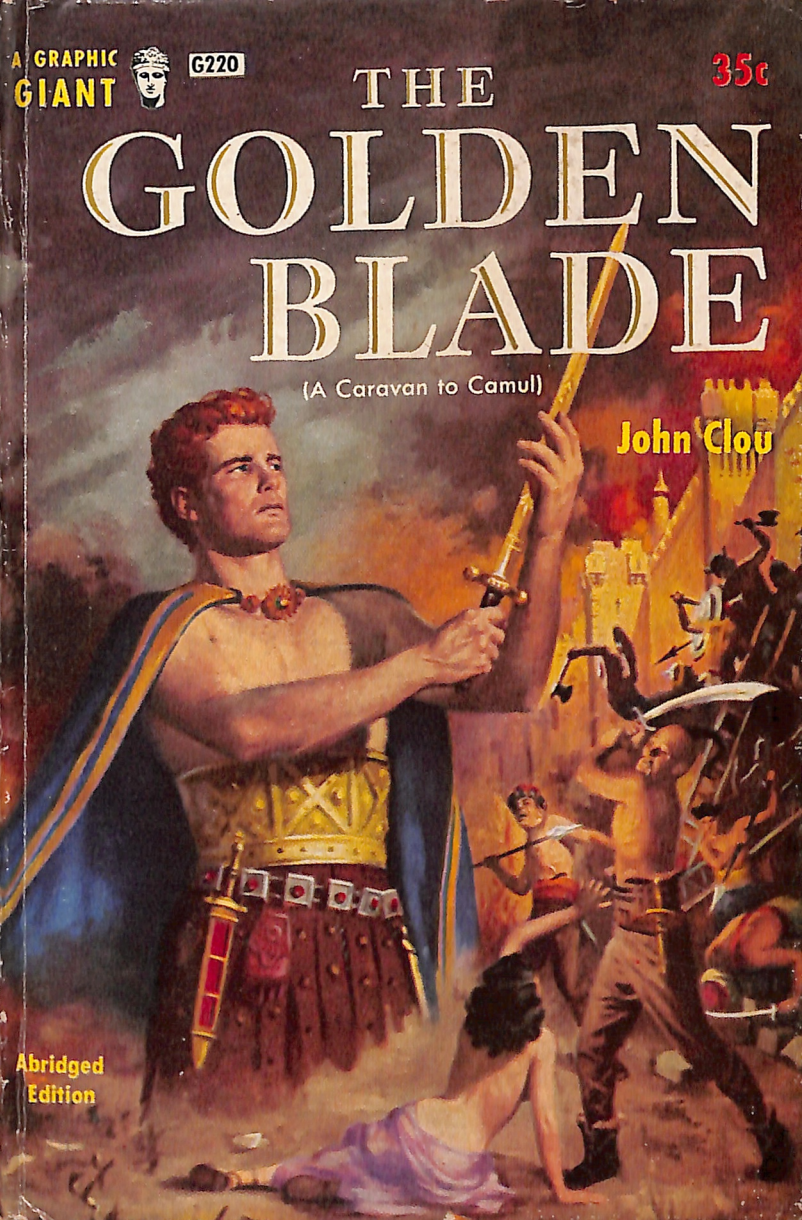
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THE GOLDEN BLADE
(A Caravan to Camul)
John Clou
Abridged Edition

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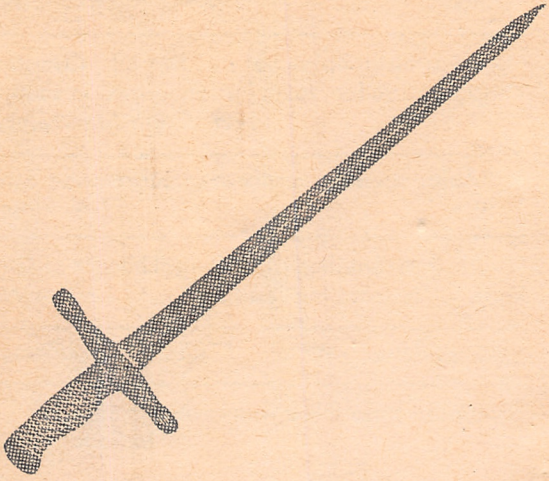

golden blade

John Clou

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO
Renée
IN GRATITUDE FOR HER PATIENT
ACCEPTANCE OF THE ROLE OF
AUTHOR'S WIFE

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THE GOLDEN BLADE

About the year 1162, a son was born to Yesukai. He named him Temujine.

History knows him as Genghis Khan.

1

KISIL

ON THE THIRD DAY of the Third Moon, in the Year of the Horse—by the reckoning of the "black-haired ones"—a young nomad on a black stallion sat guarding a clan's flocks and herds on a snow-covered hill in the heart of Asia.

The day was drawing to a close, though a pallid sun still peeped at intervals through the gray cloud mass.

From his vantage point he could see the grazing animals as they spread over the undulating plain. Down the slope, to his right, armed herdsmen watched the horses as they drifted ceaselessly, scraping the patches of snow with questing hoof.

He, too, was armed. Besides a wooden bow strengthened with plates of horn, which hung secured in a leather case from his saddle, he carried a lance across his shoulders; a pennon of white yak hair hung from beneath the spearhead. He was proud of his pennon.

To him his pennon proclaimed he—whom they had dubbed Kisil—was not just a herdsman. No indeed! His feet were set on the warrior path. How else could he quickly acquire horses and women?

From where he sat he overlooked the encampment in the valley and could see the swarms of women and children about the carts and the felt tents. This winter there had been far too many mouths to feed and game had been very scarce. The males of flocks and herds had not sufficed to fill empty bellies; too many valuable cows and ewes had been slaughtered.

Kisil stood in his short leather stirrups and gazed across to the west. On the far horizon he could see Cholan on her pony, guarding the flock of sheep that were her special pride

and care. He pulled up the stallion's head, then paused irresolute.

Abruptly he turned in the saddle to watch the younger boys herding the oxen and yaks. The cattle were slowly moving toward him as they grazed, making for the encampment which lay below him in the valley. The sudden movement of the pennon caught his eye. A light breeze lifted a few yak hairs toward the shaft of his spear! He snatched off his conical felt hat with its wide turned-down brim and sniffed the air. It's changed! The wind is blowing from the south at last!

His face broke into a grin as he pulled the worn felt back over his red hair. By the exultant shouts of the boys he knew they, too, had noticed the sudden shift of wind that augured the coming of spring.

Soon the sap would rise. In no time the tender grass shoots would thrust up from the dark earth, spreading a verdant carpet over the steppes. Kisil quieted the stallion which pawed the ground impatiently to get at the roots of the wispy frost-covered grass.

Kisil, too, was impatient, but his hunger seemed not of the belly; it was rather an ache—something he couldn't describe. It came from deep within him. Now, as he gazed across to Cholan, a surge of indefinable emotion pulsed through his veins. His heart throbbed. The hot blood suffused his cheeks. It seemed as if he would choke.

Cholan? Of course—*it was Cholan!*

She was the youngest daughter of his adopted father—his own adopted sister, and now, he knew, he wanted her! But one didn't take Besoutchei's daughters lightly. The old chieftain put a heavy price on them, and even then made judicious choice of suitors. Besoutchei used his daughters to form alliances as well as to increase his flocks and herds. Sengun, the son of Toghrul, King of the Keraits—so Besoutchei said—was asking for her as his second wife. What chance have I to win such a girl as Cholan? Kisil thought glumly.

Kisil was a *kazak,* a wanderer from his tribe whose pastures were afar off to the west on the Kirghiz steppes. His only possessions were his black stallion and the two mares

that grazed near him on the outskirts of the horse herd. They were beautiful creatures. Men envied him their possession. No other stallion could match the strength of Babor; none other could equal him for speed. Through Babor, Kisil hoped one day to be a man of substance; a man with flocks and herds—and wives. The mares were in foal now, but many times would they have to drop foals—many grasses would have to pass—before he could raise the purchase price for a girl like Cholan!

The thought of any man but himself possessing Cholan suddenly stunned him. She's no longer a leggy colt, he thought incredulously, she's grown up! She's going to be lovely—lovely like her mother—and she's almost my age!

It had been Maryam, Cholan's young mother, who had first attracted him. Boylike, his calf love had been a devotion to a woman older than himself—his adopted mother. Now . . . Kisil sat gazing into nothingness like one awakening from a spell.

Cholan, like her mother, hadn't the broad face and high cheekbones that prevailed among the nomad women of these eastern steppes; her bones were smaller and more delicately made. She was as slender as a peeled willow wand. Her eyes, soft and liquid, were fringed with long lashes. The warm brown skin of her oval face would be soft to touch—soft, like a piece of silk!

The thought of losing such loveliness to another man inflamed his senses. If only he dared take—but Besoutchei, in his wrath, would hound him all over the steppes. Besides, Besoutchei . . .

Kisil strove to shut Cholan from his mind and resolutely thought only of Besoutchei's kindness to him. When the eastbound caravan to which Kisil had hired himself as one of the escort had stopped at Besoutchei's encampment, the old chieftain had been absent. Kisil had seen Maryam standing at the entrance to her yurt in the line of household tents.

"Who is that?" Kisil asked a man breathlessly.

"That?" The man shook his head as if in warning. "Keep your eyes off her, boy! She's the old man's last brood mare, and he gave plenty to buy her and traveled many moons

across the southern deserts to get to the Moslem slave market where he picked her up. They say she was a Christian virgin stolen by the slave dealers. *Eckh!* To be rich makes up for being old when you can buy young flesh to keep old bones warm." There was envy in the man's cautious laugh.

Kisil stood entranced. In spite of the warning he couldn't take his eyes off her. He wished the trading might take a long time so that they might camp alongside this clan; yet, only a moment ago he had been chafing at the delay, eager to reach Camul, their next important stop after Bar-kul, where the caravan would rest for several days. *Camul!* Ever since his more experienced companions had teased him by enlarging on the wanton delights that awaited them there, he had thought, with an adolescent tremulousness, of staying a night in Camul; according to his informers, even the husbands of that city approved of the hospitality bestowed by their wives and daughters on the men of passing caravans. Now? . . .

On impulse he went up to Maryam, and, putting out his hand, pleaded in a low voice. "I am a nameless one. I have no father or mother. Be my mother—give me a name!"

Maryam had laughed, a low throaty laugh that nevertheless sounded kindly. "The traditional Turkish adventurer's plea. Yet does not tradition demand that it be given to an older woman?"

"Such beauty as yours can never grow old!" he answered fervently. Then boldly he went on: "I mean to grow in this land. Remember, there have been kings 'without a name'!"

She called to a young girl who was one of a laughing group about the traders. The girl came running at the call, throwing herself in Maryam's arms.

"Cholan, would you like this boy as a brother?" she asked the laughing girl. Then, not awaiting the answer, she turned to Kisil.

"It would be nice to have a son," Maryam reflected aloud, "if only an adopted one." She hugged Cholan to her. "This is my ewe lamb. My husband—" a flush like the dawn on the mountaintops spread over her cheeks—"my lord is the *tarkhan* of this clan; you must ask him. I am only his fifth wife . . . he is very old . . . I have no other child."

The caravan went on without Kisil and his horses.

When Besoutchei returned with the herds that night, Kisil had repeated his plea.

"I am *ad-siz,* I have no name. My father was lord of many tents. When he died, my youngest brother, according to our custom, inherited the clan pastures and the women of my father's hearth. My older brothers took their share of the herds and with their followers have gone westward to win new lands. I had only three horses and no followers, so I joined a caravan and rode eastward to seek my fortune. But my horses are the finest horses," he emphasized; "my father gave them to me when they were colts. You have never seen such a stallion as I have. He will improve your herd, lord. Be my father—give me a name!"

Besoutchei laughed, the belly-rumbling laugh of a well-fed man. "If I don't adopt you I shall lose the services of this wonder stallion, I suppose? *Ad-siz* are you? I'll give you the name of *Kisil!* Red is your hair and *Red* shall be your name!" He laughed uproariously at his joke, but seeing the boy's tense face, he became serious. Calling for a horn of kumiss, he mingled blood to make a potion; first pouring some on the ground as an offering to the spirits, he drank deeply before passing the horn to Kisil. "Drink!" he commanded. "You are my adopted son. My friends shall be your friends, my enemies your enemies."

Kisil's mind came back to his duties. He stood in his stirrups and scanned the horizon. Beyond that skyline were enemies that might, at any time, swoop down to drive off horses or steal women. His gaze lingered in Cholan's direction. A faint zephyr caressed his cheek. He loosened the sheepskin coat at his throat.

It had been a severe winter. The nomad families were impatiently treading on the retreating snow, anxious to get back to their summer pastures in the long-grasslands on the higher plateau. But the snow was long in going; the wind still drove from the north and Besoutchei had been reluctantly compelled to call a halt. The round felt tents and household chests had been lifted off the heavy wagons and the encamp-

ment set up. Fortunately, they had encamped where their northward drift had crossed the *Tien-shan Pe-lu,* the caravan route that passed north of the Celestial Mountains.

Kisil felt excited when he crossed that camel track. It was the road to adventure, down which he had come; the silk road that threaded across mountain, desert and grassy plain, past the cities of the "civilized ones," as the Chinese called their Uigur subjects—through cities like Camul, and led on over the torturous gobi to the still greater wonders that rewarded the traveler inside the Dragon Ramparts of the black-haired ones. Perhaps, one day . . .

Yesterday a caravan had come along, slowly swinging westward. Besoutchei had traded with the leader. In exchange for a horse or two he had got a quantity of grain; silks for the women; for the men rice wine! Tonight, he promised them, they would hold the spring festival!

Kisil slapped his thigh in delighted anticipation.

Yesterday, while Besoutchei had shrewdly bargained with the merchants, Kisil had wandered down the line of kneeling camels. It was like old times to be among camels again. He joked with the men and, as an old hand on the route, asked the news of the *Pe-lu.* While he aired his knowledge with a friendly driver, one of the camels had pulled some matting off the animal in front of him and had bitten into the leather sack underneath. A stream of black sand had poured to the ground before the camel driver was able to tie up the hole.

"Why do you carry black sand to the *kara-gum,* the black sands over which you will pass west of here?" Kisil asked, his blue eyes wide in astonishment.

The camel driver looked up to the head of the line, and, seeing the mishap had been unnoticed, he made no effort to scrape up the spilled powder. "This is not black sand, my young flea. This is a magic powder made by the people of the Sung now driven south of the Long River by the Kin." He held out a handful to show Kisil. "They use it for the *ho-pao,* the fire tubes of iron!"

To show the boy its magic properties, the camel driver placed some on a flat stone, then struck it with a bar of iron. Kisil's knees trembled when the spirit of the sand jumped out

in smoke and fire. The man laughed to see his fright. "You can blow up mountains with that stuff. They use it for making war against cities." At that moment, the trading finished, the grumbling camels were prodded to their feet; the armed escort galloped out to the flanks; then with tinkling bells the camels padded westward along the centuries-old silk route.

"You can have that spilled powder," the camel driver shouted as he hurried off. "When you want to make magic, throw some in the fire!"

Kisil had carefully scraped up every grain into a skin sack. He told only Drombo of this wonderful treasure. Drombo was the youngest of the first wife's sons—Cholan's half-brother and Kisil's very special friend. They would have some fun with that powder, one day.

But tonight was the feast! This morning the men had been slaughtering sheep. Now the cooking fires were burning brightly. In the distance Kisil could see the women hovering over the cooking holes with their iron pots. Tonight there would be much eating and drinking. They would dance and the old men sing songs, chanting the ancient glories of the *ger-igren,* the people of the felt tents. There would be drumming and music from the one-stringed fiddle, flute and pipe. Many would be the sore heads by daylight. Then when it was over and they had sobered up, they would load the wagons again and resume their northward drift to their summer pastures on the plateau.

The boys were getting impatient for the fun. They were driving the cattle now, yipping around the herd on their sturdy little ponies. Kisil shaded his eyes as he looked toward the western horizon. But he could no longer see Cholan. The setting sun blinded him; its glory setting even as the fierce blaze of his desire seemed doomed to set—though for him, he thought bitterly, it would set before fulfillment.

His legs pressed the stallion into a gallop.

At the feast he would eat until his skin was tight; he would drink deeply of the rice wine. He would forget Cholan—if he could.

2

CHOLAN

AS MOST OF the ewes were still heavy with young, Cholan slowly edged the flock back to the encampment. There was plenty of time before the feasting started; no need to hurry them as the Rider by Day still stood high in the Everlasting Sky.

In the distance she could see the boys had not yet turned the cattle toward the camp. Someone on a big horse stood sentinel on that distant rise. That would be Kisil, her big adopted brother. A smile flitted across her face.

She had been a little girl—well, not so *very* little; it was only three grasses ago when Kisil had come into their lives. She had been born in the Year of the Dragon. Cholan added the years on her fingers. Yes, she was fourteen—old enough for marriage! Though most girls had to wait long past that until men could accumulate the purchase price. Some of her older half-sisters were still unmarried. Her father seemed loath to part with his daughters—except at a price. Only last year a young herdsman from another clan had wanted her.

Her father had stroked his beard reflectively. "Give me twenty mares," he said shrewdly. "Then perhaps I might think about it."

"Twenty mares!" The young man stood appalled. "We—we are of good blood," he stammered. "My father is proud of his lineage—an alliance with us should count for something more than horses!"

Besoutchei laughed. "It might seem so to you who look like a sick camel—but not to me. Pride is a poor shield when the arrows fly. I am a chieftain badly in need of horses. How many have you?"

"I have but one and—"

"And that's probably bog-spavined!" Besoutchei interrupted.

"But horses can be stolen, O father of Cholan, and meantime—"

"Fool!" Besoutchei had thundered. "Do you think I would give Cholan to a horse thief? Cease blowing wind! By the time you have ten horses Cholan will have borne as many children, not one of whom will you have sired!"

Cholan laughed when she thought of it. She had no desire to be the wife of a poor man. Even under the best of conditions all the dirty work fell to the women. It was they who made the felt, pounding the coarse hair and wool into the heavy rolls which, treated with curdled milk, made the round yurts that sheltered the families. It was women who collected the dung for the fires, pressing it into cakes and piling it in the sun to dry. It was women who plaited horse and yak hair into ropes and split the tendons of slaughtered animals to make leather thongs and bowstrings. It was women who did the weaving, who shook the milk into curds. It was women—oh, it's always women, Cholan thought impatiently, who have the work to do! The men and boys just ride, hunt—and eat!

If Sengun *noyon* married her, she might miss a lot of such hard work; surely the second wife of a young prince would have a slave to perform her menial tasks.

Her flock was quietly browsing ahead though some of the ewes, carrying their first lambs, were uneasy. From where she sat her pony at the top of a ridge, Cholan noticed that one ewe appeared to be seeking shelter away from the flock. First it lay down behind a thorn bush, but goaded by anguish it got up again. A few yards farther on it lay down in a snow-filled hollow. Its companions passed by unheeding; they were moving faster down the slope to where a line of stunted willow indicated the possibility of water.

Cholan, content to let the flock move away from her, sat watching the troubled ewe. The ewe trembled and strained; then it turned its head and sniffed curiously at the squirming bundle of wet wool that lay on the ground. The ewe eyed it inquisitively; nudged it; started back in surprise as it moved and then licked it. The next moment her tongue was working over it with eager care. As she licked the membrane from its eyes and cleared the nose and throat, the tiny creature gave a feeble cry. With renewed energy the ewe tried to nudge the wriggling bundle to its feet, but the lamb could only lift its

head and bleat. Cholan urged her pony nearer and was just about to throw herself from its back when a sudden turmoil from the flock made her look up.

The flock was splitting up. Some of the sheep huddled together in isolated groups; some were scattering, running crazedly, bleating with fear. As Cholan dug her heels into the pony's flank, she saw two gray forms dashing in among the flock, snapping at the ewes who turned to face this enemy in an effort to protect their lambs.

Cholan dashed down the slope, her black unbound hair streaming out behind her. Her hunting bow was already in her left hand, the other reaching for an arrow from the leather case at her right hip. The wolves, each with a lamb in slavering jaws, made for the upper ground at her left. Colan swerved in pursuit. Her pony raced across the frozen ground unguided by its rider who, with arrow fitted to bow, followed the dodging gray form nearest to her. The gut string twanged and the arrow struck the wolf in its flank. Dropping the lamb, the wolf slithered to a stop, its haunches raking the snow, its fangs snapping at the arrow embedded in its side. Cholan flashed past in pursuit of the other robber, which had disappeared down a gully.

Here the patches of snow had thawed and then frozen into ice. The pony staggered and slipped. With an agonized squeal it crashed to the ground, catapulting Cholan over its head.

When consciousness returned Cholan realized she was cold. Her head throbbed and pounded like the beating of a shaman's drum. The Night Ruler hung as a slim crescent in the sky; she quickly turned her eyes from it. The older women warned young girls to beware of the moon.

Her head was clearing. She raised herself on elbow. By her side lay the pony, its flanks heaving, its nostrils distended, the whites of its eyes showing fear. Cholan struggled to her feet and took hold of the pony's head. It made a valiant effort to rise but its hoofs slid on the frozen grass and she saw that one of its legs was useless.

She would have to kill her pony—her favorite pony!

The thought of the flock spurred her into instant action.

She picked up her bow. The arrow, intended for the wolf, pierced the pony's brain. Before the stricken animal had ceased its convulsions, Cholan snatched the rough bridle from its head and started trudging back up the side of the gully.

It was difficult walking. Her deerhide boots slipped and slithered on the frozen tufts.

Though still dizzy and shaken from her fall, she knew that a good spirit had watched over her—perhaps the *Gesu* spirit that her mother told her about. In the cities of the Uigurs they had big houses for the *Gesu* spirit, so her mother said.

Her exertions made her very warm. Her clothing was suitable for sheepherding, but not for such strenuous exercise as this. Over her sheepskin coat was draped a sash of blue silk that, looped behind her neck, crossed firmly over her breasts before passing under the arms, with its ends brought back again to the front and securely tied. She untied the knot and opened her coat and the front of the coarse woolen garment she wore underneath. It was rapidly getting dark and she wondered what had happened to her flock. When she topped the rise she heard shots and could dimly see men on horseback rounding up the scattered sheep below her. A lone rider was coming up the hill. It was Kisil; she couldn't mistake that great horse of his. She shouted to him.

Hearing her shout, the rider looked up. By the shrill cry that he gave when he saw her, she knew that he was going to enjoy himself showing off. When it appeared certain that he would ride her down, he pulled the stallion back on its haunches. Babor's hoofs were unpleasantly close to her head as the breath from his nostrils spurted in her face. But she stood stock-still, a smile flitting across her features. She wouldn't give Kisil the satisfaction of seeing her flinch.

Kisil seemed as excited as his horse. He's been drinking, she thought. He calmed down the horse but he seemed to be loooking at her rather curiously. Then she saw his eyes widen at the sight of her open neck and unbound breasts. She hastily fastened up her coat.

"What happened, Cholan? Where is your pony?"

"Dead!" she replied. "I had to shoot it."

In a matter-of-fact manner she moved to his side and taking Kisil's outstretched hand, leaped up behind him. The stallion attempted to buck and plunge, but she held onto Kisil's skin coat. "I chased two wolves away from the flock," she explained. "The pony fell and broke its leg."

Kisil nodded understandingly as he turned the stallion's head toward the encampment. "The boys have rounded up your sheep."

"Go back up the hill, Kisil," Cholan pleaded. "There are a sheep and her lamb up there—I know the boys have missed them or they would have found me."

Kisil still rode on down the hill. "Have you forgotten that tonight we are having a feast?" he asked impatiently. "Already it has started."

"Kisil, stop!" She clutched his arm. "What's the matter with you? That sheep is mine and I'm going back for her." Cholan threw herself off the horse and rolled over on the ground. By the time she had picked herself up Kisil had wheeled round angrily.

"Like all girls you shoot at a duck and bring down a magpie!" he scoffed. "Your father and his wives sit at the feast awaiting you. Your help is needed. Come!" He held out his hand to help her up.

Cholan started walking back up the hill. Kisil spurred back to her side.

"Go to your feast!" she shouted angrily. "It's nothing but an excuse for men to get drunk. I prefer staying out on the hills—it's safer for young girls!"

Kisil cracked his whip. "Safer? That's what you think!" Babor plunged in front of her, forcing her to stop.

"Leave me alone! You think you have suddenly become a man, don't you?" Cholan said angrily. "One drink of rice wine did it, I suppose. You had better stay with mare's milk until you are older!"

Kisil's chest heaved as he looked at her without speaking. His horse still blocked her way. "Yes, it *is* time I became a man." He nodded, looking at her strangely. Then he said curtly, "Get up behind me!"

Cholan dodged around the horse and again started up the

hill. She suddenly wanted to be alone. It is strange, she thought: Kisil is not the same. But then, she too had changed. She no longer looked forward to the feast. Yet it was at such affairs that marriages were often arranged. She wondered what Sengun was like. Suddenly she didn't feel quite so happy about marrying a man she had never seen—second wife, too! Up until now that had seemed quite natural and desirable. But now . . .?

Kisil interrupted her thoughts by again wheeling the stallion in front of her. She threw her bow to the ground in petulant anger. "Go back!" her voice quivered. "Go to your feast and leave me alone!"

Kisil dismounted, took hold of Cholan's arms in an iron grip. "Cholan," he said hoarsely, "Cholan, I want you for wife!"

Cholan laughed; she tried to make it sound scornful, but to her ears it sounded surprisingly weak. "*You,* Kisil? You want to buy *me?*" She twisted out of his grip. "What with?" She laughed ironically. "Your three horses?"

Kisil seized her savagely. "I don't have to buy you. With only Babor I could steal you. None could catch me. I could steal you, *now!*"

Cholan's face felt hot. The night had become very warm, she thought, but she laughed at his last remark. "It will take more than one boy—or one man—to steal me!" she taunted him. But her heart was singing madly. If he *is* a man, she thought, he won't take that. No man worthy of me could take such a taunt. She almost smiled as she raised her arm to ward off the blow that knocked her down.

3

THE ABDUCTION OF CHOLAN

FOR THE SECOND TIME since the Rider by Day had set, Cholan struggled back to conscious thought. As she lay beside Kisil she noticed that the sky had cleared. The stars hung brilliantly. She felt strangely happy. By their side she heard the stallion cropping the grass. Darkness enfolded them like

a soft woolen garment. The night had turned warmer, much warmer.

The talk of the elder women now became clear. She, too, was a wife. She, too, would have a yurt of her own. She would bind up her hair like the married women of her tribe and cut it across her forehead to denote her status. She would wear a birch-bark diadem and silver ornaments in her hair. Honor would come to her with the birth of her first son. . . . *Honor? But what of Sengun?* she thought in sudden panic. *I am still my father's heifer!*

"Kisil!" she cried, starting up. "My father—we must go! Sengun—"

He pulled her down beside him. "Sengun can't have you, Cholan. You are mine now."

She pulled herself away and sat bolt upright. "Are you mad? If this is discovered you might lose your life."

Kisil again pulled her down to him. "If the daughter of Besoutchei were willing we could flee . . . now . . . while they are feasting," he whispered.

Cholan's voice quivered. "Yes, we must flee. But let us plan our flight sensibly. Tonight will be our best chance—while the men are drunk. We may even slip back unseen and while I am gathering up food you may get your weapons and your mares."

"Not the mares. They are too near foaling and we must ride hard. Much as I hate to leave them I shall take two others. You realize we shall be pursued?"

"But spring is here!" she cried joyously, jumping to her feet. "Shall we ride westward—to your homeland?"

Patiently he waited while she fastened her coat and sash. He picked up his lance and whip, leaped on Babor and extended his hand to help her up behind. As he turned the stallion's head toward the glow that marked the feasting encampment, Cholan reached forward and, pulling on a rein, turned the horse around. "My ewe and lamb," she reminded him. "I can't leave them out for the wolves. Besides, if we are seen, they will explain our delay in returning."

Kisil obediently guided the horse to where baaing sounded in the darkness. But at that moment the plaintive baa be-

came surcharged with fear. There was a snarl and the sound of scuffling. Kisil shouted as he urged the horse into a gallop. He hurled his spear at a wolf that slunk off into the darkness. The ewe lay dead, her throat torn and bloody, but her body completely covered the lamb whose pitiful bleat issued from beneath the carcass.

Cholan gathered up the lamb in her arms, snuggling it under her coat. "Poor thing," she murmured, "I must find you a mother before we flee."

"Speaking of mothers," Kisil said thoughtfully, "I must remind you to say no farewells—not even to your mother."

The feasting was at its height as they entered the camp. The dancers were stamping the earth around the fires. Many men, and women, lay prone on the ground. Other revelers were flourishing swords, extolling their bravery. Men were dancing with men.

Children watched and clapped their hands in excitement. Others played fiddle or pipe. The chieftain and four of his wives sat at the entrance to his tent; they were very merry. Maryam was walking around her yurt, looking anxiously around.

Kisil waited in the edge of darkness while Cholan slipped off the horse, but just then someone threw a fresh armful of camel's-thorn on the fire nearest them, and its blaze highlighted their arrival. Maram started when she saw them. "What happened, Cholan? Where have you been?" she asked.

Kisil shrugged his shoulders—no chance to slip away yet. He quickly whispered fresh instructions to Cholan who was walking behind him, trying to keep out of her father's sight. Kisil had told her to make for her mother's yurt, but a drunken warrior put his arm around them both, calling obscene blessings on their heads. As Kisil angrily pushed the man off, Besoutchei saw them.

"How now, Kisil!" he cried. "Is our wine too strong for a Kirghiz youth to stomach? Come, account for yourself. Why did you leave our feast?"

But then Besoutchei saw Cholan's shrinking form. He heard, too, the drunken laughter and coarse jests as the re-

velers joined hands and danced around the embarrassed pair. He rose in a sudden, drunken rage, slashing at those nearest him with his heavy rawhide whip. "What!" he roared. "Dog of a Kurd! Where have you been with my daughter? By the black yak tails of the Niruns I'll strip your hide! My herdsmen shall flog you from our pastures."

The dancers were sobered by Besoutchei's anger and, falling back, they left Cholan and Kisil standing alone. The drumming ceased, the pipes ended on a plaintive note. Everyone watched them.

"Go to your mother," Kisil whispered.

As Cholan moved to obey him Besoutchei screamed, "Cholan! Cholan, come here—and you, too, *Kurd!*"

Cholan remained rooted to the spot as Kisil strode forward, his face flushing as red as his hair.

Besoutchei made a savage slash at him with his whip. "The daughters of Besoutchei," he foamed, "are not for *kazak* herdsmen to take! Only—"

The rest was drowned out by a chorus of yells and the drumbeat of hoofs. Into the firelight swept a horde of mounted men, spears and swords gleaming in their hands. Their horses plunged through the fires, scattering the burning embers, leaving the camp in sudden darkness. From the tents sounded the screams of women and the frightened cries of children. Men cursed in drunken rage; unable to see what was happening in the darkness, many ran to their tents to protect their families; others lurched to their feet and tried to cross weapons with the raiders on horseback.

Kisil heard Cholan scream his name. He sprang toward her, but struggling men interposed. Then he thought of the horses. Shouting for those who were sober to follow him, Kisil ran to the makeshift corral. But the raiders had already found it. In the darkness he stumbled over the body of a murdered boy as the horses thundered out of the corral pursued by a crowd of shouting men. One raider leaned from his galloping horse and took a slash at Kisil as he tried to struggle to his feet. Cut and bleeding, with his ribs smashed in, Kisil dragged himself back to the yurts.

Swift as an arrow, the raiders had come and gone. Where,

but a moment ago, the dancing flames had illumined Besoutchei's patriarchal rage, the blackness of night now drew a ghostly pall over a scene of utter desolation.

"Cholan! Cholan!" Kisil's wavering cry was lost amid the shrieks of women wailing their dead.

"Cholan! Cholan!"

That was Maryam's voice! With frenzied foreboding in his heart Kisil crawled frantically to where he had last seen Cholan. Blood was pouring from a cut on his head; it ran into his eyes and trickled from the corner of his mouth. Desperately he fought to hold onto his spirit which seemed to be draining from him like wine from a spear-pierced sack. Dimly he heard the lament of Besoutchei's wives keening the death dirge as he crawled to the open space before the chieftain's tent.

"Cholan!" he gasped. His searching hands touched wool. Where Cholan had stood lay a dead lamb.

4

CHOLAN AND TARGOUTAI

WHEN THE RAIDERS burst into the circle of campfires Cholan stood petrified. For a split second—before the firelight was extinguished by the plunging hoofs—she saw the frightful picture that would be forever deeply etched on her mind. She saw the flung spear transfix her father's throat, his life-blood spurting on his snow-white beard. She saw her mother's fear-stricken face; saw the charge of maddened horses, the figures clad in wolfskins on their backs. She screamed Kisil's name and saw the savage sweep of a sword miss his head when he leaped toward her.

She tumbled the lamb from her bosom and snatched an arrow from the quiver lying at her feet, her eyes seeking Kisil's attackers in the sudden darkness. As her bow twanged the thunder of hoofs was upon her. She half turned, only to be seized in the iron grip of a raider, who swept her off the ground at a gallop and plunged with her into the enveloping darkness of the steppes.

She screamed and kicked frantically. The wild taunts of her captor rang in her ears as he exerted an ever-tightening grip that nearly broke her back. Her breath was being pressed out of her body; her upflung hand tore at the hair of her abductor who laughed uproariously at her puny efforts.

Feeling her struggles grow weaker, the man heaved her body around, throwing her face down across the horse's withers. His hand was now entwined in her long hair in an agonizing grip.

It was of no use to struggle any more. The helplessness of her position overwhelmed her. There could be no escape from this strong band of thieves. Sadly she thought of Kisil. Only a brief moment ago she had become Kisil's woman. When they had planned their flight she had felt like an eagle. Now she was helpless, like a partridge in the talons of a hawk. And Kisil? Perhaps he was . . .

"No, no!" she screamed. Goaded by the half-formed thought, she tried to fling herself free.

"Yes, yes!" her captor mocked, wrenching her head down across his knees with a twist that nearly tore the scalp from her head.

The pain revived her drooping spirits, and her fury rose to boiling point. She gritted her teeth. Kisil *must* be alive, she thought desperately. He must live to avenge this agony! For a while pictures sprang to her mind of a triumphant Kisil making this man suffer as she was suffering. Such thoughts sustained her for a passing moment until black devils of doubt stabbed her afresh.

If Kisil were alive would he . . . did he want her enough to attempt a rescue? He might well lose his life in such an attempt, yet . . . Her thoughts swung between fervent hope of rescue and despairing certainty that death would reward any effort.

The blood pounded at her temples. Her waist was sore from the violent jolting. She shouted to her captor that she would rather sit astride in front of him than be carried like a dead sheep. The man pulled up, calling to a comrade to help him. Amid coarse laughter and joking, rude hands lifted her up behind the man; her feet were lashed together under

the horse's belly, so that she had to hold onto the wolfskin coat as, but a short time ago, she had clutched hold of Kisil.

Feeling that they were safe from pursuit, the band resumed their journey at a slower pace, driving the stolen herd before them. Close by her Cholan could see other horses double-burdened and knew that she was not the only woman taken in the raid. She shouted to one hunched-up figure seated behind a man. It was a girl younger than herself, who shouted back excitedly that two other girls had been taken besides Jhotuz.

Jhotuz was the one and only wife of old Serang, the headman or *bek*. To Cholan and the other girls of her age the headman's wife was an "old woman" though actually in the prime of life. Maryam would sometimes tell her daughter how Besoutchei and Serang had purchased Jhotuz and herself at Bish-baligh. Cholan and her friends looked on Jhotuz with more than speculative interest when they learned that this young slave had been trained to please men! It wouldn't take much to please an old man like Serang, they whispered, giggling. They also wondered, as Jhotuz was barren, if Serang were too old . . . or Jhotuz knew too much!

Jhotuz! A new and frightening appreciation of her mother's earlier misfortune swept into Cholan's mind like a flood of ice-cold water. Her mind clutched desperately at the thought of Jhotuz. If Jhotuz *did* know anything . . . she must talk to her, quickly!

Cholan had no illusions as to what lay before her. Her fate, she knew, would be that of many a woman of the steppes—the calmly accepted fate of most of the girls brought to the yurts by the men of Cholan's own clan. Sometimes a girl escaped; sometimes . . . death by her own hand.

They rode on steadily, at first in an easterly direction and then, Cholan saw by the stars, they swung north. From her captor she learned that the raiders were Taijiuts. He discouraged her few questions with monosyllabic grunts. He was evidently an old man.

Cholan felt increasingly depressed as well as sleepy.

Shortly after dawn they came to a low line of hills. Before they passed over this ridge Cholan turned to take one last

glance back. No figures showed on the empty plain behind them. There was no pursuit.

Cholan resignedly looked ahead. A few miles away she saw a big encampment lying in a hollow. Flocks and herds dotted the intervening plain; bands of armed men could be seen riding on the distant horizon.

When they got closer to the encampment she could see that it was evidently a horde of many families, ruled, no doubt, by some wealthy prince. The smoke from the dung fires rose lazily in the morning air and drifted slowly northward in the light breeze.

Among the captured horses she could now see Babor's tossing mane and proud head rising well above the herd of shaggy ponies. How many horses had been taken! As they approached the encampment the herd was swung to one side and allowed to graze—all except Babor. A herdsman lassoed him and, squealing and plunging, the stallion was led out of his herd and taken ahead to the camp.

Crowds of women, children and barking dogs swarmed among the tent wagons as the captured women were ridden up to the cleared space in front of the chieftain's pavilion. It was a huge tent, Cholan saw, set on a wide-framed wagon, flanked on either side by those of his wives and servants. It would take twenty oxen to pull that wagon, she surmised.

Tethered to one of the wheels stood the chief's mare. Cholan instinctively appraised it. A splendid creature, she thought, almost as good as Kisil's mares! When Babor was led up for inspection the mare whinnied a greeting. The stallion, rearing on his haunches, tried to shake off the restricting lariat that held him by the neck. The chieftain approved of Babor with lively grunts of satisfaction.

"Have you ever seen such a horse?" he asked the group of excited men. He turned to the young man beside whom Jhotuz was standing. "You have done well, nephew, to bring me such a horse. It atones, somewhat, for your missing the caravan. With Kadia and that stallion we'll breed the finest horses on these plains!" He smacked his fist in satisfaction.

"Let's hope Targoutai has better luck breeding horses than he does breeding sons," one old man laughed to another.

"Yes! Four wives—and all he can get is daughters!" They both chuckled at their joke.

Targoutai, full of admiration for Babor, gave but a perfunctory glance at the captured women who were now allowed to stand on their feet. Cholan, her back to the men, began rubbing the circulation into her ankles chafed by the binding thong. She glumly watched the antics of the excited girls who evidently approved of the possessive attitude of the men who had taken them—all but Jhotuz, who was stung by the indifference of her youthful captor. He had left her side to join the throng admiring Babor.

"We have taken also four young girls and an old woman, *abaga,*" the youth reported. "What is your pleasure? Shall the men keep their girls?"

"Old woman indeed!" screamed Jhotuz, her face purpling in vehement indignation. "Preserve me, Uncle, from this gelded colt! Give me to a man who will appreciate a woman experienced in love!" She placed her arms akimbo.

The roar of laughter occasioned by her outburst drowned out her indignant speech. Targoutai waved for silence.

"Yes, those children can remain the spoils of their captors." His hand negligently included Cholan and the other girls. "But this one—" he eyed Jhotuz up and down— "would be wasted on you, Kurul. I may add something to her experience myself when I've tried out this stallion." He turned his back on Jhotuz, approached Babor and laid his hand on face and muzzle. He fed the horse sugary camel's-thorn tips and with practiced hands and honeyed voice soon calmed Babor. He then called for a bridle.

In the meantime the three girls had sprung up with alacrity behind their men and galloped off. Cholan, however, still sat on the ground rubbing her ankles. Thinking furiously, she impatiently shook off her captor's hand; while Jhotuz, tired of being neglected, strode up to Kurul and clutched him by the sleeve. "Come, pretty youth, show me to the tent where you keep your *haramzada!*"

The men laughed boisterously in approval of her humor, and while quips and jibes were exchanged, they relaxed their attention to Babor. Cholan got to her feet and moved closer

to Jhotuz. Suddenly she snatched the sword from Targoutai's scabbard and gave him a shove from behind that tumbled him to the ground. With a lithe spring she was on Babor's back, and with a slash of the sword she cut the lariat that held him. The stallion reared in surprise, then, with a challenging neigh, he burst through the crowd of men like a thunderbolt.

Cholan crouched low over the racing stallion's neck. Women screamed and snatched at children in her path; shouting men pounded behind her; dogs barked and raced alongside. She was out of the encampment now, heading across the grazing grounds to the distant ridge. Cholan looked over her shoulder at the pursuing riders; the chieftain, well to the fore, leaned forward in his stirrups, his hand swinging a rope.

Grimly she noticed that the shouts of her pursuers had attracted the attention of some herdsmen ahead. They fanned out in a line to cut her off. Babor plunged straight on. Cholan saw they were armed with long poles. On the end of some of the poles were hooks; others had the noose used in cutting out horses from a herd. Just as they were reaching out for her, she called on all her skill as a horsewoman to swing Babor at right angles to her course. Knee and body swung him around as a noose whistled close to her head. In a flash she saw the gap widen between the man who had attempted to lasso her and his nearest companion. Babor again responded to her swing and without breaking his stride swerved through the opening. A lariat snaked out to catch Babor's leg. She saw it coming and, shutting her eyes, she gripped the black mane awaiting the plunge to earth. No!—it could have missed her only by a hair's-breadth!

Ahead of her she saw that horses were grazing. She again glanced over her shoulder. What a splendid mare that was! Cholan thought ungrudgingly, as she saw that Targoutai had far outdistanced the other pursuers. He was closer than she would have thought possible. The mare whinnied, making Babor prick his ears and slacken his speed. The herd in front now lifted their heads and, seeing the approaching stallion, greeted him with a chorus of shrill neighs. In spite of all that Cholan could do, Babor swung toward the herd—his own

herd, she saw now, from which he had been parted but a short time ago. Babor swiftly circled once around the herd and turned to face the oncoming mare. Then with arched tail and prancing hoofs, he carried the helpless Cholan to the side of the Taijiut lord.

Furious at Babor's betrayal, Cholan slashed at Targoutai with his own sword. He reined back easily to avoid the blow. As quick as lightning the lariat pinned her arms to her side. The mare wheeled and Cholan was jerked off the stallion's back.

Cholan lay on the ground, defiance blazing in her eyes as she stared Targoutai boldly in the face. Across the taut rope they looked at each other. She did not care for what she saw. He was a middle-aged man with wispy hairs on his chin and upper lip; his oblique eyes smoldered in an outraged fury emphasized by the clenched teeth showing between snarling lips.

As they gazed at each other a smile flitted across her face when she saw the angry gleam in his eyes soften and his furious glance change to one of admiration.

"By the Everlasting One," he exclaimed in surprised amazement, "but you are *beautiful!*" He swung off his horse, his eyes never leaving hers while he tore the sword from her clutching fingers and pulled her to her feet. He sheathed the sword as she flung off the lariat defiantly, and then he slowly coiled the rope, staring at her as he did so. "You are no herdsman's spawn!" he exclaimed. "Who are you, girl?"

At that moment her previous captor came galloping up and seized her once more by the hair.

"Hands off me!" she screeched at him, her face flushing red under the tan while madness glinted in her dark eyes.

"Leave her alone, Bemiji!" ordered Targoutai. "Young falcons like this don't mate with old crows like you! I'll give you a horse for her."

"Is the daughter of Besoutchei to be bartered like a cow?" Cholan snapped. "Give *me* a horse and let me return to my father who will pay a heavy ransom for me."

"Nay, beauteous one, that I cannot do, now that I have laid eyes on you." He took hold of her with both hands,

lifting her to his horse. He sprang up behind her and encircled her in his arms. "Come, O daughter of the Keraits, such loveliness shall not be thrown away to herdsmen nor shall it be lost in grinding toil. You shall have an honored place among my women."

As they rode back to the Taijiut camp, Cholan faced ahead with stony glance; her heart ached with longing for Kisil and the memory of last night came flooding over her as Targoutai whispered in her ear, "Give me a son to inherit my wealth and title and I will cherish you above all other women."

When they arrived at the khan's pavilion her eyes darted despairingly over the women assembled to watch her arrival. "Jhotuz!" she called desperately. Some of the women laughed as she tried to struggle from Targoutai's arms when he lifted her down. "Where is Jhotuz?" she demanded of Targoutai. "I must see her!"

But Jhotuz was not to be seen. The iron hand of Targoutai propelled her before him. The felt curtain, dropped by unseen hands, shut out the sunlight, but not the mocking laughter of the women.

5

KISIL AND MARYAM

IT WAS THE tenth day after the raid before Kisil came to his senses. He first became conscious of the ceaseless throbbing of a drum. He opened his eyes. It seemed as if he were swimming under water; everything was diffused, blurred almost beyond recognition. Memory eluded him. He closed his eyes.

When next he awoke his eyes fastened on a wooden cross which swung and jolted over his head. It puzzled him. It was not the *natagai,* the usual felt image that was the presiding deity of a nomad yurt. Then he remembered it was a Christian emblem made by Maryam. This must be her yurt! By the jolting he judged the yurt was on a wagon—a wagon that moved slowly over the grass-covered plain.

He tried to move and found his ribs so tightly bound that

he could hardly breathe. His groping fingers plucked at sheepskin and fur. With great effort he got one hand outside the coverings. Carefully he explored his face with his fingertips. A swathing of silk was tied round his head. He picked at it, trying to remember.

Then memory came back like the flood of a river when an ice jam breaks. He tried to shout and marveled that his voice seemed barely above a whisper. The wagon jolted to a stop.

A skinny hand, more like a vulture's claw, opened the tent. Kisil saw fierce, sunken eyes staring at him from a wizened shriveled face. Elk horns crowned the matted locks of yak and human hair that hung in filthy festoons across the shoulders. The shaman stooped and entered the tent. A collar of iron bells hung around his waist. At every movement the bells clanged discordantly. When the shaman saw the light of understanding in Kisil's wondering eyes, he started a chant in a cracked and wheezy voice.

"Great is my medicine," he croaked. "Great is my magic! The evil *kelet* has been driven out, the noble spirit has returned!"

A woman's voice exclaimed outside and as the tent opening was flung back over the top a woman's slender figure was silhouetted against the blaze of daylight.

"Cholan!" Kisil whispered, hope burgeoning in his heart.

"It isn't Cholan, Kisil. It's Maryam." The voice had a sadness in it which contrasted sharply with the glad cry that had burst from her when she realized he was at last conscious. "Kisil! You've come back, my son, my son!"

"Cholan?" he asked.

Maryam shook her head. "She's away . . . but she'll be back. No more talking now!"

"Besoutchei?" he whispered.

Placing finger to lip, Maryam shook her head in admonition.

When he was strong enough to bear the news she told him that both Cholan and Babor had been taken, though she tinctured the bitter draught with the sweeter news that one of his mares had returned the next day and foaled.

"Another Babor, I think!" she said to encourage him.

"Another Babor?" Kisil groaned. "Yes, but where can I get another Cholan?"

Maryam raised her eyebrows in quiet astonishment.

Bit by bit, as the days passed, Kisil learned what had happened. He was deeply grieved to learn that Besoutchei had been slain. Grieved, too, that the clan had split up, the older sons taking their cattle and families to seek protection from the lord of some stronger Kerait clan and swear allegiance to him. Drombo was now the *tekine*, inheriting the pastures and Besoutchei's four wives—whom his mother now ruled with severity—and little else. They were only sheep and cattle herders now; most of the horses had been stolen in the raid.

"Without horses, how are the men going to hunt antelope?" Maryam asked sadly.

But Kisil wasn't thinking about hunting. *Of course—Drombo was now the head of the clan!* Kisil tried to sit up, feeling a strange reluctance that his friend Drombo should inherit Maryam along with other leftovers.

"Drombo! Where is he? Has he—?" Kisil looked at Maryam's face. "Has that boy—?"

Maryam shook her head. "He isn't such a boy. After all, there is only one year between you. I was carrying Cholan when the old wife gave birth to him." She laughed bitterly. "You know the law of the steppes. I was bought by Besoutchei in the slave market, so now I am a possession of Drombo's like any horse or cow, regardless of the fact that he is a youth and I—probably by his standards—an old woman!" She patted his hand. "There, don't worry about me! Drombo is still away tracking that raiding party, and I am sure when he comes back he will find plenty to do without bothering about his father's old shoes!" Her mood changed. Looking at Kisil intently, she asked abruptly, "Kisil, that night of the raid—did you and Cholan—?"

Kisil nodded rather shamefacedly. "I don't know what came over me. It was the thought of losing her to Sengun, I suppose," he added lamely.

"I am not surprised. I knew Cholan better than she knew herself."

"We knew you would have given us your blessing, but we thought it best if you could deny all knowledge of our plans. We came back for food and weapons, and, above all, for spare horses."

"And now we've both lost her. We shall never see her again!" Control suddenly snapped and her pent-up grief burst in full flood.

Dismayed, Kisil struggled to his feet and placed his arm around the shoulder of the sobbing Maryam. "I'll get her back, Little Mother," he blurted, goaded by her grief. "You surely do not think that I am going to let any man steal my wife—and my horse!"

The confident ring in his voice made Maryam look up. She rubbed away her tears with the back of her hand. "You would risk your life for her?" she asked wonderingly.

"For her and Babor!" He laughed. "How to find them—that's the riddle. But find them I will!"

When Drombo rode in the next day he was tired and dispirited. "They were a Taijiut horde, Kisil. They had come to raid caravans."

"Did you see Cholan—or Babor?"

Drombo shook his head. "No. I couldn't get near the main horde. As it was, I barely missed capture by one of their hunting parties. We'll never see our horses again, Kisil."

But Maryam chided Drombo for his despondency. Enthusiastically she told the boy that Kisil had promised to go after Cholan as soon as he had regained his strength.

"It's hopeless, Kisil—don't try it," Drombo advised. "My mother—"

"Never mind what your mother says." Maryam clutched at Drombo's sleeve. "If this family is going to eat, you had better get out and hunt—hunt as you have never hunted before!" Drombo grinned to Kisil as Maryam pushed him out of the tent.

She certainly did not afford him the respect due to the *tekine,* Kisil thought with amusement.

6

KISIL AND TATENGRI

AS KISIL GAINED in strength he was much in the company of the ancient shaman who had fastened like a leach on the remnants of the clan.

Both Kisil and Tatengri were lonely, for now both were shunned. With the exception of Maryam, none cared to approach the sick man's tent, and even Drombo made his hunting sufficient excuse to stay away. Kisil resented this apparent ostracism, though he knew it was nomad custom. The shaman was used to being shunned. The families feared Tatengri almost as much as they feared the evil spirits over which he had control, but they were afraid to turn him away.

Maryam told Kisil that Tatengri had ambled into their camp the morning after the raid when all was in confusion. The advent of such a repulsive-looking creature had seemed almost like another calamity to the superstitious tribesmen. Blandly Tatengri stated that his spirits had sent him to look after a young red cockerel that had been hurt—the spirits wanted this boy cured. He ferreted out Kisil where he lay in Maryam's tent, then calmly set up his yurt alongside. His yak, on which he had ridden into camp surrounded by all his worldly possessions, he tethered on a long rope. The clan gave both yurt and yak a wide berth; by the next morning the two tents stood in isolation.

Maryam, in defiance of custom, continued to nurse Kisil to the best of her ability, in spite of the shaman's shrill protests that his spirits did not like women. But Maryam laughingly brushed his protests aside and, through her complete indifference to the shaman's threats, Kisil lost much of his instinctive fear of the sorcerer. In fact as the days went by Kisil derived much amusement and gratification from the continued struggle between these two contenders over his welfare.

In spite of these rebuffs, Tatengri had taken a strong liking to Kisil and cunningly contrived to influence his outlook on

life and the world of spirits. Hour by hour he sat talking to the youth about his ancient practice. Day after day, as Kisil sat in the warm sunshine and rejoiced to feel his strength returning, he absorbed, along with the sunshine, much of the old man's knowledge of roots and herbs. At every opportunity Tatengri pleaded and cajoled for Kisil to follow the road of the spirits.

"You would make a good talker to the spirits, my son," he insinuated on one particularly hot afternoon.

"Do you suggest I become a shaman, O Father of Wisdom?"

"I do—and my spirits think likewise."

"Wisdom is like wind and water to me—I can't grasp it." Kisil laughed.

"A good shaman is healer as well as priest, soothsayer as well as sorcerer. There is much to learn for one who would follow the Ancient Ways, and not to everyone who seeks is this Wisdom given."

"And from whom would I learn this lore?" Kisil asked. "From you?" There was a tinge of sarcasm in his voice.

The old man wriggled on his haunches to get closer to Kisil's ear. "Some of it from me—if there is time," he admitted, "but most from those mightier than I, to whom I, though more skilled than many, am but a novice!" He sat back to watch the effect of his words on Kisil's face; then, feeling encouraged, he leaned forward and went on with an air of great secrecy: "In certain mountains, whose peaks are never trodden by the common herd, are monasteries where the earnest searcher after Truth may learn—"

"—a lot of fables, I warrant!" Kisil laughed loudly. "No, good father, the road of your spirits is not for me. I shall travel the road of the bow and spear, methinks, hiring myself to some lord as a fighter. How else can a *kazak*, set adrift like me, acquire cattle and women?"

Tatengri sighed his disappointment. "You can see no farther than the end of your spear—and not so far as that once it has left your hand. Young bulls like you want to arch their tails and rush up the mountains to bellow in the upper pastures where the heifers graze! *Eya! Eya!*" he wailed. "I once was a bull and pawed the ground and nosed around the

heifers' flanks. Now I'm nothing but a worn-out ox. But I warn you, Kisil, that the time of Youth is short and the time of Age is long, but longer still is the time your *sulde* will spend in the Spirit World when your wanderings on earth are over for this time. For your spirit's sake I urge you not to kill but seek rather to cure!" He sighed prodigiously and sat with palms open on his knee in silent meditation.

A distant peal of thunder roused him. He scrambled to his feet and, going outside, let down the felt wall and tightened the ropes that bound the tent. Kisil exclaimed in surprise when the shaman fastened the roll of felt at the entrance. The shaft of light from the smoke hole only half illumined the grimy interior.

Tatengri sat back on his haunches in front of Kisil and stared. "My spirit longs to commune with yours and show you somewhat of that at which you scoff!"

His hands made strange passes in front of Kisil's face while his eyes, now bright and menacing like a serpent's, peered into Kisil's with fierce intent. At first uneasy, Kisil tried to shake off the glance; then he felt he was bereft of will-power; now frightened, he found himself unable to move.

"Come," said Tatengri. "Let us see what lies along your path."

Completely fascinated, Kisil watched the shaman cover the smoke hole. Then Tatengri went to the opposite side of the hearth and blew on the embers of the smoldering dung fire. He took a few twigs of tamarisk and thorn and made the fire blaze into flame. Into this glow he thrust the clean shoulder blade of a sheep. He then reached for a sharp knife at his girdle and, coming to Kisil's side, he seized the youth's fingers and pared off a thin crescent of fingernail. Then he pulled out Kisil's braids and cut off a lock of hair. From a leather pouch Tatengri took some herbs and sprinkled them on the fire. His thin lips muttered some incantation unintelligible to his victim. He threw the nail paring and the lock of hair into the fire and, leaning over, breathed deeply of the fumes.

Kisil's brain reeled, spinning faster and faster like a wheel on its axis. He choked as the yurt seemed to dissolve; a

hand seized his wrist as a mighty rush of wind bore him from the earth into the bitter cold of the Everlasting Sky!

The spirit of his father rushed to meet him. "Bogorji, my son!" the spirit wailed.

"Not Bogorji, O spirit, but Kisil the *kazak*."

He was alone now. He spiraled up and up toward the warmth of the sun, as if he knew by instinct that some great happiness awaited him there. But now a tumultuous cloud mass blotted out the sun. He plunged into the storm. Ice and snow beat down his pinions; he felt himself falling . . . down . . . down. . . .

He awakened while still struggling to keep in the air, and unbelievably found himself safely in the yurt, the smoke hole opened, the air cleared. The shaman sat on the opposite side of the fire, his bony fingers tracing black lines on the calcined shoulder blade. He looked up and smiled into Kisil's wondering eyes. He lifted up the shoulder blade. "Well, what did you see—you who scoff at Truth?"

Kisil placed hand to forehead, shutting his eyes to try to gather his wits. "It is all so vague."

Tatengri laughed dryly. "Then it is well that my spirit communed with Bogdo of the Everlasting Sky about your future while your spirit was skimming the mountaintops. See, here I have it recorded on this bone." He showed the tracings to Kisil and there was a touch of awe in Tatengri's voice. "Strange, indeed, is your path, Kisil the *kazak*—to whom men will one day add another title. Merchant and warrior, saint and counselor strive in you. Sometimes one, sometimes the other will predominate—as they have done in your past lives—though in this life your greatest victories will be won with your head—not the sword or spear."

In spite of himself, Kisil was deeply impressed. He leaned forward the better to catch Tatengri's mutterings. "Yes, Father of Wisdom, go on!"

"Two sons I see who become greater than their fathers," the shaman resumed. "One of them is your son; you, who hunger for glory, will achieve it through your son. The other son calls you not father, but brother. I see him struggling like a little tree caught in the cleft of a rock. You shelter

this tree from evil men who come to cut it down. You save it from their knives, though sore beset. . . ."

Tatengri rubbed his chin while he concentrated on the bone.

"Your lines are blurred and nearly end, they grow so faint . . . women . . . ah!—one kills for you and others wind their arms about your neck." He went on excitedly: "Your line grows stronger. The tree and you grow side by side, but now you're in its shade. Its roots suck the moisture from all the trees around but most of all from you. Again great danger threatens. A man rides on a white horse, ah!—" He broke off and a look of blank surprise spread over his features. He placed his hand over his eyes.

"What is it?" Kisil asked, white-faced.

"I cannot see! I cannot see! My sight has left me." The sorcerer dropped the shoulder blade; his body twitched, and Kisil thought him in a trance. After a little while he became calmer; turning his head to where Kisil sat, he said, "I cannot see you, Kisil, but my inward sight grows stronger. Now I tell you that after great dangers you will find Peace."

Sitting there in a complete daze, Kisil asked in a shaking voice, "Does your vision tell you more?"

"The spirits!" Tatengri whispered, holding up an arresting hand as though bidding Kisil to listen. "Death beats its wings."

The air felt cold inside the tent. Kisil shivered. He saw Tatengri reach toward his sword and cymbal; his hand groped near them. Kisil reached over and pushed them into the shaman's hand. Tatengri sat still as though gathering his strength. Then his scream shattered the silence. *"Ai-hi!"* He sprang to his feet; sword clashed against cymbal. "The tree covers the earth. It reaches up into the sky and the shade from its branches means death and destruction to countless living creatures. *Ai-hi!* I see Turk and Mongol mingling to sweep in a blood-red tide over the earth."

Another scream and then he dashed out of the tent and started dancing furiously.

Kisil got up and went outside the tent. The sorcerer was dancing as he had never seen him dance before. He understood by the actions that Tatengri was fighting unseen spirits.

He screamed of battles yet to be fought. Sword clanged on cymbal; foot stamped on earth as he lunged and thrust. Suddenly he collapsed in a heap.

His body lay strangely still. Kisil hurried to the shaman's side. Tatengri, the great Talker to the Spirits, was dead.

