

# **Deadly Wands**

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## **Preface**

This action-packed epic fantasy tells the remarkable adventures of an orphan boy with incredible powers who grows up in the Dark Ages during a brutal world war fought with non-magical wands that shoot fireballs and enable flight, resulting in massive air battles. Mature content makes it unsuitable for little kids. It's more Game of Thrones than Harry Potter. This story is fiction. Any resemblance to actual people, places, or events is coincidental.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this novel to my wonderful sons, Brian and Lucas.

“A man’s greatest joy is to defeat his enemies, take their possessions, and enjoy their women.”—Genghis Khan

## **Chapter 1**

Worst. Birthday. Ever.

A wand bristling with power in each hand, Lady Elizabeth finished putting her body armor, battle helmet, and game face on. A birthday present from her father, her new wands blew away anything she had ever used, and must have cost a bloody fortune. Certainly she never would have attempted her plans for the day without them. Savoring the raw energy flowing up her arms, she forced herself to put aside all doubt, regret, and mercy. She could not afford mercy.

Not today.

The beautiful blond placed her old wands in slots in her boots and used them to propel her a meter into the air. She flew around the room, careful not to impale herself on the assortment of weapons hung on the walls. Never had she felt so powerful. Hovering in the center of the room, she arched her back. Yelling, she flung her arms wide as angry flames erupted five meters out of each wand, which made them twice as strong as her old ones. She felt strangely comforted by the terribleness of her primal scream.

Her innocence taken away by the kiss of the most horrible man she knew, she could now barely relate to the naive girl she was the day before. She had heard that there are worst fates than death; Liz just never knew that marriage could be

one of them. If she could just smash the guy waiting for her in the dueling arena, then maybe she could escape her arranged marriage after all. If not, she preferred a quick death to a long marriage. Either way, she vowed never to marry. Never!

With a flick of her wand the thick oak doors flung open. She flew down the hall, letting her fury feed a newfound aggressiveness. Wearing expensive armor, Prince George waited for her in the arena.

"Happy birthday, niece. Now that you're of age, the queen can finally marry you off to the Mongol ambassador."

Nothing could have infuriated her more. Eager to surprise him with her new death sticks, she flew at him at a 45 degree angle, firing a series of fireballs that forced him to flight. Instead of flying in a straight line—suicide in battle—she alternated between her left and right boot wands to zigzag unpredictably, like she was climbing stairs made for giants.

A combat veteran, he knew from the sound of her blasts that she upgraded her sticks—the louder the wand, the larger and faster the fireball, which made it harder to deflect or avoid.

He went for height, using all four wands to pop straight up. As she shot the path ahead of him, he zagged diagonally using one hand wand while firing back with the other. She chased him up, out into the bright sunlight, and they went at it like two street cats.

Unlike a real dueling arena, no stadium seating surrounded the high circular walls. Aside from his castle on a nearby hill, they were all alone as their blasts echoed over the empty English hillside. Strong winds from a coming storm roughly pushed them around like leaves as they traded shots.

She projected a steel shield to fly through the edge of a fireball and gain a positional advantage, shooting with both wands in a controlled freefall. He dived to avoid the two fires, then rose in an arc to blast her. Fired from too far away, the fire expanded too much to burn but, to minimize the heat, she passed through it as fast as possible, closing her eyes and mouth.

His fireballs were larger, faster, and hotter, so she closed the distance to minimize his advantage. One hundred meters above ground, they used their wands to extend swords. She spun as she fell towards him, forcing him to project a metal shield that she whacked with her blade.

The steel weighed literally nothing, so speed mattered more than strength. It was impossible to avoid glancing blows struck at lightning speed—a disadvantage to the fighter with inferior armor. Unlike sword fights on the ground, each sought to surge above or below their opponent.

Fighting while flying is inherently exhausting—like boxing while running—so those with greater endurance could defeat better opponents simply by out-lasting them. On the ground, the larger fighter has the advantage by delivering stronger blows and having more mass to absorb hits; in the air, in contrast, the lighter fighter lasts longer because wands propel lighter objects more than heavier ones. Hence, given equal wand strength, the most common strategy of the lighter fighter was to exhaust his opponent.

A blow knocked the girl back far enough for him to shoot her. She use one hand wand to propel her down while extending flame to torch his left boot wand. She liked hearing him scream so much that she briefly cooked the rest of him. Burning

flesh made him unable to concentrate, sending him into an uncontrolled fall. Elizabeth flew head-first after him to end this, once and for all.

He fought through the pain to slow his descent, but it's hard to fly with just three wands, so he tumbled head over heels a few times before he stabilized his fall. Now he could land safely.

But not dogfight. Elizabeth dove out of the sun and smacked him with a steel bat, sending him sprawling in the arena dirt. She blasted craters on either side of him to smother him in a dust cloud.

George frantically beat the flames burning the clothes under his body armor. Dueling without armor plates is suicidal, but that didn't make taking it off fast, easy, or simple. With the smell of roasted flesh making her nauseous, she used a wand to lift and dump his burning body into a bathtub-size container of water that every arena kept for just this purpose. The burning stopped with an audible sizzle sound that made her spine tingle. Her teacher's relief proved short-lived as he attacked her verbally.

"Are you trying to kill me?"

An ironic accusation since he often criticized her for lacking the killer instinct. He'd taunt her with lines like, "you shoot like a girl." Not anymore, she told herself.

Burning up herself, she took a minute to take her helmet and body armor off while he did the same to inspect his burns.

"Uncle George, that monster actually kissed me this morning. On the lips!"

"The ambassador? Mother probably suggested it. We just got word Genghis Khan finally approved the treaty, on the condition that you produce a heir to the English throne. I imagine Ambassador Tamerlane is eager to start. Remember how furious he was when the queen moved the legal age to 18 to gain leverage over the Mongols? That's the highest in the world. You should be happy she didn't marry you two years ago when she changed the minimum age."

Queen Margaret had three sons: Richard, John, and George. Lady Elizabeth was the only legitimate child of the oldest son, Prince Richard, the Royal Heir. The Queen desperately needed the leverage that an alliance with the Mongol Empire would bring to complete the conquest of Ireland, her lifelong dream. And to protect England from the Empire itself. No small consideration.

The discovery of wands in China in the 12<sup>th</sup> century completely transformed human civilization. That is, armed with wands, Genghis Khan's Mongol horde completely transformed human civilization. Handcrafted from sacred trees thousands of years old, the more powerful wands made flight possible, allowing the Mongol Air Force to pound defenseless ground troops armed with swords, spears, and arrows. Genghis Khan conquered China and Korea in his first century, India and Persia the second century, and most of Europe the third. Only volunteers from the Americas prevented the Mongol conquest of Europe.

As it was, the Mongols controlled all of Europe except the Scandinavian kingdoms, the islands of England, Ireland, and Iceland, the westernmost quarter of France, and the sliver of Spain that locals called Portugal. A million Mongols enslaved millions of Africans to mine precious minerals. Aside from the Americas, only Asian islands like Japan, Taiwan, and its neighbors remained outside of the Empire.

Genghis Khan literally controlled half the world, and waged war for the rest.

General Tamerlane, in particular, repulsed Lady Elizabeth for his history of building pyramids out of skulls. Delhi alone contributed 100,000 heads to one giant pile. Historians claimed Tamerlane killed seventeen million people. Being a two hundred year old condescending jerk did not add to his personal charm. Just the thought of him touching her made Liz sick. Her first thought was to blast her own head off. Her second was to flee.

Her decision would change everything.

"I'll not give the English crown to Genghis Khan," Liz vowed fiercely. "The treaty will give the Mongols military bases in England to launch a second front on France. For me to marry a Mongol means the destruction of Free Europe!"

Prince George dropped his chest plate, took off what remained of his shirt, and got out of the dumping pool. Water pooling at his feet, he inspected his wands for water damage, cursing softly.

"Genghis Khan has another division ready to assault Paris. Why do you think I'm recruiting another English battalion? We're even risking our lives without pay."

A squad consists of ten fliers, a company one hundred, a battalion one thousand, a division ten thousand, and an armada at least one hundred thousand.

"If Paris falls, France falls. Then England has a hostile air force at its doorstep. If you make this treaty impossible, then mother will have to deploy her quads from Ireland to our coastline to deter the Mongols. And if you anger them enough, then even that won't stop them."

But the girl had made up her mind. "If we let them conquer France, then England is lost anyways. I hope to have a child before they kill me. I'll pray for a warrior so powerful that he'll scare even Genghis Khan."

George laughed at the thought. The Great Immortal was the universal boogeyman. That someone could scare him was laughable.

"The treaty guarantees that mother remains queen for life, but it does not guarantee that your father will succeed her. The Mongols will insist that my Mongol-loving brother John succeed her. He's the force behind this odious treaty. He has always been jealous that he never became a quad like us."

When wands were discovered, only 10% could use wands to light fires or move furniture. Only 10% of those were powerful enough to project steel. Of those, only 10% could use two hand wands at once, and only 10% of them could also use foot wands to fly. Since only 1 out of 10,000 people could use four wands at once (i.e., quads), everyone wanted to mate with them. Three centuries of self-selective breeding multiplied the quad population. Arranged marriages gave way to "strategic reproduction." While isolated tribes still didn't have access to wands, Mongols boasted a quad out of every one hundred—the highest per capita in the world.

Genghis Khan himself, the most powerful quad in human history, able to project a flame 12 meters long, took strategic reproduction to an extreme by impregnating hundreds of quad women every year for over three centuries. His offspring formed the elite troops that enabled the Empire to keep expanding. Legend said the Great Immortal already produced a million descendents.

When Prince Richard's powers bloomed at puberty, Queen Margaret offered a generous stipend to any English quad who reproduced with him. The irony of Elizabeth being the Royal Heir's only legitimate heir is that she had a few hundred half-siblings—some old enough to be her father.

But mating with a fellow quad only increased the odds of producing quad children. It did not guarantee it. The power so generously given Prince Richard skipped Prince John to bless the third son, George, who turned out to be gay, and thus ineligible to wear the crown. Bitter with envy, John treated his brothers as enemies ever since his quad powers failed to appear.

John tried to get the Mongols to marry one of his sons, with their offspring becoming king, but the oldest, Aidian, had already married a powerful Scottish quad, and John's only other quad son was still a child. The ambassador scoured the royal family, and concluded that Lady Elizabeth would produce the most acceptable heirs to the throne.

"Let me see your wands," George insisted, holding up her hands. "Richie gave you grandfather's sticks! No wonder your blasts are so strong. These make you more powerful than Aidian. Mother will demand them back once she finds out. Regardless that grandfather gave them to Richie after he won the national dueling championship."

She flashed her uncle big puppy eyes. "Let me fly with you to France. I'd rather die fighting there than live dropping Mongol babies here."

George groaned. And not because of his burns. A great side effect of wands were their ability to heal. Quads rarely became sick, and recovered quickly when wounded. The burns covering his body were already changing color as he sucked juice from his wands and directed them to his injuries. Wands also extend a natural lifespan, and the more powerful the wands, the longer they extended life. Genghis Khan was three and a half centuries old and boasted that he'd live forever.

The catch—and there's always a catch—is that wand use is literally addictive, and the better the wand, the stronger the addiction. Part of the reason the Mongol Empire kept expanding is that its millions of quads needed someone to fight. A powerful quad who stops using wands ages quickly and turns sickly. Hence, immortality requires lots of death. For one to live forever, many more must die.

"You can't come with us. My volunteers will work without pay or thanks, but not if the Queen forbids it."

"I'll just go alone. The French are desperate for quads and many women fight on the front lines."

"Then we can't go. Mother will assume I'm helping you, and no one will risk going with me if I'm angering the queen."

In anguish she started punching blast-holes in the stone walls.

"Can you at least loan me money? I'll have to try Africa."

"Liz, I'm broke. I'm financing this operation out of my own pocket. If John takes my estates, then I'm literally sacrificing everything."

"But you're earning tons of money making longbows!"

At ground level, most wands lose effectiveness beyond one hundred meters, while his two-meter-tall longbows offered twice the range.

"I was. This last year was very profitable. But then some longshoremen mistook William, my business partner, for a Mongol and tried to teach him a lesson. He killed one and injured several others who had no idea he was a quad."

"You never told me he was a quad!"

"I never knew he was a quad. He only used hand wands in my presence. But it gets worse. He fought in self-defense, so nothing should have come of it, but he projected blades six meters long. That makes him among the most powerful in the country. Everyone wants to know where he got his wands, and why he hid their power. Who the hell hides their power for three years? He must be a veteran to fight like that.

"Anyways, someone's wand recorded the fight, and you know how these things spread from stick to stick. Pretty soon John got a copy and ordered Will's arrest just to put me out of business. That's why I'm free to return to France so soon. I'm taking several thousand longbows with me."

"I remember you speaking highly of William," she nudged her uncle.

"Oh, he's great. He's an engineer by nature, but he thinks of himself as an innovator. Sure, he's secretive and paranoid, but he has enough fancy ideas to last a lifetime."

"Is he a good man?" she asked quietly.

Silence. No longer able to concentrate on healing himself, George opened his eyes and examined his favorite niece.

"Ah, crap. You want to fly off with him."

"Well, I can't live in the Mongol Empire, and the rest is a war zone. A lone girl will not survive long. Fleeing with him doubles my chances of survival. Will you at least introduce us?"

George held up his hands like she had influenza and physically backed away.

"And risk an opportunity to help France? No, if you do this, I must be seen elsewhere. However, you can bring him his money. He's hiding at my lake cabin, where I took you fishing when you were just a kid."

She laughed since they went fishing there just last week. Finally, she was no longer a kid. Liz already took everything she needed with her. Now she just had to get out of her grandmother's reach.

"Please tell me you haven't shagged him!" she suddenly demanded, since he often used the cabin for sex.

"Liz!" he shouted, properly scandalized. "How can you even think such a thing?"

"Because you're handsome, charming, and persistent. So tell me the truth."

Chuckling, he shook his head. "No, we never had sex."

"But you tried."

Now he laughed loudly. "His paranoia doesn't let him drink enough. That guy never lets his guard down. I thought I had a chance since he never visited the local prostitutes, as far as the gossiping servants could tell. I've had more success with monks."

The strength of her relief surprised her. She didn't even realize she had been holding her breath.

"We're not gonna get far without money, though. I can hock my jewelry, but that takes time."

George suddenly got excited. "I know where you can get money. From your evil uncle. My dear brother John has been skimming off government revenues ever since he talked his way into mother's confidence. That's how he's been able to buy all those properties when the queen keeps raising taxes to fund the conquest of Ireland. I even know where: in that old vault in his castle keep."

"But how can I get it?"

"It was built before wands were discovered, so the vault is high in the keep tower where it could be easily defended from ground attack. Just hover near the top and loosen the mortared stones around the arrow slits."

The prospect of sticking it to that bastard John made up her mind. She blamed him for the treaty, and hence for her arranged marriage to that odious man. She looked at the position of the Sun.

"I've got to go!"

She hugged him hard, then flew to his castle. The forgotten uncle she left behind cried alone, somehow knowing he'd never see her again.

## Chapter 2

The lake reflected the last twilight of the setting sun as William finished peeing against a tree downwind of the cabin. No one enjoys stumbling in the woods at night, so William took care of business while he had some light left. As a cool breeze rustled the leaves above, he sensed someone land softly behind him. Assuming a threat, he whirled around and cut the air as far as his steel could reach while he prepared to blast with his other wand.

Poor Elizabeth had the wit to duck under the deadly blade while her hands held large travel bags. Not wanting to die, today of all days, she quickly shouted out:

"Prince George sent me! William, I brought your stuff from his castle."

The sight of a beautiful blond, all alone, stunned William. Never trusting, he instinctively scanned the skies.

"No one followed me," the girl assured him. "I flew as high as possible and from cloud to cloud to avoid being seen. And only Uncle George knows I'm here. Sorry to surprise you, but these things weigh a ton. George couldn't come himself, and I was the only one he could trust with your life," she added to give herself leverage. Now that she got a good look at him, she found herself liking everything she saw. Imagining herself in his arms, Liz visibly flushed. "Wow, you are lovely. No wonder my uncle wanted you."

William, not wanting to recall the prince's advances, continued to scan the skies. "Gorgeous girls don't tell strange men they're lovely."

"Gorgeous?" That caught her breath. Blood rushed to her ego. "Did you just call me gorgeous?" He had no idea how much she needed that, like medicine for a raging fever.

Flustered, he cursed under his breath. A girl he just met already had him off balance. A really hot girl.



"Wow!" she exclaimed, examining the distance between them. "You put out over seven meters of steel. I doubt there's a dozen quads in the country that can beat that. You're a damn super-quad!"

A "super" quad could extend flame at least seven meters. A quad is only as powerful as his wands, so super-quads must always beware poison or an arrow in the back because their wands were literally worth a fortune. Like the chicken and the egg, even great quads didn't become super-quads without super wands.

William tried not to let the flattery affect him. "Hey, I know you. George showed you my factory despite me forbidding tours."

His sword disappeared back into his wand. She took off the helmet that protected her eyes and ears when flying.

"I am his niece, Lady Elizabeth. My father is Prince Richard. Because I am his only legitimate child, some refer to me as the heir to the heir." And, with that, she did a curtsy that caused her hair to fall over her face, then threw her hair back over her head because she knew guys really liked that. She ended up with one foot forward and her hands on her hips, trying to look as sexy as possible. He saw through it, of course, but it still made him smile.

"Nice try, lady, but that won't work on me," he said, trying not to like her too much.

"It looks like it already has," she said, gesturing towards his genitals. "You were taking so long that I was not sure if you were peeing or masturbating. George mentioned that you don't go out much."

Red faced, William turned around, exposing his vulnerable back, to tuck himself back in. He stumbled behind the tree to recover his composure.

"Thanks for bringing my stuff. You can go now."

"Oh, because flying at night is dangerous, Uncle George made me promise to spend the night at his cabin."

Liz heard a groan from behind the tree. She needed him before, but wanted him now, so she changed the subject by opening his bag.

"George paid what he says he owed you. I found three other small bags hidden in your room."

"I can't believe you found three out of the four!" Her thoroughness apparently impressed him more than the money. He reset his wands in their arm sockets and walked over to rifle through his stuff. "You brought my tool chest!" he yelled excitedly. "Oh, thank you. I need these tools to maintain my wand launchers."

He seemed as happy as if she dropped him a ton of gold.

Making herself at home while he concentrated on his tools, she folded up his sleeves to examine the launchers. Leather and small wires held each wand in place on the underside of each arm. The wires, though, bit into his arms, scaring them. Looking closer, she saw layers of scabs.

"Wearing those launchers must hurt like hell."

"Actually I don't feel anything anymore. My underarms have thicker calluses than my feet. It's a small price to pay for a lethal advantage."

He did not seem to be joking.

"You wear them all the time?"

"Always," he said flatly. "I'm the last of my line and I promised my parents I'd reproduce before my death. My mother was especially impatient with me."

William feared death less than breaking a promise to his mommy. They say good sons make good husbands, and this one was apparently childless, single, and ridiculously cute. Involuntarily, she jumped in joy. The poor bastard doesn't even know how attractive he is.

"Then this must launch them," Liz concluded, pushing against a lever that caused the wand to spring into his open hand. "That's bloody brilliant!" Now virtually in his arms, Elizabeth gazed into his sky-blue eyes, admiration lighting up her face. "No wonder George praised you so much."

While a man cannot fall in love with a woman he isn't attracted to, a woman cannot fall in love with a man she doesn't respect. What he saw in her eyes made his skin tingle.

"Won't they look for you?"

"I was suppose to marry the Mongol ambassador today to cement a treaty which would allow the Empire to start air bases in England to attack France from behind. I'd rather die than destroy Free Europe. So, yes, they'll look for me. That's why I must leave the country."

Having sized him up, she realized that she could not ask him to take care of her; he must volunteer to save the damsel from danger. With that she used her wands to lift her bag and backpack and move them into the cabin. Enjoying the view of her from behind, he did the same. Inside she laid out her cards.

"My Uncle John is the one pursuing you. Without him, you and George would still be in business. He's also the one behind the treaty, so we both need to flee England because of him. I'd like to strike back before I leave.

"He has been skimming tax revenues and hiding them in a vault at Castle Edinburgh. I got to know the area during his son's wedding a few years ago. But it'll take two fliers. If we go late at night, no one may even notice us. If they do, the only decent quad is my cousin Aidian, and I'll take care of him."

William needed to warn her. "We can't run away together. The Mongol intelligence service is after me. Being with me will only unnecessarily endanger you. You'll be safer without me."

She tried a new argument. "A lone woman is not safe anywhere. I can shoot five-meter-long flames, but doing so will attract the very attention I need to avoid. If I fight back and lose, I'm gang-raped to death; if I win, my identify will be investigated. Either way, I'm screwed. If I'm returned alive, the queen will make me reproduce with that horrible man who built pyramids of skulls, and the Mongols will complete their conquest of Europe. If we flee together, then we can pass ourselves off as a married couple."

William concealed how tempting that was. "You're just a girl. How will you pass yourself off as my wife?"

And there it was. The moment of truth. Liz looked forward to and dreaded this opportunity. She rehearsed the script she wrote in her head and hoped it sounded natural.

"I have a related concern. I'd rather die than give the Mongols a plausible heir to the English throne. Not being a virgin would help, being with child would help even more, but being married with child would be best. A legitimate son would have greater claim than a younger, half-Mongolian bastard brother. And a boy as handsome as you wouldn't hurt, either."

Later she would laugh at how her vow to “never marry” didn’t even last the day.

Stunned, he sat on the bed, which put her wonderful breasts at eye level. It impressed him how clearly she thought things through. He liked smart, strong women.

"How could you plan all this before even meeting me? What if I was an ogre, an idiot, or a birk?"

"I saw those machines you made to mass-produce the parts for the longbow, so you're no dummy. George likes and respects you, and gays are great judges of character. You could be married, but after three years here alone you're more likely a widow. You're not gay or George would have had his way with you. And you could not be ugly or George would not have tried to have his way with you." They both laughed at that. "Honestly, though, I assumed you were much older because he said you must be a veteran. But you're not old. In fact, I'd say you're perfect for me."

"You could be a little taller," he joked.

She playfully smacked him, stunned at how comfortable she felt with him.

"I can't believe I'm telling a total stranger this, but you should know that my family has dedicated itself to burning the ancient trees that the Mongol Empire needs. The older the tree, the stronger the wand. The Mongols don't have the largest military they can afford; they have the largest military that they can arm. My grandfather estimated we've denied the Empire several million wands by burning the trees they use to carve them."

"That's bloody brilliant!" And it was. Burning those forests gave the rest of the world time to catch up. His family basically saved Europe. "Two could burn twice as many trees, so we should team up."

With that, she inexpertly removed her clothing. Now revealed in all of her natural glory, ignorance paralyzed her.

"Now what do I do?" she begged him, bewildered.

The adorable look on her face captivated him. He could protect Free Europe simply by marrying and impregnating the queen's delicious granddaughter. His parents would approve. His grandma would blast him for hesitating. William, who never did anything impulsive, went to the other extreme.

"Lady Elizabeth, will you marry me?"

Relieved, she jumped into his scabby arms.

## Chapter 3

The castle, built upon a high volcanic outcropping, dominated the Edinburgh skyline. Sheer cliffs to the north and south, and a steep ascent from the west, meant the castle only had to defend itself on the ground from the east. A six-ton siege cannon called Mons Meg, built in 1449, could hit targets two Scottish miles away. Since everyone used the metric system, no one knew how far a Scottish mile was.

"I see why your uncle stores his money there," William commented dryly.

Indeed, the place looked impregnable. It was first fortified by the legendary Briton King Ebraucus 2500 years before, who had fifty children by twenty women. Ebraucus' father killed his own brother, ruled as a tyrant for twenty years, then, like the Roman dictator Sulla, gave up power to pursue sodomy.

"The vault lies in David's Tower, near St. Margaret's Chapel. John married into Scottish royalty to get the castle. All we have to do is remove some blocks around the arrow slit, fill up the backpacks, and fly away."

Yes, as if anything is as easy as it should be.

They flew in from the north and knocked out a few sleepy guards. They used three wands to hover around the arrow slit, each using a blade to slice into the mortar that bound each block. It still took several exhausting minutes to remove enough blocks to slip in. The wealth stunned them. Each quickly filled up a backpack, starting with the gold and precious jewels.

All too soon they heard someone yelling. A moment later, a uniformed guard flew to the opening and saw the wand-torches. Liz extended steel in the shape of a hammer to smash his helmet, but he sounded an alarm as he fell down. The high piercing noise echoed over the castle. William assumed they'd leave at once, but Liz kept filling her backpack until a quad started blasting them.

"That's an idiot, so it must be my cousin," Liz informed him. "He's Keeper of the Castle, so it's his hide if we get away." She seemed remarkably calm given the partial blasts coming in, and William suddenly realized that she wanted this confrontation. The prospect of her kicking ass really turned him on.

A blast widens over time, so the farther away, the more it disperses, losing lethality. Firing closer in would have cooked them alive.

"Let me buy us some time." She tapped her wand to her vocal cords to multiply the sound of her voice. "Aidian!"

"I know that voice. Who are you?" Aidian shouted back.

"What's grandma gonna do when she learns how much you stole from her?"

"Identify yourself!" he screamed.

Blasts from a few dozen wands now struck them, but they were fired from too far away to hurt them. Fools.

"They're lined up along the rampart," she guessed, getting up after getting knocked down from a pressure wave. "Help me with my backpack. It's heavier than I thought."

Even with her back against the wall, she could barely stand upright.

"How do super-quads carry twice their weight?" she asked in disbelief.

"The stronger the wands, the more you can carry," William reassured her, himself dubious she could haul so much.

"Aidian," she called out to pause the firing. "Neither you nor yours will ever be king."

"Elizabeth?" he asked in stunned disbelief. "What the hell are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking of blasting you to hell!" she yelled with the laugh of a drunk to mislead him. "It's time to settle things between us."

Aidian chuckled, all his arrogance showing. "This is a better gift than that trifle you gave me for my wedding."

William turned her to face him. "You are incredibly sexy." She looked at him bewildered, so he put her hand on his erection. Liz had never felt more flattered.

She flew around the tower to scan the castle for warriors. "The roof is clear and I don't see anyone to the south. I'll lead them north and meet you at the tree. And don't worry: I'm not gonna die before I marry you!"

William was not so sure. It's hard to fight when carrying so much weight, so he took off his backpack in case he had to rescue her.

"Come and get me, cousin!"

She fired two-meter-long flames so Aidian would underestimate her. Then, with a scream, she flew high to meet him.

From higher up he fired continuously. She let one graze her so she could pretend to lose her balance. Sure enough, he dived to finish her off. Flailing a few hundred meters above ground, she almost lost her balance while pretending to lose her balance.

Liz barely managed to avoid the next blast by maximizing thrust from every wand. They closed quickly and extended blades, but Liz had double his range and crushed his groin with a spiked ball a second before he chopped her head off. He had tormented her all her life—leaving him alive but impotent was the most satisfying thing she had ever done.

The pain cost him his concentration. She risked her life to grab him before he fell to his death. Something deep inside her screamed that he must die. Life is precious, but lives are cheap, and not every death is a tragedy. Instead, she dropped him into the moat so the guards would have to save him instead of pursue her, never knowing the great price William would pay for this mistake.

Hidden in the tower, William marveled at his new fiancée. He found himself looking forward to their wedding with un-William-like enthusiasm.

"Holy crap," he whispered to himself as he escaped. "I'm actually getting married!"

## Chapter 4

The exhausted couple landed at dawn before the front gate of a secluded rural estate surrounded by grassy hills. Liz made her wand sound a greeting as several dogs rushed them. Because fliers could literally drop anywhere, everyone owned guard dogs to warn them of intruders. Often, the first sign of an attack was a dog barking.

"You nervous?" William asked, surprised, given her steadiness robbing a freaking castle.

"When my father was a teenager, he fell for a peasant named Susan who won the national championship. But he couldn't marry her because the family didn't find her genealogy acceptable. So they had ten kids instead and she helped find other powerful quads to also have his children. Because she had his children first, and because she has enough personality for several people, everyone calls her the Matriarch. Which pisses off the queen, who everyone calls Margaret.

"The queen put my father in charge of the conquest of Ireland. After several great victories, he fell for my mother, a great Irish queen. Their marriage united

northern Ireland. His plan was to sire someone who could become king of both England and Ireland, like his parents did with Scotland. Then my mother died giving birth to me.

"With grandma angry with dad, Uncle John took the stipends and estates given to my father's families, impoverishing them. He quite literally made a few hundred of my siblings homeless. They don't blame me personally, but I can't help but remind them of their change in fortune."

"Then you must remind them of something else," William said mysteriously.

Liz turned to stare at him when a large man holding wands burst out. He touched a wand to one eye, closed the other, then yelled excitedly back to the house. A dozen people burst to give Liz hugs, all talking over each other and the dogs. A little prodigy named Emily flew into William's arms and gave him a hug so good she could have charged for it. William could easily tell who the Matriarch was, even though she didn't look any older than her sons. After an eternity of greetings, the group slowly made their way inside.

"This is my fiancé, William. William, this is Susan and her first-born son, Richard."

William shocked everyone by hugging the Matriarch, who intimidated most people, then shook the big guy's hand. "You are younger than I expected, your majesty."

They all laughed, since the first-born son of the Royal Heir looked like his clone.

"And you don't look like an old Mongol birk," Richard replied with a smile.

"No, I'm some other birk," William said to more laughter, winning them over. "Back home in Prussia I'm the Baron Wilhelm von Richthofen."

The news floored Liz like a banana peel. She decided to marry a guy without even knowing his real name.

"Listen, I need help. If I marry the Mongol ambassador, they'll build military bases here to open another front against Free Europe. To stop the treaty I must marry someone else and produce a non-Mongol heir."

"Are you already pregnant?" the Matriarch asked sternly.

"No, but we're working on it day and night," Liz replied to knowing smiles. "Father's presence at my wedding will give it the legitimacy it needs against Prince John's inevitable attacks. Yet we must flee England before John arrests us."

Richard groaned, because only he could convince the prince to return to England.

"He can't afford to come now, with the potato famine collapsing the Irish economy."

"Ask him if he'd like to borrow a ton of gold at 5% simple interest," William suggested.

One benefit of Mongols controlling an economy larger than the rest of the world's combined was their insistence on standardizing weights, measures, and distances. A "full" coin weighs exactly 100 grams, so ten of them weigh a kilo. A thousand kilos is a ton. A "half" coin weighs 50 grams and a "quarter" coin 25 grams. Silver coins of equal weight were worth fifteen times less, and equally heavy bronze coins that much less. No one trusted non-standard coins anymore. So a ton of gold was literal, not a metaphor.

Everyone stared hard at him, especially his soon-to-be wife. "What?" he asked her with a huge smile on his face. "You thought I was poor?"

Her husband, as she already thought of him, was becoming a mystery before her eyes.

"If he isn't interested, I sure would be," Richard said eagerly. "Did Liz mention that I headed the royal treasury before John fired me? I now run Global Bank, which my great-grandfather started a century ago."

"Bring the prince here for our wedding and I'll loan each of you a ton of gold."

"You're gonna loan a banker money?" The big guy laughed as he lifted his granddaughter Emily into his arms. "I feel like a baker begging for flour."

"You're right. Instead I'll buy 75% of your bank for two gold tons."

"49%," Richard said too quickly.

William smiled. "Now that I know what it's worth, I'll pay three tons for 85% and double your salary."

Liz watched her family jump up and down in excitement. Little Emily gave Liz two thumbs up.

"What's the catch?" Richard asked, because there's always a catch.

"You have to fly a few thousand kilometers to get it. Just get one hundred quads to carry thirty kilos each."

The room erupted as the family practically kicked Richard out of his own house.

"There's something else," William yelled over the chaos. "Last night Elizabeth and I found treasure at Castle Edinburgh, so we can give the equivalent of a gold kilo to every family of Prince Richard who attends our wedding."

Which was a great way to win over the in-laws, legitimize the marriage, and add protection in case a sheriff showed up.

"We have over two hundred gold kilos?" Liz asked in shock, since she didn't think they carried so much.

"Two hundred?" he asked, kicking himself. "You said he started one hundred families."

"Before marrying my mother, yes. Since then, he's conquering Ireland, one female quad at a time. I can't walk into a Global Bank branch without spending an hour just greeting relatives."

The Matriarch put a friendly arm around him. "Not that I doubt you, Baron, but it'd help if we could record it to show the skeptics. It's a long flight for most of them."

The happy couple led the family to their secret stash in the nearby woods. What they dumped onto the grass stunned the family.

"The greedy bastards stole all this?"

"No wonder the queen has to raise taxes."

"We need everyone in England to see this."

"Everyone record me," the Matriarch commanded. "Lady Elizabeth and her new fiancé offer a gold kilo, or its equivalent, to Prince Richard's families who attend their wedding the day after tomorrow."

The adults flew off to spread the word. As soon as the last one disappeared in the sky, Liz playfully slapped William. "Why didn't you tell me you were rich?"

"I was happy you'd marry me thinking I was poor. Whenever I travel within the Empire, I check out the local dueling champion. If I'm confident I can beat him, then I bet heavily."

"Then why the hell did we rob my uncle?"

"We'll have a hard life on the run, so I had to see how you handled adversity before swearing to spend the rest of my life with you."

"Are you really gonna spend the rest of your life with me?" she asked, eyes locked on his.

He gave her the perfect answer: "With you, only you, and with you forever."

## Chapter 5

His wife's anguished screams pierced William's soul. He stopped his relentless pacing to peek into the birthing room again. Liz, bravely practicing the breathing techniques he taught her, lay sweating on the bed. The team of midwives urged her on, ordering her to push the baby through.

After all the fights with bounty hunters and petty bandits since leaving England a year ago, he knew how tough she was. And that only made her unbearable pain harder to handle. The love of his life suffered in agony, and he could do nothing to help her. One of the women snapped at him, and he shut the door like a boy caught watching a woman bathe.

"Maybe you should wait outside," his fake cousin suggested.

William's primary ancestor was Baron Karl von Richthofen, who Genghis Khan killed while slaughtering the inhabitants of Peking in 1215. The Baron's family swore a blood oath of revenge and recruited quads from across Europe to fight the Mongols. The Khan eventually had to send super-quads to Prussia to wipe out the von Richthofens. Luckily, a girl named Rachel escaped the slaughter, the lone survivor of a family that once ruled the Kingdom of Bohemia.

Widowed while pregnant, Rachel married Taran, the Hero of Kiev, who never knew the child was not his. Now accepted in Mongol high society, she raised her son to continue her family's feud. He started the family tradition of burning the ancient trees that Mongols needed for great wands. As the last living descendent, William carried the burden of his family's long legacy.

Rachel heavily promoted a video documentary after Taran's death to make her fake Mongol family famously Mongolian to protect her son. Passed from wand to wand, videos cost nothing to copy, so she distributed it to every library in the Empire. The investment continued paying dividends as William, careful to model his hair and beard after a man he pretended to descend from, introduced himself as the great-great-great-grandson of the war hero Taran.

He looked at the kind man who thought he was William's distant cousin. The irony is that he personally liked his fake Mongol relatives even more than he liked most Mongols. Plus, they provided a compelling cover story if anyone ever investigated him.



Their marriage infuriated Queen Margaret. Her punishment was replacing Richard with the now-impotent Aidian as the official Royal Heir. She could not anoint Prince John because his stealing angered the country. However, the English liked Prince Richard far more than Aidian, and the romantic elopement of Lady Elizabeth captured the hearts of the English. Not to mention the sharp contrast between the generous newlyweds and the thieving family of Prince John.

What worried William was the ten kilo bounty on their heads. How ironic that he feared his family's enemies would endanger her, when actually it was her family that endangered him. So much so that they moved to the Mongol capital. William had to bribe the local official to forward the baby's birth date by two years to throw off Prince John, who saw their son as a rival for the throne.

Although not the touchy-feely type, the emotional turmoil of the moment prompted William to hug his fake cousin, then suddenly burst outside into the falling snow for some fresh air. Ever paranoid, William sensed movement on his far left. He turned to see a man peering through bushes at him.

"It's him!" the guy said in terrible Mongolian. William recognized him from his fight with the longshoremen in England the year before.

William pressed his inner arms against his overcoat. Even before those wands sprung into his hands, his boot wands propelled him up, out of the kill zone, even as the first volley smashed the oak door into a thousand splinters.

William flew over the house to get out of their line of sight, then circled to attack them from behind. He killed one with his back to him, then blasted another who apparently didn't recognize him. William watched his head explode like a watermelon with great satisfaction. At least two others returned fire behind trees. A fireball engulfed one tree and the man behind it, igniting his clothes. It didn't kill him immediately, but the three-degree burns took him out of the fight. William and the fourth man traded blasts, but William—in the air—could dodge easier than the ambusher on the ground.

Two bounty hunters from the bushes flew over the house at him. William evaded the blade of one and parried the other. Too close for blasting, William used his superior length to stab one in the chest and slice the other below the knee. Without a foot wand, he fell on the roof, where William chopped his head off. William grabbed his wands to retain their power, then did the same to the other ambushers, finally dispatching the guy still on fire.

In the eerie silence he heard the scared longshoreman cry like a baby as he ran through the woods.

Something made William pause before he realized that he just heard the birth cry of his newborn son. A son! Swelling with pride, William sped after his last enemy, expertly weaving his way through the trees before slicing his leg muscles. With the Englishman's face in the snow, William landed on his back and chopped off both hands so his enemy could not use his wands. He turned over the terrified tradesman.

"How did you find me?" William wanted to know. Not hearing an immediate answer, his wand shot electricity to his groin, making him wail like a newborn.

"You'll pay for killing my brother," the man promised. "Prince John spent the last year spreading your wanted poster around the world. Every bounty hunter on Earth is looking for you."

"But why are you here with them?"

"To identify you. You grew a beard and changed your hair, so they wanted to make sure before they killed a baby. And they had plenty of time since they thought it safest to attack during the birth."

This appalled William the father, but seemed like a sound tactic to William the warrior. "How many more are there?"

The dying man laughed weakly. "And dilute their shares? They only promised me one full coin, the cheap bastards. Not bad for a month of flying, but nothing compared to ten kilos."

As he faded out from loss of blood, William transferred ownership of his wands by holding them as he died, then took his leather money sack.

Back at the house, his fake family had fanned out, wands in hand.

"The bastards assumed I was rich," he explained to his fake cousin, who looked at him with both terror and awe. It's not every day someone you think you know kills several warriors. "I think I got them all, but you better sweep the perimeter to make sure while I check on the baby."

This time, the wet nurse did not shoo him away. William found their beautiful baby boy suckling his mother's teat while the other ladies made silly baby noises. What a difference a few minutes makes.

"He looks like a blond Chinaman," William joked. Liz raised her hand to hit him, but then laughed instead.

"I want to name him after his father," she proposed.

"No," William replied. "Wang is a terrible name. We better call him Billy."

Actually, they already agreed to put Temujin, the birth name of Genghis Khan, on his birth certificate because it was the most popular name among the Khan's male descendents. Society would accept their son more, he'd blend in with the thousands of other Temujins, and it gave him status as a direct descendent of the Immortal through his fake ancestor, Taran the War Hero.

"I love you so much," she declared.

"I love you more," he answered, unable to tell her that they'd have to flee the city because he could not keep her safe.

## **Chapter 6**

William, Liz, and six-year old Billy left their ger—a portable dome-shaped hut—careful to not step on the threshold because Mongols are either in or out. Snow still covered the tips of the distant Altai Mountains. Smoke rose from the other hundred or so huts that formed this horde, one of thousands that roamed the seemingly endless Central Asia steppe.

To their joy, Billy was a prodigy, sparking his first wand at age three. Very few people could use wands before puberty. He literally flew before he could run. Not all prodigies were powerful, but their boy seemed to have a real gift for wands, so they trained him intensely to prepare him for a hard life.

Billy excelled at wand games like Tag. He could evade kids twice his age for hours as they chased him through the trees. Blessed with great vision and depth perception, the boy had the unnatural ability to miss trees by centimeters when flying full out. He especially enjoyed playing Rock, where he had to avoid kids throwing rocks at him. It usually took years to develop fine dexterity skills, but Billy displayed a mastery of the air that William enjoyed with his hands. He did his first somersault in the air at age five, not appreciating how much that shocked the horde, and flew upside down like other kids did hand stands. It was rare, unnerving, and really awesome.

Billy was pure joy until he accidentally burned their hut with his boot wands. From that moment on, they lived in terror. Until then, they thought only Genghis Khan could blast, project steel, or extend fire from boot wands. Anyone else mysteriously died.

Fortunately, nobody saw it because otherwise his unique ability would have been a death sentence. Billy would have been shot on sight and his killer given a huge reward by the Great Khan himself. Sharing the Khan's ability meant that the world was not big enough for both of them. One of them had to kill the other.

Or so they told Billy.

All his life, William thought he was too paranoid. It was not until that moment, watching Billy laugh at the fire coming from his boot wands, that he realized he was not paranoid enough.

They moved to China, Japan, and India to learn those languages, study martial arts, and develop their wand abilities in relative peace.

Most quads train to fly far. William, instead, emphasized flying high. Every flier has a maximum height called a "ceiling." If you can fly higher than your opponent, then you can shoot him, but he can't shoot you. Greater height means thinner air, however, which meant reducing the body's need for oxygen. Therefore, the family practiced meditation to slow their heartbeats.

To their shock, monks taught Billy to drop his breathing to near zero. Liz once could not find his heartbeat, even though he was smiling at her at the time. Chanting something relaxing helped Billy fly higher than either parent. Chagrined that the pupil out-did the teacher, William then emphasized endurance.

Those who can fly higher can fly faster due to less air resistance. And those who can fly faster, can fly farther. Before, the parents needed Billy to keep up. Now, the parents needed to keep up with Billy.

They moved frequently, changing identities every time. Often they'd pass themselves off as English. Billy picked up languages easily, so they hired tutors on the safe assumption that he'd need language skills. The family knew they spent too much time in one place when they had trouble sleeping at night.

Constant travel also gave William an opportunity to teach Billy geography. He collected aerial images like other fathers collected bad habits. Together they developed a system to organize the images they kept on their wands.

They kept returning to the hordes because bounty hunters never looked for them there. Ironically, they were safest from Liz' enemies by hiding among William's enemies.

Because his birth certificate said Billy was eight instead of six, he had to keep up with the other boys in horseback riding, archery, and wrestling. This toughed

Billy up, and William wanted Billy as tough as possible. While other kids played, Billy trained.

William put a priority on tactical sense. He'd outline a scenario and walk Billy through it. Then he'd change something that forced a different strategy. Rage and terror drove most fighters, but William wanted Billy to foresee how any given situation would play out before engaging. William collected video montages of every battle he could, and together they analyzed who did what right and wrong.

"Win your fights before they start," dad would tell him. "The better you plan, the less you'll bleed."

William made a living dueling. Liz feared for him every time he entered the arena. However, killing a few thousand Mongols a year boosted his wand power and made him enough to give Global Bank the capital it needed to expand internationally. All too soon he had several thousand of his wife's relatives on the payroll.

The catch to dueling was getting killed by a better dueler, like a millennial -- those with one thousand proven kills. Proving a kill is easy since a wand records everything it's used for, from starting fires to moving furniture to blasting enemies, although that memory can be lost when passed to a new owner. Everyone feared millennials because their goal was not money, but longevity. The more powerful the wand, the more years it provided. The Empire made dueling the national sport, pastime, and obsession so kids would grow up dreaming of living forever with wealth, fame, and glory. The best duelers could effectively live forever, although the price of immortality was endless war.

"Good morning," the horde's leader greeted them. "Tomorrow we'll move north along the Irtysh River for better grazing for the animals."

"We'll catch up if we're not back in time," William assured him pleasantly, eager to maintain good relations.

The leader smiled down at Billy. "Beriakh says you almost fly faster than him, and he's the fastest that I've ever seen. Maybe soon you can represent us in the summer games. I'd love to see those arrogant fools beaten by someone half their size."

Once the leader left, William smacked the boy on the back of the head. "You raced the regional speed champion?"

"What?" Billy demanded. "I let him win!"

"I'm counting on you to continue my line," his father told him for the millionth time. "Don't get killed until after you've reproduced."

The trauma of hearing her husband fighting for his life while Elizabeth gave birth triggered uncontrolled bleeding that made her unable to have more babies. Liz would never forgive her Uncle John for preventing her from having more children.

As always, the family flew as high, fast and far as possible. Today they went north over the vast Mongolian Plateau to the Siberian forest to visit some friends of the family.

When Mongols originally expanded, they incorporated the Tatars, Manchurians, the Chinese, and those living in the Stans. The one original neighbor who refused were those living in Siberia. Intensely cold and heavily wooded, the Great Khan didn't need to conquer Siberia because the Siberians couldn't defend it. Mongols

simply took what they wanted, and killed any Siberians who got in the way. The Siberians needed to eat, too, and so attacked rich Mongols. As the number of Mongols multiplied, the number of Siberians dwindled to near-extinction. Mongols probably would have exterminated them long ago if William's ancestors didn't provide them with food, money, and wands for the last two centuries.

Survival depended upon living undetected, but William arranged this meeting long ago. A few thousand Siberians greeted William like family and spoke of his parents and grandparents like old friends. William, Liz, and Billy carried all the fruits, vegetables, spices, milk, and medicine that they could carry. They had drop-off points all across Siberia.

The Siberians were down to a thousand or so quads and several thousand two-wanders six years ago when William offered to give them a superior wand set for every quad they created. They also had to agree to stop attacking Mongols to prevent retaliation.

Because William had big plans for them.

The Siberians dispersed after nightfall because they were harder to detect in small numbers. In the morning, the family flew back south. They stopped for lunch and dueling practice. Billy killed a marmot, skinned and cleaned it, then built a cooking fire under a tree with many branches to disperse the smoke. Unfortunately, some wet leaves caused too much smoke to be seen from above.

A dozen thugs soon showed up, shocking the hell out of Billy, who'd never get over his hatred of being surprised. These parasites lived off of the packs, obeying no laws that restricted their appetites. Far from Mongol authority, they could do whatever they wanted without consequences. The family came across bandits before, but having already flown several hours, they were too tired to flee. Billy wisely dived in the snow to hide himself.

William and Liz put their backs to the forest so the raiders would land with Billy hidden behind them. They closed on the couple, their intent clearly hostile.

"We have nothing of value," William yelled in fluent Mongolian.

"Even from far away we heard your blasts," their leader replied. "But because sound travels so far, we couldn't locate you until we saw your smoke. I'm glad we didn't quit. We love rich tourists on vacation."

Nomads called rich families who briefly roughed it "tourists." Robbing tourists gave raiders the cash they needed to gorge on drink and whores.

"Go find softer targets," William suggested, burning nine-meter-long flames to let the criminals know what they faced. He felt proud of how much his frequent dueling boosted his flame.

In return, the leader fired ten-meters out, which made him among the most powerful on the planet. Some libraries kept lists of everyone who ever produced ten meters because it was so rare.

"You don't become a cook without breaking a thousand eggs," the predator said, using a metaphor for millennials who have killed a thousand warriors.

Just then four fliers attacked William from the rear while the dozen in front flew straight at him.

William saw their plan clearly: to overwhelm him from all sides. The solution was to fly fast through the trees to separate the fast from the slow to deal with just a few at a time.

William led Liz away before becoming trapped. They soon lost all but the fastest. Both wore white deels, the thick fur coats that Mongols favored, so after a turn they dropped down to blend with the snow.

They blasted the leader, who shielded himself just in time, but the next fastest were less lucky. Fireballs took out two and a third crashed into a tree at high speed. Four more hunkered down and exchanged fire until the leader returned.

Then Billy attacked them from behind and sank two boot blades into the two closest, and steel from hand wands into the backs of the others. He fell hard on his back and rolled under cover in case some lived long enough to fire back. His parents charged and finished them off. They transferred ownership of the wands before they turned cold.

"I got several more back there," Billy whispered proudly, unnaturally calm. "Now you guys get the leader to show me his back."

Which seemed as good a plan as any. It's hard to hit fliers because they can move so fast in any direction. The solution is to fix their attention up front, then kill them from behind.

The couple flew back where they came, but over the trees instead of through them. As expected, the head bandit chased them, his coat still smoldering. The parents then dropped below the tree line and weaved their way back to Billy, who waited patiently in a tall tree. At the perfect moment, Billy launched himself at full speed and impaled the guy with two pikes in the back before he even knew of Billy's existence. He tumbled head over heels and smacked hard against a birch tree. The blow shook with such force that the snow on its branches fell.

Billy dropped on top of the guy and strictly followed protocol. A dying warrior has nothing to lose by fighting, so Billy sliced his biceps so he could not fire back. Then the boy took his boot wands, whose power filled Billy better than any drug. He had transferred wand ownership before, but not with sticks of this power, and the sensation overwhelmed him. He closed his eyes and soaked up the experience. Wands grow more powerful the more they are used, but people do not blast rocks with the same emotion that they blast enemies, so the more people a wand has killed, the more powerful it became. These ancient wands had killed a lot of people.

Wands don't transfer ownership well, and the more powerful the wand, the harder to transfer. Weak wands, like to store videos, can be passed around without loss of power, but strong ones cannot. Wands taken from cold dead hands lose much of their strength, which is why warriors prefer dueling, where they can take wands while the owner at the moment of death.

As he came down from the high, Billy noticed the dying man staring viciously at him.

"You're just a damn kid," the leader whispered, growing weaker as his blood colored the snow red. "You don't even know who I am."

"I don't even care," the boy replied, as he put a boot on the guy's chest and roughly tore the two hand wands away. The boot wands warned him of the power of the hand wands, which spiked him with a sizzling energy that some prefer to orgasms.

His eyes rolled up into his skull and his skin tingled deliciously. Billy didn't realize it yet, but he had just become addicted to what quads called "sipping" and

what everyone else called “sucking.” The world saw so much war because warriors went crazy from desire without regular shots of wand juice. Sucking a powerful wand dry added decades to one’s life. They say that youth is wasted on the young, and virtual immortality wasted on those who must kill to stay alive.

Billy had no idea how much time had passed, but his parents had already collected the coins and wands from the other fifteen attackers when he came to.

“Let’s go home,” his mother told him. “Anyone who can shoot flame ten meters is trouble.”

“He’s not dead yet,” Billy objected. “I want to see him die.”

The thug gathered what little strength he had left to whisper to Billy, “My grandfather will make you die horribly, and soon.”

Billy extended flame eight meters with his new wands. “Let him try.”

The boy watched the brute’s eyes go blank, something he’d never tire of. For a warrior, nothing else compared to taking life. The wands in his hands told Billy when the bandit died—they grew warmer and full of life. Holding the wands at the moment of death is vital to keeping their full power.

Billy vowed right then and there to become the best quad in history.

## Chapter 7

Before they could pack the marmot, a visitor descended, his wand emitted a friendly greeting, as curtesy demanded, before landing across from them. He looked like a rich noble. William’s wand returned his greeting, but remained wary.

“I’m looking for Barchuk the Bandit,” the visitor said, stating his business like a good Mongol. Mongols only had one name, and so used descriptions to differentiate those who share names. “I heard a firefight.”

“And what is your business with him?” William asked, keeping his tone neutral.

“I planned on killing him,” the visitor replied. “His raids threaten the nomads.”

“Then you’re too late. We killed them defending ourselves.”

“You?” The visitor found it hard to believe. “No disrespect, but Barchuk was very good. I trained him myself, before he turned bad. I even gave him his wands.”

“No disrespect, but he traveled with fifteen others. Were you hunting them alone?”

“Yes,” the visitor answered, not at all insulted.

Husband and wife exchanged anxious looks. “I am Vesak,” William said, using his Mongol name. “I descend from Taran of Kiev.”

“I knew Taran well. Good Mongol. We fought at Kiev together. That movie his wife made of him even attributed some of my kills to him. It still feels like someone stole from me.”

“And who are you?” William asked, annoyed that he had to ask.

“It’s hard to believe you killed Barchuk.”

“His body lies a few hundred meters over there.”

“And his wands?”

“I gave them to my boy for when he gets his powers at puberty.”

Billy helpfully held out the wands. The Mongol tapped an eye with his wand to examine them from a distance. "Yep. That's them."

"Is that what you want? His wands?" William asked.

Billy reset them in his arm launchers when the old man turned away.

"I wanted them, yes. But if you gave them to the boy, then you did not transfer ownership quickly enough to retain their power. Otherwise you'd have kept them for yourself."

Which was solid reasoning, except the wands belonged to Billy, who killed Barchuk and transferred ownership.

"We dueled so high that, when I finally got a lucky shot, I lost him in the trees. He was cold when I found him," William lied. He waited patiently, but the visitor was in no hurry to leave. "We have nothing more of value."

"Oh, but you do," the Mongol replied. "You have wands powerful enough to kill a great dueler like Barchuk, and fifteen others. A powerful wand can last me years, if I sip moderately." He turned to Liz. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but I need yours as well."

The visitor just said he was gonna kill them to suck their wands dry. Drained of life, their useless wands would then break like twigs. The words chilled William, who until now had not felt the Siberian cold.

"You've been very polite. Please continue by telling us your name."

The old warrior hesitated, but decided he owed them at least that. "Subodei."

Liz and Billy watched William turn pale. He seemed to shrink in front of them.

"We just killed sixteen. What's one more?" Liz demanded.

"We can't beat him," William assured her. "He has Millennial Wands. I'll fly north, you go south. Billy, lose him in the woods."

"And why can't we beat one guy?" she wanted to know.

"Show her," William begged the visitor.

"You seem like a good Mongol, so I'll tell you what. If you and your wife promise to fight, I'll let your son live. If either of you flee, I'll make sure he dies hard. I'm responsible for the deaths of millions. As your wife said, what's one more?"

"Who is he?" his wife demanded, completely irritated.

"You know him as the Third Millennial. The Second Millennial, Jamuka, was Genghis' blood-brother growing up, then rival as adults. Subodei has an even longer wingspan than Genghis Khan."

Known as the Khan's favorite general, Subodei won sixty-five pitched battles and defeated thirty-two nations before retiring in his prime. In contrast, Julius Caesar fought fifty major battles and Alexander the "Great" just five.

When Genghis first heard of wands, he paid a fortune to find the oldest tree. From it the legendary wand maker Torolchi crafted ten sets of the world's most powerful wands. Genghis promised the wands to the first warriors who scored a thousand kills. So many quads were eager to prove themselves that they completed the unification of the nomad tribes, then looked south to quench their thirst. Soon they sucked China dry.

"How many Millennial Wands are still alive?"

"What am I? A history professor?" The visitor's patience was running low.

"Come on, or we'll take our chances at high altitude! Genghis uses a set, with one as backup, and gave another to the head of his personal security. Jamuka lost



his when Genghis killed him over Lake Balkhash, and General Boorchu's burned in the ashes of Moscow. How many others still work?"

He shrugged. "You already know that Genghis gave sets to his brothers, Khasar and Kachiun, although I don't know which of their descendents have them now. Batu Mongke has the tenth set, as far as I know."

William felt Billy looking at him. In the briefest glance they read each other's minds. William nodded to give his son permission.

"Let the child go and we promise not to run." William then shushed his wife before she could argue with him.

"You know what I like most about a fair fight?" the general asked rhetorically. "The better fighter always wins."

Subodei "spread his wings," shooting flames fourteen meters in both directions for a total "wingspan" of twenty-eight meters—the most in the world. As he geared up to attack, Billy hopped through the deep snow towards him with his palms empty.

"Stop! You have to first promise to carry me home or I'll freeze to death tonight."

The general hesitated in disbelief at the ballsy kid. Although he had a good point since the old man didn't know the boy could fly. Still, he didn't want to bother with that. The father sensed it, and called him out.

"We'll agree to stay only if you swear before Father Sky and Mother Earth to carry our son safely home."

The old general grunted his displeasure. His first temptation was to kill the father, and hope he could find the mother before dark. They both looked prepared to flee, although the child stupidly walked eight meters in front of him, memorizing his face.

"Where can I find you in ten years?" Billy demanded to distract him.

"Revenge is suicide, boy. No one can beat me."

"That's my decision, not yours. As a descendent of Genghis Khan, I demand honor for the killing of my parents."

Spoken like a true Mongol. The ancient warrior stared hard at the little boy. With snow up to his chest, Billy looked about to drown.

"In a cave on top of Mt. Burkhan Khaldun. Now get out of my way."

William and Liz suddenly popped up and spread out to flank him. Subodei naturally tracked them, the child forgotten. Instead of reaching into his coat like other quads, Billy had wand launchers attached to his underarms, and already held his new wands under the snow. He now thrust twin blades through two meters of snow into the general's chest, who looked really surprised that a six year old had eight meter long blades. In all fairness, no six year old had ever projected that much length. Ever.

Billy slashed the old man's arms before the shock wore off. The general fell back, screaming in frustration. Before he could recover, the boy scrambled forward and snatched his hand wands. For a man who thought he had seen everything, Subodei looked astonished. He tried to say something, but only coughed up blood.

This was the greatest moment in Billy's life. "Revenge is suicide, boy! No one can beat me!" Billy said in a surprisingly accurate imitation. "Except some damn six year old. I'm gonna let the world know that the most powerful quad in history got

killed by a child. So how does it feel to get tricked by a little boy?" Sitting on his chest plate, Billy peered into his face. "You know what I like most about a fair fight? The better fighter always wins."

Delirious, Billy popped up in the air and blasted fire from all four wands, laughing like a lunatic. He looked down to see the old dueler staring up at him in horror.

"You can use boot wands!" Meaning, other than for propulsion. "You're the one who got Barchuk!"

"And, after I destroy the Mongol Empire," Billy warned him, "I'm gonna kill Genghis Khan."

"Nooooooooo!" the world's most successful general cried.

"Billy!" William yelled out as he landed. "This is the bastard who led the team that wiped out three generations of our family in Prussia, so make him die hard."

"I'm busy transferring wands. You make him suffer."

So while Billy absorbed the world's most powerful wands, William electrocuted the old man's genitals. The boy looked like a nympho enjoying her first multiple orgasm while the general looked like he swallowed a pinecone. While the bandit's wands were incredible, they couldn't compare to these Millennials.

They say you begin owning your wands and end with your wands owning you. Feeding the world's most powerful addiction meant Billy would have to duel constantly. Fighting would boost his wand power, which would increase his addiction, which would force him to satisfy an ever greater thirst in a vicious cycle that some called a Faustian Bargain. Every super-quad is an addict, but never had so strong an addiction started in someone so young. Nor armed with the world's best wands. This addiction determined Billy's fate. He could never retire, never take a year off. He had to fight until he died or the withdrawal would kill him.

What no one appreciated then was how the world's most powerful wands would improve a six year old's ability to heal. Because he'd use his wands constantly, Billy bathed in wand juice daily, which fortified his capacity to recuperate. His body grew, year after year, soaking up wand juice. Growing up in healing energy did not make him invincible, but it did make him very hard to kill. Billy would sleep off injuries that would have killed others.

"Watch this!" the boy told the general, torching his new Millennials almost eleven meters. "You just gave the world's best wands to the Empire's greatest enemy. I'll now join my father in targeting Mongol super-quads."

The old man tried to curse him, but Billy just laughed in his face. Literally—he landed on his chest plate. General Subodei, scourge of lands from China to Russia to Hungary, watched the boy watch him die. It seemed to take him forever to bleed to death, but for Billy, it ended all too soon.

Billy savored the best damn day of his life. And his week would only get better because they'd find thousands of wands in Subodei's mountaintop home, including a backup set of Millennial Wands that the general was long rumored to have. It was the coup of a lifetime.

Like most parents, William and Elizabeth recorded almost everything their only child did. Unlike most kids, Billy recorded himself since he sparked his first wand at age three. He wanted a video of every memorable moment of what he expected

to be a tragically short life. So now he saved this experience forever on his wand, careful to show Subodei's dying breath.

Billy left his childhood behind without a backward glance.

## Chapter 8

Dueling obsessed Billy, forcing the family to visit hundreds of big cities so he could exhaust the world's best video libraries at night while exhausting dueling arenas during the day. He even squinted at the oldest videos that had decayed so much they had more gray than color. Billy lived, breathed, and bled the sport like the worst fanatic. He spoke of ancient duelers like they were neighbors and ran librarians ragged by demanding obscure recordings buried in deep basements. He argued for hours with other enthusiasts over the smallest of details or the silliest of dueling philosophies.

William thought he had a solid Top 10 list of favorite duelers until Billy cruelly picked them apart. Not content with just ten favorites, Billy constantly reshuffled his Top 100 and speculated in detail over theoretical matches between fighters who lived in different centuries. William spent less time offering constructive criticism of Billy's dueling and more time defending his own victories in the arena. The boy showed more mercy in the stadium than in his analysis of his father's duels. William became a much better dueler, but Billy turned into a perfectionist. Liz had to forbid the topic in her presence.

To salvage his self-respect, William tried teaching Billy about war. They bought maps, read books, and studied geography. William took Billy to battlefields to show how terrain affected campaigns. They debated old war slogans like "An air force flies on its stomach" and "Tactics win battles, while strategy wins wars." They studied the greatest generals of the ancient world—Hannibal, Scipio Africanus, Alexander, Gaius Marius, and Caesar. Billy wanted to become the world's best dueler, but William wanted him to become the world's best general.

Armed with Millennial Wands, father and son dominated twice as many arenas. Billy would stay until he ran out of challengers, then take on teams of two. And who feared a six year old? Billy dueled ten times as many opponents as his father simply because he could, and in the process made a fortune. They hired more of Liz's family to open up more bank branches. Global Bank gave interest-free loans to France and Spain to keep them afloat.

Speed is thrust versus weight. Given the same wand power, a twenty-five kilo boy could maneuver four times as fast as a one hundred kilo man -- it was like boxing against someone who could punch four times as fast.

For his 7th birthday, Billy wanted to visit American University, a famous flight school founded by American Jack in San Francisco. Global Bank already had branches on the American east coast, so William sent employees to start their first branch on the west coast. Meanwhile, they loaded down every Siberian quad with gold and flew them to San Francisco to fund their newest branch.

William walked into American University with thousands of great wand sets and offered to employ every American marathoner, near-marathoner, and near-marathoners that they could train.

A marathoner could fly a thousand kilometers a day, a near-marathoner eight hundred clicks, and a half-marathoner five hundred. The University had been training quads for two centuries, so they could find them all from their graduates. It'd still take a year for their best veterans to become proficient at maneuvering together in formation.

To get the best fliers, William offered double the normal salary, plus half of the spoils from raiding, but he only wanted those who could fly the minimum distance one hundred days straight, instead of just ten. The best wands would go to those who could fly the farthest.

To spread the word, William sent Billy with their recruiters to show off at America's biggest cities. Meanwhile, they showed William their ten lines of fortifications, stretching from the Bering Strait, which separates Siberia from Alaska, to Anchorage.

Unimpressed, William paid the University to construct hidden bunkers capable of housing a battalion within a few hundred clicks of the coast. He ordered ten million bombs to distribute among these bunkers. William spent a month flying from the Strait to determine the Khan's likeliest invasion route before taking the family back to work.

The downside of constant dueling was it put Liz in a state of perpetual fear. Her husband and son suffered serious wounds weekly. Billy got hurt so much he sucked wand in his sleep—something that William did not know was possible. The few hundred Siberians who could pass for Mongols became his golden air mules. They'd fly their winnings to Siberia, where other Siberians would haul it to San Francisco.

What William really needed was Global Bank branches throughout the Empire. Or a faster way to move tons of wealth to the Americas. Or both.

Billy celebrated his eighth birthday with the pack's other boys in the leader's ger. His parents took advantage of having their hut to themselves. The next morning, when they looked for Billy, they were told he went on one of his long distance endurance exercises. Because they could not fly as high, as far, or as fast, Billy had to push his limits alone.

However, he did not come home. A few weeks later, a messenger arrived with an urgent message asking for them by their latest aliases, which terrified them.

The more the Empire expanded, the more it relied on frequent communication, so Genghis Khan founded a postal service. An urgent message could travel 24 hours a day, day after day. But William and Liz never received a message before because nobody was suppose to know who or where they were.

The messenger closed his eyes to select the message, then tapped William's wand to transfer it. He and Liz rushed back to their ger to watch it in private. A recording of Billy's three-dimensional head sprung out at them. His nose looked enormous because he was pointing a wand at his face.

"Mom, dad. I just beat the dueling champion at the Peking Arena. And several thousand other guys just to reach him. I'm sorry I worried you, but this is what I want to do with my life. I've been dueling for almost two years and I'm so much

better than anyone else it's barely challenging anymore. If you can support my decision, then visit me, but I don't want to hear any lectures. I love you two so much."

Liz collapsed in her husband's arms. William felt responsible because he told Billy that good men are rarely great and great men are rarely good, so those with great abilities need to decide early on whether they want to be good or great. Apparently, Billy decided at age six.

"He set us up. We're practically in Moscow. Even at a thousand kilometers a day, it'll take us over a week to get to Peking."

Nine days later, they went directly to the Peking Arena, a huge open-air stadium that held one hundred thousand people, the most in the world. They were surprised to find the place packed on a Tuesday afternoon. Didn't anybody work? William knew Peking had long been the world's most populated city, but he still couldn't believe his eyes. On the steppes, he could go a year without seeing a thousand people. Now he felt like an ant on an anthill.

"Is that him?" Liz shouted over the crowd.

William put his wand to his eye, but the duelers were too far away. Billy had left his old armor behind, so William asked a cheering fan what he had missed, only to have the mob yell "97" at the top of their lungs.

"Three more and I make a fortune," the merchant told William. "Not as much as I lost last week betting against the boy, but enough to scab the financial wound." He pointed into the arena at the victor, who quickly slew his 98th victim. "Yesterday he finished all one hundred before lunch! Can you imagine killing a thousand super-quads in just ten days? And that's not counting how many he got before beating the reigning champion."

"Just how many duelers does this city have?" William asked.

"We'll soon find out. Did you see the huge posters outside? They're all over the Empire. The boy posted one ton of gold with the arena to go to the fighter who beats him. Duelers are flying in from everywhere. I've never seen a feeding frenzy like this before."

The arena erupted again and the merchant held out a finger. Someone started chanting, "one more kill, one more kill." Soon everyone took it up and stomped their feet to the rhythm. The whole stadium shook.

"Billy is about to score his 1000th kill in ten days," William yelled into Liz's ear, not counting those Billy got before the championship.

Sure enough, a scared man in expensive armor flew wildly at Billy, shooting like crazy. The boy let him come, moving as needed to dodge his fire, acting almost bored. Billy let him shoot at point-blank range. Instead of avoiding the blast, the prodigy simply crouched down and shielded himself with both wands. The flame smacked harmlessly off the small wall of steel. Astonished, the man did not flee quickly enough and Billy speared him like a fish, without even leaving the ground.

The crowd went wild.

William tried not to show how proud he was, as his wife glared at her disobedient son.

Billy took off his battle helmet to show he was now a brunette, and his mother swore under her breath for teaching him how to die hair. Billy lined his face with black streaks, which started a new fad, to make identifying him harder.

Everyone now jumped to their feet to celebrate the Empire's new champion. Fights broke out and fans spilled an unseemly amount of liquor. Liz pulled on William's arm, who reluctantly followed her downstairs.

"We need to find management."

She asked someone selling wine sacks, who pointed out someone in a security uniform, who brought them through several doors to a woman behind a desk.

"We're the parents of your wonder boy," Liz told her.

"Boy Wonder. That's what they call him," the clerk replied.

"If the authorities discover you've been letting a ten year old fight a thousand quads without his parent's commission, well, I imagine some heads could roll."

The woman's face changed color and gestured for them to follow her down more stairs until they reached someone of obvious authority. William placed a restraining hand on his wife, then spoke first.

"Our son, your Wonder Boy, ran away and sent us this message." He replayed the video sent via the postal service. "Here we are celebrating his tenth birthday with him," he said, playing another video. "I assume you do not want problems with the police for letting a ten year old duel without his parents' permission. I also assume our son lied to you in order to duel. However, we expect your cooperation."

The guy took the news well. He sent a beauty after Billy who returned totally unsurprised to see his parents. By now a small crowd of employees gathered, hoping to get an image taken with the youngest champion in history.

"You came!" Billy shouted, as if he didn't expect them. He hugged them to avoid getting screamed at.

His mother, in tears, brought herself to eye level so Billy could see her anger. The boy wisely appeared suitably contrite. Once she concluded it was contrived, she rotated her upper body to slap him silly. After several years living a hard, nomadic life, her wiry muscles could pack a punch. The smack knocked the boy clear across the room to astonished silence. The manager looked shocked at anyone striking a champion with a thousand kills to his mantle. Liz was less impressed.

"I've been crying myself to sleep! Did you even think of me at all?"

Billy got up warily and kept his distance. "Mom, if you ever hit me again, you'll never see me again." He then addressed his father. "Dad, the betting here is unbelievable. I'm a counter-party to almost a million bets a day. I'm no longer getting bets against specific duelers, but against one hundred a day. A week ago nobody believed I'd survive a thousand duels, so practically everyone with two coins to rub together gave me ridiculous odds. Despite monopolizing every money transfer service, I'm still accumulating more coin than I can move.

"There are more Mongols here than in Mongolia, and they're all rich. More fans bet on dueling than on every other sport combined. This is a dream come true, and you'd have stopped me, so I decided it'd be better to ask forgiveness than permission."

As if any mother would let her child have the last word: "I've yet to hear you ask for either forgiveness or permission."

"Let's settle this in private," William suggested.

"Will you return tomorrow?" the arena manager gently asked during the awkward silence.

"I can use an abacus faster than you. Three days ago you agreed to pay me 5% of admission and concession sales, but I have yet to see that reflected in my totals. Will this problem be corrected by dawn?"

William taught Billy about business, but had no idea the kid paid so much attention. The manager sure looked nervous, before nodding his head in agreement.

"Then I'll be back tomorrow," he promised, walking out, forcing his parents to follow him like puppies.

Once they returned to his hotel, and past the bodyguards he hired, his mother broke down and cried in his bed.

"We need to talk," his father told him.

"What's there to talk about? You trained me to kill Mongols, I'm collecting the world's most powerful wands, and I'm giving literally tons of gold to Free Europe. I don't think I should be punished for doing what you raised me to do."

"What we want most is for you to live until you have children."

"I'll never be safe, so I need to do as much as possible, as fast as possible. I'm the world's best dueler. You once told me the most important thing you ever did was figure out how to live life on your own terms. That's what I'm doing."

"Doesn't killing people bother you?" his mother unjustly demanded.

Billy didn't change his position, but he seemed to grow up as he stared his mother down. "You told me people are either fighters or victims, and that you wanted me to become the greatest fighter ever. Someone so terrible he scared even Genghis Khan. I may be eight, but I'm a warrior, and I have the scars and body count to prove it. And this is what warriors do. We kill. I'm not murdering innocents. I'm killing the world's biggest killers. No one makes them enter the arena; they're all volunteers. Trying to make your own son feel guilty for doing what you trained him to do is beneath you, mother. When I put your father on the English throne that he lost because of you, I'll expect an apology."

As William closed his eyes, Billy's voice sounded just like his own father's.

"Mongols started this war. One hundred million civilians have already died, and a million more die every year from starvation, disease, or homelessness. Every Mongol millennial that I kill saves a thousand innocents. The Empire employs the world's best super-quads, who'll assassinate me when they discover my true ability. Who will stop them? You?" Billy laughed harshly. "Really, mom. Grow up. We're surrounded by death. Enemies wanted to snuff me out literally from the moment of my birth, so I don't understand why you don't want me to kill those who want me dead. All I'm doing is practicing pre-emptive self-defense."

It was a good speech. He clearly spent some time on it. Liz stopped crying as soon as Billy left the room.

"Well crying doesn't work, anymore," she concluded, disappointed. "Guilt, shame, threats. What can we do?"

"He won. He beat us at our own game. He's been thinking of this ever since he killed the Third Millennial. He won't back down, even if we threaten to leave him. Besides, he needs us. We need to ensure his personal security and manage the

money. And we need a lot more of your family for protection and coin transfer. How long will it be before his own bodyguards kill him in his sleep?"

"He's just a child."

William gave her a tired smile. "But we never treated him like a child. We were so scared of failure that we never thought to fear success."

"Billy will die in the arena."

William disagreed. "He's more likely to die of poison. Plus, removing twenty thousand of their best quads a year will cripple the Empire. Billy could be the key to ending this world war. And all he has to do is win duels in the arena, which is much safer than in battle when anyone can shoot him in the back."

Liz sighed deeply, and William knew he won. "He gave up his childhood for war."

This angered William. "Don't go soft on me now. You've told him that this war is not just worth killing for, it's worth dying for."

Liz did not look convinced. "Genghis will soon launch another offensive in France. Stopping that is more urgent than hallowing out their reserves. All the coin and wands we've sent Free Europe may not be enough."

William suddenly looked sheepish. "Genghis can't start the offensive until after the Olympics for publicity reasons. By then it'll be too late."

His wife suddenly stood up. "William, what have you done?"

"I bought a small logistics company so the Siberians can show authorities they work for Mongols. They've been driving herds north and stockpiling food, medicine, and tents for the Americans."

"The marathoners have spent all winter building underground bunkers on the tallest mountaintops across Central Asia. They brought tons of food that won't spoil quickly—dry beans, sugar, wheat, pasta, rice, legumes, dried fruit, and raisins—but they need perishables like fruit and vegetables that only Siberians can get safely. I need the Siberians to help feed ten thousand marathoners and one hundred thousand near-marathoners, and guide them around patrols."

Liz looked stunned. "You're really gonna loot the capital?"

"The Khan must station a lot of troops in Peking during the Olympics, so we'll sack the Mongol capital on opening day. That will force the Mongols to station a million troops across Siberia—Genghis may actually have to take troops from Europe."

His wife looked both exhilarated and horrified. "But sacking cities means slaughtering women and children. You'll be as monstrous as the Mongols."

William sighed. More people have an eye for war than a stomach. "One hundred million, mostly women and children, have died over the last three centuries because Mongols refuse to accept their borders. They won't stop until they conquer the world because they see themselves as conquerors. And, given the length, depth, and breadth of their success, I can't blame them. Unless stopped, world war will kill another one hundred million over the next century. So we must choose between terrible alternatives: kill millions of Mongols and their allies now, or let them kill one hundred million people later."

Liz didn't look convinced. "But kids?"

William stood strong. "My little brother was younger than Billy when they killed him, and my sister was just a baby. Yet some Mongols smashed their heads



against a rock. Mongols get away with a million murders every year. We can stop them. But sacking cities is the price to pay.”

“We’ve trained Billy to be a monster.”

“No. We trained Billy to be a warrior. And a warrior does what must be done to protect his people. That child of yours will stop the conquest of France. Not just by donating money and wands, but by stretching the Empire thin. The Mongols will be too busy chasing Americans in Siberia to finish conquering France. And England is safe as long as France remains free.”

William held up her chin. “Winning this war is the most humane mission we could possibly dedicate our lives to.”

“Do you really believe we can win this war?” she asked, clearly skeptical.

William gave her the smile that melted her heart years ago. “I believe Billy can win it. And winning will justify everything else.”

His wife’s face hardened. “Then make sure he wins. Whatever it takes.”

## Chapter 9

Genghis Khan and his wife came to watch Billy compete for his 10,000th duel in one hundred days. At over 350 years old, Genghis thought he looked pretty good. But that damn child looked even better. “He’s young, but he looks even younger,” his beloved empress joked. Genghis killed thousands to preserve his reputation as the greatest dueler ever. Now a kid from the steppe, of all places, with the same name, of all things, was usurping that unique claim to fame. What a difference one hundred days makes.

Every week the little punk suffered what looked like severe injuries. Some days ended with him unable to fly, and many days he limped or lost use of an arm. Yet, no matter how many third degree burns, ringing blows, or bloody cuts, he returned at dawn looking good as new. Genghis appreciated more than most the incredible recuperative powers of superior wands, but he still hoped the bastard suffered crippling injuries by now.

In fact, he had counted on them.

Well, the Immortal had a little surprise for the child. He personally recruited the hundred best damn quads the world has ever known and bet a fortune on them. He promised the winner a thousand tons of silver, since gold was becoming scarce. Already rich, it took the personal plea from Genghis himself, in front of their astonished families, to get them to do this favor for him. The Khan fantasized about how easily he could crush the French Air Force with such talent.

On a more practical level, he could not afford that much gold leaving the economy. Already inflation was destabilizing financial markets. Commerce could not handle so much coin leaving the system. He not only needed to kill the kid, but to stop the river of money flowing out. Paying a thousand tons of silver seemed a small price against the thousands of gold tons he’d win upon the Boy Wonder’s death.

To return money into the economy, the Khan personally walked into the betting exchanges and waged one thousand tons of gold against the Boy Wonder winning ten thousand duels. Financial institutions, the wealthy, and everyone with a spare coin duplicated his bets in betting exchanges across the Empire. Genghis smiled at the thought of all that gold soon flooding local economies, and himself taking 10% of each transaction.

The kid projected sixteen meter-long flames now—one meter more than when he arrived. Most people saw him as the One Who Could Win The War, but Genghis instead saw a threat to his own survival. He had dealt with palace politics long enough to know that rival factions would gravitate to the kid, and every misfortune the Great Khan ever suffered would be sited as reasons for new leadership. Every year he had to kill a dozen descendents attempting to replace him; this would just be the youngest.

If anyone asked him about the morality of murdering a ten year old, Genghis Khan would not have understood the question.

Few people appreciate that he was elected khan at a khuriltai, a grand meeting of the tribes, and that they could simply elect someone to replace him. Not without bloodshed, but it could be done. And a fighter who could out-duel him would be a necessary choice. So Genghis Khan saw the Boy Wonder not just as a threat to his economy, but to his life.

Genghis had never seen a crowd this excited off of the battlefield. With tickets so expensive, these one hundred thousand represented the wealthiest members of the Empire. The child sensation could become a cult. He should know—he spent three centuries building his own personal cult.

After everyone stood up for the national anthem, which glorified conquest, Mongols, and Genghis Khan himself, the arena manager grandly introduced the boy, who flew in a circle slapping outstretched hands. Genghis did not realize that he and his Imperial Guards were the only ones who did not stand. The roaring did not die down until Billy himself stopped in the center and tapped his vocal cords to speak.

"Thank you, brothers and sisters! I love you all. Today I face my greatest challenge: I will either reach ten thousand kills or die. It has been a long one hundred days, and I'm exhausted. I look forward to my first day off tomorrow so I can train for the Olympic Games. When I'm of age, I'll help conquer Europe."

The stadium roared again.

"I wish to welcome the greatest man who has ever lived; my hero, my ancestor, and my inspiration: Genghis Khan!" More applause as the Immortal rose to bow. "His blood gives me strength. His example shows the way. His policies taught me Mongol virtues hard won on the Mongolian Plateau. I owe him a huge debt of gratitude."

Genghis tapped his own throat. "I accept both gold and silver!"

"I owe the Immortal a great debt that I can never repay!" the champion re-stated to wild applause, flying closer to the Khan.

"Some say I'm just like him, so let's see if we share more than just a name." The boy, hovering close, peered intently at the khan. "They're right. It's like looking in a mirror!" People laughed and Genghis wondered where the hell this was going. "I never knew I had such pretty eyes."

With that the crowd went crazy. No one had ever had fun with the Great Khan before. Even Genghis smiled. But, next to him, Empress Borte doubled over in laughter, almost falling out of her seat. A few weeks ago she attended her first duel, and Boy Wonder dedicated his win that day to her. She liked that so much that she kept coming back, often holding a sign that said "I love Wonder." While everyone feared, admired, and respected Genghis Khan, most people simply adored the Empress. So when the child flirted with her every day, the crowd ate it up.

But to flirt with an empress was one thing; to play with a genocidal monster something else. This brat has balls big enough to attempt anything, Genghis realized.

"Let me help those of you who confuse us: the guy who rules half the world is the tall guy, while the one you never heard of one hundred days ago is the short guy. The one who did so much for so many for so long is the tall Temujin, while the kid who duels to get out of school is the short Temujin." Billy had them now. Even the Great Khan seemed to enjoy the show. "Everyone got it now? The greatest man who ever lived is the tall one, while the child who still gets slapped by his mommy is the short one."

The video of Liz smacking him in the manager's office had spread like the flu because it meant that the Greatest Fighter Ever still respected his mother like a good Mongol should. It made him human, humble, and heroic. Having won over the men, that video conquered the women. The sheer contrast between him beating one multi-millennial after another with his skinny mother whacking him across the room endeared the Boy Wonder to millions.

"I point this out because too many people keep equating us. I can't tell you how many times I'm on the crapper when some super-quad bursts in, confuses me with my twin, then knocks himself out kowtowing." Even the Khan was laughing now. "Okay, the first thousand times were pretty funny, but now I can't take a shit without wondering who will mistake me for greatness. And my mother is tired of moping up all that urine from millennials who piss themselves thinking they've interrupted the Great Khan doing his private business."

The imagery was just too much, and fans puked from laughing too hard.

"You're just afraid of him!" someone loudly yelled from the premium stands.

"You think I'm afraid of the Great Immortal?" Billy angrily demanded. Now he had everyone's attention. "Of course I'm afraid of him! He farts fireballs and his penis wand extends ten meters long." He paused to look directly at the Khan's wife. "Assuming everything the empress has told me is true."

The crowd went crazy. Or crazier.

Having made his point, the boy welcomed his first opponent, who he dispatched within thirty heartbeats. Genghis then watched in utter dismay as the child defeated the rest of his carefully recruited quads. The kid suffered several ugly heat blasts, got cut a few times, as well as thrown a lot, but no more than on any other day. The titans he spent so much time recruiting all died before noon.

And no sooner did the last one fall than half the stadium flew away, right out of their seats, as if fifty thousand puppet strings suddenly pulled them up. It made no damn sense.

The Boy Wonder limped across the bloody arena towards the Khan. With a smile that barely fit on his face, the boy rubbed his thumb and fingers together in the universal sign of money.

With that simple gesture, Genghis realized the enormity of his mistake: he pissed off one hundred powerful families, let thousands of his best quads die for nothing, lost a thousand gold tons to a potential rival, and a disastrous amount of coin just disappeared from the local economy. He didn't fix the problem—he multiplied it!

Never before had the Great Khan felt his grip on power slip so far, so fast. But he couldn't kill the boy until after he competed in the Olympics. Then he'd quash him for good.

A messenger on his personal communications staff flew in and whispered urgently to his head of security, who waved him through.

"There's a run on the bank," the messenger whispered into the Khan's ear as if this information wouldn't soon headline news reports.

Genghis didn't understand. "What bank?"

"Your bank." Meaning the Bank of Mongolia. "Thousands of Mongols are withdrawing their money." This had never happened before. Sheer panic made his own people doubt his solvency. The most powerful man in the world got up to fix this. "There's something else. Somebody bet against the market."

Genghis built the world's biggest, richest, and most stable economy with the world's first, largest, and most sophisticated stock market. Other commerce centers had them, but the Peking Stock Market traded more wealth than the world's other markets combined. Gamblers frequently bet against companies in crisis, sometimes as a prelude to taking them over, but no one had ever bet against the entire stock market before. Who could possibly have the wealth, the balls, and the desire to do that?

Something made Genghis turn around, and there stood that damn kid studying him. It was as if the boy could read his mind. It looked like the champion was challenging him. A child against Genghis Khan.

The realization that this punk crippled his beloved stock market started a fury that his wife feared would never end. Genghis flew to the main bank branch to tell the scared crowd that he'd refill the bank vaults with money from the capital right after he officiated over the opening of the Olympics.

Then he'd teach the punk a lesson.

## **Chapter 10**

William planned it carefully. The Siberians told them the location of every enemy unit in their way. A few days before the Olympics started, one hundred ten thousand Americans surprised the military units, clearing a wide path to the Mongolia capital.

William shocked the world by sacking Karakorum, slaughtering its residents, and taking everything of value. The city received tribute for three centuries, so the

warehouse section was actually larger than the rest of the city combined. The Bank of Mongolia vault alone took up an entire block. The thousand horse-drawn wagons that William earlier sent to a nearby ranch joined thousands of others from the capital, and soon stretched several kilometers.

Given his family history, William made sure they didn't burn the air-sealed wand-storage facility. The million wand sets he found there would soon arm a million Americans and Free Europeans.

While the slowest division moved the heavily loaded wagons east to the coast, where William had cargo ships waiting, the rest of the near-marathoners transported the gold and precious jewels on their backs. They went one day east, dropped their packs, returned the next day, loaded up, then flew east again in the morning. Ten thousand half-marathoners from the fleet took the loot the rest of the way. The marathoners continued attacking Mongol units south to give the wagons the month they'd need to travel within one day's flight of the ships.

Many rich Mongols owned estates near Karakorum. Mongolia always had more horses than people. After looting those mansions, the Americans used those horses as pack animals and the Siberians drove the herds north, where they'd be turned into enough jerked meat to feed an air force.

The irony itched enough to scratch: the Americans only found so much to take because the Mongols created the richest kingdom known to man. What the Mongols spent over three hundred years taking, the Americans stole in just a month. A clever singer penned a ballad called A Tribute to the Tribute that soon become popular worldwide.

While everyone said the world was at war, the only real battles were at the Empire's perimeter. Each conquest added to the world's largest market. The Khan governed two-thirds of the world's population, and three-quarters of its wealth. Genghis argued that the only way to have lasting peace was if one government ruled everyone. While critics equated the Empire with institutionalized slaughter, the Mongols said every conquest brought them closer to world peace.

And most of them actually believed it.

While Peking was rightfully called the capital of the world, because it housed the Mongol government, Karakorum could accurately be called the richest place on Earth because three centuries of tribute literally piled up there. It was less of a city and more a vast storage facility. Not bad for an old yurt town in Mongolia's oldest farmland. It'd take one hundred thousand quads, each hauling one hundred kilos at a time, weeks to move all that wealth. Plus everything on the wagon train.

Genghis stored his riches in Karakorum because the world's best air force protected it. Far from the nearest city, it'd be hard to loot even if no Mongols protected it. There was no where to take it to. The formidable Gobi Desert made the trip to China hard, Siberia's frozen wasteland lay to the north, the vast Stans to the west, and the empty Manchurian forests to the east. Plus, it only had four gates and was nearly surrounded by two rivers.

What never occurred to anybody—before William—is that the Pacific Ocean is only a thousand kilometers away. Landlocked, the Mongols never thought to fear the sea.

The Great Khan soon led a vast air force north, only for one hundred thousand Americans to bomb them with incendiaries the first night they camped in Manchuria's vast forests. Several square kilometers of trees ignited like a huge bonfire, roasting the Mongols. The well-rested long-distance Americans engaged the tired Mongols day and night for an exhausting week. The mostly short-range Mongols had to fight sleepy, hungry, and dehydrated as the Americans burned their supplies, tents, and food. Genghis assumed the Americans would run, then assumed he could overwhelm them, when what he should have done is sent his marathoners around the American blocking force to intercept the wagon train full of gold plodding towards the coast.

But, because the long-distance Mongols left the slower ones behind, Genghis lost his best quads in that initial ambush. Having half the endurance of the Americans meant they needed twice the quads just to match parity, but the weaker Mongols streamed in over several days, so the Americans always enjoyed air superiority.

The Mongols would have withstood the assault better if they had traveled slower, but together, instead of flying all out for a week. In contrast, the Americans slept the afternoon before the attack, and enjoyed dinner first. William had them pack a million food kits and water sacks so they could eat and drink in the air.

It's so much easier to kill quads on the ground than in the air, so the trick is exhausting them so they cannot fly, and then give them nowhere to hide. Burning the forest forced the survivors into the air, where they had to fight individually in the dark against formation fliers. Then they had no cover when they needed to rest.

