

*A Princess Sends A Warning
Batu's Camp
Ala Kamak, The Russian Khanate*

Winter, 1248

The Lady Sorghagtani sent a single rider on the post-roads. He was a young man, of an age to serve in the army, and he was known as a skilled rider. He would have to be. He would have an endurance ride from Mongolia to Russia. He had to ride faster than an advancing army. He had to warn of surprise attack.

Snow was falling as Sorghagtani's messenger reached Batu Khan's camp near Lake Balkash. It was a small camp, only 20,000 men, one-tenth the size of his main camp in Sarai on the Volga River in Russia.

The messenger had ridden the mount to exhaustion. He was hungry and he was tired. He would deliver his message to Batu Khan and he would rest and eat. The messenger had left the capital of Khara Khorum on Sorghagtani's command. He carried the imperial badge, made of solid gold. He made good time. On the road west, he had fresh mounts, a place to sleep and food to eat. He covered the distance, goading himself on, for his assignment was to warn Batu Khan of an attack from an unexpected quarter. The emperor was riding against Batu and Batu did not have enough troops.

The messenger could barely keep himself in the saddle. He looked up and there was the camp. Several thousand tents spread across the steppes, round ger tents held up by wooden frames with smoke coming out of the holes in the top.

The commanders and officers, the military men, camped in circles surrounding the khan's camp. The noblewomen camped next to the noblemen, and their commoners, the shearers of wool and churners of koumiz, those who cared for the children, camped beyond them. In the distance were the herds, thousands of horses, the mounts for the army, and goats and sheep, food for the army.

The commoners who supported the army, the cooks and herdsmen, the butchers, the men who cared for the tackle and weapons, camped beyond the camp of the nobility. The nomad aristocracy did not count money or property as wealth, but the number of people camping with the khan, and the size of the herds he commanded. All around the perimeter were scouts, to warn the army of the arrival of enemy horsemen.

The messenger, with great effort, straightened himself in the saddle and rode up to the entrance of the camp. He stopped at the steaming cauldrons of boiling oil, for the removal of demons. This was an old shamanist custom, a feature of all the nomad camps. The guards beckoned him to pass through. He passed inspection.

Batu stationed guards, at the entrance, six men in black uniforms and leather armor. The guards searched the messenger and removed his weapons--a sword, a dagger, a knife that he wore in his boot. They took his bows and quivers of arrows. The rider showed his pai-zi, the badge he wore around his neck, made of solid gold, bearing the seal of the imperial family. They took the reins of his horse and demanded the messenger dismount.

The discipline was strict, even though Batu was far from home. The messenger had heard tales of Sarai, a

vast sprawl of tents with herds of a million horses. Batu ruled Russia from a throne of gold, taken from the Church of the Virgin in Kiev. He entertained in a golden tent taken from King Bela of Hungary. He exacted tribute from the conquered Russian cities and its princes, some of them elected, came to the horde once a year to pay tribute. These were the princes of the Russian walled cities of Vladimir, Suz, Riazal and Moscow, cities which he had overrun.

Batu Khan was the grandson of Genghis Khan, the senior prince of Genghis Khan's line and the Khan of All the Russias. His lands were the furthest west, the attack wing of the vast empire that stretched from the Volga to the Pacific Ocean.

The messenger said the mission was urgent. He was to warn Batu Khan. The guards were proud. They protected their khan. They knew him well from battle, for the elite had fought with him.

Batu was a man deserving of respect, a military hero, a veteran of Genghis Khan's campaign in the Muslim lands and one of the principal commanders of the Russian Campaign. His father Jochi had commanded troops under The Conqueror during the Campaign against the Shah of Khwarezm. It was a desert campaign, stunning in its strategy. The Shah's army had been no match for the army of the Supreme Khan. Batu had a military pedigree, the only mark of respect among the nobility of the Mongol world.

The trembling and terrified chroniclers of Russia called he and his men Tatars, from the Roman god of hell, for the chroniclers said that the Russians knew not from where these riders came nor for what sins they were being punished, when their walled cities were overrun and the Church of the Virgin in Kiev, the Mother of Russian Cities was burned to the ground with all of the elite inside. After the icons and the gold were removed. It was the seat of the Russian Orthodox Church.

In his tent of spun gold, Batu lived in luxury, with the finest of goods from every part of the world. Leather goods from the bazaars in Samarkand, beaten copper from the metal-workers of Bukhara, cotton goods from Persia, silk from China, porcelain and tea and jade from China. The finest tooled saddles from the markets of the Muslims in Central Asia. The very air was made of gold and the musicians played the old nomad tunes as well as the lively balalaika tunes from Russia as the girls danced and paraded in front of the Russian princes who came to pay their tribute to the Mongol Khan. "Going to the horde" was how the fair-haired princes described it, the carts that followed their horse train filled with tribute collected from the citizens of the walled cities of Russia.

Positioned at the Lower Volga, the crossroads of trade between East and West, Batu Khan was growing rich. Many branches of the Silk Road ran through his territory. Batu collected taxes and revenues from every caravan which passed in both directions, East to West. The trade was vast, and international.

The head of the Guards questioned the messenger. He said that he came from the Lady Sorghagtani and the golden badge was from her house.

The head of the guards asked why he had come alone. The messenger answered. The Lady Sorghagtani had sent one single rider on the post-roads so as not to arouse suspicion. One rider could travel fast.

The messenger said that Sorghagtani had a son, Mongke, who was a hero of the Russian Campaign. The guards knew of Mongke's reputation as a commander. Mongke attended the emperor at court, the messenger said. Mongke lived in the capital. He had seen Guyug amassing his troops on the steppes. The troops with him were crack cavalry, not an escort for an imperial outing. They were flying the imperial standard.

