

Chapter 1

Death Among the Doves

In a small dusty fortress in Central Asia in the summer of 1494, the baked-mud battlements, grey as elephant's hide in daytime, were pinkening before Babur's eyes with the sunset. Far beneath, the Jaxartes river gleamed a dull red as it flowed westward across the darkening plains. Babur shifted his weight on the stone step and returned his attention to his father, the king, who was pacing the fortress walls, hands clasped against the turquoise fastenings of his robes. His face was working excitedly as he launched into the story his twelve-year-old son had heard so many times before. But it was worth the retelling, Babur reflected. He listened carefully, alert for the new embellishments that always crept in. His lips moved with his father's when the king reached the climax – the one part that never changed, each of its grandiose phrases sacrosanct.

‘And so it happened that our ancestor the great Timur – Timur the Warrior, whose name meant “Iron” and whose horses sweated blood as he galloped through the world – won a vast empire. Though he was so cruelly injured in his youth that one leg was longer than the other and he walked with a limp, he conquered from Delhi to the Mediterranean, from wealthy Persia to the wildernesses along the Volga. But was that enough for Timur? Of course not! Even when many years were upon him, he was still strong and robust in body, hard like a rock, his ambition boundless.

His final enterprise was ninety years ago against China. He rode out with the thunder of two hundred thousand horsemen in his ears and victory would have been his, had Allah not summoned him to rest with him in Paradise. But how did Timur, this greatest of warriors – greater even than your other ancestor Genghis Khan – do all this? I see the question in your eyes, my son, and you are right to ask it.’

The king patted Babur’s head approvingly, seeing that he held his complete attention. Then he resumed, voice rising and falling with poetic fervour.

‘Timur was clever and brave but, above all, he was a great leader of men. My grandfather told me that his eyes were like candles without brilliance. Once men looked into those slits of muted light they could not turn away. And as Timur gazed into their souls he spoke of glory that would echo through the centuries and stir the lifeless dust that would be all that was left of their bones on earth. He spoke of gleaming gold and shimmering gems. He spoke of fine-boned women whose black hair hung like curtains of silk such as they had seen in the slave markets of his capital of Samarkand. Above all he spoke of their birthright, their right to be the possessors of the earth. And as Timur’s deep voice flowed over and around them, visions filled their minds of what was theirs for the taking until they would have followed him through the burning gates of hell.

‘Not that Timur was a barbarian, my son.’ The king shook his head vigorously so that the fringe he liked to leave hanging from his maroon silk turban swung from side to side. ‘No. He was a cultured man. His great city of Samarkand was a place of grace and beauty, of scholarship and learning. But Timur knew that a conqueror must let nothing – no one – stand in his way. Ruthlessness ruled his soul until the job was done and the more who knew it the better.’ He closed his eyes, picturing the glory days of his magnificent ancestor. He had worked himself into such a lather of pride and excitement that beads of sweat were bursting out on his forehead. He took a yellow silk scarf and mopped it.

Exhilarated as usual by the images his father had conjured, Babur smiled up at him to show he shared the same joyous pride. But

even as he watched, his father's face changed. The fervent light in his dark eyes faded and his expression grew despondent, even brooding. Babur's smile faltered. His father's story usually finished with this paean to Timur, but today the king continued, his tone bleak, the vibrancy gone.

'But I – descendant of the great Timur though I am – what have I? Just Ferghana, a kingdom not two hundred miles long or one hundred wide. Look at it – a place of sheep and goats grazing in valleys ringed on three sides by mountains.' He flung out an arm towards the soaring, cloud-circled peaks of Mount Beshtor. 'Meanwhile three hundred miles to the west my brother rules golden Samarkand, while south across the Hindu Kush my cousin holds wealthy Kabul. I am their poor relation to be snubbed and despised. Yet my blood – your blood – is as good as theirs.'

