

Owlient



Ice Horse

Christine Frassetto

Prologue

The day Alexander the Great, barely twelve years old at the time, challenged and tamed the stallion Bucephalus, I knew that he was destined for an extraordinary future. But I did not know then that our fates would be intertwined forever.

I was looking for a sturdy and resilient battle horse and I knew that a merchant from Thessaly was coming to the court of Philip II, King of Macedonia, to present his finest horses. I immediately noticed a magnificent black stallion, eyes burning with pride, as fierce as he was powerful, that would not allow anyone to approach him. “I want that one!” cried Alexander haughtily. “He shall be yours if you manage to tame him, my boy”, said King Philip, smirking.

The boy had intuitively understood that the steed feared nothing but his own shadow. In a single athletic bound he mounted him, and after a fierce battle of unyielding wills he was able to turn him to face towards the sun, soothing the beast. Bucephalus was one of those horses who will only obey a single master, and I knew he would be loyal to him forever. King Philip then uttered a few prophetic words: “Macedonia will not be enough to satisfy your hunger; you will have to conquer the entire world!”

Alexander was twenty years old when King Philip died. I had been employed in his service and had become his faithful bodyguard. He had all the traits of a hero from the *Iliad*: charismatic, ambitious, intemperate and brutal, but also educated and a clever strategist. Aristotle had agreed to be his tutor, and his teachings bore fruit. When Alexander announced his decision to vanquish the Persian empire, 40,000 Greek and Macedonian soldiers followed him without hesitation.

Just before leaving for war, Queen Olympias, a powerful priestess of Zeus who slept surrounded with snakes and who was feared by all, sewed a cylindrical object protected by a snakeskin into Bucephalus’ saddle flaps. Around the neck of Alexander, she tied a necklace adorned with a five-pointed star engraved with incomprehensible signs, which she slipped under his breastplate. She then had me take an oath and swore me to the utmost secrecy:

“Ptolemy, I entrust you with protecting my son. He will be invincible on the battlefield as long as he rides Bucephalus and holds onto this seal of omnipotence. Ensure that he is never separated from it and I foresee that you will become king of a vast distant land and that your descendants will continue to prosper for centuries.”

In eight years under his command, we overthrew the Persians and the Medes despite being massively outnumbered. From bodyguard, I became lieutenant and then general. We were invincible. But Alexander’s thirst for power and glory was so excessive and devastating that he lost his senses. Without strong governance, the kingdoms that had

been conquered turned to chaos. The great conqueror was obsessed with the fear of betrayal from within his own ranks and would fly into uncontrollable rages. Madness would burn in his multi-coloured eyes and he would execute anyone who challenged his orders. It was when he stabbed to death his two most loyal officers, who had come to beg him to let the exhausted troops return home, that I decided to step in and break my oath to Olympias. It was the hardest decision I have ever had to make in my entire life.

The night before a battle against the Indians, a battle that I knew could not be won, I managed to drug Alexander and Bucephalus. During the battle against the Indian archers perched in their wooden towers atop indestructible combat elephants, we lost a great number of men and horses. Alexander, although weakened by the effects of the drugs, was obstinate and urged the troops to continue fighting. Bucephalus fell when confronting an elephant and Alexander was knocked unconscious. I ordered the army to withdraw and had Alexander evacuated on a stretcher. But first I removed the seal of power and broke each point with my sword. Five trusted riders were each entrusted with carrying a point of the star as far away as possible, so as to ensure that nobody would ever be able bring them all together again. The fifth horseman, my best lieutenant, mounted Bucephalus, disoriented by the effects of the drugs and his fall, and he in turn set out to one of the ends of the earth.

Alexander had the city of Alexandria Bucephalous erected at the point where Bucephalus had fallen. He was never the same again. We abandoned the conquest of India and retreated. Alexander died of malaria in Babylon, just before his thirty-third birthday.

The predictions of Queen Olympias came true; I became the king of Egypt. From the top of the lighthouse that I had erected at the port of Alexandria, the city founded by Alexander, I see the extent of this realm that has prospered under my rule, whilst also trying to be fair and respectful to Egyptian customs. I have just celebrated my 80th birthday, and in my long life I have never seen any of the five riders again. The world is much too vast for a single person to attempt to govern it without causing its destruction. I pray to Zeus and Amun that until the end of time, no one will ever reunite the five fragments of the seal of Alexander the Great.

Memoires of Ptolemy I Soter, approx. 285BC

Altair, I am an idiot. I should have listened to you. You who are always prepared to gallop unbridled, you seemed restive, shaking your head and whipping your tail to make me understand that the ground was not safe under this treacherous snow. After the great summer drought, this winter has been particularly long and harsh, and on the day I chose to face it, a white zud storm suddenly hit us. Blinded by gusts of snow and sand from Siberia, I dismounted and dragged you along with me. You reared up, snatching the reins from my hands, and suddenly the ground shifted beneath my feet. And now I lie at the bottom of a crevasse of rock and ice, helpless and alone. How am I going to get out of here?

Stop trotting above the crevasse or you'll end up falling in too! Go find help, go back to the yurts and tell my family. You, Altair, who won the race for young horses with me at the national Naadam festival. You who bear the name of the brightest star in the constellation Aquila. They will follow you. Go on, fly!

My stallion lets out a long whinny of distress before turning around and heading back to the camp. I pray to Tengri, the eternal blue sky, that help will arrive soon, before my body freezes in this icy tomb.

I wiggle my toes, protected in boots lined with sheep's wool. I tense my leg muscles; they seem to be in one piece. I try to sit up, but a shooting pain in my chest and my right shoulder prevent me from continuing. I cannot move my right arm; I must have dislocated my shoulder. Oh well, it could have been much worse. I take a deep breath, grit my teeth and transfer my weight to my left side to lift myself up before standing up straight. A few chunks of rock tumble down. I hear them ricocheting off the walls of the crevasse before the muffled silence returns. I can hear nothing but the blood throbbing in my temples. I look around my icy prison, searching for a way out. I am on a small ledge, a good fifteen feet below the next one. The rock walls are virtually smooth, veined in places with meltwater now frozen by the cold and hard as glass. I cannot see any natural handholds to attempt to climb up anywhere. In my fall I lost my bag, of course, which contained extra food, a horsehair rope, matches, binoculars, a bowl and a knife. I take off my left glove and search the pockets of my long deel, my long, warm coat, now torn to shreds. In one, I find some pieces of aaruul, which I wolf down immediately. This dried cheese will provide me with a bit of strength. The other pocket gapes open, torn to pieces. I am as helpless as a louse on a bald head...

Hmm, could I use a sharp piece of rock as an improvised ice axe? I feverishly search the small stone ledge I'm perched on. Nothing but snow and gravel and drops of blood dripping from my nose. Furious, I kick the snow. And see a snake! I recoil instinctively. If it decides to wake from its hibernation, I'd look quite the idiot. As it's my only company in this crevasse, I take a closer look. I push it gently with my foot and its skin comes apart

slightly, revealing a bronze glow from underneath. I nudge the animal again, freeing from the carcass a sort of metal cylinder around eight inches long, not unlike a small rolling pin. I crouch down and take hold of it carefully. It feels solid and compact. I clutch it and test how sturdy it is by hitting it against the ground with increasing force and hope begins to build in me: I might be able to use it as an ice axe!

But first, I need to regain the use of my right arm. I plant my feet, brace myself, rotate my upper body and, in one swift movement, slam my right side against the rock wall. A spike of pain shoots through me from head to toe, causing me to howl like a wild beast. Tears cloud my vision and I fall to my knees, breathless. I slowly return to my senses and try to move my right arm. The pain is different, duller but constant, but I can use my arm again. I slowly get to my feet and take a deep breath. I'm going to do it!

Using my improvised axe, I tap on the channels of frozen water running down the wall to create notches large enough to slide a couple of fingers or toes inside. And soon, slowly and methodically, struggling against the pain radiating throughout my arm, I manage to climb the feet separating me from the rocky bulge above. I rest here for a moment, crouching down, breathless but proud of this first victory. Then I look above me: if I continue at this rate it's going to take me... Oh no, at least three days without stopping to be able to reach the top!

I fight off the waves of despair washing over me. I think of my brave Altaïr. I know that he will find his way back to the yurts. But how long will it be before my saviours find me and hoist me from this precipice?

My heartbeat slowly returns to normal while I remain prone on this tiny ledge. But the tingling in my extremities forces me to get up. Doing nothing will cause my body and my mind to go numb, and I will fall asleep without realising it. Come on! I have to fight, continue to climb, to feel alive, even if I only manage a few feet. But first, I need to drink something. Using the metal cylinder, I break off a few ice cubes and let them melt in my mouth. I scan the wall to choose where to make my notches. Hmm, it looks as though there's a metallic sheen a bit higher up, a sort of icy mirror much larger than the ice veins. I'll use that as a reference point and a place to rest, because I might be able to make an artificial ledge there. I focus on this goal and, stubborn like a horse scratching the snow with its shoes to unearth a tuft of grass, I continue my ascent.

