

Science Fiction and Fantasy

A Sleep and a Forgetting

By Robert Silverberg


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First Published in Playboy Magazine, 1989

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COVER DESIGN BY CHRIS HARDWICK

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"Channeling?" I said. "For Christ's sake, Joe! You brought me all the way down here for dumb bullshit like that?"

"This isn't channeling," Joe said.

"The kid who drove me from the airport said you've got a machine that can talk with dead people."

A slow, angry flush spread across Joe's face. He's a small, compact man with very glossy skin and very sharp features, and when he's annoyed he inflates like a puff-adder.

"He shouldn't have said that."

"Is that what you're doing here?" I asked. "Some sort of channeling experiments?"

“Forget that shithead word, will you, Mike?” Joe sounded impatient and irritable. But there was an odd fluttery look in his eye, conveying—what? Uncertainty? Vulnerability? Those were traits I hadn't ever associated with Joe Hedley, not in the thirty years we'd known each other. “We aren't sure what the fuck we're doing here,” he said. “We thought maybe you could tell us.”

“Me?”

“You, yes. Here, put the helmet on. Come on, put it on, Mike. Put it on. Please.”

I stared. Nothing ever changes. Ever since we were kids Joe's been using me for one cockeyed thing or another, because he knows he can count on me to give him a sober-minded common-sense opinion. Always bouncing this bizarre scheme or that off me, so he can measure the caroms.

The helmet was a golden strip of wire mesh studded with a row of microwave pickups the size of a dime and flanked by a pair of suction electrodes that fit over the temples. It looked like some vagrant piece of death-house equipment.

I ran my fingers over it. "How much current is this thing capable of sending through my head?"

He looked even angrier. "Oh, fuck you, you hypercautious bastard! Would I ever ask you to do anything that could harm you?"

With a patient little sigh I said, "Okay. How do I do this?"

"Ear to ear, over the top of your head. I'll adjust the electrodes for you."

"You won't tell me what any of this is all about?"

"I want an uncontaminated response. That's science talk, Mike. I'm a scientist. You know that, don't you?"

"So that's what you are. I wondered."

Joe bustled about above me, moving the helmet around, pressing the electrodes against my skull.

"How does it fit?"

"Like a glove."

"You always wear your gloves on your head?" he asked.

"You must be goddamn nervous if you think that's funny."

"I am," he said "You must be too, if you take a line like that seriously. But I tell you that you won't get hurt. I promise you that, Mike."

"All right."

"Just sit down here. We need to check the impedances, and then we can get going."

"I wish I understood at least a little bit about—"

“Please,” he said. He gestured through a glass partition at a technician in the adjoining room, and she began to do things with dials and switches. This was turning into a movie, a very silly one, full of mad doctors in white jackets and sputtering electrical gadgets. The tinkering went on and on, and I felt myself passing beyond apprehension and annoyance into a kind of gray realm of Zen serenity, the way I sometimes do while sitting in the dentist's chair waiting for the scraping and poking to begin.

On the hillside visible from the laboratory window yellow hibiscus was blooming against a background of billowing scarlet bougainvillea in brilliant California sunshine. It had been cold and raining, this February morning, when I drove to Sea-Tac Airport thirteen hundred miles to the north. Hedley's lab is just outside La Jolla, on a sandy bluff high up over the blue Pacific.

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When Joe and I were kids growing up in Santa Monica we took this kind of luminous winter day for granted, but I had lived in the Northwest for twenty years now, and I couldn't help thinking I'd gone on a day-trip to Eden. I studied the colors on the hillside until my eyes began to get blurry.

"Here we go, now," Joe said, from a point somewhere far away behind my left shoulder.

* * * *

It was like stepping into a big cage full of parakeets and mynahs and crazed macaws. I heard scratchy screeching sounds, and a harsh loony almost-laughter that soared through three or four octaves, and a low ominous burbling noise, as if some hydraulic device was about to blow a gasket. I heard weird wire-edged shrieks that went tumbling away as though the

sound was falling through an infinite abyss. I heard queeblings. I heard hissings.

Then came a sudden burst of clearly enunciated syllables, floating in isolation above the noise:

—*Onoodor*—

That startled me.

A nonsense word? No, no, a real one, one that had meaning for me, a word in an obscure language that I just happen to understand.

"Today," that's what it means. In Khalkha. My specialty. But it was crazy that this machine would be speaking Khalkha to me. This had to be some sort of coincidence. What I'd heard was a random clumping of sounds that I must automatically have arranged into a meaningful pattern. I was kidding myself. Or

else Joe was playing an elaborate practical joke. Only he seemed very serious.

I strained to hear more. But everything was babble again.

Then, out of the chaos:

—*Usan deer*—

Khalkha, again: "On the water." It couldn't be a coincidence.