'Father—'

'Even so, all we princes of the house of Timur,' the king interrupted, voice trembling with passion, 'what are any of us, compared with him? We squabble like petty chieftains as we struggle each to hold on to our own little scrap of his empire. I am as guilty as any of the others.' He sounded really angry now. 'If Timur came back today he would spit in our faces for the fools we are. We are so proud to call ourselves Mirza, "Offspring of the Amir", so eager to call him ancestor, but would he be so ready to acknowledge us? Wouldn't we have to fall on our knees and beg his forgiveness for dissipating our inheritance and forgetting our greatness?'

The king's strong hands gripped Babur's shoulders so hard it hurt. 'You are old enough now to understand. That is why I am telling you this. We owe Timur a debt. He was a great man, my son. His blood is your blood. Never forget it. Be like him, if you can. Live up to your destiny and let it be greater than mine.'

'I will try, Father . . . I promise.'

For a moment, the king's eyes searched Babur's face. Then, seemingly satisfied, he grunted and turned away. Babur sat very still. His father's unexpected passion had shaken him. As he digested what he had said, he saw that the sun was almost down. Like so many other evenings, he watched the jagged landscape soften in

the dying light. The cries of boys herding their sheep and goats back to their villages came out of the gathering gloom. So did a gentle, insistent cooing. His father's favourite flock of white doves were fluttering home to their cote.

Babur heard a gentle sigh escape his father's lips, as if he acknowledged that life still held pleasures as well as disappointments. He watched the king take a swig of cooling water from the leather bottle dangling at his side and, his face relaxing once more into its usual good humour, turn and hurry along the battlements towards the conical dovecote high on top of the wall and partly overhanging the dry ravine below. His gold-embroidered red velvet slippers slapped against the baked-mud floor and his arms were already outstretched, ready to take his favourite doves in his hands and caress their plump throats with the tenderness of a lover. Babur couldn't see the attraction. Stupid little birds. The best place for them was plucked and poached in a sauce of pomegranates and crushed walnuts.

Babur's mind returned to Timur and his marauding soldiers. What would it be like to feel that the whole world was yours? To take a city and have its king writhe in the dust at your feet? His father was right. How different it would be from ruling just this little kingdom of Ferghana. The petty politics of his father's court bored him. The chief vizier, Qambar-Ali, stank like an old mule in his sweaty robes. With his long yellowing teeth he even looked like one. And he was always up to something, whispering in his father's ear, bloodshot eyes swivelling to see who was watching. Timur would have sliced off the ugly fool's head without a moment's reflection. Perhaps, Babur reflected, he would do it himself when he eventually became king.

Soon it would be time to pray and then to go to the women's quarters to eat. He jumped down from the step. At that moment he heard a tremendous crack, the battlements shuddered beneath his feet and a few seconds later there came a dull crash. He put out a hand to steady himself and realised he could see nothing. What was happening? Was it one of the earth tremors that sometimes shook the castle? No, the noise was somehow different. As he

gasped in shock his mouth drew in choking dust and his eyes streamed involuntary tears as they attempted to clear themselves. Instinctively Babur put up his hands to cover his face and head. As he did so, he heard swift-running feet, then felt strong arms grip him and haul him backwards. 'Majesty, you are safe.'

He recognised the deep voice. It belonged to Wazir Khan, the commander of his father's bodyguard. 'What do you mean . . . ?' It was hard to talk; his mouth was dry and gritty, and his tongue felt suddenly too large for it. His words sounded thick, incomprehensible, and he tried again. 'What's happened . . . ?' he managed. 'It wasn't an earthquake, was it?'

Even as he asked the question Babur forced his watering eyes to open and saw the answer for himself. A large chunk of the battlements where the dovecote had been had gone, as if a giant hand had reached out to break the rim off a pie crust. Dried and fissured by the intense summer heat it had suddenly given way. The doves were fluttering in the air like snowflakes.

Babur wrenched himself from the tall soldier's protective arms and rushed forward. His stomach seemed to fall from his chest as he realised he could not see his father. What had happened to him?

'Majesty, please come back.'