It was high time that I reached this mirror den; I feel my muscles starting to seize up. Suspended in the air, I hammer on the surface like a madman, sending translucent crystals flying everywhere. The ice cracks, crackles. My eyelids are almost closed to stop the sharp crystals from scratching my eyes. Suddenly, the sound of my axe on the ice changes, vibrations resonating through my arm. It's as though I'm hitting a drum. Unless fatigue has caused a ringing in my ears. I open my eyes and begin pounding again: the noise is real!

Intrigued, I make two more notches to haul myself up and almost fall backwards in terror at the vision in front of me. In the icy recess, I see a kind of metal ring attached to a leather band. I raise my gaze and find myself in front of a gruesome face, staring at me

from milky eye sockets...

A horse frozen in the ice!

How long have I been motionless in front of this ice horse? What a terrible fall he too must have had, but he was less fortunate, the poor thing. For now at least...

The walls towering above me are solid rock, impossible to climb. Incoherent thoughts begin to flicker in my mind. Daylight is fading and yet multicoloured butterflies are fluttering around me, coaxing happy smiles from my lips. That's it, winter is over, the velvety, green grass bursting through the white blanket. Poppies, buttercups, forget-me-nots and violets flaunting their insolent desire for spring over our Mongolian mountains. But a grey veil soon falls on this vision and sends shivers throughout my body. No, no, winter is not over, I'm losing my mind and I might not see the next spring.

How on earth did I, Battushig, a 17-year-old computer science student at the National University of Mongolia, find myself far from the excitement of the capital, Ulan Bator, to die of cold in the Mongolian mountains?

I focus on my last memories. A bumpy ten-hour bus ride to reach the steppe, followed by a two-hour walk to reach my family's winter camp. My stallion, Altaïr, instantly recognisable by his coat of roast coffee with flecks of cherry red and his thick, glossy black mane, leaving the herd and galloping towards me, whinnying loudly. Such an emotional reunion, him nuzzling against my neck, pushing his muzzle into my chest, then turning and spinning like a puppy before returning and placing his forehead on my shoulder, breathing noisily. I patted him, embraced him, spoke to him softly. How I had missed him!

Altaïr escorting me to the yurts, prancing happily. My three younger sisters rushing towards me, almost knocking me to the ground in their attempts to be the first to jump into my arms. My little ones had grown again. My mother, Daguima, holding me in her arms before telling me that my father had left for a meeting of horse breeders at Mount Altai. But he ought to have been on his way back. I remember my disappointment; I had so little time! Then I see myself, being wrapped up in warm traditional clothing by my mother, my feet protected by strips of felt rolled up to the top of my ankles, before sliding them into boots. She slips a bag of provisions over my shoulder once perched on Altaïr, then scatters a few drops of milk in homage to the spirits of our ancestors to protect me. I wave to her and set off at a gallop to meet my father, to tell him the great news.

Gantulga, my father, too proud of his traditions to ever use a mobile phone. Fortunately, my mother Daguima managed to convince him to buy solar panels so they could have power like most nomads. And a satellite dish to follow the news – as well as soppy Korean soap operas – on television! Ah, my father. You couldn't have come up with a more apt name for him than his own, which means "heart of steel". And he has more pride than Genghis Khan! How will he react when I tell him the incredible thing that happened to me? Thanks to the free online computer courses provided by the American University

MIT in Massachusetts and the project that I developed with the help of teachers and students at the National University of Mongolia and throughout the online world, MIT has offered me a scholarship that will allow me to join its ranks of students. Will I see pride on my father's face, or will I be turned into a motionless icicle, just like this frozen horse?

Is it night already? I can see the first stars twinkling, and the ice horse whinnies to greet them. I hear you ride, and now he speaks to me. I rub my eyes with my numb hands – the ice horse hasn't moved. All this must have been hallucinations brought on by hypothermia.

“Battushig! Hold on! We've come to get you!”

A metallic clinking sound tears through the muffled silence of the mountains. Through the fog in my brain, I can make out two bright spots slowly coming closer. I can hear voices encouraging me. A chain of points getting bigger and bigger now. Holding axes and with karabiners and ropes around their waists, members of my tribe approach me. My big brother, Gambat, head of the camp in the absence of my father, lifts me up and strokes my face to help the blood start flowing again. With the last of my strength, I point to the horse trapped in the ice. The reflection of Gambat's headlamp on the ice dazzles me. My brother almost drops me in his surprise. But he pulls himself together and I feel him fastening straps around me.

“Altair led us to you, you reckless thing!”

I think I manage to smile before completely losing consciousness.

“Are you awake? Finally?”

I hear a soft voice calling me. I feel someone caressing my arm and my heart races. It's Salonqa, my sweetheart, the girl I have loved for so long and to whom I have never been able to admit my feelings. I think I'll continue pretending to be asleep!

Fingers run over my stomach and tickle me until I open my eyes and begin to laugh – laughter that turns to a cry:

“Ouch!”

“Oh, I'm sorry!”, says Salonqa apologetically. “I'd forgotten you were broken!”

Images of my fall and my rescue come back to me in a blur. Am I in a hospital? No, I recognise the round walls and wooden, felt-covered lattices of our yurt, the hangings with the colourful geometric patterns and the smell of Horhog with vegetables and lamb which is bubbling on the hob. My stomach gurgles impatiently!

“Oh it's not too bad. It could have been worse,” I say, lifting my hands and finding them bandaged.

“Mmm... You got off lightly, according to the travelling doctor. Just a few cracked ribs. But with your frostbite, unfortunately you won't be able to use a keyboard with your fingers any more... or with your toes!”

Salonqa pulls a mirror from her backpack and moves it over my body like a scanner. I examine the extent of the damage. Bandages around my torso for the cracked ribs, hands and feet swaddled like infants, and my face... a mess of black, purple and yellow bruises. I don't look pretty. I change the subject:

“My brother? Altaïr?”

“They're fine and can't wait to see you. And as you can't leave your bed yet, you lazy thing, I've brought you a gift!”

Salonqa places something carefully on my stomach. It's my laptop, the one I had left at the university! She could not have made me any happier. But how am I going to be able to type?

“Your classmates have made a small improvement!” announces Salonqa cheerfully. “Voice commands. Remind you of anything? Go on, give it a go!”

I was all the more willing to give this a try, as I had already adapted some speech recognition software into Mongolian and had created a tutorial to help nomadic children from the steppes and the high mountains to learn to read and write. Our government has made a huge effort to develop cable internet in the country, so all the nomads have to do

is plug in their computer and log onto one of several relays scattered throughout the country to work and progress. I am so grateful to have been able to benefit from the free, distance MIT courses that I wanted to help the children in my own country to use this model. It's a bit – a lot even – for... I mean thanks to Salonqa, the daughter of a Dukhan reindeer herder in the harsh northern Taiga, now a university student by her sheer force of will. Her passion for teaching is so contagious, she is so...

“Come on, you're not looking at a statue! Get a move on!”

I comply obediently, blushing under my bruises.

“Turn it on.”

The computer obeys immediately, the screen revealing a panoramic image of the classroom at the University of Ulan Bator. My classmates cheer excitedly until my teacher, Professor Temudjin, appears on screen and silences my friends:

“We are happy that you are well,” he says, nodding. “This,” he says, pointing at the camera on the wall of the classroom, “will mean you won't miss any lessons. Welcome back. Ahem, well, let's continue,” he finishes, disappearing from the screen.

Ah, that famous Mongolian discretion! But I could tell how happy he was, my dear old teacher. He took me on as his assistant, which allowed me to finance my studies without any cost to my parents, and he never stopped encouraging me. I owe him everything! Salonqa says that as he hadn't any children, he decided to devote himself to his students, to support them even after they have finished their studies. And so he's ended up with an extremely large family, one that is loyal and grateful.

Oh, an “info” icon is flashing at the top of the screen. The search terms I programmed let me filter the endless flow of international news. I open it using a voice command and live images begin to move.

“Breaking news. An incredible discovery has delighted the world of paleoanthropologists and natural history researchers. Following the accident involving a teenager in a crevasse in the Altai Mountains in Mongolia, the cryogenically frozen body of a horse encased in ice was discovered and has been identified as a breed probably now long extinct. Its body seems to have been well preserved. Scientists from the Ulan Bator Academy of Sciences have constructed a temporary observation laboratory around the site of the discovery with the help of speleologists. According to the scientists' initial estimates, the horse probably lived between 2,000 and 2,500 years ago. The search continues in the mountains to find the body of the potential rider...”

“Hey! It's Jargal!” exclaims Salonqa suddenly, pointing to a handsome young man among the scientists. He's getting better looking all the time...”