Genghis Khan led two hundred fifty thousand quads, but only had one hundred thousand of the best when he got ambushed. The Americans finished them off in time to sleep before the next fifty thousand arrived. And the next. Genghis had to leave just to find replacements. By the time a large enough force arrived, the Americans had sailed. With another half a million wand sets and a quarter-million more coin sacks.

When the ships returned to San Francisco, American University carefully counted it. Entitled to half of the spoils, William knew he couldn't spend it in a thousand lifetimes, so he started an organization to fund highways linking the largest cities in the Americas. The first highway would pave over the old dirt trail from San Francisco to Anchorage to speed up heavy supplies.

Losing that much wealth shook the Mongol Empire to his core. And the Peking Stock Market fell into a financial coma, losing 90% of its value as soon as investors appreciated the magnitude of the disaster.

Maybe he was delusional, but William could hear his grandma laughing hysterically.

## **Chapter 11**

With the Mongol leadership racing north, Billy was free to duel during and after the Olympics. But now he fought two at a time, so opponents would still volunteer, and did not limit himself to one hundred duels daily, injuries permitting. Instead, he dueled literally from dawn to dusk, day after day, when not competing in Olympic races.

Athletes prepare for the games their entire lives. They had teams to optimize their performance. Companies paid enormous sums to sponsor likely winners. Only for the Boy Wonder to make them look pathetic as Billy dominated every wand event the Olympics offered.

As expected, the assassination attempts began as soon as the games ended and the tourists left. Elizabeth hired the quads wise enough to not duel her son. She thought a few hundred super-quads would deter attacks, but instead it only turned them into battles.

Betting huge on the implosion of publicly traded companies paid unexpected dividends. When those counter-parties could not pay in full, Elizabeth seized their assets. She never before fully appreciated having a family full of bankers. Virtually overnight, Global Bank became China's largest property owner. The month before, William had sent for several thousand English employees to manage the transition. Some of them sailed a ship full of Billy's winnings to Lisbon to lend more to France and Spain.

Global Bank would sell the real estate, eventually, but in the meantime Elizabeth used mansions built like fortresses for protection.

Whoever Genghis put in charge of killing the Boy Wonder tried mercenaries first. Several hundred attacked the estate and lost badly. They tried ambushing Billy on his way to and from the arena. Because she paid so well, Elizabeth had no trouble hiring a few thousand super-quads, while the best of her own relatives acted as an inner guard since she couldn't trust her mercenaries. Billy loved it. War was even better than dueling. He ate up his first taste of battle and hungered for more. His obsession with dueling broadened into an obsession with war. He read more books that year than in the rest of his life combined.

Then the Mongols started using regular troops. They wore civilian uniforms, but even Liz noticed the difference. Apparently the enemy was running out of mercenaries. Her bank relatives were hiring in neighboring cities as fast as they could, but Billy was still losing hundreds every week.

"I think we should run," Billy told her as the attackers descended from the night sky.

"There's only a thousand of them." It made Liz feel weird to prefer fighting when Billy wanted to flee because it was always the other way around.

"But they've trained together to fly in formation. Our mercs can't beat them." Billy paused deliciously. "But they can die trying."

That was the beauty of hiring Mongols to fight Mongols. Liz left with the English while Billy led his bodyguards. After the initial clash, he kept rising higher to deal with just several enemies at a time. His guards lasted until midnight. Billy had to duel at dawn, so he disappeared to nap with his English relatives. The soldiers blasted his compound to rubble, but Billy had many more.

To counter this new threat, they hired Peking's largest criminal gang, called a triad, and offered to fund ten thousand quads. Billy trusted the Chinese criminals

more than the Mongol mercenaries. The next time a battalion of regular troops attacked, the triads caught them from behind.

Now it became a dance. Genghis took all his good troops with him, so the Mongols had to import units to Peking. Liz paid the triads to kill whoever could be responsible for the attacks, starting with the Imperial Guard. If they could hire Mongol mercenaries as fast as they lost them, Billy would have continued indefinitely.

Peking had not seen battle in three centuries. Tourists fled, business shut down, and civilians hid in their homes. The news videos of huge firefights over the financial capital of the world spooked the rest of the Empire. And the lower the stock market fell, the more money they made.

Billy thought it awesome.

By the time William returned, Billy dueled teams of four all day, and was still running out of opponents. Elizabeth employed a virtual air force, had already bought another ship, and replaced its crew with English sailors. The English had been covertly transferring gold to the ship, but they still had room for several thousand more tons. William had no trouble buying a riverboat capable of such loads, but they couldn't just move that much gold without attracting attention.

They needed a distraction. A big one.

Billy didn't want to leave his Mongol bodyguards alive, and so suggested they go out with a bang. For the first time, Liz hired Chinese mercenaries. A lot of them.

After dark, Billy led his remaining Mongols on an attack against the largest enemy unit while the Chinese attacked the police. Triads ambushed imperial guards. William had found displaced Tibetans willing to loot luxury neighborhoods where only rich Mongols could live. Several thousand English then fireballed the city's most combustible buildings, before moving that gold onto their river barge. A few hundred wands propelled that barge downriver and out to sea, where no one could see them levitate the bullion onto their ship.

William took the other English to rob the main Bank of Mongolia branch to make it that much harder for the Khan to pay his panicky depositors. They each carried their maximum weight to the ship. Perhaps even more valuable was the video that William recorded showing the empty vaults of Bank of Mongolia. That really panicked Mongol depositors.

Billy overtook the ship before dawn as it sailed at full speed to San Francisco. His Mongol bodyguards and the Mongol airmen had slaughtered each other. They forewarned the triads so they could finish the survivors and take their valuables. Every air base has thousands of extra wand sets that allowed the triads to recruit more quads.

In just a few months, they took most of the Empire's portable wealth. William finally felt his parents rest in peace, and was pretty sure he heard his grandma laughing hysterically.

In San Francisco, William replaced his English crew with American sailors and bought enough bombs to fill the cargo bays. He paid thousands of two-wanders to turn every edible animal between the Bering Strait and California into jerked meat for the bunkers he started constructing the year before. Until spring, their full time job was to hunt game and blast lakes, rivers, and coastlines to kill fish so the Mongols had nothing to eat.



Given the mountain of valuables they took, William gave his raiders the next year off since they wouldn't return without first enjoying their newfound wealth. Almost one hundred thousand villages would become rich overnight, boosting the economy. Over a thousand tribes would share a common bond to bind them together.

While the English set up more Global Bank branches, William and Liz toured the defenses with the leaders of American University. Warning them that the Khan would retaliate, William paid them to build even more concealed bunkers and to stock each with as many anti-personnel bombs as they could find.

William sent Billy, as the Baron, to visit every tribe that contributed quads to the raid, with University recruiters. Before the entire tribe, Billy would show off, flying higher and faster than anyone believed possible. He let them measure his flames and showed the various shapes and sizes of weapons he could conjure up. His specialty was using all four wands to blast a huge crater to destroy the myth that only Genghis Khan could use boot wands for something other than propulsion.

He praised the quads by name who participated in the raid, had them show off the priceless treasures they acquired, and offered full scholarships to anyone who could fly long distance. Then he offered free wand sets to every quad who didn't already have them. Thousands of teenagers who never had the opportunity to test their wand abilities did so now, to tears of joy from family and friends. Those with the strongest power received the strongest wands, so they had to compete against each other in front of everyone who mattered. Being hugged by the Baron, as he gave them wands, coins, and scholarships, became the defining moment for an entire generation of American quads. Several million teenagers imprinted on the Baron like a baby duck to his mama.

Finally, Billy laid out backpacks full of wealth for food, schools, and hospitals. Then he showed maps of the highways they planned to build to unite the Americas in commerce. But, before handing them over to tribal leaders, he told them the price they'd pay:

"The wealth we took back from the Mongols will fund food production, infrastructure, education, and healthcare, which will create millions of jobs and power the American economy, lifting millions from poverty. Your greatest days lie before you. You will give your children greater opportunities than you ever enjoyed.

"But the price you must pay is unity. Only together are we strong. Violence against each other or your neighbors weakens us. That's how Genghis Khan has been able to slaughter you for centuries. Let the Mongols duel to the death. I need you to live for your families. Strengthen the policies, systems, and institutions that enable you to resolve problems without bloodshed. Warring tribes threaten the American system of representative democracy, the core of the new American identity, and therefore must be removed like a cancer.

"I have given your returning heroes more wealth than they can spend in a lifetime. In return, they have sworn a solemn oath to protect the peace. You think Genghis Khan is not now planning to exterminate all Americans? You destroyed his capital, stole his treasure, and slaughtered his people. Right now he's wondering why he didn't wipe this entire continent clean years ago. Unity will

make you strong, rich, and safe. Warring against your neighbors will destroy you all.”

Genghis had been sending punitive raiding parties into the Americas for two centuries. He never bothered to conquer the tribes because they didn’t have any wealth to steal, so the Mongols just killed everyone and burned cities, crops, and herds. They killed far more Americans through disease, starvation, and displacement than through violence.

Because these raids depopulated western Canada, the closest city, San Francisco, was several thousand kilometers from Siberia. Anchorage was a fortress, not a city, and acted as a tripwire to buy San Francisco time. American University took responsibility for defense by vigorously patrolling the Bering Strait and manning the ten lines of fortifications between the Strait and Anchorage.

With spring coming, scouts noticed Mongols bringing food, munitions, and supplies by the ton. Siberians warned them that the Khan would invade with a million quads. The University did the smart thing and begged William for help.

William looked relieved. Genghis wanted his money back, knew most of it was in San Francisco, and that the raiders were dispersed across the Americas. Why wouldn’t he invade? William closed his eyes and saw the campaign as Genghis would.

“Baron, why are you smiling?” the terrified University staff asked William.

“Because we’re going to destroy them,” William answered to obvious disbelief.

Although what he said was true, he also lied—he smiled not because they’d destroy the invaders, but because Genghis Khan would scare the Americans into uniting against him. Because the raiders came from many tribes, Genghis would see all Americans as the enemy. After pulling off such a profitable raid, William wanted to recruit while the moment was ripe. Which is why he sent Billy on tour and why he wanted his raiders to return home richer than kings. William needed the full strength of the Americas deployed against the Empire, and Genghis was gonna help make that happen.

That made him smile.

At their victory celebration when they arrived in San Francisco, William told them to take the next year and a half off so that Genghis would hear of it. Privately, he explained that the University would need all winter to count their plunder and deposit it into one hundred twenty thousand Global Bank accounts. Therefore, they needed to return in the spring to get the rest of their money.

The University had just graduated the last of one hundred fifty half-marathon battalions. The Baron wished he could see the Khan’s face when he unexpectedly faced a few hundred thousand long-distance quads instead of a defenseless city.

“Record me,” William ordered the staffers. “Genghis Khan leads a million-quad armada to exterminate the Americas. He plans on killing everyone. The only way you can save your family is for every quad to help us stop him near San Francisco. To compensate for leaving your jobs, I’ll pay every quad who joins our self-defense force a full gold coin or its equivalent. Come now or Genghis Khan will slaughter your family just as he has slaughtered millions of other families, including mine.”

Billy heard about the invasion just as he started getting the shakes. In South America at the time, Billy took the news like medicine. He flew two thousand

clicks a day, scared his father would win before he got there, and unaware that the sneaky bastard wanted the Americans to win slowly.

He never told even Billy this, but William wanted Genghis to bomb San Francisco because only an existential threat—a threat to their very existence—would shock the warring tribes into unity.

All ten lines of fortifications had a division of cheap quads and a battalion of two-wanders for supply, administration, and security. All were volunteers that American Jack paid a subsistence wage. William saved the quads by sending them south in a skirmish line with orders to kill every edible animal they found on their way, and to blast every river, lake, and pond to kill the fish. The two-wanders he asked to stay by explaining how they were gonna beat Genghis freaking Khan:

“Genghis must feed and shelter a million fliers, so he desperately needs your food and bunkers. You must stay to deny him it. He’ll leave his slowest division to dislodge you. You can do your part by keeping that division here so we can pounce on them at our convenience. We’ll follow the armada and ambush an enemy division at each of the fortifications. To help us win, all you have to do is survive. For your service, dead or alive, I’ll pay each of you a full year’s salary.”

“Baron, why are you so confident of victory?” one of them asked.

“Because I’ve been preparing for this battle for over a year. That’s why I built so many new bunkers. I killed a quarter-million Mongols led by Genghis Khan last summer, and now I’m gonna kill a million more.”

Instead of organizing the quads according to how far they could fly, William put them according to how high. The highest-flying battalions occupied the northernmost bunkers. The University certified the ceiling of all graduates, which made this easier. And whoever could not fly high enough was sent to San Francisco. A year of preparations was about to pay off.

## Chapter 12

William kept the thirty thousand highest fliers for himself. Billy overtook them on their way to the Bering Strait. The nervous quads had a hard time showing their fear when Shorty, as they knew Billy, looked so giddy. And Willy, as they called the Baron, could not look happier.

William sent Billy to warn him when the enemy crossed the Strait while his unit rested at a secret munitions depot that he had dug far north of the Khan’s invasion route. William depended upon Billy’s ridiculous endurance. When he convened a leadership meeting, the commanders seemed surprised they were not trying to stop the invasion.

“It’s easier to kill Mongols where we live than where they live.” William laughed. “Genghis is about to lose a million of his best active duty quads!”

When Billy finally arrived, William could not contain his excitement. Loaded down with bombs, that night they flew to an island north of the Strait that the Americans had never used before. They slept all day without cooking fires, then attacked the Mongol base camp on the Siberian side that night. The surprise was

total. Genghis took all the warriors with him, so they fought two-wanders, support staff, and one hundred thousand air mules (quads who carried supplies—not every quad was a warrior).

Genghis needed so many air mules to bring him food and bombs, so killing them cut off his supplies. Even if Genghis pre-deployed food without the Americans noticing, or had ships offshore, he'd still have to forage. For a million mouths.

Instead of attacking the armada right away, William had them air-hump all the Mongol food to their nearest mountaintop bunkers in Siberia. A week later, they stocked up on Mongol bombs and returned to Alaska to find the invaders.

William sent Billy to destroy the Mongol supply ships that he assumed were now tracking the armada offshore. His endurance made him perfect for finding the ships, and his speed made him perfect for flying past defenders to sink them with fireballs. Alone, Billy sunk three supply fleets protected by a thousand quads each. One was so well protected that Billy dived underwater and used his wands to propel him close enough to puncture the keel with steel.

William pounced on each division attacking the American fortifications. William not only got to use three divisions to surprise one, ten nights in a row, but each defensive line gave him bombs for the next drop, plus hot food and warm beds.

The night they attacked the armada, William waited until the Mongol rapid-reaction teams chased an American battalion to the south. Then William came from the north, dropped thirty thousand bombs, and blasted them all night.

Vastly outnumbered, the Americans at least held the high ground. But they still had to dive to shoot enemy units who showed them their back. Which gave the enemy the opportunity to catch them.

Just before dawn, an enemy battalion dropped on the unit his mother led. Billy warned her by screaming at the top of his lungs and waving what looked like really long swords of fire.

From all four wands.

The battle paused for a moment, so Billy did it again. Except he let himself fall while projecting flame in the shape of an "X" to keep all eyes on him while his mother led her battalion back up to safety. Then someone raced up and flashed his own four fiery wands and the fighting stopped, by mutual agreement, so everyone could watch.

Billy suddenly faced Genghis Khan in battle, while a million wands recorded them. They had even exhaustively studied each other's duels, although the Khan didn't know he battled the Boy Wonder.

His father didn't want Genghis dead because then the Mongols would lose under another leader, and assume they'd win if they could just find the right leader. In contrast, if they lost under Genghis Khan, they'd assume no one could have won.

When Billy didn't find this convincing, William tried another argument: "He can't suffer if he's dead. Only alive can we make his life a living hell."

Now that Billy found compelling.

What William didn't ever tell Billy is that he feared another leader would negotiate a peace. Genghis had three centuries of legacy to protect; a new Mongol Khan only had people to protect.

Billy, who enjoyed a height advantage, rose in an arc and fell with his hands and feet pointing at the Immortal, blasting a volley every heartbeat like a thunderous drumbeat. Two fast fliers can close the distance surprisingly quickly—to either their detriment or advantage. The Khan tried evading, without fleeing in front of his troops, but failed to anticipate the speed and size of the four overlapping fireballs swallowing the sky around him.

The Great Khan avoided the first ones, but no one on Earth could evade such huge, fast fireballs that originated so near.

With no other option, he curled into a fetal position and used his wands to project four shields to protect him from the worst of the heat. He emerged with his hair singed and what felt like a full body sunburn. He couldn't open his eyes yet, but he gulped down air because he had never held his breath that long before.

Then a metal ball full of spikes whacked him so hard in the groin that it obliterated his penis, testicles, and manhood. Genghis Khan fell from the sky a ruined man. He lost so much of his inner thighs that, for the rest of his life, he'd walk like a man recently raped. He certainly felt violated.

The Great Khan dropped from the sky for an eternity as his armada looked on. A veteran of a million fights, Genghis fought through the pain and regained control before his troopers rescued him. How embarrassing that would be. His entire force loudly cheered him as he landed at a medical tent. Unable to walk, he collapsed in the doorway and his fingers searched his trousers for his missing genitals.

In the old days, before two air forces clashed, each would send out a champion who took on all opponents, one at a time. Genghis saw the enemy do this now, exaggerating the gesture so all could see it.

Mongol super-quads accepted the challenge, but reached him just a few at a time instead of many at once. While doctors stripped his armor off, Genghis watched his best guys drop out of the sky like exploded fireworks. His nemesis beat one about every heartbeat. One minute slowly passed, then another as his aides peeled his undershirt from his back and applied lotion to his burns. His underclothes felt like they melted to his skin under his red-hot body armor. The other Americans used this distraction to disengage, leaving one guy to defy a million quad armada alone.

The video of the Baron castrating the Immortal—"sacking the Khan's personal treasure" is how the bastard phrased it—would spread faster than gossip and would smother Mongols like poverty. Mongol-haters would call Genghis Khan "Dick-less Khan" and joke about his immortal balls.

The Khan ordered his highest-flying battalion to attack. For some reason, sending a thousand to attack one quad did not feel like overkill.

More minutes passed while Genghis sucked his wands and directed their healing power to his wounds. He kept waiting impatiently for a thousand fireballs to light up the sky. Every Mongol he saw splatter the ground felt like a personal insult. Some even smashed quads on the ground, a two-fer.

As the Americans disappeared over the horizon, Genghis wondered why his enemy didn't kill him. He could have, easily. He couldn't identify the motive, but it scared him that his enemy was not scared of him.

A shadow passed through a white cloud on a dark night. The lone enemy put the super-quads challenging him between him and the high-altitude battalion. Or

what was left of it. As the battalion circled around, so did the Baron, striking his challengers like notes in a song. It looked like someone was throwing bodies off a cliff.

Genghis sighed and shrieked “attack.” Thousands of nearby quads looked at him confused. He gave the order again and half a million quads launched. A minute later the Khan saw that the battalion had broken into companies, which finally drove the bastard away. As a parting shot, he fired four fireballs at Genghis’ tent before venting one last primal scream.

The Baron would soon release a video, in his deep baritone voice, bragging that he killed a thousand Mongols that night. Genghis recognized juicy propaganda when he saw it, and couldn’t benefit by saying the Baron only killed half that many.

As soon as half a million Mongols flew over the horizon to drive off the Baron, a few dozen American battalions appeared to drop bombs on the Mongols too tired to fly. They pounded the weak, wounded, and ill for the hour it took for the half a million to return. They found their supplies, tents, and comrades burned. What really alarmed Genghis is that they targeted his food stores.

Not long after the Mongols landed to eat, drink, and sleep, even more American units bombed them from high altitude, then dived to shoot up whatever Mongols rose to contest the skies. Apparently those who just left landed to enjoy breakfast, knowing other battalions would attack the enemy at dawn. Together they stayed for several hours, denying the Mongols sleep, until other Americans arrived to replace them.

Although always outnumbered, the Americans could fly higher, and then target any Mongols capable of reaching their ceiling. Then the next highest-flying enemies. Soon the armada lost everyone who could fly high, which let the Americans shoot them with relative impunity. This is why William wanted the highest fliers farthest north, to weed out the Mongols with the highest ceiling. As the armada crawled south, Americans with lower ceilings could still fight with relative impunity. The Americans owned the sky.

Mongol divisions successfully chased some of the American battalions to their hidden bunkers. The battalion would fight from their bunkers and either wait for help or do it themselves after a refreshing nap. Without bombs, the Mongols couldn’t break through to flush them out.

The armada pushed on, pounding Anchorage with savage glee. Unfortunately, Anchorage was built with punishment in mind, so this bombardment did little more than remind Mongols of the futility of striking the same target every year. An army of two-wanders controlled hundreds of bunkers connected by hardened tunnels, while a division of quads escaped from hidden openings to blast Mongols whenever they slept. Mongols would find no food, shelter, or safety near Anchorage. William would later fund its reconstruction as a much larger planned city with an improved harbor.

Genghis had assumed he could forage, but the Americans had killed everything worth eating. It disturbed him to see his troops excited over spearing a rabbit. The burden of finding food turned their sprint into a stroll. William feared the armada would not even reach San Francisco.

Genghis realized too late his invasion was doomed. They bombed him every night so the Mongols couldn't rest, and harassed them from unreachable heights during the day. Tired troops travel slow and fight poorly. Unlike the Mongols, the Americans enjoyed warm shelter, hot food, and could sleep safely.

As William predicted, the armada moved south along the coast. Genghis desperately needed to eat, so William's three divisions hunted those units sent to hunt, fish, and forage. The Americans already evacuated every fishing village, leaving the Mongols nothing.

When the Khan sent ten divisions after them, William lured them away by staying just out of range. After a few hours, the Mongols turned around, so William attacked, mauling them. Once the Mongols started flanking them, William retreated once more, but by flying higher so they could still shoot the Mongols, but the Mongols couldn't shoot the Americans. At first, the angry Mongols kept attacking those above their ceiling, until finally the commander saw the futility and signaled retreat. But he waited too long. The American marathoners flew down the exhausted Mongols, picking them off like sharks on a beach.

Billy found his father's munitions ship, so William could resume bombing the armada as it crossed Canada. When it ran out of bombs, William sent it to San Francisco, where he had a shipload of food waiting. William had hired the entire local fishing fleet to fish off the Siberian coast, and hoped they got there in time to feed his own armada.

By the time the armada reached California, Mongol scouts reported several million quads waiting for them in San Francisco. What they didn't know is that most of those quads were untrained, short-range, and low-altitude. Exactly the quads that William refused to employ. Because the Mongols faced high-altitude, long-range quads ever since the invasion began, Genghis had to assume those protecting San Francisco were also trouble.

William put himself in the Khan's boots and foresaw his next move. He sent a messenger to San Francisco to warn them, sent others to get his battalions, then flew at night to hide his divisions between the enemy and the city. He grounded them and forbid fires. The next morning William called a leadership meeting.

"Genghis cannot go home without bombing San Francisco. Yet most of his armada lacks the strength to fly that far, so he's probably gonna send his best quads at night and hope to surprise us. Given the distance, he must leave before midnight, so that's when we'll double the sentries. Until then, eat and sleep."

Genghis actually spent another two days moving south, mostly fishing, making William wonder if he meant to attack with his entire armada. Or what was left of it. Then Billy pointed out the diminishing moon, and it all made sense. Genghis would attack when there was no moonlight to highlight his guys.

Fifty thousand Mongols, dressed like Americans, left that night, but few returned. They flew individually, rather than in units, to help them blend in with the incredible mob that awaited them. This allowed enough Mongols to sneak through to fireball half the city. Most non-quad residents fled weeks before. The rest stayed to put out fires. It's hard to kill someone faster than an eagle, but several million defenders somehow managed it.

Stocked up on fish, the armada now flew north with a purpose. The American battalions still shot them up, but now several million angry quads chased them as

well. They lost their fear once Genghis Khan fled. William had paid a tribe to turn an entire buffalo herd into beef jerky, so they had plenty to eat on the run. The Mongols, however, had to stay near the coast to find enough fish to feed a few hundred thousand mouths every day. Better preparations let the Americans fly faster than the Mongols, and that made all the difference.

While William's three divisions targeted Mongols fishing, and the battalions rotated turns blasting the enemy from above, waves of angry quads crashed into the armada without coordination or organization. Without the battalions running interference, the Mongols would have destroyed them with professional formation flying. But the battalions could fly higher, longer, and faster, and didn't worry about being chased down by superior forces. Attacked day and night, the Mongols couldn't sleep, rest, or eat. William had turned the world's greatest military into zombies—dead, but still hungry.

Genghis apparently did the math and concluded his armada wouldn't make it. So he divided the whale they just caught among the healthier half of his troops, clarified their tactical situation, and said everyone needed to get home as best as they could. He urged the sick and wounded to disappear in the vast Canadian wilderness, then escape before winter. He reformed the units, putting the best quads together. At midnight, the armada disintegrated, with some units fleeing north, others east, and some seeking refuge on distant islands. The sick and wounded tried hiding.

At first, William didn't understand what happened, but by dawn it became all too clear. He ordered his units north and urged the angry mob to follow them with all the food they could carry. Genghis had counted on the ten lines of fortifications to feed and shelter them, but instead William's troops ate well and slept warm. The enemy broke into squads, so William did the same. All the way to Siberia.

They knew some got away because they never found Genghis Khan. William's battalions didn't fly as far or fast because he loaded them down with food. At the first line of fortifications, William put his quarter-million troops in their old units to separate marathoners from half-marathoners. He left guides for the angry Americans looking for Mongols to kill. William had the two-wanders unbury the jerked beef they spent the winter collecting. His guys now carried it to the Mongol camp on the Siberian side of the strait. William sent Billy ahead to where the Siberians were suppose to be waiting for them.

Thousands of civilian quads poured in every day. William had guides direct them west, where his troops distributed the food they brought. His quarter-million troops spent the week as supply mules, mostly carrying bombs from the Mongol camp.

Denuded of a million troops, Mongolia lay on her back with her legs spread open. It was now summer, they had plenty to eat, so William and Elizabeth loaded up on gold and flew ahead to the summer games in northern Mongolia.

Success depended upon surprise. Alerted, the Mongols could destroy them just as easily as the other way around. But Genghis didn't dare reveal the destruction of his mighty armada, and it never crossed his arrogant mind that Americans would dare invade Mongolia. A sneaky sack of the capital to steal his gold, sure, but that was a one-time raid, not a lengthy invasion. Genghis assumed the few



hundred thousand quads he abandoned in Canada would keep the Americans busy.

While the location of the summer games changed every year, they always held it within easy flying distance of several cities. William and Elizabeth purchased the most ridiculously expensive clothes they could find, covered her in the gorgeous jewelry he always wanted to give her, purchased food by the herd, then bought out every liquor vendor.

William and Elizabeth arrived at the head of ten thousand “liquor mules”—quads with kegs strapped to their backs. They over-flew the crowd to get everyone’s attention. While the mules opened the barrels, William and Liz hovered above a growing mob and lied their asses off.

He presented himself as the spoiled son of wealthy merchants who fell madly in love with the woman of his dreams. To celebrate their pending nuptials, they were buying everyone drinks for the next week.

William became a hero to the very people he’d soon slaughter.

They spent the afternoon buying out all the local vendors, leaving them scrambling to bring in more booze. Word spread and every flier within several hundred clicks came to help the generous couple celebrate.

“We should make it convincing. I’ve never had sex before a million people before,” Liz teased him.

“I have,” William joked. “But mostly they just told me to keep my hand out of my pocket.”

The happy couple finally enjoyed the unrestrained debauchery that their son’s presence prevented. Liz, who had never even seen a porn video, now starred in them. It’s ironic that children come from sex, because it’s hard to have sex with children around.

By the time Billy found them a week later, the million people at the games grew into several million. And most of them quads, since easy flying distance is a long journey on horse.

“We’ll be ready tomorrow night,” Billy told his parents. “If you’re ready to get back to work.”

Using a quarter-million long-distance troops as mules and having Siberians stockpile supplies allowed over a million civilian quads to keep up. The stronger ones even carried supplies.

They dropped half a million bombs an hour before dawn, then hovered to blast anything that moved. The weakest Americans attacked around the perimeter. Because they crept to just an hour flight away, the civilians had plenty of strength to loiter. Mongols hate feeling crowded, so they had spread out over a vast area. But still, the sheer volume of bombs felt like someone picked up the earth and shook it. Most of the bombs exploded the half million or so crowded huts. Everyone seemed stunned, deafened, and blinded by the shockwave, bright lights, and burning heat. Everything flammable, including many people, became a bonfire, destroying night vision.

One million angry quads lived long enough to fly up, but did little damage because they were too spread out. The correct tactical move was to get out of the line of fire, mass together, then attack the enemy flank from above. But not even

veterans think clearly when violently woken from a week-long drunken stupor to find the sky raining fireballs.

The half-marathoners fireballed the closest cities while the marathoners and near-marathoners overwhelmed military units. The civilians took everything of value and destroyed the rest. They loaded down every wagon and pack animal and drove north, along with herds of horses, yaks, and goats.

William had them record Billy doing his scream and fire dance in William's suit, then cut to William, who explained to Mongols that they could end this today by simply renouncing never-ending expansion. If not, this would be the price they'd pay. Of course, William knew that three centuries of success had convinced Mongols of their own superiority, but he had to give them the chance to negotiate a peace.

William made the most of his unexpected good fortune. The quarter-million long-distance quads had only militia and understaffed military bases to slow them down. He needed to give the wagons three months to get within easy flying distance of Alaska, so he sacked everything between him and the Strait. He needed every city within reach just to feed his enormous horde. The million civilians became golden mules, carrying loot north. Another million flew south to replace them. The only thing that stopped him from depopulating all of Mongolia was the threat of winter.

The ten marathon battalions spread out to seek out larger enemy forces, each followed by a division of near-marathoners, who carried supplies. They killed and destroyed until confronted by superior forces, who they'd lead to their near-marathon division, who'd smash the exhausted Mongols. A few times they combined a few divisions to ensure numerical superiority. Mongols lost a few hundred thousand active-duty troops simply by not sending them in force.

It took a week for word to reach the Khan in Peking, a month before he could gather a quarter-million quads, and another month before he reached the Americans. Genghis traveled only as fast as his slowest fliers, over learning his mistake from the previous year.

Billy had the marathoners stockpile food and bombs every few hundred clicks in their path. Then he let Genghis pass a few of them before bombing the Mongol armada. They struck at midnight, hugging the terrain. Alert sentries sounded the alarm, but those waking up couldn't see them because they were not highlighted against the night sky. At maximum speed, the Americans dropped on the Mongols frantically forming ranks, then soared up to battle their highest fliers. The marathoners disappeared before dawn to destroy the Khan's forward supply base.

Genghis naturally flooded his path north with patrols, who found nothing, since Billy was killing his air mules and enjoying his supplies to the south. The ten thousand marathoners skipped a night, then struck from a hiding place while the Mongols cooked dinner. Whereas the Americans slept all afternoon, the Mongols spent the day flying. The ten thousand beat the quarter million all night because they enjoyed height, wand, and energy advantages.

The Americans bombed them most nights because they found millions of munitions at the air bases they overran—so they had to explode them anyways. Enjoying twice the range let the Americans attack the Mongols without letting the

Mongols attack the Americans. The specialty units sent after the marathoners were the first to get ambushed.

The Khan assumed the Baron wanted to weaken his force to win a final confrontation, but all Billy wanted was to slow him down to give the wagons more time. Because Genghis misunderstood his opponent, the wagons got away and William's troops got another month to sack cities. Genghis lost most of his force by the time Billy's marathoners crossed the Strait.

More Mongols died violently that year than in the previous three centuries combined. Not until the Baron released a video would Genghis Khan learn that this counter-invasion was planned before the capital was even sacked. The depth of the Baron's foresight shook Genghis to the core.

Battle forged links between warriors of a thousand Indian tribes who historically warred against each other. A few million Americans flew home rich, praising the Baron. Fear from a common threat brought them together, but joint victory made them blood family. Instead of seeing themselves as Apache or Cherokee or Aztec, they saw themselves and each other as American. That change in psychology was vital to uniting against the Empire.

William sent a ship full of coins, armor, and wands to the Free Europe Air Force with a video message from the Baron that summarized their victories and inspired hope for a continent.

William rebuilt San Francisco bigger and better than ever. The entire city welcomed the quads as saviors and the festivities lasted longer than either invasion. American University used this time to put together an impressive public relations video that documented their victory in patriotic terms. William made sure they interviewed heroes from every tribe so everyone shared the glory. They eventually went home rich heroes, all singing the praises of the mysterious baron.

But the warriors also spread a deeper message that William hammered home: Americans would never be safe as long as the Mongol Empire survived. That was the real gift that Genghis Khan gave William.

## **Chapter 13**

Liz wanted a vacation, so William took them to his ancestral home in Prussia for the first time. A forest had largely taken back the farmland. The huge family cemetery stunned them. The sight moved William to tears.

"And these are just the ones who died fighting the Empire," William lied. "Our family was among the first—after the Khan's—to reproduce strategically. The deaths of my little brother and baby sister made me the last of my blood. My father said our ghosts cannot rest until we punish the Mongols for their crimes."

Below a demolished castle, in a beautiful meadow overlooking a valley, Liz and Billy watched William update his dead parents on the last dozen years. Only warriors could appreciate how much revenge worked as therapy. Putting their success into words forced them to reconcile the enormity of what they had

accomplished. To make it real, the three of them dug their own graves. Literally. Though they left the gravestones blank.

"You don't want to be buried in England next to your family?" William asked her.

Liz gazed upon the several thousand members that her husband's family lost and vowed to become stronger. She had never loved him more, now that she felt what he felt.

"Record me!" she commanded with an authority that made them both jump to obey. "This message is for my father. Dad, you blessed my marriage, so I'm now and forever a Richthofen. England wants me dead, so this is my family. Our decisions determine our destiny, and I made mine with open eyes. I don't regret my life. I traded the life of a princess for the life of a badass, and I couldn't be happier. I've seen the world, overcome many challenges, and became a millennial in the process. I want to be buried here, in my husband's family cemetery. And I want my husband and son to be buried alongside me because I'll never be alone as long as they're with me."

She suddenly leaned forward and Billy instinctively retreated. His mother was the only person Billy feared. "Father, there may come a time when my only son needs you. When you, and only you, can help him. I expect you to do whatever it takes to either save his life or avenge it. Even if it requires declaring war on the Mongol Empire." William started laughing at tiny England challenging history's mightiest empire, but Liz shut him up with a look. "I'd have been queen if you only obeyed your mother. Make it up to me by granting me this, my ultimate wish."

Billy stopped recording and kept looking at his mother as if someone possessed her. And that someone kept talking:

"I can't do this half-way. It's too late to stop now, so let's go all the way. If we must do bad things, let's do them good. The only thing that can justify killing tens of millions is world peace enjoyed by people governed with their consent. I say we spend the rest of our lives killing as many enemies as we can, as fast as we can, for as long as we can. If we can't live in peace, then let's live for war. But whatever happens—and we all know bad things will happen—let's never have regrets. Agreed?"

They didn't write it in blood, but they may as well. Billy felt the shackles fall off. William hugged her so tight she squealed.

"Billy, what do you want for your 9th birthday?"

"Mom, dad, I already have everything I want."

With winter over, the family returned to dueling with a vengeance. They didn't raid that year because William had given the Americans the time off. William took smaller venues while Billy exhausted the larger arenas. Even Liz began dueling. Along the way they updated their maps and documented the size and location of enemy units. Billy finally studied the enemy as a professional would. They stayed away from Europe to avoid Uncle John's bounty hunters and were as happy as terrified refugees can be. The trick was disappearing frequently. They knew they stayed too long when they couldn't sleep at night.

The family entered Alaska just before winter to check out their flight students. They invited all their employees to a party in Anchorage in the spring.

Previously, students had to pay their own way, then had few job prospects other than fighting Mongols in Europe. In contrast, William offered full scholarships and super wands to any American who could fly long distance, so the University was now operating at capacity at fifty thousand students. The University of Mongolia routinely taught five times as many and rumor said the Khan recently expanded enrollment to half a million.

William had kept the bomb factory in Anchorage at full capacity. Now he had the students distribute that inventory along the coast. He then divided them according to how far they could fly and watched them choose squad, company, battalion, and division commanders. Now William gave them a crash course in bombing and basic formation flying. The University already taught them this, but William had very specific things in mind. When not drilling them in certain basics, like bomb packing, he had Billy push their endurance. Daily. As if their lives depended on it.

William didn't employ those guarding the ten lines of fortifications, but they sure listened to him when he explained what Genghis Khan may do next. Some were skeptical.

"Put yourself in the Khan's boots," William asked them. "Your job is to protect your people, yet some upstarts robbed your capital, sacked your cities, and massacred your people. News reports talk of little else. Power brokers are openly calling for new leadership. To keep his head, much less his job, Genghis has to do something big to show his people he's fixing this. He learned last time that regular quads—even a million of them—don't meet the needs of a punitive strike. So next time he'll probably do what we did and use an all-marathon force, which takes time to recruit and train. Your fortifications are spaced about every five hundred clicks from the border so, as the second line of defense, you're more likely to be hit than the first forts. He could simply fly past you, but his troops need food, bombs, and shelter. Remember this when he tries to draw you out."

"Baron, why do you look so happy?" one of their smarter ones asked.

"Because Genghis Khan is about to piss away his best quads."

That spring, news agencies reported a record number of newborns because, apparently, people with money procreate. Genghis Khan was not amused to learn that thousands of American babies were named Baron.

Fifty thousand of William's fliers lived in the area, and another fifty accepted his party invitation—mostly for a chance to get a picture taken with him. William suggested a tournament, which would get them organized into units, then played locals versus visitors. After competing for serious coin, he suggested they teach the students how it's done. So one hundred thousand veterans chased the new guys across western Canada, engaging in mock battles and highlighting the value of endurance and height. Those with the lowest ceilings, on both sides, got clobbered, which motivated them to take their relaxation and medication courses more seriously. The 5% with the lowest ceilings William kicked out of school, taking their wands as well as their careers rather than lose their lives.

Meanwhile, William sent Billy to patrol the Strait. He dressed after a hot bath and found his mother inspecting his backpack.

"Mom, you know I like to pack my own stuff."

"But you never bring enough bandages."

"Mom, you're gonna make me late for work."

Liz sighed. "I wish you wouldn't treat this like a game."

The boy laughed. "I'm a kid; what do you expect? Relax! I'm just gonna find them, not fight them."

Billy felt proud that his dad needed him so much. His ability to fly farther and faster gave them a lethal advantage.

Except weeks passed and the bad guys still had not shown up. After a month, Billy left to find his dad in Alberta.

"You were finally wrong about something," the boy cheerfully greeted him.

That made William smile. "Sorry you spent your 10th birthday alone."

Billy lit up. "Oh, I wasn't alone. I spent it taking out their patrols, ambushing their air mules, and picking off those fishing. It's liberating to only have the enemy to worry about." In cities, they never knew who'd poison them for their winnings. It really warped how they saw people. "I overheard them say Genghis started a special academy for prodigies at a secret location and that flight school has become mandatory for every teenage quad. He also wants them to procreate as much as possible. The Mongols I overheard think he's moving every good young quad from Mongolia for their own safety."

William didn't like that at all. "That's a smart move. I thought he'd give us more time before taking such drastic actions. This makes our job -- killing them faster than they can be replaced -- that much harder." He paused, shaking his head. "Well, I guess I better send the regular troops home and throw them the party I promised. I thought Genghis would be here by now. Your mom and I will meet you at the Strait."

"Dad, it's too late in the season to organize a raid, so take your time. Give mom the vacation she deserves. Don't worry about me. I really like it here. Every week I'll check in at the first forts."

Except when his parents finally arrived, two months later, they couldn't find Billy. And the Mongol camp was a frenzy of activity. They patrolled for three days before Billy showed up, as exhausted as they have ever seen him.

Many of the suddenly rich marathoners started families. They didn't want to raid Mongolia with babies at home, but still wanted to contribute, so William asked them to patrol the coastline from his fleet. William even paid to modify the merchant ships to make them family friendly—no one wanted babies to slip over the side.

"Our fleet lost contact with a ship, so our marathoners went looking for it. Instead of our boat, they found an American fishing vessel that sailed much too low in the water, just as you warned. Enemy marathoners chased ours away, which began a week of cat-and-mouse. Having babies to protect motivated our marathoners more, as you foresaw, so they only sank one more ship before we destroyed all seven of theirs. Putting marathoners on board saved our fleet. It only takes one incendiary to sink a ship.

"I didn't know they captured seven American fishing vessels, so I asked the troops in the forts to search their coastlines. Once they found the first hidden cache of bombs, food, and supplies, I island-hopped along the Aleutians to the Kamchatka Peninsula and soon ran into Genghis Khan sneaking through Manchuria.

“Dad, you were right, damn you. One hundred marathon battalions are coming. At least once I hope to catch you wrong about something.”

William hit himself in the forehead. “He’s waiting until mid-summer for the easiest foraging. He over-learned his last mistake. Crap! He’s gonna bypass the fortifications. It’s a hit-and-run.”

Liz left to warn Anchorage; Billy flew farthest, to San Francisco, for the locals who recently disbanded; and William looked for his students, who hopefully were back from Alberta. Each battalion of two-wanders spread out on every hilltop to track the enemy. The division that guarded each fort split up to utilize the Baron’s bunkers, then began hunting and fishing in case they were besieged.

The Great Immortal arrived at the Strait a week before his marathoners to hear what his spy network reported. He liked everything he heard: that the Baron was far away, vacationing with his wife, the fifty thousand students were off in Alberta, the Baron dismissed his veterans, and the only force between him and San Francisco were American Jack’s defensive lines.

Genghis apparently learned the value of speed because he arrived before either father or son, leaving Liz to organize defenses. Privately she was thrilled when Anchorage’s 10th Division chose her as their leader. Then the responsibility for so many lives chilled her. Later she realized they elected her for morale purposes because they had been defending this town for centuries. They didn’t need to be told what to do—her mere presence told them help was on the way.

Genghis hoped to sack San Francisco, but dropped that hope when he couldn’t find his supply fleet or the hidden depots. He kept to the coast and flew around the lines of fortifications, who nevertheless bombed him every night. William warned them not to fight in daylight, so they stuck with hit-and-run night attacks, sometimes using the Khan’s own bombs. Genghis countered by flying at night and taking short naps in the day. The farther they flew, the less food they needed, and the likelier they’d survive.

Genghis had every reason to believe he caught the Baron by surprise. Scouts couldn’t find anything unusual. He couldn’t find the bombs they spent a year burying along the coast, so the Khan secured the Anchorage munitions depots while his armada rained down fireballs on the rest of the city. His reserves patrolled in a wide perimeter to avoid being surprised.

While the quads who could fly the farthest joined the 1st Division, those who could fly the highest got the 10th. They broke into companies to hide in bunkers to bomb the Mongols constantly.

In fact, the only thing that surprised Genghis was the team he sent for the bombs themselves got bombed, in a huge explosion that cooked a few thousand marathoners. Locals poured out of bunkers to kill anything near the ground, before retreating when overhead patrols started targeting them.

This led to a stalemate since the Americans couldn’t challenge the Mongol marathoners in the air, yet the Mongols didn’t have the bombs to force their way into the bunkers. And using precious marathoners against two-wanders in tunnels was a waste of talent, so Genghis called it a victory and left while he could.

When the Mongols landed for lunch, the 9th Division used cloud cover to drop on them from high altitude. The Mongol rapid-reaction division eventually chased

them down as they fled to the south. The volunteers suffered more casualties than they caused, but they unknowingly cost the armada precious energy.

William had no idea if his wife lived or died. He cursed himself for letting the visiting troops return home after the party. He couldn't reach the Mongols before they attacked Anchorage, so he waited for them to come north while coordinating an attack with Jack's 7th and 8th Divisions.

His students couldn't beat experienced formation fliers in daylight, so he hid them a thousand clicks from Anchorage. His well rested students dropped fifty thousand bombs on the exhausted marathoners while they slept. While four divisions fought at high altitude, William led the division with the lowest ceiling around to attack at tree-top level from the south. With most Mongol fighting high above, William faced the sick, injured, and those attending them. The bombs killed several thousand and injured twice as many more; now William killed the injured and an equal number helping them until sentries warned William that Mongols above were dropping on them.

The students left to rest, eat, and pack more bombs. The 8th Division bombed as soon as the Mongols laid down again, and the 7th struck an hour after the 8th left. William had this students attack a few hours later near ground level from four directions—at maximum speed, they fireballed everyone on the ground, then disappeared in the dark. As the students flew north, the 8th returned to wake the enemy up with another bombing run two hours before dawn.

Billy arrived alone in the morning to harass the enemy. At noon, the Mongols caught up with the students, who had been napping. Armed with food kits and water sacks, William used his students as bait to lure Genghis away from the Strait. It's why he insisted they continue wearing student uniforms. The trick was letting the enemy get close, but not too close. Genghis, suspecting the well-rested students may have greater endurance that day than his tired marathoners, broke off just after dark. William sent Billy to track them while his students bunked at the sixth fort. After the 6th Division bombed from high altitude, Billy wounded those helping the injured. He then got the 5th Division to bomb them before midnight. The 6th returned a few hours later.

The students slept several hours before launching their pre-dawn attack. One division dropped bombs to force the sleepy Mongols into the air. Then the other forty thousand flew through a ravine to surprise the enemy with blades.

Genghis chased the students northward, where William knew Billy gathered Jack's ten divisions.

That's when Liz, leading the veterans from San Francisco, overtook the Mongols. William, Liz, and Billy sandwiched the enemy. Genghis signaled retreat, but could not execute it before the Americans engulfed his marathoners with several times as many troops.

The joy of seeing each other alive gave William, Liz, and Billy new reserves as they led their teams to victory. At one point, William saw his wife decapitate a battalion commander and yell out to him, "Best! Vacation! Ever!" Left rock hard, William had to find release in battle.

All four forces had flown a lot already, so the battle made up in intensity what it lacked in length. The fight didn't end so much as pause for ever longer periods.



Billy, with his enviable ten year old batteries, continued hunting them through the night.

Numbers now mattered. The fliers from the fortifications finally proved useful as something other than support, communications, and target bait. One hundred thousand quads and ten thousand two-wanders finally got the fight they took this job for. Having more eyes in the air was instrumental in finding the enemy hiding on the ground. Genghis and a few thousand marathoners escaped, but had little to show for their trip.

“Genghis may have infinite quads,” William concluded with satisfaction, “but he will soon miss those marathoners.”

## Chapter 14

Billy dueled more while his parents vacationed more. William’s father once told him that life is an adventure, not a vacation, and bad stuff happens on adventures. So William tried to make his wife happy while he could. Who knows what would happen when they started raiding again the following spring?

Given the Summer Slaughter, as it became known, the Mongols held their annual games in mid-winter, when it was too cold to raid, and near the Ural Mountain Range, far from the Bering Strait. It kind of pissed William off that they held it at all, given how many he killed at the last one.

So the family went to the winter games, and took along some English quads for protection. While William fought one at a time, the Boy Wonder took on teams of four. It amazed William that anyone would even challenge the boy. Apparently they assumed a lucky shot would win them the ton of gold that Billy offered.

His identity as the Boy Wonder leaked, but they didn’t know when. What they did know is that they couldn’t sleep at night, which meant they had to leave.

As was his habit, William looked out of his ger through a slit before leaving at dawn for another day of dueling. The Matriarch and two great-granddaughters, Emily and Mary, chatted like gossipy girls so the enemy would not see them as threats. Mary recently won the female dueling championship in England and Emily, a prodigy six years older than Billy, showed so much promise that William gave her his best backup wands. Cousins Tommy and Timmy protected them on the other side.

Despite their loud chattering, the ladies monitored several Mongols arguing over the sale of a horse thirty meters away. One whipped out his wand and angrily fired in the air as soon as William’s head popped out.

Just then a few dozen quads quietly raced over the nearest hill. Timmy shrieked a warning and the six of them flew up while shooting down. Billy and Elizabeth, both waiting inside for his all-clear, quickly followed. The men arguing over the horse rushed them in a skirmish line while more fliers closed in from other directions.

Rotating as they flew up, William estimated nearly one hundred attackers this time. English reinforcements piled out of nearby huts. A detachment broke off to occupy those English while about forty chased after the family.

Billy led them low over the tribes friendliest to them. As he hoped, hundreds of wands shot up the ambushers. Billy turned to another friendly horde, one they lived with the longest, and now thousands of wands greeted their attackers, who broke off amid heavy casualties. The family stopped to finish them off before going after the detachment battling their backup unit. Attacking from above and behind, the eight super-quads decimated them.

A handful escaped and Billy went after them. He took them out one by one until he wounded the fastest, who he presumed was their leader. This one he brought back alive to publicly torture before the horde leaders. Like the others they caught alive over the last two years, he confessed that some nameless rich guy paid them to kill the Boy Wonder. But, unlike previous confessions, this guy had completely erased his wand of all memories. William barked an order to test the wands of the others, all of which had also been erased. Eighty sets of wands, all virgin-clean.

"Continue questioning him while I examine his comrades," William told Billy before flying off. Within the hour William returned. "They all look like seasoned professionals. Every wand they carried radiates power. Any luck with this guy?"

"No," Billy replied, unusually frustrated, gesturing to several nomads who seemed to enjoy the task of seeing just how much pain this guy could endure before dying. "He's a lot tougher than I am. They now want to finish him using four horses to tear off his limbs."

William shuddered, then shrugged. "I should have killed you in Peking."

Billy nodded in agreement. They concluded long ago that the only way to stop the assassination attempts was to stage Billy's death. Or, rather, the Boy Wonder's. But that would seriously limit where they could duel Mongols. There's no point in staging a death if the Boy Wonder would be discovered dueling again.

Tommy, one of Liz's half-brothers, landed before them so hard that he tumbled. He looked ready to cry. "The bastards got the girls."

Neither William nor Billy understood him. "What do you mean?"

Tommy, still on his knees, pointed east. Before their next heartbeat, father and son flew to the other side of the huge encampment, with Tommy close behind. They found three of their English bodyguards tending their wounded, several enemy corpses near them. They landed next to the Matriarch, still bleeding, and Emily, one side of her upper body badly burned. They killed Mary several times over.

"Where's Elizabeth?" William asked.

Timothy led them to Elizabeth.

There, in a tree-covered gully, they found Liz's mutilated naked corpse. Father and son broke down immediately. William had not cried since his siblings died, and Billy hadn't cried since he accidentally torched Arslan, his favorite hunting dog, when he was three.

"Nooooooo!" William sobbed. "I thought I'd be next."

The ambushers targeted the Boy Wonder in his moment of greatest distraction. A dozen fireballs flew out of nowhere. Billy popped sideways to avoid the worst of them, but not even he could evade them all. Timothy, the devoted father of six,

threw himself in front of a fireball about to hit Billy in the back. He project two large shields and used his body to knock Billy to the ground. Billy suffered only minor burns, but fire swallowed Timothy whole. Billy would remember his screams for the rest of his life.

William and Tommy took to the air, forcing the attackers to show their backs to either them or Billy. With their eyes on his father, Billy used four wands to rocket himself just over the grass and barely had enough time to lift his arms to cut five rapists in the legs before he flew off the mound and into the air. The ambusher split up, with most of them chasing the bigger threat, the Boy Wonder.

William and Tommy spread out so that the attackers had to show their backs to one or the other. William shot at those attacking Tommy and Tommy shot at those attacking William, while both evaded fireballs. This took out several opponents until the enemy got within blade distance.

William's years of dueling paid off. Instead of trying for fatal blows, he nicked the bicep of one and slashed a calf muscle of another, their yells as they plummeted to Earth elating him. He popped down as they swarmed him, then popped towards Tommy, blasting into their backs. Tommy dropped down while shooting up so they engulfed his opponents in a hellish crossfire. Unfortunately, his low, slow position made him an easy target for those pursuing William. Lacking the momentum to evade, he tried to hide behind shields when several fireballs swatted him from the sky.

Diving after Tommy, however, exposed them to William, who fired in freefall. His fireballs engulfed two and he stabbed two more. The fifth one, however, reversed course to escape.

The two veterans now circled each other in the air like a merry-go-round. They traded fireballs first, but both were too fast to hit, so they drew swords.

"I'm gonna torture you for raping my wife," William vowed.

The other guy shrugged. "Someone needed to give her an orgasm before she died."

Furious, William attacked, his swords a blur against the blue sky. His opponent not only matched his blade length, which was unnerving, but was even better at sword fighting, which William previously thought he excelled at. His need for revenge gave him enough extra speed to hold off the superior opponent, until a blade he never saw took off his helmet and sliced his face. Blood blinded his left eye, so he flew up at a 45 degree angle while blindly firing until he had a moment to wipe the blood away. And just in time. He blew off his enemy's right foot off.

William dumped his bleeding opponent between a wounded rapist whose genitals Billy was electrocuting, and Tommy, whose wounds Billy was healing.

"These guys won't talk either," a very frustrated Billy growled angrily.

"I think I recognize my guy." William closed his eyes to search his wand for a recording. A moment later a three dimensional image showed Genghis Khan seated with his royal guard at the Peking stadium, laughing at Billy's jokes.

"The guard standing right next to Genghis!" Billy pointed out. "That's him."

"Which means these rapists belong to the Kashik—Genghis Khan's own imperial guards. That's why they're so good. Well, we finally have something to spend our wealth on besides American highways." He addressed the wounded. "Did you know that American Jack has your roster? Or that it lists every member of your family?"

You targeted our family. Now we'll target yours. I hope you have lots of descendents."

Billy had always wanted to meet American Jack. The Mongols enriched themselves by enslaving natives to extract resources in Africa, so the English made their own fortune doing the same in the New World, flying patrols in Iceland to protect the only route to America. They had a monopoly over an entire continent, until the Spanish started sailing there.

Then American Jack armed, trained, and united the American Indians to repulse the Mongols, English, and Spanish. Most English and their mixed children allied with Jack's Indians in exchange for outlawing slavery and setting up representative democracies. Together they kicked the Mongols out of Alaska, the English out of North America, and the Spanish out of South America.

American Jack now had quads to fight the Mongols, the natural resources of an entire continent to fund a rebellion, and a new form of government to contest the old forms of tyranny. He was the oldest and strongest voice for people fighting world conquest.

William started taking his body armor off. "I'm gonna switch armor with Tim. While I torture the rapists to death, I want you to carry Tommy to the camp and tell everyone that bandits killed your mother and father. You're now an orphan.

"For the next several weeks, I want you to take our English security and duel at the largest arenas, never spending the night afterwards, though. Not this full moon, but the dawn after the next one, return to the Peking Arena to exhaust their best champions. It's been two years, so Peking should have new duelers.

"Let everyone know that you've lost the will to live. Act crazy in Peking. Break down emotionally during interviews. Throw tantrums in restaurants. Threaten suicide. Set up their expectations. And make sure you change your appearance as much as possible.

"When you run out of opponents, I'll appear as that arrogant German duke that I killed a few months ago. You remember the Kaiser's grandson, who became famous as Prussia's best dueler? Well, he also had his face slashed like mine. Remember to carry several bags of blood and wear several layers of fire-resistant clothing so I can burn you.

"Listen. You have several thousand relatives eager to avenge their family. I'll have them spread the news that anyone can make money killing direct descendents of the khan. We'll have organized gangs, petty criminals, and professional bounty hunters working free lance for us."

Billy's eyes lost much of their glaze. William knew he'd go crazy for revenge, so he needed to propose something big to satisfy the boy's thirst.

"I don't expect you to think clearly right now, but I need to know that you'll follow my plan. Are you with me?"

Billy felt himself float around in his body. He couldn't believe he lost his mother.

"Dad, what are you gonna do?"

William smiled grimly. "They say the Khan has a million descendents. I'm gonna kill them all."

Billy wasn't sure how serious he was.

William hugged his son until they both broke into uncontrollable tears. They may have continued crying until nightfall, but Tommy moaned in pain.

“Billy, one last thing. Your mother died because we got predictable. We stayed here too long. Predictability is fatal.”

“You wanted to leave a week ago. Mama would still be alive if I listened to you.”

“Promise me you’ll never let the enemy predict your next move ever again.”

“I promise, daddy.”

“Then I’ll see you in Peking.”

## Chapter 15

Once Billy carried Tommy away, William cut off their heads because Mongols believe their souls will never find peace if headless. Then he took his wife’s wands and reviewed their last memories. He saw Liz descend to their hut when several wands from within shot them at point-blank range.

The surprise was total. Fliers need all four wands to land safely, which makes that moment the best opportunity for surprise.

William watched a blast strike Elizabeth hard. Someone behind her fired back, but did little harm to those inside. A strong arm—William assumed the Matriarch’s—grabbed his wife and carried her away. The video grew weak, so Liz must have been hurt bad. Still, he heard Mary and Emily shooting at their pursuers. Somewhere in the middle of a long firefight, his wife recovered enough to blast, but not to fly, which effectively disabled Susan, who had to carry her. After absorbing several weaker blasts, a concentrated fireball smashed them from the sky. Even then, Liz tried to shoot the enemy as she fell.

William felt so proud of his warrior princess.

On the ground, they made for easy targets. He heard a short, intense fight rage above them, and saw bodies fall in the periphery of the recording. Mary, burned and bleeding, kept shooting until fire swallowed her. Even then she tackled the nearest Mongol, driving hot steel through his chest armor as others hacked at her. Then the wand showed Emily as she lay burning on the ground. Susan cursed someone, and the wands turned in time to see the master swordsman pulled twin blades of steel from her.

Liz now used the wands for propulsion, to get the Mongols away from her wounded family members. She shot up like a rocket using only her boot wands, not able to dodge or weave. She rose in an arc and fell as predictably -- suicide flights, some called them. She landed hard and, from the sound, probably broke her back. Still, the love of his life did not cry or beg for mercy. She pointed her wands at herself and yelled “kill them all, my love. Kill them all for me. I love you and have no regrets.”

Their last image showed his wife defiantly cutting her own throat. William had never loved her more than that moment.

Once he finished his first round of weeping, William made a mental note to tell Billy how Susan, Mary, and Emily fought when they could have fled. The last thing William wanted to do in life was die well. Living well is easy; dying well is hard. He took some comfort that his wife died well. She died like a Mongol.

William genuinely liked and respected Mongols. Moments like these reminded him why he also hated them so much.

Her death opened up a chasm so large that he knew he'd never fill it. He married someone so wonderful that she ruined him for other women. Like Billy, he now had a death wish.

William flew to the nearest Global Bank branch, sent a message to his American raiders, and transferred a ton of gold to American Jack in return for an updated list of the locations of Imperial Guard families. Then he visited several large Mongol cities to buy wands, clothes, and food.

Posing as a logistical officer, he paid cash for fruits, vegetables, milk, bread, and beef jerky to be delivered on specific dates at farms he rented just outside of his targets. Fliers thought it odd he painted large red X's on the roofs. He bought ovens, stoves, large cooking pots, milk cows, wheat, grains, a lot of underclothes, and tons of salt. And, of course, all the wagons, horses, mules, and oxen on the market.

After all, he had an armada to feed.

Once Jack sent him the new list, he went to Peking and began a series of interviews with the Triad hierarchy. Triads started with the original goal of returning control of China to Chinese. After failing that, it had since degenerated into mostly a criminal money-making operation justifying itself with patriotic rhetoric. They remembered him, of course, and the son who paid them so generously.

A few dozen hardened street fighters, each carrying a large backpack full of mediocre wands, escorted William through a maze of back alleys to a small home where a dozen old men sat at a beautiful oak table. After ritual tea sipping and the traditional exchange of bland pleasantries, William handed the leader a memory stick. Despite looking so frail, the Triad projected a large image of William in a cave filled with Chinese cultural treasures, some millennia old. William helpfully recorded close-ups of the items in anticipation of this day.

"The Americans found these Chinese artifacts in the Mongol capital. They recovered thousands of old Chinese paintings, ceramics, pottery, and scrolls, which rot as we speak. They have no value in America, and they don't have the connections to sell them in China. They don't even have incentive to move them. One earthquake could bury them forever. Who knows what the intense cold in Siberia is doing to them right now? The Mongols don't want the Chinese to know that their ancestors for centuries enjoyed the most advanced society on Earth. The ancient Romans thought they conquered the world, but the Chinese, at their peak, occupied three times the land and had four times the military might. I now offer you everything that you see in the cave."

William could tell the guy wanted it all. Whoever returned these items would become a hero to every Chinese.

"Tell me why I can't just torture you into revealing its location?" the Triad asked.

"Do you know how vast Siberia is? The Americans took me there in blindfolds, so I'll need help just to find it. The snow changes the landscape every year, so everything looks different. It's not like a city where you can give someone an address."

Actually, they buried it all in a cave in a Manchurian forest rather than air-haul it to his fleet.

“And how much do you want?”

“The Mongol government tracks all benefits ever paid to members of the Imperial Guard and their relatives. That wand has a copy of that list, complete with addresses. I want you to bomb every property on that list, regardless of where they are, on the night of the next full moon. Cut off the heads of everyone in those homes. If you don’t bomb them all, then you don’t get the Chinese artifacts.”

“But they’ll avenge their families. This will re-start the war between the Triads and the Imperial Guard. It took two years just to correct our last misunderstanding.”

“Then you better kill them all.”

“Why do you want to kill Imperial Guards?”

“Because they all descend from either the Khan or his brothers, and I want Genghis to feel what I feel.”

The leader looked like a ghost. The old men spoke rapidly, talking over each other.

“How will you know we haven’t just bombed a thousand random homes?” one of them asked William.

“The news agencies will figure out the one thing they all have in common. You know how the Mongols love reporting facts and figures. They’ll count in grisly detail how many family members of the Imperial Guard have been beheaded. I know how many exist, so you better make sure you are thorough if you want the treasure. Beyond the obvious value, all of China will hail you as heroes.”

The leader had his eyes closed to read the list. “There are too many. It seems endless. What you ask is impossible.”

“Then get help or American Jack will tell the news agencies that the Triads are responsible for their heritage rotting in a Siberian cave. Your own crews will turn on you. All of China will treat you as pariahs.”

They didn’t even bother to disagree. William could tell they’d do it. They could not afford not to. Not that they were happy with the size of the task. One by one, they nodded their heads.

“Remember,” William said sternly, “not this full moon, but the first night of the next.”

## Chapter 16

The marathoners and near-marathoners crossed on a moonless night above the clouds, using ships to leapfrog around hidden sentries. They sped south along the coast, now uninhabited because William had killed everyone there the last few years. Siberians guided them around patrols. He left the half-marathoners behind to destroy the Mongols guarding the Bering Strait, then go south to haul plunder home.

The night before the full moon, William hid in the trees with a marathon battalion, using his wand to enhance his vision as they all stared at a lake. Somewhere, far above them, a scout dressed in camouflage hid in the clouds. His five best marathon battalions had gone ahead to exhaust the five closest enemy marathon divisions.

Something plopped in the middle of the lake. Even in the dark, everyone saw the tiny waves ripple towards shore. The mood changed instantly. The scout had dropped a rock to signal that the high-altitude patrol just passed. Within minutes, one hundred and five battalions flew at a steep sixty degree angle to rise to their ceiling to avoid being seen by sentries on the ground.

The Great Khan loved open space as much as he detested crowded cities, so he usually roamed within a few hours flight of his capital. Ten thousand Imperial Guards now protected his person, and fifty thousand marathoners formed a rapid reaction force to confront American incursions. Genghis needed to be seen personally leading the fight. He couldn't afford any more Summer Slaughters.

The Khan had three pairs of patrols circling his portable palace: low altitude, mid-altitude, and high altitude. The higher they patrolled, the larger the circle. Which is why William waited for one high-altitude squad to pass overhead, then raced into the gap before the second squad appeared.

Once near the Khan's camp, they dived, with the best quads sprinting towards the other patrols from behind. William sliced one squad up without giving them time to sound an alarm. A minute later, however, a low-altitude patrol must have noticed the huge shadow descending because a shrieking noise warned the rapid-reaction unit.

Fortunately for the Americans, William targeted this division twice over. First, his troops dropped bombs on them from high altitude, so they had only a dozen heartbeats before the explosions decimated their formation. Then more Americans, flying straight down at maximum speed, bombed them again before overwhelming survivors with fireballs.

Rocked out of a sound sleep, the rest of the Mongols could not possibly respond fast enough. Sure, several thousand got off the ground, but they could not stop over one hundred thousand ambushers. The raiders firebombed the felt huts, then dropped shrapnel bombs on the densest groups of survivors. A million fireballs a minute torched everything moving, including the dry winter grass.

The sudden detonations sounded like a thunderstorm at ground level, so Genghis didn't recognize it as a bombing. Pressure waves blew away his burning tents and intense heat sucked the breath from his lungs. It felt like the air itself was on fire.

Dayan, the commander of the Imperial Guards, waved at him to hurry. The expression on his face told Genghis that this was no drill. He clearly had no idea what was going on and that scared the hell out of Genghis, who roughly grabbed Empress Borte. One hundred Imperial Guards rushed the Khan into his room of last resort—a steel box large enough to accommodate one hundred. Although barely portable when empty, it was far too heavy to lift with people inside. Although great protection from bombs dropped from high altitude, it became a death trap without defenders outside.



Genghis rushed to open one of the wand slits while his guards starting firing out other narrow openings in the steel. What he saw stunned him. A vast enemy force overwhelmed his military. Easily, it seemed, as they stumbled about, blind, deaf, and probably mute. He knew his marathoners would not abandon him—he'd kill their children if they did—so they died in place, unarmored and half asleep.

The Great Khan then identified the guy who must be in charge, for he directed the slaughter of his harem. The Baron wore the same armor suit as at the Summer Slaughter. Americans rounded up his few hundred women and several hundred children. No longer able to have sex, Genghis needed his family around him. The Baron moved them within view before personally beheading them. The cruel bastard even waved towards the box, although the grim chore exhausted him. Still, he must be really pissed because he refused to let anyone help. The Khan had no idea that William apologized to his beloved wife for not protecting her every time he swung his sword. Still, killing the Khan's women and children felt cathartic. Not many men can behead hundreds of people, but doing so helped relieve his soul-sucking grief.

Genghis had not felt such helpless rage since his tribe abandoned him when he was ten. His descendents tried to pull him from the tiny window, but he would not be moved. He could not look away as he lost his women and children.

At least, those he had not already sent away.

Although his palace moved frequently to give the animals fresh grazing, the permanent nature of his camp made it practical for the families of his troops to stay with them, forming a small city. The capital was near, so they could get whatever they needed, whenever they needed it. Since the Khan encouraged procreation with female quads, these sixty thousand troops had a few hundred thousand women and several hundred thousand children. Including support staff, maids, traders, whores, venders, and those seeking favors, a million people lived with the Khan. But they did not expect to fight, nor were they organized for war.

The enormity of the loss burned the Khan up inside. His Imperial Guards could not be replaced. They were, literally, family.

The resistance didn't last long enough to justify calling it a battle. The incendiaries turned thousands of felt huts into funeral pyres. As the massacre wound down, the Americans searched for valuables, before burning everything they could not take. They must be hungry because some of them set up thousands of his goats on spits for cooking. Others expertly fired up his bakeries. The Americans had laughed, a few years ago, when William ordered them to learn cooking and baking. It slowly dawned on Genghis that the Americans planned to stay long enough to make jerked meat and bread. That would solve their food problem, freeing them to raid without having to forage. What infuriated the Khan was that it meant they were not afraid. Or in a hurry.

His personal guard, the only survivors, continued shooting at the closest enemies, so the Americans dumped beheaded bodies on his box to block the wand slits.

Genghis watched the enemy commander pick up a bomb pack and fly over him. "Everyone down!" he warned. A loud detonation blew a hole in the steel roof, followed by anti-personnel munitions which shredded dozens of his guards. Americans then lined the rim of the hole to blast blindly inside while others

dumped the heads of his harem into the giant coffin. Genghis could tell when the Baron blasted because his fireballs filled up the narrow box. Even the best quads are just sitting ducks when they have nowhere to move. The closest Mongols soon became ambulatory torches that lit up the dark coffin. Their comrades didn't even have water to put out their burning friends.

"Genghis?" shouted the Baron in perfect Mongolian. Only the empress called him Genghis.

"You're a dead man!" the Khan shouted back, giving away his position.

William fireballed the other half of the box. "You've been trying to kill me all my life. I just wanted to make sure you survived so you could see me exterminate your descendents."

"I'll kill everyone you love!"

"You already have. Why do you think I'm doing this? Oh, those bombs you've been dragging around will be dropped on your capital today, and your backup Millennial Wands are now my backup Millennial Wands. My primary wands I took from the Third Millennial. You may be in this death trap for a while. If you get hungry, eat shit, but don't die. You can't suffer if you're dead."

William was surprised at his own vehemence. Americans dropped corpses to block the hole. This trapped in the smoke. It took them all day to pile a million bodies, but the propaganda value was so worth it. Then they added the heads. It looked like a million-headed monster the size of a hill. Finally, they hovered above to piss and shit to tell the world what Americans thought of Genghis Khan. Pundits would call it a shitty declaration of war.

Inside, Genghis pushed away his traumatized wife to help the wounded. Few injuries were fatal, unless they became infected, which looked likely since they lacked medicine to disinfect the wounds. The uninjured tried to put out the burning people or they'd all die of smoke inhalation. Genghis could not help but look at the faces of his beheaded women and children as he tried to be useful. It never crossed his mind that he made millions feel the same hopeless rage that now burned in him.

The smoke irritated his eyes and gave him a hacking cough that would never leave him. The delicious smell of roasted meat reminded them that they didn't have any food. The next week, as their hunger increased, the cooking outside would grow unbearable. But the stench of urine and feces would replace their appetites with nausea. Some of them would never eat meat again. For a proud Mongol, that was like embracing sodomy.

After breakfast, William flew with his best Mongol speakers to the capital, where they bought fresh fruit, vegetables, bread, milk, spices, and medicine.

At noon, one marathon division appeared, flying low and slow. The military and the local militia chased the Americans away. When forced to rest, the other Americans dropped out of cloud cover to annihilate them.

Meanwhile, William and his crew started hundreds of fires and ambushed police. The residents spent all day and night trying to put the fires out while his armada napped an hour away.

What worked on the Khan's palace worked even better on his capital at midnight. Thousands of tired, sleepy quads rose up, only for the Americans to blast them with superior height, numbers, and power. They burned the city and

everyone in it, except the warehouses that housed the tribute. Genghis rebuilt the city because Mongolia losing their capital would be too embarrassing to live down. In the morning the Americans ate breakfast at William's ranch, and slept in comfort in their new clothes.

The next day, his best divisions each lured a Mongol division to them. William liked surprising exhausted enemy marathoners with ten times their number.

Like before, they loaded every wagon and pack animal, then drove the caravan east to their waiting ships. A few dozen other wagons spread out northward with food, medicine, and tents for their return home. Siberians drove herds of animals to their hidden ranches to feed future raiders.

Now, with the region virtually defenseless, two hundred thousand half-marathoners arrived to help William sack the nearest cities, towns, and hordes. Each city provided another wagon train of food, treasure, and supplies. William enjoyed so much success for so long that the Mongols had to largely abandon eastern Mongolia, just as Mongols historically displaced one hundred million foreigners over the last three centuries.

After several days in the box, Genghis climbed through a million decapitated bodies to freedom. The Americans wisely fled before disease infected them. Genghis would never get over the stench of feces. For years, just a whiff of shit would make him convulse. He levitated bodies to clear a path for everyone else and personally carried his wounded bodyguards out.

A month passed before a Mongol force found him and his few surviving bodyguards. That's when he learned that the Triads ambushed his Imperial Guards, which explained the delay. Local troops were too busy fighting gangs to fly north to oppose an armada of raiders.

When William left for Peking, he sent the half-marathoners home with all they could carry. The marathoners and near-marathoners decided to continue raiding. And they soon learned that William made victory look easy. Although they knew what to do, their leaders lacked the sixth sense that William seemed to possess. They still won more than they lost, but suffered several times as many casualties. After one too many surprises, the near-marathoners returned home.

The ten thousand marathoners, with so much food and mountaintop bunkers, decided to press their luck and stay the winter. Their presence would infuriate Mongols and force the Khan to expend vast resources on catching them.

## **Chapter 17**

For several weeks, Billy would arrive in a big city, get a good night's sleep, dominate the arena, deposit his winnings, then fly a thousand clicks to another city to avoid getting ambushed in his sleep.

The night before he dominated Peking again, the entire city shook with hundreds of explosions. People filled the streets to find out what happened.

Except Billy. He knew what happened, but not how. He couldn't imagine how his father pulled it off. That man amazed him once again. That old dog kept

showing him new tricks. Still, he argued with management in the hotel lobby and blasted a hole in the wall to leave a memorable alibi.

That night, kids played soccer with the heads of dead Mongols—which infuriated the nobility when they saw the news videos. The next evening, after beating several hundred duelers, Billy couldn't get enough news. The more he read, the better he felt. Later he heard that thousands of homes had been bombed, some thousands of kilometers apart, which left Billy as slack-jawed as everyone else. Every night Billy had tossed and turned, inventing revenge fantasies, while his dad pulled off something bigger than he could ever dream of. Billy never lost his awe of his father.

Then came a video that showed Genghis Khan screaming threats from a metal box while Americans dumped headless corpses on top. It showed Americans literally shitting on the Great Khan. They buried the Great Immortal under a giant pile of crap! Pundits called it Karma Mountain.

Like millions across the world, Billy could not stop laughing. Every night, he had to take the news wands to his room so he wouldn't be seen in public chuckling at Mongols getting what they had been dishing out for centuries. Reports said a deeply traumatized Khan went stark raving mad for months, pulling out his beard and blowing craters in the grass. The oppressive weight of his mother's death finally lifted, although he'd forever miss her. All over the planet, millions of victims of Mongol cruelty felt the same. It was not quite a cure for depression, but it worked better than anything else.

The government ordered massive retaliation against the Triads, but found it hard to identify them, much less punish them. To pre-empt that punishment, the Triads attacked more Guard units as if their lives depended on it. Either out of solidarity, or just for revenge, thousands of Chinese quads targeted Imperial Guards on their own. Since it became government policy to exterminate all Triads, and since Triads ran organized crime in every big city, open fighting broke out across China. Billy had accumulated more bronze coins than Global Bank could possibly utilize, so he spent several hundred tons of it hiring Chinese mercenaries to help the Triads. A surge of righteous nationalism swept the country as patriotic songs, plays, and art enjoyed a resurgence.

Mongols killed the triad leaders before William could return the artifacts, so he gave them to the University of Taiwan, which displayed them in an enormous structure called The Baron's Chinese Museum. William paid the government to send thousands of quads, who could pass for Chinese, to help the Triads kill Imperial Guards. William found American Jack's trainers, helping to upgrade their air force, and hired them to recruit contract killers.

The museum multiplied tourism and renewed Chinese antipathy towards their overlords. Because Mongols started targeting Chinese quads indiscriminately, a flood of Chinese moved to Taiwan. Their horror stories motivated Taiwanese quads to join the fight in China.

William flew from Taiwan to Japan and offered to fund as many marathon divisions as they could form, on the condition that he could borrow them on demand. How they smuggled the money from Peking was their problem. On the way back, he met with the descendents of the last Korean kings, now living in poverty, and arranged to fund the training of a rebel air force.

Billy won a fortune daily as he defeated a few hundred teams of four, day after day. It took weeks before word leaked that he was really the legendary Boy Wonder. He woke up every day, eager to avenge his mother, and slept like a baby, knowing he'd get to repeat it. When he couldn't sleep, he'd fireball rich Mongol neighborhoods.

So it was almost a shame when Billy saw his father eating at his favorite restaurant. The boy almost didn't recognize his dad with a beard that resembled the Prussian dueler's. Their scars looked very similar. They shared a knowing look and Billy nodded his head, to indicate he'd be prepared to die the next day.

William actually arrived the week before with a few hundred American sailors who moved tons of gold to the ship he bought. William would never have dreamed of transporting to much wealth from Peking without local officials battling gangs.

Every day William bet Billy's money on their duel. Until then, nobody still bet against the boy, so William met all that pent up demand himself. Once word got out that some rich fool was acting as a counter-party, everyone placed their life savings on the Peking champion. It seemed like such a sure thing.

The Boy Wonder's last duel would become world famous. They swapped wands so William could extend longer flame to make him look almost equal. After several exciting minutes of exchanging giant fireballs, they drew swords. Since his father was the better swordsman, Billy didn't have to fake much. William wanted everyone to see the Boy Wonder's last duel, so they drew upon a decade of training together to make it as memorable as possible.

Finally, the German got a lucky swipe that wounded the Boy Wonder's leg, who left a trail of blood as he desperately stumbled away. Billy pretended to fight with just three wands, which had the crowd on the edge of their seats. They anticipated each other's moves like mind readers. After an epic struggle, the duke wore the boy down and managed to stick him in the chest. While flailing about in pain, Billy covertly poured a heat-resistant oil on a mask that he used to cover his face under his helmet.

Everyone in the stadium booed because they all bet on the boy. William pretended to transfer his own wands, then projected flame twelve meters to show they were now his. This convinced everyone that the transfer was real because there was no other way he could extend so much fire using someone else's sticks.

The Prussian duke he was impersonating was famous for being a jerk, so he insulted the audience, called himself the greatest dueler ever, and praised Prussia at the expense of Mongolia. In German. Though few understood him, most got the message and pelted him with food and garbage while stadium security formed a protective circle in case the mob stormed the winner. It would not be the first time.

William then reached inside his pants for water that he colored yellow and pretended to pee on the Boy Wonder's face to protect his son from the coming heat. To everyone's shock, the duke blasted the beloved boy, watched the body flop over, then kicked it while screaming like a lunatic. This made identification more difficult later, when he replaced Billy in the morgue with a Mongol boy that William burned that morning. Billy had drunk so much pain killer that he barely felt anything. All he thought about was his mama.

That night, after putting a corpse in his bed, William and Billy, dressed like rich nobles, forced their way into the hotel, demanded to know the duke's room

number, then kicked in the door to fireball the room. The hotel naturally called the police who found a dead body, a lot of gold, and wands burnt beyond recognition.

And it worked. Mongols would grieve for years. The Kaiser then strained relationships between the kingdoms by demanding justice for his grandson.

The Mongols took every decent quad to fight Americans in Siberia, so William, some English employees, and his American sailors robbed Bank of Mongolia branches.

## **Chapter 18**

Then a storm almost killed them on the voyage to San Francisco. Only using all their wands did they out-run the tempest.

But what to do with so much wealth? William funded more highway projects, along with thousands of hospitals, schools, and universities. Global Bank in the Americas loaned at ever lower interest rates. William sent two ships full of wealth to Global Bank in France and Spain to lend money interest-free to those governments.

The following spring, William learned the Khan placed his last three marathon divisions at the Bering Strait. Genghis apparently expected the Americans to invade because he personally led his marathoners.

After celebrating Billy's birthday in an Alaskan cave over tasteless mutton, father and son crossed the Bering Strait to deal with this threat. They killed two scouts and put on their distinct uniforms to infiltrate the Khan's camp. That night, they wounded a few hundred sleeping marathoners before being driven off in a fierce firefight that wounded William.

While William left to lead his marathoners across the Strait, Billy lured one division on an exhausting flight led by the Khan himself. Seeing the Great Immortal somehow brought out the crazy in him, so when they landed to rest, Billy would drop boulders on them from high altitude.

Genghis reacted like Billy predicted, and chased after him in a blind rage, rather than let his marathoners rest. At one point he let Genghis get close enough to hear Billy yell that he still smelled like shit. The naked hatred on the Khan's face excited the eleven year old, who fearlessly played with the most feared man alive.

William, meanwhile, used his ships as stepping stones for his marathoners to fly around the patrols and surprise an enemy division in their sleep. Genghis gave his last three marathon divisions a distinctive uniform, so the Americans changed clothes, then visited the remaining unit. In fairness, the Mongols had no reason to expect ten thousand fliers, coming from their sister unit's location, wearing the correct outfits, to be anything but their fellow Mongols.

Until the bombs dropped.

Having wiped out two divisions, the Americans overtook the Mongols chasing Billy. Mongols who could not keep up had to stop. Naturally they were glad to see comrades coming to their aid, which let the Americans destroy several thousand

more marathoners in small batches while enjoying total surprise and overwhelming numbers.

Eventually, the chase left Genghis with only a few hundred of his best marathoners, suffering from severe dehydration because they didn't carry several water sacks like Billy did. Armed with Millennial Wands, Genghis didn't think anyone could fly faster. Only when the Khan himself was forced to rest did it occur to him that they'd never catch the bastard.

"He's playing with us!" Dayan complained angrily again as he started a fire against the bitter cold. "He's like a kid who thinks this is a game."

Billy woke them with a primal scream that traumatized even the Great Khan. Their campfire exploded and Genghis found his deel on fire. He rolled over in the snow to put it out. The smell of his beard burning made him nauseous. Enormous fireballs struck his camp like meteorites as hundreds of smaller ones shot up into the dark sky. Dozens of his men launched and the Khan heard short firefights ever higher in the heavens.

Genghis rallied those not helping the wounded and they took off as a unit towards the last fireballs. But they found nothing but empty skies and distant stars. Heading back, they heard thunder near the surface. Fearing the worst, the Khan dived at maximum speed. Sure enough, their prey had wounded those helping the wounded.

All those priceless wands—gone!

On his blanket Genghis found a video wand showing the Baron beheading his family the year before. Genghis knew he should not see it, but he watched anyways until the tears dried up. He projected it so large that his men -- all relatives anyways -- watched with him. It seemed to take forever for the bastard to behead so many.

"Ow!" Dayan suddenly yelled in pain, rolling away and blasting blindly behind him.

Long swords appeared out of nowhere to cut down those farthest from the campfire. Anyone looking at the fire discovered his night vision gone. As everyone fired at where the blades must have come from, Billy popped up and fired back. At such close range, the huge, fast fireballs engulfed three more quads. The Mongols launched, determined to end this. While their killer mood made them breathe heavy, Billy relaxed himself by humming a Mongolian folk song his mother sang to him at bedtime. Ever since his mother's rape, Billy found killing Mongols the best way to cope with his lethal grief.

Although powerful, chronic stress prevented Genghis from slowing down his heart enough to fly really high, so when he reached his ceiling, his personal bodyguards stopped as well. Those who could fly higher, however, found their prey waiting for them. Genghis watched a series of firefights slowly descending in altitude as Billy picked them off a few at a time.

"We're next!" Genghis warned.

They saw their prey—the Khan now realized he needed a better word to describe the bastard beating them—but, instead of engaging, he dived past incredibly fast.

"He's going after our wounded again!" Genghis shouted, diving at full speed.

They arrived too late, however. Genghis saw his arch nemesis rob the last of the survivors because, without wands, they could not fly to safety. The Khan fired his

largest fireball and watched it grow. His prey, however, blasted back an even larger fireball that engulfed his. Instead of the prey having to avoid his fireball, Genghis had to avoid his. His opponent popped up and shot four wands, his legs and arms pointing at the Khan's guys like a clamp. The four fireballs spread out over a huge area that engulfed his bodyguards. Genghis still had a height advantage, so he went into a controlled freefall to fire all four wands, his ancient back hurting from doubling over. Dueling is really a young man's game. Horrified, Genghis watched his nemesis evade as the fireballs burned his gravely wounded. Their screams would forever haunt him. Genghis heard the Baron laugh as he flew away.

While several could survive their injuries, a few dozen suffered mortal wounds, leaving Genghis no choice but to slit their throats. Men who entrusted their lives to their Khan. It dawned on him that his enemy left them this way so that Genghis would see them suffer. He suddenly realized something: he was not being defeated. He was being punished.

The only thing that kept Genghis from losing his mind that long lonely night was the prospect of his division catching this bastard. That morning, however, he backtracked to find them slaughtered in small groups, their precious wands gone.

While all marathoners are super-quads, most super-quads are not marathoners. Their relative scarcity made them far more valuable. And the only thing better than a marathoner, was a high-altitude marathoner.

The Khan spent a fortune recruiting the best marathoners from across the Empire. For a force this precious, he left governing the empire to lead it himself. That's how important it was. And they died because he let his rage blind him.

That's when Genghis Khan realized he was out-matched. His enemy had thought all this out before ever pulling a wand, and he fell for it. Genghis Khan, the greatest general ever. The Conqueror. Beaten by literally a nobody.

Who was this guy? They said he was a baron, but everyone called him Willy. He sent agents to find out from the Americans, but they didn't know much either: middle aged, paranoid, he always covered his face, he had a million scars, they only met him a few years ago, and that he was completely awesome.

Genghis had his few surviving bodyguards hunt because they were famished. They spent the night hiding, without even a fire to warm them. In the morning, the Khan flew alone to the Bering Strait to confirm his worst suspicions—that this was all a ruse to keep him busy while the Americans destroyed his marathoners. After seeing his heavily fortified bases buried in corpses, Genghis Khan flew home spiritually comatose.

## **Chapter 19**

The destruction of the Mongol marathoners allowed the one hundred thousand American near-marathoners to raid, and made it safe for the two hundred thousand half-marathoners to work as golden mules again. New graduates and better wands let the University bring them up to full strength.



William exploited the Khan's bizarre absence by sacking cities in the heart of Mongolia. Billy scouted ahead with the marathoners to ambush enemy units while the twenty half-marathon divisions carried plunder to Alaska.

It took Genghis months to find enough troops to confront the American armada. Only now did it occur to him that he should not have believed his own propaganda -- that he had infinite quads.

Before winter started, he rushed his force to the Bering Strait to block the Americans from escaping. The loaded down half-marathoners were leaving anyways. Genghis desperately wanted to destroy them and take the wealth back, but the Americans aggressively defended that first line of fortifications. The Americans had destroyed the Mongol bunkers, so the Mongols didn't have food, bombs, or shelter. Still, Genghis launched one massive assault because he knew the Baron was still raiding in Mongolia.

And got his butt whooped. Willy had already told them what to do. Half of them kept the Mongols in the air all day, then the other hundred thousand bombed them that night. The half-marathoners could fly higher and longer than most of the Mongols, and so rotated shifts to exhaust the enemy before seriously engaging. Each half-marathoner made five trips from Mongolia, taking one hundred kilos of loot each time. The Americans certainly weren't going to give up a million kilos of plunder.

Genghis not only had to flee but, before he fled, learned that the bombs that killed so many of his troops were his own. Stolen from his camp during his disastrous invasions of the Americas.

The Khan had enough. The Americans couldn't cross during winter anyways, and he couldn't keep his troops there without a huge logistical train, so he took his force after the real enemy—Willy. Why didn't he give himself a fearsome name, like Bobby or Harold? Who the hell was gonna write songs about someone named Willy?

But at least he trapped the bastard in Siberia, where feeding one hundred thousand mouths was impossible.

When William heard that Genghis was gonna block their path home, William literally jumped for joy. Without his wife, there was nothing he wanted more than to kill Mongols. His near-marathoners had to follow him as if their lives depended on it. The Siberians were running out of herds to feed them. Plus, the Strait was really far away, which meant the Khan gave him that much more time to kill. He led the Americans southwest, where they sacked cities and overwhelmed air bases.

They buried their loot on top of the Ural Mountains. Colder weather forced them to move south into the Stans—the area between Mongolia-China-India and Persia-Turkey-Europe. The people of the Stans were not Mongolian, but lived a similar nomadic life and were the Empire's closest allies. The Empire relied on these nomads to fight their wars.

Forewarned, a massive force of five hundred thousand active-duty, police, militia, veteran, and civilian quads confronted William. Instead of engaging, Billy and the ten marathon battalions lured the fifty thousand fastest enemies away on an exhausting all-day flight that ended when William and the near-marathoners ambushed them after sunset.

Knowing the geography intimately now paid dividends. Instead of engaging the main enemy unit, William led his force directly away, destroying everything within reach. As he expected, thousands of enemy quads abandoned their armada to defend their homes or flee with their families.

