

The Five Pillars of Islam:

<i>Shahada</i>	the declaration of faith
<i>Salat</i>	the ritual of daily prayer
<i>Sawm</i>	the fast
<i>Zakat</i>	charitable giving
<i>Hajj</i>	the pilgrimage to Mecca

The structure of the Mongol army:

The Mongol army was made up in multiple units of ten -

<i>arban</i>	a troop of ten men
<i>jagun</i>	a squadron of ten <i>arbans</i>
<i>minghan</i>	a regiment of ten <i>jaguns</i>
<i>tumen</i>	a division of ten <i>minghans</i>

The Persian measure of distance:

In this book, the Persian unit of distance, the *parasang*, is used. It is roughly equal to six-and-a-half kilometers, or four miles.

AUTUMN AD1292 MARAGHA

Qutb ad-Din Shirazi was master of many things. At once physician, astronomer and mathematician, his wider scholarship embraced history, language and philosophy. Moreover, he had held his post throughout three reigns and was more than three months into a fourth, and that made him master of tact and diplomacy. He understood when to listen rather than speak and had learned to be discreet when discretion was demanded. He could control his anger when provoked, and restrain his laughter in the face of the most risible folly.

And it was fortunate for Shirazi that he possessed these skills, as under the Mongol Il-khans appointments were quickly made and unmade. A hastily uttered word or ill-chosen cast of feature could often have fatal consequences.

Shirazi was indeed a man who could control his emotions. However, as he faced his most brilliant student in the library of Maragha Observatory, he could not refrain from uttering a gasp of astonishment.

“You wish to discontinue your studies, Dokhan? May I ask why?”

The pupil, a boy of eleven or twelve years of age, met his gaze steadily. He was quite tall with thick black eyebrows and ardent eyes. Otherwise his features were soft, even

feminine. He had raven black hair, cut very short, that grew in spikes on the crown of his head but was sleek at the back of his neck and round his well-formed ears. His white toga, the customary garb of the scholar, was spotlessly white.

“I have my reasons, Master, but please forgive me if I do not give them,” he said firmly. It was a genuine apology and there was no disrespect in his tone.

“You tire already of scholarship perhaps?” said Shirazi. “Or your expenses have become a burden? In that case, we have funds. You need not ...”

The student interrupted him. “It’s not that, Master Shirazi. Please do not question me further.”

Shirazi shrugged. “It’s a pity, Dokhan. You are a most able pupil. In three months only you have mastered what many take a year to assimilate. My treatise on trigonometry is not the easiest subject matter for a novice. And your grasp of Greek and Persian history is ...”

“Please, Master.” Again the student interrupted him. “Tomorrow I will make the necessary arrangements.”

Sadly, Shirazi watched the boy turn to leave. He could tell further argument would be useless. Dokhan’s departure would be as sudden and mysterious as his arrival. Shirazi recalled clearly the day in late spring when the young horseman had appeared alone at his gates.

The Master of Maragha had been worrying over his finances. The considerable funds the Observatory had received thirty years ago as an endowment from Hulegu Khan were dwindling much faster than he would have wished.

The sciences of astronomy and mathematics, for whose benefit the Observatory had been built, still occupied the bulk of his time and that of the twenty or so polymaths, technicians and scribes under his direction. Shirazi had recently checked and double-checked the instruments and found their accuracy to be more than satisfactory. The armillaries and quadrants he had inherited on his appointment were as good as new. However, there were other sciences, and he also needed to maintain the library and pay for the tuition of those who came to Maragha seeking knowledge.

Over the years, many students had passed through his corridors, not only the sons of Mongol princes, but young men from all over the civilised world, looking to share the Master’s wisdom, and hoping in the course of their studies to discover the Philosopher’s Stone or the Elixir of Life. Shirazi doubted such things existed, however he always encouraged the young to hope. It was part of his job as a teacher.

But education cost money and, in addition, Gaikatu, the new Il-khan, had demanded a forfeit of a hundred royals. Shirazi had not demurred. It was lighter punishment than he might have expected for assisting alleged enemies of the empire, his niece Nadia and her Christian lover, who had escaped to the West the previous year.

The courtyard outside still bore signs of that last confrontation. At the spot where Gaikatu himself had fallen with a shoulder wound, the weather had done its work, washing the blood from the paving stones into the earth. However, on another part of the terrace, in a direct line between the gate and the main entrance, Shirazi could see the stain where the bravest of his scholars had sacrificed his life for Nadia’s sake.

The Christian had been outnumbered three to one and at the mercy of a Mongol bowman when she had thrown herself in front of him. It was then that Jafar had rushed unarmed to her defence, slaying her attacker and receiving a mortal wound in the process. Even with two opponents the Christian would have been crushed, but Nadia’s son, the eleven-year-old Hassan, had intervened, stabbing Gaikatu’s remaining henchman in the groin. That blood too had disappeared, but at the place of Jafar’s sacrifice, though they had washed the paving, the evidence was still visible.

As a man of science, Shirazi reasoned that these stones were bedded on rock, or that

they were better protected from the elements because of their relative proximity to the walls; and though the climate of Maragha was not severe, the passage of a second winter would surely remove all traces of blood. As a man of faith, however, the Master wondered occasionally if the mark would ever disappear, and whether Allah the All-wise had chosen it as a means to remind him of Jafar's martyrdom.

Gaikatu had recovered quickly from his wound and had been less vindictive than Shirazi expected. Still, the hundred royals fine had been a blow the Observatory could ill afford. Shirazi would soon face a crisis. Then, at a stroke, his new pupil had solved the immediate problem for him.

For the most part, tuition at Maragha was given free. However, Dokhan had offered to pay and, as proof of his intent, had handed over sufficient gold and silver to meet Maragha's expenses for the next three months.

"You wish to study here?" Shirazi had enquired rather lamely.

"I seek enlightenment, Master." It was an odd phrase for a boy to use.

"Your father?" It was a question Shirazi always asked, but he did so hesitantly so as not to offend.

"He is dead, Master," replied Dokhan, "and my mother has remarried. I wish to improve my mind as well as my skills in weaponry."

"Weaponry, mmm?" Shirazi echoed. In his experience military objectives were at odds with scholarship.

"Yes, Master," Dokhan volunteered. Clearly he was not aware of any contradiction. "For the past half year I have been taking lessons in swordplay and in the use of the bow."

"You are of the Islamic faith?" Shirazi asked, trying another tack.

"My mother is Christian, but I have no faith," said the boy. He smiled with what Shirazi thought was a slightly superior smile. "There may be gods in the sky, but I'm not persuaded of it."

"Mmm." The Master coughed nervously. "How old are you? Twelve? Eleven?"

Dokhan hesitated, then nodded.

"It's a good age to begin," said the Master of Maragha warmly. He was curious but had asked no further questions. The boy was undoubtedly of Temuchin's line; his features were Mongol, though diluted in a manner Shirazi had observed was not uncommon in fourth or fifth generation descendants of the Conqueror. But he was too old to be Gaikatu's son, and whether the legitimate child of an emir or a natural one of the late Arghun Khan was for Shirazi a matter of indifference. The Master judged his pupils on their work and not on accidents of birth.

