

1 **Vienna, 1242**

2 by Barry R. Taylor

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4 **Scene:** Bare stage with a chair upstage centre.

5 [Cue 1: Stage black]

6 [Cue 2: Lights rise (warm spring day) on the Burghermeister of Vienna, sitting in the chair]

7 Burghermeister: I am still alive! How can this be?

8 [He stands] It is April, the turning of spring, in the year of Our Lord one thousand two
9 hundred and forty-two. And I live still.

10 Why does this surprise me so? Why does this simple, selfish, self-evident statement
11 seem so strange? As if every moment I awake from a deep sleep and discover myself for the
12 first time. My continuing life, my prolongation as a soul on earth, feels unlikely and uncanny,
13 like a green and tender herb somehow untouched by winter's fatal frost.

14 I am old now, and no longer lift my sword in battle. It wasn't always so. I was young a
15 time ago, and full of valour and vanity. I was knighted at eighteen. For many years I served the
16 Empire in mail and harness wherever outside threats or internecine wars called for fighting men.

17 The years passed; at length I grew too old for the field. When, in the pitch and pile of
18 battle a lucky piker pierced my knee I stopped, and never rode in armour again. I had served my
19 Duke proudly; and for my unswerving service he made me Burghermeister: here, in unflowered
20 Vienna, city of my birth, along the eastern border of the Holy Roman Empire, where the patient
21 Danube brings trade and traffic from Austria to the west, and from the Kingdom of Hungary to
22 the east, grain and cloth and trouble. Here I settled. Here I found another way to serve my
23 Duke, and the thirty thousand souls who fill the streets and mind the shops and tend the hearth
24 fires within Vienna's walls.

25 Some three years ago I first heard, from worried eastern traders and far-raftering rivermen,
26 that great trouble was coming. Rumours roamed up the river of war-like preparations in the
27 Ilkhanate, that vast territory of plains and grassland north of the Black Sea that some men call
28 the Golden Horde. The Tartar lord who ruled there, Batu Khan, was again assembling his army
29 of mounted archers, preparing beyond doubt for fresh assaults and insults upon the lands of

30 Christendom. In my own lifetime, these restless, ruthless raiders had spread outward from their
31 Mongolian homeland as plague moves through a crowded city, conquering sovereign lands and
32 defeating stalwart armies, adding each new conquest to an ever-expanding empire.

33 For a time now, the Ilkhanate had been calm. The Hungarian king, poor King Bela,
34 embattled by his own restive nobles, maintained a wary, weary watch along the eastern border.
35 Our fears too soon gained substance. In April two years ago, a mighty Mongol army swept into
36 Hungary like a late winter storm, shattering the land, razing towns and villages, and provoking
37 terrible clashes with the armies of Hungary. In the end the Hungarians could not stand against
38 them; in clanging battle along the Sajo River the greatest Hungarian army was overcome.
39 Triumphant, the Tartars swept northward, as quick and consuming as wind-fed fire.

40 Yet more trouble flowed in from the east. The following year a second army invaded
41 Poland, to the north. This time the ignoble nomads were challenged, at Lenica, by the greatest of
42 the Polish warriors, flanked by Teutonic knights on one side and Knights Templar on the other.
43 Together, with the holy cross going before them, these strong and seasoned soldiers confronted
44 the invaders, and through their combined might brought blood and breakage to their ranks. Yet
45 when the battle's clamour cleared, it was the Tartar pennants that pierced the sky, and proud
46 Poland was at their feet. God in his mercy, can no one stop these monstrous, murderous
47 Mongols!

48 Then, in December, churning northward through Russia, the Tartars laid siege to Kiev.
49 Kiev: well I knew that ancient, ageless, angel-blessed city, from three youthful years spent
50 learning the arts of bow and blade and battle from Russian masters. When the Tartar emissaries
51 came to the city, demanding bended knee and tribute, the city's defenders returned the only
52 answer they could: Kiev was a great and gentle lady, they said, and they would defend her
53 honour with all their strength.

54 They held the walls for seven days. For seven awful days and shriek-filled nights, the
55 Tartar catapults pelted rocks and fire and destruction; the Tartar archers alarmed the air with
56 arcing arrows like angry bees, and the surging enemy pressed and pounded at every gate. Yet
57 still the walls held.

58 When, on the seventh day, the city gates were breached, the rapacious Tartar raiders
59 roared through the ruined city, looting and raping and burning and slaughtering: women,
60 children, families, everyone. When all was done, our gleaming eastern sister city was a fire-

61 husked rubble and fifty thousand souls had fled to heaven. Oh, Kiev, Kiev, how I mourn thee
62 still.

63 It took exactly a year for the Tartars to reach Vienna.

64 We knew of their coming long before. As wildfire drives fleeing deer, the Tartar army
65 loosened peasants and villagers from their land and drove them before to find safety. Entire
66 villages uprooted, whole towns flowed west. Vienna's streets swelled with fleeing, fright-
67 scarred families, some seeking shelter here, more moving onward toward Germany.