More noise. Skwkaark skreek yubble gobble.

—*Aawa namaig yawuulawa*—

"Father sent me."

Skwkaark. Yabble. Eeeeesh.

"Go on," I said. I felt sweat rolling down my back. "Your father sent you where? Where? *Khaana*. Tell me where."

—*Usan deer*—

"On the water, yes."

Yarkhh. Skreek. Tshhhhhhh.

—*Akhanartan*—

"To his elder brother. Yes."

I closed my eyes and let my mind rove out into the darkness. It drifted on a sea of scratchy noise. Now and again I caught an actual syllable, half a syllable, a slice of a word, a clipped fragment of meaning. The voice was brusque, forceful, a drill-sergeant voice, carrying an undertone of barely suppressed rage.

Somebody very angry was speaking to me across a great distance, over a channel clotted with interference, in a language that hardly anyone in the United States knew anything about: Khalkha. Spoken a little oddly, with an unfamiliar intonation, but plainly recognizable.

I said, speaking very slowly and carefully and trying to match the odd intonation of the voice at the other end, "I can hear you

and I can understand you. But there's a lot of interference. Say everything three times and I'll try to follow."

I waited. But now there was only a roaring silence in my ears. Not even the shrieking, not even the babble.

I looked up at Hedley like someone coming out of a trance.

"It's gone dead."

"You sure?"

"I don't hear anything, Joe."

He snatched the helmet from me and put it on, fiddling with the electrodes in that edgy, compulsively precise way of his. He listened for a moment, scowled, nodded. "The relay satellite must have passed around the far side of the sun. We won't get anything more for hours if it has."

"The relay satellite? Where the hell was that broadcast coming from?"

“In a minute,” he said. He reached around and took the helmet off. His eyes had a brassy gleam and his mouth was twisted off to the corner of his face, almost as if he'd had a stroke. “You were actually able to understand what he was saying, weren't you?”

I nodded.

“I knew you would. And was he speaking Mongolian?”

“Khalkha, yes. The main Mongolian dialect.”

The tension left his face. He gave me a warm, loving grin. “I was sure you'd know. We had a man in from the university here, the comparative linguistics department—you probably know him, Malmstrom's his name—and he said it sounded to him like an Altaic language, maybe Turkic—is that right, Turkic?—but more likely one of the Mongolian languages, and the moment he said Mongolian I thought, That's it, get Mike down here right away—”

He paused. "So it's the language that they speak in Mongolia right this very day, would you say?"

"Not quite. His accent was a little strange. Something stiff about it, almost archaic."

"Archaic."

"It had that feel, yes. I can't tell you why. There's just something formal and old-fashioned about it, something, well—"

"Archaic," Hedley said again. Suddenly there were tears in his eyes. I couldn't remember ever having seen him crying before.

What they have, the kid who picked me up at the airport had said, *is a machine that lets them talk with the dead.*

"Joe?" I said. "Joe, what in God's name is this all about?"

* * * *

We had dinner that night in a sleek restaurant on a sleek, quiet La Jolla street of elegant shops and glossy-leaved trees,

just the two of us, the first time in a long while that we'd gone out alone like that. Lately we tended to see each other once or twice a year at most, and Joe, who is almost always between marriages, would usually bring along his latest squeeze, the one who was finally going to bring order and stability and other such things to his tempestuous private life. And since he always needs to show the new one what a remarkable human being he is, he's forever putting on a performance, for the woman, for me, for the waiters, for the people at the nearby tables. Generally the fun's at my expense, for compared with Hedley I'm very staid and proper and I'm eighteen years into my one and only marriage so far, and Joe often seems to enjoy making me feel that there's something wrong with that. I never see him with the same woman twice, except when he happens to marry one of them. But tonight it was all different. He was alone, and

the conversation was subdued and gentle and rueful, mostly about the years we'd had put in knowing each other, the fun we'd had, the regret Joe felt during the occasional long periods when we didn't see much of each other. He did most of the talking. There was nothing new about that. But mostly it was just chatter. We were three quarters of the way down the bottle of silky Cabernet before Joe brought himself around to the topic of the experiment. I hadn't wanted to push.

"It was pure serendipity," he said. "You know, the art of finding what you're not looking for. We were trying to clean up some problems in radio transmission from the Icarus relay station—that's the one that the Japs and the French hung around the sun inside the orbit of Mercury—and we were fiddling with this and fiddling with that, sending out an assortment of test signals at a lot of different frequencies, when out of

nowhere we got a voice coming back at us. A man's voice. Speaking a strange language. Which turned out to be Chaucerian English."

"Some kind of academic prank?" I suggested.