In the weeks that followed, Shirazi had discovered the extraordinary quality of the boy's mind. Dokhan had an astounding memory and a great hunger for learning. During his eighteen years as Master, Shirazi had known no more than a handful of such calibre. And now his prize pupil wished to quit his studies and leave the Observatory, probably to pursue some militaristic objective - to die needlessly in a pointless war. It was a great pity.

Dokhan went towards the door but when he reached it he stopped as if he had forgotten something. "May I remain in the library for the afternoon, Master?"

Through the window Shirazi saw that a detachment of soldiers wearing the colours of the Il-khan's personal guard was coming in through the gates. At their head was Gaikatu himself, wearing a toothy smile.

It was seventy years since the troops of Genghis Khan had thundered across the plains of Iran, sweeping everything before them. Many had forgotten, but Shirazi, with history to guide him, always experienced a cold tingle in his spine when one of the Conqueror's descendants entered the walls of his domain. And the fourth and final instalment of the forfeit was now due. Though the Tabriz treasury was reputed to be bulging with gold and silver, the

new Il-khan's personal finances had apparently suffered a severe blow after the failure of one of his many tax schemes.

Despite the mercy once shown to him, Shirazi always feared Gaikatu's unpredictable temper, and today was no exception. However, he merely twitched his eyebrows and turned to answer Dokhan's request. He thought the boy was paler than usual and that his eyes had become wary.

Dokhan smiled nervously. "I do not wish to meet him."

Shirazi nodded. "It is enough reason," he said, "but not for me. Remain here while I greet him."

He was not gone long. When he nervously handed over the remaining twenty-five royals, the Il-khan scowled but then, to the Master's relief, congratulated him on his prompt payment, remounted and rode off with his followers.

Shirazi returned to the library. Dokhan was seated on a stool and doubled over as if in pain. His face was ashen and there were drops of perspiration on his beardless chin. The wariness the Master had recently seen in his eyes was replaced by fear.

"What's the matter? Are you ill?" He went over to offer assistance but the boy backed away from him. Then Shirazi noticed on the hem of his pupil's plain toga what appeared to be a fleck or two of blood. "Have you cut yourself?"

Dokhan shook his head vigorously and backed further away. He was still bent double and clutching his abdomen.

"Let me look," the Master said. He took his pupil by his trembling shoulders and kindly eased the hands away from the belly. The front of the toga was still spotless but the seat was stained bright red. And as Dokhan straightened, Shirazi noticed for the first time the two gentle swellings of the chest and saw that the nipples were unusually prominent. For the second time that day the impassive mask he chose to wear slipped. His eyes widened, his chin fell and his mouth gaped open.

Dokhan burst into tears and knelt at Shirazi's feet clutching the edge of his robe. "Now you know why I must leave Maragha. Do not betray me to Gaikatu."

The Master had already recovered his usual composure, but his inner soul was filled with compassion and wonder.

"Now that I know, let me ask my wife to take care of you," he said. "But before I call her, will you tell me who you truly are. I'll not betray you to Gaikatu, of that you can be assured. I was ever good at keeping maidens' secrets."

"Dokhan served well enough as a name," said the girl, for there was no longer any doubt of her sex. "'Tis close. I am Doquz, Princess of Persia. My mother is named Tolaghan and my father was Arghun, the last Il-khan."

AD1295

ONE

THE ZAGROS FOOTHILLS

The children were twins, a boy and a girl. They sat astride the same pony, the girl in the saddle, the boy behind on the animal's rump with his arms wrapped round his sister's waist. Both would have derived warmth as well as solace from the contact because the day was cool. It was just past the spring equinox and early evening. Though a weak sun peeped out from the clouds from time to time, its appearances were too brief to bring respite from the wind that blew down from the mountains.

Gaikatu, Il-khan of Persia, rode on the children's left and a little to the rear. The pace

was brisk. His eyes smarted from cold and the whirling sandy dust, but he watched them through narrowed lids, deriving lewd pleasure from their innocent proximity. They were orphans he had acquired in as-Suleimaniya. The girl was about a year past puberty, he reckoned, whereas the boy had probably just reached it. Perhaps he could devise a way to test his theory when they made camp. Even in the middle of a war there was always room for diversions.

They were nearly a week out of Baghdad and at least three days hard riding from Baidu's main army. The nine grown men in Gaikatu's sixteen-strong party were fanned out across the road, four to the front and five to the rear, to give warning of the approach of potential enemies. Three women and a youth formed a single file behind his pony; all four were armed.

The Il-khan had begun to relax. In another two days he would reach Tabriz. He still had considerable support, and there would be time to muster his regiments for a counter-offensive. It was true he had enemies in the capital, but most were languishing in prison for their part in the abortive rising against his authority two years ago.

Gaikatu congratulated himself on his tolerance and statesmanship. None of his predecessors would have been so merciful in sparing the lives of those who opposed them. But he would not be so forgiving a second time. Baidu would die a prince's death - trampling and suffocation beneath a pile of carpets, while for Taghachar, his traitorous general, no torture would be too extreme. His mutilated corpse would hang on a spike on the gates of Tabriz for all to see.

Gaikatu continued watching the children, admiring the golden brown of their legs and arms, and the way their buttocks moved in unison in the canter. His senses stirred in anticipation of the pleasure he might derive from touching them. He licked his lips, then vehemently expelled a mouthful of spittle and dry sand.

One of the outriders signalled they were approaching a village. Though the light would be good for two more hours, this might be the last chance to fill their kettles with fresh water. Gaikatu instinctively waved his party forward. He quickened his pace and drew level with the children. The boy glanced round apprehensively and clutched his sister more tightly.

They were always afraid, thought the Il-khan, yet he did not want them to be. He was fond of children, not only for the physical pleasure they gave, but because they reminded him of his own childhood and of his mother, the only woman he had ever been drawn to by other than desire. No, he reflected, that wasn't true. There had been one other for whom he would have sacrificed everything, even his kingdom - Nadia, his brother's widow. And she alone among the many women he had known had refused him.

Time and again Gaikatu had asked himself why he let her go. The wound her Italian lover had inflicted on him had been slight and, anyway, he had an army at his disposal, while they were alone with an eleven-year-old boy. Could it have been a sneaking admiration for his rival, a man who risked death rather than give her up, or had it been the realisation that he could never break her spirit, that he could never possess her except by force?

Or was it rather that death seemed to follow Nadia around? Two of his hand-picked men had died at Maragha trying to recapture her. Five of Baidu's agents had perished because they threatened the Italian. A puny scholar and an ancient priest had given their lives to protect her. Nadia had seen three husbands die. Had he, wondered Gaikatu, been afraid of being the fourth?

"My Lord!"

He was shaken from his reverie by the sharp warning cry from the rear guard. He wheeled his pony just in time to see three men tumble from their saddles, their chests transfixed by slender, long-flight arrows. Before he could seize his bow, one of the women fell. The barb had pierced her neck and in her last agony she clutched at the shaft in an effort

to pull it free. The sight of her blood welling from the wound made Gaikatu retch.

