

## PROLOGUE

### ALBURZ MOUNTAINS, PERSIA, AD1256

The envoy shivered. It was only a month till the solstice and, though no snow had fallen, the mountain wind was sharp enough to chill his bones. There had been colder winters, he reflected, but the circumstances of this journey were exceptional. Fear played as much a part in his discomfort as the temperature.

He wondered what his reception would be like - a polite audience, immediate death by the sword, or a slow, bloodless execution in what he had been told was the traditional Mongol manner, suffocation beneath a pile of carpets. Hulegu's reputation for savagery equalled that of his grandfather Genghis but the new ruler of Persia did not seemingly have the Great Khan's patience.

The envoy drew his camel-hair shawl more tightly around his shoulders and urged his pony into the gully. A few stones dislodged by its hooves clattered onto the rocks below. At least he was away from the grim mountain-top fortress and breathing the free air again. Whatever awaited him below, it could scarcely be worse than the stifling of his intellect as a Nizari slave. Perhaps a quick death would be preferable to the slow destruction of his soul.

He glanced at his three-rider escort. They were well wrapped against the cold but, unexpectedly, no armour was visible. Instead, they wore felt coats with fur-trimmed sleeves and collars. There was also fur on their boots, and on the ear flaps of the helmets that covered the heads of two of their number. The third man wore a Persian hat and a thick scarf to protect his ears and lower face from the wind. The envoy could see none of the faces clearly but he could picture the pale skin, prominent cheekbones and narrow eyes that marked the Mongols as a race apart.

None of the three had spoken, indicating simply by signs the direction in which they wanted him to go. Perhaps they did not understand his language, or had been instructed to bring him to the Mongol camp, no more. The questioning would begin later, he told himself, when he had delivered the Grand Master's message of surrender. Then he would learn his fate, and whether Hulegu was truly the monster the emirs depicted, striking down indiscriminately all who opposed him and the innocents who served them. A mirror image of themselves, he reflected bitterly, only the Nizaris killed by stealth, with poison and daggers in the night.

How would his family fare then, he wondered: prostitution for his wife and daughter; at best, conscription to the Mongol army for his sons? And he could do nothing to protect them. He shivered again. The Khan's patience must surely have run out. His campaign had begun early in Ramadan and his siege battalions had been camped in the mountains for at least a month.

They had climbed to the other side of the gully and had almost reached the outlying tents. The path was less treacherous now and the envoy began to take note of his surroundings. The Mongol camp was spread out over the southern hillside, makeshift grey awnings surrounding the round, whitewashed *Gers* of the princes. Identification pennons hung limply in the winter air. Skin-clad human figures stamped their feet and swung their arms against the cold; others exercised their ponies in the spaces between the tents and round the war engines. Behind, the dark crags of the Alburz, their peaks hidden in cloud, cast an ominous shadow over the whole scene.

The envoy became aware that the third rider was studying his person with interest. In the dim light, he could just make out a pair of dark eyes peering at him from between the rim of the Persian hat and the folds of the muffler. The two helmeted Mongols were already some distance ahead and seemed bent only on reaching their destination.

Suddenly, to his surprise, the man addressed him in the Persian language.

“What is your name, Master Ismaili?” It was a young voice, well modulated, with the accent of the southern provinces.

“I am called Nasr ad-Din Tusi,” the envoy replied. “However, you are wrong in your assumption. I’m not of the Ismaili faith!” The angry sharpness of his denial surprised him, but the cold had made him irritable.

“So you have no love for the Grand Master?” challenged the escort. The eyes above the muffler flashed. “Yet you serve him, and come to Hulegu as his spokesman.”

“A man may serve another unwillingly, and without loving him,” said Nasr.

“He might also serve willingly without loving his master. Allah sometimes leads men into strange situations.”

Nasr stared at the speaker. “So you follow the teachings of Mahommet? That is unusual in a Mongol.”

Instead of being annoyed, the escort laughed. “I am no Mongol, Nasr ad-Din,” he said. “Just as you are no Ismaili. And no soldier either, if my information is correct. By all accounts you are a physician and translator of great works from the Greek. An astronomer too. A man who sees the future in the stars.”

“You are mocking me!” said Nasr, detecting irony. What could this youth know of the magic of herbs, the beauty of Homer, or the mystic paths of the planets?

“That was not my intention,” said the escort more humbly. “Like you and much of Hulegu’s army, I’m a Persian and a follower of Islam. I was a scholar too before my conscription and your name is known to me. Hulegu has great regard for men like us, and great use too. He leans toward the Buddhist religion but treats all faiths equally. And his awe of scholars is exceeded only by his awe of priests.”

“And so you serve willingly?”

“Why not?” The escort shrugged. The pitch of his voice rose and he spoke with youthful impatience. “If nothing else, we Persians are survivors. Our country has been ruled by men who forget kings are kings by the will of God and seek to further their own glory. To build private wealth. It was so at the time of the last Sasanian monarchs and is no different now. We owe the Caliph no favours. And Shah Mohammed Ali, for whom many people weep bitter tears, was a foreign usurper. A Mongol ruler can be no worse.”

