ENDLESS

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Based on an Original Concept by David S. Justin

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PROLOGUE

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- DUSK -- ANCIENT TIMES

Wind moves through grass that goes on forever. Two sets of hands. Intertwined. A man's and a woman's. Between their fingers, a soft amber light pulses like an ember refusing to go out. Pull back to reveal them -- two young people, maybe twenty, sitting in tall grass as the sun bleeds out along the horizon. We don't see their faces yet. At the edge of the frame, a shadow stands perfectly still. Watching. The amber light grows. Beautiful. Almost blinding. One word cuts through the air. Ancient Mongolian. Low and deliberate.

BILGÜÜN (V.O.)
(ancient Mongolian, subtitled)
Never.

The light goes out. Darkness. Then -- a birthmark. Close on skin. Reddish-brown. Still warm.

SMASH CUT TO:

ACT ONE -- THE AWAKENING

SUPER: "ULAANBAATAR, MONGOLIA -- PRESENT DAY"

INT. NATIONAL CENTRE FOR MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH -- BIRTHING ROOM 7 -- NIGHT

It's a busy night. The maternity ward is stretched thin. Two women in labor end up in the same room. SARA is in the left bed. Dark-haired, fierce, doing the work. Her husband GANKHUYAG is beside her -- a metalworker with hands that know how to hold things steady. MISHEEL is in the right bed. Same intensity, different woman. Her husband BATU stands beside her. Broad. Quiet. A man who doesn't move much but when he does, it means something. The attending DOCTOR moves between both beds. He's done this a thousand times but tonight the monitors are doing something he's never seen. Both labors are tracking identical. Same rhythm. Same progression. Same timing. He calls for a midwife. ODVAL enters. She is very old. White clothes, not a uniform -- her own. The nurses make way without being asked. She has been coming here longer than most of them have been alive. She goes to Misheel's bed. Takes her hand.

ODVAL
(Mongolian, subtitled)
I'm Odval. You're doing well. Let's bring him home.

She settles in. The doctor works with Sara. Both labors intensify at the same rate. Both women push at the same moment. Both children enter the world in the same breath. Two cries overlap and for one moment sound like one. Odval goes still. The boy in her hands is healthy. She goes through the motions -- years of practice running on its own -- while her eyes find the mark on his neck. Reddish-brown. Vivid. Three faint curved lines, barely visible yet, radiating from a center point.

Too defined for a newborn. She looks across the room at the girl the doctor is holding. At the back of her head. A streak of hair -- not quite silver, not quite gold -- already visible in the dark. Odval doesn't say anything. She wraps the boy and hands him to Misheel.

ODVAL
(quietly)
A son. Strong.

Misheel is laughing and crying at the same time. She doesn't notice Odval standing still a moment longer than she should. Odval looks at both fathers.

ODVAL
Would you both step into the hallway with me?

CUT TO:

INT. NATIONAL CENTRE FOR MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH -- CORRIDOR -- CONTINUOUS

Fluorescent lights. The sound of the hospital going about its business. Batu and Gankhuyag stand in front of Odval, both still wearing the look of men whose world just permanently changed. Odval gives them a moment. Then:

ODVAL
(Mongolian, subtitled)
Both children are healthy. Both mothers are fine. That's the first thing.

BATU
Then why are we out here?

ODVAL
I noticed something. On both children. When they were born.

She pauses.

ODVAL
They are marked.

BATU
Marked? You mean the birthmark on my son's neck? It's just a birthmark.

GANKHUYAG
What are you talking about?

Something in her tone catches him.

GANKHUYAG
Are you Udgan?

Odval looks at him. A small acknowledgment that he knows enough to ask that.

ODVAL
I'm not Udgan. But I have studied a great deal. And I have attended many births. I have never seen what I saw tonight.

ODVAL
Your son has a mark on his neck. Your daughter has a coloring in her hair. They were born at the same second. These things together -- I have a memory of an old story. As old as any story I know.

She looks at both of them.

ODVAL
Two souls who have been looking for each other across many lifetimes. A hunter and a girl. A love that was pure. A betrayal that cost them everything.

BATU
(carefully)
It's just a birthmark.

GANKHUYAG
My daughter has an unusual coloring in her hair. That's all it is.

Odval looks at them both. She expected this.

ODVAL
I'm not asking you to believe me tonight. I'm asking you to remember this conversation. When your children are older and start telling you they feel pulled somewhere they can't explain -- remember what I said. Look up the old stories. Make up your own minds.

She weighs whether to say the rest.

ODVAL
(MORE)

ODVAL (CONT'D)
The story doesn't end well. There is something that has always followed these two souls. Something patient. If the marks mean what I think they mean, that something will come looking.

She looks at both men one more time.

ODVAL
(quietly)
Love your children well. That's all any of us can do.

She turns and walks down the corridor. Not back toward the room. Away. The two men watch her go. Gankhuyag looks at the door. At his daughter inside.

GANKHUYAG
(to himself)
Just a coloring.

Batu looks at the door. At his son inside.

BATU
(to himself)
Just a birthmark.

They go back in. The corridor is empty. The hospital keeps moving. Both men will carry this night for years. Neither will mention it again. Not until they have reason to.

FADE TO BLACK.

SUPER: "SEVEN YEARS LATER"

INT. PRIVATE ESTATE -- OUTSKIRTS OF MOSCOW -- STUDY -- NIGHT

A room built for a child but furnished like a scholar's. Globes. Maps. A wall of books too old for a seven-year-old to be allowed near, except this one is. SULDE, 7, sits at a desk far too large for him. A TUTOR stands over his shoulder, an old man with the patient weariness of someone paid very well to ask no questions.

TUTOR
(MORE)

TUTOR (CONT'D)
(Russian, subtitled)
Again. The lineage of the Chinggisid courts.

Sulde recites without looking at the page. Flawless. Bored. The tutor almost smiles. Then Sulde stops mid-sentence. Hand flat on the desk. Eyes losing focus.

TUTOR
Sulde?

Nothing. The boy is somewhere else already. The candle flame stops. Mid-flicker. A single point of gold that doesn't move. The tutor's pen hangs an inch above the page. Dust hangs in the lamplight instead of falling through it. Only Sulde still exists in this room. Behind him, blackness gathers. Not shadow. Something that swallows light instead of blocking it. It billows without wind. Takes a shape the size of a man, and taller. KHARANKHUI EZEN.

KHARANKHUI EZEN
(ancient Mongolian, a voice like something remembered rather than heard)
I have been waiting for this moment. For you to hold it. To understand our agreement.

It moves into him. Not through the door of him -- through all of him, at once, the way water takes the shape of whatever it's poured into. Two fires. A vessel, smooth from long use. An ache in his chest that isn't his -- except it is. It's always been his. An arrow, three feet short, in snow he's never seen. A woman's hands turning to feathers under his own. More nights just like it, arriving all at once, stacked on top of each other like a hand of cards flipped face-up in a single motion.

KHARANKHUI EZEN
(V.O., as it withdraws)
Time bends where the old magic touches. It always has.

The blackness pulls out of him the way it went in. Gone. The candle flame finishes its flicker. The tutor's pen touches the page. Dust falls. Sulde's nose is bleeding. He doesn't notice. His face, for one unbearable second, belongs to someone many hundreds of years older than seven.

TUTOR
(alarmed)
Sulde. Sulde, look at me.

Sulde blinks. Wipes his nose. Looks at his own hand like he's checking it still belongs to him.

SULDE
(quietly, in ancient Mongolian -- a language he has never been taught)
Sana.

The tutor doesn't understand the words. He calls for someone. Sulde isn't listening. He's already reaching for a blank sheet of paper. His hand starts moving. Not a child's drawing. A map -- precise, practiced, a hand that has drawn this exact coastline before, in a life none of the adults in this house will ever know existed. A basin marked with a small, careful symbol. A date, in a calendar system no one in Russia has ever used. The tutor watches, and for the first time in his career, looks afraid of a child.

TUTOR
(too calm)
What are you drawing?

SULDE
(not looking up)
Where I buried it. Last time.

He keeps drawing. Steady hands. A boy's body carrying knowledge that has never once, in thousands of years, belonged to a child.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. SUBURBAN BEDROOM -- ULAANBAATAR -- NIGHT

KADE, 7, sits bolt upright in bed. He's breathing hard. His hand goes straight to his neck -- fingers finding the birthmark before he's even fully awake. Like he was checking it was still there. It is. He sits in the dark for a moment. Outside his window, the city lights are on. Past them, the steppe waits in the dark. He doesn't remember the dream. He just knows something was taken. He presses his palm flat against the birthmark. It's warm.

MISHEEL (O.S.)
(Mongolian, subtitled)
Kade? You okay?

KADE
(still half-asleep)
Yes.

He lies back down. Eyes open. Staring at the ceiling.

CUT TO:

INT. TRADITIONAL GER HOME -- OUTSKIRTS OF ULAANBAATAR -- SAME NIGHT

NARA, 7, sits at a small mirror while her mother SARA braids her hair. Sara parts the hair at the back of Nara's head. The streak is there -- gold-silver, like a sun-bleached feather running through dark hair. Sara smooths it.

SARA
(Mongolian, subtitled)
There it is. My little sun streak.

Nara looks at herself in the mirror. Reaches back and touches it.

NARA
(distracted)
I dreamed about it again.

SARA
The streak?

NARA
Just warmth. And then nothing.

Sara finishes the braid. Kisses the top of Nara's head and leaves. Nara stays at the mirror, looking at the streak. Just before she gets up, the streak pulses -- the faintest amber warmth in the color. Gone in a second. She can't be sure she saw it. She gets into bed. Two children. Same city. Same night. Same dream they can't remember.

FADE TO BLACK.

SUPER: "THREE YEARS LATER"

INT. KADE'S HOME -- ULAANBAATAR -- EARLY MORNING

KADE, 10, is already dressed when his father knocks. He's been awake for a while. Doesn't know why. BATU fills the doorframe. He has something wrapped in worn leather cloth.

BATU
(Mongolian, subtitled)
Come. Before the light changes.

CUT TO:

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- DAWN

They walk out into frost-covered grass. The city shrinks behind them. Batu stops and unwraps the leather cloth. A bow. Old. The wood dark with decades of handling. Recurve. Traditional Mongolian. The grip worn smooth by many hands before this one.

BATU
My father's father's father carried this. Nobody knows how far back it goes.

He holds it out. Kade takes it. His fingers close around the grip. He goes quiet. The birthmark at his neck flushes warm. His face does something no ten-year-old's face does -- recognition, older than he is.

BATU
Heavy?

Kade shakes his head. He's already moving. Feet finding their width. Back straightening. Left arm rising. Right hand finding the string like it's muscle memory that predates his ten years on earth. He draws. Perfect form. Batu hasn't said a word about form. He releases. The arrow crosses sixty meters of frozen steppe and hits a dry thistle dead center. Batu stares at his son. Kade stares at the bow. Runs his thumb along the worn grip.

KADE
(barely a whisper)
I know this bow.

Batu puts his hand on his son's shoulder. Doesn't say anything. But he looks at the birthmark. He looks at the steppe. He thinks of a corridor and an old woman in white clothes and a warning he told himself was nothing. He keeps that thought to himself.

CUT TO:

EXT. ROCKY OUTCROPPING -- OUTSIDE ULAANBAATAR -- SAME MORNING

A cliff face. Twenty meters of volcanic rock. At the base, a pair of small shoes placed neatly side by side. NARA, 10, is halfway up. No harness. No rope. Each handhold found before she looks for it. She stops on a narrow ledge. One hand on the rock. Twenty meters up and completely relaxed. She looks out. The steppe goes on forever. The city is behind her. Ahead, nothing but grass and sky and wind. She closes her eyes. The wind moves through her hair. The gold streak lifts. Her chin comes up. Her free arm moves out slightly from her body -- not intentional, more like reflex. Like it's testing something it half remembers. Behind her closed eyes, for just a second -- the steppe from far above. The thermal underneath. The sky. Speed. Her fingers tighten on the rock. She opens her eyes. She's still here. Ten years old on a rock face. She presses her forehead against the stone.

NARA
(eyes closed)
Not yet.

She doesn't know why she says it. She starts climbing again. Up toward the sky. In the valley below, Gankhuyag is at his forge. He stops hammering. Looks up at his daughter on the rock. At the streak catching the morning light. He goes back to work without a word. Carrying his own corridor. His own warning. Above Nara, high up and barely visible, a single eagle rides a thermal. Circling.

FADE TO BLACK.

SUPER: "THREE YEARS LATER"

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- EARLY MORNING

An arrow hits dead center at fifty meters. KADE, 13, lowers the bow without celebrating. He's already looking for the next target. He moves differently now -- economical, like a hunting animal that has found its body. Batu watches from twenty feet back. Arms crossed. Kade nocks another arrow without looking down. Eyes on a dead branch eighty meters out. He draws. The birthmark at his neck is darker than it was at ten, the three curved lines more defined against his skin. It flushes warm -- faint amber at the edges. He releases. The branch explodes.

BATU
(Mongolian, subtitled)
Enough for today.

Kade doesn't respond. He's looking north. Arrow already nocked. There's no reason to look north.

KADE
(still looking north)
Do you ever feel pulled somewhere? Like a direction has gravity?

BATU
What direction?

KADE
North. Past the city. I don't know why.

Batu looks north. Then at his son. His jaw tightens. He's been waiting years for something like this.

BATU
(quietly)
Come. Your mother has breakfast.

Kade follows. But he looks north one more time before he goes. Batu walks beside him and says nothing. Not yet. He doesn't know how to begin.

CUT TO:

INT. ULAANBAATAR MIDDLE SCHOOL -- CLASSROOM -- DAY

Geography class. A map of Mongolia covers one wall. NARA, 13, should be taking notes. Instead she's drawing in the margin of her notebook -- concentric circles, like a thermal, like something spiraling up. She stops. Looks out the window. South. Her hand goes to the back of her head. The streak is wider now. Richer. In the fluorescent light it seems to pulse.

NARA
(to herself)
Where are you?

The girl beside her glances over. Nara didn't realize she said it out loud. She looks back down at her notebook and draws an arrow through the center of the circles. Pointing south.

CUT TO:

EXT. ULAANBAATAR STREETS -- AFTERNOON

Kade walks home from school. Same route as always. But today he takes a wrong turn without noticing. He walks north instead of east. Three blocks. Five. He stops at a crosswalk and looks up and doesn't recognize where he is. He's in the ger district. Circular homes alongside Soviet apartment blocks. He has no reason to be here. The birthmark is warm.

KADE
(quietly)
What are you doing to me?

He stands there. Then turns and walks home the right way. Behind him, around the corner he didn't take -- thirty seconds away -- Nara walks home from school. Her usual route. She passes the same corner going the other direction. Thirty seconds. Six years.

CUT TO:

INT. NARA'S HOME -- EVENING

Dinner. Gankhuyag across from his daughter. Nara is somewhere else tonight.

GANKHUYAG
(MORE)

GANKHUYAG (CONT'D)
(Mongolian, subtitled)
You're not here.

NARA
I'm here.

GANKHUYAG
Your body is here.

Nara puts down her fork.

NARA
Aarav at school says the streak in my hair means I'm touched by Tengri. The sky god.

GANKHUYAG
Aarav reads too many old stories.

NARA
Do you believe in old stories?

He looks at her. At the streak catching the kitchen light. He thinks of a corridor. A woman in white clothes. A warning.

GANKHUYAG
I believe some things are older than stories.

NARA
I keep looking south. I don't know why. Like something's there that I need to find.

Gankhuyag's fork stops. Just for a moment. Then he starts eating again.

GANKHUYAG
(quietly)
Eat your dinner, my love.

Nara watches him. He knows something. She's sure of it. She lets it go. For now.

CUT TO:

INT. KADE'S BEDROOM -- NIGHT

Kade sleeps. The dreams at thirteen are different from the ones at seven. Less vague. They have weight. We move through the dream: -- Tall grass. Older steppe than the one outside his city. Different air. -- The sound of a bowstring. His hands, but not quite his hands. Older. More calloused. -- An eagle banking on a thermal. Sun behind it. -- The eagle lands on his arm. Looks at him. -- The back of its head. Gold-silver coloring. -- The eagle opens its beak. What comes out is not a bird sound. It is a name. His name. Kade wakes up hard. Hand goes straight to the birthmark. Warmer than it's ever been. He pulls a notebook from under his bed. Opens it to a page full of drawings. Eagles. Dozens of them, drawn over months. He finds one near the center -- eagle's head, from behind. Gold-silver coloring at the crown. He's drawn it before. Many times. He touches the drawing with one finger. The birthmark pulses.

KADE
(whispered)
Who are you?

No answer. He closes the notebook. Lies back. Eyes open. Six years to go.

FADE TO BLACK.

SUPER: "AGE 13. THE DRAW HAS BEGUN."

INT. PRIVATE ESTATE -- STUDY -- NIGHT

The same room, six years on. The globes and children's books are gone. In their place: a wall exactly like the one he'll keep in Ulaanbaatar years from now. Photographs. Red thread. Two names circled at the center in a hand too precise for a thirteen-year-old: KADE BATU-ERDENE. NARA. SULDE, 13, stands in front of the wall in the dark, the only light coming from a single desk lamp. He's not a prodigy performing for anyone. He's alone, and this is just what he does at night. He pins a new photograph to the wall -- a grainy long-lens shot of a boy on horseback on the Mongolian steppe, bow drawn.

SULDE
(MORE)

SULDE (CONT'D)
(to the wall, quietly, ancient Mongolian)
There you are again.

He steps back. Studies the whole wall the way another boy his age might study a chessboard mid-game.

SULDE
Already better with that bow than he's ever been this young.

He turns to a second photograph, still in an envelope, unopened -- the first image his contacts have sent him. He slides it out. A school portrait. Dark hair. The gold-silver streak, unmistakable, running through it. He goes very still. He's expecting a species. A marking on a wing. A silhouette against a thermal. What he's holding instead is a child's face, human, looking back at the camera.

SULDE
(low)
No.

He sets it down. Picks it back up. Looks again, like the image might correct itself.

SULDE
You're not supposed to be her yet.

