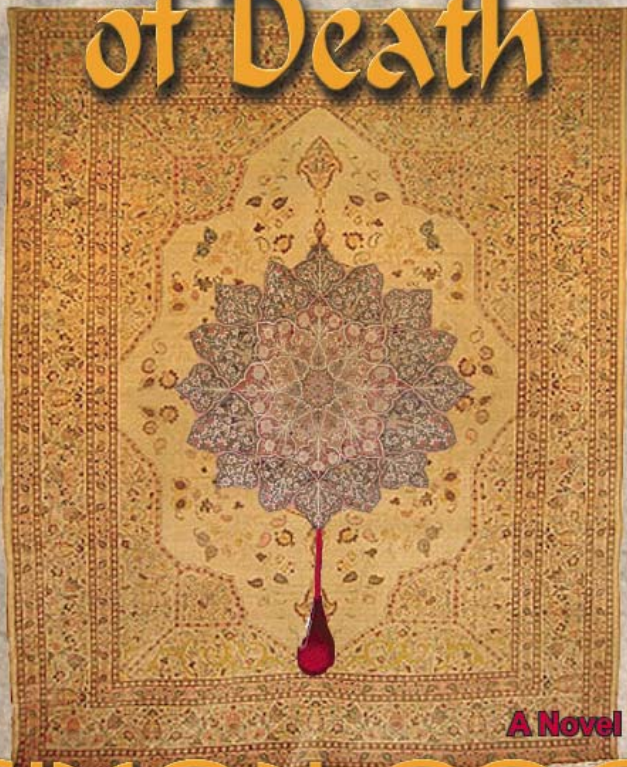


The Flower of Death



A Novel by

SIMON COE

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Epigraph

The school of diplomacy established by Ghengis Khan was one of the most effective forms of negotiation the world has ever known. The protocol was quick and simple. The first step was to crush your opponent's skull, then the rest was easy.

This creed formed the backbone of the Turkomen nation.

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Prologue

In a remote wing of the Cairo Bazaar, an old man wearing a red fez and a long flowing *abayia* led a European tourist to a shadowed corner of his carpet shop. The tassel on the old man's fez danced as he cast a furtive glance over his shoulder, then leaned closer to the wide-eyed customer. He placed an upright finger across his lips, narrowed his eyes and nodded slightly, as if to imply the secret of the ages was about to be passed.

“From 1000 AD until 1600,” he said in a coarse whisper, “a series of Khans—Ghengis, Ogadai, Kubla, Batu, and others—left a trail of blood across Asia. They conquered every land in their path and accumulated the greatest wealth the world has ever known. As was the custom, when one of these Khans died, most of his material wealth was buried with him in a secret tomb. There are seven tombs. None have ever been found.

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“The honor of protecting the secret location of these tombs was given to the fiercest horsemen the world has ever known: the Turkomen tribes. In order to protect the secret locations, yet preserve the secret over time so their sons could carry on the tradition, the Turkomen elders encoded the information and had it woven into a very special carpet.

“The majority of carpets and weavings produced by the Turkomen tribes are normally woven in colors of madder red, indigo blue, and white. But the special carpet had to be different, so it was woven in gold and black silk. It is called the *Golden Tekké*.”

The old man paused and looked back over his shoulder in a suspicious posture, then turned and winked at the tourist. “I alone know where this fabulous carpet is hidden, and for seventy-thousand piasters...”

SIMON COE

Part 1

The Fathers

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Chapter 1

SOUTHERN TURKMENSKAJA
SEPTEMBER 24, 1899

The lieutenant crouched low and whispered into the major's ear, "Sir, it would be an honor if I could take the Turkomen's head."

"That's not your assignment," growled Major DeLensky. "The count doesn't want his head, he wants the eight carpets!"

A gust of wind swept through the dried hummocks of wild kunza grass scattered across the plateau and drove a mixture of plant debris and sand particles into the major's face. He cursed and lowered his head to let the curly wool of his *karakul* headpiece absorb the stinging missiles.

A grain of sand lodged beneath the edge of the black patch that covered his right eye. He brushed at it as if it were a gnat, then grabbed the lieutenant's oilskin riding tunic where it had bunched around the man's throat and jerked him to his body, so close that the hairs of his mustache touched the

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junior officer's ear.

"Listen to me, you son of a bitch!" the major fumed. "We been chasing this Tekké fox for ten years just to get this close. You screw this up and the count will fry your balls, in front of your eyes! So remember your assignment, and get it straight in your mind! After the Beshir renegades attack, you follow me to the big *kibitka*, grab the eight carpets, and get the hell out! One, two, three, fast! You will *not* take part in the fighting."

A bolt of lightning struck a nearby stand of Aleppo pines in unison with a clap of thunder, causing the ground to tremble beneath their feet. Both men flinched at the unexpected burst of energy, but instinctively stiffened like statues as a string of lightning flashes illuminated the night and clearly outlined them against the mottled gray surface of the rocky outcropping. The thunder boomed again and violent gusts of the building storm whipped the loose edges of their uniform blouses.

The major's hairy fist maintained his grip on the lieutenant's riding tunic. "I want to see the ass of your horse disappear five minutes after we collapse the big *kibitka*," he warned. "If I see you waiting around, I'm gonna shove my saber up your Georgian ass! So keep moving! And don't stop until you reach the oasis at Terem. Count Herizi and his caravan will be waiting for the carpets. Now get back to your men and wait for my signal."

As the weather front descended on the plateau, random bursts of lightning continued to flash across the skies and force the men to remain huddled and rigid, lest they be detected by the sharp eyes of Turkomen sentries. Sheets of rain began to fall and join with the gusting clouds of loose sand, spattering like bird shot on the oilskin riding tunic of the ma-

gor. He lowered his head to shield his face from the biting elements, then narrowed his good left eye and looked into the mouth of the winds howling down from the Russian steppes in the north. An approaching armada of storm clouds obscured the horizon, and the phenomenon brought a faint smile to his features. "*Perfect!*"

He wiped away the moisture that dripped from his eyebrows, then began to climb up through the uneven crevices of the rock formation, taking great care to place his feet firmly. A disturbing thought made him pause for several seconds. *The edges of the rocks are sharp, like flint. A fall could easily break a limb and I'd be at the mercy of the Turkomen.*

For just an instant, visions of his head impaled on a Tekké battle lance flashed through his mind. He shuddered at the bitter thought and strained to keep his body as close as possible to the slippery surface.

Twenty feet above the ground, perspiring heavily and hands trembling from strain, he stopped climbing. After making sure that his head would not be silhouetted against the changing tones of the sky, he cautiously peered between a narrow slit formed by two large boulders that were part of the jagged upper profile of the rock outcropping.

300 meters away, an encampment of thirty Turkomen *kibitkas* squatted like black-topped mushrooms on the plateau. They were grouped in a circular formation around a much larger *kibitka* that was twice the size of the others. At strategic locations around the perimeter of the camp, the indistinct forms of sentries melted in and out of the shadows created by five small fires that whipped in the gusting winds.

As the major searched the shadows of the Tekké campsite for activity, a haunting vision from the past sent a rush of chills through his body. A fusillade of Turkomen arrows had

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struck his horse, two of them piercing the animal's heart and collapsing the beast beneath him. Momentarily dazed and disoriented, he knelt on the ground beside his fallen steed as the ghastly apparition of a Turkomen warrior with upraised scimitar descended upon him. Terror gripped his chest and the ground trembled beneath his knees as the thundering hooves of the Turkomen's mount straddled him like a mantle of death; clenched teeth, flying silver braids, and the intensity of the horror in the Turkomen's ghostly blue eyes that froze his breath. In concert with the memory of the event, the major shuddered and his right index finger traced along the path of a jagged scar that furrowed across his cheek and plunged beneath the black patch that covered the ugly scar of his missing eye.

He jerked his head sharply to erase the pain of the thought and continued to sweep his good eye across every shadow. After several minutes of inspection, he vented a long breath; except for the normal night sentries, the entire camp appeared to be asleep. Thoughts of a long-awaited revenge stirred the angry juices of his Cossack soul and made his heart pound in his chest. A rising sense of excitement flooded his body with anticipation and dulled the physical discomfort of his awkward perch in the rocks. He gritted his teeth and whispered, "Aram Halib, you Turkomen bastard! I'll have your balls for breakfast."



The entry flap of the *kibitka* opened and two men stepped into the windy night. Both were clad in the traditional dress of the Turkomen warrior—*karakul* fleece bound to the body with leather thongs and a bushy headpiece crafted from the

pelts of Russian wolves.

A clap of thunder rolled across the plateau. Aram Halib stopped and placed a restraining hand on the arm of his son, Mehti. The elder chief raised his head and sniffed the currents of air stirred by the approaching squall. His senses were like a psychic antenna that determined danger from some element in the ether. A subtle force stirred the atmosphere. It stimulated his instincts but the sensation was vague and lacked strength. He frowned, the uncertainty of the phenomenon made him uncomfortable.