The enemy rushed to catch up with William, leaving the slowest behind with the baggage train. The marathoners followed the enemy, picking off the slowest, taking their food, and dropping their own bombs on them. With ten thousand marathoners bringing them food, the near-marathoners didn't even have to slow down to forage. Billy's marathoners also picked off enemy units scouting, foraging, and reinforcements. This left the enemy hungry, exhausted, and blind.

After sacking another major city, the enemy camped too close. Sensing an opportunity, the near-marathoners stocked up on bombs from the city's munitions depot and surprised the enemy armada while they slept. After spending a few days hunting down survivors, they faced no more organized resistance in the Stans.

By late winter, however, new enemy armadas started shadowing them and the Americans were too loaded down with loot to fight effectively. They were also too far from the Urals to bury their plunder with the rest. At the Caspian Sea, William told them they were going home via Scandinavia-Iceland-Greenland. The cheering troops had been raiding for almost a year.

A week later, however, they got some bad news. William called a leadership meeting and laid out their situation.

"The enemy has been shadowing us instead of stopping us, so I sent Shorty ahead, who found Genghis Khan, with a large force in St. Petersburg, waiting for us. The Mongols have been herding us.

"As all of you know, I don't like fair fights. I think it's dumb to confront someone looking for battle. So, instead of going home through Scandinavia, I say we reach Iceland via England. That means we fly west, where it's warmer, rather than northwest, where the enemy wants to trap us. Europe has a lot of enemy troops, but it also has a lot of food and shelter. And I, for one, could use hot food and an even hotter bath!"

The marathoners carried light loads, so Billy led them to where enemy scouts would see them flying towards Scandinavia, while the loaded down near-marathoners fled west and avoided population centers. For an exciting month William pounded the enemy in Europe, finally stopping for a week to decimate the Mongol unit in France. The French greeted them like saviors. Not even San Francisco had welcomed so enthusiastically. William feared the wine, women, and song more than the Mongols. So when Billy and the marathoners finally showed up, William tried to look disappointed when he gave his troops the bad news:

"I hope you've all had your hot food, hot baths, and hot women, because the Khan has combined his forces and will arrive soon with half a million quads. Genghis hates crowded places, and so has never even been to France. But, once he gets here and hears we've flown home, I imagine he'll vent his rage on the people who have treated us so well. Can you see the irony? We started raiding to stop the Mongols from conquering Europe, and now we'll leave when they need us the most." His squad, company, and battalion commanders no longer looked like they wanted to party. "Yet we cannot even fight the Khan's huge armada because

we're too loaded down with loot! Nor can we get the plunder we buried in the Urals because we can't carry a single kilo more."

"I have an idea," Billy said, as they rehearsed. Billy walked in front of them. Although he always covered his face, they knew it was him because he was the shortest guy in the entire armada.

"We can't let Genghis conquer Europe, so we must reduce the quality and quantity of his troops. If we cannot fight loaded down, then let's just give this loot to the European quads risking their lives for little pay. Then, after spanking Genghis Khan, we get our treasure from the Urals, and no enemy force will be strong enough to block our escape home."

The commanders gave Shorty a standing ovation, followed by a huge group hug that Billy found suffocating. And oddly endearing.

The French king loved the idea of the Americans paying his troops what they deserved. That much loot would make the Free Europe economy boom. And he certainly appreciated getting a million sets of wands (William sent half a million more to Spain). What he didn't like was loaning his best ten divisions to a total stranger. But that was the price he had to pay.

The king called up his one hundred thousand best quads in the middle of Paris and sobbed like a baby, anticipating their reactions when the Americans handed them their backpacks. The Free European quads (only half were French and about 5% were American) had no idea what to expect. The only thing the king said was the Baron, who had been sending so much money and wands these past few years, had another gift. William wanted the act to speak for itself.

The near-marathoners, facing them, levitated their loot closer, then saluted. One hundred thousand curious quads opened their new backpacks and screamed as one. The million people watching had no idea how to react. Then some Europeans hugged their American counterparts, and the rest joined in. In the process, they knocked over some backpacks and bucketfuls of coins, jewels, and bejeweled cups spilled out. The crowd now erupted into cheers.

Billy, wearing his father's bloody red body armor, led the marathoners over the parade ground. The boy did his scream and fire dance so that everyone could see him project flames from his boot wands. His ten thousand companions blasted the sky like a drum beat as Billy landed on a tower surrounded by French-speaking Americans.

"Genghis Khan must pay for his crimes. Today, he makes the first of many payments. Never have so few fought so many for so long for so little. This compensation is the least we can do for heroes who risked their lives for our freedom. We only ask that you give half to your comrades who have been disabled and to the families of those slain. But, to keep the Khan from taking this wealth back, you must join us tonight."

Billy didn't mention that his guys removed the precious gems and jewels for the ladies back home. He himself was accumulating a huge collection of diamonds.

When the Khan's vanguard got close enough, the Free Europe Air Force bombed them to bits. The Europeans had just enough time to strip the dead of their armor, money, and wands before Genghis arrived with reinforcements just before dawn. The Europeans fled as soon as the enemy appeared on the horizon, and the Mongols had already flown too far to pursue them.

The Americans, meanwhile, ate the Mongols food and took a nap a half-hour away. An hour after dawn, they returned to the camp. As William predicted, the Mongol reinforcements slept in the camp made by their vanguard. Unlike the Europeans, the Americans had not dropped their bombs. Until now. One hundred thousand explosions woke the tired bastards up and a million fireballs a minute finished them off. Genghis had already returned to his main force.

Instead of returning to France, the Americans flew around the Mongols to get their buried treasure on the Ural Mountains. While crossing Russia, they emptied every bank and overwhelmed every enemy unit that didn't get out of their way. Split into eleven divisions, they swept a wide path.

William gave money and stolen wands to a descendent of the old Czars called Ivan the Terrible so he could rebel with more than patriotic rhetoric. The rest he left with trainers to hire the ten thousand Russians and the ten thousand Scandinavians with the greatest endurance and turn them into formation fliers -- a process that takes years. He based them out of Helsinki because that's where he had just opened another bank branch.

Genghis moved on France determined to take Paris like a sexy bitch. He should have finished Europe long ago, but worried he'd run out of enemies for his quads to kill. He never told anyone this, but he feared civil war far more than any enemy. At least, until the Baron. Without an enemy, his millions of quads would turn on each other rather than suffer from withdrawal. Conquering the primitives in Africa and the Americas would probably cost more than it was worth.

Then he learned the Americans were not even in France anymore. Instead, they were robbing Bank of Mongolia branches in Russia while getting the treasure they left in the Urals.

Genghis groaned at hearing the news. This left him two choices: intercept them before they reached Scandinavia, or use his armada to crush French resistance. The prospect of burning Paris to the ground made his fingers twitch. But the French were much stronger now than just a few years ago, while he had sent his best battalions from Europe to Siberia, so it was not obvious that he could actually win with what he had. Especially since the Baron decimated his frontline troops. And if he did commit to conquering France, the Americans would probably attack him from behind.

Genghis sighed. The French would still be in France next year, while this could be his only opportunity to catch the Americans weighted down. If he let them go now, they'd surprise him again in the spring. France wasn't his enemy. The Baron was his enemy.

So Genghis rushed his armada north, not knowing Paris pissed themselves in fear. He couldn't let his weakest troops slow him down, so he personally led his fastest twenty divisions.

With twice as many quads, Genghis faced them outside St. Petersburg. The Americans camped after dark an hour away and slept early. The scout reports sounded too good to be true, so Genghis went in person to see for himself.

Sure enough, it looked like the Americans slept. If he took his entire force with him, he could have ended this before midnight. As it was, by the time he returned with troops, it'd be almost dawn. While the Americans didn't have any bombs

because they carried too much loot, the Mongols didn't carry any bombs so they could fly fast enough to intercept them.

But William didn't want the enemy well rested, so Billy harassed them all night. The kid had more energy than the Sun. Thousands of angry quads chased him as he dived out of the night to fireball their tents. If the Mongols did attack en force, Billy would have warned his father.

The Americans didn't wear armor so they could fly higher, faster, and farther. Which made sense in their hit-and-run raids. But in a pitched battle, when neither side has surprise, the side with armor enjoyed a lethal advantage.

Well, no time for surprises. This would be a large-scale maneuver battle, the kind that Genghis perfected centuries ago. The rest of his troops were only a day away, so he was surprisingly confident.

Before dawn, the Americans ate breakfast, formed up, and took to the air, leaving one hundred thousand backpacks on the ground. This told Genghis that they planned to fight. The Mongols spent the night in their armor, sleeping in formation, and so wasted no time rising to meet them. Genghis himself led the charge, eager to acquit himself after so many costly mistakes.

But, instead of a great clash, the Americans fired volleys whenever they enjoyed a favorable position, but otherwise didn't engage. The Americans could fly higher, and so exploited their advantage by making the Mongols search for them in the sun. This enraged the Mongols, who wanted to teach these bastards a lesson. And they did. Genghis couldn't help but notice how many screaming Americans plummeted to earth. The Mongols needed this to pump up their morale. Hour after hour they pushed the raiders back, decimating their ranks.

With their heavy armor and weaker wands, the Mongols tired first, forcing Genghis to rotate battalions. He patted himself on the back for having twice as many troops. The Americans, naturally, targeted units on the ground, so they rested under the reserve division for protection. While each Mongol had a water sack, each American carried several. Having planned on a long battle, the Americans also brought beef jerky and bread to eat in the air, while the Mongols started without even enjoying breakfast.

Genghis thought everything was going better than expected until he took a wild swing at an American who just killed a bodyguard. His opponent yelled in pain and fell screaming, but the Khan was pretty sure he missed. So he dropped below the fight and tracked the wounded quad. Not easy while avoiding blasts.

Then he saw it. His opponent regained control over his fall and flew below tree level. A long moment later Genghis believed he saw him streak over the horizon.

Genghis did not like it. Something was going on, so he watched carefully until an American killed a Mongol, then soon clutched his chest and dropped from the sky. When this guy, too, recovered to disappear among the ground clutter, Genghis felt a bad chill flow down his spine.

For some reason, it felt like the Americans were laughing at him.

His battalion of personal guards flew circle-8's around him. He called a messenger over to tell the reserve division to rest, then motioned for his security battalion to follow him when the next enemy fell.

Genghis dived at full power and caught the bastard just as he recovered. The Khan sliced off a leg and watched him fall into some trees. He landed to examine

the body. The fall broke his neck, but the Khan could not find any other wounds. Yet he couldn't be certain the American faked an injury. He fought for five hours, so why turn coward now? The Americans suffered just half as many casualties as the Mongols, and did not look ready to run.

Disturbed, Genghis ordered his battalion to rest, eat, and drink. Something told him he'd need them soon. He waited until the battle disappeared over the horizon, then led his men around so he could strike the Americans from behind. They dropped on the first enemy battalion that didn't see them and smashed their formation. Genghis himself killed three and wounded seven more in his best moment yet.

Units often pair up to watch each others back. Now, the enemy's companion battalion dropped on his security guards, canceling out their minor victory and giving the Khan his first serious burn of the day. Genghis returned them to his main force to better direct the battle.

By the time they pushed the raiders back over their camp, the Mongols still enjoyed 50% more quads. Genghis knew the enemy wouldn't leave without their precious plunder, which meant this was a fight to the finish.

Finally. Genghis needed a victory under his belt. His troops lost so much faith in him that he could see it in their eyes. The few with the balls to make eye contact.

Until then, the Khan believed he could still win. The battalion guarding the camp had been cooking and, as one, lifted food packs and water sacks to distribute to the one hundred thousand or so comrades in the sky. The entire American air force broke off to enjoy a brief lunch near their ceiling, putting the sun behind them.

Dumbfounded, the Mongols stared at them. In the middle of an hours-long battle, they were gonna eat? Really? In three centuries, that had never happened before.

Genghis assumed it was a trick. Like everyone else, he studied the skies for hidden enemies, then put a wand to an eye to examine the terrain below them.

Nothing. No hidden ambushers diving from above or soaring from below. No one. But if he could see over the horizon, he could watch an American division smash his reserves on the ground.

Genghis held his troops back, although he didn't yet understand why. The textbook move would have been a mass charge to catch the enemy literally while they were eating. But, instead, he reorganized his formations to better prepare for this final fight.

And that's when he noticed his quads diving to the defenseless American camp. Soon many others followed, gutting their formations. Genghis let himself go into a controlled freefall while putting a wand to one eye to see better. Even at this altitude, he noticed something bright glittering on the ground. Near the one hundred thousand backpacks full of stolen wealth.

Ah crap!

The Americans didn't even respond. They seemed more interested in eating than protecting their gold. His troops must have agreed, because what was a stream now became a flood. The first Mongols grabbed a backpack and flew off -- away from the battle. They got away clean, which encouraged the rest.

The butterflies in his stomach suddenly turned into worms. Insight into what was really happening struck him like a knee to the groin.

"Noooooooo!" Genghis yelled, signaling retreat at maximum volume while an invisible hand clenched his heart.

Most of his troops were allies or mercenaries, fighting for pay, not patriotism, and a backpack of coin was just too tempting to pass up. They all heard how the Americans gave their European counterparts more wealth than most families saw in a lifetime. So while half of his quads followed him back, the rest dived to steal backpacks.

Backpacks that Genghis realized must be full of rocks. The bastard outsmarted him again. This was the plan all along. To exhaust the Mongols, then lure the greediest away with false gold. That's why they camped so close! We didn't push them back, Genghis realized, they pulled us in! He could not even tell his troops because they couldn't hear him. The Americans faking wounds were probably positioning themselves to pounce on the Mongols lugging one hundred kilos of rocks.

Genghis roared "full retreat" and led it himself, diving to maximize speed. A glance over his shoulder showed the Americans on their tail -- some still eating. He knew they could cut up his slowest troops, but counted on his rested reserve division to run interference.

When Genghis saw a shadow in the sky, he rose expecting to see his reserves flying cover. Instead he saw an enemy division blocking their escape. Genghis signaled a sharp turn south to elude the trap. Later he would find the ten thousand corpses of his backup division. His security battalion, having recently rested, kept up, but the rest of his mighty armada could not. The difference in energy levels proved fatal.

Genghis flew up and the sight of thousands of Americans blasting his quads in the back made him sick because he knew the fault was all his. Kicking himself for his stupidity, Genghis led his one rested battalion to slow down the Americans.

Genghis thought he'd finally get the climatic battle he sought all day.

Instead the bastards blasted down volleys from above. One hundred thousand fireballs a second rained down on them. Genghis led the charge up, but the enemy only flew higher. The fastest quads died first and Genghis himself got crushed like a bug. A fireball hit his shield with such force that it broke his nose, which blurred his vision.

He recovered before splattering on the rocks, and saw his troops getting mauled a few clicks above. The Americans tracked them like a shark, descending just enough to get within lethal range. All too soon his exhausted armada disintegrated in all directions. They abandoned their formations and the fastest tried surviving at the expense of the slowest. The Americans gleefully chased them down.

Genghis Khan just lost another battle. He pissed away his best battalion for nothing. Humbled, he hugged the terrain at maximum speed.

He landed at his camp and ordered everyone to leave. He pillaged his own tent, but had to leave most of his stuff behind. He had to personally threaten the slowest staffers to launch.

And not a moment too soon. One hundred Americans rose over the horizon like a storm. Genghis popped up and flashed his four wands, hoping he could out-run

the bastards. Instead, the Baron flashed four wands, but otherwise ignored him, preferring to kill his support staff. One hundred quads chased a thousand, and would probably win.

Genghis had enough. He raced for his follow-on forces to turn them around before the Americans destroyed them, too. He lost the better half of his armada, and doubted he cost the enemy a thousand.

They seemed surprised to see him alone that evening, and even more surprised by the panicked expression on his face as he ordered them to fly back where they came from. The Khan didn't care that they just finished setting camp -- he wanted them in the air within an hour. Genghis was aware they thought he was delusional, but he couldn't afford to lose more troops. The Baron was killing his guys faster than his flight school could train them. His boast of infinite quads now felt like a cruel joke.

Later Genghis learned the bank gold the Americans accumulated on their way to the Urals had loaded them down, so they rested and feasted while waiting for the Khan to catch up. With the Great Khan now in retreat, the Americans deposited their stolen riches in Helsinki, then flew to the Urals for the rest of their loot, while crushing Mongol units and emptying Mongol businesses. Thousands of Russians eagerly took them to the richest Mongols.

On that long, lonely retreat, Genghis examined the trick the enemy pulled on him. Its brilliance was obvious. He thought he had seen everything, yet the Baron kept coming up with something new.

Then, like a lightning strike, he realized he was fighting a Mongol! Mongols valued deception over brute force because the better the deception, the fewer casualties suffered. So duelers, commanders, and generals who won by deception received the greatest respect. That's how a million Mongols, fielding just one hundred thousand quads, conquered half the world.

Now, how do I fight a Mongol? he wondered.

## **Chapter 20**

The Americans went home for the winter, so father and son finally dueled in Europe to avoid exposing the Boy Wonder.

Tommy waited until Billy finished his final kill of the day at the Budapest Arena. Billy, perceptive as always, became alarmed upon seeing his facial expression and stopped applying a wand to his nasty shoulder wound.

"An elite English unit ambushed your father coming out of Global Bank in Frankfurt. Cousin Lloyd gave him up for ten lousy kilos. Before dying under torture, which we recorded for you, we learned that Lloyd has no idea who you are or he'd have sold you out for a thousand times as much to the Mongols. Doctors and healers are doing what they can, but his wounds are severe."

"The queen ordered this?" the twelve-year old needed to know. He couldn't believe it. They just celebrated his birthday a few weeks ago at his mother's grave.



"They tricked Prince Richard into returning to England, then jailed him in his own castle. Only the queen could authorize that."

"Why kill my father?" Billy demanded.

Tommy shrugged. "To flush you in the open to remove a rival for the throne?"

"But I wouldn't take the crown even if they tried to give it to me."

Tommy looked so sad. "But did you ever tell them that? You could have renounced your claim years ago."

Billy never thought of that. "My dad's gonna die because I didn't renounce the throne? Seriously?"

"Prince John would have killed you anyways," Tommy lied with as much sincerity as he could fake.

They arrived a few hours later at the hospital. A dozen grieving English quads guarded his room. Billy found his dad slipping in and out of consciousness.

Billy could not put his grief into words. They had talked about this for years, unsure who'd be watching who die, but Billy still didn't feel prepared. His father had been teaching him government, politics, and economics. The more he learned, the more he learned how much he still didn't know.

When his father woke, Billy could tell he knew he was dying. "Billy, you're the last of my line. Promise me that you'll procreate soon so our line doesn't die out. Given the life you chose, you must assume you'll die young."

"I promise."

William coughed as a broken rib scratched a lung. "You're the Baron now, so take credit for what I've done so they'll continue to think the Baron is middle aged."

Billy needed to know something. "How many in that cemetery actually died fighting Mongols?"

William gasped, then chuckled. He beamed proudly at his son. "I could never fool you."

"Well, some of the gravestones are older than Genghis."

"We ruled the kingdom of Bohemia until we accepted semi-autonomous rule under the Holy Roman Empire, which was really fifteen hundred kingdoms barely governed by the Kaiser. An ancestor named Hildred wanted to become independent by breeding her own air force. She, her siblings, and dozens of cousins mated with powerful quads. But, by the time the children became parents themselves, she instead fought the Khan. There's no video, but family lore says she died attacking Genghis Khan himself."

"One more reason to make him suffer."

"That's the spirit!" dad said smiling, so pleased with his son, before looking miserable again. "But it was a total disaster. Rachel Richthofen could blast with her boot wands like you and Genghis, but rather than keep that secret, the family bragged that it finally had someone who could out-duel the Khan."

"Genghis had Subodei wipe out the whole area. Everyone. Almost a million innocents died because of us, so keep that guilt in mind the next time you wonder if you've gone too far. Rachel only survived because she had flown off to see this prodigy who got her pregnant. Genghis wanted to send a message, so they made the men watch the Mongols rape their mothers, sisters, and daughters before torturing the males to death. It took them months to rape thousands of women

and girls. Not just our family, or even just quads, but those they knew were innocent. At least we don't let our troops rape or torture."

"We screwed with Genghis a lot, though," Billy admitted.

William laughed so hard it hurt, which reminded him that he didn't have much time. "I died the day I lost your mother. It has been so hard to live without her. Only your company kept me going. I still can't believe how well you've turned out. Your mother says you made up in quality what was denied her in quantity.

"Don't be like me. Don't ever fall in love. Love is not just a choice, but a decision. At some level, you decide who you fall in love with. So close your heart because people you care for will die before you, and probably because of you. Find someone worthy as your primary mate, but assume you will lose her as I lost mine.

"You chose your life, so embrace it completely. You are among the few who live life on your own terms. Most people are cattle who never rise above their petty appetites and circumstances, while you're the solution to the greatest problem humanity has ever faced: never-ending world war. I want you to do what needs to be done to end this madness."

"Yes, father," Billy said between tears.

"You're the best damn son I could ever have asked for. I can't imagine a better life than the one you and your mother gave me." He paused to sip some water. "You must help your grandfather become king. Your mother would have wanted that."

"I will, father."

"I sent our latest super wands to our bank branch in Dublin. That's how that traitor found me. Our next marathon division should arrive soon. Use them wisely. If you lose too many to battle or disease, then no one else will ever follow you."

"I understand."

"Do the hard things that no one else can do. People will either call you a hero or a murderer, but you're just a soldier, and a soldier's job is to kill the few to save the many. It's what you're good at. It's what you were born for. Make no excuses, but don't pretend you're something you're not. Don't let anyone make you weak. Especially a woman. Stay strong and finish the job of returning Mongols to their historical irrelevance. Now take ownership of my Millennial Wands. My parents would have been so proud that I developed a twenty-five meter wingspan. I could probably beat Genghis Khan himself. When I had him trapped in that steel box of his, I almost did."

"Why didn't you, papa?"

"It'd have been too merciful. That mass murderer had not suffered enough. I want him to see his family die, his people die, and his empire die. I want everything he cherishes taken from him. I want you to break him like a sucked wand. Come to my grave and tell me when you have finished that ruthless monster. Every Mongol you kill saves a dozen innocents. Every Mongol is complicit in a crime against humanity, so destroy them as you would a cancer. Do to them what they've done to half the world, and wish to do to the other half."

"I'll make them pay, dad."

Something bothered William. "I was born in Prussia, but I never thought I'd die in Prussia."

"So you were finally wrong about something!"

William smiled so hard that Billy could tell a laugh was trying to escape. He closed his eyes like that, still smiling, his hand on his son's shoulder until it went limp. William sunk into unconsciousness, then stopped breathing. Billy sensed his soul leave the room like a wand losing its owner. It literally felt colder. Or maybe it was just Billy who grew colder inside.

Billy buried his father next to his mother in their ancestral home. He looked at the thousands of ancestors who died fighting the same damn war, looked at his own open grave, then swore he'd finish it. He promised his mama he'd help her dad, then told his father, "I'm gonna kill the bitch who murdered you."

## Chapter 21

Billy infiltrated at night and waited in the bushes until morning for his targets to begin their routine. He listened to his great-grandmother and great-uncle argue over money while he looked for guards.

He did not expect to like them, but was still surprised by just how much their abrasive personalities disgusted him. Genghis may not mind killing millions, but even enemies regarded him as a brave, charismatic visionary -- not arrogant pigs like these two. Whatever his faults, Genghis Khan inspired intense loyalty among those who knew him best. Whereas Billy couldn't decide which relative he disliked more.

"Grandma," he said as he extended his blades twenty meters away. They both turned to receive steel in their bellies. "My mother, Lady Elizabeth and my father, Baron von Richthofen, send their regards."

John thrashed about in tears, but strangely did not draw a wand. Queen Margaret coughed up blood.

Hey, I got a lung, Billy noted.

"Your men ambushed my father in the street. The best man I have ever known, cut down in his prime."

"It was him," the queen insisted, pointing at her son, as if this would save her.

"Yet you obviously did not stop him."

"It took them long enough," John sneered. "The idiots missed him last month in Budapest by just an hour."

Billy seethed. "Thank you for making me feel better."

"Oh, your turn will come soon, boy. Aidian is now twice as powerful as when your mother surprised him."

"You mean when a girl humiliated your son in front of his warriors? You messed with the wrong boy. I'm gonna exterminate your family," he said, projecting flame to roast them like pigs.

Their screams brought guards, so Billy flew away, easily out-racing his pursuers.

He landed in Windsor Castle by the Thames River so suddenly that he scared the hell out of the guards when he flashed his mega-flames. But, instead of

drawing wands, they stood at attention, and Billy thanked his foresight in stealing the suit of a commander.

"Who's in charge here?" Billy demanded while trying to deepen his voice.

One soldier smacked another, who ran into the castle and came back out with a smug prig. John must have put him in charge, but left Richard's men here, Billy realized.

"Take me to Prince Richard," the boy barked.

"And who the hell are you?" the prig demanded.

Billy used his wand to throw him higher into the air than anyone watching could possibly believe. Instead of drawing wand to fly, the fool bounced against the ground like a dead cat.

"I assumed he was a quad," Billy explained in the stunned silence. Well, it didn't look like anyone missed him. "Queen Margaret and Prince John are dead. Prince Richard is king. Long live the king!" Surprising Billy, the news electrified the men, who cheered enthusiastically. "Take me to him, then assemble for his inspection," he ordered the guy who smacked the soldier who got the prig.

Soldiers poured out, scared silly. They looked desperate to please rather than eager to attack. Billy, used to powerful quads, could not see a threat among them, so he followed the guard to the dungeon. When they finally reached his grandfather, Billy ordered the soldier out.

The prince looked tired and hungry in his cell, but not scared. He got off his thin cot and put his hands on his hips.

"So today's the day? John swore he'd do this himself. Is my brother too busy pulling strings?"

Billy didn't know what the hell he was talking about. "Where's George?"

Richard blinked. "My brother or his son?"

"A son? He's not gay?"

"The son, no. My brother is, definitely. But, apparently, not permanently."

"Where is he?"

Which confused Richard. "In France, you idiot! Now stop making me wait!"

Billy usually saw things so clearly. "Oh, right," he said, blasting the lock since he forgot to ask for the keys. The door rocketed back and almost smashed into Richard, who at least had the wits to jump back.

"You're not here to kill me?" Richard asked, hope infecting his voice.

"No, grandpa. I'm here to make you king. Sorry I waited so long. I've been busy destroying Mongol armadas."

Richard was not sure how seriously to take the boy. "Who are you?"

"Oh, sorry," Billy answered, taking off his helmet.

The prince stared at him. "I'm gonna need more than that. You got a name?"

"I've a few of them. You can't tell anyone, but in China I was the Boy Wonder, sometimes I was the Baron, but your daughter Elizabeth named me Billy."

"You're alive!" Richard yelled and embraced the boy in a great hug. "Someone at the bank said your father hired ten thousand Americans to depose the queen, so John sent a special unit after him. I was so sorry to hear about what happened to your mother."

"My father is dead, too. John's men ambushed him in the street."

Richard pulled back to look at him. "Those bastards."

Billy hit his forehead with his palm. "So that's why they killed him! But my father never intended to use the Americans in England. He was sending them to the Pyrenees."

That really confused Richard. "How could your father send American marathoners anywhere?"

"Mom never told you? Dad was the Baron."

Grandpa still didn't get it. "The baron of what?"

"The baron who sacked half of Mongolia. The baron who repeatedly defeated Genghis Khan in battle. The baron who took a million tons of wealth from the Mongol Empire. The baron who saved France. The baron that everyone in the world is talking about."

The new king needed to sit down. "Oh, that baron. And I worried Liz was marrying down. Wait! My idiot brother murdered the Baron? I'll kill the imbecile!"

"I already killed Queen Margaret and Prince John. Mother wanted me to make you king because you didn't have the balls to kill your own mother. Now I'm going to Edinburgh to slay John's family."

"That bitch is finally dead?" Richard said of his own mother. "But his family will kill you!"

Billy showed him the layers of scars on his arms while igniting his forty meter wingspan. "I've killed a million Mongols. I think I can handle Aidian. Oh, mama asked me to give your grandfather's wands back to you, with her thanks. She was also sorry for the suffering her actions caused you. She killed a few thousand enemies in battle, so they're finally decent now."

Richard held up the wands that he gave his daughter for her eighteenth birthday. It seemed so long ago. "It is I who am sorry for the suffering that I caused her."

"Oh, she was pretty happy. Mom recorded a message for you." Billy played it, then played it again because grandpa couldn't possibly see it through all those tears.

"She was born to rule England."

"She didn't want to rule England. Instead, Mama wanted you to rule England. And grandpa," Billy said with a menacing tone that contrasted sharply with his baby face, "as king, I expect you to make my mother proud."

Richard looked slack-jawed at the twelve year old. He could not believe what his eyes plainly told him: the boy meant it.

"Can the Baron really flame his boot wands?" the king asked.

To answer, Billy popped in the air and blew fire from all four wands. Richard clutched his heart and Billy wondered if he killed his closest relative.

"I've seen all your videos!"

Billy laughed. "Not all of them. I have a longer version of the time I smashed the Khan's groin." That made grandpa sad. "Now what's wrong?"

The big guy held out Elizabeth's sticks. "Genghis Khan himself gave this set to his grandson, my grandfather, when he first torched a wand at age six. Like you, he could use boot wands to blast, which was a death sentence if Genghis found out. Queen Maude married him because she desperately needed quad descendents, and grandpa was more powerful than any Englishman then alive. He married the queen for protection, in case Genghis ever heard rumors of his ability.

"He was three-quarters Romanian nobility and not even the queen knew he was the Khan's grandson. I loved the guy—they say I look just like him—but I didn't believe him until he blew fire from all four wands. He only showed me to explain what happened to my brother."

Richard sighed. "I'm not the oldest. My brother Henry also had your ability, but not your discretion. He encouraged the rumors until one of his many Irish lovers recorded him showing off. She sold it for a fortune and Henry soon died in a mysterious accident. This not only made mother hate the Irish, but scared her into making me breed as much as possible. Grandfather drank himself to death, hating his grandfather with his dying breath. And passing that hatred down to me."

"So that's why you gave mom these wands!"

"It seemed fitting. Are you really gonna make me king?"

"If you don't piss yourself when I present you to the troops in the courtyard. They took the news of your kingship like gold. Can you walk?"

Grandpa tested his grandfather's sticks. "Get me out of here and I can fly."

In the courtyard, the men seemed more concerned about staying in formation than in preventing Richard's escape. Billy sent a loud blast into the sky to announce the king's presence. Terrified, they sprung to attention and Richard had never felt more flattered.

"Queen Margaret and Prince John are dead. Richard is your new king. Kneel and swear your oath of allegiance to him."

Richard's men did so eagerly.

"Send help when you can," Billy told his grandfather, flying off before waiting for an answer.

## Chapter 22

Billy had never been to the Matriarch's home, so it took him a while to find it. Dogs barked furiously as he landed in the front yard. A tall girl emerged from the granger armed with two wands, clearly willing to use force to defend her home.

"Emily?" he asked, a smile lighting up his face. It felt so wonderful to see her again. Last he heard, she was dueling constantly.

"Billy!"

The way he ran to her with so much joy almost made her forget her badly burned face. If he noticed it, he did not show it. He lifted her in his arms and twirled her around, laughing like he had forgotten how.

"It's so damn good to see you," he said, nose to nose, after finally putting her down. The way he held her close delighted her. No man had ever held her close before. He certainly had grown up. Literally, he was almost taller than her.

"Why are you here, Billy?"

"Prince John had my father murdered, so I killed him and the queen, then freed Richard so he could become king. Now I'm gonna kill John's family at Edinburgh since they'll oppose his succession. Well, mostly because I'm pissed, but also to protect grandpa."

Emily stared blankly at him, not believing what he said, but not doubting that it was true.

"Can I come with you?" she asked as if he was off to the store.

His face lit up. "You'd risk your life for me? Again?"

"Of course. I have nothing to lose. I'm surprised I haven't died dueling in Europe."

Billy didn't like how she said that. "What do you mean? A young, beautiful, powerful quad like you has everything to live for."

Emily smiled down at him. "Guys don't court stronger quads. Much less ones whose faces have been burned off."

"But you're gorgeous! You've always been gorgeous."

Wow! Emily drank that compliment, and the worm that came with it. "Men look at me like a freak, not as a woman."

Billy blinked to clear his eyes. "I can't see you as a freak. Freaky, hopefully, but not a freak."

Emily almost pitied him. She leaned forward and turned so he could not miss her burned face. "Scars make men look better and women look worse. Men with scars look like heroes while women with scars look like victims."

"But that's nothing!" he insisted. "It didn't even ruin your eye, nose, or mouth, and your other cheek is good as new. Ha! You call that a scar? Behold!"

Billy took off his shirt and turned around so Emily could see literally thousands of scars from cuts, burns, and bruises. Layers of impacts made him look like the surface of the moon. It was much worse since the last time she saw him.

"How did you survive so many wounds?" she asked.

Billy laughed, held up his left palm, and cut it open. Blood flowed out for just a few heartbeats before the skin began stitching itself together again. He closed his eyes to hurry it along, his left hand wand practically glowing. By the time his eyes opened, the cut looked like just another fresh scar.

"No wonder you don't fear battle."

"Apparently I heal several times faster than most quads. I paid librarians to research it, but they couldn't find anyone with my recuperative ability. Even my flame length does not explain it. Dad think it's because I owned the world's most powerful wands while so young. Growing up sucking so much juice affected my development."

"You must juice every day."

Billy could not make eye contact. The hands tracing his scars felt too good.

"I'm never off the juice. Before I duel all day, I'll suck an entire wand dry. Before battle, I'd share a wand with my parents, then we'd heal our burns afterwards by sucking dry another wand. I always pick my weakest captured wand, but I never have wands that are really weak. Transferring ownership keeps the demons away, but nothing compares to fresh juice. Each wand tastes different. Some are even too bitter to drink, while others feel like a hot saltwater bath. I know I wouldn't have to drink so much juice if my body didn't need to heal so frequently, but I can't stop now."

"Your body cannot take this punishment forever," she pointed out.

"Yeah." He already reached that conclusion. "So many great wands transfer their power to me that I simply have too much energy to keep still. I need to duel or fly just to burn off that excess energy. It's like I over-heat."

Although his expression didn't change, something flashed across his eyes. "What are you afraid to say, Billy?"

He sighed deeply like an old man who has to get out of bed again to pee. "Nobody has ever had a wand addiction half as powerful as mine, yet super-quads die when they stop juicing. So I must kill or die. But what happens when there's no one left to kill?"

"The irony is that I honestly believe I can win this war, but winning means my death because I cannot survive without dueling. Peace will be the death of me. Everyone else is afraid of losing; I'm afraid of winning. Sure, I may be able to reduce the dependency by flying a thousand clicks daily and blasting craters in bedrock, but otherwise I'll suffer withdrawal symptoms so severe I'll convulse for weeks. I'll be like a big newborn, unable to eat food or control my bowels. So if the war doesn't kill me, the peace will.

Emily shook her head sadly. "Well, that explains the risks you take."

Billy laughed harshly. "I cannot even risk myself too much because my parents commanded me to reproduce first. As soon as my dad noticed me looking at girls a few months ago, he took me to a porn shop and bought everything they had. I've never felt so uncomfortable in my life. I sucked those wands dry without looking at any of them. He practically begged me to lose my virginity. Almost as if he knew his time was near."

"I'd rather die than grow old as a virgin," Emily said.

That blew Billy away. "How can you still be a virgin? With that face and body?"

Emily swooned. "It'd be a shame if we died virgins."

"Wouldn't it, though? Two powerful prodigies like ourselves should beget an even more powerful quad before we go. I'll have failed my father if I let our line go extinct."

Emily couldn't believe their conversation. "You should reproduce with the first quad you see, or else fear of failing will warp your tactical sense."

"Exactly!"

Now, neither knew what to say, so they started laughing.

"I guess it's premature to talk of children when no man has even kissed me."

"Me neither!" Billy said with a smile. "We should get that off the table right away."

Emily's smile kept growing. "Absolutely."

"I'm gonna kiss you just as soon as I stop smiling," Billy promised.

"Nervous?"

"Yes, damn it!"

They laughed comfortably together.

They kept looking into each other's eyes so much that Emily wondered if he'd ever kiss her. Finally, his face closed the distance and their lips met. Lightly they brushed, at first, since neither had ever done this before. Then she pressed back, her urgency releasing her. They locked lips and he felt her hands explore his body. When she slipped her tongue in his mouth, he accidentally shot up in the air, which conveniently put his erection right in front of her face.



"I swear I didn't mean to do that!"

She laughed and pulled him down to her. They'd have plenty of time later to try things in the air.

The Matriarch prepared tea in her home when one of her many great-grandchildren came in.

"A shirtless boy is kissing Emily outside, grandma."

Lost in thought, she worried about Prince Richard, the father of her ten children. Jailed without charges, everyone assumed he'd never leave his cell alive. The child waited, then kicked grandma in the shin.

"Emily is kissing a half-naked boy outside. Just thought you should know."

The child ran before grandma recovered her wits, then flew outside with wands drawn.

"Billy?"

He stopped kissing long enough to say, "oh hi Susan," as if everything was normal.

"What are you doing here, Billy? Besides kissing Emily."

He matter-of-factly told the deaths of his father, John, and the queen. He sounded so old.

"The queen is dead? We have to help Richard escape!"

"Oh, I freed him. I made the few hundred guys at his castle swear him fealty as their king. Now I'm gonna kill John's family at Edinburgh."

The Matriarch shocked the boy by hugging him for saving the man she loved. She hadn't wept since she failed Elizabeth.

"I've been looking forward to finding the bastards who ambushed my dad while my mother was giving birth to me. That attack cost me some little brothers and sisters."

"Well, you can't fight now, Billy. You're exhausted. We have plenty of empty beds here. I'll go pass the word for the family to meet you just south of the castle at dawn. Our male quads are working far away for the bank, but I can probably find a few dozen women and teenage quads who can help."

"You're gonna find housewives and kids to attack Castle Edinburgh?" he asked skeptically.

"I'm gonna recruit some of the best damn quads in the country. Emily, take care of the kids until your aunts come home. I won't be back tonight because I have a lot of flying to do."

Susan left without ever suspecting that she gave them the opportunity to lose their virginity.

## Chapter 23

They hid in a nearby dear park while an unusual amount of fliers entered and exited the castle. Instead of fearing an attack, the fortress looked busy organizing one.

The two dozen quads who came with Susan seemed surprised she ceded leadership to the new kid. Few had ever killed anyone, and only Emily seemed eager. The prospect of attacking several hundred people in a damn castle unnerved most of them.

Billy made it simple. "I should be able to slip in with my baby face. Position yourselves as close as possible to the guards and kill them when you hear the first blasts so that they can't leave the ramparts to overwhelm me. Then blast the biggest threats."

No one paid attention to the twelve year old as he strolled through the open gates. He crossed the courtyard to where everyone gathered in the Great Hall. He felt naked with his face uncovered.

The Great Hall justified its name. The warriors gathered around several tables in the middle. Billy walked over, taking in the high ceilings and rows of large windows. A few dozen followers heeded Aidian's call and gathered behind him. Someone big bumped Billy. He turned to look up at a burly guy who desperately needed a bath. Well, needed a bath more than most Englishmen.

Aidian explained his plan while gesturing to a huge map. The foul-smelling bully bumped him again, giving Billy an idea.

Billy pointed his hand wands behind him, making sure they did not slice the bully. He extended them, retracted, extended, and retracted sideways as the first groups yelled out in pain and fell. He now sliced through those between him and the quads along the tables twenty meters away. Then Billy, clutching his chest, pointed at the barbarian behind him and yelled "traitor!" He yelped like a girl losing her virginity and collapsed on the floor among the other wounded. Anyone who saw his baby face dismissed him as harmless.

The bewildered mercenary stood alone, fallen bodies all around him. An athletic quad popped into the air. His shots flew over Billy into the bully, smashing him across the floor.

"Help the wounded," someone yelled. Billy slid his hand into the bloody back in front of him and smeared his cheap overcoat with blood. He heard Aidian argue with what had to be his shrill domineering wife. Everyone else seemed preoccupied with the wounded, so Billy limped to position himself.

They all heard a firefight start near the battlements. A herd of quads ran towards the huge oak door. Billy ran even faster, slashing at them from behind. Those who turned towards the cries of pain were the next to die. It shocked Billy how long it took them to figure out someone was killing them. When he heard a volley from the quads behind him, he popped up without even turning around and watched a dozen fireballs explode into the fools he was cutting down. Billy took advantage of so many quads with their backs to him, moving unpredictably above them while fireballing the survivors. The enemy had helpfully concentrated themselves near the doorway to make avoidance difficult. Those in front went down in flames, exposing the rest to incredibly hot, impossibly large balls of fire. The inferno ignited the solid oak doors, preventing easy escape.

One of the many tiny fireballs shot from behind Billy struck him hard enough for him to notice. He popped sideways to put the burning people between him and the remaining enemy, which also gave him a new angle to blast enemies. One quad hurt so bad he cried at the top of his lungs like a colicky baby until Billy

moved his stream of fire right into his mouth. Several quads flew at him, but not in any coordinated way. Billy easily avoided their short swords, while giving them fatal wounds. Another dozen ran—not flew—closer to blast him, but he evaded their fire and hurled fireballs at them like lightning bolts. The few who popped up were nailed in the air, which flung their flaming bodies towards the cowards in the back of the hall.

With his back to the wall and ceiling, Billy studied the tactical situation. He killed or injured about half. Over one hundred still remained, but half of them were backing away instead of massing to swarm him. They looked more scared than he, despite the numbers. Mongols spoiled him. This was easier than target practice.

"Good morning, cousins!" he cheerfully called out, as smoke from people on fire spread like an English fog. It took them a surprisingly long time to guess who he was. He assumed Aidian was a combat veteran who'd think quickly on his feet. Apparently, not so much.

"You're that bitch's bastard!" a richly dressed lady shouted.

"Your assassins cut my father down in the street without warning," Billy shouted. "So I challenge you all to a duel to the death!"

Aidian's wife and youngest son reacted far quicker than Aidian. The kid, a few years older than Billy, failed to weave in time. Billy's blast obliterated him and covered his mother's face with burning flesh, who screamed in horror until Billy sliced her head off. It bounced towards Aidian's feet, who stared at it in horror.

Aidian's brothers charged. Billy rose to give himself enough room to dodge. His cousins, however, had less success evading his much wider, hotter, and faster blasts. Billy took out both two-wanders to concentrate on Aidian. They both went to blades, their swordfight criss-crossing one end of the great hall.

"Did you know about the assassins in Frankfurt?" Billy demanded.

"Only if they're the same soldiers I sent to Budapest." Aidian answered hotly.

"It was you!" Billy backed away and sent an ax straight to Aidian's groin that struck deep enough to reach his belly button, something that his mother should have done years ago.

Something then hit Billy in the low back and he smelled his own burning flesh. He instantly changed direction to avoid the next blast and shot a wounded quad on the floor, engulfing him in fire.

If they all attacked en masse, they may have won, but more went on defense than offense, as if hiding behind tables would save them. Those tending the wounded only delayed death.

Billy swept the Great Hall from his end to the other, not leaving anyone alive behind him. He poured fire at the densest clusters of enemies who ironically huddled together for safety. Most foolishly stayed on the ground, though they could move several times faster in the air than on the floor. Those who launched themselves did not attack as a group. He could stay outside of their lethal range, but they could not stay outside of his. In a matter of minutes he killed everyone in the Great Hall.

Next, Billy flew from window to window and shot at whoever in the castle had their backs to him. The size and location of the Great Hall rendered most of the castle within range. Even those farthest away didn't see the blasts coming.

The women and teenagers fought aggressively. He saw Emily pop down under a quad to slice off a leg, then blast him as he fell. The scene made Billy rock hard.

He expected a battle, but instead found a massacre. There could be no peace as long as they lived, so he torched the royal palace, the barracks, and the sleeping quarters, burning dozens of people alive.

"Collect their wands before they grow cold," he shouted to his family.

Having kicked ass, Billy found the Matriarch taking names.

"Except for John's wife, who's probably on her father's estate, we got everyone important. You burned several kids in the palace, who were probably the children of Aidian's brothers. Congratulations," she said, keeping her tone neutral, "you exterminated John's line like he tried to exterminate yours."

Billy didn't pretend to feel remorse. "Then no one should contest Richard for the crown, which may save thousands of lives. Please send someone to tell the king the good news and ask him to send me a decent suit of body armor. Then come to the vault to see if they left us any goodies."

As his family took the valuables off the dead, as was their right as victors, Billy flew to the northern face of David's Tower to find the arrow slit gone. Instead he blew open the door in the bottom of the tower, rather than find the key, then blasted the hinges off the ancient vault. When Susan arrived, she screamed in joy at the sight of the jewels.

"John has more money than the treasury," was the Matriarch's first impression. "Richard is going to need all this to fix the country."

"No," Billy answered. "I'd rather lend him whatever he needs. Instead, divide this among everyone who fought with us today, according to how many enemies they killed. I don't need a share."

This kid just made her family rich. "Sure, Billy."

"Haul the valuables to safety and find us more quads so we can ambush other enemies as they come here."

The Matriarch was not used to being ordered around, but wasn't going to bite the hand that fed her. "You remind me of your father."

The compliment startled the boy. "That is the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me."

"You're welcome."

## Chapter 24

Warriors from both sides flew to Castle Edinburgh all day. Several hundred enemy supporters arrived, but in small groups.

Billy blasted a long trench along the edge of the forest to display the dead bodies. He made sure the earth piled up on the side away from the forest so that the enemy would land with their backs to the trees. Where his two-wanders hid. The women and children pretended to cry over the richly dressed corpses whenever their scouts signaled fliers coming. Billy turned having only women and children from a negative to a positive.

Billy reveled in his good fortune: his enemies not only came to him piecemeal, but landed with their backs to his ambushers. It was something his father would have appreciated.

But good luck never lasts long. Billy looked west to see one hundred quads and two-wanders flying in formation. But instead of stopping near the corpses, the enemy landed inside the castle and manned the ramparts. After far too long, the quads flew over them and the forest, taking their time, before landing a safe distance from the bodies.

"What happened here, boy?" the eldest man demanded impatiently of Billy, who wore a guard uniform.

"We didn't have patrols up, so they took us by surprise. I got knocked out. The few of us who survived prepared the dead for burial, but wanted to give family members the opportunity to identify loved ones."

"I sent three teams here, and none came back. What happened to them?"

Uh oh. "The usurper's supporters ambushed them from the air, sir. They have left us alone since we're burying the dead."

"Come here, boy."

Ah, crap. They know. Billy noticed them spread out, wands in hand, eyeing the woods. He dared not look at his three dozen women and teenagers pretending to cry.

"Yes, sir!" Billy answered, walking with an exaggerated limp the long way around the trench, knowing the old man wanted him to fly over so they could blast him when he used his wands to land. Billy ignored the yells as he stretched their line out. No sooner did he round the trench than four quads hopped over to take him from behind as others met him head on. Anyone but the world's best dueler would have been screwed.

Wands unexpectedly appeared in his hands, followed by unbelievably long swords that Billy used to cut down those in front of him. He blasted the line of quads because it's so much easier to hit them on the ground, then fired on those behind him, who were taking fire from the two-wanders. Caught in a crossfire, Billy took out two and the two-wanders killed two.

Now he could focus on the main group, now exchanging fire with his own quads, and the two-wanders from the forest rushing to their aid. Billy hit their flank. He darted from side-to-side and up-and-down to strike down one enemy after another, rolling them up piecemeal while his team fixed their position.

Dueling just a few at a time enabled him to mow them down. The old guy must have come to the same conclusion because his wand screamed for backup. Three squads of two-wanders flew from the castle. Billy needed to intercept them, but faced twin brothers who fought as a team.

Quads resort to swords at close range because wands have a lag time between shots—wands must "breathe." The more powerful the wand, the faster it can re-fire, but most wands need a heartbeat to recharge. At close range, that's enough time for an opponent to slice a quad open, so fliers fired until an enemy got too close, then drew steel to defend against steel. Quads can zip away from an incoming blast easier than they can avoid two long weightless swords coming at blinding speeds.

Billy blocked a sword when a blast from his brother struck him full in the chest. A more powerful fireball would have engulfed him. He saw it too late, turning before it hit.

The brothers used an old technique: one occupied with a sword while the other fired, then they switched so the enemy faced both a sword and a blast every heartbeat. It works well two-on-one, and even better four-on-one.

Oh, how he longed for his own armor. His shirt burning his skin, Billy flew up with his boot wands to concentrate on removing what was left of his smoking chest plate. He fired down at the closest brother, hitting him right in the face, before soaking up his wands to heal his own crispy skin. Billy often went through a dozen sets of body armor when fighting all day in the arena. Today, he just discarded his second set.

Two-wanders can't bob and weave like a quad, so commanders used them as a group to shell an area. Billy raced to catch the third squad. Formation flying with the leader in front of three lines of three, Billy only needed two swings of each long sword to slice them up. He didn't kill them, but the cuts made them tumble to the ground. A powerful burst of speed and he matched speed and angle with the second squad. Billy cut them quickly and raced to the first squad, now about to fire their first volley.

Billy got them first, then shot down at the enemy, starting with the quad crying over his smoldering brother. Billy's quads instinctively surged forward as the enemy turned to face the new threat behind them, while several fled back to the castle.

The problem with running away, as every defeated army learns, is it lets the enemy attack from behind. Just as cavalry chases down an enemy running away, so did Billy, Susan, and Emily. The last one made it within range of those manning the ramparts, but it did him no good as Billy trusted his maneuverability long enough to slice the guy's legs off.

Now all of Billy's quads hovered over one side of the castle to pick off the defenders, then moved to another area. The enemy foresaw the result and hid within buildings, which limited a quad's maneuverability. Billy's two-wanders now re-entered the fight, and with superior numbers they overwhelmed each pocket of resistance.

Not bad for a bunch of women and kids.

## **Chapter 25**

After sunset Uncle Richard arrived with a few hundred quads and grim news.

"The bitch John mated with is now the center of resistance. She comes from a large family. Many English estate-owners lording it over the Scottish owe their land to her access to the crown. They've been recruiting soldiers and hiring mercenaries. The latest report says they number a couple thousand. If true, they could move against London itself. The king needs every warrior he can get."

"How far away are they?" Billy asked.

"About two hours southwest of here. We don't know if they'll move tomorrow morning or wait for more men."

"Then we'll hit them late tonight. Sound asleep is the best time to attack a man or an army. At best we break them, and at worst we give the king more time and fewer enemies."

Richard was not alone in noticing that his twelve-year old nephew issued a command rather than make a suggestion. Few knew he spent the last few years helping destroy the greatest air forces the world has ever seen. Billy's problem was that he looked his age without acting his age. But Richard knew because he used Global Bank to help Billy and his father.

"Oh, I have something for you," Richard said excitedly. He peeled off his backpack and took out a beautifully crafted red suit of armor. "King Richard's grandfather gave it to him when he won the national dueling championship as a teenager, but the king quickly outgrew it. You said you needed a suit, and he thought it may fit." Billy stared open-mouth at the gorgeous suit like most people stare at a ton of stacked gold. "A famous craftsman made it. Took him years and cost a fortune. It has features that minimize burn-through."

"What's the catch?" Billy asked.

"It'll only fit someone skinny. Dad got thicker when he hit adulthood."

Richard helped Billy put the armor on.

"Oh, I needed this earlier today." Billy walked around, popped up in the air, zigzagged over them, then landed softly. "How can I get thousands of these?"

"We could set up a shop in London. We can recruit the best craftsmen in the world."

"No," Billy replied. "I want one of those new mass-production factories that England has made so famous. Better armor will give us an edge over our enemies. Take one hundred tons to get started."

Richard, old enough to be his grandfather, had trouble getting used to having a kid for a boss.

"Put up sentries and have someone wake us at midnight," Billy said, walking away. "Susan, please keep an eye on the enemy. Emily, would you help me take off my armor?"

Too horny to sleep, the teenagers took advantage of their privacy. At midnight Billy addressed his troops in the courtyard.

"My cousin Aidian was a busy boy. For weeks, his foundry made steel arrows with heavy metal tips. They are light enough to carry dozens of them; yet, unlike wand blasts, they fall silently from the heavens. We can't leave them here or they may be used against us while we sleep, so I propose we give them back. Tonight. While the enemy sleeps in the open."

Billy blew up a three dimensional image of the enemy campsite.

"Susan recorded this two hours ago. Judging by the dying fires, they probably number a couple thousand. Most are either mercenaries or retainers. The only ones who want to kill King Richard are those related to Prince John's wife. In other words, the rich farts spending this cold night inside the various homes on her estate.

"Here's the plan: from five hundred meters we'll drop into a controlled fall, spaced ten meters apart, and throw arrows at targets below. When you run out of

arrows, start blasting everyone below you. While two-wanders wipe out those inside the buildings, the quads will either defend them or attack the enemy from the air. I'll lead a team against the most important targets, the duchess and her father.

"If we wipe out the existing owners, it'll be that much easier for King Richard to reward his most important supporters with their land, so make sure everyone dies. You won't get their stuff if you let any of them surrender. Victory must be total for it to translate into lasting peace, but don't burn the buildings because you may soon own them. After we've won, search every person and room for valuables. Just because we risk our lives doesn't mean we have to do it for free," he said to great cheers. "The difference between rebels and revolutionaries is success. Follow me and we'll end this insurrection tonight."

The crowd roared, eager to pump themselves up before killing a bunch of strangers.

Billy pulled the Matriarch aside. "After we remove the threats in the mansion, find the vault. Divide whatever we find equally."

The two-wanders took off first, since quads can easily catch up. Billy left last since he could fly the fastest.

They dropped from a kilometer up. Soon, thousands of steel-tipped short spears sought out enemies. A few hundred meters later the sky thundered with a tremendous volley that smashed the surface below as if the Sun vomited. A firestorm sought out anyone dumb enough to fire back. Everything flammable burned bright. Most stared up in shocked disbelief, unable to comprehend a seemingly supernatural phenomena. Others fled as if the devil himself attacked. The few who shot back died quickly and survivors flew blindly into the woods, often slamming into trees in the dark.

Billy saw an old woman with a wand stick her head out the window. He chopped off her head as he landed, then blasted at the shadows inside. He entered and kicked in the door to the next room, firing at a couple sitting up in bed. He heard other blasts as Richard, Emily and the Matriarch blew through the front door. The memory of his dying father in mind, Billy blasted room after room. He came upon an unarmed boy no older than himself and engulfed him in a ball of fire, giving the enemy no more mercy than they'd give him.

He found an old lady cursing Richard in the grand entrance by the stairs. This had to be the duchess, whose family had Billy's father killed. The others were blasting upstairs, so Billy thrust steel through the old lady's midsection to shut her up. She fell and turned to see who stabbed her literally in the back.

"You!" she accused Billy.

"You!" he accused her back, smashing her jaw to shut her up for good. "Go help the others," he barked at Richard, who looked strangely sluggish at this authority figure who intimidated him his entire life.

Billy flew to the nearest fight outside and savaged the enemy. Instead of one grand battle, dozens of fighters fought individual duels on their own. Billy's wand signaled "attack" and his quads overwhelmed the pockets of resistance, then chased those who fled too slowly. If the entire enemy fought as a group, they may have won, but too many fled, so the bravest died first. Billy chased down enemies until past dawn, his energy, like his rage, inexhaustible.



He found his team still celebrating their painless victory. The Matriarch carefully counted out the vast treasure they found in the vault, each of them estimating their share. People he just met hugged him. Many had apparently been living on the edge of poverty and couldn't believe their good fortune -- which was literally a fortune to them. Billy felt bad for not sending them money long ago.

While Billy ate breakfast, Richard told him the Matriarch needed to show him something in the mansion. He entered the master bedroom to see Susan holding a baby girl. She did not need to explain the dilemma. If Billy wanted the baby dead, he'd have to do it himself. Billy's reaction surprised her. He took the baby into his arms like a new father.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Knowing that he just had her parents killed did not bother him. "Susan, I'll pay a kilo a year for eighteen years if you find someone to raise the baby as her own. But she can never know who her real parents were. Agreed?"

As if the Matriarch had an alternative. They couldn't just leave the baby here. And he offered more than most families earn.

Susan was so moved that she shocked Billy by kissing him on the forehead.

## **Chapter 26**

Much to everyone's relief, the threat of civil war passed as quickly as it came. One night England went to sleep with a queen, then woke up with a king. Billy wanted to contrast the bad old queen with the good new king, so he practically emptied Global Bank vaults in France and Spain to boost the English economy. He loaned a thousand gold tons to his grandfather to build infrastructure, schools, and hospitals and ordered Global Bank to buy good land. With more money than he knew what to do with in the Americas, Billy arranged for a ship in the Atlantic to bring a mixture of gold, silver, and bronze coins to Global Bank in England.

But the prospect of fame scared Billy like influenza. This forced him to order everyone to delete all images of him. Billy survived through anonymity—the distribution of his image could jolt Genghis Khan into discovering that the Boy Wonder didn't die in Peking after all.

Billy needed to disappear. Once again, he had to become someone else. Ironically, fame forced him to flee the country like his parents. Except this time he flew with his uncle Richard to Dublin to get his wands, then find the new division of American marathoners. The first division was still in Siberia playing cat and mouse with half a million Mongols.

They found their camp easily enough, but he only counted seven battalions. Most crowded around an air field to watch an American football game -- where teams score by moving a ball past their opponents. Billy saw a player levitate the ball to a teammate a few hundred meters above him, who promptly passed it in an arc to a receiver diving steeply. She caught it with her wand before it hit the ground and raced passed the defenders to score a touchdown.

They told him the division commander was the big guy in the dueling area. Billy and Richard signaled a greeting, then landed far enough away to appear non-threatening. Billy recognized him at once.

"Tiny! It's me, Shorty."

"Shorty? Nice suit! Are you sure it's red enough? You going to a dance later?"

"Willy died, so I'm your employer now."

The huge Indian broke into tears before his commanders. This was a quad so tough that ten thousand marathoners chose him as their leader.

"The bastards got Willy? How?"

"Queen Margaret assassinated him, so I killed her and those responsible. England now has a new king."

"The English got Willy? Why?"

"They thought this division was coming to overthrow them."

All the battalion commanders came from the first division, so Billy knew these guys. Or thought he did. The news melted them like butter. Tiny unsteadily sank to the ground.

"How many times did Willy save us?" one of them wailed.

"The man could read Genghis Khan like a map."

"Best guy I've ever known."

"Saved the lives of every American. Genghis would've exterminated the entire continent, for sure."

"I can't believe the Baron's gone."

"He was a giant," Tiny agreed.

Billy had no idea. Well, he knew the troops liked his father, but he didn't know they loved him. This was more than hero worship.

"Were you two together long?" Tiny asked Billy.

It took a long moment to understand what he meant. Because they slept next to each other and neither slept with women, the troops assumed they were gay.

"Willy was my father."

They reacted like he lit up a room. Some laughed while others apologized. It all made sense now.

"Your father was a dad to all of us."

"The Mongols cannot know that Willy is dead, so I'll be the Baron from now on. You must convince the new guys that I'm the old Baron." Billy waved to his uncle. "This guy represents Global Bank. Anyone who doesn't already have an account needs to sign up to get paid. I've brought some great wands for you all to fight over."

Excited now, Tiny shrieked his wand to call a leadership meeting. Unit commanders soon crowded around them. "This is the Baron. Protect him as if the lives of every American depend on it."

Everyone cheered and wanted to shake his hand. Rather than be crushed by their affection, Billy dumped the wands before them.

"You only get one set, and you must donate your worst backup set to the group. I have a simple rule: the stronger quad gets the better wand, so if two or more fliers contest a set, he or she who can extend flame longer gets them."

Instead of giving the strongest wands to the weakest marathoners, Billy preferred to give them to the strongest fliers since they'd have the most dangerous missions.

Billy and Richard left to get something to eat since the marathoners would not pay attention to anything else until they settled who got which wands. When they returned in the morning, the troops gave him a standing ovation. Another battalion had landed, so he introduced himself by doing his infamous scream and fire dance. Richard, who had never seen it in person, turned ghostly white.

"You should see the Mongols' reaction!" Tiny joked to much laughter. "Shorty, you should know that American Jack tried to steal some of us. We already signed our contracts, but the next class may graduate next year, so you may want to hire them now before Jack recruits them for his invasion thing."

"What could he possibly be invading?"

"Africa."

Billy laughed. "Africa? With a few thousand marathoners?"

Tiny shook his head. "He's been planning this for years. They say a million quads and their families are willing to move there to deny African resources to the Mongols. Gold, diamonds, lumber—the Khan is stripping the place. Jack wants to take their operations to bankrupt the Empire."

And to get filthy rich himself.

"I'll get the next class of marathoners signed up. I need them too badly to let a buffoon like Jack take them from me. When will the other battalions get here? I have a busy campaign planned."

"They should arrive within the week. A storm held them up. You're taller than I remember. If you're gonna lead us, you may want a better name than Shorty."

Billy looked at his beautiful red suit and decided on something more impressive. "Call me the Red Baron."

"No offense, boss, but you look like the gay baron."

Even Billy laughed at that.

"Aren't you gonna take your helmet off?" one of the prettier ladies asked. Almost half of the marathoners were women because, being lighter, they could fly farther.

Naturally he couldn't show his twelve-year old face. Who'd follow a kid into battle?

"I can't. It's even more scarred than the rest of me. My face has been burned too many times to heal properly. If I show my face, I'll never get laid."

Tiny clapped him on the back, vouching for him. "Not to worry. Guys your size don't get laid anyways."

"That's too bad because I'm willing to pay a ton of gold to marathoners who have my children." The ladies knocked Tiny aside like he was some damn kid. They took off their helmets and frantically fixed their hair. Billy hovered above them and amplified his voice. "Honestly, I don't care about looks, bloodlines, or personality. But you must swear to follow me until we win the war, and raise our kids to do the same. Agreed?"

Having the Baron's children would give them a special status back home. The money was so his kids didn't grow up poor.

"Are we going to France?" Tiny asked before the women started undressing the Baron.

"I want you to set up on top of the Pyrenees Mountain Range between Spain and France. Build defensible mountaintop bunkers and gather supplies, but wait for me before you start raiding. Avoid locals and stay hidden.

"We'll keep the same operational doctrine: avoid engaging superior enemy forces and unfavorable circumstances—just fly away. If you can fly higher, faster, and farther, then you should be able to strike them with relative impunity. Combine your strength to destroy any special units looking for you. If more than a few of you are getting killed, then your commander is doing something wrong. I respect that every squad elects their leader, and all ten squad leaders elect a company leader, and all ten company leaders choose the battalion leader, but any commander losing too many troops must be replaced.

"I want you to cripple their air force, rob their banks and businesses, and pound their ground troops, equipment, and supply lines. Like before, you get half of what you take, and I get the other half to fund the war. Does anyone have a problem with that?"

"Not after all the wealth you helped us take the last few years."

Good. Now to find his mother's gay uncle.

## Chapter 27

Everyone in France knew where the English quads were: on the front lines as the Mongols launched another offensive against Paris. The hundred thousand mediocre quads that Genghis left in France gave the Mongols the numbers to overwhelm the defenders.

Dawn had barely broke when Billy landed by a French officer busy barking orders, who almost laughed at his bright red suit. Billy had flown over a wave of civilians fleeing west. Driving non-combatants in front of them was a three hundred year old Mongol tactic that never got old. Asked about the English, the officer impatiently waved towards a large hospital by the main highway. Billy discovered the building full of recently wounded soldiers.

He soon found his great-uncle unconscious and burning with fever. A compatriot wet his brow and adjusted his blanket. Billy noted his uncle's missing leg.

"Will he live?" Billy asked.

"He needs a day to break the fever, then a few more days of rest, which is probably three more days than the Mongols will give us. Those who cannot fly will die here, and we will not leave him."

High-pitched warnings erupted across the Paris suburbs as friendly quads launched to meet incoming enemies. Going just by numbers, the Mongols enjoyed air superiority.

Billy left his backpack with his uncle and flew out the window. A skirmish line of enemy quads preceded nine hundred two-wanders formation-flying in a huge square block. Mongols had ten times as many two-wanders as quads, and found the best way to use them was to temporarily clear the air of enemy fliers, then

have them rise over the target and blast it on their way down. Repeated often enough, two-wanders could destroy even a city as large as Paris. Two-wanders could not replace quads, but could compliment them.

Billy rocketed up, blowing past the quads guarding the formation. Like the two-wanders, he rose in an arc, then fell in a controlled fall in the path of the enemies. At the angle he enjoyed, it was virtually impossible to miss. His pressure waves smacked the first fliers back into their lines, each knocking several others out of the sky. He fell while they rose, so all too soon they collided. The difference was the two-wanders needed both wands to control their flight.

Billy sliced a giant hole in their lines, each swipe taking out several enemies. As they rose, he worked his way down, then raced higher again, cutting a new trench in their formation.

As their leader began their blasting run, Billy dived with them, chopping as he went. Powerful wands from the ground can fire over one hundred meters up, so at two hundred meters they switched their wands to propulsion to fly away for their next run. Billy noticed those on the ground using his father's longbows, even after all these years. He matched angle to continue cutting them up until the formation disintegrated in panic.

He saw two squads chase a group of French quads, hoping to box them in. They positioned themselves so that the French would have to show their backs to one or the other. Billy poured on speed, but he could tell he wouldn't get there in time. So Billy gave a primal scream that vented all the anger he accumulated in life—while burning torches from all four wands.

The entire city below him stared up in awe as the scream echoed across the front lines. The Baron was back. And wore red, for some reason.

He sure got the enemy's attention. They not only didn't pounce on the French, but both squads turned on him. Like he always did, Billy let them come, popped out of their way, and cut them from behind.

With the skies momentarily free, Billy flew over the enemy ground forces and fired four wand volleys to let them know the Baron was in town. Mongol squads soon chased him, but he just evaded them to pound the two-wanders on the ground for hours. French quads eventually showed up in force to overwhelm the exhausted Mongol quads.

With the ground forces hiding, Billy flew down the main highway, blasting the wagons that supplied the Mongols, until one of them exploded with such force that it flung Billy threw the air like a typhoon.

Bomb wagons! Normally, a quad must drop below one hundred meters to send a fireball hot enough to detonate a bomb, but he fired four wands at the same time, so the hundreds of two-wanders firing at him from the ground may as well have been shooting at the moon. He started blowing up more wagons and laughed as the Mongols fled the highway.

He dropped down and used his wands to throw the bombs after the fleeing enemy. Some of them could not believe he could levitate bombs over one hundred meters. Some French quads following him joined in the fun as Billy took over more munition wagons. Soon hundreds of French fliers were literally cratering the Mongol ground offensive.

The offensive died within sight of Paris.

## Chapter 28

Sunset found Billy exhausted. Killing quads in the air all day just took too much effort. Even for him. The thought of going through this for two more days enraged him. He needed to find an easier, faster, and safer way to kill so he could send his great-uncle home.

He wondered what his dad would do as he surprised two quads returning home, and laughed as the answer became obvious. Billy dived, sliced into the calves of the younger one and cut the neck of the older veteran. The younger one plunged into a lake. Billy landed, changed armor and uniforms with the dead quad, then flew to save the guy hanging onto a log.

"I got ya, trooper!" Billy said before dropping him on the grassy shore. "Let me take a look at that." As the guy howled in pain, Billy bandaged both leg wounds to stop the bleeding. "You're not gonna walk for a while, but you may fly again."

"Thanks," the Mongol said, digging into his pockets for a liquor bottle. Billy didn't drink because he was usually high off his wands, and alcohol would only dull that sensitivity.

"My name is Temujin," Billy truthfully told him.

"Mutugen."

"Were you named after the Immortal's favorite grandson?"

"I descended from him, so my parents hoped it'd help my advancement."

"And has it?" Billy asked.

The Mongol laughed. "No! I don't think Genghis Khan likes being reminded he lost his favorite grandson." He paused. "They sure are recruiting younger and younger."

It struck Billy as ironic that he could only show his face to Mongols. "I descended from Taran of Kiev. My family enlisted me to keep me out of jail. Let's get you home."

Torches lit up the air base so returning fliers could find it after dark. When on the offensive, the Mongol Air Force would string temporary bases near the front so airmen would spend more time over the enemy and less time going to and from work. Billy landed near the infirmary and two troopers helped his "buddy" off his back. Then he carried the wounded quad inside and joked with him while the doctors re-banded his wounds and applied healing wands.

It turns out that they knew many of the same people from the steppe, so when Mutuge's commander came in, nobody thought to question Billy's allegiance. Since they were the Second Company of the 7th Battalion, Billy claimed to be from Fourth Company of the 1st Battalion, and asked if he could bunk with them.

"Hey everybody," their captain announced in the barracks. "This is Temujin from the Fourth of the 1st. He saved Mutugen's life, so he gets free drinks."

Not that anyone felt like partying. Billy himself quickly ate and slept. The need to pee thankfully woke him up, and he wondered what he'd have done if he slept

all night. As it was, he moved from cot to cot, silently slicing throats, starting with the captain, then busted the locks of their chests to take their wands and money.

Then he moved on to the next barracks. This time, two guys sat on their cots recounting a close call. Billy limped closer.

"You okay?" one asked.

"Idiot doctors," Billy sullenly replied. "What do they know?"

Then several meters away he drew swords and whacked them. One fell pretty hard, thumping the wooden floor. Billy laid down on the nearest empty cot, but no one woke up. Relieved, he sliced more throats and took their valuables, remembering how he found his raped mother.

The third barrack had hardly any fliers, while the fourth and fifth looked half full. The other five barracks lay in a line a few hundred meters away, but Billy felt too exposed just walking across, so he entered the colonel's home through the window. The pretty woman next to him died for sleeping with the enemy. The colonel never woke up. Opening his safe took far longer than he expected, but had more gold, silver, and wands than he could possibly carry. Still, he had the backpacks, so he loaded everything up and left them near the front door and changed into the colonel's uniform.

Billy strolled to the latrine trench, humming a popular Mongolian song, and finally peed. When he returned, however, he massacred the other five sleeping companies. What surprised him is that they lost half of their battalion since the offensive started. After the last barrack, he limped to the infirmary, killed the wounded, including Mutugen, then woke up the doctors, healers, and assistants in their dorm. He led them to the backpacks. "We need to deliver these medical supplies to a unit near the front right away."

His request was unusual, but not implausible. On the way to the front he covertly dived to change into his red armor hidden by the lake.

As dawn approached, he signaled well ahead of time, descended in full view, and saw dozens of wands pointed at them when they landed on the infirmary roof. Billy saw the same French officer.

"You have too many wounded, so I brought you more doctors."

"Where did you get them?"

"I took them from a Mongol Air Force base." Which nobody believed.

"Prove you are who you say you are," Frenchy demanded, even though Billy never told them his name.

Billy popped up and blew four flames. The soldiers burst into applause.

"We thought we lost you. We even sent scouts looking for you."

"I thought you could use more wands," he said, throwing his backpack forward. "You'll find several thousand sets in there. Arm civilian quads and pound the enemy ground troops. I took out the closest quad battalion, but you'll only have air supremacy for a day or two. If you have someone bring me breakfast, I'll kill some more Mongols after I eat. Oh, and tell the surviving English quads to come see Captain Smith."

Below, Billy instructed the medical team to dump their backpacks around his great-uncle, which woke him up.

"Your fever broke! Your team can now take you home."

George dismissed the thought with a harsh laugh. "What's with the backpacks?"

"Your bonuses." Billy dumped the two heaviest onto him, practically burying him under one hundred gold bricks. "For thirteen years of fighting imperialism."

In the ensuing confusion, Billy sat on his great-uncle's cot and whispered to him. "Do you recognize this suit? Your grandfather gave it to your brother, who gave it to me. I'm Elizabeth's son, Billy, but please introduce me as the Red Baron."

George now recognized the red armor, his eyes huge with excitement. No sooner did the Mongols leave than George's Englishmen filled up the room.

"You called us, sir?"

"No," the prince answered. "The Red Baron here did. You remember the Baron? The guy who somehow convinced the Americans to give one hundred thousand backpacks full of loot to the Free Europe Air Force? Who didn't share any with us? Red, here, finally heard how the king forgot to include us."

Billy had no idea. "After I killed the nearest Mongol battalion, I emptied their vault and kidnapped their medical unit as air mules to deliver your bonuses. I don't know how many of you are left, but I want the valuables divided equally in thanks for fighting for so long against so many despite numbering so few." With that he started dumping the other backpacks on the floor. "All this is yours. Go back to England."

Excited cheers rang out, until one of them spoiled the mood.

"We can't," one of them said in disgust. "Queen Margaret exiled us thirteen years ago."

"Good thing she's dead, then," Billy answered. "Along with Prince John and his entire family. Global Bank is loaning the crown one thousand tons of gold to boost the economy. Sir Richard, the king's first-born, is setting up mass-production factories to make excellent armor like my own, and opening more bank branches overseas. All of you have jobs waiting for you. Prince George, your brother Richard is now king, your land has been returned, and you're again a duke. You have some experience running a mass production factory making longbows. Perhaps you'll consider running the armor factory. Although I'd also like to start making more seaworthy versions of those new steel-hull steamships."

Somebody laughed and clearly no one believed him, so Billy showed them London's news reports. Even the headlines failed to convince them.

"Baron, I'm not sure what you're selling, but I'm buying," one of the Englishwomen joked. "Did you really take all this gold from an enemy air base?"

"Yes. The Mongols pay the first of every month, so they're loaded right now." An idea hit Billy like a rock. "Hey, would anyone like to raid with me? Every Mongol fighter will be over the front lines. Usually they have nothing worth taking at those temporary bases, but tomorrow's payday, so each will have literally a ton of gold that's ours for the taking. We could hit several air bases today. Most quads in the Mongol Air Force are foreigners who won't work if they don't get paid. That alone would blunt the offensive, and give the French time to decimate their ground forces. The Mongols have cost all of you dearly. I think it's time they paid. Preferably in gold and silver."

The cheering of his team brought color back to George's face, who blessed the venture.



## Chapter 29

The English wouldn't return to England while the Mongols still threatened Paris, so he put them to work as golden air mules.

Billy remembered how carefully his father organized his raids. The Mongols didn't yet know about Billy's ten thousand marathoners, so his goal was to hit them as hard as possible, as frequently as possible, for as long as possible.

They first bombed the Mongol High Command headquarters to decapitate resistance, then they targeted the largest air units near Scandinavia to misdirect them. One of the Americans grew up there, so he gave a speech in Nordic claiming all of Scandinavia had declared war on the Empire. He'd have been laughed at if ten thousand quads didn't stand at attention behind him. The fools assumed the Americans were the Scandinavian or Russian divisions his father started, and so massed troops north to punish them, leaving fewer quads to defend Billy's real targets.

As Mongols tried to figure out what was happening, Billy struck across Europe. Dropping bombs they stole from munition depots, they decimated enemy forces far behind the front lines. The Mongols didn't have any long-distance battalions because they didn't need them with a static front line, and so didn't have any units capable of chasing the Americans down.

Destroying Mongol air units left their banks, businesses, depots, government offices, and logistical network at their mercy. The front line collapsed as the High Command redeployed thousands of quads to guard banks and bases.

It took the Mongols several expensive weeks to discover they were American marathoners based out of the Pyrenees. They sent fifty thousand quads to destroy them. First Billy wiped out their high-altitude units, then bombed the rest with impunity. Each battalion rotated hourly so the Mongols couldn't sleep.

A day before they reached the Pyrenees, Billy smashed them after sunset. But, instead of bombing from high altitude, they hugged the terrain at full speed. Striking from all sides, the Americans made one pass, shooting those on or near the ground. That night, one company bombed every hour to keep the Mongols awake. Exhausted quads shoot weak fireballs.

Before dawn, nine thousand Americans hit them from their rear, but stayed to roll them up. The Mongols had spread out their camp over a vast area to reduce the odds of getting hit by bombs. Units responding to the attack ran into a nine thousand quad wall half a kilometer high that chewed them up. The Mongols still had three times as many quads, but the Americans outnumbered the Mongols who fought at any given moment. In the dark, the exhausted Mongols had no way of knowing how many enemies they faced, and the commander feared they'd also be attacked from other directions. The Americans slowly swept over the camp. At daylight, they hunted down those who escaped.

Many of the Europeans fighting for the Mongol Air Force promptly switched sides after payday, killing Mongols on their way out. Better yet, Mongols never trusted non-Mongols within their ranks after that, driving even more quads away.

Billy heard that American Jack was recruiting an African division, so he transferred enough gold and wands to train them—some super, some high altitude, and some long-distance battalions.

The Great Khan couldn't let the Baron raid Europe with impunity, so he sent one hundred of his new marathon battalions. They were finally enjoying success against the elusive raiders in Central Asia, but the prospect of losing Europe trumped all that.

These new troops negated the advantages that the Americans enjoyed, so Billy went for surprise. As soon as he heard, he took his raiders across Europe and, a week later, ambushed the Mongol marathoners outside Warsaw.

Billy's division overwhelmed Warsaw's largest munitions supply depot after sunset, then bombed the sleeping marathoners from ten directions at low altitude at midnight. The Mongols didn't expect to get hit so far from the Pyrenees.

One hundred thousand quads need a lot of room, so each of Billy's battalions attacked in a kilometer-long skirmish line at treetop level. Maximizing surprise minimized casualties. Furious, the survivors launched, unable to wait for their units to form up.

Every unit commander typically designates 10% of his troops as a rapid-reaction force. Those ten battalions, or what was left of them, rose immediately. Flying as units made them more dangerous.

Billy's ten battalions used their momentum to rise steeply after sweeping the camp and pounced on the nearest enemy unit just getting off the ground. It was easy to distinguish between orderly formations and thousands of airmen flying individually. The Americans hit them from above until the formation broke into confused pieces.

The Americans then swept over the mob rising towards them, firing down into the mass of men. Nine of Billy's units slowly rose while shooting volleys, and the tenth broke into squads to clear the skies above them. Without large units, they faced an angry mob. It was like fighting a bar full of drunks.

Not all Mongols rose at once, since many helped the wounded or were stunned, deaf, or blind from the bombs, so the Mongols didn't even enjoy overwhelming numbers. While the American battalions covered each other, the enemy didn't attack at the same time or at the same place, much less fly around to strike from above.

At dawn, the Americans slaughtered the wounded, chased down survivors, and packed the valuables. By noon, they surprised the nearest enemy units, then emptied Bank of Mongolia branches since the enemy could not stop them.

Billy called a meeting after dinner. Ten thousand troops looked up at him on a hill, where he used his wand to amplify his voice.

"We are so weighted down that we can only average half our usual distance. One hundred thousand enemy quads are within a thousand clicks, and will now be hunting us down.

"The enemy knows where we are and where home is, so they'll throw everything that have at us. If we fly as a division, they'll spot us. If we break up into companies, they'll kill us. So we cannot stay here and we cannot go home. What do you want to do?"

Atop a boulder, Billy heard more curses than suggestions. "Tiny, got any ideas?"

"I hear Madagascar is nice this time of year."

"They'll mobilize every resource, but for how long? Apart from these marathoners, we've already killed a few hundred thousand enemies in Europe. Every quad assigned to us is not killing Frenchmen or guarding gold. How long can they wait until those men are needed back at their old jobs? The French will endanger their lines. Bandits will rob banks. Rebels will empty supply depots. Can they afford to maintain their mobilization for one month? Two? Three months?"

Billy examined their faces to see who saw where he was heading.

"You're not my only employees in danger. Our brothers and sisters in Central Asia can't go home because a huge force blocks the Bering Strait. That division is what made our success possible because they forced the Khan to strip Europe of its best quads. Without those heroes keeping half a million quads busy in Siberia, many of you would now be dead.

"Tiny told me that our sister division had to break up into companies to hide and forage better. They'll starve this winter. Imagine them dying of hunger beside the huge fortune they've accumulated. Many of you trained alongside them at American University. These are friends, not strangers.

"By spring, they'll be dead and their plunder lost. Many of you will have to replace them in Siberia or else the Khan will send those Mongols to France. Genghis will finally conquer Europe and then exterminate the Americas."

Billy now hovered over their gloomy faces, thousands of eyes glued to him. Hovering is actually very hard, but he made it look easy. The Red Baron theatrically raised his arms to the heavens. "Oh, if only those heroes had friends with a few months to kill!"

The dark mood lightened instantly and their laughter thundered across the grassy hills.

"Joining our sister division doubles our combat strength. The Mongols broke up into battalions to chase our companies, which makes killing them safer and easier. I say we deposit our loot in Helsinki, then take a tour of Siberia!"

The thunderous applause elated him. He could feel his father smiling down at him.

By the time they reached the Bering Strait, the Americans killed many times their number, including most of the specialty quads that worried Billy.

While the marathoners exhausted the blocking force, Billy had the near-marathoners bomb them from the other side. Blowing a hole in the human wall, the marathoners crossed into Alaska hauling a year's worth of plunder to enjoy the winter with their families.

Billy didn't want to kill them all; he just wanted to bleed them so that the Khan kept replacing them. Billy would rather have enemies at the Bering Strait than in France. Just feeding them, thousands of kilometers from the nearest farm, tied up support personnel who'd otherwise do something useful for the war effort.

The smarter move would have been for Genghis to gather his total strength and invade the Americas. But, instead of flying where the Americans hid underground bunkers, attack where they were least expected -- like the American east coast.

Mongol editorials ripped The Great Khan. A new giant walked the earth, and he barely stood five feet tall.

With Mongols no longer threatening France, Billy could finally take his uncle home.

## Chapter 30

Winter in Paris felt warmer than summer in Siberia. Billy couldn't believe almost a year had passed.

He sent a greeting as he descended to his great-uncle's estate outside Paris. A few hundred English quads, from an original battalion of one thousand, occupied the barn. They spent the last several months moving coin to England while George got used to his new leg. Billy wanted to make a big deal out of their official return, so he asked them to fly back as a group just before the first anniversary of King Richard's coronation. George came out to meet him, while his wife and thirteen year old son waited outside their front door.

"You've done well for yourself, uncle," Billy concluded after looking around. "Not many gay men have beautiful wives."

"Marie developed a crush on me after our first great victory saving Paris. A thousand quads can really influence a battlefield. The French had no idea we were coming." He laughed. "Neither did the Mongols! When the French discovered we were all unpaid volunteers, well, the appreciation was overwhelming. The king's young niece seemed infatuated with me, and I needed protection against the inevitable rumors, so I let the king marry us and grant us this estate. I never dreamed I'd have a son that looks like me. Thank goodness for alcohol. Until he turned four, I assumed he was not mine."

"You were willing to raise someone else's child?"

"Well, I never expected to have kids, yet I cannot deny her children. It's bad enough her husband is gay. I'm shocked she's stayed faithful. I've told her to find someone discreet. She is, after all, French. She has been wonderful to me, and I'd do anything to make her happy."

"Would another child make her happy?" Billy asked quietly.

George gripped Billy with surprising strength that really hurt. Even with one leg, George was still a warrior.

"Sorry, uncle. That was out of line."

"You're too young to think of such things."

"Actually, Susan's great-granddaughter, Emily, already gave birth to my first baby. My dad ordered me to have as many children as possible, as soon as possible, so the Mongols cannot exterminate our line."

George groaned sadly. "Marie actually told me to give her more children, or she'll return to the front lines. They both got wounded during that Mongol offensive a year ago. I can't sleep when she fights. Somehow, her death scares me whereas my own does not."

"Ask her, then. No one else need ever know."

"Then why do I want to shove my wooden leg up your ass?"

"I don't know, uncle. Maybe you're gay."

Marie and George Jr. embraced Billy.

"Wow! The Red Baron!" Junior couldn't believe the Baron would spend the night in their home. His neck looked burned and he held his arm funny. "All of Europe is talking about you. Can I get a video with you doing your dance? Please?"

Billy laughed, popped into the air, and showed his four burning wands while his mother recorded her son in the background.

"I know some ladies who'd like to meet you, Mr. Baron," Marie said with a knowing smile.

"I'm flying with you to England tomorrow, but if they look anything like you, then I'd love to meet them tonight."

Marie laughed, hugging her gay husband. She still loves him, Billy realized.

Once inside, George gathered them close. "We have a family secret to share with you, but if you tell anyone, the Mongols will kill us. Remember the stories of my niece, Elizabeth? This is her only child, Billy. The queen and my brother John murdered his father, so Billy killed them and put my brother Richard on the throne."

The news stunned them. The Red Baron took off his helmet to reveal a thirteen year old orphan. They both looked disappointed, and once again it pained Billy to look his age. His baby face shined through his facial scars.

"How can you be the Red Baron?" Junior demanded. "You're no older than me."

"You're a week older, actually."

"But the Baron is old. We've all seen the videos."

"That was my father, who was a real baron in Prussia. Our family used to rule Bohemia."

"Tell them about the gold," George begged Billy.

"Oh. I gave George a ton of gold because he helped my parents meet. The rest of his team split several tons so they won't return home broke."

Marie interrupted. "A ton of what?"

George laughed. "Gold, my love. We are officially a toner." Meaning they were worth a ton of gold.

Billy dumped his backpack at their feet. "I'm also giving away ten gold kilos to every blood relative. I had them specially re-melted." He took out a golden cube and lifted it into his cousin's arms. It weighed him down like a guilty thought.

"This weighs more than my armor!" little George said, rejoicing rather than complaining.

Marie still couldn't believe their change in fortune. Just a year ago they were all about to die. "You're a prince, again?"

"Yes. My brother is king and my lands have been restored. All thanks to Billy."

"Try these," Billy said to Junior, handing him a set of powerful wands.

The boy popped up in the air and fired his hand wands four meters out.

"These are amazing. Where did you get them?"

"I took them from a dying Mongol millennial. They are yours on the condition that you practice every day. The lives of your family may depend on it."

Marie caressed the gold block like a baby's face. She looked ready to cry.

"I fought without pay, so we've accumulated a bit of debt," George informed Billy with classic English understatement.

"Marie, I've started a body armor factory in England. Uncle George has agreed to operate it for ten gold kilos a year, if you are willing to move to London." She squeezed him so hard he could barely breathe. "You are now Lady Marie, King Richard's sister-in-law, while you, cousin, are Sir George, the king's nephew."

"How can I ever repay you, Billy?" a joyous Marie asked.

"I'm sure you and Uncle George will think of something," Billy answered cryptically, looking hard at the gay husband.

## Chapter 31

Billy had his bank buy food and drink by the ton. Few people did well under Queen Margaret, so Billy wanted many to prosper under King Richard to cement his rule. He had been shipping in thousands of cattle from the Americas and virtually drained France of wine. Billy wanted to stun England with the magnitude of the free feast he was giving away in the king's name.

The thousand tons he loaned the king created thousands of jobs building roads, bridges, ports, schools, and hospitals. The ship full of coin paid for pre-planned towns around his new factories and shipyards. Instead of just lending, his bank brought shares into England's strongest companies, and employed most English quads.

Few knew such prosperity was even possible, and most looked at the new king with adoration, admiration, and awe. The English grimly joked that they should have killed the queen years ago.

Then the heroes came home for the king's first anniversary. The battalion that suffered official banishment to keep Paris free landed to a standing ovation in the stadium that Billy expanded in London. There the king gave a powerful speech, praising what they did and why they did it; introduced every hero by name to the cheering crowd; gave them a key to the new home that Billy built them (most had already moved in); levitated huge buckets to literally shower them with all the gold they earned the past year (they had to empty their bank accounts to do this); then had them kneel to officially knight them. Their knighthoods meant everyone would publicly address them as Sir or Lady for the rest of their lives. Most were peasants, so their sobbing brought the audience to tears.

The king now singled out his brother George and recounted how he remembered him growing up, his lonely years of bravery fighting Mongols, and the loss of his title, lands, and leg. To ecstatic applause, his team dumped literally a ton of gold coins on him.

