

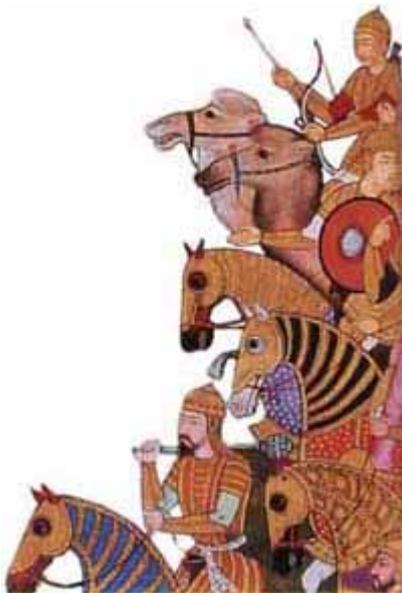
Douglas Adams - The Private Life of Genghis Khan

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In the ringing silence that followed the battle, very, very few, pitifully few cries could be heard from the bloody, mangled wreckage on the fields.

Ghostlike figures, stunned with horror, emerged from the woods, stumbled and then ran forward crying - women, searching for their husbands, brothers, fathers, lovers first amongst the dying and then amongst the dead. The flickering light by which they searched was that of their burning village, which had that afternoon officially become part of the Mongol Empire.



The Mongols.

From out of the wastes of central Asia they had swept, a savage force for which the world was utterly unprepared. They swept like a wildly wielded scythe, hacking, slashing, obliterating all that lay in their path, and calling it conquest.

And throughout the lands that feared them now or would come to fear them, no name inspired more terror than that of their leader, Genghis Khan. The greatest of the Asian warlords, he stood alone, revered as a God among warriors, marked out by the cold light of his grey green eyes, the savage furrow of his brow, and the fact that he could beat the shit out of any of them.

Later that night the moon rose, and by its light a small party of horsemen carrying torches rode quietly out from the Mongol encampment that sprawled over nearby hill. A casual observer would not have noticed anything remarkable about the man who rode at their centre, muffled in a heavy cloak, tense, hunched forward on his horse as if weighed down by a heavy burden, because a casual observer would have been dead.

The band rode a few miles through the moonlit woods, picking their way along the paths until they came at last to a small clearing, and here they reined their horses in and waited on their leader.

He moved his horse slowly forward and surveyed the small group of peasant huts that stood huddled together in the centre of the clearing trying very hard at short notice to look deserted.

Hardly any smoke at all was rising from the primitive chimney stacks. Virtually no light appeared at the windows, and not a sound could be heard from any of them save that of a small child saying "Shhhhh...."

For a moment a strange green fire seemed to flash from the eyes of the Mongol leader. A heavy deadly kind of a thing that you could hardly call a smile drew itself through his fine wispy beard. The strange kind of smiley thing would signify (briefly) to anyone who was stupid enough to look that there was nothing a Mongol warlord liked better after a day hacking people to bits than a big night out.

The door flew open. A Mongol warrior surged into the hut like a savage wind. Two children ran screaming to their mother who was cowering wide eyed in the corner of the tiny room. A dog yelped.



The warrior hurled his torch on to the still glowing fire, and then threw the dog on to it. That would teach it to be a dog. The last surviving man of the family, a grey and aged grandfather stepped bravely forward, eyes flashing. With a flash of his sword the Mongol whipped off the old man's head which trundled across the floor and fetched up leaning rakishly against a table leg. The old man's body stood tensely for a moment, not knowing what to think. As it began slowly, majestically to topple forward, Khan strode in and pushed it brusquely aside. He surveyed the happy domestic scene and bestowed a grim kind of smile on it. Then he walked over to a large chair and sat in it, testing it first for comfort. When he was satisfied with it he heaved heavy sigh and sat back in front of the fire on which the dog was now blazing merrily.

The warrior grabbed at the terrified woman, pushed her children roughly aside and brought her, trembling in front of the mighty Khan.

She was young and pretty, with long bedraggled black hair. Her bosom heaved and her face was stark with fright.

Khan regarded her with a slow contemptuous look.

"Does she know," he said at length in a low, dead voice, "who I am?"

"You... you are the mighty Khan!" cried the woman.

Khan's eyes fixed themselves on hers.

"Does she know," he hissed, "what I want of her?"