The attack came from the left flank, ten horsemen advancing fast out of the setting sun, fully armed with sabre, lance and axe. They rode low, their bows now charged with stubby arrows for close-in fighting.

Gaikatu had forgotten the twins. He gripped his own bow and barked an order. "Scatter! Do not give them easy targets." He spurred the pony and, riding with his knees, shot two arrows in rapid succession at his attackers. Both found their mark.

Ahead were the low-lying sheds of a rural farm, dusty, crumbling brickwork that glowed blood-red in the twilight. Visible to the east were some spindly trees and the outlying houses of the village.

The youth, surviving women and two remaining men of the rear guard formed a well-spaced line of defence on the west side. They fired at the gallop and two more of the enemy fell. But the attackers had the advantage of the sun. Gaikatu found himself blinded. He veered off towards the village, hoping it would provide some meagre shelter and an opportunity to mount a counter-attack.

Two more of his party were hit - one man, one woman. A third, rearmost of the vanguard, was pitched to the ground by his mount when an arrow struck it in the flank. The pony carrying the twins, panicked and out of control, sped off in the direction from which they had come.

Gaikatu, flanked by the third woman and the youth, reached the first house. A flock of domestic fowl, disturbed by the galloping horses, scattered into the path of the pursuers. The Il-khan turned, looking for the support of his four remaining followers. To his consternation, he saw that they had lowered their weapons and joined the attackers. There were shouts of greeting then, with bows recharged, his assailants, again ten in number, moved in from the sunset in a menacing arc.

The Il-khan wrinkled his brows in anger. Somehow he had been betrayed and led into a trap. But, if he could only find shelter and put the sun behind him, he had plenty of arrows. He was an excellent shot and could still bring three or four of the enemy down. Then, if it came to hand to hand, with the woman and youth supporting him he would have a chance.

He glanced along the narrow street. Apart from two scattered farmsteads, the village was a tiny cluster of single dwellings, mostly flat-roofed. It seemed devoid of people. At the point which marked its end, where it gave way again to desert, was one building, larger and taller than the others and further distinguishable by the crude minaret raised like a crown on its upper storey. However, it was not the symbol of Islamic devotion that caused panic to rise in the Il-khan's chest. Just beyond this primitive mosque, five more figures in heavy armour were strung across the way like stone sentinels. In the fading light they seemed inhuman in size. Their breastplates were ochre-red and the tips of the lances they held in their rigid fists were caked brown.

The woman screamed and wheeled her mount into the path of the advancing enemy. The youth's pony bucked violently and he was thrown to the ground. Gaikatu began to panic. His pony snorted and reared. He gripped the reins and wrapped his calves round the animal's belly to prevent himself from being dislodged from the saddle. These guardians of the way were no living men. Each body had been crucified to a stake embedded in the ground. The rigidity of their position was maintained by means of thongs tied round their torsos and arms. The heads had been severed and were raised on the spikes that formed the summit of each cross.

The Il-khan's blood froze in his veins and he emitted a croak of horror through his clenched teeth. The sight of blood had always revolted him and the congealed eruptions from these severed heads and trunks was more than he could bear. He swung round to face his pursuers and drew his sword.

The enemy riders were all round him. They held their bows steady but did not release their arrows. Gaikatu heard a shrill voice.

“Hold the woman! And bring back the children!”

Gaikatu looked in the direction of the command and marked out their leader, a slim figure with a beardless face wearing a metal helmet and the plume of a battalion captain. He raised his scimitar and prepared to charge.

“Put up your sword, Gaikatu!”

This second command halted him in his tracks. He did not recognise the voice. The brim and chinstrap of the helmet, and the high leather collar of the body armour hid most of the other’s features. All he could see were a flat Mongol nose, a bare upper lip and a pair of dark, ardent eyes.

“Put up your sword!” Now the voice, pitched too high for that of a fully-grown man, seemed vaguely familiar. “Ten arrows are pointed at your heart. Drop the scimitar now or you’ll never draw another breath.”

With a sigh, the Il-khan threw his weapon in the dust. The enemy leader dismounted, advanced a few paces and raised the helmet. A thick mass of raven hair tumbled out from under it and fell in disarray over the body shield. The face thus exposed was unmistakably female. She was a girl of no more than sixteen or seventeen years. Her forehead and cheeks were covered in grime and, coupled with heavy black eyebrows, this gave her a formidable, savage look, but she had a soft chin and thick, sensuous lips. It was not a face of great beauty, but neither was it repulsive.

She retrieved Gaikatu’s sword and began swinging it from side to side with a delicate movement. The nine bowman followed her with their gaze, but their drawn bows never wavered.

“So you’ve joined my enemy after all, Doquz?” Gaikatu had got over his terror. He faced a woman, moreover one he recognised, despite the lapse of more than a year since their last meeting. Though he had thought her a child then, she had since caused him a lot of trouble.

“If I was with Baidu you would already be dead, Gaikatu.” She tossed the scimitar in the air, caught it skilfully in her gloved hand by the narrow part of the blade and returned it to him.

“Then what’s all this charade?” demanded Gaikatu, indicating the crucified forms. He had recovered his poise and began to feel like a ruler again. “By the balls of Temuchin, how dare you attack me!”

Doquz laughed and drew a dagger from her belt. She strode past him towards the severed bodies and cut the thongs that bound them to the stakes. One by one the crucified torsos fell to the dust.

Gaikatu looked at them closely for the first time. Not only were they lifeless, but they had never been anything else. Each was a life-sized doll of rag and straw to which battle armour had been fitted. The heads had been crudely painted to resemble human faces. The bloody eruptions were real enough, probably the offal of some animal that had been killed for food. The Mongol armies often used such a ruse to confuse a superior enemy, but never had Gaikatu seen it used with such chilling effectiveness.

Doquz pointed to each counterfeit head with her dagger tip, giving them names. The irony in her voice was only too evident.

“Jahan, Commander of Arbil. Mohammed Arpa, Governor of Kirkuk,” she recited. “Once your friends! Noyan and Ahmad. Trusted generals but, like Taghachar, in Baidu’s pay. At this moment, they’re following false trails in the Zagros foothills. If they had met you here instead of me, you would already be food for the carrion birds.”

Gaikatu watched her through narrowed eyes. The four she named were men he had

once relied upon, who had turned against him but whom he had spared. Now it seemed they had escaped prison to turn on him again. However, they had had no part in the fall of Arghun and he could think of no reason why Doquz should regard them as her enemies.

The girl came to the last doll. "Genghis!" She spat at the disembodied head. "In the flesh perhaps the vilest of all. Not content with debauchery and betrayal, he dares to sully the name of our noble ancestor. As for the rest of these brave fellows strewn about the desert, I fancy they were to lead you into a trap not of my making." She pouted. "I'm sorry about the two women. Whether innocent or guilty, I cannot tell. And 'tis a pity I had to lose valuable men to teach you a lesson in desert warfare."

"And the others?" Gaikatu asked.

"The woman and the stripling I've no reason to harm," Doquz replied. "And the other four are loyal to me! Your followers are deserting everywhere, Gaikatu. Are you too blind to see it?"

