



Where Eagles Soar

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*“But they that wait upon
the Lord shall renew their
strength; they shall mount
up with wings as eagles; they
shall run, and not be weary;
and they shall walk, and not
faint.”*

Isaiah 40:31



Chapter 1



The world felt empty. There were no skyscrapers, no smog-tainted skies, just a vast, rocky skyline. Past the airport parking lot, it was almost like another planet entirely, with its rugged fields and empty mountains, but for some reason, the emptiness did not make Altan feel small. It left him with a sense of wonder.

He gripped his drone case, eager to launch it into the clear skies and see all of his parents' homeland.

My homeland as well, he thought, with flutters of excitement and sadness mixing together.

It was hard for him to believe that once, a long time ago, this place was his home. His parents had grown up in the distant mountains. They had met and fallen in love here, and later, they had Altan here. He remembered nothing of that time, having left when he was only two years old. Now, he was twelve, and he could not help but feel deep inside that he was returning home.

"I can't wait to fly my drone here," he declared, turning to see his father, Nurlan, who was struggling with his luggage.

One bag fell to the floor as his father's eyes locked on the distant mountains. A single side of his mouth twitched upwards into a sad half smile. "You're going to love it here." He waved down their hired driver. "You might not want to come home."

"Why don't you stay with me?" Altan asked, wishing they could share Mongolia together, but his father shook his head.

"I need to work, and I want to get you back home in time for the robotics tournament."

"Yeah," Altan said, looking at his dad's briefcase. "I . . ." He desperately wanted his dad to stay but knew he was busy. "I'll win the tournament this year."

His dad stopped what he was doing and looked at Altan for a moment. Hesitantly, he offered, "I could postpone the project if you want."

Altan waved his hand, a lump in his throat. "It's fine. I know you need to go."

"We'll have lots of fun in California when we go back home," his dad said as a screeching hybrid car pulled up to the curb. A man with weathered skin and humble clothes nodded to them as they wrestled the luggage into the back of the vehicle. Sliding into the back seat, Altan's dad directed the driver to where they were headed.

The Mongolian language rolled expertly off his father's lips, and although Altan understood most of it, his brain struggled to keep up.

His father motioned for Altan to jump in the vehicle, and soon, they were rolling down the road away from the airport.

The rustling of paper filled the quiet car as his dad opened his briefcase and got to work, shuffling through paperwork and marking things where needed.

“How long will you be gone?” Altan asked him, and after a moment of study, Nurlan lowered his papers to look at him.

“The contract I signed with the company in South Korea states that I’ll complete the project before I leave, no matter if it takes one month or four.”

“Four?” Altan gasped. “But my . . .”

His father raised a hand to stop him. “I don’t intend to be there all four months, Son. You’ll be back in time for the competition if I can help it. I expect it will take me two or two and a half months if all goes well. In the meantime, your mom’s family is eager to spend time with you. And Altan—” he shifted his weight so he could look Altan directly in his eyes. “It is my hope you’ll get to know your culture as well. I know you love your drones and action camera, but put them away and take time to learn how to be a Mongolian. The satellite phone I gave you for this trip is only for emergencies. Mongolia is your home. I want you to appreci—”

Before Nurlan could finish, the vehicle hit a huge bump and launched paperwork all over the back seat. White sheets of paper rained down on top of them.

“Oh!” his father cried as he attempted to stop his documents from mixing together. Altan helped him as best he could but struggled as they hit one bump after another.

“This road is terrible,” Altan observed.

“That’s ’cause we aren’t on a road, Son.”

“What?” Altan passed his father a handful of documents before turning to look out the window. “Umm . . .”

The pavement had disappeared altogether. In its place were bumpy tracks that plowed over rocky terrain and through grassy fields. His father chuckled as Altan stared, mesmerized, out the window.

“Welcome to Mongolia,” Nurlan said with a grin. “I think you’ll find it vastly different from California.”

“How far will we be driving on this?” Altan asked as he stared out the window.

As far as he could see, there was not a single road. Rocky plains rose into grass-covered mountains, and the silver hybrid charged through all of it without a care in the world.

“More than a few hours.” His father put some of his papers into his briefcase and shut it, looking out at the land as it bumped past. “Our family lives deep in western Mongolia. We’re descended from the Kazakh Mongolians.”

“Kazakh?”

His father smiled. “Our people came from Kazakhstan quite some time ago. We kept many of our Kazakh traditions, but we became part of the Mongolian culture as well. Our heritage is varied and unique. Some of your relatives even still speak our traditional Kazakh language.”