He looked annoyed. "I don't think so. But let me tell it, Mike, okay? Okay?" He cracked his knuckles and rearranged the knot of his tie. "We listened to this guy and gradually we figured out a little of what he was saying and we called in a grad student from U.C.S.D. who confirmed it—thirteenth-century English—and it absolutely knocked us on our asses." He tugged at his earlobes and rearranged his tie again. A sort of manic sheen was coming into his eyes. "Before we could even begin to comprehend what we were dealing with, the Englishman was gone and we were picking up some woman making a speech in medieval French. Like we were getting a broadcast from Joan of

Arc, do you see? Not that I'm arguing that that's who she was. We had her for half an hour, a minute here and a minute there with a shitload of interference, and then came a solar flare that disrupted communications, and when we had things tuned again we got a quick burst of what turned out to be Arabic, and then someone else talking in Middle English, and then, last week, this absolutely incomprehensible stuff, which Malmstrom guessed was Mongolian and you have now confirmed. The Mongol has stayed on the line longer than all the others put together."

"Give me some more wine," I said.

"I don't blame you. It's made us all crazy too. The best we can explain it to ourselves, it's that our beam passes through the sun, which as I think you know, even though your specialty happens to be Chinese history and not physics, is a place where the extreme concentration of mass creates some unusual

stresses on the fabric of the continuum, and some kind of relativistic force warps the hell out of it, so that the solar field sends our signal kinking off into God knows where, and the effect is to give us a telephone line to the Middle Ages. If that sounds like gibberish to you, imagine how it sounds to us." Hedley spoke without raising his head, while moving his silverware around busily from one side of his plate to the other. "You see now about channeling? It's no fucking joke. Shit, we *are* channeling, only looks like it might actually be real, doesn't it?"

"I see," I said. "So at some point you're going to have to call up the Secretary of Defense and say, Guess what, we've been getting telephone calls on the Icarus beam from Joan of Arc. And then they'll shut down your lab here and send you off to get your heads replumbed."

He stared at me. His nostrils flickered contemptuously.

“Wrong. Completely wrong. You never had any notion of flair, did you? The sensational gesture that knocks everybody out? No. Of course not. Not *you*. Look, Mike, If I can go in there and say, We can talk to the dead, and we can *prove* it, they'll kiss our asses for us. Don't you see how fucking sensational it would be, something coming out of these government labs that ordinary people can actually understand and cheer and yell about? Telephone line to the past! George Washington himself, talking to Mr. and Mrs. America! Abe Lincoln! Something straight out of the *National Enquirer*, right, only *real*? We'd all be heroes. But it's got to be real, that's the kicker. We don't need a rational explanation for it, at least not right away. All it has to do is work. Christ, 99% of the people don't even know why electric lights light up when you flip the switch. We have to find out

what we really have and get to understand it at least a little and be 200% sure of ourselves. And then we present it to Washington and we say, Here, this is what we did and this is what happens, and don't blame us if it seems crazy. But we have to keep it absolutely to ourselves until we understand enough of what we've stumbled on to be able to explain it to them with confidence. If we do it right we're goddamned kings of the world. A Nobel would be just the beginning. You understand now?"

"Maybe we should get another bottle of wine," I said.

* * * *

We were back in the lab by midnight. I followed Hedley through a maze of darkened rooms, ominous with mysterious equipment glowing in the night.

A dozen or so staffers were on duty. They smiled wanly at Hedley as if there was nothing unusual about his coming back to work at this hour.

"Doesn't anyone sleep around here?" I asked.

"It's a twenty-four hour information world," Joe said. "We'll be recapturing the Icarus beam in 43 minutes. You want to hear some of the earlier tapes?"

He touched a switch and from an unseen speaker came crackles and bleeples and then a young woman's voice, strong and a little harsh, uttering brief blurts of something that sounded like strange singsong French, to me not at all understandable.

"Her accent's terrible," I said. "What's she saying?"

"It's too fragmentary to add up to anything much. She's praying, mostly. May the king live, may God strengthen his arm,

something like that. For all we know it *is* Joan of Arc. We haven't gotten more than a few minutes total coherent verbal output out of any of them, usually a lot less. Except for the Mongol. He goes on and on. It's like he doesn't want to let go of the phone."

"And it really is a phone?" I asked. "What we say here, they can hear there?"

"We don't know that, because we haven't been able to make much sense out of what they say, and by the time we get it deciphered we've lost contact. But it's got to be a two-way contact. They must be getting *something* from us, because we're able to get their attention somehow and they talk back to us."

"They receive your signal without a helmet?"

"The helmet's just for your benefit. The actual Icarus signal comes in digitally. The helmet's the interface between our computer and your ears."

"Medieval people don't have digital computers either, Joe."

A muscle started popping in one of his cheeks. "No, they don't," he said. "It must come like a voice out of the sky. Or right inside their heads. But they hear us."