"I... I'll do anything for you, O Khan," stammered the woman, "but spare my children!"

Khan said quietly, "Then begin." His eyes dropped and he gazed distantly into the fire.

Nervously, shaking with fear the woman stepped forward and laid a tentative pale hand on Khan's arm.

The soldier smacked her hand away.

"Not that!" he barked.

The woman started back, aflutter. She realised she would have to do better. Still shaking, she knelt down on the floor and started gently to push apart the Khan's knees.

"Stop that!" roared the soldier and shoved her violently backwards. Bewilderment began to mix with the terror in her eyes as she cowered on the floor.

"Come on " snapped the soldier, "ask him what kind of day he's had."

"What...?" she wailed, "I don't... I don't understand what..."

The soldier seized her, span her into a half nelson, and jabbed the point of his sword against her throat.

"I said ask him," he hissed, "what kind of day he's had!"

The woman gasped with pain and incomprehension. The sword jabbed again. "Say it!"

"Er, what sort ...of... er, day..." she said in a hesitant, strangled squeak, "have you...had?"

"Dear!" hissed the soldier, "say dear!"

Her eyes bulged in horror at the sword.

"What sort of day have sort of day have you, had..., dear?" she asked querulously.

Khan looked up briefly, wearily.

"Oh, same as usual," he said, "violent."

He gazed back at the fire again.

"Right," said the soldier to the woman, "go on."

She relaxed very slightly. She seemed to have passed some kind of test. Perhaps it would be

straightforward from now on and she could at least get it over with. She moved nervously forward and started to caress the Khan again.

The soldier hurled her savagely across the room, kicked her and yanked her screaming to her feet again.

"I said stop that!," he bellowed. He pulled her face close to his and breathed a lungful of cheap wine and week old rancid goat fat fumes at her, which failed to cheer her up because it reminded her sharply of her late lamented husband who used to do the same thing to her every night. She sobbed.

"Be nice to him!" the Mongol snarled and spat one of his unwanted teeth at her, "ask him how his work's going!"

She gawped at him. The nightmare was continuing. A stinging blow landed on her cheek.

"Just say to him," the soldier snarled again, "'How's the work going, dear?'" He shoved her forward.

"How...how's the work going... dear?" she yelped miserably.

The soldier shook her. "Put some affection into it!" he roared.

She sobbed again. "How...how's the work going... dear?" she yelped miserably again, but this time with a kind of pathetic pout at the end.

The mighty Khan sighed.

"Oh, not too bad I suppose," he said in a world weary tone. "We swept through Manchuria a bit and spilt quite a lot of blood there. That was in the morning, then this afternoon was mainly pillaging, though there was a bit of bloodshed around half four. What sort of day have you had?"

So saying, he pulled a couple of scroll maps from out of his furs and started to study them abstractedly by the light of the smouldering dog.

The Mongol warrior pulled a glowing poker out of the fire and advanced menacingly on the woman.

"Tell him!" Go on! "

She leapt back with a shriek.

"Tell him!"

"Er, my husband and father were killed!" she said.

"Oh yes, dear?" said Khan absently, not looking up from his maps.

"Dog was burnt!"

"Oh, er, really?"

"Well, er, that's about it, really... er.."

The soldier advanced on her with the poker again.

"Oh, and I was tortured a bit!" shrieked the woman.

Khan looked up at her. "What?" he said, vaguely, "sorry dear, I was just reading this..."

"Right," said the soldier, "nag him!"

"What?"

"Just say, 'Look Genghis, put that thing away while I'm talking to you. Here I am, spend all day slaving over a hot...'"

"He'll kill me!"

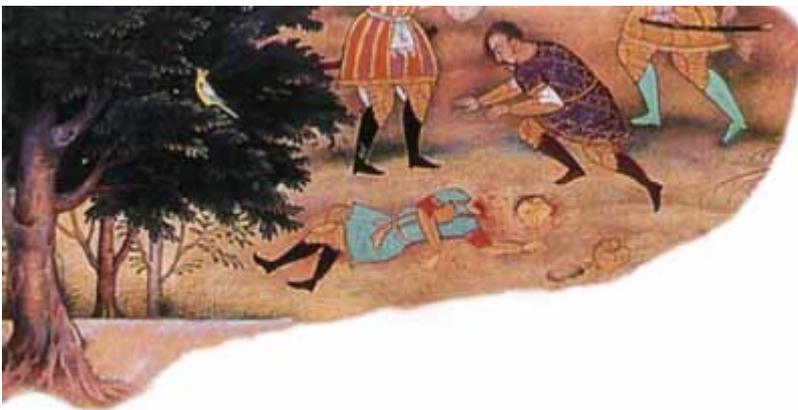
"Bleeding kill you if you don't."

