

Chapter 1

China—1259 C.E.

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 thunderclap 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?"

Several additional commanders offered their units in whole. Those whose soldiers had been more ravaged by disease volunteered only some of their Arban, smaller companies of ten men. Köke accepted them all.

“Muster your warriors and meet at the south bulwarks in one half hour,” he said. “You will be given further orders there.”

The commanders dispersed, and Bayan hurried toward the barracks. As he marched, Natalya felt a renewed surge of fear, and complete exhaustion. This would be the fifth battle she had endured with her ancestor in the Animus simulation, and she needed a break from the blood and the death.

“I can’t,” she said, pushing her way in front of Bayan’s mind. “Victoria, I can’t do this.”

A moment passed, the battle drawing nearer.

“Victoria?”

Are you okay, Natalya? asked a woman’s voice inside her mind, tinged with a slight French accent.

“No, I’m not. I think I need a break.”

Well, your neurovitals are stable, though your pulse and blood pressure are slightly elevated.

Um, you think? Natalya wanted to say. What else could anyone expect from her blood pressure right before medieval hand-to-hand combat?

“I need a break, Dr. Bibeau,” Natalya repeated, more firmly.

Are you sure? You know how hard that will be on you.

Bayan had just reached the barracks, and Natalya felt his exhilaration for battle mounting.

“I’m sure,” she said.

A moment of silence. Natalya imagined irritation in it.

Of course. Stand by.

Natalya braced for what she knew was coming, just as Bayan had braced himself under the Song artillery fire, only Natalya expected a very different kind of explosion.

Terminating simulation in three, two, one . . .

The world around Natalya, the Mongol war camp, the stars, the humid heat on her skin, the smell of smoke and blood, all of it blew apart in a mind-fire that blazed through her for several excruciating moments. When the pain abated, it left behind ashes where her thoughts had been, and she found herself in the formless void of the Memory Corridor, a staging ground and transitional space meant to make adjustment to the simulation easier. Natalya couldn't imagine it being more difficult.

Take a few moments. Decompress.

Natalya wouldn't be able to really decompress until she was out of the simulation altogether, but she worked to clear her mind of Bayan's memories by taking hold of her own. Thoughts of her parents and grandparents, and the life she'd had before Monroe had found her and caught her up in this whole mess. Victoria had trained her to latch on to specific memories, like the sound of the bells ringing at her grandparents' Russian Orthodox Church, or the smell of *shchi* simmering on the stove while the spicy *manti* dumplings steamed. These were the details that made up who she was, and helped her find herself again when she got lost in another life.

After a few moments of this, she took a deep breath to prepare for the worst of it, and said, "I'm ready to come out."

Very good. Parietal extraction in three, two, one . . .

Natalya's mind, stomach, skin, all of her seemed to turn inside out, as if exposing her raw nerves to the air. She didn't scream anymore, but she groaned until the sensation passed, and then Victoria lifted the Animus helmet away. Natalya stood in the center of a waist-high metal ring, tethered to it by a harness around her torso. Metal clasps secured her feet to small platforms on jointed supports beneath her, her arms and hands strapped to a kind of exoframe, a fully articulated skeleton that matched her subtlest movements. Unlike Monroe's setup, this type of Animus allowed Natalya's body complete range of motion within the simulation, without her actually moving anywhere. Victoria helped her unstrap from it all.

“Remember to breathe,” the woman said, guiding her out of the ring.

Natalya stepped through, her legs wobbling a bit. Depending on how much and what type of movement she performed within the simulation, this new Animus could leave her physically exhausted. Waves of nausea drowned the pain, and she tasted bile rising. “I need a bucket,” she said, closing her eyes. Keeping them open only made it worse.

“Right here,” Victoria said.

Natalya turned toward the doctor’s voice and opened her right eye the slightest bit, just enough to find the bucket through the blur of her own eyelashes. Then she heaved and heaved until her stomach was empty and she was out of breath.

