

FOR BRUCE COVILLE
AND THE WHOLE "FAMILY"

Editorial consultant: Tony Bradman

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Chapter One

MONSTERS

Rusti feared nothing but God and the lightning. Well, he was a Mongol, wasn't he? Born to a travelling life, a nomad's life. His first memories were of being cradled in the bow of a saddle, rocked to sleep by the swaying of a horse, woken by the sounds and smells of an army on the move. His life was one long journey – one long military campaign, riding in the wake of the Conqueror. Home was wherever night kissed the ground and marked the spot for pitching camp.

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Rusti despised town dwellers. However magnificent the town – and in his short life he had seen many, many towns and cities – the men who lived there filled him with disgust. They were “tajiks” – stayers-in-one-place – and to a nomad all tajiks are despicable. What did they know of a warrior life? What did they know of sleeping under the stars, of riding into the teeth of a freezing wind or into the flames of battle? They were soft. They were weak. They almost asked to be conquered, as a flea asked to be squashed.

The tajiks of India did not stand a chance against Timur the Lame, Conqueror of the World. As the Chronicler Shidurghu wrote down, bending the Emir's name into a grander shape with the nib of his pen: “Tamburlaine's millions of men advanced so fast that they overtook the birds in their flight”. Nothing slowed them – not their pack mules, camels, siege engines, flocks, tents, cauldrons, carts, iron baths, noise-throwing guns, travelling mosques nor their portable kitchens. Certainly not the cities

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that stood in their way. The Horde travelled by moonlight, storming towns and citadels by day, slaughtering thousands and taking prisoners by the tens of thousands.

Now the Conqueror's sights were set on Delhi. Listening at night to his neighbours crouched around the campfires, red-cheeked in the heat, Rusti heard them say how Delhi was a treasure house crammed with gems and perfumes, twinkling with silver, fragrant with spices. Rusti's older brother, Cokas, already had a big leather pannier full of beautiful things he had pillaged in Tiflis and Smyrna. Beneath her robes, his wife Borte rattled with silver ornaments looted on the journey south. But rumour had it that when they reached Delhi there would be the best loot of all. That's what people said.

They said Delhi had an army, too, but Tamburlaine the Great and his Mongol warriors would wash that away as a river washes away the leaves that fall into its stream. No, Rusti found nothing to fear in his young life, except for God and the lightning...

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Until he reached Delhi.

Rusti pictured what he might plunder for himself when the city fell: some silver stirrups, perhaps; a rug, some jewellery for a dowry. Well? He was twelve already, wasn't he? Soon he would be old enough to marry. (Cokas had married at fourteen – though secretly Rusti was hoping for a wife less sharp-tongued than Borte, and one who made less noise when she moved.) Today nothing seemed impossible. For as of today, Rusti was old enough to ride out with the army. Rusti was old enough to be accounted a warrior!

From the ridge-top palace of Jahan-numah, the Grand Emir Tamburlaine, Lord of the Fortunate Conjunction, surveyed the Jumna river plain, seeking the ideal place to do battle with the warriors of Delhi. If they decided to fight. Some cities just surrendered without a struggle. The people looked over the walls, saw the Mongol Horde on its way, like a tidal wave, and immediately sent ambassadors to present the symbolic shroud and sword and to

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beg for their lives. They wept, they implored, they grovelled and pleaded to be spared their miserable tajik lives. They emptied out their treasures at the Emir's feet, offered their sons as hostages, promised to add their soldiers to the might of Tamburlaine's army. (Occasionally, the Emir was merciful: he took their presents and allowed them to live.) In short, they were contemptible. Beetles. Ants. Fleas on the skin of the world. Rusti found it easy to despise them. After all, a man with fear in him is worth no more than a dog with worms.

The squirming heat in Rusti's own stomach was not fear – of course not! – it was the stirring of excitement. Rusti-the-Man was about to burst out from inside Rusti-the-Boy. It was no wonder he felt a little sick.