7

THE PLAN

THE CREAKING CARTS moved on. They drifted slowly, as sheep and cattle grazed, across the sea of grass, leaving the body of Tatengri lying where he died. His spirit, having no further use for this empty shell, would pay no heed to the dog that mangled the poor flesh, to the wolf that crunched the bones. Soon these shattered fragments of humanity would mingle with the whitened bone litter of countless generations —mute evidence that here death was of little account.

Life was like these wheels, Kisil thought, ever creaking but ever turning . . . on and on . . . and on. With unseeing eyes fixed on the wheels of the wagon in front of him, he kept turning the events of yesterday over and over in his mind. He had been more than shaken by Tatengri's sudden death.

Kisil reached for the shaman's sword slung at his back. It seemed such an ordinary weapon, he thought. . . . Of course the "magic" of the sword lay in the personality of its wielder! Tatengri had spoken of a white horse. But Babor was black . . . and Babor . . .

"Why don't you grease that wheel, Kisil? How can you ride there and listen to that infernal *squeak-squeak?*"

Kisil shook himself out of his dream as Drombo ranged alongside him. "My thoughts were far away," he said with a smile.

It was Kisil's first day on horseback. Mindful of Maryam's admonitions, he was content to walk the mare beside the carts, to think and not to race ahead. Kisil chafed at the wide strappings of soft deerhide that Maryam insisted must still stay bound. He didn't like the restraint; he wanted free-

dom; above all he fumed and fretted at the delay in setting out after Cholan. "Only a few more days," Maryam had begged.

"Have you thought any more about the plan?" Drombo asked.

Kisil nodded absent-mindedly. . . .

Yesterday, at his shouts, Drombo had come running over to him. Kisil pointed to Tatengri's body. In hurried words he had told Drombo of the strange death of the shaman.

Drombo had listened spellbound, looking at Kisil with something approaching awe. "No wonder you tremble, Kisil. Let us go!" The boy looked about him with apprehension.

Kisil had stooped down to take the sword and cymbal from the stiffening fingers. The plan came to him as he stood over Tatengri's body. "I am taking these, Drombo. They may prove useful. A plan has just come to me. . . . I think Tatengri's spirit has just whispered in my ear!" He stood thoughtful for a moment; then, as if in answer to instruction, he nodded. *"Tsa, tsa!* I think I understand. The plan is good!"

He had turned to the wondering Drombo with a serious face. "Behold in me the successor to Tatengri! I've fallen heir to his goods—so his spirit tells me! The yak, his tent and all that therein lies is mine—if you have no objection?"

"Objection?" Drombo had shivered. "I don't know how you can touch the things."

So they had gathered up the old man's effects, the bags of roots and herbs, the elk-horn headdress, the bells, the magic whip bound with snakeskin, the shining sword and brass cymbal. Kisil noticed, on close inspection, a queer, softly golden luster emanating from the sword.

"I envy you, Kisil, the opportunity you've had to learn his tricks," Drombo said while they sorted things out. He had gingerly picked up the sword. "Do you think this sword really has magic, Kisil?"

Kisil had shaken his head. "I agree with Maryam that much of a shaman's magic lies in the fear he instills in our minds by his very appearance. Since I had spent so much time with him I no longer feared him— in fact I laughed at him when he kept trying to get me to follow his road of the spirits!"

"Yet," Drombo had suggested, "it took magic for him to make your spirit go galloping up into the sky with him."

"Magic? Perhaps—or some trick, some power he had in his eyes that put me to sleep. I am still weak and I think my imagination did the rest."

"You say his spirit has whispered to you of a plan?" Drombo had asked. . . .

"Kisil! Wake up! Has that squeaking wheel lulled you to sleep?" Drombo's voice slashed through Kisil's thoughts.

"While the wheel squeaked, Drombo, I have been going over the plan in my mind."

"Does your plan include me, Kisil? I want to come with you!"

"You?" Kisil asked in feigned surprise, though all along he had hoped the suggestion would come. *"You* want to come on this perilous adventure? But you are the *tekine!"*

Drombo laughed. "There is precious little left for me to guard. My old mother will keep a firm grip on things."

"I hoped you would come with me. We could travel safely, anywhere and everywhere, if we went disguised as a shaman and his novice! With your skill at drumming and my smattering of shaman tricks, we ought to be able to deceive and overawe any of the steppe folks!"

"Drombo the shaman!" The boy slapped his thighs and laughed heartily. "What a head you have on your shoulders, Kisil! The idea is good. When do we start? Tomorrow?"

So a few days later Kisil, attired in a copy of Tatengri's greasy garb and mounted on his mare, with Drombo, in a getup of his own imagining, riding on the yak which carried also the rolled-up yurt, set out with their scanty provisions and the shaman's "bag of tricks," as Drombo called them.

"I've brought along that sack of black powder too," he told Kisil. "That is really magic—I tried some of it when you lay sick!"

"May there be a peaceful road opened to you!" Maryam whispered as Kisil bade her farewell. "I shall pray that you both come back safely with Cholan."

For many moons—how many Kisil lost count—they wan-

dered back and forth across the steppes, yet ever bearing northward. They mingled with tribes of whom they had never heard, meeting all questions with glib tongue and nimble wit. They met those whose speech they scarce could understand—queer mixtures of old Turkish and Tonguz, Mongol and northern Chinese. They acquired skill in these tongues, and everywhere Tatengri's relics and the aura of shamanism protected them from man's ill will.

Up through the country of the Mergueds they pressed, making veiled inquiry of shepherds on the grassy plateaus or herdsmen in lush valleys. They thought they must be near the land of the Reindeer people when, at last, they found themselves in Taijiut territory. There the first icy breath from the Land-of-always-ice struck them. Reluctantly they halted; despondently they turned south.

One day they stopped to eat at the dung fire of a shepherd who grumbled that his lord was delaying the clan's departure south until his child was born.

"The main horde has passed south. He's afraid to move the woman, so they say. She's a Kerait—puny little thing, the lord's fifth wife. He hopes she will give him a son as his other wives can only produce daughters!" The old man chuckled.

"I must see this chief," Kisil said. "I am a great shaman," he chanted. "I have mighty medicine that can always produce sons!"

Drombo thumped vigorously in agreement.

8

THE RESCUE

THE OPEN DOOR of the chieftain's pavilion faced south overlooking a lake. It was the largest tent that Kisil had ever seen. Over the round framework of birch saplings the layers of felt were securely bound with ropes of hide. The outer surface had been whitened with powdered chalk and then daubed with colors in a rude design.

When Kisil and Drombo, following the shepherd's direc-

tions, had wandered into the Taijiut main encampment, they had audaciously camped in front of this pavilion, ostensibly to partake of the evening meal. Both were tense, hoping the search was at an end.

The chieftain had approached them.

"Peace, blessing," Kisil murmured. "You are late, lord, in seeking the lower valleys."

"Good health to you," the chieftain replied. "Yes—" he laughed—"but the snow is also late and we have taken advantage of its lateness to linger a while in the upper pastures. But from whence come you, shaman?"

Kisil's head inclined toward a glacier-clad peak. "The spirits summoned us there and, I think, held up the snow until their servants had descended safely to go their peaceful ways." Kisil turned his back unconcernedly. The chieftain returned to his pavilion. Kisil hurriedly whispered a half-formed plan to Drombo. Then he sank to the ground, staring into nothingness, while Drombo carried out his instructions for rearranging the loads of horse and yak.

From where he sat Kisil could see that the chieftain faced the entrance, his wives sitting on dressed hides at his feet. Servants carried in a dish of steaming mutton and skin bags of fermented mare's milk for the evening meal, the chief meal of the day. The Taijiut clapped his hands and gave an order to a servant who then went to the tent at the end of the household row. A woman came out of the tent, walking in front of the servant to the master's pavilion. Kisil's heart jumped.

The woman, heavy with child, was Cholan! He had found them!

Them. For surely where Cholan was he would find Babor. It was the horse he must get first.

Where was Babor?

He could see that the occupants of the tent were watching this strange shaman with apprehensive eyes. Cholan was eating listlessly; evidently she hadn't recognized them. Kisil turned his head and muttered quietly to Drombo who nodded in understanding. Drombo, unnoticed by anyone, put his hand in a leather sack he carried under his sheepskin coat. He

threw a handful of black powder onto the nearest fire. There was a spurt of blue flame. Then a puff of black smoke spread like a sickly fungus over the fire.

With a loud shout Kisil jumped to his feet in pretended alarm. His shout terrified the occupants of the pavilion. Kisil snatched his sword and cymbal from the ground and clashed them together. Leaping into the air, he started to dance furiously. Drombo pounded the drum in steady cadence as Kisil whirled and thrust at the air.

"The evil spirits gather over this yurt!" Kisil screamed, as he gyrated in pretended combat with the unseen spirits.

The chieftain had risen to his feet in nervous alarm, but remained as if rooted to the spot. The women screamed and sank back in terror. Even Cholan—though it was obvious that she recognized them—crouched as close to the ground as her heavily burdened body allowed. Her eyes were staring in frightened recognition.

"Hi-yah! Hi-yah!" Kisil shouted. Perspiration started streaming down his face; his movements became faster and faster as Drombo's accompaniment took on a satanic tempo. In simulated frenzy Kisil stamped the ground, sucking in great gulps of air between his wild yells. Tribesmen came running up as the servants fell back in fear. Kisil was now dancing with his back to the tent as though he were defending the entrance. He flung up his arm and dropped to one knee as if he had been beaten down. Then, leaping up again, he whirled into the tent after the supposed intruding spirit.

The women screamed afresh as he stabbed at walls and floor. Even the chieftain sank back on his bed, his hand closing and opening on his sword hilt, his face blanched, his eyes twisting to follow Kisil's movements.

Cholan was plainly terrified. Uncertainty and fear stood starkly in her eyes. With an unearthly yell Kisil leaped high in the air and then thrust his sword point within a hair's-breadth of her throat.

Cholan fainted.

With a final clash of sword on cymbal Kisil dropped to the ground. He breathed in great gasps, the sweat poured from him and his muscles moved convulsively.

"Great lord," he panted, "the evil spirit has entered this woman." His finger pointed to Cholan. "It will take great magic to drive it out. I, and only I, can save the *son* this woman carries in her womb!"

By this time excited men, women and children had gathered in a large semicircle in front of the tent. Now their voices broke out excitedly as women carried the unconscious Cholan to her tent.

The chieftain plucked at the scanty hairs on his chin with trembling hands. His voice quavered. "Can you, great Talker-to-the-Spirits, drive out this evil spirit? Can you save my son?" he shouted hoarsely.

Kisil rose as if in a trance. The drum pounded monotonously with a rhythmic beat that inflamed the senses. With eyes starting out of his head, Kisil appeared to be gazing into the infinite. The sweat poured down his upturned face. Tense with effort, he slowly raised Tatengri's sword. Swaying on his feet, he held that flat blade against his forehead as though it inspired him. The spectators held their breath.

Again the sword seemed to give off a strange golden luster, perhaps a reflection of the firelight.

"The chief," Kisil intoned hoarsely, "has a great stallion in his herd—a stallion sired by the spirit of lightning in the rocky gullies of the *Kara Agola!* Black is the stallion's color. Black is his evil spirit! It is the evil spirit in this stallion," Kisil singsonged, "that has entered this woman. Evil will it do the *kobegun* she carries!"

"Aüe!" The groan went up from the bystanders in a swelling clamor that was hushed as Kisil went on: "Yet this evil can be averted! Let an altar be quickly built in yon open space before this woman's tent." Kisil pointed to a spot on the margin of the lake. "Let two great fires be lighted."

His voice thickened as he continued his chant. "Let the black stallion be bridled and held by two fearless men in front of the altar."

He paused in deep thought. Then he cried, "Let the woman be brought and laid on the ground before the altar."

His voice rose to an inspired scream as the drumbeat quickened. "I will send my spirit galloping up to the Sky to

summon aid from Bogdo, the Everlasting One! By this aid will I cast out the evil spirit from this woman, sending it back to the demon horse from whence it came!"

He flourished Tatengri's sword dramatically. A clap of thunder drowned out momentarily the steady throb of drum.

"*Aai-hi! Aai-hi!*" Kisil screamed. "I see a son of this Taijiut lord riding down the red fires of the sky, leading his people to mighty victories! I see the plains darkened with the herds of this great prince. I see his yurts thronged with stalwart sons. *Aai-hi-i-i!*" The scream died in his throat. He swayed on his feet, then dropped to the floor in a writhing heap.

They watched silently as Drombo snatched a wineskin and ran to kneel beside the convulsive figure. As Drombo raised the leather sack to Kisil's lips, the latter half-raised an eyelid, and, seeing it was Drombo, the eye twitched perceptibly.

As if he were awakening from a dream, Kisil yawned and stretched. When another bolt of lightning split the sky he rose to his feet.

"Come, lord, the spirit of lightning gathers to aid this evil spirit, its son. There is not a moment to lose!"

A roar of thunder spurred the chieftain to action and he gave orders that Kisil's instructions were to be instantly obeyed.

While the makeshift altar was quickly raised and fires were built up by the frightened servants, Kisil spoke rapidly to Drombo. The threatening storm would soon burst in full fury.

Ignoring the chieftain, Kisil stalked majestically to Cholan's tent. He drew a mystic sign with his fingers on the felt and muttered some gibberish as he entered.

"Go!" he said to the frightened women attending Cholan. "I would pray with this stricken creature, alone!"

Cholan had recovered consciousness and shrank back as he knelt beside her. At his reassuring smile she gazed at him wonderingly. "Kisil," she whispered.

He patted her hand. "Don't be afraid, Cholan," he whispered. "Has he got Babor?"

Cholan nodded dumbly, disappointment showing in her eyes.

He saw the look. "I've come for *you,* Cholan," he declared ardently, "but we depend on Babor—our lives are at stake if we fail. You will come?" The relief in her face was his answer. "Then do as I say, and all will be well." In a few hurried words he told her of his plan.

A quick step sounded outside. Cholan nodded, closing her eyes in feigned unconsciousness. When someone entered the tent behind him, Kisil was rocking backward and forward on his knees. His eyes were closed, his hands waved above her head, his lips muttered incantations in sibilant whispers. Whoever had entered remained silent behind him.

Presently Kisil heard the shrill neigh of a stallion and the answering whinny of his mare. Let it be Babor! Great Spirit loved by Maryam, it must be Babor! he prayed anxiously. Outside, the drum had started to beat as a signal that all was ready. He rose to his feet and saw the chieftain standing behind him.

"The devil has hold of your son. We must hurry!" Kisil exclaimed. "Now call her women that she may be carried outside and placed in front of the altar!"

After Cholan had been carried out he waited a moment before emerging from the tent. He thrust the felt aside.

It was Babor!

In the dancing light of the fires, Kisil saw the stallion thrashing the air with his hoofs as two grooms tried to hold him down. With a quick glance round Kisil noted that Drombo had carried out his instructions. A fire on each side of the altar blazed in the gathering darkness. Beside the altar in the direction of which lay their escape, Drombo sat quietly drumming. Behind him stood the mare, ready for a journey, the reins from her bridle securely tied around Drombo's waist. The yak lay contentedly chewing, tethered on the opposite side and forming a partial barrier to keep back the onlookers.

On the altar lay the elk headdress between the sword and cymbal, Tatengri's magic whip and two small leather pouches. Kisil's mouth tightened as he saw them. He watched silently as Cholan's litter was placed on the ground. She lay with eyes closed, the only movement being the rise and fall

of her breathing. Babor whinnied in recognition and tried to approach her.

Kisil pressed his felt hat tightly to his head. The long strands of yak hair hung grotesquely around his shoulders. Everything seemed ready. Kisil nodded. Drombo changed the beat.

Slowly Kisil raised his arms, his upturned face searching the heavens. A fork of lightning zigzagged to earth. The excited chatter stilled to an expectant hush. Kisil took a deep breath.

As the thunder pealed Kisil screamed at the top of his voice. Shaking his clenched fists at the heavy clouds, he began a frenzied dance toward the altar. Carefully he noticed the position of everything and everyone.

With a swift movement he jammed the elk-horn headpiece over his felt hat and grasped the magic whip. He made one full circle, his brain alert. The stage was set. The chieftain sat in the entrance of Cholan's tent. A spear was in his hand. The women feeding the fires had disappeared. Kisil felt the first drop of rain on his face and knew that he hadn't much time.

With appropriate gestures Kisil laid the magic whip in a semicircle in front of the chieftain's feet. He hoped it would prove a superstitious barrier not easily leaped over. He must now keep close to Cholan and Babor.

He whirled to the altar and snatched up sword and cymbal. But he kept his eyes on Babor all the time. Cholan had not moved, but her eyes followed Kisil's movements as he brandished the sword over her head. Now he had it between his teeth. Now he flung it in the air.

Bong! The cymbal struck the ground. With a slash of the sword Kisil tore off the elk horns and snatched up the leather bags.

"Now!" he shouted.

With the sword between his teeth he dashed to Babor's side, snatched the reins that fell from the hands of the fleeing grooms. As Babor plunged headlong at the crowd, Kisil vaulted onto his back. He pulled the stallion round instantly. Cholan was on her feet. The drum had stopped. The excited

tribesmen pressed closer. As he galloped round the narrowing circle, he threw one of the bags of powder deep into the red-hot glow of the nearest fire The blue-green flash of the explosion hurled the fire in all directions. Those standing near swayed like reeds. Some fell to the ground in their terror.

Kisil felt a blast of hot air at the back of his neck as he seized Cholan's hand. But Cholan's heavy body impeded her spring; her weight nearly pulled him off. Drombo, now astride the mare, dashed to Cholan's side and swept her up behind Kisil.

The hiss of thrown spears was lost in the howl of the wind. Kisil flinched as a shaft whizzed within a hairsbreadth of his face. He saw Drombo fall and heard the agonized squeal of the mare. As he felt Cholan's arm tighten on his waist, he swung the stallion round. By a lightning flash he saw Drombo's body pinned to the ground by spears. He saw the mare's white, rolling eyeballs—saw the spear sticking in her belly—saw her frantic hoofs strike down the Taijiut chief who had stabbed her—heard her shrill scream as she rolled over.

With a hand that trembled with fury, Kisil threw the remaining bag of powder into the other fire. In a burst of flame the red-hot embers were flung among the few Taijiuts who had not fled. The screams were lost in a monstrous clap of thunder. A torrent of rain shut them from view like a dropped curtain. For a split second he hesitated.

"Drombo!" he shouted.

There was no answering call.

With a maniacal laugh Kisil plunged into the night.

9

JHOTUZ

JHOTUZ, HEARING the excitement outside Targoutai's pavilion, had run up with other curious women to see what the noise of clanging bells and cymbal portended.

She saw the grotesque figure of a shaman gyrating in frenzy and, in spite of his dirty bedraggled appearance and the

witchlike locks of hair that all but obscured his face, she recognized him.

It was Kisil! A glance at the drummer confirmed her recognition. That round-faced pounding demon of energy was Drombo.

Why in the name of Eblis did Kisil have to come now? She and Cholan had already planned to escape as soon as Cholan's child was born. They had found a cave in a rocky gorge shunned by these superstitious Taijiut *haramzada*. They had provisioned it, bit by bit, for a lengthy stay before escaping southward in the spring. Kisil would probably spoil everything now, Shaitan take it! They might all lose their lives. Of course she was going to follow them! She was more than tired of being a plaything for the Taijiuts. Even Targoutai . . .

"Faugh!" Jhotuz spat.

What was Kisil planning? Whatever it was, Cholan was going to need help—if not at the moment of escape—at least a few hours later. Her mind worked feverishly.

Keeping Cholan's need in mind, she quickly gathered a few necessities. With all eyes on the central stage, Jhotuz had no difficulty in stealing a pony and hiding with it in the shadows.

Notwithstanding her knowledge that Kisil was playing a part, she was not prepared for the blinding flash of fire as he threw something into the flames. Her knees so shook with terror that she forgot to mount the pony. Then the spears began to fly. Pity wrung her heart as she saw Drombo fall.

By the time Jhotuz had recovered her faculties and mounted, Kisil had disappeared into the downpour of rain. Drombo was either dead or dying, and the stricken mare was vainly striving to get to her feet. Jhotuz withdrew farther into the shadows. She would wait.

Targoutai called for men to follow him and set forth in pursuit of the fleeing Kisil. The boy had got a good start, Jhotuz thought with satisfaction, but fear for Cholan weighed heavily on her mind.

The last of the *kibitkas* had barely rumbled off into the darkness before Jhotuz was kneeling by Drombo's side. He still breathed and she could feel a faint pulse. The yak still

lay where Drombo had tethered it; the Taijiuts had not dared to touch the shaman's beast.

The rain stopped and the moon, low in the western sky, peered fitfully through the cloud wrack. It was bitterly cold and Jhotuz expected snow before morning. She eased off Drombo's coat and bandaged his wounds to the best of her ability with the bits of silk she had taken for Cholan. At the back of her mind was the thought of the cave. If only she could get Drombo there!

At the first streak of dawn Jhotuz was up, devising means to move the unconscious Drombo to the cave. With bits and pieces the Taijiuts had dropped, she fashioned a rude litter of poles that she hung between the horse and the yak. The yak, she noticed with satisfaction, was a cow—and still giving milk. By daylight she re-examined Drombo's wounds. One spear had gone through his shoulder, another had struck him in the back, between his ribs. His thick fur clothing had prevented the second spear from penetrating deeply, but he had lost a quantity of blood before she could get to him. She tried to convince herself that his pulse was stronger this morning, but he was still unconscious as she lifted him to place him in the rude litter. From Kisil's dead mare she took the saddle, the bridle and the small store of food and weapons.

That night it was a weary Jhotuz who finally lighted a fire in the sanctuary of her cave. She heated milk and tried to force it between the raving Drombo's lips.

"Kisil, Kisil!" he cried, struggling to get up from the bed she had made him.

Jhotuz lay down beside him, the better to control his frantic efforts. She called on Allah and all the gods she had ever heard of to spare this youth's life.

Drombo's delirium was lessening. As his cries for Kisil dropped to a mumble, she thought the fever was leaving him. Then a rattle in his throat made her sit up in terror. "Drombo!" she screamed, as if to call his spirit back.

Hot scalding tears salted her lips as she cradled the lifeless boy in her arms.

The gods had heard her prayer and laughed it to scorn.

10

THE BIRTH

DURING THE FIRST moments of their precipitous flight Cholan's thoughts and feelings were a mad jumble of confusion.

She felt exultant—yet fearful; joyous—yet heavy of heart. There had not been the opportunity to tell Kisil that her time was at hand. As her legs tried to grip the stallion's flanks her body was roughly jerked by the powerful thrust of Babor's haunches. Her numbed fingers gripped Kisil's streaming goatskin coat, while her numbed brain tried to sort out the fantastic events that had suddenly swept her like an avalanche from the security of a tent to the back of a storm-crazed stallion.

The brilliant flashes of a moment ago still dazzled her eyes. What she had seen by those flashes she would never forget. Never would she forget her last memory of Drombo. She had never had a chance to say one word of greeting— or farewell. Drombo, her brother, had given his life to rescue her. Yet soon both she and her unborn babe might be as dead as Drombo.

The rain slackened and then, as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped. It was freezingly cold and her mind, unconsciously groping ahead, feared snow before dawn. Cautiously she released the clutch of one hand and tried to part the wet hair from her face so that she might see. Her eyes were now growing used to the darkness. Kisil, she saw, still gripped the sword between his teeth; evidently he needed both hands to gain control of the maddened stallion. She wondered, for a moment, why he didn't drop the sword; then she realized it was their only weapon.

Weapons? Food? Without weapons how would they get food—how would they survive if they did succeed in escaping Targoutai?

A spasm of pain gripped her, forcing a scream from her lips. She rested her head against Kisil's back and clung to

him even more fiercely in an effort to bear the pain. She noticed, vaguely, patches of snow and remembered her last ride, nine moons ago, behind a man. That had been the night of her abduction. With her ankles tied beneath the horse, she had been forced to ride behind that old vulture Bemiji. Yet, she surmised, Bemiji might have treated her better than that ravening beast Targoutai. At first it had been a matter of consoling pride that she, a daughter of a chieftain, should at least be the spoils of one of equal birth, but his desire to breed a son had made him like one possessed. At times she had felt she was shut up with a madman, until at last he knew she was pregnant, whereupon he showed her every consideration.

Resolutely Cholan banished her fears and tried to exult in her escape. Kisil was taking her back to Maryam, her mother. Longing for the comfort of those loving arms brought tears to her eyes. She was far from her mother—far from any woman's kindly aid. Then stoutly she drove self-pity from her mind and, remembering what she could of childbirth lore, the girl tried to plan the sequence of events. She remembered the ewe and the lamb. That was the night that Kisil—

Another pain ripped a scream from her throat.

The stallion plunged on through the darkness unhindered by her cry. She thought Kisil must have a heart of stone, but saw he was fighting grimly to gain control of the maddened horse.

Her pains eased for the moment, but Kisil would soon have to stop—somewhere! She lifted her head and with a cautious hand tossed her wet hair over one shoulder. Were they being pursued? She gritted her teeth; she would hold out as long as possible.

The sky was clearing. She could see the stars and the moon, striving to break through the cloud barrier piled up westward by the gale. Kisil had taken the sword from between his teeth. He shouted something to her that was snatched unheard by a gust of wind.

"Kisil!" she shrieked as another pain racked her body. "Kisil, we must stop soon. My child—"

He turned his head, then pulled the horse down to a canter

and stopped. Kisil turned the horse round to face in the direction from which they had come.

"Kisil," she gasped, but he impatiently interrupted her.

"Listen!" he commanded. He listened intently. "I don't hear them. But they will follow us, especially if we continue south!" He thought for a moment. "We will turn west and circle round behind them."

"Kisil, my time is near, very near, I think."

He flung a leg over Babor's head and dropped to the ground. He took her clutching hands in his, but stopped her from sliding off the horse.

"Cholan! I did not realize—I have been very thoughtless. Why didn't you tell me? Why—?"

"I thought you would have noticed," she said, panting. "There wasn't time to tell you . . . and I wanted to come. If we are pursued . . . you must leave me . . . you mustn't risk your life . . . you have Babor!"

"Stay where you are. We'll manage." He patted her hands and bent down to feel the ground. "These pastures feel well grazed; sheep have just moved off them. Perhaps we shall find the shepherds," he comforted her. We must! he muttered to himself between clenched teeth. We need food and a bow.

"The birth pains have only just started . . . it will be a little while before . . ."

"Then move up. I'll ride behind and hold you." He sprang up behind Cholan.

A wave of pain engulfed her. As her fingers pinched his encircling arms he said commiseratingly, "We daren't stop here, Cholan. We must double back—we'll find those shepherds."

He turned the horse westward and they started off at an easy canter.

She was nearly unconscious when she felt herself lifted from Babor's back and laid down on the frozen grass. Kisil's hands were deftly loosening her garments. His voice had a ring of confidence that found an echo in her heart. The sky was getting lighter. She herself was lighter. She was floating . . . somewhere. A child's cry brought her back to earth.

When at last she had done all that had to be done, she observed sheep grazing around her. Kisil sat on his horse talking to a mounted shepherd. The crying babe wriggled next to her warm grease-covered skin under the rough woolen shirt and sheepskin coat.

She was happy—deliriously happy! She peeped at the tiny head between her breasts.

"Ready, Cholan? We must be moving." Kisil's smile was warm, but his glance was urgent. "This Taijiut shepherd says his carts are just ahead."

The shepherd reached down and helped Cholan, with her child at her breast, up behind Kisil. "Yes, they must be just over this rise," he said.

"We must get a lambskin when we reach their carts," Kisil said, "and somehow I must get a bow and arrows, if we are to survive. It's not the Taijiut wolves that I am afraid of now, Cholan. We must hunt to live, and unless we can get a lambskin I'm afraid the fangs of winter will seize your child and—"

"My child?" She laughed happily. "This redheaded son is yours! That Taijiut lord can breed only daughters! But I will give you sons—many sons—if that will please my lord!"

11

PURSUED

KISIL RECEIVED Cholan's information with mixed feelings. It had not occurred to him that he was the father of her child. His mind went back to the night of the festival when, in a moment of madness, he had taken Cholan.

He turned all this over in his mind as he rode in the direction the shepherd had pointed out. Babor went at an easy pace, slowly breasting the hill from which Kisil hoped to see the two-wheeled carts of the shepherds. Behind him Cholan gripped his coat. She sang to the naked newborn babe wriggling between her breasts, promising it a lambskin for its swaddling clothes when the brave lord, its father, caught up with the carts ahead.

Kisil rode silently, half listening to her nonsense while he puzzled out the information she had given him. He shook his head in doubt. Was it not, perhaps, just intuitive, feminine cunning on Cholan's part to hail him father of her child so quickly? Not that it would make any real difference to him whose child it was—he wasn't a khan whose princely sons would inherit pasturelands and herds. He was now only a nameless wanderer with no prospects of wealth. Both his mares were lost. He had only a stallion. Of course he did have Cholan! And she had promised him sons—"many sons," she had said—to inherit his flocks and herds!

Flocks and herds? Kisil shook his red head, realizing that such a dream was very much in the future. At present a wife and child only exposed him to increased hazard in the battle for existence that lay before him on this wintry *dabagan.*

Yet she had said the child was redheaded!

The Taijiut lord had been dark, very dark; Cholan's hair, too, was like the plumage of a raven!

As Kisil hadn't answered her, Cholan intuitively interpreted his thoughts. "I am glad that our son has red hair like yours, Kisil, else you might not believe that you are his sire!"

Kisil laughed. "Your father—that old Turk—might not have liked that. He called me a dog of a *Kurd,* if you remember."

"My father," her voice faltered, "is he . . .?"

"Yes," Kisil nodded. "Your father was slain that night by the Taijiuts. So was old Serang. Maryam was well when I left their tents. She and a shaman cured my wounds and brought back my spirit to my body." Kisil fingered the scar on his head. "The shaman, Tatengri," he reflected aloud, "prophesied great things for me." Kisil smacked his thigh. "Life is good! I have lost two mares but gained a wife and a son!"

As they topped the rise, they saw below them the slowly moving oxcarts drifting down toward the warmer valleys. Kisil surveyed the riders anxiously. From them he must get weapons—at least a bow and a few arrows. Yet he had nothing with which to barter, only the shaman's magic sword which he still gripped in his hand. The sword might be good

for war—not hunting. He must get a bow, even if he had to take it by force.

He saw the herdsmen straighten up as he cantered toward them. Then he suddenly realized they were not looking in his direction. Something to his left was engaging their attention.

Cholan screamed.

"Targoutai, Kisil—it's Targoutai!"

He turned his head. As he caught sight of the wolfskin-clad figure of the Taijiut chieftain, swiftly he wheeled Babor to the right, kicking at the stallion's flanks.

His quick glance had shown him a horde of riders racing across the slope to cut him off. He heard their shouts of derision as they settled down to the chase.

Targoutai! So that was the name of Cholan's abductor! Where had he heard it before?

While the stallion covered the ground with long strides, Kisil's mind was active. Alone on Babor he could never be caught, but he doubted if even Babor, under this double burden, could keep ahead throughout the long day until darkness came. If they could only stay ahead they might escape in the darkness.

"Cholan," he shouted, "watch them. Tell me if they gain on us. We must ease up—this is going to be a long chase!"

"If they get too close let me drop off!" Cholan shouted in his ear. "Targoutai won't harm me. I may find a chance to escape—later."

He shook his head. Drop Cholan and his son? Never! No Taijiut was going to claim his son—even if he were a lord! My son shall hear this epic of his birth sung around the campfires.

"They are spreading out," Cholan shouted. "Targoutai is well ahead and gaining on us. He's on Kadia. You don't know that mare—she's almost as speedy as Babor!"

How well Kisil knew what their tactics would be! To them this was another antelope hunt. They would try to pen him against some natural barrier—a river or a deep ravine. He gazed anxiously over this unknown terrain. Far off, a very father of mountains raised his hoary head above the snow-

covered ridges. Then, to his right, he saw fresh riders come galloping over a rise. They had planned well, he thought grimly. If he had delayed but a while longer they would have had him completely surrounded.

Targoutai! Now he remembered!

Yesukai, the Mongol overlord of these northern steppes, had once stolen a bride from Targoutai! Kisil laughed out loud.

"Does the approach of death so amuse you?" Cholan shouted indignantly.

"Targoutai is unlucky," Kisil shouted back. "This is the second bride he has had stolen from him!"

He remembered hearing it sung how Yulun, a famous Cathayan beauty whose mother had been cousin to the Emperor of the Kin, had been on her wedding ride to the ordu of her affianced lord when Yesukai had met the wedding procession. Seeing the beauty of the bride, the young khan had swept her up to make her his own. That must have been fifteen summers ago.

No wonder the dog is sticking to this chase, Kisil thought. Too many of his bones have been snatched from under his nose!

They pounded steadily on as the sun burst through the morning mist and mounted in the sky. Several times, with a burst of speed, he tried to outdistance the pursuit and change direction, but Targoutai kept him well covered, matching move for move. There was one consolation: while Cholan and her babe were at his back, Targoutai would hesitate to use his bow. Yet he might chance an arrow in an attempt to lame the stallion!

"Watch Targoutai," he shouted to Cholan. "We must increase our lead over him. He mustn't get within arrow flight of us!"

They approached a forest of larch and birch. The ground became rocky and broken. Stones flew from Babor's hoofs as they galloped through a dried-up watercourse. Kisil hoped that this was all the dreaded river would amount to, but as he slowed the horse to pick his way carefully among the boulders, he heard the unmistakable roar of a torrent ahead.

The trees now hid them from the pursuing pack, but Kisil heard their faint exultant shouts.

He rode carefully through the trees and underbrush, then suddenly came into the open on the edge of a high bank. Babor's hoofs plowed to a stop but a few inches from the rim. The earth broke off, tumbling with a roar into the river below. Babor backed away snorting. Quickly Kisil surveyed the scene. It was a big drop to the water. The river, pouring down through a steep precipitous cleft to his right, had gouged out a deep pool in the soft clay. Beyond the pool, before the river disappeared around the bend, the water spilled down shallow rapids. The bank opposite the rapids seemed low and marshy, with the bleached fangs of dead trees showing through snow patches.

There was no time to lose. Perhaps around the bend it might be easier. As he turned Babor's head, Kisil heard hoofs galloping through the undergrowth on his left. There was no way but straight ahead!

Cholan clutched his arm. "Kisil, we are trapped. Save yourself!" She moved as though to throw herself off.

"No!" he said. "They haven't got us yet. We can leap into this pool and swim across." He wheeled Babor away from the edge, then suddenly turned him.

"Hold tight!"

He clapped his heels to Babor's flanks and the horse bounded forward—only to stop dead at the brink. Another shower of earth and stones crashed into the pool. The stallion wheeled away from the treacherous edge.

Kisil took Babor back a few lengths. He looked once more in vain for an easier way across as the shouts of his pursuers came closer. "It's our only chance, Cholan."

Patting Babor's neck, Kisil spoke quietly to the trembling stallion, then turned him again to face the river.

Just as Kisil was about to spur the horse, an arrow whizzed through the trees, snapped off a branch and ricocheted from Babor's rump. With a shrill scream the horse shot forward like an arrow from a bow. For a split second he hesitated a few feet from the edge, then leaped far out over the pool.

As the water closed over his head, Kisil grasped Babor's

mane with both hands. They rose to the surface gasping and spluttering. Cholan was still clinging to Kisil's coat, but she was off the stallion's back. Kisil's legs clamped the horse's slippery hide in a viselike grip. His right hand, entwined in the black mane, still gripped the precious sword. With his free hand he clutched Cholan, trying to pull her struggling, clawing form across the horse's withers.

"Let go of my coat!" he yelled, jerking her up with her back toward him. She threw one leg over the horse's head and fell back against Kisil. The baby was lustily spluttering under her coat; Cholan clasped it with both hands as Babor's head went under water.

"Hold onto the mane!" Kisil shouted as he slid off over the horse's hindquarters. Babor's head came up choking, his ears laid back, the whites of his eyes showing his terror. But he thrust powerful forelegs through the water while Kisil, holding the long black tail and kicking lustily, felt himself dragged forward.

He glanced back, fearing a shower of arrows.

In the brief instant before they were swept round the bend, he saw Targoutai rush to the edge of the cliff above them. He saw the brink crumble from the thrust of the mare's forelegs, saw her stumble and fall sideways as the face of the cliff collapsed with a roar into the pool. He glimpsed Targoutai's outflung hands and heard the mare's shrill squeal as she hit the water with a resounding splash.

Now Babor was stumbling among the rocks of the shallow rapids. Kisil scrambled to his feet and swayed in the clutching torrent. Cholan halted the trembling stallion while Kisil clambered toward them. Then, grasping her hand, he stumbled through the shallows by the side of the plunging horse.

He looked over his shoulder. "Targoutai!"

The chief's mare appeared to be making for them and would soon be scrambling through the rapids. Targoutai was clinging to Kadia's tail, his head just showing above water.

In a flash Kisil pulled Cholan off Babor. "Make for the trees," he shouted as he sprang up in her place. "Targoutai—" he pointed.

He turned Babor round and forced the reluctant horse back across the rapids to where Kadia struggled to get footing on the rocky shelf. Seizing the mare's bridle, Kisil dragged her alongside the stallion. He slashed downward at Targoutai. The blow fell short, but Targoutai relinquished his hold and was swept downstream.

The plunging horses gave Kisil no time to taunt his enemy. Arrows began to hiss around him. Yells and imprecations smote his ears as he made toward Cholan, who had run with the babe into the shelter of the trees.

On reaching dry ground Kisil glanced downstream and saw Targoutai stumbling ashore through the shallows. Grinning broadly, Kisil led the mare to Cholan. She sprang into the saddle with the baby clasped tight by one arm.

Kisil eyed the mare's saddle with pleasure as Cholan took the lead. There, in its case, was Targoutai's silver-tipped bow. On the other side hung the quiver wedged full of arrows! With two such horses they were fairly safe from pursuit. With such a weapon they had a chance of survival.

Targoutai, shaking himself like a dog, was shouting to his followers across the river. A few arrows fell into the river or ricocheted harmlessly from the rocks as Kisil disappeared after Cholan.

Kisil yelled derisively.

12

ESCAPE

AFTER EMERGING from the trees onto the sun-dappled plain, Cholan wanted to stop. Kisil, however, insisted on putting a good distance of open country between them and possible pursuit. When the fringe of trees had dwindled to a blur, he pulled up on rising ground. "Now we are safe—for a while!"

Kisil loosened the girths and the horses started grazing. "May the black earth swallow Targoutai!" he exclaimed. "Imagine him riding her like that when she's in foal!"

"So was I . . . this morning. Perhaps you may remember?"

Kisil, deaf to the tone of sarcasm, ran his expert hands over the mare. "Will this foal be of Babor's breeding?"

"Yes!" Cholan fairly snapped the answer.

Kisil stood back from the mare admiring her. "Long sloping shoulders, good hocks—she is equal to either of the mares I have lost . . . and in foal!"

Cholan sat cross-legged on the ground, her indignation mounting as he catalogued the mare's good points.

"I appreciate your love of horses, Kisil," she remarked with asperity. "But your son needs clothing and your wife needs food!"

Kisil nodded. "So do I," he remarked dryly, "but the needs of horses come first." He examined the wound on Babor's rump and, having satisfied himself that it was not serious, he took Targoutai's bow out of its case and eyed the weapon with admiration. He felt the pull of the bow. "It's a good bow. I've never seen better."

Some distance away a few marmots were standing beside their holes, watching these human intruders. An eagle, which had been circling overhead, suddenly dropped like a stone and settled on a mound of earth. The marmots disappeared in a flash. The fierce bird stood motionless like a carved rock. Kisil plucked an arrow from the quiver on Kadia's saddle and fitted it to the string. As he cautiously raised the bow, the eagle suddenly pounced on a marmot big as an overgrown puppy that had recklessly emerged from its hiding place. Kisil's bow twanged. The arrow pierced an outspread wing and the bird dropped its prey. Kisil ran to the stunned marmot and dispatched it with his sword. In a trice he had it skinned. He tossed the pelt to Cholan who wrapped it, bloody as it was, around her babe. Then he cut off gobbets of the flesh and he and Cholan chewed avidly.

When they had feasted Kisil stripped to the skin and began squeezing the water out of his garments. Cholan diffidently slipped out of her wet clothes, with anxious glances across the plain. She stood naked in the sunlight. Kisil tore up handfuls of grass and started rubbing her down briskly. "By Bogdo," he said admiringly, "thou art indeed fit wife for a warrior! Had ever babe such a natal day as this?"

"Had ever child a more resourceful father?" she said, laughing, "or a more reckless one?" She struck his hands aside as they lingered on her body. "Eagles don't stop to make love in their flight!" She ran from his reach.

She cut a chunk of fat from the carcass of the marmot and rubbed it over her body before slipping on the coarse woolen garment Kisil had wrung out for her. The wool steamed in the sun as Cholan spread her dark hair over her shoulders to dry. "My lord must needs find shelter before night." She nodded toward the north. "That looks like snow. I . . . I have never slept out in the open in winter."

"No," Kisil agreed as he squeezed the water from her long fur-lined breeches and coat. "The daughter of Besoutchei has been spoilt by the comfort of her mother's yurt. You will miss the dung fire and felt tent tonight and for many nights. But we'll survive." He squeezed the water out of his long red hair, then lay at Cholan's feet while she rebraided it.

"I have made a lifelong enemy in this lord Targoutai," Kisil pondered.

"Yes," Cholan agreed soberly. "There will always be a feud between you—such a feud as there is between him and Yesukai, the overlord of these plains."

"Yesukai? If I knew where to find him I would enroll among his warriors . . . it would be safer!" Kisil said.

"His ordu lies between the headwaters of two rivers that flow on the other side of that mountain." Cholan nodded to the distant peak that had attracted his attention earlier in the day. "From what I heard among the Taijiuts, Yesukai is going to need many warriors when the Taijiuts, Tatars and Tchortcha start war against him."

"War? Why should there be war?"

Cholan got to her feet and began to put on her outer garments. "These people are always fighting one another," she said. "From what I heard in the camp—just gossip among the women—Targoutai wants to set himself up as the overlord of the clans in Yesukai's place. There was a shaman who, I think, came from Yesukai's ordu in company with some other lords." Her brow wrinkled in thought. "They plan to kill Yesukai, if the gossip was correct."

"A plot!" Kisil sat up quickly. "A plot . . . I wonder . . . do you know the name of that shaman?"

She shook her head. "No. Why? What has it to do with us?"

"But don't you see," Kisil went on eagerly, "if we could find Yesukai and tell him . . ."

"You wouldn't be believed," Cholan interrupted. "No. Let us not interfere with the great ones of the earth. Let us fly south as quickly as possible to my mother—"

"—where Targoutai would speedily find us—if we weren't caught before we got that far." Kisil jumped to his feet and, shading his eyes, looked anxiously over the plain toward the river. "Don't you see, Cholan, that that is what Targoutai will expect us to do. We must either get protection from someone like Yesukai or turn north in the direction opposite to the one Targoutai would expect us to take." He sat down beside her. "Besides . . ." He told her of Tatengri's prophecy and the events leading up to his death. Her eyes grew wider as his tale unfolded. ". . . So you see it looks as if fate means me to deal with some of the earth's great ones," he concluded.

Cholan was silent for a while. Then she looked up. "If it means so much to you—to us—I think the shaman's name was Keuktche. I saw only the back of him, for a minute."

Cholan started replacing some small silver ornaments in her hair that Kisil had not noticed before. He snatched them from her hand and flung them away in the long grass. "Until *I* can provide you with silver for your headdress, you can do without. We want nothing of Targoutai's!" he said angrily.

"Yet—" Cholan smiled sweetly— "we seem to have Targoutai's mare, Targoutai's saddle and Targoutai's bow!"

"They are but a tithe of what he stole from me! I will not have the mark of Targoutai on your head!"

"Targoutai is lord of ten thousand tents and many herds, and I was his favorite wife," she teased him.

"I am sure if you wait here he will soon find you," Kisil retorted hotly, "or you can ride back toward the river and find him!"

"What! Would you give up that splendid mare?" she asked

in feigned amazement. She leaned over as his anger mounted and stroked his head. "There, Kisil. I forget you are no longer brother, but husband. I did but tease you."

"You teased me once before," Kisil replied, as he seized her in his arms. "Do you remember what happened?"

She smiled demurely, but she didn't attempt to struggle out of his arms.

Presently Kisil jumped to his feet. "It's such carelessness as this that will enable Targoutai to ensnare us." He laughed. "But seriously, Cholan, we must think what we are to do."

"I have been thinking. Would it make sense to my lord Kisil if I suggested we circle back to where Targoutai had his encampment last night?"

"What—across the river again?"

She nodded. "As the camp was struck by lightning—to say nothing of the spirit you conjured up in smoke and fire—they will flee immediately and move off into their winter pastures. They planned to do that anyway, as soon as my child was born."

"Yes, but, Cholan, you know it is unlucky to camp where lightning has struck!"

"Perhaps so," she agreed. "But I am not suggesting we camp in that particular place. You remember Jhotuz—she was stolen with me?" Kisil nodded, and she went on: "Not far from that camp is a ravine shunned by the Taijiuts because they think it is accursed and inhabited by evil spirits. Jhotuz and I planned to escape after my child had come. So we went up into the gorge and there found a cave, in which we stored a few necessities, bit by bit. I think we could spend the winter safely there. There's plenty of wood for fuel down by the river and we piled some dung inside the cave. We also hid some sheepskins, some bags of dried curds and an iron stick for striking fire."

"A cave of treasure! The idea is good." Kisil nodded in agreement. "We won't stay there all winter." Seeing disappointment on her face, he explained: "I must find Yesukai, to warn him. We have some time, you think?"

"Yes," she agreed quickly. "They won't do anything until spring, until the snow goes."

Kisil smacked his fist into the palm of his hand. "Good! If you are right—if you are sure there is time—we will circle north tonight, when perhaps it will be too cold to sleep. Tomorrow we can find a safe place to cross the river."

He got to his feet and searched the horizon. "Sleep now, Cholan, while the sun is warm. I will keep watch. Tonight we travel north."

For a while he watched the sleeping mother with her child. *His son!*

He looked again over the empty plain, then sat down beside the sleeping girl, his arms hunched around his knees.

He glanced at the sky toward the north. Cholan was right—those clouds meant snow. It would be a cold ride tonight facing the storm. The spirits would look after them, perhaps Tatengri's spirit among them. How lucky he was to get Babor back! And he still had one mare and soon, perhaps, would have two foals. He also had a chieftain's daughter for his wife. He was no longer a herdsman. Now he could call himself a warrior—his deeds had proved him. Wouldn't Maryam be pleased! Yesukai . . . he must not delay too long in finding Yesukai. . . .

His head sank lower, then he rolled sideways and lay still.

In no time Kisil was asleep.

He felt cold and stirred uneasily.

"Kisil! Kisil!" That must be Drombo calling him. Drombo? Drombo was dead! Who—?

He sat up with a start. Cholan was on her feet. They were surrounded by a mounted band of armed men!

13

KISIL BAHATUR

TO ESCAPE was impossible, yet as Kisil sprang to his feet he instinctively reached for his weapons.

They were gone!

Swiftly his eye flashed over the group. There were thirty of them at least, and they had rounded up Babor and the

mare. He trembled with anger at his carelessness. To think that they had caught him asleep!

Cholan stood by his side, clutching her babe to her breast; she stared with wide-open eyes at the encircling ring. "Kisil . . ."

It must have been her voice crying "Kisil" that had awakened him. By the blood of an ox, he'd taunt Targoutai to kill him swiftly! But where was Targoutai? . . . Kisil looked around. Targoutai was not here! Then, to his intense relief, he suddenly realized that his captors wore no wolfskins—they were not Taijiuts! Carcasses of deer hung over their ponies and feathered game was tied to their saddles—a hunting party, and the hunters were just lads in charge of an older man. Then, to his astonishment, he saw that all, even the man, gave deference to a mere boy who had dismounted and was gravely examining Tatengri's sword!

The boy looked up. He had blue-gray eyes with flashing black pupils. His hair, too, was red.

Kisil smiled. *"Mendu!"* he said in greeting, his voice warm with the relief he felt.

The boy gave a curt nod. Drawing himself up, he sternly demanded, "Who are you? What is your name and of what people?"

Kisil was taken aback by the peremptory tone but, though nettled, he replied quietly. "I am Kisil, *auda* to Besoutchei, a chieftain of the Keraits. This girl is Cholan, his daughter and my wife." Seeing no sign of friendliness in the boy's face, Kisil asked curtly, "But who are you?"

The boy ignored his question, looking toward Babor and Kadia. "Where did you steal those horses?"

Kisil stood a moment in silence. Then he deliberately turned his back to the youth and, looking round the circle of hunters, he asked of the older man, "Am I to be questioned by this flea?"

A roar of laughter greeted Kisil's outburst. Stung to fury the boy jabbed Kisil with the sword.

"Turn and answer me!" he piped, "unless you want me to leave your carcass here for the vultures!"

Kisil swung round angrily, half inclined to hurl himself

on this youngster who held Tatengri's sword. The red tide that had flooded the boy's face at the sound of laughter had ebbed, leaving a whiteness fearful to behold. Madness glinted from the blue-gray eyes—the madness of intense anger held by a doubtful leash.

Then Cholan stepped forward, laying a restraining hand on Kisil's arm. "The stallion is ours, the mare we captured from Targoutai who is pursuing us," she explained quietly.

"Targoutai!" The older man looked toward the river.

"Pursuit?" another scoffed. "The way we found you both asleep one could pursue you on an ox!"

Kisil gritted his teeth, but Cholan laughed nervously.

"So it would seem," she said. "Yet pursued we were, all last night and all this morning, until we put that river between us and our enemies."

"There are your pursuers now!" a boy called out. All looked across the plain. A small group of horsemen appeared in the far distance. They halted on a snow-covered hill and evidently took council on seeing a stronger band.

"String your bows, lads," the older man warned.

The stringing of their weapons took the attention of all of them from Kisil—all but the boy. Kisil eyed him warily.

"You must indeed be a desperate thief to steal such horses from so great a lord," the boy said doubtfully as he lowered the point. "What think you, Muhuli—have you ever seen such a stallion?"

"No wonder they pursue him," the older man laughed.

"I'm no thief, but a warrior!" Kisil boasted, stung to angry self-defense. "Targoutai wronged me many moons ago by stealing my wife and my stallion, so I tracked him across desert and plain. Yesterday I went alone into his encampment and recaptured both bride and horse. Who among your warriors would have dared half as much?"

"You would have me believe that a lamb like you would dare raid the wolf's den?" Muhuli laughed. "Bind his arms, young lord, and turn him over to the Taijiuts."

"If we can catch them!" a youth remarked. He laughed and unstrung his bow. "See, they have turned tail. They don't like the look of us."

"But what we say is true, young lord," Cholan hurriedly addressed the boy. "Yesterday Kisil rode boldly into the Taijiut camp and snatched me up right under Targoutai's nose. We fled all night on the black stallion. At dawn, they had us nearly surrounded and—"

"And Targoutai, I suppose, offered you this fine mare to give you a better chance to escape him?" the boy interrupted her. "Enough of such lies! Horses like these—and a woman like you—" he eyed her with an adolescent leer—"are worth our taking, but this lying thief—"

Kisil sprang at the youth, knocking him to the ground as he wrenched the sword from his grip. He held the sword at the boy's throat. "One move from any of you and this flea dies! Our words are true words. Yesukai the khan—"

Kisil was suddenly jerked backward, neatly lassoed from behind. Cholan shrieked and flung herself on Kisil as he was dragged on the ground. She snatched the sword from his hand and swiftly slashed the noose that pinned his arms to his sides. Kisil and the boy jumped to their feet, glaring at each other.

"By the spear of Bogdo, this youth is game!" Muhuli said, moving his horse between the two young men. Then looking down on Kisil he asked, "Now what was that about Yesukai, our khan?"

Our khan? Then these youths might be the Kiyat clan of the Mongols, and this youth . . .

"It is this," he said, panting. "For many moons I have traveled across the steppes to find this Targoutai. Disguised as a shaman, I have wandered among many tribes and have much information for the ears of Yesukai—information that may mean the difference between life and death for your khan!"

Seeing that he had their interest, Kisil elaborated on the story of Cholan's rescue and the pursuit. He noticed that the scoffing of some was turning to admiration. As he finished the story he drew himself up dramatically. "When your khan hears of this he will not thank you for thus treating a daughter of the Keraits with whom he has sworn brotherhood—or for so scurvily baiting a warrior who comes to

join his banner." He laughed. "But I will not tell Yesukai—"

"That you won't, for you'll never see him!" The boy had mounted, and now he thrust his sorrel mare among the youths surrounding Kisil. "I'll kill you first for daring to lay hands on me!" He advanced upon Kisil, an arrow pointed at Kisil's throat.

Kisil's eyes blazed defiance, but the muscles of his face twitched nervously as his keen brain swiftly appraised this decisive moment. Who was this angry boy, that no man attempted to interfere with him? Could he be . . . ? Kisil turned to address Muhuli.

"I am sent by Bogdo the Everlasting One to serve Yesukai's son!" he improvised quickly. "Tatengri, the great Talker to the Spirits, prophesied that I should save the young prince's life. He who touches me touches Yesukai's son and incurs the wrath of the Sky!"

Making a great effort, Kisil, with apparent calmness, disdainfully turned his back on the menacing arrow and the angry hand that held it. He took Cholan by the arm. "Come, wife, the spirits protect us and urge me on my mission!"

He thrust his way through the close-packed circle and led the trembling Cholan to the mare's side, momentarily expecting to feel the arrow between his shoulders. He boldly tightened the mare's girth and helped Cholan into the saddle. Turning to vault on Babor's back, he was amazed that no one had raised a hand against him. He faced the youths.

"Which of you has the magic sword of Tatengri the shaman?" he demanded. A boy tossed it to him as if it were red-hot. "And my bow?" he shouted. Riding up to the youth who held Targoutai's bow, Kisil held out his hand. The youth laughed and surrendered it to him. Kisil replaced the bow in its case on the mare's saddle. His heart was beating furiously, but his face remained impassive as he again turned to face Muhuli. "Can you tell me where Yesukai makes his encampment? I must hasten to him."

The young boy now reasserted his authority. His bow was back in its case, his hand rested on a large knife suspended from his girdle. He rode up to Kisil. "What did you say your name was?" he asked gravely.

"My father—that is, my blood father—named me Bogorji," Kisil answered quietly, "but Besoutchei my adopted father gave me the name of Kisil."

"And I," the boy said importantly, "add to your name the title of Bahatur—the Brave!" Then standing in his stirrups, while Kisil regarded him with astonishment, the boy turned to his followers. "Bear witness to that!"

As they broke into excited chatter, the youngest raised his hand imperiously for silence. "Kisil Bahatur, I did but test you, and bravely have you stood the test. I, Temujine, son of Yesukai the khan, lord of forty thousand tents, accept your services. I have need of brave men to form my bodyguard!"

Book Two—*Yesukai Unravels the Skein*

14

AT THE MONGOL ORDU

THE HUNTING PARTY, full of high spirits, indulged in much horseplay on their ride back to the Mongol ordu. Even Kisil couldn't help an occasional smile stealing across his features, burdened though he was with foreboding as to his reception at the hands of Yesukai. It was all very well, Kisil thought, for this young princeling to take on himself the bestowing of titles and the enrolling of fighting men, but would his father the khan back him up? And what had he to tell Yesukai after so greatly stressing the importance of his information? Kisil puzzled over Cholan's hints of an hour ago, trying to make whole cloth out of her threadbare bits and pieces. He shrugged. His wits had served him well so far. They wouldn't fail him now.

Unbeknown to Kisil, his serious expression and his silence greatly impressed his companions. Cruel and thoughtless, they yet had instinctive respect for this fellow who had refused to be overawed by Temujine's threats. Not one of them

would have dared, as this youth had dared, to lay hands on that young tiger cub—at least, had one dared he would not have expected to live. Keenly aware of the iron nerve displayed by Kisil in his encounter with the tempestuous Temujine, they were the more ready to take Kisil's word for the adventure of Cholan's rescue. They envied Kisil his superb horses and his beautiful girl-wife; to them he was a man of substance as well as bravery.

They camped that night among the foothills of the Mountain of the Supreme Spirit. Gratefully Cholan slipped from Kadia's back as Kisil reined alongside. His face broke into a smile—a smile that reflected his newfound confidence and, she thought, affection, and a thrill of happiness vibrated through her as he quietly said, "Well done, Little Mother! I'm more proud of my wife than I am of my stallion!"

They climbed steadily the next morning and at midday reached a point overlooking the broad valley that sheltered the Mongol tents. Kisil was much impressed by their number. It was like a city, but a movable city that could quickly disappear and be set up elsewhere. The khan's pavilion, in front of which the yak tails of the standard swung in the breeze, dominated the wide space set apart in the middle of the camp for the yurts of the khan's household.

Riding toward this center, the hunters gradually dispersed with their spoils. Temujine called a servant to take the carcass of a deer from his horse. "I'll take you at once to my father," he said to Kisil.

As Cholan followed them, Temujine turned in his saddle and called to a girl passing among the tents, "Gesikie! Have a tent set up for these people near my own and look after this woman till we return." Temujine's hand waved Cholan toward the girl. "My sister will look after you; go with her."

Temujine left Kisil at the entrance to the pavilion. After remaining inside for a while, he came out with several men who looked curiously at Kisil before going their several ways. When the last one had departed, Temujine turned to Kisil. "Leave your weapons here," he ordered importantly. "I have secured audience for you. Come with me."

Kisil took a deep breath. His mouth was dry; his nerves

taut like the strings of a lute. He lifted his head and strode after Temujine.

It was a large tent—much larger than Targoutai's, he thought. He felt carpets under his feet, but he was unable, at first, to see the furnishings or the occupant of this large but gloomy pavilion. The dull-red glow of the hearth fire struck a more cheery note. He waited while Temujine dropped the felt curtain behind them. A pleasant voice welcomed them with quiet dignity, and as Kisil's eyes became accustomed to the dim light, he saw the khan seated on a divan near the fire.

"This is the man, Father." Temujine's voice held a trace of boyish excitement. He propelled Kisil forward, then dropped at his father's feet, leaving Kisil standing before them.

"Now start at the beginning," Temujine ordered.

So Kisil told of his boyhood on the Kirghiz steppes; of his father's gift of the colts; his father's death and his decision to become a wanderer and seek adventure with the caravan along the *Pe-lu,* and how the beauty of Cholan's mother had proved so strong an attraction that he had pleaded with Besoutchei for adoption. Then he spoke of the raid, of Tatengri's prophecy and his setting out to find Cholan.

"I know that cliff!" the khan shouted excitedly when Kisil described their leap into the river. "And Targoutai lived?" His voice sounded disappointed. Kisil tactfully ended the story there, but Temujine took it up and told his father how Kisil had dared his wrath and how, disregarding Temujine's drawn bow and the imminence of death, Kisil had calmly set Cholan on her horse and then had had the temerity to demand the return of his weapons.

"Knowing my son, I would say that never were you nearer death than at that moment!" The khan paused. "You are, of course, ignorant of his temper?"

"I knew not that he was your son, O Khan."

"And had you known it, would you have acted differently?"

Kisil shook his head. "I have hunted wolf and bear and know that a bold front, even when defenseless . . ."

"But you have never hunted tiger!" the khan interjected. "And if Temujine is denied, his will is like a tiger deprived

of its prey." There were both a tinge of pride and a touch of reproof in his voice. He paused. "But you have other matters to relate that closely concern me?—or so you told my son." He looked shrewdly at Kisil. "Or was that, perchance, but a ruse to stay his hand?" His glance pierced like the point of a dagger.