“I shall weep no tears for the Caliph of Baghdad, or for the Shah of Kwarazm,” said Nasr. They had reached the camp and he saw the escort had spoken the truth. Many of the outpost guards had the dark features and neat beards of his own countrymen. “I have heard though that Mohammed Ali’s son Jalal was a man of whom all Persia might have been proud.”

The escort slowed his pace and urged his pony closer to Nasr’s mount. “Be careful!” he warned. “Even Mongols have ears for the Persian language when it comes to certain names. And Jalal is a name Hulegu fears.”

“I shall be careful,” said Nasr in an undertone. “As you say, I’m a scholar, not a soldier. One with a family to consider. I do not count bravery among my virtues, nor foolhardiness among my faults.” He glanced at a passing group of fur-draped Mongols but they took no interest in him or his companion. “But though I have lived more than twenty years in a cage, I’m not entirely ignorant of recent history. Surely Jalal al-Din is dead, his sons murdered by Genghis’s troops, their bodies thrown in the Indus, his daughters given as brides to the Mongol princes?”

“If you speak openly of what I’m about to tell you, it could mean your death,” the escort said. “Hulegu is superstitious. It’s not an old enemy he fears, but the legends surrounding that enemy. From a priest of the old religion he heard that one of Jalal’s sons survived, and lives with a sister in Kerman. The Khan is haunted by the prospect that the

story is true.”

“Supposing it is?”

“I’m not yet in Hulegu’s confidence, but I’ll tell you what I think. First, he will reduce the castles of Maimun-Diz and Alamut to ashes. The Grand Master of the Ismailis has defied him too long. Afterwards, if the omens are favourable, he’ll turn on Baghdad, depose the Caliph and adopt formally the title of Il-khan. Then he’ll subdue the south. The climate there is not to the Mongols’ liking, but they’ll take hostages to ensure obedience. They’ll execute any men who resist and abduct the women of prominent families as wives for their nobles. Thus Hulegu will take care of the heir to Jalal if one exists, dilute the blood of the Shahs if there’s a daughter, and guard against insurrection in a single measure.”

“It may be as you suggest,” Nasr said wearily. “I do not have your obvious grasp of politics. I care little what happens to Maimun-Diz, the Grand Master, or even the Caliph, but there’s a fine library at Alamut, and instruments I use in my work. It’ll be a great pity if these things are destroyed.”

“Rest easy, Nasr ad-Din,” said the escort. “Hulegu will not needlessly destroy anything that can be used in his service. Pledge him your loyalty and you will be free to carry on your work in the sciences. We shall find a worthy task for you to undertake in the new empire.”

Nasr had often met ambition in the young, but rarely such self-assurance. There was arrogance in this youth too, he thought, a quality that might be the undoing of a weak man. Yet he liked him, and had found comfort and hope in their conversation. His terror had abated and, despite the cold and the tiredness that was creeping over him, he managed a smile. Hulegu might not be the ogre depicted in the Nizari tales. Perhaps life in Mongol service could indeed offer him what he craved, to once again think his own thoughts and explore new ideas, free of the invisible fetters that had bound him to the Grand Master.

“And what does Fate have in store for *you* in this new empire, I wonder?” he asked warmly.

“My ancestors once held the hand of kings and shaped the policies of kingdoms,” said the young man proudly. “I ask no more of Fate than she allows me to emulate them.”

“I pray Allah grants your wish,” said Nasr. “What is your name, and how will I know you again?”

The escort pushed back his hat and unwound his scarf so that his brow and chin were visible. He had a handsome face which wore the gravity of expression that usually comes with middle age. His nose was aquiline. His beard was jet black and trimmed to a point.

“My name is Kartir Ahmed.”

“Kartir,” echoed Nasr with a wan smile. He had not slept well since the Mongol siege began. “That is a noble Persian name and not one to be forgotten in a hurry. He who first bore it was among the greatest of our sons.

“But you should be careful too, Kartir Ahmed,” he added as an afterthought. “If you’ll take the advice of an old man, do not let your ambition become a prison for your soul!”

## PART ONE

### I

#### KERMAN, PERSIA, AD1290

The fire temple had existed since the time of King Ardashir. Half a morning's ride from the walls of the city he had founded, it was, like the city itself, almost entirely surrounded by mountains. It lay on the road to Isfahan, a monument to old days and old beliefs. In summer, it basked in sunshine. In late autumn and early spring, cool breezes blew over it from the barren, rocky wastelands above, whipping up the sand into frequent storms that swept its deserted terrace and battered its crumbling pillars.

The city had grown and prospered in the thousand years since Ardashir's day and had long been known by the name of the province in which it stood - Kerman - proud, independent and largely untouched by the politics of the Il-khanate. Those who clung stubbornly to the Mazdaite faith had long found more convenient and judicious meeting-places for the practice of their rituals, and the temple had fallen into disuse except as a tryst for illicit lovers or men of business.