68 In October I sent emissaries to Duke Friedrich, asking for troops to defend fair, virtuous
69 Vienna. The emissaries returned with a few dozen mounted knights, and deep regrets from the
70 Duke. The losses of men and arms at Lenica had been so great, he said, and the protection of
71 other cities so urgent, that he could spare only a few men to augment our strength. The Mongels
72 would be turned back; the Holy Roman Empire would be defended! But not at Vienna.

73 For many weeks thereafter, I insisted to the city council that more men were coming.

74 As the Mongol army approached, we took what measures we could to render the city
75 defensible. I commanded a census of all males in the city over fourteen, whose arms could be
76 turned to our defense. Churchyards and courtyards became fencing fields and training grounds.
77 Black-smoking smithies turned out new armour and new weapons, and busy wood-turners
78 crafted lethal lances and endless arrows. In every way I knew, I moved to suppress the current
79 of fear running through Vienna as the Danube River winds through Austria.

80 Hope remained that the Tartars might yet be turned back before reaching our precious
81 city. King Bela had rallied and refitted his scattered troops, and with this renewed strength he
82 marched northward to meet the encroaching enemy as they struggled across the wide Danube, at
83 a ford some leagues downstream from us. But the saints were asleep and the devil brought
84 winter early. The Tartars galloped across the fast-frozen Danube like a winter wind, bringing all
85 their number at once against the startled Hungarians. The defenders scattered as sparrows before
86 the diving hawk, and King Bela himself fled to Germany. Now the Tartar's march toward
87 Vienna was unchallenged; unchecked; unstoppable.

88 By the first days of December, the Mongol army was upon us. The farms and hamlets
89 encircling the city had emptied before their advance; every Austrian for many leagues about had
90 taken refuge behind our walls. The invaders set up camp in a plain of fertile fields a few arrow-
91 flights away. We sharpened our swords and honed our daggers. And we waited.

92 Late one evening a Tartar arrived at the city gates to parley. He sat straight-backed on
93 his strange, light horse, moustaches pendulant on each cheek, and said nothing. Behind him
94 came another man, whose horse was of the same breed as my own, and it was he who spoke for
95 this inscrutable invader. His tongue was Russian, but I understood him well enough. The
96 warriors of General Sabutai wanted nothing but tribute. If we opened the gates when the troops
97 arrived upon the morrow, we could join the empire of Batu Khan and our city would be spared.
98 If we resisted we would be crushed.

99 The Russian recited the words he had been told, but his voice was a quaver and his eyes
100 were tearless, as if they had seen so much they would never cry again. All the while he spoke
101 my mind wondered: Was he there? Was he there, at Kiev?

102 I too returned the only answer possible. The motionless, emotionless Mongol messenger
103 turned his horse and rode away without a word, his Russian voice cantering behind. I ordered
104 the keepers to seal the gates with bar and brace. We said our vespers and waited for the
105 morrow.

106 Around midnight a boy came down from the watchtower and bade me climb up with him.
107 We ascended to the high turret, from which a view across the fields and plains of the east could
108 be had. The wind was chill. A crescent moon hung low in the east, a sickle harvesting the
109 darkness. The boy pointed toward the plain. There I beheld the flickering, far-off fires of the
110 Tartar's camp. Their span was endless, as if all the stars in the firmament had come unfix'd, and
111 settled to the earth.

112 At that instant, as I felt the damp December wind slap my face, as I watched the cold,
113 mocking fires of the invaders twinkle in the distance, I realized with unbreachable certainty that
114 our lives were all about to end. We were few enough along those new-built walls, far too few to
115 long resist the audacious army arrayed outside our doors. There had been many more at Kiev.
116 And behind this feeble barrier stood Vienna: rich, gorgeous, as vulnerable as a maiden bathing in
117 a pool. For a long time I stood there in the turret, watching the campfires, and wondering why
118 God and his angels had deserted us, leaving us to fall like scythe-cut hay before this heaving,
119 heathen, hellish horde.

120 Is it not odd, that I should feel mortality so acutely then? When I was a young knight,
121 swollen by my own swiftness and swagger, I willingly faced death a dozen times, without a
122 thought. A single errant arrow, an armour-cracking mace, one lucky stroke of a sword, and I
123 would have gone to my judgement with ungreyed hair. Death was something that happened to

124 old men, and children, and the poked. Because death seemed so far away from me, I danced
125 with it in every battle, and never felt fear. Yet now, so much older, when death could deprive
126 me of so little life unlived, I felt his fleshless hand upon my shoulder and

127 A warrior does not fear death. A warrior fears only death without honour. To die in the
128 thick of great battle, fighting for home and empire, stalwart against the raging enemy, is to prove
129 a true soldier. But what honour could lie in this battle? What valour proved in being overrun by
130 overwhelming numbers, to be trampled like grass beneath a horse's hoof? Who would mourn
131 our falling when the mourners themselves were lying cold among the ashes, their forgotten
132 corpses food for stoat and rook and earthly things?