George then gave his own speech, telling his personal story, the battles they fought, the adventures they had. He reminded the nation that too many of these rich heroes were still single. Finally, he told everyone how the Red Baron saved him, his family, his troops, Paris, and Free Europe.

Then tents were suddenly unfolded to reveal the families—English and French—of those who didn't survive. The king and prince carried backpacks full of coin and dumped them in front of the shocked families.

The next day, every city would show videos from the stadium for people to watch at the free feasts they thought the king provided them, along with an announcement that King Richard would soon host a celebration at Buckingham Palace to honor the heroes.

Instead of meeting the king somewhere convenient, like in his palace, Billy insisted on George's lakeside cabin, which pissed his grandfather off even more. Elated at seeing his brother again, Richard was furious to learn that he had to plan a huge festival.

Billy wasn't sympathetic: "Just assign it to the leading rich socialite and give her a kilo to cover expenses. You need to personally introduce George, Marie, and Junior to those who matter. This will help stabilize the country, legitimize your rule, and give the gossips something to talk about besides me."

"Then you better not attend. I've convinced most of the country that you're a figment of over zealous imaginations."

As if he could afford to be seen in public. He couldn't wait to leave England. "Emily and I plan to visit mama's family in Ireland. Anything you want us to tell them?"

"Tell them to stop fighting or I'll invade like my mother always wanted. The Irish bicker over such petty grievances! I'll not tolerate my kids killing each other!"

Except briefly under Emperor Brian Boru five centuries before, no Irishman ever controlled the entire island. Instead, dozens of tribes, peoples, and kingdoms fought each other, striving to be recognized as the High King of Ireland. Waves of Norse, Danes, Normans, Vikings, Welsh, Scottish, and English washed upon Irish shores, only to assimilate over generations. And for centuries before that the Irish interbred with waves of Celts.

In his twenty years of virtual exile in Ireland, Richard spurned his mother's desire for conquest to build his own native power base. Instead of fighting the so-called New Irish, Old Irish, New English, and Old English, much less the Scottish earls and lords his mother and grandfather installed, Richard formed alliances across the island. He bred with the most powerful, regardless of beauty, status, or tribe, so today his children were the best quads on the island. Unfortunately, that also meant any fighting would inevitably involve them.

The irony must have hurt. If he had but done as his mama asked, his children may now be governing a united Ireland instead of perpetuating endless violence.

"Speaking of children, who will succeed you when you die? Your illegitimate children, your gay crippled brother, his French son who can't speak English, or me -- the only legitimate son of your only legitimate daughter?"

"What's your point, boy?"

"My great-uncle tried to kill me because of succession fears. I'd rather not go through that again. You have thousands of descendents. Give the top contenders high office. The fastest way to see someone's true character is to give them great power. When you find the one with the experience, temperament, and judgment to make the best ruler, then marry his mother or grandmother to make him legitimate."

It took all of Richard's self-control to not slap the crap out of his impudent grandson. "If you must know, I plan on marrying Susan and designating my oldest son, Richard, as my heir. Although they don't know it yet."

Billy literally applauded the decision before reaching into his backpack to hand his grandfather a gold block. "I'm giving every blood relative ten gold kilos. I wanted to give you yours in person."

Instead of handing them gold, most of them would simply find a digit added to their bank balance.

The king stared at the golden cube in his hands. Something so small should not weigh so much. Elizabeth used to give her daddy the best damn hugs in the world -- her elopement left him inconsolable -- yet Billy chilled him. Then he does something like this. And he never met anyone who gave off so much energy. The air practically crackled around him.

"I executed the quads who murdered your father," was all he could think to say.

"Thank you and you're welcome. I noticed that you haven't paid any interest on the thousand gold tons I lent you last year. I'm buying a lot of property, so you can simply credit the taxes I'll owe against the interest you owe me, since I'm skeptical you'll pay my interest on time, but will collect taxes the moment they're due.

"You can repay the favor by helping American Jack transition a few million Americans on their way to Africa to take extraction operations from the Mongols. If you keep track of your expenses, I'll have Global Bank reimburse you.

"Oh, Uncle George will manage my new armor factories and steamship shipyard. I want to make a quarter-million suits equal to the red one you gave me. If you give him the government help that he needs, we'll give your air force discounts if you buy in bulk."

"I'll not have a damn boy tell me what to do!"

Billy just laughed, slapped his beefy arm, and got up to leave.

"That's the spirit, grandpa! I'll be England's largest private employer; almost your entire family works for me; and you owe me a thousand tons." He laughed literally out the door. "But I'm just a boy you don't have to listen to."

In Ireland, Billy organized a summit of his grandfather's descendents at the legendary Hill of Tara, the historic seat of the High King. The man-made mound, 318 by 264 meters, was built three thousand years before by the only people that everyone agrees was true Irish. On top stood the Stone of Destiny—which resembled an impressive rock-hard penis—by which the High King was crowned. Given the constant historical infighting, the Hill of Tara represented the political and spiritual capital of Ireland. While the king who controlled Tara never controlled the island, no one could claim Ireland without Tara.

Everyone wanted to see the kid who wiped out Prince John's hated family, so reporters from around the country flew in.

Emily had given birth to the cutest boy Billy had ever seen, and would soon be pregnant with another. She had everyone surround the mound. Billy dropped from above and, at optimum height, used four wands as one to blow a massive crater that exploded the Stone of Destiny into a million pebbles. The sacred monument disintegrated, smacking the horrified reporters like shrapnel. A moment later he fired again and excavated a crater that defied imagination. It was many times larger than what they assumed was humanly possible. Once their bodies filled the hole, Billy hovered over them to introduce himself.

"As the only legitimate heir to the English throne, and as the grandson of a Queen Ann, King Richard has sent me to halt the fighting between those seeking



to become the High King of Ireland. Without the Stone of Destiny, no High King can be crowned, so I hope the ambitious will stop killing their neighbors trying to fulfill a position that no longer exists.”

If he wanted to shock the nation, destroying the only thing they fought over did the trick.

“If the pointless warfare does not end, my grandfather has sworn to invade Ireland like Queen Margaret always wanted.

“The alternative is to change the system of 150 petty kings to something grander. Legal scholars sent by American Jack have worked with Irish experts for years to educate you on how representative democracy works. You can either unite Ireland under native Irish rule, or watch Richard forcibly unite Ireland under English rule.

“I assume you’ve heard that I’m giving away the equivalent of ten gold kilos to every blood relative. That gift is contingent upon your support for a new democratically elected government.

“I’m also here to offer employment: a kilo a year for twenty years for powerful quads willing to fight for an Irish Republic governed with the consent of the people.

“I’ve created several accounts for the new government at Global Bank, with a gold ton for the new legislature, judicial system, and executive branch. Kings today could become governors tomorrow if they earn the votes of their people. I’ll also spend a ton of gold in each kingdom—Muster, Leinster, Connacht, Meath, and Ulster—to build roads, bridges and ports, creating jobs and facilitating commerce—if those kings support The Irish Republic.

“I also wish to mate with Irish super-quads so that our children can prolong the peace I hope to foster. Every mother will receive a kilo a year for eighteen years for every child they have with me. Anyone interested should contact Emily.”

Billy and Emily toured Ireland, meeting leaders and giving speeches. His long term employment contract quickly gave Billy a battalion of the best quads in the country, which kept the warring parties in check while the government slowly got off the ground.

Opposition leaders from across the country banded together under Ruaidhrí Ó Conchobhair, who descended from the last guy claiming to be High King. They met at the Hill of Tara to settle their differences and, after hours of argument, they remain convinced their only solution was the violent death of the new government.

Billy offered his solution: “If you cannot live with free elections, I propose we settle this in the old way: I challenge all of you to a duel to the death. Kill me and opposing the new government gets safer.”

The offer stunned them. “Was this your plan all along? To bring us here under false promises so your battalion can murder us?”

The more Billy studied their reactions, the more comfortable he became. “I, alone, will fight all of you who cannot live with representative democracy.” They did not look like they believed him. “Come on. All of you against just me and the winner gets to be King of the Hill.”

Billy flew away before they cut him down and landed on the rim of the crater he created. He watched them huddle together. Some, apparently, were not ready to

die for the old ways. After several arguments, a few hundred quads fanned out around the mound. Billy foresaw how this would likely play out.

They charged as one. The strongest faced him to fix his position. The largest group attacked him from behind, so Billy flew towards the weakest group and chopped them down with long swords as he raced down the hill. He flew around the bottom to attack those slowest to fly up.

Those on the summit rallied and charged him. Once they committed themselves, he sped away and hunted down other quads, finally popping up above the crater. The attackers split up, each going around the base of the hill, as he attacked the closest group from behind.

The remaining fifty rushed him, so Billy flew straight up. Instead of swarming him as a group, the fastest left behind the slowest. Billy stretched them out, while using his larger, hotter, faster fireballs to swat them out of the sky, until the slowest fled in terror. The leader, whose name he couldn't even pronounce, was burnt beyond recognition. His family had to take Billy's word as to which smoking corpse was his.

Billy dived low enough to gesture to Emily, who ordered the battalion to surround the remaining few thousand opposition members. He landed before the provisional government leaders and offered a suggestion:

"To avoid civil war, I propose these agitators be held hostage among the families of our biggest supporters within each of the provinces until their relatives no longer threaten the peace. I'll fund the cost of their living expenses."

The Irish had long used hostages to enforce peace agreements. They lived as guests with families, rather than being locked up as criminals. When Billy returned to London, his grandfather still wasn't happy.

"If the Irish make democracy work, then the English will want to import it here," King Richard angrily complained.

Billy was not sympathetic. "If England had democracy, my father would still be alive."

## **Chapter 32**

The newly graduated 3rd Marathon Division arrived in Ireland with the 2nd. After the success of the previous year, Jack couldn't steal any fliers from him. Jack's African division would need another year, so Billy had time to kill before kicking the Mongols from Spain.

The 2nd Division returned to the Pyrenees to weaken the enemy in Europe. The 3rd he took to Russia to draw the Mongols west. Hopefully Genghis didn't know he now had three marathon divisions.

His father left trainers, wands, and coin to turn the Russians and Scandinavians with the greatest endurance into marathon divisions. They earned more training than if they worked for the Mongol Air Force. Billy gave the weakest fliers better wands and put them through basic maneuvers. They didn't have the skill or endurance to raid in Mongolia, but they were good enough to take on the

Mongol units in Russia that survived their previous raids. Billy bloodied them on smaller enemy units and rewarded them by emptying Mongol banks. They fought so well that Billy sent them raiding in the Stans to force the Khan to chase them.

As Billy hoped, Genghis himself led a quarter-million quad force, including several marathon divisions, to confront the Baron's American, Scandinavian, and Russian divisions.

Genghis and William had different definitions of marathoners—for Genghis, anyone who could fly a thousand clicks got in; William, in contrast, required them to fly a thousand kilometers a day for one hundred straight days. Like running a marathon, this took years of practice.

But, instead of fighting the Khan, Billy just wanted his marathoners to keep Genghis far from home while Billy raided Mongolia.

Billy flew to the Kamchatka Peninsula in Siberia, where his 1st Marathon Division and one hundred near-marathon divisions waited for him. They anchored ships every five hundred kilometers between the last Aleutian Island and the Kamchatka coast so they could leapfrog into enemy territory undetected. To keep the blocking force at the Bering Strait busy, Billy had his two hundred thousand half-marathoners start harassing them daily.

As Billy hoped, Genghis took all his good quads with him to Russia. Those left behind were more targets than threats. Billy sacked Mongol cities and sent golden wagons towards his ships. What Billy didn't know is if Genghis would give him the two months his caravans needed to get within a day's flight of his growing fleet.

Billy destroyed a dozen enemy forces by either surprising them or by wearing them out before engaging. Most of his casualties were caused by small, hidden units that ambushed them. Mostly, though, Billy faced barely organized militia when sacking cities.

It ended up taking Genghis three months to return with his armada. After avoiding combat for months, Billy's three marathon divisions now attacked the slowest Mongols as Genghis raced east. Still, Billy didn't want to face Mongol marathoners with weighted down near-marathoners, so they raced Genghis to the Strait, where they surprised the exhausted blocking force from behind. The Americans got several million Mongols and several thousand tons of loot in just one summer. Even more valuable was showing the world that the Baron could make Genghis Khan look like a fool every year.

Billy had several months to kill before the next spring campaign and needed to deter Genghis from crossing into Alaska. So he flew to Siam to see if he could get the emperor's Millennial Wands.

A few centuries before, the Khan's brothers conquered the tiny nation. Then, armed with Millennial Wands, the grandson of the Khan's brother Khasar multiplied Siam by conquering his neighbors. Two centuries later, the Siamese Empire was second in strength only to the Mongol Empire. His brothers' descendents were highly sensitive to their independence, and protected themselves by marrying the Khan's most powerful daughters.

Billy dominated dueling arenas in Siam, killing Mongols and hiring the non-Mongols that he spared. He sent mercenaries to recruit more mercenaries. He paid native militias to join him, promised revolution to nationalist groups, and partnered with criminal organizations.

The royal palace was their first target because it united his troops: some wanted revenge on the emperor, most wanted to topple the government, and others wanted the priceless treasures that accumulated in the palace over two centuries.

Billy's force raided the capital's munitions depot and bombed the division that protected the capital. Billy knew he couldn't beat them in the air, so he caught them asleep after they returned from a long training exercise. The next day they beat several battalions that flew in from neighboring bases. The Baron introduced himself in a video offering huge bonuses for Siamese in the Air Force who changed sides. The discovery of the Red Baron promising riches tripled his original force, despite their heavy losses. Every poor quad in the kingdom rallied to his banner.

Now to get his damn Millennials.

They bombed the palace after sunset. At dawn he rotated in the half that he didn't mind losing, knowing that the enemy's formation fliers would annihilate them in the daylight. Billy probably killed as many as the rest of his troops put together. At noon the better half took over to exhaust the Mongols while Billy napped in a safe house.

Billy ate an early dinner before going to work. The enemy won, as he expected. Bodies littered the palace and smoke still rose from fires when he landed before the main gate and politely asked to speak with the emperor. In beautiful armor made more glorious by copious blood stains, the tired emperor soon peered over the ramparts. He looked like he had been up for the last few days.

"Yes? What is it?"

"I'll leave Siam if you duel me for Millennial Wands," Billy said, holding out his famous sticks.

Quads, who had been going in and out of the main entrance, now backed away in a hurry. The gate fell before some of them even got inside. An alarm rang out and troops soon lined the fortress walls.

"So you're the famous Red Baron. I've done nothing to you. Why do you make trouble for me?"

"I want your Millennial Wands. And many of your descendents married the Khan's descendents, and therefore must die. But I'll leave today if you duel me for Millennials."

"Then you're out of luck, Mr. Baron, because I gave them a few years ago to my only descendent more powerful than me."

If Billy knew that, he wouldn't have flown here in the first place. "Then I won't be leaving you in peace after all. I'll tell you what: to keep things fair, I'll duel you with my backup wands."

Billy's backup wands, however, were also Millennials, and therefore their duel would not be fair. While non-fatal contests like wrestling should be fair, war is about power—who controls what—so it'd be stupid to not tilt everything in your favor when the lives of millions are at stake. It's why Billy exhausted the bastard before challenging him.

As expected, a few hundred quads soon flew from the palace. Billy rose straight up while humming a nursery song his mother sang to him. Her singing always calmed him.

Billy flew high to fight just several at a time. Then he'd dive down to pick them off. Those having trouble breathing were the easiest. This tactic only worked

because they didn't have enough rested troops to rotate; otherwise, they'd just wait him out or chase him down.

All too soon, Billy landed before the gate again. But this time he removed the smoking armor that protected his left leg, then soaked up his wounds to ease the pain. His left boot looked cooked and he walked with a limp.

The emperor didn't see any point in sending more troops after the Baron, so he walked out the gate and sized up his opponent. He didn't venture far from the protection of the troops lining the battlements, so the emperor wasn't interested in fair fights, either.

The two eyed each other warily, their fingers twitching. Billy hadn't felt this alive since he lost his virginity. The emperor was famous for his fast draw. Speed kills, went the old mantra, because whoever fired first forced the opponent to concede the initiative. Duels, battles, and wars were won by those who shaped events, not by those forced to respond to them.

People called him "the" emperor not because he was the only emperor, but because of how he got the title.

When Genghis gave his brothers permission to invade Siam, he never dreamed those drunks would conquer so much, so fast, with so few troops. Not even they knew they had a tactical genius in their midst. When Genghis backtracked from his promise, they remained defiant. When Genghis led an air force to subdue them, his brother's grandson beat him like a spoiled brat. When Genghis demanded obedience, his great-grand-nephew instead proclaimed himself emperor of Siam. Even Mongols still laugh at that, a khan who controls half the world having to address a rival overseeing a small kingdom as "emperor." Genghis had just lost his first fleet against the Japanese and lacked the troops to force his great-grand-nephew to obey. By the time he had the strength, the Siamese Empire fielded a very formidable force.

On his deathbed, Genghis' brother brokered a truce. But what really kept the peace all these years is how much Genghis respected the emperor, as a dueler, a general, and a ruler.

Decades later, after Genghis suffered a severe setback in India, the emperor surprised the Indians from behind. Together, the Great Khan and the emperor rolled up the subcontinent. Instead of calling him "emperor," Genghis referred to his rival as "Junior," meaning he was like the son he never had.

The other reason Genghis Khan did not subdue the emperor of Siam is that he blocked the emperor of Indonesia from expanding north. Although the Indonesian royal family married many Mongols, they identified as Indonesian. So the Indo Empire expanded south, conquering Australia. Genghis felt safe as long as his two strongest rivals limited each other's size.

So Billy now faced one of the greatest fighters in the world, up there with Subodei and Genghis himself. And something of a living legend.

What worried Billy wasn't the emperor, but his wand launchers. They had been acting up lately, after so much usage, and needed to be replaced. One bad spring and he was a dead man. Well, a dead boy.

The emperor's hands hovered over the twin wands in his belt. He drew, but looked shocked when wands magically appeared in the Red Baron's hands, shooting the largest, hottest, and fastest fireballs he had ever seen—quite

beautiful, actually, bright yellow with streaks of red dancing inside them. The surprised veteran barely evaded them. Billy shot two very wide bursts, which forced the emperor to flight. Billy couldn't approach his opponent because of the quads on the ramparts, so he needed to lure his opponent towards him.

Billy dodged fireballs by backing up in the air. He alternated between boot wands, which made him look like he was climbing giant stairs backwards, and used his hand wands to keep him vertical as he traded shots. A volley from the quads from the palace threatened to scorch his path. They were fired too far away to kill, but close enough to burn. Even a brief distraction could prove fatal.

So Billy pretended the wand in his burnt boot faltered. With a cry of shocked disbelief, Billy fell to the ground, landing hard and tumbling out of control. Shrieking in desperation, he scrambled to replace his left boot wand.

Seeing his chance, the emperor pounced—by leaving the protection of his troops. Since Billy's hands pointed away, the old man went for the kill. Billy avoided his next shot by using a wand to push himself across the ground towards his opponent.

But Billy fired a burst from his right boot wand. The emperor turned in the air to protect his face, and thus never saw the blade extend from Billy's left boot wand into his side. The boy would never forget the incredulous look on the old man's face as Billy tackled him in the air and flew away to the astonishment of everyone watching.

The Baron tricked the Emperor!

Hundreds of quads chased them, so Billy flew ever higher. The emperor had trouble breathing, but that made transferring ownership of his wands that much easier. It's dangerous to transfer powerful wands while people are shooting at you, but all Billy had to do was rise ever higher.

Once finished, Billy circled around and dropped the emperor on his palace from very high altitude. Billy followed in a controlled fall to record the dying man's facial expression. Despite the pain, the emperor clearly understood his fate.

"You know what I like most about a fair fight?" Billy screamed. "The better fighter always wins."

It wasn't even true. A sudden gust of wind, a death stick catching on clothing, a boot wand "coughing" at the worst possible moment could all kill a better fighter.

But he wanted that to be the last thing his enemies heard before dying.

After two centuries tormenting the Siamese and their neighbors, the emperor finally got what he deserved. Billy knew the video would be popular locally, but he also wanted the Khan to see it, so he did his primal scream just as a rooftop spire halved the world's most famous emperor in two. Billy recorded the thousands of angry quads swarming him before flying straight up to safety. Billy later learned that the emperor gave the wands to a super quad named Jirko who married one of the Great Khan's daughters.

Billy tired them out literally all night. After midnight, the most grateful non-Mongols that he spared in the arena infiltrated the palace, a few at a time, wearing enemy uniforms. They had spent the day ransacking rich Mongol neighborhoods. They first cleared out the palace, slaying dozens of sleeping quads, then ambushed the Mongols as they landed to rest. At dawn, the survivors of his force arrived to clean the place out.

After that, Billy never lacked for quads. Removing the head of the government and military gave thousands of natives in the air force an excuse to switch sides. He made a video urging Siamese to kill every Mongol and everyone pro-Mongolian under the nationalist slogan, "Siam for the Siamese." And to take their stuff. Billy emphasized how rich their oppressors were to make being patriotic profitable.

After consolidating the city and installing a new mayor, police force, and militia with natives, Billy led his guys against the remaining military units, many of which simply defected to the Indonesian Empire.

Billy knew they won when the kingdoms that Siam long threatened started raiding on their own. Rebel groups sprouted like weeds and anyone dressing Mongolian was shot on sight.

It surprised Billy how quickly he destabilized a mighty kingdom. He was just killing time. If he set out to overthrow the Mongols ruling Siam, he'd have brought marathoners. He didn't because they'd have to cross half the Empire to get there, then cross again to escape. He couldn't risk losing his irreplaceable troops. Still, having a few hundred quads he trusted would have really helped.

At a summit of the powerful groups vying for control, Billy bribed them into working together by transferring tons of gold to the new democratic government. The biggest warlords, criminal gangs, business leaders, and tribal leaders would prosper if they helped organize free and fair elections. And he warned them he'd return to fix things if they broke their promises.

But perhaps their biggest motivation to work together was the Indonesian threat. The Indos easily had the strength to overwhelm them, Red Baron or not. Even the criminals knew their new government needed broad popular support to survive.

Billy expected Genghis to arrive with a mighty armada to crush the rebels, but instead he led just one thousand guys. Assuming this was the best battalion in the empire, Billy wisely left before they landed.

## **Chapter 33**

Billy figured he did something right because Genghis chased him rather than topple the new Siamese government. He stood there, at noon, in the largest dueling arena in Vietnam, when a thousand dark shadow expertly fell on the stadium. Something screamed for Billy to run, so he did, leaving his four opponents bewildered. Rather than skyline himself, he zipped through the city's buildings as if his life depended on it. He didn't stop until nightfall, where he slept at a tiny fishing village.

Normally, he'd catch his own breakfast, but his fingers kept twitching, so he overpaid for the first fish caught that morning. He barely finished before he spotted a dot on the horizon.

"Too big for a scout, too small for a hunting party," he told himself, sinking farther into the shade beneath the trees to finish packing. Fortunately he brought a big fish in case he needed to eat lunch in the air.

They say not even Mongols violate Indonesian Air Space, so Billy decided to see if that was true. He could not avoid being seen, so he flew south, to a land bridge called Malaysia. He was halfway through lunch when he saw three Indonesian battalions move to intercept Genghis. Having the world's highest ceiling gave him a great view of the Great Khan turning tail.

This was perhaps the only time that Genghis Khan ever surprised him. Were the Indonesians that good? He heard they conquered a million islands centuries ago, and since then controlled a huge empty island called Australia. But, for some reason, they never invaded north, and the Siamese Empire never moved south.

Once Genghis disappeared over the horizon, another Indonesian battalion shadowed him. Billy assumed the worst and maximized speed. Other units rose to wait until he had to come down, so Billy abruptly left for open ocean to lose himself in the closest clouds. He felt the storm long before it grew angry, and felt lucky he found land in time.

Diving steeping, he found large boulders at the base of a cliff. He levitated them into a crude shelter that mostly protected him from the rain and wind. The tempest grew ugly and bellowed all night long. Billy slept hungry, using his helmet to catch rain to fill his water sacks.

Unlike the rest of the world, Indonesians did not learn Mongolian. The language was forbidden. They still married poor Mongol quads, but required them to learn Indonesian. Billy wanted to discover as much as he could about this mysterious kingdom, which meant he had to find an ex-Mongol. He knew they'd come looking for him, so he killed and cooked as many animals as possible before the winds calmed.

That evening he flew south until he saw a single cooking fire. He took a nap nearby, then snuck up on them in their sleep. Of the ten, he flew in and took the one who looked the most Mongolian. Billy lost them in the dark, even carrying a husky old man. Back at his cave made of boulders, Billy learned that Mongols were smuggling other Mongols to Australia, using ships to island-hop. Australia always attracted the odd, the adventurous, and the criminal, but his prisoner heard they put a system into place several years ago to transport thousands of rich quads. The Indos let them go, as long as they continued onto Australia, which was too huge for anyone to control.

"I had no idea I was scaring so many out of the war," Billy told himself, not realizing how wrong he was.

Billy avoided patrols for another week before they forced him to leave. He spent the fall dueling in Burma, India, Persia, Arabia, Turkey, and the northern African coast before visiting England and Ireland to impregnate the mothers of his newborns again.

In London, George presented him with his first suit. "It's ten times better than ordinary ones. The armor weighs less, although the new fire-resistant clothes are heavier and itchier. The boots protect your wands and feet better." George pointed out all the features that strengthened the steel and minimized burn through. "We're still refining the manufacturing process to mass produce them."

Billy—normally a distant boy—hugged his uncle. "You've just saved my life. I'll take what I can with me, but send more to Global Bank in Madrid."



Two years before, Mongols controlled all of the Iberian peninsula except for what locals called Portugal. With the help of the American marathons, the Spanish pushed them back to the eastern coastline. Once his new American and African divisions arrived for the spring campaign, Billy hoped to kick the enemy out of Spain. To make that easier, he planned to kill their best quads in the arena.

Even though Billy entered the Barcelona stadium under a nom de guerre, a lone girl cheered him by name. He called himself "Hideously Ugly" because an ugly mood helped him duel. So he turned to her screams and saw the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Long black hair, brown skin, and enough energy to rival the Sun. She appeared alone, confident, and totally out of place.

"Hideously Beautiful," she yelled in accented Mongolian, "kill these pretenders! Show them the real deal! Teach them who the true master is!" Then she'd lead cheers like "2, 4, 6, 8, I can't wait to pro-create."

Billy had never been in Spain before, or ever used this pseudonym, so being called out scared him. His first instinct was to run like hell, but fleeing made him feel silly.

Billy never stayed in a city after dueling, so he asked stadium management for teams of three. Unknown to Billy, the manager personally passed on Billy's challenge to the local Mongol battalion, who sent for the Khan's assassins.

Billy started at dawn and often finished by noon, but something told him this was gonna be a long day. It looked like an entire battalion of angry Mongols filled the stands, so he paced himself to maximize energy efficiency.

He loved the new suits and heat-resistant clothes. He only went through seven sets of armor—his opponents usually destroyed twice as many. The new design dug into his hips, but that was a small price to pay for tolerating twice the heat. The stronger steel turned aside what would have been penetrations. Third degree burns became just one degree burns. George gave him extra faceplates, so he could just fly through weaker blasts, knowing he could replace any melted glass afterwards.

The American Indian girl cheered every victory, rejoiced in every wand he took, and flirted with him at every opportunity. He had fans before, but not fanatics, although the word for fan in Spanish is "fanatica." She declared herself his biggest fan and sent him food, drink, and painkillers.

By late afternoon it all began to blur together, like he was sleep-dueling. Long distance flying often put him in a dream-like state—it just never happened when fighting for his life. So it came as something of a surprise when he looked up after killing his last opponent and couldn't find the sun. The packed stadium was on its feet roaring its approval, but he tuned them out long ago. The only voice he heard was that damn girl. From high in the stadium stands, she beamed down at him like the moon.

One thing was perfectly clear, though: he couldn't have survived the day without George's new suits and underclothes.

The stunned manager came out to close out the day. His final score? 1005 kills in 335 duels. The most ever. The compilation video would soon go viral worldwide. Even Billy couldn't believe the total. The manager looked at him with awe. And fear.

Billy didn't remember leaving the arena for his dressing room. He took a long hot bath and soaked up his wands. He felt strangely vulnerable after killing so many. Just when he chided himself for paranoia, he heard a huge explosion outside the stadium, followed by a massive barrage of blasts. Terrified, the world's best dueler huddled naked in his cold tub, all alone, missing his mommy and daddy. He pointed a wand at himself to do another video diary. He started, as always, with the date and location, then summarized his day.

"This may be my last diary," he confessed, not aware just how many times he had said this over the years. "I can feel the enemy waiting for me to leave."

Years later people would discover their fearless hero was also a scared little boy.

Finally, he ran out of excuses and disguised himself as a peasant. He waited for a family to leave, then tagged along to blend in. It had always worked in the past. However, not ten paces into the busy street the girl dropped down on him with the flying skill of a master.

"Are you kidding me? Hideously Ugly?" she asked with a laugh upon seeing his boyish face. "You are gorgeous!"

"Go away! It's not safe."

She smiled. "Oh, the battalion commander assumed only the Red Baron would challenge three at a time all day, so he volunteered his troops and sent for the nearest super-quad company assigned to kill you. You finished his under-strength battalion by noon, but the mercenaries didn't fare any better.

"The last team you dueled killed my parents several years ago, so you basically own me now. I'll do anything to make you happy.

"How could you still lift a wand? I dug my fingernails deep enough into my arms to draw blood. I held my breath for so long I nearly asphyxiated. I screamed so loud my throat is still raw. You let them triangulate you. Then, when they charged, you simply fell on your back—all six fireballs flew over you—and blasted two brothers with your boot wands. That propelled you towards the third one who would have died of surprise if you had not speared him like a bull. I came so hard my panties are still soaked. I've never heard of that tactic, and I've dueled thousands of times. You killed the three best Mongol duelers in Europe in one heartbeat."

"I don't really remember."

The beauty studied him carefully and began to grasp the depth of his exhaustion. "You dueled two super-quad companies. The third we bombed in an ally while they waited to ambush you. The rest of the battalion are probably flying here now."

Billy popped a cork. "They sent a battalion of super-quads after me?"

"They followed you from Siam. You didn't know Genghis Khan hired the world's best mercenaries to kill you?"

"I have seven hundred of the world's best quads hunting me?"

"Not anymore. My friends ambushed two companies this month. My twin brother has been dueling them in arenas in France."

"I look forward to meeting your twin."

"No you don't. He's not gonna like you being with me."

"I'm with you?"

He wanted to flee, but she entered his personal space like she owned it and examined his face like a ruby. He had never met a woman so direct. She looked into his eyes as if he was an open book and she read him cover to cover, writing mental notes along the way.

"I never knew absolute horniness until I watched you duel teams of three, hour after hour. It was the most amazing thing I've ever seen. You danced by fireballs like a bullfighter. You beat some teams without even leaving the ground." For the first time, he had no idea what to do as she took his head into her hands and smiled into his eyes. "Baron, your secret is safe with me."

"You mistake me for someone else."

"Oh no, my champion. I could spot your aura from a kilometer up. You have the most powerful energy I've ever seen, and I've spent my life around the world's most powerful quads. Like you, I've been dueling since childhood, but I'm an even better healer. You favor your left leg, you can't raise your right hand over your head, and your back hurts like hell. I can help you with that. Here, let me show you."

With that she backed him into the shadows and slowly kissed him until he attached himself to her face like a barnacle. Her tongue must be ninja-trained the way it snuck around his mouth. The way her nipples pressed against his thin shirt electrocuted his chest. He felt high, but instead of thinking clearer, his mind shut down. He felt her hands on his body, and the warmth she applied to his wounds, but mostly he hooked himself to her lips like a fish.

Billy just found his next addiction.

"I don't know about you," she finally said, smiling, "but I feel better." Probably three years older, she took his hand and walked through several streets until they reached a crowded restaurant where they could whisper in private over dinner. He remained in a daze, but still noticed that her eyes searched for threats.

"My name is Princess and my brother Prince. Our father wasn't even a chief, but the local shaman suggested the names because our parents were kings of the arena. They died when we were ten, so we've been killing their dueling champions ever since. I became a millennial before puberty."

She rambled on until it dawned on him that she was doing it to make him comfortable. Still, he wouldn't even tell her his name. Or why he dueled. Or where his parents were.

"Come with me," she insisted. "You must meet the people I'm with."

"Only if I can keep a mask on. I'll not answer questions or show my face. The Mongols will kill me if my image or identity become known."

And it'd be the death of him if the Mongols knew the Red Baron was just a kid.

## **Chapter 34**

Princess led him high, darting from cloud to cloud, then dropped down in a forest in the middle of nowhere. Billy couldn't spot the campfire. Her wand emitted a soft greeting, so it would not travel far, before landing in the open. A burly guy greeted them, hands empty to signal peace.

"You almost missed dinner, Princess. I'm Bear," he said to Billy.

"Oh, we already ate."

"Dating already?" He chuckled. "Better meet Grandma before you get your hopes up," he advised Billy. "Some of the guys call Princess the Universal Target because everyone has taken a shot at her. Unsuccessfully," he added.

"He won't show his face or answer questions," Princess warned.

"I wouldn't either if I beat a thousand quads in one day. They thought they could just tire you out, so they went from least to most powerful. You got a vicious multi-millennial named Buri who killed some friends of mine. You finished him so fast I thought I blinked. What harsh shit did you whisper while you watched the life drain out of him?"

"Just something the Third Millennial said right before I killed him."

The big guy lit up in joy. "You got the Third Millennial? Oh, you're gonna be real popular here."

"Would you like Buri's wand set, Bear?"

The big guy looked stunned. Wands that powerful were worth a fortune. "How much?"

"Protect me. That's the price you must pay."

"But I'd do that anyways, for someone who can out-duel a thousand Mongols a day."

"Then we have a deal?" Billy asked, opening his backpack to show him several thousand wand sets.

Bear snatched them up before the kid changed his mind and they shook hands.

"Call me Red."

"Red?" Bear thought that funny. "We believe that warriors should be called whatever they want to be called. I knew a guy who insisted we call him Shit For Brains because he kept enlisting for the most dangerous duty. Brave bastard." And apparently dead. "Well, come on. Everyone wants to meet the guy who has enough energy to duel all day. Just the thought tires me out. Don't pull a wand or some of them might pee themselves."

His chuckle echoed against the trees.

"Look who accepted our invitation," Bear announced, gesturing grandly to Billy, who looked uncomfortable with two hundred eyes sizing him up. "He wants to be called Red. I know, I know. I thought he'd be taller, too. He only came on the condition that he'd not show his face or answer questions. When I asked if he had a pleasant flight, he refused to tell me."

No one drew a wand, so Billy stepped forward. He noticed that they built a roof of branches over their cooking fires so they could not be spotted from the air. They all looked like tough veterans.

What have I walked into? he asked himself.

"Hey, grandpa!" Bear called out. "Want to shake the hand of the guy who killed the Third Millennial?"

An old man ran out, as excited as a boy on his birthday. "I'm American Jack."

Stunned, Billy gave him a thorough look-over, because he sure didn't seem like the longtime leader of the resistance. "You're kidding!"

Everyone laughed, but Billy didn't mean to insult the poor man. American Jack was a legend. Like Genghis, he mated with thousands of quads to continue the fight. He just didn't look like a legend.

"I get that a lot," he replied with a smile, apparently hard to offend. "What's with the red suit in Paris? Most veterans want to blend in, not stand out."

"For three centuries, Genghis Khan used his terrifying reputation as the world's best dueler to build an empire. I hope to build my own terrifying reputation to tear that empire down. Genghis became a legend to take people's freedom; I shall become a legend to give it back. Justice requires that what they did to others be done to them."

"Crap! I wasn't recording. Could you say that again so the world can hear it?"

At first, Billy thought they were messing with him, but they sure seemed sincere, so he repeated himself. Not a few of them were crying. Not the least of whom was Jack himself.

"You're a damn relief, is what you are. The videos of you beating Mongol armadas lifted many of us out of depression. Your victories have flooded American University with high-quality recruits. Thousands of European quads working for the Mongols switched sides because of you. You've convinced half the world that the Empire could lose."

"Could lose?" Billy found that offensive. "I'm convinced they'll lose. I could have killed Genghis Khan several times by now."

If they liked him before, they absolutely loved him now. He could see it in their eyes, like a doctor telling a patient he can be cured.

"Everyone has wondered what became of the Third Millennial," Jack said. "Genghis Khan assumes the devious fart is just avoiding him."

"I've survived a million fights because I use his Millennial Wands."

Jack studied the Millennials closely. "That bastard led the raid that killed my wife and family. I loved my wife so much that I never re-married. Not even after three hundred years."

"Wanna see the look on his face when I stuck steel into his chest?"

The audience reacted as if he threw gold at them. They instantly mobbed him, while some hovered a few meters in the air to see.

Billy projected an unbelievably large 3D image. They remained silent as they watched, from his perspective, the blades shoot out of the snow. The look on Subodei's incredulous face was priceless. They gasped as Billy sliced his arms and cheered wildly as the great general flopped about from having his testicles electrocuted. Finally, they got to the clip of him saying, "You know what I like most about a fair fight? The better fighter always wins."

The applause deafened him. The pats on his back fell so hard they knocked him around. He had never seen so many exhilarated faces. Several of these hardened warriors openly wept. A tough-looking Russian hugged him, tears falling uncontrollably.

"Can I have a copy?" someone asked.

He tapped wand after wand.

"Let the man breathe," Bear insisted, roughly pushing them back. "He obviously can take a blast, but your damn crying is unmanning him."

And it was. He bonded with them before he even knew their names.

"Sorry, Red. You see, pretty much everyone here loved someone killed by Subodei. Yet not even Prince could beat him in a fair fight."

Their tears were making even Billy cry, so Bear helped him out.

"Ay! Now look at what you've done to poor Jack." The old man sat in the dirt, cradling his head in his hands, bawling like a baby. "I've known the man for two hundred years and I've never seen him cry like that. Not even that time he thought I shoved his beloved wands up a Mongol's anus."

"I hate shitty wands," Billy deadpanned.

"Why destroy the Siamese Empire?" someone asked.

"My parent's murder put me in a killer mood."

"Another orphan! You'll fit in here. All of us have lost a loved one. It's why we fight without pay."

"You're not all filthy rich?" This shocked Billy. "I've given Free Europe ships literally full of wealth, and you guys are poor? You should all be richer than Marcus Crassus!"

Judging by the silence, they were neither rich nor aware of the guy who shared the first triumvirate with Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great. Well, Billy didn't become famous for ignoring opportunities.

"Tonight I'll pay anyone who agrees to follow me until we win the war all the coin that they can carry."

Princess instantly accepted, but the rest thought that hilarious. "You mean we're gonna win in our lifetimes?" Bear joked.

"Yes. I'll pay as much coin as you can carry," Billy insisted. "Tonight."

That shut them up.

"I think he's serious," Jack said in the awkward silence.

Bear signed up next. "The fool gave me Buri's wands for free, so I'm in."

Everyone seemed to wait for Grandma, not Jack, who conveniently disappeared.

"I can carry a lot of coin," Grandma warned Billy.

"You only commit yourself if you can take as much as you can carry."

"There's over one hundred of us."

"Then you better bring some friends," Billy shot back, upping the ante. Oh, he had them now. "What's it gonna be, Grandma?"

"Why do I get the feeling that Red is flying circles around me. All right, damn it, I'm yours if you show me the coin. Now stop teasing my curiosity by telling me how."

Surrounded by dangerous strangers, Billy smiled. "Has no one figured it out? I only arrived in Spain yesterday, yet I'm promising over one hundred quads over one hundred kilos each." No one yelled out the obvious, so Billy clued them. "I bet on every duel today, and rolled over the winnings onto the next duel. According to the stadium manager, I won the equivalent of ten gold tons today. That's one hundred gold kilos carried by one hundred fliers. But much of it will be in silver and bronze, so we literally have more coin than we can carry, and it's all legally mine. In the Bank of Mongolia in Barcelona. Until the Mongol governor confiscates it in the morning. Unless we withdraw my winnings tonight."

They cheered as one and hugged Billy until he almost suffocated. Under Jack, they risked their lives for centuries without pay. With the Red Baron, they became rich the day they met him.

It surprised Billy how many non-Europeans he shook hands with. Several from Africa and a hell of a lot from Asia. Three hundred years breeding with the world's best quads resulted in some fascinating company. A lady -- and almost half of them were ladies -- passed him a plate and cup as everyone gathered around to hear the interview.

"This is delicious. What is it?" Billy asked.

"Fried bull testicles basted in saffron paste with coriander sprinkle," Bear lied with a straight face.

"Damn it," Billy replied, not missing a beat. "I just had that for breakfast."

"Tell us your story, Red," a beautiful redhead asked.

"Mongols have killed ten generations of my ancestors, so I've paid them back by personally killing a million Mongols."

Billy could tell his claim was hard to believe.

"How good are you at lying?" Bear asked out of curiosity.

"I once fell face first in a steaming pile of fresh doodoo," Billy said matter-of-factly. "And let me tell you, it tasted like shit!" Surrounded by smiling faces, he played it straight. "It turns out I judged my mother's mutton too harshly. Until then, I thought it tasted like crap."

"No offense, Red, but you sound too young to have killed so many."

Billy took off his shirt and walked around the fire so everyone could get a good look at his debt score, as he called it. The multiple levels of cuts, burns and bruises clearly came from a hell of a lot of fights.

Billy found himself among comedians.

"They cooked you more than the boar we're roasting," Bear commented.

"Pink is a more accurate name than Red. And the Pink Baron has a nice ring to it."

"Have you tried wearing armor?"

"No offense, but you look better with a shirt on."

"Did they give you a free scar after the first million?"

"I can see why you enjoy dueling. Do you also punch yourself in the nuts?"

"You still have a little untouched skin. I can scorch that for you if you want."

The jokes kept coming, but he could tell it impressed them. Despite his youth, he had worked the trenches. Then he reached Grandma. The tiny old Asian lady projected gravitas that Julius Caesar would envy.

"How have you survived?"

"I'll show you after dinner."

"Over my dead body!" Princess yelled to general laughter, even though she clearly was not joking.

"So you're all vacationing behind enemy lines?" Billy asked.

Jack answered: "We're killing time and Mongols until my African division arrives so we can start emigrating Americans to Africa to take the continent from the Empire."

"Your African division?" Billy didn't move, but he seemed to grow taller. "They signed up with me when they accepted my super wands and salary. I even reimbursed you for the cost of their training. I want the Africans to roll up the Mongols in Spain from the south while the Americans on the Pyrenees do the same from the north."

Billy explained his father's plan. "Before we take Africa, we're gonna kick the Mongols out of Spain because that will simplify a defensive line along the Pyrenees Mountain Range, which blocks the Iberian Peninsula from the rest of Europe. Without Mongols in Spain, we have safe harbors for our ships and a safe corridor for our fliers. Our troops can fight the enemy rather than escort our civilians. I've already spoken with the king of England, who has agreed to help the Americans through."

Billy didn't mean to replace their leader, but that's how it came across. The silence only grew louder since he basically cut off Jack at the knees.

"Grandma?" Bear asked their best general

"Taking Africa will be easier, faster, and cheaper with safe harbors and a safe land route, so I'm going with the guy who spanks Genghis Khan every summer. But can you really fund forty thousand marathoners?" she asked Billy.

"I could afford a million. They're cheaper than the hundreds of highways I'm funding in the Americas."

Bear started laughing. "I'm beginning to see what Princess sees in this guy. I never liked kids. Not even my own. But, I've got to tell you, I really like this boy."

Their campfire had gone out, so Billy thought he'd give them a show.

"You folks look like you've seen everything. I bet I can show you something new." They answered with a cheerful roar. All except Princess. "What about you, my little princess? You don't want to bet?"

Billy regretted taunting her as soon as the words left his lips. She stood up and stared him down.

"I will never, ever, bet against you. I want to have your children and take care of you for the rest of my life."

Billy was hovering over them, but her words somehow turned off his wands, something that had never happened before. He crashed into several warriors who roughly pushed him off into the dirt, Baron or not. They backed up defensively in fear.

"I think I just fell in love," he mumbled in a daze, not able to even get up.

Princess looked frozen, but Grandma, next to her, screamed like a Banshee.

"Not with you, Grandma!" Billy joked. "With the young, beautiful one."

"I'm not available," Bear deadpanned.

Billy and Princess shared a long look, then he smiled as he popped up above them, releasing a raw primal scream and lighting up all four wands. His forty meter-long wingspan gave them chills. They stared at him in utter silence. Sure, they saw the videos, but those didn't do him justice. It was the difference between watching porn versus starring in porn. The entire camp applauded. Never had Billy felt so much like he belonged.

"Jack, you got any clean underwear I can borrow?" Bear asked.

Jack said nothing, stunned at how effortlessly he had been replaced.

Diva, a beautiful Irish redhead, got so excited she flew over them and performed an incredible aerial fire dance that expressed her joy better than words could convey. Princess flew up to tackle him in the air. They landed in the brush and she started undressing him.

Bear admonished her: "Not here! Some of us are sensitive. Not me. I actually like to watch, but Jack is kind of squeamish."



"I'm taking him, Grandma," she said, challenging the old veteran. "I've saved my virginity long enough."

Indeed, at a time of low life expectancy, most girls mated at puberty, yet Princess waited years longer.

"You were right, my dear. He's the one," Grandma agreed.

Princess grabbed him by the front of his pants and led him away. When Ox, a beefy warrior, didn't move out of her way fast enough, her wand threw him into the brush.

Billy had not felt this happy since he was orphaned.

## Chapter 35

Dozens of them flew to find friends, so they didn't actually empty the bank until just before dawn. Princess couldn't wake Billy up after sex, anyways. All banks have thick walls cemented with mortar, but Billy punched a hole through it quickly. With the city battalion dead, the militia tried to stop them, but they charged blind instead of massing together. The fighting woke most of the city, but most assumed the Americans were bombing again.

Billy landed them at noon in the middle of nowhere so they could rest. The poor bastards indeed took all the coin they could carry. Billy backtracked, but soon returned to get them into position to ambush their pursuers.

Leaving the wealth in a gully, Team Red (as they decided to call themselves) dived out of the sun to take the militia from behind. The few hundred super-quads devastated a few thousand mediocre quads. After that, Billy's newest employees enjoyed a much overdue vacation in Madrid. The Spanish King insisted on staging a huge feast in the Baron's honor, while ignoring American Jack, and recounted at length how the gold and wands the Baron sent saved his people.

Billy and Princess stayed the longest to party like newlyweds. His fifteenth birthday was coming up, so he showed her his birth certificate that claimed he was turning seventeen. He bought her expensive jewelry and transferred a ton of gold into her account in anticipation of their first child. The prospect of having a child, then not being alive to support it, horrified Billy. Ultimately, however, they had to go back to work.

Flying high, they spotted a company of Spanish airmen chasing two squads of Mongols. But then two companies of Mongols sprang up on both sides as soon as the Spanish passed them. No matter which way they fled, the Spanish were screwed.

Billy silently sliced the ten quads guarding the ceiling. They all fell like rocks, having no idea what hit them. Then they sped after the next forty, cutting them from behind until survivors noticed and shot back. Billy and Princess stayed with them, even as they banked left towards their comrades.

Discovering the imminent trap shocked the Spanish, who abandoned the two squads ahead to turn on those fighting Billy and Princess. The two groups quickly closed. At the last moment, Billy appeared above the Mongols and distracted them

with his famous scream. Princess then shot from above to target the enemy from three places.

The Spanish rose so they all faced the Mongols and fired like a ship's broadside. Blasts travel farther from height, so the Mongols had to gain speed and altitude before the Spanish got into range. The Spanish, however, pulled off an old Mongol trick by flying backwards at a 30 degree angle—extending their broadside until they destroyed the enemy.

The other Mongol company positioned themselves favorably against the Spanish while the two Mongol squads raced back. Billy used himself as bait to delay their attack. The reward for killing the Red Baron would set them up for life, so they attacked him instead. Once they dove, he led them in front of the Spanish, who devastated them. When the two Mongol squads fled, Billy and Princess hunted them down—two quads against twenty.

They returned to find the Spanish robbing the corpses. One of their squad leaders had an impressive fireball, so Billy sought him out. And he turned out to be young, beautiful, and female.

“Maria, this is my wife, Princess,” Billy said when she landed. He already thought of her as his wife. He handed Maria a set of wands. “Show us your new wingspan.”

Awed at meeting the famous Red Baron, Maria blew out flame nine meters in joyous disbelief.

“She’s a keeper,” Princess agreed.

“You can have those wands if you follow me until we win the war.”

“I cannot quit the Spanish Air Force now. They need me.”

Billy laughed. “I guarantee you’ll kill more Mongols with me. Take us to your division commander and I’ll get you transferred to Team Red.”

Billy found their camp much bigger.

“Bear, has Jack been recruiting?” Billy asked.

“It’s amazing how old friends find me when I’m finally loaded. The money you gave us is attracting super-quads like flies to shit. We may have a thousand supers soon. You’re a quad magnet.”

Princess cursed. “Damn! My brother is back.”

“He’s not gonna duel me, is he?” Billy asked, surprised, as a skinny American Indian marched angrily towards them.

Princess drew wand and fired off a verbal barrage in their native tongue. Prince didn’t even slow down. He walked up to Billy and swung a fist.

Billy didn’t need years of martial arts training to avoid the round-house punch. He evaded several more while a crowd formed. Frustrated, Prince tried to tackle him, since Indians grow up wrestling. Billy grabbed his upper body, twisted, and sent him flying into the dirt.

“Prince, stop!” Jack yelled.

“It’s okay,” Billy said. “I can do this all day.”

Princess, however, took no chances. Her wand threw her brother into a nearby stream. Team Red formed a wall between them. Prince couldn’t believe his friends chose the new guy over him.

“I deposited a hundred kilos in your name at Global Bank in Madrid,” Billy yelled to Prince. “And I brought super wands for everyone!”

Billy emptied his backpack onto the grass. Hundreds of wand sets spilled out, each wrapped in water-resistant leather pouches.

"Jack," Billy confessed, "I held back on you. The most powerful wands were too valuable to give away. And these are not 'dead' wands. I took them from dying multi-millennials, so they retain their full power. I sent them to Madrid to reward the best American quads, but instead I'll give them out now on the condition that those who accept them swear to follow me until we win this war. If more than one quad wants a wand, the warrior who can extend a flame the longest gets it. No one may take more than one set, and must donate a backup set to the Americans."

Quads obsess over wands like a man does his penis. Everyone was soon torching new sticks. Billy may as well have dropped naked women on them, given their excitement. Better wands let them fly faster and blast stronger. It could literally make the difference between life and death.

The twins, after a decade constantly dueling using their parent's wands, beat everyone, but a few long time veterans came close.

"Who's that lady?" Billy asked Princess. Their group had a few dozen Africans, most descendents of Jack, but this one seemed the darkest of them all.

"Pretty, isn't she?"

"I can't tell under all that hair, but look at those flames! What's her story?"

"An orphan, like so many of us. The Mongols wiped out most of her tribe, which ruled an empire in northwest Africa. She goes by Mali, the name of her kingdom. We found her several years ago dueling constantly to boost her power."

Billy had a few special sets of wands tucked in his jacket, so he walked over and offered her one.

"Try these."

She looked at him hard, trying to guess his motive. "I cannot promise to follow you forever. I'm just here to earn money to hire enough quads to kill the Mongols who wiped out my family."

"Then these may help."

She reluctantly took them and her face lit up when she fired eleven meter long fire.

"What do you want for them?" she asked, hating herself for asking.

"I'll let my wife tell you," Billy answered as he walked off, wondering what their children would look like.

Billy asked American Jack if his group had any experts in sword fighting to teach him. Jack called over someone still wearing a full suit of armor.

"Blade, Red here wants to improve his sword fighting skills. Make him show us what he's got."

Blade gave him no time. Billy ducked a swipe, then popped over another to give him time to extend his own. Very long blades are great in the air, but they smack the ground. Billy rose ten meters and Blade went after him.

He found himself completely outmatched. He thought he was an excellent flier, but she danced around him. Not wanting to get his ass kicked in front of his new friends, his wand pushed Blade hard into a tree.

Furious, Blade rose again, clearly going to beat him to a pulp, so Billy levitated a rock to smack his opponent in the head. Again, Blade went down. Fuming, Blade made a more cautious approach, using superior skill to unfairly strike Billy again

and again. Desperate, Billy extended a leg blade that flipped Blade in the air, then struck his opponent hard into the ground with a steel bat. For the third time, Billy humiliated Blade in front of everybody.

He landed a safe distance away to praise him, but Blade's helmet fell off and she looked about to cry. Billy, like most teenagers, had more hormones than neurons. Stunned at her beauty, his slow reaction got him punched in the face.

Prince howled in laughter.

"Stay out of my way, you cruel son-of-a-bitch," she roared before storming off.

"Damn it, Red!" Instead of helping him up, Princess hit him while he was down. "Blade has the best rack in the outfit. I should have mentioned this before, especially when I said I was a virgin, but I also play for that team, and Blade is my favorite player. I was hoping to include you, but now you messed it all up. Now she'll never give you any, even though she wants kids from a powerful father."

His head already hurt, but now it hurt worse. Did his wife just say she slept with other women? And still considered herself a virgin? He must know less about sex than he thought.

Princess squatted in front of him. "Blade is the only surviving child of the last king of Switzerland. The Mongols raped her and her mother when she was a teenager, two decades ago. She wants to reclaim her kingdom, but she needs a powerful son to proclaim as king. A prodigy with you would have been perfect. Nobody would dare mess with the Red Baron's son."

Mongols thought nothing of raping civilians. They raped so many in Peking in 1215 that thousands of women avoided it by throwing themselves to death off the battlements.

Rape played key roles in Mongol history: Genghis' father stole his mother from her husband and, in revenge years later, the mother's tribe kidnapped, raped, and impregnated Genghis' wife. Genghis named the product of this rape "guest" to clarify how he felt towards his wife's son. The family poisoned him to prevent the bastard from succeeding Genghis as Khan. Just as Genghis killed his own older half-brother to become the head of the family when he was just a teenager.

"I thought she was a guy," was Billy's weak excuse, watching Princess go after Blade.

Jack suddenly crash landed, looking like he burnt his wand. "I need to talk to you. Now!" Jack didn't strike Billy as the aggressive type, but he dragged Billy by the arm like he was just a skinny kid. "Where did you get these?" he demanded once trees shielded them, holding up a wand set.

"They're my father's," Billy answered.

"And where did he get them?"

"From his father. They go back like ten generations. Always to the strongest, and only on the condition that they're used against Mongols."

Jack turned pale in front of him, clutched his chest, and slid to the ground. Oh, great, Billy thought. The guy survives three centuries fighting humanity's greatest tyrant, then I kill him without even trying.

"Von Richthofen," the old man whispered.

Now Billy freaked out. He popped a wand and crouched down. "How the hell do you know my name?"

Jack tried to smile, but failed. "It's my name. I'm the Baron Karl von Richthofen. My mother Hildred carved my initials on them. I gave them to my son when I thought I was gonna die in Peking in 1215. I thought they wiped you out."

Billy suddenly felt equally old. He collapsed next to his ancestor. "Your great-granddaughter Rachel survived. The one who could blast with her boot wands. Later, while pregnant, her fiancée got killed, so she married Taran of Kiev and encouraged him to duel until he died. Since then we've burned ancient trees. My grandfather believed we cost the Khan several million wands."

Jack got all excited. "Oh, but I met some of them! I just never knew they were family."

"I'm not the last of my line, so if anything happens to me, tell the king of England."

"You've had kids with the king of England?" Jack joked.

"No, but my mother was his only legitimate daughter. Until Imperial Guards raped her to death. The queen murdered my father, so I set my grandfather on the throne. Technically, I'm next in line."

Jack now looked alarmed. "You're the one who killed Queen Margaret!"

"Bitch had to pay." The boy didn't sound the least apologetic.

Jack didn't want to say anything, but he suddenly had to take a massive crap. "Why would the heir to the English crown risk his life millions of times? England looks suspiciously like the Empire's last friend in Europe."

"I own Global Bank, which gets to operate within the Empire for as long as England looks friendly."

This explained so much. Yet it didn't explain enough. "You're too young to have raided the Mongol capital several years ago."

"My father was the original Baron," Billy said to the guy who was still, strictly speaking, the baron.

"Then those are your parents buried in our family cemetery!" Jack seemed relieved. "I go there to talk to my wife, and the fresh graves scared me."

"The open grave is mine. Please bury me there if you out-live me."

"And you me. My grave is empty, by the way. Strategic deception."

"I'm having as many children as possible, just in case this war lasts longer than I do."

"Are you gonna marry Princess? I'm shocked at how well she's turned out, given all the fawning over her."

"We're trying to have kids, but I can't marry for a few years," Billy said.

"Why not? That girl's a great catch."

Sighing deeply, Billy took off the mask he wore when not wearing his helmet. "Because I just turned fifteen years old, and the legal age in England is eighteen. The birth certificate I showed Princess gave me two extra years to throw off bounty hunters."

"Does Princess know she has to wait three years to marry you?"

"Not yet. I'm hoping I can make excuses for a few years like other men."

The old man laughed. "Good luck with that," said a guy who started thousands of families. "But I think I can help you with the bounty hunters. Let me introduce you to someone special. Stay here."

Jack returned with a vicious-looking veteran who probably had not smiled in centuries. “Red, meet John. Mongols have killed three of his families. John, Red descended from my great-granddaughter Rachel. He even has the wands I thought I lost in Peking.”

“I’m calling myself Jim this time, old man. Try to get it right.”

Daddy issues, Billy suspected. He examined their faces. “Is Jim your son or grandson?”

That really upset the new guy. “Jack, this is why I don’t like flying with you.”

“Red won’t tell anyone. He’s got his own secrets. Show him your face.” Billy took off the cloth and the guy’s eyes bugged out. “Jim, we need someone to be the face and voice of the Red Baron, and this boy can’t be it. You could impersonate him better than anyone I know.”

“Why don’t I just blast myself and save you the trouble? If people think I’m the Red Baron, my head would be worth tons of gold.”

Billy knew he needed to bring out the big guns. “Jim, I’ll give you a ton of gold and the Khan’s Millennial Wands, taken when we buried him under a million headless corpses.” Billy knew he had him when his nostrils flared. “But first I need to know why Jack thinks you’d make a better Red Baron than, say, Bear.”

Billy took out the Khan’s wands and watched the new guy salivate over them. “This will be your only chance to own Millennial Wands. See how long a wingspan they’ll give you.”

The new guy burst flame eleven meters, nearly burning down the trees around them. Billy could tell that he’d have to kill Jim to get the wands back.

“Show him, son.”

Jim carefully scanned for witnesses, then popped up and poured flame from all four wands. Billy coughed so hard he nearly choked. No wonder he was paranoid—everyone really was out to get him!

“Do we have a deal?”

“Nobody else can know about my boot wands,” Jim told Billy sternly.

“And nobody can know the Baron is just a damn teenager.”

Billy spent the night passing wand memories to video sticks, which Jim would take to experts to make propaganda that Jim would narrate, while trying to sound like William.

Once they selected, improved, and narrated every video they wanted, they organized them on a set of video wands. Then they sent a set to every major library in the world, each collection containing over a million recordings. Some, naturally, were from his father. The exhaustive list covered literally every kill. Widows would search them for husbands who never returned. Dueling enthusiasts soon argued over his best one hundred victories and universally declared him the best dueler in history.

The shock value helped make them the most popular videos in history, after porn. They struck the Mongols like a spiritual version of the thirteenth century black plague. Even hardened super-quads looked ready to give up after watching the Baron’s best-of montage that highlighted his most spectacular kills. A more comprehensive montage clinically showed one moment of literally a million lives the Baron personally took.

The most notorious wand in the set was dedicated to the sacking of Mongol cities, including the capital and the Khan's palace. Most of these extensive videos had never been seen before and horrified Mongols, who only heard impersonal news reports.

They even included a video of the Mongol postal service personally handing the first collection to the Great Khan himself, and his reaction when the Red Baron appeared in the message to offer him this gift.

Jim's job was to appear and disappear across the Empire to cloud reports of the Baron's location. He'd beat Mongols in the arena, flash his four wands, and do the Baron's scream before flying off. With the new wands, nobody could catch him. Jim won a fortune in the arena. Jack later remarked that he had never seen his son this happy.

"Killing Mongols reduces the pain of lost loved ones," Billy explained from experience. "And the more he kills, the better he feels."

After Jim left them in the trees, Billy asked Jack: "Is it true you have a million employees?"

"I have thousands of descendents who run companies that employ a million Americans."

"I need an organization to manage my investments. I'll give you access to my charity fund in San Francisco if you'll expand my food production, infrastructure, education, and healthcare projects. All I ask is that you record detailed expense reports and that you publicly credit the Red Baron. I'd also like to give you access to my general war fund accounts in Europe in case something bad happens to me."

Jack started laughing hysterically, literally rolling on the ground like a kid being tickled, which the boy took as a "yes." Billy could almost see a huge burden falling from Jack's shoulders.

"Why me?" Jack finally managed to ask.

"Because you won't rob me. You already spend every coin you can get your hands on to avenge your family."

Jack liked the logic. "In that case, I'll make you my heir."

The following morning, Billy called them together.

"Prince, if you duel enough, you could become the most powerful quad in the world. I'll loan you a ton of gold for you to bet, on the condition that 90% of your winnings go into my general war fund."

"50%"

"85%, since you can't win without my wands, can't bet without my money, and can't survive without quad protection. But let's sweeten the deal by assigning female bodyguards willing to mate with you, and a kilo a year for eighteen years for each child comes out of the 85%. But you have to duel at least 10,000 times a year."

"60% and I'll duel 15,000 times a year," Prince countered.

"80%, 15,000, and you get to keep these beautiful Millennial Wands that I took from the Third Millennial. My father dueled with these babies." The crowd gasped as Billy took wands from his arm launchers and boots. "You've seen what I can do with these beauties."

Actually, he held up Subodei's backup that his father used. The more powerful Millennials that he really used he hid under his shirt.

"Let me see those," demanded Jack. He held them to the sunlight, peered closely, even sniffed them. As the final test, he lit them up, pushing out flame ten meters to enthusiastic clapping. Jack looked like he got laid.

"Jack, we're too famous to duel, so you can't have them, but the Mongols welcome Indians in their arenas so they don't have to fight them in the field. Prince, the sooner we kill their super-quads, the faster we'll win the war. Mali will also duel, so don't kill any dark women with huge hair. The lives we save by dueling could very well be our own children."

"You just want to get rid of me," Prince said flatly.

"It'll be easier to ravage your sister without you here," Billy admitted.

The athletic Indian took the wands from Jack, felt their power surge in him, then shot twelve-meter long flames. He'll have no problem killing a million people for those wands, Billy concluded.

"You have yourself a deal, Baron," he said, shaking Billy's hand for the first time, his animosity buried.

That night, Billy found Blade off by herself, still seething mad.

"I've been an ass, so you can hit me again if you want."

Luckily he wore his helmet because she smacked him hard enough to knock his head off. He held out a set of wands, even as she began kicking him mercilessly until she exhausted herself. Then she snatched the bundle and tried them out.

She changed from fire to steel to flying through trees. Satisfied, she landed and accepted his apology. Sort of.

"Okay, Baron. What do you want for them?"

The question confused him. "I want you to make me a better swordsman."

"And what else?"

"What else is there?"

"Princess said you gave her a ton of gold for having your child, and that you'd do the same for me."

"I sure don't want my children growing up poor. Life is too short to live poor."

"Okay. For a ton a child, I'll give you as many as possible. But you must bathe first," she said.

Billy ran for the stream.

## Chapter 36

Jack built up a vast network of spies to keep him informed. That night one of them flew in, looking terrified. Poor Jack turned white when he reviewed the news. Everyone gathered around. Jack tapped his throat so everyone could hear.

"General Tamerlane is coming with a marathon division."

"We need more super-quads," Bear concluded. "We should all recruit every super-quad we know. Hell, we should have done that as soon as Red arrived."



Nobody could argue with that, so most took off to convince old war comrades to join Team Red. Jack flew to get the new Americans, who were already late.

Vemana and Sarvanja, two ancient cousins from India who looked like identical twins, sought out Billy. Two centuries ago, Tamerlane sacked Delhi and stacked one hundred thousand skulls into a giant pyramid. Jack lost several thousand quads and the cousins lost most of their extended family, but at least they stayed loyal to Jack after all these long years.

Billy always saw them as very tough birds, but now they looked scared to death.

"Sorry, ladies," he greeted them, "but Tamerlane is mine. I have a personal grudge against him that I don't care to explain."

"You'll kill him for sure?" one of them asked.

"I must be the one who kills him. But I'll give you the video of his death."

Their vast relief made them look like they just finished a giant dump. Their lips turned in what Billy assumed must be smiles. They hugged each other excitedly and, for a moment, Billy feared they'd hug him, too.

"Can you bring me some premium talent from India?" he asked them. "I may need help with the other ten thousand Mongols."

They left for India without even waiting for lunch.

"No way they get back in time," Billy predicted.

"Maybe not," Bear said, "but every super-quad in India respects them. If you kill Tamerlane, you'll have the gratitude of all of India. Even Indians with Mongol blood hate Tamer the Lame."

"We don't even know when the new bad guys will get here," Billy complained.

"I'll go find them," Prince offered.

"You just don't like seeing me with your sister," Billy taunted him with a smile.

Prince playfully stuck out his tongue.

Billy returned to his little tent, only to find Mali waiting for him with his wife.

"I don't think I'm pregnant yet," Mali complained angrily, as if it was his fault.

Over the next week, Billy re-organized those who stayed according to how high they could fly. Wand strength didn't matter so much as ability to breathe slowly. When quads returned, he placed them in ten under-strength companies according to their ceiling. Company #1 could fly the highest, while the lowest ceiling made up #10. Billy put them through the usual formation maneuvers to get them used to each other.

It surprised everyone when Prince returned just a week later to tell them that the Mongol marathoners landed in Valencia after dark and haven't been seen since.

"From the French coast they flew south to a coral atoll near Spain. I'd have drown if I didn't find a sympathetic Spanish fisherman. In the middle of the night, they flew to Valencia and disappeared, so I alerted the nearest Spanish base. They didn't attack at dawn, like I expected, and the Spanish still have not seen them when I left. I'm not even sure the Spanish still believe me."

"Valencia?" This really bothered Maria. "That's right in the middle of their coastal territory. They could fly out to sea, then surprise us anywhere along the front line, from the French border to the southern tip near Africa. Oh, and Valencia has their main bomb factory. How can we counter that?"

"But why didn't they attack the Spanish near Valencia when they had surprise?" Billy asked.

Something worried Billy, so he crossed his legs and fell into a meditative state. Meditation helped reduce his "fever," as he called it -- the excess energy that he needed to burn off through fighting or flying. Everyone talked about counter-tactics. Instead, Billy thought of his dad. He'd know what to do. He always did.

"Put yourself in their shoes," papa would say. "What would you do in their place?"

Billy chuckled because, if he commanded the Mongols in Spain, he'd be pissed. Three centuries of victories convinced the Mongols of their own superiority. The only reason they had not yet finished the Spanish is that they concentrated on the French. They saw the Spanish as more of a nuisance than a challenge. I'd use these ten thousand marathoners to buy time, inflict crushing blows, and teach the damn Spanish a lesson they'd never forget. Yeah, punish them. Demonstrate Mongol superiority.

"Oh, crap!" Billy yelled before opening his eyes, unaware that a few hours had passed. He popped over the camp and called a meeting. "Prince, how long did the new Mongols fly to reach that islet?"

"Twelve really long hours."

"Did they wear armor?"

"Of course not."

It was simple physics: the less they carried, the farther they flew; the more they carried, the lower and slower.

"Maria, if they can fly twelve hours light, could they get to Madrid from Valencia carrying incendiaries, and still return to Mongolian lines?"

Everything became obvious to everyone. They cursed as one.

"It's why they didn't attack the Spanish near Valencia -- bombing Madrid requires a day to rest up. They flew so long from France to lose anyone tracking them."

Maria's face turned red in horror. "My family lives in the capital!"

"What are we gonna do?" Bear asked, ceding leadership.

"Bear, get the Americans on the Pyrenees. Maria, take your Spaniards and warn every military unit between Valencia and Madrid. It's almost sunset. Weighed down by bombs, they probably can't get to Madrid before midnight. Every company will fly separately so the slower companies don't hold back the faster ones. If you can't get to Madrid in time, then hit them on their way back. Any questions?"

"What are you gonna do, Red?"

Billy smiled at them. "I'm gonna ambush them!"

## Chapter 37

The Mongols assaulted the Spanish near Valencia after sunset. The ten marathon battalions flew out to sea, rose to maximum height, and crossed inland

unseen. The first three hours passed uneventfully. They enjoyed great weather and scouts didn't even spot any spies trailing them.

The first sign of trouble came when a squad shielding them from above shrieked a warning. The closest battalion commander could not see the squads covering them, so he sent ten squads to find them. He'd rather over-react than under-react.

That's when the blasting started. The Mongol commander heard brief firefights that told him nothing. His ten squads had fanned out. Those closest now investigated the firefights. Again, more blasting. Those furthest away closed warily, then disappeared.

General Tamerlane broke up his best battalion into one hundred squads to screen their advance and protect them like a cocoon. So whatever lurked behind him must have already destroyed several squads, plus the ten he sent after them. The nine battalions flew in a line, with him on the far right, so the only direction he didn't have to worry about was to his left.

He flew to the rear and ordered the last company to drop their bombs and deal with the problem. He followed to identify the threat. There could not be too many enemies or they'd be visible.

His danger bells suddenly rang louder, although he didn't know why. He felt something falling at him. He pulled up and scanned the sky. Part of the problem were all the damn clouds. And, at night, it was so hard to see someone dressed in black.

Just then something blotted out the light from a star, and descended straight down incredibly fast. This wasn't something falling, but someone flying down at maximum speed. He shot at it, but the meteor dodged and fired back. Because he hovered immobile, he had no momentum going in any direction, which made evading the impossibly fast fireball impossible. He foresaw his own doom and his last thoughts, before falling from the sky as a burning ball, were for the safety of his men. Just as sailors fear drowning, he had always feared falling to his death. Mercifully, the fire entered his lungs, so he suffocated before he splattered the ground.

Once Billy took out the commander, he sped for the battalion. The company sent after him were now a kilometer away and still flying in the wrong direction.

Billy descended upon the rear two lines, each slice of his blades cutting through several marathoners. Flying requires using the foot wands to propel one forward, while the hand wands pointed down to support one's altitude. In the panic that comes from suddenly plummeting to Earth, a flier can either use his hand wands to control his fall or risk a quick shot at the guy who sliced him. Most chose self-preservation.

But finally someone shot at Billy, which alerted those in front. Since he no longer enjoyed surprise, Billy rose and targeted bomb packs.

Fireballs expand as they travel, losing potency. But there's a sweet spot between distance and intensity. While ordinary squads would have to get too close to shoot safely, firing four fireballs at the same bomb gave Billy the range to explode munitions every heartbeat.

Every squad leader saw the obvious threat. Some ordered their men to drop the bombs, while others ordered them to attack. If they all did one or the other, fewer would have died. As it was, Billy could deal with one squad at a time, dodging

laterally, varying his speed, or rising when the enemy got too close. They needed to swarm him, shoot him from behind, or get enough quads to fire volleys that couldn't be avoided.

But they didn't. True, they still had no idea they fought the Red Baron, but that was the correct tactic for the threat they faced. To counter, Billy slid around fireballs while blasting bombs. For a few magical minutes he exploded an entire battalion -- until the company he lured away returned, and not even Billy could evade fireballs that consumed a few hundred square kilometers of sky.

But, then, neither could the Mongols below him. Billy waited until the last moment before popping down below the battalion, using the enemy to absorb the fireballs. Dozens of roasted marathons, screaming in agony, fell while taking off burning clothes. He couldn't stay there because the survivors above him could hit him at point blank range, so he flew in the opposite direction to lure the battalion away from the main group.

Noticing he lost the battalion on his northern wing, General Tamerlane avoided an ambush by abruptly changing direction at a 90 degree angle to the south. He had to assume that large units now raced to block his path to Madrid.

Tamerlane heard his airmen shooting over his head. Alarmed, he turned over to fly on his back just in time to spot a dark object barreling right at him. He didn't feel the blades puncture his chest, but the impact dropped him like a stone. He fell like he got thrown off a cliff.

The stranger wrapped his legs around him as they spun head over heels like an asteroid as Billy tore the general's wands from his grasp and transferred ownership—no easy task in freefall.

Tamerlane caught glimpses of his personal bodyguard racing after him, but afraid to blast without a clear shot. The life draining out of him, he watched his assassin stabilize their fall and use the general's body as a shield while shooting at his pursuers. Thousands of troops descended to either rescue or avenge him. This pleased the general until he saw the bastard smile, still falling back-first and firing four wands.

Which only the Red Baron could do.

Oh, crap. The general saw everything clearly now: no one was gonna catch the Baron. He'd drag his troops down, then out-race them back. Then he could detonate bomb backpacks with impunity. And with his second-in-command chasing them, there was no one to correct their course.

Airmen not expecting trouble can fly farther than those expecting an ambush. The stress of imminent combat quickens their pulses, costing them speed and altitude. His troops would now wonder why they should continue to an ambush in Madrid.

"Do you remember your engagement to Lady Elizabeth? She was banging my father while you stood at the altar looking like a fool. I am her son." It shocked Tamerlane that his killer spoke to him in English. The pain on Tamerlane's face thrilled Billy. "The Red Baron would have never been born if my mother didn't find you so odious. Fifty million Mongols have died because a princess preferred exile to marrying you."

He didn't use his wands during this monologue because he didn't want a record of it. But now he recorded Tamerlane as his face expressed waves of emotion. The

last thing Tamerlane saw was the Red Baron laughing as he breathed his last tortured breath. This clip would soon become the year's best selling video in India, and add another chapter to his growing legend.

## Chapter 38

Billy dragged thousands of enemy escorts behind the main body, then out-raced them back. He attacked the battalion in the middle since they had no protection. It felt like dueling: dodging blasts while targeting bomb packs. Eventually enough bombers dropped their bombs in order to drive him off. He simply hit the next battalion. When they finally swarmed him too much, he hit the next formation.

Except this battalion dropped their bombs at once to envelop him. Billy barely escaped with his life. Two lucky swipes cut through his heavy chest plate like an "X." The wound didn't bleed much, but its sting made his eyes water.

Billy rose above their ceiling, lost them in a cloud, and went north, humming a catchy song from his childhood to help him relax. Exhausted, he spotted a dark shadow on the horizon and saw tiny fireballs on their right wing.

Prince and Princess arrived! That energized him. Soon, more of his fastest fliers would get here.

A battalion drove the twins back, so Billy hit them from behind. Falling in an arc, Billy fired four wands from five hundred meters. Although not hot enough to burn flesh, the pressure waves that accompanied the fire swatted them down like flies. He first targeted the battalion commander, then aimed for company commanders. As he fell closer, his volleys burned smaller groups of airmen until he concentrated all four to ignite the bombs.

At that distance, he shot as many as he could while adjusting his speed, angle, and position. Fire! Change position. Fire! Dodge. Mongols exploded in the sky like Chinese New Years. He sure enjoyed his job; it's only work when you'd rather be doing something else.

The sergeants shrieked the signal for dropping their bombs. Billy made the most of the minute this gave him, then he swerved left or right, or adjusted speed and altitude, to avoid the most aggressive as he shot those slowest to rid themselves of their backpacks. The explosions certainly rang his ears from two hundred meters away. It must be hell for the survivors nearby.

Just as he started considering his next move, a wall of quads dropped out of a cloud and fired in volleys from a position of height.

Company #1 arrived!

While it's easy to evade one hundred blasts fired one at a time, it's nearly impossible to avoid one hundred fireballs that cover one hundred square meters like a blanket of fire. This is what happened to the Mongol front lines. The best tactic is to pop out of the way. Instead, the battalion did what they were trained to do when they had superior numbers—fly at maximum speed to close with the attackers.

Which would have worked if Billy and the twins had not spread them out so much. Now the air unit lacked the mass to effect a decent punch. But they tried, so Billy paused them by doing his famous scream. Marathoners are superior quads, so these Mongols may still have succeeded except Company #1 abruptly flew backwards at a thirty degree angle. Recently practicing in their new units now paid off. The old training adage held true: the more they sweated in practice, the less they bled in battle.

Billy realized the rest of the flight would be like this: the super-quad company using their higher ceiling to blast Mongols with impunity.

Oh, hell. Billy suddenly realized that the division commander would also see this, and take them home. He groaned when he saw what he must do: kill the new unit commander. Crap. It's hard to fool an enemy with the same trick twice, but otherwise these marathoners would escape his trap.

Since he didn't see a better option, he flew over the remaining battalions until he found the guy in charge. Billy dived fast. Wary escorts shrieked warnings. Billy's face turned to horror as the entire battalion rose up so they could all fire at him.

Oh, this was going to hurt. Bone tired, Billy had less surprise, time, and velocity than when he took out the general. Now committed, he didn't have any choice but to expend his dwindling energy reserves to maximize speed. His arms folded against his legs, he squeezed his wands of all juice.

The commander, however, didn't even bother looking up. He dropped down, then reversed thrust to put the battalion between him and the Baron.

Billy blanched as a thousand fireballs monopolized the sky in front of him. A square kilometer wall of fire flew up at him. He aligned himself with the commander and blasted a narrow hole through the firewall, although no one had ever used fireballs to deflect fireballs before. Because of the distance, the Mongol fireballs expanded to fuse together like a giant yellow blanket in the sky. In contrast, Billy's fireballs targeted exactly where he'd hit the firewall. His stronger blasts carved a momentary opening that saved his life, if not his hair.

In the history of wands, no one had ever thought of this before. In the centuries to come, daredevils would get paid a fortune trying to replicate this stunt.

With only seconds left, Billy targeted the unit commander, who looked over his shoulder in horror.

He then tried to wrap himself in four metal shields. If only he hadn't grown taller! Most quads were lucky to cover their face, but Billy could almost enclose himself like an egg. Behind the fires lighting up the night sky, the last thing Billy saw before closing his eyes were his blasts engulfing the commander as if struck by the Sun itself.

Billy rolled in place to protect his face. His back—despite the armor and heat-resistant clothing underneath—cooked as if someone just branded him like a cow. He screamed inside his own head since he'd die if he opened his mouth.

Although Billy never told anyone this, he lost most feeling in his skin years ago. The layers of disgusting scabs insulated his fried pain receptors from minor cuts, bruises, and burns. It wasn't that he didn't feel anything -- he just didn't feel it as much. He not only looked like he wore the thick leathery hide of a reptile, but it felt like he did.

Unless cut, smacked, or burned too much. That he felt. And now he felt like he jumped into a cooking pot like the infamous dodo bird.

Deaf, blind, and mute, he slammed into another body at high speed. It felt like hitting a wall while running through a burning building. Flame tried to pry open his mouth and suck out his breath. His nose felt like he snorted a lit match. Terror seized him as he realized his burning clothes were cooking his skin. The stench of burning flesh nauseated him. Hell, his eyebrows were on fire!

Billy used his boot wands to maximize thrust while frantically stripping. He cut off George's armor like it had lice. His clothes seemed glued to his melting skin. It was like peeling off hot sticky mud.

Weakened by fire, the leather straps that held his wand sockets broke loose. Billy hoped his foot wands, protected by thicker leather, held up. If he lost even one wand, he'd bloody the ground like a giant tomato.

So this is how his enemies spent their last moments, a rogue part of him ruefully realized, elated at how horribly their lives ended.

The smoke burned his eyes, but when he could finally do more than blink, he spied a large lake right below him. But, rather than head for obvious relief, Billy dived over a hill towards the smallest stream he could find.

The burst of speed increased the distance from his pursuers, but then he had to use full power to slow his descent. His head seemed to sink into his shoulders and a different type of nausea washed over him just as he belly flopped into the shallow water. He kissed a riverbed of smooth rocks and his groin hit something hard that curdled his blood. He rolled over to cool his burning back and gulped water for his dehydration. The abrupt change in body temperature sent him into shock.

A shadow falling from the heavens turned into hell as a Mongol battalion searched for him. Fireballs pounced on suspicious shadows. As the fires grew in number and strength, the Mongols briefly turned night into day. So many fires cast so many shadows that its reflection seemed to have a life of its own. Billy half expected the lake to bellow like an angry dragon.

Billy waddled like an beaver to the thickest brush and submerged everything but his hands and face while holding his wands to heal his wounds. He covered his hands and face with cold mud. A dragonfly landed on his nose and he lacked the energy to swat it away. The damn thing made him cross-eyed when he needed to track enemies targeting him.

He assumed they wouldn't stop until they found him. He couldn't beat a thousand vengeful marathoners now. Hell, he couldn't stop a rabbit from nibbling him to death. It was hard enough to keep his nostrils above water. He had always wondered how he'd die. He just always assumed it would involve falling from the sky burning in agony. Not lying in the world's most horizontal waterfall. He smelled death like a fart in a tent. After giving so many others the fiery death they deserved, Billy was finally gonna get what he had coming. And he knew he deserved a horrible death. A spectacular, mind-blowing, soul-shattering, body-blazing death. That was all that kept the guilt away.

But it wasn't until the rock hard erection popped out of the cold water to look him in the eye that he realized his possible imminent death turned him on. Pre-puberty, it just had not manifested itself sexually before. He knew warriors who

got off killing—literally twisting the knife in others got them off—but fascination with one's own death was a kink he had not known existed. And he watched every porn his father bought him—he totally lied to Emily!—so he thought he saw everything.

But this was new. Too bad he couldn't do anything about it. He couldn't feel his numb hands, much less his penis, swaying in the stream like a reed. Then a Mongol blew past, shrieking like a dying wolf, and Billy convulsed in an erotic panic as he waited for a fireball to consume him. His erection not only had a mind of its own, but apparently a volition as it spewed like a micro-volcano. If Billy had not already screamed his throat raw, he'd have given away his position for sure.

Yet the fireball never came. Instead, the shocking discovery that he enjoyed being scared overwhelmed his exhausted mind. The threat of death thrilled him. Fear aroused him. No wonder the world's most powerful guy squealed in delight at his lovers tying him down.

The realization horrified and elated Billy. Of all the world's perversions, why did this have to be his? No wonder he risked his life so often. It made so much more sense now.

The dragonfly landed on his penis, which sunk on its own below water to get the damn thing off. Billy gulped down more cold water, careful to wait until his ejaculate floated downstream. The cold water in his stomach made his entire body numb. The odd sensations put him in a weird trance. Like meditation after someone whacks your head.

Then the shaking started. This wasn't the first time he got the shakes, after barely escaping death, but this was the worst. His whole body shook as if a demon wanted to get out. Something warmed his bowels and Billy naturally feared bleeding in his private parts, then sighed in relief that he had just involuntarily peed himself. You know you're in bad shape when you take peeing yourself as good news.

William liked to take Billy to the beach on their vacations. One time, Billy tried to take a wave in, only it tumbled him head over heels, smashing him against sharp rocks. Thankfully, his dad had told him what to do. Billy relaxed his breathing to avoid panic and assured himself it'd be over soon. The more he slowed his breathing, the sooner the shakes subsided.

Billy laid there, not asleep, but not really awake. Exhaustion took a new form. He had no energy, but the freezing stream running over his body numbed his burnt nerves. His eyes mostly closed, he drifted in and out of consciousness, as unconcerned as those Buddhist monks he once meditated with. He hummed a song he used to sing with his parents, which brought back fond memories. He sometimes got so involved watching wand memories that it felt like he was reliving the moment.

"Thank you for getting Tamerlane for me, Billy. That was sweet enough to give justice a cavity."

He looked up and saw his parents, floating above him, looking good for dead people. "Mama?"

"You've been such a good son, Billy. You put my father on the throne, helped my family through the dark years, and avenged our deaths. I'm so proud of you."

The boy started crying. "I miss you, mama."



"We miss you, too, Billy. One day we'll be together again. It won't be the same as before, but it'll still be wonderful. But please don't rush it. I know you've been trying to get killed since my death, but I want you to promise me that you'll live longer than Genghis."

"I promise, mama!"

"I could not have asked for a better son," William said, smiling down on him. "You've made me the proudest dad ever. Every day you honor us more. Few children do what they're told, but you've done even more than we have asked."

"I'll never be half the man you are, papa."

Dad laughed. "You're everything I've ever wanted in a son. You even gave us grandchildren. My soul can now rest in peace, knowing those murderers have not exterminated our line."

"Papa, I thought I was gonna die. I don't know how I survived."

"You have a destiny, Billy. One day you'll kill the Great Immortal and bring peace and prosperity to the world. By then everyone will have allied against the Mongols and it'll be up to you to stop their extinction as a people."

"I'm not suppose to kill them all, papa?"

"Their defeat does not require extermination. Leave a million non-quads to endure a subsistence existence so foreigners can visit them like depressed lions in a zoo."

"So I'm not dead? Because I don't feel so good."

Mommy and daddy laughed. "No, Billy. In fact, you have to go now. The Mongols are energized and your team demoralized because they believe you're dead. That girl you like is gonna get herself killed unless she sees you soon."

"I love you both so much."

"We love you, son. Now wake up and go!"

Billy's eyes were already open, but he had to blink again to see. Like a drunk after a hangover, he struggled to lift his weighty bones from the water. He ached everywhere. He felt really hot and really cold at the same time, what the Spanish call calor-frio.

The fires around the lake had died out, which made Billy wonder how long he napped. He felt a cord around his neck and discovered that he didn't lose his leather mask. His soggy boots held his wands, so he took to the air, naked as a bird without feathers.

## Chapter 39

Billy flew towards Madrid, but soon noticed a small firefight below him. It took him a while to figure it out because it made no sense. Quads were blasting a Spanish military base, although fireballs are not effective against stone buildings. Then he noticed how few flew over the base, and how powerful their blasts echoed. Maybe they weren't Mongols after all. Well, he better find out before he started killing people in the dark. Although it made him feel silly, Billy screamed. The harassment stopped and fliers shot straight up.

I hope they're not coming to kill me, Billy told himself, not yet over his trembling. Then Princess flashed her signal and his relief nearly choked his wands. He followed her to a hill overlooking the air base. Quads from several companies looked incredibly relieved to see him. She hugged him fiercely as soon as his feet brushed the ground and he yelped like a kicked puppy. Somewhere behind him he could hear Prince laughing.

"Where the hell have you been?" his girlfriend demanded. "We saw them dive after you hours ago."

"It took a while before the shaking stopped."

"What's with the X on your chest? Did some dude brand you his bitch?" she teased him.

"Very funny. That's where the fire burned through my chest plate."

"They burn your clothes off or are you messing around on me?" she asked, looking him over from head to toe, trying to hide how worried she was. "About time you burned your pubes. Girls should be bushier than boys. Wish you didn't scorch my favorite wand, though."

"I thought I died. My entire body feels both numb and super-sensitive. What's going on here?"

"I think they landed to decide what to do. You apparently killed the commander and the second in command. We sent for our super-quads near Madrid, in case the bastards run. They certainly can't stay or every militiaman in the country will be here by noon."

Billy closed his eyes to see the tactical situation from their viewpoint: "Crap. They're gonna go home and drop their bombs on the first big city they fly over."

Something hit him in the back of the head. He picked up a very smelly shirt.

"You're welcome," Prince shouted.

Billy put on the shirt and walked to his team, hoping the shirt covered his privates and The General. He called his penis The General because it liked giving out orders.

"They're gonna fly home, so let's leave them alone and hope they rest a little longer so our troops have more time to catch up. We'll hide ourselves to the east and hit them when they've gotten their hopes up. What's the next biggest city on their way to Mongol lines?"

"Cuenca."

"Princess, bring our super-quads near Valencia to Cuenca. Mali, get our guys from Madrid. I'm gonna warn Cuenca's militia."