A cold sweat broke on his brow as Babur worked his way along what remained of the ruined battlements and peered down into the ravine. Through the slowly settling dust he could just make out the remains of the wall and the dovecote, pulverised on the rocks. Of his father there seemed no sign. Then Babur saw his maroon turban suspended at a jaunty angle from the branch of a bush sprouting from a fissure in the rock. He must have fallen with the dovecote. He must be buried, injured, perhaps even dead, Babur thought, with a shudder.

As he looked down, soldiers with flaming torches were running from the gate at the base of the fortress and scrambling down the rocks into the ravine.

'Hurry, you fools, hurry!' yelled Wazir Khan, who had come up beside Babur and again taken a protective hold of him. They watched in silence as, by the light of their flaring orange torches in the

gathering dusk, the soldiers clawed through the rubble. One found a dead dove and tossed the limp little body impatiently aside. A kite swooped low and flew off with it.

‘Father . . .’ Babur could not stop the shivering that had seized his body. Down in the ravine as the men cleared the chunks of mud and stone he glimpsed what looked like a fragment of cloth. His father’s robe. A little while ago it had been pale blue. Now it was stained purple with blood. A few moments more, and the soldiers pulled out his father’s body. To Babur it seemed as lifeless and broken as the dove’s. The soldiers looked up at their commander high above them for a sign telling them what to do.

Wazir Khan gestured to them to carry the body into the fortress. Then he pulled Babur further back from the edge and gently turned him from the sight of the destruction below. His face was grim but also thoughtful as, for a moment, he looked down at Babur. Then he knelt and touched his forehead to the ground. ‘All hail to Babur Mirza, the new King of Ferghana. May your father’s soul fly like a bird to the gates of Paradise.’

Babur stared at him, trying to take in what he had just said. His father – so full of life just moments before – was dead. He would never hear his voice again or feel his warm hand on his head or be embraced in his great bear-hug. He would never again accompany him when he went hunting in the valleys of Ferghana, or sit close by him beside the campfire at night, listening as his men’s singing mingled with the rising wind. He began to cry, silently at first, then aloud, convulsed by great sobs welling up from the pit of his stomach.

As he wept, doubt and uncertainty, as well as grief, engulfed him. He was king now . . . Would he live up to his father’s hopes and his glorious ancestry? For some reason a leaner, older face with slanting cheekbones and cold, determined eyes ‘like candles without brilliance’ replaced his father’s image in his mind. As it did so, he seemed to hear his father’s much-repeated mantra: ‘Timur’s blood is my blood.’ His own lips began to repeat it, softly at first but then with more conviction. He would make both Timur and his father proud. Pulling himself to his full height and wiping his tear-stained,

dirty face with his sleeve, he turned. 'I must be the one to tell my mother what has happened.'



Exciting though he found Farida, his beautiful young wife, Qambar-Ali's lovemaking had been more perfunctory than usual. The vizier was preoccupied. The king's sudden and extraordinary death had left much for him to think about and little time if he wished to act. A twelve-year-old boy as king? Possibly . . . but, then again, possibly not. Splashing water hurriedly over his groin and pulling his navy brocade robes back round him, the vizier hurried from Farida's chamber without a backward glance.

As he passed through the fortress's interior passageways, lit by flickering oil lamps, he caught the sound of wailing coming from the royal harem. So, the official mourning had begun, led no doubt by Babur's mother and grandmother, formidable women, the pair of them. He would need to be wary of them. Neither would be so lost to grief that they would not be seeking to protect and promote Babur's interests.

The vizier approached the royal audience chamber to which he had summoned the other officers of state. As the two guards opened its green, leather-covered, brass-studded doors to allow him to enter, he saw that three were already there: Yusuf, the stout keeper of the treasury, the golden key of office dangling on its long chain round his jowly neck; Baqi Beg, the diminutive court astrologer, whose thin, restless fingers were twisting the beads of a rosary; and the wiry, beetle-browed Baba Qashqa, comptroller of the household. Only Wazir Khan was absent.

