought to the death.

And by resisting, by losing one or more of their own, they had brought their own end upon themselves, Orin figured. For to let the two remaining men go would be to have two enemies that would be enemies of the Kaskir forever. There can be no blood feud if there are no male family members surviving.

“You should have thought of how this would end before you shot your first arrow at us. Now your women who were ladies will be our slaves. And your line ends,” Orin told him. Turning to one of the Kaskir, he said, “Bring the women. For the men....” He drew his forefinger across his neck.

A scrawny old man came up to them unnoticed.

“Please, please,” he said, “Take word to my kinsmen that I am here and have been here all these many years, a prisoner and slave.” And then he collapsed, crying, on the ground.

Orin just stared at him and rode on.

But Kurguz had seen this and was interested. He hadn't wanted to come along on the raid at all, but some of the boys in his aul had noticed him hanging back. They had begun teasing him, gently at first, then with more seriousness. With no desire to become an outcast, he had given in.

“What did that old man say to you?” he asked Orin.

“What old man? Oh, that slave.... Nothing unusual. Just that he'd been a slave for a long time. Perhaps he mistook me for his tribesman, someone who would rescue him.” Orin looked at Kurguz. Orin had almost forgotten he'd brought Kurguz along. The boy must have been hanging back during the attack. But Orin saw Kurguz as becoming his advisor some day, and to do that Kurguz would have to at least see what war was like even if he didn't participate in it.

“Are we going to rescue him?” Kurguz asked.

“Why would we bother doing that?” asked Orin. “They're *kul*,” pronouncing the word for slaves as if it was a great insult. And perhaps it was. “These are men who chose not to die fighting for their freedom, but instead to live as someone's property. What kind of men are those?”

“I don't know that it's always that simple,” said Kurguz. Perhaps he was thinking about Chodura. “Sometimes people have no chance to fight, and then no chance to escape. I'll bet some of them at least are no different from us. Want to bet?”

Orin smiled but didn't take the ploy. "Kurguz," he said, "the wolf doesn't attack the shepherd so that he can free the sheep." Then he smiled again. "But I can see how it would be interesting to have those who were free now be slaves, and those who were slaves now be free. All right, pick out those whom you would free. You have my permission to do so."



In her yurt, Ailana was tenderly pulling the covers over a small sleeping child. Orin sat watching her.

"We will raise him as our own," he said.

Ailana looked at her husband. There was still a sadness in her eyes.

"And I will love him as our own. But... our birth children may still be alive. Back in the Homeland. And instead of looking for lost children, we're creating more."

Orin had been feeling. It had been a good day, another good day in a string of good days, and now he just wanted to bed his wife. But he could see wanted to talk, seriously, about their future. Orin sighed.

"You know we can't go back. Not yet."

"Where does it end, Orin?" Ailana asked. "You have brought us enough plunder to see us through the winter and beyond. You have punished the farmers for taking the pasturelands. What else do you want to do here? Let's just pick up camp and find some other winter pasture."

Orin shook his head. "We can't return the way we came without crossing the path of the Jersaks. Nor can we continue west through the Empire. The north is too mountainous and will be too cold. The south is an unknown. If we went south without knowing where we were going, we could wander till the winter's fury hit, and then where would we be? This plunder won't help us if we're in a *dzut* like last winter, with repeated snow and ice that keep the animals from grazing."

Ailana replied softly, "Yet we can't stay here all winter. We'll be on the run from the D'narian army the entire time. Eventually they'll find our auls. And so will the Jersaks."

Orin didn't say anything and so Ailana tried a different argument.

"Also, as you've told me yourself, the farmers are moving to the city for protection. There will be fewer and fewer targets. Especially after the raid on that farmstead today. Every farm woman will think, 'If the raiders could attack a walled, defended farm, kill the men, and carry off the women, then the same thing could happen to us.' And they will talk their husbands into leaving. If their husbands are not already convinced."

"You may be overestimating the ability of women to talk their husbands into something," Orin said with a smile.

"Am I?" said Ailana, smiling, as she put her arms around Orin's neck.

"You might be right. And I will send riders to the south to look for new pastures. But I have one more attack to make before we leave. One payment to D'nar's soldiers in memory of Jinji. One final payment to their Governor for the disrespect they had shown us. And that's enough talking for tonight," he finished, pulling her towards him.

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Sebuk looked over his army, or rather Turan Khan's army, as Sebuk served at Turan's pleasure – a situation that Sebuk planned on fixing some time soon. There were about 2000 in all, about 1500 Jersaks and 500 Burkuts. He had seen larger armies, even armies 10, 20 times as large, but this was all Turan could or would raise. Aywan, the Burkut, should have been able to raise more from among his own people, but had kept coming up with excuses as to why he hadn't been able to. But Turan didn't seem to be worried. Should this force be successful, Turan had said, it would be easier to get more clans, more tribes to fight under his *tamga*. And, by the time, they had reached D'nar, they could increase their ranks by picking up support from additional nomads. He knew the Kaskir were between them and D'nar, and they would be the first conquest on this expedition. That two Kaskir women had killed two of the Jersaks, and wounded another, had made the men only more eager for battle.

Once, Turan had offered their chief, Alban, a chance to join him, but Alban had refused. Now they would destroy him, use his

camp for supplies, his women for entertainment, and force his surviving warriors to join.

It had taken some convincing for Turan to make Sebuk his military commander, but it had been done. And Sebuk knew that his tactical skills and the speed of his mounted archers would hit their enemies like a pack of wolves bringing down a deer.

## *Chapter 11*

Once again, Orin led his 100-man group over the hills of northern D'naria. This land had once been prime farmland, but the Kaskir raids had scared off most of the farmers. After a couple of farming villages were destroyed, and then when the fortified compound was taken, there were few who did not take the hint. The farmers had scattered, some going further north into the forests, others leaving D'naria for other provinces, still others heading for the safety of the walls of D'nar.

But Orin knew the Kaskirs were not alone out here. There were Imperial cavalry in the area. It had been their task to locate the Kaskirs. Locate them, or their camp, and destroy them. But Orin had kept them guessing. Days and days of patrols, and all the cavalry had turned up were horse tracks that either petered out or ended abruptly at a stream. Orin suspected that the Imperial soldiers felt frustrated, bored, and sore from sitting in the saddle so long. They'd be looking for luck – eager to grab onto any perceived opportunity without thinking too hard upon it.

“Orin Beg,” the scout began, addressing Orin with the title of respect due a chief, “100 riders coming up from the south – soldiers.”

“Well, time to leave,” said one of the men. Seeing Orin smile, he continued, “isn't it?” They had been riding around all morning, as if looking for something, but Orin hadn't told the men what he was looking for.

“We have 100 here as well, more than enough, plus Arslan has another 100 nearby,” answered Orin with a smile. He turned to the scout, and said, “Arslan is on the other end of this valley. Go tell him that I will be leading 100 soldiers through it. And prepare to do as we had discussed.”

This would be it, his final parting gift to D'nar. To another man, he said, “Eder is behind us, about 10 arrow-flights. Tell him to spread his men out, as I had instructed him.”

Then, turning to one of his lieutenants, Orin gave further instructions. Then he selected five men and then rode off to position the others.

Orin and the five Kaskir rode directly towards the soldiers, making no attempt to disguise their presence. When they had gotten within 50 yards, close enough for the soldiers to get a good look at them, his men began getting nervous, wondering what Orin had in mind.

"I'm much glad to see you, Captain," said Orin. "There is a band of outlaw nomads camping at the other end of the valley. They are laden with plunder, including pack horses that they have stolen from my people."

"How many are there?"

"Oh, about 30," Orin looked over the soldiers. "You have more, but perhaps not enough, as these are fierce warriors whose blood thirst has made them rampage around the countryside. I have heard tales of their foul deeds and they frighten me," he continued. "Their leader is one named Orin, certainly the most wicked of all nomads." The lie came even more easily to Orin's lips than he had imagined. But then he remembered that his water bag had a stitched wolf on it, the sign of the Kaskir. He subtly turned his horse to keep the water bag out of the soldiers' sight. He wondered if there were any other tell-tale giveaways. This little ruse could easily become much more chancy than he had intended.

"Well, they don't frighten me," said the commander, V'ner. "I have more than enough men to take care of 30 renegade nomads. And it is indeed this Orin's band that we are here to find. Will you lead me to where they are?"

"Well..." Orin hesitated as if making up his mind. Then he said, "Yes, yes I will! Imperial soldiers and nomads should work together! Follow me!"

"Wait!" said V'ner. "Shouldn't we approach them stealthily?"

"No, that won't work, they'll have posted scouts. Better to attack them in a sudden, overwhelming rush."

Orin turned his horse, and signaling to his party, led off on a gallop down the valley. V'ner watched them go, hesitating.... Then figuring this would be the only opportunity he might have to find the bandits, he ordered his men followed the six nomads.

Orin could guess what the soldiers were thinking: that they would charge right into the damn barbarians and smash them to pieces. They would be thinking that all that riding around would pay off, and they'd all be heroes. Realizing that the soldiers' breastplates, backplates, and shields were heavy, and these slowed them down, Orin avoided getting too far ahead of the soldiers. For their part, the weight of the armor comforted the soldiers, gave them a feeling of security. It was as good a protection against enemy arrows as was likely to be found.

As Orin neared the far end of the valley, he and his men speeded up, then disappeared between the hills on the sides. Orin could imagine hearing V'ner swearing to himself, thinking, typical nomad cowards, they'll run from a fight. And then, just as the soldiers must have been wondering where the group of 30 raiders was, the Kaskirs gave them an answer.

Fifty arrows flew from the hillside. Aimed not at the armored cavalymen, but at their horses. The leading riders among the cavalry quickly found themselves on the ground, as horses faltered and fell. The charge fell into disarray, as others of the cavalymen tried to veer around their fallen comrades and the wounded and dying horses. Commander V'ner was one of those downed. He picked himself up off the ground to see another more arrows coming from the far end of the valley. Many of the still-mounted soldiers turned about and head back the way they'd come, in full retreat.

Annoyed with himself for riding into a trap, and cursing that the Army had failed to provide armor for the horses, V'ner ordered the dismounted men to form up in rows, shields facing the nomads. He prepared to give the order for a foot charge, when he realized that his men had begun to drop -- shot by arrows coming from the other hillside. Shot through the legs, necks, and wherever they were unprotected by their armor.

Shrill war cries filled the air, further unnerving the soldiers. And while V'ner tried to come to a decision as to what to do, while his men were being shot at from three sides, some of his soldiers weren't waiting -- they were deciding for themselves. They dropped their shields and began sprinting back down the valley, seeking safety from the arrows.

V'ner yelled at them to come back, to stand their ground, but men in headlong, mindless flight don't stop to listen to reason. Probably thinking it was better to do something before he lost any more men, he gave the order to charge directly forward. Orin, expecting this, responded by ordering his own men back. And so, much to V'ner's surprise, the nomads melted away, riding off, sending only a few more flurries of arrows.

Then V'ner turned back around, to the other end of the valley, the direction from which he had come. On foot and on horse, they retreated, following the men who had fled to safety. But all he found were more bodies. There had been no escape at all. V'ner now knew he had been surrounded on all four sides. But with the nomads having pulled back, he figured he could still escape with his life and those of his remaining men. V'ner ordered the men to round up whatever horses they could, to ride double if necessary.

Watching all this, Orin estimated that V'ner had about 50 men still in fighting condition. He knew he had handed the Imperial cavalry an embarrassing defeat. A defeat made more humiliating given that his Kaskirs were largely unscratched. A defeat that the D'narian would have trouble explaining to his superiors. But Orin wasn't finished with them. He let V'ner and his men feel better temporarily, let them feel glad to be alive, let them think the worst was over. He did this because there is no greater blow to morale than to destroy hope. And so, having allowed the soldiers that bit of hope, that bit of false hope, Orin gave the order that would dash it.

Orin wasn't close enough to V'ner to see the expression on his face, but he could guess what it looked like. V'ner would be realizing right about now that the nomads had not ridden off for good as he had hoped, but had simply regrouped for the next stage of the attack. The Kaskir now began to charge. Now V'ner had no options. He ordered the doubled-up riders to dismount. Then he ordered a countercharge at the nomads. The two forces rode towards each other, to a monumental collision, the nomads shooting their arrows the whole time.

V'ner held his own lance ready once more to plunge into the body of an enemy. But, again, Orin was thinking ahead of him. Just before the point of collision, the nomads simply parted and

rode right around and past the cavalry. V'ner called a halt and wheeled the cavalry around again, chasing the nomads back down the valley.

V'ner was still anxious to retrieve something from this day. He still thought that if he could get the damned nomads to stand and fight like honorable soldiers, he'd show them! But, in the meantime, the Kaskir kept shooting, and V'ner kept losing men. And Orin could see, as V'ner could as well, that not all of V'ner's men had wheeled around with him -- some had kept on going.

And now Orin closed the trap fully. He had led V'ner to believe that when V'ner saw a large number of nomads regrouped at the end of the valley, that this included the ones who had been on the hillsides. But now Orin ordered his remaining men on the ridge, plus Arslan's 100, to open up on the cavalry from both sides of the valley. Arrows showered down upon the D'narians.

Once again, V'ner's horse was hit and faltered, once again throwing him upon the ground. Orin watched him rise unsteadily rose to his feet. By now, V'ner had few men left mounted, and these simply kept on going through the end of the valley. As the arrows continued to rain down on him and his unmounted men, V'ner, figuring the situation was about as hopeless as a situation could get, raised his arms in surrender.

Orin gave a sigh of satisfaction. He needed some of the soldiers to surrender. And a cornered foe is often the deadliest, he knew. "Arslan, have your men help Eder's group find and kill any of the cavalymen who had ridden off. No prisoners. We have enough here. Meet me downriver when you're done," he commanded.

Mercy and practicality had contested in Orin's mind, and practicality had won. Orin looked at the defeated soldiers before him. There were about 20 still standing, perhaps another 20 on the ground.

He rode over to V'ner. V'ner looked up at him with an expression that Orin was unable to fathom. But it didn't matter. V'ner -- and the others -- were his now. "Order your men, all who can walk, to form into two columns. And leave your weapons on the ground."

V'ner turned to give the order. And in a few minutes, the nomads were marching the men out of the valley. V'ner turned

around, looking at the wounded, and called to Orin, "What are you planning to do with the wounded?"

Orin shook his head, and simply said, "I'm sorry."

It was still light when Arslan and Eder caught up with Orin. "Any get away?" asked Orin. "I don't think so," answered Eder. "Some tried to outrace us, some tried to hide, it didn't make much difference."

Now for the next step, thought Orin.



"Hold here," Orin commanded. Over the next rise was Fort 2. Perhaps another 50-100 soldiers. But it was a solidly constructed fort, with protection for archers, and could be taken by frontal assault only with great casualties. And Orin planned on avoiding casualties as much as possible.

The sun was going down when the fort commander saw 30 men advancing towards him on foot. It appeared to be a party of nomads under guard by a larger party of soldiers. A voice he recognized as that of Commander V'ner hailed the fort.

"Who comes?"

"This is patrol Number One, Commander V'ner officer-in-charge. We've lost our horses, but have captured a bunch of the barbarians. Request permission to come inside."

The gate to the fort was opened and the party proceeded to come inside. Once they were in the gateway though, the fort commander realized his mistake -- that most of the soldiers were just nomads in disguise, and both the "captured" nomads and the phony soldiers were armed.

"Sound the alarm! Close the gate. All men repulse the enemy!" he cried.

But the Kaskir stood their ground at the gate and wouldn't let it close. And, as the commander watched with horror, some 200 other nomad horsemen rode into view, up to the fort, and began streaming in through the open gate.

In a relatively short time, most of the fighting was over. A few of the soldiers had taken refuge within the storerooms. Orin thought briefly of ignoring them, but he wanted to leave a path of destruction that the Governor could not ignore. Eder had the

same thought and had already begun moving in that direction with some of his men. They cautiously moved up to the doorway. In older days, Orin would have led from the front and been the first through the doorway. And he still would not order any of his men to do what he himself would not do. But now Orin was learning to leave more of the actual doing to others.

Moving quickly, Eder darted inside, bow at the ready. Several of the men followed him. A few arrows from the soldiers flew into the walls by the doorway. These were largely silenced by answering arrows from the Kaskirs. But there was one soldier left. The room was dim and Eder had to give himself some time to adjust to the lack of light. Then he dashed forwards, taking up position behind a post. As he did so, an arrow hit the post. But Eder had chosen a good hiding place, the post being just wide enough to protect him. Still, as he stood there, he could feel the sweat dripping down his back.

Eder had seen the shooter while making his dash. The shooter was in a protected position, making it difficult, if not impossible for anyone but Eder to get a clear shot at him. And, to take the shot, Eder would have had to look around the post and risk getting an arrow in the head. Nor could he take a chance on retreating from his position, should the idea have come to him – which it didn't.

Eder stood edge-on to the post, with his shoulder leaning on it, hoping that the soldier would be getting anxious and over-eager to launch his next arrow. But the soldier wasn't so accommodating. *Boq!* He cursed.

Then, a thought hit him and he extended his arms out in front of him, with the bow more or less aimed in the direction of the soldier, while still keeping his body behind the post. The soldier did not avail himself of this small target and kept his arrow nocked. Now, no more than a second later, while the soldier was expecting to see Eder's head appear behind the bow, he leaned backwards and stuck his head out the opposite side of the post. In the soldier's momentary confusion and indecision, Eder adjusted his aim and let fly. The arrow caught the soldier in the face, killing him.

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The nomads had taken a few casualties, but Orin was pleased that, twice in one day, he had beaten and disgraced the Army of the Empire. Orin found Commander V'ner sitting on the ground, looking disconsolate. His guard stood over him, ready to execute the soldier if Orin commanded it. V'ner looked up.

“I cooperated with you so you would spare me and my men, but I regret it now. I cannot live with myself. Kill me now. Please.” But Orin simply turned away.

“Arslan,” Orin called, “set the soldiers free and let them walk back to the city.”

“My chief, I will do whatever you command, but consider this,” began Arslan. “If we let these men get back, they will provide information to the others on our tactics and capabilities. This could mean more casualties next time. If even one more Kaskir dies than is necessary, would it have been worth it? For myself, I would not give an entire army of these for the life of one Kaskir.”

Orin looked away, in the direction of the prisoners, then out over the Steppes. Arslan waited. Orin thought about what he had said to Ailana, about this being their last raid. But what would the future hold? Perhaps they would be forced to fight the army again. There was no one with him that he could trust to read the portents, and even those were fallible. After all, the portents had been favorable – or so they thought – before his first fateful trip to D'nar. What to do? He had given his pledge to V'ner that he would not kill them.

Finally, Orin turned back to Arslan. “You're right. But having given my pledge, I cannot kill them. Tie them up. We'll take them back with us as slaves.”

Orin looked over the fort. This would be nice as a base of operations were they to decide to stay, but it could not stand against the might of the D'narian army -- and it certainly would become the army's target if he stayed here. No, they'd strip the fort bare, taking all of the provisions and weapons, and all of the horses, of course, do whatever damage they could, and be on their way.

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“These raids on isolated villages are all well and good, and will give us some supplies for the winter, but they are nothing compared to the riches of the city,” said Eder.

They sat outside Orin’s yurt: Orin and his captains, Eder, Arslan, and the others -- discussing their plans.

Orin shook his head at Eder’s implication, “When we were there, we saw great walls with archers on the walls, and their army ready to defend those walls. I don't...” he started, and then deciding to take a firmer tone, said. “No, the city is beyond our grasp.”

“I’ve been thinking about it,” said Eder. “People are going to be trying to seek safety in the city, many with heavily loaded pack animals and carts carrying their possessions. With more continuing to arrive and some having to camp outside the walls, I’ll venture that space inside the city becomes short and even more will be forced to camp outside.” Eder sketched out a plan for a night attack on the city environs.

Arslan was dubious. “What if they send out their entire cavalry? I don't relish a pitched battle.”

“Neither do I,” said Eder. “But I’ve heard from our prisoners that General J'nost has become cautious with age. And he's a foot soldier, not a horse soldier. He will hold back the bulk of his cavalry to guard his infantry.”

But others raised different objections. Orin listened carefully. Despite his not all-together forgotten promise to Ailana, if an opportunity presented itself, he would not pass it up. This was an interesting plan. And Eder’s enthusiasm for an attack on D’nar was clear. But he could see that even Eder knew his plan had problems. For Eder’s part, he was realizing it was tougher being a general than he had figured.

Finally, Orin said, “I like the idea of a night attack. But before we can launch an attack in the dark, we’ll have to become a good deal more familiar with the layout of the camps and the surrounding area. Also, we should find out the exact location of the army units in the area. Eder, send out some men to bring back as much information as they can -- without getting caught. We’ll discuss this again when we have more information to work with.”

He called out, and a servant refilled their kumiss bowls from a leather bag hanging by the yurt door.

Orin thought about the servant for a moment. The richest of the Kaskir, meaning those with the largest herds, had always hired servants and other workers to help out. These had been people who had no herds of their own. Now these workers could be replaced by slaves. And he suspected some of the aksakals were already doing that. But what would happen to these workers who were now either out of work or forced to accept much less payment for their services? Do the poor just get poorer? But then he put the concern out of his mind – he had other things to worry about.

Would the Empire send additional troops to help D'naria? And what about the Jersaks? The armed reconnaissance party that Ailana had decoyed away from the camp... why had they been there? Orin knew that Turan Khan was ambitious, but was he planning on attacking the Empire? Orin considered. Perhaps he should indeed take the Kaskirs to safety elsewhere, perhaps in the south. But no, he decided. He was not his father, a sick man who would run from a threat. He had made impotent the D'narian provincial army – he could handle the Jersaks.

## *Chapter 12*

Eder's scouts did not come back with good news. Rather than information about D'naria, they returned with warning that the Jersaks were massing for an attack. Had they been close by the entire time? What had they had been waiting for? Knowledge of the location of the Kaskir camp? Or word of something in D'nar?

Orin gathered his commanders in his yurt. Arslan, Eder, and some others, including Kurguz.

"How many?" asked Arslan.

"At least 2000," answered Eder.

"Not all Jersak?" asked Orin.

"Perhaps 1500 Jersak, 500 Burkut, according to my scouts. It's an army of conquest."

"Turan is building an empire, like the old Turk khagans. Suggestions?" The numbers were double what Orin had believed they had. He had blundered in not figuring that the Burkut would ride with Turan, or that Turan could convince so many men to voluntarily leave their families and auls and follow him into unknown territory.

"We can't outrun him," said Eder. "He has brought no women, no children, no livestock other than horses. And we'd be loaded down with the plunder from our raids."

"Yet they have a force four times our size," Kurguz noted.

"Looks like we've stayed in D'naria too long."

"We can continue west, further into the Empire," Eder suggested.

"So far, we have only run into the Empire's border patrols," noted Arslan. "Should we go deeper, we will run into much more sizable forces. I would rather face the Jersak here on familiar ground, then face an unknown enemy on unknown ground, with the Jersak at our back."

"Arslan is right," said Orin. "We need to face the Jersak. We will defensively position ourselves on favorable ground where we

can reduce or negate their advantage in numbers. And we will move the camp yet again. The Jersak probably know where we are, as we know where they are.”

“Have you a place in mind?” Eder asked.

Orin did. Orin knew the Kaskir were looking to him to lead them out of this crisis. Their fate would rest upon his back. And it would not be easy. The Jersaks were nomads, like the Kaskir. They had similar ponies, similar weapons, similar skills -- and there were more of them. Besides this, their general, Sebuk, was reported to be as sly as a deer. He and Turan had won some notable victories, including one over the Burkut khan, Bakar. Bakar had been reputed to be a clever one, though not a military tactician, and his death, the death of one who had threatened to kill Orin for abducting Ailana, was actually one less headache for Orin. But Orin had to respect the Jersaks’ ability in pulling it off.

Orin wondered, briefly, if he was up to the challenge of facing the Jersaks. After all, his own father had backed down, which was why the Kaskir were out here in D’naria in the first place. But then he put the doubt out of his mind. There was no one else. And anyway, he thought, when he died he preferred that it be because of decisions he had made, not because of decisions he had to follow that someone else had made.

And so it was there, to the north, where the forests began, that he took his warriors – making sure that the Jersaks knew where he was.



Kurguz felt strangely excited thinking about the upcoming battle. He looked forward to it, even though there was a much greater chance of death than there had been on the raids he had mostly avoided. And he wondered if he could actually kill someone.

He had felt uneasy about the raids. Before the wheel had turned for his mother, she had instructed him in ethics. But the shamanism of his fellow Kaskirs had no place for a universal ethics – it was strictly an us-versus-them way of looking at things. As it was for the Jersaks.

Kurguz remembered a previous encounter with them. The Kaskirs had returned from their summer migration to their customary winter pastures. But when they arrived....

Fifteen Kaskir men, including Kurguz, driving their pony herds ahead of the aul wagons and the sheep herds driven by the women, had come upon a Jersak aul, and Jersak herds. Several of the Jersaks rode out to meet the Kaskirs.

“This is our land. It has been ours for generations,” one of the Kaskir shouted to them.

“It is ours now. We have been given this land by Turan Khan. You will have to find other winter pastures,” one of the Jersaks arrogantly replied.

Angry words were exchanged, swords were drawn, arrows nocked.... Kurguz, forgetting his Buddhist teachings and caught up in the pack-fever of the moment, was as ready to do battle as anyone else. But their aksakal had ridden up.

“Put up your weapons,” he commanded his people.

The Kaskirs obeyed, however reluctantly. Then, when out of earshot of the Jersaks, one of the younger Kaskirs asked, “Why did we back down? We could have driven them off!”

“It was a deliberate provocation,” the aksakal replied. “As with the Kaskir, the Jersak recognize that each man bears the weight of his tribe on his shoulders. They would not have challenged you so unless they were prepared to back up that challenge in force. You saw only a handful of Jersaks, but Turan Khan can call on thousands of Jersaks to defend their auls. Claiming that a Kaskir had drawn blood first, Turan Khan would have destroyed us all.”



Orin looked around him now. He had roughly 500 men, all good horsemen and warriors, lined up in multiple rows across the width of a narrow pastureland. On both sides, the pasture was bordered by woods. The north side was a great forest. On the south side the woods were much smaller, and petered out further towards the south. But it was still thick enough alongside the pasture to prevent any kind of coordinated Jersak charge from that

side. To the east lay the great grasslands. To the west lay foothills leading into the mountains, an escape route if necessary, though it couldn't serve as more than a temporary respite. They'd be unable to protect their camp from there. No, they'd just have to defeat the Jersaks here, in this field.

But it was a good spot. The narrowness of the pastureland would allow no more than 100 Jersak to charge abreast. The rest of them would have to bunch up behind the first 100. They'd be effectively out of action till the first 100 fell. And the forest would keep them from being encircled.

Orin's scouts reported at least 1000 men massed at the entrance to the pasture, still a couple of arrow-flights away. Eder, Kurguz, and some other of the Kaskir lieutenants waited near Orin. It was Kurguz's voice that broke into Orin's thoughts.

"What are they waiting for?"