"How?"

"Do I know? You want this to make sense, Mike? *Nothing* about this makes sense. Let me give you an example. You were talking with that Mongol, weren't you? You asked him something and he answered you?"

"Yes. But—"

"Let me finish. What did you ask him?"

"He said his father sent him somewhere. I asked him where, and he said, On the water. To visit his elder brother."

"He answered you right away?"

"Yes," I said.

“Well, that's actually impossible. The Icarus is 93 million miles from here. There's has to be something like an eight-minute time-lag in radio transmission. You follow? You ask him something and it's eight minutes before the beam reaches Icarus, and eight minutes more for his answer to come back. He sure as hell can't hold a real-time conversation with you. But you say he was.”

“It may only have seemed that way. It could just have been coincidence that what I asked and what he happened to say next fit together like question and response.”

“Maybe. Or maybe whatever kink in time we're operating across eats up the lag for us, too. I tell you, nothing makes sense about this. But one way or another the beam is reaching them and it carries coherent information. I don't know why that is. It just is. Once you start dealing in impossible stuff, anything

might be true. So why can't our voices come out of thin air to them?" Hedley laughed nervously. Or perhaps it was a cough, I thought. "The thing is," he went on, "this Mongol is staying on line longer than any of the others, so with you here we have a chance to have some real communication with him. You speak his language. You can validate this whole goddamn grotesque event for us, do you see? You can have an honest-to-God chat with some guy who lived six hundred years ago, and find out where he really is and what he thinks is going on, and tell us all about it."

I stole a glance at the wall clock. Half past twelve. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been up this late. I lead a nice quiet tenured life, full professor thirteen years now, University of Washington Department of Sinological Studies.

"We're about ready to acquire signal again," Hedley said. "Put the helmet on."

I slipped it into place. I thought about that little communications satellite chugging around the sun, swimming through inconceivable heat and unthinkable waves of hard radiation and somehow surviving, coming around the far side now, beaming electro-magnetic improbabilities out of the distant past at my head.

The squawking and screeching began.

Then, emerging from the noise and murk and sonic darkness, came the Mongol's voice, clear and steady:

"Where are you, you voice, you? Speak to me."

"Here," I said. "Can you hear me?"

Aark. Yaaarp. Tshhhhhhh.

The Mongol said, "Voice, what are you? Are you mortal or are you a prince of the master?"

I wrestled with the puzzling words. I'm fluent enough in Khalkha, though I don't get many opportunities for speaking it. But there was a problem of context here.

"Which master?" I asked finally. "What prince?"

"There is only one Master," said the Mongol. He said this with tremendous force and assurance, putting terrific spin on every syllable, and the capital letter was apparent in his tone. "I am His servant. The *angeloi* are his princes. Are you an *angelos*, voice?"

Angeloi? That was Greek. A Mongol, asking me if I was an angel of God?

"Not an angel, no," I said.

"Then how can you speak to me this way?"

"It's a kind of—" I paused. I couldn't come up with the Khalka for "miracle". After a moment I said, "It's by the grace of heaven on high. I'm speaking to you from far away."

"How far?"

"Tell me where you are."

Skrawwwwk. Tshhhhhh.

"Again. Where are you?"

"Nova Roma. Constantinopolis."

I blinked. "Byzantium?"

"Byzantium, yes."

"I am very far from there."

"How far?" the Mongol said fiercely.

"Many many days' ride. Many many." I hesitated. "Tell me what year it is, where you are."

Vzsqkk. Blzzp. Yiiiiik.

"What's he saying to you?" Hedley asked. I waved at him furiously to be quiet.

"The year," I said again. "Tell me what year it is."

The Mongol said scornfully, "Everyone knows the year, voice."

"Tell me."

"It is the year 1187 of our Savior."

I began to shiver. Our Savior? Weirder and weirder, I thought. A Christian Mongol? Living in Byzantium? Talking to me on the space telephone out of the twelfth century? The room around me took on a smoky, insubstantial look. My elbows were aching, and something was throbbing just above my left cheekbone. This had been a long day for me. I was very tired. I was heading into that sort of weariness where walls melted and bones turned soft. Joe was dancing around in front of me like someone with tertiary St. Vitus'.

"And your name?" I said.

"I am Petros Alexios."

"Why do you speak Khalkha if you are Greek?"

A long silence, unbroken even by the hellish static.

"I am not Greek," came the reply finally. "I am by birth Khalkha Mongol, but raised Christian among the Christians from age eleven, when my father sent me on the water and I was taken. My name was Temujin. Now I am twenty and I know the Savior."

I gasped and put my hand to my throat as though it had been skewered out of the darkness by a spear.

"Temujin," I said, barely getting the word out.

"My father was Yesugei the chieftain."