She signalled the nine riders to relax their bowstrings and resheathe their arrows. Then she turned towards one of the low dwellings. With a pout of her full lips and a girlish crooking of her little finger, she beckoned Gaikatu to follow.

"I hope you have an appetite," she said. "These Persian farmers have proved most hospitable during the four days I've been obliged to wait for you. There's enough food here for a squadron."

The homestead consisted of a single apartment. The furniture was minimal. Along the wall adjacent to the door lay a crude mattress bed. Its covering was worn and patched in places, but it was clean. A roughly-woven blanket had been folded neatly and placed at one end. There was no pillow. In the corner opposite were a chair and a commode. At the centre of the room was a table laden with simple farm fare - bread, cheese, a few joints of cold roasted mutton, two beakers of wine, and a jug of what Gaikatu guessed from its smell to be *koumis* - mares' milk liquor. Next to it was a bench.

The Il-khan raised his eyebrows quizzically.

"Friends are to be found in the most unlikely places, as are enemies," said Doquz. She unbuckled her sword, took off her body shield and threw them both on the bench. Then she sat down beside them, seized a loaf and a leg of mutton and began to eat hungrily.

Gaikatu followed her example. As he mouthed the food, he watched her dispassionately. He had not decided whether to trust her. Though what she had told him of the five generals rang true, some of the men who now lay dead in the desert had been with him since his coronation and he had never doubted their loyalty. She had no cause to love him, he thought. Even if he had not been responsible directly for her father's death, he had plotted his downfall. That alone would have been enough for a son to take vengeance. But a daughter?

On the other hand, Gaikatu argued, instead of killing him, she had returned his sword and invited him to sup with her. And something else was strange. He had noticed in her followers a reluctance to fall back when she dismissed them. One man in particular, a veteran wearing a commander's plume, had spoken to her out of earshot and had withdrawn only after an exchange of words. Now the nearest guards were more than twenty paces away. It occurred to Gaikatu that he might take her hostage and make his escape. He was alone with her and was by far the stronger of the two.

Not yet, he decided. He was curious about this woman in a man's world - a woman he had thought a mere child.

She had grown and was now quite tall. Her breasts were small, her hips straight. Beneath the armour she wore a tunic, which did nothing to flatter her plain figure, and loose drawers that finished just above the knee. Both garments were of grey silk. Her knees and

shins were covered by a pair of leather leggings that were tucked into her boots.

Doquz saw him looking. She bolted what food remained in her mouth and without speaking reached for her wine, took a long draught and gave a feeble belch. Then she slid the flagon of *koumis* along the table towards him.

“Drink,” she ordered.

Gaikatu took a mouthful of liquor and gulped it down.

“I know what you’re thinking, Uncle,” Doquz went on. “How did I become what I am? Perhaps you ask yourself - *are the rumours true?* ‘Tis no *daughter* of Arghun that dresses so ... who commands men ... who defies the will of Tabriz!”

“I underestimated you, Doquz,” said the Il-khan. He had heard stories but it had never occurred to him to believe them. Still, a woman with a man’s appetites might be a worthy challenge. His eyes lingered on her slim body.

“Do not make the mistake of doing so again,” said Doquz sharply. “I’m a woman, but I have not wasted my years like my sister, or my mother. I’m not the soft clay of womankind to be worked and moulded by men to suit their purpose. The Doquz you see now can shoot and handle a sabre, lasso or lance as well as any man.”

As it was becoming quite dark, she lit a lamp, and they continued eating and drinking in its pale glow. Gaikatu had noticed she did not touch the mares’ milk and her abstinence suited him perfectly. He quaffed the liquor greedily. Gradually he became more relaxed as the food renewed his energy and the alcohol warmed his belly. He almost forgot the unpleasantness of the last hour.

When the wine was consumed and only a few scraps of food remained, Doquz gave a deep sigh of satisfaction, crossed the room and sat on the low bed. Her drawers had slipped up from her knees and the Il-khan could see the tops of the leggings and the pale flesh beyond. The silk material clung sensuously to the insides of her thighs. For the first time since their meeting, Gaikatu was excited by her. Her breasts seemed fuller, her hips rounder than they had been only a few minutes ago. He felt a tightening in his groin.

“What do you want from me, Doquz?”

She gave a girlish laugh and moistened her sensuous lips with a pink tongue. “What do you desire to give, Uncle Gaikatu?”

There was a little fermented milk remaining in the jug and Gaikatu drained it. He stood up and felt light-headed. The table, formerly level with the floor, now appeared to be tilted at a bizarre angle. Either the liquor was more potent than any he had tasted previously or, combined with the wine, it had numbed his brain more quickly than usual. He tried focussing on her and found that his eyes obeyed him only with difficulty.

Doquz pulled off her tunic and threw it aside carelessly. Though only a fine black down covered her forearms, under her armpits the raven hair grew thickly. Through the haze of intoxication, Gaikatu found that unexpectedly appealing. He thought too that she smelt vaguely of horses and, rather than distracting him, this encouraged him. As he went unsteadily towards her, she brushed her lips with her left forefinger then let her hand fall to her breasts. She began to fondle them lazily, running her thumb along the groove between them and squeezing her nipples delicately one after the other.

To Gaikatu, the meaning of her gestures were unmistakable, yet he was puzzled. He had only ever known two kinds of woman - the wife, bound to him by the duty of marriage, the instinct to bear children, or the material advantages that attached to being a woman of the Il-khan - and the harlot, who was bound to anyone with a full purse. The first bent to his will as a cold, empty vessel he could fill at moments of his choosing; the second offered unimagined delights in exchange for the promise of silver. Now, here was a woman who fitted neither pattern, one who appeared to offer those delights without obligation.

He had known Doquz since infancy. The younger daughter of his brother, Arghun,

and first child of Tolaghan, Arghun's second wife, whom he had now married as Mongol custom demanded, she had been a quiet girl, Gaikatu remembered, small for her age and always running to hide in her mother's skirts when he approached her. Even her brother Oljeitu, younger by a year, had quickly outstripped her in development, so that by the age of ten he was generally mistaken for the elder of the two. Their half-sister Oljei was several years their senior.

Now, it seemed, he had not known Doquz at all. It meant little to him that she was his niece. He was Il-khan and he made the rules. If he wanted her, he would have her, again and again.

He loosened his breeches, took another unsteady step towards the primitive bed and knelt beside it. His eyelids were heavier than ever. Fumbling, he took off Doquz's boots, unlaced her leggings and began pulling off her drawers. She did not hinder him. The long fingers of her right hand pressed against his chest and slid down over his abdomen.

"Tell me, Gaikatu," she breathed. "Tell me how good that is."

"It's good."

"And that it is never so good with my mother ... or my sister?"

Gaikatu half rose and slumped awkwardly onto the bed beside her. He had never felt less in control of his body or his passion. *I never bedded Oljei*, he tried to say, but his tongue would not respond. He felt himself hovering at the edge of a pit of nothingness.

A chill lethargy was creeping through his limbs and inner organs. His vision clouded and bright lights danced in his head, yet other senses seemed to have become more acute. He could hear his own breathing, shallow and irregular, and the pounding of blood in his temples. Above those were audible the night cries of the desert, the chirping of insects and the mating calls of wild dogs. Then the sounds too were gone and only one sense remained. As he tumbled finally into unconsciousness, Gaikatu's nostrils caught the scent of warm, damp flesh and the lingering smell of horses.