Once, when he was nine, he waited in a concealing thicket for several hours, hoping to ambush a crafty wolf. At the very instant of truth, when he drew the arrow taut against the bowstring, the hackles on the wolf's neck rose and he darted from view. Aram felt certain that he had not been seen, and later when he asked his father how the wolf had known, his father had said, "Some say it is instinct. Others say the whispers of Allah touch all of his wild creatures, even some men. It is difficult to explain, for even those who are blessed to hear the words of Allah cannot describe his voice."

The wisdom of those words persisted in his mind, and he had come to know through experience that heeding the whispers of Allah, and a strong right arm, were vital elements of survival.

Aram shaded his brow with one hand and squinted into the gusting winds driving the massive thundercloud formation descending from the north. There was something about the swirling cloud mass that impressed him as ominous, as if it were but a covering for a greater threat. He slowly rotated in a complete circle and let his eyes trace an imaginary line just above the profile of the surrounding horizon, searching for contours that did not belong with the natural forms of na-

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ture as he knew them. He saw nothing that supported his suspicions, but he still felt uncomfortable.

Mehti watched his father closely. He had ridden by his father's side since he was seven and the intuitive bond they shared made him sense the uneasiness. "What is it, father?" he asked.

The chief did not respond immediately. He turned his attention back to the approaching clouds for a moment, then held his head close to his son's. "The winds carry the scent of trouble," he confided. "If I were to attack an enemy, I would do it on a night like this."

Mehti glanced at the churning heavens and nodded.

"The conditions are ideal," he agreed. "But we are surrounded by other camps of our tribe, over two-thousand warriors, and only six kilometers away. It would be suicide."

"Possibly," conceded Aram. "But the clouds of this storm touch the earth as they move toward us. A clever general could hide an army in them."

Again, Aram placed a hand on Mehti's arm in a gesture indicating concern. Statue-like, he held the cautious posture and watched the movements of four sentries stationed around one of the perimeter fires. Three of the warriors kept their backs to the weather and bent close to the glowing embers. Their eyes glistened like black opals in the flickering light of the flames. Ghostly shadows danced across their weathered features as they concentrated on rubbing the chill from their leathery hands. The fourth warrior was more vigilant; he ignored the comfort of the fire and faced the biting elements, searching the darkness for unnatural movement.

"The sentries are careless!" snapped Aram. "Let them know that I am displeased. Then find Sadegh and have him double the night guard. I'll wait for you in the council

kibitka.”

Mehti stopped and looked up at the profile of the council *kibitka* against the night sky. He had never been inside and the forbidden mystery of what it contained had always inspired him with a sense of awe. The council *kibitka* was a sanctum sanctorum, reserved for the use of tribal chiefs and their counsels. It was erected only once a year, during the last two weeks of Ramadan, the 9th month of the Muslim calendar. During that time, the many nomadic elements of the Turkomen tribes melted from the valleys of Asia, floating like leaves on the surface of crystal waters that gush from springs in high valleys, and tumble down as ever-widening streams, to gather in a tranquil pool in some hidden glen. There, secure from the eyes of the world, they assembled as brothers to honor their ancestors and reaffirm their tribal bonds as Turkomen.

Mehti paused just inside of the entry flap and glanced around the council *kibitka*. He was not surprised to find that it was just like the smaller ones. It was supported by a round framework of poles securely joined with leather thongs, and covered by a network of antelope hides and black felt. The interior of the *kibitka* was illuminated by five oil lamps that scented the stale atmosphere with the pungent odor of burnt animal fat. Four of the lamps were equally spaced around the perimeter on short stakes. The fifth one was on a low stand at the end farthest from the entrance flap.

He was surprised to see an unusual carpet arrangement placed over the oiled animal skins that covered the sandy earth. Seven Turkomen carpets were joined together to form one master carpet. Each of the individual carpets carried the distinctive *guls* and symbols of a particular tribe. The rich hues of madder red, deep indigo, and creamy white radiated from the carpets and blended with the lemon yellow light of

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the oil lamps to create a pleasant ambience of warmth. There was also a mellow quality in the display that he had never seen before. The patina of the silky wool had an aura that actually shimmered with a subtle elegance. These effects of the carpets combined and endowed the simple interior of the nomadic *kibitka* with a sense of life.

As Aram watched the process of discovery as it took place in Mehti's eyes, he savored the moment. Through the years, he thought many times about this special night, about this tribal ritual that started with the petition of birthright that proclaimed his son as chief of the Tekké tribe, and ended on Eid al Fitr with the bittersweet act of his resignation. *Strange*, he thought, *how one moment can be so painful, yet pleasant.*

He hobbled unevenly across the master carpet to the far end of the *kibitka* and seated himself beside the lamp on the low stand. His limited gait and halting movements gave distinct testimony to the discomfort his six-foot frame carried in old age. With some difficulty, he loosened the leather cinch that bound his waist and adjusted his fleece coverlet. He removed his treasured fur headpiece as if it were a crown and placed it on the carpet in front of him, then shook his head lightly to allow the two long silver braids of his hair to fall down his back. Like many of the men of the Turkomen culture, his silver mustache had been allowed to grow, untrimmed but precisely groomed. It had been combed from the center of his lips to the corners of his mouth, where it was tightly knit into fine braids that fell to his chest.

In his youth, his hair had been golden blonde, an anomaly for a Turkomen, as were his pale blue eyes. Both of these features were the hereditary gift of his Polish mother, a lady stolen by his father from the human inventory of a Russian nobleman, rescued from a slave caravan bound for the flesh

pits of Istanbul, and said to be of noble birth. The combination of his now-silver hair and pale blue eyes, contrasted against his sepia skin; it made him appear ghostly. A single glimpse of the legendary chief of the Tekké, astride his speckled charger, leading a thousand screaming warriors across the plain and waving his battered scimitar in the air, and the ethereal vision of Aram Halib was never forgotten.

In a gesture that he often used when gathering his thoughts, he traced a solitary finger across his mustache and lightly twisted the braid between two fingers. He nodded toward the carpets and spoke, "Is this display what you expected to find in a council *kibitka*, Mehti?"

"No" answered Mehti, "this arrangement of carpets is strange to me." He walked around the edge of the master carpet and paused at each of the seven individual carpets to examine the symbols and ideographs that identified the tribal roots. "I see the carpets of seven of the Turkomen tribes: Salor, Ersari, Saryk, Yomut, Chaudor, Pinde, and Beshir." He paused a moment and frowned. "These are troublesome brothers who are not in harmony with us. I wonder why they are allowed here. And why is there no Tekké carpet? Where is the carpet of our tribe?"

The elder chief did not respond. He simply nodded at his son's observations and gestured toward his right side, a place of honor in the Turkomen culture. "Sit here, Mehti. There is much that I must pass on to you."

He tilted his head to one side in a thoughtful pose and listened to the tattoo of the frayed edges of tent hides whipping in the gusting winds. Something vague disturbed him and he shook his head slowly. *I have an uneasy feeling about this night*, he thought. *I pray to Allah that time has not deserted me.*

Mehti nodded sharply, a cultural signal that he was obey-

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ing a command, and loosened the leather cinch that held his fleece coverlet against his body. He was a man with a huge frame, fully six inches taller than his father, well muscled and endowed with the strength of two men—a gift from the genes of his Polish grandmother. He seated himself cross-legged beside his father and removed his fur headpiece. He had a wealth of curly black hair that had been gathered tight against his head and woven into a single long braid that trailed down his back. His copious black mustache had been groomed the same as his father's, and the ends of the twin braids danced across the fringe of his woven vest when he moved his head.

In a behavior shaped by rigid cultural protocol, he remained silent, even though his presence in this sacred *kibitka* prompted a host of questions in his mind. There was a strong sense of obedience in his apple-green eyes as he stared at his father and waited.

Aram did not speak immediately. Even though he had thought many times about what he would say to his son on this sacred night, he now found himself uncertain. *Where to begin?* He withdrew a small leather pouch and a crude pipe from the inside of his coverlet and tried to remember how his father had started the ceremony—fifty years ago on a night like this.

With a practiced motion, he took some dark tobacco from the pouch and tamped it into the bowl of the pipe with his thumb. There were several tapers on the small stand. He took one, lit it in the flame of the lamp and touched it to the bowl of the pipe. The acrid odor of the tobacco billowed on the air of the *kibitka* and, for what seemed like a long time to Mehti, the elder chief puffed on the pipe and stared hypnotically into the flickering yellow flame of the lamp.