133 I did not sleep that night. For long hours I paced the wind-cold walls, pondering my
134 soul's eclipse. Was I the only one in all Vienna who truly understood our time on earth was
135 done? I had told so many cheering lies: that our walls were strong; that the Tartars would tire of
136 a long siege in winter; that fresh troops from Austria would come to our aid. Did all my eager,
137 young warriors believe me? Or were they, as was I in my own youth, too far from death to
138 realize when it was very near? I couldn't dance that dance again. I remembered Kiev.

139 [He sits back down in chair]

140 [**Cue 3:** soft light, centred on chair]

141 At last I found a sheltered place and sat, robed by moon-lit darkness with the December
142 wind blowing over my head. The calling of the guards marked the passing hours. After a time a
143 strange understanding came to me. It was neither peace nor tranquillity, but foreknowledge. I
144 understood then that despite all the labours and ambitions of a man, some fates are fixed, firm,
145 and immutable, and all human agency pitched against them is as spears cast against stone.
146 Tomorrow – or the next day, or the next – we were all going to die. Virginal Vienna, so newly
147 christened a city, would soon be ravished and violated by fire and blood. The gates of heaven
148 must open wide to receive so many innocent souls.

149 [He stands]

150 [**Cue 4:** return to warm spring day]

151 The unwelcome dawn arrived wan and wintry. Low in the southern sky, the sun was a
152 saffron stain against the grey-misting clouds. From the battlements we could see the first stirring
153 of the enemy as flits of motion across the plain. Campfires winked out; horses loose on the

154 fields were gathered and prepared. The gusting breeze carried murmurs of ten thousand foreign
155 voices to our ears. We said our prayers and waited for the siege to begin.

156 An hour after sunrise the keen-eyed boy in the tower descended with news. He had seen
157 a small troop of horsemen arrive from the east, whose demeanour and the quick attendance given
158 their horses when they dismounted suggested they had already been riding hard. They passed
159 into the great round tent where we presumed the Tartar leaders kept counsel.

160 Minutes later a restless energy spread through the enemy camp, apparent even from our
161 vantage by the renewed vigour with which they made their preparations. But something strange
162 was happening in the foreigners' field. They no longer seemed to be preparing for an attack, but
163 instead were decamping. Tents and yurts came down; great wooden wagons and ox-drawn carts
164 were hitched and loaded and lashed; horsemen mounted unhelmeted and unarmed. Then, while
165 we waited in steely, stony silence, the great Tartar army began to move, not toward our untested
166 walls but eastward, back in the direction they had come. Trains of wagons and carts creaked
167 along behind the mounted men. In less than an hour they had all disappeared into the distance.

168 Puzzlement and confusion seized our ranks then. Where had they gone? And why? A
169 condemned man, head on the block, waiting for the axe to fall, watching the executioner
170 suddenly walk away could not be more astonished than us. Nor more uncertain of our reprieve.
171 That crafty Mongol general, Sabutai, had earned his reputation for clever tactics on the
172 battlefield. I sensed a deception. Perhaps the Tartars were standing off nearby, waiting to strike
173 in the midst of too-early celebration – as an old man might find his palsy disappear, only to
174 return anon more wretched than before.

175 We waited. After an hour I told the archers to unnock their bows. After two hours I
176 ordered the watermen to bank their fires and let their cavernous cauldrons cool. At noon, while
177 the women brought soup and ale to the men on the walls, I sent out scouts to the east, south and
178 west. All returned with no word of the Tartars. The scout who rode east picked up their snow-
179 trampled trail and followed it to the ford where they had crossed the frozen Danube, still leading
180 east. All about their abandoned encampment, siege towers, ladders, and engines of war lay
181 scattered across the field like a giant's forgotten toys. In mid-afternoon, when it was clear that
182 the invincible invaders would not return, I gave the order for all to ungird their armour, and stand
183 down.

184 When the news of our reprieve became known, the celebrations throughout the city lasted
185 many days. In the weeks that followed, rumours about the Tartars' departure sprang up as corn

186 after spring rain. The Pope claimed it was a miracle, a blessing from God, and a rebuke to the
187 heathen easterners for their un-Christian ways. Others claimed that so great was the valour of
188 the Teutonic knights at Lenica, and so deep the losses they had inflicted, that the marauding
189 Mongols had lost their courage to face them again. Months later, I met a Black Sea bargeman
190 who told me that the great Khan, reigning in the unknown eastern lands, had died, and Batu
191 Khan, one of his four sons, had gone homeward with his army to ensure an orderly succession. I
192 bound the bargeman to tell no one else this pride-quenching news.

193 The winter was long, and hard, but now the warming days of spring herald new plantings
194 and a new harvest. The first barges to drift the ice-free Danube have arrived at our port, and
195 trade and commerce have renewed. Everywhere about me I see the petal-burst bloom of my
196 vital and unvanquished Vienna. Yet while my citizens and countrymen rack their weapons and
197 resume their fear-broken lives, I am left to wonder how it is that, rebuking absolute certainty,
198 defiant of all possible futures . . . [He sits in the chair] . . . I am still alive.

199 [Cue 5: Fade to black on Burghermeister sitting in the chair]