The ill-matched trio were sitting cross-legged on the red, richly patterned carpet beneath the empty throne. Without its occupant it looked a small, faded, insignificant thing, the gilt a little tarnished and the red velvet, gold-tasselled cushions shabby with use and age.

'Well,' said Qambar-Ali, looking round the assembled faces, 'who would have thought it?' He waited, wanting to gauge their views before he said more.

'It was the will of God.' Baqi Beg broke the silence.

‘A pity you did not foretell what would happen. For once the stars kept their secrets veiled from you,’ Baba Qashqa said.

The astrologer flushed angrily at the comptroller’s spiteful words. ‘God does not always wish a man to know his own destiny – especially a ruler who must be as a god to his people and act for them as well as himself.’

‘I meant no offence, but if the king had foreseen his own death, he would not have left a twelve-year-old boy as his heir,’ Baba Qashqa said slowly, and shook his head.

Qambar-Ali’s pulse quickened. ‘Indeed. The kingdom needs a strong, seasoned ruler to survive. Shaibani Khan and his Uzbek mongrels will be baying at our gates when he learns the news. He has sworn to build a tower from the bleeding, eyeless heads of all the princes of the House of Timur. A puny youth won’t keep him out of Ferghana for long.’

The others nodded, all wearing melancholic expressions as if their only concern was the well-being of Ferghana.

‘And it is not only the Uzbeks we must fear. Our late king made many enemies among his own family – his incursions westwards over the border into the lands of his brother, the King of Samarkand, will not have been forgotten.’

‘Of course, the King of Samarkand is a great warrior,’ Qambar-Ali said slowly. ‘So is the Khan of Moghulistan.’ His mind dwelled for a moment on the purple velvet bag plump with gold coins that the khan had pressed into his receptive hand during his last visit to Ferghana. He remembered his words: ‘If Ferghana should need me, only send me word and I will come.’ The khan would surely reward him generously for the gift of a throne.

‘There is also the ruler of Kabul – he, too, is of the House of Timur, a cousin of our late king.’ Baba Qashqa looked directly into the vizier’s eyes. ‘He would protect Ferghana . . .’

Qambar-Ali, bowing his head in courteous agreement, resolved instantly that this very night he would send a messenger north-east through the mountains to the Khan of Moghulistan or the chance would be lost. ‘We must be cautious and not hurry in case we stumble,’ he said, with an air of deep thought. ‘We need to take

time to reflect and to consider the best interests of Prince Babur. The throne must be his when he comes of age. We should seek a regent from among our neighbouring rulers to keep Ferghana safe from its foes until then.' Not that Babur ever would mount the throne, he reflected inwardly. A little accident would not be long in happening. It would be so simple . . .

The four men sat up as Wazir Khan entered the chamber. He looked tired and the pink scar across his tanned face – the memento of a sword swipe a decade earlier that had also robbed him of the sight in his right eye – stood out livid and raw as if it had been received only weeks ago. 'Gentlemen, my apologies.' He touched his hand to his breast and bowed to Qambar-Ali in acknowledgement of the vizier's position as the chief among them. 'I have posted a double guard around the fort but all is quiet. The king's body is being prepared and everything is in readiness for the funeral tomorrow.'

'We are in your debt, Wazir Khan. I thank you.'

'You were speaking of appointing a regent for Ferghana?' Wazir Khan sat down beside Qambar-Ali and fixed on him his one eye with an unblinking intensity that the vizier resented.

'We were. Prince Babur is too young to bear the responsibility of government. And we face a threat from those dogs of Uzbeks.' At the mention of the Uzbeks, the vizier simulated spitting.

'It is true that the prince is young, but he is the king's only surviving son and has been reared since his earliest days to reign. It is his destiny, and what his father would have wished. Babur is brave, determined and learns fast. I should know. At the king's request, especially when it became clear that Babur would be his only heir, I spent much time instructing him in swordplay and archery, how to wield a spear and hurl a battleaxe. Babur is also astute beyond his years. Surely we five can guide him through the early days,' Wazir Khan said quietly.