A noticeable state of calm descended over Aram. As his

thoughts probed through his inventory of memories, his pale blue eyes became glassy, as if they stared into infinity. Entranced in the process of recall, Aram's sense of time and urgency fell silent. In the theater of his mind he saw a montage of visions—his departed father's lips moved and he heard the Turkomen legacy couched in whisper. *"The bushy headpieces of a thousand Turkomen warriors bristled in the sun as they crested a rise, an unearthly scream stood hair erect, thundering hooves, flying arrows, flashing steel, the thud of animals colliding. The head of a Herizi rider impaled on his lance, the man's mouth frozen open in horror, and his alabaster eyes frozen wide. His treasured black karakul headpiece still atop his skull."*

Then, an angel swept his vision to the misty spires of the Hindu Kush where he saw a vista of a thousand leagues of Allah's mountain valleys, rolling plains of waving silver feather grass, and laughing Turkomen women clad in garments striped with red and yellow, green and blue, earrings tinkling as they tossed their heads, beaded bracelets rattling on their wrists as they knelt upon their looms, weaving—and then it was gone.

When Aram spoke, the phrases labored from his lips slowly, as if he were still mired in the clays of memory. His words were like a cathartic release uttered at the end of an arduous trail. "Time is like the vulture," he sighed in a hollow whisper. "Always on a distant peak until that final second when the end is near. And then, too quickly, it is upon you. I pray to Allah that I have used it well."

He vented another sigh and dropped his gaze to the carpets. Unconsciously, he stroked the silky pile of the carpets with one hand as he spoke. "Your observation about the carpets is what I expected, Mehti. You have been trained to be a warrior, a craft where you must evaluate and react immedi-

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ately. *That*, is survival. But you are about to become chief of the Tekké, and you can no longer think in the manner of a warrior. As a chief, Mehti, you must think beyond your personal emotions; *that* is the beginning of wisdom. True, the presence of these other tribal carpets in a Tekké *kibitka* is a paradox; we have quarreled with all of these tribes, bitterly! But, underneath these disagreements, they are brothers, and all brothers quarrel. It does not really matter if a warrior is a Tekké, or a Yomut, or a Pinde. If he is a Turkomen, then the spirit of the Khans flows in his veins. Every Turkomen warrior springs from the loins of Oghuz and Seljuk Turks; our blood is mixed with the spoor of Khans—Ghengis and Ogadai, Kubla and Batu. We are the seeds of the Khans! Always remember this, Mehti, honoring our ancestors keeps our culture strong.”

A clap of thunder vibrated across the plateau and underscored the prophetic words. A light rain began to fall. Aram stopped speaking and listened to the drops as they drummed on the skins covering the *kibitka*. When his attention returned to his narrative, he leaned his head close to Mehti’s and spoke in a low tone.

“Tomorrow night, at the council of Eid al Fitr, you shall succeed me, and the duties of chief of the Tekké will be yours. There is little that I can tell you at this moment that will add to your ability to lead our people wisely. You’ve been by my side for thirty-five years. The training is over. My only advice is listen to the whispers of Allah. He is there for those who seek him.”

Aram paused and looked directly into his son’s eyes to evaluate the effect of his words. Mehti held his father’s gaze, then nodded his head sharply, as if he were placing an exclamation point in space, the silent cultural signal for acceptance

and approval.

“When I became chief,” mused Aram, “the problems of survival were much simpler. Fifty years ago, there were no borders—we traveled where we wished, and there was no limit to the high valleys and mountain pastures. Allah’s hand directed the winds, and we followed. Nothing blocked our trail. Nobody dared.”

A frown of concern creased Aram’s brow and accented his words. “But it will not be so for you because time and the politics of the Russian Czar have brought great changes. The Khans have ridden to paradise centuries ago, and the treaties they made have crumbled. Those who were once meek tenants have grown to become roosters, who now crow like landlords. We are surrounded by invisible borders that grow smaller by the year. At every turn in the trail, some infidel tries to drive us from lands that we have used freely for centuries.”

Aram’s eyes became cold. He placed a firm hand on Mehti’s wrist to accent the resolve in his words. “These problems are now yours! You must lead the fight against the Czar, and the riders of his boyar, Count Herizi!”

“I will take the head of any infidel that blocks our trail,” vowed Mehti, “be it Count Herizi or the Czar himself, his head will dance on a Tekké battle lance!”

Aram felt the tendons in his son’s wrist tighten, the chill in his voice left no doubt about his determination. It was the response of a Turkomen warrior.

“I know that you will be a strong chief, Mehti. I have watched when you have taken command, when you have led our warriors into battle. You know the craft of being a Turkomen chief.” The pace of Aram’s words slowed, and again, his gaze searched his son’s eyes. “But tonight you are here for that which you do not know, that which can only be

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passed from a chief to a chief. Listen to me well, Mehti, for what you hear in this *kibitka* tonight must remain locked in your soul until the time comes when you pass it to your son when he is ready to lead the warriors of the Tekké.”

Aram noted Mehti’s sharp nod of acceptance, then puffed easily on his pipe. The tobacco had a calming effect on him. Again, he leaned forward and ran one hand across the silky pile of the carpet in front of him; the texture of the wool was pleasing to him and stimulated his thoughts.

“So, you inherit two things, Mehti. The command of the Tekké—” Aram paused and twirled the braid of his mustache between his fingers for a moment, then dropped the level of his voice dramatically to underscore his words. “And the Turkomen Legacy.”

Mehti did not speak. A slight wrinkle formed above the bridge of his nose and he tilted his head slightly to one side, the silent cultural indication that he did not understand.

Aram’s pipe had gone out, he paused to touch a taper to the small lamp and relight the tobacco. As he puffed, he noted the ‘not understand’ posture of Mehti in his peripheral vision, but he chose to ignore it. When the bowl of the pipe glowed brightly, he shook out the taper and kept his voice at a confidential level.

“During the reign of Batu Khan, the grandson of Ghengis Khan, all of the lands that we travel, and most of the land that is called Russia, were controlled by his warriors, the ‘*Golden Horde*’. He called his domain the *Kipchak Khanate*. It was the custom then, as it was back to the time of Ghengis Khan, to place the material wealth of a departed Khan in his tomb, to make his journey with the gods more pleasant.”

“That is not what Mohammed has told us,” protested Mehti.

“The Khans did not follow the words of Mohammed, Mehti; they placed their beliefs in the offerings of nature—in raw power and material wealth. My great grandfather told me that it was not uncommon for the tomb of a Khan to contain tent bags full of precious gems, and gold equal to the weight of eighty horses!”

“Why so much?” asked Mehti. “Gold is heavy and you cannot eat it. Neither can your horse.”

The elder chief cracked a slight smile at the practical nature of his son’s comment. “In the world of the infidel,” he explained, “gold is a measure of power, and the Khans had tremendous power. You will come to find, Mehti, that many people in the outer world are driven by gold. To some, it is everything. And so it was in the time of Batu Khan. Only ten years after the death of his father, Ogadai Khan, a group of Russian noblemen chasing a wounded boar stumbled onto the location of his tomb. They broke into it and carried off countless horseloads of gems and gold. Fortunately, their caravan was intercepted by a group of our warriors, who, very naturally, separated their heads from their bodies and presented them to Batu Khan in tribute. The tomb of Ogadai Khan was quickly relocated and sealed, but the incident made Batu Khan realize that it was possible for some infidel to accidentally discover the burial site of a Khan. To guard against this possibility, he conceived a plan that he called the Kipchak Charter.

“My father told me that because of the nature of what the Charter accomplished, less than twenty people knew what it contained. It does not appear in any of the historical records of the Kipchak Khanate. Very simply, the Charter made the Turkomen tribes responsible for the integrity of the tombs of the Khans, and in payment for this service, it granted the

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tribes free passage over all of the lands in the Khanate. That was over 500 years ago, and since that time our tribes have watched over these secret grave sites. There are seven tombs.”

Aram paused and slowly unfolded his leg and extended it in front of him. It was obvious that the act was painful, but he said nothing. He massaged the knee with his weathered hands and exhaled a strained breath that sounded as if it had been squeezed from his joints.

“There is an unfortunate element in this tale, Mehti, and that is that the *secret* of what is hidden in the tombs is not really a secret. The story of what the Russians found in the tomb of Ogadai Khan has floated on the currents of Allah’s wind for centuries. It is like an eternal well that squirts from the earth and ebbs away, only to erupt again in twenty or thirty years. The outer world is full of thieves, their ears are sharp and they are thirsty for a taste of the waters of the well. Sooner or later, a small handful of adventurers have always found their way here, only to lose their heads. Their bleached skulls litter our trails and give root to wildflowers, but the tombs remain intact. You must carry on this vigilance, Mehti, but it will not be a simple task. The forces of the Czar, and his boyar, Herizi, grow larger each year. The battles that you fight for survival will rob you of the time and warriors necessary to patrol the tombs. It will be a difficult task!”