The sun was hot. Light bounced back off the baked ground like brass arrowheads: Rusti had his eyes half shut. The heat was tying side-strands of his brain into a headache. Nearby he could hear his fearsome sister-in-law rattling in her chain-mail

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underwear of looted spoons, brooches, ink-holders, buckles and horse bits. Maybe it was all that lumpy weight that made her scowl. Maybe she scowled at everyone like that, and not just at him. Suddenly he heard warning shouts, turned...and saw them for the first time.

Hindu cavalymen had forayed out of the city. And with them they had brought...*monsters*. Great shapeless leather bags they were, with hideous long noses, gross, misshapen fangs, ears like flapping washing, legs like tree trunks. Their brows and chests were hung with chain mail, and castle turrets grew from their backs, big enough to hold three men. Out of these turrets flew javelins, arrows and firebombs. The fearless Mongols were thrown into panic.

The pony under Rusti went rigid. There was thunder in those trampling, monstrous feet. Blades lashed to the monsters' fangs made lightning out of the sunlight. And when they coiled back those hideous noses and bellowed, the noise was like all the demons of hell triumphing.

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But it takes more than shock and horror, more than a surprise attack to unman Mongol troops. Their little cavalry ponies wheeled away down the side of the ridge, rode round the attackers and regrouped behind them. The warriors uttered shrieks quite as beastly as the monsters, and being one with their ponies, wove and darted in among the Delhi cavalry like fish among bulrushes. Short sharp scimitars delivered short sharp strokes that opened a vein, severed a rein, nicked a windpipe, or the fingers from a hand, so fast that the loser barely knew what he had lost.

Not that Rusti was among them. He was trying to regain control of his pony, which was young and had not seen battle before. It turned around and around on the spot and, when he finally persuaded it to stop, began to trot backwards sooner than move closer to the monstrous grey leather bags. Otherwise, thought Rusti, otherwise... He gnashed his teeth, rolled back his lips, and uttered a subhuman shout which, when it reached the outside of him, sounded

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more like a groaning bleat. Then there was a double-barrelled explosion very close to and so loud that it hurt deep inside his ears. And Rusti's pony slumped down on the spot, paralysed with fright.

The noise-throwing machines of the Horde (which had created the bang) even made Delhi's monstrous beasts halt, lean back on their haunches, flap their great ears and shriek. But that only gave the archers aboard them a steadier platform from which to fire down on the enemy. Rusti saw one arrow penetrate the helmet of a neighbour of his, and caught his breath, choking on his own spit: surely the arrow had sunk to its fletch in the man's brain? But no: it had glanced off the metal and simply slid under the fur band circling his helmet. The owner took off his helmet, grinned at his lucky escape, and jeered abuse at the archers...until another arrow hit him in the side of the throat and left him riding aimlessly about the battlefield, stone dead. To give them their due, the Hindu archers were skilled.

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The tajik horsemen were good soldiers, too: emboldened by their vanguard of giant beasts, they showed courage enough and some talent for killing. But too many of the foot soldiers were ordinary citizens, undrilled, untrained, unorganized. They got under the feet of their own cavalry – even their own saggy monsters. Seeing the battle going against him, the leader of the Hindus lost his nerve and bolted for the city, his tame monsters lumbering after him. Rusti and the seven hundred would have gone after them – given chase...but for those great grey monsters bringing up the rear, shielding the retreating soldiers from attack.

As they retreated, one of the beasts tripped on the shaft of a cart and lost its footing. For agonizing moments, it teetered on two legs, then toppled sideways and rolled downhill, crushing its turret and riders. As the fleeing Hindus disappeared under a cloud of red dust, this one great land-whale lay stricken on the hillside, flailing its stumpy legs, flapping its ears, squealing like a demented pig.

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No one rode in for a closer look – not until the troops parted and The Great Tamburlaine himself came cantering onto the scene. He rode round the Thing on the ground, his crippled arm folded across his stomach, his pony's hoofs dislodging pebbles. And then – wonder of wonders! – he rode back and reined in directly in front of Rusti. "What's your name, boy?"