Orin shook his head. "So, you don't think they're afraid of us," Orin asked, smiling. "It's curious.... The position of the sun, over the forest and offering no advantage to either side, is more favorable now than later when it'll be further west and in their eyes..."

Eder said, "Unless they carry metal shields like the city cavalry, that reflect the sun."

Orin answered, "They never have before."

Eder wondered, "Perhaps they're just not as smart as we've thought."

Orin shook his head. "Turan and Sebuk have defeated Turan's Jersak rivals as well as the Burkut Bakar Khan. Granted that Bakar was distracted, scouring the Steppe looking for me and Ailana, but it was still well done. Besides, it's never wise to underestimate your opponent. And, if there's only 1000 in front of us, where are the rest of his men?"

Then Orin was quiet, still thinking about the sun. "At-Tatai!" he said suddenly. "They're taking their time because part of their army is coming around the forest, through the foothills behind us." Directing one of his scouts, he said, "Take another man with you and ride hard into the foothills, there," he pointed, "and look out for Jersaks. Take a standard and signal us immediately if you see any sizable force."

Orin, as well as the rest of the Kaskir, watched the riders get increasingly smaller in the distance. One rider stopped near to the foothills. The other rode up one of the higher foothills, though it was fairly steep, and disappeared from sight. Suddenly, the rider halfway out began waving the standard. And then the rider began heading back towards them at a gallop. In another instant, the furthest rider appeared, coming back down the slope. But the signal had been enough for Orin to begin cursing and giving his captains new orders.

“Men, this is no longer favorable ground. Find your way through the woods and we’ll meet on the other side.”

With that, they all turned south, into the thick woods, picking their way through the trees as best they could. “I hate forests,” Orin muttered.

The men plunged out of the woods, onto the edge of the Great Plain. Singly, and in groups, with the two scout riders the last ones out. The riders milled around, trying to get back into some kind of formation.

“We’ll have to find another defensive position. It’ll be a while before the Jersaks realize where we’ve gone....” Orin stopped short. Close by, on the southeast, was a large dust cloud. The Jersak army!? How could that be? Orin thought. They were just to the north, waiting at the eastern entrance to the pasture.

Arslan had the same thought. “How could they have gotten here so fast?”

Eder pointed to the west. “We can escape through that pass, between those hills.”

Orin wheeled his horse around, ready to give the order, then hesitated.

“What’s wrong? That looks like our only way out,” called Eder over the noise of the horses and men.

“I don’t like it,” yelled back Orin. “This Sebuk is not stupid. Why would he leave us with such an obvious escape route?” responded Orin.

Arslan looked at the pass again. “If he has any men there in the hills, even a small number, they can block our exit. We’d be goat food.”

Orin called back, “Turan can’t have men enough for a force on the east end of the pasture, send another around to the western

foothills, and still have a force large enough to raise this big a dust cloud.”

“And,” Arslan added, “why raise a dust cloud? Why not keep his men hidden?”

“We’re going at that dust cloud. Form up. Arrowhead.” yelled Orin. *And if I'm wrong, we're all dead.*

Drummers beat a rhythm as Orin began leading the men off towards the dust cloud, a 500-man arrowhead forming around him.

The dust cloud got closer. No men, and thus no targets, were yet visible. And, Orin was thinking, no arrows were being shot at them, a good sign -- unless of course the Jersaks were just waiting for a better shot.

And then there they were. About 15 Jersaks riding back and forth, leading horses with scrub brush tied to their tails, raising a dust cloud. Some had halted to get a better look at what was oncoming. Then all 15 took off. Most failed to make it. The Kaskir continued at a gallop, their escape route clear.

Orin headed his troops towards a fording place on the Karasu, a tributary of the Kizyl Darya. When they had crossed, Orin held up, and ordered a defensive position be taken. This would be as good a place as any to switch to the spare horses they always brought with them, and give all some time to rest. And if the Jersaks decided to attack, the river would slow them down while his men, under cover, could pick them off from the opposite bank. But he knew that Sebuk would be too smart to try that, too smart to waste men like that. In fact, Orin wondered just what Sebuk would next try to do.

Soon enough, the Jersak army appeared. They had gathered their disparate parts and were a sizable force, but no larger than the 2000 that Eder’s scouts had originally reported.

The Jersaks halted just beyond bow-shot range, on the opposite side of the river. Orin could see some activity taking place, with some riders, passing back and forth. He could see some other riders going up and down the river looking for another fording place. Finally, a single rider came slowly forth, arms in the air. “I come to talk,” he cried as he crossed the river.

“Why don't I just kill him now,” offered Arslan, as he nocked an arrow.

“Don't shoot him,” commanded Orin. “Bring him in.”

Arslan ordered two of his men out into the river where they met the rider and checked him for weapons. Then the three continued on back to Orin.

The rider approached Orin and bowed without dismounting. “My lord Turan Khan is much taken with your tactical skill and bravery, and that of your men,” he said, looking around, “and wishes to meet with you.”

He bowed again. Orin considered this. Well, why not, he thought. “I too am impressed with his ingenuity and skill. You may tell him that I am agreeable to meeting him. He can meet me in the middle of the river at a time of his choosing.”

The emissary said, “His highness Turan, Khan of the Jersaks and the Burkuts, son of...”

“In the middle of the river,” repeated Orin, “otherwise no talk.”

The emissary stopped in mid-phrase. “Yes, then,” he said, “it is agreed. In the middle of the river.” The emissary departed.

“This should be interesting,” Orin remarked.



While Orin watched, nine Jersaks approached the shore of the river. Two separated from the others and began to move out to midstream.

“Arslan, you're in charge if anything happens to me. Eder, you and I are going to a meeting.”

Leaving his men on the riverbank watching warily, Orin and Eder approached the two Jersaks. The river was fairly shallow at this point, without much current, and the four were able to converse fairly well.

“I am Turan, Khan of the Jersaks. This is my *sirdar*, Sebuk,” Turan said, indicating his general, a compact, broad-chested man. Turan himself, thinner and taller than his *sirdar*, gave an impression of authority, and more than a little grandeur.

Orin wondered why Turan and Sebuk felt the need for both of them to be there. Was it because Turan relied on Sebuk for

diplomatic advice as well as military command, or did Sebuk want to come because he didn't trust Turan?

"I am Orin, chief of the Kaskir. This is my advisor, Eder."

"I will not waste words, so we can get out of this stream," Turan said. "The Jersaks are nomads like yourselves, and like yourselves have often fought with other nomad tribes. But unlike Jersak chiefs of the past, I intend building a powerful confederation. This confederation will be able to ensure its own prosperity and security through its size and power, which will dwarf that of its enemies, and eventually even that of this Empire. It is told in the prophecies there will come a man who will command all those who live in felt tents. I am that man."

As Turan spoke, Orin couldn't help but think that the man was giving a speech, a speech he had often given before.

"I first thought to incorporate the Kaskir into the Confederation by force," Turan went on. "But now I see that your men are better trained than I had guessed, and better led than I had guessed, and so I ask now for your voluntary entry into the Confederation.

"With Kaskir support, the Confederation will be able to sack D'nar and bring to ourselves the vast riches of the city. Though the city walls are strong, the city people are weak. Taking D'nar will not be easy, but it is a reward well worthy of the risk. And when we succeed, the storytellers will long tell of our exploits."

"I take your meaning to be I subordinate myself to you as the leader of the confederation?" Orin asked.

"Yes, but you will still be the chief of your own uru. My position will simply be that of providing general strategy," Turan answered.

"I would expect," Sebuk joined in, addressing himself to Orin, "you and I would work together to finalize and carry out the details of the campaign against D'nar."

"You have a plan, then?" asked Orin. What he was hearing sounded better than what he had expected, but if they intended taking the city -- a city he had already given up as invincible -- he wanted to hear how they were going to do it. He also wanted to draw Sebuk out more, to better gauge the man. Sebuk spoke in measured tones, though with a suppressed excitement.

"We can address the details later," said Sebuk.

Turan, seeing something in Orin's eyes, quickly said, "We have even more than a plan, we have a spy inside D'nar."

"And," Sebuk added, not to be outdone, "we have a black shaman."

Orin stirred uneasily in the saddle. "The help of demons and evil spirits is not something I look forward to having."

Turan Khan continued, after a sidelong glance at Sebuk, "It is unlikely we will need the help of the shaman. The city's troops are unused to serious combat against a strong force, as you have seen from your raids, and the city is unlikely to receive any help from the Empire. We can defeat them militarily. And our spy inside the city will enable us to enter it."

Orin replied, "I will think about what you have said. I will let you know when I have decided and then we can meet again."

The two Jersaks looked at each other. Than Turan nodded, and the pair turned their horses, going back to their own side, as did Orin and Eder.

"What do you think?" Orin asked Eder.

Eder turned and looked back at the Jersaks. "I wouldn't trust them at all, but I don't see much other choice."

Orin nodded. "If you can't kill the wolf, then you must embrace him."



It was again on neutral ground that Turan and Orin met for a second meeting. Neither yet trusted the other. Now the two men discussed the details of their joining. Turan would be the overall leader, and would make all decisions concerning the joint force. Orin would continue to command the Kaskir, and make all decisions that solely concerned the Kaskir. Orin would pledge loyalty to Turan, vowing never to take up arms against him. Orin wanted the Kaskir to operate separately. Turan agreed to that, though he planned on integrating them more and more into his existing force. He viewed the Kaskir as one would view an adopted child, taken into the home, becoming part of the family structure, and forgetting about life before adoption.

He thought he had met Orin's voiced concerns, but he could feel Orin still holding back. There was more here not voiced. But Turan was saving an inducement with which to overcome Orin's final objection.

"We are basically in agreement on the arrangement, but I do have a general concern," said Orin.

Ah, here it comes, thought Turan.

"You are bound on a path for glory, and I am willing to ride with you on that path. But I wonder if we have enough force to accomplish your goals. We have only 2500 among us. Perhaps we should raise more warriors from among other nomad clans."

"Twenty-five hundred is more than sufficient with which to sack D'nar. And others will join us after this first victory. Have not empires been built with fewer? Are there not stories of how great leaders started with a handful of men, then the handful turned into hundreds, then the hundreds turned into thousands. They were like wolves and their enemies like sheep. And we will follow the same path. Our shaman, Eeren, has foreseen it."

Orin had to smile a bit at the analogy -- it was one that had occurred to him too, as he had raided the D'narian farmlands, his band carrying the wolf *gol* of the Kaskir. But he was skeptical about this Eeren. He would ask his own shaman, Ulkan, and the other omen-readers of the Kaskir, what the real portents were.

And then Turan made his final move. "The position of sirdar requires both a talent for military tactics and complete loyalty to me. As of this moment, Sebuk is my sirdar. But he has no birthright to this position. As our forces grow, someone else might prove more capable in this role. Who can say?"

Now what is it? Turan wondered. He's still holding back. I do still have one arrow left, or should I save it for when I really need it... He left that thought unfinished. "I sense there is still something you have not voiced," Turan said.

"Yes, you are right. Last winter, a band of raiders attacked our camp while most of the men were off hunting. They killed and wounded several of my people, including women, and made off with a number of our children, including my own. It was a moonless night, and amidst the confusion of the attack, there were no clear descriptions of the attackers. But there was a sense they were Jersaks. I make no accusations, but, as you can understand,

we want our children back. And the families of those who were killed want retribution for the murders.’

“I had heard of this attack. And I believe the attack may have indeed been done by Jersaks, but by a renegade aul that went *kazak* and acknowledge no khan. I swear to you that no one under me had anything to do with this attack. We are now brothers in a new alliance and I would not lie to my brother. I promise you too, that after D’nar, I will do whatever I can to find the ones responsible and help you restore your lost children.”

“Thank you, Turan Khan. I appreciate your offer.”



“I believe I have convinced Orin to join us,” Turan Khan told Sebuk as they sat in Turan’s yurt. Alone among the Jersaks, he had brought a yurt, carried around on a wagon in order to save the time in setting it up at each encampment.

“That is good news, I suppose, though we outnumbered him 4 to 1 and could have decisively defeated him in battle,” said Sebuk.

“You are too quick to seek battle,” responded Turan. “All battles, even winning ones, can leave the victor weaker than before. If goals can be achieved without battle, by cunningly forming alliances with your enemy’s enemies, or by dividing your enemy’s forces, then is this not to be preferred? Anyway,” continued Turan, not waiting for an answer that would resume an old disagreement, “that is not why I wanted to speak to you. To get Orin’s cooperation, I had to tell him I knew nothing about Kam Eeren’s raid on the Kaskir camp last winter.”

“So? Have you not just finished telling me that lying is justified in forming an alliance?”

“Whether it is or not is irrelevant. My concern is that your shaman gets out of control. He does things without my authorization. This causes us problems. You need to bridle him and rein him in.”

“He is a shaman. His actions are the result of the workings of his familiar spirits. I have no control over them. Talk to him yourself.”

Turan had no desire to talk to Eeren. He was, frankly, afraid of him. Eeren, as a powerful shaman, could eat a man's soul, not only killing him but forever denying him life after death in the Upper World. As if that had not been enough, Turan had seen the shaman summon the spirits of the Underworld at an instant's notice. And, Turan believed, rather than Eeren controlling these evil spirits, they controlled him, and that in turn, Eeren controlled Sebuk.

"This Eeren is a bad influence on you. You listen to him as you would a favorite uncle, yet this is an evil voice."

Sebuk spat on the yurt floor, narrowly missing the hearth fire. Had he actually hit the fire, defiling its purity, Turan would likely have exploded at the profanity of the action. Nonetheless, Turan clenched his teeth and ordered him out. This was a problem that would have to be fixed, he knew, but time enough for that after D'nar was taken.

## *Chapter 13*

“This is the layout of the city,” Sebuk began, smoothing out the soft dirt he had ordered brought in front of Turan’s yurt, where they were to discuss the plan for taking D’nar. Besides Turan and Sebuk, Orin, Eder, and the Burkut commander, Aywan, were present. Also present, sitting apart, was Eeren. Saying nothing, but watching everything. Orin glanced at him once, thinking Eeren fitted his name, “Raven”. Or perhaps Vulture might be better.... Orin shifted around so he wouldn’t have to look at him. He did note, though, that Turan would occasionally cast a quick glance in Eeren’s direction, as if Turan half-expected Eeren to actually change into a raven and fly off.

“At the heart of the city is the citadel,” Sebuk was saying. “Within this fortress lies the governor's palace, including the women's quarters, the prison, army headquarters, and the treasury.” He drew lines in the dirt as he talked. “The only other major building in the city that could be defended against a serious attack is the main temple. Access to the temple is gained through a thick wood door, the main entrance, or through smaller doors -- the priests' entrances, at the rear of the compound. The city itself contains sectors for various types of artisans, for the rich, for different foreign merchants, such as the Indians, Arabs, and Chinese, and their families. There are a number of marketplaces, with the main one near the East Gate. The city is enclosed by walls roughly the height of a tree and two paces thick.” He drew thick lines in the dirt as he talked.

Options were considered. Several actions were decided upon, including tactics to use against the Imperial army that protected D’nar. But when Turan described what they would do after the city had been taken, Orin looked at him in surprise.

“Destroy the city? I thought we were just going to plunder it. I understand that the insult to us, to both the Jersaks and the Kaskir, must be wiped clean. Otherwise we cannot hold our

heads up. But we can accomplish that by ransacking the city, by taking their property, by teaching them a lesson to respect us. The cities provide useful services: their markets provide salt, sugar, and other goods, they have many good metalworkers and other artisans. It doesn't seem very useful to destroy one.”

“There are two reasons for destroying D'nar. One is that a ruler, the Governor or the Emperor, has no power if he has not people to govern. Merely killing the Governor would be satisfying but it will be more satisfying to destroy him. And, more importantly, think on this: D'nar is the gateway to the Empire. If we simply plunder D'nar, we will scare the other cities into respect for us. They will then take additional precautions against us: bringing in additional troops, building additional fortifications.

“But if we destroy D'nar, destroy it totally beyond its ability to rebuild, we will terrify the other cities. We will have merely to send them a message asking for tribute, and they will line up before us in a rush to comply. With D'nar in mind, they will figure the cost of not paying the tribute would be much worse than paying it.

“And you, Orin,” Turan continued, “have taken the first step. Continuous raiding, and there have been no armies coming from the Capital to hunt you down. And the local troops have been completely ineffective against you. The people in this area have long believed that the Empire is a tiger. A sleeping tiger, that once awoken, will be awful in its rage. But your raids have proven that this tiger has no more power than a child's felt toy.”

Sebuk nodded in agreement. Eder looked eager to begin.

This was all more than what Orin thought he was getting into. He could see that Turan would not be satisfied with just sacking the city. But to leave the alliance with the Jersaks at this point would anger Turan and put the Kaskir on the run from the Jersaks once more. And, of course, following Turan in this campaign would win him a more complete revenge against the Governor of D'nar. The raids had been a start, but he had felt something was missing. Perhaps this was a revenge he needed in order to maintain his self-respect as a chief as well as a warrior. And perhaps he felt this craving for justice the more so because he felt responsible for what had happened in the city.

Turan began again, "Long after we are in the ground, Jersak and Kaskir will sit around their campfires and tell of the conquest of the Empire by Turan and Orin, beginning with the destruction of D'nar. So will it be told," he continued firmly.

Orin returned his look and nodded. "So will it be told."



Orin and Eder came out of the yurt. Orin's look was one of resignation. He hesitated before mounting his horse. Then Aywan exited.

"I would speak with you," Orin said to the Burkut.

Aywan glanced back at the yurt, then nodded, and walked away from the yurt. Orin followed him.

"I couldn't help but note that Turan never referred to the Burkut, just to the Jersak," Orin began.

"By virtue of our defeat, we are a little brother in his confederation. Increasingly, we have been ordered to adopt Jersak customs. The usage of the Burkut emblem, the spread eagle, has been forbidden to us," said Aywan. He fingered his droopy mustache. "I've even been told.... Soon, the Burkut will disappear completely as a people."

"Yet you stay with him."

"My loyalty to Turan Khan overrides all else."

"Even though you are a Burkut."

"He trusts me because I was the one who killed Bakar Khan. You see, Bakar had escaped death in the battle. And as long as he was alive, Turan Khan could not be sure of the loyalty of the Burkut. So Turan Khan ordered him found and killed. I did it by my own hand. In return, Turan Khan put me in charge."

"Then you did me a favor as well, as Bakar Khan had sworn to kill me for abducting Ailana, his betrothed."



Turan sat on his horse, surrounded by his nokers, looking over his army. *When I destroy D'nar, it will more than make up for the mistakes of the past.* One mistake in particular continued to

rankle him. It had been a disaster to his army, and a disaster to his prestige. He would just as soon forget it. But he could not get it out of his mind. It was after that incident he had made Sebuk his sirdar, a decision that was now giving him no small measure of annoyance.

Sebuk had counseled him to stay on the Steppe where the Jersak could make use of the great open spaces, taking advantage of their speed and the distance of their bowshots and where there was pasture for all of their ponies. But instead, in a fit of overconfidence, he had gone into the mountains and the forests to attack the Reindeer People. He remembered it as if it had just happened....

“These are people like us, but not like us,” a scout had told him. “They live in the forest, in small, cone-shaped, not round, yurts, covered with tree bark, not felt, as they have no sheep. Or horses. They live by the reindeer, they milk it, they use it for a pack animal, I don't know what else they do with it, but I didn't see any other domesticated animals. And they're poor.”

“What is the point in conquering them, as there would be no plunder?” one of his commanders asked.

But Turan wasn't in the mood to listen to objections.

“This will be good practice for the army,” he had pronounced.

They passed, and destroyed, one such village of cone-shaped yurts. Then they came to a wide snow field, about 2 arrow-flights wide, later called Kizyl Kar, Red Snow. They halted at the edge of the field. On the other side of the field, they could see another village. Sebuk advised bypassing the field, and the village, but Turan, driven by impatience, wanted to advance directly and sent the vanguard into the snow field. The snow was deeper than any had suspected and the ponies plunged in to their bellies. The men dismounted and immediately sank up to their waists. Some sank even further and had to be pulled out by others. But the men were strong and determined and they continued their slow progress through the field.

When the vanguard had gotten halfway, Turan began leading the main body into the snow field. Again, Sebuk advised against it, advising him to wait till the vanguard had attained solid ground. But Turan was in the thrall of a vision of conquest.

When the vanguard was less than an arrow flight from the end of the snow field, and the main body was less than an arrow flight into the snow field -- the Reindeer People attacked. They ran across the snow, on foot, without sinking in, Turan remembered, moving oddly but very rapidly. Before the vanguard knew it, they were upon them, surrounding them. Each would shoot his bow while gliding across the snow, and then continue, while Turan's men were virtually stationary and easy targets. The main body fired their bows in support, but movement was clumsy, arrows and bows got wet, accuracy was low, and there was mass confusion.

In a very short time, all that was left of the vanguard were the screams and cries of the dying. And then the attackers turned their attention on the main body. Men and ponies began to drop and not get up. Sebuk, in command of the rear guard, ordered them to remain where they were, on solid ground. The men had wanted to go to the aid of their tribesman, but Sebuk kept them together, instructing them to shoot from where they were.

Turan, who had been trying to form the main body into a defensive alignment, using dead ponies as shields, then decided he was too vulnerable where he was. He retreated with his nokers, the troops following him. The Reindeer People followed behind, continuing to shoot, but as they got within range of the rear guard, the Jersaks were able to shoot back.

Turan remembered being totally infuriated. He wanted to launch a second attack across the snowfield, but some remainder of good sense and Sebuk's opposition caused him to order a pullback. They retreated back through the forest. They narrowed their columns to fit the narrow paths of the forest and the natural spacing of the trees, but they were not yet out of trouble. Wherever there was snow on the ground, attackers appeared and shot at them.

Turan ordered men out to the sides of the column to protect it, but these were all killed as soon as they left the main column. After a while, it became difficult to get anyone to leave the column. The Jersaks tried to chase these phantom archers from horseback, but invariably they were led into deep snow

By the time they had returned to their camp, they had lost more than half their men, and many ponies.

Later on, Turan would find out how the Reindeer People were able to run on top of the snow? They'd had wooden boards attached to their feet that slid across the surface of the snow, without sinking. And they pushed themselves along with wooden poles in each hand. From a distance, it looked like running, but they were in fact sliding, first one foot, then the other. Back in camp, Turan had a carpenter make some boards and poles. He didn't want to give up, thinking about coming back in a year.

He took several men up into the mountains, back to the snow. And had them put on the boards and attempt to slide. But the men all said they could not control their legs. That it was as if their legs had developed a will of their own. One unfortunate man accidentally began going down a hill. Not a large one, and not steep. But he was unable to stop himself, picking up speed as he went, and, at the bottom, he hit a tree, was injured badly, and shortly thereafter died from his injury. Turan watched all this in silence. Then he ordered the men to return to camp and say nothing about this.

And what had he learned? Turan asked himself. He had learned that perhaps he was too impulsive to command an army, that perhaps he should leave command to Sebuk.

*But now, we have become unable to live under the same sky.*



It wasn't long after Orin had visited the Jersak camp then Ailana made a trip there. But one unbeknownst to Orin. In her mind was the question: was she doing the right thing? It was unlikely Orin would approve of her quest. Orin had told her about Eeren, about how Eeren gave an impression of great evil, that even Turan Khan was afraid of him. But that had only whetted her interest. If Eeren was a powerful shaman.... In the search for her lost children, Ailana would leave no path untaken. If there was a possibility Eeren could help, then she had to try.

And so she had taken some men with her as an escort and gone to see him. Now she sat alone with Eeren in his tent, while the men waited outside. She had brought him gifts of food, as she

had done with the Kaskir shaman, Ulkan, but Eeren seemed less than interested.

“So, you want your children back,” Eeren said, in strangely accented speech. As Ailana looked at him, an act of courage all by itself, she could see marks on his throat, as if someone had once attempted to strangle him, but had failed.

“Above all else, yes. I would do anything,” said Ailana.

“Ah, ‘anything’. For such a task as this, a difficult task I alone could accomplish, the price would be high, very high, perhaps more than you would be willing to pay.”

“There is no price too high, if you can really do it,” Ailana said. And, instantly, as she said it, she regretted it. Even if it were a true statement, and she was not sure it was, it was never wise to admit it to someone whom you were negotiating with.

“Oh, I can do it. Your children will be restored to you. But you must do as I say. Come, sit closer to me.”

Ailana’s mouth went dry. Her hand nervously twisted on her sash, as if the hand was no longer under her control. But she forced herself to get up and move closer to Eeren.

“Good. Look at me. Look at my eyes. Look into my eyes. There is nothing impossible in this world, if the spirits are on your side.”

Ailana stared into his eyes, into depths as murky, dark, deep, and unknown, as a muddy river on a dark night. She could hear his voice, but not as she had before. It was far away, almost as if in a dream. And then came a reflection. A point of light in the dim, smoky tent. He held a knife!

Ailana screamed and ran outside. Eeren continued sitting. He laughed after her.

“I will have you, and I will have you in a way you have never been had before, nor will you ever again be able to have another.”



## *Chapter 14*

General J'nost walked through Fort 2, or rather what had once been Fort 2. It reminded him of some ancient, deserted ruin, untouched for centuries. Hard to believe there had been 150 soldiers there only a day or two before, normally 50-100 on patrol, 50-100 on defense.

When word had come to him that there had been a disaster there, that there was no trace of either the patrol nor the fort's defenders, he had unbelievably come out to see for himself. But it was true. It was like there had been no soldiers posted there at all. There were no bodies, no food stores, no arms, no armor, no horses.... Anything that was not a permanent part of the structure was gone.

Why had they picked it so clean? He wondered. Then, seeing the soldiers with him standing around muttering, he realized the devastating effect the sight had. The superstitious or religious among the soldiers would think the work the result of evil spirits or demons, that no human host could do this.

But the General knew, of course, that their enemies were very human. While the reports of these Kaskir raiders ranged from 20 to 100, he had guessed there were much more. The Kaskir had struck over widely disparate points, too distant from each other for there to have been a single raiding party. Rather than 20 to 100, he figured their numbers at 200 to 1000. Separate forces, but probably operating out of a single, mobile camp. A camp he had been unable to find. Forces that would strike at will unless he could find that camp.

He ordered the return to D'nar. He'd seen all he needed to see. Best get the men from here as soon as possible. And then he thought, Yezdegerd should see this. Yezdegerd was the cavalry commander, hot-headed, eager for battle, eager to take chances. Perhaps seeing what happened at Fort 2 would cool him down. But probably not. He would probably just be encouraged to take

the entire cavalry out looking for the nomads, for a single pitched battle.

I should have replaced Yezdegerd a long time ago, he thought. But Yezdegerd was from the Capital, had political friends there, and it had been all the General could do to keep him in check. And who would he replace Yezdegerd with? The man had infected all of the cavalry officers with his way of thinking. They would all sit and drink together, talking about past grievances and future glories. The General decided to try one more time to reason with Yezdegerd.