Team Red left, which must have bewildered the Mongols. Everyone in Cuenca looked awake and in a panic. They found the mayor's beautiful wife eagerly bathing the Baron's body in lotions and creams in the mayor's bed while he soaked up his wands in his sleep. It took Blade three kicks to wake Billy from his slumber.

"I just dreamed you were queen-regent of Switzerland after we won the war," Billy said, trying to shake his head awake. "Our six children are so beautiful."

Blade couldn't believe how instantly wet that made her, and changed the subject to not dwell on it. "They're flying here at maximum altitude in a stacked formation. Our guys just arrived, but no one knows what to do and we let you sleep as long as we dared."

Billy smiled, because he'd have done the same thing. Bombers spread out in order to drop their munitions, but most of their troops no longer had bombs to drop, so they put the few thousand with bombs under them, while everyone else flew over them in a protective cocoon.

Now Billy stopped smiling, because that was a tough nut to crack. Seven battalions flying on top of each other. He had to hit the bombers, or else they'd firebomb an innocent city. The entire country would then fear the same thing happening to them, and demand the government pull front line troops back in useless static defense positions.

"What are we gonna do, genius?" Prince asked sarcastically. "They expect us to whittle them down from the top. They've probably put their highest fliers in the second row to surprise us when we hit the top layer. We just don't have enough time to get to the actual bombers. If the Spanish blame us, we'll look like pariahs instead of heroes."

"I'll think of something."

"Think faster."

"How are we gonna stop them from dropping bombs from high altitude on a city?" Prince wanted to know.

"I can't tell you. It's a surprise."

"You mean you don't know. Yet. But you'll think of something. If only to show off."

## Chapter 40

Billy dropped buck naked from the sky in front of several thousand startled Mongols. Under less lethal circumstances, it'd have looked hilarious. He flashed his four wands and gave his signature scream to make sure he had their attention.

Ten squads broke off to intercept him. He let them come, before sprinting over them in an arc, which gave him a controlled freefall to fire four-wand volleys into the mass of enemies below him. As expected, more squads broke off to drive him away. He made the most of every second: fire, adjust position, fire, pop laterally or vertically, fire. He tore big holes in their top layer as he avoided a few dozen squads chasing him.

A company leader broke off from his battalion and positioned his hundred fliers to fire down on him. As they fired, he dove between the top battalion and the one below it so their fireballs consumed a hundred-square-meter hole in the stacked formation. Blasts that missed one battalion struck the one below.

Someone had to later point it out to Billy, but no one had ever dived between two battalions before. Because it was insane.

Several hundred squads, flying horizontally just above him, shot at him. Expecting their fire, he popped laterally every heartbeat while slicing enemies just below him. The top battalion thus shot up the battalion below them. He did this for as long as he could, which turned out to be only six heartbeats, but it felt like a

lifetime. It was like dancing on hot coals. But he had to get out before the battalion above fell on him.

His distraction worked beautifully. Red Company #1 flew straight down fast and fired their first volley while the top battalion focused on the Baron. His team not only surprised the Mongols, but the second battalion was in no shape to assist the top battalion. And probably not highly motivated after they killed their teammates.

Billy flew out the opposite side of where he entered and helped his team shoot up the top battalion, who broke formation to deal with the threat. Team Red turned Mongols into flaming balls that smashed into those beneath them like fiery meteors.

Ox got hurt in an earlier fight and could barely fly, so he found an ideal location to record the battle for the publicity value. The video swayed the public so much that Billy assigned people to record all their battles. Billy didn't expect to live long, so he wanted to fully document it for posterity.

The next two battalions, in the middle of the stack, exited on either side and pulled up to confront them. Billy's company would soon face four battalions. Or what was left of them.

Company #10 now flew up from the trees at the bombers in the lowest level. The problem with attacking someone from below is that their hand wands already point down. Sure, alternating between propulsion and shooting messes up the formation, but that's a small price to pay for killing enemies who fly in front of a wand. If the best place to attack someone is from behind, the worst is from the front. Which is what Company #10 did now.

The other two battalions carrying bombs then banked to position themselves on either side of the lowest to triple their firepower and because they'd soon over-fly their target anyways. Usually, they would not spread out until just before dropping their bombs, but the enemies below looked like such easy targets.

Which was the whole point.

Company #10 spread out and stayed two hundred meters below them, dodging incoming blasts like target practice. The textbook counter-move was for the three battalions to drop fast, enveloping the enemy below, but that'd ruin their bombing run. They'd wipe out the brave fools below them once they dropped their load.

But the other super-quads now dived out of the clouds. Four companies attacked the upper Mongols from four directions, while the other four companies surprised the bombers below.

Billy's gamble paid off. How he used several hundred to destroy seven thousand would soon appear in battle textbooks around the world, thanks to Ox's video.

The three bombing battalions were getting massacred. No one protected them from above, which was the whole point of a stacked formation, and they couldn't even defend themselves. The middle battalion commander signaled "bomb release" and "dive" to fall upon the quads below them. The units on either side quickly followed. They had to rid themselves of their bombs to defend themselves, which meant going into a controlled freefall, so they may as well destroy the enemy below them in the same drop.

Waiting for this moment, Company #10 lured them down while shrieking a warning. Several thousand militia fell out of a cloud upon the bombers, who

already had four super-quad companies on their backs. It was like the Mongols flew into a box canyon in the sky filled with locusts.

The whole point of training bombers to fly really high is so they can drop bombs with impunity. Billy lured the bastards low enough for militia to reach them. After destroying those three battalions, everyone rose to wipe out the remaining Mongols.

Like his father, Billy punished the punitive expedition.

## Chapter 41

The next day Jack found them in Cuenca and had his own tall tale to tell.

“On the Pyrenees I found the 2nd and 3rd divisions eager to get back to work. We couldn’t get to Madrid in time, so I led them to Valencia. Imagine everyone’s surprise when we showed up in the middle of the night. The Mongols assumed we were their bombers returning home, so they flew up to greet us.

“We arrived in a line of two hundred companies abreast. So when thousands of ecstatic Mongols flew in front of us, their wands singing -- well, you just don’t get targets like that very often. We swatted them from the sky. It looked like a giant meteor shower. Picture twenty thousand quads in an ideal position shooting fireballs across one kilometer of night sky. The video is stunning.”

Jack sighed, savoring his rare victory.

“Well, we couldn’t stop there. The surviving Mongols naturally fled back to their bases around Valencia, so we followed them. The Spanish couldn’t wait to take advantage of their change in fortune. They swamped the air bases, their two-wanders going building-to-building. The long-suffering residents of Valencia finally saw an opportunity to strike back against their oppressors and joined in. It wasn’t a battle so much as a massacre.

“The Americans found the Mongol vaults, with ten tons of gold, and took over the stone barracks. They’re now using the Valencia bomb factories to hit the nearest Mongol air units while we still enjoy surprise.”

Billy literally and figuratively patted him on the back. “Great job, Jack. I think a thousand or so marathoners from the bombing run escaped, so we should spend a few days hunting them down. They’ll be easier to kill now, while they’re scattered, than if they join another unit. Let’s break into squads to cover more territory. I’ll need another day to heal, and could someone please find me some clothes?”

Princess applied more lotion and creams while Billy napped naked. He drank enough pain-relieving tea to cure a corpse. It turned out that he needed two extra days before he could join his friends, and it took that long to have someone pick up the spare set of wand launchers he kept at Global Bank in Madrid. His father left him dozens, yet Billy feared wearing them out all. He could make his own, but they were never as good as his father’s, and just one defect could kill him.

Usually they flew as high as possible because that was the safest way to travel, but hunting Mongols who did not want to be found forced them to fly low.

Team Red found a few hundred survivors the last two days, so they were surprised to spot a squad of Mongols below them, flying low and slow. That's a good way to get killed. Their steep dive increased their speed, quickly catching up to the sitting ducks. Then they slowed to match speed and course to blast them to hell.

Except the Mongols did something new.

A flash of reflected light caught Billy's attention, something he later recognized as a mirror, and the squad rose while turning in place to fire point blank at them. That was a tricky maneuver that required a lot of practice, and only very confident quads would risk using themselves as bait.

Billy heard someone yell out in pain as he squeezed between two big fireballs. He saw Ox falling uncontrollably, but the one frantically taking off her smoking armor was Blade. The blasts from these guys implied double strength. And that's when it hit them: the mercenaries sent to kill him!

Which meant this squad was not alone. Billy turned and saw the rest of their company dive out of cumulus cloud cover to surprise them from behind. The irony of the same attack being used against them would not register until later.

"Bear! Lead them to the forest," Billy commanded.

Normally, one hundred enemies did not worry Billy. But these guys signed up to kill the Red Baron, so they must be very good. And that worried him.

Billy cut up the squad below him, while the enemy company chased his friends. Then he rose at maximum speed to fire into the back of the mercenaries. A squad broke off to catch Blade and another squad moved to face Billy. He tried popping to the side really fast, but it didn't work nearly as well as on mediocre quads. He was probably still twice as fast, but he was usually four times as quick. It took longer to weed them out, and the mercs looked shocked that he beat them.

Billy saw them capture Blade instead of just killing her outright. And, of course, he knew why: her burned shirt exposed her fantastic breasts. Princess once joked that her breasts must have wands because they defied gravity. Enraged that she'd be raped again, he watched the Mongols knock her out and take her away. Instead of pursuing, he had to rescue Princess.

In the forest, Bear waved them down in some trees to organize a response.

"Hotshot," he said to Prince. "We need to split them up. Go north and blast some to distract the others. The rest of you, find cover before they shoot us from above."

Four enemy squads landed like a square in the trees, while the others hovered above, shooting down at every shadow. They had their backs to him, so Billy cut them up. The fourth one screamed, which drew the attention of the others. He now had a serious firefight on his hands as some moved to flank him while others fixed his position. Those thousands of duels against teams of three now paid off as Billy juggled multiple opponents.

Then another firefight broke out below the tree line to the northeast and the enemy split up. Afraid of those soon to attack him from behind, Billy pressed forward. Then Prince fried one quad hovering above him, popped up above the forest to nail another and wing a third. He fled, luring several after him. Billy's other super-quads popped up and found themselves behind the skirmish line facing Billy. They attacked the enemy from the rear.

"They captured Blade. Let's go after her!" Billy yelled.

But just as they rose in the air, the remaining thirty enemies moved to block their way.

"Go get her!" Bear told Billy, who flew away, taking several enemies with him as his team disappeared back into the forest.

Billy ignored his pursuers because killing them would only slow him down. He flew higher until he spotted Blade on the horizon. He caught up with the slower ones before they knew he was there. Six flew together, so he pierced the body armor of two using steel from his boot wands, while cutting the legs of the rest. The leader, holding Blade, shrieked a warning and a patrol from his fortress responded. Billy cursed his lousy luck at having another squad blocking him. He swung around rather than engage.

When Billy saw the castle, he realized he was near Barcelona. The Mongols not only replaced the battalion he killed in the arena, but based the mercenaries there, too.

Billy dropped near the ground to use the terrain to get closer unseen. He hid in woodlands, making his way forward as more Mongols flew south. He hopped over the fortress rim, slashed at two enemies, then used his boot wands to propel him forward along the battlement while cutting down defenders with swords. Not shooting gave him several extra heartbeats before somebody noticed and fired. For a long minute he fired at those with their backs to him while avoiding fireballs coming at him. He then fell upon troops rushing out of the barracks until the defenders along the battlements poured down fire. Fittingly, Billy was much better with steel because of Blade. He popped sideways and a dozen blasts struck those trying to exit the building.

"Everyone get down!" he yelled into the doorway, then ran in and stabbed those foolish enough to follow his order. As more blasts struck the entrance, he rounded a corner and extended hand blades to pierce several enemies each, then jumped up to fire his boot wands into the survivors, landing painfully on his back. Billy used a wand to push himself sideways and another wand to blast two guys standing too close together. Then he opened a door that led to a narrow corridor, fired at those in it, and ran deeper into the fortress.

As he passed burning bodies, he thought it must be horrific to see a ball of flame swallowing a hallway, and knowing there's nothing you can do to save yourself.

As long as he had surprise, it worked. But he heard people blasting behind him and knew he was dead if they caught him inside where he had nowhere to maneuver. He found a doorway into the courtyard and peaked out to see a lot of troops on the battlements and perhaps one hundred more flying overhead.

Billy returned to the last corridor and blasted blindly, before risking an eye to stab survivors. Those at the other end also shot at him blindly, so he closed and locked the door, fuming that he did not find Blade. He changed clothes and armor with a dead Mongol, then opened the door enough to fire blindly again, catching several more. Dense smoke consumed the hallway. He could hear a few wounded survivors coughing, which gave him an idea.

He brazenly marched arrogantly into the courtyard, swearing in Mongolian.

"The bastard escaped!" he shouted to call attention to himself, then kicked a water tub for the hell of it. He felt a dozen skeptical wands pointing his way when blasts from inside told him that the door he locked had been blown open. From the battlements, it sounded like a firefight.

"Let's get him!" Billy yelled.

He led them through the same entrance he entered originally, knelt down next to someone wounded, waited until they passed, slit the wounded guy's throat, then caught up with the group. He carefully positioned himself to extend both blades into as many as possible, then blasted. His fireballs struck with such force at close range that they literally lifted bodies into the air to smash into those behind them, which made finishing them all easier.

Now he ran the other way. He soon encountered two golden mules guarding an open steel door. Crap. That meant more elite troops.

In their own way, quads who transported money were as rare as marathoners because it's hard to trust fliers with backpacks full of coin. They didn't have to fly as far, but they had to fly and fight while weighted down. Paying for a couple million quads and several million two-wanders took a lot of golden air mules.

So it felt good to kill them.

He couldn't just turn around without raising suspicion, so he said, "have you guys heard the news?" Then he thrust two blades into their chests from twenty meters away and ran past them downstairs to what must be a dungeon. There he found ten more looking at him suspiciously. He let his helmet hang from a strap, put his wands away, and held out his hands to show he was unarmed.

"I was never that young," a veteran remarked after getting a good look at Billy's innocent baby face. Their leader stepped into his way and drew a wand.

"The captive is wanted for questioning," Billy tried.

The leader laughed. "I'm sure she's getting questioned as we speak." Billy flashed back to his nightmares of the Khan's bodyguards brutally gang raping his mother to death. He suppressed a shudder. "Who wants the girl for questioning?"

"The general."

From their reaction, he knew he screwed up. The general must be the one doing the questioning downstairs. While falling backwards, he pressed his elbows against his body to launch his wands. From their expressions, Billy doubted they had ever seen wand-launchers before.

He blasted them with even his boot wands, which conveniently propelled him away. More golden mules burst through the door from the dungeon. Billy slide down the hall like a sled, before smashing into the wall where the corridor turned. Frantic, the teenager rolled out of line-of-sight as a stream of fireballs cooked the wall.

They were not far behind, so he squatted, pointed one wand near the floor and blasted blindly. His fireballs swallowed the corridor. The bastards still shot back, so they must have used shields to make what the Romans called a "turtle." While most projected interlocking metal from floor to ceiling and wall to wall, the rest would shoot through small openings.

Since he could not defeat this effective tactic, Billy ran, panting like a dog. Hearing voices coming from upstairs, he retracted his wands and yelled out, "Help! The damn mules killed the general!"



Hoping his obvious youth would protect him, he collapsed under one of the torches that illuminated the otherwise dark corridor. Then he cried like a scared little boy. It was not hard.

Everyone demanded answers at once, but the smell of burning flesh trumped everything. Billy screamed in pain and begged them to remove his smoldering chest plate. He had no idea he had even been hit. Most of them dismissed the crying boy and raced down to see what the hell was going on. Billy cried out for someone to help him to the infirmary. Not a moment later the firefight resumed downstairs.

With an arm around an old veteran and a young kid, he limped to the infirmary for medical attention. He made sure to groan in pain whenever someone got a good look at him, and this time he didn't have to fake it. At least one hundred quads still patrolled the skies as Billy entered the courtyard. As they passed a water barrel, he stopped to slosh water onto his chest. The relief felt better than sex. It was like taking a giant dump after a week of constipation.

In the infirmary, he killed his helpers, the staff, and the wounded, before stumbling into the headquarters and turning it into a bonfire.

The good news is Billy learned where Blade was. The bad news is one hundred elite troops blocked the way.

## Chapter 42

Blade woke up in pain and found herself carried on someone's shoulder. The burly sergeant followed the general past the golden mules into the dungeon. They paused when they heard blasting in the courtyard, which soon moved inside. The firefights sounded much too loud and continued for much too long.

"It's him," the sergeant confidently said. "The Red Baron. The captain thought it was the big guy leading a squad into the trees."

The awe in his tone woke Blade up.

"He's attacking us alone?" the general asked in disbelief.

His fear gave Blade goose bumps.

"Yes. He abandoned his friends to get her back, so she must be special."

That the Baron would leave Princess to save her she found stunning.

"Fix it," the general ordered the mercenary, making Blade walk in front of him, her upper body exposed to the lusty stares of one hundred men. The sergeant resented the general for cutting him out of the action, but couldn't counter it.

"Halt!" the leader of the money transport company ordered. "Take that woman elsewhere." His job was to guard the gold they delivered until they could leave.

"The Red Baron has invaded the castle. The captive has vital information on him, and the dungeon is the safest place to question her."

The general didn't fool anyone. Everyone knew he was gonna rape her. They could see it in the old bastard's eyes. They didn't even blame him -- she was, obviously, delicious, with curves that porn stars had to pay for. They just didn't

want her to complicate their job. Let the mercenaries deal with the Baron. That's why they earned all the heavy coin the mules risked their lives to bring to Spain.

The commander stood his ground, so the general offered an incentive. "After I question her, you and your men will be free to interrogate her as often as you wish, provided she does not leave here alive."

The commander now studied the prisoner like she was a fine steak. First, his eyes widened. Then his nostrils flared. Finally, he pitched a tent in his pants big enough to hide a battalion. Blade cursed her attractiveness as the leader of the golden mules leered down at her.

"It seems I have a question for her after all," he said loudly to great cheers as he moved out of the way. "My boys will get answers out of her if it takes them all night!"

After the shouting peaked, Blade corrected him: "You'll all be dead before nightfall. That's the Red Baron up there."

She didn't know why she said it with such confidence, but she could tell they believed her.

"The Baron is just one man," the general insisted.

"Is he? Then why does Genghis Khan need a thousand of the world's best quads to get him?"

When Blade woke a few minutes ago, she almost shat herself. Now these elite troops looked about to shit themselves. The Baron turned them into jelly, and Blade couldn't help but love it.

With her hands tied, she kicked the general hard in the nuts, jackknifed her body to split his nose with her forehead, then kicked him so hard in the chest that he flew down the stairwell like a spear. Someone levitated her after him, and the two of them bounced down the steps like balls.

When they reached the bottom, the general sat on her, slapped her until exhaustion, then forced her out of her pants. But then another firefright broke out, this one just up the stairs. Blade heard the terror in the leader's voice as he ordered some troops to follow him up. Instead of abating, the firefright intensified. A cacophony of painful screams echoed down to the dungeon.

"He killed the commander!" someone upstairs yelled in shock.

Concentrating hard, Blade thought she heard the leader screaming in agony. There were so many crying out from burning flesh, it was hard to tell.

"You're next," Blade told the rapist sitting on her titties.

Swearing fiercely, the general pulled his pants up, tucked himself back in, opened the vault, and shoved her inside before running up the stairs to take control.

Blade found herself surrounded by tons of gold and silver stacked for easy counting. Wearing nothing but panties and her remaining dignity, she couldn't even pocket any. Or could she?

Just as suicidal thoughts returned after so many years, she heard a huge explosion, even through the thick steel door. And that's when it hit her: that crazy bastard isn't going to leave without her. It was the most romantic thing anyone had ever done for her. He not only invaded an enemy fortress alone, but apparently had more lives than a cat. The only man Genghis Khan feared was

gonna die rescuing her. Despite everything bad that happened to her, and would probably soon happen to her, Blade smiled.

Since her serial rape, Blade nursed a hatred of men. All men. But now she felt an exception open in her heart, and tenderness spill out like intestines from a stomach wound.

All the desperate yelling she heard through the stone walls started to turn her on. Blade had no idea how one guy could battle one hundred in a narrow hallway, but somehow Red did it. He had them in a panic, and their fear thrilled her.

Blade heard them turn the key, so she inserted a gold brick to jam the mechanism so they couldn't open the door. They blasted the mortared stone upon which the heavy door swung. Their rage generated more heat than an incendiary. The more they cursed her, the wetter she became.

She remembered fondly the first time she rode the Baron, Princess sucking her tongue to distract her. Red was the first man she had sex with since those monsters forcibly took her virginity so long ago. Blade had no idea it'd feel so good. She started with the intention of just getting it over with, so her orgasm took her completely by surprise. But, then, Red was full of surprises. Still, it felt like her body betrayed her.

"Traitor!" she accused her vagina. Red couldn't figure it out, but Princess couldn't stop laughing.

The second time, Blade went down on Princess while Red entered her from behind. Princess always tasted so delicious. Then her body betrayed her again. She didn't like a man being able to pull her trigger, so Blade told Red to not make her cum anymore. The Baron acted shocked: "Women can cum?"

The third time, Red took her missionary while Princess straddled her face, and this time she came twice. First from the Baron, then from Princess licking his juices out of her. Blade had never seen Princess so excited, so the next morning they repeated their 69, but after Red came inside Princess. And Blade exploded like a fireball. It was the most amazing thing she had ever tasted. It quenched her thirst like a good ale.

Blade questioned her sexuality so much that she let Prince kiss her for what seemed like eternity. "I guess I really am lesbian," she sadly concluded, ignoring his raging boner, desperate need, and stunned expression.

Frantic fists started pounding on the vault door. She heard them ask her to let them in, and realized those lecherous perverts were begging for their lives. Wondering how Red made so many so scared, she slipped a gold coin into her slit. The cold metal felt wonderful in her burning hot tunnel as she slid it ever deeper. Plus another, and a third, then a fourth, until she pocketed a full kilo up her vagina like a golden smuggler. Walking around with ten coins inside her woke feelings that most people could only dream of. She saw this done once in a porn and didn't believe it any more than sex while flying.

"Let us in," she heard the general cry out, fear infecting his voice like smallpox.

"Yes!" Blade yelled out, so horny she could burst. She knocked down the carefully stacked piles so she could lay down next to the door on a bed of gold. Writhing naked made the coins clink like a musical instrument, and their cries of agony played music for her ears.

"You'll let us in?" he asked, coughing so close she could smell his bad breath.

“Yes! Yes!”

This orgasm snuck up on her like a surprise attack. Every muscle tensed up. Then she came so hard a coin shot out of her vagina like a musket, making a sharp “ping” noise as it bounced off the vault door. Blade arched her back so much she buried her blond hair in gold.

“Then hurry, bitch! Or we’ll all die,” the general demanded, throwing gunpowder on her fire and triggering another bomb.

“Yes! Yes! Yes!”

Her fingers spent years training as demolition experts, so the explosion shook her entire body as she convulsed on the floor. The clinking coins played a passionate symphony. Their pleas took on a whiny tone that detonated another orgasm. Without even being in the room, the Red Baron ignited the nastiest orgasm of her life.

“Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!”

Puffs of smoke sneaked in through the tiny holes caused by their blasting. Laying on her back, they looked like beautiful clouds floating in the sky.

“Open the door or you’ll kill us all!”

The screams from dozens of would-be rapists echoed in her head. The terror in their voices, pressed in the tiny door opening, filled the vault like an aphrodisiac. Their imminent death made her soar higher than any wand as one orgasm fed another until coughing replaced their screams. With so much death just a door away, Blade had never felt more alive. The general’s final whimper made her cum so hard she almost died.

“Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!”

## Chapter 43

Billy found the key to the armory and crossed the courtyard, no one giving his youthful face a second glance. High above the fort he heard the echoes of firefights. It reassured him to know his friends were here. He killed a few dozen Mongols on the way.

Inside, he imagined what lay next to the armory. He walked to the back and blasted a hole in the wall, which led to an eating area. He killed the four guys staring at him like a ghost. He prepared a time-delay explosion, carried as many bombs as he could, then crossed the eating area to a barracks until he found his way back to the dungeon.

With so many men crowding the hallway and stairs, he knew he could not rescue Blade, but he could at least end her suffering. He owed her that much.

He hid in a closet with his bombs until the massive explosion rocked the castle. He hurried out, flew down the hallway, and stabbed or blasted everyone alive.

Billy went back for the anti-personnel bombs filled with shrapnel, rolled them down the stairs, then fired until they exploded. He rolled around the corner and shielded his face as rock fragments rained down on him like hail.

Now he could finally shut the steel door where he killed the first two golden mules. He welded the door to its metal frame, then melted the key lock, just to be sure.

Angry fists soon pounded on the door, demanding he open it. Instead, he knelt, stuck his wands under the door and maximized their flame, incinerating people and forcing the survivors to inhale smoke. He took their screams for payback for what they were doing to Blade.

Upon hearing voices, he laid down next to the corpses, his innocent face and burnt chest plainly visible. Eyes closed, he slowed his breathing down enough to pass for dead. A squad of frustrated quads came in and tried opening the door. Well, Billy couldn't let that happen, so he extended four metal spears, each killing two, his legs up like a woman giving birth, then changed to swords to cut the rest down.

Instead of waiting for more quads, Billy repeated his earlier exploration of the castle, slaying all he met. Billy peaked out a door and was surprised it was night already. He had no idea so much time had passed. Guards still manned the battlements, and small firefights still raged above, while terrified non-combatants fled through the open gate to Barcelona.

He watched another exhausted squad land, wondering out loud why their mercs had not yet returned. Once they had their backs to him, Billy ran and cut them down as soon as they left the courtyard.

On the battlements, the greatest concentration of guards looked to the west, so he walked there, placed himself in the middle, then extended wands in both directions to maximize how many warriors he pierced, like two human kabobs. Then he reverted to swords to cut more down before taking too much fire. He rose into the air and fired back—not at those shooting at him, who'd just evade, but at those not looking at him. Fliers rose to meet him and he blasted the first several easily enough, but once the volume of fire grew too much, he descended below the outer wall and hugged the ground. Several chased him, so he hid in a tree and cut them as they passed.

## **Chapter 44**

Billy joined his friends, who rejoiced to see him alive. Together they fought as a team. He and Prince made excellent partners.

While Team Red all boasted over ten meters of strength, the Mongols averaged less than half of that. So, although their volleys covered ten times the space, Team Red enjoyed twice the speed. The super-quads simply positioned the squads chasing them to show their backs, and either Billy or Prince would pounce on them.

After an hour dog-fighting, they had almost cleared the skies of Mongols when four companies dropped on them, spread out for a broadside. Billy cursed his luck. The remaining Mongols sang their wands to greet their returning mercenaries. Although he may get out of range by diving steeply enough, the rest

of Team Red was screwed. Chased by two squads, Prince didn't even see them. The new unit spread itself out to occupy a square kilometer of space and dived straight down to maximize surprise.

Tears burst from his eyes. Billy not only got his friends killed, but let those bastards rape Blade like they did his mother.

"Forgive me, papa," he whispered on the verge of an emotional breakdown.

Until they blasted the Mongols. Billy's jaw dropped in shock, and was so exhausted he could barely lift it back up. The enemy in the fortress had run out to witness their victory, so the American marathoners fell like a blanket to smother them. Before Billy even landed, the Americans started mopping up inside the castle.

Billy didn't land so much as crash softly. The emotional ups and down drained him. He found himself on his back in the courtyard and could barely lift his arms. Princess fell on top of him and Billy screamed in pain before she remembered his fried skin. She took off his helmet and poured her healing energy into him. With one wand on his forehead and the other on his chest, she funneled her life energy. Prince showed up and gave Billy some water. The twins helped him to his feet and Billy shocked Prince by hugging both of them.

Until Bear walked up. "Where's my hug?"

It took Billy a while to focus, then he lit up. "Let's find Blade! Bear, take command up here."

Billy led them to the dungeon, killing the few remaining support staff who had not fled in time. Billy found the steel door pried open from the outside, smoke still floating out, but apparently not in time to save the few hundred troops inside.

"What happened?" Prince asked, trying to make sense of it.

"They were in my way, so I locked them in and smoked them to death."

"And I thought I'd seen everything."

They walked over bodies, and had to climb over partial cave-ins, until they came upon a pile of corpses at the bottom. Frantic, they tossed the corpses up the stairs and screamed her name.

The vault magically opened. Only then did they notice the key still in it. Corpses five deep blocked it, but it was wide enough for skinny Billy to squeeze inside and take in Blade's relieved face.

"Did they hurt you?"

She knew what he meant. "No. You didn't give them time to hurt me."

Blade flipped Billy's mask up to give him the kiss he deserved, but his baby face shocked her. She had never seen him before because he was so paranoid about concealing his identity. Even with all the blasted rock chips stuck to his cheeks, he obviously was just a teenager. A really cute teenager. She remembered the thousands of scars on his body and assumed he was an old cruel jerk. Now she felt like she had never seen him before.

"What smells so good?" Princess asked from behind Billy. "Bitch, are you cheating on me?"

"Genghis Khan sure hired expensive mercenaries," Prince remarked at all the coin, hovering to take in Blade's naked body in all its natural glory.

In contrast, Billy's eyes never left hers. Blade almost joked, "hey, my boobs are down here!" Never once did they veer towards her impressive tits or the stacks of gold bricks behind her. The realization struck her like a fireball.

"I was so afraid for you," Billy whispered, throat dry and near tears. A man who does not fear death can still fear many things. "I was just ten when my father and I found my mother's naked corpse. I wanted to improve my sword fighting because the only guy who ever beat my father led the gang rape. I miss her so much it hurts, and the only thing that eases the pain is punishing her rapists. The thought of them doing the same to you..."

The traumatized fifteen year old broke down as his eyes burst into tears. Years of rage poured out as Blade took him into her arms to comfort him. And to block Prince's view of her. He didn't know it, but Billy owned her now. She'd do anything for him.

"I'm pregnant," Blade confessed.

It took a moment before the news broke through his exhaustion, but Princess shrieked and gave them a group hug. "Our kids will be siblings! We should have sex to celebrate." Princess needed to distract her brother: "Put Tiny in charge of packing all this. We need to leave before dawn."

While the rest of them got to work, Blade took the clothes off a corpse. She could not even see the floor, so she walked on bodies until she found the general. Footsteps warned her of people coming. She transferred his wands, kicked him until she tired, then peed into his open mouth, not stopping even when the new crowd appeared.

"Hey, Blade," Tiny said. "Heard you were dead."

"I faked it like a good lesbian," she replied, carefully aiming her last drops. "No, Red stormed a fortress alone rather than let them rape me."

"Yeah, I'm sure he'll do that for me, too. Friend of yours?" Tiny asked, gesturing to the dead general, pushing his people down the stairs.

"He tried to get friendly with me. He had to stop when Red refused to die."

Each American climbing over corpses looked stunned at what the Red Baron would do to protect a member of his team. What a hell of a story to tell the folks back home! His heroism multiplied the intensity of their loyalty.

"After this, the guys will follow him into hell and the gals will throw themselves into fireballs to spare him the heat."

Blade looked up at the giant Indian. "I'm gonna make myself pretty, tell the world what happened here, and interview the Baron so everyone knows how he feels about rape."

Tiny had good news. "When we heard mercenaries were hunting Red, both divisions refused to empty banks until we got them all. And that was before Red fought an entire castle to free one quad. It's scary to think what they'd do for him now."

"I'd kill or die for him," Blade confessed.

Tiny laughed. "Just wait til you see how many he killed topside. I don't understand how someone so puny can take such giant steps."

She walked past burnt corpses before she found the steel door. Then she saw the other guy she was looking for. Across the corridor, near the main entrance, she found the mercenary, stuck like a pig and practically buried in bodies. She

took back the incredible wands she got from Billy, then strolled into the courtyard to let the cold night air cleanse her. Hundreds of dead Mongols lined the battlements and filled the parade ground. At dawn she'd record it all to use in her anti-rape videos.

Blade could not believe she was still alive and un-raped. She stared at the stars. I'm gonna be a mommy! Blade said to herself in joyous disbelief.

## Chapter 45

Jawbone, the company commander, noticed a break in the snowfall. "Come on, everyone. Let's get out while we can. Mongols don't kill themselves, you know."

A well-liked veteran, he had a tendency to "jaw-bone" his team. The usual suspects made the usual groans, but most of them quickly got ready for another day on top of the 500 kilometer-long Pyrenees Mountain Range.

"Wake up, Dreamy," he said, kicking a super-quad who slept a lot, and handing him warm tea to clear his head. "Last one out cleans the latrine."

The downside of not having support staff was all the shitty chores.

Mongol control in Spain collapsed after their defeat at Cuenca. The 2nd division blocked enemy access to the peninsula while the 3rd bombed from Valencia. Then the new African division arrived and rolled up the Mongols from the south. Genghis Khan lost all his troops, government, and wealth in Spain. He vowed to re-take Spain, which meant first controlling the Pyrenees.

They built the cabin into the lee of a small cliff to minimize wind shear. Vulnerable from above, they placed large rocks on the roof, then poured water to freeze the boulders into place. A naturally-looking snowdrift hid frozen earth piled up against the exposed sides of the bunker as Jawbone peeked out a narrow slit before stepping outside.

The extreme cold made the interior feel like an oven. It got so cold that a guy could see his pee freeze as it landed.

The trick to surviving cold weather is layers of clothing, to add or subtract as needed. Jawbone decided to go back inside to take off a jacket now that the storm passed, but something made him pause. On impulse, he popped up to check out the roof. Unfortunately, a few dozen enemies blasted him for his sudden appearance, blowing his head off.

With that, hundreds of Mongols shot at the cabin from concealed positions, but did little more than melt snow and blacken the stone walls. The Americans rushed to open wand slits to fire back. Dreamy, now wide awake, noticed the white masks, gloves, and expensive coats. If they had all gone outside, the Mongols would have wiped them out.

"It's the special team we heard about!" he warned the others. "Let's hope this works."

Dreamy and several others stuck their hands out narrow holes in the back, then blasted blindly at anyone on the roof. Others climbed onto the roof to finish off the



Mongols. The boulders gave them cover, while the curve of the cliff protected them from above. A stalemate started, but with the Americans more comfortable.

"Pass the shields up and prepare for a mass attack," Dreamy yelled into the cabin. Some of the metal shields looked old enough to be Roman, but would still protect against fireballs.

Several hundred enemies attacked on the narrow front. The defenders built their bunker so everyone could shoot out, which crushed the attack. Owning the roof kept them alive.

The Mongols had to destroy the Americans to re-take Spain. Since Jawbone's company guarded the much-traveled Somport Pass in Aspe Valley, it came as no surprise that Mongols hit them. The other companies would hear and counter-attack in force. All Jawbone's unit had to do was wait.

When the counter-attack finally came at sunset, the Mongols were stiff, frustrated, and very cold. The Americans wiped out the remaining Mongols, but not before torturing some to learn where they trained.

"Oh, boy," Dreamy concluded sadly after the third Mongol gave the same information. "I hope the Baron has come back. Maybe he'll know what to do."

## Chapter 46

With winter near, Billy flew to England and Ireland to impregnate the mothers of his children again, confident the Mongols would wait until spring to start an offensive. Then Jack showed up to give him the bad news.

Everyone looked up when Billy finally arrived at the country estate outside Madrid. The crowd greeted him like royalty, which left American Jack feeling unappreciated. He spent three centuries establishing himself, only to see some teenager replace him. It never crossed his mind that Genghis Khan felt the same at the Olympics.

Jack's real talent lay in business. Without the resources he poured into the war over three hundred years, the Mongols would have conquered everyone long ago. But that didn't inspire warriors like spectacular victories.

Jack's wand called everyone's attention as he tapped his throat to boost his voice.

"We have the leaders of every company here to discuss how we should respond to our newest threat. Those of you who already heard Dreamy's report know that the Mongol High Command is training high-altitude quads on the Alps to take the Pyrenees from us."

"So much for re-taking Africa," Mali complained.

"No, since we now have a safe path to Africa, the first of many American quads and their families plan on moving there to take extraction enterprises from the Mongols. Many more will follow if our initial efforts are successful. With Red's money, I'm recruiting more African quads to add to our African division.

"Genghis has given General Jebe extraordinary powers to take veterans from Europe. Remember how Jebe trounced us outside Geneva a century ago? If Jebe can take the Pyrenees, the Mongols could finally conquer France and Spain.

"One idea is to force them to fight us at a place of our choosing—say, on top of the highest peak in the Pyrenees—and hit them with our newly grateful Spanish and French allies. We could thin them out on their way here and destroy their supply lines. Feeding and housing so many troops will give us plenty of opportunities to undermine them."

"Red, what do you think?" Bear asked, not noticing the pained look on Grandma's face when she was not asked first.

Billy hovered above them and tapped his throat. "First of all, sorry I'm late. I'd have been here earlier, but I was too busy killing enemies and taking their treasure."

Everyone leaned forward. What was coming must be good because he just paraphrased an old Genghis Khan quote.

"As you probably know, I led the 3rd Marathon Battalion to gather more intel. We followed the golden mules from the Alps to their regional headquarters in Vienna. Since Jebe is basically robbing Europe of quads, we found it surprisingly easy to wipe them out."

Oh, he had them now, like kids at bedtime soaking up their favorite story.

"There we found more gold than the thousand of us could carry, much less the silver. They also had a lot of currency," meaning paper money used in intra-government transactions. Billy coughed and took a very long time drinking some wine. Everyone knew he was stringing them along. He, of all people, wouldn't leave gold behind. "We took all the bills we could carry. The guys are now arguing over what kingdom to buy." He pretended his story ended, but everyone knew different. "Jack, this is excellent wine!"

"What did you do with the damn gold?" Bear demanded.

"Oh, that? We dropped it, actually. Every one of us. I blame the humidity. Funny thing is, we went back to get some more, and dropped it again. In fact, on every trip, the thousand of us dropped all that gold and silver in the same hole. Which should just about cover the bonuses for the volunteers who help me beat Jebe."

The applause rose to the heavens. Jack could see that the damn kid beat him again. Billy suddenly started laughing too hard to continue. He tried to drink some wine, but coughed in that, too.

"The problem, of course, with Mongol cash is only Mongols accept it, and only the government or government contractors accept it in large quantities. Because Mongolian law requires them to.

"You all know those child-size gunpowder bombs that Genghis used to such great effect bombarding walled cities two centuries before Europeans woke up to their potential? Yeah, funny story.

"Anyways, we found the main logistical officer at their headquarters who buys them for the High Command and, instead of dying, decided to retire rich. It turns out that Jebe ordered several million bombs, so I left Blade to help the logistical officer send them to private warehouses across Eurasia. Private third-party

contractors are transporting them to where my raiders in Central Asia can access them. And skeptics say Mongol currency is worthless!"

Billy paused to imagine Jebe's reaction when he discovers the enemy bought the munitions he planned on dropping on them.

"Now, I've always said the best time to kill quads is in their sleep. Preferably drunk. But we cannot kill them at all without knowing who they are. The High Command is making our task easier by sending them to the Alps. So I say, let's use Jebe to bleed Europe of Mongol strength.

"I sent the 3rd Battalion to dig bunkers on the summit of Mont Blanc, the highest peak in Western Europe. At four thousand eight hundred meters, it stands nearly one and a half kilometers higher than the tallest peak on the Pyrenees. The Mongols put their training camp at three thousand meters, which may be enough for the Pyrenees, but fighting at five thousand meters will leave them literally breathless, while American University trained our guys at great heights. So, of our twenty thousand American marathoners, I'm asking for the two thousand with the highest ceiling to alternate weeks on the mountain.

"It's almost winter, Mont Blanc is the coldest place in Europe, and I bought two thousand sets of cold-weather clothes from England. We'll go prepared for winter warfare, while Jebe will take them with what they're wearing. The mountain will cause more casualties than our wands. By spring, we'll own another mountain chain and take the Italian peninsula from the enemy, which gives us most of the Mediterranean. Since they're leaving Europe defenseless, the rest of you should raid their banks and businesses. And don't forget to spread a video of me urging Europeans to kill every Mongol on sight."

Through the thunderous applause, Jack felt the weight of responsibility for the global war finally slip off his shoulders. Over the centuries, many rebel leaders briefly eclipsed him, but none survived long. So it always came back to him to do the heavy lifting.

The problem with leading century-old veterans is that they suffer from so many scars. The physical scars that predict cold weather are bad enough, but the psychic ones are worse. It made being with them a living hell. War is endless tedium interrupted by unexpected terror endured under constant hardship, little sleep, and unbearable stress. So it's bad enough when the girl back home replaces you, or your current lover finds someone better. After enough cold, rainy nights without a tent, one innocent remark could spark a deadly fight. Jealously, envy, and boredom wound more soldiers than the enemy. Yet Jack asked them to follow him into battle, so they were his responsibility.

Until now.

He looked at the Red Baron in wonder. After believing for so long that his original family died, the rebellion finds the leader it needs in his last legitimate descendent, of all people. And just a boy, at that.

Jack examined the faces of the embittered veterans who had fought for centuries and saw hope in their eyes. Even Grandma believed the boy could beat Genghis freaking Khan, and she never let anyone get her hopes up. Not after what her father did to her.

As he watched the teenager absorb their applause, Jack discovered that he, too, believed the Red Baron would prevail. He couldn't imagine how, but something

deep inside told him the boy would win. Despite all the odds. That damn kid turned the world's oldest skeptic into a believer.

Unbelievable.

## Chapter 47

Red's growing super-quad force and Jack's ten thousand Africans left to destroy Mongol units along the northern African coastline because Billy saw an opportunity to take the entire Mediterranean from the Mongols. The Africans would eventually station themselves in Egypt to block Mongols from entering or leaving the continent, thus denying African wealth to the Empire.

To minimize cold-related illness, Billy alternated his two battalions weekly. On their week off the mountaintop, the battalion would deliver food, supplies, and bombs. Rotating companies attacked the enemy every three hours. Most of Jebe's quads could only fly a few hundred kilometers before resting. Which is why Billy located his closest base five hundred kilometers away on Mont Blanc.

General Jebe re-organized his quads so that those who could fly farthest or highest flew together, but those units suffered the first and largest casualties. The rest of the Mongols were more targets than threats. The more Billy killed, the more quads that Jebe demanded from the High Command.

Jebe, naturally, attacked Team Red on Mont Blanc, but they had to rest halfway there. Billy kept companies in hidden bunkers to ambush units when they rested. Jebe eventually took those bunkers, but Billy had planted explosives to blow them up when the Mongols slept inside.

Jebe now had to establish less protected camps close to Mont Blanc. Ger huts were portable, but not bomb or fire proof. Billy didn't mind because it meant fighting on the highest possible point in Western Europe. The Mongols looked almost comical, dropping out of the sky when the intensity of fighting required more oxygen than they received. In contrast, the Americans sang nursery rhymes to slow their breathing when going into battle.

Every time Billy's battalions switched, they interviewed the Red Baron and pooled those videos to distribute to news agencies. The extreme cold deepened Billy's voice and made it raspier. Ironically, Billy had to impersonate Jim impersonating William, who periodically released threatening videos. Soon all of Europe waited impatiently for the weekly updates, which pitted the Red Baron against the Empire's best general. Everyone understood that all of Europe was at stake. Rumor even had it that the Great Khan himself was their most dedicated viewer.

Jebe initially had to house eighty thousand troops while Billy only needed bunkers for a thousand, with a few hidden alternate camps farther away for when Jebe destroyed the main camp. Billy had a thousand marathoners to supply his camp, while Jebe needed thirty thousand for his dwindling armada. When he needed supplies, Billy sent his off-mountain battalion to ambush the Mongol logistical camp, forcing Jebe to move it ever farther away and assign more warriors

to guard it. The Americans thought it funny that Jebe brought them free supplies and gave them opportunities to kill air mules.

Billy knew the Khan could not afford to let this narrative continue. He lost Spain and could lose Africa and western Europe. Hell, news reports suggested that the Free Europe air forces now fielded more foreign quads than the Mongols. Meaning, they were winning the so-called Battle of the Mercenaries.

All thanks to the Red Baron's victories. But his death could reverse this. Already, rumors grew that the Great Khan was raising an unstoppable force to end the Red Baron, once and for all.

In his weekly interviews, the Baron progressively grew crazier, emphasizing the cold misery of living in a frozen hole and defiantly defending his latest defeats. He acted suicidal, paranoid, and delusional, claiming his quads would fight to the last man, despite the horrific losses. He complained bitterly of American Jack and the super-quads abandoning him, of sell-outs and mass desertions. He ranted and raved and cursed his former comrades.

He clearly had a death wish. Everyone knew the Red Baron was gonna die, and everyone wanted to see it. The lucky bastard who recorded the Baron's last fight could sell it for a fortune.

## Chapter 48

American Jack cautiously crawled deeper into the freezing underground bunker on the Alps, searching for the most dangerous man alive. He could barely breathe and had never known such cold. He saw Red under several blankets, talking to himself, and searched his face for signs of a suicidal lunatic.

"Jack, you're suppose to be in Africa."

"Who were you talking to?"

"I started a video diary when I was three. My dad thought it'd be good for me to see how I changed over the years."

"Your interviews are pretty convincing. I had to look around me to make sure I wasn't living in luxury in Africa. Even our own guys are worried you have a death wish. You said some pretty nasty things about us greedy sell-outs. Some wonder if you forgot that you sent them to Africa to clear the northern coastline."

"Grandpa, did you come all this way just to make sure I'm not as crazy as I seem in the videos? You, of all people, should know not to believe my propaganda. Although this cold makes me feel every injury I've ever had, which would drive anyone insane."

"You've aged, boy."

"Look who's talking, old man," Billy shot back, a bit prickly after two months of sub-zero temperatures.

"Not losing your nerve, are you, boy?" Jack needled him. He needed to know how close Red was to the edge.

"You're enjoying yourself, aren't you, grandpa? Ever been on the receiving end of those big bombs before? It's pretty unnerving. At least our bunker was covered

with several meters of frozen earth. The damn things still bounced me a meter in the air. When they finally collapse the roof—boy, I thought I'd never dig myself out. Those Mongols must have balls the size of bulls to sleep in felt huts."

Jack pretended to be sympathetic. "You're killing them as fast as Jebe gets reinforcements. The Americans have decimated their air force. Prince and Mali have basically killed all Mongols still dueling in Europe. News reports said you've killed sixty thousand on the mountain, and almost as many quads off the mountain."

The thought animated the boy. "I had someone design heat-resistance clothing for me, not knowing that it insulated even better against the cold. So we made gloves, socks, and jackets out of it. The Mongols actually fight over our corpses for our clothing. I hired experts to train us to prevent frostbite, while cold-related illnesses have shattered Jebe's combat readiness."

Jack didn't care about that. "How'd you deal with the marathon division that Genghis lent Jebe?"

"We never knew about them until they showed up. I nearly shat myself, seeing ten thousand quads carrying those big munitions. I thought I bought them all up. We didn't see them because they came from the opposite direction. They nearly buried me when they destroyed our primary base. While one company exhausted them, I sent the other nine companies to ambush them on their way to Jebe's base camp."

"But you got the bastards," Jack wanted to know.

"Oh, yeah. The nine companies jumped them right before they reached Jebe's camp, when they were most tired. They thought they were home free! Celebrating, their wands singing in unison, already collecting their bonuses in their minds. Those nine companies got half of them before Jebe drove them off.

"Then, the next time we swapped battalions, a terrible snowstorm was coming. I took the hundred with the highest ceiling and lured a few thousand enemy marathoners right into its path. We simply flew above it, although the strong winds exhausted us. But the rest of our battalion brought us tents, food, and hot soup as soon as the worst winds passed. We killed a few thousand precious Mongol marathoners without firing a shot. We suffered more casualties from frostbite, digging for their super-wands, than killing them."

"What happened to your first alternate base?" Jack wondered.

"Well, they eventually found it. I expected them to. Jebe sent twenty thousand conventional troops. His original quads screened the bombers as far as they could, then landed to screen their return so we couldn't harass them all the way back to base.

"But they never suspected that I had another battalion because I never attacked with more than a thousand fliers. My other guys found literally thousands of exhausted Mongols, panting like dogs in the snow, unable to fly another meter. Their dark uniforms against the white snow made it easier than shooting fat fish in a shallow stream.

"Then, right before the bastards arrived at our alternate camp, my other battalion hit them from above and just tore them up. Remember, those new bombs weigh fifty kilos, so those long-distance quads were in no shape to dogfight. A thousand broke off to drive us off while the rest absorbed losses until they could

bomb our camp, which they assumed would drive us off the mountaintop. They destroy our bunkers, but we harassed them all the way home.

“Since then, from our last alternate camp six hundred kilometers away, rotating companies raid their base every hour. I don’t know how they can sleep through hourly raid alarms.”

Jack felt so relieved that Red could speak rationally. His weekly ravings to the news agencies scared the hell out of him. Ever week the Baron seemed loonier. Everyone fighting the Mongol Empire now appreciated how much they depended on this faceless hero to win the war. Which led him to the next topic:

“Apparently, the Khan was not getting the quantity and quality of troops he expected, so he raised the reward for your head.”

“So that’s how Genghis convinced ten thousand marathoners to take me on,” Billy said, almost to himself. “Given my lunatic rantings, I must have seemed suicidal. How much am I now worth?”

“One thousand gold tons,” Jack answered, hating how much he enjoyed taking this cocky punk down a peg.

Given the knife suddenly twisting in his stomach, Billy couldn’t keep his expression neutral. If alone, he’d have rolled over and cried himself to sleep. “I suppose I should feel flattered.”

“What’s with all the Mongol uniforms?” Jack asked, pointing to a pile of them in another room.

“Since we have to search their corpses for valuables, we may as well take their uniforms. We send them weekly to this ingenious Italian matron who has some special laundry soap for removing blood stains. They even smell good. We have to go a week without bathing, so the base stinks pretty bad.”

Jack wondered how many days he could stay in this tiny hole before he blasted his own head off. “I bring good news. Free Europe has pushed the Mongols out of France. Since we won Spain, thousands of Europe’s best quads have signed up. Apparently, everyone wants to fight alongside you. They want to see the master at work. The Spanish and French governments are freaking out, over losing their best guys, but they can’t blame you because you’re almost single-handedly beating Jebe’s armada in the coldest place in Europe.

“The Europeans adore you. I’ve never seen anything like it. Apparently millions are thanking you when they go to bed. When someone arrives to distribute your latest weekly rantings, the hysterical crowd mobs the poor guy. If you have any idea how Paris or Madrid feels about you—most of Europe now feels the same. Since people think you’re gonna die on the Alps, every quad is being pressured to come to your rescue. I’ve seen videos of crowds literally tearing apart quads who treat your death disrespectfully. Entire schools are invading dueling arenas to beg the quads to help you. You know, before it’s too late.

“Anyways, we’re being flooded. We’re organizing them as fast as we can. Those Indian cousins returned with a thousand super-quads and we took the best Americans and put them into their own super-quad battalion. We normally assume we must replace 10% of the marathoners every year, but they suffered so few casualties that we found ourselves with too many.

“So we have two American marathon divisions, five European marathon battalions, five super-quad battalions, and thirty thousand conventional quads.”

Billy pointed to a backpack full of death sticks. "Those are the best wands we've taken from their marathoners. Give them to whoever is closest to reliably flying a thousand clicks. I need as many long distance quads as possible. I'd also like to borrow those African marathoners. After all, I'm paying their salaries."

"I wish I had more of them myself—in Egypt. They're facing more enemy units on both sides and must still fly down those running our blockade. By cutting off Africa, that division is bankrupting the Empire."

Displeased, Billy sipped his hot soup. He lost a lot of weight because the cold sapped his appetite. Maybe it was the thin air, but he could no longer taste anything. Worse yet, he had trouble sleeping. He sometimes trembled uncontrollably for hours, reliving himself crawling through frozen earth to un-bury himself. It's hard to sleep underground when dreaming of being buried alive. Yet he did it without ever taking a day off.

"Invent a crisis to justify sending the American and European marathoners to Grandma in Africa. Have her fly here as soon as possible. Then lead your conventional quads here slowly to rescue me. While the Mongols focus on you, I'll smash Jebe with Team Red before you even get here."

Billy leaned forward and gently patted his ancestor on the shoulder. "Now tell me why you're really here. What could possibly scare you so bad?"

Jack leaned back, annoyed Billy could read him so well. "Genghis has called up all veterans who retired less than thirty years ago. That must be a few million quads. He's raising a huge new force in Kiev and another at his flight school in Mongolia."

"Kiev? Why not train them somewhere warmer?"

Jack shrugged. "Kiev is the Empire's breadbasket. The Russians have been restless, they just had a huge grain harvest, it sits on many trade routes, and the Dnieper River is the fourth largest in Europe, which makes supplying the armada easier. The Scandinavians assume they'll be attacked first."

Billy agreed: "They'll overwhelm Scandinavia once it gets warm enough, then sweep south to wipe the continent clean. How many total graduates will American University have by spring?"

"At least a quarter-million half-marathoners and one hundred fifty near-marathoners. The next marathon division is another year off."

"Have the Americans wait for me in Alaska, and have them stop any non-Americans crossing the Bering Strait. I don't want the Mongols to know the force next year will be so much bigger. How large a force is the Khan raising in Kiev?"

Jack felt his sphincter tighten. "A million quads, with even more two-wanders to carry supplies. I've sent Prince to find out what he can and to get the Scandinavian and Russian marathon divisions ready."

Billy leaned back against the wall, smiling, not knowing he looked like a deranged madman.

"A million enemies makes you happy?" Jack sneered.

"The Khan is making victory easier by separating those willing to shoot us. Genghis likes to brag that he has millions of veterans. Like Pompey, he says he can call them up just by stomping his boot. And that's how we identify who we must kill. We don't have to kill those who don't join him. To win this war, we only need to eliminate those willing to kill us. Anyone we can persuade to not fight



against us is someone we don't have to kill. And we should let them know that. Let's call for a general amnesty to encourage pro-Mongolian quads to stay out of the war, and see what that does to the Khan's recruitment. They don't have to fight for us, just not against us."

This damn kid is brilliant, Jack thought, without saying so. "Foreigners make up most of the Mongol Air Force. We could cut the Khan's reserves in half! An amnesty may save us from having to kill a million or more quads."

They quickly did a video together promising a general amnesty to anyone who stopped fighting them, but warning that anyone in Mongolia, Manchuria, the Stans, and Siberia would be shot on sight. Jack never doubted that governments would honor it because the Red Baron was now the face and voice of the resistance.

"Jack," Billy said before his ancestor left. "I need to give you something." The boy tapped wands to transfer something. "I just gave you authorization for an account with over one thousand tons of gold in Global Bank in Paris."

Jack's face went slack with fear that the Baron thought he'd soon die. "Why give me so much money?"

"If we destroy Jebe and the armada in Kiev, all of Europe will declare independence. But they'll fight each other rather than settle their affairs. I want you to spend that money to unite them against the Mongol threat. Tell them Genghis Khan is coming. Bribe them into signing mutual defense treaties, non-aggressive pacts, and free trade agreements. Make them settle borders around distinct peoples with common language, history, and culture. Fund massive infrastructure projects to those kingdoms that will loan you their battalions because Genghis Khan will be in a killer mood when he gets to Europe. He'll burn all of Europe if he can. I need you to field a huge force to deter him."

"Me? Where the hell will you be when Genghis Khan invades Europe?"

Maybe it was just the freezing weather, but Billy flashed him a cold-as-ice smile that chilled Jack to the bone.

## Chapter 49

Upon arriving in Italy, Grandma sent Princess to bring Billy and his battalion off the mountain. Billy wept with joy upon seeing his friends. In contrast, Billy's scrawny frame and overly emotional weeping scared the hell out of them.

"You look half-dead," Grandma said by way of greeting.

"It's great to see you, too, Grandma. I expected you earlier."

"A storm delayed us three days. What's the plan?"

"Well, I may smell like roses, but my troops need a hot bath. We should turn in early, wake up around midnight, then bomb Jebe into the tenth century."

At midnight, he gave his final orders to the battalion and company commanders:

"Jebe knows Jack is coming, so he'll have something dangerous planned. Expect the unexpected. I want everyone to wear these great-smelling Mongol

uniforms to confuse them. We'll attack from the west instead of the east so they mistake us for reinforcements. The super-quads will take out the sky patrols, but hidden sentries will still sound the alarm before we're in position to bomb. Our true surprise will be our numbers. When scouts see thirty thousand quads, they'll assume we're reinforcements.

"I want the first battalion to bomb the Mer de Glace glacier because a lot of Mongols are hiding under the snow in front of it. The next four battalions will drop their shrapnel bombs on the structures. The other battalions should blanket the camp and drop your bombs wherever Mongols pop up out of the snow. Shoot them before they get off the ground.

"Grandma, circle high with the super-quads, broken into companies flying figure eights around the perimeter. I'd not be surprised if Jebe has hidden a battalion or two over a ridge to take us by surprise."

A few minutes later, as the commanders briefed their teams, Billy took Princess aside.

"I think I'm farthest along," she said proudly, caressing her bulging belly. He had not yet told her about his babies with Marie or the English and Irish women.

"If it's a boy I want to name him Wilhelm, and if it's a girl, Elizabeth," Billy said, knowing he better state his preference now, as she'd obsess over her own choices.

"Then I get to name the next two!"

"Then I get to name the three after that!" he retorted with a smile.

"Then I get to name the four after that!" They laughed together, so comfortable with each other.

"Battle is no place for a pregnant woman," he said softly, scared for her. "What if we have a prodigy that shoots flame out of your you-know-what?"

She instantly hardened. "I'm going."

And that, was that.

The Mongols scattered their ger huts to minimize the bomb hits, but the sheer volume of munitions canceled out that strategy as the whole valley vaporized, sending up snow geysers and turning tons of ice into slush. Warned by alert sentries, Billy watched thousands of quads exit hidden huts buried in snow. The Americans gleefully fell on them.

Flying requires wand use, which warms and heals, so his troops were relatively limber and awake, despite the bitter cold night. The Mongols, on the other hand, woke up abruptly, could not know the tactical situation, while cold, sleepy, and scared.

Billy had no doubt that Jebe prepared them for just this moment, but several weeks had passed since then. Billy had accustomed them to hourly raids so that most sleepy quads could not appreciate the gravity of the situation until too late.

Circling above the battle, Billy searched for the nasty surprises that Mongols were famous for. And he didn't see them. Instead of making him feel better, it bothered him, so he rose higher to see beyond the vast camp.

And not a moment too soon. An aerial battle broke out to the north. Billy screamed a warning as he sprinted across the sky, confident his super-quad companies would follow. By then another fight started to the south. He overtook one of his companies, signaling the commander to follow him. They cut across

another and raced together to the fight. Far to the east he heard the echoes of another battle.

Just a click ahead, one of his companies jumped a larger group of enemies, judging by the fireballs illuminating the night sky. His two companies banked sharply left to attack from the rear. He noticed a third company rushing to follow him, so he slowed down so they could catch up.

The three companies flew in a line, descending at an optimum angle to fire in a fall stabilized by their boot wands. The angle made all the difference. Because they flew in a 10 X 10 formation, instead of just the front ten quads firing, every quad could shoot. Six enemy companies rose to attack, but better wands and greater height gave Team Red twice the range.

His three hundred descended enough, so Billy signaled them to rise in an arc over the enemy. At least one enemy company anticipated this, so Billy raced ahead to cut them off. He flashed his wands so they'd concentrate on him. Now all he had to do was survive the next minute, dodging and shielding until his troops could destroy them.

Because his super-quads could fly faster, they could stay out of range of those behind them while shooting other enemies who didn't see them.

Reinforcements arrived, so Billy raced to the next closest fight. He saw an enemy unit chasing a friendly one, so he did his infamous scream and, sure enough, the dummies turned to face him, although he was still too far away. He let the enemy come, then blew past them. When every second counts, those fools just lost several minutes. Billy saw a Mongol company descending on his troopers, so he fired a volley. The fireballs had to travel too far to hurt, much less kill, but the heat wave made them break off their attack to identify the unseen threat.

Genghis promised a fortune, so commanders chased him instead of easier targets, letting him lead them away. What began as an even fight turned increasingly lopsided, so he flew to the next closest battle, but Grandma had it under control. He helped them win faster, eager to deprive Mongols of precious marathoners.

Someone came to tell Billy they got the general. They had removed his armor and chained him to a boulder. Heat severely burned his left side, from his hip to his face.

"The famous Red Baron," Jebe said, not at all afraid. "You should be congratulated. I haven't been beaten this badly since I last argued with my father."

Billy shut him up by breaking his jaw with his fist, which really hurt his hand.

"Who got him?"

Champa, the hot Vietnamese he impregnated, waddled forward. She resembled an angry Asian version of Princess, but was so skinny while pregnant that she looked like a snake who swallowed a pig.

"The new wands you gave me saved my life."

"Kill him slowly," he commanded.

She started slicing Jebe up to inflict maximum pain, enjoying every minute of it—therapy for finding her family massacred. His body now knew death was imminent, so Champa transferred his wands while contently watching life drain out of him.

Billy always suspected that Champa had many reasons to feel vindictive towards the Mongols, but never asked. Now, however, he could tell that she satiated some of that thirst. Something seemed to fall off her shoulders. She turned to Billy and bowed very low, in a gesture of deep respect.

"On behalf of my ancestors, I thank you."

Billy shocked the reserved woman by hugging her like a child. "When you give Jebe's wands to our child, he or she will always remember your victory that restored the family honor. May your anger die with Jebe."

Billy noticed Bear staring at him strangely, and knew instantly that something was wrong.

"She'll live," was the first thing Bear told him, "but she's burned up bad."

He didn't need to give a name.

Billy followed him to a hut that managed to survive. Princess lay hurt, but conscious. Snow eased the burning that cooked her skin from the lower spine to the back of her head. She lost most of her beautiful hair and it looked like a vampire nibbled on her left ear.

"I never saw it coming," was all the explanation he needed. That's how he foresaw his own doom. The blast must have hit between her helmet and her back armor. "The suit you gave me saved my life."

Unfortunately, he was going through his new armor faster than Uncle George could replace them.

"Bear caught her as she fell and used snow to minimize the damage," one of the healers told him. "The third-degree burns will heal, but leave scars. The baby should not be effected if she recovers well, but her state of mind may determine the baby's fate."

Billy could see that Princess feared how this would change their relationship. The scars on her neck may never go away. He knelt to kiss her lips.

"A few more burns and you'll be better looking than me." She tried not to laugh because it hurt so much but, honestly, he couldn't understand how anyone could enjoy touching him, much less for hours at a time like Princess did. "This changes nothing between us, you know. Don't make me enforce our contract: you still have to marry me and have my babies. If your hair doesn't grow back, I'll cut off your brother's while he sleeps. He doesn't like me anyways."

Her face beamed gratitude. "I know you have to go. When will I see you again?"

"Not soon. I need to destroy the Khan's new million-quad armada in Kiev."

"Please take someone with you," she joked.

Billy got up. "Bear, my next trip to the bank, I'm gonna transfer a ton of gold into your account for saving my wife. If it's a boy, I'm gonna name him after you."

"Bear?" he asked skeptically.

"No. Harry, because you're so hairy your body doesn't need soap so much as shampoo."

Princess smiled. "I now know my son's name."

Billy just gave Princess something to look forward to during her weeks of recuperation. Outside the hut, Bear set him straight.

"Keep your damn money. I did what anyone would do for a comrade in arms. And I still owe you for the wands."

Bill placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "I didn't give you the gold to reward you. I did it to remind Princess how much I value her. Save it in case I'm not around to support her or the child."

That left Bear speechless. He had never known anyone who could see so far ahead. But, then, Billy had another inspiration.

"I need someone to kill me for the Khan's thousand ton reward."

The thought of killing Billy horrified Bear. "What am I gonna spend a thousand gold tons on?"

Billy laughed. "I'm not asking you to keep it. I'm asking you to take it. Just think of how many mercenaries Genghis could hire with a thousand gold tons. Did you take any wands from their marathoners?"

Bear took out his best captured wand set. "These are actually pretty good. I got a battalion commander as he tried to rally his men."

"Then let's go somewhere private so you can kill me. After stripping the enemy a month ago, we put our clothes on them just so it'd look like they massacred us. I got great close-ups!" Billy closed his eyes, then passed those videos. "Remember to tell every news agency from here to Peking that Jebe destroyed us and that you killed the Red Baron. And if you get an opportunity to give Genghis one of your famous bear hugs, well, that'd be hilarious!"

They didn't have time to bury the dead. All but the seriously wounded flew to the Mongol logistical camp off the mountain. But they found the support base virtually deserted. Locals washed clothes and tended kitchens. Nobody shot at Team Red, so they didn't shoot at anybody. While they ate, the locals told them the Mongols abruptly left a few days before.

"They went after Jack," Grandma predicted. "If that storm didn't cost us three days, we'd have surprised them."

"Have them sleep," Billy ordered, since they were too tired to do anything else. "Set up a wide perimeter. I'll find out what happened to Jack. Grandma, have them pack enough food for a long trip."

Billy flew all day and found Jack's camp after sunset. Billy saw thousands of corpses as he descended. Jack didn't even get up. Once he landed, Billy could see why: Jack's right leg was severely burned.

"You let them ambush you?" Billy asked in astonishment.

"I didn't let them do anything," the old man shot back angrily. "This is war. They had weeks to plan their ambush. I doubled the usual patrols, but I had few super-quads or marathoners. I had everyone sleep in their armor. I kept a third on standby during the night. Plus, I only had weeks to organize and train them. What else could I do?"

"You knew they knew you were coming, so you should have ambushed their ambush. Put your highest fliers in the same units and rotate them to protect you from high-altitude bombers. Establish layers of sentries far from camp who can signal each other without letting the Mongols know. Arrange dummies to lure the enemy in while your best quads wait in hiding. How much of your force did you lose?"

"Over half. But their losses were just as heavy."

"Word of their victory will spread like herpes."

"How did you do?" Jack demanded.

“We killed them all, including Jebe. Princess got burned bad, but will be okay. Now we’ll go north to destroy this new armada.”

“We should spread word of your victory over Jebe,” Jake argued.

“No!” Billy didn’t mean to yell, but can’t this man ever think ahead? “The Mongols must think they’ve won so I can surprise them. I want you to record me laying on my back, dying. I’ll remove my shirt so everyone sees the X on my chest. Pretend you found me on the mountaintop, my forces slaughtered. I need you to zoom in on my chest and act scared when you realize that I have stopped breathing. Are you up for it?”

“That’ll be the easiest thing I’ve done all day.”

Jack recorded for ten minutes while Billy recounted in detail how famously clever Jebe tricked him, and how he’ll never forgive himself for sending his super-quads to their doom. He said it so convincingly that Jack almost believed it. Billy let Jack get a close-up of the Millennial Wands he took from Subodei to convince Genghis Khan it really was the Red Baron. Then Billy surprised him by projecting a video.

“This is the bastard who got me,” the teenager said after Jack examined his fake wound. The movie showed a carefully rehearsed duel with Bear yelling triumphantly when he stabbed the Red Baron in the back.

When the Baron started crying over the loss of his team, Jack—still traumatized by the death of his troops—joined in. It looked either moving or pathetic. They ended it with Jack pronouncing the Red Baron dead and weeping over the corpse.

“Let me review it,” Billy demanded impatiently.

“Geez, Red. I can’t see your chest rise,” Jack said as it ended. “No one will mistake your disgusting skeleton body for someone else’s. How can women even touch you?”

Billy let that slide since he didn’t know. “Tell your commanders you’re gonna visit me on the mountaintop. Then return tomorrow, act depressed, and finally break down to explain how Jebe wiped us out. Transfer my death video, but make them swear to not share it. If you are convincing, Mongol spies will do the rest. Everyone believes the rumor, while few believe a speech.”

## Chapter 50

A few days later, Billy entered Global Bank in Warsaw, checked his messages, transferred some gold, and picked up more body suits. He got an update of the steel-hull warship his great-uncle George was building in London. The latest message from Prince gave him directions to a secluded valley an hour from Kiev.

The Mongols apparently did not appreciate how useful a communications network would be to the Baron. It’s how he communicated with American Jack, the bounty hunters who killed the Khan’s descendents, and the Americans.

Billy flew them over a thousand kilometers a day to out-run even the Khan’s famous postal service. The strongest carried the heaviest items like cooking pots and stoves. None of them ever felt safe in the same place for more than five hours.

Even putting up sentries could bring disastrous attention. Only Billy's intimate knowledge of population centers let them travel undetected.

After over a week of constant flight, someone dropped in front of them and gave the coded signal. Billy flew forward until he saw Prince's relieved face. Prince led them to his valley, where several hundred men looked up as thirty thousand strangers landed among them.

"How did you know it was us?" Billy asked Prince.

"Mongols do not fly in a defensive stacked-diamond formation several thousand kilometers from the nearest enemy. Much less so damn high."

Billy laughed at his foolishness. He stacked his battalions five deep, five stacks total, in the shape of a diamond, with another stack flying point.

"We're hiding the Scandinavian and Russian marathon divisions an hour away," Princess told him. A big bearded guy marched forward. "Red, this is Ivan the Terrible."

"You don't look so bad," Billy joked.

"Ivan," Prince said, "it is my pleasure to introduce you to the Red Baron."

They shook hands and the big guy nearly broke his bones with his tight grip.

"You're tiny," the guy concluded, studying Billy for flaws.

"That's not what the ladies say. I hope you made good use of the money, armor, and wands we left you the last several years."

The ingrate grunted. "No offense, but could you flash your wands for us? I, of course, believe you are who Prince says you are, but it'd reassure my guys."

"Then record it to recruit more quads. Otherwise, no one will believe the Red Baron is in Russia."

Billy noticed where a stream passed by the nearest building, so he popped over it at optimum height and did his primal scream -- which, while it did wonders in combat, felt silly otherwise. He burst flame from all four wands, did a pretty dance he developed with Diva, then shot four blasts.

Literally tons of dirt rocked his stunned audience. His own men knew enough to back up, and smile in anticipation. The dust cloud smacked the Russians like a sandstorm which—being Russians—was probably a first.

Billy deafened those without ear protectors. He landed in the crater and waited for them to surround the rim, looking down at him. Every time they went for water, they'd have to walk around his crater.

Even Ivan looked impressed. "I believe you now."

The Russians cheered—they had the Red Baron! And thirty thousand other guys.

Ivan wanted to impress upon the Baron how dire the situation was. "Those bastards took all the food we had stored up for the winter to feed this new armada. Those Mongols are feeding over a million parasites from the Stans, which means a few million Russians may starve by spring. Please help us."

"So that's why you're finally willing to spill Mongol blood. How many quads do you have?"

"I've spread a rumor that I'm giving every Russian quad all the grain they can carry from warehouses in Kiev, so I expect a few hundred thousand Russian quads to show up. I'll wait until just before midnight before telling them of the attack." Ivan paused dramatically. "Are you really gonna attack a million quads?"

"That's why we're here. But we're really tired, hungry, and sleepy."

Ivan wasted no time. His men showed the newcomers where they could sleep while others prepared a giant feast. Soon, over roasted pig, Prince brought the commanders up to date.

"General Moqali has a million quads and a million two-wanders, organized into two thousand battalions, each squad living in two hundred thousand huts. Moqali sacked Kiev in 1240, so he doesn't dare trust Russian women. Instead he uses refugees from the Stans for cooks, whores, and laundry maids."

"I've heard that the military vault has more coin than the Mongol Central Bank in Peking," Ivan added knowingly.

"The vault is ours," Billy said sternly. "But you can have everything else except the Bank of Mongolia. If every quad averages one backup set, then you'll find several million wands on the battlefield tomorrow, plus whatever money the corpses have on them."

"Why do you get Bank of Mongolia?"

"Because a few thousand quads from Global Bank will arrive soon to claim every Mongolia branch for their own. Once you set up your government, make sure everything owned by the Bank of Mongolia is deeded to Global Bank. Global Bank will loan you whatever you need, but you must protect their branches. Were you able to get the bombs?"

Prince laughed. "An independent company helpfully transported a few million to Ivan's warehouses."

"So what's the plan?" Billy asked Prince. Some of the commanders looked surprised. Even Prince seemed shocked.

"They don't have airborne sentries or patrols because the fighting is so far away, and who the hell attacks a million quads? So I say we fall straight down tonight from maximum altitude, each carrying fire and shrapnel bombs. At five hundred meters, we each drop a firebomb on a hut. At three hundred meters we throw shrapnel bombs where they gather the most, then blast everything that moves. Have the Russians surround their perimeter to prevent survivors from escaping. Once resistance fades, we wipe out the million supporters from the Stans camped around them."

"Fifty thousand marathons, holding four bombs each, targeting two hundred thousand huts. It sounds like providence," Billy said. "Ivan, have your quads surround the camp to prevent any from escaping, but tell them not to enter the camp until an hour after sunrise to give their wounded time to die. Even then, they should stab every body to avoid getting shot in the back."

The big guy grunted his approval. "What should I do if we win?"

"Form a credible temporary government to set up local and national elections. That means you must include your rivals."

"Why, Mr. Baron?"

"Because a credible government will suck up Mongol resources that otherwise would be used against me."

Billy thought he detected a smile under all those whiskers. "I now see why so many follow you."



“Ivan, in return for saving a million Russians, you’ll owe me a debt of gratitude that you cannot possibly repay, but which you will try to repay whenever possible. Is this understood?”

Ivan sat back in his wooden chair and almost smiled. “Spoken like a Russian. I accept your terms.”

While Russians recorded them, the Red Baron and Ivan the Terrible issued a joint video urging Russians to kill everyone pro-Mongolian and proclaiming the independent nation of Russia.

“Ivan, Russia needs an air force. You will have the quads, armor, and the wands. All you lack is a uniform. As it happens, we have thirty thousand Mongol uniforms that we won’t be wearing anymore, and you’ll find several million more on the battlefield. Have your women figure out the cheapest way to make them look Russian and you’ll have a professional looking air force.”

## Chapter 51

Billy went over the plan with his commanders. He preferred simple plans, and this could not get simpler. The obvious drawback is any enemy units away from the camp could surprise the hell out of them, so he broke his five thousand super-quads into companies. After the initial attack, most would patrol along the perimeter.

Billy remembered the friendly casualties at the Summer Slaughter. “Remember to close your eyes or two hundred thousand bombs will render you a blind target. And make sure you use your ear protectors if you don’t want to go deaf. We don’t have cloud cover to conceal our approach, but at least we have starlight to see their huts.

“After we wipe out the camp followers, fan out in squads to hunt down those who escaped. If things turn to shit—and we are in Russia—this estate will be our rally point. Stay out of their camp because thousands of the wounded will live long enough to kill you while playing dead. Let the Russians work for whatever the corpses offer. What we want is in their vault.

“Grandma, I want you in charge of the super-quads. Moqali surrounds himself with his best quads, so they are yours.”

Everyone stood up and looked at each other for doubts. Billy radiated confidence.

“How many balls does he have?” Tiny asked Blade, who looked at him bewildered. “We’re gonna attack a few million enemies, and Red doesn’t even look nervous. With him around, I’m never the biggest guy in the room. He makes me feel tiny.”

That made Blade smile. “He only has two, but they’re so huge they can turn on a lesbian.”

“Speaking of which, I wonder how Bear is doing.”

The Russian and Scandinavian divisions arrived early. Billy feared sentries waking up a million quads in time to swamp them, but the Mongols seemed

oblivious to them as they formed a “blanket” maneuver at maximum altitude, then dropped in a controlled freefall.

The advantage of taking the time to spread themselves out was that they fell uniformly. They could not afford to hit some areas twice and others not at all. The valley was shaped like a banana, so they formed the blanket accordingly. Instead of faster fliers arriving sooner, and getting slower units blasted badly, everyone fell at the same speed since they only used their wands to control their spacing.

From maximum height, Billy could gleam the first beams of light over the horizon. The farther they dropped, with their arms and legs spread out in an X-shape, the darker it became. Their eyes adjusted to the starlight in time to spot the round dots where the enemy slept. The huts stood out against the white snow like big zits on pale tits.

Billy dropped with the super-quads over the enemy headquarters. He spotted a messenger about to leave, looking up at them more confused than alarmed. A few wands below started shrieking, but much too little and much too late.

Then, at five hundred meters above ground, Billy vented his famous scream to begin the bombardment.

## Chapter 52

Benes the Brave came out of retirement to avenge the friends who died at the Summer Slaughter several years ago. Now nearing his one hundredth birthday, the pressure to empty his bladder got him up in the freezing cold. He cursed himself for drinking so much again, but he kept bumping into old war buddies who wanted to celebrate. Otherwise he'd have waited until dawn. Or, better yet, noon. As it was, he had to maneuver past countless obstacles to find the damn sanitation trench, his old bones absorbing the cold as he stumbled in the dark.

As he stood peeing over the edge, something drew his eye up. He looked at the sky for the longest time before he shook himself awake enough to really focus. It looked like a shadow falling. Yet even as some stars twinkled, others shined uninterrupted. It made no damn sense, and again he cursed his weakness for fermented horse milk.

No self-respecting quad goes anywhere without wands, so he took one out to record whatever the hell was happening because otherwise no one would believe him.

Finally he thought he saw men. His gut reaction went from bad to worse. He tried to pee faster, but his bladder took forever to empty.

So he still had a hand on his freezing penis when someone screamed and flashed four wands right above him. The sight was so unexpected that he'd have peed himself if he were not already urinating. It couldn't be the Red Baron, here in Kiev—but, then, it couldn't be anyone else. He turned to continue recording the Baron and fell into the narrow trench.

As he splashed into urine-soaked feces, an enormous explosion shook the world. A brilliant light illuminated every detail of the crap he fell into. His hands

covered his ears even as his ear drums painfully burst. He couldn't imagine what could produce something so loud. Maybe Father Sky wanted to punish Mother Earth with a thousand rounds of thunder. A pressure wave swept over the "shit slit" and sucked out all of the oxygen. He buried his face in mud, then discovered the mud tasted like dung.

After the terrifying moment passed, his chest heaved, desperate for air. He stood on the lip of the trench. Although his ears heard nothing but ringing, his brain would not accept what his eyes saw. He got out his second wand to record both sides.

He had never seen so many fireballs! Thousands flying up and shooting down. He turned slowly to capture everything around him because if he didn't believe it, why would anyone else?

He stood there like a shitty statue rotating with outstretched arms. Numb by more than the freezing temperature, a desperate need to tell someone gripped him. The sanitation trench emptied into the Dnieper River, so he flew within the slit, the excrement of a million warriors fouling his senses and traumatizing his appetite. Once across the river, he hid behind some bushes and recorded the unbelievable scene behind him. Apparently, the sky really was punishing the ground. Only now he could make out thousands of quads firing upon his comrades. He stayed as long as he dared before an obsessive need to share the news compelled him to flee.

## Chapter 53

Despite previous experience, Billy didn't appreciate how many ear drums he'd be exploding. Even with ear protectors and flying high above, the detonations rang his head like a bell. It was like falling into a room of exploding Chinese firecrackers, except a million times louder. He couldn't imagine how much it hurt on the ground. He hoped his guys shut their eyes because the surface suddenly shined as bright as the sun.

Billy asked several Russian women to record the attack from above but, later, even he couldn't believe the videos. Their bombardment turned night into day.

His team got off several volleys at whatever moved below them before a few hundred thousand Mongols soared up in vengeance. After explosions that damaged their eyes, ears, and throats, Billy was surprised they could stand, much less fly. Without time to form into units, they rose individually, but over several minutes, as they recovered their wits.

With better wands and greater height, Team Red could hit them with lethal blasts, while those on the ground could only warm them up with defused blasts on a cold night. The Mongols almost did them a favor. Plus, the fireballs ignited everything flammable, including people—it was like hovering over a really big campfire.

By the time they annihilated the first few hundred thousand Mongols, Team Red found another few hundred thousand shooting futilely at them from the ground.

As they descended to one hundred meters, they discovered a few hundred thousand more people clutching their bleeding ears or blinded eyes. They looked like sitting ducks, except laying down. Billy forbid his troops from landing near enemy wounded, so their orders were to fireball survivors from the air.

William often described the life of a soldier as work, not unlike a butcher. Work marked not so much by heroics as doing grim deeds that needed doing. Nobody likes carving up cattle or digging graves or killing people, but someone must do it. That's how Billy felt, as he shot everything that moved: just another guy doing his job. He felt neither heroic nor sadistic as his troops moved to annihilate the support camps that surrounded the military base. Annihilating those million refugees from the Stans didn't make Billy feel sick; it made him feel safe. Any that survived would eat food that would otherwise keep a Russian alive. Mongols killed more civilians than any other people in history, so they were just getting what they deserved.

Many people would consider killing three million people unconscionable, but Billy saw it as a great day's work. Those million quads would have killed several million Europeans, and those million two-wanders and million civilians would have helped them, so Billy was actually saving Europeans. As Genghis Khan liked to say, there are no innocents in total war. Billy thought civilization was a great idea, and hoped humanity tried it some day.

Of course, the crucial difference between the two groups is that Team Red killed to give people freedom while the Mongols killed to take it away. Genghis Khan saw himself as a conqueror while Billy saw himself as a liberator.

Billy dropped through a hole in the headquarters roof and shot or stabbed everyone inside. He kicked in doors until he found the grizzled old man in charge. Billy gave the guy credit—he knew what was coming and fought with his last breath. Moqali swung long swords as soon as his doors burst open and Billy dropped to the floor just in time. He blasted the general's knees off, then flew on the floor to get close enough to slice his biceps. Like the Third Millennial, Billy sat on the guy's chest as he transferred his wands and watched him die.

"You know what I like most about a fair fight?" he asked, even though he hated fair fights. "The better fighter always wins."

"Who are you?" Moqali angrily demanded.

"I'm the Red Baron. And one day I'll take your Immortal's Millennial Wands as I watch him die."

"A messenger just woke me up to show me video of American Jack watching you die. I was on my second cup of wine when the bombing started."

"Oh, that. Yeah, I faked that in order to destroy your mighty armada. Ten days of flying for ten minutes of fighting."

"You got Jebe?"

"And Subodei, Tamerlane, and you."

By the time he found the main vault, Grandma had already blasted it open. Billy knew they struck the mother load by the stunned expressions of his team. He leaned in and whistled in shock. He knew taking care of a few million warriors took a lot of coin, but he never imagined what it'd look like. He started laughing hysterically. This was even better than the vault in Vienna. Ten crates had the word "wands" painted on them, which meant half a million wand sets.

“All right, genius,” Grandma challenged him. “This is too much to fly to Scandinavia, and a heavy wagon train can’t get through all this snow. So we can’t leave it here, yet we can’t take it with us.”

Billy smiled. “Every Bank of Mongolia branch will become part of Global Bank, so we’ll store it all there. Tell our marathoners they’re gonna be rich.”

## Chapter 54

Billy’s fifty marathon battalions systematically struck every enemy air unit in Russia. Billy took the five best to hunt down Mongol survivors to prevent them from regrouping.

This victory, after the one over Jebe in the Alps, convinced Russians that the Baron was gonna win this thing. After three centuries of personal security, most Mongols were surprised that their neighbors broke into their homes and businesses to slaughter them. Gangs killed and robbed anyone in Mongolian clothing. A massive redistribution of wealth swept Russia.

Back in Kiev, Billy found a new government trying to get off its knees. Instead of bombs, Ivan kept his quads busy transporting food confiscated by Moqali so Russians didn’t starve this winter. Billy let Ivan try out Moqali’s excellent wands. The big guy extended flame for ten meters, screaming like he was having an orgasm.

“These are yours if you help me reproduce with your most powerful quads. Preferably prodigies, but I don’t care about looks, bloodlines, or personalities, as long as they hate Mongols.”

Ivan studied him for a long time, unsure whether to be flattered or offended. “You want to have sex with our daughters?”

“I don’t care who they are related to. But wouldn’t you like to be a grandfather to a quad like me to ensure Russia remains free?”

Powerful families always bred with the most powerful quads, so he accepted the logic with a nod of his head. Soon, a few dozen ladies flew with him.

“Ivan, come with me to sign mutual defense pacts and trade agreements with the Europeans, Turks, and Persians. Yes, I know Turkey is in Europe, but nobody regards them as European. I need you to look them in the eye so they see how serious you are. You can’t smile, but you’ve mastered serious. Meanwhile, I’ll have the trainers organize those who can fly the highest so you can base units on top of the Ural Mountains. Together, we’ll form a wall against Mongol invasions.”

Now, for Billy, came the hard part—diplomacy. He couldn’t imagine dealing with clever rulers while concealing his identity. However, he knew he had to unite everyone before the euphoria of his victories wore off.

The month before, Free Europe had been on the cusp of kicking out the Empire when Jack’s video of the Baron dying on the Alps came out. His death took the heart out of the resistance.

Prussia’s Kaiser urged all Mongols in Europe to flee to his Holy Roman Empire because, without them, he was not only doomed—he was next. Millions loyal to

the Empire fled while they could. It was like Prussia was a sinkhole that sucked in the unwanted.

Then fifty thousand marathoners appeared out of nowhere and smashed the Prussian military with ruthless efficiency. First to go was the Berlin Flying Academy, which was organizing several hundred thousand quads from the rest of Europe.

The Red Baron visited the biggest population centers to tell them he'd sack any city where he found live Mongols. To survive, they must shoot every Mongol on sight. To explain his presence, he distributed videos summing up the Alps and Kiev. Ivan presented himself as the head of an independent Russia and the Scandinavian division commander said all of Scandinavia was behind the Baron.

Overnight, it seemed, everything turned upside down. The Kaiser, in a panic, offered to change sides, so the Baron demanded his government commit all its resources to eradicating the Mongol menace. Which many thought funny because the Kaiser's family had more Mongol blood than German.

Once he heard, Jack released an extended version of the video of the Baron's death, but this time, after Jack sobbed over the Baron's body, the "corpse" clearly said, "Jack, you cry like a girl." They hugged it out while bawling like kids after eating too much candy. "We pranked Genghis Khan!" the Baron yelled into the video wand. This recording spread even faster than the original.

Once again, the Baron shocked the world.

The possibility of the Baron alive in Prussia electrified the continent. Governments declared holidays and everyone who could fly, flew. Those who couldn't rode horses. Even the king of England made the trip, bringing the mothers of Billy's children to impregnate again. The few million pro-Mongol people who sought refuge in Prussia found several million anti-Mongols coming to kill them. The epic slaughter released a century of oppression that pundits called The Therapeutic War.

After their usefulness ended, Billy incited the locals to annihilate the royal family, starting with Barbarossa, the unpopular red-bearded Prussian Kaiser. The Holy Roman Emperor was older than even Genghis Khan. His unsuccessful wars against his neighbors led him to ally himself with the Mongols in the first place. Barbarossa thought the Mongols were helping him, only to realize later that he was helping the Mongols.

With the Kaiser's death, the Baron declared Europe free and every European government later made that their independence day. Every year all of Europe would celebrate liberty on the same day to cement their unity.

So many came to hear Billy's speeches that people got trampled. Kings demanded meetings. Bankers begged him for money. People climbed over each other for just a glimpse. Everyone wanted to touch him.

Billy couldn't wait to leave.

Only Jack had the credibility to organize democratic elections, rescuing Billy from months of politics.

But what really unnerved Billy were the videos recording the reactions to the Baron's death the month before. People would never forget the moment they heard the tragic news. Grown men fainted, others cried, while many simply fell apart. Riots broke out, flags were lowered, and suicides soared. When they discovered

Mongol troops celebrating, Free Europe units attacked enemies several times their size on their own. People on the street struggled for a better word since “hero” seemed so inadequate. Heroes come and go. The Baron pulled off miracles.

It made Billy feel like a total fraud.

Billy took his marathoners to Turkey to convince the Ottoman Empire to also declare independence, despite several generations of intermarriage with the Khan’s descendents. Rather than face extermination, they agreed. Billy reproduced with the royal family’s most powerful women and left trainers to upgrade the Turkish Air Force.