In the early mornings, the desert air was chill. A sharp breeze blew down from the mountains. With only her body shield for protection, Doquz shivered as she relieved herself beside the homestead wall. She took a few deep breaths. It was good to be in the open again after the stuffiness inside the peasant dwelling.

Doquz stretched her arms in the air, extending the tips of her fingers as far as they would go. She held them in this position, counted to five and relaxed. She glanced across to the long brick and clay farmhouse where her followers were billeted. Her two sentinels stood as black silhouettes against the approaching dawn. A few locals were about, drawing water and feeding animals, but they gave her a wide berth.

She leant against the house wall and drew up her left knee, pulled her shin and instep firmly towards her body, and held the leg there. She counted to five and repeated the process with her right leg. Next, with her arms low and loose, she swung her trunk from side to side several times from the hip. Feeling fresher now, and less chill, she gave a quick backwards glance through the half-open door. Gaikatu was still unconscious from the effects of the potion she had added to the *koumis*. To her he had always seemed tall, but he had gained in weight since she had seen him last in Tabriz. He was now a giant of a man. *In every way*, she said aloud as she thought with revulsion of what had so nearly been the night before.

Doquz had not expected it to go so far, only to tempt him and hold him at bay until the potion took effect. She had wanted him to feel desire and pleasure, as otherwise her plan had no meaning, but without the need to give him satisfaction. Having already tested the mixture on herself, she had increased the opium dosage by half to allow for Gaikatu's greater weight and muscularity, but had clearly miscalculated. He had been within moments of having his way with her.

She glanced at him again, steeling herself in her resolve. He was certainly a handsome man. His features were clean-cut and boyish, despite his thick moustache. It grew on his upper lip and round the sides of his mouth to meet again in the depression just above his chin. The hair on his head was cut very short except for a single braided pigtail that sprang from the crown and lay across his left ear with its end resting on the curve of his shoulder.

In his slumbering features, there was no evidence of the cruelty that had marked his short reign. In repose, his face seemed almost innocent. But then, Doquz told herself, appearances could be deceptive. He might be a giant, but he was also a monster. She wondered if he dreamed and, if so, whether his dreams were of pleasure or of pain - if he was a man whose conscience, in sleep, did not trouble him, or whether he was a man with no conscience at all.

She closed the door of the homestead, stretched her arms again, took in a few more breaths of morning air and strode over to where the ponies were tethered. There she gave a single, shrill whistle. She retrieved her bow, quiver and saddlebags and slung them round her neck before going to the well. Some empty pitchers lay in the sand beside its broken rim. The bucket was already at the top and half full. She emptied it into one of the pitchers and with the muscles of her slim arms straining under the load, carried it back to the peasant house.

Now just a few months from her seventeenth birthday, Doquz's early memories of her father were of how he had sat her on her first pony and of how he used to toss her in the air and catch her in his huge arms. These pictures had faded. After becoming Il-khan he changed. She had been only five years old, but to her he seemed a different man. Almost all his attention was given to Oljeitu. She became very jealous of her younger brother and often wished she had been born a boy. Boys had all the advantages; they were given freedom, education and training in war - a discrimination contrary to the old Mongol way of life, a result of immersion in Persian culture. On the steppes of Mongolia, she had learned from the old women's tales, all were free and equal.

For a long time she had not understood to what end girls and boys were different. Her stepbrother Hassan's cunning had changed that. Strangely, she had never felt jealous of him. While Oljeitu had become vain and insufferable, Hassan, though of an over-serious disposition, had always treated her like a true brother and had always been willing to be her playmate. And playmates they had remained until Arghun decided the boy should be trained in arms.

She would have been ten years old, Hassan about a year younger. One day, she had followed her mother all the way to her father's bedchamber only to be stopped from entering by a burly sentry. Hassan had said he knew another way. They had scrambled in through the window of an anteroom and peeked through an open door. Arghun and Tolaghan were together on the bed, both semi-naked. Arghun's buttocks were rising and falling, and he was grunting like a wild pig. Tolaghan's eyes were closed as if resigned to this treatment but deriving no pleasure from it.

Later, her sister Oljei had explained the ritual to them. She made them both remove their clothes and with great glee demonstrated their different parts. Hassan had looked very vulnerable. Oljei seized his small appendage in both hands, lifted her gown and tried to squeeze him into the opening between her thighs. When he cried that she was hurting, Oljei had just laughed.

Doquz had not understood and had gone for advice to Hassan's mother, Nadia, who, unlike her own mother and some of Arghun's other wives, seemed to love children, boys and girls. Thereafter it was to Nadia that she had clung. Only it had all ended four years ago at the palace of Baghcha; Hassan and Nadia had disappeared and she had never seen them again.

That winter had begun well. Hassan and Oljeitu had been excused their lessons in

swordplay, and they had all ridden with the hunters. They had fished together on the lake. In the boats they had laughed and splashed one another with water. Even her parents had seemed more carefree than usual and had joined in the fun.

Doquz remembered too the tall foreigner, a Christian, with whom Hassan seemed on intimate terms. She had found this odd because she had always thought of Christians as female. Her mother had tried to teach her the tenets of their faith but she had taken in very little other than that they had inexplicably crucified their leader. Only one other story had made an impression on her, about a rich man who gave his wealth to help the poor. Doquz had always liked the tale and understood its simple morality. She had been inside the Tabriz treasury with its double-locked doors and secret panels; she had seen the bags of silver dinars and chests of royals hidden within, all serving no apparent purpose. However, during her occasional trips through the Persian countryside, she had noticed how many people lived in poverty compared to the comforts she enjoyed. It was unjust, she had concluded, that they should be taxed so severely when the treasury was full to overflowing.

The fun and excitement of Baghcha had ended suddenly. Her father became ill and died, and she was snatched back to Tabriz where Gaikatu told her she would have to stay. She was twelve - too old, she thought, to be treated as a child, and she had rebelled. Tolaghan had punished her, though she had known that it was to pacify Gaikatu that she was beaten until her buttocks were raw.

For six months she had been a virtual prisoner in the castle, but her opportunity for freedom came. Gaikatu, enthroned as Il-khan, had gone off to inspect his armies and she took full advantage of his absence.

Her first objective was to learn the art of swordplay and how to use a bow, and she had enlisted Ibrahim's help. He was the officer in charge of the Tabriz castle armoury, a master swordsman who gave lessons to the royal princes. Girls were not expected to participate in military training, but Doquz had seen Hassan and Oljeitu fight and wanted to be their equal. In her leather jerkin and breeches with heavy padding on arms, chest and knees, she was to all outward appearances a boy, and her lessons had caused no stirrings among the castle servants. Ibrahim had known of course, but he had risen to the challenge.

Next had come the training of her mind. Her brothers had been students at Maragha and she decided that she too would go there. She was still underdeveloped for her age and, with her hair cut short, could easily pretend to be a boy of twelve.