J'nine tossed and turned in her bed. Each night, it was becoming more and more difficult for her to sleep. She wanted to put problems out of her mind and just think happy thoughts, but it was not to be. To her worries about her impending marriage in the Capital came new worries about all the nomad raids she was hearing about. Her father, the General, might have to go out on the field himself. It could be dangerous. And what about H'vise? He had been sent out to Fort 4 in the south. The raiders had not been too active in that area, but what if they started hitting harder there? What if they attacked Fort 4 the way they had attacked Fort 2, leaving no one behind? Her stomach turned and she felt suddenly sick. She missed H'vise, she realized, and she worried about him.

She had finally drifted off to sleep when she awoke with a man's hand on her mouth. In a half-wake state, she thrashed in the bed, wanting to scream out. And then, as a familiar voice shushed her, calling her name, she finally awoke, her eyes opened fully. It was dark, but she realized the hand belonged to H'vise. H'vise removed his hand and J'nine sat up in bed, pulling him towards her, impulsively kissing him and putting her arms around him.

H'vise, momentarily surprised at the reception, returned her kiss and embrace. When their lips finally parted, J'nine was the first to get a word out, "What are you doing here? I thought you were at Fort 4."

"We've been re-assigned. They haven't told us where we're going, but for now we're encamped right outside of D'nar. It

wasn't hard to talk my sergeant into letting me go with the supply group to D'nar. But instead of going back with them, I just waited around till dark, then sneaked over your wall and into your quarters. But I can't stay long. I just had to see you, if only for a few minutes.

"But that's desertion! I don't need to be a general's daughter to know that you should never have taken the chance!"

"I couldn't be this close to D'nar and not see you. But don't worry. I can get back before dawn, before any of the officers know I'm gone. I know some of the soldiers stationed on the city wall. They'll let me drop a rope down."

While H'vise was with her, J'nine felt happier than she'd had since the raids started. But after he left, she began again to worry. In Fort 4, he'd been fairly safe. Now, where would he be sent?



J'nine's friend T'lima was unsettled about the nomads as well. People had told her not to worry, that nomads had no power against a walled city. That the nomads would eventually get tired of raiding and go away.

But T'lima was a Christian, and her religious instruction had included reading about the people of the Old Testament. They had been nomads as well. With God on their side, the people of the Book had attacked and often destroyed the cities of the settled peoples of Canaan, killing or making slaves of the inhabitants. On whose side was God now?

She thought about the Pharaoh of ancient Egypt. In the Book, God had visited plagues on all of the Egyptian people just because he was angry at their leader, the Pharaoh. What if God was angry at the Governor? What if he took out his anger on all of D'nar? Were the nomads here as a kind of divine retribution for something the Governor had done?

And even if God was not involved, if the nomads were simply angry at the Governor for having done something, was everyone in D'nar going to suffer for it? People in the city had no control over what the Governor did. Didn't the nomads know that?

She knelt down and prayed. Prayed for her family, her friends, her city.

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“I don't understand it! What is General J'nost thinking of?” complained one of the D'narian soldiers, as they sat around their campfire. They were quartered outside the city. Not the entire D'narian force, as some were in the Citadel barracks, others manned the border forts, and others were out on patrol. But a good number of soldiers were here -- a few thousand, in fact.

“We must have enough soldiers here to track down and dispatch a few nomads! There have been nomads here before, and Ahriman curses us with some of them even living in D'naria permanently, but we've always handled them. Now my uncle tells me the villages and farms are being deserted as people rush to the city for protection. Why aren't we doing anything?”

“What would you have us do then?” responded H'vise. He didn't really want to discuss it, he wanted to figure out how to get back to the city to see J'nine again. But the raids were all anyone was talking about. “Our patrols have not been able to follow their tracks, nor locate their camp. If we knew where their camp was, we could smash them. But we don't. And when we leave small detachments to protect villages, they're outnumbered and killed.”

“But there must be something we can do. We can't just sit and wait while these Steppe wolves devour everything. Did you know their tribal emblem is a wolf? I heard that from my uncle. Are we to just do parade maneuvers while the countryside is being raped? A poor state of affairs!”

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If the soldiers were eager for combat, the merchants were even more so. R'kenor, as a leading merchant of the city, had called a merchants' meeting. Ziyān was there. Actually, it was partly at Ziyān's request R'kenor had called the meeting. R'kenor felt he owed Ziyān more than he could ever repay, for saving R'kenor and his caravan from nomad bandits.

They had been four days from D'naria. From where R'kenor and Ziyar rode, towards the front of the caravan, the world seemed at peace. R'kenor could clearly hear not only the deep ring of the bell on the lead camel, but the higher-pitched bell on the last camel. These were re-assuring sounds, almost like the bells were answering each other. But Ziyar had brought him out of his reverie.

"Bandits can attack at any time," Ziyar had said. "If I were a bandit leader, I might even pick a time when a caravan was well on its way, was within a few days of its destination, with the people getting tired and lowering their guard."

"Still, we have not yet seen sign of any. This trip is turning out to be as uneventful and as boring as I had hoped," said R'kenor, trying to respond calmly, but becoming increasingly nervous.

"I'm afraid I may have seen them. I didn't want to alarm you, but from time to time I have seen riders on those hills. They appear, then disappear. I think we are being watched. And if they are bandits, and they attack, our camels and pack-horses will not be able to out-run them. I'm thinking that perhaps the caravan-master should send a rider on ahead and bring back an army escort from the Empire."

"That could be a good idea," said R'kenor. "But who would ride ahead? I wouldn't trust these nomads we hired as guards," he said, looking around. "I believe they are honest and trustworthy only as long as they believe they are on the winning side, otherwise they will desert you. And we can't send one of the slaves, he wouldn't come back."

"What about one of the pony-men?" I asked.

"Humph, they would get lost without a guide. Only someone who knows the area could find Fort 4."

"Fort 4? I passed there once in my travels. I believe I can find it. Perhaps, as I have suggested the idea, I should be the one to implement it. I'll trust you to watch over my goods here while I'm gone? I don't trust the nomads to keep their hands off of my things."

"Yes, of course."

"Is it certain the cavalry will come if I told them there was a caravan enroute to D'nar?"

“I will give you a letter to the commander. I'm a well-known merchant of D'nar,” said R'kenor. “The commander will have little choice but to provide you assistance. And, I will further embellish the letter so that he has no choice at all.”

“Good. All I need then is a spare horse. I'll leave shortly before dawn.”

“Is it wise to wait?”

“Should there be bandits in those hills, and they see a lone rider leave for the fort, they'll try to stop him. For me to succeed, it's best I slip out secretly.”

As darkness came, the caravan began automatically to bunch up. Instead of a single column of animals, there were now 4 or 5. It might have been fear of bandits, or fear of predators, or just that ancient, universal fear of the night and what can happen in the dark. But they all felt better being close to others.

It was not till late at night when they made camp, having come to a place where the animals could graze. The goods were unloaded from the camels and stacked close together. The camels then made do with such fodder as there was. And being camels, that didn't take much. Then, with calls of *tshukh*, *tshukh*, the caravan men had the camels lie down in a circle around the goods, heads outward, to watch and listen for danger. The men themselves bedded down in the space between the goods and the ring of camels. The horses, including Ziyan's two, were hobbled outside the packed circle, where they could graze.

At R'kenor's request, the Sogdian caravan master had forbidden the lighting of fires -- a fire could be seen from far off. Before they bedded down, R'kenor noted Ziyan had kept his two horses saddled. He bid him farewell.

When R'kenor awoke at dawn, Ziyan had gone. Ziyan had been quiet, no one appeared alerted to the fact that he had gone for help -- which was good because if some of the pony-men thought there was a serious threat of bandits, they might abandon the caravan. And it was good because then perhaps the watching bandits would not know he'd left.

Now, R'kenor hoped that Ziyan had not only escaped the bandits notice, but that neither his horse nor his spare had stepped into a marmot hole in the dark, that the fort would provide him with troops, and that they would return to the caravan before any

bandit attack. What were the chances of him getting through, a lone man on the Steppe?

The next two days were uneventful. R'kenor had always liked crossing Steppe and desert in a caravan -- there was something almost romantic about it. Almost, but not quite, he reminded himself. Not when you know you can be murdered for your goods. And your children go hungry if those goods do not arrive.

And then, only two days from D'naria and safety in the Empire, the bandits had attacked! R'kenor watched with horror as a band of raiders swooped down on the caravan from behind. As arrows flew, and men and camels were hit, confusion turned to panic.

And then, like a miracle from Ahura Mazda, the cavalry appeared. The bandits immediately broke off the attack, riding away in full retreat. Ziyar had returned in time!

R'kenor warmly embraced his rescuer. "If not for you, we might have all been killed. Even had we been able to fight them off, we could have lost a considerable amount of goods and animals," said R'kenor.

"I tried to get the soldiers here even sooner, but it was difficult to get them to hurry. I'm glad to find you were not hurt. And, hopefully, our goods are intact as well."

"Your goods, as well as mine, are safe. And I hope that when we arrive in D'nar, you will allow me to repay you. You will be my guest. You will stay in my house. And I will arrange space in the marketplace for you to sell your wares."

R'kenor came back to the present. He looked over the meeting. It had begun informally. Men stood in small clusters talking excitedly. There was only one topic on their minds: the nomad raids. Finally, R'kenor called the meeting to order, though there were still shouts from the floor.

"My business is at the mercy of wolves!"

"The farmers have all run off. There's no more produce coming into the city."

"And outside suppliers won't come into D'naria at all, for fear of the nomads."

"Yes, we all have the same problem," said R'kenor. Well, most of us, he thought, spotting at least one merchant who was

making a healthy profit selling food, blankets and such to refugees. But even the profiteers would soon run out of things to sell. “Normal business has been severely disrupted by the nomads. Trade needs peace. We’ve all felt the effects of the nomad raids. About that, there can be no disagreement. The question before us is, what can we do about it?”

There was a chorus of excited suggestions, some in coarse language. R’kenor began again, holding up his hands for quiet, “Please, please, one at a time.” And so the merchants began, telling their individual stories about money lost, their livelihood threatened, the richer ones having to dig into their reserves, the poorer ones afraid of their children going hungry. But there were no real solutions other than a vague desire to have the army go out and crush these nomad raiders.

Ziyan had stood quietly, listening. With the meeting in a mixture of gloom and frustration, he signaled R’kenor.

“I see Ziyan would like to address us. For those who don’t know him, he’s a merchant from the East who has had experience with these nomads. In fact, as you’ve heard me often tell, he saved my caravan from nomad bandits.”

“And besides,” someone called out, “he’s your future son-in-law.”

There was some general laughter.

“Let’s hear what he has to say,” finished R’kenor.

The merchants turned to look at Ziyan, who started walking to the front of the room while talking.

“There is only one way to end the nomad raids – find the nomad camp and destroy it.”

“The Army has tried to do that already,” someone called out.

Ziyan held up a hand. “Hear me out. Yes, the army has tried. But all that General J’nost’s patrols have been able to find were traces of where the camp had been. The nomads see the patrols coming and misdirect the soldiers, while moving the camp before the soldiers can return to their original course. In the one case where a patrol seemed to have run into the nomads, they were apparently outnumbered, and the patrol was wiped out.”

Ziyan paused and looked around.

“What is clear from this is -- the usual system of patrols does not work.”

“Do you have a better way?” a merchant called out.

“Yes! We send out spies, other nomads, to find the raiders’ camp. And then we send out the entire army to destroy it. With certain knowledge of where their camp is, the Army can quickly move on it. And once battle is joined, the Army can destroy the nomads as easily as they destroyed the Karakoyunlu last month.”

“We still have to find their camp,” someone pointed out.

“I’ve made contacts with nomads who are willing to act as scouts and spies. And so we use nomads to catch nomads.”

“That makes sense.”

“What remains is to convince the Governor to stop listening to General J’nost and to follow this new strategy. I suggest we seek a meeting with the Governor and present our recommendations.”

A chorus of agreement greeted Ziyan’s concluding remarks. R’kenor himself, aware Ziyan had been preparing to suggest something like this, nodded to him. It sounded good to him, as it did to everyone else. That Ziyan had suggested the meeting be held in the evening, a time when men are tired from the day’s work and thus more susceptible to suggestion, did not entirely escape R’kenor. But, in any case, Ziyan had made sense. And now the merchants, rarely in agreement on anything, seemed united in calling for a meeting with the Governor and presenting Ziyan’s recommendations, which Ziyan had been careful to call “our” recommendations. And R’kenor had already helped Ziyan draw up a petition to obtain that meeting. Finally, R’kenor felt, things were in motion to put an end to the nomad raids.



“You have to do something!”

“Send out the army!”

“Repay them in blood!”

“Destroy them!”

“No, capture and torture them!”

The crowd was jammed into the Governor’s court room. The meeting had started in a more or less orderly fashion, the

Governor thought, but somewhere he had lost control. He would have to get it back, or at least deflect their anger to someone else.

“Enough!” he cried. “We are not without plans! We have among us General J'nost, the hero of Taranu, the conqueror of Jingsan, and a man more than a match for any barbarian. General! Tell us what you will do to these scum!”

All eyes turned towards the General, who, despite the lack of warning, did indeed have a plan. But he knew it was one neither the merchants nor the farmers would like.

“Before I describe what we should do, I must tell you, whatever we plan, it should be in closed session. To discuss our plans in a public meeting is to invite the larks to warble those plans to our enemies.”

“NO, NO. That is an excuse to exclude us from the decision. Our lives, our property -- and our revenge -- will not be put off any longer. We will hear what you have to say. And we will decide on it,” said a merchant.

“I will make all decisions,” said the Governor, relishing a safe role as an intermediary between the merchant and the general. “But I hear you and I will keep this meeting open.”

The general scowled. “All right then,” he said. “First, we should understand what we are up against.”

Shouts went up. “We know what we're up against: dirty, thieving, primitive barbarians!”

“SILENCE!” shouted the general, in a tone that, for a while at least, bought him a period of shocked quiet. Then, in a more conversational tone, he continued, “A good soldier never underestimates his enemy, never moves without analysis.” He motioned to an aide, who handed him a bow.

“This is the bow our infantry uses. Made of a combination of good stout wood from the northern forests, plus animal bone and sinew, it is accurate to 75 paces in the hands of an average soldier and 150 paces in the hands of someone well trained, obtained by shooting upwards at an angle.” He put the bow down as his aide handed him another, which he then held up.

Someone called out, “What kind of misbegotten bow is that?” There was some laughter, but it was tinged with nervousness.

The General continued. “We took these bows from some, ah, unfortunate nomads some time back. I have been testing these

bows since. This bow, as you can see, is smaller than ours, making it easier to use from horseback. It also contains more bone than ours. As bone is less flexible than wood, the bow is harder to draw. But when drawn, provides more power to the arrow. Also, as you can see, the maker has curved the ends of the bow rather than angled them as with ours, giving it even more resistance. And the nomad arrows are lighter than ours. The usable range of this bow is 150-250 paces.”

A murmur of disbelief turned into a persistent buzzing. “There’s more. Because the nomad archers are mounted, they have more mobility than our foot archers. And they are expert horsemen, having lived with horses all their lives, breeding horses that thrive on the Steppe. Much of their daily lives, such as hunting in large parties, is similar to military training. This is why they have been able to strike so quickly, and so thoroughly, and be gone before our patrols can find them.”

The buzzing got louder. The Governor put up his hand for quiet, which he didn’t quite get.”

“What then do you propose?” the Governor asked.

“D’nar is impregnable. Its walls are unscalable. We have stores of food. Underground springs bring us water. Even with the recent influx of refugees, we can sit out a siege.”

Some cried out, “No, no!”

The General ignored this and continued on.

“A long siege if we need to, but we won’t need to, because the nomads have not the patience for a long siege and will yearn to migrate south once the weather turns cold. We do not go after the nomads, we sit right here, safe and secure,” finished the General.

The second he finished, the hushed murmuring changed into loud, angry voices. Whatever the logic and reasonability of sitting behind the walls might be, it was not a match for the pent-up emotions of the crowd. The Governor waved for quiet, which was not immediately coming.

Then a loud, resonant voice said, “The general is a man of much-deserved respect and his plan has merit. But there is something else that can be done. I am Ziyang, a merchant who has come to D’nar after several years in the East, where I got to know nomads and the nomad way of thinking. I come to this meeting as

a representative of the merchants of D'nar. We have a plan. Do I have your leave to present it?"

"Yes! Present it!" shouted several merchants.

The Governor nodded. Even the General leaned forward unconsciously.

## *Chapter 15*

Two Burkuts rode across the grasslands. One was Aywan, the man Turan had trusted enough to put in charge of the Burkuts. The other was Bakar Khan, long assumed dead, but very much alive. Unlike Aywan, he wore D'narian clothing. They halted at a large sheep herd tended by some mounted Kaskir women.

“You have taken a chance leaving D'nar, my khan.”

“I had to do this. Everything else is going well. I've convinced the Governor to send the entire army out of the city, over the objections of their general.”

“And the man you had me request of Orin....”

“As long as he knows nothing, that will eliminate the General as a potential problem.” Bakar grinned. “See you in D'nar, Aywan.”

Bakar headed towards one of the women. Towards Ailana.

When the Kaskir women saw a lone rider approach, they gathered together. But when Ailana saw who it was, she waved them away.

“Well, Bakar, I see the Burkut eagle flies again.”

“And I see the beautiful Ailana is yet more beautiful. There is no field of flowers, no sunrise, no thing in this world that can match you.”

“I see your gift for words has not failed you.”

“It comes from the heart. Because the Kaskir took you from me did not mean I had given you up. I had wanted you when I asked your father for you in marriage. And I want you still.

“When Aywan told me you were still alive....”

“It was my cousin who had died, in the battle with Turan. He had a mark in his chin like mine, so Aywan damaged the rest of his face and passed off his body as mine. I've spent the last few years wandering, alone....”

“I see. And your blood feud with Orin?”

“Unless he surrenders you, his life is forfeit.”

“Brave words from someone with no army.”

“Soon to change.”

“Bakar, I am flattered at your attentions. And had I married you I would have made a dutiful wife. But my heart would not have been in it.”

“You would have come to love me. Love grows over time.”

“No, Bakar, I want you to understand, with no mistake. I went willingly with Orin because he ignited a fire within me. Despite the loss of my children, despite the loss of our clan freedom to the Jersaks, I love him and would never leave him.”

She paused, looking at the play of emotions on Bakar’s face.

“I’m sorry.”

“I will speak with you again, after I’ve killed your Orin.”

Bakar turned and rode off.



“Walk with me,” General J'nost said to H'vise. The army was encamped outside the city, but within sight of its walls. Much like a mother keeps an eye on a child not self-sufficient enough to be by himself, so did the General like to keep an eye on D'nar. But it was his actual child he was now thinking about.

“I called you from your tent because I wanted to talk to you. I knew your father, you know, a fine man, and all a fine family. They understood about D'nar, about our heritage, about how sacrifices must sometimes be made in order to protect what we love. I know you must feel that way too, otherwise you would not have joined the army.”

H'vise nodded. “Yes, sir, I do feel that way.”

The General continued, “I have spent my entire life in the service of the Empire, and particularly in maintaining the well-being, prosperity, and security of D'naria. And the people of D'nar have well benefited. Don't you think that's true?”

“Oh, yes, sir.”

“And now it is my turn to ask a favor from D'nar, and all D'narians. And that is to ensure the prosperity of my children. Do you think that a fair trade?” he asked.

“Uh, yes, certainly....” said H'vise, beginning to feel he was in the path of a chariot but unable to get out of the way.

“Good. Because what I have done is to provide my family with a tie to the family of the Emperor. This helps my family because it gives them a position of status long after I'm dead and gone. And, it helps D'naria as well, because it gives the royal family more of an interest in what happens to D'naria. There are some in the royal family, believe it or not, who view D'naria as an isolated province of little importance to the Empire. Can you imagine that? It infuriates me.”

“I understand, sir.”

“But I've fixed that. I've arranged a marriage between my daughter J'nine and Prince Bahram. This marriage will create a tie, a permanent tie, between D'naria and the Royal Family. As well as between my house and the royals. I'll be honest with you. It was not an easy thing to arrange. But arrange it I did, and now D'naria will henceforth have a personal spokeswoman at court, in the person of J'nine. And J'nine will have a wonderful life amidst the splendor and luxury of the court. A life as in children's tales. You can picture that, can't you?”

“Yes, sir.” There was a noticeable depression in H'vise's voice.

“And so, I have your word, don't I, that you would never, certainly never, do anything to disrupt this life I've planned for J'nine. Nor do anything to damage the future security of D'nar. As I said before, we all make sacrifices, and especially a soldier.”

At that moment, the only sound H'vise could hear on the plain, in the world, was his own breathing. Or maybe the faint sound of a heart breaking.

“Do I have your word, then, as a patriot of D'nar and as someone who has J'nine's best interests at heart, that you will not do anything to interfere with this marriage?”

H'vise choked on the words, “Yes, sir.”

“Probably it's best you not see her again. After all, there are many girls in D'nar, and a dashing young soldier like yourself should have no trouble finding one, or many. Isn't that so?”

“Yes, sir,” said H'vise, feeling very sick.

“Good. I knew you'd understand.” The General clasped his shoulder. “You've made the right decision. Now I'll bid you good night, son. After all, we have training to think about -- we have these pesky nomads to deal with. That's what we should all be thinking about. Good night, son.”

The General walked back to his tent, not looking back. H'vise stood where he was. I've promised, he thought, and I do have J'nine's best interests at heart, and D'nar's, but... but... I can no more give up J'nine than I can give up breathing.

When the General got back to his tent, he said to an orderly, “I want to see Sergeant L'makis.”

L'makis showed up a few minutes later.

“Ah, Sergeant, nice to see you. We haven't had a chance to talk for quite a while, probably not since Elivet.”

“Yes, sir.” What have I done now, the Sergeant wondered, as he stepped onto the carpet of the tent.

“I just had an idle question, Sergeant,” the General began.

You've probably never had an idle thought in your life, the sergeant thought, but said only, “Yes, sir”.

“You have a young soldier in your ranks, by the name of H'vise, I believe.”

“Yes, sir. A recent recruit.”

“I know his family, and I've met the young man. He's anxious to prove himself, and I know his family wants to see him do well, rise in the ranks, and not be forgotten in the back of the line. Do you know what I mean, Sergeant?”

The sergeant felt both relieved he wasn't the one being singled out, and sorry for anyone who was. “Well, as a new recruit, he'll be in the back of my group...”

“Yes, but is that the best place for a young man who wants to be noticed?”

“No, sir, but it'll keep him from getting killed when we go into battle. Or killing the men who stand next to him.”

“Nonetheless sergeant, I think we should... bend our practice a bit in this case.”

“Sir, I believe it was you who said an inexperienced soldier is more danger to his comrades than to the enemy....” The sergeant was going to go on in that vein, but some instinct of self-preservation stopped him.

“Of course,” the sergeant continued, “you are the general and I am just the sergeant. Whatever you order will be obeyed.”

“Oh, no, no, you misunderstand, this is not an order. This is just an unofficial expression of thought. But you do understand my thinking, do you not? And you will take that into consideration in the assignments, will you not?”

“Of course, sir,” said the sergeant, knowing full well he had just been given an order. Then, after H'vise had been killed in battle, the General could sorrowfully, but truthfully, say he had given no order specifically putting H'vise in the front of the line. As the sergeant left the tent, he thought, poor H'vise.



Ziyan took a deep breath as he walked into the Citadel prison. Usually, when people came here, it was involuntarily. But Ziyan's decision was his own. He'd had to change his plans when the Karakoyunlu were attacked by General J'nost. Then change them again when the Kaskir raids started. But he was flexible and he had a new idea to put into operation.

He approached the guard sergeant with his fruit sacks as if what he was doing was the most normal thing in the world.

“I am Ziyan. I was asked by the merchant V'senis to deliver these to the prisoners,” he said. “V'senis has a contract with the merchant M'nortis who has a contract with the Governor....”

“Yes, Ziyan, you don't need to go into all those details. But this fruit is too good for the prisoners. I don't see why the Governor would pay so much to feed prisoners and slaves.”

The jailer reached down into Ziyan's sack and withdrew a ripe peach. Biting into it, he remarked, “This is better than what we get. I think we'll all going to have to examine this food closely. And to prevent any of the prisoners from being poisoned, we'll have to taste all of it,” he said, as he finished the peach.

“Good idea,” said Ziyan, picking out an apricot.

“You can leave now, I'll distribute the fruit.”

“Of course, sir, but V'senis said he was going to check back with me to make sure the fruit had been distributed. He wanted me to stay with it. I think he's afraid if the slaves are not given any fruit or milk, their gums and mouth will swell up, then they'll

be unable to eat any food at all, and without food they'll die. I think he was afraid of being responsible for a lot of dead slaves. The Governor would probably get quite angry at that.”

“Hmmm... all right,” said the guard, pulling a few more pieces of fruit from the sack. “You can distribute it. But watch yourself with the prisoners. Even though they're shackled to the floor, they're barbarians who have no good will towards any civilized man.”

Ziyan walked through the wing where the Karakoyunlu men had been brought. The area was very crowded. And the stench was strong. Really too many for the wing, they overflowed its capacity. Some were in cells, behind barred doors, some were in cages, others simply lay shackled everywhere on the floor. And they were shackled close together too, their sheer numbers making much movement impossible. And all were filthy, as there were no sanitary facilities. Excrement littered the floors. Mostly human, but Ziyan could see the droppings of rats and other vermin as well. He could also see buckets for urine, but the buckets were all full. And as he looked more closely in the dim light, he could see the floors were wet. Such was the fate of prisoners of war.

And, unsurprisingly, the prisoners were in sorry shape. Ziyan had seen it before. The lack of decent food made men tired, lethargic, with a slow death the only result. And the eyes of the men here were listless, uninterested, many of them not even looking up at G'dan as he passed.

Ziyan had originally wanted the Karakoyunlu to fight on his side, against Turan Khan. But these men were too weak to fight. Even the sacks of fruit Ziyan carried seemed to inspire little interest. Ziyan spotted Tekin, the chief. The man looked much older than when Ziyan had seen him last.

The old man looked at him with dull eyes that flashed momentarily. Then he looked away.

Ziyan reached into the sack for a peach, which he then tossed into the air a couple of times. Then he pulled out a small knife and cut a piece out of the peach. He put the piece in Tekin's mouth. The old man closed his eyes as the sweet juice flowed through his mouth. He chewed slowly, eyeing his benefactor. Ziyan handed him another piece. The old man took it with his

chained hands and popped it in his mouth, seemingly afraid if he didn't eat it quickly, it would be withdrawn.

"Glad to see you don't have the gum disease," Ziyān said.

"Not yet, though the guards have otherwise managed to loosen some of my teeth." He smiled a bit, showing a few bloody stumps among his teeth. "Some kumiss would be nice."

"I will have some waiting for you when you leave here."

Unconsciously picking an uninvited guest out of his beard, Tekin asked, "Why have you come? There is nothing I can do for you here. My position here is hopeless."

"When the time is right, a time coming soon, I will enter to free you."

"Why do this? There is little I can do for you in return."

"After I've freed you, you will take over the prison, and then the Citadel. It will not be difficult as the attention of the guards will be elsewhere. Will you do that?"

Tekin looked Ziyān unflinchingly in the eyes. "You have my word."