Kisil flushed. "You prick shrewdly, O Khan." He lifted his head and stoutly declared, "Yes, I sought to stay his hand. But I hold a thread of sorts. It is for you to unravel the skein."

"Stop speaking in riddles, young man. If you know ought, disclose it, but remember, I am not a Targoutai to be fooled by shamans' tricks." Yesukai's round head thrust forward aggressively.

Kisil cleared his throat. "In my journeying among the nomad tribes I learned much that will interest you, O Khan. But a grave matter, by chance disclosed to me by my wife—she who was stolen and forced to lie in Targoutai's bed—I considered of sufficient importance to necessitate my searching you out. It is a plot against your life."

Yesukai laughed dryly. "Doubtless there are many who plot against my life. I am used to it. Yet, surrounded as I am by loyal Mongol hearts, their plots have come to naught."

"Yet this thread seems to lead within your household," Kisil ventured. "Treason stalks at your heels, O Khan!"

An ugly look sprang to Yesukai's broad bony face. "Such an accusation must needs be proved. I trust for your sake this is no idle jest. Put this thread in my hand, or . . ." There was a pause pregnant with meaning.

Quickly Kisil outlined what Cholan had told him. The khan's face looked serious and he sent Temujine to fetch Cholan. They waited for her arrival in silence. The khan, lost in thought, ignored Kisil who now glanced around the pavilion, taking in the scanty furnishings. A few weapons hung on the lattice wall side by side with bridles and bits. Saddles were flung in one corner. A hooded falcon huddled on its perch.

Kisil tried to relax. He smiled reassuringly to Cholan when she entered the tent with Temujine to stand before the khan.

Yesukai, by his gentle manner and careful cross-examination, unraveled more of the thread of the plot. Kisil, to his surprise, learned that Targoutai had called not one but two councils. At the first had been an ambassador from the Emperor of the Kin and chieftains of the Mergued, Oirad and Tatar tribes along with a shaman from a Mongol clan who spoke with much authority. After this gathering had dispersed, there came with much secrecy envoys from the Sung and the kingdom of Hia. The Mongol shaman also attended this second council which finally dispersed only three days ago.

Kisil began to see the design of a plot emerge under the khan's skillful questioning and realized, with thankful relief, that he and Cholan were indeed giving much information to the khan for which he should be grateful.

"This nephew of Targoutai's," Cholan was saying, "Kurul by name, would be Targoutai's heir—seeing that I have failed him—were not Kurul one of those women-men who prefer the company of youths to girls. He was very friendly with the strange shaman."

"And you think that the name of the shaman was Keuktche?" Yesukai asked with a voice kept purposely low.

"Either that or one much like it," she answered firmly.

The khan's fingers clutched the hilt of the dagger in his girdle. "Would you know this man—if you saw him?"

"I don't know," Cholan admitted. "I only caught a glimpse of him, lord."

"Yet, if you caught a glimpse, how was he dressed?" Yesukai persisted.

Cholan thought for a moment. "I see a picture, lord, of a very pointed hat with a wide fur band; a sheepskin coat, much like any other only that the sleeves seemed too long and were turned back at the wrist to show a wide band of wool lining. His black felt boots were trimmed, I think, with a band of green at the top."

"Keuktche, all right!" Temujine fairly spat the words. "Send for him, Father."

The khan shook his head, gazing thoughtfully at the ground. "It sounds like his attire. But others may possess

such boots and even I have turned back a too-long sleeve to make a cuff." The khan again seemed sunk in thought. "You heard this man's voice?" Yesukai asked suddenly.

"I don't recollect hearing him speak . . . but I do remember hearing his laughter coming from Targoutai's tent." Cholan hesitated, then went on. "It seemed thin and reedy, compared to Targoutai's bull-like bellow."

"That's him!" Temujine laughed scornfully.

Yesukai asked, "You've said naught of this to anyone?"

Cholan and Kisil shook their heads.

"Then not a word of this must pass your lips." He included Temujine. "It is a grave matter and one that cannot be brought to a head on such slender evidence. Yet I thank you for your warning." His eyes smiled kindly on Kisil. Turning to his son, he spoke in a voice warm with approval. "You have shown one of the qualities of leadership, my son, in that you recognized the worth in this youth and have chosen him as a companion. It is the mark of a superior man to recognize and value the worth of superior people. Bahatur was the title you gave him on impulse—there may come a day when you will add the title of Sechen, the Wise."

The khan turned to Cholan, whose anxiety had faded from her eyes at his words. "Your son is fortunate in his parents. He should go far in life. What name have you given him?"

Cholan flushed at Yesukai's praise. "None, lord." She looked to Kisil who suddenly seemed dull of comprehension. As he evidently was tongue-tied, she said, "Give our child a name, O Khan."

Yesukai smiled as he thoughtfully fingered his chin. "I think of a brave man I once knew when I was a youth fighting up in the country of the Oirads. Sagacious he was, as well as brave—qualities this child may well inherit from you both. I give your son the name of Subotai." Then he turned to Temujine. "Now look to the welfare of these young people and see that they are provided with all that is necessary. Tomorrow, Kisil Bahatur, at our council you must again tell your tale of rescue and flight. Our Mongol lords thrill to hear such tales of brave men."

15

YESUKAI MAKES A MAP

BUT WHEN Temujine had followed Cholan and the exuberant Kisil from his tent, Yesukai's face lengthened.

He sat alone in the gathering darkness. The sounds of dusk, the bedding down of man and beast, were about him. A young female slave came into his tent bearing lamps. She gazed wonderingly at the preoccupied face of her master while she made up his fire. That duty done, she waited silently, expectantly, for the usual order to be taken to the wife he had chosen to share his bed for the night.

What was the matter with the man? Was he going to sleep alone? A smile stole over her features. Perhaps . . .?

Yesukai looked up, then dismissed her with an impatient wave of his hand. Bit by bit he went over the evidence he had wormed out of the girl Cholan. In view of what she had said, much that had puzzled him lately now seemed less obscure.

He kicked back the carpets that covered the sandy floor. He picked up a stick and began tracing a map in the sand.

The khan drew a crescent-shaped lake. On its eastern side he traced the Taijiut borders; a stone placed in the middle represented Targoutai. West of the lake he traced the Oirad's country. At the southern tip of the lake another scrawled line showed the adjoining Mergueds. He now took a stone and placed it southeast of the lake tip. That was the Mountain of the Supreme Spirit, where he now stood. Then he traced his boundaries around it touching both Taijiut and Mergued territory. His lands across the desert—the accursed gobi—mingled with those of Tatar between him and the Wall. East of Mongol and Tatar boundaries he raised a long ridge of sand. Across the abrupt precipices of this mountain range was the mysterious country that had spawned race after race of violent men—like the Tchortcha, who had gone south and conquered Cathay.

To the south, beyond the Wall, was their empire of the

Kin, Cathay, the Golden Enclosure. The Kin were always meddling in the affairs of the nomad clans to the north. They played clan against clan in the expectation that they would exterminate one another. Twenty-six clans there were. What a nation they would make if only they would sink their differences and petty jealousies!

Yesukai surveyed his rough map, pondering, chin in hand, like a Persian chess player. The Mergued tribes, the Taijiuts and Tatars were his immediate problem. Who could keep the Tatar tribes off his back?

The Kungrads! They lay in the long grasslands between Wall and gobi. They were not unfriendly to him; once they had even warned his father of an attack coming from the Kin. If only he could make alliance with Dai Sechen of the Kungrads!

Shutting his eyes and clasping his hands, he rocked gently backward and forward while he puzzled out the baffling situation. Again he carefully weighed Cholan's information against his own knowledge. At last he thought he was beginning to see the pattern of intrigue.

The Kin emperor wanted the warlike Mongols destroyed, or at least forced out of the fertile plains north of the Wall. To accomplish this, the Kin were encouraging Targoutai to think that the Taijiuts could take over the Mongol pastures when Taijiut, Tatar and Mergued—with Kin military aid—had conquered Yesukai. It was simply the old game of setting nomad against nomad in a war of exhaustion.

But Targoutai was also playing a game within a game. He had the foresight and sense to see that in such a war he was—in the long run—bound to be the loser. But rather than sink his old feud with Yesukai—and with the Tatars and Mergueds join Yesukai's suggested confederation—he planned the riskier move of betraying the Kin, and was already plotting with the Sung and Hia for them to move against the Kin once the troops of the Kin had passed the Wall and moved well out into the desert. That could be the only explanation of Cholan's assertion that an ambassador of the Sung as well as an envoy from Hia had met Targoutai at a second council meeting at which Keuktche also had been present.

But where did Keuktche, son of the archshaman Minglig, fit into all this? What benefit would he possibly gain from Targoutai's triumph over his own khan? He must have had promise of a big reward from the Emperor of the Sung.

Oh, the fool, the blind, treacherous fool!

With the course of plot and counterplot more clearly in his mind, Yesukai thought carefully over his next move. There was only one piece on the board to play against them—the Emperor of the Golden Enclosure himself, that very Emperor of the Kin who planned to use nomad pawns to trap Yesukai, the emperor who was the hereditary enemy of his line! He drew in his breath at the thought of such a daring move. It was bold; aye, but its very boldness appealed to his Mongol way of thinking. He chuckled. With tongue in cheek he would send to the emperor asking for a reconciliation. He would expose Targoutai's and Keuktche's plot with Hia and the Sung. If only he could send proofs of that!

The more he thought of it, the more he was certain that the feud with Targoutai was at the bottom of his troubles. What had possessed him to snatch Yulun from her intended husband? Not that he regretted it! Far from it. Yulun had made him a splendid wife. From her he had bred fine sons: Temujine, Juji, Habto, Kadshiken and Temugu. But they were all so young. If only Temujine were a few years older! Then if they killed the father they would find they had a tiger by the tail!

He was determined to say nothing to Yulun about the suspected treachery; he did not want to worry her . . . as yet. Yesukai's strong fingers gripped his chin while he pondered. Tomorrow, after the council, he might talk over the situation with Yulun. He might even send her to the Golden Enclosure as his ambassador. Was she not the emperor's cousin?

He picked up his stones, smoothed the sand and replaced the carpets. From some of the distant yurts came sounds of laughter and revelry. The princes of the banners, come in from their far-flung pastures, were making merry before tomorrow's *kurultai.*

Tomorrow he would let them do the talking. While he sat with quiet dignity on the white horsehide, his eyes, with keen

perception, would peer into their hearts. Tomorrow, as they flung their words in air, he would winnow the chaff from the grain!

He pulled on a leather gauntlet and took his falcon from its perch.

"Tomorrow at our council, my bright-eyed one, we will watch those *kams*, Minglig and his son Keuktche, very closely."

16

MINGLIG

"NOW GET OUT . . . get me some food . . . but first make up that fire!"

Minglig Etchigue, sacrilegiously called "Old Fish-face" by Yesukai's young sons, kicked his slant-eyed bed warmer out of bed, then, sitting up, drew fur and sheepskin tighter around his knees.

Tcha! He had no time for her nonsense—not this morning anyway. And it wasn't that he was getting too old—she needn't think that. "A man's as old as he feels" was a favorite aphorism of Minglig's, and right now he was feeling as ambitious as a colt, and had been ever since his brain had first conceived his stupendous plan.

But he had a lot on his mind this morning, and the upsetting events of yesterday had to be sorted out to see if any of the pieces were going to fit in with his own ideas. Power he already had of a sort, but more power—and the wife of the khan—was what he had in mind. And, if he interpreted yesterday's puzzling events correctly, it looked as though he might get unconscious aid from a totally unexpected quarter—from that foolish son of his, Keuktche.

In spite of these weighty matters of state, his sharp eyes still peered from half-closed lids at the girl as she slipped into her clothing. He could just imagine what the little Tonguz was thinking—"like father, like son." He'd show her! She was going to be amusing. Perhaps he shouldn't have stopped her fun so abruptly. Perhaps . . .

Tcha! He shook off such tantalizing thoughts. For one who had reached the status of elder statesman and a place in the council, there were more important things to think about and do. He shook his head impatiently.

It's strange, he thought, how the boy picked up by Temujine has precipitated matters. That's the trouble today—these plains are full of interlopers. Spies, most of them. If I had my way they would all get kicked out or, better still—! His hand made the motion of pulling a bowstring.

Minglig twisted his lower lip between finger and thumb. It's the caravans that are chiefly responsible for this influx of strangers; they aid and abet this modern craze for rushing about from one country to another. I can't think why the emperor allows it; his soldiers in the *duguns* along the routes should put a stop to it. When I was a boy, the emperor . . .

To Minglig the emperor was the "Son of Heaven." Many years ago he too had traveled, and with the yearly tribute he had once gone to Yen, before they changed its name. He had fallen in love with things Chinese and had been lost in admiration ever since. That was partly why, when a Chinese caravan arrived a few days ago—to buy furs in exchange for grain, silks and slaves—Minglig had bought the little Tonguz.

"She was a concubine of an official at the emperor's court," the leader had explained confidentially.

When I was a boy, Minglig's thoughts ran on, the caravans were run entirely by the Chinese, or by our own Sinicized-Turkish people. *Tcha!* Now the caravans—the east-bound in particular—bring back such human scum as these Arab merchants and slave dealers, Syriac peddlers, stripe-robed Turgoman cattle thieves, masquerading as buyers—and such blasphemous dogs as that boy yesterday!

"That boy!" Minglig spat.

And Yesukai encouraged the boy—just as he encouraged all mockers of the spirits and peddlers of new beliefs. Yesukai liked to discuss the problems of the day with them. *Tcha!* These so-called learned men were constantly coming to Yesukai's ordu bringing their new ideas and unheard-of luxuries for barter. Not that Minglig despised a few luxuries. He smiled reminiscently as he thought of the little Tonguz—

"Pure Gold" she said her name was. Gold she had cost him, but pure . . . ? Minglig's bony frame shook with repressed mirth. Then his mood sobered. Keuktche had insisted on his buying her—had even paid part of the purchase price. Now Minglig wondered why. True, she seemed to spend a lot of time with Keuktche, but Keuktche did not sleep with women. Minglig shook his head in bewilderment. Now that he had the girl, Keuktche was equally insistent that his father make a present of her to Yulun! What was at the back of his son's mind?

Minglig's head nodded gently as he thought of the khan's wife. She was a proper lady and her conduct compelled the utmost respect. A true aristocrat, even if her lineage were not of the Borjiguene. These new ideas were not for her. Such ideas, she knew, might undermine the personal power of the khan among the clans. She knew, too, the hold that he, Minglig Etchigue, had on the tribesmen's minds. Shrewd, Yulun was—he didn't have to tell her that authority could best be held by instilling fear of the spirits in the minds of men. And how else but through Minglig and his like could the power of the spirits be harnessed for service to the khan?

Now, Yesukai—Minglig shrugged—liked to argue and reason before he resorted to the sword and spear; and he never asked his chief sorcerer to intercede with his spirits on his behalf. Minglig sighed: he felt no resentment against Yesukai; the khan meant well, but . . .

Minglig screwed up one eye speculatively: if anything should happen to the khan—and things might happen to any man—then there was a chance that he, Minglig, could persuade the khan's widow to remarry, once the period of mourning was over. She was still a young woman, actually in her prime. And who could be more suitable for her to marry—for political reasons, he admitted, if for no other—than himself? While the khan's sons were still mere children, she, the widow, would hold the standard of the temporal power. As her husband, Minglig could offer her the powers of heaven and earth, the powers of good and evil. That would be a combination! That was one idea he hadn't told Keuktche. Perhaps his son—and not the khan's . . . ? The old

man's elation left him. There he was back once again to yesterday's trouble with the redheaded vagrant whom young Temujine had dubbed "The Brave!"

Keuktche had started it. Yesterday, after the council, when Kisil had been brought into the tent to relate his story, Minglig saw Keuktche take Kisil's arm and draw him aside; while he whispered something in the boy's ear, Keuktche had stroked the other's arm caressingly. The boy had flushed red as a piece of raw meat and thrust Keuktche aside with an angry gibe. The color had drained from Keuktche's face and intense was the hatred that flashed in his eyes.

When Kisil had related his exploits, and while the plaudits of the Mongol lords still rang in acclaim, Keuktche fell to the floor, writhing in a fit.

While all had cleared a space about Keuktche's sprawling figure, Minglig strode to his son's side. Yesukai ignored the episode—beyond a scornful sneer—calling Kisil and Temujine to his side. But Yulun had come swiftly, to kneel beside the writhing figure and wipe the foam from Keuktche's lips. When Keuktche's spirit returned to him, he raised himself on one arm and pointed at the khan. A hush fell over the chattering bystanders.

"The spirits demand, O Khan," Keuktche intoned, "that this youth, who has profaned the holy mysteries and mocked the spirits by impersonating one of their holy servants, be instantly put to death by having his neck broken!"

"Nonsense!" Temujine shouted. "Kisil Bahatur has done no ill!"

An uproar broke out, with everyone talking at once.

"Peace! Silence!" Yesukai held up his hand to quell the clamor. "If indeed this youth has done evil, it is strange that he was so strongly aided yesterday by the very spirits he is supposed to have offended. What say you, Minglig Etchigue? Would the spirits aid one who has mocked them?"

"The ways of the spirits are strange, O Khan," Minglig had answered gravely. "Our religion—"

"Since when has shamanism been a religion?" Yesukai interrupted. "I've seen no written book of its teachings! Call it a religious practice, if you will—"

"Yes, a practice believed in by our fathers for countless generations," Minglig broke in hotly. "Is it to be set at nought? Is the voice of authority to be flouted by this beardless stranger—who is likely a spy?"

Then Keuktche had risen, swaying on his feet. "Hear, O Khan," he gasped. "Through me the spirits will reveal the awful penalties we shall incur if this man is not put to death."

Keuktche, supported by Minglig's arm, had moved to the entrance of the pavilion and called in a stronger voice that those outside might hear. "Hearken, ye peoples of the Mongol clans! Hearken to what was revealed to me just now, when my spirit went galloping up into the Sky. If this man lives, many men shall die. As the strongest rock can be shattered at the will of the spirits, so shall the tall rock, your khan, be shattered. The seat on the white horsehide shall be empty. The clans will be dispersed, your herds will be scattered, your women will lie in the arms of your enemies. Obey the command of the spirits, O Khan, and keep the peoples, your children, happy and prosperous!"

The khan merely smiled. Still sitting on the white horsehide, he looked shrewdly at Keuktche.

"The spirits that possessed you and infected you with this black poison that you have spit on us are indeed evil spirits who ever seek to harm those favored of the supreme spirits. Look at this youth, my lords and princes of our clans. Has he not the open face and clear eyes of one innocent of wrongdoing; has he not the inestimable gift of the happy smile—the carefree look and bearing of your own princely sons? Would you have me put such a youth to death at the black frothings of one evidently possessed of an evil spirit? No, my lords, I see you are enlightened men as well as wise."

Minglig had felt his son tremble as the khan's smile faded and he looked with a searching eye on Keuktche.

Yesukai continued: "Perhaps you have not said all that you know about these threats to our person."

Minglig looked anxiously at his son, but Keuktche's face was set in a stony stare.

"Perhaps," the khan went on, "you could be aided to disclose more."

Keuktche had trembled again at this veiled threat, but he had remained silent.

Yesukai turned to those present. "I have given this youth the *sai bina* of greeting. Temujine, my son and heir—" he paused to let the words take added emphasis—"has thrown his felt over this brave youth who has sworn to serve us faithfully. Anyone planning treachery against him plans treachery against the family of your khan. What say you, Father Minglig?"

Then Minglig had been on the horns of a bull. If he denied the truth of the oracle that had sprung from Keuktche's lips, he would undermine their faith in him as a talker to the spirits. Yet, if he supported Keuktche . . .

From Minglig's point of view it was an impossible situation. He did not want openly to undermine the khan's authority—Yulun would never forgive that. Why did Keuktche tremble so? Did he actually know of a plot against the khan?

Minglig cleared his throat. "I am but an interpreter of the commands of the spirits, O Khan, and cannot deny the truth of this divination. Has an evil spirit entered my khan and hardened his heart against his servant—against the will of the gods and the wishes of his people?"

"No evil spirit has influenced me, Minglig Etchigue," Yesukai had answered quietly. "Never do I hesitate to take the life of an enemy or evildoer, but this youth is neither. Remember: one of your cult prophesied to him that he would save Temujine's life and that together they would grow great."

"So he said," broke in Keuktche, "but he is a proved liar, a self-confessed mocker of the spirits, and a horse thief!"

Yesukai had raised an angry hand. "Enough. I have spoken. My word has been said!"

"On your head be it, O Khan!" Keuktche had said impudently. "Yet you will not be here, Yesukai, to reap the full effect. It is on the heads of our innocent people that the penalties will fall. Let them remember my words—and yours—when the prophecy is fulfilled!"

Minglig had shuddered at his son's temerity. Quickly he

had thrown up his hands to stem Yesukai's wrath. "There, my lord, say no more I beg you, lest words best left unsaid still further anger the Everlasting. I, and my son, will intercede with the spirits by days and nights of fasting and sacrifice to ward off this threatened evil, of which the talker-to-the-spirits has spoken truly." He had placed himself between Yesukai and Keuktche and shot his son a warning glance. "Come, Keuktche, a white camel must be found for sacrifice. There is no time to lose if we are to placate the spirits." He had bustled his son out of the khan's pavilion as Yesukai suddenly called on the lords to acknowledge Temujine as his heir.

What a day yesterday had been!

Minglig's face puckered into a mass of wrinkles. He threw back the covers and put his feet to the ground. Was that girl never going to bring him his food?

A quick step sounded outside the yurt; the felt opened to admit his son. Uttering no word of greeting, Keuktche spread his hands over the heat of the dung fire. He stood with legs well apart, his feet encased in black felt boots the up-turned toes of which showed the white felt soles. A mystic talisman worked in green wool ran along the top of each boot. He was tightly girthed around the waist, making the skirts of his sheepskin coat flare foppishly, an effect further emphasized by slender hands and wrists that protruded beyond the deep cuffs of lamb's wool. His black hair hung to his shoulders unplaited; he tossed it back from his face with an almost girlish gesture as he looked around the tent.

"Have you given that Tonguz girl to Yulun as I ordered?" he asked.

Minglig ignored the question and with a touch of asperity in his lowered voice said, "I have just been thinking over the mess you got us into yesterday. What's behind it all—what *are* you planning? What does the boy Kisil know about you that I don't—that you wish his death so ardently?"

"I care not whether that redheaded bastard lives or dies. What is to be will be. Ask me no more. It's best that you know nothing—it might be safer!"

The old man digested this in silence. If . . . if Keuktche

were in some plot against the khan, and the outcome were successful, Keuktche might be unconsciously furthering Minglig's secret ambitions—but Keuktche mustn't know that.

Minglig looked up. "What do you want with that Tonguz? Is she part of your plans? Do you want her as a spy in the khan's household?" He said "spy," but an uglier word flashed in his mind: "assassin"!

"Perhaps—and perhaps I wish to use her as bait for Temujine. That young cock will soon begin to crow. You give the girl to his mother—as a token of good will, if you like. I have given the girl instructions—she dare not disobey me!"

"Do as you like," Minglig said. "I want no hand in plots. All I want is peace and quiet, yet, through your foolishness of yesterday, I've got to find a white camel for sacrifice. And for appearance's sake you had better join me in fasting."

"I'll never intercede for Yesukai—nor even appear to."

"Then you are a fool! You got us into this mess! You'll do as I say—if you want that Tonguz."

Keuktche thought for a moment. "Perhaps you're right, in this instance. Perhaps it would be better, for the sake of appearances . . . perhaps it would be better for my plans. . . ."

"Your plans!" Minglig scoffed. "Don't expect me to set any broken bones if you are thrown off the horse you have chosen to ride."

Keuktche's scornful laugh rang with self-confidence. "Don't worry—I won't need your help."

He picked up his hat. The felt closed behind him and his step faded into the distance.

Minglig chuckled. Another plan had just come into his mind. Fear of the spirits could be the only hold that Keuktche had over that girl. Two could play at that game; Minglig could also inspire fear, and, moreover, he could satisfy a woman—which Keuktche could not. His face wrinkled in anticipation. He crossed the tent and searched among his medicines for an aphrodisiac. Hearing a step, he hurried back to his bed. It would be amusing to have her as his spy—to have her report to him before going to Keuktche.

The slave girl sidled into the yurt on bound feet, carrying a steaming bowl. She still seemed intent on tantalizing him.

As she leaned languorously over him to set down the bowl, her upward glance was provocative.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," he cackled.

"'Tis you who are to blame," she replied demurely, but behind his back she stuck out her tongue.

"Blame? I?" He pretended surprise. "How am I to blame, O daughter of subtlety?"

"Am I a *chilagon*—a stone that has no feelings?" she parried.

Minglig raised a surprised eyebrow. Perhaps Keuktche was wrong. Perhaps this girl was not desirous of such unripened fruit as Temujine. Perhaps she preferred a man of experience like the celebrated shaman Minglig Etchigue. Oh, this was going to be amusing!

"Eckh!" he laughed, smacking her buttocks. "Get us wine!"

17

YULUN

THE KHAN Yesukai had slept ill. Lying beside Yulun, he thought about the treason he had just discovered.

He again thought of the daring plan that had come to his mind on the eve of the council, the plan of treating with the Emperor of the Kin, exposing to him the counterplot of Sung and Hia and convincing him that he wished to move farther west and, if given a free hand, would exterminate a few enemies first. In the light of the next day it had seemed impossible. It would need the cooperation of Yulun, and Yulun . . .

As if attuned to his thoughts, the voice of Yulun suddenly broke the lonely silence of the night. "The wise man would share his burden to lighten his load. You are troubled, Yesukai, you do not sleep." Her hand sought his and clasped it to her breast. "Why is your mind shut to me, husband? Can I not share your troubles as well as your bed?"

Unaware that she was awake, Yesukai was surprised into silence for a moment. Then his pent-up feelings betrayed him into blurting out questions, which as he uttered them seemed

inconsequential. "Will you ever forgive me for seizing you the way I did? Do you still regret Targoutai?"

"Targoutai?" He felt her movement as she turned her head toward him. "Targoutai?" she repeated in quiet amazement, incapable for the moment of further speech. She thrust aside the hand which she had gathered to her breast; leaning on her elbow, she searched his face with an unbelieving glance. "Do you mean to say, my lord, that after all these years—after all the children I have borne you—that *that* thorn still pricks your conscience so that you cannot sleep?" Unable to see his face in the darkness of the yurt, she sank back to lie quietly beside him. Her grip tightened on his hand.

"Because you have borne my children does not mean that you have forgiven me for your abduction."

"But I have borne your children gladly—" her voice sounded bewildered and hurt—"even asking, as I recollect. . . . And Temujine, your heir, I love above all the others. You must know that, 'Sukai."

It was so long since he had heard that name in that tone of voice, so long since she had treated him in any but a formal way as one speaking respectfully to her lord and master, that his arm went around her, gathering her to his breast.

She nuzzled against him. "Silly 'Sukai. I hate the very name of Targoutai. Since talking to that girl, Cholan, I am even more thankful for the impulse that led you to save me from such a monster and take me for yourself. Why did you do it, 'Sukai?"

"Devilment, perhaps—and the sight of your Chinese porcelain loveliness."

"Porcelain? That didn't last long. I soon became as brown and tough as any nomad woman. No wonder that your love didn't last."

"My love? It was your love that never awakened—that is, for me."

" 'Sukai, how can you stretch that bow of untruth? Why, I have loved you since . . . since—well, since two days after you took me. And I have loved and admired you ever since."

"Yet you have thrust other women upon me and urged me to wed them—women less favored than yourself."

Yulun's body shook with laughter. "Less favored? Why, of course! I would not want them to supplant me in your affections. Surely you, a Mongol, realize that for prestige alone you need wives and many children—more than I could possibly bear you. A khan, father of his people, must prove himself virile. And what would my own kin think if they heard you had but one wife? But surely, 'Sukai, it is not thought of that ancient rape—the fruit of which was Gesikie—or doubt of my love for you that has kept you awake this night. Is it not yesterday's events that . . . ?"

Yesukai sighed. "Yes and no. Yet it seems as if my troubles have stemmed from that oft-told tale. My doubts—well, you do seem to favor the disturbing elements among my people, men like Minglig and Keuktche, for instance." He hesitated to go on.

"From policy, 'Sukai. You are so stubborn and ox-headed at times that you seem to ignore any other feelings or ideas but your own. At such times you are impatient and do not act with your usual wisdom." She clung closer and her voice dropped. "As for me, little you know of the many nights . . . nights when I have not shared your bed, and have lain awake, fearful, longing to hear your voice at dawn and know you were still safe."

With the utmost surprise Yesukai heard her go on.

"You have so many enemies, and yesterday you needlessly called down the wrath of the spirits upon your head—or so it seemed to me. Yet, I am glad you saved that youth—I like him and that girl wife of his."

"Yet you aided Keuktche and seemed to take his side!"

"Only to placate him and Minglig—and the spirits they serve. It is my way of serving you, who seem so intolerant of both. I seek to appease the spirits and turn their wrath from you by . . . by kindness and respect for their servants on earth."

Yesukai remained silent. How much did Yulun know? Did she have any suspicion of a plot against his life? Happy and delighted he was at the breaking down of the barriers between them, still he wondered how much to tell her.

" 'Sukai, I think you ought to try to be more tactful with

the shamans. You set Temujine a bad example by your scorn, and Temujine—unless he is a big strong man, like his father—may need the help of Minglig or even Keuktche." She hesitated. "Even if you don't fully believe in the *kams*, at least your people believe, and you should conform."

The icy finger of suspicion again touched Yesukai's heart, freezing the confidence he was about to impart. "A leader should lead," he answered dryly.

"Yes, if he has somewhere to lead his people." She felt him stiffen and draw away; now she was frightened and she clung to him.

"Forgive me, 'Sukai. It is only because I love you so much and fear for you so desperately that I have presumed to offer my lord advice and have been guilty of such unwifely conduct."

She burst into tears and the sobs that racked her still slender frame reminded him of that first night . . . thirteen . . . fourteen years ago. With little pity or understanding had he then taken her in his arms—with love and understanding he enfolded her now. "It is I who ask your forgiveness. I did not know you cared so much or thought so much about our welfare."

The floodgates were opened, the barriers swept away. Like newfound lovers they confided and without reservations Yesukai poured his troubles at Yulun's feet.

With only an occasional interjection she heard him through. Resolutely she dried her tears and with enforced calmness whispered her approval of his plans—approval of all save any suggestion of leniency to Keuktche, who, she hissed, should be put to death immediately.

It was now Yesukai's turn to urge the danger of alienating the tribesmen by putting Keuktche to death merely on the unsupported evidence of Kisil and Cholan. "Give him the plains to gallop over and he'll surely stumble in some hole and break his neck," Yesukai said, laughing grimly.

Minglig, they both agreed, was not implicated in any way. Some of the potential troublemakers should be sent away to distant duties, accompanied by men of whose loyalty they felt sure.

Yulun pressed to be sent immediately to the Emperor of the Golden Enclosure, regardless of the depth of snow in the passes.

Yesukai, pleased with her ready acceptance and approval of his plans to checkmate the confederation against him, was now loath for her to leave his side immediately. "I am like a traveler thirst-tormented by the desert's burning sands who stumbles across an unexpected oasis. I must drink my fill—you must not leave me . . . yet."

It was a happy but resolute woman who left her lord's bed to return to her own yurt.

"The khan would sleep late this morning," she cautioned the household.

18

FATHER AND SON

BUT YESUKAI'S MIND was too active to let him sleep. Soon after Yulun had quit his bed, the khan sent for Temujine to ride with him. Once out of sight, he opened his mind to his son.

"The warning of Kisil Bahatur and the disclosures of his young wife have indeed uncovered a conspiracy that, I must confess, I had but little suspected. I have tried to untangle this web of intrigue, this mesh of plot and counterplot, and to that purpose have talked it over with your mother, pledging her to secrecy as I now pledge you."

Temujine was frankly astonished at his father's interpretation of the evidence brought by Kisil and Cholan and of the possible ramifications of the plot against him.

"If indeed our shamans are against us, then our situation is bad—they have such a hold on all the clans," Temujine said soberly.

"Your mother and I both agree that Minglig Etchigue is not in this plot. But Keuktche I cannot understand. As his father's ultimate successor to spiritual power among the clans, what has he to gain? That he hates me is evident, and he is dangerous in that, apart from his hold over the super-

stitions of men, his following is among the youth, the younger men who are always restless and desirous of change."

"His hold is only among certain ones." Temujine's answer was accompanied by a scornful laugh.

"You boys haven't enough to do, apparently." The khan rode as if lost in thought. Then abruptly he shortened his rein, pulling up his horse's head. "Up till now, Temujine, I admit I have not taken seriously your idea of forming a *keshak* or bodyguard. I thought it a boyish game of playing the warrior. But now I think the idea is good. But you need a leader, someone both older than yourself and young enough to be one of you, someone who can think and plan, someone whom the boys will look up to, someone we can trust to serve under you faithfully. For one day, my son, you will sit on the white horsehide and will, perforce, have to remain among the tents to direct and control the strategy. Such a guard of devoted companions, if they are under wise and trusted leadership, will be a powerful weapon in your hands."

Temujine shook his head doubtfully. "Surely I have heard you say that a leader should lead! Would you have me buy my safety with the lives of my friends?"

"Yes!" said Yesukai emphatically, "for he who directs the strategy is greater than he who draws the bow. That is what a leader is for, and a wise leader chooses trusted men to be his sword and buckler. Now that I have proclaimed you my heir, this will be known as your bodyguard. But you are young, you need a captain. Perhaps this Kisil . . . he is about five years your senior and the oldest of your companions . . . what think you of him?"

"He owns two horses that are equal to your best, Father. He also has this idea planted in his head that he was sent by the Everlasting to protect me. *Tsa, tsa—"* Temujine's head nodded— "the idea is good!"

"You think your companions will readily accept him as your choice for captain?" Yesukai asked.

"With horses such as he has, they certainly will. Already they admire him for his bravery, and with that stallion of his he will always win the horse races, though I think I am the better hunter and I could trick him at wrestling."

Yesukai laughed. "Besides hunting—which indeed is important—and wrestling and horse racing, I trust your activities will be also something of a military nature, with a purposefulness that has hitherto been lacking. Seriously, I look to you to wean some of these youths from Keuktche's side."

"We will—but is that all, my father? Have you no other plan to avert the danger that will come with spring?"

The khan nodded grimly. "Yes, I have a plan, one so secret that I hesitate to disclose it even to you. Yet as my heir you should know all the inner workings of my mind. My plan is to send word to the Emperor of the Kin that Taijiut and Tatar—Targoutai and Keuktche—intend to betray him and are already in league with Hia and the Sung. I will ask for treaty with the Golden Enclosure and give them all they ask—that is, for now. I'll acknowledge the emperor's sovereignty over these plains. And I'll ask that if the Kin army cross the pass next spring they attack the Tatars and not the Mongols!"

Temujine slapped his thigh. "That's a piece of meat that would choke the gullets of both Taijiut and Tatar—did they but know, and that is where, my father, I think you err. Let them know that you have discovered the plot and that you have sent to the Emperor of the Kin. Surely that would nip their plotting in the bud and we could look for a more peaceful spring."

Yesukai slowly shook his head. "I have not sufficient proof. What I *think* is not proof—it is only surmise. If it were true, and I disclose my hand, they might attack at once, without the aid of the Kin. That would not suit my purpose. I need time, time to organize, time to make fresh treaties, and with that in mind I propose that you and I ride soon to seek the aid of Kungrad against Tatar."

Temujine's face lighted up with enthusiasm. "We'll take my new bodyguard—it will be good training. But whom will you send to the emperor?"

"Who could be better than your lady mother? Is she not related to the Kin?"

"You would send my mother?" Temujine's face reflected his surprise.

Yesukai laughed. "We will *say* that she is coming in the spring. And certain of my sons—and my daughter, Imperial Grace, in the hope that she will be found worthy to be included among his concubines. Whether they will be sent is another matter. We seek to gain time. Obviously, to the emperor, a lady of such high degree as your mother could not travel across the desert and through the passes in the depth of winter. He could not expect more than my trusted emissary now."

"Who?"

"Muhuli," said Yesukai as he turned his horse's head toward the camp. "Muhuli will accompany us when we go to seek alliance with Dai Sechen of the Kungrads. Then I will send him with my words to the Emperor of the Golden Enclosure."

19

THE RIDE TO DAI SECHEN

IT WAS a good song, Kisil thought approvingly, as Yesukai's minstrel, Arghassun the lute player, finished his song with a flourish and the listening group around the fire shouted in acclaim. He looked across to Cholan who sat between the lady Yulun and the khan's eldest daughter, Gesikteng, called affectionately, Gesikie. Cholan's face glowed with pride as Gesikie snatched Subotai from his mother's arms and held him up to share the applause. Gesikie had become very friendly with Cholan and seized every opportunity to take Subotai in her arms.

To avoid any semblance of urgency, the khan had brought along his family for the first day of travel. They had encamped that night in a valley, the yurts having been set up by an advance party and a parting feast prepared. To Kisil's gratification he and Cholan had been invited to the khan's tent and, to his astonishment, the khan's minstrel had sung the song of Cholan's rescue and the birth of Subotai. Then, to cap all, the khan had suddenly announced Kisil's appointment as captain of the Prince Temujine's bodyguard.

Yesukai raised his horn drinking cup with both hands. "May warmth be never absent from your bed, Kisil Bahatur, and may that warmth breed many such fine sons to honor you!" Then turning to his son, the khan again raised his horn. "May you, Temujine, be as fortunate in your choice of wife as your friend Kisil whose deeds we have just heard sung!"

"Ha!" Kisil drank deep to that. By the Blue Sky, he had indeed been fortunate! Cholan, truly, was a woman to be proud of! The song about Cholan's fortitude and the birth of Subotai would be sung round many a campfire in the years to come. Now, as captain of Temujine's bodyguard of young braves, he would be leaving Cholan for a while, riding westward with the khan and his son to the land of the Keraits.

"Ho, ho!" Kisil laughed. "Life is indeed good for those who seize it boldly with both hands!"

The next day farewells were made, the families returning to the Mongol ordu. The khan and his party galloped up the westward slope and from the summit took one last look back at the others plodding east.

They rode at a fast pace across a snow-covered plateau, then descended into a valley. By the next day they were out of the hills and riding a southeasterly course across the plains, though now their gait was more leisurely.

Yesukai, who rode with falcon on wrist, called Kisil to his side. "The young prince—" he nodded to where Temujine coursed impatiently ahead— "has taken to you strangely, Kisil Bahatur. I am well pleased that it is so. He is not a youth to make friends easily. He has a quick and violent temper, particularly with those who cross his will, but he forgives easily—though I doubt if he forgets. He will hold tenaciously to anything he considers his, and woe betide the man who tries to take ought from him!" The khan hesitated for a moment, then went on. "You must try to protect him from himself as much as from his enemies, Kisil Bahatur. It will not be easy, and there may well be times when he will hate you as fiercely as now he loves you!"

Kisil nodded. "It will not be easy, lord, to cross that fierce spirit."

"Indeed it will not. But you may have a greater influence

on him than have older, wiser men—or his lady mother."

"You speak, lord, as if your spirit were preparing to leave your body." Kisil looked at the khan with wondering eyes.

The khan laughed bitterly. "I have enemies, many enemies, who seek my life because they do not understand all I purpose for their good and for the good of all nomad people. Some are not sympathetic to my aim of uniting the tribes under one banner. Blind fools that they are, they cannot see that alone each petty tribe can be broken like an arrow, but that many such arrows bound together would be too much for one man's hand to grasp and snap across his knee—even if that man were an emperor."

Kisil nodded in understanding as the khan went on: "Some there are who resent our princely descent from the Borjiguene and resist our demands for the khan's tithe of ox and sheep, camel and horse. Some there are, as you well know, who have a personal feud with me of long standing."

Yesukai rode on silently. Kisil remained at his side.

"Twelve years ago," Yesukai resumed, "I pledged the cup with Toghrul, the khan of the Christian Keraits, so that we became brothers. Temujine is now the adopted son of Toghrul. In that way I have fortified us on the west. Now we ride to make alliance in the south, for all across the northern horizon I seem to have only enemies. These, perhaps, we could face with some confidence if only there were someone to check the Tatars at our backs."

Riding day after day, Kisil was a listener to many such talks as Yesukai expounded his policies to his young son.

"We Mongols," Yesukai explained, "are strong only because we are mobile. That is how we have survived. We don't build cities, or wall in lands, or acquire possessions that tie us down to one place to protect them. Our home is where we pitch our felt tents. Our herds and the grass on these plains provide for all our needs: food, fuel, clothing and shelter. The enemies of our nomad peoples must always be those who tear up rich grasslands and then slave endlessly to grow crops, the best of which they must sell or barter for their other needs. They rob the soil of its goodness, then the winds rob them of the soil and no man is the gainer but

all mankind is the poorer. Their crops become poor and they grow sickly, while for nomads the plains provide our meat and milk and we can barter the surplus of our herds for grain, silks and such cunning weapons as their smiths manufacture."

"Unless we raid them and take from them such things as we need!" Temujine interjected.

The khan nodded. "That is why, many generations ago, the black-haired ones built a great wall around their land to keep us out, but many tides of horsemen have swept over the wall to take of their wealth—"

"—and to capture their women!" Temujine interrupted.

The khan smilingly agreed. "They try to protect themselves with great armies of foot soldiers, which our archers on horseback easily surround and destroy at a distance, although we are but a hundredth part of their numbers. It is only when we dismount and attack their cities on foot that we are defeated."

"Or when they employ other nomad tribes like the Tatars to fight us," Temujine growled.

"Yes, that is why I try to bind all these nomad tribes into one confederation. If we could only unite, like a scourge we could sweep these black-haired tillers of the soil from the earth."

"You may remember, my lord," Kisil ventured, "my telling you Tatengri the shaman prophesied that Turk and Mongol blood would mingle and would sweep in a blood-red tide over the earth."

"I have heard it prophesied many times," Yesukai answered gravely. "Who knows but it may be you, Temujine, who is destined to be the scourge?"

Temujine's face flushed and his fist pounded the high pommel of his saddle. "It will be! I shall conquer them and transport their wealth back to our yurts. We shall press their best horses between our knees, their camels shall bear our burdens, their fairest women will lie in the tents of my warriors—warriors like Kisil and my bodyguard!" Uttering a fierce shout, he galloped ahead, pursued by his companions.

20

THE GRAY-EYED BURTE

DAI SECHEN, lord of the Kungrads, held a great feast to celebrate the khan's arrival.

Temujine had insisted that his chief of bodyguard be admitted among the important ones who would be entertained in the Kungrad chieftain's tent. So Kisil swaggered in beside Muhuli, behind Yesukai and his son. For this important occasion the Kungrad's wives had strewn the floor with rich rugs, bright in hue and wondrous of pattern. Silks lined the latticed walls on which hung a veritable armory: curved scimitars, spears, bows and curiously wrought bow cases with matching quivers of leather and carved ivory; broad-bladed knives and needle-point poniards. On pegs outthrust from a center pole hung helmet and breastplate of leather, so painted and lacquered that they reflected the gleam of fire and flaming wick.

Around the wall several wooden chests displayed fearsome dragons carved in their tops and sides—dragons with ivoried inlay for eyes that stared ferociously at Kisil as if daring him to take the prey that the craftsmen had carved between their grasping talons. On some of the chests stood objects of priceless jade, heavy yet wrought with delicacy, cold but smooth to his touch. These furnishings held Kisil spellbound until the steaming dishes of mutton were brought in and laid before them on the ground.

The two chieftains sat together. Muhuli and the two elderly captains who would accompany him to the northern court of China sat next to Yesukai, while two elders of the Kungrad's council sat by Dai Sechen. Adjoining them to complete the circle sat Temujine, Kisil and the three eldest sons of the Kungrad lord. Behind Dai Sechen and to his left, three of his wives sat patiently awaiting their turn at the mutton when the men had finished, while their children wriggled and squirmed in an impatient circle behind the feasting men.

"Now, friends, fill your bellies!" Dai Sechen cried. "I warrant you all lost fat on your long ride down here."

Each man reached forward, seized a piece of meat, bit into it and with a sharp knife dissected it within a hairsbreadth of his nose. They ate noisily, greedily, as men eat when they know not when or whence the next meal will come. The horn cups were filled and refilled with kumiss or rice wine; they drank deep, the younger men pulling one another's ears in jovial pretense of making their mouths wider, while their bellies belched in customary approval of the goodness of the fare provided by their host.

Yesukai and Dai Sechen withdrew a little from the circle and were soon—from the snatches Kisil could hear—discussing politics and war. Temujine and the Kungrad youths were boasting of their exploits, all of which paled into insignificance beside his own—so Kisil thought. By the Everlasting, life was good! Never had his skin been so tight, never had his heart been so full of love for all men. He peered around the circle—never had his head floated off his shoulders like this before. There's good old Yesukai, and that little turkey cock arguing his head off is Temujine. He must be losing his argument; he's getting angry. Now he's mounting his high horse; now he's very much the khan's heir. I'd best thrust in my spear and call a halt to the argument. "Listen, boys—" Kisil wagged a finger in front of his nose—"listen while I tell you how I got my horse and wife back from that old Taijiut rascal, Targoutai."

He soon had the Kungrads' attention, drawing their fire from Temujine and giving that lad time to cool down and reflect. The children behind them crowded closer to listen to Kisil's boasting, forgetting their hunger for the moment. But one gray-eyed little maid of great beauty was not impressed with either Kisil's importance or his exploits. She was impatient for her turn at the remains of the big dish of mutton, and slipping between Kisil and Temujine, she took advantage of the men's interest in Kisil's recital to filch a piece of fat. In her haste she stumbled against Temujine who caught her in his arms.

He held her for a moment, apparently much struck by

her beauty and childish charm. Then imperiously he demanded her name.

"I am Burte—and he's my father." She nodded toward Dai Sechen. She slipped from Temujine's hands and faded into the background.

Temujine's eyes followed her. At first she was indifferent to his gaze, but when she had finished her piece of meat, she smiled. Presently Temujine got up and went over to Burte. Taking her by the hand, he led her before his father. "I want this girl for my wife," he gravely announced.

A hush fell over the tent. Yesukai looked pleased and with raised eyebrows glanced at Dai Sechen, who also smiled approvingly.

"How old is Burte, wife?" Dai Sechen asked.

"Only nine grasses have passed, lord, since she was born," the woman replied.

"She is not old enough for marriage—"

"Then I shall come for her later," Temujine announced proudly, and in a more conciliatory tone he added, "that is, if you will approve of our betrothal now, O Father of Burte."

Dai Sechen stroked his chin; there was an amused twinkle in his eye. His face suddenly sobered as he looked at Temujine as if he had seen a vision. He seemed awed and at a loss for words.

"What says Dai Sechen to my son?" Yesukai asked. He tried to make his voice sound indifferent but Kisil detected the exultation in it. Temujine had indeed pulled off a masterpiece of strategy.

Dai Sechen answered Yesukai gravely, "He is a proper youth, of lordly bearing and with an imperious nature. A spirit speaks to me, and whispers of the harvest that will come from this union of our children. We must consult the astrologers and, if their auguries are favorable, I approve."

Burte excitedly jumped up and down while Temujine still held her hand. "Come for me soon, my lord," she piped, "come for me soon. I'll hurry up and become a woman for you and I would like a white pony."

Her last remark eased the tension. Everyone laughed heartily. Kisil sprang to his feet, threw his girdle over his

shoulder and knelt before Burte and Temujine. "Little Princess," he said, "I am your lord's sword and shield, his felt to keep off the chill winds of adversity, his dog to lie at his feet and die for him if need be. This have I sworn and this I swear to be to you once you become his wife, if it so please him."

Kisil looked up at Temujine and saw approval gleam from excited eyes. Temujine gripped Kisil's shoulder, jerking him to his feet. "It pleases me well, Kisil Bahatur. Your words ring true as steel." To Burte he said, "This man has been sent by the Everlasting to watch over me. He is my brother."

Word of the betrothal sped swiftly through the tents and an excited crowd gathered outside the chieftain's tent, shouting their approbation and demanding to see the affianced pair. The flare of torches illuminated the darkness; a fire was soon blazing, around which both Mongol and Kungrad stamped, pounding the ground.

The next day Yesukai and the Kungrad chief met in serious talk.

"The soothsayers confirm my premonition of last night," said Dai Sechen. "They prophesy that great dangers threaten these children, yet these dangers will be overcome and from your son's seed will spring a line of kings destined to rule the earth." He laughed, but awe sounded in his voice.

Yesukai laughed in answer. "It seems, O Lord of the Kungrads, that you and I have nothing much to say about what is already written in the stars. If the son is to be greater than the father it may account for the fact that my own shaman keeps my destiny closely veiled from me."

So the alliance sought by Yesukai was now more readily approved by Dai Sechen. He listened gravely to Yesukai's fears and his plans to thwart his enemies.

"These Kin," Dai Sechen said, and spat on the ground, "do not intend to attack you in any strength, of that I am sure. Why should they, if promises can get Taijiuts and Tatars to do it for them?"

Yesukai ruffled like a grouse. "But why should they ask any to attack me?" he broke in hotly. "Was it not the Kin

who gave my grandfather the hereditary title of Khan of the Northern Steppes? Why should they do that if—"

"You already know the answer to that," Dai Sechen said with a smile. "You would be no true Mongol if you had not turned over that stone and carefully looked at the underside."

Yesukai's anger melted in a sheepish grin. "Yes, I sometimes think they give us nomads titles to arouse envy in the breasts of other chieftains, O Keeper of the Outer Wall!"

Dai Sechen's laugh showed his appreciation of the thrust. "Yes, they can be generous with titles when it suits them. But, perhaps they now fear you grow more ambitious. No doubt word has been taken long ago to the emperor of your plans to unite our tribes into one nation. That alone would be reason enough."

"Your words echo my own thoughts," Yesukai said soberly. "To go back over the ground we have grazed, I repeat that I don't think the Kin will move out from the Wall in any great strength. They have, no doubt, spurred on the Tatars with fulsome promises of support, and may send a token force. You have blood ties with the Tatars?" Yesukai ventured.

"Yes, and thus I know they fear the Kin, being more in their path than you Mongols. I will do what I can to point out to them the folly of attacking you at the instigation of the Taijiuts."

"What think you of my plan of sending Muhuli to the emperor?"

Dai Sechen pursed his lips. "Good—if he can convince the Kin that the Sung princes are planning to attack when he moves his armies north—but, as I have said before, I am sure the Kin has no intention of doing that. Your chief danger, to my way of thinking, is treachery from within."

Both men sat in silence, then Dai Sechen went on: "If you like I will send one of my sons with Muhuli to carry my word also. 'Tis best to face things openly. Never doubt that the emperor will hear that you have been with me seeking aid. His spies are in our midst as they are in all the tribes. We know! As Keepers of the Outer Wall we are not blind to their comings and goings." He laughed away his

seriousness and, jumping to his feet, cried, "Enough of politics—let us hunt!"

A day or so later Muhuli and his companions were sent on their way, and when the betrothal had been completed with formality Yesukai prepared to depart homeward.

Temujine, however, completely enamored of Burte, insisted on remaining behind that he might become better acquainted with her. Somewhat loath, Yesukai agreed to this plan, but insisted that Kisil and the older youths remain with Temujine. To this plan Dai Sechen gave his hearty approval.

Calling Kisil to his side, Yesukai charged him to maintain careful guard over his son.

"O Khan," Kisil replied, "when you appointed me captain of his guard, I swore on the iron and salt to serve him faithfully, without thought of gain or honor, to my own harm and detriment as it well might be. This oath will I keep until such time as he releases me from it. For when he reaches manhood and sits on the white horsehide in your stead, then will he have the authority to reject me, if he wishes. Till such an ill day dawns I will remain true to my oath."

"Yet," said Yesukai, and his voice was almost pleading, "if he were ever foolish enough to dismiss you, I ask you to promise me that even then you would serve him, in spite of himself."

Kisil looked the khan in the face. He drew his sword and touched his tongue to the point. "I swear on the iron so to do," he said quietly.

Satisfied with the outcome of his mission, Yesukai rode away.

The daily routine of the Kungrad encampment differed but little from what Kisil had experienced in Yesukai's ordu. Every day Burte and other young girls joined the youths, hunting with them in the deep snow, showing them the best fishing places and helping to break holes in the ice of frozen streams. And daily Kisil accompanied them, mounted on Babor, enjoying their fun but never relaxing his vigilance and never ceasing to think of Cholan and his son. Many were the veiled glances, many were the girlish voices raised in song

and laughter to attract him. But Kisil was on duty and never stirred from Temujine's side, much to the latter's annoyance at times.

Thus passed a long month of winter, until the day when an exhausted messenger rode into the Kungrad encampment, calling for Temujine.

Yesukai's enemies had prevailed at last. The khan was dead!

The sun's shadow had not moved a foot's pace on the ground before Temujine and his companions were in the saddle, making for the Mongol city of tents that lay pitched between the headwaters of the two rivers that flowed from Burkhan-Kaldun.

Kisil's heart was heavy with grief and foreboding. With Yesukai dead what would be Targoutai's next move? Would he seize the Mongol pastures—and Cholan?

21

CHOLAN AND PURE GOLD

TO CHOLAN, used to women without authority like her mother, the energy of Yulun was amazing. During her lord's absence she ruled with a firm hand. Day after day she rode far afield visiting the chiefs of clans and becoming better acquainted with their wives. With Yesukai's chief herdsmen she rode the ranges to inspect the herds. Her unexpected appearances would urge the hunters to greater effort; at her prompting they rode farther afield after game, although the snow had come at last.

Some there were who grumbled that the khan's wife drove harder than the khan, that she was more exacting in collecting the tithe, and they wondered what particular flea was biting her when she ordered the arrow makers to double their output. Cholan, like the other women of the household, was kept busy stripping sinews for bowstrings in addition to her everyday tasks. While her companions grumbled and wondered, Cholan thought she knew something of the reason behind Yulun's feverish activity, but having been

warned to say nothing of threatened war or plot, she kept silent.

With Kisil away, Cholan had been asked to share her tent with a Chinese slave girl whom Minglig had recently presented to Yulun to aid in the household tasks. But the girl had evidently been pampered and was little used to such strenuous work as fell to the daily lot of a nomad woman. "Pure Gold" she said her name meant. Frequently at night Pure Gold disappeared, returning the next morning somewhat tired and dispirited. Cholan wondered if Minglig had made only half a gift, giving Yulun the girl's services by day, but reserving her nights for his own purposes.

At least, that had been Cholan's thought until one evening she saw Pure Gold talking in the shadow of Minglig's yurt with a figure in a tall pointed hat. Keuktche? But Keuktche had disappeared with the lords of the clans after the khan's council! Cholan shivered.

The day after Kisil had left, the lady Yulun had called Cholan to her side. "My lord Yesukai has asked me to keep special watch over you," she said, "as he thinks you may be in some danger."

Cholan had then spoken of her fears of Keuktche. "He may suspect that I know of his appearance at the meeting in Targoutai's camp."

"So the khan thinks, Cholan, and you had best not venture far from my yurt. No doubt Targoutai will soon hear that you are under our protection and, with both our husbands away, he will be tempted to abduct you—especially since he will believe that he is the father of your son."

After Cholan saw—or thought she saw—Keuktche in secret converse with Pure Gold, the latter's apparently aimless questions seemed to have added meaning. Her presence in Cholan's tent now seemed a menace, and Cholan's tongue was guarded as to her own affairs as well as to all questions about Yesukai's and Temujine's whereabouts and when they were expected back.

The night before Yesukai was taken ill Cholan again thought she saw Pure Gold talking to Keuktche. The little Tonguz, who always referred to herself as Chinese, had

been restless all day and more useless than usual. Her manner revived Cholan's suspicions. As darkness fell and they were preparing to go to bed, the girl suddenly left the tent. Cholan had been feeding Subotai, but on impulse, with the baby still in her arms, she followed the girl through the tents to the outskirts of the camp where she stopped. A man came riding up on horseback. Just then Subotai cried. The man looked up, touched the slave's hand, then rode rapidly away.

Pure Gold came toward Cholan. "Why must you spy on me?" she hissed. "Can I not have a lover even though I am a slave?"

It was with difficulty that Cholan kept a tremor from her voice as she improvised. "I meant not to spy on you. My son was restless from the smoke in the tent and I brought him out for the fresh air. I'm glad you have a lover. I hope one day he can buy you and make you his wife."

"That old devil would let no man buy me," the girl answered, somewhat mollified, and she nodded toward Minglig's tent. "I am terrified of him and his spirits."

"Is it Minglig you are frightened of, or Keuktche his son?" Cholan shot at her.

"Keuktche? What do you—why Keuktche?" she stammered. She burst into a torrent of Tonguz gutturals, then spoke in Mongolian once more. "I'm told he's a . . . " She used a Chinese epithet unknown to Cholan but its meaning was quite clear. "Haven't you heard he has nothing to do with women?"

"Yet Minglig is so old," Cholan ventured.

"Yet it was Minglig who bought me, and the spirits of my ancestors have appeared to me in his yurt and bade me obey him in all things." Then spite came into her voice again. "But what's that to you who have no ancestors? See you keep silent on my affairs, for Minglig will put a curse on you and yours if I ask him."

Two days later Cholan was told that the khan had been taken ill after his meal the previous evening.

By the next day Yesukai was dead.

22

THE RETURN

ALONG THE FLANK of a range of mountains Kisil and Temujine hurled themselves northward, at the head of the bodyguard. To gain time Temujine insisted on cutting across the higher plateau, only to rage in helpless fury when the deep snow forced their horses to a stumbling walk. It was hazardous country, cut and slashed into gaping gullies. Great ravines crossed one another in chaotic confusion. The setting sun threw a blood-red mantle over the snowy peaks.

They halted under the compulsion of darkness and snatched at fitful sleep. Before dawn they were in the saddle. Temujine loosed vehement outbursts against his enemies and spoke his fears: "My mother cannot hold the clans together and rule over forty thousand tents; neither can she hold the allegiance of my fighting horde. I must be at her side."

Kisil outwardly agreed, though his mind held a doubt: what difference could Temujine's presence really make? Would grown men recognize the authority of this youth?

With venom in his voice Temujine went on: "The Taijiuts and the Mergueds will likely advance their plans, now my father is dead, to seize power and pastures for themselves. They may not wait for spring."

"Yet," Kisil suggested, "you now have alliance with both Kerait and Kungrad. They would surely help, did you but call on them. I wondered that you did not ask Dai Sechen before we left."

"Never will I ask their aid!" Temujine flared. "It was Dai Sechen's place to offer it. As for the khan of the Keraits, Toghrul, might he not, being my father's *anda,* assume the role of guardian and himself take possession under the guise of giving aid? No! Never shall it be said that Temujine owes ought to any man, be he Kerait or Kungrad. With these bare hands will I seize and hold the power!"

Kisil thought such pride a threadbare mantle to don when storms came howling around one's ears. "Yet," he ventured,

"it was for such dire straits that your father made these alliances. Muhuli has gone to the Kin. Your mother, too—is she not close to them in blood?"

"Do you think she would invoke their aid and thus disclose our poverty?"

To independence like that Kisil had no answer.

Riding as if a demon possessed him, Temujine pressed his horse relentlessly. Kisil gave many an anxious glance behind him; their escort was thinning out as rider after rider was forced to drop out of the running.