Unlike the Prussians, the Turks had long resisted the Mongols. In fact, their best sultan gathered a million man air force, only to be crushed by Tamerlane two centuries before in the largest battle in history. The current sultan, the Khan’s own great-grandson, happily declared his kingdom’s independence, urged his citizens to kill Mongols on sight, and ordered his military to cleanse itself of pro-Mongolian officers. To show his sincerity, he personally killed his mother, the Khan’s granddaughter, who ruled in his name and made his life a living hell.

Billy sent his force to seek out enemy units while he flew to Arabia. The Arab leaders got freedom, wands, and the prospect of offspring with the world’s most powerful quad. In return, all they had to do was loan the Baron several marathon battalions.

The Persian leadership, however, was more Mongolian than Persian, so Billy wiped it out and started a representative democracy.

Through cash, political support, military might, strategic reproduction, treaties, and trade agreements, Billy built an iron curtain west of the Mongol Empire. If warfare is politics by another means, then Billy just consolidated the victories paid for in blood on the battlefield.

His English family followed his growing armada and turned Bank of Mongolia branches into parts of Global Bank.

Europe declaring its independence inspired the Chinese to rebel from the island of Hainan, Indians from the island of Ceylon, and Koreans from Kanghwa Island, opposite Seoul. So Billy sent them wands, armor, and gold, plus videos of the Baron urging the Koreans, Chinese, and Indians to kill Mongols and take their stuff. Global Bank also sent teams to start branches there. Billy offered generous rewards for natives in the Mongol Air Force to switch sides. The Baron was famous for his generosity, and Billy would rather pay them than kill them.

Bear found Billy in Damascus, trying to teach the new government how to govern and wishing Jack would do it for him. There Bear regaled his friends on how he gave a thousand tons of gold to the rebels in Korea and China. As soon as the smugglers got away, Bear left news agencies a video of how the Great Khan funded his newest rebellions. Then he ran like hell to find safety with his friends. Billy had a video recorded of the two of them laughing at the Khan’s foolishness. Team Red pooled together a thousand insults to ridicule the Khan so that he never offered so much ever again.

Billy encouraged them to celebrate for as long as they wished. Only after satiating themselves with food, drink, and sex would they accept their next assignment. Meanwhile, Billy held a leadership meeting with just a dozen of his most trusted commanders.

"We're starting a new phase of the war. Send for Jim to impersonate me. He'll find red body armor waiting for him at Global Bank in Warsaw. I need Genghis to think the Red Baron leads you.

"Grandma, you have over fifty marathon battalions. Exterminate everyone in the Stans so that the Khan cannot re-supply there. You may find a million Mongols fleeing Europe, so kill them, too. Take as many Mongol lives and valuables as possible.

"Genghis will need months to field an armada that can take you on. Meanwhile, he'll position a blocking force to deter you from raiding east. Wait for me to bring the 1st Marathon Division to destroy them.

"Your raids will enrich your troops, so make them commit now to stay with you until the Khan enters the Stans. They're not gonna fight an armada when they have so much money to spend, so send them home and harass the Khan with the super-quads. Destroy the roads to slow him down. Moqali left millions of bombs near Kiev, so I asked Ivan to move them to the southern edge of the Ural Mountains for you. I want Genghis far from home for as long as possible."

His friends stared at him in stunned silence before Bear asked the obvious question: "Red, you want five thousand of us to take on Genghis Khan?"

"No. I want you to keep Genghis Khan far from home for as long as possible, while intercepting his communications with the homeland without jeopardizing your troops. To reward you, I'll start delivering thousands of super-suits to Global Bank in Kiev. You've all begged me for your own armor. This is what you must do to earn it."

Grandma asked the next obvious question. "What are you up to now, you devious bastard?"

Billy felt flattered. "It's so preposterous that you'd laugh in my face."

"Then I approve," Bear grandly declared.

"But how will we stop Genghis Khan from destroying Europe?" Grandma asked.

"Stop him?" Billy looked surprised. "I don't want you to stop him. In fact, I want all of Europe to know that Team Red cannot stop him. I need you to send the marathoners home so the Europeans know you cannot save them from Genghis Khan in a killer mood. I told Jack when he visited me on the Alps that I was sending Genghis to Europe. I even gave him a thousand tons of gold to prepare the Europeans."

Grandma needed a moment to take all this in. "You knew, before beating Jebe, that Genghis Khan was personally going to Europe?"

Billy shrugged. "Well, yeah."

"Just how far do you plan ahead, Red?"

"I must foresee a few years to pre-deploy supplies. My father explained what I must do a decade ago."

"You've known for a decade how to end our world war?"

"Not end it. How to win it."

"Why are you sending Genghis Khan to Europe?"

"One hundred new governments can't spring up overnight and just get along. Without a compelling reason, it'll take Europe a century and many wars to settle its borders, affairs, and policies. I can't wait that long. Since I believe in self-



representation, I cannot conquer Europe for its own good. Which is why I need Genghis.

"The only thing that can unite Europe is a credible enemy threatening to exterminate them all. Jack and I cannot prevent the Europeans from fighting each other. But Genghis Khan can."

## Chapter 55

His newest son climbed on Genghis Khan as if he were a tree, planting his baby feet in his face as he strived to lay his belly on the Khan's head. The Great Immortal, watching the Red Baron die in front of American Jack for the millionth time, hardly noticed. The sight of that sickly, emasculated corpse revived him like jumping in the freezing depths of Lake Baikal. His arch nemesis had more bone than meat. Genghis heard of the phrase "death warmed over," but had never seen it until now.

He laughed every time he saw Jack search frantically for a heartbeat. The Great Khan thought Jack stupid for recording the Baron's pale chest as it stopped rising. Now they couldn't even pretend he still lived. That damn Baron imposter led his assassination teams astray countless times. Only the layers of scars, the X branded into his chest, and Subodei's Millennial Wands convinced him. This was definitely the same guy who spent months on the Alps.

His enemy died. Jebe finally finished the Red Baron. His long nightmare was over. Genghis Khan had not felt this alive since he massacred his first city.

Then Hulagu flew in as if his clothes were on fire, yelling incoherently.

"Really, grandson, we do have doors."

"Have can you leave your windows open?" Hulagu demanded angrily. "You must weld them shut. He could have come in just as easily and gutted you like a fish."

"That's it! No more fermented milk for you."

His grandson studied him for a long moment. "You don't know." It didn't sound like a question, so Genghis didn't answer. Hulagu closed his eyes to search his wand for a memory. "The Baron somehow destroyed Moqali's entire force in Kiev. He even killed a million refugees. All of Europe has declared independence and the Stans are being overrun."

"What the hell are you talking about? The Red Baron died on the Alps."

Hulagu looked ready to cry. "No, grandpa. That's just what he wanted you to think. When I got the video from Kiev, I searched for the latest dispatches from the Alps, and there aren't any. Not even any messengers or survivors. We haven't heard from anyone on the Alps in a month."

"That's not possible!" Genghis screamed. "I just paid a thousand gold tons!"

Hulagu projected a 3D movie that started with a dark sky that gradually filled with growing dots. Genghis squinted to discern just what he was watching against the white ceiling. When one of the dots did that famous scream, the Great Khan jerked back like a horse kicked his forehead—that actually happened once. Unknowingly, he started mumbling to himself, not unlike Hulagu when he flew in.

When the warrior fell into the ditch, he continued recording, so they saw and heard it all: the incredible explosion, the blinding light, the pressure wave that knocked over entire huts. Hulagu opened another stick to project a second wand peeking over the rim. Tens of thousands of quads in the air, blasted hundreds of thousands of deaf, blind, and stunned Mongols on the ground. They acted more like cattle than warriors. The Khan was speechless, but his grandson was not.

“A veteran recorded this as he peed just before dawn. Falling into the sanitation trench saved his life. It took him a week to find someone who believed him. He arrived deaf and yelled so loudly that everyone thought he was crazy. So he pulled wands and almost got burned alive before he projected this video. They sent it here by the fastest couriers. The guy who transferred me a copy looked ready to vomit. I’ve sent marathoners to the Alps and to Kiev, but it’ll take a few weeks to travel there and back. In the meantime, we must assume the worst.”

“But he only had a thousand quads on the Alps!” Genghis protested, still in denial. “I just gave Jebe ten thousand marathoners! And we destroyed the reinforcements that American Jack brought him.”

Hulagu shrugged. He didn’t have any answers. Only lots of questions. “We need to do something about Europe. I couldn’t take those reports seriously until now. But if we lost Jebe’s airmen, after he stripped Europe of talent, then we could lose the entire region.”

“We’re not gonna lose Europe,” the Khan insisted. “Not after the price we paid.”

“If the Baron destroyed Moqali’s armada, then we’ve already lost Europe.”

The Great Immortal hugged his baby son, who giggled while playing with his beard. “Send our best men to assassinate the Red Baron and everyone he loves.”

Finally, Hulagu smiled.

Every passing week felt like a century. After three hundred years of success, Genghis Khan had never known so much bad news. He got more terrible reports than sleep, despite sucking wands like tits.

First came confirmation of the massacre on the Alps. They found over one hundred thousand Mongol corpses half buried in snow. How could not one person escape?

Kiev was even worse. The Russians threw three million naked corpses into a ravine, that had almost as many birds as bodies. The shrieking of a million birds was something Genghis would never forget.

Local news reports gave them their best information. The Baron somehow destroyed over a million quads with just fifty thousand marathoners. Genghis forced himself to watch every video. It felt like plucking out his own teeth. What seemed unanimous was that their side got destroyed, while the Baron suffered insignificant losses. Again.

Then came reports of everyone in Europe who looked Mongolian being killed on sight. Men shaved their beards and cut their hair to avoid getting shot.

Governors in northern India, Tibet, western Mongolia, and the Stans sent forces west—only to be crushed by the Baron leading a huge international team.

Genghis Khan couldn’t believe it—he lost Europe. Not taking Japan or Taiwan was one thing, but to lose an entire continent? And the more his government put the best face on recent events, the more credibility it lost with Mongols. What he

needed was a victory. A big victory. Even a symbolic one like the Baron's head on a spike. Oh, yeah, that'd help enormously.

It seemed like just several months ago that Tamerlane took his best marathoners to Spain. Wait! That was just several months ago.

He understood that many people hated him, but he had never hated anyone like he hated the Red Baron. And nothing would satisfy him until he could spit on the Baron's corpse.

## Chapter 56

Despite his reputation for fearlessness, births scared Billy because his own almost killed his parents. Watching a loved one scream in agony for hours—when he could do nothing to help—drove him crazy. He needed less stress, not more. He had long felt so burdened by the need to win the war that it was surprising he could get off the ground.

So, instead of returning to Princess before she gave birth, Billy flew to England and Ireland to impregnate the mothers again. Many of the English ladies wanted to meet their Irish counterparts, so he held a picnic party at one of his Irish estates. Puppies and kittens played with the thirty or so newborns among lush grass as the mothers gossiped.

Once Billy returned from the bank, one of the Irishwomen flew straight up and shrieked her wand really loud. It seemed so suspicious that Billy popped his wands and flew up after her. From distant woodlands, Billy saw five hundred quads race over a hill in attack formation. Billy would later learn they wanted to kill him to stop payroll for his battalion of relatives.

Billy had not been this scared since his mother died. To lose someone special was bad enough, but to lose fifty mothers and a few dozen innocent babies turned him into a berserker. Thankfully the English mothers left their babies at home. Although always angry inside, he had never let rage control him before, much less turn him into a homicidal lunatic. He hated being surprised, and so vented that hatred on these baby killers.

Billy blasted the traitor's head off to warn the other mothers and rose in an arc to use all four wands for blasting instead of stabilizing his flight. As he fell over the hill he did his famous scream while extending four flames to shock them with his identity. That's right, Billy whispered, you're facing the Red Baron!

They expected surprise, and boy did they get it. He saw their eyes widen as four-fireball volleys burned holes in their formation. Some rose to swordfight him while the rest slowed like cattle in a stampede approaching a cliff. Those behind—racing all out—slammed into those pissing themselves in fear.

Instead of approaching from all sides, they chose to hide in nearby woods. That got them closer, but it also bunched them up so they had nowhere to dodge his huge fireballs. At a minimum, a few loud quads attacking from the opposite side would have had the women looking over their shoulders.

For a long moment Billy faced more quads than he could track, and before he could finish those closest to him, he felt sharp blades stabbing deep. It didn't occur to Billy to wear body armor at a picnic. He spun like a cyclone to swat them from the sky and blasted so many with his boot wands that he gained altitude. The more powerful the wand, the less time it needs to "breathe" between shots, so Billy's fireballs flowed out like water from a hose.

Having fixed their position, Billy rose to the edge of their range. Their fireballs felt no worse than sitting too close to a bonfire. Shocked to see their leaders fall, the best rose up to swarm Billy. Expecting this, Billy over-flew them, which put their backs to his women. He deliberately made himself the target so the ladies could shoot them in the back. If he wasn't terrified to death, he'd have laughed as they slammed into each other, trying to reverse direction in mid-charge.

About half of the survivors attacked Billy while the rest chose to slaughter women and babies. The ladies formed a 25 X 25 meter vertical wall and fired at the charging Irishmen—something they could not have done if even one enemy attacked them from behind. Pausing their charge gave the ladies valuable time that the Matriarch put to maximum use.

Those chasing the Baron were too angry to change targets, so Billy lured them farther away to split them up. He flew up backwards to keep shooting at them. Blasting with his boot wands made his ascent unpredictable. This strung them out, separating the fastest from the slowest. He killed less than half of the few hundred chasing him when they stopping chasing him at all. Out-numbered over 100-to-1, the worst quads feared getting too close to the Baron. Billy was used to veterans—he knew how they think. These guys probably never killed a quad in their lives. The Baron fireballed their leaders—now they didn't know what to do.

So Billy attacked them. He descended, like in a swordfight on stairs, careful to not get within range of too many of them. Few of them had lethal fireballs beyond one hundred meters, so Billy didn't even bother to avoid the weaker blasts. The most terrified wouldn't even get within range, so the ambushers looked like a snake in the sky when they should have all enveloped him at once.

Billy realized he faced bullies rather than warriors by the expression on their faces. Billy couldn't afford to let them run so, instead of pressing his attack, he actually eased up. With just fifty left, Billy put himself in the middle, hoping they didn't rush him all at once. The closest died first, so most stayed away.

It was the most bizarre firefight Billy had ever been in. The enemy did everything wrong. He could shoot farther, yet fear kept them at the outer limit of their range. This felt more like practice than battle. Kids throwing rocks at him would have been more dangerous. Billy's challenge was killing them without scaring them into fleeing.

Then he realized they were waiting for his blood loss to knock him out. Surrounded by enemies, Billy frantically applied bandages to his worst wounds while avoiding fireballs.

He got down to a couple dozen when the ladies swarmed them. The ambushers threatened the babies of powerful mothers and so got what they deserved. When Emily approached, he basically fell into her arms.

"Kill them all," he whispered before losing consciousness. Billy couldn't afford any witnesses to his four flames. If just one of these Irishmen escaped, the world

would learn the identify of the Red Baron, and bounty hunters would kill his families for the Khan's gold.

The ladies weren't in the mood to take prisoners, so they fired down at the wounded desperately stumbling towards the nearest rock or ditch. It must be horrible, waiting to be burned alive, so the mothers slow-played it by taking turns rather than ending their enemies before their rage. The ambushers died screaming, their flesh literally cooking.

One of the Irishwomen returned after sunset with his battalion of Irish relatives. After collecting videos to document their identities, the Irish mothers led them across the island to avenge themselves on the friends, family, and supporters of the ambushers. To deter future attacks, they dropped the traitor's newborn on his head in front of the parents of the bitch who betrayed them, before slaughtering the entire family.

Billy woke up three days later, heavily bandaged, and as weak as the babies crawling on him. Emily, also wrapped like a mummy, snored beside him.

"Am I wearing a diaper?" he asked Susan. "You're ruining my fearsome reputation."

"We had some extras," Susan explained. "You had three life-threatening wounds and a dozen minor ones. They seemed to heal even as I treated them. Another week and they'll blend in with all the old ones."

"I recover quickly. I can probably survive anything as long as I keep my head."

"Must be nice." The Matriarch looked envious. "Your quick reaction saved us. We should all be dead."

"I assumed I was dead," Billy confessed. "I just wanted to take as many with me to avenge my babies."

"Our Irish sisters should have warned you this may happen," Susan answered. "Five paid for this mistake with their lives, plus two of my granddaughters. Most of us got hurt when they broke up our wall, and ten of the ladies have serious wounds. Luring so many away was brilliant on your part. They should have slaughtered us, then assassinated you later. Just imagine your reputation if people thought you abandoned your women and newborns. Instead of them, people would have called you a Baby Killer."

"I didn't enjoy killing the Irish like I enjoy killing Mongols. I have never killed anyone not pro-Mongolian before. Every time I kill a Mongol, I feel one less threat to my life. The more Mongols I kill, the safer I feel. In contrast, killing Irish felt necessary, but unpleasant. I didn't care for it at all."

Susan had an ugly scar across her face and a patch where her left eye used to be. "Emily fought like a lion. She must love you very much to throw away her life like that."

Billy's love for Emily was deep, but not intense like for Princess. And he sure didn't want to discuss his feelings with her great-grandmother.

"You lost an eye because of me."

"I lost an eye defending my family. I'd rather die fighting than let babies become orphans."

"Please have Richard double their monthly payments. Do they now know my other identity?"

Susan sighed. "I don't think so. The hill distorted your scream and the ladies ran out of mercy when one of the attackers said they planned to rape us and kill the babies. They may as well have kicked a cub in front of a bear. We ran down every one that fled."

"How vulnerable are we here?"

"The English mothers guard us while the Irish mothers hunt down the loved ones of those who tried to murder their babies. The press is calling this a Bitch Hunt. Nobody has ever seen so many women in a killer mood, with the capacity to act out their revenge. We've actually lost more mothers since the battle than in the battle. Usually the Irish fight between families, tribes, or kingdoms, but this time everything is confused. You should know that they have been killing the children of the ambushers on sight, which is triggering bloody payback. This could start a war that no one wins."

"Tell the Irish mothers I want to meet them in England, then find a way to keep them there. The angriest will continue until they're killed, but we can save the rest."

The rebels not only lost the battle, but the war. Their surprise attack on mothers and newborns horrified Ireland, forcing even those who agitated for the old ways to denounce the ambushers for fear of being associated with Baby Killers. It didn't help that five hundred men couldn't defeat fifty women. Anyone who opposed the new democratic government was called a Baby Killer, regardless of its veracity.

Billy needed his family to enforce the peace, so he founded a parent company that bought land and started businesses, and a political party that'd institutionalize his vision of a representative democracy.

In particular, Billy bought uninhabited islands off Ireland and England so he could have somewhere to hide. He had houses built, wells dug, and gold buried.

Just in case.

## Chapter 57

By the time he found Princess, she had already given birth to a beautiful baby and was eager to start another. What surprised him was how much Princess looked like a new woman. Her short hair and scarred neck made her appear older, with a harder beauty. No one would mistake her for a girl now. Knowing she would scrutinize his reaction, Billy greeted her like nothing had changed and swept her off to the bedroom.

"Wow," she said afterwards. "You really missed me!"

"Just wait until I'm rested," he warned her.

"Blade, Diva, Mali, and a few dozen other mothers have been waiting nearby to get pregnant again. You haven't been going without, have you?" she asked sternly.

"No, your majesty. Your prized stud has been rotating them as you arranged."

Princess never told Billy this, but she didn't expect either of them to live long. Few who lead forces against the Empire last long. Her parents sure didn't.

Princess bonded with the other mothers and made them vow that the survivors would take care of the orphans.

Some of those pregnant quads, and those hoping to get pregnant, now served as their bodyguards, babysitters, and midwives. This killed several birds with one blast. Princess listened in horror as Billy told her what happened in Ireland.

"Are you still gonna marry me?" Princess asked, afraid the ambush changed his mind.

"Not even Genghis Khan could stop me."

What he didn't pick up is that Princess wanted them to get married. Like, now. She thought he was two years older, and thus of age, but a wedding never crossed his mind because he was just turning sixteen.

Unfortunately, while Billy left the war, the war found him within just a week.

Late at night, Princess got up again to nurse the crying baby, singing softly to put the beauty to sleep. She opened the patio door overlooking a canal to catch a breeze. Often she'd pace on the patio late at night until baby Elizabeth fell asleep.

But good thing she didn't because she clearly heard her bedroom door shut and lock. Alarmed, she left Elizabeth on the floor and ran while taking out her wands. She blasted the door lock and extended steel.

Princess burst through the door as it swung off its hinges and she impaled a beautiful pregnant super-quad they called Blondie right through the gut. Blondie, with both wands drawn, looked like she was searching for his heart or throat to finish Billy off without waking him.

He sure woke up now, as Princess levitated Blonde into the ceiling. By the time she hit the floor with a loud thud, they both sliced her arms because one blast would signal the enemy to attack. Billy kicked the traitor in the face, then sent electricity into her head. Princess ignited the fireplace to signal for help while calling the others:

"Southie, Unibrow, Babysitter—wake up!" she yelled downstairs. "Squinty, Sunshine, Smiley." She couldn't remember what the last one called herself. Something long and hard to pronounce. "Dumbass! Stay with the babies in the basement."

"Why?" Billy asked the assassin. "You're six months pregnant. You were about to get a ton of gold and the offspring of the Red Baron. Why kill the father of your child?"

"The Mongols took my entire family, including my other children," Blondie explained unapologetically. "A bastard named Stinky from my village sold me out. He made me volunteer as a midwife." She turned to Billy. "Sorry, Red. It was nothing personal."

"How many are out there?" Billy demanded. "And what signal are they waiting for?"

"A lot. I have to give a thumbs up when I leave, then fly north. Oh, and whoever is on guard duty is probably dead."

That'd be Ivan's favorite granddaughter. They called her Bones because she was so skinny. Her growing belly was bigger than her chest.

"Who's behind this?" Billy asked.

"Ask Stinky. He must be out there because he doesn't get paid unless I deliver. Please don't kill me until I give birth. Think of our baby!"

Billy stepped on her bleeding belly to let her know what he thought of that. "I must document the deaths of everyone you love to deter future attempts on my life."

Just as Blondie started to warn those outside, Princess bashed in her head to minimize bloodshed.

"Put her clothes on over your armor," Billy told Sunshine, a really fast blond who could pass for Blondie. "Go out the back door, give a thumbs up, then fly north. Once they follow you, we'll hit them from behind. Does anyone know what Stinky looks like?"

Unibrow raised her hand. "I do. We voted him ugliest in the battalion, a contest which had a lot of competition. He always wanted Blondie, but she had plenty of better offers than that pig."

Billy covertly watched the ever-cheerful Sunshine fly north. One hundred quads from around their house quickly followed. He caught up to cut the slowest Mongols. Sunshine's speed made them follow as fast as they could, but some inevitably flew faster than others, stringing them out. After several free kills, the next quad suddenly turned, shot at him, then banked away at maximum speed. Billy fired into the backs of the next quads, waved Princess onward, and chased him, soon spitting him like a roasted pig near the Piazza San Marco.

He didn't need to ask who they were, though. Under their deel overcoats he recognized the uniform of the Kashik, the imperial guard who gang-raped his mother. Since Genghis wanted him to know who was after him, Billy resolved to rape someone that Genghis really cared about.

Preferably female.

Sunshine sped east into the Adriatic to put their backs to her team. Billy sought cloud cover since he had time before the rest of his team overtook the enemy. And there were a lot of them. Maybe too many.

So the sight of the other mothers shocked the Mongols almost as much as Billy. Blade, Champa, Diva, Mali, and others pounced on the tail of the Mongol threat like mothers protecting their newborns. The Mongols had to break off three squads just to deal with their fury.

Just as Princess attacked, Billy dived. His ladies carved up a few each before one of their wounded fired back, warning the others. Billy now fired four wands into those who had their backs to him, burning several. Those in the front continued after Sunshine while the back half turned to fight him. With Billy a few hundred meters above his team, the enemy had to split again to meet both threats, while absorbing losses. The two dozen who rose to meet Billy had to fly into four wands pouring fireballs at them. Billy crossed over them at full speed, then dived upside down to attack before they could reposition themselves.

With much of the city watching, the ladies attacked in a line, like a ship firing broadside, concentrating fire on those closest to them. As the two groups closed, one of the pregnant ladies fell from the sky. Princess, at the center, spent an minute dodging heavy fire before finishing off the last two with long swords. The years she spent dueling paid off since her victims assumed they were out of range.

Sunshine had circled around and skimmed the Grand Canal to keep them focused on her rather than the sky behind them. The ladies dived and Sunshine banked towards them at the perfect moment for them to strike the enemy.



Sunshine executed an upward U-turn and popped the two Mongols closest to her before a blast from a third sent her spiraling in a burning ball into the water.

Billy just lost his fourth unborn baby. And he really like Sunshine. She had a smile that sucked the poison out of him.

Another ten, apparently flying a patrol, dived at Billy, so he flew past his ladies. The Mongols could either attack the ladies or show their backs to them. With just a split second to decide, they split up evenly. Princess led her ladies straight up to take them out of the Mongol's arc, while Billy let them come out of their dive, then rose sharply after slowing their momentum. He knew he could out-fly them, so used his superior speed to position himself above them to fire all wands in a controlled fall. Worried about his ladies, he even took a weak blast from the last survivor, using one wand to shield him while the other spliced the guy's guts open.

The mothers positioned themselves faster than the Mongols. Just before the two groups flew within range, Billy screamed to make the enemy turn and look. Hundreds of Venetians below recorded it. The ladies exploited the opportunity to wipe them out over the island of San Giorgio Maggiore.

"Find Stinky and our missing ladies," he yelled before he searched for someone to torture. While Smiley carried Sunshine back to the house, Princess raced back to find Bones with her head cracked open and her facial expression full of pain. She recorded it to show her grandfather, who'd seek revenge. Blade and the others turned up, ready for blood. Diva had knocked Stinky unconscious and carried him on her shoulder for the longest night of his life. Mali alone looked eager for more.

Billy, meanwhile, electrocuted the genitals of the surviving enemy until he learned who sent them: Hulagu, the Khan's favorite grandson.

"I'll kill him," Billy vowed, his whole body tingling with rage.

## **Chapter 58**

Billy reached the Mongol capital, pre-paid a room for a month, then filled several backpacks with food to hide outside the city.

He cursed his predictability. That's how he got his mother killed. They should have left Venice as soon as he landed. His mistake burned him like a fireball. The need to lash out at his enemies drove him like a bull seeing red.

The Khan hated buildings and famously never stayed in one long. Since the Americans destroyed the sira-ordo (Golden Residence), his famous "felt palace," one hundred thousand quads guarded it and the capital. This was the core of the Khan's rapid reaction force to counter the American raiders. But they couldn't deter one lone flier.

After a good night's sleep, it took him all morning to find his next target. Billy shrieked a greeting before landing in the huge rural estate. "We got him!" he yelled excitedly, holding up a box while pocketing his hand wands to appear non-threatening—now would be a terrible time to get blasted by accident. "The Red Baron is a dead baron."

A dozen quads stood outside drinking. Buddies instead of guards, one of them shouted for Hulagu like an old friend. The conqueror of Persia and Arabia emerged from the mansion with a drink in his hand to see what everyone was yelling about.

"What the hell is that stench?" he demanded.

Billy held up the box. "Proof! The Red Baron is now deathly white!"

Hulagu took in Billy's imperial uniform, the size of the box, then yelled in joy. As the men gathered around, Billy set down the box and took off the top for Hulagu. The Khan's grandson reached in past the melting snow and pulled out a head by the hair, examining it closely. Everyone focused on the face, so Billy sidestepped to position himself while launching his wands. He impaled the closest with his boot wands and the rest with his hand wands. It ended without a single blast.

"Yes," Billy told Hulagu, his intestines falling between his fingers. "I'm the Red Baron. And now I'm gonna rape your women and kill your children. Or was it the other way around?"

Nobody came out of the house, so Billy transferred wands according to how soon they'd die—what veterans call "wand triage." He only had two sets left when a boy his age stepped outside, screamed, and drew wand. Billy thrust a steel rod through his chest from twenty meters away—the look on the kid's face was priceless.

Billy flew into the mansion and found several adults and children running towards him. His fireballs engulfed them and set the home on fire. Someone shot at him from behind a door, so he thrust a blade with such force that it penetrated the wood and pierced the guy through the gut.

He flew outside and shot at two women getting out. A beautiful lady carrying an infant flew out, but he easily swallowed them in a fireball, thinking of the four unborn babies he lost. Another woman fled in the opposite direction, but he quickly overtook her as well.

Two women and five teenagers blew open a wall and escaped the inferno, but not Billy. He surprised them as they took off their burning clothes. Their numbers didn't win the fight, despite their obvious wand power. An older lady took longer to kill than the rest of them combined, despite her hair on fire, so he transferred her wands as she bled to death. He stopped her cursing by kicking in her teeth, then flayed her alive once he recognized her.

His fury not yet satiated, Billy beheaded them all and had them face the same way in the vegetable garden. He packed Hulagu's head in the box and added snow on the way to the Khan's tent city.

One day before his 16th birthday, Billy wished he waited until tomorrow. As he descended, he recorded himself: "Either Genghis Khan or I will die today." He turned his wand to show thousands of troops turning to look up at him before pointing the wand back to his face. "Maybe I should have given this more thought." His voice trembled with doubt. "Papa, sorry if I fail you. Mama, maybe I'll see you soon."

Instead of greeting unobtrusively, he emphasized his presence to attract the guards. As soon as he landed, he yelled out the good news: they finally got the Baron! Hundreds of guards cheered him on as he held up the box that he said contained the Baron's head. They all escorted him in, only for Empress Borte to

inform Billy that the Immortal was unavailable. Apparently the old man was in another of his killer moods.

Well, that screwed everything up. Billy was hoping to end this whole thing today. Even if it killed him.

“Would you like it see it, Empress?” Billy asked, placing the box on the ground. They only let him get within thirty meters of her. Everyone gathered around excitedly. The Empress couldn’t refuse. The head of security, at a gesture from her, reached inside to pull out a severed head.

With everyone’s eyes on Hulagu, Billy flew over them to plunge a blade into Borte’s gut from twenty meters away. His shoulder knocked the wind out of her as she collapsed on him without his feet ever touching the ground. His momentum carried him far into the giant tent. He frantically searched for his nemesis.

“Genghis! I’m gonna rape her!”

Having run out of time, he burned a hole in the ceiling and flew through it. He popped up over the camp and fired at every tent within range.

Alarms beget other alarms. With thousands rising towards him, he showed them his primal scream, burned four wands, then shot at more tents that he drifted over.

As soon as the alarms sounded, his guards covered Genghis Khan in shields and carried him to a nearby steel room that they used as a bomb shelter. Somebody shouted that the Red Baron was attacking and Genghis pushed aside a great-grandson guarding an arrow slit to look up at the Baron shooting fireballs at his royal palace. As thousands rose, so did hope that they’d capture him. Oh, would that be satisfying! To get his hands on the guy who made him suffer so much. Then his heart sank when he heard the powerful scream and the four burning wands -- much longer than the last time he saw them in person. He must have fought a million times, Genghis whispered under his breath, to power wands that much. He must be ancient!

They won't catch him, Genghis sadly realized. Which is why the arrogant bastard took the time to show off while elite troops chased him. The arrogant pig certainly recorded the royal tent city burning for the propaganda.

What the hell is he carrying? Genghis felt his soul shrivel up. Somebody pointed to the incoming balls of fire, but Genghis shrugged off their hands, watching them strike where he slept a moment ago.

Some days he really felt his age.

He heard someone yell that the Baron took the Empress and ran to see for himself. He questioned a stunned guard who cried out, “When she said you were unavailable, he just took her. He said he was gonna rape her.”

She had already been raped for several months, as a teenager, because Genghis married her. His father kidnapped his mother, making Genghis the result of a rape. His mother’s tribe got their revenge on the son by raping his wife until impregnating her. Genghis loved his wife so much that he treated the son of this kidnapping as his own.

The Great Khan promised her that it’d never happen again. So to have her taken from him while in her own palace—to be raped at over three and a half centuries old—was intolerable.

"I'll never see her again," the Great Khan whispered out loud, the tone of his voice melting in pain. And with Borte he lost his backup Millennial Wands. No one had any idea how many good Mongols he had to kill to get his Millennials back.

The enormity of losing the love of his life struck him down. He collapsed, hardly able to breathe. Denial and reality fought, neither winning, yet neither losing. Much later, one of her maids would show him the video so he could see for himself. Among hundreds of the world's best quads, the Red Bully kidnapped his wife.

What kind of man has the balls to waltz into the enemy's den and, surrounded by lions, take the mother of the pride? Who could conceive of such a thing, much less get away with it? The Great Immortal shuddered at the thought of defeating such a man.

Genghis was now on the receiving end of the implacable rage that he inspired in so many others. For him, war was total. If his men caught the Baron's wife, he knew what they'd do to her. They'd kill any kids they caught. That's just how things had to be. The Baron showed he played by Mongol rules. And reminded Genghis that he faced a Mongol. A really great Mongol.

His four legitimate sons—drunks all—died centuries ago. Then most of his grandchildren. He now outlived everyone who knew him before he ever touched a wand. While everyone held up Genghis as the oldest Mongol alive, he failed to point out that Borte was actually a year older. Women hate to be reminded of their age and, really, she didn't look more than seventy.

Of course, keeping her alive meant she had to kill and drain the wands of hundreds of imprisoned quads a year, but slaying tens of thousands of jailbirds over three centuries seemed a small price to pay for immortality. In fact, Genghis saw everything as worth the price of immortality.

Long after he scared the doctors, healers, and shamans away, Genghis finally noticed the box stinking up what was left of the burning tent.

"What the hell is that?"

A guard held up the head so the Khan could see Hulagu's face. Genghis grabbed his chest at the sight of his favorite grandson. "Why couldn't it be that fat bastard, Kublai?" was his first reaction. Something that his last legitimate grandson would intensely resent.

Genghis flew to his grandson's estate. There he found Hulagu's dead family and still smoking home. He counted 27 heads among the tomatoes, including the Imperial Guard commander. When one head moved he almost wet himself, but it was only a rabbit, going after another carrot. It looked either spooky or comical. Genghis had no doubt that all the world would soon see what he looked at now. Mongols would shudder while everyone else would applaud. If nothing else, this one image would turn the Baron into a near-holy hero to Arabs and Persians. Neither had yet recouped the populations they enjoyed before Hulagu decimated them two centuries ago.

Genghis found that he could identify every single frozen face. All twenty-seven. How could one guy defeat so many? Hulagu's assassination team must have killed someone the Baron loved for him to risk his life like this. It looked like Hulagu's mother died the hardest, given that he took the time to skin her alive. Genghis made his drunkest son marry her because she was the best female dueler of her

day. Ugly as scorched earth, but among the best duelers he had ever seen. Yet, judging by the position of the bodies, the Baron apparently beat her and several others at the same time.

Genghis Khan had never felt out-classed before. Unable to think and too able to feel, the Immortal walked the grassy steppe until late at night, nursing his vengeance til his fingers cramped.

## Chapter 59

Billy lost them in the clouds and landed in a wooded ravine where he had left blankets and food, since he could not afford to light a campfire.

He examined the empress. Gut wounds can take hours to kill. He transferred the Millennial Wands as blood loss slowly took her. Given his rage, rape was the last thing he was capable of.

"You're just a boy," she said surprised.

He opened his eyes to see her watching him. He had taken off his helmet and the cloth that kept the helmet from digging too much into his scalp. How odd that the Empress Borte would know his face before almost everyone else.

"Tomorrow I turn 16."

"I know you."

"You knew me eight years ago in Peking as the Boy Wonder."

The empress grew angry. "I cried at your funeral. Genghis gave a beautiful speech."

"Well, that makes up for him killing thousands of members of my family." He started recording their conversation in case anything good came of it.

"I can't believe you tried killing him in his own tent. He must have hurt someone close to you."

"He had my mother gang-raped and his personal bodyguards killed four of my unborn babies."

She nodded her head in sympathy. "War is such a terrible thing. Will you be the one who stops him?"

"To stop this never-ending global war, I'll kill everyone who fights for the Mongol Empire. No one who practices genocide as public policy should control all of humanity."

"I wish this war ended centuries ago."

That pissed him off. "You've killed thousands of quads to live so long, so you're not innocent. You could have saved one hundred million lives by simply cutting his throat in his sleep."

"I loved him too much."

Billy had not anticipated liking her. He felt his rage melt as her breathing grew ragged, patiently recording her last hour alive. His father would have approved of how well she died. Many who live strong, die weak. Literally the last thing that anyone can do in life is die well.

"I'm gonna behead you and feed your body to the wolves. I'll then collect their excrement. After I turn the Mongol empress into crap, I'll turn the Mongol Empire into shit."

The most powerful woman in the world used her dying breath to get the last word: "You must be in more pain than I am."

Billy desperately wanted to hate her guts, but couldn't find it in him. Instead, he remembered how kind she was to him as the Boy Wonder in Peking as her Millennials warmed his hands.

Camping alone relaxed him. Even with a million Mongols searching for him. Since coming out as the Red Baron, he constantly worried about being killed in his sleep. The super-quads he trusted the most guarded him while he slept and he only ate food he knew could not be poisoned. Billy tried to get to know those who joined his team—they assumed because he was such a good leader, but self-preservation motivated Billy. Those recruits who inspired doubts he paired with quads of proven loyalty. Despite the cold, lack of shelter, and terrible food, he didn't have to worry about assassination when camping alone.

Being alone also let him do stuff that he couldn't do with others around. He often needed help sleeping, so he projected videos of his ancestors on his father's side, beginning with a short clip of American Jack looking very different. Generation by generation they passed. His father recorded all that he knew about them, especially how they died. None had ever passed away from old age. He liked his father's parents very much and wished he could have known them. His father's beaming face reminded him why the world's richest kid endured so much suffering. Then he got to his mama.

Billy had compiled a best-of video—a thousand short clips that defined how he remembered her. Where they went, things they did, battles they fought. The last clip was his favorite, from when he was just three years old. Mama sang a nursery rhyme to help him sleep because he had nightmares of the boogeyman. Her smiling face, soothing voice, and beautiful eyes imprinted on him like a baby duck.

Billy woke up next to the dead empress. He carried her to where they least expected him: the nearby capital. He found his room just as he left it and got to work.

He spent a few days killing hundreds of quads in the street or in stores. He'd enter a tavern or the mayor's office or the police station and slaughter everyone.

But it was the empress who gave away his location. Her stench brought the manager, who pounded on his door. Billy stabbed the guy right through the door, and left a video wand so the world would know how well she died.

He flew out the window to the local military base, slew the guards, then the few remaining administrative officers, logistical air mules, and the ill. Everyone else, apparently, was out scouring the vast steppe for him. He took their wands and money before burning the place.

Sex can be better than battle, but battle lasts so much longer. And while nothing beats the moment of orgasm, nothing compares to taking a human life. Especially the lives of those he hated.

Billy fought a disorganized enemy all night. He disappeared before dawn to take a nap fifteen minutes away, before starting up again around noon. He could tell they found the empress by how well organized they became. They tried to swarm

him, so Billy had to fly high enough to fight only a dozen at a time. Furious at the death of their beloved empress, they continued flying up to him, but could not overwhelm him at that height. He disappeared in the dark to eat and nap, then returned after midnight to ambush the patrols. Rapid reaction units chased him, but could not catch him, so he fireballed everything flammable.

Billy repeated this for two more days before a shrieking alarm captured everyone's attention. He flew higher to see a looming shadow on the horizon. That was Genghis Khan, so Billy left, having delivered his message.

Hulagu's last daughter—already an old lady—held out a video wand as soon as the Khan reached the hotel entrance. He watched it in silence as he stormed up the stairs and burst into the room. There, in the bathroom, lay his wife in the tub, covered in snow.

"This is how they found her," his great-granddaughter explained. "Her clothes had not been removed and I could not see any violence other than the stomach wound." She paused dramatically. "Um, he put a pillow under her head and covered the rest of her in a blanket. She looked like she was napping. I don't understand why that monster didn't do any of the terrible things that he threatened. Instead, he returned her body, at great risk, instead of beheading her and feeding her body to the wolves."

Genghis had no answer to that. He couldn't figure this guy out. If he understood the Baron, he'd have killed him long ago. Which was, in part, why Billy did it: to mess with his head, to get under his skin, and to inflame his emotions.

The funny part was, Genghis didn't even know yet that he was going to Europe.

## Chapter 60

Few people appreciate just how vast Siberia is. Although larger than Europe, now fewer civilians lived there than Peking, so Billy had to figure out an easier way to find his Americans.

So when he came across a Mongol division, he killed a sentry and put on his uniform as they settled in for the night. It was a mixed unit, half filled with two-wanders as scouts, sentries, and communications. The battalions formed a skirmish line across one hundred kilometers facing south.

They're looking for me, Billy realized. The Empire had ten times as many two-wanders as quads. Having lost several million quads recently, Genghis had little choice but to utilize his available resources. Two-wanders can't fly as fast or as far, but they can shriek their wands just as loud. The commander would simply rotate them twice as often to keep his quads well rested.

After dinner and a refreshing nap, Billy noticed sleeping Mongols as far as the eye could see. Because it had few trees and less shade, the steppe resembled a grassy ocean that never seemed to end. It was why the Mongols worshiped Father Sky and Mother Earth, since they both seemed infinite, powerful, and capricious. Billy walked through the quad companies, stabbing as he went.

He didn't need to kill them, either. He could simply cut deep into an arm or leg so they could no longer operate four wands. Better yet, they'd forever burden their families.

But he had to walk quickly in case one got off a shot at him. Most of them yelled, so Billy tried to get out of their line of sight before they shot him. Such were the advantages of twenty-meter long blades. Whenever someone fired, he just flew ahead to lose them in the dark. After all, he had several hours to kill. Stabbing sleeping quads certainly beat fighting them in the air when they shot back.

He heard someone shooting at him from his right, so he headed in the opposite direction. A squad flew close, so he dropped to the ground and pretended to sleep until they passed by. More and more quads now looked for whoever was stabbing their buddies, so he flew away to start with a fresh battalion.

He again got lucky by surprising the night watch. Things went well for another hour before a wounded company commander got his men looking for him, so he fled again to the next unit.

All too soon, however, someone shot him in the back. He dived to one side as soon as he heard the blast, but they fired at close range and burned his stolen armor. Laying on his belly in the grass, he used his boot wands to propel himself down a gentle slope while his hand wands helped him avoid obstacles. A fallen branch still smacked him in the face. Once out of sight, he started again.

He cut deep into a commander's bicep and the bastard's wand shrieked "attack." Billy popped up and flew away as dozens of blasts sought him out. He maneuvered through some trees and over a hill, until he lost them between camps. He landed in a secluded pocket and hid under bushes until they looked for him elsewhere.

The meat he saved tasted delicious. After resting, he found the next camp too awake, so he flew around it.

And found the bomber battalion. They wore different uniforms, so he changed clothes with a two-wander guard who didn't challenge him until too late. Sleeping next to a bomb is nerve-racking; sleeping near a thousand even more so.

His guard uniform allowed him to walk around the camp. Bombers spread out more than other units, so he had to locate the quads closest to the munitions. He wouldn't have much time—he could see a dozen sentries flying above, and many more patrolled farther out.

Billy played the part of the bored security guard as he cut quads. Inevitably, one caught him. The veteran must have been awake while faking sleep because Billy had not even gotten to him yet. He let Billy slice several quads until Billy showed him his back, then fired at point blank range. Billy hugged the grass as soon as he heard the blast, and rolled away from the shooter as soon as the fireball scorched his back armor.

The teenager used his boot wands to slide across the grass until he could behead the cunning bastard. Desperate, he ran to slash everyone getting up. With the whole camp waking, Billy levitated munition packs to throw them at dense clusters of quads while he blasted threats too close to bomb. Troops launched high in the air under the logical assumption they were being bombed from high altitude. Billy knew he only had seconds, so made each one count. When the sky



started raining fireballs at him, he wisely escaped, close to the ground to use the terrain to conceal himself.

The division stretched out east-to-west, so he made himself visible flying south. Once the battalion committed itself to chasing him, he reached maximum speed, then soared up as soon as he believed they couldn't track him in the dark.

Billy slowed his breathing to reach his ceiling. The fliers below him looked like ants crawling south as he raced north. They must inform the general in command, so he ambushed the one Mongol flying east and put on his messenger insignia. When a sentry flashed a challenge, Billy flamed the code that he saw other messengers give.

The general must have the tent with all the guards, so he shrieked a greeting and landed well away from them. To avoid questions, he played the video that he took from the messenger. The bomber commander recounted the attack and warned that the Red Baron may be near—which almost made Billy giggle. A guard went inside and, a moment later, waved him in. Two guards followed. Both the division and the battalion commander were just getting out of bed.

Billy didn't recognize the general, although the battalion commander looked like a younger, slimmer version, so he couldn't address him by name. Instead he projected the video again while positioning himself so his targets lined up.

"I've never seen a video that large," the general remarked, surprised.

Oh, crap! Billy didn't dial down his wand power and the head of security was already drawing wand. Billy continued with the video to keep some eyes focused on that, projected steel through three of his victims, while kicking up his leg at the security leader, who looked puzzled until a sword from the boot wand poked a hole in his chest. All those stretching exercises his father made him do finally paid off!

Billy quickly finished them, but the guards outside must have heard something, so Billy crouched down behind a shield to cut them down as they charged in.

With a moment's peace, he transferred wands while eyeing the locked chests. The heavier one must contain the division's petty cash and the others probably organized the administrative paperwork—a big military unit fills out lots of forms. The treasure chest was designed to fit within a big backpack. Although Billy certainly didn't need the money, the idea of depriving the enemy of gold appealed to him.

No sooner did he heft the pack onto his back than two more troopers entered. Billy got them both, but more warriors outside started shooting in, igniting the tent. If they took another heartbeat to aim, they'd have killed him. Billy sure didn't want to fight when loaded down with a few hundred kilos, so he burned a hole in the ceiling when the sight of the other chests caught his eye. It only took a second, so he torched them before launching, laughing to himself. He knew better than most the hours that went into keeping paperwork current—who got paid, who was out wounded, who deserved bonuses, who got penalized for drinking, etc. It's why he had Grandma do it. He just gave the staff pukes an administrative nightmare, and all warriors in all militaries hated bureaucrats.

Billy knew he took his ridiculous speed for granted when he needed all four wands just to open the range between the hundreds of quads chasing him. He couldn't even shoot at them without letting them catch up, and he could have blasted so many of them. The gold acted like an anchor on his humility.

Billy rose to the south, then hit his ceiling far too early. Appalled, he realized the weight made him need more oxygen, which meant he couldn't rise above the fanatics trying to blast him to hell. He had often wondered how it felt to get hit in the face with a fireball, then tumble out of control to earth, screaming as the flames burned his lungs, coughing up smoke. He searched for cover and didn't see a cloud in the sky.

He only flew south to misdirect them. Now he sped north. Only a few dozen of the fastest quads were high enough to track him. He tried to clear his head to focus, but the previous fighting had tired him out. If he only took half the gold, he'd have escaped. The irony of exhausting himself before battle, instead of the enemy, hit him like an angry wife. Yet he could not afford to take the time to cut off his backpack. The prospect of greed killing the world's biggest philanthropist dizzied him.

Billy dived to increase speed. Something about the terrain caught his eye. It took him an eternity to realize what it was: if I was an American, that wooded ridge is where I'd hide. He needed to lose the backpack anyways, so he changed course, pulled up in an arc, and wiggled loose the albatross on his back while tumbling head over heels in an uncontrolled fall.

He righted himself in time to not splatter on the bounders below -- unlike the chest full of gold. With the weight off his mind, as well as his shoulders, he popped up to greet his pursuers, flashing his wands and venting his fearsome scream.

Billy watched them watch him, then check out the coins that glittered below them. His momentum kept him flying north, although he flew backwards at half speed.

"Go for the gold," he whispered urgently. "You don't want the Red Baron."

Apparently they disagreed. Their leader signaled them to form up. About thirty total, Billy guessed.

Now, normally Billy wouldn't hesitate to engage so few enemies, but these guys knew who he was, and still wanted to fight. His dad hated fighting enemies who wanted to fight because it was so much easier to kill enemies when they didn't want to fight. These guys had calculated the odds, and still wanted to engage the dreaded Red Baron.

Which meant Billy needed to run.

"The enemy only wants to fight when they think they'll win," his father had taught him. "Knowing nothing else, you can safely assume that you don't want to fight when the enemy expects to win. If you don't have a clever trick up your sleeve, it's because they do."

That's when the obvious hit him: Genghis must have given every division a company of super-quads assigned to kill him. And not mercenaries, either, but fierce Mongols out for revenge. Well, now he really didn't want to fight these guys—they had scores to settle with him.

Until a shadow rose behind them. Or perhaps ten shadows. From the rocky woods where he splattered the coins.

Billy flew lower and slower to lure the enemy down. The shadows timed it carefully. Just as the Mongols positioned themselves to fire on Billy, the strangers struck silently like flying ninjas. They only needed to wound, and they could injure more with steel than blasts. The unluckiest got cut twice.

For his part, Billy fell back-first shooting to make noise, keep their attention, and to look like an easy target. The Mongols could either track his impossibly fast fireballs, or they could avoid the guys slicing them up. But not both.

After a few confused seconds, the enemy chose to fight the guys on their backs, so Billy flew up to take his turn, hitting them from behind. Everyone drew steel, which suited Billy just fine since he had twice the length. The Americans had backed away as soon as the few Mongol survivors turned on them, and Billy expertly swatted them from the skies.

One American dropped like a sack of rice, and another flailed like a duck. Billy dived to scoop her up before she fell among the injured Mongols. Her arm bled badly and she lost her grip on her wand. Billy dressed her wound as soon as they landed, while the others blasted the enemy and transferred their super-wands before the burnt assassins stopped screaming.

"You guys!" she yelled. "The Red Baron saved my life. Record him putting on my bandages. My dad is gonna piss himself."

Once recording, Billy gave his own version of the "battle" that emphasized how she and her squad saved his life. Then he dropped the bad news:

"You won't heal soon enough to go raiding with us, so you'll need to make your own way to one of the coastal rendezvous points as best as you can."

The problem with fighting several thousand clicks in enemy territory is any illness or injury could prove fatal. Landing too hard could sprain an ankle; a fever that keeps a quad on the ground; even diarrhea, which happens all too often from drinking dirty water.

Billy turned to the rest of the squad. "Your fallen comrade will be covered by the Death Benefits Fund I gave the University, but you guys can't keep up with me when weighted down with a few hundred kilos." He turned to the wounded marathoner: "How much gold can you carry once you get better?"

She couldn't stop laughing long enough to answer. By the look in her eyes, he could tell he'd be sleeping with her that night. He may have the body of a roasted rabbit, but everyone wanted powerful children.

What bothered him is how much she looked like Princess. Not as beautiful, of course, but they had the same dark eyes, skin, and hair. It didn't make him want to have sex with her any more or any less, but it made him miss his wife so much it almost brought him to tears. They had so little time together before he had to leave to kill the guy who murdered his babies.

Their tactical situation was so unsurprising that it surprised Billy that he had not anticipated it. Of course, he had other things on his mind this past year.

Eleven American battalions snuck in a year ago. They waited for a storm to conceal their crossing, rather than contest the Bering Strait. All eager for another summer of profitable raiding, they instead never even reached Mongolia.

Genghis hid sentries on every mountaintop, and a division every thousand kilometers. Dividing Siberia into areas of responsibility made those generals study their territory in detail. They hid squads, companies, and battalions according to the size of whatever concealed them, and instructed those units to inform others and/or attack on their own. The Khan came up with so many divisions by filling half of them with two-wanders, who could spy, scout, and patrol just as well as

quads. Instead of gathering a huge armada, each unit—from squad to division—acted independently to inflict as much pain as possible.

That sneaky bastard stole from dad, Billy realized with horror.

“No matter how far, how fast, or how high we flew, they kept surprising us at night,” the squad leader confessed. “The bigger the unit, the easier it was to find us, so we split into eleven battalions. Then into companies. To make it easier to hide and forage, our company broke into squads. Once spring starts, we were all suppose to unite at Fish Lake,” she said, referring to their northern-most base camp. They long ago built concealed bunkers there. “Just before we left, the closest enemy division suddenly abandoned its territory and formed a long skirmish line facing south. We thought that so odd that we searched for the next nearest division, which was also sweeping south in a long line.” The squad leader smiled at the Baron. “Well, we all agreed that only you could make Mongols act so crazy, so we followed them down and hoped we ran into you.

“Mr. Baron, what do we do now? A huge force still blocks the Strait, so we can’t go home, yet we’re not accomplishing anything staying here.”

Naturally, Billy knew exactly what to do. “Let’s go to Fish Lake, then do some fishing! But first, let’s divide the gold.”

## Chapter 61

The appearance of the infamous Red Baron at Fish Lake changed the mood of the American marathoners from depression to euphoria. Few knew him, but they all trusted him with their lives. They had a miserable year, an even worse winter, and no wealth to show for it. Illness caused more casualties than the Mongols. If a battalion of replacements had not arrived in mid-winter with food and medicine, many of them would have died.

Like his father, Billy had flair. He dropped screaming from high altitude and fell doing his fire dance. From optimum altitude, he blasted an island in the middle of the lake to create an impossibly large crater. He disappeared into the hole before the dust settled.

Ten thousand Americans flew to the crater rim to see what became of him. He turned in place, arms welcoming, a big smile the only part of his face they could see.

Then it started raining gold. One by one, his squad dropped coins on him. Billy started laughing and everyone joined him. When the roaring subsided, Billy popped up to give them their first orders:

“I want you all to celebrate tonight, because we’re gonna spend the next few months killing Mongols and taking their wealth so you can go home rich!”

Lifted from their misery, the crowd fell in love. They got drunk without alcohol and danced without music. The Red Baron led them in their favorite songs, which he learned for just this purpose.

As always, almost half of the Americans were female because—weighing less—they could fly farther. But William never intended for them to work year-round, so

the several hundred mothers nursing their newborns in the main bunker worried Billy. He needed to get them home, but they couldn't safely fly far until the babies were older. Yet they couldn't stay here because this location was compromised. Even if they beat the Mongols surrounding them, other units would bomb these bunkers into the permafrost. So he sent them with the sick and wounded to his supply depots on Kamchatka Peninsula.

Still, they were thrilled to meet the Red Baron. Billy asked the names of their babies, careful to record them clearly as the fathers wondered if he meant to replace them.

"You know what all these babies have in common?" he asked after recording them all. "They'll all be one gold ton richer when you set up an account in their names at Global Bank! We'll call them the Tonner Babies."

So show he wasn't kidding, he recorded himself ordering the bank to transfer a ton each, then passed the video memory to everyone. He had most of the fathers and all of the mothers crying more than any of the babies. Although they thought him incredibly generous, it seemed small compensation for them risking their lives in a freezing wilderness for a year with no plundered booty. It also made them more likely to campaign with him next time. The publicity value alone made this worth doing.

The battalion commanders took the Baron aside to let him know that five divisions were closing in all around them.

"I know. We saw two of them on the way. We'll start wiping them out tomorrow. Those idiots are still five hundred clicks away because no division wants to get closer than the rest. What they should have done is rushed our camp from five directions at the same time. We'll make them pay for the mistake with their lives."

Word soon spread and everyone noticed that the commanders lost their stressed out looks.

After dinner, Billy regaled them with the recent victories, rotating in place so everyone could see the videos. They couldn't believe that Europe—widely believed a lost cause just a few years ago—was now free. Billy distributed the mutual defense agreements. He showed them the fifty marathon battalions cleansing the Stans, pointing out the uniforms of Russia, Scandinavia, Prussia, Turkey, Arabia, and Persia. He walked them through the battles on the Alps and Kiev and shocked them with how much he deposited into their retirement accounts. The video of he and Bear ridiculing the Great Khan for handing a thousand gold tons to his newest rebels had them rolling on the ground in laughter. More importantly, it motivated them to do their share for the war effort. For a year, they felt like losers.

Billy finally told them how the Khan's personal guards killed his babies and their mothers, and showed them what he did to avenge those deaths. He helped them laugh at the heads in Hulagu's garden, and saddened them when he spoke of the empress with such respect. Then he got them chuckling again by taking on the capital of Mongolia alone for three days.

The next day Billy re-organized the marathoners into ten full battalions, with the sick, wounded, and pregnant moving to a temporary location. He put those with the highest ceiling into Battalion #1 and sent them after the enemy farthest away from help. Billy knew he couldn't surprise the Mongols, who had too many two-wanders as scouts and sentries, so he tired out their quads. #1 broke into

squads to make it harder for the enemy to estimate their numbers. They hit the division just before dinner and kept them awake all night long, blasting everyone on the ground while trying to avoid the Mongols in the air.

Billy's other battalions slept for several hours, then hit the division at dawn, when #1 left to get some sleep nearby. Nine thousand marathoners quickly owned the sky and, by noon, hunted down survivors.

Each enemy unit only had half a division of mostly short-range, low-altitude quads and half a division of two-wanders who were basically useless in battle. The trick was attacking the divisions before they combined their strength.

So Battalion #2 ate lunch and rested. When scouts reported the neighboring enemy division just an hour away, #2 harassed them until sunset. Then #3, who ate and rested next, went on duty, attacking until dawn. Battalions 4-10 engaged them after breakfast and by nightfall stripped their corpses of valuables.

#1, meanwhile, slept all day and attacked the next closest enemy before they supped. At dawn, after a good night's sleep, #2 took over. #3 took their place at sunset, but by then, another division arrived to delay the inevitable. #1 joined them after midnight and was able to exhaust them until noon.

Battalion #4 and #5 rotated attacks on another division fast approaching, to give the rest time to destroy the two divisions that joined up.

#1 flew to rotate shifts with #4 and #5 until the rest of the marathoners finished off their target. By the time the other Americans arrived, the Mongols were too few, too tired, and too cold to do more than die with wands in their hands.

Because they could fly higher, longer, and faster, the Americans beat five times their number with few casualties by taking them (mostly) one at a time. Each American picked up five money sacks while Billy scored over fifty thousand wand sets, which he sent to Korea.

They ate an early dinner and Billy gave them a speech while they waited for nightfall.

"The day before my eighth birthday, I asked my dad how we could win this war. Not end the war, as many pray for daily, but how to win it. Except for you optimists who volunteered to fight a lost cause, everyone else in the world seemed to think nothing could ever stop this war except total conquest by the Mongols. My dad took so long in answering that I assumed he either didn't hear me or didn't know. But what he said that day changed my life. And, since you're about to sack cities in the heart of Mongolia, yours.

"Dad explained that simply killing Genghis Khan wouldn't help unless it provoked a civil war, and that wouldn't happen because every time he changes the succession, Genghis makes every Mongol quad send in a video recording an oath of allegiance. Even killing the top ten probably wouldn't start a civil war because his line of succession is so deep.

"And destroying every Mongol air force wouldn't win the war either because they famously have so many veterans. Every active duty quad can be automatically re-enlisted within ten years of leaving. If we kill those quads, which apparently we have, the Khan can call up several million more who either never enlisted or who retired more than a decade ago. American Jack told me these are the troops we face in Siberia, and those we destroyed in Kiev.

“The problem is that Mongols and their allies breed half a million quads every year just due to population growth. So all they have to do is simply wait until more kids reach puberty. Which means we have to kill them faster than they can be replaced. Which means our real target is the civilian population.

“As everyone knows, when Genghis Khan united the Mongols, he only had a million people, and only one hundred thousand quads. But, since then, those Mongols have produce one hundred million descendents. Their allies double that. Only about half of those descendents identify themselves as Mongolian or as an ally, but that’s still one hundred million people. And since they reproduce strategically, Mongols have about twice the quads per capita as the rest of the world.

“In contrast, American University estimates that there would be one hundred million more Americans if the Mongols didn’t sack their cities, burn their crops. and destroy their herds. So you Americans have lost more brothers and sisters than the total population of Mongols in the world. Just imagine how much easier it’d be to win this war if we had another one hundred million Americans helping us.

“We therefore cannot win this war without destroying every city, town, village and horde in Mongolia, Siberia, Manchuria, and the Stans. We must burn every crop and slaughter every herd. Anything that keeps them alive. You, your home, and your family will never be safe until we exterminate every Mongol quad.

“As kids, you grew up dreaming of becoming a hero. You sit here before me as warriors. Now I ask you to become something less glorious. I want you to become butchers. And butchers slaughter. That’s their job. And, until we win this war, that is our job.

“After dad explained all this, I said, okay. He looked at me for the longest time and asked, okay? Okay, I told him. A day before my eighth birthday, I had agreed to kill one hundred million enemies. My father could not have been prouder. And if you help me keep the oath I swore that day, I could not be prouder of you.”

They rose in the air and twenty thousand wands sang the American anthem. It was so beautiful Billy cried. Which made them cry.

Of course, what he didn’t mention is that his father told him to fly to Peking the following night and dominate the dueling arena. His mother would never agree, but it had to be done because they could never win without first hallowing out their super-quads.

At eight years old, Billy understood what he needed to do. And every day since then he thought how best to kill more Mongols faster. Just like most battles are won before they start so, too, did Billy figure out how to win the war before he started.

William bombed the cities in eastern Mongolia into rubble by pre-deploying munitions brought off ships. That wouldn’t work for western Mongolia, which is why Billy bought bombs and sent them to warehouses in the cities he wanted to destroy. But, unlike his father, Billy only had ten thousand troops.

With so many Mongols in eastern Siberia, Billy flew them west, then south, around the enemy. It took them a week, flying nights, to reach their target. Billy scouted the city and got directions to the warehouse. He presented images of the paperwork to prove ownership, so the manager helpfully showed him the

munitions depot. They walked past dozens of storerooms before they reached the depot.

“For safety reasons,” the manager explained, “we placed it in a large depression, then threw up berms of earth around it in case of a mass explosion. We divided it into sections. You occupy all of Section 8.”

He opened the hanger door and led Billy to his storage unit. Billy couldn’t believe how many bombs it contained. He could destroy every stone structure in the city with so many.

Gleeful, Billy paid to put the bombs in their special packs, then flew to his division, hiding nearby. Before sunset, he took those who spoke the best Mongolian to the munitions depot, waited for most of the employees to leave, then killed the rest.

Now came the tricky part. The city’s air base operated continuous patrols. Worst still, they located the depot close to the base. Billy had to get ten thousand fliers to the depot without alerting the enemy. They didn’t have time to walk, and they’d be spotted if they flew in.

So Billy found himself in a cloud at very high altitude soon after sunset. He tracked a patrol, closed the distance, and dived. He matched speed and angle, then sliced the squad without giving them time to sound an alarm.

Now he moved out to the medium patrol and repeated this. He rose to the east and made an “X” with his hand wands—two twenty meter flames can be seen from far away. The Americans waited for the outer perimeter patrol to pass by, then hugged the terrain.

The first company reached the depot by flying in small, odd-numbers groups. Since they didn’t get caught, the second company tried it, too. Then a third.

The problem was that he could not sneak in ten thousand Americans this way.

Meanwhile, Billy snuck up on the other patrols, took them out silently, and replaced them with Americans flying the same pattern. Now, at least, he could bring his troops in faster. Every fifteen minutes he got another hundred bombers. What he didn’t know was how much time he had.

On the tallest building with a view of both the base and the depot, Billy waited for the next patrols to leave. This bought him three more hours. By then he had fourteen hundred bombers ready. He signaled those hiding at the depot, then flew to lead the rest of the division.

A sentry on the ground sounded a warning when the division was still a kilometer away. His bombers attacked the barracks as they assembled on the flight deck. The resulting explosion woke the entire city.

Now the fun would start.

His fourteen hundred blanketed the air base, then descended enough to shoot at everything that moved on the ground, burning to death those trapped inside.

As Billy predicted, every quad in the city flew up to find out what was going on. His eighty-six companies fanned out over the city and shot everything that flew. Billy led ten of them to the rescue of his bombers, who’d otherwise be overwhelmed by a mob of veterans attacking from above. His bombers returned to the depot for more munitions while Billy’s companies fought off the militia.



Mongols had an old adage: "Bombs don't destroy cities. Fire destroys cities." Gunpowder bombs knocked holes in solid buildings so fireballs could ignite everything within.

As Mongols proved over three centuries, formation fliers beat unorganized mobs, despite inferior numbers. Billy proved that again as his companies flew high enough so that relatively few Mongols could reach them. Their first goal was to exhaust the enemy by keeping them in the air and fighting fires on the ground. Then they reduced altitude as fast as they safely could, diving to send volleys into the mass of enemies below them. Instead of fighting many times their number at a time, the Americans actually enjoyed numerical superiority all night long.

The city burned and Billy let everyone go who left on foot. At dawn, the Americans hunted down any quads and two-wanders who escaped. Before nightfall, they wiped out the remaining residents, then took their maximum weight in bombs. Except Billy, who may need to intercept enemies.

One lone division destroyed a Mongol city many times their size.

They flew an hour away, then waited for any Mongols trailing them. Several thousand showed up, eager to strike the Americans as they pretended to sleep. Instead, the rested Americans rose above their ceiling, surrounded them, then waited for the weaker Mongols to tire out before fully engaging.

They napped as close as they dared to their next city. At midnight they blew past the patrols and bombed the hell out of the air base. Everyone who could fly rose to fight and Billy let them come: his one hundred companies formed a ceiling against a mob of angry Mongols eager for revenge.

The beauty of pissing enemies off is that their rage impedes their ability to think tactically. Instead of attacking from above, most just rushed his Americans frontally in small groups -- the fastest didn't even wait for the slowest to catch up.

Still, Billy had the center of his line pretend to panic and flee at the huge mob flying up to them. Who then turned in the classic Buffalo Horn tactic, used countless times by the Mongol Air Force. This caught the majority of the militia in a pincer movement whereby the Americans could strike them from several directions. Once they broke and fled, the raiders chased them down. While one company secured the munitions depot, the rest firebombed the city. Again, Billy let the survivors flee before destroying them like a good Mongol.

The Americans stocked up on more bombs and found a forest five hours away to hide in. Billy and his best company surprised the Mongols following them.

They attacked the next city just before dawn. Patrols actually saw them from far away but did not signal an alarm because they now wore the uniforms of the Mongol Air Force. Billy met their first patrol and bought time by demanding an escort to the air base for his tired troops. The lead patrolman asked for the images authorizing their deployment, so Billy passed him a huge number of images and rejoiced in every extra heartbeat this gave them. When the patrolman didn't find the authorization he needed, Billy argued with him, finally demanding to speak with his superior. The Mongol, in return, demanded they land.

It worked, in that Billy got his force that much closer to the base. But, from his altitude, Billy could see a battalion forming in the parade ground. They would not launch until dawn, but enough of them stood around, setting up their gear, to

alarm Billy. If a patrol shrieked, that battalion would have time to position themselves favorably against his weighted down bombers.

"I'm gonna report your insolence to your commander!" Billy shouted with the perfect tone of arrogance that descendents of Genghis Khan made famous.

He signaled a greeting and landed looking pissed. He asked the closest Mongol where he could find the general. The patrolman landed a minute later and started arguing with him. Billy looked up to see several patrols now surrounding his division. Those seventy patrolmen could cripple his force if they detonated the bombs.

A general came to sort out all the shouting. Billy threw an imperial tantrum like so many privileged rich kids did, who didn't think the rules should apply to them. As the general started chewing him out, Billy spied the giant shadow approaching.

Ignoring the general, he sidestepped a bit to line up the commanders. He pressed his arms against his body to launch his wands, then impaled several Mongols with each blade. Dozens of Mongols stood within twenty meters, so he twirled and sliced them up, not worrying if the cuts were fatal. He popped away from the base while blasting them. This focused their attention on him instead of the battalion in their diving run.

Billy sprinted towards the closest patrol as they attacked the Americans trying to release their bombs. His company commanders didn't carry bombs to protect their troops. Billy did his famous scream to draw the attention of the other six patrols now firing on his troops. He only paused them for a moment, but that moment saved lives. Billy sliced up the first patrol and blasted a second. A third panicked, diving away, and a fourth positioned themselves defensively, so Billy went after the fifth squad, shooting them in the backs. His company commanders sliced and blasted the rest.

A thousand bombs disintegrated the air force base and the division using it. The battalion swung around and broke into companies to finish off survivors.

The other nine battalions bombed the city, careful to not explode the munitions depot, then formed a giant blanket to shoot the thousands of quads who flew up. All day long the Americans weeded the angry Mongols out. It always surprised Billy how few Mongol quads fled to fight another day.

Just before sunset, Billy gave the signal to finish them off so they could sleep safely. That night, one battalion stood watch, another hunted Mongols, while the rest slept. After breakfast, they eliminated survivors and loaded up on more bombs. At noon, they surprised the several thousand Mongols who hoped to catch them sleeping.

## **Chapter 62**

Billy wisely skipped some cities to make tracking him harder. They ended up bombing more divisions and fewer cities as more units showed up. But, as the weeks passed, they surprised fewer enemies and got surprised more often. Time to leave.

But he needed bombs, so he had his division fireball a city after nightfall and let themselves be driven off, knowing the residents would stay vigilant all night. The Americans returned to their hiding place to sleep and eat. In the morning, they attacked the city again, and whittled the enemy down all day before overwhelming the defenders. Instead of searching for survivors at night in the wreckage, Billy captured the munitions depot, dropped gunpowder bombs on the strongest structures, incendiaries on what had not yet burned, then packed shrapnel bombs to take with them. The Americans surprised the city by leaving before finishing them all off.

They flew west, away from the main enemy forces, but found no good hiding places when they needed to stop and rest. They didn't even have time to eat the food they started cooking when a sentry flashed a warning upon seeing a Mongol scout. They were too tired and hungry to fight effectively.

"Fly as far as you can towards Grandma," Billy told the division commander. "Keep your bombs, but avoid the enemy. I'll catch up soon."

Billy overtook the fleeing scout, but not before he warned another scout on the horizon, who raced back to his unit.

Crap. Billy hoped to point them in the wrong direction, but that second scout surely saw his division rising north. After killing the first scout, he overtook the second one. A third scout, however, would reach the unit before him.

It was only a battalion. If Billy knew the threat was only a thousand Mongols, he'd have his troops leave their bombs on the ground and fight. But now his tired marathoners were already in the air. A rested battalion could cripple his irreplaceable marathoners, so he had to stop them.

He swapped outer coats in a cloud with the second scout he killed, then raced to the enemy, which rose on an intercept course. Billy knew his division would turn ninety degrees west once they lost their pursuers.

Billy had to judge their relative positions carefully. Confident of their course, he popped up in an arc that positioned him at the very front of the battalion. He watched the battalion commander turn his head to see what the hell he was doing. Billy sensed disapproval, rather than danger, so he continued until he rose above the battalion, but falling at an angle towards them.

Now, in a controlled fall, Billy pointed his hands and feet at the battalion leader and fired every wand. The fireballs not only struck the front line, but continued to burn a dozen rows deep. Billy sent his next volley at the nearest company commander, then turned the other way to fire at the second closest.

Now he fell below a thousand angry quads—not a safe place to be. He popped sideways to avoid dozens of balls certainly coming at him, then fell to earth, back first, so he could fire even his boot wands at the bastards descending to get him.

Normally, this is exactly what a lone quad should not do, but Billy needed to give his division time, and costing the enemy altitude did that. Sure enough, dozens of squad leaders broke off to pursue the famous Red Baron and a thousand gold tons.

They flew down faster than he fell, so he hit more of them as they closed the distance. Billy adjusted his position to evade the inevitable fireballs for as long as he could, before finally popping down to avoid getting swarmed.

He made them chase him through the terrain—around hills, between trees, and into gullies. They didn't tire much until the third hour. Some had to land, while the strongest continued the chase. Billy led the best quads away, only to race them back.

In his Mongol uniform, they had no idea he was the Baron when he landed. He knelt as if exhausted. After drinking water, he cut down everyone within twenty meters, then popped up to shoot at all the easy targets. A few dozen quads tried to swarm him, but he just popped sideways and took them out a few at a time. The exhausted tried to flee, but he caught them easily, then searched for those who hid.

Billy knew that the quads he fought today were nothing compared to the Mongols he battled several years ago. The quality of the enemy fell every time Genghis had to recruit.

Billy hid when he spotted a shadow on the horizon. He waited for their best quads to rest, then shot them on the ground. A few hundred chased him away, but he just circled around to strike those too tired to fly.

Now their best quads had to stay in the air to warn the rest. Once rested, Billy hugged the terrain, blew past their sentries, and fireballed everyone who had not launched. He avoided the strong to attack the weak.

This worked well all day, and even better after nightfall. They couldn't see him coming until giant orbs of flame engulfed those napping. To Billy, it was the best game ever invented. Nothing made him feel more alive than taking everything a man had, and everything he would ever have.

They dispersed in the dark, so Billy left to catch up to his division. He found them looking relieved to see him.

Billy explained how he wanted to beat the Mongol force between them and Grandma. He gave memory sticks containing his latest exploits to several who knew Grandma, along with instructions for the next battle, and sent them to find her.

It took his division three more days of easy flying before they found the new enemy force. The division rested all day while Billy located the enemy camp and found a large enough hiding spot. It took five hours of flying in the dark to get there, but at least it was only an hour from the enemy. The Mongols put their long range patrols north, south, and west, not behind them.

After sleeping well, the Americans took off two hours before dawn. Without the Baron, they never would have dreamed of attacking one hundred thousand quads, but Billy gave them confidence. Even though they didn't know if Grandma's force would participate.

They hugged the ground in the dark to not stand out in the sky, which helped them get much closer unseen. Sentries sounded warnings, which other patrols repeated, but the commanders assumed the enemy came from the west, not east.

His line slowed to minimum speed and dropped their bombs into the mass of sleepy men scrambling into formation. If warned just a few minutes before, the Mongols could have murdered the weighted down Americans flying low and slow.

Instead, the marathoners dropped their shrapnel explosives and got off several volleys into grounded targets with nowhere to run. The Mongols were within lethal range of the Americans, but the Americans were not within lethal range of the

Mongols. They crossed the camp and rose steeply since they enjoyed momentum, while the Mongols did not.

Billy, however, rose in an arc back over the camp. As thousands of Mongols rose to chase the Americans, Billy screamed, blazed his wands, and shot volleys. He waited for them to get close, then led several thousand of them east, away from his escaping division.

As planned, the Americans waited until the fastest enemies nearly caught up, several kilometers from camp, then formed a ten square kilometer vertical wall in the sky to launch volleys down at the thousands of angry quads chasing them. Stretched out in a long pipeline, the Mongols threw themselves away against the American broadside. Even when an entire division charged as one, volleys from ten thousand with stronger wands fired from greater altitude destroyed them. Once the Mongols stopped the blind charge, the Americans closed the distance before the Mongols circled around them.

After mauling these Mongols, enemy reinforcements arrived. Twenty battalions raced to encircle the Americans, who instead fled west towards Grandma.

Except Grandma was no longer west of them. On Billy's instructions, she hid as close as possible south. When her spies reported twenty battalions chasing the American division, Grandma ordered her slowest twenty battalions towards the enemy camp, while she led her fastest to hit them from the other three sides. In the dark, the Mongols assumed the dark shadows were their battalions returning.

The Americans caused about fifty thousand casualties, but most were minor cuts and burns. But those wounded needed immediate attention.

Team Red shot up the camp from every direction. Only a rapid reaction battalion stayed in formation, and Grandma's super-quads made it a priority. The rest amounted to shooting a lot of disorganized individuals, or torching felt huts with wounded inside.

When Billy returned, a few hours after dawn, the five super-quads ambushed the Mongols chasing the Baron. Now came the fun part: preparing the camp before the remaining twenty thousand enemies returned.

The American division arrived first, having lost their exhausted pursuers. They gave the code and were given a hero's welcome. Then Billy set up patrols and sentries just like the camp originally had. While Grandma's force hid, the Americans pretended to be Mongols.

The returning battalions looked relieved to be almost home again. Billy stole the uniform of a battalion commander so that his battalion could escort them to base. Billy led them to an open parade ground where they buried the munitions they found.

Naturally, they hit the Mongols as they landed. Grandma's force dropped bombs on their heads, which exploded the buried munitions. Everyone else rushed to blast them from all sides and above. The good guys had every advantage over the twenty thousand bad guys and suffered no casualties.

Billy's friends swooped down on him as soon as the blasting died away and Bear gave him one of his famous hugs. So many people surrounded him that quads had to extend steel just to pat him on the back.

"Why's everyone so happy?" Billy asked. "At this rate I'm gonna run out of Mongols."

And he wasn't joking.

Grandma pushed her way through, not afraid to elbow her own grandchildren. Or, perhaps, delighted for an excuse to knock them about.

"We've been reduced to melting down statues and chiseling loose precious gems. Work work work! You know how bitchy the boys get when they go too long without killing. It was like living in a camp full of old cranky ladies.

"Then your messenger arrives to tell us you plan to attack one hundred thousand Mongols—with or without us. First you abandon us, then you command us to save you from the big bad Mongols? We'd have blasted your messenger if he didn't start talking nonsense—how you beheaded Hulagu, tried to kill Genghis Khan in his own palace, kidnapped the Empress, took on the capital alone, made fools of an entire enemy division, then sacked cities deep in Mongolia. Hell, I'd have blasted him myself if he didn't produce the videos. That turned my boys into puppies eager to follow you into hell. Me? I'm only here to smack the fool who walked into the Khan's tent city alone to assassinate the Great Immortal."

With that she smacked him across the head like his dad used to, then kissed his forehead. Billy tracked their hero-worship like a fireball. A woman collapsed at Billy's feet, crying out of control. Billy felt caged by their admiration.

"Geneva is happy you killed the person that Genghis loved most," Bear helpfully explained. "You paid him back for all the loved ones that he took from us."

Billy understood, but didn't want to endure fifty thousand hugs. "Just don't call me a hero because I know exactly what I am."

Grandma suddenly looked sad. "Genghis has left governing to his granddaughters to run his massive flying school. He should have half a million quads soon. We should bomb them before he learns of our victory."

"Yep. I hoped you moved enough bombs near him."

"We have a million not far from him, another million hidden along his most likely route west, and a few million more in Kiev."

"The sooner you strike, the safer it'll be," Billy said, looking up. "You have great weather for flying."

"Crap," Bear said with a tired sigh. "He wants us to leave today."

"If you leave after breakfast, you can bomb him tomorrow night. I'll infiltrate his camp to find out where his super-quads, high altitude troops, and marathoners sleep, then I'll find a path through his patrols."

Grandma sighed in resignation and the other super-quads knew Billy won again. It's hard to argue with someone willing to do so much more.

The next day, Billy met them at the rendezvous point. He projected a huge overhead image of the camp and pointed out the barracks of the specialty quads.

"Genghis spread them out around the camp to make targeting them harder. The paranoid bastard has too many patrols up to his west, so the only way in is from the east. And, even then, we'll have to slice up a few patrols and fly in so high that sentries on the ground don't see us. So the bad news is that we have another day of flying into enemy territory. The good news is that cloud cover should cloak our approach.

"Instead of bombing the whole camp, I want to divide our force into four groups, three targeting his specialty quads and the fourth to destroy his supplies. Let's dive straight down, bomb when we get close, hover and blast at two hundred

meters, then let them come up to us. Each group will need to break a battalion into squads, flying an overhead perimeter to intercept the enemy. Each group leader should stay above their troops and signal retreat as soon as circumstances turn unfavorable. The facility is huge, so each unit leader must act independently. I'll do my scream to distract them. Afterwards, I'm gonna start my next mission, so I don't know when you'll see me next."

"The preposterous one you can't tell us about?" Bear asked.

Billy put a hand on Grandma's shoulder to emphasize his next point. "Keep him away from home and don't let any messengers through. Okay?"

"Just what do you plan to do, Red?" Grandma asked, alarmed.

Billy, quoting his mother, smiled. "I'm gonna kill as many as I can, as fast as I can, for as long as I can."

## Chapter 63

Genghis Khan stewed as another messenger reported in, this time to tell him the Baron—alone—gutted an entire battalion. Only the cowards who hid survived.

"But we know where his division was a week ago," the messenger pointed out.

The problem with hunting down marathoners is that, by the time he reached their last known location, they could be on the other side of the world. No, he wouldn't be seeing them for a long time.

One by one he considered and dismissed his options. What he wanted to do was take his marathoners after the Baron's marathoners. But he didn't have nearly enough, and they could not fly as far, as fast, or as high. As the Baron proved over and over again, the trick to killing quads was surprising them on the ground. His troops kept losing because they had no idea the Baron was nearby until too late.

At that very moment, he thought he heard a distant alarm. He shook his head, blaming his legendary paranoia, but then he heard it again, but coming from a different direction. He stormed out of his stone bunker and flew onto the roof to hear better. His eyes faced west, searching the skies, when several firefights broke out high above the vast facility.

Genghis saw his troops stumble out of bunkers, frantically putting on armor. At first it pleased him how fast his men assembled into formation, but then he saw it through the eyes of the enemy, who wanted the Mongols massed together for their shrapnel bombs. Genghis knew he should withdraw to the protection of his underground bunker, but his thirst for vengeance ran too deep. All he wanted was someone to strike.

Thousand of enemies dropped out of the dark clouds to throw bombs at the marathoners forming into their units. Every detonation made him wince because it represented more wasted talent. With so many bunkers made of mortared stone, they'd have been safer inside. A huge explosion to the west turned him around—ah, the bastards got his super-quads! Then a closer explosion created a pressure wave that knocked him clear off the roof.

He rolled in the dirt, desperate for oxygen, his whole body aching. His ears rang so loud he couldn't hear himself swear. He found himself on his feet, running to his bunker. He gulped a sack of fermented milk to pop his ears, like when changing altitude too fast, while watching the enemy blast his previous marathoners. Thousands of two-wanders bravely shot up at enemies beyond their range, doing little more than warm the enemy on a cold night.

Genghis waved nearby quads to follow him. They rose to attack the Americans from above. No sooner did they position themselves when a squad of enemies attacked him from above. They exchanged fireballs for a few minutes before the Khan realized that he should just dodge the blasts while striking the bastards below who had their backs to him. Or, better yet, slice them with blades.

Then a familiar scream woke him like a bad dream. He squinted to see the Baron, tantalizingly close, flashing four wands, divert one of his rapid-reaction battalions that was about to pounce on the Americans. He lured them away and the Khan got set to follow. Genghis realized with disgust that the Baron just saved hundreds of his irreplaceable marathoners. Then a fireball smacked Genghis from the sky like a green recruit for not maintaining constant situational awareness.

He hit a rooftop with a loud thud before smacking into the ground. Concentrating through the pain of burning flesh, he removed his armor while flying into the nearest water-filled tub to cool his third degree burns in freezing water. He sucked wand like a slut to ease the pain.

The Americans left by the time he got out, dripping cold water, his eyebrows still smoking. He stared at them as they disappeared into the cumulous clouds and realized he didn't kill a single enemy.

A massive artillery barrage made everyone on the ground look up towards the glowing western horizon. For some reason, it didn't sound right. Genghis hoped his fastest troops caught up with the bastards and shot them in the back, but that's not what this sounded like.

It slapped Genghis like an open palm: the enemy used cloud cover to assemble into a wall to fire broadsides at those pursuing them. The angry Mongol novices would fly right into their trap. His veterans would know enough to attack them from behind, but few flew under experienced leaders. Genghis inwardly winced at every blast. He saw a rapid reaction unit take off in good formation, but feared they'd arrive too late. Soon the explosions stopped and Genghis knew the enemy escaped largely unharmed.

The world's most powerful man cursed his impotence. The Great Khan couldn't even hide in his bunker and get drunk. Instead, he had to show his troops that he cared. So he roamed the camp, helping the wounded and promising vengeance.

One hundred thousand dead and twice as many wounded mocked his eyes. He had not even left his training camp and already his nemesis made a fool of him. Ever since the Baron toyed with him near the Bering Strait several years ago, Genghis felt like the cosmos was bitch-slapping him. What did those funny Indians call it? Karma. Yeah, the Baron was karma sent to pay him back for all the bad things he had done.

A few hours of bucking up his troops helped them, but drained the leader of the mightiest empire humanity has ever known. A man who practically invented flying dragged his feet to inspect the damage.



One of the wounded actually snored in a water tub so loudly that the Great Khan smiled for the first time in months. He patted the burnt warrior on the shoulder and wished he could sleep so soundly.

The sight of his favorite son-in-law put spring in his step. He sprinted over and hugged his old friend. Few foreigners appreciated this, but Genghis relied on his daughters and daughter-in-laws to govern while he conquered.

Genghis examined the guy's bleeding hip. Nothing lethal, unless it got inflected, but it must hurt like hell. Worst yet, the veteran must stay immobilized for it to heal. They went back three hundred years. He knew how hard it'd be for such an old warrior to just lay still for a few days.

He remembered asking his daughter why she wanted to marry this local chief instead of a great king. Her answer? "Because he's a good Mongol." Genghis laughed so long he could not then force her to cement the political alliance that he planned for her. They gave him great grandsons, too. Even after her death, he remained his favorite. His descendents hated when he said this but, really, they didn't make Mongols like they used to. His son-in-law was something of a model by which he judged others.

Which really pissed his grandsons off.

Something made Genghis look up. That wounded airmen stared at him, and not in a good way. Before he could make sense of it, wands magically sprung into his hands and giant fireballs flew to engulf him.

The Baron!

Genghis flung himself to one side, away from his old friend so he wouldn't die as well. If he held his hand wands, he may have escaped, but these fireballs were too large to avoid without wands for propulsion. So the Great Khan rolled when he hit the dirt while awaiting the inevitable. A heat wave washed over him, so he kept rolling until he bounced hard against a pole.

Even as he spit out dirt, it occurred to Genghis that the Baron never left. When not snoring in water tubs, the bastard must have been killing his best quads. Who had such nerve?

He heard a firefight and looked up to see his arch nemesis laugh down at him. Genghis drew his death sticks but, before he launched, heard his son-in-law cry out in agony. Genghis levitated him into the same wooden bathtub the Baron slept in. The water put out the flames with an audible sizzle that sent a chill down his spine—a sure sign of future nightmares. He ran over to help.

Genghis cried. He didn't even hide it. His friend's eyes were burnt out, his face more cooked than his mother's mutton, and his clothes hung on him like tiny rags. His nose burned to the bone. Smoke rose from his blackened corpse.

But that was not what made the Great Khan cry. It was seeing the poor man's chest rise and fall, indicating he lived long enough to experience all this suffering. Genghis quickly slit his throat and burst into tears, to the astonishment of those around him.

## Chapter 64

After his troops left, with thousands of Mongols on their tail, Billy—still in his Mongol commander uniform—landed in the training facility and pretended to help the wounded. In actuality, he covertly killed as many as possible, even as he levitated some to triage centers, where he got to kill doctors as well as wounded. He worked his way to the high-altitude unit, most of whom left to chase Grandma.

As he hoped, only the sick and wounded remained in their barracks. Billy killed them, then blasted open their chests to take their backup wands, starting with the battalion commander, who had the most sets.

Once he exhausted those barracks, he made his way to the marathoners, stopping at the medical stations, who were easy prey. As he took the wands from those he killed, he slew those bringing in more wounded.

Billy moved from building to building, slaughtering everyone within, until surprised by suspicious veterans who torched his stolen armor, his pants, and his bony booty. He beat the three of them, but had to throw himself in a water trough to cool his burning butt.

Having filled his backpack with thousands of good wand sets, Billy relaxed there for so long he may even have slept. The wand juice flowing to his wounds released so much tension that he peed without knowing it. Then a tender hand on his shoulder woke him up and who should pass by but Genghis Khan himself, comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. Billy's first reaction was to escape, but then Genghis did something rare: he hugged one of the wounded, relief showing on his face like pimples. The two talked like old war buddies, and the warrior showed his familiarity by patting the Khan on the shoulder.