"Here, distribute this bag of fruit to the others."

As Ziyān left the prison, he considered the possibility Tekin would try to better his conditions in the prison by reporting Ziyān. But it was a chance that had to be taken.



"Good news, my lord. May I approach?" said Ziyān loudly, striding into the court, towards the Governor. He had not had to wait long at the entrance. He was, after all, becoming known as the architect of the coming victory.

The Governor beckoned him forward. He knelt before the Governor. The Governor, seated on his cushioned chair, motioned to Ziyān to make himself comfortable.

"I have found someone who knows where is the camp of this bandit Orin. He can lead the army there, and we shall be done with these raids."

The Governor could feel his neck muscles relax. Since the meeting at which he had decided to lead the army after the

nomads, doubts had set in. The biggest one, of course, was: how would they find the nomad camp after the army's consistent failure to find it since the raids began.

“Who is this man and how come he to know where the camp is?”

“He is an Eastern nomad himself. He has a herd of sheep a half-day's ride from here, and stumbled across their camp quite by accident. He waits without. I caution you, he is not pleasant to look at, he is filthy and smells awful. But sometimes it takes a barbarian to catch a barbarian.”

“Bring him in. Let us have a look at him.” And the Governor motioned to the guard at the door.

And indeed the man they brought in was anything but pleasant to look at. His sheepskin coat looked to have never been washed. The nearest it had ever come to water would have been if the man had gotten it wet while crossing a creek. His trousers were equally dirty. His shoes caked with dried mud. He was not old, but he walked with the gait of someone made old before his time. Short to begin with, as most of the Eastern nomads were, his stooped posture made him even shorter.

Ziyan motioned him to kneel and the nomad flattened himself on the floor.

“You know where the raider camp is?” the Governor addressed the nomad.

“Oh, yes, your worship, yes, Guyuk knows, yes, Guyuk can point it out, yes, all Guyuk wants is a little tiny bit, yes....” Ziyan slapped him in the head and the verbal stream stopped.

Ziyan spoke, “He's a little weak in the head, but I've done some business with him before -- which is why he came to me with this information -- and I've found him to be reliable. Greedy, but reliable. A few gold coins and he will lead you to Ahriman himself. But we must not waste any time. Nomad camps can move. The army should be prepared to move on the camp as quickly as possibly, and as massively as possible, letting none of the nomads escape.”

“There may be some trouble getting General J'nost to move that quickly,” the Governor noted.

“It's the only way. To delay is to give them warning. We must be decisive! We must kill them off, brutally and efficiently. Make

every nomad too frightened to even think about raiding D'naria. If General J'nost, for whatever reason, is not anxious to do this, perhaps you should lead the troops yourself.”

To a guard, the Governor ordered, “Summon the General.”

Within the hour, the General had arrived. While the General and the Governor discussed the situation, Ziyān quietly listened but said nothing.

An officer and several soldiers appeared at the entrance.

“I must speak with you, my lord.”

The Governor motioned the officer to approach. The officer gave an odd look at the General, then handed the Governor a paper.

“We intercepted a messenger carrying this, along with a pouch of gold dinars.”

The Governor read over the message. A vein in his forehead seemed to grow larger as he read it. When he finished, he handed it to a scribe. Through clenched teeth, he told the scribe, “Read it out loud.”

The scribe read, “Greetings. As we had agreed upon, you will find our regular payment of 100 gold dinars accompanying this message. We are much indebted to you for providing us with information regarding D'narian military locations and capabilities. Without this information, our raids would not have been as successful as they were. I understand that, even as a General, your financial situation may be precarious, and so look forward to our continued collaboration under the same arrangement as before. Signed: Orin of the Kaskir. And there's a drawing of a wolf emblem like we've seen the nomad raiders use.”

“It's a trick! I know nothing of this!” cried the General.

“You will have the opportunity to plead your case after further investigation. But in the meantime your words and actions are under suspicion. And, of course, you can no longer be involved in military matters,” the Governor finished coldly.

“But... but this is what they want,” the General shouted. To remove me from directing the military!”

“Do not dare to shout at me. And I will direct the military myself. Guards, escort General J'nost to the prison.”



The Governor sat on his high cushions, in the now empty room. His senior wife Raukshana came in and sat beside him.

“You’re not having doubts about going after the nomads, are you?” she asked.

“Frankly, yes. I’m not a military leader. Perhaps I should select one of the military officers to lead the attack. Except I don’t know whom to trust nor whom has sufficient courage and experience.”

“No, my husband, you are the one. Is it not written in the *andarz* that a ruler lead his people’s forces on behalf of Ahura Mazda against those of Evil? You are the ruler of D’naria, not the Emperor in the Capital who has forgotten D’naria even exists. You will be like Ardashir,” mentioning an ancient hero-king, “and like Ardashir, you will defeat the nomads and drive them from D’naria.”



In her bazaar stall, R’kina was cleaning up and talking to Ziyān who had stopped by.

“Many people are going to go out and watch the battle tomorrow. It’ll be exciting. Do you want to go?”

“It’s not a good idea, R’kina. Battles can be much more dangerous, even for bystanders, than people realize. Promise me you’ll stay in the city.”

“Oh, all right. I’ll close the stall early and we can have a picnic.”

“Ah, I’ll be busy tomorrow. And probably the next day. But, yes, close the stall, and stay at home till this whole thing is over.”

“Stay at home? Till it’s over? Ziyān...”

Ziyān grasped her by the shoulders. “Please. Do this for me. I don’t often ask you for something.”

## *Chapter 16*

The army made an impressive display. They came out in the same formation they had used and practiced in parade. Foot soldiers with pikes, swords, and shields made up the center of the formation, in 2 long rows. Then, behind them, 2 rows of archers. Then a gap, and another 4 rows of the same. Then a second gap, with another 4 rows. In front of them, the junior officers. On the wings, the cavalry, massed 30 across and 25 deep, their officers also in front.

The Governor stood in a chariot behind the lines, well-protected amidst a personal guard. D'narians streamed out of the city gates to watch the show. Most had never seen a military action before. This would be the biggest event of their lives, and few wanted to miss it. Some, especially the youth, would get too close to the soldiers and be warned off. But most stayed back -- wanting to see the fighting but not be close enough to get involved *in* the fighting.

Few had doubts about the eventual outcome. And if there were those who did, well, they knew better than to speak up. Doomsayers are rarely well liked.

And then there they were. The nomads! Off in the distance on the great plain before the city. But they approached no closer. The Governor gave the signal to advance, and horns relayed the message to the officers. Infantry and cavalry started moving, as one. The infantry were now in a quick march, the cavalry keeping pace. And so did the sightseers. This kept on, as the city receded into the background.

Yet, still, they did not seem to be drawing any closer to the nomads. This was perhaps not surprising, many thought. Even if the nomads had been anxious for an engagement, they would probably want to put some distance between the battle and the city, so to stretch out the army's supply/reinforcement line.

In fact, nearly all of the city's troops were here on the plain. There were precious few to defend the city -- should that become necessary.

A horn sounded and the army came to a halt, peering out at the distant nomads. The nomads were neither running away as Ziyah had predicted, nor so crazed with blood lust they would attack. And there was no nomad camp here. There were some signs there had been one here once, but it was not here now. The officers looked to the Governor. The Governor looked over at his officers. He was clearly confused as to what to do. But his officers weren't volunteering any options.



Orin and Eder and some 200 Kaskirs sat on their horses letting the D'narian army approach. At a signal from Orin, drummers began a distinctive beat. The Kaskirs instantly formed into a single line.

"Suppose they don't chase us?" Eder asked.

"Attack again. If they're not already frustrated with us and over-eager to get to us, a few shoot-and-run attacks will do it."

Orin led the Kaskirs directly towards the right wing of the D'narians. As they approached to within a few hundred yards, both of the D'narian cavalry wings surged forward. But the Kaskirs kept coming. Then, as the Kaskirs closed to within bow-shot range of the approaching cavalry, they swung wide to their own right, crossing in front of the cavalry. And, as they swung around, they began shooting at the cavalry horses.

Dozens of horses stumbled and fell. Most of the cavalry was forced to pull up to avoid the downed men and horses in front of them.

The Kaskirs continued their move and then headed back the way they had come.

Cries of dismay went up from the spectators.

"Get them!"

"Charge them!"

"Crush them!"

The cavalry reformed and charged after the Kaskirs.

“Wait! Wait for the infantry. Wait for the archers!” the Governor shouted. But his voice was lost amidst the thunder of horses’ hooves. Then he remembered his horn blowers. But too late. The cavalry, embarrassed and furious, was not turning back now.

Orin let the cavalry catch up slightly, just close enough to allow some of his men to shoot behind them. The cavalry, with no bows, could do nothing but ride harder.



The chase went on for more than an hour. Several times, Yezdegerd, the cavalry commander, felt he was on the verge of catching up to Orin, but each time Orin had put a little more distance between them. With 1500 cavalry against 200 nomads, Yezdegerd could feel the victory, could feel his lance plunge through a nomad’s chest, could feel his sword cut through a nomad’s neck. *Just a little further!*

They were less than 200 yards apart when the nomads crested a low ridge and disappeared over the other side.

The thought crossed Yezdegerd’s mind there could be an ambush behind the ridge. He slowed slightly, and his officers matched the new pace. But when he followed the nomads up and over the ridge, there was no ambush. Once again at a full gallop, he tried to make up for the lost time. And then there was another ridge. But this time, he figured, he’d ignore it. *If we slow for every ridge, we’ll never catch the nomads.*

Once again, there was no ambush. But the nomads had changed formations. They were now riding 6 abreast, and slower than before. Yezdegerd wondered what that meant -- perhaps the little Steppe ponies were tiring and the nomads were preparing to make a defensive stand? As the distance closed to 100 yards, Yezdegerd signaled his officers to hit the nomad column from each side, as he took the rest into an attack on the rear of the column. And then, with a sickening shock, he saw why the nomads had formed a column.

The nomads had dug two wide, hidden pits in the middle of the field, leaving only enough space between them for 6 riders to pass abreast. Yezdegerd and the men directly behind him, who were in

turn directly behind the nomad column, could pass between the pits. And riders on the extreme wings could pass around the pits, but everyone else was heading directly for disaster.

Yezdegerd reined up abruptly and tried to halt his men. With his hands in the air to warn them, he galloped back to his horn-blower, screaming for the man to blow the halt. And the man did so, but not before the first soldiers had ridden their mounts into the pits. Yezdegerd heard screams as the mangled bodies of horses and men mixed in the pits, joined by those who fell on top of them. But Yezdegerd did manage to get his men stopped with only about 25 casualties. He was congratulating himself on not losing more, and trying to get the jumble of men re-organized, when he began to think about the nomad arrows. And indeed, Orin had halted his men on the other side of the pits. As Yezdegerd looked, Orin's men nocked arrows.

With the D'narians bunched up as they were, the Kaskirs had easy targets. Yet Yezdegerd knew his men's armor would protect them. So, he continued trying to regroup his men. It was with horror he saw the nomads' first volley hit their targets, the horses of the soldiers. The 200 nomads, shooting from less than 100 yards away, seriously wounded or killed 100 horses. A second volley made casualties of 100 more. If this kept up, they'd all be on foot before too long, Yezdegerd realized. There were only 2 choices, retreat or attack.

Yezdegerd chose to attack, leading the center of his disorganized troops through the path between the pits, while sending his wings around the pits. He noted with dismay that the wings were forced to slow down. Caltrops! Wicked, multi-spiked devices which, when thrown on the ground, would always land with one spike in the air.

Worse, Yezdegerd now realized his rear guard had come under attack from another group of nomads. Pre-occupied with the pits, and with the enemy in front of them, they hadn't seen this new enemy ride up. More horses fell under a shower of arrows, as the rearguard commander turned his troops around and attempted to close with their new enemy. But like their compatriots, these other nomads also refused to stand their ground, instead retreating back the way they had come. The rearguard returned to the main body, with another 50 men unhorsed.

Meanwhile, back in the vanguard, Yezdegerd saw that the first group of nomads had taken off and were a few hundred yards ahead of him. In a white-hot fury, he ordered the rear guard to double up with the unhorsed men and trail behind, as he ordered the main body to continue the pursuit of the first group of nomads. *I'm not going to be distracted. That first group of nomads can't continue fleeing forever. At some point they'll stop and then I'll have them.* And, he realized, *I'll have to bring back something. I can't lose 250 horses without a single dead nomad to show for it. My name will be an object of derision for years.*

And so the pursuit continued. But now even more of the Kaskirs would twist around on their saddles and shoot backwards at the cavalry's horses. Yezdegerd knew of this tactic from ancient history as the "Parthian shot", but he had never believed it could be accurate. It was. And, he was repeatedly attacked by other nomads, dressed differently, with metal helmets. These also would stay just out of reach.

Again, they came upon a set of low hills momentarily blocking Yezdegerd's view of what lay ahead. Could they be planning another set of pits? No matter. He would just follow their path.

But when he got to the crest of the hills, he found another unpleasant surprise. The nomads had spare horses, already saddled, waiting for them. Hardly slowing down, the nomads switched mounts. And now that the nomads had fresh horses, they began pulling away from the cavalry. And worse, still more nomads came towards Yezdegerd from his flanks, shooting arrows as they got within range. More horses were going down. And again, when his wings tried to close, the nomads turned and fled.

Yezdegerd called a halt and sized up the situation. The longer he continued the pursuit, the more horses he lost and the more men he'd have to double up or make walk. This would slow him down further, not that it mattered much -- as it seemed impossible to catch the nomads. He was completely frustrated. The nomads had decimated the cavalry's horses and were now escaping. But perhaps he should stem his losses and return.

He tried to bottle up his fury and think unemotionally. If he kept up this pursuit, all he would do was lose more horses. General J'nost had been right on both counts. The best strategy

should have been to stay in D'nar and come to some kind of arrangement with the nomads. And if the cavalry did charge out, they should armor the horses. That would slow them down and make them even less likely to catch the nomads, and even more critical that they first be sure of the location of the nomad camp, but at least they wouldn't lose any horses that way.

He turned his troops back around so as to begin the ride back to the rear guard. And then the nomads came again. There were a thousand of them now. They swooped down to within 100 yards, shooting as they passed, yelling their war cries. More horses dropped. Yezdegerd began getting a sickening feeling. They were a 2 hour hard ride from the army, even longer from safety at D'nar. And the horses were tired. It might be nightfall before they made it back to the army, if the army was still waiting for them on the plain. He began to realize he had seriously misunderstood his situation. He would not just be losing horses on this campaign.

As more and more of the men became unhorsed, the mounted nomads would ride them down. Why wouldn't they close with him and fight a hand-to-hand battle like real soldiers? Where was their sense of honor? But they were primitives, he realized. They would not fight a war in a civilized manner. He shook his head. Could things get worse?

The cavalry continued back the way they had come, all the while under arrow attack by the nomads. Yezdegerd remembered a small pond he had seen on the way. It was almost dried up, but perhaps they could stop there, try to shield the horses while they drank and rested, and then make a final push back to the infantry position.

Finally, they made it to the pond. The men dismounted and set up as good a shield wall around the horses as they could while the horses drank. He began to breathe easier as he noticed the nomads had broken off their attack. Was the shield wall idea working? The cavalry's small round shields were not large enough to provide much coverage -- it seemed the nomads were giving up too easily. Yezdegerd's sickening feeling began coming back. He had been completely outsmarted at every stage so far, why not now? He turned and looked back at the pond and the

horses drinking. Inexplicably, one of the horses sat down. Then a couple of others made strange whinnying noises.

Yezdegerd screamed, "Stop. Stop them from drinking. The pond has been poisoned."

The men immediately pulled their horses away, though in many cases the horses stubbornly tried to continue drinking. And then the horses began to fall. Some of the men had drunk from the pond as well, and these had begun to roll around on the ground clutching their stomachs.

If we stay here, the horses will become uncontrollable, thought Yezdegerd. They smell the water and won't understand why they can't drink it. They'll make so much noise, we won't even hear the nomads sneak up on us.... Still, the poisoned horses might recover. And, perhaps this position was defensible.... That question was answered when the arrows began coming in. The nomads came to within 50 yards – close enough for Yezdegerd to see their faces -- unleashing a piercingly accurate attack on the remaining horses. Some men began to mount and flee for their lives. And so, coming to the conclusion that no matter what he did, his cause was lost, he ordered a general retreat. Those who had horses could try and escape with their lives. Those who didn't... well, they could try to hold out by shielding themselves as well as they could. But, of course, then there'd be nothing to stop the nomads from coming in to within a few yards and shooting around the shields.

As he rode off, he told himself there was nothing else to do. Best to let as many men save themselves as possible. Behind him, he could see that the nomad force had split up. Half had surrounded the soldiers on foot, shooting arrow after arrow into the ranks with no D'nar archers to reply. Why had he ridden off without the archers! The other half of the nomads were keeping pace with those of the still mounted D'narian cavalry. They weren't even bothering to feign a retreat, they simply kept pace, shooting at will. Twice he thought they were dropping back, but they were only pausing to pick up their arrows. Then they caught up and came on again. He could see individual officers try to close with the nomads, but the nomads, on fresher horses, always stayed out of lance range.



A young cavalryman whipped his horse on, trying desperately to ride out of danger. He had once told his friend H'vise how much better the cavalry was than the infantry. Now he could only laugh bitterly. Still alive, but barely, he had sustained arrow wounds in the side of his neck, in one thigh, and in another calf. He had to try to keep from falling out of the saddle. But it was hard even to keep his head up.

He looked down on the ground, seeing it rush by. He could see that his stirrup was bleeding. Or so it seemed. Then he realized his boot had filled with blood, and overflowed so that the blood dripped, dripped, dripped off the stirrup. That image was still in his mind when he fell off the horse. He lay on the ground, face up. He could see riders come. One was young, about 15-16, with a scared look on his face. And he could hear voices.

“Go on, Kurguz, finish him off,” said Eder.

“He's finished, he won't be doing any more fighting.”

“Kurguz, I've seen Buddhists kill people. You'll never be accepted as a warrior, nor accept yourself as one, if you can't kill. He would have killed you had he the opportunity.”

Their voices grew ever fainter to the dying man, and then slipped away entirely.

“Well, forget it now. He's gone and died while we were talking. But stab him with your lance, anyway. At least you should get the feel of putting your lance through that breastplate.”

“All right.”

The point of the lance bounced off the steel plate.

“No, harder, like he was still alive.... No, forget I said that....”

Kurguz plunged harder, but apparently had closed his eyes upon doing so, and so the lance went deep into the ground by the body.

Eder looked at Kurguz and shook his head. “Just stay out of trouble.” He rode off.

Kurguz decided to rejoin Orin. As he rode off, he looked behind him, wondering what the dead soldier had been thinking of when he died: of family? of lost glory? of women he would

never have? of all the things he would never do? But now he was just a body with no name, lying in a field with no name.



When two nomads cut off his own path, Yezdegerd readied his lance and charged the nearest one. But this one did not retreat. He kept on coming. Maybe he's out of arrows, thought Yezdegerd.

But Eder was not out of arrows. Shooting at a distance was good strategy militarily, but Eder wanted the feel of blade biting into flesh. And so he came at Yezdegerd, lance in his left hand, seemingly held at a careless angle, but determination in his eye. They closed, bent on a head-on collision course. At the last second, just before Yezdegerd's lance could make contact with his chest, Eder's horse veered ever so slightly to his right.

Yezdegerd correctly shifted his lance to compensate – but the lance passed harmlessly through the air above Eder's saddle – where Eder's chest had been a fraction of a second before, but was no more. In a sudden move, Eder had leaned back and down to his left, in the space between the two horses. Yezdegerd could almost feel as well as hear a sickening crunch of bone – and knew that the nomad had made an impossible move. In leaning down, Eder had whacked the legs of Yezdegerd's horse with his lance, breaking a foreleg. Yezdegerd's horse now pitched forward in a roll, carrying Yezdegerd with it.

Yezdegerd, on the ground along with the horse, helmet knocked off in the fall, had one foot free and now frantically tried to free his other foot from the stirrups before the horse stood up. And he did so, though he suspected he had broken something when the horse had fallen on him. He staggered to his feet -- and then he looked up. Eder had dropped his lance in the maneuver, but now came at Yezdegerd with his sword. Yezdegerd dove back to the ground as Eder thundered by.

Eder turned and charged again, slower this time. And again, Yezdegerd dove to the ground. Eder halted and dismounted. Yezdegerd stood and drew his own sword. They eyed one another momentarily. Then Eder suddenly yelled the Kaskir war

cry and attacked Yezdegerd with an overhead stroke. Yezdegerd was momentarily shaken by the war cry and by the nomad's fury, but was still able to block the attack.

But Eder didn't relent. He struck again and again, not giving Yezdegerd a chance to think, moving from a succession of overhead strikes to a more intricate plan of coming at the cavalry officer with a variety of angles, forcing Yezdegerd back each time.

Yezdegerd knew his breastplate would protect him against a direct strike to the chest, but other parts of his body were not as well protected. Yezdegerd became vaguely aware that other riders – nomads – had closed around the two combatants, but were simply sitting on their horses and watching. He knew he'd have to make a move. And then he saw an opening. The nomad had seemingly left himself off balance after his last stroke, his chest unprotected. Yezdegerd lunged, directing the point of his straight sword directly at Eder's chest. Too late, he realized that he'd been taken in by a ploy. The nomad sidestepped the strike, and made his own on Yezdegerd's unprotected leg.

Yezdegerd's leg crumpled under him. He got up on one knee, still holding his sword, still challenging the nomad.

"Come on, Eder, stop playing with him and finish him off. This isn't a boar hunt." It was Sebuk.

Eder leveled his sword at the kneeling Yezdegerd. "Surrender now or die where you are."

"Never, you barbarian goat," came Yezdegerd's answer. But they were his last words, ever, as Eder swung to his left, knocking aside Yezdegerd's sword and then, on the return stroke, cutting off Yezdegerd's head. For an instant, it appeared that the lips of the severed head continued to move, perhaps uttering some further curse. Then they were stilled.

"All right, let's get moving. Kill any stragglers you find and then we rejoin Turan," said Sebuk.



Unhorsed soldiers were being ridden down by the nomads while the still mounted cavalymen, on tired horses, were each

separately attacked by the nomads in groups of two to four. It was a massacre.

Orin watched the remaining action from the sidelines, surrounded by his personal guard. Kurguz was with him as well, but he turned away from the slaughter. When he did so, he saw a group of 10 Burkuts behind them, making straight for them.

“Orin.... Orin!”

Orin turned. He could see the Burkuts coming at full speed, holding lances.

“I don’t like how this looks,” he said.

“Should we shoot them?” one of his men asked.

“No. We cannot shoot first, not without knowing what they intend. Lances out!”

The Kaskirs pulled out their own lances.

“I’ll get help,” Kurguz offered. And he took off.

As the Burkuts approached, the Kaskirs began to move towards them, several Kaskirs keeping in front of Orin to protect him against either arrows or lances. And then the Burkuts were on top of them.

Orin parried lance blows with his own, then countered with his sword.

It was a melee: 15 men with swords, lances, and shields going at each other. One of the Burkuts backed off, took a bowshot, and hit Orin.

But then Kurguz and a dozen other Kaskirs entered the fray and it was over, leaving only bodies on the ground and riderless horses.

Orin had blood running down the side of his face and an arrow in his shoulder. But the look on his face was not pain. It was fury.



## *Chapter 17*

Out of sight of the D'narian infantry. Turan had positioned half his force. With him were Aywan, commanding the Burkuts, and Arslan commanding the Kaskirs. But Turan would not attack till Sebuk and Orin had returned from their battle with the cavalry.

And then they did return. Nearly all that had gone out had come back. Turan was pleased at the lack of casualties. It left more men to attack the D'narian infantry. And then the city.

Orin and Eder rode straight for the group around Turan. His wound was roughly bandaged but he was in a state of mind where he didn't even notice.

He rode up to Aywan and drew his sword. "Explain yourself or die here!"

Aywan backed off. "Explain what?"

"What happens here? Orin, were you successful against the cavalry?" Turan asked.

"The cavalry is no more. But I was attacked by several Burkut. They wore the eagle, the forbidden gol of Bakar Khan." Orin threw a coat down on the ground. Aywan stared at it.

"I know nothing of this." Aywan said.

"You are their commander, are you not?"

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"Aywan! Orin!" Turan admonished. "Whatever problem you two have will need to be settled later. We have 3500 infantry facing us. That is our first concern."



The Governor stood in his chariot, thinking about General J'nost. He really needed some military advice just now, advice he

was used to getting from the General. The two men had never been great friends, but for J'nost to make a private deal with the nomads – the thought horrified him.

When the Governor had first spotted the nomads, he had drawn himself erect in what he figured was a military bearing. But as the waiting for his cavalry turned from minutes to hours, his bearing and his confidence had ebbed. Now he was having doubts. Where was the cavalry? What was taking them so long? Why hadn't they at least sent some word back? By late afternoon, many of the spectators had tired of waiting and had headed back to the city. And the Governor was coming to the same mind.

Then, into the stillness of the air could be heard the sound of horses' hooves. Ah, he thought, the cavalry is finally returning. I should berate them for taking so long. He could see them in the distance, a huge host. The cavalry must have taken only few casualties. I'll need to commend Yezdegerd, he thought. *What, what is that noise from the soldiers' ranks? Why are they shifting around uneasily?* And then he realized -- the coming host was not his returning cavalry, but a new enemy. So the rumors were true! And now, at the worst possible moment, they had appeared. And in much larger numbers than he had thought possible -- he could see a thousand mounted warriors, and the size of the dust cloud behind them indicated thousands more. For the first time that day -- for the first time in years -- he could feel his stomach knot up.

He watched the nomads split up into separate units. The first thousand advanced on the D'narian position, but keeping out of range of his archers' arrows. They halted and faced the infantry. As was common practice in the Empire, several soldiers, champions, advanced in front of their lines and challenged the nomads to single combat. They hurled not weapons -- not yet -- but challenges.

“Who among you wishes to test himself?”

There was no answer. The nomads held their ground.

“Who among you is not a coward?”

Still no answer.

“Are you afraid to fight? Are you all sheep?”

And still no answer.

“Are you all women? Is there not a man among you who will fight us?”

A nomad arrow flew out. It hit a champion in the breastplate, bouncing off. The infantry laughed.

“Is that your best? Is that your best? You shoot like girls!”

The infantry began jeering and hooting. Some began making obscene gestures. The crowd of spectators -- hushed by events and wondering if they should not have left sooner -- began to pick up spirit and add their own cries. Still, few of the nomads even bothered to return the insults and gestures. They just held their ground.



Orin looked out at the enemy infantry. It was large, but he was not impressed. Neither were Turan, Sebuk or probably any other of the nomads had they been asked. For most nomads thought, these soldiers had no horses! How could they fight without horses?

Orin considered these taunters, these D'narian champions. They were within arrow range of his men, as one nomad had already demonstrated, but probably not close enough to hit in a vulnerable spot. And to shoot and cause no damage was worse than not shooting at all, as had been demonstrated.

“Orin Beg,” called out Arslan. “I can kill them from here.”