My jaw tightens involuntarily upon hearing the name Jargal, Salonqa's ex. I hate him, that Don Juan. Sure, she ended up dumping him as he was so notoriously unfaithful, but she still suffered a lot. And I'm afraid she might still have feelings for him... In a rage I reach out to close down these images, but I am so clumsy with all these bandages that I send the

laptop flying.

“Take it easy!” laughs Salonqa, putting the laptop back on my stomach. “Think about using your voice instead of your fat fingers. Well, I’m going back to class. I’ll be back soon,” she finishes, planting a kiss, as gentle as a butterfly, on my cheek. My heart soars like an eagle, beating its wings in the cage that is my chest. Let’s hope she can’t hear this racket. The next time I see her, I’ll definitely confess my love for her!

A quiet chuckle from behind my bed causes me to jump. My grandmother shuffles over, a cup of tea with salted milk in her hand. She had been sitting behind me in the yurt this whole time! With her smile full of wrinkles, as if to represent the many warm memories of her life, she makes me drink very slowly, just like when I was a little kid. And I’m grateful that Mongolian discretion is so legendary, as it saves me having to respond to the teasing I sense in her eyes...

My mind races as I lie on my bed, helpless and useless. My university class fades into indistinct noise and I am incapable of paying any attention. The temptation is too great. I trawl through the information I've managed to gather on the ice horse. Speculation is rife in the media, but until the analyses are finished, the truth will remain hidden. And what if I were to return to where I fell, to observe the naturalists and paleoanthropologists?

Don't laugh. I don't mean going there in person, considering my condition. But given the incredible equipment of our Academy of Sciences, thanks to international sponsors, surely there must be a state-of-the-art camera system allowing the horse to be studied from afar without the risk of damaging it. If only I could log into the system, discreetly of course, then I would have live updates!

I know who to ask! Oyunbileg, a university friend a little older than us, a computer engineer who specialises in optical networks. He is one of those rare great minds who has not been tempted by a mammoth salary to leave Mongolia and he works at the Ulan Bator Academy of Sciences. I am sure he will agree to connect me to the temporary lab's network. Crossing my fingers, uh, in a figurative sense given their condition, I contact him.

Oyunbileg's dishevelled face appears and grimaces at me on the screen. He laughs like a hyena at the sight of my turbaned hands and asks how I manage to pick my nose. Yeah, although computer scientists are very intelligent, their sense of humour leaves something to be desired. Nevertheless, he promises to sort things out for me so that I can access the camera network on my computer. It will take him some time, but he doesn't say how long. I thank him warmly and try to focus on the university classroom. But I can feel my eyelids growing heavy, and despite my best efforts to pay attention, the curtain falls and I start to drift off....

Marilyn Manson screams curses into my ears and tears me from sleep. My heart pounding, I try to control myself and prepare to hurl abuse at the psychopath who woke me up in such a brutal fashion, before a hyena-like laugh drowns out the music, which is quickly switched off. It's another rotten joke from Oyunbileg, but I forgive him as soon as I see a window open on my screen: the little genius has managed to connect me to the camera network of the temporary laboratory in the Altai Mountains!

The surface of the ice chasm looks like a crime scene. Black and yellow striped tape to keep out intruders marks out the area of investigation for the specialists. Teams of speleologists extract ice cores to date them and collect all of the samples and pieces of evidence that might turn out to be significant. Others, armed with portable radiology equipment, take pictures of the horse from every angle. In the temporary laboratory, men wearing masks and surgical scrubs are already carrying out analyses. I can't help myself, I look for Jargal. There he is, using tongs to pick up a diamond-patterned piece of cloth,

spreading it over a glass plate and cutting a fragment of this strange fabric with a scalpel. He then drops the sample into a test tube half-filled with a clear liquid, which he places in a round machine. As he closes the lid of the machine it suddenly dawns on me: it's not fabric from a clown costume, it's the snakeskin that contained my improvised climbing axe! If I remember correctly, I was still holding it in my paralysed hand when my brother arrived. If I find it, I could bring it to the scientists in person!

I move the laptop and get up out of bed, holding back grimaces of pain. Ah, I'm just in my underwear... I look around our yurt for the cylinder. At first glance it hasn't been put on any of the wooden chests, nor on my mother's large dresser. Maybe it's in my brother's chest? I walk slowly to the chest and lift the lid, but all I can see are clothes and old magazines. Could one of my younger sisters have "borrowed" my new toy? No, all I see are colouring books, cloth dolls and girly stuff. I'm so stupid! I haven't even looked in my own chest!

I turn around, panting like an old horse crippled by rheumatism, and open my chest. Right at the top is my deel, cleaned and sewn back together! My grandmother is truly incredible. I take this opportunity to put it on, misshapen from all these bandages. It's quite chilly away from the yurt's wood burner. I move the clothes in my chest and CLANG! something slips and falls to the bottom with a thud. I manage to catch it with my flipper-like mitts and look at it carefully. Despite having been hammered against the ice, it doesn't look too battered. There are strange symbols engraved on the surface. I look at the ends; they seemed to be sealed with metal caps. Could there be something inside the cylinder?

My imagination is on overdrive: could the mysterious cylinder contain a map showing the location of a spectacular lost treasure trove? Or rough diamonds? Or an ancient relic believed to bring power, fame, and fortune? I try to unscrew the caps. I'm so clumsy! I try to think of a way to remove the metal caps. Not with my nails. And an axe or a saw are definitely out of the question. For want of a better alternative, I look for the tongs used to hold the dry dung for burning in the oven. I grab the tongs and sit next to the stove, holding the cylinder between my knees. Using my forearm, I grip the cap with the tongs and try to turn it. The tongs slip; my grip wasn't strong enough. I try again and again, until a scream pierces my ears:

"Fire!"

Before I even realise what is happening, buckets of cold water are thrown over me and my clothes are ripped from my body. I was so focused on my task that I didn't even notice that my deel was too close to the oven and had caught on fire!

My mother thanks the neighbours who came to help extinguish the outbreak of the fire, accompanies them to the yurt's exit and then walks furiously towards me. I mumble,

“Sorry, Mum. I promise I’ll work hard to buy some fabric for a new deel and... Ouch!”

She clips me around the ear and drags me out of the yurt. She forces me to sit down on a mat and then throws a blanket over my shoulders. I am tasked with peeling vegetables with my grandmother, just like when I was little. Feeding the ail, the members of our clan (composed of a number of families in their yurts), is by far the most heroic mission I can accomplish in the short term, my mother tells me in a tone that makes it clear there is to be no discussion. While she goes to clean up the mess in the yurt, I try to strip the leaves from a cabbage... Well done, you Indiana Jones wannabe!

In the distance I notice my brother Gambat on his horse, accompanied by the older children of the ail, rounding up the sheep to guide them to their pen for the night. He has dedicated his life to these horses and herds of cattle. Even if he sometimes envies my life in the city with all the “distractions” of the bars and nightclubs, he would never question his choice to follow in our father’s footsteps. As for me, even though I don’t go to these “distractions”, and even though riding like the wind in the steppe is my favourite thing in the whole world, I cannot see myself entering the tough breeder business. And I must admit, I’m a bit relieved that my brother is going to inherit all this... What’s this? The ail dogs, noses pointing south west, have started yelping to get our attention. Is there some new threat approaching us?

I can hear neighing sounds in the distance, a cavalcade; riders are approaching our camp. My grandmother stands up and shuffles into our yurt. She is going to prepare a traditional gesture of hospitality, the Airag ceremony, in which a bowl of fermented milk is shared with visitors. But these are not just any visitors!

Impatiently, my mother runs to the few horses tied to the Ouiaa, a rope suspended between two poles. She unties the knot holding the halter of Tarjenjau, her old red mare, and without stopping to saddle her, she grabs her thick mane and climbs onto her back. Too happy to ride, Tarjenjau the “fat girl” races off at a gallop toward the troop of horsemen. My father and the men of the ail have returned!

Their horses draw alongside one another and my father embraces my mother, then lifts her, light as a feather, and places her on the saddle in front of him. I can hear her laughter from here. One day will I too carry off the woman I love on Altaïr’s back?

Before going to their families, each rider first takes care of their horse. The riders unsaddle their horses, check their shoes, rub them down and pat them before removing their bridles and leaving them to drink from the river. Only then does each man go to his family, embracing them in order of age. My three little sisters make my father laugh with

joy. But once he puts the girls back down, his face darkens. He stares at me, his eyes harsh and inscrutable. I swallow; I cannot say anything until he speaks first. But he does not utter a sound. When he turns his back to us and enters the yurt, I feel a lump in my throat and my eyes begin to sting slightly. Gambat gives me a friendly pat on the shoulder before going to check the sheep pens. Despising my sentimentality, I look into the distance, at the setting sun. Men do not cry.