Aram stiffened as a sharp cramp in his folded leg shattered his concentration and he stopped his explanation to straighten the leg and massage the tender area around the knee. Outside, the winds whistled and drove a steady spray of airborne sand into the tent hides. It sounded like rustling leaves and the sound irritated him. *I wonder, have the demons that eat at my joints also fed upon my brain? Am I imagining something that isn't there? What is this sense of doom? Is this how Allah decays a war-*

rior by turning him into a nervous old woman?" He studied Mehti's features for a moment and thought he detected uncertainty in his eyes. "What disturbs you, Mehti?"

"The mysterious seven tombs bother me! You say our tribes patrol them, yet I have never heard you or one of our warriors mention anything about guarding the tomb of a Khan."

"It is like I said," explained Aram. "Very few knew what was contained in the Kipchak Charter. We cannot keep a secret by letting every warrior know our thoughts! This is a sacred trust, so it is known only by a chief!"

Mehti nodded sharply. "I understand your words. The secret will never cross my lips. But the duties I inherit confuse me. How can I have our patrols check the tombs if I do not know where to send them?"

"Each of the seven great Khans is entombed in a land castle, very close to a trail that our tribes travel," explained Aram, "and always in difficult country. Each tomb is within eyesight of a Turkomen ancestral grave site. When a monthly patrol checks the grave sites, they have to ride near a Khan's tomb. In effect, they have checked the tomb even though they do not know it is there. You've ridden near the tomb of a Khan many times."

Mehti shook his head. "I don't know. I've never seen a marker."

"Like all of our burial sites, the only marker is the Flower of Death. It is somewhere nearby. Other than that, all is natural as the hand of Allah has left it. There is nothing that would betray the presence of a tomb."

Aram watched Mehti's expression as he digested the information. He knew how the question of the exact location of the tombs persisted in his son's mind, like a gnat buzzing

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about the syrupy font of knowledge. It had been the same with him fifty years earlier.

His pipe had gone out. He placed it on the low stand next to the lamp and labored to his feet. He rubbed the sides of his legs until the glow of circulation returned, then shuffled unevenly to the center of the carpet display and turned to face Mehti.

“The exact location of each tomb is recorded in the carpets before you, along with the tribal records,” he said as he gestured across the carpets with a sweeping hand. *They* are the Turkomen legacy.”

Mehti looked at Aram and cocked his head. He narrowed his eyes and the shadows of his high Tartar cheekbones accented his uncertainty. He rose to his knees to afford a better view of the total display, then looked across the montage of symbols and ideographs in the carpets in an effort to understand his father’s words.

Aram watched him silently, aware of his son’s building frustration. This, too, had been the same for him when he was first confronted with the puzzle of the carpets. “Sit, Mehti,” he said. “The information is there, but your eyes cannot see. They are not supposed to! I will explain.”



Just ahead of the swirling cloud mass of the squall, a frontal wave of turbulent winds drove heavy sheets of rain across the plateau. The torrents pelted the aching body of Major DeLensky. Rain saturated his *karakul* headpiece and coursed down his forehead, dribbling from his bushy eyebrows into his lone eye. He silently cursed and jerked his head, straining to keep his eye on the Tekké campsite, anxiously searching the

darkness for the Beshir assault force that would start the attack.

“Goddamn Turkomen!” he whispered. “Where the hell are they?” Muscle cramps tortured his legs because his feet were wedged painfully together in a narrow crevice, one on top of the other. But he did not dare move them—the fear of falling in the rocks persisted and haunted his thoughts. With both arms outstretched and fingers clawing at fissures in the slippery rocks, he was a living crucifix, perched on the treacherous surface like Christ on a cross. His entire body trembled with fatigue and the muscle cramps persisted. His temper had shortened to centimeters.

Where the hell are they?

The volume of the rain increased and a steady flow began to fall as the clouds of the squall swallowed the plateau, obscuring the profile of the campsite from his view.

Shit! I can't see a thing! Those goddamn Beshir! What if they don't attack? What?

From somewhere in the void of his mind, a voice answered with a consequence he didn't want to hear.

Then you and your forty-seven men are isolated in the middle of twelve Turkomen camps, and when daylight comes, Jesus! The thought brought a sudden pain in his bowels, his intestines growled and he belched. There was a sour taste in his mouth.

I can't see a goddamn thing!

The thought kept harassing him and he felt his armpits perspiring. A terrible sense of desperation began to gnaw at his nerves and he felt his outstretched arms tremble. The moment was like looking up at the blade of a guillotine. His sense of approaching trauma made his intestines twitch and the pressure in his bowels was becoming unbearable.

He shook the water from his eyebrow with a jerk of his

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head and strained his good eye to locate the campsite in the opaque soup of the storm. Then something moved—he held his breath and grew rigid for what seemed like minutes. It moved again. It was vague, but it *was* there. Something was moving along the ground, formless figures about ten meters in front of the rocks. He couldn't define them well enough to count them but they were there, moving toward the Tekké campsite.

It's the Beshir!

He wanted to scream. He could feel his heart pounding as he started to feel his way down the rocks.



The steady downpour beat on the hides of the *kibitka*. It was like being inside of a drum, and Aram hated it every time it happened. He glanced nervously at the carpet display, then adjusted his sheepskin coverlet and shuffled to the entrance flap of the *kibitka*. He stood there for a long moment in a rigid listening posture, his ear only centimeters from the hides.

“What is it, father? Do you hear something?” asked Mehti.

“I hear nothing. *That* is the problem. This rain robs us of our hearing, and our sentries of their vision. It makes me uneasy.” He shook his head in displeasure, then shuffled across the carpets and stood at arms-length in front of Mehti. “It’s not just the rain,” he confided, speaking in Polish—a gesture that accented his concern for security. It was a very private way of sharing information with his son. There was a heavy sense of urgency in his voice as he continued. “During the first week of Ramadan, I visited a Salor camp and spent a few

hours with an old friend, Arafa LiYang. Do you know of him?"

Mehti frowned and shook his head. "I'm not sure. Isn't he a tribal storyteller?"

"Yes, he's a sage. Has been for many years. The Salor tribe had just finished a difficult migration. He told me that one of their long patrols saw a very strange thing: five Beshir warriors who rode into the oasis at Terem just like they belonged there."

Mehti's eyes grew fiery and he scowled darkly. "Turkomen warriors? In Terem? That oasis is Russian! It's a camp for Count Herizi's riders!"

Aram nodded, "There are many questions about the loyalty of our Beshir brothers." He stared at Mehti and the gaze between them clearly expressed how they felt about the treachery this act implied.

Aram broke the silence, "It's something we should discuss, but there isn't time. We must get back to the carpets." He turned and walked stiffly to the far end of the carpet display, then began shuffling along the perimeter of the rectangle formed by the seven carpets.

"Pay close attention to the position of each tribal carpet. It's important that you notice how they are joined," he said. As he passed by each carpet, he touched his foot to it and identified it by tribal name. "Ersari, Yomut, Salor, Pinde, Saryk, Chaudor, and Beshir."

Mehti watched Aram's progress intently, when his father's foot touched the seventh carpet, he blurted out the question that still persisted in his mind. "Why is there no carpet from our tribe? Why is there no Tekké?"

"Patience!" said Aram sharply as he pointed at the carpets with an extended arm. "This is where your attention should

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be. Take special notice that each of these seven carpets carries the sign of the '*Yarlyk*', a symbol that we *never* place in carpets. It is buried within the tribal pattern. This clearly separates these seven carpets from any of our other weavings." To illustrate his words, Aram touched the tip of one foot to a six-pointed white star on a two-inch, circular, indigo field. It was almost hidden in the geometric pattern of the Salor tribal carpet.

"When each of the *Yarlyks* on these seven carpets have been arranged in the same relationship as the seven stars of the Zemsky Sobor, and only in that pattern, then the combined carpets form a master chart of the lands that the Turkomen tribes travel."

"You said that I inherit the Turkomen legacy," said Mehti. "The term is strange to me. Does that mean that I inherit these carpets?"

"No, Mehti, that's not the idea. The Turkomen legacy is more than just a group of carpets. It's our way of life as Turkomen. We live a simple life. We are Yoruk, nomads who follow the winds of Allah and live from what he provides. We are herdsmen, first, and warriors because we have to be. This is a hard land and the forces of Allah are unforgiving, but we survive because of what our ancestors have taught us; our culture. Everything we do, the way we live, our dress, the way we ride, the way we fight, our morals, our code of justice, everything is the result of trial and error by our ancestors. It is the matured fruit of centuries. And we have learned that this can only be held together by leadership. Hard, disciplined chiefs who lead by strength and the wisdom that has been passed to them by their fathers. Allah has not seen fit to grant wisdom to the little ones in the womb. No, they arrive helpless and ignorant. They know nothing. Culture must be taught with

care and discipline to every generation, just as my father taught me and I have taught you. *That* is the legacy you inherit, Mehti: the responsibility for maintaining the Turkomen culture. You, and the chiefs of the seven tribes must work together, as brothers, and train our children in the ways of the Turkomen. The carpets before us are only a part of the process. They are a method of storing the many facts that are vital to our survival. All of this information has been accumulated over the years, but there are far too many facts for anyone to remember, so they have been coded and hidden in the carpets.

