Seventeen years old. Green as grass. I already considered myself a man, but one day I was made to pay dearly for that delusion.

One July day, I set out with Chinghis Khan and his wife for a county fair. Chinghis Khan was planning to take part in the horse races. We started out early so as to cover the greater part of the distance before the midday heat.

Chinghis Khan was a nickname I had given to Tsamba, but I never mentioned it to anybody. Nobody rode a horse as fast as he. Horses were his passion. Some said that he was lucky, that good fortune attended him. Most of his fellow countrymen held red-haired Tsamba to be a boastful and vindictive person. As to me, I always thought he very much resembled Chinghis Khan.

Chinghis Khan had several excellent racers. I had helped him ready them for the races that summer. I didn't know much about training race horses in those days, so my help was naturally rather minimal. As soon as the heat subsided toward evening, I would lead his famous racers out to graze. They had unusual names, like Chestnut Wind and Lightning-Fast Bay. In the morning I'd walk them about and during the day take them to water.

Red-haired Tsamba didn't look more than thirty. He had a jutting cleft chin, was shortish and slightly bowlegged. But his step was firm and even heavy. He always kept his fists clenched as if ready to hit somebody. I never saw a tender look in his yellow eyes. His gaze alone kept the neighborhood boys trembling,
and they dared not budge in his presence.

Tsamba was rich. He had a lot of cattle, a lot of fine horses and was never short of money. He went in for horse dealing.

In the spring, as soon as the ground began to turn green, Tsamba would put a rich silver-decorated saddle on his horse, don a new deel and, taking along several racers, would be gone for several months. People said he managed to visit Bayanulaan on the Kerulen and Galshar and Darigang. He would return in the middle of summer, leading several horses with matching coats. There would be amblers among them and coursers and race horses.

As I already said, we left at the break of dawn and rode southward. The road passed through very rugged country. Tsamba ordered us to ride faster so as to cross the Jirem ridge before the sun got too hot.

The sun kept rising. "I'll drop by the ail for a drink, and you ride on," Chinghis Khan remarked and turned off the road.

A feeling of inexpressible exultation swept over me. I was seventeen, and my awakening manhood was probably making itself felt.

Red-headed Tsamba's wife's name was Kulan. Tsamba had brought her in from far away. She was as beautiful as the moon and as inconstant as the wind. I had lived two years at my brother's in the aimag and returned home only that spring. It was then that I discovered Tsamba had a new wife, and an attractive one to boot. The neighbors said he beat her a lot. Some even had heard her crying in the mornings, but I myself had never seen Tsamba beat his wife nor had I heard her cry.

Chinghis Khan soon disappeared behind a turn in the road. I continued riding alongside Kulan, leading four other horses.

I kept casting sidelong glances at Kulan, an unusual joy surging within me. I felt I could ride on with this beauty to the ends of the world. The sun was shining brightly in the
cloudless sky, and a fresh breeze was blowing in our faces. The mountains to the left of us were still cloaked in darkness and seemed quite black, those to the right were golden, gilded by the rays of the rising sun. Tall dewy grass glistened greenly along the edge of the road. Every now and then a frightened lark would shoot up into the air.

Kulan was riding her mount very gracefully, the toes of her yellow booties slightly bent and resting upon the stirrups. At times she would lift the edge of her blue deel, and I could catch a glimpse of her shapely silk-stockinged legs. A wide yellow silk sash was wound tightly around her narrow waist. She sat very straight in her saddle, and the sinewy ambler with a star on his forehead was trotting so smoothly that if one were to place a bowl of water on his croup not a drop would be spilled. The thin leather strap along his back curved ever so slightly. Horse and rider were amazingly suited to one another.

I was wearing an old deel of coarse cotton, so worn that the edges had become frayed. There were two patches on the knees of my coarse army breeches, and on my head was an old cap with a broken peak. I was riding the most rundown hack of Chinghis' herd, a skinny three year-old skewbald colt.

Kulan suddenly broke into a song, her gaze fixed on the mountains, but she soon stopped singing and slowed down her mount.

"You sing something, Sampil," she said, casting a roguish look at me.

I blushed crimson and was taken aback for a moment. It is commonly believed that someone who grew up as an orphan has a good voice. Well, my voice was really not too bad. For want of something better to do while grazing herds in the steppe, I used to sing for days on end, listening to the echo reverberating in the mountains. So now, after licking my lips like a calf that has licked its fill, I began to sing timidly. It seemed to me Kulan
was even a little surprised by my voice. She halted her mount, looked at me with her beautiful eyes and smiled. Her smile encouraged me, and I began singing a song about a mother who was longing for her only daughter who had been married away from home. I sang, putting all my skill and all my heart into the song. I saw tears gathering in Kulan's eyes. She took out a handkerchief and wiped them away. I broke off my song in embarrassment. How could I have known that the song would move her so?

"How nice you sing, Sampil," Kulan said in a barely audible whisper.

It seemed to me I had discerned a tremble in her voice and became even more perturbed.

We reached the top of a mountain. The sun was shining brightly.

Little by little we got into a conversation. I learnt that Kulan was also an orphan, just like me.

We dismounted at an oboo. It was a hot day, and a light breeze brought the aroma of pine needles and leaves. The Onon, winding below us through a thick grove, was glittering silvery. Kulan removed a red silk kerchief from her head and passed her white plump little hand several times across her brow. She looked at me closely, the ghost of a smile crossing her lips. I didn't know what she was thinking about at that moment, but it seemed to me she was thinking about me and that it was something very nice. A feeling of strange excitement gripped me.