During the night, I hear my father sigh and whisper to my mother,

“Will he ever become a responsible man, some day?”

My phone is vibrating in my trouser pocket. I set down the buckets filled with water from the river that are hanging from my elbows so that I can get at it more easily. What am I doing outside in the middle of the night, muffled in a blanket, lost in my pain?

Unable to sleep, I got up before dawn to fetch water for my family's morning tea and give them a pleasant start to the day. Then I will leave for Ulan Bator. I think that's where I belong rather than in the steppe, despite the strong attachment I will always have for this place. I was hoping to be able to speak to my father, but he already had left the yurt to check on the mares close to foaling. I don't know what I can do to win his approval, if not his pride. Since I started university, I have been worthless in his eyes for not following in his footsteps. That's enough, I stop dwelling on bitter thoughts and answer my phone; it must be my brother Gambat worrying where I am. When will he stop feeling responsible for me?

"I'm coming," I say tersely.

But it's not Gambat's voice on the other end. It's someone I don't know, a confident voice, rather hoarse, with a strong American accent.

"Mr Battushig, this is John Fitzgerald Hannibal, from Hannibal Corp. I have been following your university progress very closely. Congratulations on being accepted into MIT..."

I almost drop my phone. The American company Hannibal Corp., which made its fortune thanks to its pioneering work in the field of scientific innovation, is the main sponsor of the Ulan Bator Academy of Sciences at the University of Mongolia. Almost all of our scientific and IT equipment was financed through generous donations from this company which helps students from a number of disadvantaged countries thus. The brightest students sometimes have a chance of being hired by Hannibal Corp. I know that this has happened to a few former students from our university, and Professor Temudjin always talks about Khubilai, now the head of networks and IT security for the company. I cannot even imagine being one of those chosen few! I am so stunned that I can only stammer like an idiot,

"Haha..."

"Mr Battushig, I'm not going to beat around the bush."

This is it, my heart is going to stop. I can already see myself on the path to glory, and my joy is mixed with a nameless dread; I will never be able to live up to Mr Hannibal's expectations!

"When you fell in the Altai Mountains, did you happen to come across a cylindrical object?"

Ah. I come down to earth with a bump. It's not my potential as a future scientist that he's interested in after all. He just wants the metal cylinder I used as a climbing axe. What with my deel catching on fire and my father's return, I had completely forgotten about the mysterious cylinder.

"Yes sir," I manage to mumble. "I was going to give it over to the staff at the temporary laboratory."

"Excellent. But I'll save you the trouble. In less than an hour, a helicopter will be landing near your camp. You can give the object to the pilot. Get well soon!"

The line goes dead. He didn't even ask where our camp was. The GPS in my telephone has obviously already given him all of the details. Or maybe a secret drone is watching me from the sky. And all for a stupid metal tube. I feel so stupid, thinking for a second that I could touch the stars...

The stars! Of course! Why didn't I think of it before? As though struck by lightning, I drop the buckets and run like the wind back to the yurt. I throw the blanket over my bed and open my chest, trying to make as little noise as possible. My mother must have put the cylinder there. Yes! I carry it outside the yurt and run up a rocky knoll so that I can look at the mysterious object by the light of the stars. Before handing it over to the pilot, I really want a souvenir of it. My hands still rather clumsy, I manage to take some photos with my phone from every angle, before taking it in my hands and rolling it slowly in front of me. I think I can make out a star from the mass of symbols engraved on it...

It's a very peculiar star – a five-pointed star – right in the middle of the cylinder. And it has a twin, in perfect symmetry, half a turn around the cylinder. As though magnetised by these two ancestral symbols, I take the cylinder carefully between my thumb and forefinger, the tips of my fingers on the stars. I position the cylinder horizontally; it balances perfectly. And, as I will forever be a child at heart, I wave my hand up and down to create that famous optical illusion – the rubber magic wand. The wand dances, causing me to grin like a kid. I almost forget why I'm sitting there on a pile of snow.

Suddenly, a warm breath on the nape of my neck yanks me out my self-hypnotised trance. In my surprise, I jump and squeeze the cylinder tightly to stop it from falling. I'd recognise that breathing anywhere; it's my Altaïr! I start to turn happily towards him, but at that moment my hand begins to shake and it draws my attention away. Altaïr butts me gently with his head – his way of giving a hug – but I push him away with one hand and focus on the strange phenomenon that just happened. As though controlled by some inner workings, one of the two "caps" lifts up. My hands trembling, I pull off the cap and look to see what is inside.

In addition to the opening mechanism, constructed of delicate gears with slender metal rods and latches, there is a second cylindrical object inside!

I wonder how many cylinders are hidden inside the first. Could it be a Matryoshka system, those Russian dolls that fit inside one another?

The second cylinder appears to be made of bone, given the dark streaks running through it, and has been hollowed out. I raise it up to the pure light of the stars to see if there is something hidden in the centre. The light doesn't pass through but I can't see anything clearly in the centre of the cylinder. I shake it to try and dislodge whatever might be inside, but still nothing happens. I put my lips to one end and blow into it as though it were a flute. The air flows through but I get the impression that whatever is inside is getting in the way when I blow. I would need to slide a metal rod or a thin twig inside the channel to remove the contents. But there's nothing here I could use except for snow. I hold the bone cylinder in front of me and turn it slowly in my hands. There are carvings covering the outside – yet more mysterious symbols. I can make out a horse's head topped with a star – five-pointed again. I look to see if there is another star, just to try my luck and see whether this cylinder will open like the first one, but I can't find one. You can't win every time! I continue examining it. There's clearly a series of symbols, letters and numbers, but the layout and the design don't remind me of anything. I can sense that I'm going to stay disappointed when I hand the object over to the pilot...

“Hey! What's got into you, Altaïr?”

My horse is grazing my hair; he's clearly worked out how to get my attention. And now he's trying to suckle my ear!

“Hey! Stop, that tickles!”

I squirm and drop the bone cylinder onto the snow where it leaves a vague rectangular imprint. I go to fetch it on all fours while Altaïr nibbles at my backside. I push him off so that I can slide the bone cylinder back inside the metal one, and by pushing the two stars together I am able to close the cap again. Then I slide the cylinder into my trouser pocket next to my phone before getting up and growling loudly at Altaïr, laying down a challenge.

“You want to play?”

In response, Altaïr rears up and boxes with his forelegs before falling back down in front of me, eyes shining and ears pricked, muscles tense, ready to go at the first sign of movement. I look him right in the eyes, keeping myself perfectly still, before jumping to his side and slapping him lightly on the rear. I spin around to dodge Altaïr as he tries to barge me in retaliation – I know him too well! I was there during his difficult birth and fed him by bottle for the first few days when his mother couldn't herself. I often fell asleep nestled against him. We were inseparable. My father took care of Altaïr's mother using his knowledge of plasters and herbal broths, and encouraged her to let the little one feed from her. She had suffered immensely while giving birth. She was so weak that she refused to

let the foal come near her. But I have never seen a horse resist my father for long; she finally ended up accepting her son. At the time, I resented my father for having separated me from Altaïr, but I later came to realise that it was for the good of the young horse. But that special bond we had formed endured, and Altaïr, now a majestic stallion, still plays with me just like when he was a young foal, and my heart soars with joy whenever we share these moments.

I dodge another attempt to barge into me and sprint off. Altaïr catches up immediately, overtaking me and pulling up short in front of me. I pretend to make a break for it to one side, then the other, but Altaïr also knows me well and anticipates this, blocking my path. We twirl around, dancing together until my trusty steed causes me to lose my balance, making me roll over in the snow just like the bone cylinder when I dropped it. I burst out laughing.

“You win!”

Altaïr prances proudly before approaching and nuzzling me. Still lying on the ground, I fling my arms around his neck and breathe gently on his forelock. Altaïr drops gently to the ground next to me, giving me an invitation I can't refuse. I press myself against his back, pass one leg over his flank and Altaïr gently stands, carrying me off for an exhilarating ride on his back. In moments like these, time stands still and nothing else matters but this intense bond.

But the rapidly increasing roar of an engine brings reality flooding back. Through the rays of the rising sun, a dot in the sky begins to grow, approaching us at high speed...

I straighten up on Altaïr's back to slow him down and ask him to trot and then walk. My horse shakes his head in annoyance, exhaling loudly. We catch our breath as the plane approaches, landing on the snow with a muffled thud a few yards in front of us. Alarmed, Altaïr watches the intruder, sniffing the air and moving his ears in all directions. His muscles quiver, ready to confront or flee from this potential predator. I stroke him and speak gently to him to soothe him, but I can still feel the tension in him. I examine the small plane, fitted with skis, streamlined, more like a James Bond jet than the large helicopter I was expecting. The Hannibal Corp logo, a capital H inside an equilateral triangle, is emblazoned on the side of the aircraft. The engines stop purring and the side window of the cockpit opens at the same time as a ramp slides silently to the ground.