By the fifth day Kisil and Temujine rode alone. The sorrel mare ridden by Temujine was now in sore distress. The young khan was forced to stop, and with burning resentment in his eyes he looked at Babor. To Temujine's order that they exchange horses, Kisil turned a deaf ear. "The spirit of your father would deal evilly with me were I to let you go on alone," Kisil protested.

In a flash Temujine strung arrow to bow. "Give me the stallion!" he demanded, "or—"

Kisil faced the angry boy calmly, though the war shaft was aimed at his heart. "Once I heard you declare, O Temujine, that to be wise is to be strong. You may kill me, but will that be wisdom? When you have foundered Babor in your fury, will you go on alone—on foot? No, my lord, even Babor needs rest."

Ignoring the menace of the shaft, Kisil dismounted. He quietly unbridled Babor and slackened the girths. "You, too, need rest," he said, and smiled at Temujine. "I, your dog, will keep watch."

The next few days they rode at a slower pace, the sullen Temujine begrudging the time spent in resting and feeding the horses, yet accepting with surly thanks the raw flesh of such birds as Kisil was able to hit with his short bow.

When but two days' ride from the borders of the Mongol domain, they saw a few felt tents moving toward them on creaking wagons. Mounted men circled slowly moving herds spread in a wide arc on the plains in front of them. Kisil at once insisted on Temujine's changing horses with him.

"Remain here on Babor, lord," he counseled. "I will ride

to meet them on your mare. If they prove enemies, I shall likely not return. If you see me fall, then flee to your mountains on Babor."

Temujine's tired face lighted up with enthusiasm as he declared, "Well did I name you Bahatur, friend Kisil. If yonder men slay you, your services to your khan shall be sung on these plains while dung fires burn. Your son, too, shall be adopted by me."

Kisil could not help but smile to himself as he trotted to meet the oncoming riders. The young khan had such confidence. Perhaps he, Kisil, might yet grow tall as a tree in his shadow. With an assurance that he was far from feeling, Kisil rode up to the men. They halted at his approach.

"Sayn!" he greeted the leader. Then copying Temujine's boldness in the tones of a rich man addressing a beggar he demanded: "What are you named and what people are you?"

The man was taken aback by such imperiousness. "I am Bardan—but who are you that speaks like a lord?"

"Well met, Bardan! I am Kisil Bahatur, captain of Temujine the khan's bodyguard. See, yonder he awaits you!"

The men roared with laughter. "Temujine the khan? That calf?" one shouted. "We have no khan, now that Yesukai is dead—perhaps you have not heard that news?"

"I have long ears, and many sleeps ago a spirit whispered in my ears that Yesukai was dead, but perhaps I grow deaf and cannot hear aright, because I imagined I heard you say you had no khan. Temujine may be a calf, but I warn you he can bellow like a bull, as well I know. Come! He awaits you!"

Without waiting for their reply, Kisil wheeled the mare and galloped toward the spot where Temujine sat motionless on Babor. Kisil turned his head; the Mongols had not followed him and were arguing together with much waving of arms. Temujine now came galloping to meet him and as he thundered up Kisil waved him on. "Bardan!" he shouted. He urged the tired mare after the black stallion.

"What word bring you, Bardan?" Temujine asked as he pulled Babor up. "Why do you move away from our pastures?"

"Strengthen your heart, O son of Yesukai," Bardan answered gravely as Kisil, also, halted alongside, "for I have much to say that is sorrowful!" He paused, then turned to his followers as if asking for their confirmation.

"*Ai!*" they chorused. "That is so."

"We have felt the mountains tremble," Bardan went on, "for the hard stone, your father, is broken. The deepest of all wells is dry and the tribes are scattered. You have no business now, O son of Yesukai, to stay us!"

"Say you so, Bardan? Yet were you not among those lords and princes who swore fealty to me as my father's heir at his last council? What shall be said of a man who makes a promise at dawn and breaks it by nightfall?"

Bardan lowered his eyes and stood as one confused.

"My mother—?" Temujine demanded.

Bardan looked up. "The lady of iron resolution pursued the lords who deserted her; with standard in hand, and accompanied by Minglig Etchigue, she has galloped afar to recall them to their allegiance. The greater part of the lords said they refused to be governed by a woman and a child, and left to seek protection among your enemies. We would have stayed on to protect her flocks and herds, but were warned in time that Targoutai had sworn to kill you and intended raiding our valley. From the hills we watched the Taijiuts fling torches among your tents, seize women and drive off the herds. Some old and some young they slew, and now the vultures rake among the ashes."

"My brothers and sisters?" Temujine said in a faltering voice.

"We know not. Perhaps the Taijiuts took them!"

Kisil felt as if an icy hand clutched his heart. He longed to speak, but looked at Temujine, down whose face the tears were streaming.

"Why did you not stay among the hills?" he asked.

"We thought to seek protection among the Tatars, preferring them to Taijiut or Mergued. The clans are scattered like sheep without a shepherd, an easy prey for ravening wolves unless we can find a strong leader."

Temujine dashed the tears from his eyes. "You have found

him!" he stoutly declared, standing in his stirrups on the back of the tall stallion. "I, your khan, will protect you!" Then raising his voice so that all who had come up in the wagons could hear him, he declared, "Today you, my people, as well as my flocks and herds are scattered by the thieving Taijiuts. Today I am but a youth. But by the Blue Sky above, my spirit tells me that the day will come when my head shall rise above the plains like the peak of Burkhan-Kaldun! See!" he shouted, pointing to the distant peak. "The setting sun throws a purple mantle of majesty over that mighty symbol of our unconquerable race! Return then, my people, to the pastures of your fathers. As the sun rises, so shall our greatness rise. Its light shall shine on your faces and our enemies will tremble to see it. Together we shall grow great, and like a grass fire shall we sweep these plains. The world shall be ours! By Bogdo, I swear it!"

The murmur that went up from the assembled throng swelled into a great shout. Their dejection fell from them like magic. Even Kisil glowed with inward fire as he looked wonderingly at the amazing boy.

"Can a boy have such wisdom unless some great spirit fills him?" Bardan asked Kisil. Raising his voice, he cried, "The Spirit of Bogdo fills the young khan! Let us take heart. The grass now withers, but soon the sap will rise."

"Now that you come to lead us, O Temujine," another cried, "we shall leap like antelope when tigers rouse them from their sleep!"

"*Amor!* Peace!" shouted Temujine, raising his hand.

When the noise had subsided he gave orders to camp where they stood. "Tomorrow, make your way back to our mountains. Hide among the hills. I shall ride ahead to search for my mother and brothers," he declared.

"Stay with us tonight, lord," Bardan urged. "You are tired and need rest. My yurt shall give you shelter, my fire shall heat your food."

Temujine lowered his voice. "Know you how my father died? What say men of his death?"

Bardan looked troubled. "Rumor flew about the camp that he was aided to his death by unseen hands. Your lady mother

has kept her thoughts to herself—but did she not send you a messenger? What said her message?"

"*Your father's enemies have prevailed at last,*" Temujine answered in a low voice.

Bardan sucked in his breath. "Then it was by treachery—but who was behind the traitor?"

Temujine clenched his teeth. "Targoutai!" he muttered.

Kisil lay sleepless that night. Targoutai would have taken Cholan and his little son. And what vengeance would he wreak on the helpless girl? The next day as they rode northward, leaving the rejuvenated clan encamped, Kisil confided his fears to Temujine.

"You are worrying about a woman and a child!" Temujine scoffed. "You shall have other wives, Kisil Bahatur, never doubt that."

Kisil could understand Temujine's attitude. What was one woman or one child when this young prince's world was at stake. Though he felt resentment swell in him, he heard his voice in calm reply: "This woman is my wife—this child my son. He is my first-born. Her I value above all women. I risked my life for her—"

"For your horse, more likely!" Temujine mocked. Seeing Kisil's face, he quickly added, "There, I lie, and you know I lie. I am but envious of your good fortune, friend Kisil."

"*Good* fortune?" Kisil's emphasis was bitter. "To have lost wife and child?"

"But you still have your life and your horse; and so have I, so we are brothers in misfortune."

"Then let us take heart, my lord. Neither of us knows for certain that the worst has happened."

Heeding Bardan's warning that Targoutai was out hunting him, Temujine left the plains and rode carefully along snow-covered mountain paths beneath tall trees. They crossed frozen streams, heard the wild cries in mountain ravines, gazed upward to where eagle and vulture circled in the blue sky. It was a fearsome land.

They slept that night in a cave. In the morning Temujine declared they were nearing the Mongol ordu. "Soon we

shall be enjoying a dish of steaming mutton!" he promised.

Before descending into the valley, they climbed a crag that overhung the Mongol city of tents and peered cautiously through an opening among the trees that fringed the rocky ledge.

A scene of utter desolation met their eyes.

The once smiling valley that had sheltered throngs of tents lay deserted. Where fecund herds had pastured on sloping hillsides, a few straggling animals dotted the snowy wastes. Some tents still stood, but no smoke from dung fires rose in the air. The smoke holes, seen from above, gaped like open mouths. A deadly silence reigned where once the air had rung with the music of lowing herds and laughing children.

"I thought my father ruled a pack of fierce hounds, not fainthearted mongrels!" Temujine blazed. "With the shepherd gone, these lily-livered curs have deserted the fold, and with tail between their legs have crept on their bellies to join the very wolves that will devour them."

His anger burst the dam that held back the floodwaters of grief. The tears poured down the boy's cheeks as he gazed ahead with unseeing eyes.

"I thought my mother would have returned ere now," he said at last. "Surely she has not met with disaster? Surely she intends to set up the standard here and not abandon our ancestral valley to our enemies?"

Kisil turned his head away from the young khan's grief. His own heart felt like a withered stick, the sap and strength drawn from it by the certainty that he would never see Cholan or his son again.

"Bardan was right!" shouted Temujine. "The hard stone *is* broken—just as Keuktche prophesied. The deepest of all wells *is* dry, and, even as the shaman said, my father has not lived to see it."

He rose to his feet and stood on the very edge of the rocky ledge that overhung the valley. He turned his face up to the blue sky and threw his girdle over his shoulder in a gesture of submission.

"O Bogdo, Lord of the Everlasting Sky and Master of the

Absolute, may the spirits of the upper air loose the whirlwinds on my enemies and scatter them in confusion—and do Thou send me strong men!" He took a deep breath, then turned to Kisil. "Now let Targoutai beware!"

Book Three—*The Women*

23

CHOLAN AND GESIKIE

CHOLAN HAD BEEN CONFIDENT that the messenger sent to Temujine would soon bring Kisil back. For several days she remained immersed in happy anticipation of their reunion, disregarding the conflicting rumors that swept the rapidly emptying encampment. As more and more of the families deserted the banner, the city of tents dwindled. The lady Yulun, accompanied by Minglig and a few loyal followers, rode after the deserting lords to harangue them and sway them back to their allegiance. Yet Cholan felt no alarm.

She enjoyed the company of the four younger sons and two daughters left in her care. They were well guarded by fighters Yulun had left particularly to watch over them. The eldest girl, Gesikie, was a great help, spending many hours taking care of Subotai, while Juji practiced archery all day long with Targoutai's bow that Kisil had left behind.

"I shall ask Kisil Bahatur to give me this bow," he told Cholan one day.

"As if so great a warrior would give such a bow to a mere child!" scoffed Gesikie, cradling Kisil's son in her arms.

"He might," Juji answered airily, "just as he might give you the child you long to bear him!"

Gesikie flushed under her tan and her green eyes looked at Cholan apprehensively.

"Blows the wind that way, Gesikie?" Cholan asked.

"He doesn't know it," Gesikie answered quickly, "but I would be his second wife—your sister—if he would have me."

"The daughter of so great a khan could hardly be taken as a second wife by a herdless warrior," Cholan said quietly, "even if he wanted a second wife—" she flared up—"which he doesn't!"

"Kisil Bahatur is more than a warrior," Gesikie retorted, throwing her red hair over her shoulder. "Remember, he is now the captain of the khan's bodyguard and stands high in Temujine's favor, while I, alas, am no longer the daughter of a khan."

"Yet you must look higher, to strengthen your brother's hand," Cholan gently chided, ashamed of her sudden outburst of temper against this girl who was at least a year younger than herself. "The khan, your brother, must give you to some strong ally, not to the captain of his bodyguard. Besides, in the duties of this household I do not require the aid of a second wife as yet. Neither do I want another to share his bed!"

A drumming of hoofs interrupted Gesikie's reply. A rider came galloping between the tents. "Fly! Fly!" he shouted. "Targoutai is coming!"

"Targoutai!" The men left to guard them leaped to their horses and fled.

"Targoutai!" The blood drained from Cholan's face. She snatched her child from Gesikie's arms. "Our horses—"

"No time for horses—see, they come!" Gesikie pointed to a horde of riders topping a rise on the outskirts of the camp. She laughed. "Perhaps you will no longer be Kisil's wife. You may soon be sharing Targoutai's bed again—that is, if you are lucky."

"If you really love Kisil, Gesikie, you won't betray his wife and son—he would never forgive that, and your hopes of . . ."

"Promise me that if I save you from Targoutai, you will . . ."

"Yes, yes!" Cholan gasped.

"Quick!" Gesikie cried. "You must be disguised!" Her nimble fingers tore the ornaments from Cholan's hair, undid

the married woman's headdress, tumbled the hair in disarray over Cholan's face. "This hair will give you away. Now, stand still!" Before Cholan realized what she was about, Gesikie had sheared off a thick strand of Cholan's hair.

"No! Not that!" Cholan put up her hands in protest.

"Either that—or Targoutai. Which is it to be?"

Dumbly Cholan submitted to the shearing. Gesikie gathered up the hair in handfuls and tossed it on the fire. Swiftly she labored to disguise the bewildered girl. Mud was smeared on Cholan's face and hair. Over Cholan's deerskin boots Gesikie swathed strips of felt and bound their shapeless bulk with rawhide thongs. On Cholan's head she clamped a man's old felt hat. It was large and came well down on her head. From under it, tattered, muddied ends of hair stuck out grotesquely over the collar of Cholan's sheepskin coat. Gesikie surveyed her work. Cholan was transformed.

The children of Yesukai stood around gaping, while Pure Gold watched with an amused smile on her face. "And what reward do I get, if *I* don't betray you?" she asked.

Gesikie snatched up Juji's dagger. "One word from you and death will be your reward! Juji," Gesikie said, "take the children to Minglig's tent and keep watch over the Tonguz girl. Don't hesitate to kill her if she tries to call out—and keep that bow out of Targoutai's sight!" She snatched Subotai from Cholan's arms. "He is safer with me. You are my servant, remember!"

"Here comes Targoutai now!" Fear clutched at Cholan's heart. She stood with downcast head as one half-witted.

"Get out of my way, fool!" Gesikie shouted at Cholan as Targoutai came striding up with his men, and she pushed Cholan so that she fell in the mud. Targoutai went up to the felt pavilion, inside of which were some of Yesukai's wives with their children.

"Come out, Temujine!" Targoutai shouted, while his armed men circled the tent.

"The prince Temujine is not here!" Gesikie called out.

Targoutai wheeled his horse. "Where is the young cub?"

"The prince is being married to a Kungrad girl, I'm told. It will be many moons before he returns north."

The wailing of the frightened children started Subotai crying. As Gesikie rocked him in her arms she saw that Cholan had risen from the mud and was standing with her back toward them, her hunched shoulders and drooping head the very picture of oafish stupidity.

Gesikie rushed over and began pushing Cholan toward a distant tent, the felt of which was smoldering. "Quick, fool! Get my things out before they burn!" she ordered. She picked up a whip and slashed at Cholan with it.

Targoutai shouted after her, "Come back here, you who seem to know so much! Where is the lady Cholan?"

Gesikie stopped and turned to face Targoutai.

"The lady Cholan?" she echoed as if in wonderment. "That so-called lady is one mare you're too late to mount. She ran off, but an hour ago, to a refuge where she expects her husband to join her. Look, she has left her tracks for you to follow!" Gesikie pointed out tracks that led eastward, in the direction opposite to that in which she intended to flee with Cholan.

Targoutai's eyes fell on the crying child Gesikie held in her arms. "And the lady Cholan's child—does it live?" he demanded.

"You mean—your son?" Gesikie said daringly.

"Ha! So she acknowledges it as my son?"

"Oh, yes, lord!"

Targoutai's long whip crackled in the frosty air as he wheeled to follow the trail eastward. "Come away, you hunting dogs!" he shouted. "Follow me, all of you! We'll come back for some of these women later."

The Taijiuts flung taunts and coarse promises at the huddled women who watched their departure with smoldering eyes. Gesikie laughed disdainfully as she saw them ride away.

Cholan rushed up to her. "My thanks, Gesikie, but you need not have laid on so heavily with the whip. Give me Subotai." Cholan's fear had departed with the Taijiuts, Gesikie thought, as Cholan quickly asserted her authority. "Now get the children and horses, Gesikie. We must flee before they return."

Cholan saw Gesikie's face turn pale. She was staring at someone behind Cholan.

Cholan spun round and found herself face to face with Bemiji, her former captor.

"Ho, ho!" the old warrior laughed with hand on hip. "I thought so! My pretty bird fooled the lord Targoutai, but she didn't fool old Bemiji!" He laid his finger along his nose, eying Cholan with a speculative glance. Then he turned and whistled to his horse. "The lord Targoutai will give this old crow more than a horse this time. And he'll thank me for saving him a wild chase after nothing, if I can catch him." He leaped to the saddle.

Despair again gripped Cholan's heart. She gestured helplessly. But close by Minglig's tent, Juji raised a bow as Bemiji galloped past him shouting. An iron-tipped shaft sped after the exultant Bemiji and his shouts died in his throat. He swayed in the saddle and crashed to the ground, dead.

"Another horse for us!" Juji whooped, running to catch the reins.

"Get the horses, Juji, quickly!" Cholan cried. "And you, Gesikie, gather all the food you can. Hurry, we have no time to lose!"

In no time Juji rounded up Kadia and two ponies. They would have to carry double. Cholan mounted the children and started them off. Hastily she tied skin bags of dried curds to her saddle, then, with Subotai in her arms, mounted Kadia. To the women who were watching she called out a message: "If you see Kisil Bahatur, tell him we make for *my* cave. He'll know the one I mean."

The Night Ruler cast a luminous glow over the desolate plain. Stars peeped from behind the scudding clouds, their friendly, familiar gleam giving Cholan renewed hope and confidence.

At dawn's first streak she halted her little flock. She brushed the frozen snow off the children, set them on their feet and urged them to jump around. They mounted again and rode throughout the long day. That night they camped in the snow, bedding down beside the tired, hungry ponies.

The next morning they struck the river and, later, came to the lake beside which Targoutai had camped last summer. Cholan had trouble in finding the actual site under the snow, and while the children rested she circled round on Kadia.

Somewhere here, before Kisil came, she had lain in her tent awaiting Subotai's birth. Somewhere here, under the snow, lay Drombo.

At last she recognized the rock formation of the cliffs ahead. There was the valley up which she and Jhotuz had explored.

"We shall soon be there," Cholan called happily to the children as she guided them to the banks of the frozen stream that led to the cave. She and Jhotuz had walked their ponies up its shallow waters last summer.

As the sun set behind the towering hills, the narrow valley became sinister. Cholan searched anxiously for the cleft in the steep precipice through which they must pass to reach the cave. At that moment a crimson shaft from the dying sun seemed to burst from the very cliff.

"There it is!" she shouted.

Then she saw footprints in the snow. She reined in Kadia, signaled to the children for silence and pointed to the tracks. "Someone is here before us!" She lowered her voice and looked around fearfully. There was no one to be seen.

Juji dismounted and strung the bow, Kisil's bow. "Is that the way to the cave?" His hand shook as he pointed.

Cholan nodded.

"Stay here," Juji ordered. "I will go in alone."

With fear in their hearts they watched his stocky little figure climb the rocky debris that lay piled at the foot of the cliff, then disappear into the fiery glow. With sober faces they watched for Juji to reappear in the awesome gap. They held their breath, watching, waiting.

A shout! That was Juji! They heard him again. Was he calling for aid? Cholan wished for a weapon. Now he appeared running. He stopped and waved to them. "Come on up. There's only a woman here!"

A woman? Cholan's heart leaped.

In a twinkling she was off Kadia. She thrust Subotai into

Gesikie's arms. She clambered over the rocks, slipping and stumbling in her eagerness. Dashing past the surprised Juji, she sped up the gully. There, in front of the cave, stood a woman who raised a bow uncertainly at her hasty approach.

"Jhotuz!" Cholan yelled. "It's me! It's Cholan!"

She rushed, sobbing, into the astonished woman's arms.

24

TEMUJINE IS WOUNDED

THE DAY AFTER Cholan's party arrived at the cave, Juji went hunting. He was pleased that Gesikie offered to accompany him, for he wanted an audience to acclaim his skill with the bow. However, as soon as they were out of earshot of the cave. Gesikie took the opportunity to upbraid Juji bitterly for disclosing her secret desires to Cholan.

Juji, because he felt there was some truth in her words, at first sat silent on his pony. "Peace, Gesikie!" he cried at length. "Is there no small crack in your talk into which I may thrust a word? I thought the world knew your secret, as your spirit shines so strongly in your eyes when you look on Kisil. I am not the only one who knows why you desire to nurse Cholan's child in Kisil's presence—the women say it is so that he may often look on you and conceive ideas." He laughed at Gesikie's angry face. "You love him, Gesikie?"

"I would die for him," she announced simply.

Juji nodded. "But Temujine would never allow you to marry the captain of his guard. With our princely descent you must become some *noyon's* chief wife."

"I would that I were just a herdsman's daughter!" Gesikie exclaimed passionately. "Gladly would I toil all day could I but bear Kisil's child!"

Now Juji wished that he had left Gesikie in the cave, or that her tongue would remain silent. How could a man hunt? "Hist!" He quickly snatched the reins of Gesikie's pony and headed for the underbrush overhanging the ice. Suddenly he dropped the reins and slipped a bone-tipped hunting arrow onto his bowstring.

"What is it?" Gesikie whispered.

"Hush! Horses!" He pointed downstream through the bushes. A horse and a rider could be seen approaching at a walk.

"Juji—the horse is black!" Her eyes grew expectantly large.

"It's Babor!" Juji shouted, sending his pony into a trot.

"But it isn't Kisil!" she wailed.

"No, it isn't Kisil," he mimicked. "It's Temujine!"

He whooped to his brother, recklessly spurring his pony to greater speed. Babor pricked up his ears at their approach, but Temujine remained hunched in the saddle. They saw him sway.

"You are wounded, brother? There is blood on your coat."

Temujine tried to lift his head. "Arrow . . . neck," he gasped.

Gesikie leaned over and took his hand. "Kisil?" she asked.

"Taken . . . Taijiuts . . . stolen our valley."

Juji wheeled his pony alongside Babor. "Get to the other side to support him, Gesikie."

But Gesikie sat on her pony and stared with unseeing eyes. She might have been a statue carved out of rock in the middle of the river. Her pony nickered impatiently, then turned and followed the others.

When they arrived back at the cleft, Temujine slipped unconscious into the snow. Jhotuz waved the others back and, lifting Temujine in her strong arms, carried him to the cave. She placed him on her own bed, bared his throat and examined the wound. It looked ugly and was much inflamed. Under her direction Cholan quickly brought melted snow to a boil, while Jhotuz, fearing poison, sucked the bleeding gash. Jhotuz took a handful of yak wool and dropped it into the boiling water. Then she wrung the steaming wool in a piece of silk and applied it to the swollen neck.

That night Temujine recovered sufficiently to whisper to Cholan something of what had befallen Kisil and himself.

"We . . . rounding up . . . scattered herds . . . met woman, gave Kisil your message . . . found your trail . . ." Temujine's pallid face broke into a sweat and his fingers clenched convulsively.

Gesikie put a piece of ice to his burning lips. "Yes, brother, go on . . . Kisil?" she encouraged him.

"They came after us," Temujine said, laboring. "They shot arrows." He pointed to his throat. "Kisil took my mare . . . gave me Babor . . . he kept them back but . . . only had few arrows left."

"But Kisil?" Cholan urged. "Was he wounded? Is he alive?"

Temujine's eyes closed, his breathing became quieter and soon he lay as if dead.

"Get me a feather," Jhotuz said.

Gesikie rose and came back with a fistful of feathers. Jhotuz selected a soft curl of down and placed it on Temujine's lips. They watched with frightened faces. The feather lifted gently up and down and then a stertorous puff sent it flying high in the air.

"The young khan has a chest like a bull!" Jhotuz laughed reassuringly. "He'll soon be bellowing after the heifers again."

"That will be a new experience for Temujine, I think," Gesikie said thoughtfully.

Jhotuz raised her eyebrows. "So?"

"Yes . . . horses, men and weapons have been my brother's passions up till now. And even now—betrothed to a mere child of nine . . ." Gesikie shrugged her shoulders and appeared lost in thought. Presently she raised her head, her eyes staring into the distance. "He must be saved!" she said intensely.

To all but Cholan the words referred to Temujine. Only Cholan knew that Gesikie meant Kisil. "But how?" she whispered.

Gesikie turned her head and looked searchingly at Cholan. "He saved you from this same Targoutai," she said. "Can't you think of a plan?"

Cholan, dumb with a misery that seemed to paralyze all thought, shook her head.

"Then *I* can!" Gesikie rose to her feet. "I'm tired. I need rest. We'll think tomorrow." Abruptly she went to her bed at the back of the cave.

They intended to sit up to watch Temujine all night. One by one they dropped off to sleep where they sat.

Juji awoke them. Inside the cave the light was still dim, but outside the sun was just rising. Jhotuz rose quickly and, after a look at Temujine, began to heat some milk.

"Where's Gesikie?" Cholan asked.

"Gesikie?" Juji ran outside.

She was gone—and gone, too, were Temujine's knife and Targoutai's bow. They all rushed down to the horses. Kadia was missing! There, in the snow, fresh tracks led to the river. Hope and fear struck alternate blows at Cholan's heart.

"Gesikie! Gesikie!" she screamed, running along the snow-covered bank. But no answering shout came from down the frozen river.

25

CHOLAN AND TEMUJINE

THAT GESIKIE had unexpected depths Cholan had discovered in the last few days. That she could be ruthless in attaining her desires was obvious by her threat to Pure Gold. And, Cholan thought, had she not promised to aid Gesikie in becoming Kisil's second wife, there was no doubt that Gesikie would have betrayed her. If Gesikie had a plan to rescue Kisil she would carry it through.

But whatever plan Gesikie had in mind, it could depend only on Kisil's still being alive. Knowing Targoutai's cruelty and vindictiveness, Cholan was certain that her husband had already been put to death. Her hopes, at best but dim wraiths, faded.

Jhotuz shouldered the task of looking after them all. Her main care was Temujine. She was determined that she was not going to have another wounded man slip through her fingers.

The next day Temujine's fever left him. He had an iron constitution that matched his will and both soon pulled him to his feet. He was now very much the khan, and took control. To Juji's plea that he be allowed to scout toward the Taijiut encampment in search of news, Temujine turned a deaf ear. In fact he gave emphatic orders that on no ac-

count should Juji stray down the river valley in his hunting.

"Keep off the plains!" he ordered. "We want no fresh track leading here. Gesikie has done me enough ill service as it is. Our mother doubtless hides in the cave of the Tsagan Yasse. For us to attempt to join her would be to invite the destruction of us all."

About Gesikie and Kisil, Temujine had no doubts. "Kisil is dead and Gesikie—" he shrugged—"she might prefer to be dead!" Taking Cholan aside, he added, "I gave my word to Kisil Bahatur that his son should be adopted by me. I will go even further. I'll take you as my woman as long as you understand that my betrothed, the princess of the Kungrads, will bear my heirs!"

Temujine was getting well too quickly, Cholan thought. She remembered his approving appraisal of her looks when he had first met her—when he had threatened to turn Kisil over to the Taijiuts as a horse thief. She must try to hold him off till spring—until she knew for certain that Kisil was dead. After that—as well he as another! Under the young khan's wing Subotai could grow great.

But Temujine was evidently not willing to wait. When he became more demanding in his desire, she confided her fears to Jhotuz. "If I let him have his will of me, Jhotuz, and then later find Kisil is alive, it will destroy their friendship. Can't you do something?"

"The young khan is like a bull turned out among the heifers for the first time," Jhotuz said, but a seed of jealousy was ripening in her mind.

Was it for this she had sucked the poison from Temujine's wound? She felt piqued, and her professional vanity suddenly flared up; that—and something else! Yes . . . she admitted it. She, who had never believed in love—who had never felt the need for it—knew she was in love and wanted to be desired by this one youth!

Jhotuz turned to Cholan. "Having learned somewhat of ways to please men, I may be able to dull the edge of his youthful appetite and distract his attention."

"Do you think so?" There was a tinge of doubt in Cholan's voice that brought a surge of color to the face of Jhotuz.

"I thought to be free of men and their attentions," she answered primly, "for men have pursued me all my life!" She knew she wasn't being honest with herself or Cholan, yet she went on. "But for the daughter of Besoutchei and Maryam I . . . I'll sink my personal feelings—at least," she added dryly, "I can but try."

Temujine, however, seemed impervious to her blandishments. He had eyes for Cholan only; and Cholan had to frustrate his plots for catching her alone by always having one of the younger children with her. She appealed to Juji for advice.

Juji appeared much taken aback by her information. "Temujine is the khan," Juji said slowly. "If he orders you to submit, you can but obey."

"But you know what the law of the steppes is regarding adultery. If Kisil is still alive—"

"Yes," Juji agreed, "if Kisil is still alive. I'll try to interest him in hunting food—not women! If he is hungry, food will come first."

For several days Juji, unaccountably, had no success in hunting and all soon felt the pangs of hunger. This forced Temujine to take a hand and he and Juji roamed farther up the valley after game. This went on for two days. Then Temujine, as if he had come to the end of his tether, declared before them all that they would hold a wedding feast the coming night and he would take Cholan as his wife.

"It is time I became a man as well as khan! I have waited long. Besides, it is a duty I owe to a man who gave his life to save mine!" He went out to saddle Babor.

Jhotuz went to the mouth of the cave and called Juji back.

Hurriedly Cholan urged her case with Juji, begging the boy to flee with her and guide them to the Cave of the White Bones where his mother had probably taken refuge.

"Temujine but thinks to do you honor," Juji protested half-heartedly.

"But something tells me here—" Cholan pointed to her breast—"that Kisil still lives. I must know for sure, otherwise it would make for enmity between Kisil and your brother."

"She has no desire to become a second wife," Jhotuz broke in, "not even the second wife of a khan!" Then with sly insinuation she said sweetly, "She would rather wait to become your wife, Juji, if you would have her."

"Jhotuz!" Cholan rebuked her sharply, seeing the glow of enthusiasm on Juji's face.

Jhotuz laughed. She knew she had found the chink in Juji's loyalty. Quickly she told them her plan.

26

A PRISONER

KISIL GROANED as consciousness slowly seeped back into his brain. His mind fought to disentangle itself from the enveloping folds that smothered it like a roll of felt. For a moment he thought he was already being suffocated to death; that this was what it would feel like to die in the way they had promised he should die. He gasped for air and, to his astonishment, his lungs filled without hindrance. Then what—?

His head pounded and throbbed as though it were being hammered with a wooden bludgeon. To ease this dreadful pain he instinctively tried to put his hands to his head; he found he couldn't move them. What had happened? Had he no arms? Had his arms already been pulled out of their sockets by stallions? They had promised him that, too, he dimly remembered.

They . . . ? Who were they?

Sweat trickled into his eyes, making them sting. He was conscious now of a vise gripping his shoulders, raising them, while his head hung back and rested on the hard earth; his throat was bared like that of a sheep ready for the knife.

If only he could remember! A thought flashed through his mind; he tried to arrest its flight, but it was lost like an arrow in the reeds.

Reeds! He had tried to hide in the reeds after he had shot his last arrow from the back of the sorrel mare.

Sorrel mare! That was not his horse—not Babor! Yet he

had been on a sorrel mare and with a jab of his knife had sent her scurrying into the forest so that she would lead them away from him. But it had been no good; they had trailed him through the snow to the reeds that bordered the frozen lake. He must have fallen asleep through weakness and exhaustion, and there they found and bound him. But Babor—Temujine had mounted on Babor.

Temujine! Kisil's mind held tenaciously to this thread of thought. Temujine? Had he escaped?

Kisil's eyes were open, but he couldn't see. It was as dark as if he were in a roll of felt. Or had his spirit already entered the black earth? He shuddered.

Was this the end of the path that Tatengri had prophesied? He had foretold of great dangers besetting his path. Well, that was right, but he had also promised that women would wind their arms about his neck.

Women? He had only had one woman—Cholan, whom he had rescued from Targoutai.

Targoutai! Now he remembered! They were saving him for Targoutai! They had fastened a *kotylwyr,* a double ox yoke, across his shoulders upside down, lashing his wrists to each end of the yoke. No wonder his shoulders ached, his arms were numb! How many days and nights had he lain, fastened thus, awaiting the coming of Targoutai and death?

The instinct to flee made him move his legs. They weren't tied! He tried to struggle to his feet and in so doing one of his outstretched arms hit against the felt wall of a tent. The other brushed against a man's clothing.

"What is it?" a voice growled. "Do you want another blow on the head to keep you quiet?"

A blow on the head! That was it! Targoutai had returned at night and Kisil had been led before him expecting instant death. But Targoutai was in a merry mood.

"They've got you nicely trussed up—you will keep. Tomorrow or the next day I shall spend just watching you die. Oh, we'll have a merry time exacting retribution for the tricks you've played on me!"

Kisil, hoping to provoke a speedy death, kicked out and

caught Targoutai in the crotch. He saw Targoutai double up with pain, then a bolt of lightning seemed to strike him from behind. He remembered no more—until now.

His eyes were getting used to the darkness. He turned his head; a dung fire smoldered on the hearth. The wind was rising and moaning a dirge around the felt dome. He was bitterly cold and longed to stamp his feet and swing his arms. He turned his head the other way and could dimly make out the form of a man seated by him: a man whose head was bowed over his knees, asleep.

Cautiously Kisil got his feet under him and tried to roll over on his side, but the heavy yoke prevented him. He then tried to raise his head and shoulders. The pain was excruciating and he sank back, exhausted.

The moan of the wind had now turned into a howl. The round wall of the tent bulged under the pressure. Snow was blowing through the smoke hole. If only he could get outside into the storm! Better death in the snow than to be tortured for Targoutai's pleasure. Better to seek death than to wait for it.

He made several cautious efforts to get to his feet and failed. He rested, flexing the muscles of his legs. Then with another effort he stood swaying on his feet. The guard stirred as Kisil stood over him.

"What—"

Kisil swung one end of the heavy yoke against the man's head. The guard lay still. Now, before the man regained his senses!

He lurched to the entrance, squeezed past the felt flap and took a deep breath of icy air. Blinded by the snow, he hesitated which way to take. But what did the direction matter to one who was soon going to die! At least he was free enough to seek his own death.

But was he—?

A dark figure that had been crouching beside the tent sprang to its feet and moved toward him. Kisil saw the knife. The upraised arm was ready to strike!

27

GESIKIE'S SACRIFICE

GESIKIE HAD no set plan when she left the cave. She knew there was but a slender chance that Kisil was still alive; there was no point in their keeping him a prisoner, unless Targoutai were absent from the ordu. If Targoutai were away, they would keep Kisil alive, for Targoutai would want to be present at his death. Yes, this was the only chance.

She had taken the mare and bow ostensibly as peace offerings. The gift of these, and herself, might secure her a fair reception and give her a few precious minutes to find out Kisil's fate. If he were still alive, she would exert all her wiles to effect his escape. If he were already dead—or if he died in spite of her efforts—opportunity to avenge him and to exact retribution for the disasters that had overwhelmed her clan would surely present itself. Her hand tightened on the hilt of Temujine's knife under the girdle of her coat; it must be well hidden when she reached her destination.

When she left the river ice, she followed the trail broken by Temujine. She traveled all day and all night, and in the morning she recognized familiar landmarks in the foothills of the mountain. Temujine's trail made a wide semicircle where he had thrown off pursuit. She herself would take the precaution of coming into the familiar valley from the south —from the direction opposite Temujine's refuge.

It was nearly dusk when she caught the smell of dung smoke from the Taijiut fires. Now her courage forsook her. She had no illusions as to what lay ahead. She wondered now at her reckless impulse and hesitated for an instant. *Faugh!* She was no lily-livered herdsman's daughter!

No riders came out to meet the solitary figure advancing on horseback over the snow. In the dusk the Taijiuts were gathered round the comforting fires of the yurts. Where once stood the many tents of her father's ordu was now a

scattered encampment of Targoutai's clan. What a poor watch they kept! Then Gesikie realized, by the absence of horses, that the fighting men were away. For a moment she grasped at the idea that she need not thus boldly ride into their camp. She was about to throw herself from Kadia and seek concealment when barking dogs brought a man to the door of the nearest tent. He recognized Kadia and set up a shout. At his cry many came running out. She ignored all questions and rode at a quiet walk up to the white dome of the principal tent. Her whole body trembled as, in a quavering voice, she asked a servant for Targoutai.

"The khan is away with his riders hunting the wolf cub, Temujine," the woman answered. At that moment, from the tent west of the chief pavilion, a woman appeared, with two young girls by her side. She would be Khatun, Targoutai's chief wife.

"Who asks for the khan?" Khatun demanded. Then her eyes fell on Kadia. "You have his mare and bow—who are you, girl?"

"I am Gesikteng, daughter of Yesukai, O lady of respect," Gesikie answered gravely, "and I bring Targoutai his mare and bow and news of where his son lies hidden."

"His son!" the woman scoffed. Khatun's lips curled in a scornful sneer. "Perhaps you, too, have come to bear him a son?"

"Perhaps," Gesikie replied in a steady voice. "I am only a girl, but I am Yesukai's eldest daughter and a marriage alliance might heal the breach between our clans. Besides, I am hungry and have no desire to be hunted like a wolf among the mountains in winter."

By now she was surrounded by a jabbering throng anxious to see this demented daughter of Yesukai. She slipped off the mare and handed the reins to a servant.

"I crave your shelter, O mother of goodness, and the protection you would accord to one of your own sweet daughters."

She held out her hands appealingly and smiled with a confidence she was far from feeling as she faced the shrewish woman.

Khatun disdainfully spat at Gesikie and turned her back. "Ho there!" she shouted. "Which of you men wants another woman? Here's a maid who so craves a man she has come to seek one out. It may take several of you to satisfy her—she comes from such highborn stock."

At her jeering words the men jostled toward Gesikie, but the girl faced them with drawn bow. Backing up against the walls of the big tent, she warned, "The first man who attempts to touch me, dies!"

Her eyes flitted over the men. Her young voice rang out: "Now that the lord Targoutai is khan by right of power, he will cherish strengthening his hold by marrying a princess of the Borjiguene. He who lays hands on me will answer to his khan!"

"Don't heed her words!" Khatun shouted as the men drew back. "Would Targoutai take to wife a slut who offers herself?"

An old man at the back of the crowd laughed. "Knowing Targoutai," he shouted, "I would say yes."

Laughter broke out among the crowd. Then a shout went up from the outskirts. All turned their heads. Targoutai and his men were returning across the snowy waste. The crowd melted away from the pavilion, the women throwing jeering remarks at Gesikie. The girl stood resolute.

Khatun laughed. "I thought to see some sport. At least you've got spunk and you'll need it when Targoutai takes you. When he has finished with you we can always do with another servant. Go inside my tent with my daughters and await our lord's pleasure."

Khatun watched Gesikie follow the excited girls into the tent, then strode across the snow to welcome her returning lord.

Targoutai soon sent for Gesikie.

When she entered the khan's pavilion and stood before him, he recognized her. His face flushed and his hand tightened on his whip.

"Ah! You are the girl who lays on so heavily with a whip!" His thong flickered out like a snake's tongue, raising a welt on her unprotected hand. Her hand flew to her

lips. "Well, how do you like your own medicine?" He laughed. "I did not realize," he went on, "that you were the daughter of Yesukai when you sent me on that senseless chase. For that I have a mind to cut you to ribbons—" he eyed her up and down appraisingly—"afterward."

The glint in his eyes made Gesikie shiver. "Senseless chase, my lord? I sent you on no senseless chase!" she said, faltering.

"Do you deny telling me that the lady Cholan had fled eastward with my son but an hour before? The—"

"Where I followed and found her!" Gesikie interrupted. "If you had but waited, lord, I could have led you to her, but you departed in such a hurry."

Targoutai plucked the scanty hairs on his chin; he eyed the trembling girl shrewdly. "Where's your brother Temujine?" he rapped out suddenly.

"He has fled westward to seek the protection of Toghrul," she lied boldly, for she had expected that question.

"Ah!" Targoutai spat. "I thought he might do that, so I have most of my armed men out scouring that part of the country."

Gesikie tried to show appropriate concern over this news.

"Where are your other brothers?" His eyes bored into hers.

"Scattered among the tents of our people."

"And your mother?"

"I know not. She rode away and left us."

"Yes, I hear she is trying to rally the clans." Targoutai laughed. He took a drink of wine from a leather sack and wiped his mouth with his hand. His eyes never left her face. "What brought you here, girl?"

"I would buy my peace—and peace for my clan—from you at any price." Gesikie held out her hands in appeal. "I offer all I have to give—myself. I hope to find favor in your eyes, O Khan, and seek your shelter and protection. Perhaps—" her voice broke—"I can bear you a son, even as the lady Cholan did!" Gesikie knew she was provoking the question she dreaded, the question of Cholan's hiding place; and, knowing that to protect Temujine she must

protect Cholan, she prepared to lie boldly, but at any cost must she bring the conversation round to Kisil.

"Ah! The lady Cholan and my son. Where are they?" he snapped, thrusting his face forward.

"I sent her under escort to a cave, of which I spoke to you before. There she awaits her husband Kisil Bahatur—"

"Then she'll have a long wait, for her so-called husband is my prisoner and he dies tomorrow." Targoutai's smile was evil to see.

"Kisil a prisoner?" Gesikie gasped, her face suddenly paling. Her heart leaped in her breast. "He dies tomorrow, lord?"

"What is he to you," Targoutai asked suspiciously, "that your voice breaks to hear he dies?"

"Nothing, lord." Gesikie forced herself to laugh.

"Then if he is nothing to you, and you hate him so, you shall share my pleasure in watching him die—but tonight you share my bed!" He clapped his hands. "Ho there, bring us lights—lights that I may better appraise this treasure the good spirits have brought me!"

When the servant had gone out Targoutai lifted one of the smoking wicks and held it close to Gesikie. He peered into her eyes to see if she was frightened. "Well, what do you say, girl?"

"I am honored, lord." Gesikie smiled demurely. "After all, that is what I came for, but I am so tired I am afraid my lord would find scant pleasure. I beg you to let me rest alone tonight."

"Neither tonight nor for many nights," he snapped.

"Then, lord, as I am a maid and no man has ever lain beside me, I ask for the honor of my acknowledgment as your wife and demand—" The whip slashed across her hand.

"Demand?" he shouted. "Enough! Cease blowing wind! No one makes demands on Targoutai the khan. What I want I take!" He broke into insane laughter.

"There," he said, taking her hands, "I mustn't frighten my little bride. Give me a son first and then we'll talk about wifehood and the like."

He clapped his hands. A woman entered and he gave

orders for the fire to be made up and suitable apparel brought for Gesikie.

"Stay with her." Targoutai indicated the trembling Gesikie. "I shan't be long." The woman nodded as he left the tent.

The woman, Gesikie found, was a garrulous person, and as she made up the fire and bed Gesikie soon learned from her in which tent Kisil lay imprisoned. The woman was quite unsuspecting, and when Gesikie sauntered to the door of the pavilion and looked out on the moonlit snow, she followed and pointed out the tent.

"They've fastened an ox yoke across his shoulders," she said, laughing. "Now I must go and get your bridal array." She sniggered.

The moment she left the tent Gesikie whipped out the long knife from beneath her clothing. She went to the door and again looked out, but too many people were still around the tents. Then she saw the woman coming back. It was impossible to make any attempt now—she must go through with the ordeal. Swiftly she turned and hid the long knife under the carpet on which the bed rested. She straightened up as the woman came in.

The woman flung some garments on the bed. "Feeling the bed, were you?" She laughed. "I lay you'll sleep soft and warm tonight."

Gesikie stood as if paralyzed. The woman looked at her sympathetically. "You had better hurry, my dear, and change. Our lord doesn't like women to keep him waiting."

Dazedly Gesikie let the servant help her change into the silks she had brought, then the woman flung a fur mantle over her shivering body. "It's best not to cross his will," she advised. "Not for nothing is he called Targoutai the Spiteful."

Dressed as she was, she would find flight impossible. Gesikie piled her own discarded clothing carefully, visualizing the donning of it later in the darkness. She looked around the tent walls. She saw with satisfaction that Targoutai's bow and quiver hung near a bridle on the lattice. Kadia, she had already noticed, was fastened to the wheels of the tent wagons.

Suddenly she heard Targoutai's voice. He was talking to the horse caressingly.

"The master's just outside," the woman said. "I'll go and send the food in." She left Gesikie to her thoughts.

Shaking from head to foot, Gesikie stood near the fire. Her mind was in confusion, but one thought dominated all else. There was one thing she must steel herself to do tonight to save her brother and the clan.

Later that night she awoke with a feeling of lassitude. Then a spark of remembrance burst into flaming hate. She lay quietly beside her enemy, collecting her faculties and going over in her mind what must be done. Asleep, Targoutai still encircled her with an arm.

Although her tired body screamed for rest, she slipped cautiously from his slumbering embrace, her body shivering in the bitter cold. Feverishly she groped for the knife. Standing over him, she listened intently. All was still. With a trembling hand she bared his breast. As he turned to embrace her in his sleep, the knife plunged into his heart.

She flung herself across his thrashing body and clasped a hand tightly over his mouth. Not a cry escaped him. In a little while he lay still. She sighed and felt her strength ebb with the sigh. Her body was wet with sweat; her hands were sticky. Resolutely she fought off her faintness as she frantically searched in the darkness for her own garments. Her trembling hands fumbled at the familiar fastenings.

Dressed, she slipped Targoutai's bow over her shoulders and belted on the quiver of arrows. She snatched the bridle from the wall. Knife in hand, she stumbled out into the storm without a backward glance.

She was thankful that it was snowing so heavily. Her first thought was for horses. She thrust the bit into Kadia's resisting mouth and untied the halter thong from the wheel. She untied another horse and, having no spare bridle, just unfastened the thong. She led both horses near to Kisil's prison. Stealthily she crouched in the snow beside the felt wall, listening intently for any sound of movement. She must make sure this was the right tent before she entered.

Someone was struggling inside and she heard a strange voice cry out. There was a heavy thud and again the sound of struggling. Then a stumbling figure with outstretched arms emerged, swaying in the wind.

She sprang to her feet. "Kisil!" she whispered hoarsely. "It's me—it's Gesikie! I've come to save you!" But her words were flung away by the wind and he stood there, a figure of dull despair. She approached and quickly cut the confining thongs. The heavy yoke fell from his shoulders. She clutched the bewildered Kisil by his coat and dragged him through the drifts to the two horses.

She had great difficulty getting him astride the spare horse; he groaned every time she touched his arms, but at last he was up and his legs gripped automatically. She vaulted on the mare's back and led the pony through the sleeping encampment. No voice was raised to stop them. The dogs had crept into the warmth of the yurts.

Once clear of the encampment, Gesikie headed west.

"I thought to die in the snow," Kisil shouted. "How came you here, Gesikie?"

Gesikie thought there was still a chance of dying in the snow—both of them. It was too exhausting to shout; she just shook her head.

"Where are we going?" Kisil shouted.

Gesikie pointed ahead to the mountain. They couldn't leave a fresh trail to the cave where Temujine lay wounded —to the cave where Cholan awaited Kisil, she added to herself. No, they must make for the Mountain of the Supreme Spirit. There, in one of its rocky gorges, she hoped to find one of Juji's and Temujine's caves. What they did then, how they would survive, must lie on Kisil's shoulders.

Now the reaction from the terrors of the night set in. The ghostly face of Targoutai seemed to flit before her. She was almost unconscious and only by instinct did she keep Kadia's head pointed toward the higher ground.

As dawn broke they reached the first trees. The snow squalls had long passed; Gesikie hoped they had been heavy enough to cover their tracks from the Taijiut camp. She now realized she had dropped the halter thong by which

she had been leading Kisil's pony. She had almost forgotten Kisil was behind her. She turned in the saddle and saw him below her. As he saw her halt, he waved. Her spirits revived and she exulted. Now, for the first time, she realized she had saved him. Tonight she would lie in Kisil's arms. If only she were not so sleepy—so dreadfully tired!

When Kisil caught up she lay fast asleep in the snow.

28

THE STRATEGY OF JHOTUZ

TEMUJINE'S BLUNT STATEMENT that when he returned that night from the hunt he would brook no further delay in taking Cholan as a wife filled the girl with dismay. Such an irrevocable step seemed to slash like a sword through the last slender thread of hope that her husband would return.

Only a moment ago she had told Juji that in her heart of hearts she felt Kisil was alive, and Juji had agreed to help Cholan flee to another refuge. Now Cholan wondered what was the use of incurring the wrath of the young khan and making bad blood between the two brothers if Kisil were dead. Temujine must be very sure of it. She felt as if she had heard Kisil's death proclaimed among the tents. It was as though Targoutai had flung Kisil's broken body at her feet. She said as much to Jhotuz.

"What maggots are eating your brain now, Cholan?" Jhotuz said irritably. "I am amazed that the daughter of such a shrewd old trader as Besoutchei should be so taken in by the wiles of a youth. Can't you see through Temujine? If he were so sure that Kisil is dead could he not afford to wait a little longer? What's his hurry—unless he's afraid that Kisil will come here before he's had a stab at you?"

"But he's the khan and must uphold the law," Cholan said without conviction. "Surely he would not risk the penalty for taking another man's wife."

"Oh, but if he could convince others as well as himself that he thought the husband dead and was merely carrying

out an obligation to a dead comrade . . ." Jhotuz laughed. "Anyway, what's a law or two to a khan who makes the laws?" Then she said sharply, "I think as you that Kisil is alive—and so does Gesikie, who you tell me is enamored of your husband. What are you going to feel like if she brings him back here and you find yourself pregnant by another man?"

That sent Cholan's thoughts spinning. Now, once again, she was frantic to get away. "If I hadn't asked Juji to come with me I would go at once."

"It's as well that I am here to stop you, then," Jhotuz said dryly. "Have your wits so completely deserted you, Cholan? Temujine will soon return. On Babor it wouldn't take him long to catch up with you. No, my plan is best. Now let us go over it carefully."

That afternoon when the hunters came back Juji seemed subdued, but Temujine was jubilant. "It seems I am a better archer than my brother the Bowman. His skill was all awry. Three times I aimed and each time hit my bird." He tossed the partridges to Jhotuz. "Now cook them tender for my wedding feast."

"May you have equal success tonight, young lord!" Jhotuz said. Then softly she added, "I will make my bed elsewhere tonight—the lady Cholan will occupy my yurt alone."

Temujine nodded with pleasure and left the cave.

Juji joined the women at the fire to help with the cooking. "I've tried to persuade him against it, Cholan," he whispered, "but his will is like iron. Are you determined to go through with your plan?"

"Yes, she is," Jhotuz answered for her.

"It doesn't seem possible that he won't notice the deception," Juji muttered.

"One woman is like another in the dark. Trust me, I'll keep him occupied." Jhotuz laughed.

"He may kill you—he may kill us all," Juji said desperately.

"I've handled tougher men than that lad. You get Cholan to your mother. Then if Kisil is alive, as Cholan thinks he is, there'll be no trouble. In fact, some day your brother will probably thank you." Her voice was confident, though

in her heart Jhotuz began to share Juji's fears. But her need for Temujine was greater than her fear and her pulse quickened at the thought of the role she had to play.

Never had a meal seemed so long. It was a mockery of a wedding feast. All of them were under tension. In vain Temujine tried to make it festive.

"A wedding feast without wine is a poor thing," Jhotuz said. She rose to her feet and ostentatiously made a bed for herself at the entrance to the cave. Then she took an iron pot and filled it with embers and carried it into the yurt. She came back to the group around the fire and lay down on her makeshift bed.

"I shall miss the comfort of you at my back tonight, Cholan," she said and laughed. "And you, Juji, will miss Temujine—too bad you aren't a little older. You had better give me Subotai, Cholan."

Temujine looked at Cholan with mute inquiry. She stood up and with a tremor in her voice said, "I must first feed Kisil's child."

She noticed that the emphasis on her husband's name brought a quick frown to Temujine's brow. She got up and went into the yurt; with a beating heart she stood still as the child suckled.

She heard Jhotuz say lazily, "If I'm not mistaken, Juji, there's something worrying the horses."

Juji, Cholan presumed, left the cave. Now if only Temujine would go. Their whole plan depended on that. She peeped out of the yurt: Temujine was standing looking into the fire; Jhotuz had crawled under her bedcover. Still Temujine did not move. Although Cholan's heart pounded she forced herself to croon to Subotai. Fearing Temujine's impatience, she called out, "He's a hungry little boy tonight!"

"Well, when he's through give him to me," Jhotuz shouted from her bed. Then to Temujine she said, "You are impatient, young lord, but as a father you will find that a babe's needs come first if you want an undisturbed night." She laughed. "I suggest you take a little walk to cool down your excitement."

With an oath Temujine strode from the cave.

Cholan heard a rustle in the darkness. Jhotuz was at her side.

"I'm afraid he will find out before we can get away, Jhotuz."

Jhotuz swore under her breath as she stripped. "In the dark he will only feel a naked woman on the bed—unless he feels my long hair! Quick! Take a knife! Hack it off! Hurry, Cholan . . . Not too close—just the ends!" She winced at Cholan's tugs and inexpert shearing. Both of them were close to panic. At last it was done. "Go!" Jhotuz cried and squeezed Cholan's arm.

Swiftly Cholan glided to the bed Jhotuz had left. She pulled the felt completely over her and Subotai. She held her breath. A quick step sounded near at hand. She peeped from under the felt and by the fire's light saw Temujine enter the yurt. The pounding of her heart nearly suffocated her. She heard Temujine speak some endearments to which there was no answer. She lifted her head and listened intently. It seemed safe. Quietly she rose from the bed and slipped outside. She felt her way carefully and slowly until her eyes became accustomed to the darkness. A figure rose from beside a rock. A hand clutched her wrist and steadied her.

"I was afraid you weren't coming," Juji said.

Carefully he guided her over the rocky debris that littered the mouth of the cleft. Babor and the best of the other horses were already saddled. Juji untethered the other ponies also and took the ropes in one hand. Mounted, they picked their way carefully until out of earshot. Then they trotted to the river ice. Here they halted. No shout came from the cave. Without saying a word they turned down the river. They set the ponies loose so that they could wander. If Jhotuz were successful, Temujine would not attempt to find the horses until morning. If Jhotuz were not successful, Temujine would have a task finding them in the darkness. Silently they turned their faces south.

Their progress, though hampered by the depth of snow, was steady. They rode all night and by morning were under the trees where the snow was not so deep, but deep enough

to obliterate landmarks long familiar to Juji. Their path through the rocky gorges was covered with a mantle of snow that sloped to yawning precipices. As they tracked over these slopes, they gazed fearfully at the overhanging masses of snow that threatened at any moment to slide down and engulf them. Juji was almost despairing of finding the Cave of the White Bones where he was sure his mother would be hiding, when they stumbled across fresh tracks of hunters.

Juji whooped with delight. "They must be our own people. These footprints will lead us to safety, never fear!"

They plunged recklessly down the slope, certain that their journey was nearly at an end. They rounded a cliff, and there planted in the snow stood Yulun's standard, its yak tails hanging motionless.

Their shouts were drowned by a dull roar. A white wall of snow swept over their heads, blotting out the sky as the avalanche carried rock and ice beyond them to fall crashing into the gorge. Masses of soft snow piled on top of the riders crouching under the cliff. Higher and higher it rose, pinning the horses in immobility. Higher—until both horse and rider were swathed in icy folds of suffocating darkness.

"Keep your hands in front of your face!" Juji shouted. They were the last words Cholan heard.

29

AT THE CAVE OF THE WHITE BONES

EVERYTHING WAS vague and shadowy in this spirit world.

At first she was only conscious of voices—strange, weird voices that seemed to fill the void around her, voices, thin and quavering, that intoned her name over and over again—*Cholan! Cholan!* Then she became aware of some substance to these spectral voices. Eyes they had—eyes that came and went—eyes that stared into hers devoid of recognition—eyes empty of hope, forlorn.

And now through the chant she heard Kisil's spirit call-

ing her. She couldn't see him, but his voice rang clearer and clearer and dissolved the spectral chant about her. Those were his eyes gazing into hers; it was his spirit whose arms were around her. The light of the Jeweled Doorway to the Everlasting Sky flickered about them, bathing their spirits in a gentle warmth.

Now she was conscious of other spirits—spirits with happy voices that welcomed her. She had never dreamed that death could be so sweet. A young girl took her hand—Gesikie. So Gesikie was dead, too? The kind face of a woman looked into hers. Yulun! She had a child in her arms. It was crying. It was Subotai! Cholan's spirit tried to take the child, but Kisil's arms held her firmly.

These arms were flesh and blood!

This is no spirit world—I'm alive!

Cholan laughed while tears of happiness coursed down her cheeks. Kisil was alive! She clutched his hand as though she would never let him go, her voice uttering endearments until sleep claimed her exhausted body.

The tired, strained face of Yulun relaxed into a happy smile as Kisil looked up. "She will be all right now, Kisil. Sleep is the best medicine for her; that, and her knowledge that you are safe and her child is alive. Your coming today before she and Juji arrived was most opportune." Yulun paused. "I've just been talking to Juji. I am glad that you got here before Temujine."

"Why?" Kisil said in bewilderment.

"Go and talk to Juji—then you will understand. I don't know which of you to blame the most—or thank the most." Yulun turned toward Gesikie. "I am angry with Gesikie for what she has done, yet grateful to her for ridding us of our most vicious enemy and for saving you. From what Juji tells me, Kisil, I am sure your presence here will save his life. Cholan risked Juji's life when she used her wiles to persuade a little boy to disobey and desert his brother and khan."

"If Temujine values my services," Kisil said hotly, "I should think he would be grateful to Juji for what he has done."

"Then you don't know Temujine," Yulun answered curtly. "That he is ruthless may well be the salvation of our people. Those few who have followed me here know it, and not one of them would raise a hand against the khan if he invoked the law—not even to save his brother."

"I know one who would," Kisil said quietly.

"Who?"

"You!" he answered. "And I'll stand by you."

"Of course I'll do what I can, but if you value your own life, don't lay a finger on Temujine—these men here would skewer you like a piece of meat. I tell you that because I am in debt to you for risking your life to save Temujine's."

"And I," said Kisil, smiling at Gesikie, "I owe your daughter my life and shall be forever in her debt. Temujine should also be pleased that—"

"Think you he'll be pleased to know she wants to wed you—that you have already slept with her these last two nights?"

Kisil burst out laughing. "Go on, my lady, what else?"

"It's nothing to laugh at," Yulun said indignantly. "For you, merely an armed rider, to take the sister of the khan who has been promised to the Emperor of the Kin—"

"—and who was first raped by Targoutai!" Gesikie interjected. "Yes, Mother, let me tell the tale. Yes, I slept two nights with Kisil's arms around me as close as I could get, to keep from perishing from the cold. But that was all. Think you that had even Kisil and I been in the marriage yurt I would have let Kisil, the man I love, take me after Targoutai—until a month had passed and I could be sure whose child it was I bore? And that I am promised to the emperor—when did this come about?"