Her deception had lasted a few short months only, until her first bleed, but they were among the most wonderful of her life. She grasped quickly the minuteness of the world in which she lived and the shortness of the time span her life occupied, compared to the vastness of the earth and sky, and to the aeons of history. She could work with astrolabe and armillary. She discovered the names of the stars and how to use them to establish directions and distances. Just as interesting were the glimpses she received of the great personages of the past - of Darius and Ibn Sina, Omar Khayyam and Archimedes. More especially, she learned of Cleopatra, Sheba, and Hypatia of Alexandria, women who had engaged with men on man's terms and had proved their equal - women whom she longed to emulate.

Her affair with Ibrahim had lasted almost a year and from it she discovered what it meant to love and be loved. She had experienced the sheer delight of what it was to be a woman. She had found out what gave men the most pleasure, and had learned which of their many fumbling caresses incited the most pleasure in herself. She knew not only how to use her body to drive a man to madness, but how to check that madness so that they used it to rouse her own.

Doquz remembered the day the sword-master had first touched her. It was six months after she quit Maragha and she was newly fourteen. Ibrahim had been twenty-three, she knew

now. She had always been fascinated by his lithe, athletic body, though until then she had always thought of him as old.

She had discarded her padding and he was explaining to her the construction of the Mongol bow, how the skilful welding together of sinew, wood and horn into three layers gave the weapon its latent power. As he passed it to her where she sat, his right hand fell by accident on her thigh, just above the knee. She felt the fingers grip and begin to encircle her leg before, suddenly, they were withdrawn as he realised the enormity of his indiscretion. But the hand had rested there long enough. Its gentle pressure through her breeches had caused her a thrill of excitement. She had looked up into his face. His eyes were wide and fearful like a boy who has misbehaved and expects to be punished. He no longer seemed so old.

“It’s all right, Ibrahim,” she heard herself say.

He had looked at her, apprehensive but puzzled.

“It’s all right, Ibrahim,” she repeated. “We’re alone.”

She had reached up and pressed her lips against his. He had smelt of oil and leather. She took back the hand, brown and powerful compared to hers, and laid it again on her leg, moving it up and down against the fabric of the breeches. She could hear her own violent heartbeat.

“This is not proper, my Princess.” Half-heartedly he had tried to pull his hand away. “We should not.”

She resisted him. “But you want it,” she replied.

“It would be heaven beyond dreams, my Princess. But I dare not.”

“Dare not?” she challenged. “Dare not, even if I command you?”

“What would you have me do?” he asked hoarsely.

“I’m a child no longer, Ibrahim,” she had said sharply. She took off her leather jerkin, exposing her silk chemise, and lifted her breasts towards him. He had not removed his hand from her lap.

“No, you are a woman, and beautiful,” he said, “but I dare not.”

“But there is no danger here,” she had said more gently. “Do whatever you will!”

Then he was kissing her. His tongue was in her mouth and she was responding to him with rising desire. His left arm encircled her while his right hand, unaided, slid between her thighs.

“Doquz.... my Princess,” he was mumbling. “I have loved you long months. You have my devotion ... my life.”

A week previously this would have amused her, but Doquz was now caught in a frenzy of excitement. Her whole body was on fire. She wanted only to be free of the breeches and to feel Ibrahim’s manhood against her naked flesh.

He had bolted the door of the armoury and they had lain together, that first time, on the matting. In the months that followed, he had taken her to his cramped quarters above the armoury where the mattress was soft. Once, she had smuggled him into her bedroom. Doquz was always careful to choose the times when he could safely remain inside her, whereas on other occasions she would satisfy him in the cradle of her breasts and be satisfied herself by his kisses and the gentle motions of his hand.

Now, though a year had passed and all passion was cold, it seemed as if part of Ibrahim still remained with her. She could still see his eager face and the boyish devotion in his eyes. She could hear his murmurings of admiration and the deep-throated moans of his ecstasy and wondered whether it would ever be possible to know such tenderness again.

Gaikatu opened his eyes feeling dazed and nauseous. The dawn light was creeping through the single window of the homestead. He was cold and his hands and feet were numb. He tried to remember how the night had ended, but all was a jumble of dreamlike images. The sound

of breathing coming from a point to his left and a little above the level of the mattress made him turn his head. It ached.

Doquz stood not five paces away, naked apart from her boots and silk drawers. Her tunic, body armour and leggings were draped over a stool along with her saddlebags. An unstrung bow and quiver lay on the table beside the empty dishes and beakers, and her sabre was sheathed in the narrow gap between two of its slats. She had placed a pitcher on the table and was bent over it, splashing water over her face and body. She dried herself with a lint towel taken from a saddle bag, then took up a comb and began teasing out the knots in her hair.

Gaikatu lay still, watching her keenly, admiring the firmness of her small breasts and the litheness of her limbs. If she was aware of him, she gave no sign. In the morning light she seemed more womanly than he had thought her previously though, perversely, he decided he preferred the warrior princess of yesterday to the comely maiden who now calmly performed her toilet in his full gaze.

He tried to sit up and found he could not. What he had supposed in the darkness of one of his nightmares, that he was tied to the bed, was a reality. His hands were bound behind his back with light but strong cords. His knees and feet too were tied together, and an extra cord was looped through the bonds to connect wrist with ankle. Gaikatu recognised the texture of bowstring. He moved his fingers and felt it cut into his flesh.

“What new game is this, Doquz?” he cried, more amused than angry. As an adept in the art of carnal perversion, he would have hoped for something more original from her.

Doquz did not respond immediately. She finished with her hair and put on her tunic and studded leather jerkin before turning round.

“Are you thirsty?” she asked unemotionally. Without waiting for his reply, she ladled some water into a beaker and held it to his lips. Gaikatu drained it.

“And a little mares’ milk? Perhaps there is some remaining.”

Her voice held a new timbre and suddenly it dawned on Gaikatu that the stupor of the night before had not been a natural one. The liquor of which he was so fond and which he had swallowed so greedily had been poisoned. Mildly alarmed, he struggled again with his bonds but they remained secure and painful.

“I want no more of your devil’s brew,” he hissed. “Release me at once!”

Doquz went back to the table and appeared to search for something. When she turned again, she held a dagger in her right hand. Thinking that she was about to obey him, Gaikatu turned his back on her and extended his wrists as far as they would go. Doquz made no move to cut the string.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” the Il-khan demanded, squirming onto his other side and facing her once more. “Release me!”

“All in good time,” Doquz replied. Gaikatu had the impression she was talking more to herself than to him. She looked down at the dagger and tested its point on her left forefinger. A few drops of blood fell on the floor.

Gaikatu’s mild alarm was turning to fear. He had faced death in battle undaunted, but now he was to die helpless at the hands of a woman, moreover one whom he fancied he had just bedded. The nightmare made no sense. Twice already he had been at her mercy, surrounded by her warriors and comatose from the poison she had fed him, yet he still lived. The only explanation was that she was out of her mind. Perhaps if he handled her gently she would relent.

“What do you want from me, Doquz?” he asked, repeating the question he had put to her the night before. “I have never sought to be your enemy. If you want half the kingdom, I will give it to you. If your desire is to be queen I will marry you.”