"Temujin," I said again. "Son of Yesugei." I shook my head.

Aaark. Blzzzp. Tshhhhhh.

Then no static, no voice, only the hushed hiss of silence.

"Are you okay?" Hedley asked.

"We've lost contact, I think."

"Right. It just broke. You look like your brain has shorted out."

I slipped the helmet off. My hands were shaking.

"You know," I said, "maybe that French woman really was Joan of Arc."

"What?"

I shrugged. "She really might have been," I said wearily.

"Anything's possible, isn't it?"

"What the hell are you trying to tell me, Mike?"

"Why shouldn't she have been Joan of Arc?" I asked. "Listen, Joe. This is making me just as nutty as you are. You know what I've just been doing? I've been talking to Genghis Khan on this fucking telephone of yours."

* * * *

I managed to get a few hours of sleep by simply refusing to tell Hedley anything else until I'd had a chance to rest. The way I said it, I left him no options, and he seemed to grasp that right away. At the hotel, I sank from consciousness like a leaden whale, hoping I wouldn't surface again before noon, but old habit seized me and pushed me up out of the tepid depths at seven, irreversibly awake and not a bit less depleted. I put in a quick call to Seattle to tell Elaine that I was going to stay down in La Jolla a little longer than expected. She seemed worried—not that I might be up to any funny business, not me, but only that I sounded so groggy. “You know Joe,” I said. “For him it's a twenty-four hour information world.” I told her nothing else. When I stepped out on the breakfast patio half an hour later, I

could see the lab's blue van already waiting in the hotel lot to pick me up.

Hedley seemed to have slept at the lab. He was rumpled and red-eyed but somehow he was at normal functioning level, scurrying around the place like a yappy little dog. "Here's a printout of last night's contact," he said, the moment I came in. "I'm sorry if the transcript looks cockeyed. The computer doesn't know how to spell in Mongolian." He shoved it into my hands. "Take a squint at it and see if you really heard all the things you thought you heard."

I peered at the single long sheet. It seemed to be full of jabberwocky, but once I figured out the computer's system of phonetic equivalents I could read it readily enough. I looked up after a moment, feeling very badly shaken.

"I was hoping I dreamed all this. I didn't."

"You want to explain it to me?"

"I can't."

Joe scowled. "I'm not asking for fundamental existential analysis. Just give me a goddamned translation, all right?"

"Sure," I said.

He listened with a kind of taut, explosive attention that seemed to me to be masking a mixture of uneasiness and bubbling excitement. When I was done he said, "Okay. What's this Genghis Khan stuff?"

"Temujin was Genghis Khan's real name. He was born around 1167 and his father Yesugei was a minor chief somewhere in north-eastern Mongolia. When Temujin was still a boy, his father was poisoned by enemies, and he became a fugitive, but by the time he was fifteen he started putting together a confederacy of Mongol tribes, hundreds of them, and eventually he conquered

everything in sight. Genghis Khan means 'Ruler of the Universe.'"

"So? Our Mongol lives in Constantinople, you say. He's a Christian and he uses a Greek name."

"He's Temujin, son of Yesugei. He's twenty years old in the year when Genghis Khan was twenty years old."

Hedley looked belligerent. "Some other Temujin. Some other Yesugei."

"Listen to the way he speaks. He's scary. Even if you can't understand a word of what he's saying, can't you feel the power in him? The coiled-up anger? That's the voice of somebody capable of conquering whole continents."

"Genghis Khan wasn't a Christian. Genghis Khan wasn't kidnapped by strangers and taken to live in Constantinople."

"I know," I said. To my own amazement I added, "But maybe this one was."

"Jesus God Almighty. What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm not certain."

Hedley's eyes took on a glaze. "I hoped you were going to be part of the solution, Mike. Not part of the problem."

"Just let me think this through," I said, waving my hands above his face as if trying to conjure some patience into him. Joe was peering at me in a stunned, astounded way. My eyeballs throbbed. Things were jangling up and down along my spinal column. Lack of sleep had coated my brain with a hard crust of adrenaline. Bewilderingly strange ideas were rising like sewer gases in my mind and making weird bubbles. "All right, try this," I said at last. "Say that there are all sorts of possible worlds. A world in which you're King of England, a world in which I played

third base for the Yankees, a world in which the dinosaurs never died out and Los Angeles gets invaded every summer by hungry tyrannosaurs. And one world where Yesugei's son Temujin wound up in twelfth-century Byzantium as a Christian instead of founding the Mongol Empire. And that's the Temujin I've been talking to. This cockeyed beam of yours not only crosses time-lines, somehow it crosses probability-lines too, and we've fished up some alternate reality that—”

“I don't believe this,” Hedley said.