The pilot removes his helmet, takes off his sunglasses and walks down the ramp. Squeezing Altaïr with my calves, I encourage him to walk towards the newcomer, but my horse plants all four hooves into the snow and refuses to move. I insist, in vain, and end up dismounting to approach the pilot alone on foot. Behind me, I can feel the anxiety and mistrust of my steed, who is stamping his hooves. I try to reassure him but he continues to trot back and forth. I take a closer look at the tall figure walking towards me. Despite a slight limp he exudes an incredible self-confidence, and not just because of his elegant, finely crafted Western clothing, which is light and warm at the same time, and his expensive hiking boots. He has thick black hair and his pepper-and-salt beard is neatly trimmed. We approach each other slowly, like two cowboys in a western, not looking away from one another. Instinctively, I put my left hand in my trouser pocket and grip the cylinder tightly as though it were a pistol. We find ourselves face to face, just as if it were a duel to the death... I feel incredibly breathless. Who will draw first?

The pilot holds out his gloved hand as if to shake my hand and I instinctively hold out my own out of politeness. But the position of his hand soon sets me straight. Palm upwards, he signals for me to give him the object he has come for. My right hand falls limply to my side and I reluctantly pull the cylinder from my pocket and place it in his outstretched palm. As soon as he sees it, the pilot loses all interest in me. His lips twist into a grin as his fingers close around the cylinder and he fixes me with an icy blue stare from behind his sunglasses. It's only when he speaks in his hoarse voice with the instantly recognisable accent that I realise it is John Fitzgerald Hannibal himself in front of me!

"I am most grateful to you. This object is very valuable... to science."

I want to ask him lots of questions because I want to know more about this cylinder, the symbols engraved on it and where it came from, but I stand there, mouth gaping like some kind of stupid fish or something. When Hannibal hands me a thick envelope, I shake my head and mumble,

"No, no, there's no need. It's... it's for science after all."

Hannibal chuckles and tries to force the envelope into my shirt. At that moment, obviously thinking I am being attacked, Altaïr appears, violently charging into Hannibal who stumbles and falls to the ground. It wasn't a playful shove like when he plays with me, but an all-out attack. Nostrils flared, ears pinned back, he's ready to bite and trample my assailant without mercy. I rush to Hannibal to help him up, but the expression spreading across his face makes my blood run cold and causes me to take a step back.

Hannibal is livid. He stands up, a hateful expression on his face, and pulls from his inside pocket a thin telescopic baton which he flicks open. He raises his arm and whips Altaïr with incredible violence. A long bloody welt appears on my horse's neck. Without thinking, I throw myself between Altaïr and Hannibal, arms raised, taking a blow to the side of my face from the baton in Altaïr's place:

"Stop! Please! He won't hurt you!"

Hannibal grits his teeth, nostrils flaring. A tic in one of his cheeks is twitching. I gently place my hand on Altaïr's neck and whisper a few calming words to him without taking my eyes from Hannibal. Slowly, Hannibal mutters:

"I suggest that you never let him come near me again."

I move my hand from Altaïr's neck to his forehead, push him back and whistle sharply. Altaïr moves backwards, turns around and trots off quickly, tail erect and ears back, stopping at a safe distance. I can tell he's furious, ready to attack at the least suspicious move, but I also know he will obey me. Hannibal lowers his weapon without putting it away. He walks back towards his plane, up the ramp and slams the cockpit window shut behind him. The plane sets off as soon as the engines start up, accompanied by Altaïr's furious neighing. Fear finally hits me and my legs shake like leaves in the wind. I slap myself to pull myself together, and tell myself that the worst is over. Breathing deeply, I head towards my shaking horse.

"I... I... Let's go."

Without even glancing at the banknotes flying out of the envelope Hannibal dropped, I rub a handful of snow onto Altaïr's wound to clean it. Then I return to the camp on foot, completely dejected and upset by the encounter, like a poor lonesome cowboy...

When I arrive at the camp, everyone has been awake for some time and are all working away at their tasks without paying me any attention. Altaïr leaves to drink from the river and I, my heart heavy, enter the empty yurt and grab my laptop and a few things I'll need for my return to Ulan Bator. If I hurry, I can catch the only bus of the day. I need to speak to someone about what happened, but unfortunately no one in my family can help me...

“You’re so stupid, you should have taken the cash! You could have used it to buy a new deel!

After what felt like an endless journey during which I wasn’t able to get a wink of sleep, Salonqa’s response hurts me deeply. She’s normally so sharp, but she can’t seem to understand why I could never accept anything from someone like Hannibal. For all his philanthropic pursuits, this guy must be sick to be able to hit Altaïr like such a savage. I would have felt dirty taking his money.

Salonqa sighs deeply and lets out a huge yawn, suddenly reminding me that I woke her up just as she was getting to sleep. She goes to the bathroom and returns with antiseptic cream, cotton wool and bandages. She pushes out a chair with her foot and points to it with her chin:

“It looks like you’ve been in a fight with a bear. First let’s get you cleaned up and then you can show me the photos of the cylinder. If Hannibal came to pick it up in person then it must be really valuable.”

“That stings!”

“You’re such a wuss! There, it’s over.”

When Salonqa grabs my phone and scrolls through the photos, her bad mood fades away, immediately replaced by intense curiosity.

“It’s incredible!”

The she reaches into her desk drawer and hands me a notepad and pencil.

“It’s a shame you didn’t take a photo of the bone cylinder. It would definitely have given us a better idea of what it was. But see if you can draw it from memory, the horse’s head and all the other engravings.”

“Yes boss!” While I scribble with the pencil in the palm of my hand like a kid in primary school, Salonqa uploads the photos to my laptop. She arranges them into a rectangle which once rolled and modelled in 3D looks just like the original cylinder. I’m impressed.

Salonqa looks at my picture, scans it and carries out the same process that she’d performed for the photos.

“Did it look like this?”

“Apart from the fact that I drew it like a goat suffering from Parkinson’s disease, yeah, pretty much.”

Salonqa thinks intently then fixes me with an intense stare.

“An ancient language and strange symbols. We’re going to need some help to decipher all this. Would it be OK to ask the ‘Network’?”

The Network... These are all the Internet users who, anonymous or famous alike in their field, have helped us to create our learning system for nomadic Mongolian children. It involves people of every nationality using all forms of knowledge in all possible subjects, all helping one another. So it would be perfect for looking for answers!

While I make a very strong tea, I can hear Salonqa typing on her keyboard like a woman possessed. When she decides to take on a project, nothing and nobody can get in the way of her willpower and energy... I can picture her, frowning, blowing her hair impatiently out of her eyes. Her long, slender fingers dancing, occasionally stopping to move her hair back behind her ear. She says that one day she will shave it all off. I pray she never does as I am crazy about her crazy hair, the mahogany curls blocking out the light. I would stroke her hair for hours, drowning in her scent. But I just stand there like an idiot, hypnotised by her back, the two cups of tea burning my palms until she finally hammers the “Enter” key and sits back in her seat, stretching her neck and her arms behind her, fingers spread like five-pointed stars.

She stands up and walks towards me to take her cup of tea.

“Thanks! But why are you staring at me like that? Do I have ink on my face or something?”

Of course, I am unable to tell her how mesmerised I am by her and how much I like her. Instead I look away, feeling myself blushing crimson and ask her,

“Have you got a mirror?”

After such a moronic remark, any other girl would have slapped me or would have run to check what she looked like in a mirror. But not Salonqa. She responds with her legendary wit:

“Yeah, in my backpack. Why, do you want to put some lipstick on?”

When she was stretched out in her chair like that, her face upside down and her outstretched hands like stars, I had a sudden brainwave: what if we try to decipher the engravings on the bone cylinder in reverse? I think back to when I dropped the cylinder and the rectangular imprint it left on the compressed snow and explain my idea:

“The engravings are raised. If we were to roll the cylinder on a wax plate or on a fresh clay tablet like our ancestors used to do, the imprints would be...”

“In reverse, like a mirror!!!”

Instead of going to fetch her mirror from her bag, Salonqa rushes to the computer and inputs the command to flip the images. She lets out a cry of surprise,

“What a brilliant way to transport a written message. Easier to hide, much less bulky and far tougher than a clay tablet or parchment. When you flip it, it looks like Ancient Greek. There are clusters of words and all of these interwoven geometric symbols... But what secrets does it hide???”

As if to confirm my gut feeling, we receive a message from Talila, an Australian student in primitive art, accompanied by photos of a piece of coloured fabric protected by glass and a grey cylinder with raised engravings very similar to ours. A spindle has been pushed through it and there are coloured inks in terracotta clay pots next to it. Her message is slightly mocking:

“Hey kids, if you were thinking of inventing the process of printing repeated ethnic patterns on fabric to start a new fashion trend, you should know that the patent was filed in Phoenicia over 2,500 years ago! And get a professional designer to do the drawings, unless you were going for the “naïve” look!”