Orin looked at the big man. Arslan's bow had a stronger pull than any other, a bow that probably only Arslan could string, even as old as he was. With normal arrows, his shots would travel further than anyone else's. But Arslan had been making heavier arrows, arrows that might pierce the armor of the soldiers.

Orin looked over at Turan and Sebuk. They were paying only the barest attention to the infantry in front of them, while watching the rest of their men get into position.

“Take your shot,” Orin called back to Arslan.

Arslan nocked the arrow, pulled back on a bow that would one day become legend, and let fly. The arrow flew through the air and buried itself in the chest of one of the champions. For a second, the man stood upright, looking down stupidly at the arrow

protruding from his breastplate, then dropped to the ground. The other champions backed off, as the infantry line opened up to let them in. And while the spectators fell silent, cheers and hoots went up from the nomad side.



The Governor saw his man fall and involuntarily touched his own chest. His spirits had been lifting before this. He had interpreted the nomads just sitting there on their horses and taking the insults as fear on their part. Perhaps they would not attack, as Ziyang had predicted they would not. But now, but now, he didn't know. Had the General been correct when he had said these nomads had better weapons than other nomads they had fought? And then he cringed in fright when he heard screams from behind him.

The Governor whirled around and saw, to his horror, that a band of nomads had attacked the remaining spectators. Civilians -- men, women, and even children, were being shot at -- and were falling to the ground, wounded and dying. The uninjured ones fled to the protection of the army. As the arrows continued flying, the Governor told an officer to send some soldiers out to protect the civilians. He also ordered the closest army group to open their lines and protect the spectators. Soldiers mixed with civilians in a disorganized mob.

Arrows began flying into the soldiers' ranks. The Governor could see some of the soldiers wounded, hit in areas not protected by their armor: legs, faces. But his own archers were firing back! To get good shots, the nomads had come in closer. But they still were not really close enough for the infantry archers. He saw only a very few nomads being hit, while more and more of his soldiers were dropping.

But the whole scene was becoming harder to see, what with all of the smoke around him. *Smoke?* He looked around in confusion. There were now nomads on his other flank, firing arrows that smoked as they flew through the air and continued smoking as they landed. And fire arrows as well. *What to do? What to do?*

Fortunately, his officers, not waiting for his commands, were forming their troops into a defensive position -- into a ring shaped formation, presenting a shield wall to all sides, with the archers behind and shooting over the heads of the outer soldiers. The Governor found himself at the center of this ring, still frozen in place in his chariot. One of the officers ran to him, "What do you want us to do, sir? Should we retreat?"

"I don't know, I don't know," was all the Governor could say. He watched as the men he had sent out to protect the spectators came running back, some having dropped their weapons to run faster, and were trying to get into the ring. All the while being pursued by nomads with bows and lances.

As the soldiers broke their formation to let their comrades into the ring, this opened up holes. And the nomads, moving in an arrowhead formation, attacked each of these weakened sections. While untrained horses will shy away from riding into a mass of men, these were war horses who obeyed their masters completely. But still, the nomads were unable to break the lines. Some -- men and horses -- were impaled on the infantry's pikes. And many were shot down by the infantry's archers, shooting over the heads of the pikemen, up at the mounted nomads. Despite the noise of the horses, the cries of the nomads, the sound of the nomad drums, plus the choking dust, the confusion, and the fear, the infantry ring held, repulsing every nomad attack. The General had trained his soldiers well.

H'vise, positioned in the outermost row of pikemen, could barely keep from shaking. But he gripped his pike tightly, planting one end in the ground when the nomads charge, lifting and jabbing the pike at the nomads when the charge had been broken.

Another officer joined the Governor in the chariot. "Do you have any orders for us?" he asked.

"What do you think we should do?" the Governor asked.

"Well," answered the officer, "if we can maintain our formation, we'll be safe for a while. But if our line ever breaks at any point, and the nomads get inside the ring, then we're in trouble. If the cavalry were here, they could protect us by driving off the attackers ... but without them...."

“Perhaps the cavalry will return soon.... Maybe we can hold out till it gets dark, then try to sneak back?” the Governor asked, still looking for advice.



Orin sat on his horse alongside Turan and Sebuk, watching the battle from a distance. It was an odd position for him. He'd always been in the middle of things. The D'narian cavalry had not been hard to defeat. In fact, they been defeated right at the outset, simply by coming to a location Sebuk had chosen, then being led on a path that Sebuk had chosen, to combat at locations Sebuk had chosen.

But the infantry wasn't moving. They could stay where they were, fighting off attack after attack, until.... They might be getting reinforcements from the Imperial capital. Reinforcements that would make both the defeat of the army and the taking of the city impossible. Or they could just retreat in formation back to the city. Had Turan something new in mind?

“Well, they've taken some losses, but most of their force is intact. What now?” Orin asked Turan.

“Did you notice those wagons we were bringing along?” asked Sebuk.

“Yes, of course. I assumed that was just baggage.”

“Ah, never make unnecessary assumptions. There's one that does not have baggage. Turn around and you will see what it carries.”

Orin turned. And smiled in disbelief. “Does that actually work?”

“In a situation like this, it's perfect. And another wagon contains a load of bolts.”

What was in the first wagon was a huge crossbow, what in the West was called a ballista. The Jersaks maneuvered the wagon to just out of arrow range of the infantry's archers. They pointed it directly at the ring, which they could just barely make out through the smoke. Then, eight men pulled back the rope attached to the ends of the ballista. A bolt was loaded.

“Watch this,” Turan said. He signaled, and one of the Jersaks triggered the firing mechanism. Orin watched as the bolt, fired on a level plane, rushed over the ground, and passed into the smoke cloud. It was received with a chorus of screams.

“Again,” Turan called out. To Orin he said, “When I used this last, I saw 5 men skewered like meat on a stick. The bolt passed through their shields, their armor, their bodies, it was beautiful.”

The wagon was turned slightly and another bolt was launched. More screams were heard. Orin could now see movement in the D'narian line, as soldiers tried to get away from the next target area, though, with the smoke obscuring their vision, none were sure of where that might be.

“Continue shooting,” Turan commanded.

Two more bolts were fired as Orin watched. But on the next one, a great cracking sound was heard as the bowstring was drawn back. “That was what happened to the last one, also,” Sebuk remarked. “But the D'narian lines should be weakened sufficiently by now.” He signaled to the waiting riders. And, again, the arrowhead formation moved across the plain, passing into the smoke cloud.

Meanwhile, Turan motioned to his crossbow lieutenant. The man came over, clearly not at ease. “I thought you fixed that problem,” Turan said.

“My khan, the air is dry.... the summer was hot.... I tested it yesterday and it seemed all right...”

“If the D'narian line is not broken, you will fill the wagon with oiled cloth, set it on fire, and personally push it into their lines. Now go and await my orders.”

“Yes, my khan.”

But that was not to be necessary, Orin saw. The initial Jersak charge was successful. The Jersak arrowhead formation had not been turned as it approached the ring, but instead, Orin guessed, trying to peer through the smoke, must have pierced the ring, or whatever was left of it. Sebuk must have been of the same conclusion, because he signaled for his main body to follow the vanguard in the attack, leaving only a small force in reserve.

From his vantage point, Orin could see soldiers fleeing, and being chased down by the nomad riders. Could victory be this easy? But they still had the city to take.



“What am I doing here?” screamed the voice in his mind, as H'vise frantically looked for a way out. He scrambled in one direction, then another, finally just taking off in a direction where he saw no nomads. As he ran, he threw away first his shield, then the sword -- just so to run faster. Then the breastplate went. Now that he was running at full speed, in a direction he wasn't sure of, the whole thing seemed like a dream, like the battle had not happened, like the whole thing was not really happening.

Was there even a battle? There were arrows, there were men milling around, there were horses charging. But he didn't kill anyone, like he had dreamed of doing, didn't even draw his sword. But he wasn't a coward, he had stood his ground. Then someone yelled that the Governor was fleeing, and they had all started to run. And they were still running. H'vise saw his friend L'vel running just yards away, also having thrown away his armor so as to run faster. H'vise joined him and they ran together over the rough ground.

The two boys looked at each other. This wasn't what they had planned. “Next time,” began L'vel, but L'vel's words stopped in mid-sentence, and so did his legs. H'vise turned his head back in time to see L'vel, with an arrow sticking out of his chest, falter and fall.

But in taking his eyes off the ground, H'vise caught his foot on an exposed root. He performed a somewhat less than graceful flip into and out of a patch of dense brush, hitting his head in the process. Flat on his back, his body slipped down into a shallow dry wash. Stunned, unable to rise, he could only lay there, feeling consciousness slip away.



What was left of the infantry was being hunted down and captured or killed. But some of the ones heading back to the city were allowed to go, along with some of the spectators. And in with them, were some of the nomads in disguise.

The Governor was one of those that had been captured. Wounded, bleeding, unable to stand without assistance, he was left in a half-sitting, half-lying position on the ground. He had panicked and driven off in his chariot after the third ballista shot, adding to the general confusion, and worse -- when the soldiers saw their leader fleeing, many figured there was no point in their staying around to die.

All the prisoners had been brought together. Their weapons and armor had been taken, their arms were bound with cords. There must have been about 500 survivors there.

Turan and Sebuk were clearly relishing the victory. Orin was happy as well. He and his men had fought bravely. They had been victorious over a larger foe. And they had done it with few casualties. The dead Kaskir would be off on their journey to the next world, to Heaven. And there would be a victory celebration tonight. But there would also be women wailing in the camp tonight. That would dim their spirits. Perhaps the Jersaks had a better idea. When you go off to war, leave the wives behind.

To no one in particular, Sebuk announced, "Eeren told us we would be victorious. He told us the spirits of the underworld would turn our enemies into stupid donkeys. And lo, his words have come true."

Meanwhile, Turan looked over at the prisoners. "We do not need this many. Kill half," he ordered.

A voice cried out. "No!" It was the Governor. "Please don't do this. Why are you doing this? We are already helpless. Don't you have any mercy?"

Turan took notice of him, seemingly for the first time. "Ah, Governor Chandrapida," he said. "To answer your first question, I have plans for your men. And I will answer your second question, as well. What is important is winning. There is no plunder for losers. No one tells stories of losers. No one remembers who was merciful, only who won." He paused. Then he continued, "You can stop it though. Order the city to surrender. Then there will be no need for further injury."

The Governor looked down at the ground. He'd been foolish, over-confident and foolish, and now he would pay. But if he had to die, he would do it with dignity. And he didn't believe any more what anyone told him. "Even if I gave the order, they would

not obey. The military has standing instructions from the Emperor to never surrender a city of the Empire, under any conditions.” This was not actually true, but it sounded good.

“I do not know if I can believe you, so I want you to give the order anyway,” Turan replied.

The Governor sighed. He could think of nothing else to say that would put off the nomad. And he certainly would not turn over the city to these barbarians, he had that much self-respect remaining. “I cannot. Do with me as you will.”

Turan walked over to where the Governor lay. “Your soldiers will survive only long enough to do the work I have planned for them. And for you, because you have given us a great insult, doubling the insult because you thought to easily defeat us, I have planned for you a long, lingering, painful death. A death in which you will spend your many last hours reflecting on the destruction of D'nar and the total annihilation of its inhabitants.”

“Annihilation?” The governor gasped. Everyone killed? His wives? His children? He would go down in history as the man responsible for the total destruction of D'nar? He struggled to get up, but Turan pushed him down and laughed.

## *Chapter 18*

Aywan, dressed as a D'narian civilian, had entered the city along with about 30 of his men. Bakar was waiting for them in a warehouse. As the men entered, they bowed to Bakar. He greeted each one warmly.

“The army has been almost completely destroyed,” Aywan told him. “We slipped into the city with spectators, refugees, and the few returning soldiers. They checked us for weapons, but not our identity.”

“I have weapons for your all,” said Bakar, pointing to several chests. The men pulled out bows, arrows, swords.

“Have Turan or Sebuk yet learned I am your spy?”

“No. He still thinks you’re just some kinsman of mine.”

“Aywan, my friend, we are now ready for the last steps. Do you know what you and your men have to do?”



“Perhaps it would be better to wait before we attack the city -- give the men a chance to rest?” Orin suggested to Turan.

Turan answered, “No, we should attack now. The D'narians are undoubtedly in a state of shock over the defeat of their army. I'm sure they had not expected it and have most certainly not adjusted their defenses. And they will have to adjust because they will be defending the city with far fewer men than anyone there could have foreseen.”

“Won't the city people assist in the defense?” Orin asked.

“Aywan’s agent in the city,” answered Turan, “says that there are few weapons there and even fewer men accustomed to using them. And even fewer with any significant experience in using them. They engage neither in hunting, nor in defending their herds, because the city residents have none, nor in war. They are

soft and weak. They have grown up believing that just being part of the Empire will scare their enemies away. And that even if their enemies be not scared away, as the Kaskir were not, the Empire's soldiers would protect them. And so the men have not bothered learning how to fight. They will cower in their homes when our men enter the city.

“We will send our men house-to-house, herding people out into the streets, and then out to the plains beside the city. Then we will encircle them and slaughter them as if we had been hunting. Those that refuse to come out of their houses when called upon to do so, will be killed inside. It will be glorious. There is no greater thrill than destroying your enemy, taking his women, and ending his line by killing his children. Let there be no survivors, no one to ever rise up against us.”

Sebuk and Eder stood nearby. Orin looked at their faces. Sebuk was looking forward to the battle for the city, Eder was looking forward to finally getting his revenge against the people of D'nar. Orin was, in fact, the only one of the four uncomfortable with the mass killing that was to occur. Over the past two weeks, the Kaskir raids had resulted in the deaths of many people -- and this had begun to bother him. Now he was sitting here participating in planning the deaths of thousands more. But he would go through with it. He had pledged his cooperation and would keep his pledge.



On the East Gate, after sunset, as the light faded and the moon rose, soldiers nervously looked over the parapets, straining to see the nomad attack that could come at any time. And they had reason to be nervous.

“There should be 10 times as many men up here as there are.” one soldier complained.

“Some of the officers have gone into the city to recruit help.”

“They won't have much experience. They may not be any use.”

“Anyway,” said another. “The city walls are too high for the nomads to scale.”

“Unless they have ladders.”

“Where would they get so many ladders?”

“They have ropes. Maybe they’ll lasso the top of the wall and pull themselves up.”

“We can just cut down the ropes, and knock down the ladders. There are hundreds of soldiers spread out over the walls. That should be more than enough.”

“I saw over 5000 men leave the city the other day, and we thought that was enough.”

“Oh, quit worrying. You sound like an old woman.”

An officer joined them, offering some words of encouragement. Then some sounds from the plains reached their ears. The soldiers looked at each other, then they all looked out. There was just enough moonlight to make out any movement on the plain. And there was movement.

A hundred or more figures were advancing on foot towards the city, coming right towards the section of the wall by the tower.

One of the soldiers muttered, “Why are they attacking here? Why me?”

“Why are they on foot?” asked another.

All strained to get a better look at the figures.

“They don't really look like nomads.”

“Would you know one if you saw one?”

“Are they refugees, sir?” one asked the officer.

“No, no women, no children, no animals, no wagons -- no belongings at all.”

“They must be attackers then. Sir, should we sound the alarm?”

“Hail them first,” answered the officer.

One of the soldiers leaned over the parapet. “Who goes there?” he called. There was no answer. “Stop or we’ll shoot.” The men on the ground continued forward.

“Give them a warning shot,” ordered the officer.

The soldier nocked an arrow and sent it at the feet of one of the men in the lead.

Immediately, the cry went up, “Don't shoot, don't shoot. It's us, Group 3!” But then another voice from the ground yelled, “It's a trap, it's a trap!”

This voice was stilled and the soldiers could make out a man fall to the ground and not get up. And the force advanced.

"It's our men, but there are nomads among them. Sound the alarm," said the officer.

There was an alarm bell and one of the soldiers ran to ring it. Bells from nearby towers answered him.

They continued peering over the parapet. It looked like a large number of men had made it to the wall.

"I can't tell what they're doing..." said one of the soldiers.

"Someone's handing out something, I think."

"Weapons?"

"No, if there are indeed nomads down there, why would they be giving our men weapons?"

"Spades! They're going to try and undermine the walls."

"Maybe we should take a shot at them."

"It's too dark. We'd be hitting our own men."

"Make the attempt," ordered the officer..

One of the soldiers nocked an arrow, aimed for one of the figures -- in the dark, they all looked alike -- and let fly into the shadows. Had he missed? No one cried out. The two other soldiers also took shots. This time there was a cry and they all looked at each other. Had they hit one of the nomads or one of their own?

"Continue shooting," said the officer. "There'll be more archers coming soon."

One of the soldiers nocked another arrow, leaned over the parapet again..., but instead of firing, he cried out and his bow fell to the ground outside. He began to pitch forward, but other soldiers pulled him back. It was ugly. He'd taken an arrow in the face.

They realized then that anyone on the parapet would be framed in the moonlight, and an easy target.

But there was another way to stop the tunnelers. As more men arrived, they began digging their own tunnel. When the two tunnels met, as narrow as they would be, it would only take a few of the soldiers to keep the nomads from digging further.

The officer in charge, C'tal, leaned back, against the wall. The wall felt substantial, solid, how could mere nomads break a defense like this? He was exhausted from being up all night, and

in a state of anxiety the whole time. And trying not to show it. The soldiers must not see fear in their officers, else they'd feel all is lost and abandon their posts. This could be a great day of glory for them, the officer knew, a day when they successfully defended their city against a vast army of pillagers.

Had he done everything he could? He wondered. The city could hold out against a protracted siege. In fact, a siege would work to their advantage, as fresh Imperial troops would have a chance to arrive. And, he believed, while they were very short-handed, there were enough men to defend the walls. If the city could hold out tomorrow, they could round up all the healthy men in D'nar and put them to work, either as guards or in improving the fortifications.

He could hear the nomads digging. The repetitive sound of the shovels and axes made almost a soothing sound. Ka-chunk, ka-chunk, scrape, ka-chunk. C'tal imagined he could see the diggers, shoveling and shoveling, taking out dirt and piling it up, piling, piling, till the pile of dirt was as high as the walls of D'nar itself. And then he saw a mounted nomad on the rampart. And then another. C'tal cried out and jumped up, shaking, his breathing rapid, heart racing.

“What is it, Sir?” his aide asked.

Still breathing rapidly, C'tal stared at the ramparts. No one there, except a few crouching guards. He had dozed off and dreamed. “They're going to come over the top. Get pitch, oil, anything that burns well, we have to get them away from the walls!”

The men looked at each other. One said, “I joined the army to fight enemies, not kill my friends,” referring to the diggers.

C'tal told him urgently, “They're piling up the dirt. And when it's piled up, they'll ride up it and onto the parapets, and it'll be too late to stop them. If you want to live, do what I say and do it now.”

That finally did it. The men took action. Dozens of oily rags were set on fire and thrown over the top. More oil was boiled in large containers, ready to be dumped over the walls as well. But it wasn't necessary. The sound of digging stopped. Messengers were sent to the other walls with the warning. C'tal began breathing a little easier.

•

When additional help came, C'tal had the archers positioned on the wall, ready to shoot at the miners – but few of the soldiers were either anxious to shoot among their own men, nor risk their own lives by leaning out over the parapet or tower windows. And then a new alarm came from the West wall. Seeing no immediate threat from the miners, C'tal sent men over to the opposite side of the city.

On the West wall, the soldiers were trying to figure out what the nomads were doing. But it was yet too dark.

“You'd best keep your head down, sir, they've been pretty accurate with their shooting,” one of the soldiers told an officer.

“Sir, look there!” one of the men shouted. They peered over the wall. It was still very dark, but the officer could now make out something moving towards them, something large. He waited a few moments more, till he knew for sure what it was. And, in a few moments, it did become clear. The nomads had stacked three wagons one on top of the other, and were pushing it towards the wall. He could guess what would come next: nomads were likely hiding in the top wagon. When the wagon had been pushed against the wall, it would give them an easy climb to the top of the wall.

There was no shot at the nomads pushing the wagon, they were too well protected behind it. He would just have to... wait.... what about fire arrows? He could set it on fire before it even got to the wall. “Fire arrows!” he yelled to his men. “Get some hay, get some cooking oil!”

•

Bakar had left for the East Gate some hours before dawn. He looked up at the stars. An end, and a new beginning.

They had been waiting across from the East Gate, in the shadows thrown by the torches on the wall. They were all dressed in the style of D'nar. And the swords they carried were D'narian

swords, purchased in the city. But they were not D'narians. They were Burkuts. And they were watching the gate.

Finally, they saw many of the men dash off, to defend against a new attack elsewhere. Not too many left -- now was the time. Time for them to make their move.

Ziyan and his men walked smoothly towards the gate.

"Take heart men," he cried to the soldiers. "The walls of D'nar have never been overcome by force. And they won't be now."

"Ziyan! Glad to see some of the merchants are helping out."

"We'll just do what we can. Commander P'nor says he needs 10 more men over on the West wall. So I have brought some friends and we will fill in for you."

The soldier hesitated.

"Should I tell him you didn't think we could fill your positions?" asked Ziyan.

"Of course not," replied the soldier. Then to some others, he called, "Men! Form up. We leave to help Commander P'nor."

Several soldiers hurried off. A few remained.

"We'll stay," said one. "But we appreciate your assistance."

Ziyan draws his sword. "Ah, but I'm not here to assist you."

He struck down the soldier. Then he and his men attacked the remaining soldiers on the ground. Two of the disguised Burkuts pulled out bows from under their robes and began shooting at the soldiers on the parapets. The soldiers shot back, but in the meantime, Ziyan/Bakar had taken control of the winch holding the gate. He opened it.

Another Burkut waved a torch at the open entrance. As Bakar and his men threw off their robes to reveal their Burkut coats underneath, alarm bells began ringing. To this sound was added that of horses' hooves approaching the city. A group of soldiers appeared in the street and headed for the gate. But they were too late to stop the stream of nomads riding in, shooting as they came in the early light of dawn.

At the South Gate, the Burkuts, Aywan leading, fought a short, bloody melee against the surprised defenders, and opened that gate also to the invaders.

•

Chodura and J'nine had woken up. They went to a window and tried to peer out, but all they can make out were shadowy figures.

"I heard bells," said J'nine. "Do you think the nomads are attacking?"

"I don't know. I hope not."

"Do you think we should get the men to barricade the doors and windows?"

"Oh... mistress... the slaves have all run off."

J'nine's face began showing fear for the first time.

"But what are we going to do if the nomads come?"

"Perhaps," suggested Chodura, "we should leave and go somewhere safer. Maybe the Citadel."

"I'm afraid to go out while it's still dark. I think there may be looters."

"In the morning, then? Do we have any weapons?" asked Chodura.

"There are some swords and nomad bows. But I've never used a weapon. Never had to."

They both turned at the sound of a small voice. J'naris had entered the room behind them, clutching the felt camel Chodura had made for him. And looking small and very vulnerable.

"If we die and go to Heaven, can I take my camel with me?"

•

As the sun's rays hit a window in the Citadel prison, they found a man's chained hands clenched tightly on the bars. A night in prison hadn't helped the General's mood. And the sound of the city alarm bells didn't either.

He took off his emerald ring. "Guard! Guard!" he shouted. And when a guard appeared to tell him to shut up, he held up the ring. "This is yours. If you bring me an officer."

The guard reached for the ring. But the General quickly withdrew it. "Bring the officer. Then you shall have the ring."

Perhaps another man couldn't have pulled this off, but the General's voice was one that suited command.

An officer showed up shortly afterwards. This time both a bribe and the voice were not enough. The officer was hesitant, and finally the General exploded.

"Let me out of here, you idiot! Since I've been in here, the army has been destroyed and the Governor has probably been killed. Do you want the city to fall as well? Do you want the deaths of thousands more on your head? I am D'nar's only hope!"

The officer unlocked the cell.



Astride a horse outside the massive citadel, the General attempted to rally soldiers around him. A rider came up.

"General! They're in the city," a soldier yelled. "Scores, maybe hundreds."

The General staggered under the force of the statement. He grabbed the soldier by his breastplate. It was a man he knew, and, unfortunately, a man he knew to be reliable and normally unexcitable.

"Are you sure? Did you actually see them?"

"Yes, General. I was with a detachment bringing supplies to the East Wall. But when we got within sight of the East Gate, we saw that it was wide open, with horsemen streaming through unopposed. They were heading up all the streets. And they were shooting everyone they saw! We dropped our supplies where we were, and ran for it. I found a horse and set off to look for you." The soldier paused for breath. The General, momentarily stunned, said nothing.

The soldier continued, "It took me a while to get here. By this time...." His voice trailed off.

A bunch of other people came running up.

"They're in the city. They're burning the Indian Quarter!"

Everyone looked to the south. Part of the city was lit with flames, with smoke rising above it.

The other soldiers crowded around the General.

“What should we do?” they wanted to know.

“Into the Citadel. Everyone into the Citadel,” he ordered.  
“My children... you men! Do you know my house? Find my children. Bring them here!”



Pandemonium in the streets! People rushed around in all directions. Others followed those whom they hoped knew where they were going. Like a school of fish, these often became crowds that would start in one direction, then change abruptly to another direction. Some headed for the gates, others for places to hide. The devout streamed into the temples for comfort and salvation. They were joined by those who were not devout, but were ready to start. All pushed and shoved to get in. Perhaps they figured it would be a sanctuary. Perhaps the barbarians would spare the temples. Perhaps the Lord would protect them. Or perhaps it was simply a place of comfort in a world suddenly turned upside down.

The High Priest stood by the Sacred Fire in the Great Temple. He called out, “Welcome.” He had, in fact, never seen so many worshipers in the Temple before. “Enter and find the True Path.”

The Great Room filled up. There were people sitting on the floor so thickly that one could hardly walk. Others stood and lined the walls. Some overcame their fear of impropriety and climbed onto the platform where the sacred fire burned, the holy place, but the priests pulled them off, reserving that place for the High Priest alone.

“Listen to me,” the High Priest cried, and the noise of the multitude dimmed. This is my moment, he thought, though he was afraid himself. I can guide these people to the true Path.

“Listen to me,” he said in a firm, well-modulated tone. He had an excellent speaking voice, and knew how to use it. “Listen to me. I will be your guide. I know you are frightened, you are afraid for your lives. But do not give into this fear.

“It is written,” his voice boomed out, resonating against the walls of the Temple, “that Man will undergo much pain inflicted upon him by Ahriman and his demons and

their army of followers. But this army of daevasyna that gathers without will never ascend to Heaven, they will spend eternity in misery. While, you, the faithful, you who have lived a life in accordance with the will of Ahura Mazda, you who have shown by your deeds that you a follower of good, a believer in right, you will live eternally in Heaven. Though we may lose now, we will win in the end. It is written...”

“Is it written that you all die now?” The speaker was a cloaked latecomer standing by the Great Door. He pushed and shoved his way to the front, stepping right on people who were on the floor, as if they were of no consequence.

“Who lives and who dies is the result of the Great Contest between Ahura Mazda and Ahriman, between Good and Evil. A contest, that in the end, will be won by Ahura Mazda,” the High Priest answered.

