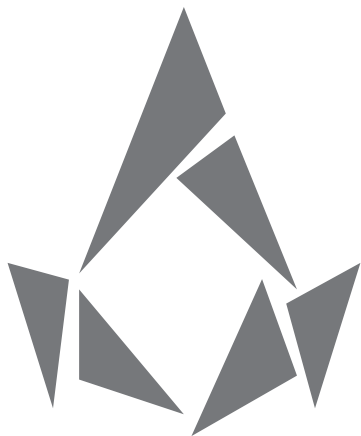


— AN ASSASSIN'S CREED[®] SERIES —

LAST DESCENDANTS

TOMB OF THE KHAN



BY
MATTHEW J. KIRBY

SCHOLASTIC INC.

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CHAPTER ONE

China, 1259 CE



Natalya held her breath and waited for the explosion. From the high fortress walls above her, the Song artillerymen had just launched another barrage of iron bombs from their *fei yun pi-li pao*, their metal thunder-clap cannons. The glowing red shells arced high through the night sky overhead and then hurtled downward toward the Horde of the Great Khan.

She palmed her ears and took cover behind the ramparts the Jin engineers had raised, and though the earthworks shuddered with each impact, shaking loose dirt into Natalya's eyes, the sound loud enough to shatter her ears like porcelain, the defenses held. Thus far.

The air, hot and humid between the strangling hands of

summer, quieted then, thick with the smoke of black powder that stung Natalya's eyes and nose.

No, *his* eyes and nose.

The eyes and nose of Natalya's ancestor, Bayan, a Buryat warrior from the far northern steppes. But experiencing the memories of a man had been the least disorienting aspect of this simulation. Bayan's Mongol culture had been completely foreign to her, their war of conquest across Asia and Europe deeply unsettling. And yet those invasions had introduced the DNA of her Mongol ancestors into her Russian and Kazakh family tree. The story of the Mongol conquest was in some ways the story of Natalya's ancestry.

Next to Bayan, a younger warrior trembled, his eyes turned upward as if he feared the earthworks would collapse upon them. Everyone in the Khan's army had seen what damage the Song weapons could inflict, tearing men and horses asunder with iron and fire.

Natalya felt Bayan stepping in front of her on the stage of her mind, and she retreated into the shadows, allowing his memory to play out.

"Steady," Bayan said to the younger warrior. "This is just for show. They want to make sure we remember our defeat at the Xin Dong Gate today."

The young warrior tightened his lips and nodded. "It's quite a show."

By his speech and the look of him, he was a Tangghut conscript and had likely done little fighting. He wasn't a Mongol of the steppes. He hadn't participated in the training exercise and great hunt that was the *nerge*. Bayan remembered his own first experience with it, the awe-inspiring line of warriors eighty

miles long, marching and riding forward with discipline, unbroken, the right and left flanks reaching slowly ahead until they had enclosed a massive circle many miles wide, followed by a methodical constriction, driving all game inward until the herds of terrified animals at the center could be dispatched at the leisure of the Great Khan. The exercise had taken months, and had trained Bayan and the tribes of the steppes for war.

This young soldier would find his courage or he would perish, either at the enemy's hands, or the Horde's for cowardice. Bayan would instruct the captain over the warrior's Arban unit to pay the Tangghut special mind.

"What is your name?" Bayan asked.

"Chen Lun."

Bayan then asked for the names of the man's captain and commander, after which he said, "Stand firm, Chen Lun. Just as Ögedei Khan conquered the Jin, so Möngke Khan will defeat the Song. We will *nothing* this city and kill every man, woman, and child within it."

The warrior bowed his head. "Yes, sir."

Bayan left him then, and walked along the bulwark inspecting several of his own troops, pleased by their stalwart and strong appearance in the face of the Song artillery, and in spite of the heat and disease in this place. To the west, beyond the Khan's defenses, the mountain rose high and black into the night, the distant lights of Fishing Town atop it. Not even Alamut, the fortress of the Assassins in Persia, had resisted siege as successfully as this bastion had. Its location, with wide rivers and steep slopes on three sides, gave it an undeniable natural advantage, augmented by the Song engineers of war.

But another shadow rose up before the mountain, a terrace

on Saddle Hill, which the Khan had ordered his engineers to raise. Bayan assumed the structure would eventually facilitate an assault, or offer a better vantage on the city. Some thought it a foolish display of the Great Khan's pride, but was it truly pride if shown by the Scourge of God, the Emperor of the World?

At the appointed hour, Bayan retreated east to the barracks at Lion Hill, joining the nine other commanders of his Mingghan unit in the *ger* of their general. The large, round tent, enrobed in felt, was sweltering inside. Several of the other commanders coughed, and a few looked sallow and weakened, though they did their best to hide their infirmity. Bayan wondered how many troops they would lose to the plague before the end of this.

"We have new orders," General Köke said. "Wang Dechen is leading an assault on the Hu Guo Gate. Tonight."

"Wang Dechen?" one of the commanders asked.

"Yes," Köke said.

Wang Dechen was the Great Khan's most trusted general, his commander-in-chief. Here at Fishing Town, Wang Dechen controlled four of the Horde's Tumen, each ten thousand strong, both upon the rivers and upon the land. For him to personally lead an assault meant the attack was of critical importance.

Köke continued. "With our defeat at the Xin Dong Gate, the Song won't be expecting a fresh attack so soon, and not under cover of darkness. Wang Dechen wants only the fittest at his side. You each know the health and status of your Jagun."

"Mine is prepared." Bayan wiped sweat from his brow as it escaped from beneath his cap and helmet. "All of my men stand ready to fight."

Köke looked around the *ger*. "The rest of you?"