A long silence. He sits.

SULDE
Every time before this, I made certain what you'd be. This time I let the arrow decide instead of the fire.

He looks at the photograph a while longer. The desk lamp gutters -- one flicker, then steady again. No draft in the room to explain it.

SULDE
(to himself)
I don't know yet if that was mercy or carelessness.

He doesn't move for a long moment, like he's waiting to find out if he said that out loud to someone. Nothing answers. Not tonight. He finally pins the photograph to the wall, beside the boy's. Doesn't write anything next to it. For the first time, the wall has a question on it instead of an answer. He pulls the ledger toward him. Writes. Stops. Looks back at her photograph one more time before he closes it.

SULDE
(quietly, to himself)
Years until they find each other.
More after that until they're ready
to come looking for me.

He closes the ledger. Looks at his own reflection, faint, in the dark window glass. A thirteen-year-old's face. Nothing else about him reads thirteen.

SULDE
(flat)
Plenty of time.

He doesn't sound like he believes it. He sounds like a man saying something he's said many times before, in many other rooms, across more years than he can hold in his head at once.

FADE TO BLACK.

ACT TWO -- RECOGNITION

SUPER: "SIX YEARS LATER"

EXT. NAADAM FESTIVAL GROUNDS -- OUTSIDE ULAANBAATAR -- DAY

Summer. The steppe comes alive with the Naadam festival. Gers in a great circle around the competition grounds. Flags snapping. The smell of roasting meat and horses and dry grass. Thousands of people. The steppe doesn't notice any of it. It just goes on in every direction the way it always has.

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
(Mongolian, subtitled)
Next in mounted archery -- number
seventeen. Kade Batu-Erdene.

CUT TO:

EXT. MOUNTED ARCHERY TRACK -- CONTINUOUS

KADE, 19. He's grown into himself. Lean. Still. The kind of quiet that isn't absence -- it's control. Traditional deep blue deel, sleeves pushed back. His grey mare shifts under him. He steadies her with his knees. Both hands on the bow. The birthmark at his neck is darker than ever, the talon-shape stark against his skin. In the sun it has a faint amber warmth at its edges. Something is different today. The pull he's had in his chest since he was thirteen is louder this morning. Closer. The starting flag drops. He and the mare become one thing. His upper body stays perfectly still while she gallops underneath him. First target at forty meters. CENTER. Second at seventy, angled. CENTER. Third at one hundred, moving. He tracks it, holds the space between heartbeats, releases. CENTER. The crowd erupts. He doesn't react. He's already turning the mare around. And stopping.

The birthmark flares. Not warm -- hot. Urgent. His hand goes to his neck before he even thinks about it. He scans the crowd. He doesn't know what he's looking for. But something is here.

CUT TO:

EXT. FALCONRY AND HUNTING DEMONSTRATION AREA -- SAME TIME

The eastern edge of the festival. Smaller crowd. These are people who know what they're watching. A handler releases a rabbit. It bolts. From the raised platform, NARA, 19, sends her eagle up. The bird climbs hard -- three powerful wingbeats and she's at twenty meters. Nara watches from the platform. Completely still. Her eyes track the rabbit with an intensity that makes the people around her take a small step back without knowing why. She lifts her chin -- barely -- and the eagle dives. Vertical. Total commitment. The crowd pulls in a breath. The rabbit doesn't make it three more strides. Nara is already moving down off the platform, crossing the field. She kneels beside the eagle, offers her gloved arm. The eagle steps up. They look at each other for a moment in a way that isn't about training. Nara strokes the eagle's chest. The gold-silver streak in her hair catches the afternoon sun. She stands. And stops. The streak is warm. Not sun-warm. Something else. The eagle shifts on her arm, spreads its wings slightly. Nara turns south. Looks across the festival grounds. Through the crowd. Through all of it. Her eyes find nothing. But the warmth at the back of her head is insistent.

NARA
(to the eagle, uncertain)
Do you feel that?

The eagle's talons tighten on her arm.

CUT TO:

INT. DR. NERGUI SULDE'S PRIVATE STUDY -- ULAANBAATAR -- SAME TIME

This room shouldn't exist in a modern apartment building. Floor-to-ceiling shelves. Artifacts from everywhere and every era. Japanese lacquerware next to Scottish iron next to Native American beadwork next to Mongolian bronze. One wall is different. Photos. Maps. Red thread connecting points across geography and time. At the center, two words. Vertical. Ancient. Worn soft from touching. Below them -- modern names. Modern photos. Kade at thirteen with a bow. Nara at thirteen, the streak visible. DR. NERGUI SULDE sits with his back to us. Young. Composed in a way that doesn't match his age. Dark suit. Hands folded on the desk. On the desk, a single eagle feather in a glass case. Ancient. His phone rings.

SULDE
(Mongolian, subtitled)
Yes.

VOICE (O.S.)
They're both at the Naadam festival. I don't think they've --

SULDE
I know.

He hangs up. Looks at the wall. At their photos. At the red thread.

SULDE
(to himself, quiet)
Not today.

Something colder than the room answers, low under his own voice, gone before he's sure he heard it at all. He picks up a different phone.

SULDE
The festival. Twenty minutes. Don't let them get within thirty meters of each other.

He goes to the window. Ulaanbaatar below. The steppe beyond. He's done this more times than he can count.

CUT TO:

EXT. NAADAM FESTIVAL GROUNDS -- CENTRAL THOROUGHFARE -- AFTERNOON

Kade moves through the crowd on foot. Mare handed off. The birthmark is hot and getting hotter. He doesn't know where he's going, but he's going there with purpose. From the east, Nara moves west. Eagle returned to its handler. From above, we see them -- two people in a sea of thousands, converging. Fifty meters. Forty. The glow starts -- barely visible. Warmth under Kade's collar. Light rising in Nara's streak. Thirty meters. A large man steps into Kade's path. Sulde's man. He doesn't touch Kade -- just takes up space, apologizes, slows things down. Kade pushes around him. Twenty meters. A woman with a double stroller crosses in front of Nara. Stops to adjust something. Nara waits. Ten meters. The crowd thins at a junction between two rows of gers. They're in the same sightline. Nothing between them. Ten meters of open ground. The glow ignites. Kade's birthmark blazes through his collar -- amber gold, impossible. Nara's streak floods with light. Both of them stop cold. The festival goes on around them. Nobody notices. Nobody looks. Kade's hand goes to his neck. Nara's hand goes to the back of her head. Their eyes meet across ten meters. This isn't attraction. It isn't recognition in any normal sense. It's what happens when something that's been lost for so long finally shows up -- it feels like grief before it feels like anything else. Kade steps forward. Nara steps forward. His hand comes up -- open. An offering. An old gesture, older than he knows. She looks at his hand. At the birthmark. Back at his eyes. She places her hand in his.

SUPER: "THE DUST DEVIL"

The world inhales. Every sound at the festival -- music, crowd, horses, wind, everything -- goes silent in one instant.

Then the ground erupts. Dry steppe dust blows straight up in a perfect circle around them both. Not violent. Deliberate. Like the earth has been holding its breath for nineteen years. The dust rises and spirals -- a dust devil, but nothing like a natural one. This one doesn't drift. It has a fixed point. Them. It builds fast. One meter. Three. Ten. A column of spinning gold dust and light that cuts them off completely from the festival around them. Inside it -- silence. The festival is still out there but it might as well be another century. The glow from their joined hands feeds into the column. The dust catches it. The whole thing glows. They look up. Blue sky in a circle above them. They look at each other. The flood begins.

SUPER: "THE MEMORY FLOOD -- INSIDE THE COLUMN"

Not images yet. First: The ground changes under their feet. Same steppe, but the city is gone. Just grass and sky and something ancient underneath. SOUND comes first. A bowstring. Wind in tall grass. A hawk's cry. A ship's bell. Rain on canvas. A stranger's voice crossing a market square in a language neither of them has spoken in centuries. Hoofbeats. Always hoofbeats. Then SENSATION. The weightlessness of altitude. The weight of grief. This hand -- this exact hand -- its heft and warmth and the specific way these fingers fit, recognized across more lifetimes than either of them can count. Torchlight on a collapsed gate becomes starlight over a desert caravan becomes dogs pulling across a frozen strait becomes rain so total it erases a monsoon coast, no seam between them, no telling whose lifetime this was -- only that it was theirs. All of it. Always. And at the edge of every blurred second -- a SHADOW. Same darkness. Same eyes. A face that changes but is always the same underneath. The images speed up further. Every lifetime at once. All of it. Unbearable and necessary. Then -- silence. Just their hands. Just the glow.

Just them -- foreheads together without either deciding to move, breathing the same air inside the column. Nara is crying. Kade's free hand has come up to cup the back of her head, his thumb finding the streak the way you find something you've reached for more times than you can count. She presses her palm flat against his birthmark. It blazes under her hand. The column starts to come down. Slow. The glow softens. One last image, faster than the rest, gone before either of them can hold onto it -- worn leather, a bell gone silent, hanging in a narrow shaft of light through a single window. The dust devil touches the ground and disappears. Sound bleeds back in -- music first, then voices, then everything -- like someone turning up a dial. Gone completely. They're standing in the festival. Exactly where they were. Same crowd. Same vendors. Same sun. Time never left without them. It just stopped and waited, the way it always has where this magic touches. The people who were mid-step when the column went up are still mid- step. Nobody noticed. Nobody stopped. A lifetime's worth of moments happened inside thirty seconds of a summer festival and the world kept going. Kade and Nara stand in the middle of it. Hands still joined. Still glowing softly. Tears drying on Nara's face.

KADE
(broken whisper)
I know you.

NARA
(wondering)
You found me.

KADE
I've been --

NARA
I know.

She's still holding his face.

NARA
How many times?

KADE
Too many. I can't hold it all at once.

NARA
There was always something stopping us.

Not a question.

KADE
A shadow. In every memory. Always at the edge.

NARA
I saw it too.

They look at each other. Neither of them has a name for it yet. Nara almost laughs -- something breaking loose, not the moment, just its weight.

NARA
(startled by her own realization)
I don't actually know your name.

KADE
(the same realization landing)
Neither do I.

KADE
I'm sorry -- Kade.

NARA
Nara.

KADE
Nice to meet you.

NARA
(dry, aching)
Looks like we have a lot to talk about.

NARA
(quietly)
Don't let go.

KADE
(quietly, absolutely)
Never again.

Above the festival, riding a thermal nobody else has noticed, a single eagle circles. Then banks away on the wind and is gone.

FADE TO BLACK.

SUPER: "AGE 19. THEY HAVE FOUND EACH OTHER."

SUPER: "SULDE HAS SIX YEARS."

INT. KADE'S APARTMENT -- ULAANBAATAR -- NIGHT

Three weeks after the festival. Kade's apartment is sparse and honest -- a traditional Mongolian recurve bow mounted above the window, photographs of the steppe, a worn saddle blanket on a chair. And now, drawings everywhere. Pinned to every surface. Faces and landscapes and fragments from every era that's been flooding back since the festival. Kade sits on the floor. Across from him, NARA. Two cups of tea between them, gone cold hours ago. They've been at this for six hours and neither has noticed.

NARA
(Mongolian, subtitled)
The Yamabushi. In Japan. Something went wrong in my chest the moment the samurai found the hawk.

KADE
Standing at the back. Smiling.

NARA
Wrong smile. I felt it before I understood why.

KADE
It's the same person. Every time. Different face.

NARA
Same eyes.

The glow between them is ambient now. Warm. A permanent condition when they're near each other. NARA sits back, something clicking into place all at once.

NARA
(Mongolian, subtitled)
It's the same man in every memory. I keep telling myself it's a different person because he's wearing a different face, but it isn't. Same eyes, every time. He's been standing at the edge of every one of these since we were children -- which means whatever's coming for us has been watching since we were seven years old. He didn't miss the festival. I don't care that neither of us felt him there. He was close enough to see it happen.

KADE
I would have felt him. I've felt everything else about this.

NARA
Would you? Or would you have been too busy feeling me?

Kade doesn't have an answer for that.

NARA
Three weeks ago I didn't know your name. Now I can tell you what different versions of you sound like when they're dying. I don't trust what I would or wouldn't have felt right now. Neither should you.

Kade takes that. Actually takes it, instead of arguing it away.

KADE
Okay. He was there.

Kade gets up. Goes to the bow on the wall, like he needs something to hold onto while he says this.

KADE
I've been trying to place the oldest one -- the one everything else seems to hang off of. You were a blacksmith's daughter. I was a hunter. And we have the same birthday, Nara. Not close. The same day, maybe the same hour, going back as far as either of us can see. Nobody gets born on the same day as a stranger, cycle after cycle, for that long by accident. Somebody built this. On purpose. Every piece of it -- including us finding each other exactly the way we keep finding each other.

NARA
Built it for what?

KADE
I don't know yet. But I know it wasn't an accident, and I know whoever built it is the same man standing at the edge of every one of your memories.

NARA
(quietly)
He wanted me. In the oldest one. I chose you instead. And he's been making us pay for it every time since.

Something shifts in her face.

NARA
Smoke. I can still taste it.

KADE
What?

NARA
Heat on my face. Two fires, close together. Something burning between them -- I don't have a word for it. Just the smell.

KADE
A feather. An eagle feather. Seeds burning around it in a circle.

NARA
(quietly)
He needs pieces of it. Every time. He gathers them again.

Kade gets up. Stands beside her.

KADE
We have six years before our birthday.

NARA
He won't wait six years.

KADE
All three of us. He's trapped too. He's always there in the memories. Always the same age. He hasn't moved either.

NARA
He did this to himself.

KADE
Yes.

NARA
(flat)
Good.

Despite everything, the ghost of a smile passes between them. Kade takes her hand. The glow. A silence. Long enough that it becomes its own thing.

KADE
Say it. The actual word. Not the pieces of it.

NARA
(steady, meeting it head-on)
(MORE)

NARA (CONT'D)
We've been alive before. Not once. Not twice. However many lives it takes to fill a sketchbook that size -- that many, over and over again.

KADE
Reincarnated.

NARA
Say it back to me and it still doesn't feel real. But yes. Reincarnated. Over and over, for longer than either of us can actually count.

Neither of them looks away from it this time.

KADE
Nineteen years of drawing, and I can now draw these past remembrances like I experienced them yesterday.

NARA
(a short, unamused breath)
Every bird I've ever flown, I earned that trust the hard way -- hand-feeding, manning, years of it. Turns out I've been on the other side of that glove before. More than once.

KADE
We find him before he finds his components. We find them first or we find him first.

NARA
And then?

KADE
We end it. This cycle. No more.

NARA
How do you know this time is different?

He's quiet for a moment.

KADE
Because you're standing in front of me. Not flying above me.

Nara holds that. Then nods. Once.

NARA
Where do we start?

CUT TO:

INT. BATU AND MISHEEL'S HOME -- ULAANBAATAR -- EVENING

Dinner, mostly finished. Batu and Misheel across the table from Kade. He's been quiet through the whole meal, and they both know what that means by now.

KADE
(Mongolian, subtitled)
I'm moving in with Nara.

Misheel sets down her cup carefully, like the sound of it might interrupt something.

MISHEEL
So soon.

KADE
It's not soon. Not really.

Batu doesn't react right away. He's been waiting a long time for a version of this conversation.

BATU
And how do two nineteen-year-olds support a home.

KADE
(MORE)

KADE (CONT'D)
I'll hunt. Sell what we don't need. It's enough.

BATU
Hunting isn't a living, Kade.

KADE
(steady)
It's been a living for our family longer than either of us can count. I'm good at it. Better than good. You know that.

Batu studies his son. There's something underneath this that isn't about money, and both of them know it.

BATU
(quietly)
This is about more than an apartment.

KADE
Yes.

BATU
Is it about what Odval said. The night you were born.

The question lands in the room and sits there. Kade meets his father's eyes.

KADE
I can't tell you everything. Not yet. Maybe not ever. But I need you to trust that I know what I'm doing, and that it matters more than either of us can explain at this table.

A long silence. Misheel reaches over and takes Batu's hand, a small gesture that says more than words would.

BATU
(finally)
Your bow. My father's father's
(MORE)

BATU (CONT'D)
father carried it. It found you for a reason I never fully understood. I'm not going to stand in the way of whatever that reason is.

KADE
(quietly)
Thank you.

BATU
Just -- come to dinner. Once a month. Whatever this is, don't let it take that from us too.

Kade nods. Something in his chest loosens slightly -- the first real breath he's taken through this whole conversation.

KADE
Once a month. I promise.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. NARA'S HOME -- ULAANBAATAR OUTSKIRTS -- EVENING

Gankhuyag at the table. Sara nearby, drying dishes, listening without turning around.

NARA
(Mongolian, subtitled)
I got into the university. Fall term.

Sara turns, delighted, already crossing the room to hug her.

SARA
Nara! That's wonderful.

NARA
(carefully)
And I'm moving in with Kade.

Sara stops halfway through the hug. Steps back. Gankhuyag sets down his tea.

GANKHUYAG
Both of those in the same breath.

NARA
I didn't want to make it two conversations.

A silence. Gankhuyag studies his daughter for a long moment -- the same look he's given her since she was small, like he's always half a step ahead of what she's about to tell him.

GANKHUYAG
You're sure about this. The boy.

NARA
More sure than I've been about anything.

GANKHUYAG
(quietly)
You've known him less than a year.

NARA
It doesn't feel that way.

That answer costs her more than it should, and something in her face gives it away -- more truth than she meant to let slip. Gankhuyag catches it. Doesn't push.

SARA
(gently)
Your father worries. That's all this is.

GANKHUYAG
I'm not going to pretend I love this news. A daughter moving out and moving on in the same month. But I raised you to know your own mind, and I'm not going to start doubting that now just because it frightens me.

He stands. Crosses to her. Puts a hand on her shoulder -- an echo, though neither of them knows it, of a gesture that's older than either of their lifetimes.

GANKHUYAG
(quietly)
Be happy. That's all I ever wanted for you.

Nara's eyes well up faster than she expects. She hugs him, tight.

NARA
(muffled, against his shoulder)
I love you. Both of you. More than I know how to say.