“Neither do I, really. Not seriously. I'm just putting forth one possible hypothesis that might explain—”

“I don't mean your fucking hypothesis. I mean I find it hard to believe that you of all people, my old pal Mike Michaelson, can be standing here running off at the mouth this way, working hard at turning a mystifying event into a goddamned

nonsensical one—you, good old sensible steady Mike, telling me some shit about tyrannosaurs amok in Los Angeles—”

“It was only an example of—”

“Oh, fuck your example,” Hedley said. His face darkened with exasperation bordering on fury. He looked ready to cry. “Your example is absolute crap. Your example is garbage. You know, man, if I wanted someone to feed me a lot of New Age crap I didn't have to go all the way to Seattle to find one. Alternate realities! Third base for the Yankees!”

A girl in a lab coat appeared out of nowhere and said, “We have signal acquisition, Dr. Hedley.”

I said, “I'll catch the next plane north, okay?”

Joe's face was red and starting to do its puff-adder trick and his adam's-apple bobbed as if trying to find the way out.

"I wasn't trying to mess up your head," I said. "I'm sorry if I did. Forget everything I was just saying. I hope I was at least of some help, anyway."

Something softened in Joe's eyes.

"I'm so goddamned tired, Mike."

"I know."

"I didn't mean to yell at you like that."

"No offense taken, Joe."

"But I have trouble with this alternate-reality thing of yours. You think it was easy for me to believe that what we were doing here was talking to people in the past? But I brought myself around to it, weird though it was. Now you give it an even weirder twist, and it's too much. It's too fucking much. It violates my sense of what's right and proper and fitting. You know what Occam's Razor is, Mike? The old medieval axiom,

Never multiply hypotheses needlessly? Take the simplest one. Here even the simplest one is crazy. You push it too far."

"Listen," I said, "if you'll just have someone drive me over to the hotel—"

"No."

"No?"

"Let me think a minute," he said. "Just because it doesn't make sense doesn't mean that it's impossible, right? And if we get one impossible thing, we can have two, or six, or sixteen. Right? Right?" His eyes were like two black holes with cold stars blazing at their bottoms. "Hell, we aren't at the point where we need to worry about explanations. We have to find out the basic stuff first. Mike, I don't want you to leave. I want you to stay here."

"What?"

"Don't go. Please. I still need somebody to talk to the Mongol for me. Don't go. Please, Mike? Please?"

* * * *

The times, Temujin said, were very bad. The infidels under Saladin had smashed the Crusader forces in the Holy Land and Jerusalem itself had fallen to the Moslems. Christians everywhere mourn the loss, said Temujin. In Byzantium—where Temujin was captain of the guards in the private army of a prince named Theodore Lascaris—God's grace seemed also to have been withdrawn. The great empire was in heavy weather. Insurrections had brought down two emperors in the past four years and the current man was weak and timid. The provinces of Hungary, Cyprus, Serbia, and Bulgaria were all in revolt. The Normans of Sicily were chopping up Byzantine Greece and on the other side of the empire the Seljuk Turks were chewing their

way through Asia Minor. "It is the time of the wolf," said Temujin. "But the sword of the Lord will prevail."

The sheer force of him was astounding. It lay not so much in what he said, although that was sharp and fierce, as in the way he said it. I could feel the strength of the man in the velocity and impact of each syllable. Temujin hurled his words as if from a catapult. They arrived carrying a crackling electrical charge. Talking with him was like holding live cables in my hands.

Hedley, jiggling and fidgeting around the lab, paused now and then to stare at me with what looked like awe and wonder in his eyes, as if to say, *You really can make sense of this stuff?* I smiled at him. I felt bizarrely cool and unflustered. Sitting there with some electronic thing on my head, letting that terrific force go hurtling through my brain. Discussing twelfth-century politics

with an invisible Byzantine Mongol. Making small talk with Genghis Khan. All right. I could handle it.

I beckoned for notepaper. *Need printout of world historical background late twelfth century, I scrawled, without interrupting my conversation with Temujin. Esp. Byzantine history, Crusades, etc.*

The kings of England and France, said Temujin, were talking about launching a new Crusade. But at the moment they happened to be at war with each other, which made cooperation difficult. The powerful Emperor Frederick Barbarossa of Germany was also supposed to be getting up a Crusade, but that, he said, might mean more trouble for Byzantium than for the Saracens, because Frederick was the friend of Byzantium's enemies in the rebellious provinces, and he'd have to march through those provinces on the way to the Holy Land.

"It is a perilous time," I agreed.

Then suddenly I was feeling the strain. Temujin's rapid-fire delivery was exhausting to follow, he spoke Mongolian with what I took to be a Byzantine accent, and he sprinkled his statements with the names of emperors, princes, and even nations that meant nothing to me. Also there was that powerful force of him to contend with—it hit you like an avalanche—and beyond that his anger: the whipcrack inflection that seemed the thinnest of bulwarks against some unstated inner rage, fury, frustration. It's hard to feel at ease with anyone who seethes that way. Suddenly I just wanted to go somewhere and lie down.