Altan’s heart dropped, thinking about all the years he had spent practicing Mongolian with his father. “But I’ve been learning Mongolian.”

His father chuckled. “Don’t worry. Our family speaks both Kazakh and Mongolian.”

“So we’re Mongolian?” Altan asked.

“Yes.”

“But we’re also Kazakh?” Already, Altan felt very out of place in a country he knew little about.

His uncertainty showed, and his father reassured him.

“You’ll fit right in. Just give it time.”

Altan stared out the window, where vast mountains rose into rocky peaks before him. “I wish I’d put my action camera on the car.”

“You’ll have plenty of opportunities to film the countryside, Son.”

Their hired driver bumped expertly over the rocky tracks at a speed that jostled Altan uncomfortably in the back seat. He had no idea how his father managed to work on this sort of ride, but he seemed to move easily with the car’s motions, like a well-seasoned sailor on a familiar ship. The speed at which they traveled thrilled Altan, and he rolled down the window to feel the air whip through his hair.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you, Son,” his father said.

Altan was about to ask why when they blasted across a white, frothy creek. Water sloshed up the side of the car, splashing Altan’s face and soaking the collar of his shirt.

His father and the driver broke into laughter, and as Altan lifted his shirt to dry his face, he felt a force push him back against his seat. Opening his eyes, he saw that the car was zooming up a steep hill.

“This is just a little car, right?” he asked. “How is it doing all of this?”

His father smiled. “In Mongolia everything does what it has to, Son.”

For hours Altan marveled at the little hybrid, which drove up and down steep grades. They even crossed several more creeks before they broke through a mountain pass into a valley, the sight of which stirred something deep inside of Altan. Awe or familiarity—it was hard to tell.

The valley was framed by steep green mountains, and spread out within were verdant fields speckled with vibrant wildflowers. A stream lazily meandered from the distant mountains through the valley, where a herd of horses grazed on the lush grass. On the far side of the valley, nestled next to the hills, sat a round white *ger*. Tendrils of smoke spiraled above the strange tent, which stood in contrast to the purple pasqueflowers that blanketed the grass around it. The whole valley felt like its own pocket of heaven.

As the car bumped its way over the terrain, a small group of individuals gathered to wait in front of the *ger*, and although Altan did not remember his family or his home, he felt like these must be them.

“That’s our family’s *ger*,” his father said, lowering his papers and closing his briefcase to take in the sight. “This is our summer camp.”

To Altan’s surprise, a young girl burst from around the *ger*, mounted atop a horse the color of midnight. The girl’s ebony hair was tied back and whipped behind her, lashing out like black flames as she urged the horse to a full gallop. She sat high and confident in the saddle, waving excitedly at the approaching car.

One word crossed Altan's mind as he watched her: *wild*.

"She looks like your mo—" Altan's dad started, and Altan looked over to see his father, completely still, mesmerized by the sight.

"Who is she?" Altan asked, and his father smiled.

"Your cousin Roza. The two of you were once inseparable."

Altan turned to watch the girl as she passed their car with the horse and turned the horse's reins to ride back to the *ger* once more. "I don't remember her."

"You will get to know her again," his father encouraged.

Their car pulled in front of the *ger*, and the people swarmed around. Before Altan had a chance to even unbuckle, his door swung open, and a massive man blocked his way out.

A woman's gentle voice trilled from his father's side, slow and steady in her native speech, "We have missed you, Nurlan."

Altan felt himself tugged abruptly from the car into a pair of tree trunk-sized arms. His father hugged the woman, who Altan assumed was Nurlan's sister, and she laughingly pointed to the man who was currently squashing Altan to near breathlessness. "This is your uncle Esen."

The man held Altan at arm's length, grasping his face between two large, calloused hands. "A hardy boy. Could use some meat on his bones, but we'll fix that, Brother." Altan stood dumbfounded by the man's sheer size. His uncle towered several heads above him and looked down on Altan with thick eyebrows and glistening eyes. Altan was surprised to see a huge smile streak across his uncle's worn, leathery face, and before Altan could object, his uncle leaned forward and touched his

nose to Altan's forehead, pulling away as he boomed, "Welcome home!"

Everyone laughed as Altan stood dazed and somewhat shocked by the warm welcome. His Aunt Bota stepped forward, an adorable toddler beaming on her hip, as she leaned in to kiss Altan gently on the cheek. "It has been so long, but I would recognize those mischievous brown eyes anywhere." She smiled and nodded to the little boy on her hip. "This is your baby cousin, Bek."