"It's a secret, Gesikie. It was your father who offered you. Muhuli carries the message."

"Then it had best remain a secret!" Gesikie laughed hysterically. "I can see the emperor's face when I am presented to him with a swollen belly!" She burst into weeping.

Yulun sighed. "Remember, Gesikie," she chided, "that as well as being a woman you are a princess. We are not of

common clay. We cannot follow the dictates of our hearts. Even I . . ." Yulun dropped her head between her hands. "Even I had to promise something I never thought possible!"

"What is it, Mother?"

"To help Temujine, to help our people, I have promised to marry Minglig once my period of mourning is over!"

"Mother, how could you?" Gesikie stared.

"I could because—as I have just told you—I am a princess and have a duty to our people and to my son, the khan. When I rode after the deserters, the day of your father's funeral, Minglig, at my request, rode with me. We caught up to several of the princes, but none rallied to their old khan's wife or to the standard they had so often followed into battle. I made no progress, and Minglig, whom I had taken to add his persuasions to mine, remained silent. I asked him why. He told me he had a price. I was that price. He swore that if I consented to marry him he would rebuild the fortunes of our clan and bring the spirits to the aid of Temujine. I was desperate, so I consented. Then Minglig took a hand in affairs and things changed completely. He so overawed them that all those with whom we came in contact swore allegiance on the iron and salt and vowed to rally to the standard when Temujine called."

"And what think you Temujine will say to this marriage?" Gesikie asked.

"Being a prince he will understand—being our khan he will approve."

"Where is Minglig now?" Kisil asked Yulun.

"Down on the plains or in the valley trying to gather the remnants of our herds with a few old men and set up an ordu under his protection. He thinks that I and the women could then live there safely under his mantle. There I could collect the khan's tithe and gradually build up our herds again. It must not look like an ambitious undertaking—just the sort of thing that an old shaman and his wife might undertake," she said bitterly.

"Why does not Minglig throw his mantle over Temujine and give him sanctuary with you?" Kisil asked.

"Temujine's presence there would become known and pro-

voke attack regardless of Minglig. The confederation that has sworn to kill Temujine and his brothers is too strong. Minglig thinks, for the time being, that Temujine and our few fighting men should disperse among the mountains and carry on the fight by means of independent bands attacking and raiding from the hills."

"And Keuktche?" Kisil asked.

"I asked Minglig about his son and whether the bargain would include his cooperation."

"And what said he?"

"He could vouch for Keuktche's active interest in Temujine's affairs."

"Your lord, Yesukai, seemed sure that Keuktche was plotting against him. Does Minglig know where Keuktche is?"

Yulun nodded. "He said he had sent him to seek aid from his own clan—the Khonghotats."

"Ah! I vouch he'll go no farther south than the tents of the Tatars!"

Yulun turned to watch Juji, who was sleeping in exhaustion.

"Now, for the first time, I hope I'm pregnant," Gesikie said bitterly. "If I were, Temujine could not send me to the Kin. Would you still take me to wife, Kisil?"

Before Kisil could answer a man came running into the cave. "My lady, your son the khan is here!"

Cholan was awakened by a voice shouting in anger.

"There cannot be one law for the herdsman and one for the prince! He dies! I tell you he dies!"

Temujine!

She struggled to her feet. Pine torches filled the cave with smoke; their unsteady light and the deep glow of the fire shone on Temujine's face, giving it a satanic expression.

"Not even my brother dare flout my will and live. Disobedience and desertion are treason, and death is the penalty. Stand aside!"

Temujine faced a semicircle of onlookers. His drawn bow pointed at the bound, kneeling Juji. On Juji's face

was the fear of death. But between the bow and Juji stood Yulun, facing the young khan. With a shriek she flung herself on her knees, tore open her clothes and pointed to her breasts.

"First aim your shaft here, Temujine, if you must soil your hands with family blood. Juji is no more a traitor than I am! Is this how you will defeat our enemies? Will you first kill those who love you?"

His mother's appeal seemed to pour yak butter on the fierce blaze of Temujine's wrath. The onlookers held their breath as Temujine moved to get a better aim at Juji. The bright point of the arrow caught the gleam of fire and glittered like the eyes of a snake, holding Cholan hypnotized as she watched from the shadows of the cave. No hand, no voice was raised to stay Temujine. She saw Gesikie holding Subotai in her arms. Where was Kisil? Then she saw him struggling with two men who pinned his arms to his sides. Juji screamed.

Something snapped in Cholan. She sprang forward and clutched Temujine's arm. She flung herself at his feet. "Slay me!" she cried. "I made him disobey you—to save you from breaking the law. The fault is mine," she sobbed.

Now Kisil twisted out of the hands of the men who held him. He sprang to Cholan's side—his strong hand fastened on her wrist, raising her to her feet. Gesikie thrust her way through the circle and stood on the other side of Kisil.

Kisil, facing Temujine boldly, said in an even voice, "Yes, the fault is hers, O Khan, if loyalty to a husband be deemed a fault. And if such loyalty can be interpreted as treason, then there are many here you'll have to slay." He took off his hat and scratched his red head, his eyes never leaving Temujine's. He smiled. "This reminds me of the day you dubbed me Bahatur—you do like to try your friends, my lord, to prove their mettle. Now I'm sure this will be a proper lesson to young Juji and to us all. He's a brave little fellow and so is Gesikie here, who with her own hands slew your worst enemy. The spirit of your father must be grieved to see you all at odds." He encircled the two girls with his arms and led them away.

Temujine flung down his bow. He went to his mother and helped her to her feet. He cut the cords that bound Juji and, raising him, he faced the silent clansmen round the fire. "You heap ashes on my head," he said weakly. "You would do well to cast me out and choose another leader. It is your right!" The tears ran unashamedly down his cheeks as he lifted his head.

A shout of approbation ran through the cave.

"We want no other leader but thee, O Temujine!" one cried.

"Nine times shall we proudly raise thee on the felt to make thee our khan," an elder gravely declared.

"The young khan is a tiger!" a youth shouted. "He will teach us all to be tigers and when he unleashes us we shall be swift to hunt down his enemies!"

At their clamorous shouts the gloom lifted from Temujine's face. He placed an arm around Juji's shoulder. "By the Everlasting, this band of brothers shall be called the Avalanche! When the spring comes we shall sweep down from this mountain, gathering strength as we go, destroying those who would arrest our progress, bringing aid to those who would be friends and allies."

Another shout of approval rang through the cave. It turned to laughter as Temujine, taking his mother's arm, said, "Now, Mother, have you got something for a hungry boy to eat?"

30

EACH TO HIS OWN TASK

WINTER HAD BEEN gently nudged aside by a youthful spring that, like a nomad maid, promised to mature early into full summer.

A warm wind rippled over the seed-bearing tops of the long grass, making it shimmer like the surface of a zephyr-kissed mountain lake.

Herds of antelope broke off their feeding to approach the slowly moving carts inquisitively. More wary were the

wild ass and camel herds, who kept their distance and showed no desire for closer acquaintance. High in the sky vultures ever circled, seeking the halt and lame of herd. Sparrow hawks dived into the grass after prairie rats. Eagles pounced on marmots. Wild ducks and geese rose from reed-fringed pools to resume their northward flight to the cold tundras where the Reindeer people lived.

The children on the carts laughed and clapped their hands to see these sights, calling to their mothers to share in their enjoyment. Sometimes their sharp eyes would see the light-green shoots of wild chives or the fernlike tops of wild carrots. Then they would jump or scramble down, oblivious to the danger of the heavy lumbering wheels in their instinctive craving for this change of food.

The carts were crossing a valley to seek the higher ground on the opposite slope. The tents would be pitched on the drier ground and every woman and child could watch over their few cattle feeding lower down, and also scan the valley grass for men of ill intent.

But the women evinced little interest in these familiar scenes that were so exciting to the children. Perched on the creaking carts—so short were they of oxen that the pole of one cart would be fastened to the axle of the cart ahead—the women were never idle. There was always some plaiting or stripping, some repairing or sewing to be done, and their calloused hands pushed the long bone needles through the softened hides making boots or clothing for their families. The thoughts of most were with their men—with husbands, sons or brothers—scattered through the mountains, pursued and harassed by their enemies and eking out a precarious existence.

Only the old men were their escort, men like Minglig the fearsome shaman, who rode on one of the few precious horses alongside Yulun. Yulun sat like any tent-wife on the foremost cart. The women thought it almost indecent that she had married Minglig Etchigue in such haste, before her period of mourning had passed. True, she was old—their heads nodded as they discussed it; the Calendar of the Beasts must have turned full circle thrice for Yulun, or

nearly so, and she had to hurry—but Minglig was a worn-out ox! What pleasure could she get, they laughed, from such a one as Minglig, who but a few moons ago had bought a slave to warm his bed and given her away immediately?

As to their own men—if Yulun didn't take them too far down the Onon, perhaps some night a handful would ride down from the mountain and snatch a few hours of darkness with their wives, disappearing again before dawn. The men, at first, had had only eight or nine horses on the mountain; these could ill be spared for such a purpose, yet, when Temujine allowed, the men had taken it in turn to ride down. This was a compromise, for Temujine would allow no women with his band of brothers on the mountain, while Yulun, anxious to rebuild the fortunes of the clan, wanted no empty wombs in herd or yurt.

"Produce! Produce!" was ever Yulun's and Temujine's cry.

Under the dowager's leadership the women worked as they had never worked before to produce the sinews of war, their task made doubly difficult because they were kept on the move.

They had to seek safety in movement. They were so few. Too many of their sisters and daughters lay in Taijiut tents. A camp of women and young girls would be enticing bait for Taijiut or Mergued on the prowl, who, in a night raid, might disregard the supernatural emblems hung around the tents by Minglig to ward off both evil man and spirit. Minglig, shaman of all the clans, both the loyal and the rebellious, might claim the growing herd as his, but he could never lay claim to so many women, neither he nor the old men who protected them and hunted for their food.

In the mountains Temujine gathered his men in groups according to their trade. The smiths, the skilled workers in iron, were forging war heads for arrow and spear, and iron helmets, which the women would pad with felt. Elsewhere, those used to leather work were tanning hides for saddle and apron, boiling oxhide strips to mold over each man's shoulders and breast.

The arrow makers, and those who fashioned shafts for spears, worked in the forests with the wheelwrights who turned out carts.

Among them all Temujine flitted back and forth in constant peril of his life. Sometimes alone, sometimes with Kisil and Juji, he survived ambuscade and pitfall, treacherous snare and demoniacal intrigue. Restless and ruthless, inflexible of will and untiring of body, he nevertheless inspired his followers with enthusiasm, inflamed them with his zeal.

If raiding bands approached a camp the workingmen just disappeared, dissolved into thin air, their unfinished tasks the only evidence that men had been about. The enemy on horseback could destroy, but he could not hold this mountainous terrain. If he pursued up the mountain they just retreated higher and higher. Down gorge and gully Temujine's band of brothers would slip, and when the discomfited foe came down from the clouds, as like as not he would find men slain and horses taken. Then, fearful of ambuscade, he would clatter down faster than he had come up. And so in time the confederated foes, more used to warfare on the plains, contented themselves with throwing a strong cordon round the mountain and isolating Temujine from those clans prepared to be his allies.

And now the horse thieves, men reviled as the greatest of all criminals on the plains, came into their own. On many a night they stole through the cordon to steal a horse, Temujine himself taking part on more than one occasion, for he had vowed to exact retribution nine-fold for what had been taken from his clan. They hid the horses they stole in the highest valleys and stored their slowly mounting stock of war gear in many a secret cave. It would take years to restore the bare necessities that they had lost, but the energies of every man, woman and child of the scattered clan were concentrated on that aim, their lives dedicated to that purpose.

"We are still beggars!" Temujine bitterly declared to Kisil, "but the day will come when I shall be an emperor in the saddle!"

* * *

Cholan had seen Kisil only once since their meeting in the Cave of the White Bones. Kisil had come unexpectedly by night. He told her that he and Temujine would likely be away all summer, enlisting recruits among the young men of friendly clans. Cholan had risen from her bed in the tent she shared with so many others and had gone out into the long grass with him. Too soon he had left her; too soon, too, for Gesikie to whom he gave but greeting and farewell; not yet had he bedded with Gesikie.

Gesikie—a subdued Gesikie—was under Cholan's wing. The girl had not yet fully recovered from her night of terror, the fruit of which she bore in sullen resignation. She was pregnant. However, now that she knew she could not be sent to the emperor and was the acknowledged wife of Kisil, Gesikie appeared much calmer.

Temujine had given in ungraciously to Gesikie's importuning. When her condition became apparent both Yulun and Cholan had added to her plea. At first Temujine demanded that Kisil put Cholan aside and take Gesikie as his wife—her children to be his heirs. Kisil had stubbornly refused; he pointed out that already the song of Cholan's rescue and the birth of Subotai had been sung around the fires and now passed as history.

"What has been sung cannot be unsung, lord. Besides, what do I possess, what lands, what herds, for my sons to be heirs to?"

For the sake of all, Kisil argued, it were best that Gesikie forget—if not renounce—her status as the sister of the khan, and that they dispense with the unwanted publicity of a marriage feast.

To this Yulun had surprisingly agreed. Yulun also, for her own reasons, wanted no publicity.

A few days ago Muhuli had returned, bringing with him a Chinese title for Yulun from the emperor who awaited with interest the deliverance of Gesikteng to the eunuchs of his harem.

Now Yulun had selected a virgin, Tsari, half-sister to Temujine, of about Gesikie's age, and was grooming her to take Gesikie's name and place, training her to act the

princess as if to the manner born. At first Tsari had been difficult, but after Yulun's persuasive tongue had worked its spell, the girl appeared delighted at her prospects. In glowing colors Yulun painted the delights of court life among the civilized Chinese; she told of their refinements and described a life of ease.

Jhotuz undertook to teach the girl something of the art of pleasing men. She and Yulun labored to soften Tsari's calloused hands and weathered face.

"They say the emperor likes the bodies of his women smooth, unmarred by hair," said Yulun, "so perhaps the attendants—who will also ascertain you do not snore and report on the sweetness of your breath—will pluck you." She smiled encouragingly. "If I ever come to court I shall likely have to kowtow to the great lady you've become!"

Soon the girl was eager to leave this life of hardship, and so apt a pupil did she prove that at times Yulun had to bite her lip to keep from laughing at some newfound arrogance. The girl had always known that Yesukai was her father, but now, Yulun warned her, she must forget her mother's name and think of Yulun in her stead.

"Should you betray us, or if our deception is found out through your carelessness, your life of ease will end with a bowstring round your throat twisted in the hands of a eunuch!"

Kisil had told Cholan the gist of Muhuli's report to Temujine.

"The emperor," Muhuli said, "rejoiced to hear that the superior man, Yesukai, acknowledged himself the servant of the emperor, but deplored the fact that the arrow had already left the bow and could not be recalled—by now, Yesukai was undoubtedly dead."

"Ha! Said he so, Muhuli? Then it was the emperor himself who gave the order for my father's death?" Temujine asked.

"So it would seem, young lord. However the emperor said he would welcome the dowager princess, your lady mother, to his court if she cared to come, and would

graciously accept Imperial Grace as one of his wives. He requested she should be sent without delay, as nomad girls lost their virginity somewhat easily on the plains."

Cholan flushed. "What said Temujine to that?" she asked Kisil.

"About that? Nothing. But about his father—plenty! His anger was terrible to behold. If our khan lives he will wreak a terrible vengeance on the nation of the black-haired ones. It was a long time before we could calm him down to hear the rest of the emperor's message, which said something about greetings to his servant Temujine and ordered him to take the official title of Commander of the Hiong-nu—which title Temujine must use in future when he communicates with the emperor."

Cholan laughed. "Commander of the Rebel Slaves! That may prove an apt title if Temujine lives to carry out his threat."

"There was one thing the emperor would do for his new vassal," Kisil went on, "and that was to countermand the orders given to the Tatars to attack us. To see these new orders were carried out, he sent a small military force to camp in the vicinity of the Tatars. Muhuli came through the pass with that army. So it seems we are safe for a while from southern foes."

"But what said the emperor about the plot—the plot you and I discovered?" Cholan asked.

"As to that," Kisil replied, "the emperor told Muhuli that he was always at war with the Sung—and the *ho-si* west of the river were often rebellious—he was grateful for the proof of loyalty that prompted the warning, and he advised Temujine to put a certain double-dealer to death at the first opportunity."

"Keuktche?"

"Undoubtedly."

"So at least Temujine has only the Taijiuts and Mergueds now to fight," Cholan said.

"They and many others," Kisil answered wearily. "It will be part of my work, this summer, to find out who is and who is not with us."

"Kisil, can't we leave these Mongol clans to exterminate one another and steal south to find a more peaceful land—to find my mother?"

"No! By the spear, no!" Kisil answered vehemently. "I am sworn to Temujine's service and that oath will I keep. Besides, I chose the path of the warrior and now it opens broad before me. I shall grow great in this land as Tatengri promised."

"But Tatengri could not see the end of your path, Kisil, and I'm afraid for you and my small son."

"No more politics, Cholan. We waste time. I came not to talk!" He laughed, seizing her in his arms.

31

GESIKIE GETS HER TENT

CHOLAN AND JHOTUZ were sitting in the shade of the yurt, busy making the long woolen stockings worn by the men. Jhotuz was telling once again how Temujine had wakened in the cave to find not Cholan, but Jhotuz, in his arms, and had thrashed her in a demoniacal fury. Though he was still angry at having been deceived, yet—well, Jhotuz knew how to please a man, and besides, she loved Temujine.

Cholan put down her wool. "Here comes Pure Gold. I don't trust her."

"Nor I. She hates both me and my lord Temujine—jealous, of course, because the khan ignores her. She is too full of fussy ways to arouse Temujine's interest."

Cholan smiled, "She's not much use for anything else."

As the Tonguz girl came up, Jhotuz said brutally, "We were just talking about you, wondering what good you were. Did you ever work to earn your food?"

"I have never worked," Pure Gold said haughtily. "At the court of the emperor I was concubine to a very high official."

"Probably the old man who emptied the chamber pots of the harem," Jhotuz scoffed.

Temper got the better of Pure Gold. "I'll have you know,"

she said, flaring up, "that my lord was a very superior man —he was the emperor's Minister for Preserving Law and Order, and like the emperor he had concubines and eunuchs—"

"So your master was the emperor's minister of law and order, was he?" Jhotuz interrupted. Her face suddenly looked thoughtful; then she laughed. "How did you lose your job? Did the old man catch you with a young gardener?"

"I wonder our lord Temujine the khan can bed with such an uncouth person!" Pure Gold spluttered indignantly. "I'll tell him—"

"You'll tell him—" Jhotuz snorted—"if you get an opportunity, which I doubt, for you'll find no eunuchs here to carry you like a bale of carpets into the tent of our young lord. You'll need two good feet—and a leather backside as well—if you're going to try to keep up with him on his travels."

The Tonguz beat a hasty retreat to get away from the stinging tongue of Jhotuz.

"And," Jhotuz shouted after her, "if our lord does ever take you to his tent, you can forget the rules of procedure in bed that you've likely learned by rote—our superior man makes his own rules!"

Cholan let out a peal of laughter at Jhotuz' tirade. There had been so little to laugh about that the women nearby looked up to share the joke. Then Cholan saw Gesikie coming into the camp. "I wish we could do something to make Gesikie happier," she said thoughtfully. "I owe her my happiness. . . . I have much to be grateful for."

"Why doesn't she wear her hair the way the married ones of this clan do?" Jhotuz asked.

"Perhaps she will not feel married . . . until—"

"Until she has a yurt of her own and a man to bed with," Jhotuz interrupted. "Well, can't we make her a yurt?"

Gesikie came up to the tent carrying a woven basket of dung that she had been collecting. She dumped the basket and started stacking its contents.

"Gesikie," Cholan said, "Jhotuz and I wondered—should your mother be willing—if you would like us to help you

make felt for a tent. When we are back in our pastures you will need a yurt of your own."

Gesikie brightened at the thought, then shook her head. "I think my mother will consider the men need the felt for more important things than a tent for me. Yet I can ask her and thank you for the thought."

But Yulun, anxious about her daughter's listlessness, readily agreed to the proposal. "New felt for a new wife—by all means!"

Gesikie was enchanted. A tent of her own plainly set forth her status—that of a married woman and a princess, both. Circumstances had denied her the marriage feast and she was, as yet, no bedmate to her husband—but her own tent! Not even Cholan could hope for that for a long time, so short they were of tents. Among her other tasks, in the months ahead of long bright days, Gesikie would work patterns in the felt. Her own hands would dye twisted wool and grasses and with these would embroider any design her fancy would suggest. In this tent she would bear her child —hated Targoutai's child, and Kisil's children, too, when good fortune came again.

And Kisil? He was still enraptured with Cholan, apparently. It was Cholan he had taken out into the long grass on that one and only visit by night to the women's camp. Yet, to be fair to Kisil, Gesikie couldn't blame him. For during that first month she had denied her body, waiting to know for sure if she had conceived Targoutai's child. There had been risk in that denial, for Kisil might think her as indifferent to his advances as she had pretended to be.

Indifferent! Her face flushed with longing for him, a longing that had possessed her the first time she had seen him smile. She had been bewitched by the way his eyes crinkled when he laughed; his strong hands—more slender than any other man's hands she'd seen—fascinated her; she wondered what it would be like to feel their touch, to feel his long lean body pressed to hers. His kindness to Cholan marked him out as one unusual; she envied Cholan his attentions and longed at least to share the rapture that must come from his embrace.

Gesikie looked wonderingly at Cholan. Was Cholan so certain of Kisil's love that she could afford to be kind to one who thirsted to share it? Yet it was Cholan who had suggested Gesikie should have a tent and Cholan had worked as hard as any in the making of it. Gesikie had fully expected that Cholan would suggest they share it. That evidently had been also Yulun's thought, for her eyebrows had lifted somewhat when Gesikie, the first night, had slept in it alone. Gesikie knew she was being selfish, but she had felt a tremendous need to enjoy the first night of ownership in solitary possession, wrapped about with delicious imaginations of Kisil. But the next morning she had gone up to where Cholan and Jhotuz were busy at their tasks.

"Sister," she said diffidently, "I would like you and Jhotuz to share my tent, until such time as I, in turn, may help to make one for you."

Cholan looked up, surprise showing in her face. "You want to share your nice new tent with us? 'Tis a kind thought, Gesikie. A princess—and married—is surely entitled to her own tent. But what about your brothers and sisters? Would not you . . . or your lady mother . . . prefer . . .?"

"My mother seems to prefer to have them in her tent."

Jhotuz laughed. "No doubt they crowd out Minglig! Yes, I accept, and so does Cholan. It will be good to sleep under new felt." She jumped to her feet. "Of course we accept, don't we, Cholan?"

Thus Cholan was quickly brought face to face with the problem she had been turning over in her mind ever since she had moved into the shelter of the second-wife's tent. Her instinctive hesitancy had been overridden by Jhotuz' prompt and enthusiastic acceptance of the offer. Later, the thought did come to Cholan's mind that perhaps, in the eyes of these Mongol women, she had put herself in a subordinate place, but she dismissed it at once, feeling sure that such a thought had not been in Gesikie's mind. But she did keep on wondering what would happen when Kisil came again.

Cholan wished she had talked it over with him the last time. She had been wildly possessive then. Gesikie had dis-

appeared and had come back the next morning with the glint of madness in her eyes. For the sake of Gesikie's sanity, as well as for the preservation of peace and harmony in their daily relationship, Cholan realized that, however distasteful the thought was to her personally, Kisil must consummate his marriage to Gesikie. But how to bring it about without offending Gesikie's proud nature, Cholan did not know.

Yes, she should have talked it over with Kisil the last time. When next he came, she must deny herself to him on the usual womanly pretext; conceal the fact of her new pregnancy; tell him to demand his rights from his second wife and not be denied by any make-believe excuse. Yes . . . tell him—even if it broke her heart—as Gesikie's was breaking now! She shook herself impatiently. Why couldn't she accept facts like any woman of the steppes? That she and Kisil—and Gesikie, perhaps—were different was no reason why they should get involved in the foolishness of love. As Jhotuz rightly said, "It is worse than a snake bite!" There were bound to be other wives, and even her own mother had looked upon such a situation as normal. She would be firm in her newborn resolve to stand aside when next her husband came.

And then Kisil came, and for the moment Cholan forgot her resolve.

Hearing the well-loved voice, as Kisil and a few other men rode singing into camp, she, like the rest of the women, rose from her bed and rushed outside the yurt. "Kisil, here I am!" she shouted—and could have bitten off her tongue. "Here we are!" she corrected herself. "With Gesikie in a new yurt!"

Jhotuz and Gesikie stood at her side, silent, motionless. Kisil came riding to the sound of her voice and, seeing the three women standing together, he appeared nonplused and remained mounted on Babor. All were speechless for a moment that seemed to hang suspended.

Jhotuz broke it with a laugh and asked hopefully, "Has not my lord the khan come with you?" Then as Kisil still remained mounted, and still seemed tongue-tied, she answered her own question. "No, I suppose not. You couldn't

both come at the same time. Well, I'm getting used to sleeping alone. It's a fine warm night, so I'll roll up my bedding and get out of earshot."

While Jhotuz was speaking, Cholan was frantically trying to sort out her thoughts. She sensed that Kisil, seeing his two wives standing side by side, hesitated to dismount for fear of hurting the feelings of the one he failed to take in his arms first. She knew she should say to Jhotuz, "Wait, and I'll come with you!" But her voice gave no utterance; her feet seemed rooted to the ground.

As Jhotuz turned, Kisil found his voice—but his feet were still in the stirrups. "This is a handsome yurt. How long have you had it? When did you make it?"

His embarrassment was shown by his stupid questions, but they gave Cholan her cue. "We made it for Gesikie. It seemed only right that the sister of the khan—now that she's your wife—should have a tent of her own, and out of the kindness of her heart she has persuaded Jhotuz and me to share it with her. I'll take Subotai and leave the tent's rightful owner to welcome you." She couldn't prevent her voice faltering as she asked, "You are well, Kisil?"

"Yes, Cholan, I am well, but tired, as we all are." He swung himself off Babor, and, as he did so, Gesikie sprang past him into the darkness and vanished among the tents.

"Call her!" Cholan cried. "Call her quickly!"

"Gesikie!"

"Gesikie!" She added her voice to his. Then they heard a horse galloping out of the camp.

Jhotuz came out of the tent with bedding in her arms. She looked first at Cholan, then at Kisil. 'Gesikie," she told him, "broods too much. I wouldn't be surprised to find her lying at the foot of a cliff one of these mornings."

"Yes! Go after her, Kisil. Go quickly!" Cholan urged vehemently. "Tell her you came for her tonight and you won't be denied."

"Chase her and take her where you catch her!" Jhotuz advised him, pushing him toward Babor. "That's the way a girl like Gesikie would want to be taken—and that's the only way you will break down her scruples. They are only

a flimsy defense thrown up to bolster pride. Go, Kisil. The girl is sick with love for you!"

"But Cholan . . ." Kisil said doubtfully as he remounted.

"I'm not your only wife! Go! What are you waiting for?" There was anger in Cholan's shout—anger and rising hysteria.

Kisil bent down and kissed the top of her head. She flung up her hands as though to pull him to her, then turned instead toward the tent. She heard Babor's hoofs tear the sod as Kisil wheeled him around. She felt absurdly weak—weak with longing . . . or was it jealousy? She clenched her hands so that the nails cut into the flesh. She bit her lips to stifle her sobs — summoned her will-power to master her trembling. Raising her clenched hands to her ears, she tried to shut out the sound of Babor's hoofs retreating into the night.

A fierce anger burned in Gesikie when she realized that Kisil was pursuing her. Drumming her legs on the pony's ribs, she forced the animal to greater speed in an effort to reach the tree-fringed ridge where both riders would have to abandon their mounts, and where, among the rocks and trees, she might prove as fleet of foot as Kisil, or, failing that, evade him by hiding.

That her anger was illogical—inasmuch as she had burned with resentment over his agreeing to leave her alone—did not occur to her. Although she was glad of the sacrifice and risk she had taken to save Kisil, there were moments when she cursed the love in her heart that had made it necessary. Even now, as she fled from him as fast as her pony could travel, she refused to admit that her desire to escape him was less than her desire not to succeed.

If the straightforward Kisil had known of these inconsistencies, or even suspected the paradoxical nature of the girl he was pursuing, he might have given up the chase in despair. He had started after her because both Cholan and Jhotuz hinted that her troubled mind might drive Gesikie to desperate straits, and that the responsibility of pacifying her was his and his alone. He was not sure what he would do when he caught up with her.

By the bright moonlight he could see her pounding her pony's flanks in a determined effort to get away from him. He knew she had seen him, for he saw her turn her head and then increase her speed. If he had felt diffident at first, something now strangely increased his ardor. The thrill of the chase was inflaming his blood. His determination to catch the girl was growing and so was his intention to break her down by either persuasion or force; and the way he was feeling he thought it might be force. After all, she was his wife! But force had been used on her once before, so perhaps persuasion should be his method; the thought of persuading Gesikie rather excited him. But pay she must, most handsomely, for leading him on this chase when he was tired and wanted rest! He had a right to feel angry.

As Kisil's heat increased, Gesikie's anger was dying down. There was exhilaration in this chase, that and something else she hadn't time to define. She was looking back now, not in angry desperation at his rapid approach, but rather dreading to find he had given up the pursuit. She was even facing what she thought of as the inevitable, and wondering with increasing excitement if she should fight him, or just meekly surrender. Then she thought, and the thought was paralyzing, that he might catch her only to drag her back a captive to the women's camp—and bed down with Cholan! She remembered Targoutai and she hated all men.

She reached the rocks at the foot of a cliff, jumped off her pony and began to climb. When she looked back she saw that Kisil, too, was afoot. Her heart was beating with a strange excitement. All the feelings she had been trying to suppress shook themselves loose. Delicious shiverings began to chase up and down her quivering body. She felt weak at the knees. Her breasts tingled with anticipatory delight. There was nothing to do but look for a suitable place to surrender.

Deciding she would go no farther, she climbed a cleft that gave access to a ledge. A single pine tree grew on the ledge; behind it the wall rose sheer. Gesikie reached this eyrie and looked around, taking deep breaths. The tree's branches swept down to a carpet of grass and pine needles

that filled the air with fragrance. She advanced to the edge and looked down. Kisil was at the foot of the cleft.

Kisil stopped. His chest was heaving and a fever was burning in his veins. Emotion seemed to suffocate him as he gazed on this young descendant of the Borjiguene who stood proudly and imperiously above him. He didn't know what to do. He didn't know what she expected. He did know what he wanted, but he feared to make a false move. So he gazed at her with all his soul, his eyes holding hers in mute inquiry, and, as they pleaded, he saw a sweet smile of acquiescence spread across her features. He sensed she didn't want him to move, and he too was so enraptured that he did not want to break the spell. She raised her arms and slowly began to unwind her plaits of hair, her eyes never leaving his. When her hair was loosened like a cloud about her shoulders, she unfastened the girdle about her coat in an unmistakable feminine gesture of consent. Now, proudly lifting her head and standing erect above him, she flung wide her garment, exposing her breasts to the moon's silver light, waiting for him to accept her generous offering.

He sprang forward like an arrow from a bow. When he reached the ledge she turned to face him, an enigmatic smile playing about her lips.

She felt his arms lift her, felt the brushing of sensitive nipples against his rough coat. There was no need for either to speak. He had to stoop to carry her beneath the branches, and the touch of his hand, shifting to the back of her knees, loosening them, drove the last fear of man from her mind. He laid her down in the place of her own choosing. She rejoiced when he stripped the clothing roughly from her supine body and divested himself in like manner. As she wrestled with Kisil in that fierce mating, her outpouring of energy matched his in the give-and-take of love; she forgot the looked-forward-to play, spoken of by Jhotuz, the timid withdrawals, the coquettishness that she had once planned in the loneliness of her tent. A primordial urge swept over them both.

Afterward, she thought it had been better this way. It had released some pent-up hatred, so that she could even think

of Targoutai now without the utmost loathing. Her fingers strayed speculatively over Kisil's back, feeling the muscles that were now relaxed; she wondered that she was so unconscious of his weight. Once, too, she remembered, she had wondered what it would be like to feel his strong hands on her body. Now—she smiled—she knew.

Kisil, too, had forgotten the persuasion he had thought to use. He had been surprised by the dramatic surrender of this daughter of the gods and amazed at the strength of her desire. As he turned to lie at her side he wondered who had been the giver, who the taker.

Later he awoke and looked up. The moon had hidden its face, but there was enough light filtering through the branches for him to see Gesikie. She was sitting up, naked from the waist, her soft shift of antelope skin draped across her loins. Her smile was no longer enigmatic but tender as she turned to look at him. He reached up and, twisting his hand in her hair, brought her head down until their lips met, and while they kissed her eyes met his unwaveringly. The wildness had gone from them. They were full of unspeakable love.

Her breasts were warm to his cooled skin. He held her close. "That was a fierce battle," he said reflectively.

"But you won the field!" Her fingers brushed his lips and he playfully bit them. She threw herself on him and, freeing her fingers, ran them through his hair. Her warm weight settled like eider down about him; her voice caressed him, the fluted notes of a new Gesikie falling softly on his ear. She was all femininity now; gone was the fierceness; she was wooing him with voice and touch, seeking to explore the other deep recesses of feeling that she knew must exist where only instinct could suggest. She aroused him again, and their second mating was as sweet and tender as the first had been strong and fierce.

"Does my lord wish to leave now?" she asked at last.

"Your lord doesn't seem to have the energy to climb down those rocks." He laughed. "No, I'll spend what little time I have with you. I must be across the valley and in the mountains before dawn."

He could have added that he didn't particularly want to meet the searching gaze of Cholan, or the impish smile of Jhotuz, for a while.

Book Four—*The Golden Enclosure*

32

THE "PRINCE" BOGORJI

KISIL HAD NOT TOLD Cholan or Gesikie that he hoped to be among those accompanying Tsari and the tribute of horses and camels being sent to the emperor.

Temujine had discussed it with him. "When Muhuli agreed to the resumption of paying tribute he did not dream that he would find us beggars on his return. We cannot send all that the emperor demands, but at least I must send a token tribute, and that soon."

Kisil was aghast at the thought of sending horses, they had so few.

"If I don't send them," Temujine answered, "we shall have the taxgatherers here with an army at their back. Remember, the army that is watching the Tatars can readily move up here."

"Will you have this girl impersonating Gesikie—this Tsari—delivered to the general of the army?"

"No, Kisil, I have other plans. Tsari and the tribute herds will be sent directly to the emperor and go in by the usual route, but I hope some of the escort will stay a while in their land, and come back by another route. I want to know something of Hia and why they were plotting against us with Targoutai." Temujine paused, smiled thoughtfully. "In exchange for my tribute I want information. To obtain that I need someone with the eyes of an eagle and the cunning of a fox, someone who can think quickly and does not lose his head—I have thought of sending you, Kisil Bahatur."

Kisil was delighted at the prospect. He was eager to see the glories of the fabulous cities of the Chinese. "I would certainly keep my ears open, lord."

"And your eyes—for ears may deceive but eyes reveal! I want to plant you, and a few others, in the midst of the Kin to absorb their knowledge and ways of making war. I want to know the strength of the Inner Wall that I am told they are building, and where the weak spots may be. I want to know if Hia can be an ally, not an enemy!" Then, seeing Kisil's eagerness, Temujine laughed. "Only, this time don't go disguised as a shaman. I think you might go as a student, as one eager to learn at their Academy."

"Who else will you send?"

"We must choose carefully—younger men, preferably those who already know something of their ways and language. Tsari, I hope, will remember she is still half-sister to me and will seize any opportunity to further the welfare of our people, though my mother says once she enters the women's courts she will be seen no more by men. If she pleases the emperor she may be able to do much for us."

"But what will you do for horses and camels to make up the tribute?"

"Round up wild ones and break them in. The best we'll keep ourselves. Yet I grieve to think my mother must thus expose our poverty and plead for a lessening of the tribute."

"Your mother goes, then?"

"She thinks it best to carry out my father's plan. She will do her utmost to gain the ear of the emperor. It will be dangerous for her if they find out that we have switched girls, but my mother will not be there long, we hope."

Apparently Tsari's risk, and Kisil's, did not enter Temujine's mind.

Kisil left two months later.

He did not consider it necessary to tell Cholan and Gesikie that he would not be returning with Yulun but staying on in Yen to spy. They could get used to his absence a while before learning that his feet were set on the adventure path once more.

The tribute horse herd was driven before, the camels were led behind. Kisil rode Babor beside the swaying camel on which Yulun was perched. Muhuli rode on her other side; he had insisted on coming, but only, he said, to see that Yulun got back safely.

Behind them, on a young white female camel of grace and elegance, rode Tsari—that is, for the first day. The second day Tsari begged Yulun to let her ride her pony until they came closer to the Pass. Tsari pleaded that she might never ride again, so Yulun consented. Then Tsari snatched avidly at her last days of freedom. Like a child she raced ahead to flush birds for the falcons the party carried, or hunted the myriad small rodents that infested the long grass, shooting them from the back of her horse with deadly skill.

Their journey was swift and uneventful. When at last the Pass came in sight, Tsari donned her finery, such as it was, and remounted the white camel with a certain amount of reluctance. She was excited and very proud of the new clothing that Yulun had provided for her: the white camel's-hair riding coat, the riding boots of soft, purple-dyed leather, the round white felt hat with its fur band that she could pull over her ears. Yulun gave the girl also a pair of pointed silver cases with elegant tassels into which the ends of her hair were fastened and brought over her shoulders, as well as other minor ornaments for her hair and a carnelian necklace from which hung a lucky charm.

Tsari thought Kisil was much impressed with her changed appearance and she assumed an air of importance that would have amused him had he noticed her.

But Kisil's eyes were on the Wall. He had visioned China's "Long Ramparts" as something like the mud walls the Uigurs built around their cities; he had certainly not been prepared for their overpowering appearance. The Outer Wall writhed like a snake across the mountainsides, humped over the peaks and coiled down into the deep shadows of the gorges. Heavy iron-studded gates were set deep into the tunnel that burrowed through the walls and gave emphasis to their thickness. Flanking battlements crested both sides of the pass and, indeed, seemed to stretch away into infinity. On distant peaks

square towers stood sharply silhouetted against the sky, and near at hand, at intervals along the Wall, crenelated bastions brooded over all with an impression of infinite power and majesty.

This was but one of five similar "mouths" that opened in the section of the Wall that stretched across the northern mountains east to west from the Great Sea to the Yellow River. Inside this Wall, Kisil learned, was a similar wall one day's march nearer Yen, and many loops of wall ringed about the gorges that funneled from the mountains into the coastal plain.

Occupied with these wonders, Kisil was unaware that Tsari's eyes followed him wistfully as he rode ahead, to the exclusion of all else that she was passing. But Yulun observed this interest and called Kisil to her side. "It was unwise of me to allow Tsari to break her training," she said quietly. "You have a fatal fascination for our maids, apparently, Kisil Bahatur. I think it best that you and I ride behind, for I have much to plan with you before some official of the Golden Enclosure meets us."

She and Kisil turned their horses to let the party ride ahead.

"We make a sorry showing," Yulun said. "My retinue is better suited to our plains than these civilized parts. Tsari and I, having no maids in attendance, will lose face."

Pure Gold had pleaded to accompany Yulun as her servant, but Kisil, urged by Cholan's distrust of the girl, had pointed out that she—or any woman servant—might gossip with other servants and thoughtlessly betray Yulun. Yulun had appreciated the danger and, in spite of the girl's repeated pleading, had left the disconsolate Tonguz behind.

As they rode at the rear, Yulun gave Kisil further instructions: "I have a few bars of silver to give you for your sustenance. These you can change in the city for their money, both paper and silver, though the paper money is good only for use inside the city. It is possible that the emperor may give an order for your education and keep to be at the public expense—in that case the silver will look after the men we are leaving with you and take care of any bribes you may

find necessary in your gathering of information. As an excuse for leaving a student with such a retinue I shall tell the emperor that you are a prince descended from the old Khitans and related to Yesukai through his brother. 'Tis best we now rehearse this story until it comes glib on your tongue. You will likely be sent to live with some high official where, you may be sure, careful watch will be kept over your actions. I need not further stress the importance of your behavior, and only warn you to be forever on your guard."

"The men, too, had best be told of this assumed rank," Kisil said, "and would it not be as well for them to address me by this title now, so that they will become accustomed to it?"

Yulun agreed. She halted the party and called them all together for a conference. "None of you, with the exception of Sanang, Mendo and Lob who are remaining behind with Kisil, can speak the language of the black-haired ones, but some of them may well speak our language and try to pry secrets from you—so I warn you all, as you value your lives, to watch your tongues! From this time Kisil Bahatur will be know to us as the Prince Bogorji—his title, Bahatur, bestowed on him by the khan, we had best forget. He is posing as a student, as one anxious to learn, and it would be as well for them not to know that among us he is also known as *the Brave.*"

Muhuli's ready laugh set the seal of acceptance on Kisil's rank. This, to all of them, was a joke they were playing on the emperor. "I have the rank of general, but have no army," Muhuli said. "You are a prince and have no subjects. We are equal!"

They were now riding over the feeding ranges of the emperor's herds—brown rolling hills devoid of tree and shrub that billowed like a vast flood from the western peaks down to the coastal plain. And here they turned over the tribute herds to the Warden of the Range who said the emperor would be informed of what a scurvy lot they had brought in. When their party breasted a ridge Kisil looked over the terrain; far ahead, on the last crests, he could see from his vantage point the man-made works of the Inner Wall tossed and upflung like driftwood on the flood of hills.

Kisil found it hard to concentrate on the plans he and Yulun had discussed. His eyes were fixed on the teeming throngs that swarmed like ants where they were rebuilding the fortifications. Passing on, they went through fields of grain. The land was tilled so close to the narrow trail that their horses snatched at the grain. The earth in this region was of a yellow color and amazingly prolific. That it supported a large population was evident by the numerous villages they passed. The inhabitants scrupulously avoided association with this party of barbarians, yet they seemed pleasant and temperate people in spite of their life of grinding toil.

They were approaching a walled city. Not wishing to spend the night within its walls, Yulun ordered the tents set up outside. Kisil ventured within the walls but found the multitude of people frightening. He thought the whole population of the empire must be gathered here, but the next day, when he rode through town after town and saw equal multitudes, he was stunned into silent awe at this overwhelming evidence of the fertility of the earth mother—the yin of China.

When they arrived at the gates of ancient Yen, now the capital of the Golden Enclosure, they were met by an escort under a high official. He bowed superciliously and spoke to Yulun.

Then Yulun called Muhuli and Kisil to her side. "The time for parting has come. This *kwan* informs me I am to be lodged within the walls of the emperor's palace, but you and the escort are to follow a lower official who will lodge you elsewhere. No need to tell you to keep firm control over the men and see they behave. I shall do my best to see you again, Kisil, before I leave. You both will soon hear from me, I hope."

She signaled to the camel driver. "*Dzouk-dzouk!*" the man shouted, and the camels knelt. Kisil helped Tsari down from her perch. The girl was deeply agitated and pressed Kisil's hand fleetingly, well aware that the eyes of the officials—as well as those of Yulun—were upon her. Together she and the dowager entered the gilt chairs provided for them; the escort of soldiers closed around; the bearers lifted the chairs

and Yulun and Tsari were carried out of sight. The other official spoke the language of the frontier. "Follow my mule," he ordered briefly.

They were lodged in a compound of sorts—a caravanserai, Kisil called it. At the gates a sentry was posted and Muhuli was instructed to keep his men within these bounds until such time as these conditions might be relaxed. Here, also, their weapons were taken from them.

Three days passed. Then a messenger came from Yulun asking for the Prince Bogorji and requesting him to accompany the messenger to see her.

Taking Sanang with him, Kisil rode through the huge gates set in the walls of the emperor's inner city, walls as high and as thick as the city wall itself. Inside this inner city were countless homes belonging to government officials as well as buildings housing government offices of various ministries. He rode through another gate into the innermost grounds and parks that surrounded the palace itself.

Yulun received Kisil in the presence of several men, who, he thought by their looks, might be eunuchs.

"The emperor has graciously assented," Yulun told him gravely, "to your staying here as a student, and has given orders for you and your servants to be suitably lodged with a family befitting your rank. You will be provided with teachers at the emperor's charge and I urge you to take every advantage of His Majesty's generosity. I shall not see you again before I return to our ordu, for I leave tomorrow. Peace, blessing, be with you, *Prince Bogorji!*"

Kisil longed to question her, but her glance forbade him. He bowed and followed his guide out of the palace with a dignity he hoped looked befitting to his new title. The javelin was thrown!

When Muhuli and his party mounted the next morning, Kisil and his three men watched them go. He suddenly felt apprehensive and lonely and conscious of a deep longing in his heart for Cholan. He deeply regretted now that he had not confided in her.

He stood by Muhuli's stirrup. "Tell Cholan I grieve that my duty keeps me here," he said quietly. "Tell her that my

absence will make my return the sweeter, and bid her cherish my son."

"And the . . . other one?" Muhuli asked.

"Tell her . . . when I get back there will be other moonlight nights beside the Onon, and compared with them the one she remembers will pale into insignificance."

Suddenly he wished, as he had never wished for anything before, that he were returning with Yulun and Muhuli; but he managed to smile as he turned toward Sanang, Mendo and Lob, who also were shouting messages for the girls they had left behind.

33

YULUN REPORTS TO TEMUJINE

WHEN YULUN returned without Kisil, Cholan, like a creature with mortal wound, stumbled toward the hiding shelter of her tent. There Jhotuz let her weep.

Later, when Yulun sent for her, the hurt increased when she learned that Kisil, at the time of parting, had known he would not be returning.

Dumbly she nodded her head while Yulun went on eulogizing Kisil who put duty before personal preference. "Wasn't there someone else whom Temujine could have sent?" she asked despairingly. "Wouldn't an older man—wouldn't Muhuli—?"

"Kisil has more quick wit and intelligence than Muhuli," Yulun answered. "During my journey to Yen I learned more than ever to appreciate your Kisil, though I fear he lacks the ruthlessness of those who would be truly great."

"I should hate him to be ruthless!" Cholan clenched her fist and looked up defiantly. "I don't want him to be great—especially if it means his being yoked to Temujine's wagon and dragged off to fight in Temujine's wars."

Yulun suddenly looked old. The woman's eyes became gloomy with foreboding. "Temujine's wars . . ." she said slowly. She gazed piercingly at the solid shadows of the tent and spoke as one suddenly seized with occult perceptions.

"The spirit of Temujine is the spirit of one of his great ancestors—perhaps Gray Wolf himself—who will lead the Mongol clans to battle and win once more the pre-eminence of his people on earth. If it be so, it must be heaven's will!"

She turned to Cholan, who stood spellbound, and said seriously, "In the emperor's palace I spoke with a holy man who came from a country south of the Great Snowy Mountains. He told me it was the belief of his people that when men die their souls pass to the land of the spirits for rest and replenishment, and then they come back again to earth, living in another body chosen by the heavenly powers, bringing with them the experiences of past lives. Thinking of Temujine's birth, I can believe that. He was in such a hurry to be born that he burst from my womb before my time was full, clutching a clot of blood in his fist. From the first he was impatient to reach manhood. Not for him the lisping of babyhood or the playing with childish things. Early his eager fingers reached out for his father's weapons and he was happier astride his father's horse than in his mother's arms. Yes, I can believe what the holy man told me, for how else can one account for the genius of leadership being apparent in so young a boy? And Kisil, too—"

Gesikie burst into the tent, stamping snow off her boots and bringing in a gust of cold air. She had just returned from hunting and had evidently been told the news. There was despair in the heart of Cholan, but in Gesikie's bosom raged a tumult that quickly burst the bonds of reason. In a storm of passionate invective, the girl bitterly upbraided the absent Temujine—as well as her mother—for sending Kisil away and keeping him from her.

Yulun snatched a whip and slashed at her daughter. "That's but a tenth of what Temujine will give you if you dare talk to him like that. No woman's desire—even if she is his sister—will count for anything where his ambition and the welfare of our people are concerned. Bridle your tongue, girl, if you would live!" Then in a quieter voice Yulun went on: "You've had your child? What was it . . . a boy?"

"Girl!" Gesikie spat out and rushed with unabated anger from her mother's tent.

"I sympathize with her feelings," Yulun said, then shrugged her shoulders. "What a rebellious brood I've got! There, child, dry those beautiful eyes of yours. Your Kisil will come back, never fear—and please try to be patient with that foolish daughter of mine. Now leave me."

Gesikie that night tried to fan Cholan's dismay into righteous anger. Indeed, so fierce were her fulminations against Kisil that Cholan indignantly rose to his defense.

"Peace, Gesikie!" she cried at length. "You say things I know your heart cannot mean. I have known Kisil for a long time. I know his spirit still yearned to see those far-off places he had set out to seek before he met my mother and settled down among us Keraits."

"For the love of Allah do go to sleep!" Jhotuz said irritably. "I expect my young lord Temujine will be in to see his mother tomorrow and I need my sleep tonight!"

But Jhotuz was far from the thoughts of Temujine when he rode in the next night. As Yulun slowly and at great length unfolded the story of her journey to Yen-king and told him of her brief interview with the emperor and of her long talks with the *chen-sang*, the emperor's prime minister, Temujine tried to curb his mounting impatience at her slowness.

"Did you tell them that in pulling us down they were building up the Tatars—that the tribes and clans that once gave us their allegiance had now joined our enemies, preferring to be known as strong invincible Tatars rather than weak defeated Mongols?" he asked her.

"Yes." Yulun nodded. "But they seemed to think that it was a simple matter to thrash a Tatar horse. I told them it wasn't so simple as thrashing a horse, that their previous experience should have taught them that it was like punching a bag of feathers, for like feathers the Tatars flew into the gobi or up the mountains, and when the wind desisted, like feathers they floated back again. Then I said: 'What smith could beat his iron into shape if he lacked an anvil? Hammer these so-called iron Tatars against an anvil as tough as themselves—a Mongol anvil!' "

"What said the *chen-sang* to that?" Temujine asked dourly. " 'Can the tribe of Yesukai be rewelded by an untried youth? Dare they—whose men are so few that their standard has to be held by a weak woman—bare their breasts as an anvil to Tatar iron?' "

The knuckles of Temujine's clenched fists were as white as his face. "So!" he hissed. "How answered you?"

Yulun's voice rose: " 'Yes,' I told him, 'we dare!—and the woman is not so weak or she would not be talking to you now like a man—and the youth is of that same Borjiguene stock which produced a Kabul Khan, and further, is the adopted son of Toghrul of the Kerait hordes!' That was something he had evidently forgotten, for he abruptly ended the interview. I think he wanted to consult the emperor. Anyway, the next day he sent for me again and was more affable. The outcome is this: Word has been sent to Toghrul advising him that any help he cares to give you against your enemies has the emperor's sanction and—"

"That help I could have asked for—as my father did—only I am no beggar to hold out empty hands. Sanction, indeed! As if Toghrul needed Kin sanction to aid me!"

"Then why has he not offered to help you? Why did he not come swiftly to your father's aid? No, my son, you are wrong! Toghrul's wealth lies in his fixed settlements, and those, he knows, are very vulnerable to the might of the Kin! That crafty old fox will not move a hand to help us without word from Yen. And that same word has also been sent to the Warden of the Marches outside the Wall—that general has been told to put pressure on the Tatars should they move against our backs." Yulun continued indignantly: "As for your pride why was I sent to Yen if not to plead forgiveness and ask for aid? Your father knew a woman could plead where a man would die of shame. And, much as I hated doing it, I pleaded poverty when questioned about the deficiencies of the tribute herd, so that the emperor gave instructions that the animals—worthless they called them—should be returned to me ere I left the North Gate in the Wall. I am hopeful, too, that the question of tribute will be left in abeyance for a few years. I think they realize that we shall

be in a better position to help them against the Tatars if we are relieved of this yearly drain."

"How they must scorn me!" Temujine's voice was bitter. "In one breath you boasted of our past prowess, and in the next you pleaded our present poverty. Not thus can one win allies!"

"Scorn thee? I think not!" Yulun said angrily. "The emperor sent two camel-loads of gifts!"

"Charity!" Temujine snorted. "That they despised our tribute shows in what esteem they truly hold us. From the strong they exact tribute—to the weak they give charity! I would rather pay tribute and be thought strong. So they thought the animals I sent were worthless. What did they think of Tsari?"

"She was the only part of the tribute kept," Yulun said.

"And Kisil?"

"The emperor has given orders for his education and entertainment. He will be closely watched, but I think in time they will show him what you want him to see—if only to impress their invincibility on this young barbarian from the gobi."

"I am glad. I told Kisil to act as my envoy if he found the opportunity, and, if I have judged Kisil rightly, I know he will live up to his instructions. He won't plead poverty—he'll boast of my importance!"

"Your pride, Temujine," Yulun said, shaking her head in bewildered reproof, "is like an intractable horse. Take care lest it throw you!"

"No horse can throw me! And the greater the mettle of my pride the farther it will carry me victoriously into the ranks of my enemies—foremost of whom I count the Kin!"

"You talk, my son, as if you had thrice your father's forty thousand tents at your beck and call. You will do well if, in time, you can avenge his death upon the faithless Taijiuts. But think not to wreak vengeance on the mighty Kin—it would be like a gnat biting a horse!" Yulun sighed. To bring him back to earth she asked, "How go your affairs?"

"They will go better now that you have come back. During your absence they have gone as the wind blew, sometimes

good but more often ill. I have made Sorgan-Shira, whom once my father befriended, one of my leaders, putting him in charge of nine tents—for, keeping to the sacred number nine, I have thought it prudent to scatter my people in groups of nine families under the leadership of a tenth man. With these small bands I keep constantly in touch, finding fresh pastures for them. I and my faithful band of companions live in the saddle and sleep at night in caves. We are the only unmarried ones in the horde. The women who lost husbands I have given to men who lost wives. The girls I sent up into the mountains to mate with those devoted to the making of weapons of war. It satisfies both the men and women, and keeps them more steadily at work."

"And what of your relatives?"

"They blow hot and cold. I once called them all together and offered them the leadership, saying I was willing to serve under whomever they chose—for I have not yet been raised on the felt as they swore I would be—but they seem as suspicious of one another as they are jealous of me."

"Would it not be well for you, my son, to swallow your pride and ride to Toghrul? When he needed help he never hesitated to ask your father for aid, which was freely given."

"I have not dared as yet to loose my grip on these few bands. Now that you are back I might. These gifts from the emperor might be useful also. I could take them to Toghrul with openhanded generosity, asking for nothing in return. *Tsa-tsa!* The idea is good. Guard those camel-loads well. Keep Minglig's hands off them."

"He has supported you?"

"Well enough. The herds are safe under his mantle and have increased—so have the shamans!"

"And have you any word of Keuktche?"

"With the Tatars, I suspect. That is one spy the less in camp!"

"Spies—still, my son? They hound you yet?"

"Some day the mangy curs may tire of it—when it is too late! For then they'll find the hunted is the hunter—the cub they failed to trap, the wolf that snaps at their heels." He rose to his feet. "Now I must go."

As he was leaving the tent, Yulun said, "I hear that Chelme, son of Dsartsutai, is now the captain of your band. What will Kisil think of that when he returns?"

"When he returns he will find the cedar grown and accustomed to command. His care of me was becoming oppressive. He can grow and be most useful—but it must be in my shadow."

34

YANG

ON THE ORDERS of the emperor, the young Prince Bogorji was lodged with a wealthy family who still used the old Khitan patronymic of Ye-lu. These people were to be responsible to the emperor for Kisil's well-being and behavior. They were to see that he was given a smattering of education and most thoroughly impressed with the might and power of the Golden Enclosure before he returned to the turbulent breeding ground of barbaric hordes that lay outside the Wall. To the head of the House of Ye-lu the emperor said that the prince was to want for nothing in reason, but as he might be a spy one of the sons of the house had better be his constant companion; it was important that he make no contacts with persons other than his tutors outside the family circle.

With this family Kisil lived as a guest, a humble guest lost in bewilderment and more than half ashamed of his ignorance. Their house was vast, of many courts, the greater number of which he never saw; it was like a village with a wall around it, a wall that encompassed a hundred and sixty-odd souls. Within the house lived the Ancient One—the mother of this lord—his sons, their wives and children and a horde of relatives besides. The Lady of the House, whose responsibility it was to see that all ran smoothly, gave orders to a still greater company of retainers: the steward and his staff, servants, cooks and scullions, nurses, gardeners, sweepers and mere hangers-on—each attending to his particular work, content to dwell within these walls in peaceful security on the bounty of the House of Ye-lu.

Kisil was given a small court of his own next to that of Ye-lu-chutsai, the oldest unmarried son. Two rooms, one for sleeping and one in which to eat and study, opened on this little paved court in the middle of which a weeping willow tossed its golden hair in the brisk spring wind. A small pool, in which tiny red and gold fish darted under lily pads, lay like a jewel set in the paving; a stone seat beside the pool gave the occupant of the court opportunity for quiet contemplation and refreshment of spirit.

Here Kisil lived, at first suspicious of the hands that fed him, resentful of the role imposed on him by Temujine and Yulun that enforced a pretense of study—until his mind gradually awakened to the wonders that his tutors spread before him. Then, grateful for the opportunity, and appreciating by degrees the comfort that surrounded him, he wallowed deep in the luxury of living and learning.

Yet always was he conscious that his movements were restricted, and he began to wonder how he would ever make the survey that Temujine desired. Upon his earnest protest that Babor and the other horses could not live cooped up behind walls, his two men, Mendo and Lob, were allowed to live outside the city walls in a neighboring village; here they lived an easy life, their only apparent concern being that of exercising the horses and riding out sometimes in attendance on Kisil and Ye-lu-tchutsai.

At first Sanang, as his personal servant, had lived with Kisil, but walls were a constant challenge to any Mongol. It did not take Sanang long to find a convenient tree that facilitated his coming and going over the compound wall whenever the fancy took him, which was very often, for Sanang became a frequenter of gambling houses and taverns—and would have patronized other houses of pleasure had he possessed the necessary silver. Lacking that, he had created a scandal by seducing a maid into whose father's house he had crawled at night. To hush the hubbub that this caused, Kisil had bought Sanang a small tumbledown house in a nearby street. As a family man with a legitimate wife, Sanang now entered and made his exit through the gate in a manner befitting the dignity of the House of Ye-lu.

But having climbed one wall, Sanang set about finding a way to climb the city walls, for when the city gates were shut at night, he, Mendo and Lob felt irked at being either shut in or shut out. They had been bred in the largest room, without walls or gates. Denied entrance until dawn, the men outside felt a strong desire to come in; denied exit until the same time, Sanang felt compelled to get out. Between them they soon found a secluded part of the wall, out of sight of the watchers on the towers, with convenient crevices that were easily made larger for a toe hold.

This arrangement, while known to Kisil, was not used by him, for he could converse in private with Sanang, who passed on his instructions to—or received information from —Mendo and Lob. When Kisil clattered with them through the gates for a ride into the hills west of the city, Ye-lu-tchutsai always accompanied them, making private conversation all but impossible.

From this youth, a few years older than himself yet ages older in knowledge, Kisil learned to speak the language of officialdom. The father of Ye-lu-tchutsai spoke to Kisil more often as his fluency of tongue increased, delicately probing into his purpose in remaining behind to study.

"Can knowledge of our ancient ways aid one to live on your plains?" the father asked. "Will it make you a better hunter—a more skillful soldier?"