“Done?” Victoria asked, smoothing her hair, sounding very gentle.

Natalya stumbled toward a cot in a corner of the room, gasping, feeling heavy. “Done.”

She heard the sloshing bucket being carried away by one of the Abstergo technicians, felt badly for whoever it was, but only for a moment. After all, Natalya was the one going through hell.

She shielded her eyes and tried to open them a sliver. “How long was I in there this time?”

“Three hours, eleven minutes,” Victoria said, taking a seat next to her.

“It felt like longer,” Natalya said, but then, it always did.

“Would you like to sleep?”

Natalya opened her eyes a little more, and turned toward the woman. Victoria’s pixie haircut had grown out just a bit in the weeks since Natalya and the others had come to the Aerie, but the doctor’s large teeth and smile remained the same.

“I think so,” Natalya said.

“Very well. We’ll debrief later.”

Victoria took a hissed breath and stretched as the woman got up from her rolling chair and walked across the room. She went to a sleek glass cabinet from which she drew a pale blue fleece blanket, which she spread over Natalya.

“You rest now. We’ll keep an eye on things.”

Natalya nodded, or thought she nodded, but couldn’t quite tell as sleep overcame her, and her eyes closed again.

When Natalya awoke, she was alone, but she was pretty sure someone, somewhere, would be watching her. She sat up in the soft light of the room, head pounding. She could expect that to last at least a day, though in the very beginning her headaches had lasted longer. The others experienced them, too. Victoria had reassured them all that each of their Animus machines had been calibrated and coded to their individual neurometrics, and that eventually the headaches should stop.

Should, not would.

Natalya rubbed the back of her head, up near the crown, where the Parietal Suppressor had bombarded her brain with waves of electromagnetic pulses designed specifically for her. Those waves didn’t bother her at all while she was inside the simulation. The on and off part was the problem, which was why the others usually spent longer in the Animus than Natalya did. Sean would probably live there if he could, but then, he experienced things Natalya never would.

One of the techs had once suggested there was another, even more invasive version of the Animus out there, but Abstergo would never use it on kids. Natalya was glad for that. The CT scans and fMRI’s and the Suppressor were invasive enough.

The door to the room opened with a *whoosh*, and Victoria walked in wearing her white lab coat, carrying her ever-present tablet. The room lights awoke fully at her presence, and Natalya squinted.

“How are you feeling?” Victoria asked.

“Better,” Natalya said. “But I still feel like someone went all Lizzie Borden on the back of my head.”

“Really?” Victoria said with a frown. “That should lessen with time.”

Should.

“Do you feel ready to debrief?”

Natalya looked around the room, all white panels and glass and curves and computer monitors, the contours of the Animus ring like something from the bottom of the sea that had been shaped and polished by thousands of years of waves.

Natalya got to her feet. “Yeah, I’m ready.”

“Good.” Victoria extended her arm, gesturing toward the open door. “Shall we?”

They left the Animus room and entered a wide corridor, with a line of doorways on the right-hand side, and on the other, a wall of glass that looked out into the dense pine forest surrounding the Aerie facility. The trees were an aspect of this place that Natalya truly enjoyed. All she had to do was step outside and breathe in their scent and she often felt a little better.

Victoria led her down the corridor, and then toward a conference room. Once they left the labs and Animus rooms behind, the building opened wider, allowing golden evening light in through the glass ceiling and multiple glass walls and windows. The place had an almost prismatic effect in certain places, each of the Aerie’s five buildings constructed in much the same way.

When they entered the conference room, Isaiah rose from his chair to greet her, his green eyes vivid, his blond hair swept back. “Good to see you, Natalya. I understand your simulation continues to prove quite stressful.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Natalya said.

“Are you holding up?”

“So far.”

“Please.” Isaiah gestured to one of the seats around the conference table, which looked as if it’d been cut from an enormous slab of obsidian. “Let’s talk.”

Natalya picked a chair opposite Isaiah, and Victoria took the one next to hers.