Though spring was not yet over, the signs of summer were everywhere. The winds had abated and only an occasional flutter of breeze disturbed the sand that was settling on the ruins. The sun had not yet unleashed its full power, but the plain shimmered in a heat haze. The ring of mountains was blue and distant.

Kartir Ahmed, civilian governor of the province, halted his mount by a broken, half-buried column. He raised himself considerably out of the saddle while the animal relieved itself in the sand.

"So what are you up to, Nizam?" he enquired of his companion, breaking a long silence.

"May not a man ride with an old friend without incurring suspicion?" retorted the other. Time had been unkind to him, Kartir thought. He was below average height, which accentuated his stoutness. His jacket and breeches were plain, his boots well worn. A sweat-stained yellow turban was wound round his brow. It seemed too large for him and dipped untidily over his right eyebrow.

Kartir hoped he had aged more gracefully. His once jet black hair and beard were streaked with grey and his aquiline features were deeply lined, but he held his tall frame erect. And he had always taken pride in his clothing. It was never ostentatious, but he chose and wore it carefully, as befitted his position as a man of means.

"We were never truly friends, Nizam," he said sharply. "I haven't seen you for ten years, and we exchanged no more than a few civil words in the ten before that. Now tell me what you want, and why you have dragged me out to the desert in this weather."

"The place is symbolic, Kartir. The gods of our ancestors are all around us."

Kartir Ahmed allowed his eyes to rest on the cracked altar stone. "It's rather late for an apology to them, don't you think?" He could not disguise his sarcasm. "We both know the old faith was doomed from the moment temporal power broke with spiritual. Religion is now a political matter, and I for one am a pragmatist."

"Keep your beliefs to yourself, Kartir," said Nizam irritably. "I did not propose this meeting to argue about religion. Events may be going well for us at last."

"Still dreaming of the glory of Persia, Nizam?" laughed Kartir. "Why don't you just admit the scheme failed? We are both twenty years older than we were then, and the world is

a different place.”

Nizam scowled. “I’m sorry you see fit to mock my dream. It was once yours too. But, despite your derision, I repeat: events may be going well for us at last. Perhaps our hopes are half realised, without our lifting a finger.”

Kartir’s amusement died. “I’ve no time to play power games, Nizam,” he said. “I’m nearly sixty, as you must be, and would like to enjoy my old age in peace. Tell me what you’re doing in Kerman. Explain your reasons for requesting an interview, and do not take all day.”

“Have you forgotten our first meeting here more than twenty years ago?”

Kartir had not forgotten. He sighed. “At least twenty-five. A long time, Nizam.”

“In those days you were in service to Hulegu,” resumed Nizam. “You believed he would unite Persia in peace and justice. But our first Il-khan was superstitious. He was haunted by the spectre of his grandfather’s enemy, Jalal. He had heard a story that two of Jalal’s children survived the massacre on the River Indus, a boy and a girl living with the priests of Zoroaster in Kerman. Then Nasr ad-Din Tusi with his fortune telling persuaded the Il-khan he had nothing to fear from ghosts and that if he attacked Baghdad he could not fail. You should be grateful to Nasr. He diverted Hulegu’s attention ....”

“Just as I intended. Give me credit for recognising Tusi’s fine intellect.”

“So Hulegu forgot,” went on Nizam, ignoring the interruption. “You, on the other hand, wondered if perhaps the story was true and asked my help. We met at this very spot. You had just returned from Baghdad to take up your appointment as viceroy. Jalal’s son had not survived, but his daughter was alive, and *her* daughter Roxanne. I found them for you.”

“And you were paid well enough, Nizam. Please get to the point.”

Nizam’s face had not lost its scowl. “You remember our next meeting?” he enquired smoothly.

“How could I forget!”

“In the intervening years you had become disillusioned. The Mongols were just the same as other conquerors. Though you were still governor here, you no longer enjoyed the same trust. Hulegu was dead and his son Abaqa of a different disposition.”

“I should have listened to my own predictions,” said Kartir philosophically. The conversation was stirring painful memories. Abaqa had wanted to be Il-khan, not just in name but in reality. He could not overlook the south and had ensured its obedience the only way he could.

“But I offered a solution, Kartir,” pursued Nizam. “The seed of Jalal. An alliance by marriage between Roxanne’s son and your daughter, though they were only children at the time.”

“The boy had a father too, Nizam!”

“You know he was unimportant. The priests wanted only to preserve the line. Anyhow, you approved my suggestion. You betrothed your daughter to the lad. A new dynasty would rise in Kerman, one that would recapture the empire of Darius and drive the Mongols back to the steppes. The old Magian prophecy would be fulfilled!”

Kartir shook his head sadly. It was a sign of the times that men revelled in the glories of the past. They looked to the skies for portents that would herald the new age, - the birth of a Persian Alexander, foretold by the Magians of Istakhr a thousand years ago. The old gods would awake; the sacred fires would be rekindled.

“Prophecies and dreams? I should have known better.”

“If you had acted sooner ....”