Kisil had wondered that himself. It seemed a pity to waste all this time soaking up knowledge he could never use, but lately at the back of his mind was a growing doubt that perhaps what he had once thought wealth was . . . He shook his head in answer to both his own unspoken thought and the Elder One's question.

"I am a prince, not just a hunter, and a prince should have knowledge. We are barbarians in your eyes simply because we have not learned the peace and harmony in which your people are steeped by tradition. We need teachers—perhaps, after I have learned more . . . " he shrugged.

"May the gods grant you wisdom, may you drink deeply at our old springs!" The father's voice was smooth.

Kisil had been amazed when a venerable teacher, Shu-

shih, had shown him the libraries of rolls on which were written—so that all men now might read—the thoughts of men long dead, the sayings of ancients which still directed the way of life of those about him. He could not read them, but he could read those other paper and silken rolls on which the old masters had painted pictures. He marveled at the exquisite detail, the delicate shading of inks that created an atmosphere which he could understand. It was strange, though, he thought, that when they copied every detail of tree and building so carefully they did not copy the expressions and movements of men. Their figures looked all so wooden, with bland faces like pigs' bladders. They were shocked when he voiced his thought. This was tradition and one must never depart from tradition.

They showed him the work of other artists, those who carved jade, ivory and wood, or shaped porcelain vases, or wrought with such metals as silver, iron and bronze. He held jade objects which the artist had spent ten years of his life in making; he saw embroideries into which the souls of nameless women had been stitched when this old earth was in its youth.

When he had learned to speak and understand their tongue better, he was surprised to find rules for the work of artists laid down and prescribed—just as the rules for everyday procedure and living were laid down. From these rules one must not depart.

To Kisil such a life was stifling. He could understand now why Ye-lu-tchutsai sometimes spoke with envy of Kisil's unfettered life on the plains. At such rare times a spark of individualism would glow in Ye-lu-tchutsai's dark eyes, lighting up his smooth ivory-colored face with fleeting animation, but the spark would quickly die as centuries of tradition reasserted themselves in his mind.

The Chinese love of order and harmony, Kisil learned, was derived from their study of nature and the heavens. In their worship of the spirits he found much in common with the beliefs prevalent on the plains, though the worship of ancestral tablets, however virtuous the ancestors had been, seemed strange.

He learned of other beliefs. With Ye-lu-tchutsai he had gone into one of the many shrines that dotted the countryside. Here he had lighted the joss sticks before the God of Valor and burned gold paper before the God of Wealth. He had not known of such gods, but they appeared part of a Way of Life. In one of the many courtyards of a Buddhist temple he saw scores of yellow-coated novices droning their lessons cross-legged before a many-handed God of Mercy. Elsewhere within this temple, purple-robed lamas performed a ritual before the image of a placid Buddha who sat benignly contemplating the celebrants as the smoke of incense curled in a cloud around his nostrils.

Kisil gazed with interest at the rites.

"To need an idol seems to me like leaning on a broken reed," he remarked to Ye-lu-tchutsai thoughtfully. "What think you made the earth?"

"Primitive force—yang, the masculine principle—came into relation with primitive matter—yin, the female principle—and that produced the earth," the youth expounded.

Kisil shook his head. "It's all wind and water to me!"

"And what do you believe in?" Ye-lu-tchutsai asked.

Kisil looked blank. "Me? . . . Oh, I believe in the spirits and in one supreme spirit, Bogdo of the Everlasting Sky, but I do not know whether I believe it is in the power of the shamans to conjure up spirits to tame the wind and lightning or to produce evil spirits to do their bidding. Although—"

He then told Ye-lu-tchutsai of his extraordinary experience with Tatengri. His listener was impressed and questioned further about Tatengri's prophecy concerning the future of the Mongols and their scourging of all the peoples of the earth.

"You may sweep the frontier of your nomad enemies, but I would be sorry for you if you tried to turn against our emperor. We have a magic weapon, the fire tubes—"

Kisil felt like saying he had used their magic powder against Targoutai, but he put a curb on his tongue.

A few days after this conversation Ye-lu-tchutsai told Kisil, "I have been instructed to take you through some of our cities and show you our industrial power. This Academy, with all its ancient learning, may lead you to think us weak."

"Who instructed you?" Kisil asked interestedly.

"My father."

Kisil nodded. "Good! I would like to see more of your cities." The emperor would have instructed the father. No doubt they thought to overawe the young barbarian prince. Well, this would suit him like the tail on a horse. This was what he was here for.

Now Kisil was shown the industrial life of China, the districts teeming with men who produced merchandise, the arsenals where munitions of war were manufactured. The merchant in him responded to the wealth of the goods. He became very thoughtful as he fingered a variety of stuffs, and had visions of caravans bearing his own merchandise traveling across the *Pe-lu* to the far western cities of the Turks and Iranians. It now seemed a far cry from the days when he had thought horses and women the standard by which a man's life could be judged.

It was the arsenals that really interested him. They showed him the fire tubes that could make breaches in city walls or cut great lanes through closely packed armies. He admitted the workmanship of the chariots, but secretly thought them great lumbering things that a nomad archer could make circles around. They took him outside the city and showed him the corps of disciplined soldiers on maneuvers.

"You are indeed a powerful nation," he agreed. "No wonder your empire stretches far and wide and we nomads tremble at your might!"

Between the capital and the Wall, large colonies of soldiers were kept employed in agriculture. A poor way, he thought, for soldiers to live—no wonder they looked dispirited. He soon found also that the civic officials outranked the military officials, and that most of the troops were hired mercenaries or impressed militia who were constantly deserting to their villages and farms.

They had told him at great length about the strength of the Wall—how it stretched north and south along the borders of China right down to the tropical forests where elephants and tigers had their home.

"Your horses would have to sprout wings to get over that

Wall, my friend," Ye-lu-tchutsai said, and laughed.

Kisil had soberly agreed, but inward he chuckled. The tribes outside the Wall knew much about that outer line of defense. Near the capital, where the inspections were frequent, the Wall was strong indeed, but farther away it got weaker and weaker and in the mountains it often only bridged the valleys. Mongol horses did not need wings to climb mountains.

In the cities Kisil admired the delicate towers rising upward in innumerable stories, each story a little smaller than the one below, each with a multicolored roof, concave and sloping, the eaves hung about with little bells that tinkled merrily.

Lulling them to sleep, Kisil thought.

But he also had been lulled to sleep. His body had grown soft. This luxurious living had subtly weaved a cocoon of silken bonds around him.

Tonight Sanang had burst the bonds.

He had come but a few moments ago just as Kisil was settling down to sleep.

"I have a message from Tsari," Sanang whispered. "She must escape tonight with us!"

"Tsari . . . escape!" Kisil gasped incredulously. "How do you know the message was from her? Perhaps it's a trap. Who brought the message?"

"A woman came to me at the tavern tonight. 'Are you the Mongol Sanang?' she asked. I said yes, what about it? 'Do you recognize this ornament?' she asked. I looked at it—it was a long pin with a gold knob that once Yulun gave to Tsari. I told her I recognized the pin. Then she said, 'You know then who sent me?' I said no, I didn't—the pin might belong to anybody or nobody."

"What said she then?"

"Something about me being a thickheaded ox of a Mongol. 'Go, idle one,' she said, 'and get your master—there is no time to lose.' So I said, 'If there's no time to lose, then stop playing games. Let's get down to wrestling, and give me something to get a hold on.' " Sanang sniggered.

"Then—did she give you a message?"

"Yes. It didn't sound right to me. I made her repeat it several times."

"Stop bleating wind! What was it?"

Sanang thought a moment. Then, lowering his voice to what he thought was a whisper, he said, *"They know of our deception. We must escape tonight. Bring all the silver you can get—we shall need it."*

They know of our deception. Kisil tried to get his wits to work. That sounded genuine. Tsari would not have sent such a message unless the woman also knew, unless her situation was desperate. *Our deception*—did they know that he was no prince, that he was a spy?

"Right or not, we must go! This woman knows our secret—where did you leave her?" Kisil sprang from his couch and started dressing.

"With Mendo and Lob. She's just outside the wall, where I climbed over. Mendo said he would watch her if Lob would go for the horses. Lob will bring the horses to the place outside the city wall where we climb over. He'll wait there until dawn, then move to the city gates to meet us there."

"You all take this message seriously, then?"

"Yes, because the woman said she had brought Tsari out of the palace and out of the inner city—"

"Out of the palace and out of the— Where is Tsari, then?"

"Some place where the woman keeps her grandson."

"How did Tsari get out of the palace?"

"On the woman's back, in her laundry basket."

Kisil was hurriedly dressing. "Why is the woman doing this—risking her life?"

"For silver—that and something else I didn't quite understand. It's the silver part I don't like—that's why I smell a trick. We have no weapons, remember."

Kisil lifted the mattress and picked up the knife that lay beneath it.

"I have my knife."

"Then you think we ought to go?" Sanang asked.

"Yes, we must risk this being a trap. The woman knows something of our secret and we dare not do otherwise. Make up my old clothes into a bundle to tie on the saddle. I'm

wearing the civilized ones because they make me look more important."

Sanang went about his task with a happy expression. "It's time we went. We've been here too long. Two years, lord, you have wasted here in learning."

Yes, Kisil thought, it was time he went. How quickly the time had passed! But leaving in this fashion rubbed his pride the wrong way. It was the sort of thing they would expect a barbarian to do, and he considered he was no longer a barbarian, even in their eyes. He would hate any trouble to come to this house because of him; the emperor might well take vengeance on them. He hated this seeming ingratitude for the family's kindness. Perhaps, some day, he could repay them.

He had two bars of Mongol silver left that he had not changed into silver or paper money. These he wrapped in some rough maps he had made, copied from memory as best he could. This parcel he strapped to his body; then he fastened his clothing. Over his brilliant vest and embroidered tunic he pulled on the quilted coat with a fur lining that he had bought in the Street of the Clothiers. He snatched his old girdle from Sanang, who was about to tie it around the bundle, and fastened it around his waist. Then he thrust the knife through the girdle.

The question of money for the bribe worried him. The woman wanted silver. He would gladly give her greater value in the "convenient money" that the emperor printed, but the poor were suspicious of it. They preferred strings of copper or ounces of silver.

All the silver money he had was in a leather bag. He weighed it in his hand. It wasn't heavy. To make it feel heavier, he picked up a jade seal that served as a paperweight and slipped it among the coins.

"Let us go, Sanang. I must leave everything else."

Taking one last look around the room, Kisil gestured good-by to this peaceful life with his thumb upthrust, his fingers clenched into his palm. He grinned as he blew out the flickering light in the saucer.

Ye-lu-tchutsai would think a dragon had whisked him away!

35

YIN

TO TSARI these past two years had seemed an age, a lifetime spent within the four walls of her courtyard.

She lifted the polished mirror and critically surveyed the changes wrought in her appearance. It was difficult to think back and remember her early enthusiasm, to recall the simplicity of mind that had led her to assume she was already a great lady because officials bowed to her, even as they bowed to Yulun, from whom she had parted dry-eyed. Flattered by the respect of those who bore her away, she had been still sufficiently the child to wax openly enthusiastic before her female attendants over the rich clothing awaiting her in her own private court.

When she had stripped to the skin they had tittered to see that her slender legs were slightly bowed; incredulously they had felt the strong muscles of her legs and thighs. And her feet—what would the emperor think?

Her face was round, like her sturdy Mongol mother's, though her straight nose and the gleam of red in her hair had come from Yesukai. The attendants dressed her hair to make her face look oval, they tried to hide the healthy tan of desert under white powder, and they plucked the heavy brows that had kept the sweat of hard work from her hazel-brown eyes; but they couldn't change the generous pout of her lips any more than they could mold her feet.

But if they couldn't mold Tsari's feet, they could mold her mind. She learned of yang and yin and knew that she was yin, the emperor, yang—that everything was dual and that perfect harmony was achieved by the completion of the circle.

Too soon her early ecstasy had passed. Now Tsari was like a wild bird caged, though no song trilled from her slender throat to fill the air with melody. And like birds they were, she thought—these companions chosen for their loveliness and not sent as she had been, mere tribute like a camel or a

horse. Such beauty as she had seemed dimmed before theirs; she envied them their air of graceful elegance which she tried to imitate. Like birds they were, in their bright plumage of brilliant brocade and embroidered silk and satin, their heads crested with jewels, their elongated fingernails encased in silver sheaths. Like birds they chirped incessantly; they gossiped about the latest scandals relayed by servants, or secretly intrigued with the eunuchs for privilege and place—the place most coveted, of course, being the emperor's bed.

And there was something else she had learned about—bribery! Tsari had been amazed to find that the eunuchs were the most influential men of the imperial city, that the rank of many a minister did not depend on his success in passing the examination but was in proportion to the amount of money paid as bribes to these eunuchs—these so-called men. Indeed, the naming of an heir to the middle-aged emperor might well devolve on their choice. The women schemed to bear many sons in the hope that one might oust the only son of the old empress.

She put down the polished mirror. What would Kisil think if he saw her now? Two years had passed since she had seen her . . . friend.

It had been a year before Tsari had called a woman "friend." The woman was a laundress, one of no account to these birds of bright plumage, yet, unlike them and their slave attendants, she was free!

The woman had approached Tsari in her court and had bowed from the hips. "Would the Princess Imperial Grace deign to cast her eyes on this unworthy person who pleads the anxiety of a mother as her only excuse for presuming to intrude?"

Tsari thought the woman looked ill. "Who are you? What is your name?" she asked kindly.

"They call me Peahen now, though once a master who fondled me in youth named me Rose Petal. Once I, too, wore silks and had my court within his walls—now . . ." Her shrug expressed both resignation and indifference, and she stood patiently with folded hands before Tsari.

The woman was dressed in a cotton tunic and her shoes

were of cotton with felt soles. Her feet, Tsari noticed at once, had not been bound. Her speech hinted she was a northerner.

"Please seat yourself, good mother, and tell me what it is that makes your face look strained. Your son, perhaps, is ill?" Tsari suggested, motioning the woman to a chair.

The woman sat down as one accustomed to such furniture, yet she had a wary look as if ready to spring to her feet should anyone approach. "The gods did not favor this person with a son," she said gravely. "It is of my daughter that I would speak to the gracious one."

"Then speak of her. Where is she?"

"In your birthland, I think, Imperial Grace, for she was given to a man who owned many camels and when he tired of her he sold her as a slave—the misbegotten spawn of a she-monkey told me so when he returned to the city without her. My daughter a slave!—she whose feet I bound—to good purpose, I thought, when she was fondled as a 'little wife' by one of the emperor's high ministers."

"Why did this high one give her to the man who owned camels? What had she done?"

"My foolish daughter committed an indiscretion with a younger man when her master was away. He knew the child she bore, my ugly little grandson, was not his seed." Peahen sighed and shook her head over the oft-told story. "My daughter was made to look on as her lover died a death by many tortures. When the spirit of her lover was at last released, the executioner took my grandson by the heels to dash his brains out on the ground. But as my daughter shrieked the minister cried, 'Stop!' "

Tsari's fingers pressed deeply into her cheeks. Her eyes were filled with horror. "What then?" she whispered.

Peahen looked up. "I was not told, gracious one. A man came to me with my grandson in his arms. 'Here, old one,' he said, 'take this misbegotten child of your daughter and do what you will with it. Your daughter has been given to a camel driver who is taking her in his caravan across the empty lands of sand. She chose to chance slow death from thirst rather than certain death now.' "

Tsari's eyes brimmed with tears as she reached out to touch

the woman's arm. "What can I do, older one? I have no silver to dull your pain—"

"I thought perhaps the princess knew of this slave, my poor unhappy child, for her master said he sold her to a spirit conjurer of your people."

"A spirit conjurer?" Tsari's eyes shone bright with interest through the mist of tears. "What was her name? How long ago was this?"

"Chili-kin was the name her lord gave her when first he took her to his bed."

"Chili-kin—*Pure Gold!*" Tsari exclaimed with astonishment. "I know her—she's alive and well. Your daughter is the personal slave of my Lady Yulun, my father's first wife!"

"Do my ears hear aright?" Peahen raised her hands as if to grasp this amazing news. "You tell me that you know my unhappy daughter—that she is alive and well? A slave to your father's first—?"

"My mother," Tsari said hastily, correcting her error.

Peahen's joy was uncontrolled; she knelt at Tsari's feet kissing her hands, wetting them with the tears that streamed down her cheeks; and then she coughed—a spurt of bright blood flecked Tsari's hand.

"You are ill, older one!" Tsari cried. She helped the woman to the chair.

"It's nothing, my precious lady. Don't tell anyone," the woman begged, "or they will take my work away from me."

Between her fits of coughing she blurted out to Tsari: "I paid money to a eunuch to get this work. . . . If I can't work my grandson may starve. . . . I think I soon may die, and I must make provision for him lest my daughter never come back. Now, lady, this wilted flower thanks you for your brightness which has lifted her face to the sun."

"Come again, older one, for I am much alone."

Between Tsari and Peahen grew a vine of friendship that quickly threw out tendrils which twined about their hearts, a friendship the more precious because it was concealed.

From Peahen, Tsari learned that Kisil—the Prince Bogorji, she remembered to call him—still lived in ancient Yen, breathed the same blossom-scented air, felt the same winds

from northern plains to which she sometimes lifted her tear-stained face. Peahen had even seen him ride with his retinue of fierce Mongols through the city gates. Men envied him his black stallion, though they looked somewhat askance at his rough followers.

For a long time Tsari was unaccountably happy to know that Kisil was near; then she dreaded to question Peahen further about him, lest she learn that he had gone—gone back to the rolling plains and freedom. She thought she hid her longings from the other woman's eyes.

Peahen, however, was a keen observer of feminine emotion and well steeped in court intrigue. A tiny seed suddenly germinated in the head of this woman who yearned for her daughter; if this young Mongol princess—whose heart was evidently pining for a lover and whose thoughts were forever in her birthland—if she could get back to the uncouth tents of her tribe, might she not be able to contrive that Chili-kin be freed from slavery and returned?

Thus Peahen reasoned. So whenever she could get into Tsari's court for a few stolen minutes of chatter, she always encouraged the girl to talk of the Mongol pastures and then she would slyly bring the Prince Bogorji's name into the conversation.

Peahen was surprised that this young girl had as yet remained unnoticed among the women. The reason was, she shrewdly suspected, Tsari's lack of money to bribe; her charms had not been drawn to the attention of the emperor—it was even possible that an adverse report had been made by the attendants. Such things did happen; some of those not especially chosen for their grace and beauty lived sterile lives and died as virgin as when they had come.

Tsari had at first been grateful for the apparent neglect. Compared to these polished jewels, she was just a rough stone; she needed polish. When over a year had passed the girl began to feel resentful. Was she not a woman like the others? Could she not please the emperor as well as they? But since she had known Peahen her thoughts had switched to another channel. It was thoughts of Kisil, and not the emperor, that kept her tossing in her bed at night.

It was the morning after such a troubled night that the summons came. The chief eunuch appeared in her court and bowed from the waist. Her education, he said, had progressed to the point where she was considered sufficiently prepared to take her exalted place.

"Tonight?"

The eunuch bowed in affirmation.

She had blushed the color of a sun-ripened peach. Little trickles of sweat ran down her nape, her hands were hot and clammy, her body quivered when they came to bathe her. So it was to be the emperor, after all.

The eunuch had carried her, wrapped in swan's-down, on his shoulder. . . .

She had been glad when it was over and she was returned to her court. When they left her she had taken up her mirror and gazed curiously at her eyes. She was so certain that they would look different but the hazel-brown irises were the same. Nothing to indicate . . .

Peahen knew that the date of that night visit had been entered on the tablets and that a closer watch would be kept on this young concubine at the next moon. If Tsari was to go, it must be soon.

To test Tsari's feelings Peahen dropped a hint that the young prince was leaving soon, by what his servant's wife had told her.

Tsari burst into tears. "I beg you, older one, not to mention him or my birthland to me again unless you want to break my heart and see me die. To him, and others that I love, I am as one already dead. Sometimes," she sighed, "I wish I were."

"Do my unworthy ears hear aright? You want to die—you who have just been favored by the emperor and now have security for life?" Peahen's voice sounded incredulous.

"I would give up all and face starvation on the desert if need be, but the prince has never given me a thought—his thoughts are with his wives, Cholan and my half-sister Imperial Gra—" She bit off her words, looking with startled eyes at Peahen.

"Imperial Grace, you were going to say? Are there then two

princesses named Imperial Grace in your family?" The woman's eyes were bright as she added ironically, "O illustrious one, is it possible . . . ?"

Tsari stuttered and stammered and laughed, but the laugh was hysterical, and she was dismayed at having revealed her secret.

Soon Peahen had the story and she could not believe her ears! So the young man was no prince and the girl was no princess! Of a truth, these Mongols were deceitful! Now, perhaps, the youth would aid her plans . . . if he thought that both their lives were threatened.

"You won't betray us?" Tsari begged, now fearful for her life and Kisil's.

"No, but such a secret is too great to be hidden long. The Minister of Crime has long ears and you are both running to certain death. 'Tis well you told me. You must go—and quickly!"

"You say 'go' as if I could sprout wings and fly over these walls. Where could I go, how far would I go, alone?"

"He would go with you if I told him that you both had been betrayed and must leave before cockcrow!"

Tsari gasped. "Older one, why do you torment me? You know what you suggest is not possible."

"With my help it can be done," said Peahen.

"But why would you help? I have no money to repay you."

"Your gratitude could find no surer way to repay for a lifetime of happiness than by sending Chili-kin back by the first caravan."

Tsari suddenly felt nauseated; in dumb misery she looked at Peahen and nodded. "I am in your hands, but oh, older one, plan well, for you will not lie quietly in your grave if our deaths lie across its threshold, nor will you see your daughter—ever!"

36

"SILVER, SILVER, SILVER!"

KISIL THOUGHT the old woman's story fantastic.

They had met her in the shadow of the compound wall and Kisil wished to question her before he crossed the narrow strip of moonlight that lay like a naked sword between the wall and a dark mass of huddled dwellings. His hand shot out and grabbed her wrist as she was about to dart across the moonlight. "Nay, slippery one, tell me your story right here. What manner of woman are you, who dare to walk the streets at night alone?"

The woman tugged to free her hand, then covered her mouth with her other hand and coughed. He thought it a signal, but repeated coughs racked her body, and her voice as she struggled to speak convinced him that this was no ruse —the woman had the lung fever.

"My barking will bring the watchman of the house!" she croaked in a loud whisper. "Large ears can lurk behind walls, lord."

Mendo and Sanang darted across the moonlight into the shadows on the other side; Kisil waited a moment. Then, still gripping the woman's wrist, he followed. "Now speak," he commanded.

He turned her story over in his mind as he followed her wavering footsteps through a tangled growth of hovels. Some of the fragments of her story fitted in with his own knowledge. Probably neither Tsari nor this woman realized that the daughter, Pure Gold, had saved her life by consenting to be a spy. She had been deliberately planted within Yulun's household. Had Minglig aught to do with that? Had he so desired the wife of Yesukai that he had schemed to poison his khan? For now Kisil was sure Pure Gold had been the agent who had put poison in the dish from which Yesukai ate. Then Kisil remembered Cholan's suspicions of Pure Gold's meeting with Keuktche. Keuktche . . .! He and the emperor were the snakes at the bottom of the well!

Kisil turned to Sanang. "Where is she taking us? Do you know this part of the city?"

"All I know is my poor feet are taking me farther and farther away from the place where our horses await us. What now?"

The woman stopped. She would have fallen had not Kisil steadied her with his arm. "You are indeed ill, O holder of dark secrets. You sound as one who has not long to live."

"The girl was heavier than I thought. . . . I died a thousand deaths." She moved forward again. "We are near the roof that shelters my stupid little grandson. You have the silver, lord? I trust you for the silver."

"Yes, but tell me more about this sudden danger, this information that came from beyond the Wall," Kisil urged her.

The woman's voice now seemed incoherent. She mumbled, "Her coffin was at the door. . . . The one-who-strangles had been sent for. . . . I put her in my basket, threw her clothes on top. You will send my daughter back, lord? . . . I have not long to live."

By the blood of an ox! This belated information might well have come from Pure Gold. That Tonguz had much to answer for. Kisil turned to his companions. "This is a strange story the old woman tells."

"All I hear is 'silver, silver, silver.' " Sanang said grimly.

The woman caught the word. "Yes, silver for my little grandson—she promised me much silver."

"She moans like a moon-struck cow!" Mendo said.

"You shall have silver when I know you speak true and do not make words for our undoing. You lead me to an evil corner. Know this—" Kisil pressed the point of his knife into her back—"your spirit will be the first to leave its body if you plan treachery."

The woman stopped; her face looked ghastly in the moonlight. "Oh heaven!" she moaned. "Is this how you repay one who has saved your life? You must trust me, young lord, as I trust you about the silver." She turned and stumbled on.

So weak did she appear that Kisil now feared she might

collapse before she could lead him to Tsari. His arm went round her body in support. "Forgive me, old one. You shall indeed have much silver once I know that she is well and free. Have we far to go? Shall I carry you?"

The woman paid no heed to his suggestion; her eyes were fixed and staring, she walked like one whose spirit was loath to leave its body until one last purpose had been accomplished. The men behind Kisil were silent as if they feared their speech might further weaken this slender thread that led them through the maze to Tsari.

They cast frequent glances to the stars as their path twisted and turned. A great wall loomed up before them. Kisil wondered if this were the wall of the inner city or the outer wall. He was about to ask Lob when the woman sank to the ground. She pointed to a low house in front of them deep in the shadow of the wall. No speech came from her lips, but she nodded imperceptibly in reply to Kisil's inquiring glance.

"Stay here with her," he told his men. He advanced cautiously toward the doorway.

"Tsari!" His voice was like the dull twang of a bow in the stillness of the night. "Tsari!"

The door opened cautiously and someone in a white coat stood within the shadow.

"Tsari! It's Kisil!"

"Kisil. Is it really you? I thought you'd never come."

He stared. So it was true—Tsari had escaped! She stood near him; there was a smell of scented blossoms in the air. He grasped her wrist and led her to the silent men who stood by the huddled form on the ground. Their teeth showed white as their faces broadened in welcoming grins.

"Where are the horses, Kisil?"

Tsari's voice sounded like music.

"Horses? Oh, they're outside the city wall," he answered vaguely.

"Outside? But she said we must ride through when the gates opened at dawn!"

"She? You mean her?" He nodded to the woman on the ground.

"Older one, what is it?" Tsari knelt beside the woman.

Peahen raised her face to Kisil. "The silver—"

Kisil unfastened the bag from his girdle.

"Here, old one, silver for your grandson, and richly have you earned it! May you be spared to live a thousand years!"

Peahen reached up to take the bag. A look of delight spread over the face of the kneeling woman as she felt the weight of the bag. Her fingers fumbled at the fastening. Then her face suddenly changed. She pitched forward into the dust, her hands still clasping the bag, and lay still.

Tsari turned the woman over. A stream of blood ran from her dusty lips and gathered in a pool beside her head. Her sightless eyes stared into the moonlight.

Tsari looked up at Kisil. "She's dead!"

Kisil nodded.

Sanang reached down and took the bag from the dead woman's fingers.

"She won't need this, lord." He handed the bag to Kisil who again tied it to his girdle. Tsari's voice was raised in a feeble protest, but the thoughtful look on Kisil's face silenced her. He unfastened the paper money he had tucked in his sleeve. "Each of these notes of *piau thsian* is worth a string of a thousand cash—together they are worth much more than the silver in the bag. The woman wanted silver. This paper money might be worthless to us outside the city, but it will mean wealth to the people who care for her grandson. Take me to them, Tsari."

Tsari went into the house and presently came out with a man and woman poorly clad in cotton. They were but half awake and stood shivering in the night air. The woman, seeing Peahen's body, opened her mouth to scream, but Tsari hissed a warning. The woman then flung herself to her knees and beat her head on the ground. "Don't slay me," she moaned. "I have many little mouths to feed." The man gazed with oafish stupidity.

Tsari spoke softly to the woman. "We did not slay her. Her heart broke and she died at our feet. See, this lord has much money for you to keep for her little grandson."

Kisil placed the money in the woman's hands. Then, turning to the man, he said sternly, "Swear by the spirits, both

of you, that you will not rob her grandson of his inheritance." He drew his knife and held it blade downward before their terrified eyes.

Eagerly they swore as Kisil said, and promised to bury Peahen secretly that night.

He turned to Sanang. "Our lives now depend on you. Get us out of the city quickly, for daylight is not far off."

Sanang and Mendo conferred briefly. "This wall is the wall of the inner city. We must circle it to get to the eastern side where Lob awaits us." Sanang glanced at the stars. "You are right, Kisil Bahatur, we have no time to lose."

Unused to walking, they all were exhausted by the time they had circled the inner wall to the part of the city they knew. Cutting across more familiar ground, they had to hide from the watch patrolling this wealthier section. As they approached the city wall the stars were throwing a false light in which everything looked gray and shapeless.

"I would we still had moonlight," Sanang muttered. "Both you and Tsari may well find this climb beyond your powers."

So Kisil thought, too, as he stood in the wall's shadow and glanced upward.

"Take off your boots," Sanang whispered. He and Mendo set the example and tied their boots round their necks. Kisil glanced up hopelessly. His heart gave a jump as he thought he saw a man's head silhouetted against the sky. He pulled Tsari into the deeper shadow. Something hissed through the air and fell at their feet. Mendo exclaimed delightedly. It was a spun cable of bamboo fibers. Lob was up there, waiting for them!

37

FOUR MEN AND A MAID

FROM THE DISTANT watchtower within the city the drums were sounding the hour before dawn. Kisil swung his leg over Babor and held out a helping hand to Tsari. She sprang up behind him.

He led the way eastward at a cautious walk, until he was

sure they were out of earshot of the sentries on the wall. Then he swung south across the fields at a brisk pace, anxious to be out of sight of the wall before sunrise.

The events of the last few hours had stirred Kisil's blood. It was a long time since his heart had tingled with such excited expectancy. Now he faced the uncertainties which lay ahead with a zest that surprised him; he thought he had become too civilized to get excited over the possibility of adventures.

When they reached the southern route he turned Babor to look back, and, just over the swell of ground behind, he saw the tiles on the roof of the South Gate gleam in the first rays of the sun. He gave a gesture of farewell; then, meeting the eye of Sanang, he grinned.

"Farewell to civilization and an ordered existence!" He laughed, but there was a tinge of regret in his voice and a vague feeling within him that he could not interpret.

"We are well out of that cage!" Sanang said in his booming voice.

They rode too fast to talk, but later, when they pulled up to give the horses rest, they loosened their tongues, and then Kisil learned what a narrow escape they had had from disaster.

"It was well you came when you did," Lob said. "I was getting anxious. I knew it would take much time to lead the horses round the walls to the North Gate, and I had determined to leave in another hundred breaths when I heard your whispers beneath me."

"The *North* Gate!" Kisil exclaimed.

It had never occurred to him to ask Sanang which gate Lob would go to if they failed to climb the walls before daylight. Kisil, knowing which route he must take, had thought only of the South Gate. He shivered to think what would have happened had they trudged across the city to the South Gate and waited there in vain for the horses.

"That shows you how carefully plans should be laid, and that nothing should be left to chance or the sudden prick of circumstance when spying in an enemy country," Kisil said sententiously.

Lob's eyebrows twisted comically as he looked at Mendo. "Is it not wonderful, Mendo, to be so educated? Our Kisil has a quiver stuffed full of beautiful long words." Turning to Kisil, he snorted, "You are just full of wind, Kisil. Acting the prince, you were just like a performing dog dressed up to ride on horseback. It was lucky that I thought of getting that rope!"

"That rope saved our necks!" Kisil agreed, ignoring the man's insolent tone.

"Yes," Tsari added, "in more ways than one. As I stood and gaped at the wall, I had the thought that a broken neck from a fall would still be preferable to a strangled one."

"I hope we'll soon have you safely back under a felt tent away from walls, Tsari," Lob said, "though it looks to me as if we are riding the wrong way for that."

"Yes, why not ride west, Kisil?" Mendo broke in. "Lob and I know a place where we can get our horses over the Wall."

"You may as well get it into your round bony heads now," said Kisil, "that it will be many moons before we see the tents of our women down the Onon. Our lord the khan gave us work to do in this land and gave me instructions to come back by the south route."

This information they received in silence until Sanang cleared his throat and spat. "It is wisdom, in any case, to ride this way for a time. They will expect us, as Lob did, to strike north or west, and the main pursuit will be already clattering up to the Pass after us now."

Kisil nodded. "That's right, Sanang. I wager couriers have already been sent to the 'five mouths' warning them to keep a double watch along the Wall to catch us."

"What about this route, Kisil?" Mendo asked.

"Yes, and down this route too, but it is along the Wall that word about us will spread. We'll keep away from the Wall and edge southeast toward the sea for a few days. It is the least likely way for us to take, they will think."

"Why not move into the hills? Why stay on this trail?"

"It is down this route that the courier will ride."

"You mean—" Sanang stroked his chin, his eyes fixed on Kisil's.

"Yes." Kisil nodded. "We must stop him."

"But won't they send mounted soldiers after us?" Mendo said in astonishment. "Only a man on horseback?"

"This is what I think—why send soldiers when soldiers are ahead of us whichever way we turn? Mounted couriers traveling day and night will soon spread a net to ensnare us. We must stop the courier who will come down this route."

"It would be easier if we had a bow, Kisil."

Kisil agreed with Sanang, but he didn't worry much about it; four of them lying in ambush should be able to manage without difficulty.

They had rested without dismounting. Kisil flicked his rein, and they all set off again at a gallop.

While he rode, the sense of duty unfulfilled chafed Kisil's mind. He could scarcely face the thought of going back to confront a Temujine ablaze with anger. True, it wasn't his and Tsari's fault that they had been betrayed. The plan in the first place had been Temujine's and Yulun's, and now that it had gone awry he could not be blamed if the emperor in righteous wrath redoubled his efforts to exterminate the Mongol clans.

His men—he still thought of them as his—threatened to be a problem. They no longer showed the respect for him that they had been forced to show. He sensed that they were full of surmise about his future relationship with Tsari. He caught the speculative glances they cast in her direction. They were, he realized, starved for women. Unlike him they had not tasted the delights of the Yen-king girls—except Sanang who had a wife. With Ye-lu-tchutsai, Kisil had on occasion patronized the "flower houses," but the others had been denied that for want of money.

Kisil had not said much to the girl who rode behind him, yet she was constantly in his thoughts. What was he going to do with this young woman?

While Kisil rode immersed in thought, his hands and feet controlled his horse, his eyes and ears served his mind automatically. From time to time he would pause to look back, but the cloud of yellow dust raised by their passing lay like a curtain over the trail, no breath of wind dispersing it; from

behind this curtain came no sound of bells that would herald the approach of a courier.

There was little traffic on the road; this set him wondering if today was one of those days considered unlucky for traveling. The thought brought a worried pucker to his forehead. Then a hare raced across his path, and he smiled, for the hare signified long life. Only one incoming caravan had passed them; the camels were piled high with crates packed with porcelain in straw—green tiles for temple roofs, dishes and painted vases for the wealthy—coming from the potteries farther south. Once they passed a wedding litter, painted bright red and hung about with bells, concealing a bride on the way to her future home and no doubt in a panic about her unseen bridegroom. She would not have started *her* journey, Kisil reflected, without consulting the soothsayers!

Their lack of weapons made him uneasy, although so peaceful was the land through which they passed, they had encountered no one armed on the road. He knew the city of Yi-chow lay ahead; there, in exchange for silver, he could outfit his men to better advantage. But in Kisil's mind the waylaying of the daily courier ranked first; that man must be stopped before he could get word to the garrison at Yi-chow; after that they could relax a little.

Tsari, he thought, should don man's attire and pass as his young brother. The clothes she was wearing were most unsuitable for riding. They must have aroused conjecture in everyone they passed. Their headlong pace, too, must have caused comment; he would like to continue this journey in a more dignified manner as befitting the rank his clothes indicated; by his attire he was still a prince.

Of the men he thought Lob the one most likely to cause trouble; Lob apparently resented the leadership of one so much younger than himself and wanted to get back to the Onon as soon as possible. It might be good policy to get rid of him before he affected the other two. Kisil wondered if Lob should not be sent to tell Temujine about their escape from Yen. The man's tone of familiarity with Tsari was disturbing. Was she going to be a bone for dogs to fight over? With Lob away it would be one dog the less.

At noon Lob said he wasn't going to ride much farther in this heat. Their faces were grimed with yellow dust and their clothes drenched with sweat. It was with relief that they spied an orchard where the road entered a cleft between two bare, brown hills. Kisil did not think it perfect for this purpose as, lying in a hollow, it gave no view of the trail behind them; they would have to take turns watching from a rise on the far side of the orchard, above the cleft. But the horses, like the men, wanted to go no farther. They made straight for the luxuriant verdure under the trees.

Lob flung himself from his horse and stretched out in the shade; without consulting Kisil the other two dismounted. Sanang lifted Tsari off Babor, for she said she was too stiff to move.

Kisil pulled up Babor's head and forced the stallion back onto the road. He trotted up the hill they had just come down to take a look over the stretch of road behind them; satisfied that no mounted rider was in sight, he returned to the cleft. The three men were lying in the shade, their eyes feasting on Tsari as she drew off the camel's-hair coat, disclosing her slender figure clad in a blue silk tunic over red silk trousers. Her attire, Kisil thought, was suitable only for the privacy of the women's courts, yet she seemed quite unconscious of their stares and with her white hands felt the insides of her thighs. She made a wry face at Kisil.

"The women made me feel ashamed of my tough hide and took months to make me white as a peeled willow. Now I am ashamed to say my skin is badly chafed." She straightened up. "But I'll soon be tough again." As she raised her arms to tidy her hair, the damp tunic clung to her body, emphasizing the high pointed breasts that, he thought, looked like lotus buds.

She met his eyes again, then averted her own. Kisil dropped his eyes to the red shoes. In spite of her dishevelment he thought he had never seen a more desirable woman. The girl had been transformed. Her movements flowed like water, her hands fluttered like little birds, her voice was low and pleasant even as she broke into the familiar gutturals of the nomad tongue. He wanted to tell her that she looked beau-

tiful, but seeing the effect she had on the other men, who took no pains to hide their admiration and desire, he spoke in a brusque voice.

"You had better plait your hair. It will attract less attention. Hide it under your coat when we ride."

She raised delicately arched brows at his tone and went on dressing her hair as best she could without her silvered mirror.

"As I am smaller than the others," Kisil went on, "you had better try some of my old clothes." He indicated the roll on his saddle. "They will be too big, but at least you'll be well covered."

Lob stretched on his back and yawned. "You stay as you are, Tsari. *I* like to look at you. I'd forgotten what a woman looked like."

"Forgotten?" Sanang snorted. "You've never seen a woman like her in all your life! How could you forget what you never knew?"

"You're right!" Lob agreed. "I was forgetting, too, that you have many wives scattered about the country, and Kisil has two very good-looking ones, so that just leaves Mendo and me still to be satisfied—eh, Mendo?"

"I'm hungry," Mendo answered. "What are those things growing on the trees, Kisil? Can you eat them?"

"Plums!" Tsari said. She was glad to have the subject changed. "Try them," she urged the men.

Soon their mouths were sticky with a hitherto unknown sweetness.

"Luscious as a young girl's lips," Lob said, looking at Tsari.

"And easier to attain than some lips," Tsari replied.

"I was thinking of yours in particular," Lob answered dryly.

"Then don't!" She spat out a plum stone emphatically.

"Is it true, Tsari," Mendo broke in with a nervous giggle, "that the emperor has a hundred women like you?"

"Only ninety-nine now that we have plucked this flower from his garden." Sanang sprang to his feet and pulled Tsari down beside him.

The girl did not struggle but gave Sanang an icy stare. Her

body stiffened like a spear as he tried to pull her toward him. He laughed foolishly and released her. The others watched silently.

Tsari got to her feet. After two years in the emperor's palace it came as a surprise that a man such as Sanang would dare lay hands on her. Among her father's tents he would not have dared. Was she not half-sister to the khan? *Half-sister!* That was the chink in her armor. Her mother was no princess like Yulun.

Eckh! I must watch myself, she thought.

Kisil broke the tension. "We will remain hidden here all day and travel by night. You men get some sleep. I'll take the first watch."

With a critical eye he looked over the dirt road that wound through the orchard. He took the reins of his stallion's bridle and looped them around a tree. "That courier must surely come soon. When I see him in the distance I will run down to wake you. We will catch him here in this hollow. We four should be able to stop one man, even if he is armed."

Then turning to Sanang, he ordered, "Get that roll off my saddle for Tsari. I must go."

"With pleasure, young lord," Sanang mocked, irritated by Kisil's peremptory tone. "I'll see to her fitting myself!"

Tsari looked at Kisil as if she wanted him to stay. "I'm sorry about my clothes," she said ruefully. "The eunuchs took my others—to burn them, they said. I bribed them to leave me my white coat—they would only have sold it, I know. That's all I could bring."

"So the eunuchs robbed you, little one?" Lob lazily eyed her up and down. "At least there was one thing they couldn't take from you!" He laughed.

Tsari turned to Sanang. "Give me those clothes, and from now on I'll do without attendants, male or female." She snatched the bundle from Sanang and sped out of sight among the trees.

Kisil turned and walked thoughtfully up the hill. How would he maintain his authority over these men? They did not belong to the youthful guard of which he was captain; they were too old. Yet Temujine had definitely told them to

obey Kisil as they would obey him. The thought made Kisil smile in spite of his difficulties. Mongols were adept at promising one thing while meaning another. He was not alarmed for himself so much as for Tsari, and then wondered why he should be. What was Tsari to him, who, as Lob had just reminded him, already had two wives?

He reached the top of the hill and turned round. The orchard was out of sight, but the long winding road up which they had come stretched out its sinuous course across the richly cultivated plain. He sat down with his back against a rock.

Suddenly Tsari appeared. She hadn't changed into any of his clothing and her silks made a brilliant splash of color that delighted his eye. "What is it, Tsari?"

"I must look an untidy wench," she said. "I would welcome a *k'u-li's* hat to shade my face if we ride again by day."

"I plan to ride by night. I think it safer."

"That will be better. I don't want to lose the porcelain complexion they took such pains over." Then she laughed shyly. "You do like me as I am now, don't you, Kisil?" She stood beside him, her laughing eyes looking up to his. Her throat was bare and he saw the cleft between her breasts.

"Why haven't you—wouldn't any of my things fit you?" he mumbled.

Her laughter tinkled like little bells. "You mean your old riding breeches? They came up to my neck. I think I'd rather die than be seen in such attire. What does it matter how I'm dressed if we ride by night?"

"I'm thinking of the effect you have on men—on our men."

She looked roguish. "They do have a hungry look, don't they?" She looked behind her. "Can't you get rid of them, Kisil?"

"Get rid of them? Have you forgotten your brother the khan gave us work to do?"

"Which you and I alone could do much better. Send them back, Kisil, before it's too late. Send them back—we'll think of some excuse to satisfy Temujine, and I think they are anxious to go."

Kisil sat down against the rock. Avoiding Tsari's eyes, he looked anxiously down the road. "We must get men's clothes for you."

Tsari plumped down beside him. "There are times when I wish I were a man—" she sighed, then she giggled—"but not when I am with you." Her shoulder touched his as her arms went around her knees.

Now Kisil asked a question he had been longing to ask all day, but he tried to make it seem a mere afterthought. "What were you able to accomplish for your brother with the emperor? Have you borne the emperor a son?"

Tsari was not taken in by the casualness of the tone, nor did she fail to see the bait on the end of the line. She restrained her laughter, but she could not help a smile creeping across her face. "What you really want to know is, am I pregnant? Isn't that so, Kisil?" Then, as another thought struck her, the bells in her laughter really tinkled. "Or is it that you ache to know how the emperor manages to bed with a hundred wives?"

So she told him something of her empty life inside the palace walls. To Kisil's astonishment he learned that "only once," as she emphasized, had Tsari been summoned to her lord's bed.

The laughter had gone from her voice as she described her feelings at the summons.

It had come at last. After all the long months of waiting and preparation the circle was to be completed. She had been overwhelmed to think that her womb was to receive dynastic seed from the loins of the godlike emperor. The careful grooming of her body made her feel she was being prepared for a sacrament. Later, she knew the consummation had been no sacrament but a sacrifice and she, like the virgins of tradition, had been given to appease the monster and thus save her tribe.

"I was terrified," she said, "when the eunuchs came for me. And when this emperor, whom I'd never seen, pulled back the silken curtains of the bed, I was crouched in one corner of its vastness like a frightened mouse. I was overawed by the many emblems of Fecundity that hung every-

where, embroidered into silken bedcovers and curtains alike. And, too, I was overwhelmed by the honor being done me. For I knew that I was darkness, he was light, that I was earth and he the sun, that I must take and he would give."

Tsari knew that her recital was exciting her listener. Though not yet would she tell Kisil that her eyes had been closed, her thoughts concentrated on him until they were jolted by the sudden pain of brutal penetration.

"Only once?" Kisil asked. "Is he a man?"

"I have every reason to think so."

"Did you mention Temujine to him?"

"I was instructed in the part I had to fulfill. I was told not to speak unnecessarily and then only to express my delight at the emperor's prowess in the arts of love."

"And did you?"

"Why not?" she asked with assumed innocence. Her sense of humor was restored at the sight of Kisil's face.

"How should you recognize skill—or the lack of it—who have had no opportunity to compare?" Kisil snorted.

Tsari's heart leaped, her breasts rose faster under the silken tunic, but she cast her eyes down and her voice was demure.

"Are you suggesting, my lord Bogorji, that you give me an opportunity to compare your manly charms with those of he who sits on the Dragon Throne?"

"I'm suggesting that if you are not careful with these men you will have many opportunities for comparison." His voice had a raw edge that cut across her playful tone. "You realize that, Tsari?"

She resented his curt answer to the opening she had given him. She bit her lip to stop the angry reply that sprang to mind.

"Y-yes," she said thoughtfully. Then she flung him another challenge: "That is, if they stay with us."

"We stay together," he said firmly. "As a matter of fact, I had long thought of leaving the way we have—though I did not include you in my plans."

"And what are your plans, now that I am with you?" Tsari asked with some asperity.

"For you I have no plans beyond getting you safely back to Temujine."

"And if I don't want to go—?"

"Surely you want to get back to your mother?"

"Having once been sent as a tribute—a sorry tribute substituted for another, just as Temujine sent the oldest horse and meanest camel—do you think I wish to return to my mother's tent? Do you think I owe aught to Temujine?" Her eyes flashed the indignation she felt.

"Temujine will, no doubt, find you another husband to make alliance elsewhere to aid him in his struggle. You are the only sister he has of marriageable years, so to him you are of double value!"

Kisil sought to reassure the girl that her return did not necessarily mean a bleak life spent with an aging mother.

"So you would have me sacrificed again for Temujine?"

"That is not for me to say. But this I do know—your brother will hold me responsible for your safe return, and when I say safe I mean . . ." He paused to search for a word.

"I know what you mean!" Her lip curled contemptuously. "I'm just a bale of goods and Kisil the merchant doesn't want it damaged!"

Kisil nodded. "Since you put it that way, I agree. From the khan's point of view—as you are practically untouched—you do have a market value, one perhaps enhanced by the fact that the seal of your virginity was broken by an emperor!" His smile was ironic. "But—until Temujine finds you another husband—woe betide the man who gets you with child! I would be sorry for him if Temujine—"

She sprang to her feet, white-faced with anger. "You Kirghiz swine! You merchant! There is one thing—you'll never have to be sorry for yourself! Yet there may be others in the market who are not afraid of Temujine and might—"

Kisil's laugh interrupted her tirade. "No doubt! But if any man dared, he would take good care to keep out of Temujine's reach if he wanted to live. And you, knowing your brother—but why get so angry, Tsari?" He yawned and stretched his arms above his head.

As the torrent of her invective poured over him, he slowly

got to his feet. What tempers these children of Yesukai have, he thought. This girl is a female Temujine. He longed to seize her and shake her, to stifle the scathing words, but he knew he dared not trust himself to touch her. He fought to control his rising resentment. When he had mastered himself he felt pity for her. Why was she like this? he wondered.

Suddenly Tsari flung herself to the ground and the torrent of words was followed by a flood of tears.

To Kisil, her tears were part of women's wiles. "Come, Tsari, dry your tears," he said at length. "You had no business coming up here without a coat to cover this gaudy attire. If anyone comes along and sees us like this, tongues will be clacking from here to Yen-king."

It wasn't the speech she had hoped for, but it brought back to her the seriousness of their position. She kept her head averted and tried to blot the tears on her silk-clad arm.

"Get back under the trees and rest. You are like a colt that has just been branded." His voice was kinder and had a coaxing quality as he went on: "Tomorrow you will wear breeches like a man, even if I have to waylay some youth to get them. Quickly now!"

Tsari did not want to go down into the orchard without Kisil, but she sat up and dried her eyes, though she kept her head turned from him. "You do well to chide me, Kisil Bahatur. I am ashamed. Not thus should the daughter of a khan act—"

"Or a runaway bride of the emperor!" Kisil laughed. He held out his hand to help her to her feet.

"How long will you keep watch here?" she asked.

Kisil looked back over the road. There was still no sign of a galloping horseman. "I will wake Sanang soon, and he in turn will awake Mendo, and then it will be Lob's turn."

"I could watch here, Kisil, while you sleep," she suggested.

Kisil shook his head. "You need sleep and we shall be riding all night. Go now and hide, before anyone comes and wonders at such a beautiful woman gossiping on the road when she should be in her father's house."

As Tsari turned obediently and walked down the hill, she

thought about the events of the last hour, wondering if she had hindered more than helped herself in achieving her aims. Kisil had changed. He was no longer the gay companion, the carefree youth. He was a man now and saddled with responsibility. She had made a false move, she thought, and bit her lips in vexation. She realized now that Kisil would not take her in the heat of the moment. He was not one to gulp down love. Look how considerate he had been with Gesikie when at last Temujine had given in and become reconciled to the thought of her as Kisil's second wife! The girls all knew that Gesikie was sick with longing for him—in spite of her resolve, which few of them appreciated. When at last the word was swiftly passed among them that he had pursued her up the moonlit hill, they all envied Gesikie. That was the way a girl would like to be taken!

This morning as she rode behind Kisil she had dreamed of stealing him from Cholan and Gesikie, of making it impossible for him to return to Temujine so that he would have to seek refuge—with her, of course—in the land of the Sung where, she had heard, it was pleasantly warm. There, in the dreams she had woven, she would be his only wife, bearing his children and meeting his needs until she grew older and tired of childbearing. Then, to keep him from taking other wives, she would buy him a concubine or two —girls inflammable as dry desert grass but brainless, who wouldn't usurp her authority. Thus she had plotted and dreamed only this morning.

Eckh! She had better stop dreaming and watch her tongue!

38

WHAT IS VIRTUE?

IT SEEMED to Kisil that he had barely lain down to sleep when Sanang grasped his shoulder roughly and shook him. Kisil was cold and his wits were sluggish, but by the coolness of the air and the deep shadows in the orchard he realized the lateness of the hour. He struggled to grasp the import of Sanang's words. Then the word "courier" brought

him quickly to his senses. The courier was coming at last!

He was on his feet before he understood that Sanang was telling him the courier had already passed. The distant tinkle of bells came back mockingly on the still air.

Kisil's first glance was to Babor. Sanang was untying the stallion's reins while Mendo busied himself with the other two horses. There was no sign of Lob.

Kisil fastened up his riding coat and swiftly knotted his girdle. "Who was watching the road?" he demanded.

"Lob," Sanang answered. "He's ridden after him."

"Why did you let him pass—you brainless fools?"

"We were asleep and Lob didn't awake us in time," Sanang explained humbly.

"Then Lob also must have been asleep, for those bells sound clearly a li or two away. Curse Lob!" he rapped. "May the black earth swallow him! Follow me quickly—bring Tsari, Sanang!"

He gathered up the reins, placed his hand on the saddle and vaulted. The stallion plunged blindly through the scrub and trees that hid them from the road. Kisil let the animal have his head, and Babor, sensing the anger of his rider, needed no jab of heel to urge his utmost effort. The dust of the two riders ahead still floated thinly in the air, but it gradually thickened as the stallion's staccato strides ripped the stillness like a drum roll.

He would soon catch up to Lob. I'll deal with him later, Kisil thought grimly—if I'm still alive!

They shot over a rise of ground and ahead Kisil could see Lob flailing his pony in frantic effort. Of the courier there was no sign through the thickening dust.

In a few moments Babor's nose was at the pony's rump. Lob looked round and as Kisil drew alongside he shouted something that Kisil failed to catch. Kisil shot ahead into cleared air. The twilight deepened and the dust grew thicker, but at last he caught the sound of bells.

Soon the quarry was in sight. The man seemed unaware of pursuit as he rode at his usual pace. Some instinct made the man look back. He seemed undecided. Again Kisil saw him glance back quickly. Evidently the courier came to the

conclusion that this purposeful pursuer boded ill, for now his whip rose and fell on his horse's flanks. The animal responded for a while, then as it tired the gap narrowed rapidly. The courier, seeing he was bound to be outrun, pulled his horse around. He was on higher ground and silhouetted against a patch of fading light. Kisil glimpsed the unmistakable action of a bow being strung and aimed, arrow to ear. He called what he hoped might be mistaken for a friendly greeting. The man shouted an unintelligible command across the few horse lengths that separated them.

Kisil had no time to reflect. As he drew his knife, his knee instinctively pressed Babor to swerve. A searing pain in his arm caused him to lurch in the saddle, his unconscious action swinging Babor straight at the man on horseback. The impact flung both horse and rider to the ground. Kisil leaped from the stallion's back to land directly on the man sprawled in the dust, his legs pinned beneath his struggling horse.

Once, twice, thrice, Kisil's knife thrust deep. He regained his feet and with a pounding heart watched the man's life slowly ebb. Once the bells sounded as the stricken courier tried to rise. A scream rasped in his throat and subsided in a gurgle when blood gushed from his mouth. He collapsed face down in the dust. A convulsive jerk—then he lay still.

The sweat was cold on Kisil's forehead. He shivered.

For the first time he had killed a man.

Kisil tried to still the trembling of his body. The pain in his arm was acute. Blood was pouring down his hand. He ripped his sleeve and saw that the arrow had gouged a deep furrow up the fleshy part of the forearm and through the muscles in the bend of the elbow. Had he not swerved at that moment the arrow would have struck him in the stomach; then he, and not this man, would be lying here in the dust.

Hearing Lob approach, he tried to pull himself together. To Lob's shouted inquiry he gave a terse answer. Lob flung himself off his horse. He turned the dead man over. "He's dead as mutton!"

Lob straightened up, then seeing Kisil's drooping figure, he put out an arm to support him. He felt the warm stickiness of blood. "You are wounded, Kisil?"

"Yes—and it's no thanks to you that I'm not lying there instead of him. How came you to let him pass?"

Lob stammered. "I—I am ashamed before men, Kisil Bahatur, for I slept. It was the bells around his waist that awakened me as he flashed by."

"Had you done this to Temujine you well know the fate you would have earned. Through your carelessness this man lies dead and I am wounded at an ill time and place."

"Nay, Kisil, I take the blame for your wounding, but this man had to die, once we stopped him."

Kisil did not answer. He had not admitted the probability of having to kill the man when he planned this ambush, but now he knew Lob spoke true words and he himself had merely shirked the issue.

"Maybe," he said wearily. "Give me his leather pouch, then strip him of his clothes."

Mendo hailed them from the gathering darkness. His horse shied at the dead man lying in the road and he dismounted.

"Who killed him?" he asked Lob.

"Kisil." Lob raised his voice: "Best let me see to your wound, young lord."

Kisil didn't want Lob to touch him. He thought Tsari might do a better job.

"It can wait," he said gruffly. "I've twisted a stirrup leather around to stop the bleeding. Sanang has some old clothes of mine which he can rip to make a bandage. You get on—get that man buried. We must leave here quickly."

They heard Sanang approaching. Tsari was with him.

"Are you all right, Kisil?" Tsari cried as she ran toward him.

"Winged only—but the courier is dead. Find something to bind my wound. I have a nick in the arm and it bleeds a lot." His voice was flat and checked her concern.

"Let me see it. Which arm?"

"You can't see it, it's too dark. Just get a pad and tie something tight around it till daylight." He tried to make his voice seem unconcerned but it sounded like the bleat of a sheep.

Sanang whispered to Mendo, "Is he badly hurt?"

Mendo shrugged. "I know not. I got here just ahead of you."

"Were you with him, Lob?" Sanang's voice was low.

"No, the lad killed him alone." Lob raised his voice. "What now, young lord? We have him stripped."

Kisil roused himself to answer Lob. "Carry him well off the highway and dig as deep a grave as you can with your hands. Take my knife to cut the turf, and replace it so that it doesn't show. Bury the bells elsewhere, so that if he is found they won't know he was a courier."

"Three stabs—you made sure of him," Sanang said admiringly as he helped to lift the naked body.

Tsari had made a pad of sorts; she snatched off her veil and used it to tie the pad around Kisil's arm. As she bent over her task, the faint perfume of her hair teased Kisil's senses. When she had finished binding his arm, she let her head rest for the briefest moment on his chest and injected the suggestion of a caress in her words: "Kisil, he might have killed you—"

He was as stiff as a Buddhist idol. She straightened up. "There," she said in a matter-of-fact manner; "that will take care of it until daylight." She stood hopefully for a moment, then walked over to the courier's horse where it stood grazing by the trail, and came back leading it. "Now I have a mount—though a tired one, I fear."

Kisil said, "We must be careful; the post station cannot be far from here. We detoured around one this morning—this one we will not see in the darkness until we are right on it —unless we leave the road and take to the hills. I wonder—"

"Take to the hills," Tsari said. "We shan't go far tonight with this horse." Then she added, "I heard Lob call you 'young lord.' You have regained some influence over these men, Kisil."

"If so, I shall feel this man has not died in vain. I wish I had not killed him, though," he finished lamely.

Tsari was astounded. "Don't let the men know that—they'll think you soft and brainless as a *sarlok*. Besides, what's a dead *tchortcha* to us?"

Kisil felt like replying, "He was a man," but he kept his

feelings to himself. "Keep watch on that horse, Tsari, lest he bolt for his stable ahead. I'll lie down on the grass until the men have finished."

Tsari tied the reins of the four horses together and came and sat down beside him. "You should rejoice in your victory, Kisil. You have proved your title of Bahatur no empty one."

These children of Yesukai—aye, the daughters as well as the sons—are of tough fiber, he thought. "Why should I rejoice at having killed a man," he asked her, "when he who rejoices cannot tread the Path?"

"You sound like a monk," she scoffed, "like one of those Buddhists."

"They are the words of a great sage, Lao-tse, who came before Kung-fu-tse. Perhaps you have heard of them?"

"Of Kung-fu-tse, yes. The black-haired ones were forever dinning in my ears his virtues and the ceremonies he laid down." She laughed. "It all sounded like nonsense. It has made them soft as a nation."

"Soft? Far from it! I hope you won't try to impress that false idea on Temujine. It is because they *are* a warlike people that they deplore war and teach the virtues of humility, of gentleness and compassion and the return of good for evil."

"That's no creed for a warrior," she said. "Temujine would find no virtue in that."

"No virtue?" he asked. "It depends on what a man considers virtue. Once I thought there was virtue to be found on the warrior's path. Now—" he shrugged— "I'm not so sure. Once I heard your own father say that great virtue is like water, for it nourishes everything.

"You sound like a Buddhist," she said scathingly.

Kisil nodded and said quietly, "There is no greater sin than unrestrained desire and no greater misfortune than want of peace and the torturing unrest of the soul which comes from such desire."