But someone put printout sheets in front of me, closely packed columns of stuff from the *Britannica*. Names swam before my eyes: Henry II, Barbarossa, Stephan Nemanya, Isaac II Angelos, Guy of Jerusalem, Richard the Lion-Hearted. Antioch, Tripoli,

Thessalonica, Venice. I nodded my thanks and pushed the sheets aside.

Cautiously I asked Temujin about Mongolia. It turned out that he knew almost nothing about Mongolia. He'd had no contact at all with his native land since his abduction at the age of eleven by Byzantine traders who carried him off to Constantinople. His country, his father, his brothers, the girl to whom he had been betrothed when he was still a child—they were all just phantoms to him now, far away, forgotten. But in the privacy of his own soul he still spoke Khalkha. That was all that was left.

By 1187, I knew, the Temujin who would become Genghis Khan had already made himself the ruler of half of Mongolia. His fame would surely have spread to cosmopolitan Byzantium. How could this Temujin be unaware of him? Well, I saw one way. But

Joe had already shot it down. And it sounded pretty nutty even to me.

"Do you want a drink?" Hedley asked. "Tranks? Aspirin?"

I shook my head. "I'm okay," I murmured.

To Temujin I said, "Do you have a wife? Children?"

"I have vowed not to marry until Jesus rules again in His own land."

"So you're going to go on the next Crusade?" I asked.

Whatever answer Temujin made was smothered by static.

Awkkk. Skrrkkk. Tssshhhhhhhh.

Then silence, lengthening into endlessness.

"Signal's gone," someone said.

"I could use that drink now," I said. "Scotch."

The lab clock said it was ten in the morning. To me it felt like the middle of the night.

* * * *

An hour had passed. The signal hadn't returned.

Hedley said, "You really think he's Genghis Khan?"

"I really think he *could* have been."

"In some other probability world."

Carefully I said, "I don't want to get you all upset again, Joe."

"You won't. Why the hell *not* believe we're tuned into an alternate reality? It's no more goofy than any of the rest of this. But tell me this: is what he says consistent with being Genghis Khan?"

"His name's the same. His age. His childhood, up to the point when he wandered into some Byzantine trading caravan and they took him away to Constantinople with them. I can imagine the sort of fight he put up, too. But his life-line must have diverged completely from that point on. A whole new world-line

split off from ours. And in that world, instead of turning into Genghis Khan, ruler of all Mongolia, he grew up to be Petros Alexios of Prince Theodore Lascaris' private guards."

"And he has no idea of who he could have been?" Joe asked.

"How could he? It isn't even a dream to him. He was born into another world that wasn't ever destined to have a Genghis Khan. You know the poem:

'Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting.
The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar.'

"Very pretty. Is that Yeats?" Hedley said.

"Wordsworth," I said. "When's the signal coming back?"

"An hour, two, three. It's hard to say. You want to take a nap, and we'll wake you when we have acquisition?"

"I'm not sleepy."

"You look pretty ragged," Joe said.

I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

"I'm okay. I'll sleep for a week, later on. What if you can't raise him again?"

"There's always that chance, I suppose. We've already had him on the line five times as long as all the rest put together."

"He's a very determined man," I said.

"He ought to be. He's Genghis fucking Khan."

"Get him back," I said. "I don't want you to lose him. I want to talk to him some more."

* * * *

A SLEEP AND A FORGETTING by Robert Silverberg

Morning ticked on into afternoon. I phoned Elaine twice while we waited, and I stood for a long time at the window watching the shadows of the oncoming winter evening fall across the hibiscus and the bougainvillea, and I hunched my shoulders up and tried to pull in the signal by sheer body english. Contemplating the possibility that they might never pick up Temujin again left me feeling weirdly forlorn. I was beginning to feel that I had a real relationship with that eerie disembodied angry voice coming out of the crackling night. Toward mid-afternoon I thought I was starting to understand what was making Temujin so angry, and I had some things I wanted to say to him about that.

Maybe you ought to get some sleep, I told myself.

At half past four someone came to me and said the Mongol was on the line again.

The static was very bad. But then came the full force of Temujin soaring over it. I heard him saying, "The Holy Land must be redeemed. I cannot sleep so long as the infidels possess it."

I took a deep breath.

In wonder I watched myself set out to do something unlike anything I had ever done before.

"Then you must redeem it yourself," I said firmly.

"I?"

"Listen to me, Temujin. Think of another world far from yours. There is a Temujin in that world too, son of Yesugei, husband to Bortei who is daughter of Dai the Wise."