Within the carpets in front of you are the locations of our mosques and ancestral burial sites, secret trails through the mountain passes, locations of sweet water, locations of food caches, secret land castles, high mountain valleys that are safe in winter. Many facts vital to our existence are hidden in these weavings—*and* the burial sites of the seven Khans.”

Mehti rose to his knees and looked across the carpets once more. Something within him ached to locate the elements that his father had described. A deep furrow of frustration formed across his brow. He shook his head slowly and vented a long breath. “These carpets look just like the rest of our weavings. I have looked at these patterns all of my life. I see nothing but tribal *guls* and symbols.”

Aram nodded and lowered his voice to a whisper. “You cannot see what is in the carpets because you do not know how to read them. The information they contain is in a language that you do not understand, and each carpet speaks a different dialect. The master key to understanding them is contained in the eighth carpet, the Tekké, the carpet of our tribe. No single carpet will reveal the information it contains without the Tekké carpet.”

Mehti twisted one of his mustache braids between two

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fingers and looked at his father thoughtfully, as if analyzing his explanation. “If that is the case, then why bother with these seven carpets?” he asked. “The Tekké carpet will reveal the information by itself.”

Aram smiled at the simplicity of his son’s logic. “No, it is not as you have assumed, Mehti. The Tekké carpet contains only a few instructions and eight codes—it is but a master key to each of the other carpets. You will understand when you see it because it is not like the other carpets our women weave. It is a very strange Tekké carpet.”

Mehti tilted his head in the cultural ‘don’t understand’ posture and continued to twirl one of his moustache braids. “You puzzle me. I do not understand how a carpet of the Tekké can be strange to me. They are either Hatchlies or clearly marked with Tekké *guls* and symbols.”

“This carpet does not display the Tekké *gul*; it is marked with a Yomut *gul*, the Dyrnak *gul*. It does not use Tekké colors—it is woven with gold and black silk. The central field of the carpet is gold and the Flower of Death is in the center, woven in black. There are eight other *guls*, one for each tribe, with Turkic script inside of each, all woven in black. The few that have seen the carpet call it the Golden Tekké.”

“Why is it not here?” persisted Mehti.

“As a safeguard, the Tekké cannot be in the presence of the other seven carpets. Only I, as chief of the Tekké tribe, know where it is hidden. That is the custom, and the other carpets are treated somewhat the same. Each one is carried throughout the year by the chief of the tribe. At the end of Ramadan each year, when we gather for the council meeting on the Eid al Fitr, the carpets are joined as you see them now. At the meeting, we exchange information we have gathered through the year and plan the patrols that check the tombs of

the Khans for the following year. If there are any changes to be made in the information in the carpets, we approve them jointly.”

“Changes?” asked Mehti in a coarse whisper. “Carpets are woven with knots. How can they be changed?”

“The language these carpets speak,” replied Aram, “is special. It can be changed.”

A tremendous bolt of lightning burst from the dark thunderhead above the clouds that covered the plateau and struck the earth with a shock that vibrated the framework of the *kibitka*. It was accompanied by a sudden torrent of rain that poured down on the animal hides with such intensity that it seemed like it might collapse the *kibitka*. The sudden phenomenon startled both men, and although it lasted for only a few seconds and stopped abruptly, it electrified the emotions of the moment.

Aram placed a single finger across his lips, the universal sign for silence, then held his head near the skins that formed the walls of the *kibitka*. There was a scuffling noise from outside the *kibitka*, much like the sound men’s feet make when they wrestle. It was followed by the snort of a horse and the beating vibration of hooves. Aram’s head jerked sharply. He turned and stumbled across the carpets as quickly as his aged joints would allow and fell painfully to his knees in front of Mehti. He grabbed his son’s head in both hands and whispered hoarsely into his ear.

“The Tekké is hidden inside the fourth support pole of my *kibitka*. Allah be with you. The foundation of—”

The urgency of the moment was shattered by the sharp report of gunfire and the sounds of grunts and scuffling movements from outside. Simultaneously, the entrance flap of the *kibitka* was split by a slashing saber and two night guards

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stumbled through the gaping hole. The throat of the first guard had been impaled by a short lance. He spun dizzily across the carpets and collided with Aram, knocking both of them to the ground.

The second guard had been struck in the eye by an arrow. He staggered blindly as his hands found the shaft of the arrow and he stumbled awkwardly to the ground. He howled in agony and his lethal wound spewed a stream of red gore as his body arched in spasms and rolled across the carpet display.

The carnage took place so rapidly that there was no time for human reaction. The image of the guard thrashing on the ground had just registered in Mehti's mind when a horse and rider ripped through the side of the *kibitka*. The front hoof of the animal stepped through the chest of the dying guard. Mehti's world burst into a brilliant orange flash, then darkness.

Chapter 2

KARA KUM DESERT SEPTEMBER 25, 1899

Silently, gently, like the fingers of dawn dissolve the mantle of night and probe the mists of morning, so did the hand of Allah brush aside the fog of healing sleep shrouding Mehti's mind. On the fringes of reality, his first awareness was dominated by a massive headache and waves of pain throbbing in concert with the tempo of his pulse. He cracked his eyelids, a narrow slit of light was visible through the debris covering his head. It radiated needles of pain and he closed his eyes to calm the sting. There was an icy chill throughout his body, his arms and legs ached and he sensed the pressure of something resting on top of his back and legs. The weight was not painful, but it was heavy and pinned him to the ground.

As his senses returned, he flexed the muscles of his body. There was no pain from broken bones or injury. When he stretched his right foot, he felt the muscles tighten and begin

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to cramp, but he did not move. The disciplined training of his youth made him recall the survival protocol that had become an automatic part of his behavior. For just an instant, he was seven years old and heard the words of his grandfather, "*The illusion of death is an ally. Remain dead—your enemy may be watching. Remain carefully dead.*"

For ten minutes, Mehti lay quiet, listening, sorting out the events that had brought him here. His senses strained for anything that might tell him something about the unseen world surrounding him. When he felt certain he heard nothing but the rush of the wind, he worked his left arm free and felt around his body. He quickly realized he was entangled in the debris of a fallen *kibitka* and pinned to the ground by the carcass of a dead horse.

The debris probably hides my movements from the eyes of an observer. He moved his head until he could see the narrow slit of light. Taking care to keep his movements slow, he maneuvered his left arm toward the light source and worked a small opening in the debris.

Immediately, a splash of light from the late afternoon sun spilled in and momentarily blinded him. The sudden flood of light was painful, but somehow uplifting. When the shock subsided and his vision cleared, he looked through the opening for signs of life. The field of view was very limited and told him nothing about the outer world, except that it was a sunny day and there was a slight breeze.

For a long moment, he stared at the opening and tried to evaluate the uncertainty of his position. *If I'm discovered here, pinned beneath this animal, the end will be quick! The safest course is to wait for darkness, when unfriendly eyes cannot see. But how far away is darkness?*

Something vague about the logic of this reasoning dis-

turbed him. A fragment of doubt buzzed in his mind like a pesky gnat. Then, a wispy zephyr from the lips of Allah crossed his mind and impressed a thought: *You cannot wait for darkness; time is important.*

He began struggling to free himself. The long period of inactivity had left his limbs stiff. His muscles cramped as he labored to work free of the weight of the dead animal. The increase in his pulse sent new waves of pain through his head. And to add to his discomfort, the clammy strips of torn hides entangled his body, clinging like the tentacles of some ghastly hydra and adding to his mounting frustration.

The natural fear of entrapment and a sense of approaching panic spurred him to exert a maximum effort, and he slipped free of the dead weight of the animal. But the effort drained him, perspiration flowed from his brow and the muscles of his body trembled like quivering jelly. He was still trapped by the entangled debris and the messengers of approaching fear stimulated him to twist and flail spastically until his head was through the opening. With a final effort, he stumbled free of the debris and collapsed to his hands and knees. The world spun dizzily around him, his head pounded, and a wave of nausea swept through his stomach, making him retch. A tide of vomit erupted and he found himself straining to remain on his hands and knees as he gagged and struggled for breath.

Soppy with perspiration, drained of stamina and weak, he pushed himself back and sat on the ground with his head bowed, still trying to clear his throat and quell the waves of dizziness. His head continued to pound. He felt the back of his skull; it was tender and his hair was matted with dried blood. When he was able to draw a full breath into his lungs without choking, he brushed the tears from his eyes and scanned his surroundings.