What has got into the man? Tsari thought despondently. If this is what learning has done for him, the sooner he forgets it the better. No desire, indeed! Those Buddhists were

celibates—it would be her business to help him forget such trash.

"No desire?" She laughed. "That may be all right for women haters, but what man is there—if he be a man—who doesn't desire sons, and tell me how he can get them if he doesn't desire women?"

"I once wanted horses," Kisil said laconically, "and thought I had the making of a great herd, but now it seems women—"

"But now you see there are other ways of acquiring wealth," she broke in. "This country is like a ripe plum, ready to fall into your lap. There is wealth for the taking—" She jumped to her feet and picked up the courier's bow. Testing its pull, she laughed. "Now I have protection! Anyway, I am a better bowman than you and better, probably, than any of the men, so I'll appropriate this as well as the horse."

"The less conspicuous you are the better," Kisil said seriously.

Tsari realized that she must curb her nomad instincts and appeal to the protective male in him. She transferred the sheaf of arrows from the courier's horse to Babor's saddle and presented the bow to Kisil. "I'm not the barbarian maid I was, Kisil. I don't look forward to the hardships I once thought natural, nor do I want to spend my life milking cows and sheep, shredding sinews—or piling dung!" Her laughter was low and musical.

"Tcha!" Kisil got to his feet. "We've both become soft in this country. I would not have thought a scratch like this could make me feel so weak."

"You've lost a lot of blood, Kisil," she said seriously, and her voice was low and vehement as she added, "but I'm proud of you!"

"I'll go and hurry up the men," Kisil said briefly. "You keep the bow."

"Do we ride westward now, Kisil?" Mendo's words were as much an assertion as a question, Kisil thought.

"Of course," Sanang answered for him, "for westward lies the Wall and Temujine wants a report on that."

Kisil visualized the maps he had caught a glimpse of in the libraries. He had tried to fix them in his memory, and later in the privacy of his room he had tried to make copies.

"Westward lie steep mountains and the inner loop of Wall," he said slowly, "which hem us in and will eventually force us back in a southerly direction, if we cannot cross the Yellow River."

"How do you know that?" Mendo's voice was doubtful.

"I've seen their maps and copied them, as Sanang can tell you. Tomorrow I will show you what I mean."

"What is a map?" Mendo asked.

"Wait and see." Sanang's tone had a superior ring.

Kisil suddenly made up his mind. "I thank you all for reminding me of our duty." As they stared in wonder at his words, he went on: "The Outer Wall, as you well know, can be surveyed for our lord the khan from the plain side just as well as from inside it. But this Wall is the Inner Wall, and that's a different matter. This Wall joins the Outer Wall somewhere, and it is our duty to find out where, and to find out what the strength of the Inner Wall is. Yes. We make our journey westward tonight."

The grave was now filled in. They trampled down the turf and scattered the displaced soil. Sanang picked up the courier's bells.

"Don't bury those, after all, Sanang," Kisil said. "Muffle them and carry them with you. I have an idea for their future use. Tie them up in the clothing and let us get away from here."

They rode at a leisurely pace, the better to accommodate his weakness as well as the flagging spirit of the courier's horse. The hills were rolling and much of their way led across cultivated ground. They avoided the deeper shadows of mud-walled villages where barking dogs heralded their passing. Tsari as she rode hummed Mongol songs that told of man's love for horses, war and women. Kisil was reluctant to chide her, for he felt she was singing for him, yet she was fanning flames in every breast. He felt that each of the men—and himself too—was suspicious of the designs of the others where Tsari was concerned. As they rode silently in the dark, listen-

ing to her voice, Kisil had no doubt that the imaginations of each, like his own, were a riot of desire.

He turned his head to watch her as she rode on his right hand almost knee to knee. Her voice was silent now; she too was evidently occupied by her thoughts. She caught the turn of his head and, pressing her mount closer to Babor, reached out in the darkness and lightly touched his uninjured arm. "Are you feeling all right, Kisil?"

Her voice broke the seal of silence that each man had set upon his dreams.

"I'm all right."

His voice was purposely rough, for he wanted no undertones to feed the suspicions which might be lurking in the minds of the other men. The others turned in their saddles but said nothing. Tsari moved away; Kisil was alone once more with his thoughts.

As the night wore on their way grew steeper; soon they were riding in single file with Sanang in front picking out their path.

At the top of a hill he called a halt. "Tsari's horse needs a rest," he explained, moving into the lee of a rock where Tsari followed him. It was getting light and he could see distant peaks.

The men relaxed in their saddles as the horses started their usual quest for grass, the jingle of the bits and the tearing and champing of teeth the only sounds that broke the silence—until Tsari dismounted and stamped her feet.

"Are you cold?" Kisil asked her.

"My body is warm, but my feet are cold and my legs stiff."

He wished she wouldn't say such things, though her voice had been very matter of fact.

"Your wound must be painful, Kisil," Lob said in an apologetic tone. "I deeply regret being the cause of it."

"I'm sure you do, Lob." Kisil had decided it would be better to treat Lob's failure lightly. He changed the subject. "I'm anxious to peruse these documents." He patted the courier's leather pouch. They all looked impressed—there was no reading or writing among the Mongols. "It's getting lighter. Let us go down into that hollow and rest for a while."

They rode in silence down to the hollow. When they had dismounted Kisil asked Tsari to unfasten the courier's pouch and sat down on the ground.

The first thing she took out of the pouch was a tablet. Kisil saw it bore the seal of the Minister of Communications, and was the courier's authority to requisition horses and solicit aid along his route. An idea sprang to his mind.

"This could be your pass to safety, Tsari," he said, his voice purposely low.

"How?" she whispered, her hands busy with the pouch.

"With your hair cut like a man's and wearing the courier's uniform, with this seal you could pass both Walls in safety and in twenty or thirty days be back among your people."

"Or die of starvation in the desert." She frowned. "No," she said vehemently, "if you have aught to send to Temujine, let one of the others bear your message—he can better fill the part. I would be afraid."

"Yet if you stay with us your danger is far greater. If—"

Her raised voice cut off his protest: "Lob, will that courier's uniform fit you?" Then she laughed. "Kisil Bahatur has an idea that one of you men could wear it and with this pass—" she held up the tablet— "get safely through the Walls and back to our pastures."

The men looked dumfounded. Mendo's voice broke the silence. "Do you mean that?"

"It's an idea," Kisil admitted. "Yes, I thought of sending Tsari disguised as the courier."

Their laughter was boisterous. "She would make a pretty boy," Sanang bellowed, "but with that skin and those long lashes she would make no courier!"

"And once she opened her mouth," Lob said, "her birdlike chirp would invite exploring hands."

"Perhaps so." Kisil appeared doubtful, though inwardly he was glad that the decision was unanimous against his idea. "Yet this seal gives the bearer authority to demand food or horses or aid from anyone. I think one of us should go quickly to our lord to warn him of the Tonguz spy and give him a report on all that we have learned and what has happened to us up to now. Would the clothes fit you, Lob?"

Sanang unrolled the bundle and took out the bells, the thick felt boots and the hat with three feathers that signified the wearer had to fly like a bird. Holding up against his breadth the red tunic with its yellow emblem that denoted the imperial courier, he made a wry face. Lob picked up the breeches. "I'd soon split these if I tried them on."

"They might fit me," Mendo's voice had a trace of eagerness. He measured the breeches against his legs, then flung off his coat and took the tunic. It fitted perfectly.

"It looks as if you are to be the lucky one," Sanang said. There was no envy in his tone. He laughed and winked at Lob.

"Shall I wear them now, Kisil?" Mendo asked, ignoring Sanang.

The man seemed pleased at his opportunity to get back to the Onon. Kisil would have liked to keep Mendo with him; of the three, he thought, Mendo seemed the least interested in Tsari and might prove an ally against the other two should they be troublesome.

"What do you think?" Kisil said quietly to the girl seated beside him.

Tsari nodded. "Send him."

Tsari wanted to get rid of all three and Mendo's going meant there would be one less to cope with. She knew that the bold ones were not always the ones to be feared. These quiet intense men had much the same ideas, and she had seen Mendo look her up and down and mentally disrobe her. She was glad when she heard Kisil say at last, "All right, Mendo. From now on you are the courier. When the gelding is rested you ride on. Before you go we will make up a story for you to tell. Now let us see what else this pouch contains."

Tsari handed him a bulky document. He studied this and found it bore the emblem of Inward Tranquillity used by the *tai wei,* the "great tranquilizer" as the grand chief of police was called. It was addressed to the governor of the fortress at the Si-king Pass. He handed Tsari his knife to cut the cords. The document consisted of a number of printed sheets, all alike.

Kisil puzzled over one of them in silence. "This is about

us!" he said, and went on reading while his companions watched with bated breath as though he were a magician.

"Just as I thought," he said at last. He held up the paper. "The courier had to wait for these—that is why he was so long coming. This is a notice printed in scores by a machine they have which saves writing out each notice with a brush—the same way they make paper money. It tells of our escape, calls us spies and gives orders for our arrest and return to Yen." Kisil smiled. "The descriptions are not very flattering." He then looked solemn and explained, "These are the snares of the fowler—they were to be posted at the Si-king Gate and in all villages of the district."

Tsari handed him a similar bundle. "This is another of them," Kisil said, "addressed to the Governor of the Outer Mouth." He paused and looked round at his companions. "How say you—did I do right when I stopped the courier?"

None answered him in words, but all four nodded thoughtfully. They feared these printed pages as things accursed.

Then Kisil laughed. "You must carry something in your pouch, Mendo. Take some of these. You can leave them at the Outer Wall—we'll be out of their clutches by then. We'll tear the rest to shreds, then bury them. See to it, Sanang. Take my knife and dig another grave."

While the men busied themselves with this, Tsari brought forth the last roll, a yellow silk one fastened with silken cords surmounted by a silver seal. To Kisil's amazement he saw it was the Great Seal of the emperor. He took the roll in his hands almost reverently. It was addressed to the Prince Hoang-shan, the *ta-se-thu*, the general directing the imperial army at Pu-chow-fu.

Kisil weighed it in his hands thoughtfully. Although he was burning with curiosity about its contents, he did not want to break the seal, for it might be more useful unbroken.

"This roll of imperial yellow is fastened with the Great Seal of the emperor and has to be received with the three kneelings and the nine knockings," he explained. "It is addressed to the director general of the army of Pu-chow-fu." He thought for a moment. "That is at or near the 'meeting of the waters,' the place where several rivers meet the Yellow

River. This general must command the army watching Hia. The roll is valuable. I will take care of this." He unbuttoned his coat and thrust the roll under his silken vest, then refastened his coat.

"Aren't you going to see what it says?" Tsari asked.

"I'll wait until I can treat the seal with the care and respect its importance demands," he said seriously.

All that morning Kisil rehearsed Mendo in his role, to prepare him for any questioning. "Avoid the *yambs,*" he warned, "where they change horses. If another offers at the Gate to take your place, just say you were ordered to go right through." When he was satisfied that Mendo was glib in the part he had to play, Kisil then made him repeat over and over the verbal message for Temujine. "Make light of my wound," he told Mendo. "I would not have Cholan worry herself unnecessarily."

Tsari smiled to herself when she heard that. It evidently had not occurred to Kisil that Cholan might worry more when she knew Tsari was his constant companion. She turned to Kisil. " 'Tis well you remind me of your wound. Your scholarship has made me forget my duty. It would be well if I rebound it."

When she had unbound his arm she called Sanang to see it, for she was horrified at the extent of the wound. All three men gathered round. Lob looked grave, while Sanang pursed his lips and said ruefully, "You'll never make a bowman now, Kisil Bahatur. The sinews are cut and that arm is going to be as stiff as a spear shaft once the wound has healed."

Tsari saw the look of dire concern that flashed across Kisil's face at this news. It was a look that might have wrenched her heart—but his wound added weight to her side of the balance. She still nursed her dream of persuading Kisil to leave the warrior path for an easy life with her.

"A man who can use his head need never regret a stiff arm," she said in condolence.

"But a stiff arm might mean an empty belly."

"Yours won't," she said succinctly.

That day and the following night they got their rest in snatches. The dawn of the third day came up in a reddening

sky that might have augured well were it not for the roll of thunder that came from massed clouds over the western mountains. Their journey in the night had brought them close to the Inner Wall, the battlements of which outlined the ridges nearest them. Kisil thought they must be close to the Si-king Pass, for many paths seemed to be converging and several villages were seen, the soldier settlements that housed the guardians of the Long Ramparts when off duty.

It would soon be time to part from Mendo.

Kisil eyed the approaching storm apprehensively. As the lightning flashes became more frequent he saw the nervousness of his Mongol companions was giving place to terror. I had better find shelter for them, he told himself, and then a daring thought sprang to mind—its audacity made his lips twitch in an impish grin. This storm would make the men more willing to cooperate.

"I fear the spirit of the lightning more than I fear the soldiers of the emperor!" he shouted. "We had best take shelter there." He indicated a village ahead and altered his course toward it. To their half-hearted protests that the village might be full of soldiers he answered that most of the male inhabitants would be working in the fields, and they were probably only foot soldiers without horses. Without waiting for further protests he rode boldly on.

They rode into the village. The chime of bells around Mendo's waist seemed to allay the suspicions of the group around the village gate, though Tsari's attire caused lifted eyebrows. Kisil demanded of a soldier where his commandant lived.

"Lead me to him," he commanded haughtily, "and announce me. I am the Prince Bogorji, a prince of the Ye-lu family of the Liao on the northern frontier."

In the courtyard of the commandant's house Kisil and his party remained mounted. Kisil's manner expressed all the anger and impatience of outraged aristocracy as he waited for his message to be delivered. When the officer appeared at the door of his dwelling Kisil ignored the man's deep bow and immediately upbraided him in insolent tones: "You keep such ill watch in this district that robbers can

murder and steal from the emperor's subjects with impunity. Know you that last night I found this courier attacked, and going to his rescue, I suffered a most grievous wound and my party was almost overwhelmed. My guide was slain and the mules and the litter in which this lady was riding was stolen."

The officer looked terrified. "Robbers, Your Highness! We—we shall die of shame," he stammered.

"You'll die by having your head struck from your shoulders if I tell the emperor of the indignity his envoy has been subjected to in this so-called peaceful district—to say nothing of the dishonor heaped on the mother of my son by forcing her to ride a horse like a man, exposed to the common gaze of your soldiers. Have you no manners that you keep us standing at your threshold?"

"*Ai*," the man wailed. "I am but a leader of a thousand and not the governor of the district. I grovel in the dust of Your Highness and beg you to accept the shelter of my lowly dwelling." Saying which, he knelt in the dust and struck his head with both hands.

At this obeisance Kisil appeared mollified. "Give orders for the accommodation of my men and horses," he commanded. Then he dismounted, held out his hand to Tsari and lifted her down. To Sanang and Lob, who sat their horses mystified, he said, "I'll have food sent to you. See that the horses get grain and be ready to move at an instant's notice." Turning to Mendo, who seemed puzzled as to what was expected of him, Kisil exclaimed, "I beg you, courier, to shelter from this coming storm while I write a message to your superior to explain your delay and commend your bravery." Of the commandant he asked, "You have ink and paper I presume?"

"Alas, Your Highness, I cannot read or write, but there is a scholar in the village who has these materials."

"Get them," Kisil said tersely; "also a physician to attend to my wound, and food for us all." He waited while the commandant gave hurried orders. Then he gestured the man to precede him and entered the house, followed by Tsari. There was a louder crash of thunder, the prelude to a deluge.

Kisil demanded a table for writing. Seated behind it, he subjected the officer to rapid questioning. When he had were due for duty on the Wall and a great deal of local information that didn't interest him but kept the commandant busy answering and thus unable to think, Kisil began issuing orders.

learned what horses the detachment had, when next they

"After my experience of last night I can plainly see that this province is not so peaceful as His Majesty led me to believe. I want an officer and five men, all mounted, to accompany me, and the mule litter you keep for your wife I must borrow for my favorite concubine, who accompanies me on this tiresome business the emperor has entrusted to me."

Tsari could hardly keep her face straight and look appropriately haughty. Inwardly she was amazed and delighted at the turn of events. She knew Kisil's purpose in demanding an escort was protection against his own two men, but she was surprised at his glib assertion that she was his concubine. If he has chosen to mount that mare, she thought with glee, I'll keep him in the saddle come what may! When the commandant with deference turned to her and suggested she might prefer to follow his servant to his women's quarters, she smilingly agreed. As she left the room she winked at Kisil.

"Will Your Highness require these men—and the litter—for long?" the commandant asked when he and Kisil were alone. There was more than a tinge of hesitancy and doubt in his voice.

"You are," said Kisil, "I can see, a man of discretion and one I can trust with a matter of great concern to His Majesty. Yet, for the safety of us all I must request your oath of silence, on the tablets of your ancestors, concerning what I shall divulge to ensure your loyal cooperation."

The commandant, gratified to think he was to learn a state secret, led the way into an adjoining room and took the required oath before the tablets.

"Then know this," Kisil said in a low voice. "Suspicion lurks in the mind of His Majesty that all is not well on the

Wall. Whispers have reached him that the new construction is proceeding in a slipshod manner and the officers are more interested in their women than in the ramparts."

The commandant nodded his head as if to confirm the emperor's suspicions.

"This being the case," Kisil went on, "His Majesty instructed me to take a journey as if for pleasure—that is why the lady accompanies me—and to disarm suspicion I was not to journey in state, but as a simple country gentleman."

Kisil sighed and shook his head. "His Majesty is too trusting. He assured me that this province was not like the more turbulent northland to which I am accustomed and I could in safety travel without escort and unarmed. Now this wound disproves that, and if I am to get back in safety—and if I am to carry out His Majesty's commands—I must have an escort, but one not large enough to attract attention. I foresaw these difficulties and now I am glad that His Majesty acceded to my request for his written commission, to be employed should such difficulties arise."

Kisil took out the yellow silk roll from under his coat. He showed the commandant the seal, then placed it on the high table where the household tablets stood and swiftly kowtowed; the commandant followed his example. Kisil reverently picked up the roll and replaced it in his bosom.

"You are now the sharer of a great secret," he said. "No word of this must reach your superior officers. Now pick me out trustworthy men as I request and rest assured His Majesty shall learn of your cooperation. The officer should be one who knows the wall from here to the Hoangho, like the guide His Majesty provided who was killed last night."

Kisil went into the inner room and sat down at the table, and when the writing materials were placed before him he further impressed the commandant with his scholarship by writing a letter for the supposed courier. He untied the bag from his girdle, turned out the contents and picked up the jade seal with the Ye-lu device. With this he unblushingly sealed his letter. Then he called for Mendo and handed the letter to him. "Good speed, courier! This letter explains your delay and commends you to your lord." He picked up some

silver. "Here's silver for your comfort and I wish you a safe journey."

When Mendo had gone, Kisil submitted to the ministration of the local physician, brushing aside the man's recommendation that he should rest under his care for several days. He ate a hearty meal, while servants cleaned his clothing of bloodstains as best they could. Then he interviewed the young officer who was to accompany him.

This youth, the leader of a hundred, said his name was Ming-nan, and at Kisil's request the commandant instructed him to obey Kisil in all things.

An hour later Tsari entered the litter—much to the astonishment of Sanang and Lob. They were further flabbergasted when Kisil told them to ride the mules and lead their horses. The detachment of soldiers closed around them.

In bidding farewell to the commandant Kisil, with a show of reluctance, accepted the loan of a curved saber, the belt of which the eager hands of the commandant fastened round his waist.

It was good to feel a sword bump against his leg as he settled into the saddle. He was thankful that it was his left arm that was strapped across his chest—his right could still wield a sword.

"May a peaceful road be opened to you!" the commandant called.

Kisil grinned.

39

MING-NAN

MING-NAN, a prince of Liao-yang, content for the present to submerge his identity and serve the emperor as a mere under-officer of the White Tigers, was somewhat puzzled by his unexpected assignment. Called from a comfortable bed by his superior to lead this detachment of five men—an assignment he considered unworthy of his rank and talents—he had been further humiliated by the lack of courtesy shown to him, inasmuch as he had not been introduced to

the one he would escort. This person of the lordly bearing and black stallion wore the insignia of a prince and spoke the language of the northern court, albeit with a foreign twist of tongue.

Who was he, and what business was he about? It was mysterious, and Ming-nan determined to solve the mystery before he was much older.

He had stared boldly at the young concubine as she entered the litter and had been agreeably surprised at her beauty, though more surprised when he saw that her feet were unbound. It set him thinking that she might well be a woman from his own country; her features suggested it, for she hadn't the oval face, the ivory-tinted skin or the slant of eye of these so-called "civilized ones." For that matter, neither had this prince. His features and unusual hair marked him as one from beyond the frontier.

Some answers to his questions were vouchsafed to him during the first hours of their journey. The prince condescended to inform him that he was the Prince Bogorji, thus confirming Ming-nan's suspicions that he was a "foreigner"—like himself. The prince revealed that he was on a secret mission for the emperor and had been waylaid, his guide slain, his men disarmed and his concubine's litter stolen.

Yes, it was mysterious—very mysterious!

But later the mystery deepened still further when, having thrown etiquette to the winds, Ming-nan had boldly asked from which country the prince came, and was curtly informed that he was of the Ye-lu and his home was in the Liao. Now Ming-nan knew this prince traveled under false colors, and to prove it he addressed a question to the prince in a Liao dialect. It was received with a blank face and remained unanswered.

The old man had certainly been deceived again. Ming-nan thought "again" because he also had deceived him, as, indeed, he had deceived the whole rank and file of the regiment when, with a bribe, he had obtained his rank of junior officer. They knew he was from the Liao, but they didn't know he was a prince.

The air of respect with which Ming-nan had first greeted

the prince faded under this knowledge and before long he was addressing the prince with an easy familiarity that brought a puzzled frown to the prince's brow. This amused Ming-nan immensely. The prince was not sure of his ground or he would have put a stop to it immediately.

Since this pseudo-prince, as Ming-nan now considered him, was more than a trifle uncommunicative, showing a preference for his own thoughts, Ming-nan dropped behind and rode alongside the litter. It wasn't long before he was engaged in conversation with the girl inside. As her lord did not rebuke her Ming-nan was encouraged to ask leading questions under the guise of aimless chatter. Her tongue was guarded, and when his questions grew pressing she suddenly appeared to recollect the proprieties and suggested he address his questions, if he had any, to her lord and master.

She was a delightful creature. It was long since he had bedded with such a one. He quite envied the young man ahead and thought his own barren nights were going to be trying. However, when night came and the order was given to find a suitable place to camp, the tent his men erected was occupied by the lady alone, her lord rolling himself up in his coat and sleeping by the fire with the rest of the men. Once Ming-nan heard a whispered appeal come from the tent. He caught the syllables of a name and it certainly did not resemble "Bogorji" in any way. In the morning he ascertained from his men that the prince had not moved all night!

Mystery heaped on mystery, Ming-nan thought. He could sympathize with the girl's disgruntled demeanor when he caught sight of her face as she again entered the litter. No doubt she wondered, as Ming-nan did, why she had been brought along on this journey. Then the prince called him to his side and requested Ming-nan to ride ahead with him.

Kisil had done much thinking during the night. He wondered now at his recklessness in carrying out the idea that had flashed into his mind. He had carried it through with an air of bravado and had thoroughly enjoyed the play-acting that had overawed the commander of the detachment. He realized he had been lucky in striking such a man; the

commander was the type of professional soldier who had probably risen from the ranks of soldier-peasants by long service and devotion to duty; a man uneducated and unimaginative.

Kisil had thought that such a small detachment as he had requested would have only a squad leader—another soldier-peasant—in command. He had been totally unprepared for this young exquisite who had been detailed to accompany him. Now he wondered if the commander had been not quite so simple after all, and had purposely placed an intelligent man to spy on him.

Today he must be all affability and charm with Ming-nan and treat him with frank comradeship as one of equal rank. Perhaps in that way he might disarm suspicion. So he called Ming-nan to his side and rode well ahead of the others. Now it was Kisil who pressed his companion as to his antecedents.

"When I spoke of coming from the Liao country I spoke but half a truth," Kisil admitted with smiling candor. "My mother was a Khitan, but my father was a Turkish prince of the Kirghiz tribe."

"I thought you were a *sao-tha-tse*," Ming-nan said and laughed, "for your men look like 'stinking Tatars.'"

Kisil laughed with him. "They do look like bandits, don't they? And, confidentially, that is one reason why I asked for your escort, in case they might be tempted to become bandits and rob me of her." Kisil indicated Tsari with a jerk of the head.

"But this is strange, Prince Bogorji," said Ming-nan, speaking in Khitan, "for my own mother was a Khitan."

Kisil readily answered him in the same language, expressing his surprise.

"Yes, I too," Ming-nan continued, "am a prince. My father is a prince of Liao-yang. Like you I am a rebel slave, as they call us."

"Then what do you in the emperor's army?" Kisil asked.

"I might ask you a similar question—what do you in the emperor's service?"

Kisil told Ming-nan the same tale that he had told the commander, but fearing this young prince could read, he

did not mention the sealed roll which he carried in his bosom. He thought his talk had the appearance of frankness and he expected confidence for confidence, but in Ming-nan Kisil had met a man more adept than himself at evasion.

However, the barrier between them was partially down and soon both were talking with easy familiarity. Kisil all along had called the officer Ming-nan, dispensing with his military title as any civilian aristocrat would. When Ming-nan still addressed him as "Prince Bogorji" Kisil said smilingly, "My friends call me Kisil."

"Your journey, to me, does not seem really necessary," Ming-nan went on, "for if the emperor wanted a report he could find plenty of disgruntled men like me who could fill his ears with accounts of scandal, bribery and misappropriation of public money. No, I can't see that there is any need for you to take this arduous journey—unless you too have a purpose within a purpose—one, perhaps, that you consider my ears unworthy to receive."

"What other purpose could I possibly have, O Prince of Liao-yang?" Kisil bantered.

Ming-nan looked serious and his eyes probed Kisil's face. "A purpose that would readily suggest itself to any frontier tribe contemplating rebellion and raids."

As Kisil did not answer, he went on: "Alas! We of the Liao are well under the heel of the Kin—at present."

"Yet you seek advancement in this army?"

"One day I shall be a general commanding an army of the emperor," Ming-nan boasted.

"And then?"

"Why, I shall have climbed to the summit."

"And that means?"

"Power, wealth and women." Ming-nan laughed.

"No fighting? No wars? No lands to conquer?"

"Advancement does not come solely from fighting. An affair—such as yours, if you speak true words—could bring me to the emperor's notice."

Kisil became more alert—this man was beyond doubt suspicious. "How?"

"As I have suggested. I could tell him much of what is

going on in the higher command—if you cared to bring me to his attention."

"Life is good to those who seize it boldly with both hands," Kisil quoted sententiously.

"Then it is a matter of regret that you have one arm bound," Ming-nan remarked crisply.

"The superior man need not regret the loss—especially the temporary loss—of a hand when he can use his brains."

"When are you going to use yours?" Ming-nan countered quickly.

"You mean?" Kisil frowned.

"I mean there is a lot we have not confided to each other, which seems a pity as we are more or less compatriots and have much in common against these people." Ming-nan paused. "I am strong and you are weak. The strong must give the lead to the weak. Well then—I have a purpose in seeking advancement. When I finally command an army I shall use it to wreak vengeance on the Kin. We shall welcome aid from without the Wall."

"I think you jest, and, anyway, your plans lie deep in the womb of time."

"Some midwives can hurry up matters, as I have done in telling you this. You alone know my secret—none of these men know that I am a prince with ambitions. If the secret leaked out, it would be the end of Ming-nan."

"Yet you have told me."

"You are in my power," Ming-nan answered tersely.

"And you expect me to place myself at further disadvantage by telling you my own secrets?" Kisil was anxious but he managed to smile.

"I know some of them. That girl, yesterday, was not so close-mouthed as you." Ming-nan smiled. "I know she is a Mongol by words she used. You haven't Mongol features, but your men have. You say you are of the Tu-kiue—that I can believe, but beyond the fact that you can speak Khitan there is very little else of your story that I can swallow. Frankly I am puzzled as to what you are doing here and why you asked for an escort. That looks to me like putting your head needlessly between the tiger's jaws."

Now Kisil was alarmed. He laughed and tried to appear at ease.

"Since when have Mongol maids and Mongol men been a rarity in Yen-king? Do not the tribes pay tribute?"

"Yes," Ming-nan replied, "but the emperor does not entrust state secrets to them!" He loosened his sword and shouted to his men to close up. "Perhaps this party should turn about so that this matter can be looked into."

"What, and give me a chance to betray your secret?"

"Much as I like you, Prince Bogorji—" Ming-nan smiled grimly—"you would not be included in the party. I regret to say I should have to report that you met death in another brush with bandits."

"And my lady Tsari?"

"Her throat would cut easily."

Not so easily as you might suppose, Kisil thought grimly. "So you would cut the throat of one of the emperor's concubines without compunction?" he said quietly, that the men who had moved closer might not hear him.

"What?" Ming-nan's face showed his amazement. "So that's it!" he said thoughtfully. "You are stealing for yourself a maid destined for the emperor to whom you were, no doubt, entrusted to deliver her."

"To whom she was delivered!" Kisil said. "Already she may bear the emperor's seed."

"You stole her from the emperor?" Ming-nan was aghast.

"Does that distress you?"

Ming-nan waved back the soldiers who had pressed closer. "No, that doesn't distress me—what is one woman more or less to him? But I am amazed at you both. You must indeed be a stout fellow." Incredulity and respect mingled in his tones. "Who is this girl that she was selected for the emperor?"

"She is a daughter of the late Mongol khan, sister to the present khan. Her life—and mine—were threatened in Yen-king, so she escaped from the Palace and together we have fled."

"You plan to take her to wife?"

"I plan to take her back to the khan. I already have one

of his sisters as wife, and would fear to take another without his consent."

Ming-nan looked thoughtful. "But how will you pass the Wall?"

"I propose getting back through Hia and along the caravan route."

"You'll never get a woman through Hia. They are so short of females that their women take many men as husbands, I am told."

"Nevertheless, I shall try. I shall disguise her as a man. She can ride like one and is a skilled marksman to boot."

Ming-nan was silent, deep in his whirling thoughts. There were two roads open to him. By one, this likable prince and charming girl would undoubtedly lose their lives by hideous torture; it would bring Ming-nan to the emperor's notice and he might get advancement. By the other—it was taking a long view, but it might have compensations. Then he suddenly made up his mind.

"You had best tell me all," he said seriously, "so that I may be better advised to aid you." He reached for an arrow from his quiver and put the metal point to his tongue. "I take the ancient oath of our people and swear not to disclose what you shall tell me."

So Kisil told him much of what had happened since he left the Kirghiz steppes. Its telling whiled away many hours as they journeyed parallel to the distant Wall, riding in the lower valleys, but when Kisil's story came to recent events he still did not tell of the death of the courier or of the roll he carried.

"Then we are allies," Ming-nan declared at length. "Your khan, when he grows great enough to seek vengeance on the Kin, may well look to a certain General Ming-nan and solicit his aid. I will make smooth his path across the Wall and even through open gates."

"He will welcome your aid, and he is not one to forget a service."

He's a cocky youth, Kisil thought, relieved at the turn of events. They are both cocky, both he and Temujine, and both seem certain of their destiny. Well, I know mine, if

Tatengri proves right. The warrior path is a short one, and I have to keep an eye out for white horses!

Ming-nan's eager voice broke into his thoughts. "Why do you need to loiter down the Wall when I can make you a rough map showing where horses can get over both Walls? You must flee across the Yellow River into Hia without delay. I wonder now that messengers did not arrive advising us of your escape."

He paused and seemed lost in thought, then he lifted his head. "News of your escape must have flashed down by now. You must stay away from the Wall, and even in Hia keep far south of the Wall until you can round it and get into the desert. When the clamor has died down I will send a trusted messenger through to your khan with my map and advise him he has an ally in Ming-nan, prince of Liao-yang. If your khan has many such as you I look forward to the day when we shall unite our forces. Now I suggest we make for a place where I know you can get over the river."

To this Kisil agreed.

The following days passed swiftly, but to Tsari, the starlit nights by smoking fires were nights of frustration, for night after night the consummation she so earnestly desired did not take place. To make Kisil jealous she rendered herself very agreeable to Ming-nan, so smart in his striped uniform of the Tigers, with his shield painted with the White Tiger emblem. To her questioning he answered that he had, as yet, no wife, being, as he said, more set on a military career than on raising a family.

"A wife," Tsari suggested, "might help you in your career."

Ming-nan smiled. "I have thought that myself, lately. I think I shall apply for a transfer to another regiment when I get back. I want to know more about siege engines and the fire tubes." He winked at Kisil. They had already discussed that matter and concluded that an ally with an army so equipped would be doubly valuable to the Mongols.

Tsari knew nothing and cared less about military matters, but she did think Ming-nan looked at her with a more discerning eye. Occasionally his stare made her blush and draw the curtains of her litter. He mustn't think her too forward.

They were traveling due west now and the country was becoming more and more mountainous. Ming-nan led them down valleys and up steep paths through countless herds of game that roamed still unafraid of man. And then the day came when Kisil saw at his feet the shining water of a river that pierced the mountain range like a bright sword glistening in the sun. The Wall had looped back—no longer the Inner Wall, so Ming-nan told him—and Kisil could see in the distance where it stopped at the river and continued on the other side. Across this river was Hia, but Kisil, seeing the mighty sweep of water, wondered how they were going to cross.

"Leave it to me," Ming-nan said, and laughed. "I'll get you and your lady across."

"And you? Is this where you leave us?" Kisil asked him.

"That is for you to say. Was I not put under your orders by my commander?" Ming-nan grinned. Then his voice became serious. "I might venture a little farther with you, if you wish, but my uniform would assure me short shrift from any roving band of *ho-si* if they caught me."

"I would not have you take an unnecessary risk." Kisil smiled. "Yet I shall miss your company."

"Oh, do come over the river with us," Tsari chimed in. "I should not feel half so afraid if you were with me. I should like to keep my litter as long as possible."

That touch of femininity made Kisil smile. Perhaps the girl had changed more than he thought. The Tsari he had known on the long ride down to Yen-king would have chafed at the confinement of a litter and longed for the freedom of riding horseback.

Their path twisted down the steep sides of the gorge to the water's edge. Here they found goatherds who won a scanty living from their flocks which they augmented by ferrying the occasional traveler across the river on a raft supported by inflated goatskins.

Kisil had never seen such a river. He was frankly alarmed. To the old man who seemed to be the headman of the group, Kisil expressed his wonder that they could live beside such a noise of rushing water.

"Never fear, we shall get you across safely, but not without a wetting. Your horses will be led over—the raft can take you three at a time. Now who is going first?"

Lob and Sanang were most fearful. "I won't venture on that thing unless you are with me, Kisil," Sanang said.

Tsari was actually clinging to Ming-nan and her face was white with fear.

"You had best take them with you, Prince," Ming-nan said. "I'll bring over your lady and the litter, and my men can follow after."

Kisil swallowed hard, then stepped forward briskly.

"All right," he said to Sanang, "you, Lob and I will go first."

The horses had been coaxed into the water, plunging and snorting. Each horse was led by a man and Kisil saw that the torrent barely came up to the men's chins. Suddenly realizing that Babor was halfway across, Kisil shouted to Sanang and Lob above the noise of the torrent and seated himself on the goatskin raft. When Lob and Sanang were seated beside him, the four men pushed the raft out into the river, hanging on to the corners to push or pull as occasion required. Several times Kisil thought the current would tip the raft over, then he sensed the men were making it appear more dangerous just to frighten him or make him think he had got his money's worth. He glanced back to shore and saw Ming-nan and Tsari watching from the water's edge. Kisil waved and gripped the raft again as it lurched. They were now in the deepest part of the river. The men were swimming, holding on to the goatskins. The raft was carried downstream, spinning as it went, but soon the men found fresh footing and they pulled it up to where the horses had landed.

Kisil gave a sigh of thankful relief as his feet touched dry ground. He watched as the ferrymen recrossed; they evidently knew the bars and shoals like the lines of their hands, for their course was erratic. Suddenly one man appeared in difficulties; his companions went to help him and the raft slipped out of their hands to whirl away downriver. By holding together the four men reached the opposite shore.

Now Kisil was in a panic as he realized the ferrymen had no spare raft. Then despair gripped his heart as he stared unbelievingly at the scene across the river. The mules were being put back between the poles. Tsari stood and waved, until two soldiers mounted the mules, whereupon she turned and entered the litter. Ming-nan mounted and the party started the long climb back up the gorge.

He had been tricked! He was sure of it! Rage filled his heart and he could not answer the excited babblings of his men. Ming-nan had no doubt arranged the loss of the raft with the ferrymen, and Kisil had paid cash for it! And Tsari? He would never know about Tsari. He would always wonder if she had gone willingly, a party to his deception, or had been forced by Ming-nan's villainy.

Fool that he was, he had allowed himself to be tricked into passing over first! He had been so intent on showing off his courage and setting an example to his men that he had been blind to what was going on! He mounted Babor with the desperate intent of plunging into the river.

Sanang clutched the skirt of his riding coat and shouted above the river's roar, "Why throw away your life, Kisil, to go after that woman? You have taken her too seriously—she was not worth it. That Ming-nan went to her tent last night and she let him stay!"

Lob came to Sanang's aid and clutched Babor's bridle. "They'd kill you if you survived the river. Don't leave us here alone in a strange country, lord!"

Sanang's last shaft had wounded Kisil—he was now jealous besides. Grimly he sat in the saddle and watched the progress of the party on the other side of the river. He saw them reach the summit. Tsari got out of the litter, making a bright patch of color where she stood beside Ming-nan. They waved once more, but Kisil hardened his heart and gave no answering signal.

He, who thought himself so clever, had been tricked by one who was evidently a master of guile! He turned Babor so that he could no longer see Tsari, and faced the two men now mounting their horses.

"What now?" Sanang asked soberly.

"What now? Are we not across the frontier of Hia? Are we not rid of a troublesome wench whose tempting ways threatened the success of our mission? We owe a debt to Ming-nan. The honorable direction lies across those hills. There is no question where our duty lies."

"We are certainly on the wrong side of the river to reach the gobi!" Sanang agreed thoughtfully. "That river is a bigger obstacle than any Wall."

"But we are on the right side to reach the King of Hia! This scroll will prove a talisman that will open gates and secure me an audience. Trust me. We may yet cross the gobi in comfort and safety with a caravan and—" Kisil smiled— "from what Ming-nan said, the women of Hia are very hospitable!"

His voice rang with confidence. He set his face resolutely upward.

"Spread out! Let us find the path to the heights!"

Book Five—*The Wheel Turns*

40

JHOTUZ AND PURE GOLD

JHOTUZ, during the past two years, had seen less and less of Temujine. He was riding farther and farther afield, and the winter his mother returned, he had gone to the court of Toghrul khan, taking with him the emperor's gifts, which he offered as a dutiful vassal to his lord, asking for nothing in exchange. And, far from asking aid, he offered his, should Toghrul's need arise! He returned empty-handed, but satisfied with his gesture of independence.

Jhotuz knew he had experienced other women, but being sensible, she never broached the subject to him.

Last winter he had tried the experiment of joining his bands into one horde, moving in a careful and skillful man-

ner to a larger but less secluded valley where he had earlier stored supplies of fodder. As a result of such exertion—and Temujine's growing reputation as a provider for his people—more and more families joined him, which necessitated more and more exertion.

And, like a good tent wife, Jhotuz encouraged him, never bewailing his absence or importuning his love. If he wanted her, she was there. She knew he appreciated this attitude. Yet her instinct told her what her heart did not want to believe, namely, that the time was drawing near when he would give her up. Soon he would ride to claim his bride, for he desired sons to aid him in his work and carry on his destined greatness.

Since Yulun had returned, the output of felt had been doubled. Cholan now had her own yurt which Jhotuz shared with her and the two children. Cholan's second son, as yet without a name—for she would not name him with Kisil away—had been born in the last moon of the Year of the Monkey. Temujine had offered Jhotuz a tent of her own, but she had gracefully declined it, feeling what reputation she still had was safer under Cholan's watchful eye. Jhotuz wanted no breath of suspicion to mar her relationship with Temujine or to give him an excuse to cast her aside.

And Jhotuz still kept a watchful eye on Pure Gold. She still had no firm ground for her suspicion, but her intuition—backed up by the girl's obvious hatred of Temujine after he had repeatedly ignored her suggestive posturings, and her intense jealousy of Jhotuz—prompted continued vigilance. Keuktche was an added reason for unrest in her mind. Minglig, to bolster up his pride—for his shadow grew less under Yulun's tree—sent for all his bastard sons with their wives and children to augment his personal following. Keuktche had no wife, but his yurt was filled with the type of youth for whom Jhotuz coined her choicest epithets. With such elements in the camp it was no wonder, Jhotuz thought, that Temujine's foes sometimes seemed to have an uncanny foreknowledge of his movements.

It was toward the end of the seventh moon, when an early and unexpected fall of snow had whitened the higher

plateau where Yulun's horde was still at summer pasture, that Yulun returned with a miscellaneous collection of four-footed animals from a tithe-collecting expedition that had occupied her for many days.

The same night Temujine came riding up the hill out of a blind gray world. To Muhuli who accompanied him he rapped out an order: "I stay here but to snatch food and a moment's sleep. Bid that Tonguz slave girl make up a good fire in my tent and prepare a meal for two. Tell her to get us a skin of wine."

"Do you mean Pure Gold?" Muhuli asked.

Temujine, striding toward his mother's tent wagon, called back over his shoulder, "Yes. Tell her to hurry—I'm cold."

Had he seen Muhuli shrug he might have known that his order had been misinterpreted.

Yulun, hearing Temujine's voice, quickly rose from her bed; coming out on the wooden platform before her tent, she saw him, moisture glistening on hair and skin, tying his horse to the wagon wheel. "Temujine, my son, you ride late. I had given up expecting you tonight."

He saluted her. "Go inside, Mother—the night has a raw chill. I'll be at your side when I have seen my horse fed."

He rubbed down the sweating horse and fed it some scarce grain; then he strode across to Cholan's new yurt. "Jhotuz!"

Swiftly she appeared at the entrance in answer to his call. "I expected thee, lord. As always when I know thou art coming I am ready." She made as if to leave the tent but his hand arrested her.

"There's a raw bite in the air. Stay warm in your bed until I come for you. I have given orders for a fire to be lighted and food prepared for us. But first I have much to discuss with my mother."

A smile of sensual quiescence spread across her features. "Delay not long, lord," she begged, "unless it is thy intent to break thy usual rule and linger in my warmth past daylight."

"That I dare not do. Do not entice me, O daughter of wantonness." He laughed. "Short and sweet must be our dallying this night for I must press on to warn the bands that we move tomorrow."

As Temujine mounted the platform to his mother's tent, Muhuli called to him, "Fire, food and drink will soon be ready. She is hopping about like a flea!"

"Good. Now look to your own comfort. We leave before dawn."

As Muhuli said, Pure Gold was hopping about quickly. When she heard Temujine's unexpected order a look of incredulous amazement spread across her broad Tonguz features. The girl knew Temujine was expected, but she had given up hoping that he would send for her. It was always that old, barren dancing whore who shared his bed. Now he evidently intended changing his fare; he must be tired of that much chewed-over Moslem flesh and she had best plan carefully. Yes, she had better discard the etiquette and ritual she had been taught to offer in the bed of a superior and civilized man. Temujine might be superior—but he was not civilized!

Yes, tonight she must be careful. She had been ordered to prepare a meal for two. That was thoughtful of him. But she would only toy with her food and would wait on Temujine with tender provocation. If she were skillful in interpreting his mood, and could parry with feminine art the impetuosity of hot masculine desire—stemming his lust while fanning it aflame, prolonging the exigencies of passion that he might enjoy the greater ecstasy of fulfillment—she might well oust that faded Moslem wanton from his favor. Yes, she must be more skillful tonight than ever before in her life. The thought made her tremble with eagerness; the hatred she thought existed in her heart for Temujine seemed to have dissolved.

She wished she had thought of this chance earlier. Then she could have bathed herself and washed her hair—but she remembered, on second thought, that such niceties were impossible among the Mongol women. Washing outraged their superstitious beliefs. Yet she wished she had oil of jassamine to perfume her body. She wished she had cosmetics to make up her eyes and face. She wished she had silks and brocade to veil from his eager eyes the joys within his grasp—silks rather than the sweaty wool and furs that at best could

only open to expose a breast like any nursing mother's. Pah! She would make the tent so warm that she could dispose of clothing from the first, attending to his service attired in nothing but her diminutive, slender nudity! Yes. That was it—make up the fire!

She got the meat. She got the wine. Hurrying about, she gathered fuel and heaped twigs on the hearth to make a hot bed of ashes for the dung. With trembling hands she struck a spark from the iron stick and lighted the fire ceremoniously. Then, borrowing pots from outside the tents of neighbors, she started preparing her love feast. She filled an iron pot with snow and placed it to heat beside the fire. The air inside the tent was now warm, so she swiftly disrobed and, feeling she had the time to spare, quickly washed herself with the water of melted snow. She dried her body by the heat of the fire and reveled in its ruby glow, then lighted the wick in the saucer that she might have more light to admire herself. Her feet, she thought, were very pretty and dainty. She had good thighs, and the breasts she cupped in her hands were round and firm though small. The tiny flame from the wick and the glow from the fiery coals cast her shadow on the wall of the tent as she postured and practiced the movements she would make in serving Temujine's meal, in pouring out his wine, in kneeling to wipe the mutton grease from his fingers—in coyly retreating from his amorous advances.

"Well, I'll be bastinadoed by a baschi!"

Jhotuz!

The Tonguz spun round. So engrossed had she been in her rehearsal that she had not heard the approach of deerskin boots in the snow. And Temujine stood there too, laughing, with his arms about the Moslem whore! Pure Gold stood petrified.

They came into the tent. Temujine remained by the door and Jhotuz advanced to the fire. She loosened her fur coat and disclosed silken, filmy drawers fastened at the ankle. A gold necklace—something Temujine must have just given her—adorned her neck; from it a large ruby lay suspended in the hollow between her breasts.

Pure Gold moaned. She doubled over and reached frantic-

ally into the darkness behind her for her clothes. She gathered them in her arms and tried to brush past Temujine, but he forced her back.

" 'Tis cold outside," he said, and laughed. "You'll freeze to death in that barren raiment—besides, I rather like you that way. 'Twill be a novel experience to be waited on by nudity. Come, girl, throw down your clothes and pour out some of that wine," he ordered brusquely.

"Phew! It is as hot in here as the fiery ditch Jahannam!" Jhotuz kicked off her boots and threw aside her coat to stand revealed in a short sleeveless jacket that had no fastening in front and disclosed breasts like two pomegranates warmed to ripeness by the summer sun. Below the silken drawers her feet were bare, the toes curling into the luxurious depth of fur, her toenails and heels brightly painted. Her eyes, too, were skillfully made up and a trace of perfume overcame the smell of cooking meat. Such attire—these cosmetics—must have been brought from Toghrul Khan's court last year when Temujine visited him! Where else could this whore—?

The slave girl averted her eyes that burned in jealous rage and remained bent over in silent shame. Temujine seized her wrist and, twisting it, forced her to stand upright. He amusedly looked her up and down. "When I sent orders for you to get me a meal, I had not thought of any other service. For this presumption you shall remain and wait on us!"

"Please, lord Temujine, let the girl go! Don't shame her more!" Jhotuz begged. Catching the look of baleful hate that flashed from lidded eyes, she shivered. "She would be like the Angel of Death at our feast."

Temujine undid his girdle, slipped out of his coat and threw them on the ground; his dagger he tossed atop the heap. "Pull off my boots," he ordered the girl. The slave girl dared look up with hatred in her eyes, but Temujine stared her down. She bent to her task and when it was completed crouched submissively in shame.

"Go then. Perhaps the error is not yours, but lies rather at the feet of Muhuli—who doubtless would welcome you!"

Pure Gold lifted her clothes and in her haste dropped them

again. She fumbled in nervous trepidation as she stooped to regather them in her arms, then glided swiftly on naked feet into the snow.

"What a presumptuous bitch!" Temujine said laughingly.

But in the heart of Jhotuz no laughter responded to his jibe; for her the pleasure had departed from the night—even before she had entered the tent to find it already occupied by the expectant Tonguz slave. The jewel that sparkled between her breasts hung more like a stone on her heart, for Temujine, in making her this costly gift—the first he had given her except for the gossamer clothes she wore at his desire—had made it seem more like a parting gift or payment for services performed.

And now this! The hatred of the girl hung like a miasma in the tent. Jhotuz served Temujine his food, and, at his insistence, took some herself. They ate, talking in whispers. The anticipated raptures, when they finally embraced, did not materialize. Jhotuz started at every sound outside; and, far from prompting play, for the first time submitted passively, her mind elsewhere, fearing she knew not what. She longed for this night to end—to know that Temujine was ahorse and away. With him breathing heavily at her ear, she gazed up at the faint light of the moon struggling through the mist in the open circle of the smoke hole.

And then she saw the upraised arm!

She shrieked. In a flash she twisted over, rolling on top of Temujine as the blade descended in the darkness. She shrieked again as it pierced her back with a numbing pain. And then she couldn't shriek. Warm blood gushed from her mouth. She tried to rise in a fresh effort to protect the youth she loved, but he in haste thrust her aside and, springing to his feet, grappled with a dim, slippery figure that sought to escape.

"Guards!" Temujine shouted. "I am attacked!"

They came running. He burst from the tent, holding a writhing figure that twisted and snarled in his grip of steel. "Hold her," he commanded. "You two, one at each arm." He looked about for aid. "Send for my mother and bring me a light!"

By the smoking blaze of a pine knot the men who crowded into Temujine's tent saw their young khan kneeling naked beside an equally naked Jhotuz. Blood welled from her mouth as she gasped for breath. Temujine threw a fur robe across her body. Ignoring his own state, he knelt beside the girl and clasped her hands in his.

"You have saved me, Jhotuz. I am unhurt. But thou—"

"I'm glad," she gasped, "to do . . . thee this . . . last service."

"Not last, Jhotuz—you shall live!"

"Inshallah," she murmured faintly.

"If God wills," he amended humbly.

"I have . . . so . . . little time." She forced a smile. "I love . . . you . . . Temujine." She struggled for breath.

"I, too, love thee, Jhotuz," he said earnestly, and saw by her eyes she understood, for a smile—he could only describe it later as a "happy smile"—crept wistfully into the darkening eyes, making him wish he had said it before. Then the smile changed to a look of bewilderment. The light in her eyes flickered and died out, leaving her eyes open, staring into nothingness.

"Jhotuz!"

The cry was wrung from Temujine. Distraught, he rose to his feet and gazed in unbelieving horror at her blood-drenched nudity.

Muhuli forced his way through the frightened crowd round the yurt. Taking the smoking torch, he thrust the men from the tent and faced Temujine. "You too are bloody, Temujine! Are you wounded?"

Temujine slowly shook his head, still looking trancelike at the corpse.

"Then put on your clothes, Temujine. Your people must not see you humbled thus." Muhuli's voice was stern.

Wordlessly Temujine dressed, for he could not control his deep emotion, and he feared to disclose his weakness by tremors in his voice. But he could not hide the whiteness of his face revealed by Muhuli's torch, and his hands trembled at the fastenings in spite of strong-willed effort.

Wordlessly, too, Muhuli watched him dress, though ques-

tions clamored in his brain that his lips denied utterance, for never had he seen his lord so overwrought. He was confused, perplexed. Where was the slave? Why was Jhotuz lying here—and murdered by the bloody hands of Temujine, from what he'd heard and seen?

Outside the yurt such questions echoed in the minds of all, and frightened women traded shrill rumors with equally ignorant men, their wits still drugged from sleep.

Yulun burst through the chattering throng. "What viper bit your hand, my son? There is blood on it."

Temujine gently broke her grasp and went on tying his girdle about his coat. "Not mine, mother, but hers." His head inclined to where the dead woman lay.

"Jhotuz! But why—?"

Temujine sought his dagger and found it lying bloody at Yulun's feet. "She even used my own dagger in her attempt to slay me," he said with seething fury.

"She?" Amazement, incredulity and horror showed in Yulun's face.

Muhuli also was shocked out of his assumed calm. "She . . . tried to slay you?"

"Who tried to slay you, son? Who killed Jhotuz?" Yulun looked for an answer from either man, but Muhuli shrugged to show his ignorance. "Was it you who killed Jhotuz?" she demanded of her son.

Temujine stiffened at the question. At last he trusted his voice to answer, "Thy slave, the Tonguz whom Minglig gave thee!"

"And she?"

"The guards hold her, I trust."

"Then I give orders for her instant death!" Yulun turned to leave but Temujine's hand restrained her.

"That I shall attend to, myself! By my hand shall she die!"

As Temujine emerged from the tent, he saw the fear-stricken faces of Cholan and Gesikie in the forefront of the women. To Cholan's mute inquiry he said, "Jhotuz is dead. Go to her." He laid his hand in sympathy upon her arm, but she saw the blood and shrank from him in horror. So Cholan, too, thought him a murderer; her eyes accused him

just as Muhuli's had done. With his face frozen in a mask he thrust his way through the crowd, and, not seeing the guards, asked where they held the slave.

Minglig came puffing up. "I found the two men holding Pure Gold—they said at thy orders, Temujine. I told them to take her to a tent as she was partly unclothed and nearly frozen. What is amiss? What has she done?" His face twitched with anxiety.

"Bring her out—and I'll tell you." Temujine stood icily detached from the crowd while he waited for the guards and their prisoner. Presently they stood before him, each man holding a wrist of the struggling girl.

"This slave you gave to my mother tried to kill me! But Jhotuz flung her body to meet the murderous steel and 'tis Jhotuz who lies dead—Jhotuz, who so often tried to warn me, who suspected the slave was a shaman's tool. Is this your work, shaman?"

There was such menace in his voice and gesture that Minglig's sons, detaching themselves from the crowd, quickly came and stood about their father. Foremost in their rank stood Keuktche.

Minglig wondered for a moment if Keuktche were going to take the blame and say the gift of the girl had been at his insistence; but he saw that Keuktche stood with his eyes fixed on the trembling girl, and he knew his son was exerting all his mental power to impose on her his will for silence.

Mustering his courage, now that his sons stood between him and Temujine, Minglig dared say, "Your wanton lied to you, Temujine. What sort of a leader are you who cannot judge the worth of his leman's poisonous tales against the proved worth of service done by those who've risked their all?"

Minglig's pose of disdainful dignity was scant covering for his ignorance. He was puzzled and knew not what to make of it all—no more than he had two years ago. It was with the utmost relief that he saw Yulun advance to Temujine.

"Son," Yulun admonished Temujine. "Guard thy tongue lest worse befall us. Anger not the *kams* lest they withdraw their protection from this horde. They are truly our friends

and allies." Then she spoke loudly that all might hear. "Muhuli has just explained the mystery to me. 'Twas jealousy that nerved the slave's arm to strike at thee—jealousy the viper that she nursed at her breast until its venom poisoned her mind! How say you, my people?"

"*Aie!* Kill her!" they shouted.

Minglig approached. "Most assuredly, Temujine, does she deserve death. Leave her to us. Let us take thy vengeance on our shoulders!"

"*Aie!* Kill her!"

Temujine shouted above the beastlike roar, "Not vengeance, but justice! She shall die by my hand!" He drew his dagger still wet with the blood of Jhotuz.

Pure Gold, suddenly realizing that she stood but a handsbreadth from death, tried to fling herself at Temujine's feet. In her struggles her quilted coat came unfastened, exposing her to avid eyes. The guards, still holding her wrists, forced her arms above her head, making her straighten up, and one seized her long hair from behind and drew her head back, so that her breasts were outthrust to Temujine's dagger.

"Spare me, lord," she shrieked, "and I will tell thee a—"

A bow twanged.

The guards jumped back in affright, releasing her.

She swayed, then fell in a twitching heap on the trampled snow, a shaft through her heart.

Temujine's voice shattered the silence. "Who did that? Who dared—?"

Keuktche handed back the bow he had snatched from a brother. He answered quietly, "I did it, lord, to save thee from soiling thy hands! It is not meet that such as she should be honored by death at thy hand!"

He turned to address the mob, and now his voice was frenzied. "Do we not rejoice and give thanks to the Eternal Blue Sky for our lord's escape from death?"

"*Aie!*" they shouted.

"Is he not our Hope—the Protector of our Pastures?"

"*Aie!*" they shouted.

"Is he not our Sword and Shield—a Tall Cedar whose branches spread over all his people?"

"Aie!" they shouted yet again.

"The spirits have spoken to me, revealing much that lies within the womb of time. We have fallen—but we shall rise! We are few—but we shall be many! We are low in worldly goods—but we shall soon own the earth! I have seen the vision. I speak truth!"

He turned to Temujine, pointed dramatically to the still figure lying in the snow. "And, thus, lord, shall we thy people slay your enemies!"

The blood hunger of the crowd now seethed and mounted to their brains. Over this high, snowy plateau, the devils of darkness held revel. Torches were lighted and in the smoky glare, beneath lurid orange patterns cast on the swirling mist, the frenzied mob stamped and danced around the silent group—and the still warm body.

Temujine bit back the angry words he wanted to hurl at Keuktche. His rage was at white heat. Keuktche had outwitted him.

41

KEUKTCHE AND MENDO

MENDO, with the unerring instinct of the Mongol, had safely passed the Wall and was riding swiftly across the grasslands of the Onguts, enjoying his novel use of the talisman to obtain a fresh horse from those he met.

It had been after the death of the courier, when he had changed into the dead man's attire and Kisil was making him repeat the message he had to carry to Temujine, that an idea had sprung to Mendo's mind. Knowing Kisil's suspicions of Keuktche's part in Yesukai's death, he had suddenly thought of the possibility of bargaining with the shaman for his silence, suppressing that part of the report dealing with Pure Gold. He could seek Keuktche first, before he sought out Temujine.

Approaching the grazing grounds of the Tatar clans, Mendo changed from his courier's attire, rolled it up and tied it to his saddle. He rode more slowly now that he could no longer

expect to change horses. Each night he stayed by a different fire, contributing what game he killed to the pot of his hosts.

He was now riding in a land the cliffs and crags of which had been familiar since boyhood. Finding Keuktche was going to take time. It took him several days of circling around and as many nights of sleeping cold before he found unmistakable signs of an ordu being near.

Eventually he found the ordu hidden in a valley, made snug for the winter. He might have to lie here a day or two in careful observation. For it would not do to ride boldly in. If Temujine—or his mother—were among the tents he would have to drop his plan and report to either one at once; and that meant giving a full report—he could not hold back any of it to give later if his negotiations with Keuktche proved fruitless. So he lay concealed—he hoped—where he could overlook the camp. That his hopes were false he speedily found out when an arrow zipped into the snow but a handsbreadth from his nose. He sprang to his feet and quickly identified himself by voice. To his great relief, Mendo learned that both Yulun and Temujine were away hunting. Keuktche, who seldom hunted, was probably around the tents, they told him. All augured well. The spirits must approve his plan.

Keuktche, at first mistaking the purpose of this bronzed, good-looking young man who had sought him out, fawned on him; but as Mendo quickly and bluntly outlined his purpose, hatred seethed in Keuktche's black heart. It was a struggle for him to appear calm. This was yet another notch to make in his reckoning against Kisil.