“Tis too late for that,” said Doquz coldly. “Once I might have married you. We are

both young. I could have borne you a son - or a daughter perhaps - who, when we are gone, would lead this empire to greatness; greatness that my father with all his unifying plans could never dream of. Where Temuchin failed, we could have succeeded."

"It could still be so."

"'Tis too late," Doquz repeated fiercely. With a sudden spring she was on top of him, one knee pressed against his throat and her dagger poised above his breastbone.

"This is madness, Doquz," screeched Gaikatu. "You can gain nothing by killing me."

"Kill you?" echoed Doquz. "If I had wished your death, you would have been dead long since. Your life has been in my hands since you rode into my trap, and I had only to whistle to bring a dozen of my followers to the door."

"Before they reached it you would have been throttled."

"Perhaps, but I do not fear death the way you seem to, Uncle Gaikatu. I wonder why that is. Is it the dying you dread? Is it the sight of your own blood emptying on the sand, or is it the hell that awaits you in the mythical after-life?" She drew the tip of the dagger lightly across his belly and Gaikatu felt it prick the skin of his groin. "Do you think I would have let you near me if it had been your death I desired? No. I wish a long life for you, Gaikatu, a life lived in the hell you have made for others, a life dreaming of the paradise you might have enjoyed nightly between my sheets but can enjoy no longer. I wanted you to taste desire, Gaikatu; I wanted you to taste it before your manhood was lost to you for ever."

Gaikatu stared at the dagger in terror. Her intention was now clear and he did not dare struggle too much in case he hastened the act of mutilation she threatened. Keeping his torso as still as he could, he heaved again, desperately, at the cords binding his wrists. They gave a little. He needed more time.

"I do not deny I have hurt others," he said, trying to divert her with conversation. "Yes, and I plotted against your father. You may hate me for that but, believe me, I would have prevented his death if I could."

"Liar!"

"It was not I who murdered him." The pressure on Gaikatu's wrists had eased and he wriggled his fingers to restore the circulation. He picked silently at the knot in the cord.

"Yet I might have forgiven you even that," breathed Doquz. "In some ways I hardly knew my father. His thoughts were ever on Ghazan, and on Oljei: the son who did not come to Baghcha when he was most needed; the daughter who made him into a fool and now sits in Khorasan in piety and contemplation."

"A fool?"

"There was not a youth in the guard but had tasted her ..."

With a sudden burst of energy, Gaikatu tore his hands free. He twisted to one side, away from the menacing dagger, and lashed at Doquz with his fist. It struck her on the shoulder and the force of blow threw her to the floor. Her right hand struck the edge of the bench and the dagger was sent spinning out of reach. For a second Gaikatu savoured the look of surprise in her face then, though still hampered by the cord around his knees and ankles, he leapt, pinning her down by the arms.

He had underestimated her strength and agility. Doquz moved and he grunted as she brought up one knee into his face, then howled in agony as the toe of a boot sank into the flesh of his testicles. She wriggled from his grasp and backed towards the table. Her eyes blazed with fury.

Gaikatu was faced with an impossible choice. The dagger lay where it had fallen, near the door and more than an arm's length from his outstretched hand. Unless he retrieved it and cut the ties round his ankles he could not hope to escape. However, if he went for it, Doquz would have more than enough time to reach her sabre and to call for help. Already she was on her knees with her fingers raised to her mouth to give the whistle that could bring her

bowmen to her aid.

The Il-khan did the only thing he could. Ignoring the pain that was spreading across his belly, he seized her by the arm and hair, pulled her towards him and kissed her full on the mouth. Doquz bit his lip, but he did not care. He was stronger than she and would not underestimate her a third time. One hand closed around her throat while the other reached for the scimitar. The full weight of his body pressed down on her legs preventing her from using them against him.

Gaikatu had never intentionally killed a woman and now that Doquz was at his mercy, the thought of doing so made him sick. Anyway, she was of more value alive, as a hostage to ensure his escape. He relaxed his hold on her neck but kept his mouth over hers to prevent her crying out.

However, his hesitation had given Doquz the ability to counter-attack. His act of seizing her scimitar had also pulled her bow to the floor. Doquz freed her mouth and bit him again. Gaikatu felt her incisor teeth cut through the muscles of his face. Through his pain, he was aware that she had taken hold of the bow and had twisted the loose string round his throat.

She bit him a third time. Her teeth clamped together firmly through his cheek. Gaikatu had no more chance of loosing himself than a deer in the grip of a tiger. He swung the sabre but they were much too close together to give him a clean stroke. The blade sheared the table.

Gaikatu released Doquz's neck and clutched at the bowstring. She was tightening it and he could not breathe. Bright lights danced in front of him. He could not focus properly. There seemed to be two of her, each one more menacing than the other. Two strings were twisting in two pairs of slender hands.

Doquz was panting. "Yes, I could have forgiven you even my father, Gaikatu, just as I would have ignored your other excesses, your debaucheries, your Greek and African whores, your boy concubines ..."

Gaikatu's throat was closing, but he made a last effort at speech, asking the one question that gnawed away at his brain. "Then why?"

She was on top of him, twisting mercilessly, and she spat the words in his ear. "Ibrahim ..." Gaikatu heard her say. "... what you did to him. That I could never forgive!"

"The sword-master?" the Il-khan gasped. "I don't understand ... a slave ... and you ... a princess of Genghis's line ..."

"I loved him," said Doquz coldly. "I loved him and you had him castrated."

She jerked his head violently to one side and the Il-khan gave a gurgle of despair as the breath was forced from his body. The last sound he heard was the snap of his own neck before he fell back stone dead on the floor.

Doquz allowed the bowstring to fall from her grasp and rose slowly to her feet. She stood as if paralysed. There had been no time to feel remorse for what she had done, but the rigidity of the corpse, its lifeless eyes still bulging in fear and incomprehension, caused her stomach to heave.

The Il-khan lay on his back. His legs, still bound together at the knees and ankles, were twisted to one side exposing genitals that now seemed obscene in their limpness. His hands were at his throat, the fingers half-clenched as if trying, even in death, to fasten round the fatal cords.

Doquz had killed before, but it had been mostly in the heat of a skirmish or raid, her skill and that of her band pitted against the skill of the enemy. Afterwards, there had never been time to moralise. Now, though she had acted in defence of her own life and the deed was done, it sickened her. The anger against Gaikatu's savagery that she had bottled up for so long was cooling and she began to feel empty. She had been so sure of herself and it had

almost ended fatally for her.

She bent down to touch the Il-khan's body. There was no doubt he was dead. There was no pulse and he had already begun to grow cold, the flesh unresponsive like that of a wild fowl plucked ready for the pot. Doquz picked up her dagger, fingering its blade lightly before leaning across to place it against the skin of Gaikatu's groin. She stopped, revolted by what she contemplated. What kind of monster had *she* become, she wondered? And what kind of evil *jinn* would she become before it was all over?

Tears welled up in Doquz's eyes. Her cheeks burned and acid vomit rose in her throat. She retched, rose unsteadily again to her feet and, with the dagger still in her hand, stumbled to the door of the tiny house and out into the desert air.