“No,” the stranger said, as he approached the platform, “I decide.” And he roughly pushed aside the priests, mounted the platform, and threw off his cloak. “And I have decided upon death for D’nar and all D’narians, in memory of my sister Jinji.”

And then Eder, with one swift, fluid movement, drew his sword and severed the head of the High Priest. The head fell, bounced on the platform and then rolled off the platform onto the main floor. Screams of terror filled the Great Room. People pushed away from the platform in mad panic.

And the stranger, who now without his cloak could clearly be seen as a nomad, drew out a second sword. With a sword in each hand, Eder slayed first the remaining priests and acolytes surrounding the platform, then swung with determination at every person within reach.

The people who had entered in fear of what was outside, and had been calmed with hope of eternal life, were now, once again, frantic with fear. But where they had once struggled to get in, they now struggled to get out.

In complete terror, having totally surrendered their reason, people pushed and shoved towards the exits. Everyone wanted to get away from this daevasyna, but few only could escape, and these were killed by the nomads outside. Many more were crushed so tightly that their ribs cracked, they could not breathe, and they lost consciousness. Yet, there was little room to fall, and

though unconscious and dying, were still held upright, carried along by the mob. No better off were those who had found room to fall, as they were trampled. And still Eder continued swinging the two swords, making new victims with each stroke.

A young man called out to his wife, "Grab my hand!" But the crowd pulled them apart and she could no longer reach it. He turned and tried to push towards her, but the crowd was like a river whose strong current pulled them apart. Then she saw him go down. She went crazy, wildly flapping the one arm that was free, till she too was drowned by the current.

A young girl covered her ears against the overpowering noise of the screams reverberating within the Temple, echoing them, multiplying them. Her father tried to reach out for her, but was pushed aside by the frantic crowd. Everyone was trying to push by her, to get ahead of her, to get ahead of everyone else, to push towards the exit. But there was no real progress. They were all trapped!

And the screams of pain and fright continued, as the demon nomad continued his merciless work. A woman watched, petrified, as people fell. As the crowd thinned between her and the *dregvant*, the follower of evil, she could see his swords flashing, cutting, slashing. Whoever was in his way, armed or unarmed, was felled by those blades. She didn't want to look, but she couldn't take her eyes off the unspeakable evil. And when she finally backed up, there was no place to back up to. As the blades came closer, she tried to think of a prayer but the words wouldn't come. Her mind was filled with pure terror and all that escaped from her lips was "Oh Mazda, oh Mazda..." And then she drew herself into a little ball on the floor, trying to make herself as small as possible, maybe so small the *dregvant* wouldn't see her.

## *Chapter 19*

“Close the gate, close the gate,” the General commanded to the guards at the Citadel entrance. From the parapets, he could see D’narians running for the safety of the Citadel. But he didn’t want them there. They would get in the way. There’d not be enough food or water for them in a siege. And their numbers might include disguised nomads. And so they found the gate closed against them.

“General!” one of the soldiers cried. “It’s our people, our families. We must let them in.”

“No we will not. Stand by your post.” The General was adamant, even when people pushed up against the iron gate, threatening to push it down from weight of numbers. And then he saw a familiar standard above their heads, the standard of the Governor. As people parted for it, he could see a chariot with a man lying on its floor, and some 20 mounted soldiers in armor.

“The Governor is hurt. We need to bring him inside,” one of the soldiers called out.

The General hesitated. This was the man who had put him in prison. But now, he figured, the Governor would had no choice but to rely on him for defense of the Citadel.

“Open the Gate,” he ordered.

As the gate opened, the General watched the Governor’s party enter, along with a number of civilians who were not pushed back by the guards. The party pulled up in front of the prison, as the General came down off the parapets. The horsemen in the party dismounted. And most then stood by their horses. But the General could now see that some did not. That some had entered the prison. A sick feeling began to come over him.

“Guards! Hold those men!” he cried.

The Governor's party drew their swords and defended themselves against the soldiers. As the General rushed over to the chariot, the man inside rose and threw off his robe.

"You!" The General froze.

"I am Bakar Khan of the Burkut. And I take command of this citadel."

The General drew his sword, as did Bakar.



In the Citadel, the soldiers outnumbered the Burkuts, but as time passed, the Burkuts were aided by Karakoyunlu who had been freed from the prison. They were weak from incarceration and lack of good food, but their numbers began changing the course of the battle.

Off to one side, Bakar and the General went at it, sword against sword. Man to man. Tekin, the Karakoyunlu chief, watched this for a moment, then picked up a bow and shot the General in the head. The General's body jerked on the ground, just barely alive. Tekin went over to it and hacked at it with a sword. "For the women and children who died, for every day we rotted here, caged like animals."

Finally Bakar pulled him away. "We need to secure the Citadel against the Jersaks."



People were pouring into the market square, herded there by the mounted nomads as if they had been sheep. Over the babble of sound, R'kina and S'riah could hear the nomads shouting commands to each other. The two girls were terrified. R'kina, with no idea of where her father R'kenor might be, had spotted S'riah with her family. They had never been actual friends, but in the grip of disaster, it was easier to look for solace with familiar faces rather than with complete strangers.

"Turan Khan said to take them out to the plains outside the city," they could hear one nomad say.

An oddly dressed nomad replied, "It is faster to just do it here. Be certain that your men have completely surrounded the square so that none may escape. Then order all to begin shooting at once."

"Who are you to do this? Why are you doing this? At least spare the women and children!" It was S'riah's father who spoke.

"I am Eeren," cried the nomad, in his strange accent. "Erlík, the Khan of the Underworld, has granted us victory over you." The shaman, dressed in a ceremonial robe, strode over to S'riah's father as the milling mass of people let him through. He raised a knife on high. "And we shall repay him for his help with your souls." With that, he plunged the knife into the man's breast.

S'riah's mother screamed and S'riah felt faint. Eeren simply turned on his heel and strode out of the momentarily silenced crowd. He had only gotten to the edge of the crowd when another voice shouted out.

"Have you no mercy?" S'riah found herself saying. "Don't you have wives, children, parents at home? Are we so different? Can't you see we're not your enemies? We're people like you."

"Shoot her! Shoot them all!" screamed Eeren.

The Jersak Tardu nocked an arrow and aimed it straight at S'riah's heart. S'riah could hear the screams of people around her. People being shot and dying, people looking for exits where there were none. But she stood where she was. She stood tall and straight. Tardu looked directly at her, his bow not wavering. But his mouth felt strangely dry while his eyes had become moist. And when his thumb released the bowstring, his eyes were closed.



"Don't go out, don't go out," T'lima could hear her father yelling. And then her mother's voice, pleading, "They say they won't hurt us if we leave the house. We should do what they say."

"No, no, they're killing everyone who goes outside. They're shooting them down with arrows, like marmots. Don't go out and don't let them in. Maybe they'll think there's no one here."

And then T'lima could hear blows upon their gate.

NO! NO! They had entered the house. T'lima backed into a corner of the room that held the women's quarters. Curtains partitioned the room and she couldn't see much. But she could hear the sounds of struggle. The sounds of mercy being asked, and none given. While she couldn't see, her imagination filled in the picture: a picture of rape and murder. Blood splattered across one curtain and her mother's protesting voice was silenced.

T'lima leaned against the wall, pushing so hard against it she could have become part of it. THIS CAN'T BE REAL, she thought. I'm going to wake up. But she knew it was real. And she could feel the blind panic, the hysteria, that wanted to take over her mind. And then, standing there, in a second of silence as the last member of her family died, she knew she wanted to live, wanted to live no matter what.

The curtain was roughly pushed aside by a sword. A nomad stepped in with a leer on his face. And T'lima dropped her clothes at her feet, standing there naked before him. The nomad lowered his sword slightly. T'lima walked towards him and put her arms around him. "Take me from here," she said. The nomad looked at her with a bemused look. Then he lifted her up and carried her out.

"Dayar!" a voice called out. "Where are you going with that one?"

"Get your own," Dayar called back.



Leaving Tekin in charge at the Citadel, Bakar rode out to meet with Aywan and to gather as many of the Burkut as he could. But as he rode to their agreed-upon meeting place, he became increasingly disturbed at what he was seeing. The Jersaks – and the Burkuts as well – were plundering, as he had expected, though he had no heart for it himself. He had dispatched some men to guard the houses of friends, including R'kenor's. But he began feeling worse sight of the destruction than he had thought he would. A spy can never make friends, he realized. But perhaps few lives would be lost. It was a small consolation he granted himself.

But that consolation dissipated as he saw the Jersaks killing everyone in sight.

“Stop that one,” he called out to his men, pointing to a Jersak. “Bring him here.” When the Jersak was brought over, Bakar asked, “You! What’s in that sack?”

“Just ears.”

“Ears?”

“Turan Khan has offered a prize to him who collects the most D’narian ears.”

When he caught up with Aywan, he asked, “What exactly are Turan’s orders?”

Aywan hesitated before answering.

Bakar looked at him. “I know you well Aywan. There’s something you’re not telling me.”

Aywan glanced at him nervously. “My khan.... I hadn’t wanted to mention it before....”

“Mention what? Continue!”

“Turan has ordered everyone in the city killed, as an example to other cities.” Aywan looked relieved at making the admission. He’d been looking off in the distance when he’d answered. But now he glanced back at Bakar, and was sorry he had done so. And sorry to be here. He looked away again. When Bakar began talking to him it was in a level, cold voice that Aywan had never heard him use before.

“You will never, ever, keep anything from me again. Otherwise I will forget we are friends. Do you understand? Look at me, dismount and kneel to me, and tell me you understand.”

Aywan hurried to comply. “Yes, my khan. I should not have done so. I was afraid to tell you before, but I will not hold anything back from you again, if you can forgive me.”

Still in the same voice, Bakar asked, “Anything else you have not told me?”

“No, my khan, there is nothing else.”

“Did you send men to R’kina’s house?”

“Yes, they should be there now. They’ll keep her safe.”

“Will the men go along with this extermination?” he asked Aywan.

“Yes. Turan is the khan, all will comply with his orders.”

Bakar thought for a moment, then asked, “How many men can you count on that are loyal to me, who will obey my orders even if they don't understand why?”

“I believe about half of the Burkut will follow us. Turan’s victory yesterday, and the sack of the city today – even though it would not have been possible without you – have made him more popular than he would otherwise be.”

“This is what we will do – tell our men that there is to be no more killing except in defense. And that all unarmed D’narians are to be escorted to safety in the Citadel. Tell the men they can plunder later.”

As Aywan left to spread the word, Bakar thought: *My world had once been destroyed. And in return, I’ve destroyed another. How many deaths will be upon my head?*



Orin sat on his horse, in a street in D’nar, surveying his “conquest”. But it hadn’t felt much like a conquest. What resistance there was had been quickly dispatched. And now most of his men had scattered, plundering wherever they could. And, as Turan Khan had ordered, killing without regard for age or gender.

Ten or so of his men, his personal guard, remained with him. It wasn’t that they were uninterested in plunder. It was simply that, as chief, Orin would take a share of all the plunder collected, and from this he would distribute some to his guard.

Some more Kaskirs rode up.

“Did you find the house of Ziyar?” Orin asked them.

“Yes, my chief, but the house was empty.”

To no one in particular, Orin said, “I wanted to repay a favor....”

A young woman suddenly burst out of a nearby house. Dressed in what Orin guessed might be bridal clothes, she had figured Orin was the leader and made directly to him. While his men watched, bemusedly, she grasped Orin’s leg.

“Please, please don’t kill us! We have done you no harm. Today was to be our wedding day.”

The woman was the same physical type as Ailana, and as pretty as Ailana, and Orin felt disconcerted, at a momentary loss for words. Then a young man burst from the same house, calling to the woman. He held a sword, which he raised. From his look, Orin gathered that he was its intended target. His men quickly knocked arrows. But Orin called out, “Wait!”

The tableau froze. Then the woman ran back to her would-be protector, crying, throwing her arms around his neck and burying her face in his chest. Still his sword did not waver. Orin looked at them. The man was brave, the woman beautiful. It would really be a shame to.... Did he have to kill them? Perhaps not. Orin had pledged his allegiance to Turan Khan and had agreed to the extermination of the D’narians, but.... A few more or less would hardly matter.

“I will grant you your lives. You can come away with me as my slaves. Then you can stay together. That is the only way,” said Orin.

“We *will* stay together. Forever, in Heaven,” replied the man. And he made as if to attack Orin, whose horse instinctively backed away. Instantly, ten arrows shot out. The couple fell to the ground.

Orin stared at their bodies, united in death, and perhaps in Heaven, as the young man had said. Two more women came out of the house, crying, throwing themselves on the bodies. Orin’s men turned to him for instructions. But Orin said nothing. In the distance, cries and screams carried through the air.

Finally, Orin spoke, “We are done here. The Kaskir are done with D’nar. Turan can do his own killing. This is no longer a city of the enemy, but a city of tears.”



Inside the Temple, the floor was wet with blood. The pitiful groans of the dying and the shrieks of the soon-to-be-dead mixed in an awful cacophony. Sheer terror ruled. A few of the D’narian men who had weapons tried to stop Eder, but they were no match

for his experience and his frenzy. They died, as their loved ones watched in horror. Eder's swords moved like scythes on wheat, striking in regular motion at all available targets, creating a harvest of the dead. No mere words could describe the scene. To get at new victims, he had to climb atop the bodies of previous victims. But Eder continued to kill, unstoppable, mechanical, his mind turned off, his entire being existing for only one purpose: revenge. Men, women, children, fell to his swords, with no exceptions. Until...

In mid-stroke, about to bring a sword down on young woman curled into a ball on the floor, he hesitated, his sword arm in the air. For a brief moment, he had looked at the girl and seen not her, but Jinji. He paused, confused. Eder extended his sword arm again, but again hesitated.

“Are you going to kill me?” the girl asked, her voice shaking.

Eder stared down at her and tried to say “Yes”, but nothing came out. His upraised arm began to lower. Then, slowly he looked around the Great Room, at the results of his recent work. He began to become conscious of his own heavy breathing, of fatigue in his arms. At just how many lives it had taken to satisfy his bloodlust. Destroying so many enemies should have made him exultant, but he just felt confused. He put one sword back in his belt.

For the first time he became aware that people were trying to get into the Temple. But the doors were partially blocked by piled up bodies. Some had wounds, but the ones closest to the door looked like they had simply been trampled and crushed.

As he stood there, the Jersaks finally managed to push the doors open sufficiently for them to burst in. They had their swords out, but in the first moment of entering the Temple, all they did was stare at the bloody scene, and then at Eder.

“Nice work,” said one. “Are you going to take their ears?”

Eder didn't respond.

The man continued, “Because if you don't want them, I'd like them.”

Eder raised a sword towards the Jersaks and they shrank back.

“Get out!” Eder told them. And the Jersaks, looking at the two bloody swords, did as he told them.

Eder knew what the Jersaks wanted: to kill the surviving men and children, then, later, the women, after making use of their rights as victors.

“It’s enough,” Eder said quietly, to no one in particular.



Three Jersaks, dressed in the armor of D’narian soldiers, and carrying D’narian bows, lay on the roof of a low building near the East Gate.

“Do you see him?” one asked. “Is he sure to pass this way?”

“I saw him heading in this direction with his nokers.... There he is! We’ll have a clear shot as he approaches the gate.” another replied. They moved over to where they had an unobstructed view of the gate.

Down in the street, Orin and his personal guard slowly rode towards the gate. As they passed the building where his trouble with the D’narians had begun. He called a halt and looked at it. Then he rode over to where Jinji had been killed. It hadn’t been that long ago, yet now it seemed a world away. As if it had happened to someone else.

“Where’d he go?” one of the Jersaks asked. “He should be in view by now.”

Another Jersak inched back over to the front of the roof and peered over the edge. “He’s turned down an alley. He’s just sitting there on his horse....”

The other two joined him.

“Maybe he’s going to use that building as a headquarters instead of returning to his camp. We can’t take the chance. We’ll have to get him from here.”

The three notched arrows and took aim. “Wait! Someone’s moving in back of him. Wait till we have a clear shot.... There! Aim right for that wolf’s head on the back of his coat....”

The three shot.

“Got him!” cried one.

“Short!,” cried another, throwing the D’narian bow down on the floor. “No wonder those donkeys lost the war.”

But, despite only one hit, they could see a figure fall off his horse with an arrow in his back. The three scrambled down off the roof, leaving the bows and armor, and headed for their horses.

Down in the alley, a fallen man looked up at the sky, and at his chief.

“I’m sorry I asked you to do this, Baber....” Orin asked.

“I was glad to do it. To wear your coat and take the arrow meant for you,” the man replied weakly.

As Baber lay dying in his arms, Orin, surrounded by half of his nokers, waited for the other half to return. But when they returned with D’narian armor and weapons, and he turned Baber over to see a D’narian arrow sticking out of his back, he was ready to count the man as another casualty of war. Though, in the back of his mind, he wondered if there was not an increasing number of people who wanted to see him dead.



H'vise, lying on the ground near the battlefield, was awakened by hands grabbing at his arm.

“Huh, what, get away!”

“Oh, thought you were dead,” answered an old man.

“What were you trying to do, steal my ring?”

“Well, if you were dead, you wouldn't be needing it, would you?”

H'vise got up and backed away. He now saw that the man had a donkey and a cart, into which the man had piled weapons, armor, clothes, and some other things that could have been....

“Where am I, which way is the city?”

The old man pointed and H'vise could see a column of smoke in the distance. H'vise began to jog off in that direction, then he came to a halt and headed back to the man.

“Thanks for the loan of your cart, I'll give it back sometime.”

“You can't take that, get off there!”

H'vise emptied the cart on the ground. “Here take your treasure.” This didn't mollify the old man very much, but H'vise wasn't in a generous mood.

The old man said, “All right, go, go, go back to the city and become another dead body. I'll end up with your ring yet,” and he laughed in a fashion that sent a shudder through H'vise.

H'vise turned the donkey towards the city.



On the street outside of General J'nost's house, three soldiers rode up. They had been sent to protect the General's children, but the job needed more than three, as the Jersaks arrived on the street at the same time. In no more than a minute, the soldiers lay dead or dying. The Jersaks dismounted and began entering all the houses on the street. At one barred house, a few stopped.

“Open up. If you open up and come on out, we'll let you live. If you make us break in, we'll kill you.”

A door opened. People came out. The Jersaks surrounded them and killed them. Then they charged into the house looking for plunder.

At another house, the General's house, three Jersaks broke down the courtyard gate and entered.

Chodura sat on the floor, back against a wall, facing the entrance to the house. Her left hand rested on a bow string, her right held an arrow. Her feet were in the air, pushing on the bow, while she held the bowstring

Her breathing was short and hurried. She tried to steady herself by taking deep breaths, breathing in and out slowly, as her father had once taught her. He had taught her, too, how to shoot a bow that she was not strong enough to pull back on with her arms, by using her feet. But she'd had no practice for years.

Then she heard the men coming in. She held the bowstring tightly, extended her feet, and nocked the arrow. The first one through the door, she thought, and then didn't want to finish the thought. And then they came in. They were in before she could pick out a target. There were three of them, wearing sheepskin coats. She pointed her feet into the middle of the group.

“And what is this?” one asked, looking at the tiny figure curled up against the wall.

“Back away,” Chodura called out, in a tremulous voice. “My father was a Naiman warrior and he taught me how to kill raiders.” It was bravado, but it was all she had.

The Jersak on her right laughed. The three spread themselves out. Chodura kept her bow pointed at the middle one. He was the largest and had on a breastplate under his open coat, probably taken from one of the dead soldiers. Chodura wondered if her arrow could penetrate the plate, but realized she had no choice but to brazen it out anyway.

“Whichever one of you attacks me, you in the middle will get an arrow in your chest. You will die knowing you were killed by a 14-year-old slave girl. The others of your uru will laugh at how you died, as will the spirits in the next world for all eternity.”

The Jersak on her left made an angry growl, but then the one in the middle said, "Bori! Remember Kurun!"

Bori grunted in affirmation. Chodura knew they had decided on a plan of action and were going to make their move. She had just seconds to live. Her eyes started to mist up and her vision was becoming blurry, but she had no free hand to wipe them with. She didn't want to die! Maybe I can get one at least, she thought, and she blinked hard to stop the tears.

And then there was another figure in the doorway. And a youthful voice called out, “Stop! She belongs to me.”

The Jersaks turned, seeing Kurguz.

“Whoever hurts her has to answer to me.”

The Jersak on Chodura's right laughed again. But he put up his hands and walked out past Kurguz. The other two Jersaks remained where they were.

“I don't believe you,” said the one in the middle of the room.

“Chodura, put down the bow and come with me.”

“I can't,” answered Chodura, beginning to breathe a little more normally and remembering her mistress once again.

“Kaskir, leave now!” commanded the big one.

Kurguz was holding his own bow. He slowly nocked an arrow and pointed it at the other Jersak. “Take the shot, Chodura” he told her.

“Wait! Come on, Bilga, it's not that important. There are a thousand houses in this city,” said Bori. The big one facing Chodura seemed to reconsider and they both headed for the

entrance. Kurguz, trying to keep a distance between himself and the big Jersak, backed up all the way through the dalar and the gateway, keeping his bow aimed.

Once outside, Bori joined some other Jersaks in breaking into another house. But Bilga held off. He wasn't ready to quit. He found it shameful to be faced down by two... children. A low growl came from deep within his throat. And he continued moving towards Kurguz. Kurguz continued backing up. "That's far enough!" he warned.

"You don't have the nerve to make the shot. I'll wager you've never killed a man before. Do you think you can do it before I cut you down with my sword?"

Kurguz's heart was beating so loudly he thought the Jersak could hear it. He continued pointing the arrow at Bilga, and continued backing up. But then, he tripped, the arrow flew from his fingers, and he landed on his back in the street. In panic that Bilga would attack him as he lay, he began to scramble up as fast as he could. He was halfway up – and then he froze. Bilga was still standing where he had been when Kurguz fell. But he was twisting in pain from an arrow in his neck.

Pure luck? Kurguz stood up. Should he finish Bilga off with his sword? He was saved from having to make the decision when Bilga fell. He writhed for a few moments, then lay still. Kurguz looked around him, nervously. He was ringed by Jersaks – and they didn't look too happy. Finally, one of them spoke. Kurguz thought it was the one who had first retreated when Kurguz had confronted the three in the house.

"It was a fair fight. Bilga had drawn his sword on him and the Kaskir was just acting to defend himself. I told Bilga that breastplate wouldn't bring him any better luck than it had brought its last owner." He looked down at the dead Jersak, and then back to Kurguz.

"Not a bad shot. A few inches lower, and the arrow wouldn't have stopped him, and you'd be dead." He then turned and went back to his looting, the others following him.

After Kurguz remembered to start breathing again, he turned back to the house.

Chodura stood in the doorway.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

“Yes. I’m fine.” In her eyes was gratitude, and something else. “That was very brave of you to intercede for me like that.”

Kurguz, later on, would think about how much female approval mattered to him. But for now, all he could do was smile sheepishly.

Chodura asked him, “Can you help me?”

“Of course. You can come with me.”

Chodura hesitated.

“What are you waiting for?”

“J’nine, J’naris,” she called. “You can come on out.”

J’nine shrank back when she saw Kurguz.

“It’s all right, mistress, I know Kurguz from before. Kurguz, this is my mistress J’nine,” said Chodura. “She’s always been good to me. I won’t leave without her. There are enough horses in the stable for all of us.”

Kurguz thought for a moment. There shouldn’t be any trouble sneaking a nomad girl out of the city. Getting a D’narian girl out might be something else. Especially if she was recognized as the daughter of the General. But Kurguz was of that age when nothing is impossible, so he said, “Sure.” That settled it, except that J’nine shook her head.

“This is my home, I don’t want to leave. Anyway, you’ll have a better chance to get out without me.” J’nine said.

Kurguz looked at Chodura and then back at J’nine. “You must leave here,” he told her. “The Jersaks,” or the Kaskir, Kurguz admitted to himself, “will be back through here to pick over what’s left... and make sure there are no survivors. You can’t be here when they return.”

“Well, I don’t care about leaving. I loved H’vise. He was in the army, but he didn’t come back! The ones who did come back said they were the only ones and all the others were dead, killed in the battle or slain as they ran.” And she started crying.

“You still have to go. Come. We’ll go to the Citadel. If there’s a safe place in the city, that would be it,” said Kurguz.

## *Chapter 20*

The Governor's wife, Raukshana, took her husband's seat in the Great Court Room. Now, with him captured by the barbarians, she reasoned she could put in a claim to be in charge. At least till the Emperor appointed a new governor, or Chandrapida was ransomed.

Well, if the barbarians wanted a ransom, she could negotiate with them. She would bargain hard -- there were, after all, better things she could do with the money than save Chandrapida's neck. But where were the members of the court? Where were all the counselors, all the servants? She clapped her hands together, but there was no one to hear the sound. She had slept late this morning -- her attendants had not woken her at the usual time, for some reason -- was something going on that she should have known about? Was court convening elsewhere? She was about to get up when several ragged-looking nomads entered the room.

"What is the meaning of this?" she asked loudly.

One of the nomads sprang forth and pulled her from the seat. Then another sat down. How dare he sit in the Governor's place? thought Raukshana from the position on the floor where she had roughly been thrown. And then she started getting a very sickening feeling. The sitting nomad looked around as if trying to acclimate himself to the position. Then he shrugged and stood up.

"If I had ruled this city, I don't think I would have done it from a little room like this."

He began to walk out. One of the other nomads said, "My chief, what should we do with this one?" nodding in the direction of Raukshana.

Tekin turned, apparently becoming cognizant of Raukshana for the first time. "Take her for a slave."



As H'vise drew closer to the city, his breath became ragged. He imagined his heart was beating loud enough to hear. When he had started out on the donkey cart, he wondered how he could enter a city under siege. Now, it was clear there was no siege. The city had been entered by the nomads, and they had sacked it. The cloud of smoke over the city -- and an awful smell -- told him there must be numerous fires inside. The buildings, mostly clay, sun-dried brick and dried mud, would not burn, but all the furnishings would. And flesh. And that was what he was smelling. He felt sick.

H'vise stopped the cart. Now what to do, he wondered. But there really was nothing to be done but go into the city to see for himself. At the same time, he realized there were scores of nomads between him and the city. How could he go around them without being seen? Of course, he couldn't. He would go through them, and try to talk his way through if -- when -- he was stopped.

And, it wasn't long before he was stopped. A party of mounted nomads leaving the city surrounded him on the road. H'vise tried to avoid making eye contact with them, trying to appear non-threatening. "Who are you and where are you bound?" asked their captain.

H'vise lied, "I work for a merchant in the north. I'm just here to pick up a load of cloth that was promised us."

"Well, if you like burned cloth, you'll find plenty of that!" one of the nomads said, "Turn around, boy, before we decide we don't like your looks."

"Yes, sir," answered H'vise, and picked up the reins as if to turn around. The nomads started moving off, but the captain paused and stared down at H'vise. Still afraid to raise his eyes, H'vise just barely moved his head. It was enough to see that the front of the nomad's coat and trousers were covered with blood, as was a sword stuck in his belt, and even the hilt of another sword stuck in his scabbard. Blood of his relatives? J'nine's blood?