SARA
(surprised by the intensity of it)
Nara --

NARA
(pulling back, forcing a smile)
I'm just happy. That's all.

She isn't just happy, and some small part of her parents seems to sense that without being able to name it. But the moment passes, and Sara pulls her back into an embrace, and Gankhuyag watches them both with the quiet ache of a man who has loved his daughter through more than she'll ever be able to tell him.

FADE TO BLACK.

CUT TO:

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- DAWN -- ONE MONTH LATER

Kade and Nara ride together on the open steppe. Full gallop. They move in formation without discussing it -- Kade with the bow, Nara with the reflexes of something that used to hunt from the sky. A rabbit breaks from cover. Kade draws but doesn't release. He watches Nara. She comes around the far side, cuts off the angle, and takes it with her bare hand at a speed that makes no sense for a human. She holds it up. Matter of fact.

KADE
You didn't need me for that.

NARA
I never need you for the catch.

KADE
Then what do you need me for?

NARA
The arrow. When the thing I'm hunting doesn't run.

They look at each other across the space between their horses. The glow visible even in daylight now.

KADE
(quietly)
We're good at this.

NARA
We've had practice.

She turns her horse toward the city. Kade watches her go. Then looks east. A pressure. Directional. Not north anymore. East. The museum is east.

CUT TO:

INT. NATIONAL MUSEUM OF MONGOLIA -- ULAANBAATAR -- DAY

DR. NERGUI SULDE moves through his museum like he owns it. He does, in every way that matters. A junior curator chases him with a tablet.

JUNIOR CURATOR
(Mongolian, subtitled)
The Gobi acquisition arrived this morning. Third century bronze, exceptional --

SULDE
Not interested.

JUNIOR CURATOR
The board meeting is Thursday --

SULDE
Reschedule it.

He stops in front of a case of shamanic artifacts. Looks at his reflection in the glass. Young face. Eyes that carry more than a young face should. His phone vibrates. He reads the message. His hand against the glass slowly curls into a fist. The message reads: Hellebore confirmed. Shipment delayed. Three months. Three months. He closes his eyes. Calculates. They are nineteen. He has five years and change. The delay is manageable. What isn't manageable is the surveillance report from this morning -- the two of them on the steppe at dawn, hunting together in formation. They've never done this before. Not at nineteen. Not even close.

SULDE
(quietly)
You don't get to win.

He turns from the case and walks back through his museum. Through centuries of evidence of every civilization that rose and fell while he simply kept going.

CUT TO:

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- LATE AFTERNOON -- THREE MONTHS LATER

Kade and Nara ride side by side. Nara has a notebook open.

NARA
(Mongolian, subtitled)
A feather from my current form -- which is a problem since my current form is human. Thirteen juniper berries burned in a circle. Sagebrush and mugwort burned simultaneously -- one in sunlight, one under moonlight.

KADE
That needs a specific astronomical window.

NARA
Black hellebore. Seasonal. Rare.

She closes the notebook.

KADE
How do we know all this?

NARA
The memories. The first time. Before the darkness -- fragments. Enough.

NARA
He works at the museum. I saw him three weeks ago when I went with my father. A man -- senior staff. The moment I saw him --

She touches the streak.

NARA
The eyes, Kade. It was the eyes.

KADE
You're certain?

NARA
I am now.

Kade looks east. The pressure he's felt for months. East. The museum.

KADE
He's been watching us this whole time.

NARA
So we stop letting him watch.

KADE
And start watching him.

They look at each other. The glow steady between them.

NARA
(quietly)
Kade. What happens when we find him?

He takes her hand across the space between their horses.

KADE
The same way it was always going to end. Together.

She looks at their joined hands. Nods. They turn their horses back toward the city. High above, barely visible against the late sky, a single eagle banks east. Leading the way.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. FALCONRY SUPPLY SHOP -- ULAANBAATAR OLD QUARTER -- DAY

Nara steps through the door, the streak's warmth peaking the moment her hand touches the frame -- the same pull that's led her past two wrong shopfronts to find this one. A cramped shop off a side street. Leather goods hang from every wall -- jesses, hoods, worn gloves, bells. Dust in the light through a single window. The kind of place tourists never find and locals are sent to. The SHOPKEEPER, sixties, hands like a man who's flown his own birds for forty years, looks up from a hood he's restitching -- and stops. Not at Nara. At the eagle on her arm.

SHOPKEEPER
(Mongolian, subtitled, delighted)
Now that's a bird who's been somewhere.

He sets the hood down entirely, comes around the counter.

SHOPKEEPER
Altai stock, or closer? Look at that keel on her.

NARA
(a small bow of the head -- she knows this is owed)
Closer. My father's line.

SHOPKEEPER
There's always a story in "my father's line." Sit. I have tea. You don't walk in here with a bird like that and walk back out in five minutes.

NARA
(taking the tea, meaning it)
Thank you. I won't pretend I'm not in a hurry -- but I'm not in that much of a hurry.

She sits properly, the eagle settled, giving him the time he's owed.

SHOPKEEPER
I flew golden eagles myself, out past Ölgii, before my knees decided otherwise. Whose hands taught yours? I can usually tell.

NARA
(careful, but warm -- not a door closing, a door not yet open)
Someone who'd tell you the same thing you'd tell me -- that it's not really his to take credit for. She taught herself as much as anyone taught her.

SHOPKEEPER
(a real laugh)
That's the only honest answer I've gotten to that question in twenty years.

NARA
I mean it as one.

SHOPKEEPER
(satisfied, turning businesslike but still warm)
So. What is it you're actually here for?

NARA
Old jesses. Lures. Whatever you've had the longest.

He doesn't just point -- he gets up, moves down the wall himself, running a hand along old leather like he's greeting each piece.

SHOPKEEPER
Longest. That narrows it. Most of what's on this wall, someone's grandfather brought it in for pocket money and never came back for it. But there's a few pieces I keep because I don't have the heart to sell them to anyone who won't understand what they're holding.

He stops at a coil of rope, moves it aside without ceremony -- he knows exactly what's under it. A single hawk lure. Old leather, a bell long gone silent, worn smooth in a pattern that doesn't match handling.

SHOPKEEPER
This one, for instance. Older than the shop. Older than my father's shop, and he had it before me.

He doesn't hand it to her yet. Turns it once in his own hands first, a small private ritual.

SHOPKEEPER
Worn like something held, not like something used. You fly birds long enough, you stop needing words for that. You just feel it.

He holds it out. The moment her fingers close around it, the eagle on her arm goes rigid -- wings mantling half- open, a sound coming from her throat that isn't a hunting call. The shopkeeper doesn't miss it. His eyebrows go up, but he doesn't ask.

SHOPKEEPER
(quieter now)
She feels it too.

NARA
(MORE)

NARA (CONT'D)
(carefully neutral)
She's particular about old things.

SHOPKEEPER
Aren't we all.

He watches her turn it over in her hands -- no visible markings, nothing that would explain the pull.

NARA
What do I owe you for it?

SHOPKEEPER
(waving it off, almost offended)
Nothing. You don't sell a piece like that. You give it to the next person it's decided to belong to. That's not generosity, that's just how it works.

He walks her to the door himself.

SHOPKEEPER
Come back sometime when you're not in a hurry. Bring the bird. I'll tell you what I actually know about that lure, which is less than I let on in there.

CUT TO:

EXT. FALCONRY SUPPLY SHOP -- CONTINUOUS

Nara steps out into the street, lure in one hand, eagle riding her other arm. She pulls her phone from her coat, texts with her thumb -- awkward, one-handed, the eagle unbothered by the movement. Across the city, Kade feels his phone buzz. He's on a rooftop terrace, scanning the skyline out of habit though there's no bird up there to track tonight. He reads the text, exhales.

KADE
(to himself)
One.

CUT TO:

EXT. ULAANBAATAR STREET -- CONTINUOUS

Nara walks, the lure tucked into her coat now, against her chest. The eagle settles, finally, feathers smoothing back down.

NARA
(quietly)
He doesn't know we have this.

She looks north, toward the museum, though nothing pulls her there tonight. Just old caution -- a habit two people carry when something ancient and patient has spent every one of its lives learning how to wait.

NARA
But something does.

The eagle turns her hooded head north anyway, as if she heard the thought before Nara said it.

FADE TO BLACK.

SUPER: "AGE 19. THE HUNT BEGINS."

SUPER: "THE SHARED RETRIEVALS"

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- THE HOLLOW -- NIGHT

SUPER: "THE NIGHT OF THEIR TWENTIETH BIRTHDAY"

The city is a glow on the southern horizon. The steppe goes dark in every other direction. Kade and Nara sit facing each other in a natural hollow in the grass -- not a place they chose, a place they found. Like the land offered it. No fire. The glow between them is enough. Between their joined hands, the hawk lure -- old leather, a bell gone silent, held by both of them at once. They've been sitting like this for an hour without talking, the birthmark and the streak both faintly lit in the dark.

NARA
(Mongolian, subtitled)
It's closer tonight.

KADE
I feel it too. Something recent.
Right at the surface.

They don't discuss what to do. They've been working toward this without knowing how it works. Only that the lure has to be between them for it to work at all. Both of them lean forward at the same time. Foreheads touch, the lure held between their joined hands. Eyes close. The glow ignites -- not like the festival, not explosive.

KADE AND NARA
(together, quiet)
Baxúawishe.

A door opening. The steppe dissolves. For one instant, the hollow holds still -- a moth frozen mid-wingbeat, caught between one beat of its wings and the next.

SUPER: "FIRST MEMORY RETRIEVAL -- THE AMERICAN FRONTIER"

SUPER: "MONTANA TERRITORY -- 1874"

EXT. YELLOWSTONE RIVER VALLEY -- DAWN

Not memory watched from outside. Memory worn like skin. This is Kade's own body, three lifetimes removed. His own hands. His own breath. A name he's never spoken yet that already answers when called. Cottonwood trees along a river bend, leaves turning gold. Red bluffs above the valley floor. Grass to every horizon, broken only by a distant herd moving slow as weather. It's the Mongolian steppe in different clothes. Same sky logic. Same breathing. A COOPER'S HAWK rides a thermal above the river. Small. Precise. Rust-barred chest in the morning light. At the back of its head -- the gold-silver marking. She circles. Below, an APSAALOOKE CAMP is waking up.

CUT TO:

EXT. APSAALOOKE CAMP -- CONTINUOUS

BAXÚAWISHE, 22. Crow Nation.

Built for this country and at home in it. He's fletching arrows -- hands working without thought, the way a man does something he's done all his life. At his neck, above the collar of his hide shirt -- the mark. Reddish brown, three curved lines meeting at a point. Warm at its center. He keeps looking up at the hawk. He's been watching her for three days. She hunts the same territory he does. Shows up at the edge of his vision with a regularity that moved past coincidence into something else two days ago. He brought it to the medicine man twice. Both times the answer was the same: Listen. He sets the arrow down and stands.

BAXÚAWISHE
(Apsaalooke, subtitled)
There you are.

He doesn't know why he says it. He's said it every morning for three days.

CUT TO:

EXT. YELLOWSTONE RIVER -- LATER

Baxúawishe moves through the cottonwoods along the bank. Silent. The hawk has been following him, or he's been following the hawk -- the line between the two has blurred. He stops at the river and kneels to drink. The hawk comes down -- not diving, not hunting. Just descending, steady and deliberate. She lands on a branch six feet from his head. They look at each other. The birthmark blazes. The gold-silver marking at her crown catches the river light. Baxúawishe raises his left arm slowly. Just holds it out. The hawk looks at his arm. Looks at his face. Steps off the branch and lands. Her talons find his forearm with a gentleness that has nothing to do with training. The glow pulses under his skin. The hawk's crown flares with the same amber light.

BAXÚAWISHE
(quiet)
How long have we been doing this?

The hawk doesn't look away.

CUT TO:

INT. APSAALOOKE CAMP -- BAXÚAWISHE'S LODGE -- NIGHT

Fire between them. Flames throwing shadows up the lodge poles, long and moving, telling a second story of their own on the walls. The hawk on her stand near the doorway, head tucked, watching the fire the same as they are. GRANDMOTHER looks at the bird a long while. Doesn't ask anything yet. Watches how close it sits to him. Watches how its head turns toward him before he moves, not after. She feeds the fire.

GRANDMOTHER
(Apsaalooke, subtitled)
There was a warrior once, before your grandfather's grandfather. Wounded in a raid. Left behind. The People mourned him three winters before he walked back into camp.

Baxúawishe nods once. Settles in.

GRANDMOTHER
He wouldn't say where, not for a long time. Only that the eagles found him first, and would not take him. The falcons found him next, and would not take him either. It was the hawks who took him in. Small ones. Patient ones.

GRANDMOTHER
They taught him to hunt without a bow for three winters. When he came home he could still smell the wind the way they smell it. His children couldn't. His grandchildren couldn't. But something of it stayed in the family. Thin, like a coal that won't quite go out.

She looks at the hawk again. At how it sits.

GRANDMOTHER
I have wondered, some nights, if that's what I'm looking at.

Baxúawishe looks at the hawk too. Says nothing. The fire settles. She doesn't change her voice at all for what comes next.

GRANDMOTHER
(MORE)

GRANDMOTHER (CONT'D)
There is a white man at the trading post. I have seen him three mornings now, at the tree line, not moving. Yesterday his eyes followed the bird's shadow across the grass and never once went to what was casting it. Today he watched the two of you together. Not the bird. Not you. The two of you, together, the way a man reads one word made of two smaller ones.

She stands. Banks the fire down for the night.

GRANDMOTHER
Keep her close.

She goes. Baxúawishe looks at the hawk. The hawk looks back.

BAXÚAWISHE
(quietly)
She knows something about you.

The hawk blinks. Baxúawishe almost smiles. First time in a while.

CUT TO:

EXT. FRONTIER TRADING POST -- TWO DAYS LATER

SOLOMON REED on the trading post porch. He looks like a preacher -- tall, dark coat, Bible in hand, reassuring face. His eyes are wrong. Older than his face has any right to be. He watches the Apsaalooke people move through the trading post the way a man catalogs, not observes. Baxúawishe comes through the tree line without the hawk. But Reed sees the birthmark at his collar. Just a glimpse.

His expression doesn't change. His eyes do -- recognition and calculation light up and go dark again in under a second.

REED
(to the man beside him, very quiet)
The young man from the trees. Find out his camp.

CUT TO:

EXT. YELLOWSTONE RIVER -- DUSK -- THREE WEEKS LATER

Baxúawishe and the hawk at the river's edge as the sun goes down. They've developed a hunting partnership in three weeks that other hunters in the camp have stopped trying to explain. They just watch and say nothing. Tonight they sit still. Baxúawishe has been trying to find words.

BAXÚAWISHE
(Apsaalooke, subtitled)
I think we've done this before. Not this life. Before this life. Many times.

The hawk is still on his arm. Listening.

BAXÚAWISHE
I think something was done to us. Something that keeps --

The birthmark goes cold. He turns. SOLOMON REED at the tree line. Thirty feet. Bible in hand. Smiling.

REED
(English, subtitled)
Evening. Beautiful bird.

Baxúawishe steps in front of the hawk. Reed's eyes go to the birthmark, then to the hawk, then to the gold-silver crown. The smile holds. His right hand moves to his coat pocket.

REED
I wonder if I might take a closer look.

BAXÚAWISHE
(English, flat)
No.

Reed holds his eyes for a moment. Then tips his hat.

REED
(softly)
Another time perhaps.

He goes back into the trees. Baxúawishe watches the spot long after he's gone. The hawk has drawn herself thin, every feather slicked tight to her body. She makes a low continuous sound that no hawk should make.

BAXÚAWISHE
(quietly)
I know. We move tonight.

CUT TO:

EXT. YELLOWSTONE RIVER VALLEY -- THREE WEEKS LATER -- DUSK

They've been moving camp every few days. Reed moves with them. Always at the edge. Always just outside. Baxúawishe pulls up on a bluff above the river. The hawk comes down and lands on his arm. They're both breathing hard. He looks at her. The glow between them is deep and steady. In the fading light it's all they have. He presses his forehead against her feathered crown. The gold-silver marking is warm against his skin.

BAXÚAWISHE
(worn thin)
Not this time either.

He feels it before he hears it. The birthmark goes cold. An arrow hits him in the shoulder. Not his. He doesn't fall -- but the hawk screams. Not a hawk sound. Something older. Something human. The gold-silver crown starts to glow wrong -- the cold, spreading light of the dark spirit's magic taking hold. Baxúawishe reaches up with his good arm and cups her small body in his hand.

BAXÚAWISHE
(broken)
No. Not yet. We were --

The hawk looks at him. Everything in those eyes. The wrong light spreads. The birthmark starts swelling across his neck. They hold each other's eyes until the light goes out. EXTINGUISHED. The bluff is empty. The river keeps going below. Solomon Reed stands at the tree line. His hand comes out of his coat pocket. He looks at the empty bluff. Something passes through him -- thin, familiar, already fading. Enough to keep going. Never enough to feel finished. Just the worn-down look of someone doing something they can't stop doing.

REED
(tired)
Again.

He goes back into the trees. From somewhere high above, a hawk cry. Already distant. Already gone.

SMASH TO BLACK.

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- THE HOLLOW -- NIGHT -- CONTINUOUS

The steppe comes back. City lights on the horizon. One last image trailing behind the rest -- tarnished metal, a knot of interlocking lines, half-buried under rows of things nobody wants anymore. The moth finishes its wingbeat like it was never interrupted. Kade and Nara pull back from each other. The glow settles. Neither of them speaks for a while. Then Nara pulls back enough to see his face. Her eyes are wet. His jaw is tight.

NARA
(still catching her breath)
Four days.

Kade nods. Can't talk yet.

NARA
We had four days.

KADE
(hoarse)
You landed on my arm.

A sound from Nara that isn't quite a laugh and isn't quite a sob.

KADE
The same weight. Exactly the same weight as your hand right now.

She looks at their joined hands.

NARA
(wonder breaking through the grief)
I felt the birthmark through your
(MORE)

NARA (CONT'D)
skin. From outside. It felt like coming home. Even as a hawk on a stranger's arm on a river I'd never seen.