“The Mongol Khans were often quite merciless.” Isaiah sat back down. “Especially during their invasion of southern China.”

Natalya didn’t really like to dwell on it, but the Mongols followed a pattern of psychological warfare and terror. First, they would offer to spare the city if its rulers would submit to the supreme sovereignty of the Great Khan and pay him tribute. If the rulers agreed, having heard rumors of Mongol invincibility, the city was usually spared any bloodshed. If the rulers of the city refused, however, the slaughter and destruction that would inevitably follow turned Natalya’s stomach.

“I understand why that would be so distressing for you,” Isaiah said.

“We all do,” Victoria added.

Isaiah folded his hands on the table, his fingers long and narrow. “I wish there were some other way to learn what we need to learn.”

So did Natalya.

“Would you like to call your parents?” Isaiah asked.

Natalya thought about doing that all the time, but she usually only allowed herself to call them every two or three days. And they visited most weekends. But she never told them about this kind of thing. She didn’t want to worry them or stress them out.

“I think I’m okay.”

Victoria laid a hand on Natalya’s forearm. “Then can we ask you a few questions about the simulation?”

“Sure.” Better to get it over with.

“How is the Parietal Suppression going?” Isaiah asked. “Dr. Bibeau tells me you’re still having painful side effects.”

Natalya nodded.

“That is to be expected,” Isaiah said. “The electromagnetic waves temporarily silence your parietal lobes, the part of your brain that orients your perception of time and space. This allows

for a deeper and more rapid acceptance of the simulation, but it can be quite disorienting for you.”

He offered this same explanation every time, almost word-for-word, as if they hadn’t had this conversation before. “The headaches aren’t quite as bad,” Natalya said, hoping to move on.

“That’s good to hear.” Isaiah tilted his head a fraction of an inch to the left. “Have you seen any sign of it?”

“No.”

“Are you certain?”

Natalya didn’t like the way he always second-guessed her. “I think I would recognize a dagger with the power to destroy the world.”

“Perhaps you would,” Isaiah said. “Perhaps you wouldn’t.”

She knew he was impatient, and truthfully, she felt impatient, too. The Piece of Eden was the entire reason she was here. It was the reason all of them were here at the Aerie, and Owen and Javier were wherever they were. The relic had to be found. But Natalya still wasn’t sure who she wanted to find it first.

“We know Bayan came into contact with it at some point in his life,” Victoria said. “It’s only a matter of time.”

“What if he came into contact with it as an old man?” Natalya asked. “I still might have a long way to go.”

“If we had Monroe’s Animus core, with all his research, we could be more targeted in our approach.” Isaiah’s eyes seemed to flash, and his jaw muscles tightened. “But unfortunately, we still don’t know where he is, so for now, you will have to take Bayan’s life one day at a time.”

“One battle at a time,” Natalya said. Isaiah and Victoria hadn’t mentioned the Ascendance Event recently. They knew Monroe had found something unique in all their DNA. They just didn’t know exactly what it was.

“What is the current situation in the simulation?” Isaiah asked.

Natalya filled him in on the mountain assault, and the Mongol Horde's very rare defeat.

"Everyone's sick," she said. "Cholera or malaria or something."

Victoria swiped and tapped her tablet screen. "Some sources claim Möngke Khan died of an infectious disease during the siege."

"He hasn't yet," Natalya said.

Isaiah had started drumming his fingers on the obsidian table, his nails clicking. "Can you go back in tonight?"

Natalya paused a moment before responding, rubbing her temples. "No. I'm done for the day."

Isaiah looked at Victoria, sharply, and Victoria looked back at him for a moment before shaking her head, as if Natalya wasn't there to see any of it. But it didn't matter. They couldn't force her, and there was no way she was going back in right away.

Isaiah rapped the table with his knuckles, once. "Fine." He rose to his full height. "I trust you'll get a good night's rest. And tomorrow—"

"Tomorrow I go to war," Natalya said.