Salonqa sends a message to thank her before turning to me with a defiant glint in her eyes.

“If I had a clay tablet and rolled the bone cylinder over it, I would be able to print out the secret message. But how will I know which way I have to read it and what these symbols mean if I don’t have the ‘decoder’?”

Uh oh, here we go again. I’m a computer specialist, a data encryption expert, not a hacker who cracks secret codes! All of my friends are constantly asking me to help them watch movies and TV shows whenever they’re out or play games for free and I can never say no.

But that's a different kettle of fish. How will I be able to get inside the heads of people who lived such a long time ago and understand their encryption system? But with Salonqa's beautiful eyes looking right at me and her soft hand on my shoulder, I can't resist. I try to wheedle her:

"I'll really need to find out what time period it comes from to know where to begin. Could you ask any experts in ancient languages and historians of ancient relics?"

Salonqa flashes me a bright smile and hands me my laptop.

"I've already sent you the images. You can do it!"

Then she pours us another drop of tea. The night has only just begun!

Before throwing myself into my archaeological decryption work, I think back to when I found the first cylinder, partially covered by the snakeskin. Then the surreal vision of the ice horse pops into my head. Could there be a link between this cylinder and the horse? When I connected to the temporary laboratory's cameras near to where I fell, Jargal the lady killer was examining the snakeskin. I need to get over this foolish jealousy and find out what discoveries they have made in the lab. I'm going to see how far they've got. Given the speed of Hannibal's jet, the scientists must already have the metal cylinder. Could they have solved the mysterious secret messages contained inside already?

I use a voice command to connect to the temporary laboratory's camera and zoom in on the department dealing with the snakeskin. Hmm, it looks like the analyses have progressed a great deal, seeing as there are so many people gathered around Jargal's desk. No, they are looking at a screen showing the diamond-patterned scales of the outside of the snakeskin, stretched out and pressed between two large glass slides. A scientist, probably a herpetologist, a specialist in amphibians and reptiles, is presenting the results of his study.

"This specimen, from the *vipera ammodytes meridionalis* subspecies, which is highly venomous, lived approximately 2,300 to 2,400 years ago according to our initial estimations. According to our database, it can't have come from Mongolia or any neighbouring regions, as this species is native to the Greek islands. It has been 'imported', most likely post-mortem, as you can see by the traces of this almost surgical cut. The internal organs have been removed and replaced by... something. Something up to 20 cm long and with a diameter of 3 cm. The skin was scraped clean before being treated with salt to cleanse and preserve it. Then it was perforated around the edges and stitched together around the hidden object... You said that no such object has been found yet?"

I am outraged! Hannibal hasn't given them the cylinder??? The man who is known as THE defender of science, he kept it for himself???

But I have no time to dwell on my outrage as my eyes are drawn to what is happening on screen. The glass plate rotates to reveal its inner surface. Squinting, I can make out the rough marks on the skin left by some of the symbols engraved on the metal cylinder, including the two stars!

"And now, I'll pass you over to my colleagues from the departments of linguistics and symbology!" concludes the herpetologist. "I would be honoured if you could keep me updated with the results of your research."

My first instinct would be to send the lab the images that Salonqa had modelled, but I was so shocked by Hannibal's violence and am so afraid of his immense financial power that I just sit here, paralysed, just like when I had done something wrong as a child, causing my

father to fly into one of his rages. One day I'll have to grow up and not be so intimidated, but right now all I can imagine is what Hannibal will do to me if he finds out I have sent the images to the lab. What should I do?

Fortunately, Salonqa drags herself away from her research to focus on me, rescuing me from my state of prostration.

"According to Anguélos Keusséoglou in Athens, the letters come from one of a number of ancient Greek dialects. This one might date back to the middle of the fourth century BC. He thinks he recognises Attic-Ionic, the main official language of the Macedonian court, but he wants to do a bit more research to make sure."

"Macedonia, that's a region in the north of Athens if I remember correctly. What did he understand from his first read-through?"

"It seems to be some sort of protective spell for the son of Zeus or his horse. And apparently there's also some rather unpleasant threats warding off thieves. It's not very clear right now. And what about you, where have you got to?" she adds, sitting next to me to look at my screen.

With an anxious lump in my throat, I tell her what I found out about the snakeskin, confirming the date that Mr Keusséoglou had estimated. I also tell her about Hannibal's deception and my fear that he could be using the cylinder for his own personal gain. Salonqa pouted doubtfully.

"Apart from collecting archaeological trinkets, right now I don't see what he could be up to. In fact I don't know anything about Hannibal, apart from the fact that he's an international businessman and a philanthropist. Have you done any research on him?"

I shake my head. Salonqa rubs her eyes before returning to her computer.

"Let's see what it says on the net. It might help to nip your paranoia in the bud!"

I really hope that Salonqa is right. But I feel a strange uneasiness deep inside me. What is Hannibal hiding behind his perfect appearance?

While Salonqa looks into Hannibal, I return to watching the cameras.

“You’re not going to believe it!” I choke suddenly.

“What? Have you discovered something else out about that disgusting Hannibal?”

“The speleologists have found the rider of the horse that was at the bottom of the crevasse I fell down. Look at these pictures!”

Through the headcams attached to the speleologists’ helmets, we can see the bottom of the abyss in which the unfortunate rider ended up.

Salonqa sits down next to me and slides her arm under my elbow, clutching my shoulder.

“To think that could have happened to you...”

If it weren’t for the tragic sight of the contorted body frozen in the ice, I would have hugged Salonqa, kissed her neck, moving up to her hair, brushing her lips and...

“Did you see that?” she cries suddenly, pulling away from me to point at the screen.

Don’t tell me that she’s still going crazy for Jargal’s dazzling smile! Either way, I’ve missed my chance again. Sometimes I wish that Salonqa wasn’t so intelligent and curious about everything. Any other girl would doubtless have succumbed long ago to my ineffable charm. But on the other hand, how could I ever be interested in a girl other than Salonqa?

“He’s still got his armour on over his tunic and he’s missing a sandal, the poor guy.”

So it was the rider that she was interested in. I picture a sword at this ancient warrior’s side, then gaiters extending from his sandals to cover his calves. For a moment I imagine riding Altaïr in the snow in my sandals and an involuntary shudder runs through me. Compared to the soldiers from the past I really am a wimp...

“Come back up. Don’t touch anything, we’re sending in a team,”

somebody barks and the speleologists leave the site of the discovery. To my huge disappointment, the images from their cameras turn away from the rider and back along the rocky protrusions, lined with ropes, karabiners, quickdraws and bolts.

Heated discussions are breaking out in the lab. Some are talking about a major historical discovery, a Nobel Prize, others are saying they should be contacting the media. Then the lab manager asks for silence. In a mournful voice he announces,

“We have to pack everything up. The government has just appointed Hannibal Corp to take care of the rest of the operation.

Among the hubbub of disappointed comments, I make out a disillusioned voice.

“They’re going to send in the big guns and take all the credit. They’ll cut into the mountain

and take all of our discoveries back to the United States in their refrigerated planes. And we...”

Salonqa stares at me for a long time.

“When exactly are you leaving for Massachusetts? I’m just like to mention that one of the subsidiary companies of Hannibal Corp is THE global specialist in cryogenics and is only a couple of miles from MIT.”

I suddenly realise that I have absolutely no desire to go to the United States when Salonqa will be staying in Mongolia. I’m devastated at this prospect.

“I... The age of majority in the US is 21 – I’ll need my father to agree to it.”

“And?”

“I haven’t asked yet,” I respond pathetically. “But, Salonqa, I...”

“Shame on you!” says Salonqa indignantly, standing up in front of me, eyes flashing and hands on her hips like an angry goddess. “Hop to it! Pack up your things and go home at once. When you get the opportunity to study at the top level, nothing else matters!”

And with that, she slams the door in my face. I’m such an idiot!

I leave the halls of residence with a heavy heart. I should really try to use the remaining hours before dawn to get some sleep, but my brain is going a mile a minute and so I think I wouldn't be able to drift off. I wander the deserted streets, surrounded by identical concrete buildings built by the Soviets in the 1970s. Out of habit, my feet lead me to the university. I use my key card to enter through the library, a place of research or refuge for insomniac students. There's no one here. I head to the History department, reading the shelf markers until I find the ancient history section, then run my index finger, still covered in torn bandages, along the edges of the books. Will any of these old books hold the key to understanding what this ancient rider was doing in Mongolia among the peaks of the Altai mountains?

"Can't sleep, young Battushig?"

I let out a cry of surprise and turn towards the source of the voice. Behind a mountain of books piled on a table, I recognise a familiar bald head.