"Another world? What are you saying?"

"Listen. Listen. He is a great warrior, that other Temujin. No one can withstand him. His own brothers bow before him. All

Mongols everywhere bow before him. His sons are like wolves, and they ride into every land and no one can withstand them. This Temujin is master of all Mongolia. He is the Great Khan, the Genghis Khan, the ruler of the universe."

There was silence. Then Temujin said, "What is this to me?"

"He is you, Temujin. You are the Genghis Khan."

Silence again, longer, broken by hideous shrieks of interplanetary noise.

"I have no sons and I have not seen Mongolia in years, or even thought of it. What are you saying?"

"That you can be as great in your world as this other Temujin is in his."

"I am Byzantine. I am Christian. Mongolia is nothing to me. Why would I want to be master in that savage place?"

"I'm not talking about Mongolia. You are Byzantine, yes. You are Christian. But you were born to lead and fight and conquer," I said. "What are you doing as a captain of another man's palace guards? You waste your life that way, and you know it, and it maddens you. You should have armies of your own. You should carry the Cross into Jerusalem."

"The leaders of the new Crusade are quarrelsome fools. It will end in disaster."

"Perhaps not. Frederick Barbarossa's Crusade will be unstoppable."

"Barbarossa will attack Byzantium instead of the Moslems. Everyone knows that."

"No," I said. That inner force of Temujin was rising and rising in intensity, like a gale climbing toward being a hurricane. I was awash in sweat, now, and I was dimly aware of the others

staring at me as though I had lost my senses. A strange exhilaration gripped me. I went plunging joyously ahead. "Emperor Isaac Angelos will come to terms with Barbarossa. The Germans will march through Byzantium and go on toward the Holy Land. But there Barbarossa will die and his army will scatter—unless you are there, at his right hand, taking command in his place when he falls, leading them onward to Jerusalem. You, the invincible, the Genghis Khan."

There was silence once more, this time so prolonged that I was afraid the contact had been broken for good.

Then Temujin returned. "Will you send soldiers to fight by my side?" he asked.

"That I cannot do."

"You have the power to send them, I know," said Temujin. "You speak to me out of the air. I know you are an angel, or else

you are a demon. If you are a demon, I invoke the name of Christos Pantokrator upon you, and begone. But if you are an angel, you can send me help. Send it, then, and I will lead your troops to victory. I will take the Holy Land from the infidel. I will create the Empire of Jesus in the world and bring all things to fulfillment. Help me. Help me."

"I've done all I can," I said. "The rest is for you to achieve."

There was another spell of silence.

"Yes," Temujin said finally. "I understand. Yes. Yes. The rest is for me."

* * * *

"Christ, you look peculiar," Joe Hedley said, staring at me almost fearfully. "I've never seen you looking like this before. You look like a wild man."

"Do I?" I said.

"You must be dead tired, Mike. You must be asleep on your feet. Listen, go over to the hotel and get some rest. We'll have a late dinner, okay? You can fill me in then on whatever you've just been jabbering about. But relax now. The Mongol's gone and we may not get him back till tomorrow."

"You won't get him back at all," I said.

"You think?" He peered close. "Hey, are you okay? Your eyes—your face—" Something quivered in his cheek. "If I didn't know better I'd say you were stoned."

"I've been changing the world. It's hard work."

"Changing the world?"

"Not this world. The other one. Look," I said hoarsely, "they never had a Genghis Khan, so they never had a Mongol Empire, and the whole history of China and Russia and the Near East and a lot of other places was very different. But I've got this Temujin

all fired up now to be a Christian Genghis Khan. He got so Christian in Byzantium that he forgot what was really inside him, but I've reminded him, I've told him how he can still do the thing that he was designed to do, and he understands. He's found his true self again. He'll go out to fight in the name of Jesus and he'll build an empire that'll eat the Moslem powers for breakfast and then blow away Byzantium and Venice and go on from there to do God knows what. He'll probably conquer all of Europe before he's finished. And I did it. I set it all in motion. He was sending me all this energy, this Genghis Khan zap that he has inside him, and I figured the least I could do for him was turn some of it around and send it back to him, and say, Here, go, be what you were supposed to be."

"Mike—"

I stood close against him, looming over him. He gave me a bewildered look.

"You really didn't think I had it in me, did you?" I said. "You son of a bitch. You've always thought I'm as timid as a turtle. Your good old sober stick-in-the-mud pal Mike. What do you know? What the hell do you know?" Then I laughed. He looked so stunned that I had to soften it for him a little. Gently I touched his shoulder. "I need a shower and a drink. And then let's think about dinner."

Joe gawked at me. "What if it wasn't some other world you changed, though? Suppose it was this one."

"Suppose it was," I said. "Let's worry about that later. I still need that shower."

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