“Always if!” snapped Kartir. “Abaqa needed more power. He went on conscripting our youths to his ranks and kidnapping our maidens to be wives to the Mongol aristocracy. The young man on whom I pinned my hopes was sacrificed in a senseless war. My daughter

Nadia is trapped in marriage to Arghun, the new Il-khan.”

“A marriage that has never been consummated, if reports from Tabriz are to be credited.”

“That’s small comfort to me, Nizam, when she’s a prisoner,” said Kartir bitterly. “Anyway, the fact they have no issue proves nothing. How can you say events are going well; that your plan is even one tenth realised?”

Nizam swung round in the saddle and faced him with a knowing smile. “There is the boy. Your grandson.”

“Do not involve Hassan in your schemes,” cried Kartir. He felt his stomach tighten and his chest burn as the acid rose into his mouth. “He is only ten years old, and can be of no use to you.”

“You’re a politician, Kartir, but you show little understanding of the politics that matter. The child is a Persian.”

“One who was weaned and raised at the court of the Mongol,” objected Kartir. “I’m not as naive as you think, Nizam. I love the boy for Nadia’s sake, but he is tainted. He is learning their customs and is being trained to bear their arms. He’ll grow up with Mongol thoughts and habits.”

“Perhaps you underestimate your daughter’s strength and influence,” said Nizam. “I have heard she supervises her son’s education. She provides him with the best teachers, and he is being instructed in the Islamic faith by the imams. For all that, it seems Nadia does not scorn the old religion as you do. She obtains favours for its adherents.”

“I do not scorn the old religion,” said Kartir. “Mazdaism is irrelevant, that is all.”

“Maybe so,” acknowledged Nizam. “But what I hear too is that Arghun is enamoured of Nadia, and that Hassan has become his favourite.”

“You hear a great deal for a humble administrator in a provincial government,” said Kartir. The man’s demeanour irked him, but he was still curious to learn the reason for his sudden appearance in Kerman after a decade, and what scheme he was hatching. “But supposing your reports are correct, where does it lead us? You can’t expect Arghun to make the boy his heir. He has sons.”

“He has,” agreed Nizam, “but your grandson is Persian. On your side he has the blood of the Magians, on Roxanne’s the seed of Jalal al-Din. In a few more years he will be a man. The people will support a Muslim claimant. Perhaps even the Mazdaites will subordinate their faith to the good of our country.”

“You’re living in the world of fairy tales, Nizam.” Kartir laughed humourlessly. “May I remind you the people supported Teguder when he declared himself a follower of the Prophet and took the name Ahmed.”

“Teguder had his eye on the main chance and was a Mongol,” spat Nizam. “The popular support withered when the princes showed their disapproval.”

“And they would do so again, only more so. My loyalty to the Il-khan is hollow but it was purchased at a great price. I’ll not be party to anything that could bring Mongol wrath down upon Nadia and her boy. If Arghun were to hear of Hassan’s blood line - and the prophecy - and link the two .....

“From whom would he hear it?” scoffed Nizam. “All those who knew the true facts of Roxanne’s birth are long dead. Roxanne herself died before her son reached puberty. Only two old priests of Zoroaster knew our secret. Khalafi converted to Islam and departed this life twelve years ago, though he was senile long before that. Gobras was killed during Abaqa’s assault on Kerman. We two alone know that Hassan is the great-great-grandson of Jalal al-Din and heir to the empire of the Kwarazm Shahs.”

“Even so, Arghun’s eldest son, Ghazan, will not forgive a plot to disinherit him.”

Nizam wrinkled his brow earnestly, looked around as if they were in the middle of a

crowded market-place, and laid his hand on Kartir's saddle-horn.

"Listen to me, Kartir. You said yourself the world is a different place. Our country has changed for the worse since Hulegu's reign. The Mongol empire is no longer secure or at one with itself. Arghun pays only lip service to the authority of Kublai Khan. The troops of the Golden Horde perform manoeuvres on the shores of the Caspian. The Chagatai Mongols mass on the border of Khorasan, and Ghazan is hard pressed to keep them in check."

"So?"

"To the west, the Mamluks are always a threat to Arghun's hold on power," went on Nizam. "And there lies the seed of our success. Sultan Ashraf's dearest wish is to see Baghdad the capital of Islam again."

"An Egyptian rather than a Mongol ruler? Small consolation."

"Not a conquest, Kartir - an alliance," said Nizam triumphantly.

"And what would your master, Baidu, Prince of Baghdad, have to say about your proposed alliance?" asked Kartir. They were on dangerous ground.

"Baidu is young and dissolute," Nizam said. "He will be easily swept aside when the time is right. Only a few princes, retain their loyalty to the ambitions of Genghis, and they too are weak drunkards. The junior officers have intermarried, and their offspring are half Persian. The ranks are swelled by men of Persian birth. Once an enslaved minority, they are now the backbone of the army. As governor you have influence, Kartir, and a loyal following. If you were to mobilise, the people of Fars and Yazd would follow. And with the forces of the Mamluk Sultan supporting our cause in the west, the princes would be overwhelmed. Think. You might be regent!"