His own blood started to surge but he struggled to remain calm. He did not even care if his death was added to the nomad's count. What right did he have to live, when everyone else was dead? They were people he had sworn to protect. Instead, they were dead, and he, their protector was not only alive, but without even a battle wound to demonstrate his courage.

H'vise could hear the nomad captain make a noise, something like a sigh. "I can see you don't really plan on turning back. But if you continue on, you'll probably be killed. And there's not much in the city to see anyway, little left, and few bodies even recognizable as most have been burned. But if you're looking for someone in particular, some of the city people have taken refuge in the Citadel. If you head directly there you might make it. That's if you care to know who had survived."

H'vise looked up, and repeated, "If I care to know who has survived...."

The nomad continued looking at him and the cart. "I could actually use a cart. And you could get there faster with a horse. Want to trade?"

H'vise was surprised. If these nomads wanted a cart, they could just take it. "Uh, sure."

This was too much luck, thought H'vise. First, I survive the battle, then I escape on foot, then I'm able to steal a donkey cart, now I've traded the cart for a horse. Divine intervention?



Tekin exploded at Bakar, "I didn't spend all that time in the Citadel prison so that, when I was finally released, I could save D'narians!"

Bakar tried to cool him off. "These are not the people responsible for your imprisonment. The Governor is captured. General J'nost is dead. These are ordinary people, people like yourself, people who have not harmed anyone."

"Among my people, if one member of a clan does something wrong, then all members must pay for it. Every man bears the responsibility for his clan."

“Yes, I understand, but these people don’t think like that. It’s like... like they’re many clans even though they live all in one city. And their Governor is not even of their people, he is of the people who had conquered D’nar years ago. As you had been conquered.”

Tekin considered that for a moment. Then he asked, “Are there soldiers among them?”

“Yes, but they are city garrison, not the ones who attacked you. And I’ve given them my promise that they would be safe in the Citadel.”

Tekin thought about it for a bit. His teeth hurt. His stomach hurt. His unused limbs ached. He was in a mood for more killing. But this was the man who had freed him from prison, given him the weapons he needed to restore his self-respect. How could he refuse him?

“I will agree to this, but I will tell you, if I see someone who had not treated us well, that person’s life is ended here.”

“Agreed,” said Bakar.

That taken care of, Bakar turned his attention to some of his men who had reported in.

“We couldn’t find her, my khan.”

“Find who?” he asked.

“This R’kina that we were sent to guard. Her house was empty except for this man here.” And they produced the merchant R’kenor.

“Where is R’kina,” Bakar asked.

“You’re a nomad! You were a spy! You betrayed us!” R’kenor sputtered.

Bakar grabbed him by the shoulders. “R’kenor! Take hold of your wits! I can save R’kina’s life, but you must tell me where she is.”

“But I don’t know. She didn’t come home last night. I thought she was with you.”

Bakar started feeling sick. *If she’d been on the streets... if anything had happened to her....* Too late, Bakar realized that any victory in which R’kina died would be no victory.

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“J’nine....” said Chodura wonderingly. They had stopped a little ways from the Citadel, now part of a crowd of people who desperately wanted entry. Chodura had been looking around nervously.

J’nine and Kurguz followed Chodura’s eyes and saw a lone rider approaching. It didn’t mean anything to Kurguz, who turned back to Chodura. But J’nine gave a gasp of recognition.

“Oh, Mazda, it’s H’vise.”

When H’vise rode up, he embraced J’nine, who again began to cry. Then H’vise turned a suspicious, and perhaps jealous, eye on Kurguz. “Who is this?” he asked.

“That’s Kurguz,” said J’nine. “He saved our lives.”

“Then I’m forever indebted to you,” said H’vise, gratefully.

“I did what I could,” responded Kurguz. “But we can’t stay here. The Jersaks will eventually get suspicious. You will need to take the women to protection in the Citadel. That is, if they open the gate.” Kurguz looked over at the gate as he spoke. “They seem to be arguing about it.... It’s opening!”

“That’s what we’ll do then,” answered H’vise.

J’nine looked at him. He seemed taller than he had been before, before the war, and she wanted to lean on him, to feel his strength. She said excitedly, "Let's go."

Chodura looked at J’nine and said, “Good-bye, mistress.”

The others stared at her. “Aren’t you coming?” asked J’nine.

“I love you like a sister... J’nine... but there’s no future for me here.” Turning to Kurguz, she said, “I’m going to go East. Perhaps if I ride far enough, long enough, I can find my own tribe.”

Chodura put her arms around J’nine and the girls tearfully embraced.

“I’m going to go with Chodura, so I guess this is where we part,” said Kurguz. “Here, take this,” he said to H’vise, handing H’vise his sword and shield.

“Thank you both,” said J’nine.

Kurguz and Chodura rode off, looking behind them.

“I feel bad about leaving them,” said Chodura. “But they should have a good chance in the Citadel.”

“You’ve done quite a bit for her already. Like getting me to help her,” said Kurguz.

“Well, we do what we can,” she said, as she started to go.

Kurguz grabbed her reins. “You’ll never make it, alone on the Steppe. You don’t know how vast it is. You have no food, no extra clothing. Come with me, I mean, with the Kaskir. I’m sure Ailana will like you and she’ll convince Orin to take you in. And we move around a lot, so you’ll have a good chance of meeting up with your own tribe someday.”

“What are you looking for in return?” she asked, suspiciously.

“... I don’t know.... What are you offering?” he said smilingly. She was cute, and possibilities arose in his mind....

“Well.... I could teach you to read.”

“Oh, well, sure, that’d be good.”

She smiled and patted him on the shoulder. “Don’t be so disappointed. Patience is often well-rewarded.”

Kurguz thought, when we rode out from the city a while ago, one of us was a slave. If I’m not careful, one of us will still be a slave, and it won’t be the same one.



The Citadel loomed up before H’vise and J’nine. They could now see a group of mounted nomads in the streets, heading for the Citadel.

H’vise looked into her eyes. And then he leaned over and kissed her.

“Let’s go!” he shouted and slapped her horse.

It took only seconds for them to reach the Citadel gate. But even that was too long a time to pass unnoticed. And too long a time to keep two of the Jersaks from notching arrows. H’vise saw them, and broke off from J’nine. He raced towards the Jersaks, raising his sword on high. Both Jersaks took aim at him. He was getting closer, but he knew he would not reach them before they could shoot. He simply hoped this would give J’nine enough time to get to the Citadel. And he hoped the small round shield Kurguz had given him would stop at least one of the arrows.

Suddenly, the horse of one of the Jersaks pitched forwards, throwing the nomad off. The second Jersak was momentarily distracted. And when he looked back up, H'vise had ridden up to him, swinging the borrowed sword. H'vise had wielded a sword from horseback only once before, in fun with friends, but his blow was enough to put the Jersak out of commission. A second blow knocked down the other Jersak, who had just stumbled to his feet. Then H'vise took off, following J'nine to the safety of the Citadel. Safe for the moment, at least.

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“Nice shot,” Chodura told Kurguz.

“It was a large target. Uh-oh, the Jersaks have seen us.”

“Shouldn't we try to escape?” Chodura asked, beginning to worry.

“I don't think we'd make it. But I think I can talk our way out of it.”

A group of Jersaks rode up. Two were riding double.

“You shot my horse! You let them escape! What did you do that for, you Kaskir idiot!” The man was unhappy. The others didn't look all that friendly either.

“I'm sorry,” lied Kurguz, “I was aiming for the D'narians. I guess I'm not a good shot. But I will give you my own horse as payment for my mistake.”

“I don't want *your* horse. I want *my* horse. That's my best horse! And now she's wounded.”

“Take his horse, Chelkan, that's fair,” said one of the other Jersaks.

“All right, I will take your horse. But this is not over. I will take this up with your chief!”

And so Kurguz doubled up with Chodura on the big D'narian horse they had taken from the General's stable.

“That was good thinking, Kurguz,” Chodura told him when the Jersaks were out of earshot.

“Thanks,” said Kurguz. But as they rode back to the Kaskir camp, Kurguz hoped he wouldn't run into Eder. Eder had once scolded him for returning from a raid without his sword, because

he had given it to a freed slave. Now he was returning from the sack of D'nar having given away both his borrowed sword and his horse. Eder would probably tell him the purpose of raiding was to come away with more than what you started with, not less.



As Kurguz and Chodura rode back to the Kaskir camp, they were joined by some of the other Kaskir Kurguz's age. These boys had never really accepted him and his own feelings towards them were ambiguous as a result.

They noticed Chodura of course, and began baiting Kurguz about her. Kurguz fended them off politely. One of them, Bumin, tried a different tack, seeking to impress Chodura.

"I killed 5 men today," he boasted, "and almost that many women and children. How did you do, Kurguz?"

This did not have the desired effect on Chodura it was designed to have. But Kurguz knew that he had to respond, and also that Bumin was going to make fun of him, no matter what he said.

Kurguz figured he might as well beat him to it. He said, "I did very well. Why I cut a man's leg, clean off, with one stroke."

"His leg? Why didn't you cut off his head?" asked Bumin.

"Oh, I couldn't, you see," Kurguz continued, "someone had already done that."

They all laughed.

## *Chapter 21*

R’kina lay on the ground in the market square, near the body of S’riah.. Ever so still. As still as the dead, she told herself, otherwise she would indeed be dead. She had hit the ground when the shooting started. Someone had fallen on top of her – and his body was still there, partly covering her. But it wasn’t going to be enough protection, she knew. Eeren’s men were going ‘round hacking off ears. Fairly soon, one of these would come over to where she lay – and.... She unconsciously whimpered at the thought, then mentally kicked herself for being so weak.

Why was she even trying so hard to stay alive? She had loved Ziyan, had trusted Ziyan, would have done anything for Ziyan.... And he had used her, used them all. She had seen him with the nomads last night, plotting or whatever it was they were doing. And she had run into the streets, crying. She had wandered for hours, then fallen asleep in some alleyway. And then brusquely woken in the morning by a whole army of them. And now she was here, waiting to die.

Could she run? Could she get up and run fast enough from the square, before they brought her down with an arrow? Hardly. No, when the nomad came, she would just have to lie there, ever so still, ever so still.... And if she did die here, well, perhaps that was the fate she deserved for helping make a home for a nomad spy.

But when her would-be executioner did come.... When he did stand nearby, his sword making awful sounds, R’kina could not lie there. Every part of her screamed to escape. And she rose. She got up and she ran. She ran for the edge of the marketplace – but there were more nomads there.... She changed direction, all the time expecting an arrow in her back....

Then when she turned again, there was a nomad directly in front of her. She could see him nock an arrow, could see him

draw back the bow.... And then an arrow mysteriously appeared in his chest and he fell down. She kept running, running past the fallen nomad. She could hear nomads on horseback riding after her, getting closer, about to ride her down. She screamed.... And then the lead nomad picked her up and swung her onto his saddle as he continued galloping on. And when she looked at him, her scream froze. For it was Ziyen.



Orin and Eder rode to the Jersak camp, after making sure the Kaskir camp was well guarded. The Jersak army had no women with them, the Kaskir had their families. He'd needed to take precautions against drunken Jersaks raiding the Kaskir camp for women.

Neither one spoke on the ride. Orin was full of thoughts about what path the Kaskir should take. They were part of Turan's little empire now, on his road to conquest. But was that really the direction they should go? Could he make the decision to leave Turan? Would Turan let them leave? Would the Kaskir still follow him if he tried to lead them away? Plundering was easier than herding, fighting more exciting than trading -- the men may have gotten spoiled by the easy riches of the past days.

The Jersak camp had been set up on the plains before the city. And it was there, with bodies still burning in D'nar, a huge toa was held. Jersak, Burkut, and Kaskir all savored their victory and their prize.

Whole cows were being roasted, as well as sheep, pigs, and chickens. Besides the food, there were games going on. As Orin and Eder rode in, Orin noted some men gambling, throwing sheep knuckle bones, a game Orin himself had often played. Each of four bones could come up on one of four sides, each side having the name of an animal. "Oh Tangri," moaned one man. "Four cows!" Orin smiled, feeling more at ease. He and Eder rode up to Turan's yurt, joining Turan, Sebuk, Eeren, and some others. They were greeted cordially. As they sat down to partake of the food, Orin noted a large box near Turan.

There were huge piles of freshly-killed meat, plus so much wine it was said to rival the amount of water in the river. And more food was continually carried over by riders shuttling between the cooking fires and Turan's yurt. Orin had never been at a feast like this -- well, he thought, he had never sacked a city before -- and he could get spoiled living like this. Once again he was reminded that while nomad living was often hard and precarious, sacking cities seemed relatively easy, and produced much greater results.

Perhaps that was why, too, many of the Burkuts had been tempted to stay with Turan Khan rather than joining Bakar. While Bakar held the Citadel, and the City Treasury within it, Turan was not making any overt move in his direction. Perhaps he didn't know Bakar's force was bolstered by the Karakoyunlu nomads. Or perhaps that wasn't substantial enough support. Kurguz had seen the Karakoyunlu close-up, and had reported them to be in sorry shape, not suited for any kind of real combat. Or perhaps they both had something more important on their minds.

"Have some of this," Sebuk offered, interrupting Orin's thoughts. It was lamb strips coated with garlic, salt and pepper. The smell of the meat was enticing. He accepted it and bit into one of the succulent strips, the juice running down his chin.

"I wonder if the city Governor ever lived as well as this?" Orin asked rhetorically.

"I don't know," Turan said. "Maybe we should ask him." Turan kicked the box near him, which made a thumping sound inside. "Your Excellency, does this remind you of other feasts you've attended before?" And then he laughed.

Orin stopped in mid-bite and stared at the box, now noticing it had some tiny slits cut in it. For air? Orin turned to Sebuk. Sebuk returned his look and nodded.

"How... how long has he been in there?" Orin asked

"Since the battle. He'll probably last quite a while longer before he dies of thirst," Turan said. "The best part is he can hear us and smell the food, but bound and gagged and locked up as he is, there isn't anything he can do about it." Turan leaned forwards and spoke softly into one of the air slits.

“You'd like a quick death wouldn't you, your Excellency, but no chance of that. Instead, you will have much time to reflect on the insult you inflicted on me. Think about it as your tongue swells up, your mouth and gums become sore....”

“Be careful you don't talk him to death, Turan,” said Sebuk.

Turan leaned slowly back, looking at Sebuk, fixing him with a stare that would have made most men extremely uncomfortable, though it didn't seem to bother Sebuk. Orin began to break the silence, then realized it could be beneficial to the Kaskir if the two Jersaks had a falling out.



With the feast still going on, Turan made the rounds of the camp, letting his men see him, feeling their appreciation. When he returned to his yurt, he noted that food had been brought inside, spread out on a cloth on the floor, along with The Box.

Turan knew it was time to have a final confrontation with Sebuk. He called in his nokers and then sent for Sebuk, Orin, Eder, and the shaman Eeren.

As they entered, Turan stood to welcome them. The yurt was a large one. Turan liked to pace around as he talked and this yurt gave him plenty of space to do it in, even with his visitors. Eeren was not to be found, one of the few times Sebuk could be seen without Eeren hovering around nearby.

Turan was in a good mood, perhaps the best Orin had ever seen him in. “This was a great campaign. I wouldn't have thought beforehand things would go this well. But I have taught the D'narians, and the Empire, that the Jersaks are to be taken seriously.

“They were oh so eager to attack us that they forgot that war is deception, that the goal of war is to win, and win by any means whatever. The storytellers do not honor losers. The voices of losers are drowned out by the winds of time. It is the winners who tell the stories, because it is the winners who are left alive,” Turan announced.

“But now, there is another matter to be taken care of,” continued Turan. And via some signal hidden to Orin's sight, Turan's nokers had drawn knives and held them to the throats of all three men.

“Sebuk, I have suffered your insolence for far too long. You have been useful in the past, but I have no further need of your services. Or those of Eeren, whom I will execute as soon as we find him. And you, Orin, your usefulness to me has ended. I sought twice to have you killed without the blame falling on me, but you were fortunate enough to escape each time. No matter. You have delivered yourself to me and I will not pass up the advantage. The Kaskir have followed me in this victory, and now they will follow forever. They will merge into the Jersaks and lose their separate identity.”

Orin reddened in the face and made as if to charge Turan, but the noker did not loosen his grip and held the knife ever more tightly against Orin's throat, drawing blood.

“I thought we were allies,” said Orin. “I trusted you. Believed you when you told me you would never lie to me.”

“That was a lie,” laughed Turan. “Weren't you listening? War is based on deception.”

“War may be based on deception, but life is not,” said Orin.

“Ah, but what is life but war and the preparation for war? It is all deception,” answered Turan.

“What do you intend to do with me?” Sebuk asked. “I request only that whatever you decide, it not be The Box.”

“Ah, the Box,” laughed Turan. “You have named your own death. It will be the Box. And you will not only die in that box, but we will bury you in it. Then your soul will never be able to get out. You should have not sought to usurp my authority. Now you will be a demonstration to any who ever dares to plot against me.”

Smirking at how neatly everything had worked out, Turan went to the Box and undid the fasteners on the cover. Grinning at Sebuk as he unfastened the lid, he remarked, “I'm sure the Governor will be glad of the company.”

But as he said this, and opened the lid, a ghostly figure uncoiled itself from inside the

Box. In one fluid movement, the demon -- or so Orin thought -- stood up and plunged a long knife into Turan's heart. In shock, the entire assemblage seemed to take a step back, as the demon continued his work by severing Turan's head. Only Sebuk appeared unsurprised. Turning to the noker who held him he said, "Your master is dead. I am the new leader of the Jersaks. Pledge me your allegiance and you shall live."

The noker stole a quick glance at his compatriots. Seeing a universal recognition that their situation had changed, he released Sebuk and knelt before him. "We serve you now, my khan." The other guards released Orin and knelt as well.

When the demon turned to the assemblage, Orin saw it was no demon. It was Eeren.

"Sebuk, I congratulate you on this outcome, and owe you my life," Orin told him. "But I wish now to take the Kaskir and return to the Homeland."

"Yes, Orin, you do owe me your life, and in return, I ask you to accompany us in our conquest of the Empire. Eeren had lied to Turan about his being the one to rule over all those in felt tents. I am that one. Follow me and you will participate in the wealth and glory that will result."

Orin nodded. "You are right. I will inform my people that you are the new leader of the confederation." He knelt before Sebuk. Eder looked at Orin, then reluctantly followed his lead.

"Good. Return here tomorrow and we will make plans to defeat Bakar Khan. And do not say anything about the manner of Turan's death."

Orin and Eder left the yurt.

Sebuk turned to Turan's ex-nokers. "You will all stay here and keep guard over the body." He and Eeren then went out. When they were outside, Sebuk called out to Tardu, who had gathered about 40 men and was waiting for Sebuk's orders. The order was quickly given, "Turan Khan is dead, killed by his own nokers in a frenzy. They are still inside, mutilating the body. See they pay for their crime."

When they were alone, Sebuk turned to Eeren and asked, “What did you do with the Governor?”

“Stabbed him and dumped the body. He was of no use to us. But why did you not kill this Orin when you had the chance, as we had discussed?”

“The situation has changed. With Bakar Khan alive, and Turan dead, the Burkuts will revolt against me. Orin’s support will be helpful. Were we to kill Orin now, we would have the Kaskir against us as well. There will be time enough later to get rid of Orin.”



Inside the house of her neighbor, T’lima watched as the Jersak Dayar slept. She could imagine only one ending to his capture of her. *If I were a man, I would kill him as he sleeps, for what he and his kind did to my parents.* But she couldn’t quite bring herself to do that. And so, ever so carefully, she slipped out of the bedding. She made no noise, yet distant noises from the street penetrated the morning stillness. Dayar moved restlessly, the rhythm of his snoring momentarily interrupted.

T’lima got to her feet and slowly moved to the door. She stepped gingerly into the doorway....

“Dayar!” a voice cried from outside. T’lima froze. Dayar jerked awake. He jumped unsteadily to his feet. The two looked at each other. Dayar reached for his sword.

“I could go with you,” T’lima said, trying to keep her voice steady. “You don’t need to kill me.”

“What would I do with you? You’d be useless as a wife, and not much better as a slave. You probably don’t know any of the things nomad girls are taught: herding, weaving, cooking.... All I could do with you would be to bring you along to sell as a slave. But I can’t even do that, because Turan Khan has ordered death for all D’narians, for reasons of his own.”

“Can you ask Turan Khan to make an exception?” T’lima asked frantically. “I could learn to do all those other things for you.” She had to find a way out, a way to stay alive.

“No. I’ve disobeyed him by not already killing you yesterday. Come here. I will make it quick.”

“God, no, please!”

He advanced on her, carrying his sword. T’lima reached for the cross around her neck.

“Wait! I can spy for you,” she blurted out.

“Spy? How could you be a spy?”

“I’m a Christian. There are Christian communities all over the Empire, in all the cities. I can travel among them where you nomads would not be welcome.”

“Hmm, perhaps. All right, I will take you to Turan Khan. He will decide.”

A noise from the front of the house made them start. More Jersaks? T’lima had an icy cold feeling in her chest. She looked for a place to hide, but there was really none.

“Dayar?” a voice called. Then the owner of the voice, Bori, appeared at their doorway. “Dayar, we’re forming up. With Turan Khan dead and the Burkuts in revolt, we need regroup around Sebuk. Put your clothes on and come.”

He started to turn away, but Dayar called, “Wait! Turan Khan is dead?”

The stranger looked at Dayar with bemusement. “How long have you been here? Yes. Turan Khan’s own nokers killed him. Then the Burkut khan returns from the grave -- claims he was the one who opened the city gates, declares himself Burkut khan again, and no longer recognizes Jersak authority. We have to get our forces together before the Kaskir decide to leave as well. So, come on.”

“Why did his nokers say they killed him?”

“I don’t know. They’re all dead. Come on!”

“Well, how do you know that’s what happened?”

“Sebuk saw it happen, and the shaman Eeren was also a witness.”

“Eeren would agree with anything Sebuk said,” Dayar said.

Bori hesitated. “What are you saying?”

Dayar continued, “We all know there have been words of anger spoken between Turan Khan and Sebuk. Did either Sebuk or Eeren suffer any wounds from defending Turan Khan against these nokers?”

“Well, no.... You think Sebuk and Eeren were in on the plot?”

“Or did it themselves,” said Dayar.

“You tried telling me once that Sebuk was planning something like this...”

“But you didn’t want to listen.”

“I’m going to discuss this with the others.” Bori turned away.

“Aren’t you coming?”

“I’m leaving. I have enough in jewels to make me rich in the Homeland. I’m taking them and returning home.”

“Wait for a while. There may be some who want to go with you.” Bori left.

“Now you don’t have to kill me, right?” asked T’lima.

Dayar looked at her and smiled. “I suppose not.”



“Ziyan, Ziyan....” R’kina’s voice sounded unnatural. “That’s not even your real name, is it? How could you do this? How could you do this to them? How could you do it to me?”

Bakar looked at her, not liking himself very much at that moment. The death of Turan and his plan to free his people from Jersak domination, all that was gone from his head now. It was just him and R’kina.

He had gone over what he could say. But in truth, there wasn’t much to say. “It didn’t turn out quite the way I had thought it would,” he began. “But I should have seen it coming. I do not... seek forgiveness nor expect it. What I did, I did to help my people, my kinsmen and tribesmen. They would have attacked the city, having been ordered to do so, failed in the attempt, and died where they fought.”

“So... was it all a lie? Your entire life here? Your friendship with my father and with the soldiers, your heroism saving the caravan... your feelings for me?”

They looked straight at each other, neither wavering.

“Most of it was planned in advance, before I knew your father... or you. So, yes, it was nearly all a lie. Except that I came to... love you. There were times when I thought about

simply leaving D'nar, but I was in too deeply. I had become indispensable to the plan and there was no way I could not continue it, no way I could extricate myself from it – even if I had wanted to. And, in truth, I did not want to, as I owed it to my people. I had let them down once before, in letting them fall under Jersak domination. I had to help them, and redeem myself.”

R'kina shook her head from side to side. “There must have been another way.”

“If there was, I did not see it,” Bakar answered.

“Now what will you do?”

“Return to my homeland. I... would like you to come with me, as my wife.

R'kina looked down at the floor. Bakar walked over to her and took her in his arms.

With all the evil that had occurred, R'kina thought she could not succumb to him, should not succumb to him. It would be like approving his actions, approving the disaster that had befallen her city. She should put up a wall between them till she could sort things out. Well, perhaps a small wall.... But as he kissed her, she knew there would never again be a wall between them.

## *Chapter 22*

Orin sat in his yurt with Eder and Arslan.

“So you don’t intend to cooperate with Sebuk?” Arslan asked.

“Not for a moment,” answered Orin. “But as these Jersaks seem to believe that lying is a sport, I thought to show them I can play as well as they.”

“We probably wouldn’t have gotten out of their camp otherwise,” Eder added.

“So, Bakar holds the citadel?” Orin asked.

“The standard on the parapets is that of a spread eagle,” said Arslan.

Kurguz came in. “Bakar has arrived,” he said.

“He must trust my good nature to walk so into the wolf’s den,” noted Orin. “He told you he was not the one who had tried to kill me? And that he had renounced any claim to Ailana?”

“Yes. He has a new betrothed.”

“That could be a trick.”

“I have seen them together. I believe it.”

A few moments later, Bakar entered. Orin looked up and stared.

“You’re Ziyan.”

“Hello... Jaglan,” said Bakar.

Orin rose and showed Bakar to a seat near his own.

“I admit to being surprised.”

“As am I. But I have come tonight to ask for your help.”

“In light of your help to me in the city, it seems I owe you a small favor.”

“I need a large one. I need you to leave Sebuk and not side with him against the Burkut.”

•

“You did not come when I summoned you,” Sebuk accused. He, Eeren, and a party of Jersaks had ridden into the Kaskir camp for a talk with Orin. He met them in front of his yurt, where Sebuk and his nokers dismounted..

“I am truly sorry, Sebuk, but as much I would like to help you, I am facing too much resistance from my aksakals. They all want to return to the Homeland. I think perhaps their wives have convinced them to resume the search for our lost children.”

Orin could see Sebuk’s jaw tighten.

“Let me explain the situation,” Sebuk began. “The old Burkut khan, Bakar, your old enemy, has returned, taking advantage of the death of Turan to cause trouble. If we are to continue our campaign against the Empire, we must remain united. And we must destroy Bakar. Have you forgotten the insults and death threats he offered against you?”

“I have not forgotten, but my aksakals....”

“Listen, Orin, D’nar was just the first step. When the other cities hear of what we’ve done, they will open their gates to us to avoid the same fate. And, that success will attract other nomad tribes to us. There are several tribes within the Empire as well as around its borders that will fall in behind our banner, as wolves go after a wounded prey.”

“Then I wish you luck. But the Kaskir are finished here,” said Orin.

Now Orin could see Sebuk’s entire body tense. “I need your men against Bakar. And against any reinforcements the Empire sends to D’nar. I hold you to your pledge to myself and Turan Khan.

“My pledge was to Turan. It died with him. I wish you luck, as I said, but that is all I can give you. Do not make an issue of this.”