"I can't stand it!" cried the woman and collapsed on the floor. She flung herself on the great Khan's feet. "Don't torment me," she wailed, "if you mean to rape me, then rape me, but don't..."

The great Khan surged to his feet and glowered down at her. "No," he muttered savagely, "you'd only laugh - you're just like all the others."

He stormed out of the hut and rode off into the night in such a rage that almost forgot to burn down the village before he left.

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After another particularly vicious day the last of the horsemen disappeared into the smoke and the thudding of their hooves receded into the grey distance.

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Far away behind the screen of smoke thousands of horsemen arrived at their sprawling camp, and with a huge amount of clatter, shouting and comparing of backhand slashes they dismounted and instantly started in on the cheap wine and rancid goat fat.

In front of his splendidly bedraped Imperial tent a bloodstained and battle weary Khan dismounted.

"Which battle was that?" he asked his son, Ogdai, who had ridden with him. Ogdai was a young and ambitious general, keenly interested in viciousness of all kinds. He was hoping to improve on his own Known World record for the highest number of peasants impaled on a single sword thrust and would be getting in some practice that night.

He strode up to his father.

"It was the Battle of Sammarkand, oh Khan!" he proclaimed, and rattled his sword in a tremendously impressive way.



Khan folded his arms and leant on his horse, looking over it across the dreadful mess they'd made of the valley beneath them.

"Oh, I can't tell the difference anymore," he said with a sigh, "did we win?"

"Oh yes! Yes! Yes!" exclaimed Ogdai with fierce pride, "it was a mighty victory indeed!

"Indeed it was!" he added and waggled his sword again. He drew it excitedly and made a few practice thrusts. Yes, he thought to himself, tonight he was going to go for the six.

Khan screwed his face up at the gathering dusk.

"Oh dear," he said, "after twenty years of these two hour battles I get the feeling that there must be more to life, you know." He turned, lifted up the front of his torn and bloodied gold embroidered tunic and stared down at his own hairy tummy. "Here, feel this," he said, "do you think I'm putting it on a bit?"

Ogdai gazed at the great Khan's tummy with a mixture of awe and impatience.

"Er no," he said "No, not at all." With a flick of his fingers Ogdai summoned a servant to bring the maps to him, ran him through, and as he fell caught from his nerveless but not entirely surprised fingers the plans of the grand campaign.

"Now, O Khan," he said, spreading the map over the back of another servant who stood specially hunched over for the purpose, "we must push forward to Persia, and then we shall be poised to take over the whole world!"



"No look, feel that," said Khan, pinching a fold of skin between his fingers, "do you think..."

"Khan!" interrupted Ogdai urgently, "we are on the point of conquering the world!" He stabbed at the map with a knife, catching the servant beneath a nasty nick on his left lung.

"When?" said Khan with a frown.

Ogdai threw up his arms in exasperation. "Tomorrow!" he said, "we start tomorrow!"

"Ah, well, tomorrow's a bit difficult, you see," said Khan. He puffed out his cheeks and thought for a moment. "The thing is that next week I've got this lecture on carnage techniques in Bokhara, and I thought I'd use tomorrow to prepare it."

Ogdai stared at him in astonishment as the map-bearing servant slowly collapsed on his foot.

"Well, can't you put that off?" he exclaimed.

"Well you see, they've paid me quite a lot of money for it already, so I'm a bit committed."

"Well, Wednesday?"

Khan pulled a scroll from out of his tunic and looked through it, shaking his head slowly. "Not sure about Wednesday..."

"Thursday?"

"No, Thursday I am certain about. We've got Ogdai and his wife coming round to dinner, and I'd kind of promised..."

"But I am Ogdai!"

"Well, there you are then. You wouldn't be able to make it either."

Ogdai's silence was only disturbed by the sound of thousands of hairy Mongols shouting and fighting and getting pissed.

"Look," he said quietly, "will you be ready to conquer the world... on Friday?"