If only Chinghis Khan were detained, lashed through my mind.

"What are you looking at the road for, Sampil?" Kulan suddenly asked.

"Chinghis..." I suddenly blurted out, again casting an involuntary glance down the road.

"What?" she asked in surprise.

I was stumped. "Yes, Chinghis... that is, no, I meant to say..." and, babbling incoherently, began to laugh.
"What Chinghis are you talking about?" she asked with growing surprise.

"No, I mean... Uncle Tsamba will soon be back."

"But what has Chinghis Khan got to do with him?" Kulan continued probing me.

"Uncle Tsamba looks very much like Chinghis Khan," I finally admitted.

"What are you talking about!" she burst out laughing, and then added, "He's probably blind drunk by now and green in the face. With luck he might get to the suman only by night." She heaved a deep sigh and lay down in the grass. A pink knee flashed between the flaps of her deel, and she hastily covered it with the hem. She picked a blade of grass, slipped it between her lips and closed her eyes.

It seemed to me she was thinking about something. Suddenly she laughed and extended her hands toward me: "Help me up!"

I took her hands and helped her rise. How soft and warm they were!

She leaped into her saddle. "Let's gallop down to the river. It's nice there on the bank. Don't worry, Tsamba won't be back soon. Come on!" And bringing her whip down upon the mount she went galloping downhill.

I quickly climbed my hack and went after her.

"Sing, Sampil!"

With the wind filling my old deel behind my back like a sail and the flaps spreading like wings, I burst into an old folk song about a brave gray hawk.

We reached the river bank, our horses breathing heavily. Kulan headed toward an old ford and pulled up in a thicket of willows, bird cherries and hawthorns.

We tethered our horses to two aspens overlooking the grove,
sat down and began conversing in low voices.

I didn't fully realize what was happening to me.

"You know, Kulan, there isn't another woman around here as beautiful as you."

"Not only my face is beautiful."

"What else?"

"Guess."

"How happy you are!"

"No I'm not happy at all. I'm in the power of an evil man. I simply try to hide my grief from people's eyes, and so they think I'm happy."
"But you shouldn't live like that, Kulan. You're meant for a better life. Leave that Tsamba. He can't keep you by force. If you go away, he won't be able to do anything."

"Oh, Sampil! If only I had a friend like you. But you're so timid. Come, kiss me."

A little gray bird perching on a bush stretched its little neck and looked in our direction and then, as if in surprise, began blinking its tiny black bead-like eyes.

"When you'll leave in the fall for the aimag, I'll leave with you," Kulan said pensively, putting her arms under her head. "I could probably find work there. I know how to sow. And if worst came to worst I could get a job as a charwoman somewhere, don't you think so, Sampi?"

"Of course, you could. And I'll learn to drive a tractor or a truck. Look, Kulan, what a nice little bird..."

By the time we rode up to the new ford the sun had already begun sinking toward the horizon. It was so quiet all around us. We were sure Chinghis was still quenching his thirst in Tsagaantokho. We were so happy! Kulan was riding, leaning upon my shoulder and smiling peacefully. I was humming a song to her about the brave, strong gray hawk, and the setting sun was smiling on us from behind a mountain.

Suddenly we saw clouds of dust down the road. A horseman was galloping towards us. Kulan halted her mount.

"That's Tsamba," she said in a low voice, pointing her whip in the rider's direction.

"How does he come to be here?" I mumbled bewildered.

The ground seemed to be slipping from under my feet. My heart began to beat as if it were about to burst.

"That's him, that's him, Tsamba! While we were sitting in the grove he had already been to the suman."

"What should we do?"

"I don't know... We'll say we stopped at the river to feed
the horses."
"So long?"

We hadn't yet decided on anything when Chinghis Khan, very grim-looking, was already quite near. He rode up close to us, looking angrily at me and Kulan with those cold yellow eyes of his. The collar of his deel was wide open and his eyes kept darting back and forth.

"Are you coming from the suman?" Kulan asked.

She wanted her voice to sound calm, but an involuntary tremble gave her away. Tsamba grit his teeth, his lips twisted.

"You are asking whether I have come from the suman? Yes, I was there already while you were playing around with this pup in the grove..."

"You're crazy!"

"A...a!" Tsamba cried, and before I could say knife, he grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and flung me from the saddle. Then he struck my horse with his whip so hard that the beast galloped off.

"I won't ride with you," Kulan shouted. "You hear me, I'm dismounting immediately!"

"Just try!" Tsamba retorted and, heading toward me, shouted: "I'll skin this snotnose!"

Grabbing his arms, Kulan begged: "Leave him alone, Tsamba, let him go!"

I stood rooted to the ground in complete confusion, not daring to move. Tsamba seized the reins of Kulan's mount and galloped off together with her. Clouds of yellow dust were rising in their wake, and poor Kulan's sobs were fading in the distance.

When I finally came to, I realized I was stranded without a horse and would have to walk all the way home.

"I'll get even with you!" I shouted, shaking my fist in Tsamba's direction. "You'll see, I'll get even with you somehow! And Kulan will throw you overboard! So help me God, she will, you'll see, you dirty dog!" I kept shouting, wiping my nose on my sleeve and sobbing.