"Are you all right, Captain?"

Doquz raised her head, the taste of vomit in her mouth. She was sitting hunched up against the wall of the homestead. Her dagger was lying in the dust beside her. Two of her followers were bending over her with concern written on their faces. One, a middle-aged Persian with a fatherly expression, helped her to her feet.

"I'm well enough now, Sabbah," she replied, rubbing her cramped limbs.

"We heard your whistle." Sabbah frowned. "What happened?"

"He is dead. I should have listened to you, Sabbah, and instead he is dead."

The second man, a Mongol youth, picked up her dagger and inspected the blade.

"No more, Khumar," said Doquz in answer to his questioning look. "He is dead and that is enough."

"Yes, Captain." The youth went towards the door of the homestead, peered inside and returned to her side. "What's to be done now?"

"What we always intended, I think," said Doquz. "Send him to Baidu as a warning. Sabbah?"

"We would have to accompany him," said the Persian, "and I do not think we are ready to face Baidu yet. Besides, the body will decompose quickly in this climate..."

"Are Arpa and Noyan still trailing us?"

"They will be here within the day by my reckoning, and Jahan will be only a few hours behind. The trail is clear."

"Then we should leave Gaikatu here," said Doquz. "Or close by so the villagers are not involved. Put him on his own pony. The generals will find him. They can take credit or blame as they choose."

"Let it be so then, Princess," said Sabbah. "Dead, he can serve no less a purpose than alive." He cast a glance at the dagger, which Doquz had taken from Khumar and tucked in her belt. "And you are wise, I think, to leave things as they are. The mutilation of corpses is work for barbarians."

"You are right as usual," said Doquz quietly. "Now, see that he is dressed and made ready to receive his pursuers. And, Khumar, fetch my bow, sword and saddlebags from the shack. I will tell you both later how I almost paid for my childish arrogance."

Sabbah whistled and several armed men appeared from behind the nearby farmhouse. "The boy and the woman wish to join us," he said, "but we cannot hide from them what has happened."

"And the children?"

"They are no threat," said Sabbah. "All night they huddled in a corner, too frightened to speak."

"Reassure them, then see they are returned to their homes," said Doquz. "Enlist the volunteers. When that is done, join me again with the ponies. We'll go north, to al-Qisma. The rest of the band are waiting for us there and, anyway, I want to put as many days as we

can manage between ourselves and Baidu before the generals reach him with the news!”

Khumar returned with the items she had requested. By now the village had come alive. A dozen or more of its inhabitants had emerged from the primitive mosque and were loading donkeys and hitching carts in preparation for a day’s toil in the Zagros foothills. Doquz knew they scratched only a meagre living from quarrying the stone they found there. She reached into a saddle bag and drew out a purse from which she took two silver coins.

“Give these dinars to the head man of the village,” she said, “and make sure there are no traces left of our presence here.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Doquz watched both men go. She restrung her bow, strapped on her quiver and gave one final glance towards the door of the peasant homestead.

“North. To al-Qisma,” she repeated quietly to herself. “To Destiny! But what I shall find there, the gods only know. That is, if they exist!”

TWO VENICE, ITALY

The clash of swords disturbed the tranquillity of the valley. On an open stretch of ground amid sprouting vines, and overlooking a lazy bend in the River Po, two men were exercising vigorously.

One was tall, powerfully built and in the prime of life. His face was rugged rather than handsome, and his complexion betrayed him as a man used to long hours out of doors. His dark hair showed no sign of thinning, however flecks of grey were evident at his temples and in his neat black beard. He handled his weapon with the ease of an expert but sweat poured down his face as he ducked and weaved to avoid the equally intelligent strokes of his opponent, a slim youth of about fifteen. Both wore thick padding on their chests, and the swords they wielded with such brilliance were curved in the eastern style, though the blades had been blunted to avoid serious injury.

The strenuous game began to tell on the older man. Hampered by his surplus clothing and by the growing warmth of the morning, his movements gradually became slower and less well timed. Suddenly, he retreated a few steps and held up his hand as a signal that hostilities should cease.

“I’m no match for you today, Hassan,” he said grudgingly, plunging his sword into a mound of soft earth and flopping down beside it. “In fact, I think the pupil already outshines the master. My forty years are beginning to tell.”

The youth laughed. He cut a few strokes in the empty air, sheathed his weapon and stood with his hands on his hips, looking down at his former adversary. “Yet I would never underestimate you, Giovanni,” he said. “I have still to learn to read your eyes as well as anticipate your arm.”

“And you would do well to attend to that before you are much older,” said Giovanni di Montecervino sternly. “For all your skill, I fancy I could twice have taken your legs if we had been playing with keen steel instead of these toys.”

The boy stopped laughing and acknowledged this criticism with a grave nod. “Then we should practise some more.”

“Tomorrow perhaps,” replied Giovanni. He studied the serious young face of his opponent, still fresh despite the exercise. In the years he had known him, he had grown to love Hassan as much as any natural son. But he was no longer a child. His jet black curls had straightened and though he had not yet grown a beard, the fine down on his chin had begun to coarsen. For all that, the deep brown oval eyes had not lost all their innocence.

Hassan squatted in the grass. For a few moments he stared silently down at the river, which glistened in the April sun as it twisted its way east towards the Adriatic. Giovanni continued watching him. Though the face had filled out, the nose was still aquiline in profile. His colouring, deeper than that of the Venetians, betrayed his Persian origins.

“Are you happy, Giovanni?”

The question took Giovanni by surprise. “Happy? How could I be miserable? Your mother grows more beautiful every day. Instead of one son I have two - and a daughter. I’m master of the finest vineyards in the Po valley. We grow the tastiest grapes in the whole of Italy, and you ask me if I’m happy.”

Hassan smiled. There was a wistfulness in his smile, as if it belonged to someone much older, a man with a profound understanding of the world.

“And when in Persia, did you never long for your homeland?”

“I longed for it often, Hassan; you know that. At times, I felt there was a war inside me, tearing me apart - the reality of the love and companionship I had found against my duty as an envoy. Against the memory of those I had left behind.”

Had it been four years, Giovanni asked himself? Had it really been so long since his mission to the Persian court to secure a treaty on behalf of the monarchs of Europe? And the mission would have succeeded, he reflected, had it not been for Arghun’s death. Persia’s ruler, descendant of Genghis Khan, had been struck down by a poisoner’s hand and Giovanni had been forced to flee for his life. But he had returned to Italy with a bride, Hassan’s mother Nadia - Arghun’s widow - whom he had rescued from the clutches of Gaikatu, the new Il-khan.

“You know I must go back, Giovanni?”

“I think I’ve always known that,” said the Italian. “It was never a question of if, but of when.”

“And now is the time, Giovanni.”

“Have you received news from the Venetian jeweller then? I know you have twice been to see him. Or was it the bright eyes and ripe breasts of Mistress Luciana Polo that took you there?”

“Lucy is pretty certainly, and we’re friends, I think, but ...”

“Then you have not ...?”

“No, Giovanni.” Hassan laughed. “Lucy is as pure as the winter snow that covers the peaks of the *Kuh-e-Sahand*