Though the candle of Kartir's youthful ambition had long since been snuffed, Nizam's persuasive tone stirred the still-glowing embers of his pride. But his instincts warned him to tread warily. He was too old to take risks.

"Ghazan will not take a rebellion lying down, and he'll not be swept aside so easily."

"Perhaps Ghazan will not survive his father."

"The Lord Ahriman has entered your heart, Nizam," cried Kartir in horror. His companion's sinister meaning was only too clear. "I have no love for the sons of Arghun, but I'll not be a party to assassination. I've seen too much of it in my lifetime."

"So you remember the names of the old gods!" snorted Nizam. "Anyway, such drastic steps may not be necessary. Ghazan has discontent among his own generals, as well as the Chagatai, to worry about. As for Arghun's other son, Oljeitu, it's rumoured he's being raised as a Christian by his mother. He'll never be accepted as ruler."

"Don't forget I'm viceroy here and could have you arrested for just thinking those thoughts," said Kartir. "Are you so sure I'll not betray them to Arghun?"

"As you say, they are thoughts only. By betraying them, you would compromise yourself. Anyway, I know your heart too well, Kartir. You may be Arghun's governor here but like me you're a patriot."

A patriot, but not a fool, thought Kartir Ahmed. He was struck by the enormity of what he had been for a second contemplating. Nizam's arguments were too glib, his motives and true loyalties unclear.

"You're wasting your time, Nizam," he said. "Your scheme is madness."

"Still the same arrogant Kartir!" rejoined Nizam angrily. "I hope you don't live to regret your decision."

Kartir's temper too was rising, but he controlled it. "Coming here was a stupid mistake," he said. "Go back to Baghdad and your accounts, Nizam. Learn to accept Fate as I have done. Allah will return our country to us in His own good time."

"And if I cannot accept?"

"Ignore my advice if you like," warned Kartir. "It's *your* head and severed limbs that

Arghun will display on the gates of Tabriz.”

“That’s your final word?”

“Only one more. If you decide to turn your thoughts to action, whatever you do take care that no harm befalls my daughter, or her son. In either case, Prince Baidu will not protect you, and your unseeing eyes will look down from a spike on the gates of Kerman!”

Kartir watched Nizam ride off ill-humouredly towards the city. When the dust trail had vanished, he dismounted and sat pensively on the crumbling temple steps. The meeting had reminded him of events he would rather have forgotten. He breathed slowly and evenly, trying to ease away his tension. Gradually his indigestion subsided.

It was not Nizam’s fault the plan had failed. The hand of Allah, All-wise and All-powerful, had intervened. Yet Kartir had known in his heart they could not succeed. That one man, not out of his teens, could change the course of history as Alexander of Macedon had done seventeen centuries earlier was no more than a mad dream. Though the deeds of Jalal had already passed into legend and Jalal himself, dead more than forty years, would soon become a cult figure in Persian mythology, that an unknown and probably spurious descendant could rally the shattered forces of Islam was a pious hope.

But he had been desperate.

At Alamut it had been different. His belief in Hulegu’s unifying mission had been genuine, his ambition fired by the prospect of emulating his ancestral namesake. What the first Kartir, High Priest of Zoroaster, Grand Wazir to the Persian kings, had done a thousand years ago was to give pride and unity to the nation in the name of Ahura Mazda, the god of the Magians. He, Kartir Ahmed, would restore that pride and unity in the name of Allah, and in another thousand years men would remember *him*, and honour *his* name.

Disillusionment with the Mongol cause had come gradually. Even the bloodletting had been accepted in the early days. Empires were not built without blood being spilt, even innocent blood. The fate of the Caliph had left him unmoved. Later had come the doubts.

The turning point had come in Khorasan. Once the land had been rich, its fertility assured by the network of underground irrigation channels, maintained by generations of peasant farmers. Now, much of that province was sparsely populated and the network had fallen into disrepair. He had witnessed none of the supposed atrocities himself: the rotting corpses in the streets; the stench of burning flesh; the piles of bleached skulls left as a warning against defiance. But he had seen too much death, too many elegant buildings fired, too many hostages taken. And he could not close his ears to the stories.

Kartir remembered the words of Nasr ad-Din as if they had been spoken yesterday. *A man may serve unwillingly and without love.* He had never imagined they would one day apply so aptly to his own situation. Love had never been part of his relationship with Hulegu but he had respected, even admired him.

*I have lived more than twenty years in a cage.*

His career had flourished in the early years, but he was losing the idealism of youth. By the time of his posting to Kerman he knew the bars of the cage were closing round him. His ambitions had been achieved at the expense of his conscience. They had become his prison and he could not escape. The Il-khans did not tolerate desertion.

He had first heard the story from Juvaini, the Il-khan’s secretary. A group of priests of the Zoroastrian brotherhood, returning to Kerman from a pilgrimage to India had found a young girl wandering near the River Indus, at Peshawar, with an infant boy in her arms. In terror of her life, she had told them she was Roxanne, daughter of Jalal al-Din, Shah of Kwarazm, Khorasan and Transoxiana.