Sebuk’s tone changed from a conversational pitch to a low, threatening growl. “You *will* help me. You will help me, if you value the lives of your lost children.”

“What?!”

“Yes. I have your children. Eeren was the one who attacked your camp. The one who stole them. And we would have sold

them as slaves but Turan thought they might be of some use as hostages.”

Orin grabbed Sebuk’s throat in a stranglehold. Sebuk was a strong man, but Orin’s rage was such that Sebuk was unable to break Orin’s grip. And Sebuk’s nokers were held back from interfering by the Kaskirs.

“Kill him and your children die.” It was Eeren.

Orin stared at Eeren, then back at Sebuk. He slowly released his grip. Sebuk took a step backwards, rubbing his throat.

“That’s right, Kaskir,” said Sebuk. “My men have instructions to kill the children if I do not return. I am in charge here, not you. I say what the Kaskir will do, not you. And what the Kaskir will do is join me against Bakar. If you do not, your children’s lives are forfeit. I will personally crush the life out of them. And you will remember for the rest of your life that it was you who caused their deaths.”

Orin stood stunned, in powerless frustration.

Eeren spoke again. He had the kind of voice that could not be ignored, that could make any listener believe in his underworld connection. “The spirits have told me Sebuk will be successful against Bakar, as he was once before. They will assist him with his coming victory. And they will wreak a terrible vengeance on those who dare to oppose him.”

Sebuk now continued in a more conversational tone. “Join me, fight Bakar with me, and your children will be spared. I will even let, oh maybe one or two, return to your aul.”

“Keeping the others to ensure my support?” Orin asked.

“Of course. But I will see they are well taken care of. I will treat them as I would my own children. Now, I will tell you my plan. I will entice Bakar out of the citadel....”

•

Chodura tensed. Kurguz could hear her breath being drawn in. He wheeled around to look at her. She had turned pale.

“What's wrong?”

Chodura could only barely get the words out. “That's him. That's him.” That was all she could say.

Kurguz looked at the Jersaks who had ridden into the Kaskir camp. He had recognized a few: Sebuk, the shaman Eeren, a warrior named Tardu, and three other riders.

“That's who, what?” he asked her.

Chodura got out some more, “The thin one, he's the one who abducted me, years ago.”

“Chodura, how could you possibly recognize him after all these years?”

“Kurguz,” she began quietly, trying to keep her emotions in control, “I've seen that face for years in my dreams. I could never forget. Who is he?”

“He's Eeren, the shaman. Orin says he's always with Sebuk....”

Chodura cut him off. “I know it is him. I was afraid he was going to do something bad to me the entire time, but I think, luckily, he went elsewhere, as I never heard his voice again.”

Kurguz debated whether or not to tell Orin what Chodura had said. After all, could Chodura really be positive after all those years? And did it really matter Eeren had once raided Chodura's tribe for slaves? Raiding for slaves was a common practice. The Kaskir themselves had come away from their raids of D'naria with slaves.... But if Eeren had raided for slaves once, perhaps he had done it again, against the Kaskir.

“We should tell Orin. That is, if you're really positive. We should get closer so you can tell for sure.”

They started over towards where the men were talking, Kurguz leading, Chodura reluctantly following, not wishing to get close to Eeren. As Orin and Sebuk talked they stood off at a distance, near the horses. Kurguz maneuvered himself and Chodura nearer to Eeren so she could make a more positive identification. Kurguz looked up at Eeren, still mounted. Then, to avoid appearing to stare, he looked down. And then he noticed Eeren's horse had muddy feet.

Kurguz bent down and pulled out a little piece of thistle from around the horse's ankle. He looked at it for a bit.

Then the scuffle began and everyone knew Eeren had abducted the children.

•

Orin sat on his horse staring out over the Steppe, but not seeing it. Ailana rode up beside him. They looked at each other. When Ailana had learned her children were still alive, she had wept with joy. But then had come the realization that for her babies to continue living, many more would have to die.

“Whatever you choose,” she told Orin now, “I will support you. I will always be at your side, no matter what. But consider this: we may never have children again. And is there anything in the world more important than one’s own children?”

•

Sebuk was ready for Bakar. More than ready. He looked forward to it. He would perhaps have been content to let Bakar sit and rot in the Citadel. But Bakar apparently wanted to finish it. Or perhaps he was afraid Imperial troops would show up and lay siege to him.

It didn’t matter, Sebuk thought. Sebuk still held command over most of those who remained after the battle. He figured there were about 200-300 serious casualties in the battles and the taking of the city, plus another 300 who had gone kazak and just taken off. Had he been of noble birth with a claim to the position of khan, perhaps they wouldn’t have left. But, nevertheless, that left Bakar only with about 400 Burkuts, plus 200 Jersaks who wanted revenge for Sebuk’s murder of Turan. He would have liked to squelch that rumor and squash the one who started it. And after this battle he would. He would track down that Dayar and personally kill him.

But, coming back to the task at hand, he counted his own force at 800. Plus he had some 450 Kaskir in reserve. Could he count on them? With his holding Orin’s children hostage... And with Orin’s support, this Burkut revolt would be stillborn. But even if the Kaskir stayed out of it, it was 800 to 600. Plus, Bakar was no military tactician. While he, Sebuk, had won numerous battles --

in fact had never lost a battle -- Bakar had fought only one, and lost that one, to Sebuk and the Jersaks. Also, Eeren had read the portents and pronounced victory. Things could not be more auspicious. This time, the head on a lance would really be Bakar's. And Aywan's would join him on another. Orin's head would follow later.

This all played out in his mind, as he sat on his horse right next to Orin. Around him were some 400 Jersaks and the members of Orin's personal guard. Further down the valley were another 400 Jersaks.

Orin looked up on the hillsides. Under cover of the brush, were Kaskirs. Further up, their heads sticking out just above the crest, were more Kaskirs.

Eder stood on the crest and waved his arms as a signal. Orin waved back.

"My men are positioned," he told Sebuk.

Moments later, a scout rode up. "The Burkut come."

"Jersaks!" shouted Sebuk. "Remember, we will engage, then fall back."

The Jersaks began advancing slowly. Sebuk hung back and Orin stayed with him.

"A khan commands from the rear," Sebuk said.

Bakar's troops now came into view, several hundred yards off, on the plain. Sebuk liked to guess what his opponents would try to do. The last time they had met, he had defeated Bakar by encircling him -- by putting him in a position where his entire force could rain arrows on the Burkuts, and keep in constant motion, while the Burkuts were forced into a stationary position and only the outermost ring of Burkuts had a clear shot at the Jersaks. So Sebuk knew that Bakar would go to any lengths to avoid a repetition of that situation.

Therefore he guessed that Bakar would choose a swift attack as his strategy. Bakar would figure that his best chance, against superior numbers, would be to kill or capture Sebuk. That would end the battle. But, of course, Sebuk would not let that happen. To the swift attack, he would reply with the feigned retreat. Even though the Burkuts had seen that tactic when they had defeated the D'narian cavalry, it was a hard lesson to learn.

Battle was not a thing that men went into with cool heads. The average soldier would excite himself into a frenzy so that he wouldn't think about the possibility of his own death. In that feverish frenzy, juices flowing, screaming war cries, if he saw his enemies fleeing the field, he wouldn't stop and think and analyze. He would follow. Only the most disciplined, cool-headed officers could stop their men from that pursuit. And Sebuk bet that the inexperienced Bakar would be unable to control his men.

And indeed, Bakar ordered a frontal attack as Sebuk had guessed. With bows drawn, the riders and horses thundered across the plain. Before anyone was even within range, arrows began flying. But as they got into range, the Jersaks melted away as planned. And Sebuk watched the Burkuts follow. He thought about Bakar trying to stop his men from riding into an ambush, and he had to laugh. He thought, I'll bet those 200 Jersaks out to revenge Turan's death won't stop for anything. And the Burkuts got caught up in the excitement and followed them. Instead of being in the lead, Bakar is probably in the rear, with his force out of control. Sebuk gloated. He had taken the battle out of Bakar's hands.

Sebuk could turn and see Bakar's men still hot behind them. Now he would run them into the river valley, to the point where the Kaskir were waiting on the hillsides. Then, when the Jersaks were clear of the ambush, they would turn and shoot down their pursuers, just as the Kaskir began shooting from the hillsides. It was perfect. "Bakar," he said aloud, "prepare for your death."

The plan was working flawlessly. They rode into the valley with the Burkuts and renegade Jersaks behind them. Sebuk looked up at the hillsides, but Orin's men were apparently so well hidden that they could not be seen. Then, at the agreed-upon point, Sebuk halted and turned his men around. When the Burkuts began getting into range, the arrows began flying.

But Sebuk realized, with a sickening feeling, Orin had hidden his men not where they had agreed upon, but further down the valley, where the Jersaks had turned. The Kaskir arrows were now falling with deadly accuracy upon the Jersaks.

Sebuk turned to Orin with a look of fury.

"Damn my spirit to the Underworld forever," shouted Orin, "if I give up my people to your rule."

Orin drew his sword and struck at Sebuk, who deflected it with his shield. Sebuk's personal guard came up to defend their leader, but Orin's own guard interceded. At the same time, arrows continued to rain down on the Jersak force from the hillsides. To these arrows were added those of the arriving Burkuts.

Some of the Jersaks fled up the river valley. Others died where they were, shot at from three sides. Many looked to Sebuk to tell them what to do, but he was occupied defending himself against Orin.

Both Bakar and Eder sent men to help Orin, with most of the Burkut and Kaskir holding their ground, killing the Jersaks at a distance. The Jersaks returned the attack with their own flights of arrows, but even after dismounting and finding hiding places in the bush, their position was more exposed than that of the Kaskir.

It was not till the allies began to run out of arrows that the Burkut and Kaskir advanced on the Jersaks for hand-to-hand combat with lance and sword.

Through all this, Orin and Sebuk clashed. Both sat astride horses whom they'd trained for years. Warhorses who knew every command of their masters' almost before they felt it. Horses that were so into the fighting, that each horse viewed the other as the enemy, and would look for an opportunity to bite her.

The two men jockeyed around, looking to get a better position on the other. But while Orin attacked Sebuk with single-minded fury, Sebuk looked around at the disaster befalling his army. He thought first of his lost dream of empire, and then, though not daring to turn his back on Orin, of a path by which he could escape. It was in such a moment of inattention, a moment when he thought he could ride clear, that Orin knocked him off-balance. As he struggled to right himself, a second blow from Orin unhorsed him.

Sebuk scrambled to his feet and tried to run. He tried to catch a riderless horse, but couldn't. As a Jersak rider came into his reach, he grabbed the man's leg. It was Tardu, the man who had been ordered to shoot S'riah in the city square. Tardu kicked Sebuk away and rode off.

Orin dismounted and stood in front of Sebuk. "You have lost. Tell me where the children are and I will spare your life."

"Take my life if you can."

Sebuk struck at Orin. Again, it was sword and shield against sword and shield, one on one. But this time the spirit had seemingly left Sebuk, while Orin's determination would not let up. Orin knocked Sebuk down and stood over him, pointing his sword at Sebuk's throat.

Sebuk smiled arrogantly at him. "No, Orin, I will not tell you where they are. And Eeren will kill them when I don't return. Your children will die. And it'll be on your head. It was your choice to make, and you made the wrong one."

"I made the choice that would remove a snake from around the neck of my people. A snake that would eventually crush the life out of us. Now tell me where they are, or I will kill you slowly, painfully, as painfully as possible."

Sebuk forced a smirk. "And I will smile at you, because I will know that in the end you will lose."

Seeing their leader down, the Jersaks had begun surrendering. But Orin seethed. This was a painful victory. He did not regret his choice. But what could he do now? Were his children now to die?

A ring had formed around the two men as they had fought. Bakar was there, hearing everything. Things had worked out well for him. But once again, as before when seeing the Jersaks murder unarmed D'narians, he felt frustrated at being unable to halt a situation he had helped to create.

A group of Kaskir came riding up. It was four young men with Kurguz in the lead.

"Orin! We know where the children are!" Kurguz shouted. "There was a thistle on Eeren's horse that only grows in a few places. At one of those places we found a small Jersak camp. We saw the children there."

Orin turned back to Sebuk. Sebuk's smirk had faded. The would-be-khan of the Jersaks, still half-lying on the ground, tried to slither backwards. "You cannot take my life! It is prophesied that...."

Orin's sword flashed. Blood splattered in a wide arc from the force of the blow.

One of the young Kaskir whistled. Admiringly, he said "I've never seen anyone cut in half like that."



The camp where the hostages were held was easily taken. Bakar sent 100 of his Jersaks into the little camp. By the time the 10 guards in the camp realized that these were not friends, the camp was in the allies' hands. When Orin saw his children again, after so many months, his eyes became moist. But Eder's eyes remained hard.

"Eeren is not here," Eder noted.

Eder and Orin looked at each other. And the same thought hit both. "He's gone for our camp!"



As Eeren approached the Kaskir camp, he headed directly for a sentry.

"I have a message for Ailana," he called out. The sentry let him approach. Eeren faked an object in his left hand, then held out that hand to the sentry's right, the sentry's sword hand. As the sentry reached for it, Eeren grabbed the man by the wrist, drew out his knife with his other hand, and stabbed the man in the chest.

Eeren continued on. The gray yurts of the Kaskir lay before him. From a distance, they all looked very similar. But no, there it was. A wolf's-head standard on one yurt, indicating the yurt of their chief. *This would be easy.* He would sneak in, take Orin's wife in such a way that Orin could never forget, and slip out again. An easy revenge for his thwarted plans. But he had never really needed an excuse to maim or kill. It had made him an outcast among his own tribe. Only their fear of his powers as shaman had enabled him to leave them and start anew with the Jersaks.

A dog growled at him. But a dog was no match for Eeren with a knife. And the growl turned into a fading whimper.



Ailana had her loom spread out on pegs on the ground. She wove, as Chodura sat with her.

“How can you do that now?” Chodura asked.

“It takes my mind off the danger to the men.”

“Really?”

“Well, no. I can’t help but think about it. And wonder if my children will now be lost to me forever.”

Ailana looked up slowly. She saw Eeren standing nearby. She could see the knife in his sash. Ailana stood up and stepped back. Chodura too saw him and stepped back.

Ailana pulled the knife out from the sheath at her waist. She held it in her right hand, half-hidden by her body.

“I know you! I know you!” cried Chodura.

Eeren turned to stare at Chodura, trying to place her. Then he focused again on Ailana. He advanced on her, grabbing for her right hand.

Eeren smiled. “What have you got there, my pretty one? Let’s have a look.” He caught her arm and began pulling it from behind her back. Laughing, he said, “You need more practice in knife skills. Perhaps I’ll let you live so that you can get more.”

But when he had pulled her arm out and looked at her right hand, it was empty.

And at that same instant, he felt a sharp, deep pain on his right side. He realized now, too late, that Ailana had switched hands without his seeing it, and now the knife was plunged deep into him.

“Actually, I’ve gotten more practice than I ever wanted,” she said. Then she twisted the blade in him.

Eeren shrieked in pain and staggered sideways. He wanted now to kill her more than anything he had ever wanted. And he still had the strength to do it. “You are dead! I will eat your soul!”

But then a young voice said, “Eat this!” And Chodura stabbed him from behind with a loom peg. Eeren, dazed, staggered off.

Still alive, his mind beginning to refocus, he thought, I’ll get back to my pony, find some place to recover, then I’ll be all right. Some of the women had gathered around him. They looked at

him with curiosity, some with pity. But with Ailana there, no one was going to help him. And it was Ailana's voice he heard next.

“This is the man who raided the aul last year, stealing our children.”

Eeren could feel a wave of hostility towards him. But he still had his knife in his sash. And he was a shaman and able to make people tremble at the sound of his voice.

Eeren pulled out his knife and waved it around.

“I call on Erlik, Khan of the Underworld,” he cried weakly. Then the women’s hostility towards him turned physical, as a stone hit him in the back. Then another stone. He turned to face his attackers, but another stone made contact with his head and his vision became blurry. More stones flew. He tried to escape but he was getting dizzy, too dizzy to keep his balance, and he fell to one knee. This elicited no sympathy on the part of the Kaskir women. Another rock hit him in the head and he pitched forwards.

He struggled for consciousness, against the pain, amidst the blood, amidst the weakness from the knife wound and the head injuries. *I have to get up, I have to get up.* But he couldn't. Then just when everything had turned into a world of pain, the blows mercifully stopped. Eeren took a breath. They weren't going to kill him after all! Despite the pain, he felt exhilarated. He didn't want to die. And he wasn't going to. How foolish could these women be? If they gave him the chance, he would kill them! In fact, he promised himself that he would indeed kill them as soon as he could. He rose onto his elbows.

Then he realized that the women had only stopped because some horsemen had ridden up.

“Ailana,” said Orin as he dismounted and embraced his wife, “I seem to have made a habit of arriving too late.”

“No, husband, your timing was perfect.”

And then Eder, who was still mounted, roped Eeren with his lasso. Still conscious enough to realize what was happening, Eeren felt himself being dragged along the ground as Eder trotted his horse out of the camp.

Chodura turned to Orin. “What is Eder going to do to him?”

Orin answered, “I don't know, but whatever it is, I suspect Eeren is going to wish you had killed him here.”

And then, as more Kaskir horsemen rode up, several carrying small children, Ailana cried with joy as two small voices called out, “Apa! Mother!”



## *Chapter 23*

“He’s totally useless,” said the Karakoyunlu woman. “You might have just as well left him in the field where you found him.”

“I’m sure there’s a reason Tangri spared him, after he had been left for dead. If that wicked knife wound had been an inch lower, it would have cut his heart. And I didn’t nurse him back to health just to leave him behind now,” said her husband.

“But he has soft hands unaccustomed to work. And he’s not in his right mind. He doesn’t seem to remember who he is. And he refuses to sleep anywhere but outside. Whenever we try to lead him inside, he screams ‘Don’t put me back in The Box!’”

“Nonetheless, I will make a nomad out of him,” her husband responded.



“It’s sad about D’nar,” said Chodura to Kurguz. “I’m glad to be gone from there, and not a slave any more, but so many people dead.... Do any of the Kaskir regret it?”

“I think perhaps some do,” said Kurguz. “I’m just glad I was able to make it through the whole thing without killing anyone.”

“No one at all? You mean no D’narians? Because there was that Jersak you killed, the one who wanted to kill me.”

“Actually, while I’d like to be a hero, I didn’t kill him. My shot missed.”

“You know,” said Chodura, “I’d wondered about that. I was watching from the dalar and it looked like you were falling over backwards as you shot. But hit or miss, you were very brave to save me like you did.”

She paused, then asked, “How do you know you missed?”

“I went back later and looked around. I found my arrow on the roof. I had shot it into the air while falling down.”

“So who made the shot that killed the Jersak?”

“I don't know. When I had looked at the arrow in his throat, it was a Kaskir arrow, and it was feathered the way that Eder had shown me. But it wasn't mine. Each of the Kaskir mark their arrows in a distinctive way so that they can retrieve them later. And this one had a red circle around the shaft. So I asked around to find if anyone was using arrows identified like that. But no one admitted to it. Though when I asked Eder, he looked at me strangely.”

Kurguz was silent for a while. Then, as if trying to explain to himself all that had happened, he said, “My father was a traveler. On one of his travels, he found an old tablet on which was written: ‘On the boundary between order and disorder, sometimes stable and sometimes chaotic, lies Life.’”



Eder rode quietly with the nomad caravan, deep in thought. Many of the Kaskir men had taken ears from their victims, but, Eder, who had probably done more killing than any of the other Kaskir, carried only two ears – those of the shaman Eeren. The rest of Eeren's body parts lay scattered on the Steppe, his heart buried in a ceramic jug. A jug solid enough to keep his spirit inside for eternity.

We did a heroic thing, in overcoming a fortified city with an army that outnumbered us, thought Eder. *Ozmans* will tell stories about us for a long time. But at the same time, there are all the people dead -- people who didn't need to die. Was that evil? I didn't feel evil when we were doing it. Just angry. Does anger always end up as regret?



Ailana looked towards the East, towards the rising sun. Counting the slaves, and despite the losses in battle, they were

more than they were before. While she would always have with her the sweet sadness of Jinji's memory, now she also had her own lost children back. Plus, the Kaskir would take with them the lost children of another people, to raise as their own. A fortunate outcome in an uncertain world. Looking at her children, Ailana, for the first time in a long while, felt connected to the future.

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In D'nar, a few bewildered people walked aimlessly through the empty streets. One woman stood in the middle of a street with her hands to her face.

#

## For Further Reading

### Books I found useful and/or interesting

(This list is mostly but not totally complete. Being more than a bit absent-minded, I've misplaced some of my bibliographic notes. Most of the books on the list I own though, so can look particular things up for those interested, time permitting.)

- **Abai** (a.k.a Abai's Way, Abai's Path) – Muktar Auerzov – Progress Publishers. A hard-to-find classic, but worth searching for, it's the novelized biography of the Kazak nomad poet.
- **Afghan Nomads in Transition** – Gorm Pedersen – Thames and Hudson - 1994
- **Attila and the Nomad Hordes** – David Nicolle – Osprey – 1990
- **Central Asia: A Century of Russian Rule** – Edward Allworth, editor – Columbia University Press – 1967
- **Central Asia Reader: The Rediscovery of History** – H. B. Paksoy, editor – M.E. Sharpe – 1994. Dr. Paksoy has put a number of his works online, including his edition of *The Alghamysh*, possibly the oldest of the Turk sagas.
- **Central Asian Monuments** – H. B. Paksoy
- **Central Asians Under Russian Rule** – Elizabeth E. Bacon – Cornell University Press – 1980
- **China's Last Nomads: The History and Culture of China's Kazaks** – Linda Benson and Ingvar Svanberg – M.E. Sharpe – 1998
- **Culture Incarnate: Native Anthropology from Russia**, Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, editor – M.E. Sharpe – 1992-5
- **The Devil's Horsemen: The Mongol Invasion of Europe** – James Chambers – Atheneum – 1979. A very entertaining read. Out of print, but copies are often available on eBay.

- **The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia** – Rene Grousset, Naomi Walford, translator – Rutgers University Press – 1970. A modern classic.
- **Ethnic Minorities in the Red Army: Asset or Liability** – Alexander R. Alexiev and S. Enders Wimbush, editors – Westview Press – 1988
- **Foreign Devils on the Silk Road** – Peter Hopkirk – Oxford University Press – 1980. The story of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century explorers in Eastern Turkestan.
- **The Heritage of Central Asia: From Antiquity to the Turkish Expansion** – Richard N. Frye – Marcus Wiener Publishers – 1996
- **History of Civilizations of Central Asia** - UNESCO - 1996
- **Hungary and the Fall of Eastern Europe 1000-1568** – David Nicolle – Osprey – 1988.
- **Journey to Tuva: An Eye-Witness Account of Tannu-Tuva in 1929** – Otto Manchen-Helfen, Alan Leighton, translator - Ethnographics Press – 1931, trans 1992. Entertaining, and fortunately back in print.
- **Kazak Social Structure** – Alfred E. Hudson – Human Relations Area Files Press – 1964. Extremely useful.
- **Medieval Siege Warfare** – Christopher Gravett – Osprey – 1990
- **Medieval Warfare Source Book, Vol 2: Christian Europe and its Neighbors** – David Nicolle – Arms and Armour Press – 1996. A wonderful reference.
- **Mongolian Folktales** – Hilary Roe Metternich – Avery Press – 1996
- **The Mongols** – S R Turnbull – Osprey – 1980
- **The Mongols: A History** – Jeremiah Curtin – 1908- reprinted by Combined Books – 1996
- **The Nomadic Alternative** – Thomas J. Barfield - Prentice Hall – 1993
- **Nomads of Eurasia** – Basilov – University of Washington Press
- **Oral Art and Literature of the Kazakhs** – Thomas G. Winner – Duke University Press – 1958

- **Oriental and Western Siberia** – Thomas Witlam Atkinson – 1858 – reprinted by Praeger 1970
- **The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China** – Thomas Barfield – Blackwell - 1989
- **The Pleasantries of the Incredible Mulla Nasrudin** – Idries Shah – Penguin – 1968. One of several versions of the humorous Nasrudin stories.
- **A Ride to Khiva** – Capt. Frederick Burnaby – 1876 – Oxford University Press edition with introduction by Peter Hopkirk 1997.
- **The Secret History of the Mongols** – Anonymous, Francis Woodman Cleaves, editor – Harvard University Press – 1982. The story of Chinggiss (Genghiz) Khan, possibly written by a contemporary.
- **Shamanic Worlds: Rituals and Lore of Siberia and Central Asia** – Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, editor – North Castle Books – 1997.
- **Shyaan am!:** Tuvan Folk Tales – Kira Van Deusen – Udagan Books – 1996. A fun book.
- **Sketches of Central Asia** – Arminius Vambery – c1860? The classic travel book, by a Hungarian professor who passed for a Turk. He also wrote another (earlier?) book on his travels, but the title escapes me.
- **Social Organization of the Mongol-Turkie Pastoral Nomads** – Lawrence Krader. I believe I used Krader's work extensively at the UMCP library – but didn't write down the bibliographic details.
- **The Story of the Mongols Whom We Call the Tartars** – Friar Giovanni diPlano Carpini, Erik Hildinger, translator – Branden Publishing – 1996. Friar Carpini was a medieval Papal envoy who journeyed to the court of the Khan, survived the trip, and wrote about what he saw. Unlike the Yule-Cordier translation of Marco Polo, Hildinger's translation of Carpini is very readable and fascinating.
- **Traditional Textiles of Central Asia** – Janet Harvey – Thames and Hudson – 1996.
- **Turkish Archery and the Composite Bow** – Paul Klopsteg – 1947

- **Warriors of the Steppe: A Military History of Central Asia, 500 B.C. to 1700 A.D.** – Erik Hildinger – Sarpedon – 1997.  
Survey of the various nomad conquerors that came out of Asia.
- **The Zoroastrian Faith** – S. A. Nigosian

Some authors/editors whose works are available on the Net:  
(Because URLs and list archives change, best bet is to search)

Dr. H. B. Paksoy

Prof. Peter B. Golden (Rutgers)

Dr. Pallan R. Ichaporia

Malgorzata Labecka-Koecherowa

## **Other Books of Potential Interest**

(Obtained too late to use)

- **Ancient and Medieval Warfare** (West Point Military History Series) – Elmer May, Gerald P. Stadler, John F. Votaw – Avery Publishing Group – 1984
- **Anthropology & Archaeology of Eurasia** Journal, fall 1997, Central Asia: Islam, Politics, and Gender
- **Foundations of Empire** – Gary Seaman, editor – Ethnographics Press – 1992
- **Mongols and Mamluks: The Mamluk-Ilkhanid War 1260-1281** - Reuven Amitai-Preiss – Cambridge University Press – 1995
- **Rulers from the Steppe: State Formation on the Eurasian Periphery**, Gary Seaman and Daniel Marks, editors – Ethnographics Press – 1991
- **Siege Warfare: The Fortress in the Early Modern World 1494-1660** – Christopher Duffy – 1979 – Barnes & Nobles Books - 1996