Khan sighed. "Well the secretary comes in on Friday mornings."

"Does she."

"All those letters to answer. You'd be astonished at the demands people try to make on my time you know." He slouched moodily against his horse. "Would I sign this, would I appear there. Would I please do a sponsored massacre for charity. So that usually takes till at least three, then I had hoped to get away early for a long weekend. Now Monday, Monday..."

He consulted his scroll again.

"Monday's out, I'm afraid. Rest and recuperation, that's one thing I do insist upon. Now how about Tuesday?"

The strange keening noise that could be heard in the distance at this moment sounded like the normal everyday wailing of women and children over their slaughtered menfolk and Khan paid it no mind. A light bobbed on the horizon.

"Tuesday - look, I'm free in the morning - no, hold on a moment, I'd sort of made a date for meeting this awfully interesting chap who knows absolutely everything about understanding things, which is something I'm awfully bad at. Now that's a pity because that was my only free day next week. Now, next Tuesday we could usefully think about - or is that the day I..."

The keening sound continued, in fact it grew, but it was so lightly borne upon the evening breeze that it still did not intrude itself on Khan's senses. The approaching light was so pale as to be indistinguishable from that of the moon which was bright that night.

"- so that's more or less the whole of March out," said Khan, "I'm afraid."

"April?" asked Ogdai, wearily. He idly whipped out a passing peasant's liver, but the joy had gone out of it. He flipped the thing listlessly off into the dark. A dog which had grown very fat over the years by the simple expedient of staying close to Ogdai at all times leapt on it. These were not pleasant times.

"Well no, April's out," said Khan - I'm going to Africa in April, that's one thing I had promised myself.

The light approaching them through the night sky had now at last attracted the attention of one or two other leading Mongols in the vicinity, who, wonderingly, stopped hitting each other and stabbing things and drew near.

"Look," said Ogdai, himself still unaware of what things were coming to pass, "can we please agree that we will conquer the world in May then?"

The mighty Khan sucked doubtfully on his teeth. "Well, I don't like to commit myself that far in advance. One feels so tied down if one's life is completely mapped out beforehand. I should be doing more reading, for heaven's sake, when am I going to find the time for that? Anyway -" he sighed and scratched at his scroll, "'May - possible conquest of the world'. Now I've only pencilled that in, so don't regard it as absolutely definite - but keep on at me about it and we'll see how it goes. Hello, what's that?"

Slowly, with the grace of a beautiful woman stepping into a bath, a long slim silver craft lowered itself gently to the ground. Soft light streamed from it. From its opening doorway stepped a tall elegant creature with a curiously fine grey green complexion. It walked slowly towards them.

In its path lay the dark figure of a peasant who had been crying quietly to himself since he had watched his liver being eaten by Ogdai's dog and had known that no way was he going to get it back, and wondered how on Earth his poor wife was going to cope now. He chose this moment finally to pass on to better things.

The tall alien stepped over him with distaste and, though you would have had to read his face very closely to realise this, a little envy. He nodded briefly to each of the gathered Mongol leaders in turn, and pulled a small clipboard out from under his heavy metallic robe.

"Good evening," it said in a small weaselly voice, "my name is Wowbagger, also called the Infinitely Prolonged, I shall not trouble you with the reasons why. Greetings."

He turned and addressed the completely pop-eyed mighty Khan.

"You are Genghis Khan? Genghis Temüjin Khan, son of Yesügei?"

The diary scrolls slipped from Khan's hands to the ground. The pale luminescence from Wowbagger's ship suffused his wondering ravaged, careworn yellow features. As in a dream the mighty Emperor stepped forward in acknowledgment.

"Can I just check the spelling?" said the alien, showing him the clipboard, "I would hate to get it wrong at this stage and then have to start all over again, I really would."

Khan nodded faintly.

"Right number of aitches, then?" said the alien.

Again, the transfigured Emperor slightly inclined his face, while his eyes still boggled.

"Good," said Wowbagger, and made a little tick on his clipboard. He looked up. "Genghis Khan," he said, "you are a wanker; you are a tosspot; you are a very tiny piece of turd. Thank you." With that he retreated into his ship and flew off.

The was a nasty kind of silence.

Later that year Genghis Khan stormed into Europe in such a rage that he almost forgot to burn down Asia before he left.