“Highly improbable,” Juvaini had joked. “The Gabars can’t forget the days when they held the hand of kings and would like to do so again.”



Kartir knew some Gabar myths but this was one tale he had not heard. He was intrigued.

Of course, history told a different story. The battle of the Indus had taken place two generations earlier. At first, Jalal's troops routed the Mongols, but his army was torn apart by rivalries. Genghis's forces had regrouped and driven Jalal back to the river. The Shah had escaped by leaping fully armed into the current. The Mongols had butchered his sons and married off his harem and female issue.

Supposing it were not myth. How then would he have heard it? The followers of Zoroaster, the Gabars, did not openly declare their faith. For more than two hundred years, the law had persecuted them and forced their conversion or exile. They practised their religion behind locked doors. Their secrets were theirs alone.

He had been given no opportunity to investigate. He was posted to Maragha to work with Nasr on building an observatory, and had remained there for three summers. He had cemented their friendship by marrying Nasr's daughter. After Maragha had been Baghdad, his reward a finance ministry under Juvaini. Four years later, he had been with Hulegu when he annexed Fars and Kerman to the empire. Nadia had just been born. For his loyalty, he was appointed Wazir.

Even then, it would have been unwise to ask openly about Jalal's children, but by an accident of Fate he made the acquaintance of Nizam, a steward formerly in the employ of the deposed Emir. Nizam had offered his services as agent, and for five hundred silver dinars, Kartir had bought the information he wanted. He was too late. The Shah's son had not survived and his daughter Roxanne, now an elderly matron, was dying in the care of the Mazdaite priests. However, there was a granddaughter, also named Roxanne, and *her* son, Mahmoud Hassan. Khalafi, the Gabar patriarch, had sworn to the story's truth.

Within a year, the first Il-khan was dead. His son and successor, Abaqa, was less trusting and, while confirming Kartir in his appointment, had taken measures of his own to ensure allegiance. The generals came. There were more hostages. The conquerors' grip of Kerman became a stranglehold.

Kartir had borne it philosophically. Though his loyalty had begun to waver, he had a wife and child. He never doubted that, without his co-operation, not only would their lives have been at risk, but the treatment meted out to the province would have been much harsher.

In Nizam's proposition he had seen hope. He instinctively distrusted the man and there were risks involved, but beneath his growing doubts and cynicism still burned some of the idealism of Alamut. The Mongols had failed him, but perhaps he could indeed become the father of a new dynasty. His ancestors were noble - Magians, the priestly tribe, rulers of Persia in all but name. Nadia and young Mahmoud were already playmates and he had little to lose by agreeing to a betrothal. Whatever the outcome, that was an investment in the future of his race.

Abaqa stayed away, but the threat of further oppression was always there. The military commanders came and went, each demanding commission from the poll tax in return for their protection. Though the cage imprisoning his conscience was growing ever smaller, Kartir endured it. His life was comfortable, the people of Kerman uncomplaining. And he had his family.

His private pain had come later. The death of his wife, just as Nadia was growing into womanhood, drove him to the depths of despair. He had no understanding of a maiden's needs and had pressed ahead with the marriage contract too hastily. But Fate had intervened once more. Without warning, the Il-khan's forces again attacked the south. The new bridegroom was conscripted to fight against the Golden Horde and never returned to Kerman. Kartir had to bear the agony of his pregnant daughter's abduction as security for his continuing allegiance.

For a decade, he had governed without interference. Only once had he been summoned to Tabriz, and that had been six years ago, by Teguder. He had not seen his daughter or her child since: Nadia, prisoner of a barbarous marriage, victim of an ancient Mongol custom that demanded she be passed as a chattel from one ruler to the next; Hassan, the grandson he would not see grow up.

A curse on the brood of Genghis, thought Kartir. And on Nizam for dredging up these memories. But though his new proposal was insane, it had just enough logic to tempt a desperate man.

Nizam did not look back until he saw the minarets of Kerman loom up through the haze. He slowed his pace, spat out a mouthful of sand and wiped some foam from his horse's neck. The animal was snorting and trembling from exertion.

The ring of mountains seemed closer. Over the peak of Segoch, away to the south east, hung a solitary white cloud in an azure sky. Nizam scanned the horizon from left to right. Satisfied that the road behind was deserted, he stopped, unhooked a water-bottle from the saddle-horn and took a long drink.

Nizam had no reason to believe he was being pursued, but his native caution was honed by ten years as a double agent. In his world of suspicion and deceit, of lies and secrets, survival depended on being able to outthink and outrun the enemy, on having quick wits, sharp eyes and a glib tongue.

He was satisfied with his morning's work. Kartir would put spies to work and discover that al-Ashraf did indeed aspire to conquer Baghdad - that a Mamluk force was already encamped west of the Tigris river, not far from ar-Ramaddi. Perhaps he would learn that Ashraf and Baidu had already exchanged dispatches. But he would not interfere. Though he might risk a visit to his precious daughter, he would not go to Arghun with his intelligence.