'My dear Wazir Khan, if only it were that simple.' The vizier smiled. 'If these were peaceful times your plan would be suitable, but the Uzbeks' ambitions know no limits. As soon as they hear that the King of Ferghana has died leaving his kingdom to a mere

boy they will be upon us, ripping out our entrails and raping our women.'

'What do you propose, Vizier?'

'We should ask one of our dead king's relations to hold the throne in trust until Prince Babur comes of age. The question is, which one . . .'

'I see. Well, I am just a simple soldier and still have much to do tonight. Your heads are wiser than mine. May God guide you to the right decision for our kingdom.' Wazir Khan rose, bowed, and walked slowly from the audience chamber. As soon as he was outside he quickened his pace, making for the royal harem across the courtyard on the far side of the fortress.



Babur was sitting beside his mother, Kutlugh Nigar, letting her find comfort by running her fingers through his long dark hair. As, haltingly, he had broken the news of the tragedy, she had gone so pale he was afraid she might faint, and her eyes had stared at him blankly, like a blind woman's. As the reality penetrated, she had begun to rock back and forth and a thin, terrible wail of grief had risen from deep inside her, gathering in intensity. Though the king had had concubines, she had been his only wife and the bond between them strong.

He watched his grandmother, Esan Dawlat, pluck at the strings of a lute. The sad notes echoed and soared around the chamber like a bird seeking sanctuary. Her white hair, thick as it had been when she was still a girl, or so she liked to boast, hung in a plait over her shoulder. Her raisin eyes were red-rimmed but she had mastered herself. After all, she had told Babur, determinedly staunching her tears, she was a *khanim*, a direct descendant of Genghis Khan, the man they called the Oceanic Ruler who, two hundred years before Timur, had plundered half the known world.

As Babur watched his grandmother's face he recalled her constant arguments with his father over who had been the greater warrior – Genghis Khan or Timur. Esan Dawlat had never ceased recounting how Babur had been a large-headed baby, the labour long and

agonising. Throughout it she had comforted her daughter with predictions that, like Genghis, Babur would be born clutching a blood clot – symbol of his warrior destiny – in his tiny fist. But she had been wrong. Nevertheless she would inevitably continue, ‘May he still be a great ruler!’

As if she sensed his scrutiny, Esan Dawlat looked across at Babur and he saw in her eyes something he had not seen there before: uncertainty. She put the lute down. ‘Khanzada, send for some iced sherbet,’ she snapped, at her sixteen-year-old granddaughter.

Babur watched as his sister, tall and graceful, leaped to her feet to summon an attendant. As she reached the entrance of the room, where the light of the oil lamps was dimmest, she almost collided with Fatima, head attendant of the harem. Her broad, plain face was streaked with tears. ‘Mistress,’ she began, before Khanzada had a chance to say anything about cooled sherbet, ‘mistress, Wazir Khan begs an audience with your august mother and grandmother.’

‘Can’t it wait until morning? They are grieving and need to rest.’

‘He says it is urgent.’ Fatima put out her hand in supplication, as if pleading his cause.

Khanzada looked at her mother and grandmother, who exchanged a glance. Then Kutlugh Nigar said, ‘We will see him. Babur, leave us, please.’

‘But why? I should stay.’

‘Do as I say.’ His mother sat up.

‘No,’ said Esan Dawlat, ‘he is the new King of Ferghana. Anything Wazir Khan has to say affects him more than any of us. Let him stay.’

Kutlugh Nigar glanced at her son’s earnest young face, the determined set of his jaw, and nodded. The three women pulled their veils across the lower part of their faces and composed themselves, the old woman standing in the middle, her daughter and granddaughter at either side. Babur rose and stepped away from them. At his grandmother’s words, something within him had changed. He was apprehensive but also excited.

Wazir Khan stooped beneath the low lintel and prostrated himself before them. 'Forgive this intrusion at so late an hour, Majesties.'