Genghis really liked this guy, so Billy decided he must die. Billy wanted the man who sent his mother's rapists to know what absolute hatred felt like. He remembered his father saying, "Genghis can't suffer once you kill him." So Billy was always on the lookout for opportunities to make the Immortal suffer.

Slipping out of the water like an eel, he put on his backpack and wished he had time to steal some pants. His backside exposed to cold air and silent ridicule, Billy limped along a path that took him near the Khan. Until then, he hadn't realized his leg hurt. It surprised Billy to find a deep cut in his calf. The bleeding stopped, but the pain continued.

Several quads watched him warily. He stopped twenty meters from Genghis and turned. When his nemesis finally looked up, Billy launched wands and blasted the Khan's friend. Genghis, assuming he was the target, threw himself to one side. His quads fired as one, but Billy popped into the air laterally, before escaping. Billy paused a few hundred meters up to laugh directly at Genghis, which sounded sinister with his vocal cords augmented.

Billy crossed Siberia to the Bering Strait. As he was told, Genghis pulled his best one hundred thousand quads from India—half of them marathoners—to guard the Strait with fifty thousand Mongol quads and fifty thousand two-wanders. Billy heard the rebels in India declared independence as soon as the marathoners cleared the Himalayas. The Mongols may be mediocre, but the Indians represented a real threat. Billy was so glad he ordered the Americans to not cross into Siberia without him.

“Dad,” Billy asked out loud, “how am I gonna beat fifty thousand marathoners?” It may have been early dementia, but he thought he heard his fathering laughing as an idea formed.

Billy called up the maps his father made years ago that showed a chain of islands, called the Aleutians, that jutted out from Alaska towards the Kamchatka Peninsula in Siberia. That winter the Americans had pre-deployed literally tons of supplies along their raiding route, so Billy searched for the closest supply ship. He had it load up on potable water, sent messages to the other ships farther down the coast, and asked them to position themselves equidistant between the coast and the nearest Aleutian islet. Using the first ship as a stepping stone, he island hopped to Alaska, bypassing the heavily patrolled Strait.

At Global Bank in Anchorage, Billy found the bright red suit that he asked George to send him. It had been a long time since the Red Baron actually wore red.

He assembled the armada that Jack promised him and had video taken of him flashing his four wands—with 250,000 cheering quads in the background. Because he had sent so many great wands, the University graduated twelve marathon battalions this time, rather than ten.

Who had to defeat fifty.

While the rest broke camp, Billy had two marathon battalions island-hop to the supply ships. They carried sleeping gear, stoves, and supplies, with instructions to cook enough fish for a division.

The best marathoners he took to the camp closest to the enemy. After a good sleep, they packed food kits and water sacks, then attacked at midnight. By morning they pretended to tire quickly, lost formation easily, and looked scared to death. The Khan rewarded victories, so the fifty thousand marathoners, who had not eaten breakfast, took the bait and tried running them down.

The marathoners from India chased the Americans several hundred clicks down the island chain until exhaustion stopped them. By now they knew they had been duped. They had no food, water, or blankets. All the Baron had to do was block the only way home and dehydration would do the rest. They basically killed themselves.

Sure enough, the Red Baron himself flew from that direction and dropped several hundred video wands of him speaking bad Hindu.

“We poisoned the watering hole that you passed two islands ago and now block your only route back home. Our ship has the only drinkable water within a thousand clicks. Those who don’t freeze to death tonight will soon die of dehydration.

“Or I’ll triple your salary if you switch sides. I promise you can return home if you fight for me this summer. But you must first kill everyone pro-Mongolian and lay them on the beach so I can see their corpses at dawn.”

As the sun rose, Billy saw several thousand dead bodies. It was more than he expected, which meant the pro-Mongolian Indians went down fighting. The living looked tired, hungry, and dehydrated. Nothing destroys morale faster than killing your own. Caesar famously threatened to decimate the 9th Legion, where one out of ten randomly selected men are clubbed to death by the other nine. But he only

threatened. His friend Marcus Crassus actually did it when Roman troops fled before Spartacus.

Billy wondered if they'd rush him when he landed. They sure looked beaten, though. Trapped. If they knew his Americans had already reached the Kamchatka Peninsula on the Siberian coast—instead of blocking their only way home—they'd kill him for sure. They backed up as he descended, more scared of him than he was of them.

Billy called them by squad, such as first squad of the first company of the first battalion. He recorded them identifying themselves, swearing fealty to the Red Baron, insulting Genghis Khan, then beheading a pro-Mongol corpse.

After making them give him their backup wands, Billy sent them to the island with potable water that he had not, in fact, poisoned. Billy repeated this all day with the other survivors, except they pissed on the corpses when they ran out of heads to cut off.

All good quads carry backups, but really good quads often have backups for their backups, so Billy netted over one hundred thousand sets of super wands to give his new Asian allies. Plus those he took from the Khan's flight school.

The relieved Indians found more instructions at the watering hole: return to camp, recruit the other Indians, kill the Mongols, then act as the vanguard of the invading American armada.

Using the fleet as a stepping stone to the coast, Billy had already sent his marathoners to Korea. Being much faster, Billy would catch up before they got there.

Back at the Strait, the Indians lied their asses off, telling everyone they destroyed the Americans who attacked them. Then, that night, they got the cooperation of the other Indians, killed those pro-Mongolian, then turned on their Mongol comrades while they slept.

Billy thus killed one hundred thousand Mongols and fifteen thousand pro-Mongolian Indians without firing a shot.

The next day, American scouts found over eighty thousand scared Indians eager to obey. They emptied the vast Mongol camp of food, filled the bunkers with dead Mongols, then set out to depopulate Mongolia.

Meanwhile, Billy introduced himself to the Koreans by pouncing on the main Mongol unit opposing the rebels. After destroying a force several times his size, Billy then thrilled the rebels with his video showing a quarter million Americans about to raid Mongolia.

The grateful Koreans agreed to lend Billy the marathoners that his father funded years before. In fact, every quad wanted to join the Red Baron, so he invited everyone to a Grand Raid the next full moon.

Billy and the marathoners then flew to Japan and his proposal electrified the nation. Genghis started an economic blockade two centuries ago after typhoons destroyed his third attempt to invade them, so they really wanted payback. The emperor mobilized his entire military and militia.

Billy now had thirty-two marathon battalions to take down the Chinese coast before island hopping to Taiwan. The Taiwanese gave him a hero's welcome for saving China's cultural treasures. Everyone loved his proposal and the nation organized for war. With six Taiwanese marathon battalions, they flew south to

Hainan, a mountainous island a five minute flight from the southern Chinese mainland.

Billy met with the leader of the Chinese rebellion, and former governor of the island, Kung-ti, and sold him on the Grand Raid. On all three islands, the most powerful female quads took advantage of him as if their nation's independence depended upon them siring offspring as powerful as the Red Baron.

Like in India, the Chinese rebelling against the Empire had some of Jack's trainers. But because they could draw from a much larger population, they had trained up twelve marathon battalions with the gold and wands that Billy sent them.

While the Chinese prepared, Billy led his fifty thousand marathoners to Hanoi, where he spent a few weeks defeating the Mongol units in Indochina: Annam in Vietnam, the Khmer in Cambodia, Chiangmai and Sukhotai in Thailand, the Majapahit Empire in Java, and the Burmese Empire. By then, everyone in Asia knew of his proposal and the new Siam government lent him their entire air force.

The idea of the legendary Red Baron leading American, Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese, Chinese, Indian, Vietnamese, Siamese, and Burmese quads to raid Mongol businesses inspired a frenzy of greed. Everyone with a wand and a grudge flew to China. Experts later estimated a million foreign civilian quads crossed the border before the raid even started.

Billy remembered, years before, trying to hide his astonishment when his father first outlined his plan for a multinational Grand Raid. Now Billy didn't know what was harder to believe: that a million quads would have the balls to plunder Mongol wealth, or that he was about to fulfill his father's dream.

## **Chapter 65**

The Mongol commanders knew of the Baron's intent to lead a massive raid because they all saw the widely distributed videos of a guy in a red suit saying so. Which made it easier to dismiss because, as far as anyone knew, the Baron didn't speak Chinese or Japanese, and another guy wearing a red suit was marauding in the Stans. And they had multiple videos of that guy blowing flame out of his boot wands.

In contrast, every Mongol new agency broadcast stunning videos of a massive American armada sweeping across Mongolia with a vanguard of traitorous Indians. Now that was real. It's hard to fake burning cities and thousands of Mongol eye witnesses.

So, with the Khan leading an armada west, the governors needed to identify the greater threat: a quarter million deadly Americans, or a speech by a guy in a red suit talking about leading quads from a dozen kingdoms.

So the leadership sent every possible quad in China north to confront the Americans because the threat of a Grand Raid seemed ridiculous. Mongol authorities also assumed that any dead Mongol was murdered by local Chinese, and so retaliated almost at random. Terrified locals called upon militia, quad

relatives, and criminal organizations to protect them. Which led to more Mongol reprisals. But, out-numbered 100-to-1, vengeful Chinese overwhelmed local garrisons, police stations, and government offices. Cities became battlegrounds and rural areas became graveyards.

Then came the raid. And it was grand.

Instead of attacking on the next full moon, as stated in the video, a few hundred battalions from several kingdoms struck Mongol air bases the night before. Short-range units hit units just across the border, while the marathoners struck deeper to maximize surprise.

The crowds massing for the invasion saw videos of burning air bases before they even left home. Mobs poured over the border in a killing frenzy that overwhelmed the Mongols who had not fled.

Several million more Chinese now took the opportunity to kill Mongols and take their stuff. Those without wands used swords, arrows, and spears. Chaos and anarchy ruled the streets. Criminal gangs and ex-military raided on a larger scale in front of the invasion forces. Triads finally got their revenge on Imperial Guards. Foreigners serving in Mongol units killed their comrades and looted their barracks to raid on their own. The richer the Mongol, the sooner he died.

In China, as the raiders moved inland, more Mongol units banded together to push them back. But what they didn't do was wait until they had sufficient force. Instead, they made themselves targets for the foreign battalions. The invading mobs got bombed a lot, but the battalions behind them then wiped out the Mongol bombers.

Billy and his marathoners targeted western Mongolia, his near-marathoners struck central Mongolia, and the Koreans destroyed everything in eastern Mongolia. Dozens of caravans flowed east to Peking like rivers of riches.

His half-marathoners plundered the corridor between Peking and the port city of Tianjin, 120 kilometers away. The Americans captured every seaworthy ship in the harbor to transport their loot. Barges full of Mongol wealth sailed down river to the harbor.

As the weeks passed, more and more raiders returned home with all the valuables that they could carry. As the rest pressed inland, the greater territory spread them out ever thinner.

After a month, the tide turned. The invaders finally faced superior forces, who pushed them back towards the coast. Billy sent his non-marathoners home since they were too loaded down to fight. He used the marathoners to bomb the larger units, but did not stick around to eliminate them. Billy advised the other commanders to also return home while they could, and distributed a video urging all Chinese to leave northern China or face the Khan's wrath.

Over a million northern Chinese fled to Korea, the closest refuge. At Billy's suggestion, the Korean king used them to build mountaintop fortifications to deter the Khan.

Formation flyers still killed disorganized mobs, but this time in reverse. The Mongols progressed slowly, however, because they killed all non-Mongols on general principal. Millions of them. Rather than search door to door, the Mongols found it faster to simply flatten every building in their way. If they stayed in a killer mood long enough, the Mongols would depopulate northern China.

Everyone seemed shocked—shocked!—that the Mongols didn't bother to distinguish pro-Mongolian Chinese from the rebels. Except for Billy, who needed to physically separate Mongols from non-Mongols.

When they didn't have bombs, Billy looked for enemy divisions to gang up on. Mongols that spent the day targeting civilians would suddenly face fifty thousand disciplined marathoners. With plenty of food in the cities, Billy spent the next month surprising or overwhelming enemy forces, which gave millions of non-Mongols time to get away.

But what Billy didn't do was stand his ground. He couldn't surprise the same units twice, so once he attacked one, he moved on to the next. While this slowed the Mongols, it did not stop them. But Billy never intended to liberate China. He just wanted to "drain the swamp," as his father phrased it. That was the whole point of this entire campaign. And it worked better than he imagined.

Until the Mongols realized how much wealth they were losing. That's when they decided that killing everyone took too long. Now they leaped ahead unpredictably, trying to stop their valuables from leaving their lands.

Suddenly, Billy had too many targets. He struck as many as he could, until they started surprising him. In war, those who surprise, win, while the surprised die.

So Billy let his marathoners go home rich, except his best American battalion which guarded the last wagon train entering Peking.

Now Billy looked forward to a safe vacation with his wife and kids.

Then a scout saw fifty thousand enemies approaching the Gobi Desert, probably to intercept his golden caravan and burn whatever ships had not yet sailed.

Oh hell.

Billy led his last battalion north and poisoned every water hole within flying distance. The enemy already arrived at the largest water source on the northern side, so the Americans had to fly over a thousand kilometers at night to reach safety. Weaker quads would have been trapped between poison water and angry enemies.

Billy gave the Mongols a head start before he left to find them. He attacked them for an hour to wake them up, then slept far away under a blanket that resembled sand. At dawn, midday, and sunset he shot whoever stayed on the ground to exhaust them.

By dawn they apparently discovered that every water source in front of them was poisoned, forcing them to return the way they came. Billy naturally harassed them the entire trip.

Since blasts grow wider the farther they travel, Billy knocked the weary from the sky. The advantage is he could smack down several every heartbeat. Those with enough wit flew away from comrades since Billy targeted those in clumps. Billy didn't mind—he had plenty of weary targets to keep him occupied.

The exhausted, sleepy, dehydrated Mongols were no match for the Americans waiting for them at the oasis. The marathoners wiped out ten times their number without suffering a single casualty.

But angry Mongols now flew between them and the route back home. They couldn't stay, yet had nowhere to go.

## Chapter 66

Because they could not re-cross the Gobi, Billy sent his troops west, around the desert, while he took a dozen water sacks and over flew it at night.

Northern China looked almost as deserted as the desert he just crossed. Only the old, weak, and stupid stayed behind. Peking looked fake, like a theater full of unemployed actors. Forced from their homeland by foreign occupiers, the Chinese burned their crops and slaughtered the farm animals they could not bring with them. Even the vacant buildings looked like they wanted to leave.

Billy's marathoners had worked only in Mongolia and northern China. Something urged him to see how the Chinese from Hainan fared against the Mongols pressing into southern China.

Billy knew when he entered southern China by the millions of people desperately crossing the mighty Yangtze River. Many tried swimming, judging by the thousands of corpses littering the water. He followed the river west until he found the enemy force slaughtering the civilians. They drove what looked like a stampede of people. It reminded him of waves crashing upon rocky beaches.

Billy couldn't do much to help, but he did what he could. He killed the enemy commander, did his scream and fire dance, then let thousands of vengeful Mongols chase him away from the civilians. It'd only buy them a day, but that could save thousands of lives.

Billy found the Chinese camp by following the Mongols. He flashed his four wands to identify himself and landed to a standing ovation. He watched their fear turn into relief just at the sight of him. They expect to die soon, he concluded, even though they numbered in the thousands. Several officers led him to their commander, the ex-governor's grandson, Zhu Ching. Zhu, a powerful quad in his 40's, looked twice his age.

"Where have you been?" he greeted the Baron, not bothering to hide his desperation.

"I am well, thank you, general," Billy answered. "Yes, we destroyed the fifty thousand Mongols invading from the north. How are you?"

"The foreigners left! And a few million Chinese quads have abandoned us, with all the stolen valuables they could carry. That money was suppose to stay here."

"I'm sure you took your share." Billy was not sympathetic. If that wealth stayed here, the Mongols would obviously take it back. "How many quads do you still command?"

"A month ago I had over one hundred thousand, but now I only have ten under-strength battalions after recent desertions. I am all alone."

Other than several thousand troops.

"Well, you are not alone now," Billy assured him. "What about the enemy?"

"Until recently, the mob always looted ahead of us, so when they got hit, we struck whoever hit them. It worked out well for us. The greediest criminals gave us a trip wire."



"But then entire divisions starting hitting us—not retirees, but active duty troops good at formation flying under Kublai. Who knew that fat bastard could general an air force? He's not Subodei, but he's far more competent than I care for.

"A division now surrounds us on three sides, plus a few hundred thousand civilians and veterans. We have to move far every day just to stay alive. We'd have left long ago if we didn't have so many civilians to protect."

The general sighed. He looked ready to collapse under all the stress. "Genghis Khan is coming with one hundred thousand of his best quads. My guys are rich now, for the first time in their lives. They want to live long enough to spend those riches. They'll not stay and fight Genghis Khan. He could show up alone and say, boo, and I'd lose half my force."

"Then run."

"Can't you beat them? They say you're the best."

Billy felt tired. "My wands are not magical. They cannot make the enemy disappear. If I have highly motivated super-quads who can fly higher, faster, and farther, then I attack if I have surprise. Otherwise, I avoid battle until I enjoy favorable circumstances."

The general looked about to cry. "I don't know what to do."

"Show me the enemy on a map," Billy asked.

Billy could tell these officers didn't want to fight. They may have been fierce warriors a month ago, but now they felt like rich teenagers eager for a night out on the town.

"They're boxing you in," Billy concluded after just a glance at the map. "Once you stay in one place long enough for them to position themselves, they'll hit you from three directions. I suggest you leave as much as possible behind, go tonight, and fly as far as you can. Give everyone a week off to hide their wealth, so the Mongols don't know who to follow. Those who fly the farthest will survive at the expense of the slowest."

"But who will protect China?" one of the officers asked.

"They're after blood, while your guys want to survive long enough to spend their new wealth. Your quads are worthless until they can safely store their valuables at home. Then they'll fight for their homes, gold, and families. Only then will fliers rally around you for protection.

"I'll send for the marathoners that I returned and give you a video of me asking their leaders to send you everything they have. They'll help you because they know they'll be next. They could loan you one hundred thousand quads, which will stiffen the spines of the few million Chinese quads that may be available.

"After the Mongols exhaust themselves driving deep into your territory, bombard them from behind with everything you've got while they're sleeping. Maximize casualties because you won't get a second chance. Harass them until they leave, and make the Yangtze River your new border. Then declare independence, form a representative democracy, and sign mutual defense pacts with your neighbors."

"But the Khan has half a million quads!"

"Not anymore. My marathoners in the Stans have killed half of them. I'll try to get rid of his follow-up forces. With me behind him, he'll have to redeploy several divisions to protect his rear. Stand your ground because he can't garrison what he

has, much less what he wants to take. We've killed at least several million Mongols, and probably twice that, so the Khan has never been weaker."

Billy saw the sheer terror that the Khan inspired. One of the colonels looked like he had to take a dump. Billy wanted to inspire that depth of fear in his enemies.

"How many marathoners do you have?" Billy asked.

"Just one battalion."

"Have everyone else leave now while the marathoners bomb the enemy at midnight. Nothing fancy—just drop them where the enemy is most concentrated. When the Mongols chase you, I'll flash my four wands and do my silly scream to distract them so your marathoners escape. Then use your marathoners to lure the Mongols away from your main force and tire them out."

"Oh thank you, Mr. Baron!"

The general looked tempted to hug him, so Billy stepped back. Having their decision made for them energized the staff. The officers rushed out to spread the news that the Red Baron himself was gonna save them.

"You impregnated my sister and daughter," Zhu told him once they had privacy. Billy was not sure if the general was proud or angry.

"They don't even tell me who they are," Billy replied. "Some tough looking grandma tells me to come and them to go. You have no idea how awkward it is, someone entering a dark room to reproduce, then leaving without saying a word. I call it Ninja Sex because I never see or hear them. If stress, exhaustion, or sleepiness inhibits my ability to participate, the matron scolds me like a child. Everyone thinks the Red Baron is powerful, yet procreating with nameless, faceless silent shadows makes me feel impotent even as I impregnate them. I sometimes feel like a blind man in a dark room at night looking for a black cat that isn't there."

"So why do it?"

Billy sighed. "Who knows how long it'll take to beat the damn Mongols? I fear Genghis Khan has a trick up his sleeve that I haven't seen yet. And the more royal families I mate with, hopefully the fewer wars they'll start. After three centuries of global war, I'll do anything for world peace."

"That was my grandmother, Kung-ti's wife, scolding you. I remember what it feels like. I look forward to seeing if your kids resemble the father."

"I'm trying to create a legend, so I hope my kids don't compare themselves to me. My father was a greater man than I'll ever be, and you can tell my children that."

After a nap he infiltrated the enemy camp and the level of disorganization surprised him. Probably from all the veterans expecting special treatment, yet refusing to organize into units. Having cowed the Chinese, they slept soundly, so Billy walked among them, stabbing as he went.

Billy came across their munitions depot and smiled. He continued cutting them up, occasionally flying away when someone shot at him, while at the same time searching for the tent of that fat bastard Kublai. It took him another hour—and three brief firefights—before he stumbled upon it. And he only recognized it because of the numerous guards surrounding it.

A battalion was pre-loaded with bombs, so he worked his way there. He sliced and diced while looking for a rock to hide under. He just finished putting on a

pack that he took off of a dying bomber when three quads—all commanders—unexpectedly surrounded him ready to shoot. He popped up and shot down before they struck, terrified they'd detonate his bomb and blow him into tiny pieces. Except he aimed for a bomb pack near them. The explosion triggered other bombs as Billy escaped at maximum speed. That woke up half the camp.

He went to ground and walked through the trees, slicing whenever he could do so safely. It shocked him how much the damn bomb weighed -- he really did lose a lot of muscle on the Alps. He needed to eat more and sleep better. The stress was killing him.

Zhu finally arrived to bomb the camp. Several hit the bombing battalion and the place lit up like New Years. Anti-personnel bombs explode on contact, so quads were safer in the air. As one, thousands of Mongols flew up. This little ruse would tire them too much to catch the Chinese.

Billy, in contrast, raced to Kublai's tent. He popped up into an arc and used wand levitation to throw the bomb at five hundred meters. Now in a controlled fall, he shot four wands at Kublai's security. Just as the bodyguards fixed their aim on him, the bomb exploded, shrapnel flying everywhere. Billy adjusted his fall, continued firing, then went to blades to cut the rest of them down as reinforcements rushed in.

He fled inside the burning tent and stabbed Kublai, still barely awake. Hiding behind the royal heir, Billy transferred Kublai's Millennial Wands. They warmed his hands like a stiffening penis. The surge in power sent him soaring. With flames all around them, Billy felt like a dodo bird, which was so dumb it actually jumped into the cooking pot. Nearly on fire themselves, Kublai looked him in the eye and told him something explosive.

Billy now had six of the remaining eight sets of Millennial Wands.

He burned a hole in the ceiling and flew to the munitions depot. They assembled a log roof over the bomb wagons, but that didn't protect them from the sides. Billy sliced a bomber taking off and threw his bomb pack against one of the wagons. Seeing what he planned, dozens of Mongols rushed him, but not before he popped up to his maximum effective distance to point his arms and legs at the bomb. Four fireballs struck at the same time with enough heat to detonate it. The wagon full of munitions disappeared, setting off secondary explosions that shook the ground like an earthquake. The air super-heated like a dragon farting.

Billy popped away as soon as he fired. He almost made it over the crest of a mound when the pressure wave smacked him like a fly. It threw him head over heels into a tree. A much greater shockwave followed, but the mound sent the worst of it over him. Billy covered his head with his arms and kissed the grass in a fetal position. Eyes firmly shut and gulping a lungful of air, searing heat reached out and gave him a night time sunburn that almost set his clothes on fire. Despite his head ringing, he could hear what sounded like a god screaming in agony.

The key to Billy's survival was seeing into the future just a little farther than everyone else. So, half deaf, and with a good case of the shakes, Billy searched for stunned enemies to eliminate. And there were thousands on the ground bleeding from their eyes, mouths, or ears. It was like killing fish on a beach. He wobbled as quickly as he could, knowing he'd soon be discovered.

As his senses returned, something made Billy look up. There, maybe a kilometer up, Zhu and his marathoners were still shooting at thousands of Mongols. So many enemies should have overwhelmed them, but Billy's explosion energized the Chinese and shocked the Mongols.

More and more quads, coming to aid the wounded, noticed Billy dispatching their comrades. He evaded them as long as possible until they swarmed too close to comfort. At the peak of his ability, he could have continued all night, but he was not near peak ability. After someone he didn't see whacked him on the back of the head, Billy took that as a sign and shot straight up at full propulsion. He did his scream and led them away from the fleeing Chinese marathoners.

The next week he'd watch a news report of General Zhu claiming the Baron helped a million Chinese civilians escape by killing Kublai and throwing the Mongols into confusion. And associating his own heroics with the Red Baron didn't hurt his reputation as his grandfather scheduled a national election for the following year.

War is terrible for many reasons, but it also has its moments. He just wished he could see the Khan's face when he heard the Red Baron killed his last legitimate grandson.

## **Chapter 67**

Genghis Khan impatiently paced outside the smoldering ruins of Krakow like a cat waiting for a mouse to come out of its hole. A dozen generals nervously stood nearby, each with an expert opinion he didn't dare share. The Khan reduced the entire city to rubble to show his displeasure. Yet even massacring a million innocent people barely improved his mood. Destroying all of Europe -- now that would lighten his fury.

This entire expedition had been a disaster. Flying west was like marching in mud because he needed a long logistical train to supply a million mouths. The cities he normally relied on lay in ruins. He had to set perimeters three thousand kilometers out, with layers of security and redundant sentries to counter the damn enemy. The problem with marathoners is that they can come and go with virtual impunity, and are almost impossible to find.

Genghis was tempted just to take his specialty quads to travel fast, but fighting like the Baron's force meant hardship: frequent hunger, no protection from the weather, going weeks between bathing, and always wearing the same stinking clothes. Every little infection became life threatening. Just the thought of using leaves to clean his backside after crapping made Genghis shudder. It brought back memories of that decade he suffered from hemorrhoids.

Sometimes the enormity of his losses would stun him into a horrifying trance. It felt like a bad dream that wouldn't end. Or a metal box he couldn't escape.

If only he had quads like the Baron's! He knew he used to -- that's how he conquered half the world.

Every night for several weeks the Baron attacked him, then ganged up on the special units he sent after him. Genghis lost a few hundred thousand quads and a few hundred thousand two-wanders without ever engaging in a proper battle. They attacked and he defended. Never once had he been able to strike them, much less with surprise.

Not until he crossed the Stans did he realize how big an area the Baron depopulated. His force found nobody who spoke Mongolian in the weeks it took his armada to cross the territory.

What worried Genghis the most is that the Baron's force fell from fifty thousand marathoners to just five thousand exceptional ones. The Khan assumed his arch nemesis was preparing something diabolical, but he couldn't figure out what. So they traveled as carefully as possible.

If someone had told Genghis that the guy impersonating the Red Baron sent home those forty-five battalions, Genghis would not have believed it. Nor would he find convincing the idea that they only fought as long as they did precisely because they were promised they could return home—with all the wealth that they could carry—as soon as Genghis Khan entered the Stans.

Genghis would have found the idea unfathomable. But there it was. The Baron, in his flaming red suit, harassed his armada with just five thousand quads. Really good ones, certainly, but where was he hiding the others?

Five thousand quads punishing five hundred thousand humiliated the Khan. His hatred of the Baron kept him from sleeping at night, which made dealing with him dangerous. His staff walked like the ground was full of eggs they didn't dare break.

His head jerked up when wands sang out. Another scout came in to give the latest.

"Nothing to the north, sir, although an enemy company was seen a few days ago escorting a large number of civilian air mules to Finland."

The khan cursed softly. He felt like pulling his damn beard out.

"Then where the hell is he? Marathoners don't just beat everything around them for months, then disappear when they run out of resistance. He murdered my wife, sacked my cities, and slaughtered half of my armada because he wanted a fight. Why won't he fight?"

Russia, Scandinavia, Prussia, Persian, and Turkish air forces tracked him from a safe distance. To the west, American Jack organized what the news reports called a European Air Force numbering several hundred thousand, so he assumed the Baron was setting up a massive attack from all sides. At times he felt like he didn't need enemies to do him in; the damn stress may just do it for them.

But the Big Day never happened. Team Red, as they called themselves, attacked constantly, but everyone else stayed away. So Genghis sacked the first city in Europe that he came across. Just to bring about the climatic battle he assumed was coming. Looking back, he regretted not targeting Moscow. But he had so many regrets.

A warning from the sky shrieked and Genghis rushed outside. A single exhausted quad descended, dozens of wands tracking him. He landed well away from the Khan, tapped his vocal cords, then gave the bad news as soon as he could catch a breath.

"The Baron somehow raised a huge force of foreign quads," he cried out. "The Americans and Koreans wiped out Mongolia, while a million foreign quads swept China with several million Chinese."

The Immortal walked closer. "Jirko?"

Everyone knew the Khan's son-in-law because of the Millennial Wands the emperor gave him.

People assumed that the Khan killed everyone who could blast with their boot wands, but only his descendents had ever displayed this ability, so he only killed potential troublemakers. The rest lived far away to avoid having a fatal accident.

About once every decade Genghis fathered a child who stole his heart. His most recent beloved daughter, Khutulun, was as beautiful as she was powerful, and blasted with her boot wands stronger than Genghis Khan himself. Yet she would only agree to marry someone more powerful, so Genghis let her roam the world to find her mate.

And that's how she found Jirko, the heir to the Siamese Empire, who could also use his boot wands for more than propulsion. The clever couple even planted a seed that was too entertaining to dismiss: that one of their children could one day inherit both kingdoms, uniting the Mongol and Siamese empires. Without bloodshed. Genghis had dreamed of that for two hundred years.

Then what happens? The Baron destroys the Siamese Empire and slaughters Jirko's entire family. On the one hand, Genghis just lost a powerful ally when Siam went under. But, on the other hand, his champion now hated his arch enemy as much as he did. So it wasn't all bad.

Jirko set a new world record for one thousand kilometers at the Olympics several years ago, only to be beaten by the Boy Wonder. Who the hell sets a new record, only to get the silver? Genghis remembered inviting Jirko to a public feast where he showered the depressed champion with praise to cushion the bad jokes.

Genghis handed Jirko a water sack. While drinking, Jirko played the video of the Baron doing his scream and fire dance. Genghis had learned to distinguish between the true Baron and the imposters, and knew this was the real one.

Ironic that it was Jirko, of all people, to bring him the terrible news since it was Genghis who informed Jirko that the Red Baron killed all seven generations of his family in Siam.

Genghis Khan lived a hard life. Tatars poisoned his father to death, then his clan left him to starve on the freezing steppe when he was just ten. He had to kill his older brother because he stole food while the family starved. His former clan enslaved him for the murder. He fought for twenty-five years to unite the clans, only to have his childhood friend and blood brother Jamuka become his greatest rival. So he hardened his heart long ago. But failing to protect millions who counted on him threatened his sanity.

Without saying another word, he walked to his personal tent where no one could witness his uncontrollable rage. To be out-witted at the peak of his power infuriated him. The Baron humiliated him repeatedly so the rest of the world would stop fearing him. He had never felt impotent before—even when the Baron crushed his genitals—and it ate him up like a cancer.

But rage did not stop his mind from working. For months he felt like he was being played. And now he realized he was. The Baron lured him literally out of Asia to destroy the heart of his empire.

Genghis could now see that the Baron killed his Empress to make him personally lead the chase away from the real target. The Baron suckered him. He never planned on battling him. He just wanted time to depopulate Mongolia. While his heart ached and his emotions raged, his mind recognized brilliance when he saw it. Despite all his efforts, Genghis fell into the Baron's trap after all.

He felt like such a tool. Now he understood why he had not received messages from home for so long. He stuck his head out of his tent and barked his smartest order in months: "Let's go home."

Not that he saw any other option. His destruction of Krakow scared the Europeans into uniting against him. The Russians, Scandinavians, Prussians, Turks, Persians, and even the Arabs looked like they were just waiting for him to lock horns with the Europeans so they could sodomize him.

As soon as his men started breaking camp, those five thousand super-quads bombed them again, with one of them doing the Baron's scream and dance. Tired of feeling helpless, Genghis chased them himself, but they disappeared before he could get close. It unnerved him how fast they flew. He used to be the fastest, yet he couldn't even close the distance. It never occurred to him that those five thousand enjoyed the best wands ever produced.

Now he understood what returning home would be like: exactly like the damn trip here. Those bastards would slow him down as much as they could, because that's what the Baron told them to do months ago. That's why they always seemed to have food, bombs, and shelter. Because the Baron planned this long ago.

He had to get home to salvage what he could, so he separated his one hundred thousand best quads, even though this meant re-forming every battalion, company, and squad.

A week later, in the Stans, millions of Mongol refugees shared their stories and he finally appreciated the scale of the disaster. Then he learned that the Red Baron himself killed his heir and prevented the destruction of the main Chinese force. Several thousand kilometers from where the Khan was hunting him.

He resolved to kill the Baron and everyone he cared about.

## **Chapter 68**

When Billy found his American battalion, they came with a surprise: his wife! Princess didn't fly here alone. She flew with five thousand super-quads outfitted in world-class armor suits.

Princess hugged him before he even landed, sending them tumbling on the grassy steppe. Fortunately they landed in some bushes where they kissed for the first time in almost a year. Afterwards she showed him new images of their firstborn, Elizabeth, and now their son, Harry.

"He's just like you," Princess claimed, "except with my dark hair, eyes, and skin."

"Yet he's just like me? What, he's small and skinny?" Billy joked.

"No, because he's demanding, cries a lot, and tries to pee on me," Prince answered.

"Brother," Billy replied, "I don't care how much you look like my beautiful wife, I'm not having sex with you. Anymore."

Prince must have had a good year since he didn't get all prickly on him. Since Kiev, he, Mali, and a few others had been dueling across the Empire to build up their flame. Prince made himself a fortune.

"You're lucky fatherhood has mellowed me. I have a few dozen kids, and many more on the way. Dear sister has them milk me like a cow."

"And me like an elephant," Bear boasted. "Those magnificent wands you gave me have somehow overcome my great looks, charismatic personality, and elephantine penis. I don't have as many babies as Prince Charming here but, then again, I don't have his inferiority complex. And don't get me started on Tiny," he said, gesturing to the huge American Indian. "We're saving the biggest ladies for him because this world doesn't have enough giants."

"Both of our boys look exactly like you," a radiant Blade pointed out, showing images of their sons. "Because of the imperial guard attack in Venice, we sent the babies to relatives for safety. My family in Switzerland is taking back our kingdom. Your son may someday become king."

Billy would spend the day watching proud mothers show him videos of his beautiful babies. He had not been this happy since his mother died. He didn't know he even could be happy since his mother died.

"You look different without all the pent-up anger," Billy told Blade.

"Better or worse?" Blade demanded, an edge to her voice.

"Oh, better. Much better. Did you want to give our sons a little sister?"

"I didn't fly several thousand clicks to hear your jokes," she said with a smile.

Billy turned to Prince. "Struck out again?"

"Unlike you, I'm not into lesbians."

"Yes, I turned him down," Blade confirmed. "I still prefer women, so Princess still gets all she wants. And then some."

For reasons he had not yet cleared up, it bothered Billy that his wife—that's how he saw her—slept with other women. A lot.

"Feeling left out, Grandma?" Billy joked.

"A woman with my passion would break you little men like a sucked wand. Tiny, however," she said looking up at him, "doesn't look too fragile."

Tiny, to his credit, didn't bat an eye. "Just don't uncork this wine unless you'll finish the bottle."

Pleasantries over, they gleefully recounted how they flew rings around the Great Khan, and how he returned home rather than ravage Europe. Billy blanched when they told him of a million dead when Genghis sacked Krakow. The super-quads harassed him all the way home, until they found Americans about to run into one hundred thousand Mongols.

"Alright, Red," Prince interrupted. "How did you lose a million Asian quads? And how did you get them in the first place? They'd have been handy right now."



"Same way you lost yours—they took their money and went home. But now powerful neighbors surround the Empire. I hope they keep Genghis busy."

"You're not gonna lead their defense?"

"I prefer offense. Waiting for half a million fliers to attack doesn't appeal to me."

"But we're still gonna kill Mongols, right?" Prince needed to know. He still thirsted to avenge his parents.

"As many as we can, as fast as we can, for as long as we can," Billy answered. "All we did these last few years was drain the swamp. Now we have to turn it into desert."

"Genghis will probably fly to China along the Silk Road, bringing only the quads with the greatest endurance. After they pass by, I'd love to bomb his follow-up forces. The Tian Shan Mountains would be perfect for ambushes if we can find some bombs."

"After Kiev," Grandma said, "we sent trainers, wands, and gold to rebels in India. Maybe we can find help there."

Billy started laughing. He told them what happened at the Bering Strait. "I wonder how many Indians reached India. It seemed every Mongol unit wanted to punish the traitors."

Later that night, Billy took Grandma aside into a grove for privacy.

"How's the other Baron?"

Grandma smiled. "I've never seen him happier. I didn't think he could be happy after losing his third family, but the ladies drained him at every opportunity, not knowing he was not the real Baron. He likes the idea of having more children than even the Mongols can kill. Does it bother you that he has impregnated hundreds of your women?"

Billy swayed in the wind, blinking hard to get the images out of his head. "I had not thought of that. All those mothers will think I'm the father of their children. I may never know which kids are really mine."

It surprised Grandma how much she enjoyed his discomfort. "How does it feel to be a cuckold a thousand times over?"

Billy shook himself awake. He couldn't afford to let himself show his vulnerabilities, so he showed her the new Millennial Wands.

"I took these from a dying Mongol."

She stared at them like a ghost, turning them over in a weird trance. It was the only time Billy ever saw her unguarded. Several conflicting emotions crossed her face.

"Were these your father's?" he asked gently.

Shocked, she looked up a little scared. "But how could you possibly know that?"

"Kublai asked me to give these Millennials to his daughter, who was a better general than her father. Said she earned them. It took me this long to figure out who she was. And you can have them, too. But first, I want to know why the great-granddaughter of Genghis Khan has fought the Empire for two centuries."

Grandma looked around to make sure they were alone. "When I shot flame from my boot wands at five years old, Kublai had my mother take me and flee. He had so many illegitimate daughters nobody ever missed me."

"Who knows you can use your boot wands for something other than flight?" Billy asked.

"Still living? Only Jack and the son who impersonates you."

"You can have your father's wands, but you must show me your true power."

"What do you mean?" she asked angrily. She didn't like being challenged.

"I think you hold back. You project ten meter long flames, but your blasts are as powerful as the twins."

They held a staring contest, but he was right, so he won. Smiling sheepishly, she blew flame thirteen meters from the new Millennial Wands and he jumped up and down like a kid.

"Now show me your face," she demanded.

Billy reluctantly took off his mask, hoping no one could record it in the darkness.

"I knew it! You're just a damn kid with deadly wands!"

"No one would follow me if they knew my true age," he pointed out. "Hey, can you scream like me?"

The prospect startled her. "Why?" Billy smiled as an idea developed. "Red, stop smiling. You're scaring me."

"If you can scream like me, then I'll plan something special for the Olympics."

"Are you gonna kill Genghis Khan? And don't you dare lie to me."

Billy chuckled. "Oh, Grandma. We're gonna kill them all."

"You swear?"

"I swear on my life."

## Chapter 69

Billy left a few super-quads to track the Mongol follow-up forces, while the Americans built hard-to-find mountaintop bunkers. The rest flew to India.

Prince saw them first. A squad on the horizon suddenly turned and fled. Billy's vanguard, consisting of the very best quads, raced after them. Billy, the fastest, overtook the squad first. They banked away in a steep dive, but Billy not only kept up, but flew ahead to sound off a friendly greeting. Since neither wore Mongol uniforms, Billy carefully closed the distance and gestured for them to land.

"Birdy!" Grandma yelled once their leader took off his flight helmet. Billy saw the relief on the guy's face. The others looked Indian. "Birdy, this is the Red Baron. Birdy is one of our trainers."

Birdy looked at Billy, disappointed.

"Why does everyone think I should be taller?" Billy complained, which broke the ice with the new guys. "How many Indians from the Bering Strait made it home?"

Birdy smiled. How the Baron convinced Indians in the Mongol Air Force to turn on their masters had become legendary.

"I heard sixty thousand made it to Tibet, where Kublai had set up an ambush. Mongols may hate you, but they hate traitors more. The Indians got hit several times before that, but this time the Mongols overwhelmed them. Maybe twenty thousand crossed the Himalayas, but they kept getting attacked. The High Command delayed the final assault on Ceylon just to punish the traitors."

"Anyways, the unit broke up and several thousand may have made it home. Rich, apparently. Criminal gangs flew all the way to Tibet just to see if the rumors were true. And apparently they were. The Mongol Air Force saw desertion soar, although few of them signed up with the new government in Ceylon.

"The Mongols made things worse by treating the families of deserters as traitors to be shot on sight. Local militias stepped in to protect them. Units sent to destroy those militias had their own members blast their leaders. Which created more traitors, more angry militias, and more battles."

The new elated Billy. "That worked out better than I had hoped. How are the rebels doing?"

"Oh, they're still in Ceylon. The politicians can't decide on a general, so they won't go on offense. I almost cried when I heard they're using my marathoners to line the ramparts like untrained two-wanders."

"They're using marathoners in a static defense?" Billy's jaw dropped to his knees. "We must rescue them!" Meaning the marathoners, not the rebels. "We were looking for your team. How many are you?"

"We've trained seven marathon battalions. Almost half deserted to us when the Khan ordered them to the Bering Strait. I have the best battalion to slow the Mongols down if they divert to crush the rebellion."

"We need those battalions to bomb the slower Mongols on the Silk Road as they pass through the Tian Shan Mountains."

"Good luck getting permission to take them. The Mongol High Command in India is throwing everything they have against the rebels so that they can later send troops to help retake China."

They arrived a few days later. Billy called a leadership meeting to go over their options. Below them a ring of torches marked the northernmost fortifications that blocked Ceylon from the rest of India.

"By morning they'll know we're here and we lose surprise. I say we break into companies and hit their barracks while they sleep, grab their bombs, and drop them on the next row of fortifications. Once the situation starts to go against us, we race to the island. Company commanders, don't expect orders from me. Use your best judgment to hurt them while preserving your unit. Unless anyone has any better ideas?"

Billy looked straight at Prince, who threw up his hands. "Hey, I ran out of great ideas in Kiev."

"Well, we ran out of food, so I guess we eat Mongolian tonight."

The barracks sat in a line a few hundred kilometers long, which meant they'd attack across a very long and very thin front. Few companies would even fight within sight of each other. Since the enemy did not mass their troops, they did not have any better option. But at least they could bomb the enemy in their sleep, since they picked up bombs that Birdy stored on the Himalayas.

Billy flew with Birdy to get a sense of his tactical abilities. His company flew low and fast, utilizing terrain to mask their approach. It bothered Billy that the Mongols didn't seem to have any patrols or sentries behind them. They dropped their bombs, pulverizing the fortifications, then dropped to one hundred meters to shoot at everything that moved. Almost all the defenders were two-wanders.

It was over before the smoke cleared.

"That's it?" Billy asked, worried.

"Something's wrong," Birdy answered. They discovered the problem as soon as the dust settled. "They're gone! They must be bombing Ceylon before the monsoons start. We have to warn them!"

Billy took off at maximum speed. A few hours later, he flew over several large shadows before finding the island. Those on the ground could not hear his wands, so he dropped in a controlled fall and blasted down. From that great height, his blasts would spread out too far to hurt anyone, but would hit hard enough to wake people up. Once he saw Ceylon patrols coming at him, he flashed four wands to identify himself and sounded a friendly greeting.

"One hundred thousand bombers are coming," he yelled at them, guessing about the number attacking.

Their squad sounded the alarm and Billy immediately mimicked it, but with four powerful wands. The patrol seemed shocked that his alarm was so much louder than all of theirs combined.

On the surface they heard their warning repeated and soon hundred, then thousands, flew up. Other patrols flew in and Billy tapped his ears to hear them report that many battalions were forming up on all sides of the island. The leaders huddled in a hover to figure out how to respond to the threat. Billy suddenly saw what the Mongols were up to. To interrupt the arguing Indians and to introduce himself to the fliers now joining them, Billy released his terrifying primal scream and flashed his four wands. In the stunned silence that followed, Billy yelled his orders:

"Their two-wanders need to rise in an arc to drop their bombs in a controlled fall, so form a circle to shoot them in the back as they rise." No one reacted, but neither did they argue with him. Damn, doesn't anyone understand Mongolian anymore? "I'm the Red Baron and I say, form a damn circle!"

This time, with large shadows approaching on their horizons, they did as he commanded.

Over the next several minutes, tens of thousands of Ceylons joined them. Eyeing the bombers, Billy flew around the circle to order them to back up. The flow of Ceylons that continued to rise from the island joined the circle instead of becoming targets in the middle.

As the battalions closed, Billy noticed the ones coming directly from the mainland were much closer than those who had to circle around to hit them from open ocean. As he well knew, timing is everything in a surprise attack. If everyone doesn't strike at the same time, then enough defenders survive to fight back.

As the closest battalions climbed in their square-shaped formations, Billy raced over to release his famous scream. Human nature being what it is, many in that first formation could not help but turn around to look. Instead of keeping their spacing, hundreds collided with their comrades, sending surprised fliers tumbling out of the sky. Squadrons of quads formed the corner of each formation square. Those closest to him broke off to attack. Billy responded by popping up in his own arc and shooting every wand at the same target.

Even as the exhilaration of battle consumed him, Billy thanked the Khan for pulling one hundred thousand quads from India. Just ten thousand would have swept the defenders from the sky.

The circle of quads now sent volleys into the backs of the rising attackers. The closest battalion was still too far below them for fatal shots from an average wand, but the better wands knocked holes in their formation, which must have unnerved the unit.

Then the battle changed. Billy's four blasts detonated a backpack and the entire squad disappeared faster than the eye could track their falling body parts in the night sky. The defenders cheered, closed the distance, and intensified the shooting. Many more backpacks exploded and the battle turned into a massacre. Billy poured fire into the second group of quads until they, too, blew into tiny pieces.

The Mongols now felt like suicide bombers, yet they realized they had no good tactical options: instead of continuing to rise in their bombing arc, they could just fly over the island to release their bombs, but their backpacks would invite blasts from the defenders above. Turning around also left them exposed. Every one of them wanted to simply jettison their backpacks, but that took more time than they had, although many dropped out of formation to try.

A crescendo of explosions rose to a deafening roar as the squares of bombers flew into range of the ring of defenders. Entire battalion formations disintegrated as terrified two-wanders fled. Losing the element of surprise defanged the whole operation anyway.

Billy raced towards the attackers coming from the ocean. Billy distracted them with his primal scream. The Mongol quads had their backs to the Baron and could not help but turn to look. Half of the two-wanders flying straight up impotently watched Billy fire at them since they needed both wands to fly. Billy's distraction cost them precious time.

Then the first backpack exploded, soon followed by others. The bombers wisely broke formation and ran for their lives, falling to give themselves time to cut the straps off their backpacks. The elated Ceylons raced to kill them. All around the island, the massive air force disappeared -- either literally from explosions, or from members diving to lose themselves above the wave tops. Thousands of fliers from the island chased them down.

"Kill the quads!" Billy shouted repeatedly to groups of joyous Indians as he took his own advice and blasted quads who had no choice but to show their backs to him. As the fastest left the slowest behind, Billy focused on the swiftest. By dawn, the herd had thinned out considerably and made it easier for the hunters to take down the hunted.

Finally the first Mongol fortresses came into view and gave new speed to the terrified prey. Billy, exhausted, tapped his last reserve to blast as many quads as possible before the fortress could protect them. Hundreds of them landed and the thought of flying all the way back to the island sucked the life out of Billy. Until, as more enemies landed, a few of them popped back up while firing down. Some managed to escape their own fortress, but others got overwhelmed by guards.

Then Billy's heart sank when squads dropped from the clouds. But, instead of attacking Billy, they attacked those Mongols trying to get away. Just as his tired brain tried to make sense of it, the fortress ejected more of Team Red. They formed a skirmish line and chased down the Mongols. Billy found enough energy to flash his wands to identify himself, then land in the fortress, dangerously dehydrated.

## Chapter 70

His quads, spread out over a few hundred kilometers, naturally killed everyone in the fortifications and took everything valuable. Then they moved on to the next line of fortifications. And the next. In a beautiful irony, his quads were perfectly positioned to mow down thousands of exhausted Mongols by occupying the southernmost line of fortifications built by the very men they killed. Team Red got to kill several times their number in the fortifications, then kill several times their number expecting sanctuary.

But all this loot loaded them down, so Billy invited them to deposit it at his bank.

Billy didn't give the politicians the opportunity to waste this opportunity. He called a meeting of the military commanders, expecting just Team Red and the marathoners that Birdy trained. Instead, it appeared that all the quads commanders showed up. Either to see the famous Baron, or all the booty that his team captured the night before. The politicians showed up, of course, but he ignored them to speak to the unit leaders.

"I heard that you're all risking your lives for an independent India for free. Well, I'd like to pay you according to how high or far you can fly. Sign up with Birdy and open an account with Global Bank so that you can rob Mongol banks and businesses with us.

"Half of what you take belongs to the Republic of India. You get to keep the other half, although I ask you to distribute some to the families of our slain and disabled heroes. My team will lead the marathoners to destroy the larger units. Start now or else the enemy will surprise us, instead of the other way around."

No one but the politicians objected, so they fanned out, seeking out the enemy for the first time. While Grandma led the marathoners, Billy visited the news agencies in the largest cities to urge Indians to kill Mongols on sight, plead with the militias to join the democratic government, and warn Indians serving with the Mongols to switch sides or else.

As he hoped, the appearance of the Red Baron electrified the subcontinent. He distributed a longer video of him killing Tamerlane. The first week went so well that he stayed to orchestrate the second week. Billy was so in-demand that time flew by like a super-quad.

Things couldn't be better. Until Blade arrived from the Tian Shan Mountains to report the horrible news.

"They wiped out half of the Americans," she said, looking like she either just flew a few thousand kilometers, was pregnant again, or both. "Genghis sterilized the Silk Road so the follow up forces could travel faster. He rewarded locals, who gave us up. The vanguard of the follow-up forces will arrive in just a few days."

Well, that made Billy feel like shit because he was suppose to return a week ago. No way anyone but him could get there in time. He had sent ten thousand Indian near-marathoners north with bombs, but they wouldn't get there in time.

He called a meeting of his team leaders. "Load up the Indian marathoners with bombs and have them launch as soon as they get back from raiding. I want Team Red to leave in the morning without bombs. Have each battalion fly on their own so the slowest won't hold back the fastest." He paused to consider his options. The sight of Birdy gave him an idea. "Our victories have multiplied the number of air bandits—quads who've turned criminal. Birdy, spread the word that the Red Baron secretly moved the plunder your troops accumulated when based out of the Himalayas."

"What plunder?" Birdy asked surprised.

"The huge fortune you guys stole from Mongols north of the Himalayas," Billy said with a wink. "Yeah, reassure the new guys that I had the treasure moved to the northern side of the western-most Himalayas to put it out of reach of the Mongols in India. I want those bandits to become our blocking force in case the Mongols from the Silk Road decide to intervene in India.

"Genghis and his best quads are back in China by now, but they need those follow-on forces. I'm gonna lure their vanguard to the Himalayas to give the rest of you time. The Mongols will assume the criminals are our troops, and the criminals will assume the Mongols want to take the gold that they think we've buried.

"Unless anyone has any better ideas."

## Chapter 71

Billy sat in the lotus position to slow his breathing when Princess started up again.

"I know you can hear me," she said, as if he wasn't in the same room. "It's ridiculous that you won't wait for us. We may not fly as fast as you, but we can fly pretty damn fast. Isn't that the point of putting all the super-quads in their own units? But no, you want to play the hero and attack them alone like in Barcelona. I saw the Mongol uniform you have under your overcoat. That means you plan on infiltrating their camp."

Billy didn't care about glory, fame, or power. He just wanted to stop a never-ending world war that killed a million civilians a year. Nine generations of his ancestors died for that mission. As the world's most powerful quad, he owed it to them. Everyone has to decide what to make their life about—stopping a cruel imperialist empire from subjugating the entire human race seemed a pretty good way to spend one's life. It was not just worth killing for, but worth dying for. But Princess knew all this.

Billy got up and inspected his backpack while silently thanking his father for his advice.

"I wanted to wait until morning, but you won't let me meditate, even though you know that the more I slow my breathing, the higher I can fly, and therefore the faster and longer. I can get there early to slow the enemy vanguard. But not with you filling my head with your fears. You want me with you, but you drive me away. I am what I do. I'll spend the rest of my life killing Mongols. If you help me, then

we can be together. If not, not. But right now you're costing me my edge. I need peace of mind in order to do what I do, so you are killing me."

Princess broke into tears—a woman's cruelest tool. He packed some leftover food, bandages, and water sacks.

"Listen to me," he said, raising her chin with his palm. "My mother, Elizabeth, was the only legitimate child of King Richard of England and Queen Ann of Ireland. If something happens to me, take our children to my grandfather. Technically, I'm still next in line to the throne."

"You're a real prince?" She backed up as if bitch-slapped. "Here I've been telling everyone to call me princess, and all this time you've been a damn prince? And didn't tell anyone?"

"I'm too busy to rule, so I told the king to find another heir to the English throne."

Princess nearly fainted. She stared at him as if her eyes couldn't focus. Her mouth formed such a perfect "O" that it tempted Billy to place a coin in it like a fish on a dinner plate.

"Do you have any other family secrets you'd care to share with your fiancée?" she finally deadpanned.

"Oh, on my father's side I'm a Prussian baron and heir to the kingdom of Bohemia. It's why I call myself the Red Baron. Like my father, my name is William von Richthofen, but my parents called me Billy."

"That's it?" she asked sarcastically.

Billy twisted the knife. "You know how Jack thought Subodei wiped out his first family, and how he love his wife so much that he never remarried? Well, a great-granddaughter was visiting her lover in the White Mountains when it happened, but Jack only learned she survived when he saw me with his wands from three centuries ago. I was the last of his legitimate bloodline, so he has made me his heir."

"But Jack owns most of the Americas and will probably end up with half of Africa," she said, only slightly exaggerating.

"Our kids will enjoy the life my parents should have had."

She snorted in disgust. "I'm not really a princess. My parents were orphaned together, so I don't even know who my grandparents were. They call me princess because I'm probably the only Indian in the Americas who can't trace ancestors to a tribal king. My real name sounds great in my native Iroquois, but translates into Running Turtle."

Billy burst into laughter, then hugged her until she laughed, too. "Look, I'm not trying to get myself killed. This is my job, and no one is better at it, which saves the lives of those who can't do what I do as well. Don't make my job harder than it already is. I cannot be with you if you make scenes like this." Drawing a line in the sand of their relationship, he walked out the door. Before flying off, he paused to floor her once more. "I never make promises, but I promise to make you a real princess before I die."

"And how will you do that?"

"By marrying you, silly."

She stripped him before he could escape and showed him how much she loved him. It turned out that he didn't leave until morning, after all.



Billy launched before dawn while she snored. He ascended as high as possible, acclimated to the thin air, then slowly rose higher, while falling into a meditative trance that allowed him to fire all wands at maximum thrust for many hours.

Billy loved to fly because he associated flight with his beloved parents. It cleared his mind and let him soak in the amazing experience of shooting through the sky. Flying high, far, and fast relaxed him like nothing else. It gave him peace. It made him feel like part of the universe. And the longer he flew, the more he merged with the cosmos. No drug, no wand, not even sex beat the experience. He heard that runners experienced a kind of natural high, but this was so much deeper. It was like sleepwalking in the clouds. It emptied his head, purified his spirit, and drained his rage. Plus, the longer he flew, the more it increased his wand power, which made him repeatedly push his limits.

He had no idea how many hours he flew, but it was dark and his body needed to sleep. He landed in a village, slept until dawn, then flew north. A day after that he passed the Tarkestan Desert and slept in a gully. Next he flew west until he spotted the enemy outside of Samarkand, still showing the wounds from Grandma's raids. It was funny that the Mongols rebuilt this city since Genghis Khan famously destroyed it three hundred years before. Large units camp near cities for quicker re-supply. Hunting enough to feed ten thousand takes too long.

Billy landed in the ancient city and drank in a tavern to learn the latest. The vanguard broke into five divisions to form an arrow around the tip of the supply train. Each division would dedicate a battalion to long range patrols. Each division commander would rotate the battalion flying patrols to share the burden evenly. The other fifty thousand quads would stick with the thousands of horses, mules, and oxen slowly pulling the bombs, gold, and supplies. Billy ate, checked into a nice hotel, then slept until nightfall.

Instead of attacking the quads near Samarkand, Billy flew to the division farthest to the north. He started targeting those least visible to others, often walking past hundreds of sleeping troops, just to find another dip, gully, crevice, ravine, or sloping wooded hill where troops fatally chose to sleep. And so he spent the night. By midnight, with the division looking for him, Billy landed among the bombers to throw munitions at other bombers. Now that he had everyone's attention, he rose above them, flashed his wands, and did his scream to freak them out.

They now had to find him.

Billy slept in his hotel in Samarkand the next day, then killed quads in the second division that night. A cut to his thigh drove him away early, so he flew to the town nearest the next battalion and slept all day. That night he repeated his attack, but this time in the rain, which helped him kill more Mongols.

Now he flew to the unit near Kabul and started work as soon as the troops fell asleep. On his fifth night he hit the Mongols camping by Kandahar. Except he didn't stop at dawn. With greater visibility, the number of pursuers grew to alarming levels, but Billy kept weaving through the trees until they boxed him in. Dozens of squads now patrolled overhead, but he knew he could evade them. He only hoped his contempt for mediocre quads didn't get him killed by a lucky shot.

He assumed the divisions stayed in constant contact, which meant they all now knew where he was. By luring the southernmost division south, he brought the

rest as well. Which is why he left India alone. This was a one man job. Another person would have only slowed him down.

Billy lured them towards the Himalayas. Now all he had to do was let them believe they could actually catch him. The sight of several thousand quads blotting out the sky in pursuit of a lone flier would probably have horrified Princess, but he was truly having fun. He loved to test his tactical instincts. How else would he improve? His life of constant self-sacrifice had its moments.

After just a few hours most of the enemy tired out. Several hours later, even their best gave up. Billy, who brought jerked mutton and several bags of water, had already eaten lunch in the air, so now he pummeled those on the ground. They ran, they hid, they flew into trees, but Billy still had plenty to fire at. Billy spent a wonderful afternoon shooting fish in a pond, or its Mongolian equivalent.

Just when he thought it couldn't get any better, a large group of fliers in a skirmish line appeared on the horizon, blasting those trying to fly away. They didn't actually meet until sunset, when Princess broke their line to greet him with a flying kiss that nearly broke his nose. Side by side they hunted Mongols until it grew too dark to see.

They camped far in the woods and roasted deer for dinner in a ravine. Only the first battalion of super-quads arrived yet, but the others would get there soon.

"When we saw the sky darken, we couldn't figure out why," Bear told Billy. "They didn't fly in a normal formation, but they were shooting at someone we couldn't see, so we figured only you could drive people so crazy. Instead of helping you, Princess suggested backtracking the enemy to their camp to steal their bombs. We found several hundred Mongols still there, packing up, tending the wounded, or burying the dead. After eliminating them, we ate their food, took their bombs, then raced after the main body. We started finding the enemy in small groups. These one-side engagements hardly qualified as fights.

"Several hours later we found a larger force with patrols airborne. We sliced up two patrols, dumped all our bombs on their camp, then blasted the survivors. Again we ate their food. After that the groups got smaller, and we found most of them on the ground. It was like hunting cattle.

"Spoiled by super-quads, I forgot just how little good most quads are. No wonder Genghis left them behind. They're only useful attacking in large numbers over short distances. Most were too tired to even fly over the horizon. Pathetic!"

"What happens now?" Princess asked.

"The survivors of this division will tell the other divisions. They cannot continue their journey without first removing the Red Baron. This is the value of being a boogeyman." They laughed. "So each division will leave a battalion to clear airspace around the logistical train, but the rest will come south to kill me. These are not marathoners, so those flying patrols will soon exhaust themselves.

"How about I draw them to the Himalayas while the rest of you kill the battalions they left behind? Follow their patrols to hit the main units while they sleep."

The next day, Billy showed himself to the next closest division, so they could tell the others. He played cat and mouse with them, causing a few hundred casualties, but really he was just killing time and Mongols until his next battalion got here.

As he evaded their small, slow fireballs, it occurred to Billy that they could kill him easily if these pathetic fliers had just one super-quad. He had to let them get close to pull them southeast, so just one large, fast fireball could have swallowed him whole.

Because they moved from cloud to cloud like a ninja using shadows, Billy didn't even see his guys until they struck the division from behind. His second battalion was more than a match for several thousand tired mediocre quads. Slow units are no match against fast ones, so the battle grew ever more one-sided. If they had just a few more hours of daylight, Team Red would have destroyed them all.

Billy had this battalion take their bombs and look for the next closest enemy camp. They found them around midnight, coming south just as Billy predicted, and bombed them good. The super-quads shot them up until they stopped coming out to fight.

Now Billy feared the other divisions wouldn't come because of what happened to the first ones, so he sent this battalion to harass the baggage train while he alone lured the enemy to the Himalayas. Soon he had the remains of five divisions afraid of a skinny boy with deadly wands.

Instead of terrifying them, Billy exaggerated his thigh wound so they'd chase him. Before he tore them down; now he wanted them over-confident as they approached the Indus River.

At the Himalayas, thousands of air bandits searched for gold. He had dropped plenty of shiny coins when he flew over this slope on his way out of India, so they had reason to believe in buried treasure.

A Mongol patrol found the bandits, who promptly attacked. The survivors went back for more Mongols, who attracted more bandits. Both sides fed quads down a hole in the sky. Just watching a battle without any use of tactics gave Billy a headache. He wanted them both to lose and, surprisingly, they did.

The ability to fly in formation won the day for the Mongols, but Team Red wiped them out that night.

Fifty thousand down, fifty thousand to go.

## **Chapter 72**

Billy now commanded six battalions of super-quads, fourteen marathoners, and ten near-marathoners. They faced fifty weak quad battalions and three hundred thousand two-wanders. Billy looked for doubt in their faces, but his commanders assumed they'd triumph like they always did. Even Midis never turned so much into gold.

At least they didn't have to confront fifty quad battalions at the same time. Twenty battalions flew ahead in an arrow formation, while ten protected their rear. Leaving just twenty babysitting the supply wagons.

Billy hid the high-altitude quads in the Victory Pass. At 7500 meters in altitude, it was too high for the Mongols to breathe. The rest concealed themselves in a nearby forest. Billy watched several patrols fly high over them and waited until one

inspected the trees. Then he sliced that squad up and led the near-marathoners bombers to battle.

He expected to be seen, and was surprised how close they got, given how slow they flew, weighted down with bombs.

Lone sentries hiding in clouds sounded the alarm when they were just five minutes out, and others quickly echoed it. The mountain pass went from east-to-west, and an enemy battalion each occupied the northern and southern rim.

Billy watched the rapid reaction battalion rise to position themselves to attack him and could almost hear their glee in having such a fat target. Although Billy couldn't see him at this distance, their general almost certainly popped up to personally assess the threat, and broke up a reserve battalion into one hundred squads to fan out to find other threats. The general was probably laughing at the sight of a bunch of weighted down Indians flying low and slow in broad daylight with no cover.

As the rapid reaction battalion moved above and behind them, three more enemy battalions confronted them head on. Four coming after him, two on the mountaintop, and two flying patrols—that left just twelve on the ground guarding the wagons.

Excellent! This attack would not have worked if the enemy had another fifty thousand quads.

While the Mongols focused on this faint, his best super-quads slew the sentries and patrols above the battleground and through this hole Team Red dived at maximum speed. As soon as an alert sentry shrieked a warning, Billy did his primal scream and flashed his fiery wands to keep their attention on him a little longer. His near-marathoners turned and flew straight up to form a wall to fire broadsides at the battalion diving at them from behind.

The other three Mongol battalions rushed to attack, oblivious to Team Red diving behind them. The super-quads fired as soon as they got within range, then retained their relative positions because they could hit the enemy, but the enemy could not hit them. The three battalions had three options: a mass attack into those firing at them, turn on the bombers led by the Red Baron, or flee. And if all three made the same choice, they'd have been better off. Instead, each made a different choice. The battalion that rushed the super-quads died first; the battalion that turned their backs to the super-quads to attack Billy's bombers died next; and those who fled lived several minutes longer.

The battalion diving at the near-marathoners from behind could only shoot with their front quads, while Indians formed their wall at an angle so they could all fire back, despite the bombs on their backs. The Mongols should have rose in an arc to fall like a blanket so they could all shoot at the same time—and even then, target only the highest enemies. Instead, a thousand Indians shot up one hundred Mongols at a time, ten times over, as they got within range.

Good thing, too, since Billy had already left them.

The Americans flew out of their bunkers to attack the two battalions on the mountaintop while his high altitude unit dove to bomb the quads in the pass eating lunch. Within the pass, the Mongols had no idea what was happening. As he hoped, Prince and Princess killed the general before he could sound the general

alarm. Soldiers obey commands. The general didn't send for them, so they continued eating. Until too late.

Which is why Billy attacked at lunch time, with the bulk of the logistical train stuck in the pass.

His near-marathoners raced to drop their bombs in the pass and joined the Americans, super-quads, and high altitude quads blasting the Mongols on top. The enemy had nowhere to go. Hence the efficacy of corralling them in the Torugart Pass. Taking the high ground turned the battle into a rout.

Billy was not used to out-numbering the enemy. The super-quads pursued the enemy fleeing east and marathoners attacked those fleeing west. Now all he needed to worry about were the Mongols in the vanguard, those in the rear, and those flying distant patrols.

The super-quads had almost ran out of targets fleeing east when Billy saw a shadow on the horizon. He led his team away, diving behind the mountain to get out of sight before rising sharply into the closest clouds.

The vanguard has broken up their twenty battalions into groups of four thousand. Billy's six thousand super-quads raced to get behind the first group unseen. Billy chased the enemy as they dove. Billy estimated his unit would arrive a little too late, so he screamed at the Mongols.

Warned, the Americans rose straight up to get out of the angle of attack. This forced the Mongols to rise sharply, which fatally slowed them. With a gesture from Billy's flaming wands, Team Red spread out to attack with swords. Those closest slowed to let the rest of the team catch up—something the Mongols attacking his near-marathoners should have done earlier. Almost as one, they got within range to slice up four thousand Mongols from behind.

By the time they finished them off, the next four thousand showed up above and behind them, forcing them to flee south. Billy hoped they would pursue him, but instead they joined the main battle.

Billy couldn't catch them in time, so he positioned his guys for the next four thousand. Who took forever to show up. But once they committed, Team Red flew out of cloud cover to smash them, then engage the four thousand they missed.

But just a few minutes into this firefight, Prince warned them of the next group. Billy shrieked the signal to form up, but needed to give his guys time, so he popped up and flashed his four flames—one man staring down four thousand.

The enemy commander took his unit out of their steep dive to consider his options as they fell in formation at gravity speed. Every heartbeat felt like a victory. Billy could almost read his mind. He didn't want to fight the Red Baron but, at the same time, thousands of comrades were fighting for their lives. So the bastard did the right thing and ordered his formation to form a square—well, technically, four squares that looked like one big square—to fire a huge volley that would cover everything near the Red Baron.

Billy respected it. The leader made the correct tactical call. And he forced Billy to run like hell because not even the Baron could dodge or shield himself from four thousand fireballs. Looking west, Billy saw his super-quads still engaging the enemy, with their backs to the four thousand.

So Billy didn't see Prince, diving at maximum speed, behead the unit commander. But he did see Princess lead the five hundred Americans—now

formed up—to shoot them from behind. So Billy positioned himself below the four thousand to look like an easy target. He spent a dangerous minute dodging thousands of fireballs—or mostly dodging most of them—as the Americans knocked them from the sky. Billy fell with them, to stay at their maximum range, until he ran out of room at the bottom of the pass. Now he raced west as his super-quads turned to attack what was left of the four thousand.

Enough Mongols apparently survived to warn the rest of the vanguard because no more groups attacked from the east.

The Battle of the Pass was a victory worth bragging about. Billy sent Zhu a propaganda video of him documenting the destruction of the Khan's follow up force, showing a few hundred thousand dead in the pass, and thousands of smiling Indians bathing in gold coins. To boost Chinese morale and deflate the Mongols, Billy even lied and said the Indians freed the entire subcontinent. Zhu naturally dropped thousands of copies to the Khan's troops when he bomb their armada. Losing his follow-up forces and India (as far as he knew) made fighting deeper into southern China futile. Genghis retreated that night and Zhu declared China independent the next morning.

Some historians argued that this effectively ended the world war. What they didn't mention is that Genghis Khan could have stopped it at any time by accepting William's terms after the Summer Slaughter.

They spent the afternoon finishing the enemy wounded, aiding their own injured, and stripping the corpses. The Mongols provided them food and tents. Billy posted plenty of sentries, but didn't expect any night raids because his faster quads could chase them down. In the morning, they met at the scenic Lake Chatyr-Kul to discuss their options.

The Mongols at Grandma's end abandoned the heavy supplies, including most of the gold, and fled to the relative safety of the ten thousand quads guarding their rear. She now had ten kilometers of wagons to protect. None of them liked the idea of being anchored to one spot. They needed to get rid of them. Fast. Without turning themselves into air mules.

Billy ran a proposal by his leaders. Since no one objected, he sent for the two Indian cousins who looked like twins, with their unit commanders.

"You still have family in northern India?"

"Several thousand," one of them answered. He still couldn't tell them apart.

"Who rules there now?" Billy asked.

"A greedy Mongol named Bekel. He has squeezed the land, people, and businesses into dry carcasses. It shames us since for centuries we were the most prosperous kingdom in India."

Billy caught them by surprise. "It'll take decades for the Republic of India to consolidate the entire subcontinent. You can make their job easier if you restore the kingdom that Tamerlane took from you and turn it into a representative democracy."

The offer stunned them.

"You'll have to deposit the shares due the Indians, but the Americans and the super-quads have agreed to forfeit our cut to fund your new government. And the half that would go to my general war fund I hereby donate to your treasury on the

condition that your elected leaders sign trade and mutual defense treaties with China, Persia, and the Republic of India.”

“Agreed!” they shouted, jumping up and down like teenagers.

“Then let’s leave the near-marathoners to move and protect the wagon train while the rest of us leave after sunset to liberate your kingdom.”

The Indians gave Billy a group hug a dozen people thick. Someone started a song in Hindi and soon everyone was singing while they took turns embracing Billy.

For Team Red, this solved their problem simply. They couldn’t just leave all that gold, yet they sure didn’t want to tie it around their ankles. Mongols controlled Tibet, Billy didn’t trust the new Persian government, while northern India was the closest place to send it.

While everyone prepared to leave, Prince came back with word that the 20,000 or so survivors on the eastern end of the pass headed north, to circle around west to join up with the gold they were suppose to protect.

“Do you know what I want you to do, Grandma?” Billy asked.

She sighed. “Make sure the Mongols don’t ambush the wagon train.”

“You’re a mind reader!” He turned to Princess. “Well, my wife, want to liberate a kingdom?”

“You can call me your wife when you finally man up and marry me.”

The silence felt incredibly uncomfortable.

“At least you two talk like a married couple,” Bear remarked.

“I don’t know about the rest of you,” Billy said, looking hard at Princess, “but now I’m really in a killer mood.”

“I’d be in a better mood if you gave me more,” she shot back.

“You’re not pregnant enough?” he joked, patting her growing bump. “You don’t see Blade here demanding more.”

“Well,” Blade replied smiling, “not from you.”

“Ouch!” Billy turned to Prince. “If even Blade can develop a sense of humor, then I hold out hope for you, dear brother.”

## Chapter 73

Despite their defeat in southern India, the Mongols in northern India clearly did not expect 20,000 enemy quads to show up at the provincial capital. The Khan and the assault on Ceylon had bled their units of those identifying as Mongolian, so when the Baron identified himself with his scream, backed by a sky full of quads, the Indian troops mostly cheered. The twins didn’t get the battle they expected, but they got some therapy killing the governor and his family. The twins’ extended family had plenty of Mongol blood, so they offered an amnesty to anyone who accepted the new democratic government.

Billy didn’t want to kill Indians, so he waited for enemy units to offer battle. Instead, those who didn’t support the new regime either remained silent or left.

As they toured the cities, most people welcomed the twins, hoping they'd resuscitate the dead economy. To that end, Billy let every quad who recorded a video swearing loyalty to the new democratic government to get free food from the pass. In one swoop, the cousins learned the identities of every quad they could count on. More importantly, they knew they couldn't trust any quad not on their list. Billy barely had enough wagons to haul the gold, so much of that food would rot unless eaten soon. Every militia soon returned to distribute food to the cities they served, then went back for more.

Distributing gold, food, and supplies ended the war before it began. It's hard to rebel against overlords giving away fortunes. The Red Baron gave it the credibility it needed. And it helped that they scheduled elections, rather than rule by fiat. Just like that, several million people left the Empire. This was the first time things went as well as Billy hoped.

Billy sent for enough employees to convert every Bank of Mongolia branch into Global Bank centers. All the deposits were now his. He had to wait for the first team to arrive, so he sent his super-quads to Grandma.

In his last speech, Billy set up a competition: "The Republic of India in Ceylon is expanding north. The faster the Republic of Northern India expands south, the stronger, safer, and richer it will be."

Forming a competition in the minds of all Indians would speed up the liberation of the subcontinent and give a sense of inevitability to Indian rule. Millions of mixed descent would choose the side they thought would win. Whereas before no one doubted the Mongols would prevail, now no one doubted that the Indians would win. Doubters had only to look at what the Baron did in Europe.

Once the wagon train arrived, the cousins would have twenty-six long distance battalions, a sense of urgency that the Republic of India didn't, and a hell of a lot of coin.

Billy left confident that the new kingdom would thrive. Now he had to destroy the remains of a mighty armada with just four thousand super-quads.

For the first week, the Mongols posted layers of sentries because they couldn't believe the Red Baron would not hunt them down. By the second week, they relaxed because no one had attacked them. So Billy's super-quads surprised them completely.

Still, the twenty thousand would have fought much better if they knew they faced only four thousand.

With strong winds, heavy rain, and dark clouds, they posted sentries on the ground rather than get blown away in the storm. The Mongols spread out over several small hills to make bombardment less effective.

So Billy formed his super-quads in a skirmish line on the ground. They walked quickly into the Mongol camp, stabbing and slashing the sleeping quads as they went. The wind and rain drowned out their shouts, while terrible visibility and rolling hills masked their presence among the trees. As they progressed, more Mongols lived long enough to blast, but the sound did not carry far and Team Red stuck with steel to avoid noisy firefights.

For several minutes, things went so smoothly that Billy hoped they could cross the entire camp. But all good things end too soon.



Out of Billy's hearing, the enemy spotted his troops walking down a hill, killing as they went. A Mongol woke his teammates by blasting Team Red, and soon a few hundred Mongols were shooting from behind trees, stopping the advance. Not dumb enough to charge out in the open, Team Red flew up and over these Mongols to use their maneuverability in the air to pick off the easy targets on the surface.

It was the right tactic. Unfortunately, aerial blasts carried much farther, waking up more Mongols.

Billy's skirmish line broke down. Some companies advanced far, while their neighboring company fought duels above the treetops. As Mongols tried to flank the aerial duelers, they came upon the super-quads on the ground, triggering desperate fights in the dark. The two sides became mixed up, which cost Team Red some of its advantages.

In contrast, Billy had a great night. He had plenty of practice, so his team advanced the farthest. Whenever Mongols looked too closely, Billy sang the latest Mongolian hit song or yelled something reassuring to buy enough time to get within twenty meters. He heard some firefights, but had no reason to retreat until he reached the peak of a hill and saw the extent of the battlefield. Some of his companies advanced a kilometer into the Mongol camp, where they could be attacked from behind. Hell, Billy realized, his own company could be ambushed from the rear.

Billy gathered his team together, flew behind a thousand or so Mongols pushing back his neighboring team, and surprised the enemy from behind -- what Mongol tacticians call The Sodomy Maneuver. Billy now flew over the battlefield to signal retreat as the entire Mongol force would soon be upon them. They had a great victory. Now all they had to do was break off and enjoy it.

They rallied in dense woodlands across from a stream, behind a large outcropping just a five minute flight away. Billy's company hovered in a line between the rally point and the camp to drive back enemies pursuing too closely. He noted which team members flew by and which had wounds.

Then something prompted him to fly higher.

Billy noticed a fierce firefight in the enemy's camp. It now dawned on him that he had not seen Princess. Instead of fading away, the firefight grew in intensity. Stomach churning, Billy tapped his throat and shouted down to his unit:

"Do my scream when you engage."

Billy knew this was bad. Superior quads maximize their advantage by keeping a distance because they could fly and fire better. It's so much easier to avoid small, slow fireballs than big, fast ones.

Knots tied up his stomach as he raced full out and saw his worst nightmare—an aerial rumble where numbers mattered more than skill. The remains of a company battled a thousand Mongols and some of the dead bodies on the ground were mothers of his children. He glimpsed Tiny picking up Prince, who looked dead, while Princess held off several Mongols in a blur of sword fighting.

Time to distract the enemy.

Billy risked blowing out his vocal chords by tapping his throat with both hand wands. His primal scream erupted all on its own, voiced with greater fear, rage, and intensity than Billy had ever known. Later, watching the video, he didn't recognize himself. It was like a parent shouting down a child, if that parent was

Thor and he used thunder to yell. Billy's throat would remain raw for weeks, but he accomplished his goal: letting the enemy know that the Red Baron was coming.

The verbal assault froze the battlefield as hardened warriors felt chills run down their spines. It was like crawling into a cave, then having a mother bear roar in your face. Hearing the Baron's scream on video did not compare to the terror of hearing it in person; it was like virgins comparing sex with watching porno. Few would have been surprised if a giant troll crashed through the trees. The enemy backed up, seeking the protection of comrades, squinting in the dark to see the new threat through the rain. They looked more at each other than the vulnerable enemies virtually at their feet.

Billy rose in an arc to fire at the densest mass of Mongols below him. He descended like a meteor farting streaks of fire. All enemy eyes could not help but focus on him. Billy knew his quads on the ground would use this opportunity to break contact. Since he had so many targets, he continued his controlled fall, firing as fast as he could. His powerful wands barely needed to breathe, so his fireballs flew in a virtually continuous stream.

No one had ever seen that before, and many were not sure what to make of it.

Having captured their attention, he needed to keep it. He extended his full forty-four meter wingspan—he no longer hid his recent gains—and twirled among the Mongols as fast as his body could rotate. The Baron struck them like a tornado.

While the tip of a sharp blade can pierce body armor if given enough force, a sword's edge just scratches the surface. So, instead of blades, Billy used fire. Falling among them, he positioned his boot wands at an angle to keep spinning. When he fell too far, he reversed thrust to spin back up, like a cyclone with two fiery arms. They were so numerous that Billy didn't have to see them to burn them.

His boot wands blasted at those below him, which threw him in the air, like a dancing drunk. It looked like he bounced off of invisible walls in the sky, but it worked since this made it harder to predict where he'd be the next second. Every heartbeat he changed his elevation, speed, and trajectory, like kids learning to fly.

Billy's flames obscured the battlefield. The rain turned his fire into mist, the hissing sound surprisingly loud against the falling rain. The aerial dance now had music. The Mongols projected shields, even though a thin stream of fire would not injure them. It was like the Baron held a water cannon in each hand, except it blew fire instead of liquid. In a very crowded quarter-kilometer of cubic space—not unlike an open-air stadium arena—Billy used dual twenty-two-meter long flames to burn a dozen enemies a heartbeat, and horrify the rest.

Billy glimpsed a few thousand Mongols staring up in confusion, not sure what they were seeing. If they joined the fight, then not even his one hundred quads could save his troops on the ground. But first they had to understand what faced them. It looked like a giant fire serpent dancing in front of a mirror, the way the lines of flame flowed, curled, and snapped. Forty-four meters of air hissed like an angry snake. With every heartbeat more steam rose to cloud their night vision.

Although someone had to later point it out to him, what Billy did was not unlike the fire dance that Diva taught him, but delivered with a desperate fury that confounded expectations. The video montage would soon stun viewers worldwide.

A Mongol above him recorded the “fire” fight and used the sale to fund his early retirement. Although the Sun was far beyond the horizon, it nevertheless did not look like nighttime. It was easier to imagine a two-headed fire-breathing dragon with one hell of a cough than one guy taking on a thousand quads with just flames.

As Billy staggered vertically and horizontally, he crashed into enemies unpredictably. Billy felt something whack or cut or burn him every other heartbeat. He passed through pockets of super-heated air as if campfires filled the sky. He thanked Princess for bringing him more of George’s armor. Something almost knocked his head off and his left boot wand kept coughing. Because of the rain, Billy had no idea that tears of fear for Princess flowed down his face like rivers. He prided himself on his tactical sense, his self-control, and foreseeing the immediate future, but now he became a fiery tornado hell bent on destruction.

With all his twirling, he could not keep an eye on his wife, so he tracked her grunting and groaning as she sliced off limbs, lanced chests, and whacked helmets. It sounded like his wife was having great sex. Without him. But as long as he knew she lived, he was free to fight like a fire demon. She didn’t know it, but just one moment of silence would have undone him. Him—the mighty quad who spooked history’s greatest empire. He heard her yelp in pain, and would have turned to make sure she was okay, but she screamed in outrage and Billy clearly heard a terrified Mongol loudly curse her—and that anger made him love her all the more. When he next saw her, she still hovered above her twin, daring the big bad men to come any closer. Not only did the sight make his heart leap, but it gave him an untimely erection that pressed uncomfortably against his body armor. In a weird irony, Princess hurt the one part of him the Mongols left uninjured.

Smoke, steam, and mist now obscured the battle zone. Billy didn’t defeat the enemy so much as blind them. The Baron didn’t even kill many of them. Instead, he worked his fire dance like a flute player controlling a cobra.

Every second felt like eternity, although it couldn’t have been more than a minute before reinforcements arrived. His company repeated his arc and one hundred super-quads—each touching a wand to their throats—screamed like a million stadium fans outraged at a referee for an impossibly bad call. The sound wave hit Billy like a gust of wind and covered his exposed flesh in goose bumps.

But Billy, at least, expected them, and popped down to get out of the way. No sooner did his feet touch solid earth than he fell, his head still dizzy from spinning. Tiny kicked him to get up, but instead he flopped like a fish on a beach, mostly defenseless and completely terrified. He could almost taste the fishing hook in his lip.

The closest Mongols could only see a dark shadow falling menacingly towards them. As if fighting the Red Baron was not enough. And who knew what to make of the piercing scream that sounded like a dragon belching? They sure as hell did not venture closer to find out.

Because no one knew what the Baron looked like, the superstitious speculated that he was super-human. The videos this fight produced would give their worst fears better imagery.

Then a few hundred large fireballs swept the sky like a volcano exploding sideways. A cloud of mist drifted up in their wake, creating an impermeable wall

between Team Red and the Mongols. Their simultaneous screams and the sudden stench of burnt flesh cost even the bravest of Mongols their nerve. Those who fled slowest were next.

Later, his friends would praise Billy for his brilliance, but he couldn't remember ordering them to scream as one. Billy agreed it was clever, but couldn't claim credit, despite one hundred witnesses. It became really popular with parents who'd project the clip to cower their kids. Even Mongol veterans could praise the tactic over lonely campfires. All that mattered to Billy was that even more enemies feared the Red Baron. When Billy closed his eyes, he could hear his mother laughing with savage glee.

"That's my boy!" she'd say proudly.

Diva, pregnant with their third child, had her guts split open and Billy saw his unborn son on the bloody grass. That baby would have been his first redhead. The Russian known as Crotch, because he fondled his penis like a wand, had several fatal wounds. That elderly Swiss lady who kissed his feet literally lost her head. Zulu, a fierce African great-grandson of American Jack, bled too much to fly. Billy's flopping on the ground kicked Dreamy, who certainly looked dead from a nasty head wound, but who shocked him by yelling, "I'm awake, I'm awake." Billy didn't know how many they lost in the entire battle, but he could see a few dozen dead friends just in this firefight. With the enemy blind and bewildered, they carried back their wounded.

Although the Mongols didn't press their momentary advantage, their victory no longer felt victorious.

## Chapter 74

At the rally point, Billy found Princess moving from wounded to wounded, and kept away to not distract her. He found Prince, now conscious and badly burned. It must have hurt like hell. Billy scooped water from the stream and heated it for pain-relieving tea.

"We thought we were doing so well when they surprised us from behind. I turned and the damn blast hit me in the face," Prince explained as Blade fixed him up.

"That's how I got so handsome," Billy whispered, his throat sore, his nose hairs burnt, and his eyes blurry from smoke. "Now you look more like me than your twin sister. Congratulations, you poor bastard."

"The crazy stunt you pulled saved sixty lives," Blade remarked, almost angrily.

"Thanks for rescuing me," Billy told her.

"I'll not let my children lose their father like I lost mine."

"I want that in writing."

Startled, she looked up and smiled. His ability to make her laugh really pissed her off.

Sweaty, filthy, and stinky, Blade still looked great. Princess once showed him images of Blade a decade ago and he was almost dumb enough to tell his fiancée

that Blade was the best looking blond he had ever seen. He could hardly blame Princess for sleeping with her. If Blade and Princess could somehow reproduce, their kids would probably look like Greek gods with great tans.

Pushing away the pain, Prince looked up at Billy like he didn't recognize him. "You really do love my sister."

"You sound surprised."

"You don't know how much you care for someone until given the opportunity to kill or die for them. You knowingly threw your life away, so you must love her so much that you cannot live without her."

Prince may as well have peed in his face, the way Billy reacted. He kept blinking as if his eyes didn't work. That's when Billy knew he was screwed. He knew he loved Princess, but he never pondered the depth of that love. He apparently didn't follow his father's advice by falling in love with someone wonderful. Now he's vulnerable because her safety will warp his tactical judgment, and if he ever lost her, he'd become a shell of a man like his father after his mother's death. Which he expected to happen. Hell, it almost happened tonight. Billy was surprised he survived for so long, given that he feared death from withdrawal more than death from battle. He remembered his father's last two years -- that's what I'm gonna look like soon, Billy realized. Unless he died before her. He didn't know which fate was worse.

"Well, that's why I'm gonna marry her."

"If you wanted to marry her, you'd have done it by now. But at least I know your true feelings for her. You may never actually take her to the alter, but if you do, you have my blessing."

"I want that in writing, too." Billy needed to know something. "The day we met, did you fight me because you didn't like me or because you didn't want anyone with your sister?"

Prince smiled through the pain at the memory. "For years I threatened everyone who wanted my sister, so I couldn't give you a free pass. I also couldn't challenge a better dueler, so I had to punch you or else everyone would know how much you scared me."

"I scared you?" Billy asked, shocked.

"My sister's bodyguards recorded those thousand guys you dueled that day in Barcelona. Just watching exhausted me. I've dueled since I was ten, yet you clearly fought far more than me, although I knew you were younger. And don't get me started on the scars. You must be a masochist to endure so much."

Just really addicted, Billy thought to himself. "Bodyguards?"

"Every guy thinks he's her big brother. Everyone loves her, while nobody likes me."

"That's not true. Blade likes you."

Billy backed up so Blade's punch missed him. He looked over and saw Princess, on her knees in the mud, fighting for Zulu's life, an obnoxious man she didn't even like. She thought nothing of how much this would drain her while thousands of enemies camped just minutes away.

The guys claimed she was the world's best female dueler, but he never paid it much attention until now. If she had not dueled for the last decade, she would not have survived that last fight. Billy knew he loved her, but he never dreamed he'd

respect her so much. He always knew his wife was amazing; he just now realized she was awesome.