KADE
(flat, still processing)
Four days and Reed was already there.

NARA
He was watching us from the moment we found each other.

KADE
He was afraid. Under everything -- I could feel it. He was afraid of us.

NARA
Four days and he was afraid.

KADE
Means we're more dangerous than he wants us to know.

NARA
(quietly)
There are more. Deeper ones.

KADE
How far back?

NARA
All the way.

They sit with that. The steppe holds them.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- THE HOLLOW -- THE FOLLOWING MORNING

They try again. Same position. Foreheads touching. Hands joined. The glow is steady but nothing opens. No door. No depth. Just the warmth of being close. After a long time, Nara pulls back.

NARA
(Mongolian, subtitled)
It's closed.

KADE
Like a door that was only open one night.

NARA
Our birthday. He tied the death magic to our birthday. And in doing that he made it the only night we can go back.

They sit with that.

KADE
One night a year. One memory at a time.

NARA
Three more deep ones before the origin.

KADE
Four more years.

NARA
He won't wait four years.

KADE
No. So between birthdays we hunt him with what we have.

NARA
The flashes -- the other memories -- those still come. A Viking ship. Desert heat. An Egyptian river. Seconds only. Not enough to go
(MORE)

NARA (CONT'D)
inside. Just enough to know they happened.

KADE
They confirm the pattern.

NARA
But Sulde is always just a shadow in those. Nothing we can use. The deep ones are what matter.

KADE
(quietly)
Four years to make sure we're still alive when the next one opens.

NARA
(simply)
Then let's not waste them.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- ULAANBAATAR OUTSKIRTS -- NIGHT

SUPER: "THE MONTHS AFTER THE FIRST MEMORY RETRIEVAL"

Kade and Nara ride at a walk, not a hunt tonight -- just two people on horseback with nowhere they need to be. The silence between them has weight.

NARA
(Mongolian, subtitled)
He said one word after. "Again." Like it was the thing he hated most about himself.

KADE
I know.

NARA
That's not a monster's word. A monster doesn't sound tired of what he's doing.

Kade pulls his horse up. Looks at her.

KADE
He still did it, Nara. Tired or not.

NARA
I'm not saying he didn't.

KADE
Then what are you saying?

She's quiet a moment, choosing the words carefully.

NARA
I'm saying I felt what Baxúawishe felt in that arrow. And I felt what the hawk felt dying from it. And neither of those was hatred for the man who did it. It was grief. Grief doesn't ask you to kill something back.

KADE
(carefully)
Doesn't it, sometimes.

NARA
No. It asks you to survive it. That's different.

A long silence. Neither of them wants the next part of this conversation, and both know it's coming anyway.

KADE
(quietly)
We have four years left. Maybe less, if he moves early. I can't spend them hoping he stops on his own.

NARA
I'm not hoping that.

KADE
Then what are you hoping?

She doesn't have an answer yet. That's the truth of it, and she lets him see it.

NARA
I don't know. I just know I don't want the first thing I do with a human body in this life to be taking one.

Kade looks at her a long moment. Not arguing. Just letting that land.

KADE
(quietly)
Neither do I.

He nudges his horse forward. She follows. Neither of them has moved an inch closer to agreement, but for the first time, neither of them is pretending they already agree.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. ANTIQUE FLEA MARKET -- ULAANBAATAR -- DAY

Kade arrives on foot, the birthmark's directional pull gone quiet the moment he crosses into the market -- exactly here, nowhere else. Rows of stalls under patched awnings, tables crowded with Soviet medals, prayer beads, chipped porcelain, tools nobody makes anymore. The DEALER, sharp-eyed, mid-fifties, sits behind his table on a low stool, not calling out to passersby the way some of the other stallholders do. He watches the crowd instead of working it. Kade works the table on his own, unhurried, not performing interest he doesn't have. The dealer watches him do it and says nothing.

KADE
(Mongolian, subtitled)
Do you carry anything from Scotland? Old metalwork.

A pause. The dealer's expression doesn't change, but something in him closes slightly.

DEALER
Foreign pieces are complicated. Papers, mostly. Most stalls don't bother carrying them at all.

KADE
But you do.

DEALER
(non-committal)
I said complicated. Not that I don't.

He doesn't offer anything further. Kade doesn't push -- steps back, looks over the rest of the table instead, in no hurry to leave. The dealer watches him do that too.

DEALER
(slowly, half to himself)
There was a lot, some years back. Estate sale, mixed in with everything else. A few pieces nobody could place.

Something surfaces behind his eyes.

DEALER
There was a small iron thing. Knotwork. I think I still have it, in with the rest.

He reaches under the table into a crate of unsorted stock, digs for a while, comes up with a small object wrapped in cloth. Unwraps it on the table -- a brooch, Celtic knotwork, tarnished black. The moment the cloth falls away, Kade goes still. Not the cold of danger. The same warmth Nara described from the lure. Recognition without a name behind it. The dealer notices. Says nothing about it. Just recalculates, quietly.

DEALER
No papers on this one. No history I can give you. But it's yours if you want it.

KADE
What do you want for it?

DEALER
Hundred twenty.

KADE
Sixty.

DEALER
(not offended -- this is just the shape of the conversation)
Hundred.

KADE
Eighty.

The dealer looks at the brooch, then at Kade. Not calculating anymore -- just done.

DEALER
Ninety. That's fair for both of us.

KADE
Ninety.

They shake on it. The dealer wraps the brooch back up and hands it over. Kade's fingers close around it, and it warms instantly, like it's been waiting in that crate for exactly this hand.

DEALER
Whatever it is. Wherever it's actually from. I hope it was worth the asking.

He's already turning to the next customer before Kade's out of earshot.

CUT TO:

EXT. ULAANBAATAR STREET -- CONTINUOUS

Kade walks away from the market, brooch closed in his fist. He pulls out his phone, texts one-handed. Across the city, on a rooftop terrace, Nara's eagle lands beside her, restless, feathers unsettled for no reason she can name. Nara checks her phone. Reads it. Exhales.

NARA
(to the eagle)
Two.

The eagle's feathers smooth back down, as if she understood.

CUT TO:

INT. SULDE'S ESTATE -- THE STUDY -- NIGHT

Sulde at his desk. He felt it an hour ago -- small, directional, wrong. A thing he scattered forty years ago, moving for the first time. The room is colder than it should be. It has been, off and on, for weeks now. He's stopped mentioning it to anyone. The old ledger is already open in front of him -- a private inventory, handwritten across decades in different inks. His finger on one line.

The Scottish piece. He reads it twice. Then turns back pages. Stops on another line.

SULDE
(ancient Mongolian, to himself)
The lure.

He sits very still. Not one misplaced thing. Two. This has never happened. Not once, in all the years he's carried this. Things he discards stay discarded. Nobody has ever gone looking. He doesn't say what he's afraid of. Doesn't need to. It already knows.

SULDE
(sharp)
That's not possible.

He picks up his phone. Doesn't dial. Just holds it, thinking.

SULDE
(quietly)
Someone's following the thread backward.

He looks toward the window. Toward the city.

SULDE
Move the rest. Tonight.

FADE TO BLACK.

SUPER: "ONE YEAR LATER"

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- THE HOLLOW -- NIGHT

The same hollow. One year deeper. Kade and Nara have changed -- something settled in them that wasn't there before. The glow between them is richer than it was a year ago. More layered. Between them, the brooch -- tarnished black, warm now from Kade's own hand -- held in their joined hands.

KADE
(Mongolian, subtitled)
It's there. Further back than the frontier.

NARA
This one is longer. I can feel the weight of it. Months.

They lean forward, the brooch still held between them. The glow deepens.

KADE AND NARA
(together, steadier now)
Eoin.

The door opens further than last year. The steppe dissolves. For one instant, the grass stops moving. Then it's gone, and so are they.

SUPER: "SECOND MEMORY RETRIEVAL -- THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS"

SUPER: "GLEN URQUHART, SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS -- 1314"

EXT. GLEN URQUHART MOOR -- DAWN -- EARLY AUTUMN

Different from Montana. Older and closer. The moor presses in from every direction -- heather purple and grey, granite outcroppings like bones sticking up through the earth. Low cloud moving fast across a bruised sky. Everything wet. Everything permanent. A PEREGRINE FALCON rides the wind above the moor. Larger than the Cooper's hawk. The gold-silver marking fuller here. More of her in this form than in the last. She circles. Below, a single figure crosses the moor on foot. She's been keeping pace with him for three days.

CUT TO:

EXT. GLEN URQUHART MOOR -- CONTINUOUS

EOIN, 21. Built for this country. Longbow across his back. A plaid wrap worn down by weather. At his neck -- the mark, darker here against his wind- reddened skin, the talon-shape unmistakable now. He walks with his eyes on the sky. On the falcon.

EOIN
(Scots Gaelic, subtitled)
You're back then.

She banks lower. He stops and holds out his bare arm -- no glove, no training, just the gesture his body knows to make. She circles twice and lands. Her talons find his forearm with a care that has nothing to do with instinct. The birthmark blazes. The gold-silver crown responds. The glow comes up between them against the grey Highland morning.

EOIN
(rough)
Every morning you don't come, I count it against me. Against something. Don't ken what yet.

He doesn't smile. Doesn't need to.

CUT TO:

EXT. GLEN URQUHART VILLAGE -- LATER

A small settlement on the River Enrick. Market day. Thin. Muddy. Scotland is at war and everything shows it. Eoin moves through the market with the falcon on his arm. An OLD WOMAN at her herb stall catches sight of the bird and goes still -- just for a moment -- before her hands find their work again, bundling and tying, never quite stopping.

OLD WOMAN
(mix of Scots and Gaelic, subtitled)
Come here, son. Slowly. Let folk see you've naught to hide.

He comes closer. She doesn't look at his face. Looks at the bird.

OLD WOMAN
That's no barnyard hawk. That's an earl's bird. A king's bird. A commoner caught with a peregrine on his arm answers for it same as a poacher answers for the king's deer -- with his hands, if he's fortunate.

Her fingers keep working. Tie, pull, tie.

OLD WOMAN
And yet there she sits. Chose you her own self, didn't she. I can see it plain -- no jesses, no hood, no man's hand ever taught her that grip.

EOIN
The moor. She found me.

OLD WOMAN
Aye. That's the trouble of it. What chooses on its own, answers to no one's claim but its own -- and that makes men look twice. Both kinds of men. The kind that fears God, and the kind that wears his coat and fears naught.

The wheel of her hands doesn't slow.

OLD WOMAN
There's a man come to the village three days past. Black coat, soft voice, claims himself sent down from the Bishop of St Andrews. Friar Solomon.

Her hands don't stop.

OLD WOMAN
Asking after bloodlines. Whose father was whose. Who holds land, who's owed land, who might have more to him than a plaid and a longbow.

EOIN
Asking after me?

OLD WOMAN
Asking after a hunter who keeps company with a bird no hunter ought to have. The lineage questions came after. Almost as if he'd near forgot to ask them.

EOIN
He stopped me on the road yesterday. Wanted to see the bird.

OLD WOMAN
(sharply, hands stopping for the first time)
Did he touch her?

EOIN
No. I didn't allow it.

Her hands start again. Slower.

OLD WOMAN
Good. I kent a woman once found a hind in the birch wood, white as milk, followed sweet as anything to her door. She let it in. By Martinmas the whole house was bone. The hide had been wearing her the whole while, not the other way round.

She ties off the last bundle. Sets it down.

OLD WOMAN
A bird no man can claim, and a man of God who wants to hold her anyway. Keep both close in mind, and her closer still on your arm. Don't let him find you alone.

CUT TO:

EXT. GLEN URQUHART MOOR -- THE FOLLOWING MONTHS

Weeks go by. Then two months. -- Eoin at dawn, the falcon launching from his arm into grey sky. -- The falcon stooping on prey -- impossibly fast -- a commitment that makes watching hunters go quiet. -- Evenings. Eoin's small stone shelter on the moor. The falcon on the threshold perch -- not inside, not outside. Her own rule, her own boundary. -- Rain. Both of them under a granite overhang. Both soaked. Neither bothered. The glow warm against the grey wet world. Friar Solomon at the edges. Always the edges. Watching.

Waiting for his window.

CUT TO:

EXT. GLEN URQUHART MOOR -- TWO MONTHS IN -- DUSK

Eoin on a granite outcropping with a piece of charcoal and a flat stone. He's been trying to draw a face for weeks. The face from the dreams. He holds the stone up, looks at it, looks at the falcon.

EOIN
(Scots Gaelic, subtitled)
Still not right.

The falcon tilts her head.

EOIN
I think you were a girl once. And I think someone decided he could take that away from you.

The falcon steps onto his arm and walks up to his shoulder. Presses her head against his cheek. The gold-silver marking warm against his skin.

EOIN
(quietly)
I'm going to find a way to give it back. I don't know how yet. But I will.

At the moor's edge, barely visible in the fading light -- Friar Solomon. Not calculating tonight. Just watching.

FRIAR SOLOMON
(Latin, half under his breath)
(MORE)

FRIAR SOLOMON (CONT'D)
Dominus regit me, et nihil mihi deerit.

He stops. Almost laughs at himself -- a short, joyless sound.

FRIAR SOLOMON
(quietly, to no one)
The Lord is my shepherd. I have told that to dying men in four parishes and never once asked myself what shepherds do to the things that follow them.

A man who has been doing this for two months and isn't entirely sure anymore that he can keep doing it. He stands there a long time. Then walks back into the Highland dark. The calculation will return. But not tonight.

CUT TO:

INT. FRIAR SOLOMON'S CHAMBER -- THE LAIRD'S HOUSE -- NIGHT

Small room. One candle. Friar Solomon at a rough table with the components in front of him -- cloth bundle open, juniper berries counted, herbs in their pouches, black hellebore dried and ready. And at the center of it all, the carved summoning vessel. Ancient. Worn smooth by many uses. He has everything he needs. He's had everything for six weeks. He hasn't moved. His hands are flat on the table. Not moving.

FRIAR SOLOMON
(ancient Mongolian, to himself)
Do it. You have everything. The window is open. Do it now.

His hands don't move. He closes his eyes. The moor is there behind them. The glow between Eoin and the falcon. Warm in the grey evening. Two months of that. He opens his eyes.

FRIAR SOLOMON
(quietly)
It doesn't matter what you feel. It never mattered.

He reaches for the summoning vessel. His hands begin to move. Preparing.

CUT TO:

EXT. GLEN URQUHART MOOR -- THREE DAYS LATER -- BEFORE DAWN

The falcon is on her threshold perch. She hasn't slept. Her head turns east. Her feathers pull in flat against her body, one slow wave from crown to tail. Braced.

CUT TO:

EXT. GLEN URQUHART MOOR -- HALF A MILE EAST -- CONTINUOUS

Two fires. Sagebrush in one -- hot, solar, reaching up. Mugwort in the other -- slow, lunar, spreading low. Friar Solomon between them. The astronomical window has been open for an hour. He speaks the summoning words. Old Mongolian. Pre-Christian. The kind of language that goes down into the dark places of the steppe where things older than human memory wait for someone to call them. The smoke thickens around the vessel. A shape forms in it -- not quite a shape. KHARANKHUI EZEN. The Dark Master. Answering. The spirit moves through the smoke, into the vessel, into Solomon. His body locks up. His eyes go dark. Something else looks out through them. A voice comes out of his mouth that isn't his. Lower. Older. It speaks the final words of the curse and blows the hellebore powder across the feather. The spell goes out.

CUT TO:

EXT. EOIN'S SHELTER -- CONTINUOUS

The falcon SCREAMS. Eoin is up and out the door before he's fully awake. Birthmark blazing cold. He runs. The falcon is already in the air, heading east toward the fires.

EOIN
(running)
No -- come back --

He falls once in the dark. Up immediately. Running. He can see the fires now. Friar Solomon between them -- the spirit beginning to withdraw back through the smoke, the ritual complete. Eoin draws at a dead sprint. The falcon stoops at Solomon from above. Eoin releases. The arrow hits Solomon in the shoulder. Not the heart. The shoulder. Solomon staggers. But it's done. The spell is already in the air. Already finding the falcon. She cries out. Eoin reaches her. Gets his hands around her small body. The marking spreads -- wrong light, wrong color. His birthmark swells across his neck.

EOIN
(broken)
I almost had him. I almost --

The falcon looks at him. All of her, all of what she is, looking out through those eyes. Refusing to look away even as the light builds wrong.

EOIN
(low, fierce)
Next time. I swear it. Next time I won't miss.

The light goes out. EXTINGUISHED. The moor is empty. The fires die. Friar Solomon on his knees, arrow in his shoulder, blood on the heather. The spirit is gone -- back to whatever dark place it came from. Solomon is alone with what was just done through his hands. He pulls the arrow out. Looks at it. Doesn't bind the wound. Just sits there in the dying firelight with the arrow across his knees and blood running down his arm.

FRIAR SOLOMON
(ancient Mongolian, wounded)
He said next time.

The moor wind moves through the heather.

FRIAR SOLOMON
(barely a breath)
He won't miss next time.

He stands. Binds his shoulder with a strip of cloth. Looks north. The calculation comes back. But slower than before. And something has cracked in him that won't fully close again.

SMASH TO BLACK.

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- THE HOLLOW -- NIGHT -- CONTINUOUS

Hours have passed. The city lights have shifted. One last image, sharper than the others -- black lacquer gone matte and cracked, sitting under glass beside documents nobody's touched in decades. Somewhere, the grass starts moving again. Kade and Nara pull back from each other slowly.

NARA
(voice unsteady)
You drew my face.

KADE
(rough)
I could never get it right.

NARA
I watched you try. Every night from the threshold. Watching you sleep. Watching you draw. Watching you talk to me when you didn't have the words yet.

Her jaw tightens.

NARA
You said you were going to find a way to give it back to me.

KADE
I remember saying it.

NARA
(almost inaudible)
I wanted so badly to answer you.

He takes her face in his hands.

KADE
You're answering me now.

She closes her eyes. Leans into his hands.

KADE
Friar Solomon. We could see him differently together. The broken thing underneath all of it. He didn't want to do it.