'What is it?' Above her veil, Esan Dawlat's shrewd eyes scanned his face.

'It concerns His Majesty,' Wazir Khan glanced for a second at Babur in the shadows. 'It is not safe for him here. Even as we speak, men are plotting for their own gain to take the throne from him.'

'You must speak more clearly. Who is plotting?' demanded Esan Dawlat. Her colour had risen and rough red patches stood out on her high cheekbones.

'We trust you,' Kutlugh Nigar said, more gently. 'You were the king's most loyal commander. More than that, your own mother suckled my husband as a baby, making you milk-brothers, bound by ties as deep as blood. In the days ahead I look to you to honour that bond . . . to protect my son as his own father would have done . . . Please, speak frankly. What have you heard?'

'Men of a dark temperament, impatient and seditious, scheme against you. The vizier and the other members of the royal council plan to offer the throne to another – they think I caught only the end of their conversation but, concealed outside, I heard it all. They claim it is for the good of the country, that your son is too young to reign and that chaos will descend on Ferghana if they do not appoint a regent from outside until he comes of age. But they have all been bought long since by our neighbouring rulers. Each will promote his own paymaster. There will be civil strife, and all of their making. Because of their greed, rivals will battle for the throne, sowing the seeds of blood feud after blood feud. And whoever emerges the victor, your son will not live long. He will always be a threat – until he is dead.'

'That is impossible. The lives of Timurid princes are inviolable under our code of honour . . .' Kutlugh Nigar's voice faltered.

'What must we do?' Esan Dawlat gripped Wazir Khan's arm. Despite her skinny frame there was a martial force about her. She had Genghis Khan's spirit as well as his blood.

'Yes, what must we do?' Babur stepped out of the shadows. His

face, in the flickering light of the oil lamps burning in a niche in the wall, was set and determined.

‘We must be quick. We must be decisive,’ Wazir Khan said shortly. ‘Tomorrow, after His Majesty your father’s funeral, we must immediately declare you king, here in the royal mosque within the fortress. Once the mullah has read the sermon naming you in the sight of God as the king, anyone who challenges you will be a traitor. And we must have our supporters around us as witnesses. My guards are loyal. So, too, will be many of the nobles of Ferghana – especially if you promise to reward their loyalty.’

‘Fetch me paper, ink and quill,’ Esan Dawlat requested of her granddaughter. ‘We will not spend this night in mourning, lest our indolence brings even greater woes upon us. I know those we can rely on and those who are untrustworthy and deceitful. People think my old eyes and ears notice nothing but I see what goes on. I won’t trust a scribe to write letters such as these, I will do it myself. Wazir Khan, you will make sure that each reaches its destination safely. If anyone dares enquire what they are, tell them they are invitations to the funeral feast. That is partly true, but they will also be invitations to the ceremony in the mosque that will serve as Babur’s coronation. I am summoning every trustworthy chieftain who lives within half a day’s hard ride here to Akhsi. I will ask them to make their way secretly and silently to the mosque as soon as the funeral feast has begun. Babur, sit by me and hold an oil lamp close.’

As the hours of night drew on and the fortress fell silent around them, Babur looked on as the old lady wrote and wrote, pausing only to sharpen her quill and to call for more ink. It was extraordinary, he thought, how much she knew of the blood rivalries and bitter enmities but also the complex marriage links and deep personal loyalties between the clans that went back almost to the days of Genghis Khan. For the first time he felt grateful to her for all the hours she had forced him to spend learning who among the tribal chiefs were friends, who were foes and – most important of all – why. Watching the thin set line of her mouth, he was glad that she was his ally, not his enemy.

As every note was written – the Turki script sprawling over the paper – it was folded, sealed with red wax and handed to Wazir Khan to be entrusted to one of his men. Outside, the courtyard echoed to the sound of departing hoofbeats. Only when the call to prayer rose through the early-morning mist did Esan Dawlat finally lay down her pen.