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The panorama of the ravaged camp made his breath catch in his throat and he vomited again. His lungs cried for fresh air, but the dank odors of feces and death persisted in his nostrils. The surrounding site was a matrix of annihilation. Pieces of black felt and shreds of animal hides randomly interlaced with debris and dismembered bodies formed a ghoulish weave of carnage. All of the *kibitkas* had been either slashed or burned, and the disarrayed debris punctuated by the carcasses of goats, *karakul* sheep and fallen horses. A rush of anger surged through his chest. *I have seen this destruction in other battles, but never in a Turkomen camp!*

Once again, the gentle hand of Allah stroked his senses and he was somehow compelled to twist to the left and look over his shoulder. Thirty feet from where he sat, his eyes were drawn to a five-foot battle spear stuck into the ground. Impaled atop the blood-stained shaft was his father's head!

The bloody tips of his father's silver braids moved lightly in the breeze, and his pale blue eyes were now lifeless milky orbs staring into eternity. Only Allah knew what had preceded Aram's decapitation, but whatever the experience, it had carved a cameo of gothic horror into the leathery features of his countenance.

The grisly sight triggered a rush of emotion in Mehti's chest and tears flowed down his cheeks as he stared in disbelief at the grim display. But the genetic fibers of his wild heritage would not allow him the luxury of mourning. The fires of anger flared in his mind and dulled the emotional impact of his grief. Reacting in an instant of weakness, he disregarded the need for caution and staggered to his feet, then stumbled noisily through the debris to the spear. He wiped the tears from his eyes, then began throwing aside pieces of debris in a determined search for his father's headless

body.

Within thirty seconds, he realized it was an impossible task. The mixture of body parts, personal belongings and general debris of battle was so disarrayed that he couldn't recognize anything. It was clear that it would take hours, perhaps days, to sort through the remains of the carnage.

Frustrated and still fighting waves of dizziness, he fell to a crouch and glanced back at his father's head. Once again, the brutal reality of the moment brought a twinge of nausea to his throat. He swallowed hard and looked away in an attempt to erase the ghastly image, but the smoldering embers of anger persisted and thoughts of revenge dominated his mind.

A gust of freshening breeze caught a dangling piece of hide that waved like a pennant from the naked frame of a partially standing *kibitka*, it whipped in the air and drew his attention. In that instant of distraction, he suddenly realized how careless he'd been in his movements and instinctively hunched lower to the ground, casting rapid glances in every direction. *Is someone watching?* There were countless places for an observer to hide. The elusive hand of Allah brushed across his intuition again.

Something's wrong! What is it?

Again, he scanned across the remains of the camp site, searching for the unseen danger that piqued his instincts. And then he realized the anomaly that disturbed him: *The birds! There were no birds! All these bodies and not a vulture in sight.* He cursed his weakness in allowing his grief to momentarily blind him. *Only one thing keeps these scavengers from their grisly feast—man! Either man was here, or nearby!*

The snort of a horse crossed his ears and the hair on the back of his neck stood erect! He instinctively dropped to his hands and knees to lower his profile.

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Propelled by his adrenaline, he scurried on his hands and knees to the nearest pile of debris. As if he were a fleeing mole being chased by a weasel, he burrowed under the remains of a *kibitka* until his progress was blocked by the carcass of a dead horse. He wedged his body tightly against the stiffened animal and grabbed his knife from his belt sheath. Waves of dizziness continued to wash through his head and the fingers of nausea stroked his throat again. He cursed and squeezed the handle of the knife as he tried to quell the urge to retch and the rising pressure in his bowels.

The minutes dragged by, each one longer than the one before. He detested the feeling of confinement. The tension of the moment, and intermittent flashes of vertigo made him break out in a layer of perspiration, and salty moisture gathered and trickled down his forehead. The reaction irritated him, but he did not move. For ten long minutes, he lay silent and wondered. *Did they see me? Who are they?*

Then he heard the faint hoof beats of an approaching horse, and they grew louder until they stopped very close to him. The rider paused a moment, as if undecided about something, then dismounted. The sound of several more horses followed closely. They stopped nearby and the riders exchanged muffled words while they dismounted and moved through the debris.

Although he couldn't see the activity, the sounds told him they were searching the debris. The danger of impending discovery made his heart pound in his chest. His body was dank with perspiration, a sour taste of vomit permeated his senses, and his headache felt like a band of steel that tightened in orchestration with his rising heartbeat. He gritted his teeth and fought to control his rising anxiety. *A Turkomen does not die like this, like a mouse in a burrow!*

Then it happened! One of the searchers moved a pile of debris directly above him! He squeezed the handle of his knife and tensed his body.

"Heads up," said the voice of the searcher standing over him. "Here comes the major, and he looks upset."

The voice spoke in perfect Turkic, the language of the Turkomen. Thoughts of treachery coursed through Mehti's mind and his temper bristled with anger. *Are these the Beshir traitors?*

His attention was diverted to the galloping staccato of the approaching rider. The tempo of hoof beats grew louder until they stopped near his feet, so close that he could feel the sharp vibrations of the animal's hooves as it pranced nervously under the tight rein of the rider.

"Is that where the lieutenant found the Bokharas?" a voice asked sharply in Farsi.

"Yes, major, where the big *kibitka* stood. All seven of the carpets," answered another voice in Turkic.

"Goddammit! There's supposed to be eight carpets," snapped the Farsi voice. "Are you sure about the number?"

"Yes, major, I was there. The lieutenant and two Georgian troopers gathered up the carpets. I distinctly heard them say that there were only seven. They acted scared and rode off like the devil was after them. Should we keep looking?"

"*Never mind!*" growled the major. "There's no time for this. There are Turkomen patrols in the area and their warriors will be back. The crazy bastards will go wild when they see this destruction. Take your men and leave a distinct trail to the north. Make it wide, toward the oasis at Merv. Ride hard till nightfall, then make camp. I'll catch up with you sometime during the night. Now hurry! We must set the trap at Merv well! The Tekké have sharp noses."

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The major turned his mount and trotted briskly to the southern perimeter of the camp site, then reined up and watched the scattered group of men mount their animals and ride off in a cloud of dust. He glanced in a northwesterly direction toward the oasis at Terem, then slowly swept his gaze along the horizon all the way to the south. "That simple lieutenant!" he said aloud to himself, "He knew there were eight carpets—the count will be furious!"

A thought of a past event sprang from his memory. During a hunting trip in the Caucasus with the count, a simple shepherd had innocently stumbled into a trap set for a trophy stag that Count Herizi had trailed for the past week. The count became a wild-eyed lunatic, knocking the man to the ground and cutting his nose from his face with a hunting knife.

Major DeLensky frowned darkly. *That stupid-ass lieutenant is a dead Georgian*, he thought, *and so am I if the count catches me*. He shook his head, as if to erase a bad dream from his vision, then removed his black *karakul* headpiece and rested it on his saddle horn. His hand trembled as he loosened his belt and slipped off his forest green uniform tunic, ripped the gold epaulets and insignia from the shoulders, and tossed it into the debris. Nervously, he glanced once more toward the west and the north, then took a folded garment from one of his saddle bags. It was a *Mishlah*, a cloak that Arab caravan drivers wore. He donned the garment hastily, took a simple wool cap from his other saddle bag and slipped it over his head. *In this part of the world, a man's loyalty is identified by what he wears on his head.*

There was a pathetic sense of reverence in the manner that he took the black *karakul* headpiece from his saddle horn and traced across the gold Russian eagle of the Herizi crest with

one finger. The wetness of emotion gathered in his eyes and he whispered hoarsely, "Twenty-two years of service, and it's all for shit because of a stupid lieutenant!" He swallowed hard and flipped the headpiece into the debris, turned his horse, and began to lope toward the southwest and survival. *I'll change animals and clothes at Qandahar, he thought. Then move on toward Madras.* He would become a grain of sand, lost in the dunes of humanity that were India.

Mehti remained still for a long time after he heard the searchers ride away. The conversation he had overheard left him with a thought that was like a ray of sunlight in the dark tragedy surrounding him; *they didn't have the Golden Tekké carpet!* This fact made his priorities clear: *I must find the carpet and get it away from this camp site! When the Tekké warriors return, I will reappear and take command.*

Even though he felt certain he was now alone, Mehti moved cautiously as he wriggled his way clear of the debris. He kept his profile low and checked the horizon in all directions. *Nothing in sight.*

Ten feet from where he crouched, he saw the body of a dead Herizi rider trapped under the body of a horse. Strung across the rider's back was a recurved bow and two quivers of arrows. Moving as quickly as he could, he worked the weapons free and strung them across his own back. Hanging from the torn saddle bag, he saw a bladder of water and a small woven bag. It contained a supply of dried meat and some dates. He smiled at the gifts of Allah and slipped the bag and bladder over his shoulder, then jogged swiftly through the debris toward the spot where his father's *kibitka* had stood.