"Professor Temudjin!"

"Come sit with me and tell me what answers you seek. I have some tea in my thermos."

After a few sips of salty tea, I managed to get a few incomprehensible words out. My professor's friendly smile widens and he nods to encourage me to continue. The dam breaks. I tell him my fears, about going to America and leaving everything I know behind, about not being good enough, about confronting my father... When I finally finish, my professor looks around at the library shelves with an affectionate look on his face.

"It's interesting that you came to find your answers here among all these old books. But you know, 'the world is a book and those who don't travel only read one page'. It was Saint Augustine, a Berber Christian theologian and philosopher from the 5th century, who said that."

I nod; my professor knows my thirst for knowledge and how to get the best out of me. While pouring some more tea, he asks,

"What attracted you to the ancient history section? A sudden urge for wisdom?"

"Oh no, Professor. I'll explain," I continue, opening up my laptop to show him the photos of the cylinders.

And in an endless stream of words, I tell him everything that Salonqa and I have discovered. At the mention of her name, my professor's eyes twinkle, but he refrains from commenting and continues listening to me attentively. When I finish speaking, he remains silent for a long time. Then he mutters a name.

"Khubilai. He's one of our brightest former students and works for Hannibal Corp. He set

up the company's computer security system. I think I mentioned him before, quite often actually. Would you like me to put you in touch with him? It may help you to avoid any risky 'break-ins'. Hannibal Corp is a dangerously well-informed and powerful entity."

I accept with gratitude. Then my professor takes something wrapped in greasy paper from his old briefcase.

"Eat. You'll need your strength to get back to the steppe."

I try to refuse but to no avail; I know I'm fighting a losing battle. So I thank him, bow respectfully and leave the library. I walk back through the town, now slowly beginning to wake up, and head for the bus stop. It felt good to talk to my teacher. All that remains now is to confront my father!

But when I finally arrive at my family's camp, I want to scream in despair – there's no one here! They must have decided to change the location of the camp, and in the space of two or three hours they've managed to dismantle the yurts and pack all their gear. There are hoofprints and tracks from the herds heading south, but I don't know where they could be going. Sighing deeply, I decide to climb the face of the mountain still covered in snow to get a better view. Using my hands to prevent myself from being blinded by the reflection of the sun off the ice, I spot a large, dark group of people moving. The entire ail and their herds are moving as one. Very well, I guess I'll have to hurry so I can catch up with them...

It feels like I've been walking for centuries and I'm really starting to lose my strength. The poor excuse for a doughnut given to me by my professor has long since been eaten; I really hope they're not very far away. There is less and less snow on the ground, green shoots of grass beginning to poke through here and there, beckoning the spring with their imperious vegetal longings. The wind over the steppes carries the sound of bleating and human voices. I'm nearly there. Finally! And at the top of a hillock, I see a wonderful sight. An immaculate grassy valley with a river tributary running through it, flooded with sunlight. This is the new pasture location that the ail has chosen and the cattle, lambs and horses, who can't wait to taste the new grass, are enjoying it wholeheartedly. Their energy rejuvenating me, I soon make it back to the camp.

I recognise my father who, with Gambat and several other men from the ail, is already knocking in stakes for the sheep pens. The others are laying out the concave lattices in a circle, folding them out like accordions. Then they affix large poles, that have been strung together, to the central crown, like rods in an umbrella, raise the whole thing all up and place it on two central pillars. And last of all, this self-supporting rig is secured solidly in place by tying several sturdy knots in the yurt's leather cords. I have often said that Mongolian nomads are the sailors of the steppes!

I spot my mother spreading the felt roof on the ground and I approach her happily. Her eyes sparkle, a broad smile lighting up her face, but her hug will have to wait until the job is finished. I grab a pole, slide it into the felt and help my neighbours to lift and hoist the heavy fabric to the top of the frame. We settle it around the central crown then strap it down carefully. Then we roll the felt sides down over the circular latticework from one side to the other of the central door and strap these down as well. Inside the yurt, my grandmother and sisters are spreading carpets on the wooden floor, while they wait for the central oven, the beds and the chests to be put in their usual places.

With every neighbour helping each other, it only takes two or three hours to have the yurts of the entire ail ready and the ovens lit. The elders then make an offering of milk to Tengri, the Sky Father, to our ancestors and to the guardian spirits so that they will watch over the herds and the inhabitants of the yurts. I pounce on the sweet doughnuts offered to me by my sisters, who are all babbling, eager to tell me about their latest adventures, when there is a sudden loud explosion. The camp dogs begin to bay at the moon. A terrible storm suddenly breaks out and torrential rain starts to batter the steppe. For us, thunderstorms are as severe a disaster as wolves attacking our herds. Rivers of water already cover the floor of the yurt, flooding the carpet. The panicked screams of women and children spur me into action. I order my sisters to climb into their bed and not to move until the adults have returned. Then I rush out of the yurt to help my people.

The mothers gather their children and lead them inside the yurts. The sheep in their pen

bleat with terror, trampling over each other as the water level rises at breakneck speed. Why are they already in their pens when night is still so far away? Where are my brother, my father and the men of the ail???

Oh no! They must have left to pay homage to the ancient tree at the top of the neighbouring mountain, to tie ribbons of multi-coloured fabric to its branches and to pray to the spirits of our ancestors and the spirits of nature for a bountiful spring. By the time they get back, the storm will have drowned even the fish in the river! Someone has to get the sheep out of their pen! I whistle loudly and hear an instantly recognisable neighing in response: Altaïr, defying the raging elements, gallops towards me. I throw my arms around his neck and, using a technique I learnt as a young rider in the steppes, throw my legs up over his flank and get onto his back. I squeeze him with my legs and direct my stallion towards the animal pens. Altaïr's hooves splash waves of muddy water around us as he valiantly makes his way through the currents.

We make it to the pen. I wrench the ropes from the entrance stakes and the sheep race out in an indescribable panic, shoving us out of the way as they pass. Streaming out in a flow as dense as the sheets of rain falling on our heads, they head straight for the raging river tributary. They are completely mad! I squeeze Altaïr's flanks and, galloping furiously, we catch up with the sheep at the front of the herd. Altaïr rears before them, diverting their path. Great work, my wonderful Altaïr. We push them back, guiding them upstream to take refuge high up on the slopes of the mountain. Once the storm is over we will have to find them, hoping that the wolves haven't made us pay too heavy a price, but it is better to risk losing a few than losing them all. That's something my father taught us. Suddenly, I hear bleatings of distress behind me. The rain is so intense that it is blocking out the light of day. I move forward blindly, guided by sound alone, when the ground suddenly disappears from beneath Altaïr's hooves. He is wading through a torrent of mud that is leading us inexorably towards the river. There's something white splashing in the water in front of us – surely a lamb. I urge Altaïr to move towards it. I grab the lamb with my forearm and hoist it onto Altaïr's neck, holding it against my chest. My stallion fights with all his strength and manages to pull himself out of the muddy torrent and climbs to firmer ground. He snorts and returns instinctively to the camp.

The storm ends as suddenly as it began, pale light shining over the ground once more. I feel the adrenaline slowly leaving my body now that the worst is over. Dazed, I approach the yurts to check the extent of the damage. Like a typhoon shaking a yacht on the ocean, the sky's fury has claimed everything that was not tied down securely. Things are scattered everywhere: linen stretched out to dry, broken crockery, saddles, busted wooden furniture... A woman runs towards me screaming, others in her wake. She throws herself on me and tears the lamb, wriggling and wailing weakly, from my arms where I had been holding it tightly against my chest.

“Taitchou!” she repeats over and over again, sobbing with relief.

I realise that what I had thought to be a lamb is actually Taitchou, her youngest son. Having only just started to walk, he had managed to slip away from his mother's watchful

eye to explore the new camp and the torrents of rain and mud had carried him away. Thank goodness Altaïr was there to help me save him! Dark shapes are just starting to flicker beneath my eyelids when I feel arms grabbing me, pulling me from Altaïr's back and dragging me into a yurt...

When I awaken, a glorious sun is shining over the wet steppe. Slanting rays of sunlight penetrate the tondo, the wooden crown that serves both as a vent for smoke as well as the mainstay of the structure. Dazzled, I blink a few times before getting up and heading for the yurt's exit.

I start to open the door and notice that the bandages have been removed from my hands. I look at my black and blue fingertips stupidly. Then I compose myself and take a few steps across the spongy ground. It's almost dusk. The men of the ail must have rushed back from their pilgrimage and are helping with the communal work, such as gathering the scattered herds, drying the carpets, the hangings, the furniture and recovering everything they possibly can. The nomadic lifestyle is subject to all the uncertainties of the land they live in. Differences in temperature ranging between -40° and +40°, having to move with each new season and sometimes more often if new pastures must be found. Not to mention all of the unexpected acts of nature, such as this sudden storm. I admire the strength of my people, their unwavering solidarity in the face of hardship. There's not a single complaint; on the contrary, they begin singing guttural chants to get each other going.