That was the one certainty. The scheme might have failed but Nizam had covered his tracks well a decade ago and the viceroy still believed the lie that had been spun round him. To confess to the Il-khan would be to confess his own treason.

Nizam mopped his brow with the loose sash of his turban and swallowed another mouthful of water. Yes, he had done well and hoped Baidu would be reassured. The prince might be dissolute, but he was no fool. He had his own spies and would act decisively and fatally at any sign of a double-cross.

A pang of fear rose in Nizam's belly. For a moment he doubted his own resolve and whether even his profound hate for Kartir outweighed his terror of the Mongol.

Umid Malikshah pushed aside his empty plate and gave a satisfied belch. His eyes settled on a fruit-laden basket placed just out of his reach. Kartir slid it towards him and watched his supper guest's hand hover over it briefly before falling back on the table.

"Your hospitality is overwhelming, Excellency, as ever!"

"Then, if we have finished eating, let us talk," said Kartir. "What intelligence do you have of Tabriz, Umid? How has the city changed in the last six years?"

"Truly, it has changed little, Excellency. Trade is good, and I always return to Kerman a happier man than when I left."

"I'm pleased to hear it," said Kartir with a smile. Fine food and good company always cheered him and he was in a much better mood than on the previous morning. "Is that all you have to say? No rumours or gossip among these mighty men of business of whom you are so fond?"

"You know I do not move in such exalted circles as yourself, Excellency," said Umid with friendly indignation, "but do not mock my humble profession. As gatherers of

information, we merchants are unequalled. The spies of the Il-khan himself are blind and deaf compared to the sellers of carpets, silks and fine spices.”

Kartir knew this was no exaggeration. Since before Mongol times, the weavers of Kerman had been unequalled for the elegance of their designs and quality of their handwork. Their products were known from Damascus to Samarkand. The industry had suffered greatly during the Conquest, but due to men like Umid it had recovered and was flourishing again. He and his company of merchants pursued their business fearlessly from India to Genoa, from Herat to the deserts of Arabia.

But hand in hand with their trade in carpets and blankets went a trade in information and Kartir was only too aware that, while the whole province benefited from the former, no one relied upon the latter more than himself. Though almost twenty years his junior, Umid was his most valued friend and confidant.

“What is Arghun like as a ruler?” the viceroy asked.

“Shrewd, Excellency,” replied the merchant. “Like his predecessors, he’s a Buddhist, but tolerant in religious matters. You knew he had appointed a Jew as Grand Wazir?”

“I’d heard something of the sort. This tolerance could be his downfall.”

“Indeed, Excellency,” agreed Umid, “though the Jew seems a capable enough man. A more interesting piece of news is that Arghun has recently received an envoy of the Christians, from their patriarch in Rome.”

“Jews and Christians together? Perhaps I should not judge so hastily, but that usually bodes ill. What do the Christians want?”

“I haven’t been able to discover that,” said Umid, “but when I do, you’ll be the first to know. I plan to be in Tabriz shortly, and I’ll return there again in autumn.”

“Actually, I have another commission for you, Umid, or rather for your army of intelligence gatherers. I may go to Tabriz myself while the weather is still bearable, and there’s someone whose activities need careful watching.”

The idea had been growing in Kartir’s mind since his meeting with Nizam the day before. He would visit his properties at Qazvin and Maragha, neglected for six years. From Maragha he would travel on to Tabriz, request an interview with the Il-khan. If he achieved nothing else, he might at least see Nadia again, and her son.

He related the substance of the interview at the fire temple, omitting mention of Jalal’s children. Some secrets were better buried.

Umid raised his eyebrows quizzically. “Nizam, eh? I heard something in Baghdad. A slippery fellow by all accounts. His ear always to the ground.”

“And it’s not friendship that prompts him to renew my acquaintance after ten years,” Kartir added. “Once he was useful to me, that is all.”

Umid scratched his beard. “It’s true that Ghazan is hard pressed in Rayy. If Sultan Ashraf is contemplating invasion, with or without Persian help, there could be no better time.”

Kartir only nodded. Umid’s counsel was always helpful and reassuring.

“Still, if you’ll pardon me,” went on the merchant immediately, “a visit to Tabriz by Your Excellency might be untimely. Perhaps the princes think of Kerman as a backwater, merely a hot, dry desert of no importance. But again, perhaps not. Suppose the Mamluks have already formed an alliance with the Islamic underground. If Arghun’s agents have wind of it, he may see the most innocent journey as a threat.”

Kartir considered this advice. He did not want to act hastily and a month or two would make no difference. “You’re right!” he agreed. “I shall remain in Kerman, at least for the present. But I’ll be satisfied only when I know Nizam’s intentions.”