NARA
He did it anyway.

KADE
Yes. The arrow hit him though. Shoulder. Not heart. Eoin said next time.

NARA
He came three feet short in Japan.

KADE
We haven't been to Japan yet. Next year.

A long silence.

NARA
(quietly)
Six weeks. He had everything he needed for six weeks and couldn't make his hands move.

KADE
And then he made them.

NARA
When I was the falcon, hating him was simple. It filled the whole sky.

KADE
And now?

NARA
Now I've watched him sit alone in a room, talking himself into it.

NARA
(beat)
Don't ask me to pity him.

KADE
I'm not asking.

NARA
He hesitated. Actually hesitated -- I felt it. Whatever face he's wearing out there, some part of him is still choosing this. Every single day, still choosing it.

KADE
Then that's what we saw tonight. Somewhere under all of it, a man who wanted to stop.

NARA
Wanting isn't stopping.

KADE
No. It isn't.
(then)
But no one has ever asked him to.

Nara looks at the city glow on the southern horizon. Somewhere under it, a man with eyes that don't match anything else about him. Choosing. She leans into Kade. The steppe goes quiet around them.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. KADE AND NARA'S APARTMENT -- ULAANBAATAR -- NIGHT

SUPER: "THE MONTHS AFTER THE SECOND MEMORY RETRIEVAL"

Kade's drawings cover every wall now -- years of fragments given shape. Nara stands at the window, arms crossed, not looking at him.

NARA
(Mongolian, subtitled)
The old woman in Scotland knew
(MORE)

NARA (CONT'D)
exactly what he was. Told Eoin to his face. And still Eoin loved that falcon enough to almost let her choose her own danger.

KADE
Eoin still put an arrow in him.

NARA
An arrow that missed. Or an arrow that never got drawn at all. Doesn't that tell you anything?

KADE
It tells me none of them were close enough, or steady enough, or --

NARA
Or none of them actually wanted to kill him.

That lands hard. Kade goes quiet.

KADE
(low)
You think I don't want to?

NARA
I think you've decided you have to, and you stopped asking yourself whether you want to. I haven't stopped asking.

KADE
Because you still feel sorry for him.

NARA
I feel sorry for a boy who got told no by a girl he loved and spent the rest of forever unable to let it go. I'm not excusing what he did with it. I just feel both things at once.

KADE
Isn't it? You're describing him like a wound instead of a weapon.

NARA
(sharper than she means)
Maybe because I've been the weapon in every life he's used, Kade. I've watched from inside a bird's eyes -- hawk, falcon, whatever shape he left me in that time -- never once given hands to lose. I get to decide what that makes him.

Silence. This is the furthest apart they've stood since the festival.

KADE
(quietly)
If we don't end this, it happens again. Not just to us. Whatever child gets born with your streak next time, whatever boy gets born with my mark -- they inherit this. Forever. Is that the mercy you want for them?

Nara doesn't have an answer. She looks out at the city, at the dark beyond it.

NARA
(barely audible)
I don't know how to want him dead and still be the person who felt what I felt in that rain with Eoin. I don't know how to hold both of those.

KADE
(gently, but not backing down)
Maybe you're not supposed to hold both. Maybe you're supposed to choose.

NARA
That's easy for you. You've never had to be inside him the way I've been inside every version of me he's broken.

That's unfair and she knows it the second she says it. Kade doesn't flinch, but something closes in his face.

KADE
(quietly)
No. I've just had to watch you die in my arms nineteen times and decide, every single time, to come back and do it again anyway. That's not nothing either.

Nara has no answer for that. She turns and leaves the room. Kade doesn't follow her. He sits alone for a long time among all the drawings -- every face Zairan has ever worn, staring back at him from every wall.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. DOJO -- ULAANBAATAR -- DAY

Kade follows the pull through a part of the city he's never had reason to visit, fainter than the first two but unmistakable -- it settles the moment he reaches the entrance.

A small traditional training hall tucked between modern buildings. Wooden floors worn smooth by decades of bare feet. Practice swords and scrolls line the walls. The SENSEI, seventies, moves through a line of students correcting stances -- sharp corrections, no wasted words, the kind of discipline that doesn't soften for anyone in the room. Kade stops at the threshold. Doesn't cross it. Bows from the waist, spine straight, eyes down -- then waits. The sensei doesn't turn. But he's clocked it -- the pause, the bow, the fact that Kade hasn't moved since. Deliberately, he finishes the correction he's mid-way through before acknowledging anyone waiting. Only then does he cross the floor. Kade straightens as he approaches -- hands at his sides, eyes meeting the sensei's directly.

SENSEI
(Mongolian, subtitled -- flat, sizing him up)
You're not here for a class.

KADE
No, Sensei. I won't take much of your time. I'm looking for
(MORE)

KADE (CONT'D)
something that may have been given to this dojo, a long time ago.

The sensei studies him a moment longer than the sentence requires -- not the words. The stillness Kade's holding. The economy in it.

SENSEI
(a small, private note of approval)
Whoever taught you to stand like that didn't teach you here.

KADE
No one taught me. It's just how I hold still when something matters.

The sensei almost smiles. Doesn't.

SENSEI
Follow.

He crosses to a modest glass case mounted between two scrolls on the side wall -- doesn't slow down, doesn't explain, expects Kade to keep pace without being told.

SENSEI
Old donations. Documents. A case. Nobody in this building has touched them in my lifetime, and I've been here longer than the building next door.

Kade crosses to it. Inside: a few yellowed documents under glass, brittle at the corners, ink faded to brown. Beside them, a small lacquered arrowhead case, black lacquer gone matte and cracked. The birthmark, warm under his collar as it's been for years, pulses once, sharper than usual.

KADE
(quietly)
Can this be opened?

The sensei doesn't answer immediately. This is the actual test -- not the bow, not the posture. This.

SENSEI
(finally)
I don't open it for students. I don't open it for the curious.

SENSEI
(weighing him)
You didn't ask to see it. You asked to open it. Most people don't know there's a difference. That's the only reason I'm about to say yes.

He unlocks the case himself. Doesn't hand Kade the key.

SENSEI
Take what you came for. Leave what isn't yours.

Kade lifts the case out with both hands -- the correct way, the respectful way, and the sensei notes that too. The warmth spreads up his arm, settles behind his sternum next to the others.

SENSEI
Whatever it is you're carrying, carry it the way you just carried yourself in here. That's the only advice I have for a man who won't stay for the lesson.

KADE
(a small bow -- genuine this time, not etiquette)
Thank you, Sensei.

The sensei's already walking back to his students before Kade's reached the door.

CUT TO:

EXT. ULAANBAATAR STREET -- CONTINUOUS

Kade steps out, three artifacts now carried against his chest. He doesn't reach for his phone yet -- something's different this time. A prickle at the back of his neck. He stops. Looks back toward the dojo. A FIGURE half a block down, standing too still for someone just waiting for a bus. Young. Composed. Utterly still in a way the street around him isn't. Watching the dojo entrance -- not Kade. He hasn't been made yet. SULDE. Kade doesn't react outwardly. Turns, walks the opposite direction, pulse loud in his own ears.

CUT TO:

EXT. ULAANBAATAR ROOFTOPS -- CONTINUOUS

Nara's eagle rides a thermal above the district, tracking Kade's route from above out of old habit. She banks, catches sight of the still figure across from the dojo. Goes rigid mid-air. Drops altitude fast, peeling off toward Nara.

CUT TO:

INT. SULDE'S ESTATE -- THE STUDY -- LATER THAT NIGHT

Sulde enters, sets down his coat. Goes to an old file -- a record of the dojo donation, decades old, kept out of habit rather than need. He opens it. Stops. He's confirming what he already knows some other way. A pull. An absence felt rather than seen. He sets the file down.

SULDE
(ancient Mongolian, to himself)
The Kyoto piece.

He goes to the window. The city below, indifferent, enormous, full of places he's hidden things across more years than he lets himself count.

SULDE
(quietly)
Three now.

He looks toward the desk drawer, where the botanical illustration of the black hellebore waits, not yet placed for anyone to find. Not yet decided whether it's bait or surrender.

SULDE
(barely a breath)
Not yet.

He sits. Doesn't turn on the light.

FADE TO BLACK.

SUPER: "ONE YEAR LATER"

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- THE HOLLOW -- NIGHT

The hollow again. Two years of coming here has worn the grass at the edges slightly. The land knows them now. Kade and Nara sit together. Two years older. The change isn't in their faces -- it's in how they take up space. They're not two people finding each other anymore. They're just together. Between them, the arrowhead case -- black lacquer gone matte and cracked, held in their joined hands.

NARA
(Mongolian, subtitled)
It's not waiting tonight. It's been pushing all year.

KADE
Three years inside it. This one will take most of the night.

NARA
We'll see dawn from inside before we see it out here.

They lean forward, the case still held between them. The glow opens wide.

KADE AND NARA
(together, certain)
Haruki.

Not a door this time. A world. For one instant, a fox in the distance is frozen mid-step. Then gone, and so are they.

SUPER: "THIRD MEMORY RETRIEVAL -- FEUDAL JAPAN"

SUPER: "YEAR ONE"

SUPER: "FEUDAL JAPAN -- 1185"

EXT. KYOTO VALLEY -- DAWN -- AUTUMN -- 1185

Crystal air. Light coming through cedar and pine at precise angles, gold bars moving through morning mist. A mountain valley outside the capital. Cherry trees losing their last leaves. Each one falls like it means something. This is the closest we've been to Mongolia. The air knows it. A GOLDEN EAGLE rides the mountain thermal. Massive. Unhurried. Nothing like the Cooper's hawk's speed or the peregrine's precision -- this is something older. At the back of her head, the gold-silver marking. Fuller than it's ever been. Almost what it was meant to be. She circles the valley. Below -- a temple complex. And on the practice ground, a figure with a bow.

CUT TO:

EXT. TEMPLE PRACTICE GROUND -- CONTINUOUS

HARUKI, 20. Young samurai, middle rank, Takasho -- a falconer of the school before he is anything else. He carries the stillness of a man whose discipline has become his nature. At his neck, just above the collar -- the same mark.

Three curved lines, old as the world he's standing in. Bow at full draw. Target sixty meters out -- the discipline that keeps a falconer's hand steady for the birds under his care. He hasn't released. He's watching the eagle. She descends. He lowers the bow. She lands on the practice ground fence ten feet away. They look at each other. The birthmark blazes. The gold-silver crown responds. The glow comes up between them in the cold morning air. Haruki sets down the bow. Every bird he has ever flown, he could name by its house and its master's master. This one answers to no hand he has ever heard of. He steps toward her. She holds. He stops three feet away. Drops to one knee -- not a crouch, a bow. The formal bow of a samurai for something of equal or greater rank.

HARUKI
(Japanese, subtitled)
I have been waiting for you.

CUT TO:

INT. TEMPLE -- LATER

Haruki kneels at the threshold, forehead near the mat, and waits. He does not look up. He does not speak first. This is not humility performed for an audience -- it is simply how a threshold is crossed in this house. A long silence. The SOKE studies the eagle on the stand in the corner without acknowledging Haruki at all. This, too, is the lesson -- the waiting is not empty time, it is the first instruction. Finally:

SOKE
(Japanese, subtitled)
A goshawk answers to a house. A falcon answers to a sky. Name me the house this one answers to.

HARUKI
I cannot, Soke.

SOKE
Then you already know more than you think you don't.

He moves closer to the eagle. She holds his gaze with those amber eyes. He stops. Studies the gold-silver marking. His jaw tightens -- the only thing in his face that moves.

SOKE
A Yamabushi came down off the mountain two days past. Offering purification for the clan. He asked whether you had family. Whether anyone would count the days if you were gone.

He lets that sit. Doesn't explain it. Doesn't need to.

SOKE
I told him you belong to this house, and this house does not misplace what belongs to it.

Haruki bows lower. Says nothing.

SOKE
A hawk that will not name its house, and a mountain man asking who would grieve you, in the same
(MORE)

SOKE (CONT'D)
turning of the moon. I have led this lineage forty years. I did not survive them by believing in accidents.

A long beat. Haruki still hasn't moved.

SOKE
(quieter, almost to himself)
Water does not ask the stone why it is in the river. It only learns, in time, to move around it.

He turns. Walks toward the door. Stops without facing Haruki again.

SOKE
Meditate on that until you understand it. You have less time than you think.

CUT TO:

EXT. TEMPLE GARDENS -- EVENING

Haruki on a flat stone in the lantern-lit garden. Eagle on a low branch. The memories have been coming all day -- stronger here than anywhere, closer to the origin.

HARUKI
(Japanese, subtitled)
I see open grass. Farther than trees grow. I see you -- not as you are now. Standing in the grass. Your hair caught the light the same way this marking does. Like the sun chose it.

He reaches toward the crown. She leans into his hand.

HARUKI
I think someone took something from you. I think I've been trying to find you across more lives than I can count.

The birthmark goes cold. Both of them turn toward the garden gate at the same time. SORU in the gateway. White pilgrim robes, travel-worn. The small black tokin bound at his brow. A string of beads wound through folded hands. A conch-shell horn and a worn walking staff, both slung across his back the way a man carries tools he's used for centuries, not decades. Serene face. Ancient eyes. Tonight Haruki sees through the costume for the first time. What's underneath is vast and damaged and very, very old. For just a moment he feels pity.

SORU
(Japanese, subtitled)
Magnificent bird.

Haruki stands between Soru and the eagle.

HARUKI
What do you want?

SORU
(mild)
To speak. Warrior to --

HARUKI
You're not a warrior.

Something flickers in those wrong eyes. Almost human.

SORU
(quietly)
No. I'm not.

He looks at the eagle. His hands tighten inside his sleeves.

SORU
Do you know what she is?

HARUKI
Yes.

SORU
(surprised)
You remember.

HARUKI
Enough.

Soru studies him. This is new. The calculation shifts. And underneath it, for just a second -- fear.

SORU
(very quietly)
Then you know how this ends.

HARUKI
I know how it's always ended. I don't believe it has to end that way again.

The broken thing surfaces in Soru's face. Fuller here than in Scotland or the frontier. Something working its way up through the compulsion he's carried for centuries. Almost making it. Then the calculation closes back over it.

SORU
(cold)
You don't know what I know.

HARUKI
Then tell me.

The longest silence. Soru looks at his own hands. Folds them back into his sleeves.

SORU
(turning away)
Sleep well, warrior.

He goes back through the gate. Haruki watches him leave.

HARUKI
(quietly, to himself)
He wanted to stop.

The eagle makes a soft deliberate sound.

HARUKI
I know. Doesn't matter what he wants. We move at first light.

SUPER: "ONE YEAR PASSES"

SUPER: "YEAR TWO"

EXT. MOUNTAIN VALLEY -- SPRING -- 1186

A valley far enough from the temple that Soru can't reach them easily. Haruki and the eagle have built something here in a year -- a working grammar between hunter and bird that other hunters have stopped trying to explain. A morning hunt. The eagle launches without signal. Climbs. Haruki moves left, cuts off the angle. The deer bolts directly into his sightline. He releases. Clean. The eagle mantles over the catch and steps aside when Haruki arrives -- making room, not retreating. The trust of two hunters who know each other completely.

HARUKI
(Japanese, subtitled)
Good morning.

The eagle blinks. He almost smiles. He's been almost smiling for a year. That evening at the valley's edge, looking down at the distant temple:

HARUKI
I found his garden. Under the east wall. He's been growing the death flower. I destroyed it last week. He'll grow more. But it buys time.

The eagle listens.

HARUKI
He's changing. Something is happening to him. He's tired -- not like a man is tired. Like something very old that has been under weight for too long.

The eagle makes a sound.

HARUKI
I know. Don't mistake it for weakness.

CUT TO:

INT. SORU'S GUEST QUARTERS -- TEMPLE -- SAME NIGHT

Soru at the window. Looking at the mountain. Three years of them. Longer than any cycle he can remember.

SORU
(ancient Mongolian, to the empty room)
He's patient in a way I taught him to be. Every cycle of pursuit made the hunter better. I've been building the thing that will destroy me.

He looks at his hands.

SORU
(hollow)
I cannot win.

He sits with that. First time those words have existed in his head in longer than he can remember. He looks at the hellebore garden through the window. Growing again. Third planting. He'll have components in two months. The window opens in three. He can reset this cycle. Begin again. He sits for a long time without moving.

SORU
(to himself)
Plant it a fourth time if you have to. A hundredth. It won't change what you already know.

The candle. The mountain. The silence.

SUPER: "ANOTHER YEAR PASSES"

SUPER: "YEAR THREE"

EXT. MOUNTAIN VALLEY -- WINTER -- 1187

Snow on everything. Haruki and the eagle at the highest point of the valley. The eagle on his arm, not working -- just there. As she always is.

HARUKI
(Japanese, subtitled)
Found the new garden. He hid it better this time. Northern face of the temple wall. I destroyed it
(MORE)

HARUKI (CONT'D)
again. He'll grow more. But each time it takes months and the components degrade and --

He looks at the eagle.

HARUKI
I almost have it. The name. The first name. It's right there -- in the deepest part of what I can remember -- I can almost touch it.

The eagle makes a sound. Low. Deliberate.

HARUKI
I know. I have to find it myself.

CUT TO:

EXT. MOUNTAIN PASS -- DAWN -- TWO MONTHS LATER

High ground. Haruki moving north. The eagle above, matching his pace. Three years of this. The glow between them the fullest it's been in any cycle. He stops at the top of the pass. The eagle lands on his arm. They look at each other.

HARUKI
(Japanese, subtitled)
I can almost see it. The first place. The first time. I can almost --

He closes his eyes. She presses her head against his cheek. And for one moment -- he sees it. Tall grass. A girl laughing. His own hands, younger, the same.

A name forming -- The birthmark goes cold. The eagle SCREAMS. SORU behind them on the pass. Robes replaced by something older. Hands already moving. Two fires lit on the pass stones. The summoning vessel at the center. The smoke already thickening. KHARANKHUI EZEN moves through the smoke. Into the vessel. Into Soru. His body locks. His eyes go dark. Haruki draws. Full draw. Instantaneous -- three years of this moment in his hands. The eagle launches. Both moving at the same time. The spirit speaks the final words through Soru's mouth. Haruki releases. The arrow -- THREE FEET SHORT. The spell lands. The eagle cries out. The gold-silver crown blazes wrong. Haruki reaches her. Gets his hands around her.