My little sisters have seen me and run towards me, squawking like wild geese. They swarm over me, knocking me to the ground, covering me with kisses, their laughter ringing in my ears. Suddenly, a shadow looms over me against the last faint rays of sunlight, silencing my sisters' laughter. They scatter as quickly as they had arrived, and I, standing up sharply, find myself face to face with my father.

He stares at me for a long time, impassively. Then he slowly opens his arms to give me a hug which I accept with relief. Maintaining his silence, my father motions me to enter our yurt and sit down. I'm scared to death but do everything I can not to show it. My father removes a metal box from his pocket, opens it and hands it to me. Oh! Snuff? Is that a sign that he considers me a man? My hands trembling slightly, I take a pinch of snuff, place it on the back of my hand between my thumb and forefinger and sniff the pungent substance. I am gripped by a sudden sneezing fit while my father takes his tobacco with his usual serenity. I wonder if I'll ever get used to this male ritual. When I finally stop sneezing, I look at my father timidly and wait for him to speak.

"I've spoken with your mother."

A long silence follows, anxiety gnawing at my insides like a hungry rat. Then he continues, gravely,

"I am sorry that you haven't chosen the life of a nomadic herder, like your father and your ancestors before him. I even prayed to Tengri, hoping he would bring you to your senses. But I have decided to respect your choice."

My heart skips a beat. My father sighs gently and gets up to leave the yurt. I stand up immediately and bow before him, thanking him. Then he removes a rolled-up envelope from the pocket of his deel and slips it into my pocket.

“Be careful in America.”

He leaves the yurt quickly without saying another word. I don't think I've ever heard him say so many words at once. I unroll the envelope he gave me and open it. It contains the permission slip allowing me, a minor, to study at MIT. There's also a wad of crumpled tugriks in small denominations. Here we go again. My eyes sting and I feel tears welling up. This time, I let them flow.

On the way down to the bus which will take me to Ulan Bator, who should surprise me but Professor Temudjin accompanied by Salonqa! He has come to pick me up in his old rickety car and, before explaining anything, asks me if my trip was beneficial. I show him the crumpled envelope and he simply nods in satisfaction. Salonqa, on the other hand, is extremely talkative.

“Professor Keusséoglou told me where the engravings and the cylinders come from. They’re from Macedonia, and date from around 350 to 330BC. However the geometric symbols are still incomprehensible to him.”

“Professor, what did they know of mathematics and geometry by this period?”

“In 600BC, Pythagoras formalised a range of key concepts that are still used today, such as integers, square numbers, the properties of right-angled triangles, pi, the golden ratio, the pentagram, etc. and translated them into pure mathematical components. A number of esoteric societies, such as the Freemasons, still claim to represent Pythagorean discoveries and...”

My professor is extremely passionate; I could listen to him for hours. But I have to focus on the subject at hand and, rather mundanely, I cough loudly to interrupt him.

“So, the cylinders, they date from around the time that Pythagoras was formalising all of this?”

“Definitely. This knowledge spread to all the important royal courts of the time. The professors were called preceptors. They dedicated themselves to educating princes and members of the nobility in philosophy, the sciences, military strategy...”

We arrive at the university car park and my professor stops talking. As soon as we enter the library, Salonqa directs me to a table strewn with books, grabs my laptop and puts it down on the table in front of a chair.

“On your screen you will find pictures of the bone cylinder, both a flat and a 3D version. I’ve blurred out the letters that Mr Keusséoglou has identified as belonging to the Macedonian language, but which don’t seem to make any sense. However, there are still a jumble of bizarre symbols which I do not understand. Your turn.”

Whoa, the whole thing looks like a supernova. I rotate the image in every direction to see if I can make out a geometric pattern from the distribution of the symbols, just to create some order from the chaos, but nothing obvious comes to me. Although... all of these symbols are full of those right angles that Pythagoras loved so much. Sampling them, I count 24 different symbols, but all of simple geometric shapes. I separate a group of 18 symbols that all have lines of the same length. They are arranged edge to edge, at right angles, in pairs, in threes or in fours to form a square. Half of these 18 symbols have a dot

in the corner when there are 2 lines, on the central line when there are three, and at the centre of the square when there are four. Suddenly I start to laugh.

“Morpion solitaire!”

The professor looks at me, puzzled, so I explain my thinking.

“It reminds me of a game played when I was a kid.”

Using a few voice commands, I separate the nine dotted shapes from the others and arrange them to form a morpion grid of nine squares with dots in each square.

“If I may, there’s symmetry in the nine remaining symbols,” says my professor. “Look, an empty morpion grid,” he says, tapping on my keyboard.

I attach the two symmetrical shapes and feel a tingling down my spine.

“Salonqa, how many letters are there in the alphabet they were using in Macedonia?”

“24. 18 consonants and six vowels, the same as Ancient Greek. Here it is,” she adds, tapping on my keyboard to bring it up on the screen.

I create a grid that matches the 18 morpion squares with the 18 Greek consonants, then replace the geometric shapes on the bone cylinder with the consonants. Then I cycle through the triangles and diamonds that I assume to be the vowels in the various possible combinations.

Suddenly, Salonqa, who had crept up behind me, lets out a cry of astonishment.

“There! Zoom in on this sequence. I’ll send it to Mr Keusséoglou. I think I recognise a word on the metal cylinder...”

Ἀλογο του Αλεξάνδρου, ανίκητος στην πλάτη σας θα είναι αθάνατο δύναμη αστέρι.

Professor Keusséoglou has barely received the sequence when he sends the translation. Professor Temudjin is so shocked that he can only mumble,

“It’s incredible, it’s... Battushig, the secret message is about somebody arguably as famous as Genghis Khan is to us! Alexander the Great, one of the greatest conquerors of the world, and his famous horse Bucephalus!”

At this moment, a notification pops up in one corner of my computer screen telling me I have a new message. Instinctively I open it, almost jumping out of my skin when I see who sent it. It’s Khubilai, the former student from our university who now works at Hannibal Corp. Professor Temudjin had given him my e-mail address and my request after I had left to speak to my father. Out of loyalty to his old professor, Khubilai agreed to send me pictures of the objects taken from and around the body of the horseman found in the ice. In addition to the fragments of clothing and armour, there is a metal triangle engraved with symbols, some gold coins and two scrolls.

Khubilai’s message is brief. “The first document is a military ‘pass’ and the second is a bill of exchange. The two documents date back to 326BC and are signed by General Ptolemy,

Commander-in-Chief of Alexander the Great's army."

"I thought that Ptolemy was the first in a long dynasty of Egyptian pharaohs?" asks Salonqa.

"Indeed," replies Professor Temudjin. "It's the same General who later became king of Egypt, five years after the death of the Conqueror."

Professor Temudjin beckons us closer and shows us on a screen the map of Alexander the Great's conquests after leaving Macedonia in 334BC. He points to the city of Alexandria Bucephalous, somewhere in the modern-day Punjab region.

"This was where the final battle took place before the troops retreated in 326BC. Alexander's beloved horse, Bucephalus, disappeared and Alexander founded a city which he named in his honour."

Then he points to the Altai mountains and traces the journey back towards the Punjab.

"This is the route that the rider in the ice probably took."

I turn my attention to my laptop, returning to the translation of the bone cylinder's secret message.

"Horse of Alexander, invincible on thy back shalt bear, a star of immortal power"

That damn star again... I take the picture of the metal triangle with the broken end, duplicate it four times, rotate the five images and arrange them so they are connected at their bases. The image thus created is what I had guessed it would be: a five-pointed star... The star of immortal power, a seal of omnipotence, broken. A shiver runs down my spine. That means Hannibal has one fragment of the star, and...

I am seized by a fear that is most likely irrational but impossible to control. The 'what-ifs' are rattling around in my brain and multiplying, leading me to a terrifying conclusion:

If John Fitzgerald Hannibal, with the power of his intelligence network, his financial backing and his mastery of the most sophisticated technology,

gathers the pieces of the broken seal and puts them together,

and finds Bucephalus...

Then he will become as powerful and indestructible as one of the greatest conquerors – and dictators – in the world!

I have to stop him! But how are Salonqa, Professor Temudjin and I going to be able to fight Hannibal's thirst for power and immense resources by ourselves?

You, the members of the online Network, all those who are unknown in their field as well as all those who are famous in their field, representing every nationality, armed with all your knowledge, all of your subjects and with all of the support possible, I hope that you

will join with us, so that, together, we will find the fragments of the seal of omnipotence before Hannibal does. And that we can stop him from getting his hands on a power that is so dangerous!

*If you enjoyed this story, come to meet Altair and discover the other legendary horses
on www.howrse.com*