"Your sister is a damn hero," Billy concluded, surprised at his surprise.

That startled Blade, who also now looked at him like she no longer recognized him. Which, considering he never showed his face, seemed odd.

"You need another helmet," Blade told him. "The one on your head died, saving your life. How is it that you're not dead?"

"When I become completely still inside, I can see one heartbeat into the future. Well, not exactly see. But something compels me to move suddenly, like a sixth sense foretells when something lethal is about to strike me."

He had never mentioned this to anybody before. Not even his parents.

He took the burnt metal off and nearly fainted. Something sharp cut deep into the top. Well, that explained the headache. He fingered his scalp and felt blood flow down his face. He closed his eye just in time as blood dripped off his chin. Uncle George's suits saved him again. Billy couldn't even remember the blow.

"I'm leaking."

"Take mine," Prince said, handing him a helmet. "That's the least I could do for you saving me." Prince looked ready to cry. "Princess wouldn't leave me, and Tiny wouldn't leave her. Even after they got Diva, Zulu, Crotch, and Geneva. Even pregnant, that arrogant bitch Mali almost died protecting me, and she despises me. The Mongols saw victory and charged. Another minute and they'd have killed us. Then you screamed and the fight turned upside down. Even through my burning flesh I could see the naked fear in their eyes. I have never known someone who could terrify veterans like you do. Not even Genghis Khan wielded such power."

"Stop turning me on," Billy joked. "Unless Blade is into it."

Prince closed his eyes to better soak up wand juice. "I'll make their families rich. I'll tell their children that their parents were heroes. And I'll one day make the same sacrifice. Princess and I are from a city called Philadelphia. It means love for one's brothers in arms."

"I gave him a lot of painkiller," Blade explained, as Prince rambled on.

"I better leave before he breaks out in song."

Despite herself, Blade laughed. She didn't know whether to curse him or herself. It's hard to stay miserable with him around.

Drenched to the bone, the world's best flier struggled through the mud and waited until Princess finished stitching a wound before stepping into view. Visibly pregnant, she looked up despite the rain, face dirty, hands bloody, and her messy hair blowing in the wind. She was completely unprepared for his verbal assault.

"I never imagined the world's most beautiful woman could become better looking, yet tonight you somehow did it. I want you to know that I'm in awe of you, and that I plan on marrying you as soon as I can."

Like any good surprise attack, Billy disappeared to maximize the shock value, so he didn't see her burst into tears. He walked off, trying to think of something witty to tell Prince, before he suddenly felt dizzy and collapsed, his eyes swimming. He spit out dirt and realized his leg hurt like hell. He found his lower-leg plate bashed in. He took it off and nearly shat when he saw the size of the welt.

"I have more bruise than leg."

Blade explored the leg, ignoring—or perhaps maximizing—his pain, before concluding his leg was not broken. But then she found additional cuts, bruises, and burns. The more he undressed, the more wounds she found, until he was completely naked and feeling anything but heroic. He stood among thousands of warriors wearing nothing but bandages. The fearsome Red Baron appeared covered in toilet paper. By the time Blade finished bandaging Billy, the scrawny kid looked like a mummy looking for his daddy. While the gauze stopped the bleeding, it also soaked up the rain, making his every movement squeak like a rusty wagon on a bumpy road. His dancing sounded like the world's worst orchestra.

"You belong in a hospital," Prince insisted.

"I belong in a museum," Billy countered. "I look like I escaped from an Egyptian pyramid. Bear will start calling me the Red Mummy."

"Go away," Blade begged him with a smile, "before you make me more gay."

Billy called his leaders together and proposed hitting the bastards again while they aided their wounded. Armor would ruin his bandages, so he stood before them dressed in gauze, boots, and Prince's battle helmet, looking as silly as he felt.

"Go ahead and laugh," he dared them. "I just wanted to prove I could become paler because we don't have enough albinos. Come on, Bear. Wrap me up. Bandage my pride. Show me your best cracks."

Instead, they stared at him silently with glassy-eyes, looking like lost puppies. Even Bear wasn't coming up with any quips, and those were his specialty.

"Why are you all looking at me funny? Is it my helmet?" Billy joked.

"Us?" Bear asked. "Did you notice how the Mongols looked at you? You'd think the Baron was a kilometer tall."

"What are you talking about?" Billy demanded, exasperated.

"We just compiled videos of what you did back there to save our wounded, and we're all awed by it. We've never seen anything like it. You somehow paralyzed a few thousand Mongols by impersonating a giant fire serpent. I thought I'd gotten used to you routinely doing the impossible, but then you pull this out of your helmet. And what's most unbelievable is that you don't see it. You should be strutting like a peacock." Bear gestured to his white bandages while getting one quip in. "Maybe it's your new battle uniform that keeps you humble."

Billy tilted his head as if he didn't understand Bear's flawless Mongolian. No one had ever mentioned the irony of rebels overthrowing Mongolia speaking Mongolian. Then he studied everyone else, who nodded their heads in agreement without losing their puppy-dog faces. He recognized it as hero-worship, but because he was so in awe of his father, he didn't know how to accept it from others. Billy didn't hide his impatience.

"I'm gonna go kill me some Mongols."

They descended upon the Mongols like divine fury. They approached from the opposite side, but in a tighter skirmish line flying over the trees instead of walking for a faster strike.

They caught the Mongols as they either packed in the rain to leave or treated their casualties. They pierced the camp like a knife through flesh. They moved fast to avoid becoming fat targets, while cutting and slashing to wound as many as

possible, knowing those wounds would soon become fatal. Like phantoms, they disappeared as quickly as they appeared.

At their rally point, Billy called another leadership meeting. "We can't sleep in the rain without tents, so let's hit them from above when they fly away."

Everyone liked that idea. They even knew the enemy would head west, so the super-quads rode a circle 8 pattern above the rain clouds until a long shadow rose beneath them. Lousy visibility worked both ways and the enemy didn't see them until Team Red stabbed them in the back with long blades. The bastards didn't even try to fight back as a group—they couldn't see or hear their commanders anyways—so they broke formation and scattered like rats. Every warrior loves a cheap kill. They wounded several thousand without suffering any casualties other than the common cold.

The rain stopped as dawn broke and Billy, although unable to get up, called another leadership meeting. "Find their wounded."

They surrounded the enemy wounded in the dense woods and blasted until none survived. Then they swept the neighboring areas and found a few thousand injured Mongols hiding in small groups. Mali hunted them all day.

After eating breakfast from the enemies supplies, they slept nearly nude to dry out. They feared illness more than Mongols. A cold is nothing to sneeze at.

Billy slept all day and woke up the next morning barely able to move. He had been unconsciously sucking up wand energy so his body could heal itself. What was different this time was the number and severity of his wounds required far more juice than even he was used to. It felt like he slept in a warm salt bath with weights tied to his limbs. He looked like a drunk trying to get up.

"Kick me," he begged Prince, who didn't need to be told twice. Then he liked it so much he continued kicking until Billy rolled out of range. It took the teenager several painful minutes just to stand up. Everyone watched, and nobody helped. "What's happened to me?"

Most of them had never seen the Red Baron scared before. It now endeared him to them.

"You've grown old, you poor bastard," Bear kindly informed him.

"But I don't have time to grow old!" the teenager complained with complete sincerity.

Blade laughed so hard she wanted to punch him.

"I know what he needs," Princess confidently told everyone, using her wand to levitate him behind some bushes.

That afternoon they caught up with the enemy. Team Red weaved through the trees. Sentries sounded the alarm, but they were quickly overrun. Steel works better than blasts in the woods because it's easier to dodge fire than steel. The trick was to advance as far as possible before organized resistance pushed back. Then both parties trade shots behind trees, and no one dies. This stalemate negates the greater abilities of the better quad, and gives the advantage to the side with more shooters, who can flank.

But what it also did was expose the enemy's back to Billy's main force who attacked them from behind. The Mongols now found themselves between a rock and a boulder. With nowhere else to go, the Mongols flew up—exposing themselves to the super-quads hovering above.



The battle soon ended with few casualties for the good guys. Four thousand quads destroyed a force five times larger.

## Chapter 75

Grandma and the surviving Americans looked relieved to see Billy. The Indians were all either in India or taking the caravan there.

"The Khan put his treasury in big steel boxes too heavy to fly off with, but the survivors broke one open and took all that they could carry. Plus a lot of bombs. So the good news is that the enemy is weighted down. The bad news is they have twelve thousand quads and over one hundred thousand two-wanders. They disappeared west before we could get more eyes on them."

"Then let's fly a thousand kilometers southwest tomorrow morning, and start a systematic search for them."

Except the first day of their search yielded nothing, and Prince did not return. Nor the next day, which really bothered them. Finally, Prince flew in after midnight on the third day and woke Billy up.

"I wondered if you got tired of all the gold, glory, and women," Billy said in greeting while handing the dehydrated quad a leather bag of cold water. "Thought maybe you took up fishing."

"I did," Prince said. "And I caught a whale. I found them near Herat."

Billy blinked like he was spit on. "Herat? But that's way the hell to the south. Our last report had them far to the west, so... oh right!"

"They're gonna intercept the wagon train full of gold as it returns to India," Prince finished his thought.

"They chose to avoid undefeated super-quads and instead snatch tons of gold? But of course they'd do that. Why would they do anything else? Now why didn't I think of that?" He eyed his brother-in-law. "But you did, didn't you? Otherwise, why fly so far to the south?"

"I actually caught one of their outer patrols and followed them back to the main force. The bad news is that pro-Mongolian Indians fleeing northern India have doubled their quad force."

"This is why I surround myself with those smarter than me," Billy said. "You just saved ten thousand lives."

"Don't bother flattering me. I can't give you children."

"Grandma is gonna flip. She didn't think of it, either. Now go wake up your sister so she knows you're okay, but don't tell her she snores. It only happens when I'm sleepy."

Prince looked enormously pleased.

And that's how a leader turns a rival into a friend, Billy told himself, hoping Prince never learned that Billy had already warned the Indian near-marathoners that he was using them as golden bait.

Knowing where they were and where they needed to go told Billy where to intercept them. He hoped to find them on the ground, preferably at night, but instead Team Red ran into them at high altitude.

Billy found it strange that the enemy made themselves so visible when they had so much cloud cover to hide in, so he looked around and saw movements within clouds on either side of him suggesting two other enemy units. The Mongols obviously wanted to use their superior numbers to negate Team Red's superior ability by engaging them from three sides. Which was smart. Much smarter than letting Team Red ambush them on the ground.

The problem with flying really high is suddenly flying much higher -- just one heavy breath could leave a quad gasping. But Team Red was used to high altitudes, while the enemy hopefully was not.

So Billy signaled "line formation" while slowing down and climbing higher. The companies behind him quickly lined up on either side of him as the Mongols rose, five hundred meters away.

Each Red company flew in a 10 X 10 box-shaped formation. Slowly rising at a thirty degree angle exposed the enemy to the entire company. All one hundred could now fire instead of just the ten in the front line. Or, rather, all four thousand quads.

The Mongols closed as fast as possible, so Billy signaled to rise backwards at a thirty degree angle. Given the power of their wands, they could fly backwards while firing down almost as fast as the enemy quads could rise using all four wands. Billy's textbook aerial broadside devastated the Mongols. And the higher they rose, the worse the devastation, because Billy's troopers were already acclimated to very thin air, while the Mongols were not. Like rising from deep underwater, the faster they rose, the more it hurt.

The Mongols had four times as many quads, but their front broke under the withering fire before they could get within blasting range. The few survivors dived straight down while they could.

Billy then turned into the Mongols on his left flank who had wind at their back, and therefore would close faster. His formations rotated so everyone had a clear shot, and the turn evened out the distance between the two lines. Still, the Mongols were closer, higher, and approached faster. Billy was unable to have his people fly backwards because of the third Mongol force rising behind him.

So he flashed all four wands to unnerve the enemy and climbed higher to buy his team more time. Their wands had the benefit of higher altitude, but the disadvantage of firing into the wind.

From that angle, only the Mongols in the front line could fire. Billy's fliers could therefore unleash several times the volume while firing from beyond the enemy's range, and were better positioned to dodge blasts without bumping into their neighbors. The enemy broke like cheap pottery.

Having destroyed the Mongols hoping to out-flank them, Billy led his team forward to put distance between the Mongols behind them. Billy turned his fliers to face the remaining Mongols, while leading them gradually higher, suspecting this would leave the Mongols literally breathless. The Mongols had two bad choices: attack or expose their backs flying away. They chose to die fighting. With the wind behind them, Billy's super-quads had no problem shooting them up.

Later, nobody could believe it: what many considered the war's last battle was a perfect score. This fight would soon become popular at video libraries across the world as an example of the effectiveness of formation maneuvers.

And solidified the Red Baron's legend.

## Chapter 76

Team Red took the remaining munitions carried by the wagon train and used them on the huge number of two-wanders waiting to bomb the Indians.

Some of their bombs struck enemy bombs and the fireworks blinded the eye and deafened the ear. The shrapnel not only shredded bodies, but sent gold coins everywhere. They now had to chase down the two-wanders who could not possibly dogfight them. Good thing they had great endurance, because that's how they spent the next week, while Indians from the wagon train searched the enemy camp for coins in the mud.

This campaign over, Billy called another leadership meeting. "We should escort the wagons to Delhi so nobody steals them. But then what? Tonight, I want everyone to think about how we can defeat the Mongol Empire and tomorrow we'll discuss our options. But you should all know that I could use a break. I have a woman to marry and babies to kiss."

"You already know what to do," Grandma insisted. "I can see it in your devious eyes. Why not just tell us now?"

"Because I want to see if anyone can come up with a better idea, because mine is pretty crazy."

Red's proposal spoiled their celebration. They just beat four hundred thousand Mongols, but they didn't feel like they did. They reduced the Mongol Empire to just Mongolia and northern China. In just a few years they re-wrote the world map. Now what?

The following morning they voiced their opinions. Billy laid out the consensus:

"It seems we agree that the best duelers should continue dominating Mongol arenas to get rid of their best quads. Some of you want to form specialized hit squads and go after their super-quads, Imperial Guards, and government officials. Others want to help the Indians and Africans crack the Mongol resistance. I agree that we should field more marathoners in Siberia to raid Mongolia and bleed their treasury. And most of you want to see your families and spend your new wealth. I approve of it all.

"But I haven't heard a way to defeat the Mongol Empire, so let me know what you think of my idea.

"Most quads are tired of fighting. They want to rest, enjoy their families, and spend their treasure. So we must give them time to do that. Late at night, when their lack of fresh wand juice gives them the shakes, they will contrast the wild times they had with us with their boring, peaceful routine. But they will need a compelling reason to leave their families to risk their lives again.

"So we need a powerful catalyst to bring them to the same place at the same time. They don't need money or fame or better wands, and the Mongols will no longer look like a lethal threat to their lives, families, and kingdoms. So how do we motivate them to fly across the world and finally finish off the Empire?"

Billy studied their faces and could tell no one had any idea how to end this war. His father did. Dad explained how in Peking when Billy was just eight years old.

"I got nothing, bro," Prince said to break up the long silence.

Billy gave it up like a virgin. "I'm gonna challenge Genghis Khan to a duel at the next Olympics."

The group exploded. They turned to each other and screamed into faces screaming back at them. They blasted the skies, flew dances, and burst into song. Prince levitated Billy onto Tiny who carried him around like a sports champion. After basically ending a world war, they didn't feel like celebrating. Now they couldn't do anything but celebrate. The Indians heard the news and reminded them that the Mongols left barrels of wine with all that gold. Although already in motion, the need to party stopped the caravan and thousands of quads drank themselves silly.

Billy had never felt more vulnerable.

"You're a genius!" Prince, of all people, yelled at him over the shouting.

"There's no such thing as genius," Billy yelled back.

"Well, as a genius," Bear quipped, "you should know."

Mali found him later: "I'm leaving now."

"But I haven't even met our kids." He patted the big belly on her thin frame. "Can't you wait until the baby is born?"

"No, but you can always visit me. I'd have returned a year ago if it wasn't for you. I wanted to thank you for all that you have taught me."

"But you were a pretty good quad when we met."

"Not dueling. Tactics. I was too obsessed with fighting to even think about how to lead warriors in battle. You make it look so easy, but never once did I think of a solution before you."

He gave her a hug for the first time.

"We'll probably never meet again, so can I see your face? I promise not to record it."

Billy sighed. They went into a tent and he flashed his baby face.

"But you're so good looking!" Mali squealed, undressing him for one last bedding. "I thought you'd be hideous."

It was the first time Mali ever made anyone laugh. Even her babies looked at her like, really?

The next morning, Billy finished the speech he tried to give the day before:

"How many of you assumed you'd die fighting a war we could not win?" Billy hovered above them, his amplified voice reaching thousands of people below him. "I have a proposal. If I can convince you today that we'll win this war and end the Mongol Empire forever, then you must agree to follow me until we've won. If I haven't convinced you, then I release you from any obligation to follow my command. Agreed?" They roared up at him like wolves at a full moon. Billy struck a pose and bellowed angrily as if he couldn't hear them. "Do we have a deal?"

There were only four thousand of them, but they sounded like so many more. Satisfied that he gripped their balls in his fist, Billy satisfied their lust.

"Genghis has hosted the Olympics every four years for three centuries. We have two and a half years before the next one. I will make a video asking for marathoners to join me in Anchorage, Alaska, three months before the Olympics. The best will receive free world-class body armor. Every other quad in the world will go to Peking just to see us duel. Grandma, I need you to organize the marathoners. Work them as if their lives depend on it and we'll have the largest long-distance force in history."

Oh, he had them now. He could feel their excitement. He just gave the world their next obsession.

"Why wait for the Olympics?" Blade asked. "Why not kill the Khan now?"

"We need the Khan to scare the new kingdoms into setting up their new governments quickly. Without a credible external threat, rival factions will fight for power instead of figure out how to share power."

"The smart move is for Genghis to spend the next two years building up his strength. Which gives Europe, Persia, India, China, and Korea time to sort out their own affairs, but with a deadline. If Genghis prevails, then they need to be strong enough to survive without the Baron. I hope this will give them a sense of urgency to get their acts together."

"We also need a way to identify Mongols willing to kill for their Empire. Those of Mongolian ancestry who want to stay out of the war need only leave Mongolia, Manchuria, the Stans, Siberia, and Northern China. Anyone who stays is an enemy."

"Every anti-Mongol marathoner in the world will join us!" Bear predicted. "You could have a quarter-million marathoners."

"Millions more will go see you duel him!" Princess added. "Foreigners will swamp Peking. Everyone with a grudge will go kill Mongols before they become extinct. You'll have millions of warriors that you don't have to feed, house, or pay."

"What else are you thinking behind those devious blue eyes?" Grandma demanded.

Billy smiled as if she complimented him. "I plan on offering northern China as the stakes. If Genghis wins, he gets to keep northern China. If I win, the government in southern China gets to govern China's historical territory."

"Every Chinese will see this as a fight for their homeland!" Prince predicted. "Nothing could motivate them more. Even the women and children will come armed. You are brilliant!"

"American University will continue training quads. With this epic duel to help recruitment, we could have half a million Americans attacking Mongolia."

"Having so many Americans and Chinese will make it easier to persuade neighbors to join the Last Battle of the War. Imagine millions of Europeans, Persians, and Arabs attacking from the west, Americans from the north, Chinese and Indians from the south, and the rest of Asia from the east."

As usual, Grandma was a step ahead of the others: "Red, you're using a duel as the foundation to build an unstoppable coalition! Millions of quads, coming from every direction, could exterminate the Mongol Empire permanently. We could actually win this thing!"

Grandma sounded surprised.

Thousands of tough veterans cheered while hundreds more sobbed. Until this moment, most of them never expected to win. Then the damn hugging started as the prospect of finally fulfilling their vows to dead loved ones appeared within reach. They were gonna end a brutal world war that ruined lives for over three hundred years.

Billy rose higher to emphasize something: "I want everyone here to transfer every relevant video to document your personal war story. I want future generations to see how devastating war can be, and what heroes can do to stop it. And that's what you are: heroes. You risked your lives to save people who haven't even been born. You beat the world's most powerful, most oppressive, more brutal military. Leave me your videos before you leave here. I'm gonna name this collection, The Baron's Heroes. I hope to make you all so famous that you'll never have to buy your own drinks ever again."

That seemed to humble them.

"I can't go two years without killing Mongols," Bear complained once the cheering subsided. "Ever since they slaughtered my babies, I feel guilty unless I'm avenging them."

Billy held out his hands to calm them down. "I'm giving you a vacation, not unemployment. We haven't won yet. The more we kill now, the fewer we have to kill later. Any marathoner who wants to kill Mongols should meet me in Anchorage in the spring. Travel light, but bring all your anger."

That night he took Princess and Prince aside so no one else could hear them. He could tell the prospect of a long break thrilled her.

"When is our third baby due?" he asked.

"February."

"Then we should get married on my 18th birthday, March 11, in England. I'd like my grandfather, King Richard, to attend." The twins looked at him completely bewildered. "Oh, yeah, I never mentioned this, but my father added two years to my Mongolian birth certificate, which is why we had to wait so long to get married. I wanted it to be legal under English law so our kids would be English royalty. It'd be hilarious if Harry and Elizabeth became a prince and princess."

Expecting a fierce hug for scheduling a wedding date, Princess instead slapped him so hard in the face that she left a hand print. No one struck him that hard since his mother. Prince laughed so much he fell on the ground.

"You bastard! That's why you wouldn't marry me? Because you weren't old enough? Why didn't you tell me?"

Which explained the bitchiness that Billy had blamed on the pregnancies. Now she cried again, forcing him to hold the girl who just whacked him.

Relationships are so unfair.

"Brother," he said to Prince, "Do you want to get laid?"

"My sister turned you gay like Blade?"

It shocked Billy just how likable Prince had become. Even Mali could stand him now. "I want you to come with us to breed with England's and Ireland's best quads. I'll even finance the child support."

Billy sent Chinese ships to deposit shiploads of wealth to his banks in Europe. Even Jack couldn't figure out how to spend it all.

Prince smiled. "I can get even with the guy doing my sister? You have yourself a deal, whatever-your-name is."

"Billy," he said, finally taking off his mask. "My parents called me Billy."

Prince thought that hilarious. "The most feared man alive is a scrawny teenager named Billy? What—was Timmy already taken?" Prince couldn't stop calling him names. Like Rupert, Albert, Edwin, and Alvin. "Genghis Khan is scared of a boy named Billy!"

## Chapter 77

Billy, Prince, and Princess landed before the Matriarch's front gate. Emily screamed, ecstatic to see him again. She already delivered their sixth baby and was eager to start another. Billy held out his arms and she leaped into them, kissing him on the mouth with the passion of a newlywed. To his credit, he turned his head and tried to pry her off him. She backed off confused, saw the pained expression on his face, then noticed the pregnant woman next to him. She assumed the lady was with the guy who looked so much like her. She looked ready to burst any day now.

"The fiancée I told you about..." Billy began before Emily screamed in horror at her blunder, then ran red-faced into the house.

"She's in love with you," Princess concluded with a deep sigh.

"My parents approved the match before I even hit puberty," he weakly explained.

Billy's kids with Emily now ran out, shouting "daddy!" The five, four, and three year olds tackled him with such enthusiasm it made him cry. The two year old led the one year old by the hand, who looked up at him like he was a giant. Later, inside, the twins would see Billy's baby face actually on a baby.

Billy, eager to change the conversation, whispered to William, his oldest kid, who looked up at the twins and smiled. Something about that smile unsettled Prince.

"How can your firstborn look just like you, yet also mature?" Prince asked.

"I want to show you guys something."

Billy led them towards the woods, searching for something close to the ground, the twins a few steps behind him, looking over his shoulder. Then an enormously loud primal scream exploded behind them, several times larger than a normal human voice. Both Prince and Princess dived to the ground while drawing wands. If they had their wands already in their hands, they may have blasted William, who was rolling in the air laughing.

Billy collapsed on the grass laughing so hard he couldn't breathe. He balled up like an infant, completely helpless as Prince kicked him, tears flowing like rivers. His son hovered above them, doing his own version of the four-flaming-wand dance that Diva helped Billy develop. Except the boy was a much better dancer, doing graceful somersaults with the agility of a veteran.

"You bastard!" his fiancé screamed at Billy, trying hard not to laugh.

"I'm so sorry," Billy lied, knowing they knew he wasn't sorry. "I've been planning this ever since Emily did the same thing to me. Oh, he scared me so bad I nearly peed myself. My legs shook so much I couldn't even stand! I had no idea how terrifying it is for someone to scream so loud at one's back. Every warrior hates feeling vulnerable—I just never felt it so keenly before."

After nearly crapping himself, Prince stared up at the boy with both envy and admiration. "That was awesome!"

Indeed, Princess now smiled up at him, seeing him in a completely unexpected light. She held out her arms and the damn kid dropped into her embrace with a laugh that only kids can do. He hugged her so fiercely that she found herself kissing him as if he were her own.

"I've never seen anyone so beautiful," the boy said, looking deeply into her eyes, his adorable face radiating as much innocence as many hours of practice can manufacture. Princess burst into tears and opened her heart, loving the oldest son of her fiancé despite all the complications that this would bring.

"This is William," the father introduced them. "Not Will or Willy or Billy, but William, after my father."

"You gave him Millennial Wands?" Prince suddenly demanded, examining the kid's sticks. "You had another set of Millennial Wands?"

"Show them, William."

The five year old flew up and shocked them. Not just with the eight meters of flame from his hand wands, but from the four meters from his boot wands. The Khan's unique ability was looking more common.

"William, you're incredible," Princess told the boy. "I need to bring my daughter Elizabeth here to meet you. Your dad also gave her millennial wands when she shot flame from her boot wands."

"Is it true you're the most powerful woman in the world?" William asked, staring at her like a puppy.

Princess laughed, knowing what he was doing, but unable to defend herself against it.

Billy got up to warn her. "Princess, William is just practicing flattery on you. His real target is the king. He wants to be named in the line of succession—not because he wants power, but because he thinks it'd be hilarious. He ingratiates himself so well that poor grandpa runs at the sight of him."

"Don't be jealous, papa. Not everyone can be a world famous hero like you." The boy touched noses with Princess. "I hear you have an amazing wingspan."

Billy warned her again. "You see? Better lock up your dignity or he'll take that, too."

As more adults from the house gathered around, she motioned them back then, with a deep breath, extended flame fourteen meters. All that fighting and flying paid off.

The crowd mobbed her, all talking at once, accepting her as one of their own. The woman who had to be the Matriarch—she just gave off that kind of authority—picked her up like she won a championship. The English started singing a song as they put her on their shoulders and carried her to the house like a Roman senator. This was not the awkward reception she had been dreading.

Maybe this won't be so bad, after all, Billy privately wondered.



The Matriarch met the guys outside the front door. Her one good eye examined Prince like an Arabian horse. "Is this the Indian you keep bragging about?"

"Show her, brother," Billy urged him.

So Prince extended flame fifteen meters.

"Does he understand the rules?" Susan asked Billy.

Prince looked alarmed. Billy put a friendly hand on his shoulder. "Every time I visit, Susan makes me 'donate' five times a day. I strip, put on a blindfold, then women who wish to have my children have their way with me. Few speak and I never know their identities. Susan prefers this because it reduces jealousy, gossip, and back-stabbing. It's more like a medical exam than sex. For hot sex I need your sister."

Billy smiled when he said it, so Prince didn't hit him as hard as he wished.

Princess planned to share Billy with several hundred women on their honeymoon so her children could have as many powerful siblings as possible. She'd continue this for the next two years. Princess, Susan, and Emily would spend hours discussing the logistics, reviewing potential recruits, and organizing tracking systems.

"Susan keeps track of the results. Since her son runs Global Bank, she arranges for any children to receive a kilo a year for eighteen years. It's basically what they did to us in Europe and Asia, but with barely edible food."

"I can't wait to start," Prince said.

"Is he always this easy?" Susan asked Billy.

"He matures slower than wine."

"If you're ready," she said, taking Prince away, "I'll show you where you can bathe. You'll be very busy for as long as you stay here."

Against everyone's expectations, Prince would soon fall so deeply in love with one of Billy's cousins that he'd marry her when Billy wed Princess. A duel wedding for the twins was the perfect way to close the circle since they met Billy three years before.

Billy entered and found Princess and Emily whispering suspiciously in the corner. He felt naked every time they looked at him. He never expected them to get along, much less conspire against him. His fiancée waved him over, and he dragged his feet the entire trip. It reminded him when he was just a kid and his father made him fly as slow as possible.

"We've agreed to raise our kids as siblings," Princess told him, "since a threat to one is a threat to all."

"I appreciate you informing me," Billy said carefully.

"You should impregnate her before we honeymoon."

Billy sometimes wished his fiancée was more possessive. "Yeah, impregnating her before our wedding is better than after," he said dryly. "But, hey, if you two are really into each other, maybe Emily should join us on our honeymoon."

Billy said it sarcastically, but apparently not sarcastic enough.

"You are so hot," Princess told Emily.

"You're just saying that."

"I'll prove it."

Princess pushed Emily's hand south to the land of milk and honey and Billy could tell when she arrived by the freakishly big smile on her face. Princess

exploited the moment by teasing her with a ridiculously long kiss that sent the Englishwoman into the clouds.

"Why can't you kiss like that?" Emily demanded of Billy with a straight face.

Princess laughed it off. "Lesbians are the best kissers. Did you know that 94% of all women sometimes fake an orgasm? The rest are gay."

Billy would have left if watching them kiss didn't give him an unbearable hard-on.

"Can I have you?" Princess asked Emily as if ordering lunch.

"Now and forever!" Emily answered with an enthusiasm that made Billy swoon. You'd think it was the girls getting married. "I have so much to learn." As if Billy didn't teach her anything these past six years. "Billy, you can join us if you'll promise to pay attention."

The world's most powerful man meekly followed them to Emily's room, as they chatted happily, hand in hand. He feared they'd be enemies, but never imagined he should fear them becoming lovers. He felt replaced.

As a child, he acted like a man. Now he felt like a kid, surrounded by demanding women planning his wedding. They told him what to wear, what to do, and who to sleep with. No wonder he spent the last decade at war.

A few days later, the Matriarch ruined an otherwise pleasant supper. "Billy, I'm sorry for the loss of your babies. Ouch! Did someone just kick me?"

Princess glared at her. Nobody could believe a guest kicked the Matriarch in her own home. Her eye patch made her look like a pirate.

"Exactly what babies are you sorry about, Susan?" Billy asked, all senses on full alert. She sat there acting deaf, so he turned to his bride-to-be. "Honey, what babies have I lost?"

Princess looked anguished. Susan left for the kitchen—a sound tactical retreat—leaving the bride to defend the silence.

"The Khan is paying a ton of gold for the heads of your children. He has gotten eight so far, that I have confirmed, although the Mongol News Agency says twenty-four."

"He's killed twenty-four of my babies?" Billy couldn't believe it.

"Prince led the unit that destroyed one team, but there are many Imperial Guards who want revenge for you putting a price on their families."

Billy had almost forgotten about that. "But they gang-raped my mother to death!"

"The only way to stop it is to kill the Khan. But, for reasons I don't understand, you're waiting for the Olympics."

"I told you! We need Genghis alive so the new kingdoms get their acts together and to motivate quads to see us duel at the Olympics." And, he didn't add, so I can live a few more years before withdrawal kills me.

"Then expect more dead babies," Princess said harshly, losing her appetite. She got up, turned to Emily, and said something stunning: "Tell him about his mother."

Emily was halfway out the door when Billy flew in her way. "What about my mother?" Emily stared at him like a dog levitated for the first time. "What's going on?"

"Your mom was not raped," Princess said. "Make her show you the video."

Billy felt lightheaded. "Emily, please."

She could not refuse him anything. Emily searched for the video, one among thousands, every heartbeat taking an eternity. When she found it, she let it speak for itself.

Of all things, Billy saw his father on the day his mother died. He looked, just, devastated. On every level. His wife's corpse was not yet cold and already he turned into a shell of a man. William looked into the wand like a cow about to be tipped over.

"Billy, I'm using Emily's stick to record this since you may inherit mine too soon. I'll tell her to tell you when the time is right. The way Emily looks at you makes me trust her more than anyone on Earth. After her heroism today, I'm gonna let her have as much gold as she can carry and beg her to have your children once you're old enough. Your mother already gave her advice on how to seduce you, even though I thought that just too weird.

"I can't imagine how old you are now. Probably older than I'll ever be, although I can't see you as an old man. I was hoping to be a grandpa before I checked out. Now I only want to inflict as much pain on them as I can before I'm killed.

"I sure hope you finish this. Since you were six, I've always felt that if someone could stop the conflict, it'd be you. I was willing to sacrifice all of us to stop the bastards. The suffering they've caused is unimaginable."

William burst into tears. The man who awed Billy turned into jelly. "They killed my wife and babies, Billy. The mass murderers burned the entire city, and blasted everyone who tried to escape. The kids I told you were my brother and sister were really my son and daughter. My wife survived the fire by blasting a hole under the house, but the Mongols not only gang raped her to death, but made her watch as they bashed the heads of our babies against a rock. I know because they left a video wand as a message to others. And they didn't even know who I was. All they knew is that the quads from that city defied them. So it wasn't even personal. It was policy. And that's what unlocked my rage.

"It hurt so much I could barely fire up a wand. I went to England to escape the war. I never thought I'd ever love again. I certainly was never tempted to have more children. The loss was overwhelming. Nothing hurts more than losing a child. Three years later I was still wallowing in grief when your mom levitated me into the clouds. Wow. I had never met anyone like her. Her wands must have been magical because she had me under her spell before I even knew her name. I've never been more flattered than when she chose to run off with me rather than become queen of England."

William looked down on his wife and caressed her long blond hair. "When you left, I assumed the Khan's guards raped her. But here is her last video." He held up Elizabeth's wand and played her dying words, urging him to kill them all. Then she cut her own throat. "Crap! Sorry, Billy. I meant to stop before you saw that. Oh, I'm such a mess right now.

"To be sure, I checked her body. It turns out they only wanted us to believe she had been raped to distract us when they attacked. A wand doesn't work if the quad can't focus. I'm not saying they would not have raped her, if given the chance, but that they didn't. I'm just happy she died like a warrior rather than a

victim. How we live determines how we die. She lived with purpose, and died with purpose. It takes more courage to die well than to live well.

"Billy, Elizabeth surpassed all my expectations. Did you know I once asked her where she wanted to retire? She looked me in the eye and said she never wanted to retire. She expected to die as she lived, fighting tyranny, oppression, and servitude. She knew I'd do the same, and you know she expected even more from you. I wish I could say I was sorry we placed such a huge moral burden on you, but I've never seen anyone carry so much responsibility with greater grace. Ten generations of your family expect you to finish the job, regardless of the sacrifices. I do not expect you to be happy, but I do expect you to be consequential.

"The love of my life just died, Billy, so please understand that I can't think clearly. Your mother wanted them all dead, so I think I'm gonna honor her dying wish by letting you believe they raped her. That horror will motivate you when all else fails. On those long flights, over those lonely camp fires, when you have to eat unsalted yak for the millionth time, only uncontrollable spite will get you up when your body craves sleep. Son, I need you angry. I need you vengeful. I need you cruel. Because only then will you do what must be done to win this war.

"But doing this to my only child is gonna make me feel like shit. But I'm gonna do it anyways. And I hope you can forgive me, even if I can't forgive myself. I love you so much, but nothing means more to me than crushing the Mongols. I need you to stop them from doing to others what they did to me. Make an example out of them so that no one else ever tries to conquer humanity. There will always be war. For my dying wish, Billy, I want you to make this the last world war."

Then William kissed his wife for the last time. Maybe he forgot he was recording because the emotional dam burst and reduced William to a sobbing mess. Billy had never seen his father like this before. Papa had always been his hero. Watching him fall apart unnerved Billy. When the video finally ended, Billy had no idea when he started crying. Or how to stop. All his life he felt like an adult. Now, within spitting distance of his 18th birthday, he became a scared little child in a big scary world.

"I'm so sorry," Emily said, aghast at what this did to him. Could Billy still idolize his father? Would he still raid in the summer? Did they just lose the war? Could he still duel the Khan? Did she just screw everything up? She fled to her room in a panic, and seemed to take all sound with her. The house felt unnaturally silent until his bride-to-be manned up.

"I should have kept my damn mouth shut," Princess said firmly, wiping away her own tears. "Until now, I thought I had the world's most amazing parents. Hell, they weren't even close. With a mom and dad like that, no wonder you turned out so great. You once told me that your father was a greater man than you'd ever be. I thought that ridiculous, but now I see what you mean. After knowing how awesome our parents were, I can't help but fear our children will become soul-crushing disappointments.

"Emily told me about the video, but didn't let me see it. Even with my face between her legs. If I had, I'd never have made you watch that. After all that you've been through; after all that you've done for others; after all that you've done for me—I just shat on the memory of your parents. You'll never see them the same way ever again. I stole your last illusion. I can't believe I did that to the person I

love the most—just days before I give him another baby. I don't deserve you. I'm sorry, Billy, but I can't marry you. You should marry Emily instead. If anyone is worthy of you, it's her."

Princess loudly waddled out of the room, vehemently cursing herself.

Billy stood like a statue, wondering how he got here. The world's most powerful quad could not move his limbs. Billy felt stuck. Not just physically, but mentally and emotionally. If he stood before an altar, he would have felt like many grooms, only more so.

His father never told Billy he had a dead brother and sister. His father let him believe his mother had been raped. His mother preferred him becoming a genocidal monster exterminating an entire race of people rather than a prince of England.

Billy had to pee so bad.

The Matriarch suddenly walked in with fresh baked pie that made the room smell like apples. But before she could offer Billy a slice, he asked the one question that forever changes childhood into adulthood:

"When did life get so complicated?"

## Chapter 78

Billy held a secret meeting with the few dozen relatives who knew his duel identities. He scheduled it during Princess' childbirth to be sure she wouldn't attend. He felt naked not wearing something that covered his face. He made them record him, then gave it to them bluntly.

"I'll die when I run out of Mongols to kill. Many of you can get by with flying a lot, but my addiction is the strongest in history. No quad with half my strength has ever survived retirement, even blasting mountains into rubble. It's what keeps the dueling arenas alive. It's the real reason I'm waiting two years to duel Genghis Khan. Victory will kill me. I may survive the war, but not the peace, so we need to plan now for my absence."

He paused to let them absorb this, not appreciating how his words contrasted with his boyish face or the energy radiating from him. The Matriarch, of all people, looked ready to cry with her one good eye.

"My father warned me about this. We just didn't think this day would arrive so soon. I found it harder to enjoy our victories because each one reduced my life span. Winning battles felt like committing suicide. Please don't tell me how sorry you are, because I regret nothing. I'll have lived longer in twenty years than most people who last two hundred."

Although death staring at him in the face was a hard way to enjoy a honeymoon. Just convincing Princess to marry him took more energy than it was worth.

"I've made out my Last Will and plan to legalize it in every relevant country. If something also happens to Princess, then Emily becomes the executor of my estate. She knows how I want my fortune invested. I've also given her my video

diaries for her to release after my death, along with my parent's. What? Oh, yeah, I've been recording myself since I was little.

"My problem—it sounds weird to call it that—is that I have too much money. I want to spend as much as possible, as fast as possible, as constructively as possible, so I need people I can trust to spend it for me. Under the parent non-profits that I've started, I want you to invest heavily in food production, infrastructure, education, and healthcare. Buy as much farmland and ranchland as possible to feed people during famines and for leverage over bad leaders. I also want to give free land to Americans who move to the Stans. I'd like to see huge herds of cattle and buffalo there, like in the American Midwest.

"I want to hire as many marathoners as possible. Some can fish off the coasts. Long flights and blasting the ocean—so dead fish float to the surface—will help ease the pain of their addiction, while feeding the hungry. Jack, please start a global postal service to employ others. George, hire marathoners to increase ship speed.

"I plan on holding a family get-together at the end of every year. Since they'll be the world's best quads when grown, I want them to develop personal bonds. Jack, as our common ancestor, I leave you in charge of my general war fund, charity, and investment company, although Princess or Emily can overrule decisions. Please do everything you can to keep my kids from killing each other.

"The world economy will soon be booming. I want everyone to credit peace for their prosperity. Genghis Khan made world war his legacy. I want to leave world peace as my legacy. That is my dying wish for all of you and for all of my children. See to it that they live up to it."

Now that Billy bummed them out, he tried to lift them up. The king never married the Matriarch, nor informed her that he once told Billy he'd marry her. Since he had more money than time, Billy thought he'd hurry that along. He turned to the king, but waited until he grew impatient, because that never got old.

"Grandpa, if you marry Susan before my wedding, I'll forgive that thousand ton loan."

The room exploded as if bombed. Everyone but King Richard was on their feet hugging and screaming. Susan not only lifted Billy up, but kissed him on the lips in front of her new fiancé. They weren't, after all, blood related. No one bothered to ask the king if he accepted because no one refuses a thousand gold tons.

King Richard finally understood how this little brat kept beating the Great Khan—through surprise. Billy's true talent was not war or dueling, but surprising. He must have gotten it from his parents.

Some actors perform on larger stages.

Emily started chanting, "Queen Susan, Queen Susan!" When the room finally quieted down, Billy thought he'd clarify something. Like all good surprise attacks, this one had more than one shocker.

Billy called Emily and their firstborn up front.

"Emily—or should I now say, Lady Emily—I'm not giving away a thousand gold tons to make Susan royalty. I'm doing it to make you royalty."

And, with that, even King Richard broke into tears. The beefy guy picked up Billy and Emily and everyone else hugged them until the tears of joy dried up. William did flips above them and Billy saw past Emily's shocked expression that

he made her the happiest girl on Earth. The utter devotion he saw in her eyes helped heal his wounded soul. But he was not done. Billy could be vicious in his generosity.

“But our children are less likely to ascend to the throne if they remain illegitimate.” That stopped the music. “Princess refused to marry me after making you show me that video. Do you know how I convinced her otherwise?” He didn’t wait for an answer because Emily looked about to shatter into a thousand pieces of glass. “By promising to marry you if something ever happens to her.”

Billy caught Emily as she collapsed. William, however, was past mere joy. He slammed into them so hard he knocked the three of them down. He sat on King Richard’s barrel chest and joked, “Do you know what I like most about a fair fight?”

Every quad in the world saw the video of Billy taking the Third Millennial.

Billy was laughing too hard to use his wands, but the king chased him around the high ceilings. Billy brushed Emily’s blond hair from her face so she could see his eyes.

“Emily, should the opportunity present itself, will you marry me?”

It felt like such an odd question to ask the mother of six of his children right before he married someone else.

“You actually do understand how much I love you!” she whispered in joy.

“I’m gonna take that as a yes.” Billy turned to Susan. “Several of your offspring have died for me. Ennobling your descendents is the least I can do for their service.”

Which is why he invited Prince’s beautiful fiancée to this meeting. Billy called her in front of everyone and William let the king finally catch him.

“Cousin Mara—or should I say, Lady Mara—your sister Mary died protecting my mother the day she was killed. I cannot thank her enough. But I can try.

“When my future brother-in-law wouldn’t shut up about how wonderful you are, I suggested he turn the baby in your tummy into a prince or princess by marrying you. So if you ever hear him call me a genius, that’s why. As royalty, I warned him that you should own an estate to pass down to your children. Since he didn’t know what to buy, he just gave me control of one of his accounts. I doubt the fool had any idea how much was in it. Anyways, you should soon own several estates in England and Ireland, a dozen in Europe, a huge territory in the Stans, and an agent is buying land across the Americas. Just in case you two have a lot of children.

“I also had your forgetful groom put you in charge of the charities he started for war orphans and widows. And I gave a thousand gold tons in your name to his tribe to build roads, schools, and hospitals. I hear they’ve already named a street after you. The rest I donated to the families of those who either gave or risked their lives saving him.

“And you’re still richer than the king, who just got a thousand tons wealthier. But please don’t lend him money—that’s my job!” Billy paused to smile at grandpa. “It’s better to give to family than to lend, and it costs about the same.

“Your boyfriend has invested heavily in my companies, but he doesn’t care about business. I hear you’re a whiz with numbers, so perhaps you’d consider a membership on my board of directors. Our children will be cousins twice over, but

I want them to grow up as brothers and sisters. After all, any one of them could one day rule England.”

And, more importantly, Billy needed powerful people willing to work hard to make his legacy last. His mother was right: only lasting peace justified killing so many. Falling short of that would make him the genocidal monster he spent his life destroying.

When Susan, Emily, and Mara sobbed together in a group hug, it occurred to Billy how frequently he made women cry. He didn’t have the heart to tell Mara that Prince would spend the rest of his life dueling to satisfy his wand thirst, rather than living large in luxury in London. Effectively, she’d be a widow as soon as they married.

“You’d make a great king,” his grandfather flatly stated in awe.

“Thank you, grandpa. It’s in my blood.”

## Chapter 79

Best. Birthday. Ever.

The king’s huge wedding at Buckingham Palace drowned out his own, smaller wedding on an uninhabited island off England’s coast. Having his wedding a week after the king’s made Billy feel safe. While royalty from across Europe flooded England to witness history, only a few dozen relatives saw Billy and the twins get married. Wanting to make the new queen as popular as possible, Billy imported kegs of alcohol and tons of food which he distributed free in Susan’s name. The hundreds of infrastructure projects, hospitals, and schools that he funded propelled the English and Irish economies like super wands. Billy’s growing fleet couldn’t keep up with demand, no matter how many shipyards they started.

Princess looked stunning in her white dress. He had never seen someone so happy cry so much. She made Emily her bridesmaid, and the two bonded like incestuous sisters. William loudly and repeatedly volunteered to be his best man, the little shit, knowing Billy had already asked Jack to have that honor. The little monster loved attention, and soon became the life of the party. William tried to make everyone like him, and collected jokes like other quads collected porn.

I’m gonna be a grandpa as soon as that bastard touches puberty, Billy realized.

In contrast to his dreamy wedding, Billy’s honeymoon was a nightmare. So long between transferring wands gave him the shakes, which affected his performance, which pissed off the ladies impatient to get pregnant. A lot of dangerous women with nothing to do but gossip was a unique hell that Billy became eager to escape from.

Spring in Siberia couldn’t come fast enough.

Billy found fifty thousand marathoners in Anchorage desperate to kill someone. Over half were Americans, and the rest split between Europeans and Asians thirsty for revenge. Grandma had been flying their units hard -- telling them it was to maximize their endurance, but really to keep them from shooting each other. Billy wondered how they’d fare after the war ended.



Bear took Billy aside, bubbling with excitement. He had never seen the old veteran look so content.

"You finally got laid!" was Billy's first guess.

Bear projected a video of a laughing baby. "Isn't he beautiful?"

Beautiful was—honestly—not the first thing that came to mind. Furry, maybe. "If you're into little boys, yeah, he's cute."

"Mongols killed every family I've ever started -- three wives and seventeen children, so I never expected another family. I haven't reproduced in a century. You remember the three brothers you dueled in Barcelona? They killed my last wife and kids over what they thought was my dead body. You gave me the wands that nearly destroyed me, and I've been killing Mongols with them ever since. So I no longer fear Mongols slaughtering those I love. Then I met this really great girl..."

Billy lit up like a fireball. "Congratulations! Are you calling him Bear Jr.?"

Bear must be projecting an invisible shield because Billy's quips just bounced off him.

"We're calling him Ralph, for now, but..."

Billy's laugh interrupted him. "Ralph? Really?" He studied his friend. "Oh, no! Is Ralph your real name?"

"Lower your voice!" Bear had never yelled at him before. "The new guys aren't gonna respect a guy named Ralph. Much less let me get away with so many jokes."

"So why burden your only child with that name?"

Bear suddenly looked sheepish. "I was hoping we could name him after you."

Billy fell backwards. He had never been floored before. Or, in this case, grounded. His butt landed on a rock and he squealed like an anal virgin. He was about to joke that his name was also Ralph, but Bear looked so vulnerable. Billy got up, still dizzy from being so flattered. He looked around to make sure nobody could overhear.

"Billy."

Bear had been staring at him hard. First his eyes started laughing, then his face began chuckling, and finally his whole body roared with mirth.

"I'd rather call him Ralph," Bear said with a straight face.

"No, please, no!" Billy felt like he was begging for his first blowjob. "Ralph is a terrible name. You know that better than most." Bear did not look convinced, although his eyes twinkled more than usual. "Hey, one day everyone will know my real name, and the world will have an armada of Billy's. Yours can be first." Bear was proving a tough sell. Billy was not sure who was doing who the favor. "I'll tell you what. I'll make a video praising everything you've done. Your son will know that the Red Baron thinks you're a hero. That must be worth something."

Bear couldn't hold it any longer. He burst out laughing and hugged his skinny friend.

"I've never felt towards any man what I feel for you, Billy."

"I'm drawing the line at hugs. Don't you dare kiss me, Ralph!"

But Bear saved the best for last. "I've been thinking how best to thank you for giving me enough hope to start another family. I'm a husband and father again because of you. I'd have been miserable until death without you. I forgot what happiness felt like."

Billy looked behind him because he sure as hell felt an ambush coming.

“Did you know the world population peaked the year Genghis Khan invaded China? Earth would have half a billion more people today if the Mongols didn’t start this world war.

“Or that this year will set a new world record for babies born? Europe and the Americas are popping kids out at twice their historical rate. Not only was the war indirectly killing a million civilians a year, but millions more were not being born because people like me felt too insecure. American University put out a report estimating the world will set a new population record within several years, meaning every dead Mongol will be replaced with a live non-Mongol. All those new governments are taking a census, for tax purposes, so I’ve hired a team of university professors to document the change in population projections. Every year they’ll publish the latest numbers—oh, I used to teach math.

“Right now people associate you with war, but every year I’m gonna remind them that you’ve helped create far more life than death.” Bear suddenly radiated intensity. “I want an entire generation to grow up knowing that most of them have you to thank for their existence.”

Overwhelmed, Billy almost fell on his ass again. “I feel so virile.”

“You’re welcome.”

Bear walked off like he owned the planet, while Billy applied a wand to his butt. It really hurt.

Team Red landed at night at a new secret base north of the Bering Strait. They slept all day and took off at dusk. Patrols soon shrieked alarms, which gave them the opportunity to bomb quads forming in the dark. They fought long enough for the enemy to get a good estimate of their numbers. Then Billy led them straight south because—even in the summer—northern Siberia is really cold. They slept all day, waiting for the enemy to catch up.

And Billy got his first surprise when sentries reported that the enemy did not pursue him. Which really pissed him off. Now was a terrible time for the enemy to become unpredictable.

“I didn’t want them in my rear,” Billy complained. “What if we have to cross the Strait in a hurry? Or we arrive too tired to outrun them?”

“They know they can’t catch us, so they didn’t even try,” Bear reasoned. “Or they stayed to block our other quads.”

Billy shook his head. “No, after what I did to his Indian marathoners, Genghis simply told them to contest every crossing. Crap. This ruins my plans for the Olympics.” He called a leadership meeting. “Grandma, get as close as safely possible to their west. Sleep all day, then attack them all night long to exhaust them. I doubt they’ll sleep much tonight, so you’ll have an energy advantage.

“Meanwhile, I’ll return to Alaska and give the near-marathoners the day shift since they need light to target their bombs. We’ll take days and you have nights until we eliminate them.”

The battle played out as Billy expected, but it surprised him to learn that half of the Mongols were two-wanders, and all of them volunteers. Two-wanders can fight within tunnels just as well as marathoners. Since cleaning out bunkers was dangerous, Billy assigned it to his half-marathoners and sent his near-marathoners down the Manchurian coast to clear it of people while he drew Mongols forces elsewhere.

It shocked Billy that Genghis abandoned Siberia. They saw literally no one except the Siberians who he had asked to fish and hunt for them. It bothered him that Genghis did not chase him. Billy wanted to beat Mongol armadas like he always had: exhaust and ambush. The change in tactics worried him so much that he left his force at several lakes while he sent scouts to fan out far ahead. Billy himself went to the nearest city.

Instead of hidden armadas, Billy saw sentries on mountains and hilltops near huge piles of wood to ignite when they saw the Americans. No doubt they had several great hiding places nearby. It wasn't until he saw Ulaanbaatar that he spotted battalions hiding in forests and ravines. A lot of them. He circled around and found even more south of the city.

Dressed as a Mongol civilian, he entered the city and found a fortress. Everyone who didn't want to fight apparently left because they all seemed eager for battle. They already disassembled the most flammable structures and built hundreds of underground bunkers and stone buildings for the two-wanders to fight from. Everything around the banks looked like kill zones. Food seemed widely distributed, he saw water barrels everywhere, and safely assumed that they kept little wealth here.

Genghis took all the fun out of sacking cities.

Billy put himself in the Khan's boots and everything suddenly made sense. The Mongols couldn't catch marathoners, except sleeping near their targets, so that's where they deployed their troops. He didn't see any crops, so the Mongols only planted what they could harvest before the raiders got here. He saw few horses, mules, or oxen, so they probably drove them south as well.

Genghis planned on using hunger to force them to leave. If it worked, then the Americans would never return. Billy respected the move. What he didn't know was how to counter it. He couldn't even besiege them because they had more food. Since he didn't even have bombs, it could take weeks to finish off each city. They had already run out of the supplies they brought from Alaska. Instead of returning north to his troops, Billy flew south until he found what he was looking for: food.

Instead of storing food within the cities, they hid it a few hours south, in the middle of nowhere, so the Americans couldn't find it.

Nobody ever said Mongols were dumb. Genghis weighed the pros and cons of each force and developed tactics accordingly. The Mongols won as long as they didn't lose. It was Billy who needed victories to justify taking so many so far for so long. It wasn't until he thought of his father that the answer came to him. And the answer had him laughing all the way to his troops.

Billy led Team Red south, but carefully avoided the cities like the plague. Instead they went to the border separating Mongolia and China and found the support camps keeping the troops in Mongolia fed. There they found the civilians, herds, and harvested crops. With the vast Gobi Desert to the south and Korea to the east, those in eastern Mongolia literally had nowhere else to go.

Genghis assumed the Baron wanted to sack Mongol cities, which is what he would have done. But, instead, Billy's goal was to kill Mongols. And that's so much easier when they have sent their quads elsewhere.

Team Red fell upon the defenseless civilians just as Mongols for centuries wiped out American civilians. Billy fouled watering holes within the desert and destroyed

everything of value. They found little gold, so they carried food. Instead of flying fast and far, they spread out as wide as possible along the border. The towns in northern China seemed to have more Mongols than Chinese, so they let the Chinese leave before burning those towns and everyone in them. They created a path of destruction about one thousand kilometers wide. Once west of the Gobi, they raided even wider. The cities they sacked acted as supply bases rather than forts.

Genghis finally showed up with a quarter-million quads. Billy rotated his highest-flying battalions to blast them during the day, while the rest rotated lightning strikes at night. Genghis suffered several times as many casualties simply because Billy had better fliers. Genghis retaliated by sending battalions on suicide attacks on Billy's camp to catch those resting. Team Red continued west, destroying everything within range, and occasionally doubling back to hit the Khan's camp at night.

What he didn't do was attack the cities that spent a year preparing for him. Instead, they destroyed the people, roads, and supplies that kept those cities alive to make them wither on the vine.

While Team Red lured Genghis west, Billy flew to Korea where his one hundred fifty thousand near-marathoners waited for him. Guides led them to their fleet, anchored equidistant between Korea and Shanghai, the port city that divided China from the Empire. They crossed the sea one division at a time, resting on an uninhabited island where their ships provided them with tents, blankets, stoves, food, and potable water.

The Mongols did not accept the Yangtze River as their new border, or even China as an independent nation, so both sides struck each other constantly. Which made President Zhu very receptive to a message from the Red Baron to meet him in Shanghai. It not only surprised Zhu when the Baron actually showed up, but shocked him to learn that one hundred fifty American battalions wanted to attack Mongol units. Zhu did his part by ordering a brief attack all along the border. When the Mongols retaliated in force, the Americans fell upon them from behind, after first destroying their bases.

The near-marathoners then sacked and pillaged everything within three hundred clicks of the coast, targeting everyone who looked Mongolian, but letting the rest live. They stole every ship that looked seaworthy to transport their valuables. They started in the south so that they could raid north, closer to home. By the time Genghis heard the Baron led troops within northern China, Billy had already looted the area around Peking and soon disappeared into Manchuria. The Baron left a video explaining he didn't burn Peking because he wanted everyone to see him duel the Immortal.

When Team Red got the news, they had already accumulated as much wealth as they could carry, and so went home. The Europeans continued west, the Asians southeast, and the Americans hugged Siberia until they crossed into Alaska.

Billy spent the next several months traveling Asia to reproduce with the mothers of his children, give speeches, and advise governments. Kings still threatened war, rebels still threatened revolution, and everyone had a grievance. Billy wisely intervened as little as possible, other than to advise non-violent means to effect change.

On Hainan Island, Billy met with Kung-ti, whose grandson Zhu the Chinese elected as the first president of the Republic of China. The fat man hugged Billy like a son. It felt like being thrown into a large vat of leftover soup.

"You scared us, you know?" he told Billy. "The Khan stabbed deep into our territory like a hot knife. A nation of butter would have resisted him more. Then you destroyed his follow-on force. Even better were the videos. Before that, they had great morale while we were depressed. Your videos reversed that. Your victory gave us the confidence to bomb the Mongols to hell, wounding Genghis Khan himself. You wanted democracy instead of another dictatorship, so I held elections to capitalize on Zhu's new popularity."

"Would you like to retake the rest of China?" Billy asked lightly, watching the greedy bastard squirm. "If I kill Genghis and destroy his largest air units, would the Republic of China send everything they have north? I'll have a quarter-million marathoners and half a million Americans. I'm willing to bribe Korea, Japan, Taiwan, India, Persia, and Europe into helping you."

The old man's eyes twinkled. "We Chinese will never feel safe as long as the Empire threatens our border. Most of the Chinese quads who fled with stolen loot have since resettled in our territory, while few Chinese still serve in the Mongol Air Force. We now have over a million quads in our air force and militias."

Billy took that as a yes. "I'm distributing videos urging Asians—not just Chinese—to kill Mongols after I've killed The Immortal. You could help by handing out the wands I brought, and maybe giving away spears, swords, and arrows. Genghis will have to devote more quads to basic security, leaving him fewer to chase me."

The governor was too excited—or heavy—to continue standing. He fell into a chair to think through the consequences. "But how will we know the Khan is dead?"

"Post sentries around the Peking Stadium. When they see him die, ring monastery bells. Have your men stand by every bell in every city to spread the word."

"That's it?" Kung-ti asked.

Billy paused dramatically. "Well, there is one more thing you can do in return for getting northern China. Out of all the people in the world, I trust you the most to do this."

Billy leaned closer and whispered into his ear so that not even their bodyguards could overhear.

Kung-ti looked like the Buddha after a satisfying fart. "You are such a clever bastard. You have come to the right person. I shall personally see to it."

That winter was the longest of Billy's life. To reduce how many wands he sucked, he blasted bedrock and flew constantly. Princess seemed desperate for him to impregnate as many quads as possible—as if the world would need them in twenty years.

The next spring, Billy led his American marathoners and near-marathoners to the southern end of the Ural Mountain Range, where they met one hundred European and Indian marathon battalions that he borrowed for the summer. Ivan the Terrible stockpiled tons of food, bombs, and supplies at a dozen hidden locations near their targets. More importantly, Siberians and Russians drove herds

east to make sure they wouldn't starve, while many of the near-marathoners worked as supply mules.

With a quarter-million long-distance quads, Billy sacked the cities he avoided the year before. When Genghis approached with a million troops, Billy simply sacked cities in the opposite direction, forcing Genghis to chase him. Once tired enough, Billy would attack at night, then backtrack them to eat up the Khan's supply train. Billy evaded the armada to concentrate on easier prey. Whenever Genghis got too close, Billy would strike hard and then fly away to burn more cities.

With Genghis in western Mongolia, Grandma led Team Red and three hundred thousand half-marathoners from Alaska, down Siberia, to strike what was left in Manchuria and eastern Mongolia. They swept everything within several hundred clicks of the coast. A supply fleet sailed parallel so they ate something other than fish and rabbits. In Korea they picked up one hundred thousand Asian marathoners eager to kill Mongols and take their stuff. Having pre-deployed bombs all winter, they overwhelmed the cities that defied them the previous summer.

William's dream finally came true: no one lived in Mongolia.

With summer ending, both forces in western Mongolia struggled to feed themselves, but Billy had fewer mouths and longer legs. Billy pretended to send his Americans home, when really they just went to Lake Baikal, the world's deepest lake, to fish it out. Billy led the European marathoners west, to their last stashes of food. Genghis took the opportunity to try to catch him while he had them out-numbered. He pushed his troops and stretched his supplies, since he could no more live off the land than the raiders.

Billy stayed just out of reach until his one hundred fifty American battalions surprised the Mongols from behind, after overwhelming the slower Mongols that Genghis left behind. No sooner did Genghis organize his armada to face the new threat than Billy attacked as well. Team Red rotated divisions to exhaust the hungry Mongols, until Genghis wisely fled with only one hundred thousand troops. Billy sent the Americans home before winter started and chased the Mongols down with the Europeans until the enemy scattered.

Only for a Persian to stab Billy in the back. Even pregnant, Princess caught him before he dove a kilometer and divided her time between healing her husband and torturing the traitor. The fool didn't erase his wand memories, which led them to several others back home who soon perished, along with his family.

What Billy hated even more than getting stabbed again was being unable to move for a week. Nobody could even carry him to safety if Mongols attacked.

"You apparently killed a lot of his family," Princess explained the next morning. "But he hated Mongols even more than you because they suppressed his people while you set them free. He understood why you killed his pro-Mongolian family members, but his honor code still demanded he avenge them."

Billy survived two assassination attempts the previous summer, but this one nearly killed him. To keep the Mongols away and to enrich his European marathoners, Billy had them loot northern China. Weighing them down with wealth was a surefire way to keep his followers following. Plus, the less money Genghis had, the fewer mercenaries he'd hire.

Because they both knew that the Olympics would be more than just an historic duel.

## Chapter 80

Overlooking the crowded Peking Stadium Arena, Genghis Khan smiled for the first time in years. Instead of the Red Baron interrupting his beloved Olympics, the games went off flawlessly. Foreign news agencies fawned over the Khan's charm, wit, and generosity. In fact, it was the most successful Olympics in history. Tourists filled every hotel within flying distance, boosting the local economy. If they spend enough, the tourists may actually pull the Empire out of its decade-long economic depression.

Of the several million Mongol descendents who moved here or just visited, the one hundred thousand sitting with him in the Peking Stadium represented the most powerful—who refused to fight the war. Most of them preferred running their businesses than the hazardous job of facing the Red Baron.

Genghis hoped watching the duels would get their blood pumping enough to fight. They had enough quads and gold to win the war. So he charmed them, culminating in this exclusive honor of attending the final award ceremony with the Great Immortal at the famous Peking Stadium Arena.

Genghis went out of his way to welcome athletic teams from his former enemies. Beating Mongols in sports helped them recover from centuries of humiliation. Few realized that public relations was the Empire's most effective weapon. He charmed the world media into dispelling the negative caricature that Mongol-haters had of him. One summer event would not erase the hostility, but it was a good start to resettling relations.

While critics portrayed Genghis Khan as a villain, his own people saw him as a great man who brought peace, prosperity, and security for the most people on Earth for the longest period in history. A lone woman could cross from one end of the Empire to another reasonably sure of her safety. The Olympics was less about sports and more about spreading this message to the rest of the world.

Now more than ever.

The only dark spot was that damn American Indian dominating every wand event—something he expected Jirko to do. The Indian arrived in Peking a few months before the Olympics and remained undefeated. Genghis wanted to poison him until his spies showed him an interview of the arrogant bastard bragging that he'd beat the Red Baron to prove he was the world's best dueler. Even better, the Red Baron publicly accepted the Indian's challenge!

Well, that was the best news that Genghis heard in a long time because he could not re-conquer his Empire with the Baron alive.

And the Khan was glad he didn't poison the Indian because it turned out that he flew for the English Olympic team. King Richard and his extended family came all the way to Peking to cheer their new champion, who married the king's favorite granddaughter.

When crowned several years ago, King Richard reassured Genghis that England would stay neutral, despite the pressure his neighbors put on him. When Genghis lost his air forces in Europe, the king repeated his neutrality, despite being called a traitor by the rest of Europe. Genghis Khan valued loyalty. England didn't blow with the wind like most countries, so he didn't regret not poisoning the Indian who won so many medals for the English.

And King Richard turned out to be a delight at the supper table. Genghis was now very glad he didn't kill him two decades ago, as Ambassador Tamerlane demanded, when his daughter's elopement voided their treaty.

Queen Susan, however, gave him the evil eye. Or perhaps she gave that to everyone. He wondered if she blamed Mongols for her wound.

"My dear Susan," Genghis asked soothingly in his grand dining hall, "would it be too painful to share with us how you lost your eye?"

The Matriarch gave Genghis Khan a look that would have turned softer men into stone. Then she sighed.

"I fell on an Irishman."

"Before you wed, I hope. I've heard sex is possible in the air, but I've never managed to pull it off. Or, rather, put it in."

She closed her eyes to search her wand for the video. "Some English mothers were picnicking with our babies in Ireland when some Irish bandits mistook us for rich victims. They planned to rape us and ransom our babies."

She started the video just after Billy had screamed over the hill. Susan stood on her chair so the few thousand guests could watch.

They saw a few hundred men yelling in Gaelic rush closer, clearly expecting to butcher them. The wand swung to show a few dozen women leave their babies in the grass as Susan commanded them to form a wall. Spacing themselves a meter apart, vertically in the air, is hard enough for trained professionals. These scared mothers had just moments to execute a complex maneuver. Susan led them higher to force the attackers to look into the sun.

Then the fireballs began. Susan and one other blasted at three hundred meters—beautiful fireballs, bright colors, tight spacing, while accurately leading their targets. The men charged too closely together to dodge effectively, which allowed the ladies to funnel their fire into a narrow space where it was hard to miss. The bandits fell like rain. The men should have prevented this by spreading out vertically and horizontally to flank the mothers in a classic envelopment maneuver. If fear made them cling to their buddies, then they must have been terrified. The best quads in front faced a meteor shower from the female broadside. Efforts to evade only made them collide with those around them. Those behind, flying all out, smashed into those burning in front. What should have been an easy victory became a bloody defeat.

The survivors fired once they got into range until the mass of men struck the middle of the wall. The video devolved into a free-for-all, glimpses of steel, fire, and death played out to a soundtrack of grunts, groans, and growls. Susan clearly fought like a demon bitch, so maybe she was born with the evil eye.

The Matriarch had been spitting giant fireballs, alternating her hand wands every heartbeat, as the ambushers rose up to kill her. She jumped onto a man's face, breaking his jaw with her boot, then popped vertically a few meters to avoid



two men and slice a tendon at maximum range. She saw one granddaughter get cut in the shoulder and a great-granddaughter fight off three more. Susan dropped on one and sliced the other two when something knocked her from the sky. She fell onto the head of an Irishman, her face slapping the top of his helmet, slashing her eye. Yet she barely paused. She wrapped her legs around the guy long enough to slice his head off—they'd later find an infant playing with his face. This put her into freefall. Her feet smashed into another Irishman who she savagely hacked, while still falling. The recording suddenly showed a wide shield, then a fireball hit, and finally her wand blasted the bastard who almost fried her. Someone crashed into her, and her wand recorded her punching him in the face, splattering his nose in an explosion of blood before her other wand-blade slit his throat. The video watched him fall. The grass had more corpses than babies, and a few dozen men were still desperately fighting to the death when Susan ended the fun.

"Not all fights involve Mongols," she said in the stunned silence.

Now Genghis Khan understood why they called her the Matriarch. She could beat a few hundred murderous ambushers with just a bunch of girls. He was tempted to ask for a copy to humiliate his recruits.

"Remind me never to invade England," Genghis said loudly to great laughter. "King Richard, I imagine you don't argue often with your queen."

This was the first time Richard had ever seen this video. "Not unarmed, anyways."

Everyone laughed. Even Susan, who finally managed to look more like a grandmother than a dueling champion.

Genghis thought of his wife. Borte loved witty banter and would have really enjoyed these English.

What Genghis Khan didn't know is that, as he surveyed the Peking Arena, Mara helped Billy's son William put on bright red custom armor. Grandma and her son Jim stood uncomfortably in their own red suits, while Elizabeth danced in excitement in hers. Their job was to lure the four largest Mongol air units away from the marathoners flying in. The four fake Red Barons would tire them out, then take them over the ocean where, hopefully, many of them would lack the energy to return. Those who survived would be lured to the Baron's huge marathon force, one at a time. Their most important job was to keep those air units busy, tired, and apart.

Grandma did not look forward to pissing off fifty thousand vengeful Mongols, but the other three looked eager to be chased all day. But now she understood why Billy gave them all Millennial Wands—because they were gonna need them. Two hundred thousand quads chasing four fake barons—Grandma chuckled at the crazy stuff Red came up with.

King Richard sought to avenge his daughter's murder via fifty thousand English and Irish quads dressed as civilians who would pounce on police, militias, and smaller enemy units. Lady Mara, although pregnant again, was especially eager to avenge her older sister's death.

Then, to the dismay of millions, reports came in that the Red Baron caught pneumonia in Alaska by working himself too hard. Apparently he never recovered fully from his near-fatal wounds from the previous summer. Genghis found that hard to believe, but his spies followed the marathon armada south to San

Francisco. The Khan expected the Baron to make a last-minute rush north, but instead they flew farther south to Los Angeles, which made it impossible for the marathoners to reach Peking in time.

Or so he thought.

In fact, Genghis received a report every day, and just this morning he saw a video of Grandma at the Baron's bedside with the distinctive Los Angeles city and many thousands of marathoners behind them. What he didn't know is that this would be the last messenger that Team Red would let through.

Genghis organized two million quads into four groups: he had half a million at the Bering Strait; four groups of fifty thousand around Peking; half a million opposing the Koreans, Japanese, and Taiwanese; and the rest near his border with China. The Russians, Persians, and Turks kept their air units far from his borders, so he redeployed those troops to oppose the Chinese.

What Genghis didn't know is that Europe started attacking a week ago. The Khan's sack of Krakow scared them, and Jack constantly reminded them that they'd never be safe as long as the Mongols survived. The Russians spent the winter pre-deploying supplies and the marathoners carried heavier loads so the rest could travel farther.

To help the Chinese, Billy paid the Indian Air Force to attack the Mongols facing the Chinese from behind while the Republic of Northern India cleansed the Tibetan Plateau of Mongols.

In the Khan's favor, the Baron's raids motivated Mongols to join his air force. Widespread persecution in former territories succeeded in motivating several million other Mongol descendants to move home -- something that Genghis himself repeatedly failed to do. The Baron's threat to the homeland motivated several million more to temporarily defend their ancestral homeland without actually moving there permanently.

Apart from a million new quads joining his air force, and a few million more flying in just to protect Mongols in case the bells rang, Genghis hired a million foreign mercenaries with bullion he buried centuries ago.

Besides training millions of two-wanders, Genghis spent heavily to give away conventional weapons—swords, bows, and spears—to millions of Mongols who couldn't use wands. The generals facing the Americans, Chinese, and those in Korea spent months preparing for every conceivable scenario, building defenses, and stockpiling supplies. If the enemy attacked, these troops would trounce them.

If bells rang across northern China, several million people on each side would start slaughtering each other. Plus the four million quads in professional air units.

Genghis tasted victory already. Without the Baron and his quarter-million marathoners, the Americans and the Chinese Air Force won't attack, which presented him with a delicious irony. Genghis waved a messenger over and gave the order to ring the city bells after the ceremony. He'd much rather fight the enemy now without the Baron.

With his two million quads without enemy armadas to occupy them, he could deploy them against the Chinese civilians and foreign tourists shooting Mongols. With the homeland empty of traitors, he could then retake southern China.

Or, he thought with a smile, put pleasure before business and wipe out the Americas. There couldn't be more than one hundred million of them left. That'd be just the therapy his traumatized spirit needed.

What a beautiful morning! He personally didn't like Peking because dust clouds from the Gobi practically buried it. And the dust triggered his hacking cough, which inevitably reminded him that he once had to crawl through a million headless bodies covered in shit. But since the Baron destroyed his roving tent palace, he only felt safe within the Forbidden City in Peking.

Music started and the three champions flew out. The Indian landed on the highest post, with Jirko winning the silver and a Tatar prodigy the bronze. Then Genghis gave an inspiring speech that he spent an unusual amount of time on, knowing the world was watching. The Empire's national anthem followed while the arena played a montage of video clips of the duels that the audience witnessed over the last month.

Genghis Khan could not remember when he last enjoyed himself so much.

## **Chapter 81**

What Genghis Khan didn't know is that the Battle for Northern China, as it'd soon be called, actually began a week ago because it takes that long for his relay messengers to reach him from the Bering Strait. Billy timed the American attack so that Genghis would not learn of it before Billy killed him. As it was, a messenger—flying at maximum speed—was only an hour from Peking with news of the epic battle.

Billy had been planning this attack for a decade. He had the Americans eliminate everyone in eastern Siberia and Manchuria the last few summers, sent his commanders to learn the future battleground terrain, and sent munition ships to the coast so his marathoners could stockpile bombs.

Days before the Khan's spy even left Los Angeles, Billy's marathon divisions flew a thousand clicks to his first fleet. Every thousand clicks they'd use either an island or another fleet as stepping stones until they reached Korea. Billy's marathoners traveled from Los Angeles to Peking faster than the Khan's relay messengers, and were still rested enough to fight.

The marathoners were still crossing the Pacific when half a million Americans began the Battle for the Bering Strait. The Americans had slept all day, then bombed them after sunset. The Mongols had been awake all day, then spent all night defending themselves. Both sides numbered half a million, but the Americans averaged twice the endurance, and so could keep more quads in the air. They also had better wands, greater motivation, and the initiative. Munitions ships sailed near to save time, and hospital ships to save lives. Supply ships set up temporary bases along the Alaskan coast, providing food, beds, and medicine. They literally did the heavy lifting.

The first day they fought at parity, but with each day the Americans fielded more and better quads. Within the week they turned air superiority into air

supremacy, and had to position several divisions just to catch the Mongols who fled before the inevitable. It'd take another week to clear the bunkers, but it was so worth it to see Genghis Khan lose another half a million quads.

The reason the Khan put so many quads there was to prevent Americans from entering Siberia. What he didn't know is that one hundred fifty thousand near-marathoners island-hopped down the Aleutians, then flew every five hundred kilometers to a ship, until they reached the Siberian coast. They raced down Manchuria until they reached the supply ships waiting for them near Korea.

The day before the marathoners struck Peking, the near-marathoners bombed the Mongols facing the Koreans, Japanese, and Taiwanese in Korea. The Mongols had practiced against every possible threat.

Except getting attacked from behind.

## Chapter 82

Genghis didn't know how long he had been looking up when he noticed others staring at him. Then he realized he heard something really faint, like a musket shot fired from the moon. Now he heard it, regularly like a heartbeat: someone was shrieking a friendly greeting from high altitude.

Warnings rang from multiple patrols and everyone suspected they had another suicidal—some idiot eager to ruin the party. They'd barely feel a blast fired that high up. Still, he looked around for hidden dangers, and noticed his Imperial Guard doing the same. They had multiplied patrols for a few thousand kilometers out to detect large air units, but lone wolves still posed risks. One hundred thousand of the world's best quads, like those in the stadium, couldn't stop a single flier.

What the Khan didn't know is that 1) Billy's fleet just anchored over the horizon; 2) that four fake Barons lured his big air units away; and 3) that two hundred fifty thousand marathoners were about to end the Olympics with a bang.

Dayan, his head of security, put a hand on his shoulder, something that few others dared. "You know the rules," he said harshly to deter an argument. Genghis grunted impatiently—he didn't want to hide in his panic room during this incredibly important publicity event. "Why build an escape room if you won't use it?"

Still, Genghis hesitated. Then Dayan looked up, alarmed. The greeting not only kept coming, but grew much louder. Too loud for an ordinary suicidal. "Go!" Dayan barked at the greatest conqueror in history while opening a hatch below them.

Genghis reluctantly went, climbing down the stairs and hoping nobody noticed. Except that damn Indian in the arena. While everyone else searched the skies, the Indian's eyes never left him. The Indian cursed, covertly stabbed the silver and bronze winners in the back, then fired at Genghis while pretending to help Jirko.

"No!" the Khan cried out in despair. He just lost the most powerful Mongol he had left. Except maybe for Jirko's prodigy son.

Dayan, facing the wrong direction, never saw the blast coming. Genghis yelled a warning, then dropped down the chute just before a huge fireball vaporized his most trusted descendent. Genghis bounced off a wall and smacked into compact earth.

So much happened so fast that he didn't even get the chance to use his wands to control his fall. When he finally got on his feet, he screamed in pain. He sprained an ankle, or worse. He didn't even know if he could fly.

Genghis heard a familiar primal scream and climbed up to a spy hole to see the Indian face off against a guy in a bright red suit. No! The Red Baron here? Challenging the dueling champion? The bastard even spoke to the crowd before bowing to his opponent like in ancient honor duels. As well he should because one hundred thousand pairs of wands tracked him. The Baron wasn't going to leave this arena alive. Oh, how Genghis would love to see two hundred thousand fireballs consume the Red Baron! His hatred of the man felt as immense as the vast grassy steppe.

The duelers positioned themselves in a fighting stance, then the Indian charged, shooting rapidly. The crowd swooned. Genghis, unable to believe his eyes, could not stop watching, even though he knew something was terribly wrong.

The Red Baron avoided the first blasts by flying up while flaming all four wands. Genghis still had a hard time believing it, but his hands wands extended fire for twenty-three meters. His personal best was thirteen and a half meters after hearing reports that Subodei reached thirteen. To get even that he had to kill thousands of tied up prisoners, transferring their wands while they died. But that was centuries ago. The best he could do lately was eleven meters.

Unimpressed, the Indian attacked aggressively until they slashed at each other with blades in the very center of the huge arena. Higher and higher the battle took them. The fight captivated the stadium, despite warning shrieks from distant patrols. Suddenly the Baron saw a shadow in the sky and released his infamous scream. Instead of fighting, the two duelers popped up, not three meters from each other, and engaged the Mongol patrols above them. Two guys attacking two hundred while two hundred thousand fireballs flew at them?

What the hell? Nothing made sense.

Then a series of explosions shook the arena, knocking Genghis back down his bolt hole. Thousands of explosives under the stadium stands detonated nearly as one, each many times larger than the contact bombs dropped by fliers. Millions of scrap metal flew in all directions as the Chinese who lit those fuses raced for cover. The earth shook so hard he bounced into the air. His ears ringing, Genghis had never experienced such a heavy bombardment before. He looked up from his hole deep in the bedrock to the thick metal walls above him. He flew to the ceiling and locked the heavy steel hatch from within.

I'm safe, he told himself, not quite believing it.

Hundreds of quads monopolized the skyscrapers with views of the arena. They were told to record the Khan at all times in case the Red Baron dueled him, yet were still shocked when the Baron actually showed up. From that distance, an Imperial Guard blocked their view of the Khan when the champion fireballed him, but he clearly had not flown away when the stadium blew up. And the Immortal

certainly would not have survived the bombers who dropped serious tonnage onto the survivors. Much less when the attackers stabbed everyone in the arena.

They looked at each other in shock: Genghis Khan was dead!

As one, the witnesses flew off to report to various Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese, Korean and Mongolian generals. Soon thousands of Chinese flew out across China to spread the video of the Khan's death. The stadium explosion was like a rock thrown in a pond, as a wave of quads flew out in a circle to share the news. Bells rang nearby, and thousands more would soon clang across China. Every Mongol within a thousand clicks would have to fight for their lives today.

The largest battle in history began. Several million Mongols and their supporters fought several million enemies. Plus those in military units.

The arena survivors, ears bleeding and heads throbbing, barely noticed a dark cloud above that dropped thousands of bombs. Fifty thousand marathoners dived to finish them off and transfer their wands. Five divisions set up a perimeter to intercept Mongol rapid reaction teams, militia, and local police, while the rest struck targets in and around Peking. Billy knew thousands of Mongols would fly up in a mad rage at the invaders, which only made his job easier.

Prince led Billy to where the Khan escaped and explained, once again, that he saw the Khan descend into something. Quickly enough they found a wooden chute and, below that, a large metal box. Prince thought his twenty-year old brother-in-law may have a heart attack, he looked so distraught. Billy started babbling to himself, his eyes glazed over, so Prince slapped him, then backed up, not a little afraid.

"Now is not the time to get diarrhea of the mouth and constipation of the head," he warned the Baron.

Billy finally cleared his eyes and, apparently, his head. "A panic room. The Immortal built himself a box to escape into." It sounded like Billy was trying to convince himself of what his eyes plainly saw. "The whole point was to kill the Khan. We knew exactly where he'd be, exactly when. And he still got away."

"Pull yourself together, man!" Prince barked impatiently.

Billy pounded on the steel. "My lord! Are you all right? The cowards fled. Everyone is chasing them down. Do you need help?"

Genghis recognized that voice, but couldn't place it. It sounded like his kids when they are lying about something. I've met him, the Khan realized. I know the Red Baron.

He also realized that the Indian and the Baron worked together, knowing that nobody would be able to take their eyes off them. The warnings from numerous sentries fell on deaf ears. Since he himself fell for it, Genghis knew it was a great deceit.

Literally shaking, he got up and flew to a spy hole above the bedrock. He could not believe what he saw—total devastation. Thousands of laughing enemies stabbed bodies and transferred wands. One hundred thousand quads—the talent he needed to exterminate the Americas—all gone. Just like the Peking Arena.

And that's when it struck him like his father's boot.

"You're that damn traitor, Temujin, aren't you?" he yelled. "The brat from the Olympics twelve years ago. I gave a beautiful speech at your funeral! I'd never have believed a descendent of Taran would betray his own people."

"I didn't descend from Taran. A pregnant ancestor married him after Mongols killed her husband. My ancestors died fighting you. You killed the first one over Peking in 1215."

"Do you even care that I exterminated Taran's descendents? You know, you're not the first true quad I've had to kill. You're just the first to not descend from me."

"True quad?"

Neither Billy or Prince ever heard that term before. Apparently it described the few who could use all four wands for fire, steel, and blasting.

"As for Peking, you mean that cocky Prussian? Of course! He was a baron, too. Richthofen, right? His mother Hildred caused me more trouble than he ever did." Genghis, despite everything that happened, now laughed viciously. "You descended from Karl van Richthofen? The jokes on you then, because Baron von Richthofen was my bastard son. The baroness sought me out because she wanted a powerful son. Well, I gave her one, only to have the turncoat grow up to lead thousands of quads against me in China. She wanted me to marry her. Ha! Like I'd give up Borte for a cranky bitch like her. She was all beauty, zero gratitude."

"Liar!"

"She proudly put me on his birth certificate. Look it up."

"I'll ask him. He's fighting above us right now."

"What? Now you're the one lying!"

"He changed his name to American Jack. Perhaps you're heard of him," Billy yelled.

"That traitor is still alive?" the Khan roared incredulous. The irony is that Genghis never targeted American Jack because his weak tactical skills killed more enemies than Mongols.

Billy felt overwhelmed. He could not think clearly and therefore needed to buy time. "How ironic that your only surviving son is your biggest enemy. Consider this a final family reunion, grandfather."

"I descend from this mass murderer?" a shocked Prince asked in disbelief.

"So, Genghis, you're my ancestor?" Billy said, trying to figure how to break into the panic room. "Does that make me Mongolian after all?"

"This changes nothing," the Immortal yelled back. "You killed my woman, so I'll kill you and yours. I don't care how many babies you have -- I'll kill them all if it takes me eternity."

They say Heaven is where you have nothing to do and eternity to do it in, so this must be Hell.

Billy turned to Prince. "Take a team to the Forbidden City and kill the Khan's family."

"I heard that," Genghis screamed, "you son-of-a-bitch!"

"What are you gonna do, yell at me?" Billy screamed back, nearly losing it. He knew he hated Genghis Khan with all his soul, but he never let it consume him so completely before. His head hurt and he really needed to pee.

If Genghis Khan fathered American Jack, then all of Jack's descendents were also the Khan's. As were his own kids. Billy felt sick. He not only had the Khan's blood, but polluted thousands of babies with it. Though his mind was a fog, he knew he had to kill the mass murderer now while he had the chance. He flew

down to where the steel wall disappeared into the bedrock. Collecting all his strength, he punched a short blade into the metal, causing a short gash. He repeated it a dozen times until exhaustion stopped him. By that time he had a small crowd wondering what the hell he was doing.

"Uh, Red, more Mongols are coming."

"I need more time. The Khan is in there. Do we have any bombs left?"

"Why would we not drop them all? And what do you mean, he's still alive? The bells are ringing. A million battles are raging in the streets."

Given his stressed out mind, Billy couldn't think of anything Genghis could do to save himself, yet something nagged at him that The Immortal would somehow survive.

"If you come out, I promise you a fair fight," Billy yelled into a hole, but didn't get an answer. He flew to the top, punched more holes, then blasted straight down. He searched for a dead body through the smoke. What the hell? He squinted to see, to his horror, the entrance to an underground tunnel.

Billy fought his way up, out of the rubble, and saw, a few hundred meters from the stadium, a store made of mortared stone built like a fortress. He ignored the fierce dogfight raging above him. He flew to it and found an oak door still open, but nobody inside. He rushed in and saw the tunnel's exit. Panicking for the first time in his life, he flew to the Forbidden City and found several of his troops gathered around a body. The richly dressed corpses must be the Khan's family, quad warriors who may have fought like tigers, but were no match for his brother-in-law. Yet it was his brother-in-law laying in a pool of blood.

"Prince was cuddling two crying babies when some Mongol stabbed him in the back, took the babies, and fled. Some of our guys are chasing him, but he's pretty fast."

"That was Genghis Khan."

"Weren't you suppose to kill him?"

Some of the guys recorded Prince's final moments, while others waved wands to heal his back. One of them looked at Billy and shook his head negatively. Too much internal bleeding.

"We should have given him one of our new suits," someone said, which only made Billy feel worse since he didn't think of that, either. Prince had been dueling for months in Peking, and so couldn't make it to Anchorage. Better back armor may have saved his life.

"I never saw him coming," Prince whispered. "I'd be alive if I killed the babies, but they reminded me of my own." He pulled Billy close so no one else could hear. "Jirko didn't have his Millennials on him, so he must have given them to his son, who has the same name. They say the kid is even better. And when the Khan took my Millennials, I saw his wands clearly. They weren't Millennials."

That rocked Billy. "Genghis gave away his most prized possession?"

"You have three sets of Millennials to find, brother."

Billy knew his brother-in-law was in terrible pain. "I'll get him for you, and make sure your children know what a great hero their father was."

"You're the hero," were Prince's final words.

"Don't say that! You don't even like me."



Prince laughed, despite blood flowing from his mouth. He clearly thought that funny. He made eye contact with Billy and died with a big smile on his face.

Which really pissed Billy off. Who the hell dies happy? Every version of his own death, that he imagined, ended horribly.

Billy broke out in tears, which shocked the troops. Through his blurry eyes he saw Princess, not Prince, dying before him, which flipped a switch that let the crazy out. The image of losing his wife was more than he could handle. Too much happened too fast. His brilliant plan failed, and millions of the wrong people were about to die because of it.

Billy had never felt overwhelmed before.

With the Khan still alive, the Chinese wouldn't attack from the south, the armada in Korea wouldn't attack from the east, and the air force now attacking from the west would return home, leaving the Americans and his marathons to face a few million Mongol quads. What Billy needed was time to think things through, but his grief shut his mind down.

"How am I gonna tell my wife that Genghis Khan killed her twin?" Billy cried out, on the verge of an emotional meltdown.