HARUKI
(broken)
I had the name. I almost had the name --

She looks at him. Three years of eyes. Everything in them. Every morning. Every hunt. Every almost. She doesn't look away.

HARUKI
(barely a breath)
I will find it. I swear it.

The light goes out. EXTINGUISHED. The pass is empty. The spirit withdraws. Soru alone. His own eyes back. The arrow on the pass stones. Three feet short. He doesn't pick it up. He sits down in the snow, heavily, like a man whose legs have made a decision he wasn't consulted on. He sits there a long time. Snow covers the ritual fire. Covers the arrow. Covers everything. His face is just a face now. Tired. More present in his own existence than he's been in a very long time.

SORU
(ancient Mongolian, resigned)
I cannot win.

In his cell two months ago -- a thought. On the mountain -- the truth.

SORU
(barely a breath)
I never could.

He closes his eyes. For just a moment the compulsion and calculation and broken thing all fall away and what's left is just Bilgüün. Young. Standing in tall Mongolian grass. Before all of it. Carrying the seed of everything he would become. He opens his eyes. Stands. Walks north. Toward the next lifetime. Carrying something new that doesn't have a name yet. It will find one in Ulaanbaatar. In a study full of artifacts. In the face of a man who has been waiting a very long time and is almost ready to let them finish it.

SMASH TO BLACK.

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- THE HOLLOW -- DAWN -- CONTINUOUS

The pre-dawn steppe. Hours have passed. Somewhere in the grass, that same fox finishes its step and is gone. Kade and Nara pull back from each other. Three years in a single night. Neither speaks for a long time.

KADE
(Mongolian, subtitled)
Three feet.

Nara nods.

KADE
(still winded from it)
Three years and three feet.

NARA
(finally, worn thin)
I watched you destroy the garden. Twice. From above. You came back each time with mud on your hands and that look on your face.

KADE
I felt you up there. I thought it was the wind.

NARA
It wasn't the wind.

KADE
The panels. The paintings.

NARA
You never got the face right.

KADE
(quietly)
I needed to see it from your side.

NARA
And now?

KADE
(steady, deliberate)
Now I could paint it exactly.

Nara looks away at the dawn coming up.

NARA
Soru on the pass. Something was breaking in him. Three years of watching us did something that four days and two months couldn't.

KADE
He sat down in the snow and didn't move. He's tired.

NARA
He's not stopped. He's just tired.

KADE
No. But it means something for the end.

The dawn comes fully. The steppe goes gold.

NARA
(small)
I'm afraid of the origin.

KADE
I know.

NARA
(MORE)

NARA (CONT'D)
We were happy. Before. And then it was taken. Feeling that from inside --

He moves. Gets his arms around her. She puts her face against his chest.

KADE
(quietly)
Two more years. Then we go there together.

NARA
Promise me.

KADE
I promise you.

She nods. Takes his hand. The steppe waits.

FADE TO GOLD.

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- THE HOLLOW -- NIGHT

Three years of coming here. The hollow has a smoothness to it now from their presence. The land has learned them. Tonight something is off.

KADE
(Mongolian, subtitled)
Something's wrong.

NARA
Not wrong. Different. He's been moving faster this month. Less time at the museum. More time at the estate.

KADE
The hellebore. He's close.

NARA
If he moves before next year we won't have the origin.

She takes his hands.

NARA
Whatever comes tonight, we take it.

They lean forward. The glow opens -- and instead of one memory: The hollow catches for one instant, same as it always does. This time it doesn't let go. It just keeps falling.

SUPER: "FOURTH MEMORY RETRIEVAL -- THE FLASH MEMORIES"

Many. Not a door. A flood. The memories too numerous to enter fully -- they wash through in flashes, each one a second: -- A longship on a grey northern sea. A GYRFALCON on the prow. A Norse archer at the stern. The marking. The birthmark. The glow across the deck. Three days before a storm. -- Ancient Rome. The Colosseum's shadow. A LANNER FALCON on a marble column. A soldier with a recurve bow across his back. Six months before the legion moved east. -- The Silk Road. Desert heat. A SAKER FALCON on a merchant's pack horse. The merchant -- young, birthmark the color of the desert at dusk. Four months to Samarkand. -- Viking Age Iceland. Black volcanic rock. A MERLIN on a stone above a fjord. A hunter below. Two months before winter. -- Ancient Persia. A walled garden. A PEREGRINE. A young archer at a palace wall. A year before the invasion. -- Ancient Egypt. The Nile in flood. A STEPPE EAGLE on the thermal above the valley. A man with a composite bow. Six weeks before the season ended. -- More. More. More. Thousands of lives, too many to count. Each one the same life. The hunter and the bird. The birthmark and the marking. The glow. The connection. The loss. Again and again and again. So many times, so many years, so many losses.

CUT TO:

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- THE HOLLOW -- NIGHT -- CONTINUOUS

They come back hard. Both breathing like they've been running. No easing back this time -- time didn't hold anything for them. It just let go. Neither speaks for a long time. Nara makes a sound that isn't a sob -- something deeper than that. There isn't a word for what you need when you've just felt thousands of lifetimes of loss hit you at once. Kade pulls her against him. His eyes stay open. Looking at the city. At the place where Sulde's estate sits beyond the museum and the streets. His face isn't grief. It's resolve.

KADE
(measured, holding it together by will alone)
How many?

NARA
(muffled against his chest)
I stopped counting.

KADE
Thousands.

Silence.

NARA
Thousands.

KADE
Egypt. Rome. The ships. The lives don't touch, Nara. There's dark between them -- sometimes a season. Sometimes ages.

NARA
It starts us again when it's hungry. Not before.

She pulls back. Looks at him. His face is set.

NARA
(something harder now)
We protect this year. Whatever it takes. One more year and we get the origin.

KADE
And if we can't keep him off long enough?

NARA
Then we hunt him with what we have.

He looks at her. Centuries looking back at him from one face.

KADE
(quietly)
When did you become this?

NARA
I've always been this. You just couldn't hear me say it.

He presses his forehead against hers. Not the retrieval position. Just this. Just them. Alive and here.

KADE
(quiet, resolved)
One more year.

NARA
One more year.

The steppe holds them. The glow between them steady and patient as the grass.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. KADE'S APARTMENT -- ULAANBAATAR -- NIGHT

The drawings that used to cover every surface have been cleared to one wall, replaced by something more ordered. Three objects laid out on the low table between them: the worn hawk lure, the tarnished Celtic brooch, the lacquered arrowhead case. Kade and Nara sit across from each other, the way they did after the festival, except nothing about this feels new anymore. It feels like work.

NARA
(Mongolian, subtitled)
Three.

KADE
Three.

Neither touches the objects. They've learned to let the warmth come to them rather than reaching for it too fast.

NARA
And still nothing. No names. No
(MORE)

NARA (CONT'D)
understanding of the curse. Just -- objects.

KADE
They're not finished with us yet.

He picks up the lure. Turns it over.

KADE
Each one gave us the last. Montana led to Scotland. Scotland led to Japan.

NARA
Which means Japan should lead somewhere.

KADE
It hasn't yet.

They sit with that. The birthmark at Kade's neck pulses faintly, steady, the way it has for years. The streak in Nara's hair catches the lamp light.

NARA
Maybe it's not a place this time.

Kade looks up.

NARA
Maybe it's a when. The origin. The soul retrieval. We haven't had it yet. Everything before it has been leading somewhere we can't reach until we do.

Kade considers this. Sets the lure back down beside the other two.

KADE
Then whatever's left waits for our birthday. Same as always.

NARA
(MORE)

NARA (CONT'D)
Not the same. Never the same again. This year we go into it holding three pieces of him instead of empty hands.

Kade reaches across the table. Not for the artifacts. For her hand.

KADE
He doesn't know what we're carrying.

NARA
He'll feel it. The night we use them, he'll feel it.

The old caution between them, worn smooth by repetition, said now without needing the weight it used to carry.

KADE
(quietly)
One more year. Then we find out what these were for.

NARA
One more year.

She looks at the three objects on the table -- small, unremarkable, ancient. Everything that's left of four lifetimes reduced to what fits on a low table in an apartment in Ulaanbaatar.

NARA
(worn)
I used to think the memories were the hard part.

KADE
They're not?

NARA
Waiting is the hard part. It always was.

He doesn't answer. Just holds her hand across the table, the birthmark and the streak both glowing low and steady in the lamplight, patient as anything that's had this many years to learn how.

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- THE HOLLOW -- NIGHT

SUPER: "THEIR TWENTY FOURTH BIRTHDAY"

Four years of coming here. Tonight the three objects lie in the grass between them -- the lure, the brooch, the arrowhead case. Small and old, dark against the grass. They join hands over them.

NARA
(Mongolian, subtitled)
Whatever's down there, we don't come back without it.

They lean forward. Foreheads touch. The glow opens -- and drops. Deeper than the frontier. Deeper than the moor, the mountain, the flood of memories. The artifacts warm in the grass, all three at once, pulling downward like stones finding a riverbed. Down. Down. And stop. Not a door this time. A floor. Smooth and total, like stone under dark water. The origin is under it -- they can both feel it. Tall grass. Gold light. Right there, on the other side of something built to hold. The glow strains against it. The artifacts blaze. The floor holds. Then -- forced through some hairline flaw -- one breath of what's below: Tall grass. Two people running toward each other. Laughing. Gone. The hollow. The night. The city glowing to the south. They come back hard, still holding hands, breathing like divers. A long silence.

NARA
(hushed)
He sealed it.

KADE
The door goes as deep as the curse. The origin is under the curse. He built it so we'd never see the beginning.

NARA
We were laughing.

KADE
I know. I saw it too.

Nara looks at the three artifacts in the grass. A year of hunting them, and one breath of gold grass is everything they bought.

NARA
A seal that lets one breath through isn't a wall. It's a door holding.

KADE
(quietly)
Then something can open it.

NARA
One more year, Kade. Then we turn twenty five.

He doesn't answer that. There's no answer to that. He gathers the artifacts out of the grass, one at a time, and puts them against his chest.

KADE
Then we don't spend it waiting.

CUT TO:

INT. SULDE'S ESTATE -- THE STUDY -- SAME NIGHT

Sulde at his desk, not working. He felt it start an hour ago. The artifacts in his study tremble. The old feather vibrates in its glass case -- harder than it ever has. He watches it until it stops. He knows exactly what it was. Their reach. Deeper than it has ever gone. All the way down to the one thing he built to hold.

SULDE
(ancient Mongolian, quietly)
It held.

He gets up. Goes to the window. Below, the north garden -- the hellebore bed, green and low. Months from color. He runs the calculation, the one he has run across every era, one more time. The crop needs a year he doesn't have to spare. Every window that opens before it ripens will open and close, useless. That leaves two. Every other cycle fed him without trying. This one doesn't. Something in what they're doing together leaves less on the table than grief usually does. He's starving faster than he's ever starved before.

One falls three weeks short of their birthday. The last falls on the night itself -- and if the last one fails, there is no after. They turn twenty five. Alive. Unbound. And the thing he feeds does not forgive an empty cycle.

SULDE
(to the glass)
The first window, then. Ready or not.

He looks at the feather one more time. It's still. He cannot wait any longer. He opens the desk drawer. The illustration, still waiting where he left it. Not yet, he told himself once. He doesn't have not yet anymore. He sets it on the desk instead. In plain view. Doesn't reconsider. Doesn't let himself.

CUT TO:

SUPER: "THE INCOMPLETE RITUAL AND THE TRANSFORMATION"

SUPER: "ELEVEN MONTHS LATER"

SUPER: "THREE WEEKS BEFORE THEIR TWENTY FIFTH BIRTHDAY"

INT. ZAIRAN'S ESTATE -- RITUAL CHAMBER -- NIGHT

Below the estate. Not a basement -- something older than the building above it. A chamber cut straight from the earth. Stone walls. No electricity. Torches in iron brackets, the same light that lit this ritual in ancient Mongolia. Same hands. Different room. The components are laid out on a flat stone at the center. The eagle feather, kept across lifetimes -- degraded, not Nara's current form. Thirteen juniper berries in a circle. Sagebrush. Mugwort. And the hellebore, harvested tonight, two weeks early. The color isn't quite right. Almost black-purple. Almost. At the center of it all, the carved summoning vessel.

Worn smooth by time. Sulde stands over the assembly. He's done this countless times. Every time it's worked. He looks at the hellebore. He knows the color is wrong. He's never run the ritual with degraded components. He has never had to before.

SULDE
(to himself, ancient Mongolian)
It will be enough.

He doesn't believe it. He lights both fires -- sagebrush hot and reaching, mugwort low and slow. He speaks the summoning. The smoke thickens around the vessel. Something moves in it. KHARANKHUI EZEN. Coming through the smoke. Into the vessel. Into him. From this breath, in this cycle, he is Zairan again. His body locks up. His eyes go dark. But it's different tonight -- the spirit senses the degraded components and only half commits. Half present. Half unwilling. The voice that comes through his mouth is thinner than it should be. The hellebore is crushed and blown across the feather. The final words go out incomplete. The torches flare. The feather lifts and settles. The spell leaves the chamber, crosses the city, crosses the steppe, finds its mark. Zairan waits for the second layer. The death magic. He waits. The spirit pulls back fast -- dissatisfied -- gone into the dark places. His own eyes come back. He waits. And waits. It doesn't come. The transformation took. The death magic didn't bind. One layer instead of two. The cage without the slow unraveling. Zairan stands very still. Looking at the degraded powder on the stone. He's never felt this before in any of his castings. He puts his hands flat on the stone and drops his head.

ZAIRAN
(broken)
No.

A long silence.

ZAIRAN
(quieter)
No no no --

He pushes off the stone. The calculation comes back fast. She's the eagle now, but she won't die. He has no more hellebore, and this window is finished. One remains before their birthday. The wolf's hour. The night itself. The fallback he swore he would never need. Three weeks to force a crop that wants a year -- three weeks, or they turn twenty five alive. He closes his eyes. Japan. The snow. The arrow. Three feet. I cannot win. He opens his eyes and looks at the chamber, at the residue on the walls, at the life he's lived down here across every era that came before this one. Something crosses his face that isn't the calculation and isn't the broken thing. Something new. It feels almost like relief. He puts out both fires. Stands in the dark for a while. Not calculating. Not compelled. Just present. Then he climbs the stairs back up to the modern world, not entirely sure for the first time in longer than he can remember what comes next.

CUT TO:

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- THE HOLLOW -- SAME NIGHT

Three weeks out from their twenty fifth birthday. No attempt tonight -- there's nothing down there the door can reach. Just the two of them in their place in the grass, hands joined, the glow steady and low against everything coming. Then the spell hits. Not like the festival. Not the dust devil. A cold wind across the hollow that has nothing to do with weather. Nara pulls back. The glow changes. The streak in her hair blazes wrong.

KADE
(Mongolian)
No --

He grabs her hands. The birthmark fights it, but the transformation is already moving. Nara feels it and her face isn't afraid -- it's recognition.

NARA
(steady)
It's happening.

KADE
(gripping her hands)
Fight it --

NARA
I can't. I never could. Kade -- listen to me.

He stops. Looks at her.

NARA
The death magic. Do you feel it?

He reaches for it through the glow, the way you feel for a second heartbeat. Nothing.

KADE
(slowly)
It's not there.

NARA
Degraded components. The death magic didn't bind. I can feel the transformation but not the --

Her hands change in his. Her voice changes.

NARA
(urgent)
The origin. We can still reach it. The channel's still --

Her hands are gone. Where Nara was -- the EAGLE. Full. Massive. The gold-silver marking blazing at her crown, fuller than any previous cycle. More of her present in this body than the spell intended. She looks at Kade. Those eyes. Hers. Completely. He holds out his arm. The ancient gesture. She steps forward onto it. Same weight. Always the same weight. The glow is still there between them. Incomplete spell. Incomplete severance. The channel still open. And under it, where the floor held eleven months ago -- cracked. The seal was his spell. His spell just broke.

KADE
(strained)
Can you still --

She presses her head to his cheek. The glow deepens.

KADE
(barely a breath)
The origin. We go now. Together.

The glow opens deeper than it ever has. The deepest door.

FADE TO BLACK.

ACT THREE -- THE HUNT AND THE END

The steppe dissolves.

SUPER: "THE FIFTH AND FINAL SOUL RETRIEVAL -- THE ORIGIN"

Not a door. Home. Tall grass moving in wind older than anything they've felt before. No city. No estate. No roads. Just grass and sky and the particular gold light that only exists on this steppe. Two voices, laughing. Young. Free. Kade inside Khurelbaatar. The eagle inside Narantsetseg. Both home.

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- ANCIENT TIMES -- GOLDEN HOUR

KHURELBAATAR, 20, running through the grass toward her. His face is open -- no weight, no grief, none of the years of cycles that haven't happened yet. Just a young man running toward someone he loves. The birthmark at his neck is dormant. Just a mark. Not yet a curse. NARANTSETSEG, 20, running toward him. Hair loose. The gold-silver streak catching the light. Her face is everything the eagle has always carried, but free of it. Laughing. They collide. His arms around her. The glow between them is quiet and fundamental -- two people who have never been apart and don't know yet what that word means. Kade, inside Khurelbaatar, feels this for the first time. What it was before any of it. The eagle, inside Narantsetseg, feels her own hands. Her own feet in the grass. Her own laugh. For the first time across every cycle. Khurelbaatar pulls back to look at her. The names come, spoken freely, for the first time:

KHURELBAATAR
(ancient Mongolian, subtitled)
Narantsetseg.

She laughs. Takes his face in her hands.

NARANTSETSEG
Khurelbaatar.

Both of them, inside the memory, hearing their own names for the first time spoken by the other. They hold each other in the gold grass. Everything ahead of them.