Even though the *kibitka* was collapsed, it had not been slashed and burned like some of the others. Some of the bracing forms were still erect and the black felt covering had

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survived the hooves of countless animals. It was still laced into a single piece. It was obvious from the ordered arrangement of articles that the interior of the *kibitka* had not been searched. Mehti reasoned that the raiders had probably been instructed to slash and run. The near proximity of other Turkomen forces didn't allow time to scavenge the remains of the camp. The headache started pounding again and he tried to ignore it while he mentally estimated where the fourth support pole was anchored. He worked his way through the overburden of bodies and debris, and about ten feet from the location he had estimated, he found the fourth support pole underneath the carcass of a goat. One end of the pole had been shattered by a heavy force, and the other end sheared clean. Still cautious, he paused to glance at the surrounding horizon for activity, then dragged the pole free from the debris where he could work on it.

“Blessed be Allah! It was as my father said,” he whispered. The pole was hollow and the void had been filled with several rabbit skins. The prospect of saving the Golden Tekké sent a rush of excitement through him. He pulled the rabbit skins loose and tipped one end of the pole into the air. A rolled carpet slid onto the ground. At the sight of the carpet, he dropped to his knees and suspiciously checked the area around him again.

This was too good to be true! He paused a moment when a thought occurred to him, *What if someone were cleverly waiting for him to lead them to the carpet?*

The notion made him hunch lower to the ground. His eyes darted across the debris searching for potential hiding places of an observer. Then a second impression filled his mind, *Get out of the camp!* The sensory message was so strong that it made his skin tingle as if a spider had run across his

hand. He was certain that it was a whisper of Allah.

The carpet was bound into a tight roll by four leather thongs that were knotted. Moving with renewed urgency, he hastily cut a long strip from one of the *kibitka* hides, then tied each end of the strip to one of the thongs that bound the carpet. He slipped his head and one arm through the loop and adjusted the carpet so that it slung across his back, resting next to the recurved bow. He gave the carpet a final tug to be certain it was secure, then trotted through the debris to the uphill perimeter of the camp site.

In a final act of release, he took a last look at the devastated camp, then turned and started jogging up the rise of the plateau at a brisk pace. The terrain sloped gently upward for the first hundred meters. The success of saving the carpet gave him a sense of exhilaration, and he covered the distance easily. At random spots, small bits of wild Kunza grass dotted the landscape. He was careful not to damage the plants. To a keen-eyed tracker, a bent stem would mark his trail clearly.

The rise of the slope became much steeper at 200 meters, so he slowed his pace and took care not to dislodge any of the small rocks that began to increase in number. At 300 meters from the camp site, the rocks had become huge boulders and the pitch of the land was very steep. He stopped at the base of a large rock outcropping and looked at the structure with the eye of a warrior. It offered excellent cover. About twenty feet above the ground, there was a narrow cleft between two large boulders—he marked the location in his mind and began climbing the outcropping.

When he reached the cleft, he was delighted to find a small hollow behind it. The natural depression enabled him to sit in the narrow space and be hidden from view. Yet, if he wanted to, he could raise to his knees and view the horizon

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and campsite below him.

In reaching this position, he had climbed about thirty meters above the camp site. The elevation enabled him to see for several kilometers through two low valleys that stretched to the east and west of him. The ground immediately in front of him sloped sharply down to the camp site, then blended into a series of gently rolling hills that slowly increased in magnitude until they melted into the foothills of the Koppeh Dagh mountains in the distance.

This is an excellent position, he thought. He removed the bow from his back and took a piece of dried meat from the woven bag. He tore off a bite and carefully surveyed the surrounding terrain for signs of life as he chewed. He hadn't realized how hungry he was and the meat tasted good. From one extreme of the horizon to the other, nothing moved—all was peaceful. Yet, only 300 meters from where he hid, a grisly violence had been released on his people. He took a deep swig from the water bladder and reflected about the destruction of the camp. *It's right before my eyes, yet I still have trouble believing it! How could this happen to a Tekké camp? Where were the Tekké warriors from the other camps? Why are they not here where their chief was murdered?*

No matter where he looked, something drew his eyes back to the remains of the camp. Thoughts of his father persisted in his mind. The image of the silver-haired chief explaining the carpets was still vivid in his memory, and so was the sight of his head on a Herizi battle spear.

Mehti's vision blurred as tears overflowed the brim of his eyes and traced down his cheeks. The deep emotions he held for his father were hard to control. He lowered his head in silent grief and as he brushed away the tears, his eyes came to rest on the knife his father had given him when he was seven

years old. He squeezed the handle of the weapon with grim determination. "Fifty heads," he vowed in a low whisper, "Fifty heads for my father's! And one of them shall be Count Herizi's!"

A slight flicker of something in his peripheral vision jarred his attention from the clouds of emotional recall. *Something moved!* He couldn't determine exactly what it was, but he was certain about the movement. As he had been tutored from childhood, he stiffened into a rigid posture and methodically scanned his eyes back and forth across the camp site. The slight blur of movement happened again, and this time he saw the source. About seventy-five meters beyond the camp site, the head of a man popped over the rim of a knoll.

The intruder appeared to study the debris of the camp for several minutes. When he apparently felt comfortable that the site was deserted, he stood cautiously to his feet and waved his arm in a wide arc to someone behind him. Still somewhat suspicious, he looked at the camp for a few minutes, then crossed the knoll and trotted toward the perimeter of the site. He disappeared amid the debris and several minutes later, riders on horses began appearing over the knoll. They showed little caution and boldly rode right up to the edge of the camp.

Mehti counted them as they cleared the knoll—five riders and seven horses. The lead rider was trailing four prisoners who stumbled awkwardly along the trail. They were obviously fatigued from the journey. The hands of each prisoner were tied behind his back, and around the neck of each man was a rope that was held by the lead rider. The group gathered at the edge of the camp, and even though they were beyond hearing range, Mehti could tell that they were uncomfortable with their discovery by the manner in which they waved their arms as they talked.

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Mehti immediately recognized six of the men as Herizi riders. All of them wore Russian-style black leather riding boots cut off on a bias at calf height and each man wore the traditional Herizi headgear: a black *karakul* wool headpiece with a Russian gold eagle on the front.

The prisoners contrasted sharply against the Herizi group because of their simple clothes. All four wore loose-fitting white *thobes* with dark brown *mishlabs* as outer garments. The head of each man was covered by a white *gutra* that fell across his shoulders and protected the back of his neck from the weather. It was a style of dress that he had seen many times in the bazaars of Bokhara.

The prisoners are Arabs, Mehti thought. They're probably the survivors of a caravan the Herizi men had attacked on one of the southern trails.

The edge of the sun had dipped below the horizon and the light of day started to wane. One of the group waved his arm in the general direction of the rock outcropping, then spurred his mount into a fast trot around the debris of the camp and up the rise. Mehti froze in his position; the rider was coming directly toward him. *Did he see me?* The question flashed through his mind but he quickly dismissed it. He was confident about his ability to move through the terrain undetected. It was a field-craft he'd practiced all of his life.

He kept his head below the profile of the two boulders and watched the group through a narrow crack that was only wide enough for one eye. He felt his muscles relax when the rider stopped about twelve meters from the outcropping and threw his saddlebags in the center of a small clearing. The other riders followed the leader up the rise. They separated when they reached the clearing and went about the general duties of setting up an overnight camp.

The first rider was obviously in command. He remained in the saddle and watched the progress of the group for several minutes, then mumbled some gruff commands to one of the riders. The man nodded and handed the reins of his horse to another rider, then began to climb the outcropping.

Mehti ducked his head and cursed to himself. He grabbed his knife from the sheath and felt his stomach muscles tighten. *This damn cleft has become a trap! If this fool discovers me, I'm trapped like a weasel in a hole! With six against one the end is inevitable!* The bitter feeling of vulnerability sent waves of nausea through his stomach. He didn't like it. *Damn these people! This is not the way for a Turkomen to die!*

"This is good. I can see the horizon from here," said a voice in Farsi. There was a reply from one of the riders but it was too indistinct to understand.

Tense and ready for battle, Mehti slowly edged his body to a position where he could see through the crack between the boulders with one eye. Five meters below the cleft where he crouched, there was a large flat rock that projected toward the small camp site. The man who climbed the outcropping was standing there. He watched the camp site for a moment then turned and looked at the area where the horses had been picketed for the night.

Mehti relaxed and smiled at the way he'd reacted when the man climbed the rocks. *The man is the first night guard, he reasoned, He was only selecting a convenient position in the rocks, which gave him good visibility of the camp and the animals.*

In less than a second, the situation of the moment had shifted his point of view from hunted to hunter, and it felt good! He restrained a growing sense of excitement and watched the guard move around on the flat rock, noting every facet of the man's pattern of movement and planning exactly

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how he would kill him.