"It's nice to meet you, Bek," Altan said in his best Mongolian, hoping he didn't sound like a foreigner. His little cousin flapped his arms up and down excitedly and squealed.

"And this is Roza," Uncle Esen said, opening his palm to wave as she galloped past, slowing her horse to an abrupt halt so she could dismount and run to the group. As she dropped to the ground, her hair tie fell loose, causing her ebony hair to fall in waves around her shoulders. Her skin was painted with dirt after a full day of working with the horses in the hot sun, but her smile was radiant. "Roza is thirteen," Uncle Esen continued, "so I'm sure the two of you will have a lot of fun this summer."

"Hi!" Roza said, skidding to a stop.

"Hi," Altan said, unsure what else to say.

"Would you like to go riding?" she asked.

"Ummm . . ." Altan looked at her horse warily, eyeing the thick muscles rippling beneath its silky dark coat. "I don't know how to ride."

"What?" Her eyebrows drew together as she looked at her

uncle. “How does a Mongolian not know how to ride a horse?”

Altan’s cheeks burned, and he turned away so as not to show his embarrassment.

“Shhhh . . .” Aunt Bota said, waving for Roza to be quiet. “He has grown up in a place very different from here.”

“Who better to teach him to ride than you?” Uncle Esen laughed as he nudged his daughter and placed a hand on Altan’s shoulder, gripping it tightly. “You’ll be riding like a Mongolian long before your father gets back.”

“I expect so,” Altan’s dad laughed.

Roza stared at Altan, her gaze unwavering and curious. “Father says we ride before we walk in Mongolia. What do you do in California?”

Altan looked down to the drone case in his hands. “I build and fly drones.”

“Oh! Like my father! What type of bird is a drone?”

Altan looked at his father, confused. “It’s not . . . a bird. Here . . . look.” Excitement took over as he knelt to the ground to open his drone case. “Its name is Scout. I’ll show you why.” His hands shook nervously as he unlocked the case, revealing his greatest treasure within. For months he had labored over the drone, perfecting the intricate wiring and code. Carefully, Altan lifted the drone out of its case, holding it up so all could admire his work. It glistened like a tiny spacecraft, its carbon fiber catching the light of the sun, but when he looked at Roza to see her reaction, she did not look impressed.

“You fly this?” She looked at her father. “Our eagle could crush this with one of her talons.”

“Hush, Roza!” Aunt Bota sighed. “Why don’t we all go inside? I’ve made us some fried dough and tea.”

Roza stood over Altan, her lips pressed tightly together in disappointment. Without a word, she spun on her heel and walked into the family *ger*. Her parents followed behind her, and Altan was left kneeling on the valley floor, his most prized possession ignored and forgotten in his hands. He gingerly returned it to its case and tried to suppress the hurt in his heart while his father waited beside him.

Something rustled nearby, and he turned to see a bird—bigger than any he had ever seen up close—resting atop a small perch. Altan was used to little songbirds that rested on trees outside his apartment, but this bird—it was different. As Altan stared, it stretched its wings out, as if to show him its greatness. The sun caught its feathers, which seemed to sparkle like gold in its light, and Altan knew this bird was made to rule the sky.

“A golden eagle,” his father said, kneeling down beside him. “Your m—” He froze mid-sentence, staring at the bird. “I used to fly them.”

“You flew that?” Altan asked. “How?”

“Your uncle will show you while you’re here. I think you’ll love it.”

Altan swallowed, trying to suppress the growing lump in his throat as he looked at the magnificent bird. No wonder Roza hadn’t been impressed by his drone. “I’m not going to fit in here, Dad,” Altan whispered. “Can I go with you?”

His father pulled him in for a hug. “This is your home, Son. Even if you don’t remember it. You once loved this valley as

Roza does.” He paused and turned his head away. “Your mother did too.”

Without another word, his father stood and slipped into the *ger*. Altan sealed his drone case and stood to follow, his eyes lingering on the eagle for a moment.

This was his mother’s land. His father’s land. And though it did not feel like his yet, he would try to remember.

Where Eagles Soar

Altan's life no longer feels familiar. Left in Mongolia with his mother's family for a summer, the traditions feel strange to him and he struggles to master Mongolian skills and connect with his spirited cousin, Roza. When Altan's mistakes send the two on a journey across the valleys and mountains of the steppe, it will take all the lessons he has learned and the courage he has gained to bring them safely through.