CUT TO:

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- ANCIENT TIMES -- LATER

The settlement at the steppe's edge. Felt gers. Cook fires. A blacksmith's forge, the sound carrying across the grass. Khurelbaatar and Narantsetseg walk hand in hand through the settlement. People know them and like them. An ELDER sits outside the largest ger. He's the kind of old that's become part of the steppe itself.

ELDER
(ancient Mongolian, subtitled)
Khurelbaatar.

KHURELBAATAR
Elder.

ELDER
(looking at their hands)
Your family has always known this land. And the blacksmith's daughter -- her father makes the finest arrowheads on the steppe.

NARANTSETSEG
He does.

The elder looks at the glow between them. He can see further than the young people can.

ELDER
(quietly)
There are those who'd say a hunter and a blacksmith's daughter aren't --

KHURELBAATAR
(gently)
I know what they'd say, elder.

The elder nods once.

ELDER
Be careful of those whose want outpaces their wisdom.

He looks past them. To a figure at the settlement's edge. Watching. BILGÜÜN. Young. The same age as them. But already carrying something the other young faces around him don't. Watching Narantsetseg with an intensity that's curdled into something wrong. He meets Khurelbaatar's eyes across the settlement. Holds it. Looks away.

KHURELBAATAR
(quietly)
He's always watched her.

NARANTSETSEG
Let him watch.

CUT TO:

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- ANCIENT TIMES -- THE FOLLOWING WEEKS

-- Khurelbaatar teaching her to shoot. Her form is already right. He adjusts her elbow anyway. Any excuse. She knows it and lets him. -- The forge. Her father GANBAATAR watching Khurelbaatar with the look of a man deciding if someone deserves his daughter. Khurelbaatar holds his eyes. The old man nods, eventually. -- The council arguing about class and propriety. A hunter and a blacksmith's daughter. Khurelbaatar waits outside with her hand in his. Neither of them afraid. -- And at the edge of every scene, Bilgüün, watching, the darkness in him getting heavier.

CUT TO:

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- ANCIENT TIMES -- THE REJECTION

Evening. Narantsetseg coming back from the river alone. Bilgüün steps into her path.

BILGÜÜN
(ancient Mongolian, subtitled)
I'd be a better match for you. My knowledge. My standing in this settlement --

NARANTSETSEG
(quietly)
Bilgüün.

BILGÜÜN
The council would approve --

NARANTSETSEG
Bilgüün.

She's not cruel about it. She actually feels for him.

NARANTSETSEG
I know what you're asking. I'm sorry for the pain of it. But I love him. I've always loved him.

Something breaks in Bilgüün. Quiet. Clean. No rage yet -- just a young man's hope ending. He nods once and walks away. Khurelbaatar reaches her and takes her hand. They watch him go.

KHURELBAATAR
Are you alright?

NARANTSETSEG
He's in pain.

KHURELBAATAR
I know.

CUT TO:

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- ANCIENT TIMES -- THE WEDDING

Days later. The settlement has transformed. A new ger stands apart from the others, felt walls bright and unweathered, built by Khurelbaatar's family and gifted whole, the way custom demands. Narantsetseg stands at its threshold. Two women -- her elder cousins -- part her hair at the crown and dress her in the wife's garb, heavy felt and bright thread, nothing like the plain clothes she's worn

her whole life. GANBAATAR watches from a short distance, arms crossed, trying and failing to look like a man who isn't close to tears. Khurelbaatar waits by the fire outside the ger, in clothes finer than anyone's ever seen on him. His bow is slung across his back. The ELDER stands between the fire and the ger, presiding.

ELDER
(ancient Mongolian, subtitled)
Bring the bow.

Khurelbaatar unslings it. The Elder takes it, holds it crosswise between them.

ELDER
Hold here.

Khurelbaatar grips one end. Narantsetseg, led forward now, grips the other. They turn together to face the rising sun, low and gold on the horizon.

ELDER
Bow to the sun three times. It has watched every one of your kind before you. It will watch every one after.

They bow. Once. Twice. Three times, the bow held between them like a shared spine.

ELDER
The bow does not break under two hands if both hands pull true. Remember this when you disagree.

CUT TO:

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- ANCIENT TIMES -- THE FIRE

The whole settlement gathered now. A fire burns high between the new ger and the old. Narantsetseg kneels at one side, Khurelbaatar at the other.

ELDER
Bow to the fire. It has fed you since before either of you had names of your own.

They bow together, foreheads nearly to the earth. The glow between them -- the private, ordinary warmth that's always

lived there -- catches the firelight and for a moment looks like it belongs to the flames themselves. The Elder raises both hands. The gathered settlement quiets.

ELDER
Let this fire hear them said whole, so the steppe remembers who stood here tonight.

He turns to Khurelbaatar first.

ELDER
Khurelbaatar. Hunter of this grass, son of this settlement.

Then to Narantsetseg.

ELDER
Narantsetseg. Daughter of Ganbaatar, who shapes iron true. Said once, before all of you. Let it stand.

The settlement repeats the names back -- a low overlapping murmur, dozens of voices at once, warm and unbothered, the way a crowd repeats something it already believes. At the edge of the firelight, Bilgüün hears his own private grief get answered by an entire settlement saying, out loud, that it was never going to be him. Something in his face goes very still. Ganbaatar steps forward with a small wooden bowl of milk. Offers it first to Khurelbaatar, then to Narantsetseg. Both taste it.

GANBAATAR
(rough, trying to hold it together)
Sweet life. May it stay that way.

CUT TO:

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- ANCIENT TIMES -- THE FEAST

A whole sheep, prepared and shared among the gathered settlement. The Elder carries the neck bone on a flat stone, presents it to Ganbaatar with both hands -- the old gesture of respect from the new family to the old. Laughter. Song.

Someone plays a two-stringed horsehead fiddle badly and nobody minds. Khurelbaatar and Narantsetseg are led to the new ger. They circle it together, three full turns, hand in hand.

NARANTSETSEG
(quietly, only to him, ancient Mongolian, subtitled)
Once for love.

KHURELBAATAR
Once for health.

NARANTSETSEG
Once for --

She stops. Can't find a word big enough. He finishes it for her.

KHURELBAATAR
Everything after this one.

They duck inside together. The felt door falls closed behind them. Firelight glows through the seams of the ger walls, the whole settlement's noise softening around it like the world giving them room. Outside, at the edge of the firelight, unnoticed by anyone celebrating -- Bilgüün. Watching the glow through the ger walls the way a man watches something he can't have and can't stop looking at either. He turns and walks back into the dark of the settlement, alone.

FADE TO GOLD.

INT. BILGÜÜN'S DWELLING -- LATER THAT NIGHT

He sits alone. The settlement's noise still reaches him faintly through the walls -- laughter, a badly-played fiddle, everyone else's happiness carrying on without him. He can still hear it. Both names. Said whole. Said in front of everyone who will ever matter to either of them.

BILGÜÜN
(ancient Mongolian, to himself)
Khurelbaatar. Narantsetseg.

Saying them himself doesn't help. If anything it's worse -- his mouth shaping the same sounds the whole settlement used to close a door he didn't know was still open until tonight. He reaches for a bundle wrapped in hide. His tools. The shamanic practice the settlement respects and fears in equal measure. He unwraps it. Looks at the contents in the firelight. The break from the rejection is still on his face, older now, settled in. Underneath it, the worst thing -- grief with access to tools it shouldn't have.

BILGÜÜN
(stung)
You said it in front of everyone.

His hands start moving.

CUT TO:

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- ANCIENT TIMES -- THE MARRIED YEARS

Time moves differently now. Not memory rushing toward loss -- memory settling into something ordinary. Happy in the way that doesn't need witnesses. -- Dawn. Khurelbaatar and Narantsetseg outside the ger, her hands adjusting the fletching on an arrow he's already fletched correctly. He lets her fix it anyway. -- The forge. Narantsetseg working alongside her father now, Khurelbaatar watching from the doorway with the look of a man who still can't quite believe his luck. -- A hunt. The two of them moving together across the grass, her instincts sharper than his in ways neither of them examines too closely -- not yet knowing what that sharpness will become. -- Winter. Both of them under furs inside the ger, the fire low, talking about nothing important, the kind of conversation only married people are allowed to have. -- Spring again. Narantsetseg pregnant with the idea of a future, not yet with a child -- just talking about one, tentative and hopeful, some evening by the fire.

NARANTSETSEG
(ancient Mongolian, subtitled)
A daughter, maybe.

KHURELBAATAR
(MORE)

KHURELBAATAR (CONT'D)
Or a son who can't shoot straight and needs his mother's help forever.

She laughs. Throws a scrap of felt at him. -- Ganbaatar, older now, watching the two of them from his forge the way a man watches something he built and is proud of, even though he didn't build this part. At the settlement's edge, in every season, at the corner of every scene -- Bilgüün. Older too. Thinner in the face. Watching less like a wound now and more like a countdown. He's not gathering yet. Not tonight. But his eyes track the seasons passing the way a man tracks a debt coming due.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- ANCIENT TIMES -- BILGÜÜN'S GATHERING

The same years as the married-years montage. Same seasons. Different use of them. -- Bilgüün alone on the steppe, bow in hand -- not Khurelbaatar's craft, something closer to desperation. He tracks a golden eagle for three days before he finally takes the shot. He kneels over the bird afterward. Doesn't look satisfied. Takes a single feather from its wing, wraps it in cloth like something already sacred, already terrible.

BILGÜÜN
(ancient Mongolian, to the dead bird)
Forgive the shape I'm about to give her.

-- A dry season. Bilgüün on his knees in a stand of sagebrush, harvesting by hand, counting under his breath. -- Night. Mugwort cut under a full moon, the same plant cut again months later under direct sun -- the astronomical window taking two separate harvests to complete. -- Juniper berries, counted out one by one into a leather pouch. Thirteen. Recounted. Thirteen again. -- The hardest one.

Bilgüün travels far from the settlement, following word of a plant that blooms wrong, blooms black, blooms rare. He finds black hellebore growing wild in a shaded fold of rock. Harvests it carefully. Doesn't smile. Each season he returns to the settlement's edge and watches the married years continue without him -- Khurelbaatar and Narantsetseg older, easier with each other, a life building itself in front of him while his own life narrows down to components in a hide bundle. By the final winter, the bundle is complete. He sits with it in his dwelling, all the pieces gathered, and doesn't open it yet.

BILGÜÜN
(unhurried)
One more season. Then the window opens.

He wraps it tighter and puts it away; a man circling his own worst decision one more time before he finally lets himself make it.

FADE TO BLACK.

CUT TO:

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- ANCIENT TIMES -- THE RITUAL

Night, away from the settlement. Two fires. Bilgüün between them. The carved summoning vessel at the center -- new, the first time it's ever been used, though it won't look new for long. The eagle feather, taken clean that first season, still holds a faint shine that will dull with every cycle after this one. Thirteen juniper berries burning in a circle. Hellebore, gathered months ago and kept dry, perfectly prepared. The only time it will ever be this right. Bilgüün kneels and begins the summoning. The forbidden words. The smoke thickens. A shape moves in it. KHARANKHUI EZEN. The first time. Bilgüün doesn't flinch. Grief already took everything flinching was for.

BILGÜÜN
(ancient Mongolian, subtitled)
I want them separated forever.

KHARANKHUI EZEN
I can do that. But I must be fed.

BILGÜÜN
Fed?

KHARANKHUI EZEN
Your grief.

BILGÜÜN
My grief?

KHARANKHUI EZEN
What else could sustain what you have asked for?

He doesn't ask what happens when the grief runs out. That question hasn't occurred to him yet. Answering the call of a young man's grief, aged now into something patient and deliberate. The spirit moves into the vessel. Into him. From this breath forward, he is Zairan. Full inhabitation -- the spirit and the vessel perfectly matched. Grief and hunger lined up. The voice that comes out of him isn't his. It speaks the final words. The hellebore goes across the feather. The spell completes. In the ger, the mark at Khurelbaatar's neck -- dormant his whole life, never more than a birthmark -- goes cold for the first time. And changes. The soft, formless reddish-brown sharpens into something with edges: three curved lines radiating from a center point. Talons. Not pain. Recognition. Something that was only ever waiting for a reason to wake up. Khurelbaatar and Narantsetseg, asleep in their ger, both sit up at the same instant. Something in the night has changed shape. Zairan feels the spell leave his hands and find its mark in three directions at once. Because it binds all three. He feels the third direction come back into himself. The spirit pulls out of him and leaves him alone between the fires with his own eyes returning. And he understands, for one breath, exactly what he's just done to himself. The binding sets in his own soul. Permanent.

His death date arriving with theirs. That breath of understanding. Then grief closes back over it. And the spell is cast and can't be uncast.

CUT TO:

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- ANCIENT TIMES -- CONTINUOUS

Inside the ger, Narantsetseg gasps -- not pain, transition. Khurelbaatar reaches for her in the dark and his hands find feathers instead of skin. He doesn't panic. He's already moving before he's finished understanding, hands going gentle, finding her weight exactly where her body should be. The EAGLE looks back at him with her eyes. Completely her. He carries her outside, into the open air, where there's room. Raises his arm -- the first time this gesture has ever existed, born right here, on this exact patch of grass. She steps onto it.

KHURELBAATAR
(ancient Mongolian, subtitled, reverent)
Narantsetseg.

Her wings settle. The glow between them, unbroken, holds in the dark. Far off, between his dying fires, Zairan feels the transformation land -- and feels his own binding settle into place beside it. Two things happening in the same breath, tied together forever.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- ANCIENT TIMES -- THE LAST YEAR

Not five years now. One. The memory moves through it the way memory does when there isn't much time left to spend -- every day feels counted, even the ordinary ones. -- The first morning. Khurelbaatar woke up and found the eagle where she'd been. He lay there a while. Got up. Went outside. She was on a stone, watching him.

He held out his arm and the year began. -- The settlement adjusting. Ganbaatar at his forge, watching the eagle perch on his daughter's favorite rock. Saying nothing. Older, quieter, carrying something he doesn't have words for either. -- The hunts. Every morning. The grammar developing fast between hunter and eagle -- faster than it should, like two people who know exactly how much time is left, rushing to build something that would normally take a lifetime. -- Khurelbaatar searching for a cure. Every shaman he asks shakes their head. One won't even look at the eagle directly. -- The seasons passing, compressed now, urgent. The glow between them constant. Warm. Neither of them says out loud that it feels like borrowed time, but neither of them wastes an hour of it either. Zairan watches from the edges all year, watching the glow he tried to extinguish burn brighter with less time left to burn in. Eleven months in. Zairan approaches them on the steppe. Not to threaten. A man with one month left and nothing further to calculate.

ZAIRAN
(ancient Mongolian)
I didn't know it would --

He can't finish it. Khurelbaatar looks at him without hatred.

KHURELBAATAR
(quietly)
I know.

Two words. Not forgiveness -- something too large for forgiveness, but adjacent to it. Zairan nods once and walks back across the steppe.

KHURELBAATAR
(to the eagle, barely audible)
He didn't know what he was doing to himself.

The eagle watches Zairan go, then turns to look at Khurelbaatar. The beginning of something that will take thousands of years to fully understand -- that ending him is mercy too.

CUT TO:

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- ANCIENT TIMES -- THE TWENTY FIFTH BIRTHDAY

Dawn. Khurelbaatar and the eagle on the steppe. Their birthday. The twenty fifth. The last. They've known this was coming since the night the mark changed shape. One year of borrowed mornings, and this is the final one. They spend it the way they've spent every morning since -- together, watching the sun come up. He presses his hand to the gold-silver marking.

KHURELBAATAR
(ancient Mongolian, low)
Narantsetseg.

She closes her eyes. The sun rises. The death date arrives. The magic fires in three directions at once. The mark at his neck swells, talon-lines darkening past color into something closer to shadow. She doesn't look away. Across the steppe, Zairan feels it arrive in his own soul. All three. The same breath. The light goes out for all three. The steppe is empty. The grass keeps moving. The sun keeps rising, the way it does no matter what. Then, somewhere in the grass, a baby cries. Another answers. Far off, in a different place -- not a third child. A third cry that isn't a child at all, that comes from a wealthy house a thousand miles north, where a boy is born who won't remember any of this for seven more years. The first reset begins.

CUT TO:

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- THE HOLLOW -- PRESENT DAY -- DAWN

The steppe comes back. The hollow. Dawn breaking. Kade, the eagle on his arm, both very still, coming back from the beginning of everything. He presses his free hand to the gold-silver marking and closes his eyes.

KADE
(ancient Mongolian, low)
Narantsetseg.

Her name, spoken in the present, spoken freely again, in the original language, on the original steppe. She closes her eyes. The marking floods with warm amber light. Their light. She opens her eyes. Fully her. Fully Narantsetseg. Fully ready.

KADE
(quietly)
Now we know everything.

She spreads her wings once, full span, then settles and looks south. Toward the valley. Toward Zairan.

KADE
(urgent)
South. He's gone south.

He stands. Looks at the hollow one more time.

KADE
(MORE)

KADE (CONT'D)
(to the hollow)
We won't need to come back here.
One way or another.

He moves. She launches off his arm and banks south. He moves toward the horse. The bow across his back. Her, above him, always above him. Hunter and predator. Moving south together.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. KADE AND NARA'S APARTMENT -- ULAANBAATAR -- DUSK

SUPER: "THE NIGHT BEFORE THEY LEAVE FOR THE SOUTH"

Lanterns strung along the balcony rail and across the small courtyard below. A modest gathering -- Batu, Misheel, Gankhuyag, Sara, a handful of friends from the years between. Laughter. Food. The ordinary warmth of a family that doesn't know it might be saying goodbye. Kade moves through the crowd, embracing people, present in a way that costs him something to fake. Nara catches his eye across the yard. A held look. Then she's pulled back into a conversation with Sara.

Later. The party has thinned. Batu finds Kade alone near the edge of the lanterns' light, looking north, out toward the dark steppe.

BATU
(Mongolian, subtitled)
You've been looking at the horizon all night instead of your own party.

KADE
(quietly)
Habit.

BATU
Six years of habit. I've counted.

Kade turns to face him. Something in his son's face tonight that Batu hasn't seen before -- not fear exactly. Something closer to gratitude.