The Emperor Guyug was riding to the West in command of an army. He had announced to the court that he was riding to his lands in the west in order to take the waters for his health at the place on the Imil River renowned for healing powers. The Imil was two days' ride from Batu's camp. Batu had to be warned.

The guard saluted the messenger and commanded the messenger to follow him.

Sorghagtani knew Batu well and she knew how little respect he had for the emperor and with good reason. Guyug had stolen the throne against his father's wishes. Guyug was a usurper. Batu had no intention of letting Guyug, his cousin, steal Batu's lands. For what purpose? Batu did not think much of Guyug's character.

Guyug was a spoilt sniveling brat, he had left the field of battle when he was under Batu's command in the Russian Campaign, for a petty reason. At the victory celebration, Batu made the first toast. He was in command of the troops in the field and therefore the senior officer of the Army. Guyug claimed that he had the right to make the first toast, because he was the son of the Emperor Ogodei, the successor to Chinggis Khan.

Guyug got up from the table with Buri, Jagadai's son, and the two of them rode the distance back to the capital at Khara Khorum to complain to the emperor. Ogodei chastised the two of them and told them that the rank of a military officer in the field was superior to civilian posts. He ordered them back to Batu's command. Guyug never forgot nor did he forgive the humiliation. He fancied himself the ruler of all of Christendom. He wanted to make the Kings of Europe submit to him. He wanted to defeat Islam. Batu thought Guyug unfit for rule. He could not have an unstable mentality on the throne. He wanted a sound man, a man of affairs, a man who did not spend with the abandon of Guyug, who was paying off his sycophants and emptying the treasury.

The situation was terrible in the capital. Batu had discussed this on his last visit to the capital when he visited the Princess Sorghagtani, the widow of the great military hero Tolui, Genghis Khan's youngest son. Tolui was chief of staff, the man who had fought in every campaign at the side of The Conqueror. The Princess Sorghagtani was the favorite daughter-in-law. The Conqueror had personally arranged their marriage. She was Batu's ally. He he admired and respected her.

Alone of all the wives of the imperial family, she was renowned for her virtue, for her good works, for upholding the Code of Laws. So when Batu paid a visit to the capital, Khara Khorum, which means Black Rock, he paid a visit to the Princess, and he received her report of how things stood. Spending and breaking the Code of Laws, luxury and perversion. What would The Conqueror have thought if he had seen the performance of his designated heirs. It was Genghis Khan's only flaw. He had failed to provide for an orderly succession. Something had to be done or they would all be reduced to poverty.

Batu Khan and the Princess agreed that there should be a removal of the house of Ogodei from the throne and the placement of the house of Tolui on the throne. But, Batu said they should wait upon events. Not to rush into anything too quickly. They had to appear to be above reproach.

Batu would handle the organization of the election. He had the biggest army. He would guarantee the peace. Sorghagtani would handle the politics of the capital for she had forged alliances with the top nobility. She would command their votes at the next election.

It was the custom of the khans to have their women, mothers and wives, as political advisers. This was not considered any loss of masculinity. It was the opposite. Their women owned horses and clans, their women rode horses and engaged in trade for their own camps, for the men and women camped separately

in the vast steppelands. When the men were away making war, the women managed their clans, herds and pastures. These were the true partnerships of the nomad khans.

Nothing Guyug did surprised the Lady Sorghagani. The emperor had cast a jealous eye on Batu's lands and revenues. Guyug wanted to wage war on Islam and Batu was in the way. Guyug fancied himself the leader of all Christendom, and he had already notified the Pope in Rome that the Pope had best submit.

Error upon error. Guyug was amassing an army to mount a war on a Mongol prince. He thought nothing of plunging the empire into civil war. He had to be stopped. Sorghagani had served as the empress when her husband Tolui served as regent after the Supreme Khan's death. She watched her father-in-law build the empire and now she was watching his heir destroy it. It was her duty to stop him. She had ways of influencing events, even if she did not command armies.

Why did they form an alliance? For the good of the empire.

The Princess was a widow and stayed a widow. Her brother-in-law the Emperor Ogodei was an amiable man, a generous prince but not a wise one. He had offered her a marriage of state. He offered her his son Guyug, but she was having nothing of a marriage to her nephew. She declined on the grounds that she wanted to devote herself to the careers of her sons. Mongke was a military hero of the Russian Campaign. Khubilai was distinguishing himself in China, ruling according to Chinese methods. She knew them to be good and able men. She did not know at the time that both would become emperors, because of the bloodless coup d'etat she had arranged with Batu Khan. Bloodless if one does not count the death of the Emperor Guyug, whom many say she poisoned, but historians disagree about that.

Her husband Tolui had been Genghis Khan's Chief of Staff, had ridden in every campaign, and was the favorite of the nobility to lead the Empire after the death of the Supreme Khan. Tolui deferred to his brother, gave up power peacefully and Ogodei took the throne. Her sons were men of great talent. Her sons would make better emperors than Guyug and his offspring, a sorry bunch, the lot of them.

What justification could they have? They had it from the mouth of the Supreme Khan. He did not believe in hereditary rule. He had defeated too many fools who had come to their thrones through inheritance. He had not provided for the succession. It was the one weakness of the empire that he left behind. But in theory, any member of the nobility could stand for election to become the ruler of the empire.

The messenger arrived at Batu Khan's tent under armed escort. The head of the guards pulled the tent-door aside and the messenger crossed the tent and bowed before the Khan. Then he stood and delivered his warning. He clasped his fist to his chest, the old gesture of loyalty among the troops.