It was two hours past sunset before the Herizi riders organized the night-camp to their satisfaction. The horses were hobbled and staked about twenty meters to the east, and a small fire burned brightly in the center of the camp clearing. Mehti watched two of the riders forage debris from the destroyed camp. They made three trips back and forth and struggled with the task of getting the damp tinder to burn.

He smiled at their ineptness. They had failed to build a shield around the fire to limit the reflection of light on the camp occupants, a critical mistake in a land where death hovered in the darkness and an illuminated face was a target. The four prisoners were bound hand-and-foot with wet rawhide and placed on the ground with their backs against a large boulder and their feet less than a meter from the embers of the fire. Their darting black eyes and somber expressions clearly indicated they expected a bleak future, but they faced their captors stoically, without emotion. Mehti was impressed with their courage.

The riders arranged their sleeping blankets away from the fire, just beyond the circle of visible light. One of the men was fortunate in a hunting foray and proudly waved two rabbits in the air when he returned. The cleaned carcasses now hung over the coals of the fire on makeshift spits and roasted slowly. The aroma of the sizzling meat held the attention of the riders as they relaxed on the ground around the fire, drinking tea and exchanging comments about the savory aroma of the rabbit.

As the friendly security of darkness closed over the camp, Mehti carefully retraced the priorities of his attack. *First, I must kill the solitary guard without alerting the others. Then, my success depends on the accuracy of my arrows and a rapid assault—I*

must kill swiftly!

Because of his experience on the open trail, he knew the men would gather around the fire for their evening meal. It was probably the only time that they would assemble in a close group, so he must attack them at that moment. He looked across the terrain carefully: the position he selected had to give him a strategic advantage. He had to be where he could command full view of the group of riders, but not be easily seen when he loosed his arrows.

The rider in command of the group nudged one of the men with his tin teacup and gestured toward the night guard. Not happy with being selected to relieve the guard, the man grumbled when he left the comfort of the fire and climbed the rocks noisily to where the night sentry stood guard. The two men spoke casually in low voices while they watched the preparation of food and tea in the camp below them.

The relief guard, thought Mehti, a gift from Allah! While the attention of both guards was centered on the odor of roasting rabbit and the pre-dining activity of the camp below, Mehti silently slipped from the cleft and crept down the maze of rock to a deep niche behind a craggy boulder—less than three meters from where the two men stood. He crouched low in the dark shadows, and after the relieved guard returned to the fire, Mehti cautiously edged within two meters of the remaining guard.

He watched the sentry carefully and waited for the right moment, noting the manner in which the man moved, how he stood, how he balanced his body on his feet. *The fool is careless, he thought. He allows the scent of food and the activity of the camp to fill his senses. It will cost him his life.*

A gentle breeze carried the cool hint of approaching autumn across the plateau. The stars of early evening twinkled

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sharply against the indigo of a clear sky. The sentry grumbled his displeasure about his duty in a low voice and shuffled slowly around the flat rock. Completely bored, he turned his attention to the heavens and stared up at the stars, as if trying to predict what fate would bring. Silently and swiftly, Mehti was upon him from behind. He clamped a rabbit skin that he held in his left hand forcefully over the man's mouth. Simultaneously, he drove the knife in his right hand upward into the man's right kidney with a savage thrust and lifted him from his feet. The sentry stiffened and his body arched sharply backward. He trembled in a short series of spasms, then quickly slipped into the paralysis of shock.

Mehti had expected the reaction. He braced his feet and easily held the trembling body above the rock surface. As a praying mantis holds a hapless beetle, he held the dying sentry suspended as his convulsions waned in a silent dance of death. During the seconds he was in this position, Mehti kept his attention on the men around the camp fire. When he felt the fingers of death drain the sentry's strength, he withdrew the knife and sliced a deep furrow across his exposed throat, then turned and silently let the man's body slip easily into a crevice behind the rock. Quickly, he crouched low to limit his profile and rechecked the camp fire. The men were still at ease and engaged in low conversation.

Time was now critical. This was the most precarious moment of his plan, and he had to get in position and launch his attack before the sentry was missed!

Moving as quickly as he dared, he retrieved his bow and quivers and scaled down the rocks to the dark side of a large flat-topped boulder about seven meters from the fire. When he'd planned his attack, he noted that the boulder was directly between the camp fire and the horses. This was a critical loca-

tion because the Herizi men would have to pass by him if they tried to escape during the attack.

Taking care to move as quietly as possible, he crawled onto the flat surface of the boulder and braced himself in a solid kneeling position, resting one foot flat on the rock surface. Very deliberate and positive in his motions, he kept his attention on the group around the campfire while he freed the bow from his shoulder and notched an arrow on the string. The hardened surface of the bow felt good to him. He drew a slight tension on the bowstring and flexed it several times, testing the resiliency of the bow.

It's like an old friend, he thought. The sense of approaching battle was exhilarating to him, and he felt a rippling sensation trace up the back of his neck as he drew a slight pressure on the bowstring.

Damn! There are only four. Where did the fifth man go? They must be together when I attack.

As if the master of fate were choreographing the event, the fifth man suddenly appeared out of the darkness on the far side of the fire. He had been down to the destroyed camp and scavenged a small goatskin of wine. Overjoyed with his discovery, he babbled happily to his comrades and walked up to the fire holding his prize above his head with one arm.

When the man was within two paces of the fire, Mehti loosed his arrow. It struck the man squarely in the throat with a dull *thunk*. The wine bladder flew high in the air and the man clutched at the shaft and lurched sharply backwards. He gurgled a ghoulish sound and fell heavily into the lap of one of the men sitting by the fire, then spewed a frothy mixture of blood and wine across the group. As he ripped the arrow from his throat, a stream of arterial blood spurting across the face of his comrade, who immediately began retching and struggled

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to shove the grisly burden away.

The unexpected event drew the complete attention of the other three men. They watched wide-eyed with mouths agape as the scene registered in their minds. In that instant of time, Mehti notched and loosed a second arrow. The shaft struck the man nearest to him in the lower spine. The man arched backwards and pitched to the ground, where he howled in pain and jerked in spastic movement. The violent thrashing and screams of the impaled man spurred the two men who had remained seated into action. They dropped their metal tea cups and sprang to their feet in a dash for cover. Even though they moved swiftly, they still didn't know the source of the attack, and they both stumbled directly toward Mehti as they raced for their horses. Mehti easily put fatal arrows into both of them. The fifth man, who had been tangled with the man who fell upon him, had freed himself and began running after the two men that Mehti killed. In mid-stride, he sensed the error of his direction and changed his path to one that carried him directly in front of the prisoners. When he attempted to leap over them, one of the prisoners raised his legs and tripped him. The frantic man tumbled to the rocky surface and cursed loudly. As he tried to regain his feet, Mehti put an arrow between his shoulder blades.

Just as quickly as the action had shattered the peace of the night, silence fell over the camp site. At the moment that the last man had fallen, Mehti jumped from the boulder and changed his position to a small cluster of rocks five meters distant. Still excited, his heart pumping wildly, he crouched low with an arrow notched in the bow and listened to the sounds of the aftermath of battle. The groans of dying men floated on the night zephyrs and waned, the weakening volume of their voices clearly testifying that the angel of death

was nearby. Mehti waited patiently for ten minutes, then cautiously approached the campsite.

The prisoners remained silent. They stared wide-eyed into the black abyss of night and awaited the fate that lurked in the darkness. This was a dangerous and unpredictable part of the world. They had not yet seen the killer that rained death upon the camp and a rescuer could well turn out to be an assassin.

Mehti paused at the rim of the campsite, drew his knife and surveyed the details of the camp carefully. He was certain the prisoners offered no threat, because their eyes clearly told him that. Very cautiously, he checked the bodies of the four men nearest to the fire. They were all dead. Somewhat relieved, he relaxed and walked to the prisoners. He easily moved the bodies of the first two men away from the boulder they were propped against and cut the rawhide thongs binding their feet and hands.

The first prisoner, obviously the oldest of the group, was so elated that Mehti had cut his bonds instead of his throat that he began jumping up and down and babbling his gratitude in Arabic, "Allah be praised! Allah be praised! I, Sheik Yusef Bin Samin, thank you! May Allah smile upon you for eternity!"

Mehti paid no attention to the ranting man. He pulled the third prisoner clear from the rock and was about to cut his bonds, when the first prisoner yelled, "Behind you!"

Mehti jerked upright and turned to see the form of the fifth man he had shot looming over him, his scimitar raised above his head. During the unguarded moment, when Mehti was releasing the prisoners, the man had struggled to his feet and drew his weapon. Now, summoning every ion of his fading strength, he stumbled forward and lunged at Mehti with

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the last thrust in his body.

For a dimensionless instant in time, a futile thought flashed through Mehti's mind, *I didn't check the fifth man!* The desperate move of the dying avenger was grimly effective, for the blade of the falling scimitar struck Mehti squarely across his left eye socket. Something flashed, he heard a sickening crunch of bone, and then nothing.

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