KADE
Papa. I need you to know something. Not everything. But something.

Batu waits. Doesn't push.

KADE
Whatever happens after this birthday -- and I mean that exactly the way it sounds -- I need you to know I was never anywhere but exactly where I was supposed to be. Every choice. I'd make every one of them again.

BATU
(carefully)
Kade --

KADE
I'm not asking you to understand it. I'm asking you to trust that I loved you and Mama my whole life, completely, and nothing that happens changes that. Not ever.

Batu's throat works. He doesn't ask the question sitting behind his eyes -- the one that's been there since a hospital corridor twenty-five years ago. Some things a

father chooses not to ask, because the not-asking is its own kind of love.

BATU
(quietly)
I know, son.

They embrace. Long. Neither says goodbye, because neither one is willing to make it that. Across the yard, Nara stands with Gankhuyag, her hand in his.

NARA
(Mongolian, subtitled)
Papa. I never got to say -- you made me feel like I always belonged in my own skin. Even when I didn't know why that mattered so much.

GANKHUYAG
(gently)
You're speaking like a girl leaving for a very long trip.

NARA
(a small, sad smile)
Maybe I am.

GANKHUYAG
(quiet, watching her carefully)
Wherever it takes you. Come back to us.

NARA
(barely audible)
I'm going to try harder than you'll ever know.

She hugs him. Holds it a beat longer than a normal embrace would ask for. He lets her. Across the yard, Kade watches her, watches all of it -- two families who will never fully know what their children carry, loving them anyway, completely, in the only language available to them. The lanterns burn low. The steppe waits beyond the light, patient, the way it always has been.

FADE TO BLACK.

SUPER: "THE HUNT"

EXT. ZAIRAN'S ESTATE -- ULAANBAATAR OUTSKIRTS -- NIGHT

Gate unlocked. Grounds empty. The hellebore bed at the north wall, harvested clean. Kade crosses the grounds. The door is unlocked too. Nara's eagle lands on the windowsill above, watching him enter.

CUT TO:

INT. ZAIRAN'S ESTATE -- THE STUDY -- CONTINUOUS

The wall is cleared. Photographs gone. Red thread gone. The glass case empty -- the feather taken with him. Almost everything is gone. One thing remains on the desk: a botanical illustration of black hellebore, precise and scientific, with a location written in the margin in ancient Mongolian. Kade picks it up. Studies it. This wasn't left by accident. A man who's spent every one of his borrowed lives calculating doesn't make that mistake. He sets it down beside the three objects he's carried in from his jacket -- the lure, the brooch, the arrowhead case -- laid out together on the desk for the first time. The moment the illustration touches the same surface as the other three, all three warm at once. Not toward Kade. Toward the illustration itself. He goes still.

KADE
(sure)
It's not a trap.

He looks closer at the illustration. Beneath the botanical detail, faint under the ink -- barely visible unless the light hits it right -- a second layer. Old pigment beneath new. A symbol matching the worn pattern on the lure's leather. The same knotwork as the brooch. The same lacquer grain as the arrowhead case. One image. Built from three.

KADE
It was never separate. It's the last piece of the same thing.

The eagle drops from the windowsill, lands on the desk beside the objects, folds her wings.

KADE
(quietly)
The curse. It's not hidden somewhere new. It's underneath everything he's already given us.

He folds the illustration and places it against his chest, with the others, all four together for the first time. The birthmark at his neck flares -- not warm this time. Full. Complete, in a way it's never been across four artifact hunts. Something answering something else. He looks at the eagle. She's gone rigid, staring at the illustration through the fabric of his jacket like she can still see it.

KADE
You feel it.

She doesn't look away.

KADE
(barely a breath)
We have everything he ever used against us. Now we go find out what it's for.

He looks around the stripped study one more time.

KADE
He's not hiding anymore. He's running out of places to run.

He turns. She launches out the window into the night. He follows her out through the empty estate, the four objects warm against his chest, moving as one weight now instead of four separate ones.

CUT TO:

EXT. ULAANBAATAR -- THE FOLLOWING WEEKS

The hunt is methodical. Patient. Two souls who've waited this long can wait three more weeks. -- Kade at the museum, talking to a junior curator who always found Zairan unsettling without being able to say why. A security guard who noticed him leave three nights ago with more than his usual briefcase. -- The eagle riding the thermals between buildings, tracking Zairan's movement from above.

She finds the cold trail in the east district. Loses it. Finds it near the train station. Then the south road. Then nothing -- he's gone somewhere she can't follow from the air. -- Kade on the ground following her map. The bow across his back, the birthmark his compass. Cold toward Zairan. Warm toward the eagle above him. -- The valley in the botanical illustration. Two hundred kilometers south. Remote. A strange microclimate where black hellebore could grow out of season if somebody who knew what they were doing was tending it. -- Zairan's contacts, one by one. An antiquities dealer. A university botanist who got odd cultivation requests. A property manager who handles a remote estate in the southern valley. Every thread leads south. -- Kade and the eagle meeting each evening at the hollow, building the picture together. His words, her eyes. Hunter and predator. Working.

CUT TO:

EXT. SOUTHERN MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- DAY

The city falls away. The steppe opens up, older and emptier than the country around Ulaanbaatar. Kade rides hard. The eagle rides the thermals above him, mapping ahead. The communication between them, sharpened over weeks of hunting in the city, is now completely fluent. She banks left, he adjusts course. She circles, he slows. She drops lower, something below is worth attention. The birthmark stays warm with her proximity. Underneath that warmth, a thread of cold. Directional. South. Getting stronger.

CUT TO:

EXT. SOUTHERN VALLEY -- LATE AFTERNOON

A fold in the steppe, lower and warmer than the country around it. A remote stone estate at the far edge, older than it looks -- Zairan has held this site across many lifetimes. Smoke from the chimney. Someone's home.

The birthmark goes cold. The eagle lands beside Kade on a rock. They look at the estate. The garden on the southern face. Even from this distance, the dark blooms.

KADE
(grim)
He's been here since he left the city.

He studies the bloom color. Almost black-purple. Almost ready.

KADE
Days. Maybe a week. He can't wait for full strength again. The window closes in three days. He's going to move before it's ready.

The eagle's eyes stay on the garden. Her message is clear without a word -- they don't wait for him to move first.

KADE
(quiet, sure)
The binding never took. Whatever happens to him now, we walk away from this alive.

This was never about surviving. It's about setting him down.

KADE
(quietly)
Not tonight. We need to know the layout. The night the window opens, we end it.

She doesn't move. Her talons close harder on the rock. Agreement.

KADE
(quiet, final)
Three days, Zairan.

He pulls the horse back out of sightline. She climbs, circles the valley once, then banks away.

CUT TO:

INT. ZAIRAN'S SOUTHERN ESTATE -- THE RITUAL CHAMBER -- SAME EVENING

Stone room, no windows, torches in iron brackets. Zairan stands over the components. The hellebore is almost the right color. Almost. He's running out now -- not aging, just worn thinner with every day since the failed casting, the way a man looks after too many sleepless nights stacked on top of each other. He looks at the hellebore. Three more days would make it perfect. He has two. Two compromised components in a row. He's never not known the outcome before. He picks up the estate phone.

ZAIRAN
(Russian, subtitled)
Send the household away. A week. Tell them anything.

Sets it down before the answer comes. He crosses to the window. Works the ridge, line by line. Nothing. He watches another minute anyway. Hand flat against the glass. His own reflection, faint, over the dark shape of the hills.

ZAIRAN
(to the glass)
Two more days.

He turns back to the torches. Back to the only thing he knows how to do.

CUT TO:

EXT. SOUTHERN VALLEY RIDGE -- SAME NIGHT

Kade and the eagle on the ridge, watching the estate window, watching Zairan's silhouette move inside. Neither of them moves.

KADE
(quiet, final)
Two days.

She holds his gaze. A soul that's waited this long can wait two more.

KADE
(barely a breath)
We see you.

FADE TO BLACK.

SUPER: "TWO DAYS"

EXT. SOUTHERN VALLEY -- THE FOLLOWING TWO DAYS

They map the estate from two angles. The ritual chamber -- stone, no windows, single door, north facing. The garden on the southern face. Zairan's routine -- garden in the morning, chamber at midday, window every evening, always looking at the ridge. The estate has one approach from the south. The ridge is north. The only other way in is from the air.

CUT TO:

INT. ZAIRAN'S SOUTHERN ESTATE -- THE STUDY -- DAY (ONE)

Zairan at the window, binoculars in hand. Works the ridge, left to right, slow. Nothing. He lowers them. Doesn't set them down. A small case by the door. Documents. Cash, three currencies, banded. He opens it, checks it, closes it. Doesn't take it with him.

CUT TO:

EXT. SOUTHERN VALLEY -- CONTINUOUS

Kade and the eagle, a half mile off, watching the same window Zairan just left.

KADE
(quietly)
He's still here.

She rouses once, sharp.

CUT TO:

INT. ZAIRAN'S SOUTHERN ESTATE -- THE RITUAL CHAMBER -- DAY (TWO)

Zairan checks the hellebore again. Closer.

Not close enough. He looks at the single door a long moment. Doesn't lock it. A locked door is one somebody has to break down loudly. An open one is a door nobody remembers checking.

CUT TO:

EXT. SOUTHERN VALLEY RIDGE -- CONTINUOUS

KADE
(Mongolian, subtitled)
Tomorrow night, when the window opens, he goes to the chamber at the wolf's hour. That means he crosses open ground between the garden and the door. We can't let him get inside.

He looks at her.

KADE
You come from above. I come from the north.

She rouses -- every feather lifting and settling in one slow ripple, the way a bird does only when nothing in her is afraid. The agreement. The end of waiting.

KADE
(ancient Mongolian)
Narantsetseg.

Her name, in the original language. She closes her eyes. Opens them. Everything in them.

FADE TO BLACK.

SUPER: "THEIR TWENTY FIFTH BIRTHDAY"

SUPER: "THE FINAL CONFRONTATION"

EXT. SOUTHERN MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- DUSK -- THEIR TWENTY FIFTH BIRTHDAY

The valley loses its light. Gold to amber to grey to the particular black that only exists out here. The estate is dark tonight. No torchlight.

Zairan isn't at the window. Kade on the ridge, bow in hand, birthmark cold and steady. Above the valley, the eagle rides the last warm air rising off the ground, circling, the gold-silver marking catching the dying light. He looks up at her. The glow holds across the distance. He checks the sky -- the wolf's hour alignment coming together. The last time this window will ever open for Zairan. Zairan doesn't know that yet. Kade looks at the open ground between the garden and the door. Twenty meters. That's where it has to happen. He nocks an arrow. Doesn't draw. Waits. Below, the estate door opens.

CUT TO:

EXT. ZAIRAN'S SOUTHERN ESTATE -- CONTINUOUS

ZAIRAN steps out. His face is exactly the face it's always been. Young. Unmarked by time the way nothing about this curse ever allowed. But something in it has worn through -- the stillness of a man who has run out of places to put what he's carrying. He's not wearing the modern suit tonight. He's in a dark traditional deel, like he's decided to be what he actually is for this last ritual. Not the curator. The Zairan. He crosses to the garden, kneels at the hellebore. Almost ready. Not quite. He knows it's wrong but the window won't open again for months and he doesn't have months. He harvests it. Stands. Turns toward the door. Ten meters out. The wolf's hour assembling above. The birthmark on the ridge blazes. Kade draws.

CUT TO:

EXT. SOUTHERN VALLEY RIDGE -- CONTINUOUS

Full draw. Kade's eye on the line. Zairan crossing the open ground. The eagle climbs above him, finding her altitude, the stoop position locked in. Seven meters. Five.

Three. Kade holds the space between heartbeats -- the same space Haruki found on the pass, Eoin found on the moor, Baxúawishe found on the bluff. Every hunter who ever reached for this and fell short, present in this one draw. One meter. Zairan's hand goes for the door. Kade speaks. Not one word this time. All of them.

KADE
(ancient Mongolian)
Bilgüün.

Zairan's hand stops on the door. That name hasn't touched open air since a fire outside a wedding ger, since before he had a title at all.

KADE (CONT'D)
Khurelbaatar. Narantsetseg. Said whole. Same as the night you stood at the edge of the fire and heard them said whole the first time. You don't get to be Zairan anymore. Not to us. We know the name that came before it.

CUT TO:

EXT. ZAIRAN'S SOUTHERN ESTATE -- CONTINUOUS

Zairan stops. Turns slowly. The words land like something he's been waiting his whole existence to hear, longer than he's let himself admit. He faces the ridge. The calculation is gone from his face. So is the broken thing. Just a young man who was once called wise, standing in the open ground between what he planted and what he built. He looks up. The eagle, climbing, the marking catching the last light. He looks at her eyes, looking down at him, knowing him completely. He looks at the hellebore in his hand. At everything a name he gave up let him become. His hands open. The hellebore falls into the dark soil.

ZAIRAN
(ancient Mongolian, final)
Narantsetseg.

Her name. Spoken by him. Not as a weapon this time. Just her name. The closest thing to an apology his borrowed years have left in him. He looks up at her and nods once. Drops his hands to his sides and stands in the open ground, waiting. Not running. Not calculating. Choosing. For the first time since a fire he never should have watched.

CUT TO:

EXT. SOUTHERN VALLEY -- THE WOLF'S HOUR -- CONTINUOUS

The alignment completes. Above, the eagle folds her wings and commits to the stoop.

KADE
(like an apology)
You are freed.

Vertical. Everything she is, released. The marking blazes like a falling star. From the ridge, the arrow leaves the string. Fast and certain across the dark valley. Every hunter who ever reached for this moment is in it. For one frame less than a frame -- hide becomes plaid becomes lacquered silk becomes hide again, the same shoulders wearing every life he's ever drawn a bow in, gone before the eye can hold any single one of them. Then just Kade. His own jacket. His own hands. Drawing. Every life that came after and every one that came before, all of it, in this one arrow. Zairan stands with his hands open, looking up, watching the end of everything he's carried come at him from above and from the dark, both at once. The eagle strikes. The arrow lands. Same breath. As it always had to be.

SUPER: "THE SHATTERING"

Silence. The valley holds it. Then his bargain shatters -- not a sound, not an explosion. A release. Like pressure equalizing. Like a breath he's held since a fire outside a wedding ger, finally let go. Smoke rises from the valley floor.

The old smoke. The original fires, somehow still inside the structure of the spell after all this time. It takes shape. KHARANKHUI EZEN. Rising out of the broken spell. The bargain is done. The vessel is broken. The spirit, not destroyed -- released. It climbs into the dark sky, higher, gone. The glow that's lived between Kade and Nara since the beginning erupts -- not the wrong light this time. The original light. Theirs. It floods the valley. The eagle transforms inside that light. Not the violent instant of the curse. The opposite. Slow and warm, like dawn. NARANTSETSEG kneels in the dark soil. Her hands. Her own hands. She closes her eyes and feels herself completely for the first time since she was twenty four years old in this body. Since the very first time, in tall grass, laughing. She reaches up. The streak is gone. Just her hair. Footsteps on the soil. She looks up.

CUT TO:

EXT. ZAIRAN'S SOUTHERN ESTATE -- CONTINUOUS

Zairan on the ground. The arrow. The eagle's strike. Both true. His eyes are open, looking at the wolf's hour stars -- stars he's never actually seen -- there was always something else demanding his attention instead. Just stars now.

ZAIRAN
(barely a breath)
Choloologdson.

Free. His eyes close. All those years, done. The soul released, not destroyed. Whatever mercy looks like for something that old and that tired.

CUT TO:

EXT. ZAIRAN'S SOUTHERN ESTATE -- CONTINUOUS

KADE comes down off the ridge fast. He touches his neck. Nothing there. The mark is gone.

He looks at his hand. At the valley. At Zairan on the ground. Then across the valley at the figure kneeling in the soil. At her hair. Unmarked. At her face, finding his. No mark on him. No mark on her. No curse. No reset -- and no forgetting either. Every ridge, every shoreline, every garden they've ever stood in, still theirs. Carried now, not returned. Just two people, looking at each other across a Mongolian valley on their twenty fifth birthday. Alive. He moves toward her. She stands. They meet in the open ground, between the garden and the door, between everything that was and everything that's coming. His hands find her face. Hers find his.

KADE
(ancient Mongolian, low)
Narantsetseg.

She closes her eyes. Opens them.

NARANTSETSEG
(ancient Mongolian, low)
Khurelbaatar.

He pulls her in. Her face against his chest. The valley around them. The stars above, the same stars that have watched this from the beginning, watching it end. Two souls. Free. Together. Alive. On the same steppe where it started.

FADE TO BLACK.

EPILOGUE -- THE TWENTY SIXTH DAY

EXT. MONGOLIAN STEPPE -- DAWN

Morning. Gold light, the kind that only exists out here. In the valley below, the estate, the garden, the scattered hellebore already starting to look like nothing more than flowers in dark soil. On the ridge above, two figures stand side by side, looking east. KADE. NARANTSETSEG. Neither of them marked anymore. Just two people watching the sun come up. Neither speaks for a while. Then Narantsetseg raises her hand and touches the back of her head where the streak used to be. Just hair now. She looks at her own fingers.

NARANTSETSEG
(MORE)

NARANTSETSEG (CONT'D)
(Mongolian, subtitled)
What day is it?

Kade looks at her. At the dawn light on her face. A sound comes out of him that isn't quite a laugh.

KADE
(soft)
The twenty sixth.

She understands what that means. Neither of them has ever seen a twenty sixth day. Not once. In any life. The sun clears the horizon and floods the steppe with the same gold light from the oldest memory. The golden hour. Where it started. Come back as a morning. She reaches out and finds his hand. No glow this time. Just warmth. They stand there. Looking east. At the day that belongs to them now and every day after it. The steppe keeps breathing the way it always has and always will. The camera pulls back. The ridge gets smaller. The steppe gets bigger. Two people standing in all that gold, getting smaller, until they're just two points of light on an old steppe that's seen everything and is still here.

FADE TO GOLD.

In the Mongolian tradition the word for dawn is UUR. It also means -- beginning.

ENDLESS

Written by David S. Justin

FADE OUT.

THE END