"Rusti, Gungal Emir!"

"Then take it prisoner, Rusti. What are you waiting for? Take the beast prisoner."

"I— Yes, Gungal Emir! Right away, Gungal Emir!"

Rusti dug in his heels but his pony refused to go any closer: he had to dismount. He looked around for help, but everyone was hurrying back to camp. The men galloping past gave the monster a very wide berth indeed. Rusti was left alone with the task of getting it on its feet.

The Thing appeared helpless and worn out, so summoning up all his nerve, Rusti threw a rock at it.

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When nothing happened, he ran in and kicked it. It was like kicking a boulder; for a minute he thought all his toes were broken. But the Mighty Emir, Conqueror of the World, Lord of the Fortunate Conjunction had told him to take the creature captive. Tamburlaine had given him a direct order: to take it prisoner. Desperation lent Rusti courage. He tugged on the bell-rope tail. He shoved with his shoulder against the bloated grey bulge of the belly. He even went to heave on the nose, but it groped at him like a hand, and he stepped smartly away again, out of reach.

"Aaaow!"

He had stepped back onto one of the Hindus. This was no archer or javelin thrower. He was nothing but a boy – younger even than Rusti: the driver presumably. Rusti drew his dagger. A hot, sharp pang went through him. He had just ridden into battle for the first time: now he was about to make his first kill.

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Kavi the elephant boy looked up at the Mongol warrior who had trodden on him, and his throat closed up with fear. The flat round face peering down at him looked so cruel, its eastern eyes the colour of dry dust. He had heard what merciless killers these devils were, sweeping over the land like a sandstorm, leaving it scoured of life. There was no point in pleading for mercy. The only chance he stood of surviving the next few seconds was if he could rouse his elephant and make her obey him. He would command her to pick up the Mongol devil in her trunk and hurl him to the ground... Then Kavi would simply set off and run for his life...

"Get up, Mumu! Lift the devil! Toss the devil! Kill the devil!" he urged the fallen elephant.

But the elephant was dazed, hurt, afraid. She plucked at him with her trunk, like an old woman asking a neighbour's help to get up. Kavi gave a sob of frustration. Was it because of this stupid creature that he was about to die?

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The boy looking up at Rusti had huge, oddly round eyes, unlike any Mongol's. His nose was bleeding, his teeth chattering with fear. Well, not a kill, perhaps. A prisoner, rather. Yes! This little elephant driver could be Rusti's first prisoner! The Great Tamburlaine had taken one hundred thousand prisoners on his march into India. Now Rusti had one of his own. It was an exciting thought. A warm feeling of power stirred in him, as the young elephant rider jabbered piteously, presumably begging for his life. But the fact remained; Rusti was supposed to make a prisoner of the elephant, too, and he had not the slightest idea how to begin.

Sudden inspiration struck. Rusti put his dagger-tip to the boy's throat, pointed at the monster and said: "Make it get up!"

A mind reader! Almost before Rusti had spoken, the little boy was up on his feet, unlashng the ruins of the turret, picking up a hooked stick, snagging the great, flapping ear, shouting at the beast in his own incomprehensible language. With a lurch, the

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massive animal dragged itself to its feet. Rusti could not help grinning.

"Good! Good, Mumu! Now kill him!" shouted Kavi, eye-to-eyeball with the swaying elephant. "Gore the filthy Mongol! Kill him! Do it for me!" (It did not matter how loudly he shouted it: the foreigner would not understand what he was saying.) The elephant blinked and pitched to its knees again, making both boys yelp. Kavi slapped his own skull. He sobbed and pleaded with his elephant, throat straining, failing to make the right noises of command. Soon he could not even remember the right noises to make. "Please, Mumu! Pleeeeeease! Pleeeeeeaaase don't let him kill me!" he wept. At last the elephant reached out her trunk, coiled it around the thighs of the Mongol warrior and lifted him off the ground.

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