“You may rely on me. Whatever his intentions are, I’ll keep an eye on him. But be careful, Excellency. I fancy this Nizam is a dark horse. Drunkard or not, Baidu pays his

wages. And he might resent your standing in the province. If, as you say, he once served the Kermani royal house, he would lose status when Hulegu replaced the Emir with a governor. And if you passed him over when forming your administration .....

“What of that?” Kartir interrupted dismissively. “Nizam tried hard to ingratiate himself with me, but he did not merit a post. I doubt he ever had influence with the Emir.”

“A man may reach fifty and still harbour envy and secret ambitions,” said Umid. “And because he is fifty, there’s less time for him to achieve them.”

## II

### TABRIZ - AUTUMN

“He rides like a Mongol!” The Il-khan of Persia threw back his head, took a long draught from a decorated metal cup and fetched the Italian ambassador an energetic blow on the back. He was a large man, about forty years of age, with muscular shoulders and arms. He might once have been handsome. Now his hair was sparse, excepting that which grew from his upper lip in a thick moustache. The flesh of his neck was puffed, the pale yellow skin of his face blotched. His features were those which to outsiders distinguished the Mongol race, a flattened nose and curiously elongated eyes, the latter presently glazed from the effects of alcohol.

Giovanni di Montecervino stood his ground. He absorbed the blow and acknowledged his host’s enthusiastic observation with a polite smile. After nearly four months in Tabriz, he had become used to Arghun’s moods, his bouts of drinking and his spontaneous outbursts.

The two men stood on a platform overlooking a stretch of bare, dusty ground, on which had been raised, to left and right, a line of poles. Each pole supported an overripe gourd.

“And he handles the bow like a Mongol!”

This second vociferation was uttered as the object of their attention wheeled his pony at the end of the line and, crouching low in the saddle, spurred the animal forward. Simultaneously he raised a diminutive bow and drawing six arrows in rapid succession loosed them at the gourds on his left side. Each found its target. The rider halted, wheeled the pony again, and prepared to make another pass. From his lips came a bloodcurdling battle-cry.

“Kolokol!”

The second flight of arrows was no less successful. Six found their targets and four of the gourds were toppled to the dusty earth. Arghun raised his cup in salute, took another swig of liquor and again clapped Giovanni between the shoulder-blades.

The rider reined in his pony at the foot of the platform and looked up at them. He was a boy of ten or eleven years of age, slim and dark-complexioned, with curly black hair. His nose was prominent, but not large enough to detract from his pleasing, handsome looks. His dark oval eyes under long black lashes sparkled with excitement, his lips were parted, and his breathing was fast from exertion.

“How was that, My Lord?”

“Well done indeed, Hassan,” cried Arghun. He drained his cup and refilled it from a flagon at his feet. “Now we’ll have to test you in the hunt.”

Giovanni regarded the lad with a mixture of surprise, approbation and curiosity. “He is only a child, Your Majesty,” he gasped. “I had not imagined he would be so young.”

“We don’t pamper our children as you do, Ambassador,” laughed Arghun. “It’s true he’s only a boy, and his bow is half the normal size, but we Mongols are warriors, and this

training is no game. Hassan must learn to hunt, fight, and drink like any true descendant of Genghis Khan.”

“Shall I make two more passes, My Lord Arghun?” asked the boy eagerly.

“No, Hassan. That’ll do for today. Go to your mother. I fear she’ll cast a spell on me with those wide eyes of hers if I detain you too long.”

Hassan dismounted, retrieved his arrows and led his pony through a gate into the courtyard at their rear.

The ambassador hesitated, then turned to Arghun. “The boy will be a credit to your noble ancestor, Sire, of that I am sure,” he said. His inquisitiveness was beginning to overcome his diplomatic reticence. “However, if you will forgive my boldness, he does not look like a Mongol.”

“Nor was he born one,” said Arghun casually. “But he’s the son of the third wife of the Il-khan of Persia, and’ll learn Mongol skills, just as if I had seeded him myself.”

“You have other children, Your Majesty?”

“Two sons and two daughters out of my current wives. That I acknowledge. The eldest governs for me in the eastern provinces. Who knows how many others I may have spawned? But tell your master, the Prince of Venice, that the Il-khan treats all his wives’ children equally.”

“Your Majesty’s wisdom and impartiality are well known,” the Italian acknowledged tactfully. The alcohol had loosened Arghun’s tongue and seemed to have heightened his feeling of conviviality, but flattery was always a diplomat’s most powerful weapon. “I’m certain *all* your children will be a credit to you.”

“Let me tell you frankly, Sir Giovanni,” said the Il-khan, “I’ve a great fondness for this Hassan. He’s a clever lad, and no less skilled in arms than my own son Oljeitu, who’s about the same age. His mother is not as other women.

“I married her as was the custom when my father’s brother, unfortunately ...” He winked knowingly. “... met with an accident. I once suspected the child was my uncle’s, but now I doubt it. Nadia had a husband or lover in my father’s time. In truth, I’m rather afraid of the woman and don’t like to ask about the boy’s parentage. Breathe a word of my weakness and I’ll cut off your tongue, then your balls.....”