While food was preparing, the *kara-kumiss* Keuktche so extravagantly bestowed on Mendo speedily took effect. Mendo, in his befuddled state, quite overlooked the fact that in Kisil's mind there was no certainty for accusation—only suspicion pointed a finger at Keuktche through Cholan's disclosure that the shaman and Pure Gold had met secretly. And, listening to Mendo, the shaman jumped to the conclusion that his part in Yesükai's death had been revealed. So his guilty mind, not conscious of the error, quickly sifted the possibilities in the little pile of information it had gleaned from Mendo.

Here was a chance to discredit Kisil in Temujine's eyes. Here was an opportunity for revenge on Cholan. That Keuktche was in grave danger of losing his life he recognized. Mendo held a dagger to his back. What a fool! But if he seemed to yield to the pressure and agree to Mendo's demands, what message would the man give Temujine as a reason for his coming? He had it! No message! Kisil had been pursued and captured by the emperor's soldiers! Only Mendo had escaped.

"Mendo, your fortune is made if you do exactly as I bid you. Rub out of your mind all traces of Kisil's message. This is the tale you must tell: Kisil stole Tsari. He was pursued by the emperor's cavalry, and in a battle in which Kisil was wounded, you alone escaped—the others were taken prisoner, you suppose. Tell Temujine how disgusted you were at Kisil's treachery. Tell him how swiftly you sped—that when your horse dropped dead you waylaid a courier and slew him, that you took his horse and garments so you might safely pass the Gates. Do you not see how he must reward you? What is it you want, my *anda?*—for *anda* you must be to me. Is it power? Is it prestige?"

As he spoke, thoughts shuttled in Keuktche's brain. Poison! Poison in the blood cup! What a pity this nice-looking youth interfered in things that didn't concern him—they might have been such friends. "What is it, my *anda,* that I can give you?"

"Horses—*hic*—and a woman—*hic*—several women!" Mendo belched.

"The horses I can give thee now. What are a few horses compared to thy golden silence and thy friendship? For thee these horses can mean women—creatures for which I have no use. For me, they buy thy devotion. We must be sworn brothers! We'll mix the blood potion now, while the fever in our blood is high. What friend of thine hath the good fortune to be *anda* to a shaman?"

Keuktche opened a chest behind him. Then he turned to face Mendo and half filled the cup with kumiss. "How many horses hadst thou in mind?" he asked pleasantly.

"T-three!" Mendo stated hopefully.

Keuktche put down the kumiss sack. "Three? I'll give my

anda five!" He gashed his forearm with a dagger and squeezed blood into the cup. "Five horses—if thou wilt tell this same tale to Cholan."

Mendo nodded eagerly as he watched the preparation for the rite. Then Keuktche gravely handed him the dagger and Mendo did likewise. "Now drink, my *anda,*" he said, "but drain not the cup, for I, too, must pledge thee."

Mendo drank and handed the cup to Keuktche, who lifted it to his lips and tossed his head back. But his lips were firmly closed. He grasped Mendo's hand and, as Mendo repeated the oath after him, his fingers felt his pulse.

"Remember; there is no message. 'Tis best we rehearse this tale again before spilling it in Temujine's ear. Then I'll send for Cholan. Thy tongue can tell her how that paragon of virtue, Kisil, has broken faith with her and Temujine and has been captured by the Kin."

But Keuktche had no need to send for Cholan.

Learning that Mendo had been seen entering Keuktche's tent, she had waited patiently for him to reach her with the message she knew Kisil would have sent her. She was not in the least alarmed, but as time passed and he did not appear, she overcame her reluctance. She was making for Keuktche's tent when Temujine, Yulun and Gesikie returned with the hunters.

"Mendo has come from Kisil," Cholan shouted, in her excitement forgetting the deference due. "He is in Keuktche's tent."

Temujine was surprised. "Tell him to come to my yurt immediately, Cholan."

Cholan ran through the tents to Keuktche's. As she approached the shaman lifted the tent flap and came out. "I was about to send for you, Cholan," he said gravely. "Mendo has come with news of—"

"Our lord the khan awaits him and bids him come immediately." Her heart beat so she almost danced. "Is Kisil well?"

"That Mendo must tell thee himself, if he can—the man is ill." He turned into the tent and she heard him say, "Mendo, our lord is here and wishes to commend thee for thy loyalty. Come, give me thy bundle, let me take thy arm."

Mendo stumbled across the threshold and would have fallen had not Keuktche held him up. He beamed foolishly on Keuktche and, seeing a woman, he likewise beamed on her. "My *anda,*" he explained with a grotesque grin.

The girl was puzzled. "Mendo, I'm Cholan. What message did Kisil send me?"

Mendo straightened up and peered at Cholan as if he were seeing her through a mist. "Cholan?" Then the same grin appeared. "Cholan! *Eckh!* I forget."

"There was no message!" Keuktche said sharply and Cholan saw him pinch Mendo's arm.

"Cholan mustn't worry about my wound," Mendo said with a shake of the head.

"Was that his message? Is Kisil wounded?"

Mendo nodded. *"Tsa!* Nasty wound—arrow!" He frowned. "Right up here." He drew his right hand up his left forearm and nearly lost his balance, but he straightened up and said, as if to reassure Cholan, "But he's all right. Tsari bound it up. Nice girl, Tsari. Kisil lucky man. Tsari make him good wife in bed!" He looked at Keuktche in drunken indignation. "Don't push thine *anda!"*

Pain and bewilderment blanched Cholan's cheeks; she looked helplessly from Mendo to Keuktche. "But Tsari—" she faltered— "our Tsari went to the emperor. Yulun saw her enter the women's courts."

The worry on Keuktche's face was genuine. Temujine had come too soon, and this fool—"According to this man, Kisil stole Tsari from the women's courts and with her fled from Yen. But, I gather, they were caught by pursuing soldiers. Only Mendo escaped. This will make bad feeling between the emperor and Temujine our lord, I fear."

"The man is drunk!" Cholan said indignantly. "I would like to hear him tell this tale to Temujine!"

"And so you shall—if Temujine permits. Yet in this bundle is evidence which bears out something of his statement."

When they entered the khan's tent, Muhuli, Yulun and Gesikie were with Temujine.

To Temujine, Keuktche, acting as Mendo's spokesman, told the story of Kisil's apparent perfidy. He unrolled the

bundle and displayed the bloodstained courier's attire; showed them the bells which Mendo said he wore about his waist; showed, too, the tablet that had produced fresh horses like magic.

Temujine held the tablet in his fingers and, his brows creased in puzzlement, looked from Yulun to Muhuli. "Is this the garb the emperor's couriers wear? Does this tablet carry the authority this man claims?"

Muhuli nodded. "It seems so. Yet it is a garbled tale."

"The women's courts are too closely guarded," Yulun said thoughtfully. "I cannot understand how Kisil could get her out."

"Washwoman—woman who washes concubines' clothes *in water!*" Mendo said emphatically, shaking his head as if surprised to find himself so indisposed. "She carry Tsari out with dirty clothes. Bad custom, washing clothes—brings bad luck. Brought bad luck to woman who was mother of—"

Keuktche broke in quickly to stop Mendo's bibulous flow. "Mendo is to be commended, lord, is he not, for his zeal in riding to thee with this startling report when he was ill with such a fever?"

"Fever?" Temujine snorted contemptuously. "The man is drunk!" He turned. "Take him away, Muhuli. Keep him in the guard tent. Tomorrow, when he's sober, we'll hear more of this story."

Muhuli almost had to carry the incoherent Mendo from the tent. All eyes but Cholan's watched his departure; she alone saw the smile of satisfaction that flitted across Keuktche's sallow face.

A heated discussion broke out in the tent. Keuktche repeated his assertion that the man was ill. "'Tis the lung fever, I think."

"I know a drunken man when I see one!" Temujine said. "And I have drunk enough *kara-kumiss* to recognize its smell!"

There's that smile again, Cholan thought. Keuktche is too pleased—too satisfied about something. She listened with growing indignation to the discussion that followed: even Gesikie seemed to believe with Yulun that there might be

a germ of truth in this sheaf of nonsense. Keuktche said little, but everything he did say seemed to add another twig to the flames of suspicion. At last a servant came to say that Temujine's meal was ready, and they all began to leave his yurt. Temujine called Keuktche back. "I have several things to say to you, Keuktche. Share my meal!"

Keuktche shivered in apprehension.

When the others had gone, Temujine turned to Keuktche and said, "You seem too satisfied at Kisil's apparent breaking of faith, shaman."

Keuktche managed to laugh. "I admit I never liked the man," he said disarmingly. "Chiefly because he, a foreigner, sought too high a place in thy esteem. And, too, he made sport of me, thy faithful shaman."

"There are too many shamans in this camp!" Temujine said as if in challenge.

"I think so, too." Keuktche smiled and turned the edge of his opponent's steel. "I have told my father so—but," he added more seriously, "I have thought of a plan by which they can do thee great service, lord. I think it might find favor in thy sight." Taking Temujine's silence to mean he might go on, he said, "These shamans are anxious to serve thee. Dispersed among those clans unfavorable to thee, they could undermine the confidence of both men and women in their leaders and win them for thy service."

Temujine looked hard at Keuktche. "Your mouth echoes my own thoughts. 'Tis thus I wished to use them and it is about this I wished to speak. I will forgive you much, Keuktche, if you will see to it in good faith!"

They were discussing this proposed infiltration of shamans into unfriendly ordus when Muhuli came in with the startling news that Mendo was dead.

"Then it was the lung fever!" Keuktche said, pretending to shiver.

"Or, perhaps, it was something he ate which disagreed with him!" Muhuli suggested dryly.

"More likely something he drank!" Temujine said, and Keuktche thought there was a dangerous glitter in his eyes. Then the khan's mood changed. "Come, Muhuli, reach for

the mutton. Listen to this plan for making friends without bloodshed!"

Neither Cholan nor Gesikie got much sleep that night; they lay awake in the darkness of the yurt they had occupied together since Jhotuz died. Gesikie despaired of ever seeing Kisil again. Indeed, so absolute was her belief in Mendo's tale that she actually spoke of asking Temujine to find her another husband, where he thought fit.

"Fie, Gesikie!" Cholan said at last. "You talk like a lily-livered wench. Your lack of faith in Kisil would hurt him if he knew of it. Cease this foolish talk. Our husband will return, and if he comes back with Tsari and wants us to greet her as his wife, we must both welcome her. There is no law against a man having two sisters for wives."

The next day Cholan repeated her convictions to Temujine, convictions strengthened by the knowledge that Mendo had died. "Kisil is unerring. When the cry of the raven is misleading, he is not led astray; when the grave bird croaks unmeaningly, his brains remain clear; when the dust rises from the earth or the mist comes down from heaven, he doesn't lose his way!" She stopped, and apologized. "Forgive me, lord, but I am his wife."

"By these tokens thou, too, art unerring, Cholan. There has been something between us in the past. I have avoided thee, lest some might say I sent Kisil away that I might enjoy his wife. But let us share one more secret—I, too, think Mendo lied!"

42

CHUNG-HSING

LI-NGAN-TSUEN, KING of Hia, lord of life and death over the millions who drew breath within his realm, sat in his Hall of Council at Chung-hsing with his ministers, his governors of districts, the generals of his army and his nephew and heir, the Prince Li-tzun-hien.

To Chung-hsing had the king called the general commanding the bulk of Hia's forces—the armies of the east and southeast, whose duty it was to protect the king's province of Shensi that, girt about by Wall and river, faced both Kin and Sung. From the west, too, had come the general who was always bemoaning the scanty forces the king placed at his disposal—scanty for the task he had in hand, for it was in the west that Hia had, not long ago, set out to wrest more cities from the eastern Uigurs who recently gave allegiance to the Kin—through Hia—but now seemed to prefer the domination of the increasingly powerful Kara Khitai.

From these distant places had his generals come at the king's command, he being sore perplexed and much in need of counsel, for Hia, as of old, was again playing with fire and the king feared to burn his fingers, for had it not been foretold that a king of Hia would die of grief over the destruction of his people?

Between the emperor of the north and the emperor of the south, Hia was like a woman coquetting with two lovers, playing each against the other. But Hia was sworn vassal of the Kin, so her indiscretions with the other savored of treason. Having again wandered from the path of political virtue by dallying with the Sung and the Tatars—who had both immediately disowned her when the Kin found out—Hia braced herself to bear the blows she knew were merited.

Now, strangely enough, the *ta-se-thu* of the Kin army stationed at the Pass—the general expected to bring chastisement—had proposed a truce to the weaker member of the liaison! If Hia would mend her ways and agree to certain difficult terms, she would be restored, unpunished, to the bosom of her lord. It was even suggested that additional territory might adorn the neck of wanton Hia when she carried out the terms imposed and moved her eastern army westward to take over more cities and inflicted a crushing defeat on the Khitans as a service to the Kin. The Kin in the meantime would withdraw their forces threatening Hia's eastern frontier and, with Hia's southeastern army, execute a pincers movement on the Sung, driving them farther south.

It was an alluring proposal to Hia, oft jilted by the wavering Sung, but Li-ngan-tsuen, because of a dream, nursed deep-seated suspicion of it.

"I dreamed," he told his council, "of a youth coming out of the north, and on his wrist perched an eaglet. 'Give me meat,' he asked, 'that I may feed my bird; then will I tell thee much thou ought to know.' But in my dream I laughed his plea to scorn. Even as I watched, the eaglet grew and grew, until its spread of wing blotted out the sky, its talons gripped the mountain peaks. Its hunger was so great that all the people of Hia did not suffice to fill its craw. In terror I awoke and in my fear roused the astrologers and necromancers. And those who consult the stars said, 'This day must thou weigh more carefully whatever matter is laid before thee, even cast old prejudices from the scales for the shrewder weighing of new ideas.' And the dead spake to me through the necromancers and urged me to placate the north, for there a tumult was breeding that would sweep south, and Hia was in its path. What think you, trusted councilors, of last night's dream and divination?"

And those who favored the Kin said, "This eagle must be the northern court. Let us placate them!" And those who were for accepting the face-saving offer of the Kin outvoiced the others, and, much against his instincts, the king prepared to go along with them. Then into the Hall of Council came one who kowtowed before the king and said there stood at the gates of the city a youth attired as a prince who claimed to come from some Mongol khan with an urgent message for the private ear of Li-ngan-tsuen, King of Hia.

The councilors looked at one another in awe, and the king, seizing this pretext to delay decision, gave orders to admit the Mongol prince. After dismissing the council, the king retired to his chamber, where a youth attired as a prince of the northern court was ushered in.

And the king looked on this young man and liked him, for the youth had a clear face and manly bearing. When the king heard what this envoy had to say, he reached out his hands and took the roll sealed with the Great Seal of the Emperor of the North. And the king broke the seals and

read the secret message the Emperor of the Kin sent to his general at the Pass.

The face of Li-ngan-tsuen lengthened as he read, and he knew his instincts had been right—that while the Emperor of the Kin protested his friendship and desire for peace, he secretly instructed his general to exterminate the Kingdom of Hia when Li-ngan-tsuen withdrew his armies from the frontier and marched against the Sung and the Kara Khitai.

When at last the king looked up he saw the deep concern on the face of the envoy and he said, "You have arrived at a most opportune moment, Prince Bogorji, for you have saved me from moving to my destruction and that of my people. Tomorrow, when you are rested, I will better express my gratitude."

Then Li-ngan-tsuen gave orders for the prince's entertainment and well-being within the palace and, to satisfy his every need, instructed that a woman be provided for his bed. "For," said the king, "we of Hia know that food satisfies but half the hunger of men."

And what the king ordered was done.

In the succeeding days, because of his deep-seated superstition, Li-ngan-tsuen kept Kisil constantly at his side, regarding him as "heaven-sent" to save Hia from stumbling into the snares of destruction set by the vengeful Kin. But the king soon learned to appreciate Kisil for himself. So fresh was this youth's outlook on life—especially when compared with the intrigues and blandishments of the courtiers—that Li-ngan-tsuen felt a breath of fresh grassland air come into his private chamber whenever Kisil entered at his summons. Kisil in these informal talks not only entertained the king but learned much of political significance and was able, by occasional selected words, to do much to build up Temujine's prestige in the eyes of the king.

For a while Kisil enjoyed his new importance; but when he learned from his men that Babor and their two horses were kept in the guarded stables of the king, to which the Mongols were denied entrance, he began to suspect that he was half prisoner and half guest. To test this growing belief,

he ventured to suggest to the king that it was time for him to leave.

"I pray thee, Lord King, permit thy servant to depart," he said quietly. "I fain would stay longer if I could serve the king, but I also have a duty to my lord, Temujine."

The king seemed taken aback. "But you can serve both your khan and me, Prince, by remaining here. My astrologers advise me that your continued presence in my realm will contribute greatly to the welfare of my people. And, too, there is much ground to be explored between your khan and myself—for once, unaware of his father's strength and purpose, I listened to false tales. I shall plead your khan's forgiveness for keeping you longer at my side. Has aught been left undone that might add to your ease and comfort? Is it more women that you want?"

"Indeed, no, Lord King. The one provided for my bed is a charming companion of whom I am quite fond. But I am not suited to this life of ease. I prefer the wooden saddle to silken cushions."

The king smiled. "Soon I set forth to inspect my army on the frontier. Come with me. Ride close beside my chariot. See for yourself the might and power of Hia. Surely the acceptance of such an offer would be most pleasing to your lord Temujine—and you."

Kisil's face widened in a most uncourtly grin. "The king knows how to bait a cunning trap," he said.

But he little suspected just how cunning was the trap set to snare him.

A few days later the king sent for Kisil and made an astounding proposal.

"I wish to strengthen the tie of mutual respect and trust that should exist between your khan and myself, by a marriage between you—one of his most trusted princes—and my daughter Kudarshin."

Li-ngan-tsuen's voice held a veiled hint of command as he proposed this startling proof of the high esteem in which he held Kisil. It was a command that neither prudence nor policy could refuse offhand. But Kisil shied away from it like a colt from the halter. Accepting the services of a high-

born young lady of the court, as he had, was one thing—but to be offered the daughter of the king in marriage was a horse of a different color!

"What say you, Prince? Has the prospect made you lose your tongue?" the king asked.

"I am honored, O King, honored far beyond my merits," Kisil replied in some confusion, trying to make his face appear as though he were overcome with delight and stunned by good fortune; yet his heart sank as he realized this bond was designed to delay still further his return to the Onon, where Cholan so patiently awaited his return and Gesikie no doubt fretted at her husband's continued absence from her bed.

Kisil tried to keep the dismay from his voice as he said, "We princes of the felt tents have no gold and silver to maintain the style that a daughter of the king merits. How can such a one as I—?"

"I will tell you how, Prince," the king broke in, waving his hand to cut off further protest. "Full well I know you nomad princes value not gold and silver and that your wealth lies in your flocks and herds. My daughter would not be suited to such a life and would, indeed, lose face were she to live in the barbarity of a nomad tent. On the other hand you, too, would soon be irked by the emptiness of a life spent behind palace walls."

Li-ngan-tsuen paused as if to enjoy the suspense he saw on Kisil's face. Then he sprang his surprising solution. "After the marriage, which must take place soon, you will take your bride to my city of Camul which lies near the junction of the routes. There you will replace the present governor, who will be recalled, and act in his stead. The city lies on the frontier and was taken a few years ago from the Khitans. It seems appropriate that you, whose mother was a Khitan, should be sent there to bring tranquility to the people of the frontier. Your wealth will come from the collection of taxes from your district, the tithe on the increase of flocks and herds, and such tolls as you may impose on caravans coming and going on the routes. Well, what say you, Prince?"

"Wh-what can an unworthy person, whom yet the king

delights to honor, say to such munificence?" Kisil stammered. "But," he went on, "I have also a duty to my lord the khan and must ask his permission before I may enjoy such enticing fruits."

Li-ngan-tsuen smiled. "You shall send a messenger to your lord, telling him of our gratitude to you for saving us from disaster, informing him that the prince—whom he was pleased to honor by giving him his sister as a wife—equally pleases us, so that we bestow on him the person of a much-loved daughter. Your messenger, too, shall take a white stallion from our royal herd as an apology for my having listened to your lord's rebellious Taijiuts. And furthermore—" he held up his hand to stop Kisil's protest—"the messenger shall suggest that Hia is willing to pay a subsidy of horses and camels, slaves and grain to your lord *if* he will protect the caravans of Hia passing to the Naiman settlements *and* give his permission for this marriage and our mutual sharing of your services!"

Now indeed Kisil felt trapped. Temujine would never be able to resist that lure.

"I am too inexperienced in your ways to be a governor," Kisil said diffidently.

"I will have you well instructed before you leave. You seem to have a wisdom, Prince, well beyond your years."

Now Kisil flushed at the other's commendation and he hated the deception he had practiced on the king. But that arrow could not be recalled. More than ever his safety depended on his continued assumption of rank. As to his duty to Temujine—what greater success could either of them have envisaged? Here he was, appointed governor of a strategically situated town at the junction of the routes. What better listening post could Temujine desire for one he considered his eyes and ears? And married to the daughter of a king! Well, he thought, I have done my best. The sooner I get away from here the better, and the farther I am away when the king's envoy returns in disgust to report on Temujine's poverty—and to disclose that I'm no prince. His mind worked swiftly. Perhaps the envoy should not be permitted to return. Perhaps his messenger could carry a private message for Temu-

jine's ear, bidding him keep the king's envoy as Li-ngan-tsuen kept him!

The king gave instructions that his envoy and Kisil's messenger were to leave on the morrow, before he set out with Kisil on his tour of inspection.

Kisil decided to send Lob. That night he tried to cram many messages into Lob's round, bony head.

"Trust me, lord," Lob said. "I won't fail you a second time, and if Temujine agrees, I will soon find my way back without this envoy slowing my progress."

With the emperor's duplicity exposed, Li-ngan-tsuen had broken off negotiations with the general of the Kin across the river. Fresh regiments of wild Mohammedans were being brought from the western districts to strengthen the Army of the East. The king would make no move for or against the Kin, but adopted a policy of strength and watchful waiting.

With Kisil in his entourage, the king set forth to see that his orders for defense were being promptly obeyed.

In the days that followed, Kisil was deeply impressed with the might of Hia. Along the frontiers the king inspected regiment after regiment as they passed him in review—regiments armed with spears who passed with a springing step —regiments who carried broad curved swords at their sides, leather bucklers slung on their backs—turbaned regiments from the west, whose men had beards and hawklike noses and carried Turkish scimitars. Still more impressive were the squadrons of chariots, each two-wheeled vehicle carrying archers and spearmen.

What a lot he would have to tell and warn Temujine about . . . when he saw Temujine! Sometimes he wondered, during those cold months of traveling about, if he would ever see the Onon again.

Satisfied at last that his defenses in the east and southeast were in good order, Li-ngan-tsuen turned his face westward. The armies of the three neighboring nations watched one another across their river frontiers. An armed peace prevailed that none dared break—an armed peace based on mutual distrust. The king made for his palace in the Blue Lotus Hills outside his city of Lan-chou, a city, he explained to Kisil,

much to be preferred to Chung-hsing and more central for conducting the affairs of his expanding kingdom. Here his wives and family awaited him, and here Kisil would wed the king's daughter when his envoy returned.

But the envoy didn't return. Only Lob came back, with a broad grin on his face which he tried to subdue as he made his report to Kisil, who sat in the king's chamber.

Kisil, as he interpreted, tried to wrap Lob's blunt message in more diplomatic language.

"The lord Temujine, Khan of the Mongols, the Sutu-Bogdo, sends his greetings to his brother the King of Hia. He is pleased to accept the white stallion sent him by the king and furthermore will also accept the subsidy of horses and camels, slaves and grain as a token of friendship—for the protection of caravans should not be a matter of hire, but of keeping justice and order. 'Too often,' says Temujine the khan, 'have I seen the plundered treasures of civilization lying spurned and neglected in the tents of those too ignorant to appreciate them.'" Kisil could scarcely keep from smiling as he translated this, but his gravity returned as Lob went on: "The khan bids the prince to obey the king in all matters dear to the king's heart, and to wed the king's daughter and accept such honors as the king is pleased to give him."

So it came about that all was done as Li-ngan-tsuen the king commanded and his daughter made herself ready to wed the Prince Bogorji. Then the king's nephew, Li-tzun-hien, came from Chung-hsing in great wrath at these tidings and, going to the king, said, "This prince to whom you give my cousin is but a nomad beggar. Are we to bribe every so-called prince who may come out of the north with the body of a virgin, the choicest stallion from the royal stud and the governorship of a city?"

And the voice of the king was serious as he answered his nephew, "Can we fight against the stars? For my astrologers tell me the khan this youth serves is that eaglet whose spread of wings brought darkness to the land of Hia in my dream—the eagle from whose nest will hatch a brood of preying kings. What is a daughter, a white stallion and the govern-

orship of our farthest western city compared to a throne? What price is this to pay for a friend—to win an intermediary with this khan?"

Then Li-tzun-hien waxed wroth that he could not prevail against the king, for he desired this cousin for himself, and he said, "When I am king, these foreigners will be outthrust from all our borders!"

"Then you may be the king of whom it is foretold—the king of Hia who will die of grief at the destruction of his people," the king answered sadly.

And on the day appointed by the king on the advice of his astrologers, his daughter stood before the tablets of her ancestors and by her side stood the Prince Bogorji. And the princess was attired in costly robes and her person was adorned with sparkling jewels, even with rubies and sapphires and turquoises and emeralds. And the pair were wed in the presence of the king, his *chen-sang* and the lesser ministers of state; but the king's nephew, Prince Li-tzun-hien, was not present, for he had ridden from the city with his companions and vowed that soon he would avenge this insult to his house.

And when the bride and groom had kowtowed to the ancestral tablets, they went into the courts that had been set aside for them.

And all that the king commanded was done.

43

KUDARSHIN

AS KISIL STEPPED across the threshold into the shadowy room lighted by a smoking oil lamp and saw the bridal bed hung about with heavy, embroidered curtains to shut out the night air, he suddenly thought of Tsari and her description of her feelings.

He lifted the lamp which was smoking before a shrine to the goddess of Fecundity. The attendants had plentifully bestrewn the room with similar emblems, he noticed. As he moved toward the bed he shielded the flickering flame with one hand. He stood listening. No sound came from behind

the drawn curtains. With a hand that trembled he pulled them aside—and stared.

She was a tiny girl, but not so small as she had appeared under the headdress and embroidered robe. Scarcely veiled in a silken shift, Kudarshin sat primly erect in the middle of the bed. Her frightened eyes turned to the lamplight and met his stare; she looked swiftly away and then down at her hands which plucked nervously at the bedcoverings. The well-oiled plaits gleamed in the light of his uplifted lamp. Her breasts were pulsating. She flung up her hands to her face; then her body twisted away from him, her head drooped, and suddenly she lay face down among the silken pillows, her shoulders quivering with a distress he could not interpret as shyness. A sob burst from her lips.

"Kudarshin."

His voice was a caress. "Kudarshin." Brushing past the curtains of the bed, he passed to the other side to be near her. Then placing the flaring lamp on a convenient shelf, he sat beside her and pulled the resisting hands away from her face.

"Kudarshin."

She looked up wonderingly at the gentleness in his voice. "Yes, lord?" she whispered.

"I like your name—it seems to fit your loveliness." This was flattery, he thought, but he hoped the poor child would not think so. "Your name fits my tongue and comes sweetly to my lips. Kudarshin!" he repeated, as if intoxicated with the name. He stroked her hands and presently she looked up and gazed at him while he uttered soothing words. Thus they looked at each other, and when she found his eyes didn't waver or leave her face, she lost a very small part of her fear and ventured an embarrassed smile—a smile that asked for patience.

But he wasn't going to sit like this all night!

He made a casual move, intending to get into bed beside her. She immediately stiffened and the fear came back into her eyes. His consequent actions translated his attempt as merely a gentle smoothing of her pillow. He continued to stroke her hands and said such small things as came into his

head, much as he would have comforted a child that had fallen from a horse on its first attempt to ride. He asked her age and found she boasted of fifteen years. "Nearly sixteen," she said, like a child who values every month it can add on. The contrast between Kudarshin and the sturdy, supple wench he had bedded with in Chung-hsing disappointed him. How was he to take this frightened girl who knew not how to substitute desire for a love that had not yet been stirred? How could he arouse desire in her when she shrank from every move he made?

'Tis not thus I was wed upon the plains, he thought.

Kudarshin sensed by his abstract mood that he was comparing her with other women. "My lord has other wives?" she whispered.

He nodded. "Two—you are my little 'third wife.'" He spent the next hour talking to her of Cholan and Gesikie, but he said nothing of the poverty of his existence on the plains, but rather embroidered on its freedom and the glories of the chase.

His stock of small talk was beginning to run out like the oil in the flickering lamp. He extinguished the light and placed the lamp on the floor, then slipped out of his robe in the darkness and, getting into bed, enfolded her stiffening, withdrawing form in his arms.

"We have much to learn of each other," he said, ignoring her feeble struggle. "I have talked too much, now tell me something about yourself." He tried to draw her out. She spoke of other palaces her father had, of other sisters with whom she played or did embroidery. Of life she knew nothing. She seemed aware of the emptiness of her mind and conscious of some lack of knowledge that was expected of her by her husband—a lack that the warmth and closeness of his body emphasized.

She spoke with evident effort, as if trying to reassure herself, but her voice quivered. "My lord must teach me . . . teach me . . . to be like his other wives," she finished in a rush.

"Your lord must teach you first to live," he bantered.

His sleep was all pretense. After a while he moved an

experimental hand to her breast. She instantly stiffened, so he knew she, also, was not sleeping, but was probably staring wide-eyed into the darkness, perhaps wondering at his forbearance. Then presently, as if his warmth had melted her reserve, she was all curves, relaxed and molded to him. His arms encircled her unresisting back, and as he hovered on the brink of sleep he smiled.

There was lots of time. He could no more spoil a woman than he could spoil a horse!

Accompanied by an escort of mounted soldiers, Kisil walked Babor beside Kudarshin's litter, his blood tingling with anticipation as he started another journey into the unknown.

His mind wandered back over the years to Maryam, whose beauty had interrupted his previous journey to this same city of Camul.

How the years have flowed since I drank the blood potion with Besoutchei and he adopted me!

Now, wonder of wonders, eight years later he was going to Camul from the other direction to rule as its governor with a daughter of the king as his wife! When he reached Camul the circle would be complete and perfect harmony achieved.

At the first nomad encampment they passed, Kisil stopped and bought a goat-hair tent.

"It's a poor thing compared to a round yurt," Sanang said. "The winds will probably catch it and blow it away—which might be awkward!" He grinned.

As day after day their way led to higher ground, the rivers they forded became more treacherous; ice formed a crust on many, and storms in distant mountains would send down an unexpected surge that threatened to sweep the horses off their feet. Some days their way led over scrubby sandhills, and water would be scarce or so salt that it was undrinkable; the next day might lead across a squelching swamp.

Grain fields changed to orchards and orchards changed to cattle ranges where domesticated yaks browsed and flocks of white sheep dotted the mountainsides. The people,

too, changed at every stage. The comings and goings of the caravans threaded fresh blood through the black-haired, ivory-skinned masses. Bearded Mohammedans stood beside hairless chins; sharp features jostled flat faces. There were girls with hazel-brown eyes, red cheeks and hair that glinted like copper in the sun.

Finally they reached the Barrier, the fortress gate of which was the western tip of the Long Ramparts—the tail end of the dragon that sheltered this ancient civilization within its coils, protecting the children of the black-haired ones whose blood and toil had created this now benevolent monster. Over the centuries, masses of despairing humanity—criminals and political refugees—had been excreted through this somber portal from the comforting body of the earth mother of China. And through this gate went the caravans, carrying their precious cargoes to the Western world, treading the path of high adventure to win the wealth of commerce!

Kisil's spirits rose joyously above the gloom that had settled on his party. He laughed happily to himself as he thought: this gate leads to Cholan and my son. For me this is not exile—it is escape!

"From here to Camul," the commandant at the Barrier warned Kisil, "your journey becomes more dangerous. The tribes are always on the prowl and a straying horse or camel is snatched up immediately."

"But the frontier posts are still manned, are they not?"

"From here to the Jade Gate we have a small force at each stage. The commandant there can advise you as to conditions between his city and Anhsi-chou, which is a bleak, desolate, windswept place you will be glad to get out of quickly. A peaceful road to you. We shall meet again, Prince!"

"*Tsa-tsa.*" Kisil nodded, beginning to feel himself a man of the desert once more; if he had his way he wouldn't set foot inside the Wall again.

Once past the Jade Gate, they rode from scenes of desolation to others more desolate. Fierce light and heat glared up from grassless gravel. Burning wastes and shadeless dunes, exposed to the scorching heat of a pitiless sun, were crossed by purple ridges. Granite and black rocks broke through sun-

baked ground. Deep sands filled wide valleys, further impeding the suffering beasts, while mirages tantalized the dry, cracked lips of the travelers with false promises of tree-fringed lakes and cooling shade.

But in spite of the heat, the nights were cold; as the wind died and twilight deepened, a chill air would rise from the ground, making the travelers snuggle down under their fleeces.

On one such night Kudarshin lay in warm content beside her lord as an unexpected surge of passion slowly ebbed and a peaceful serenity flowed in to take its place. Gone were the uncertainties of adolescence, the fears of untaught girlhood. A spring suddenly gushed from her heart, flooding her being with unbelievable warmth.

She stole a glance at Kisil. He, too, was awake. Usually he fell asleep at once but this time, she sensed with something akin to awe, his spirit was soaring upward, leaving hers wrapped in her newfound contentment of the flesh. She wanted to bring him back to earth that she might share this wonderful discovery with him—surely he would find nothing to equal it among the stars! But she was too shy and feared he might think her forward and unwifely. Next time, perhaps, by her ready response he would realize that he had breathed life into her clay at last, and beneath his hand would feel the quickening of love in her once sterile heart.

"Om mani padme hum," she murmured, *O jewel in the heart of the lotus,* and nestled closer to her silent lord who lay as if in a trance. She was in no hurry; his spirit must find its way back in its own time to the body she would keep warm. As her eyes closed, a zephyr of a smile ruffled the ivory smoothness of her features; her red lips parted in dreamy content.

Kisil had sensed the difference in her. For the first time in his life a woman had made him feel that his union with her was a deeply symbolic rite and not the mere satisfying of a mutual need. Tonight she had made him feel extraordinarily humble and absurdly grateful. He lay on his back to puzzle this out, but his thoughts became lost in wonder at the brilliance of the stars and the magic splendor of the

moon, so that his spirit entered into the stillness of the night and became part of it. In the brooding silence he gazed into the immensity of the heavens as if he were seeing it for the first time.

Here, he thought, is purity and truth, width and depth. This is stillness wrapped in stillness. He murmured a few imperfectly remembered lines of the Tao. "How still, how clear is the Tao! How deep, how mysterious it is! It is everything and nothing. No being made it, for it is being. All things originate in it, all things return to it. It is the author of all things, yet it is nameless."

He wished he had learned more about the Tao in Yen, instead of concentrating so much on ways of making war. He yearned for the unspeakable—the unnamed. He didn't know how to find it but suddenly prayed that it would find him.

"Thou Nameless One," he pleaded aloud and wondered at his voice.

"Om!" he experimented. *"Om!"*—and the sound boomed into space, and with it went his yearning spirit.

44

PAKEMBO

THE SNOWCLAD MOUNTAINS to the south were closing in on the trail, though it would take many days of travel to reach them. They were riding in range country again. Bands of nomads gave them unchallenged passage when they saw the escort of soldiers. Mud walls, lonely in the vastness, marked new settlements of colonists sent out by the king to wrest a living from the earth and thereby earn the undying enmity of the riders of the plains.

Sanang drew Kisil's attention to black specks in the southern sky. "Those vultures flock to many a carcass, I should say," he commented grimly.

For many years afterward Kisil was to ponder over the impulse which had led him to change direction. At the time he was conscious only of an irresistible call.

"We are needed there. Let us hurry!"

The vultures circled and swooped over a village. There were no other signs of life. Kisil put Babor into a gallop and raced ahead with Sanang at his heels.

Outside the walls, a Mohammedan's dead horse—to the saddle of which the gory head of a woman was tied by its hair—gave them an inkling of what they would find inside. Yet, prepared as he was, Kisil was shocked into stupefied silence when he rode through the gate.

Amid a conglomeration of mud hovels lay the headless, mutilated bodies of women and children. Babor snorted and stepped daintily through the mess of blood and entrails that covered the narrow passageways between the blood-daubed huts. Vultures, busy at tearing flesh from bones, rose in a whir of flapping wings and outraged cries, and settled again to their feast when the intruders had passed. Turning a corner, Kisil and Sanang saw an aged man standing in what was evidently the center of the village, flailing at vultures with a staff. He was not only driving the birds from the bodies around him, but also defending his own life. The lama—for such he appeared—on seeing them coming to his deliverance ceased his combat with the birds and, leaning on his staff, watched them through eyes that were half-closed slits unfringed by lashes. An old felt hat, which curled up at the corners much like nomad headgear, covered his head from the sun. His face was a mass of leathery wrinkles and the flesh which stretched over his bony frame was little more than skin and sinew.

When Sanang reached for his bow to shoot a few arrows into the vultures, the old man raised his hand in protest. "There has been enough slaying here," he said gravely.

"The vultures evidently didn't think so," Sanang retorted. "They were getting impatient for your hide!"

The old man ignored Sanang's wit. His eyes never left Kisil's, who remained silent. "You were a long time coming," he said as if in rebuke. "I looked for you earlier."

"I came as fast as I could!" Kisil replied in surprise.

"As fast, perhaps, as a man can travel when he rides beside a woman in a litter."

Kisil ignored this statement, though he was astounded. "What happened here?" he asked.

"It is the oft-told story of man's inhumanity to his fellow creatures who do not think and pray the way he thinks they should. The slayers were followers of the Prophet. They raided this village yesterday evening when they knew only old men were left to protect the women and children, for the younger men had sighted a herd of antelope and had gone far in pursuit."

"And when they came back?"

"They set forth in senseless pursuit and many of them will die because they are ill-armed compared with the Mohammedans." The old man shook his head sadly. "Why they must slay . . . why they must torture before they slay . . . is past my understanding. But perhaps you understand! This may not shock you—for this is war and you glorify war!"

Kisil ignored the flash of bitter sarcasm. "How came you to escape?"

"I was not here in body, yet I saw it all—just as I saw you turn aside and come this way."

"From what source did you learn I was coming?" Kisil asked in amazement.

"Perhaps from that same source which you tried to reach last night. It seemed that I heard you cry aloud a sacred syllable that holy men dare only to think, not utter—not throw it like a stone into a pond so that its ripples spread out in the immensity of space."

Kisil felt the rebuke. "Are you a priest?"

The old man shook his head. "I am more prophet than priest. I prefer to be known as a guru—a teacher. Men call me Pakembo."

"Can you read the future as well as the past, guru?" There was awe in Kisil's voice.

"When one stands on a peak one can sometimes see forward over the path to be traveled, as well as down the path up which one has toiled," the old man said quietly.

"And you stand on such a peak?"

"I stand in the sight of God, and in His eyes I am less than a grain of sand." His voice was humble and apologetic.

"Yet, I was sent to find you—and aid you, if you will let me."

"I cannot grasp all this," Kisil said weakly. "Are you telling me that these people had to die that the vultures might bring me to you?" he was following the guru, aghast at what he saw.

The guru shook his head. "I would have found you by other means—though the death of these people may be intended to show you some of the fruits of war at first hand. Their dying might not be entirely in vain if, through you, many others were spared the same fate."

Kisil felt sick. Even the dogs lay in pools of blood. Some old men had been disemboweled while living, their cavities filled with hot ashes. Mostly the bodies were of children and older women—women who had suffered much before death. Some of the naked bodies, hanging by their heels, had been sliced in half as a butcher cleaves a sheep. Others had been spitted on sharp poles as they lay with outstretched arms pegged to the ground.

The guru was relentless. Kisil dismounted. Leaning his head against Babor to hide his distress from Sanang, he retched. Then turning to the guru, he said solemnly, "If this is war I want none of it! For me the warrior path has ended!"

"Then swear it!" the guru said eagerly. "Take an oath by all that you hold sacred that you will never take life again—not even to save your own!"

Kisil did not heed the instinct that flashed a prophetic warning against his unconsidered acceptance of the guru's plea. Indeed, the poignant pity that had swept over him was immediately engulfed in a new revelation. How dared any human being usurp the prerogatives of the Supreme Being and interfere presumptuously with the Eternal Law by launching unready and unwilling victims into the spirit life? The thought was the more fearful as the memory of the slain courier rose up to confront him. Accusation of that crime glared from the guru's eyes, which seemed to bore into the inmost recesses of his heart. He seemed unable to tear his eyes away, yet he was fully aware that his actions were of his own volition. Drawing his Chinese sword, he touched

his tongue with the point. "By the spirit of the iron I swear I will never again take human life—not even to save my own!" He sheathed his sword, then drew his knife and pared a nail. "May I be thus cut off if I break this oath!" Then he turned his back on the slaughter.

"May I never see such a sight again!"

45

MAHMUD YELVAJ

THEY STOPPED at an oasis and learned that a caravan had just pulled out. Kisil ordered a rest of short duration. He wanted to catch up with that caravan—it might be the first of many from which he would collect a toll as governor.

The next morning they saw camels feeding in the distance around scattered tents. Mounted men were keeping watch and as they saw Kisil's party they drove the camels in and made hurried preparations for a defense.

Sanang laughed. "There are only about twenty in that escort. With our Tanguts we could easily overwhelm them!"

"You can't forget the old ways, can you, Sanang? Remember I am now a governor, sworn to keep law and order, and that includes protecting caravans! Ride ahead and reassure them."

A party of Mohammedans came riding back with Sanang. The leader, a young man, bowed from the saddle to Kisil.

"May the blessing of Allah be upon you, Prince! I, Mahmud Yelvaj, am honored to escort the new governor to his city of Camul. Have you had a good road open to you?"

"We have survived," Kisil said.

"Ah! You have been in our city before, Prince?"

Kisil shook his head. "No closer than Bar-kul."

"I confess to being puzzled," said the Moslem. "Your man is a Mongol, so he says. How came you to Hia?"

"I crossed the desert and visited the Emperor of the Kin," Kisil answered nonchalantly, "then I traveled to Chung-hsing, where I found great favor with the king and was given his daughter in marriage and this city to govern."

Mahmud Yelvaj's voice became distinctly more respectful. "The princess, I trust, has stood the journey well?"

Kisil nodded. "This is your caravan, merchant?"

"I have shares in it, Prince, but surprisingly enough it belongs to a woman, a rich widow in Camul."

"One, no doubt, you would like to marry, then," Kisil laughed.

"A beautiful woman—" the man shrugged— "but a Christian Nasrani—yet a very enterprising woman withal. Ah, there are many who would like to marry her! She married one of the True Faith, and when he died she inherited his property, which is considerable."

"Are there many Christians in Camul?"

"Yes, indeed. You will find Camul is more or less divided into three cities. We Followers of the Prophet have our walled enclosure, the Christians have another, and the idolators more or less keep to themselves. We live in harmony—it pays us all to do so."

The next three days passed pleasantly for Kisil. It was good to be eating the flesh of sheep once more and it was many years since he had tasted the round, flat loaves of bread that were baked each day by a Mohammedan cook. He learned much of the political situation from Mahmud Yelvaj, who spoke cautiously on this matter to the governor appointed by the King of Hia. Kisil gathered that the Chinese among the population still looked to the Emperor of the North as their ruler. The Moslems evidently resented Hia and looked westward to the Khitans. Of the Sung who had once ruled all this land, no one thought anything at all, though much merchandising passed through Camul to and from the southern kingdom.

"Though not so much since Hia became our overlord," the merchant explained. "Law and order have become somewhat relaxed and bandits are more numerous since Li-ngan-tsuen has sent in so many peasant cultivators to replace the nomads. I fear unless the king shows strength, the caravans are in for increasing trouble. I am glad you have brought in some reinforcements!"

"These twenty are to replace twenty men who may want to go back with the governor I replace."

"You won't find twenty who want to go back." The merchant laughed. "Unless you are promoted to a much larger city, you also may be reluctant to leave. Life is very pleasant in Camul, for the idolators have wives and daughters who are quite a paying business to them."

"I have heard something about that." Kisil smiled. "The women, I understand, are very hospitable to travelers."

"Oh, the women don't exactly give their charms. A small fee—"

"Which the husbands collect?"

"Exactly!"

Kisil soon found the young Mohammedan was an excellent scholar. Then Kisil spoke of his studies in Yen-king. The young men found they had much in common and their friendship quickly ripened.

Pakembo was left to ride alone wrapped in his usual meditation.

Kisil asked the Uigur if he were married.

"Allah has granted me the blessing of two wives, both True Believers, for whom my spirit yearns. And you, Prince —have you others besides this delightful daughter of Hia?"

"I have at present three."

"And where are the other two—if I may ask, Prince?"

"At the ordu of the Mongol khan. One is the sister of the khan," Kisil replied.

"The Mongol khan—now that is very interesting, Prince. I have long wanted to journey in that direction. There might be profit there for trading—do you think?"

"If you have an army with you for escort—yes!"

"Perhaps if I might be permitted to accompany you, your escort might be sufficient, Prince?"

"That *is* an idea worthy of my most earnest consideration," Kisil said, copying the other's tone and mode of speech. Then warming to the idea as he mulled it over in his mind, "We will speak of this later."

Each day's stage brought a marked improvement in the aspect of the country. The rolling hills were dotted with the

white of browsing sheep; villages nestled in the hollows. The route suddenly seemed to spring to life and commerce shuttled with a quickening tempo as they neared their journey's end. Trees shaded inns. Children laughed and raced alongside the camels or stared with awe at the long spears. Hucksters offered fruits and vegetables beside a village well, and Kudarshin avidly ate the orange-tinted slices that Kisil carved for her from a superb melon.

When they left the last stage before Camul, Mahmud Yelvaj sent on a rider to announce his coming to his partner —the "Rose of Camul," as he called the rich widow.

"She will ride out to meet us, I am sure."

"Do your women ride?" Kisil asked.

"This one does. She is a law unto herself and, although a Christian, still lives in our quarter in the serai of her late departed, who, I vow, will find no sweeter houri in Paradise than the one he has left in Camul."

"Had he no other wives to share his wealth—no sons?"

"Alas, Allah willed it otherwise! He was not a begetter of children but a begetter of wealth."

"The woman sounds interesting." Kisil smiled. "Perhaps as governor it would be my duty to meet her?"

"If I am not mistaken, you will very soon, for the riders coming this way, I think, are headed by the woman we discuss."

In the distance Kisil could see three riders approaching at a fast gait. The one in the center did appear to be a woman, for a white veil fluttered from the head, yet the pace was swift—too swift, he thought, for a lady of leisured wealth.

"Yes, 'tis she!" the Uigur exclaimed. "I see she rides her black stallion that so closely resembles your own fine beast."

The woman was now racing far ahead of the two men who accompanied her, and Kisil saw that she was, indeed, riding a horse that he might have mistaken for Babor. As she came closer he saw she was wearing a coat of white camel's hair; a veil swathed round her head protected her face from the dust.

"She rides well—like a woman of the plains," he commented.

The woman pulled up her stallion a few lengths away and raised her veil. "Greetings, Mahmud Yelvaj! I rejoice to hear that all goes well with you." She turned to Kisil. "Greetings, lord . . . *Kisil!*"

Kisil found himself face to face with Maryam.

"Maryam!"

He saw her sway in the saddle. He flung himself off Babor and sprang to her side. Grasping her hand, he felt a boy once more. Gone were the intervening years. "I am *ad-siz*—be my mother—give me a name!"

Then Maryam laughed through her tears, the old, throaty laugh that again sounded like music in his ears, and she quickly snatched at the memory he flung to her. "I'll call you *Kisil!* Red is your hair and *Red* shall be your name!"

He rested his head on her knee as he stood beside her horse. The caravan had halted. The Uigur stroked his beard in puzzlement. Kudarshin peered through the curtains of her litter, not understanding a word. Sanang scratched his head; he, too, could not understand what this was all about.

Maryam looked up. "Please lead on, Mahmud Yelvaj. I'll explain more when I know more. My daughter is alive and well—that is all I can grasp at present."

When the caravan and his escort had passed by them with curious, inquisitive looks, Kisil mounted. "Can he be trusted?" he asked, looking ahead at the Uigur. "If he knows too much my life may be in danger."

"Leave him to me. He is devoted to my service and his interests are bound up with mine. When I have heard your story I can better advise you."

When Kisil had told her his story in brief, Maryam said, "I waited a year. When you and Drombo didn't come back I concluded you were dead. We were hungry—we had no horses, you remember? The clan just disappeared. I was determined to get away from the hard life of the plains and thought the beauty you once praised might bring me some wealth, if not comfort, elsewhere. I stole away, taking your colt—yes, this stallion—and made for Bar-kul. There I met an old Moslem, Ali Khoja, who wanted me for his bed. I bargained for a marriage—even a Moslem one—and to my great

surprise found myself the wife of a very kind husband. After two years he died. I have been a widow ever since—a wealthy widow, for he bequeathed everything to me because, as he said, I had done my best to make his last years happy."

Mahmud Yelvaj came riding back. "The governor approaches with an escort to meet his successor, Prince."

The Oasis of the Gourd stretched far and wide about the city of Camul and never, even in his most hopeful dreams, had Kisil envisioned such a haven in the desert. In his first dispatch to Li-ngan-tsuen Kisil expressed his gratitude to the king. He outlined his adventures and urged the king to send more troops to put down the bandits and avoid a repetition of the massacre.

The days seemed a brief span between rise and set of sun. Kisil's energy and his desire to see everything and come to grips with his task brought smiles to the lips of some and remonstrances from Maryam. "You work at this too hard, Kisil," she said. "It is for others to attend to all these details, not you. Your predecessor lived in affluent ease and governed with dignity."

"A governor must know whom and what he governs, and I'm not affluent—though I do try to be dignified!"

Maryam and he had long since explored every recess of each other's mind. While she avowed her admiration of his courage, she expressed her wonder at the torture he inflicted on his mind over the conflicting vows.

"I am a Nasrani—as they call us Christians—and serve the One God. Our priest will tell you that oaths sworn to false gods are not binding, Kisil."

"There are many races, Maryam, and each claims to serve the 'One God.' I swore by the ancient oaths of my people—oaths which I believe are fast binding and cannot be broken except at great peril."

"Your oath to Yesukai that you would uphold and protect Temujine did you credit. Your oath to slay no more does you even greater credit in my eyes, and will be the harder one to keep, methinks, in a land where the hand of man

seems ever raised against his brother. And the worst slayers of all are those who murder in the name of the god of their belief—I know, for I have long dwelt among them!"

She went over to look at his Chinese sword that Sanang had hung on the wall. In the twisted pommel of the sword were carved the fanatical eyes of a demon. She looked at it in silence and then turned to Kisil who sat moodily staring at nothing. "This is a demon-haunted, superstitious land, Kisil," she said soberly. "Don't let your mind become twisted by it!"

"I need the services of a scholar," Kisil said to Mahmud Yelvaj. "When I want to communicate with my khan—as I do now—it can be only by word of mouth. Words of a message learned by rote can be easily forgotten in the course of a journey. Could signs be devised that when written would mean Mongol words?"

"Hmm! That might take a lifetime. A better idea—for the present at least—would be to send a scholar to the ordu of your khan, who could read and translate your communications to him, and write down his reply to be translated to you."

"That idea is good. Could you suggest a scholar who would be willing to go with Sanang and some of the Tanguts in a few days' time—a man who can ride and bear a few hardships?"

Mahmud Yelvaj thought for a moment. "Yes, I know of such a man."

"Can you send for him at once?"

"He is here."

"Here? You mean—?"

"Myself! I have long wanted to visit the northern tribes. Your khan sounds interesting."

"But your wives—your family?"

"Can await my speedy return, as your wives, no doubt, await your tardy one."

"But Maryam—your shares in the caravan—what will she say?"

"The Rose has other *beks* to captain her caravan."

The report to Temujine took two days to write, during which time Sanang had picked out the hillmen he would take with him and organized the expedition with Maryam's help.

The day before they left Mahmud Yelvaj said to Kisil, "Have you no thought, Prince, of sending a written message to the lady Cholan?"

Kisil answered, lost in thought, "What can I say to her when I have been away so long? You will be filling her heart with joy when your lips pour out the news that her mother is well and is here in Camul. You could, perhaps, lay happiness at her feet by telling her that Kisil, who was once known as the Brave, has sworn an oath to forsake the warrior path." His voice was tinged with regret. "Tell that to Temujine, too," he said bitterly. "Yet say that I am still his dog to lie at his feet, his felt to cover him in adversity—say I will keep that much of my oath sworn to his father!"

"As you say, so shall it be done."

"I would that I were going with you, Mahmud Yelvaj. Come back quickly. Bring me word from Temujine that I may desert this post—and failing that, bring Cholan and my son—and Gesikie, too, if she wants to come—back with you."

"It shall be as Allah wills," the Uigur said solemnly.

46

LI-TZUN-HIEN STIRS THE POT

BEHIND THE ever-increasing demands of the king for higher taxes, Kisil had long suspected the promptings of Li-tzun-hien. The king's heir, Kisil knew, had been his avowed enemy ever since his marriage to Kudarshin. According to his staff, such demands had never been made on the last governor. They told him this with a bland smile, but behind his back they openly derided him and laughed with one another that his term might soon end.

"Yes, Maryam, I'm as poor as the day I arrived—except I have found my 'mother.' "

Maryam nodded in thought. "The trouble with you, Kisil, is that you have a conscience, and you are burdened with

a sense of duty which harms your own interests. What other governor in the kingdom—or in the whole Kin empire—would try to lighten the tax burdens of the people he governs at his own expense?"

"Like Pakembo, I want to see the people happy and prosperous."

"You and Pakembo want the ox to push the cart, not draw it!" she said impatiently. "What says that Kung-fu-tse, whom you like to quote so often? Did he not say, 'There is good government when the ruler is ruler, the father is father, and the son is son?' " She paused. "As I interpret that—to govern well you must be a ruler to these people, not a father!"

Kisil's hands twisted together as he answered without looking up, "Kung-fu-tse also said, 'If a prince sets a good example, the people will be good.' "

"The people! What goodness can you expect from people with such vile customs? Some there may be, like Mahmud Yelvaj, who love you, but there are many, especially among your staff, who hate you for the very virtues I have praised. Their fingers have too long been sticky with the stolen sweets of office for them to enjoy having them wiped clean by you. I doubt not that your messengers carry reports other than yours—tales to poison the mind of the king against you."

"If that be so, the sooner I can rejoin Temujine the better!" He struck the table impatiently.

"That, too, I doubt. If you join in the struggles that we hear reported, I don't think you will find the security that your wives must desire, or the peace of mind you want for yourself."

Kisil jumped to his feet and strode about the room. "I am confused, Maryam. I don't know what I want. Once I thought the life of a warrior was all I wanted. My ideas changed in Yen-king and blew around like straws in the wind. The wealth of merchant princes aroused my cupidity. Then the king gave me his daughter and this city to govern, and I thought that prestige and power were the highest peaks of man's attainment. But through all these desires ran another thread. As I told you, sickened at the sight of massacre, once more I yearned for the Tao—for the Way of the Spirit.

Now the fruits of office taste bitter! The wheel has turned full circle and I think now that happiness can best be found in valleys and on the plains, living in felt tents and watching the steady increase of flocks and herds—"

He took Maryam's hand in his as if to draw strength from her. "I dream of a valley nestling beneath some mountain peak, a well-watered valley with wide meadows of long grass, a valley with sloping hillsides giving easy access to summer pastures, tree-fringed for shade. There, apart from a world of intrigue and slaughter, I would breed fine sons, who in turn would ride forth on the love hunt and seek their wives among the women of the steppes, bringing them back to breed another generation. Surely, somewhere under the Blue Sky there must be such a pleasant valley."

"There are many, but I doubt if you will find one untenanted by man," Maryam answered thoughtfully. "And your oath to serve Temujine—?"

He dropped her hand. "What a fool I am! How impetuous I was to make that oath! Yet perhaps I can best serve him by saving him from himself."

"Go on dreaming your dreams," Maryam encouraged him. "You stir the chords of memories I thought long dead." She paused, and her eyes were wet with tears. "Kisil, I find wealth alone doesn't bring happiness. I want to be near Cholan and her children—when she bears again. Can I join you in your search for your valley? Can I become a member of your *omuk?*" she asked wistfully.

"But your caravan—your goods—?"

"I would trade all for horses and things with which we could travel swiftly."

"You would leave so much—your house in its compound—your furnishings—?"

"I think the time is coming when I must leave anyway. Many in the Moslem quarter resent me. The Khitans may well come back and reconquer, and if they don't, Hia will surely rob me under some other governor—for I do not think you will remain here long, and I think it best to be prepared for a sudden departure. . . . What do you say, my son—for son you are to me?"

"I can think of no greater happiness. You lift much of the load off my mind."

"There is still a load?"

"Those oaths! I must keep them. I must remain true to myself—do you understand?"

"I would not have you otherwise, my son."

"One day, perhaps, Pakembo will help me to find the Nameless One."

"I think He has found you, already," she said quietly.

There was some basis, Kisil knew, for Maryam's fear that the Kara Khitai might dispossess her, for the king had not yet sent the promised troops to bolster this far-western outpost, and the caravans reported that the Khitans had massed more troops than usual just east of the Tien-shan.

Kisil had written to the Khitan governor of Bish-baligh, advising that he, the Prince Bogorji, whose mother had been a Khitan, held Camul for the King of Hia, and that his main purpose was to keep peace and keep the streams of commerce flowing freely. The Khitan's reply had been noncommital, yet Kisil felt he had purchased time.

Kisil had explained this to the officer commanding the garrison at Camul, one Ku-kang, who seemed prone to look on Kisil as a mere figurehead. When this officer said he preferred fighting the Khitans to dealing with them, Kisil had bluntly informed him that it was his policy as governor to keep peace, and the purpose of the garrison was to ensure peace—not make war.

From then on Kisil had tried to take more interest in the small garrison, an effort that was obviously resented by the officers, so, to his oft-repeated plea for more soldiers, Kisil now added a demand for a new commander.

Camul, as a pleasant place to live, was not standing up to his first impressions of it. No wonder Pakembo urged him to leave! No wonder he dreamed of grassy meadows set in high places!

And so he spent less and less time in the city and rode farther and farther afield, visiting the villages of his district that nestled in the hills, overseeing the work of those who

collected his tithe, and, like as not, waving aside his just claims at the earnest entreaty of those who pleaded poverty, yet owned more wealth than he.

And, to keep his mind off the futility of his position, he avoided Pakembo and listened instead to those mothers who hovered around the door of his resting place at night, praising the skill and charms of nubile daughters—girls whose breed varied from village to village, yet who were all possessed with the same idea: the collecting of coins, jewels and ornaments which they wore in their hair or on their person, to advertise to youths desiring wives that they were women much desired of men, with a visible dowry that suggested much experience.

Some girls there were among these Uigur villages who reminded him of Cholan. But never had Cholan been attired like these little fillies. Their short sleeveless jackets barely covered their shoulders and only half hid the ripening breasts, while the waist and navel were fully exposed above voluminous muslin drawers, each layer pleated and puffed to accentuate the curve of hips. To peel off these layers was like stripping petals from a flower! But the cry of these wantons was, "Give! Give me silver for my hair, jewels for my breasts!"

Then in disgust he would fling himself on Babor and ride back to a less experienced Kudarshin, whose gaily colored silks concealed less opulent charms, but whose now eager giving was untainted by demands and unsoiled from other men's embraces.

Meanwhile Maryam was getting ready for a quick move. The warehouse lay empty. Horses, purchased in great number from the caravans coming up from Iran, moved her carpets and furnishings—up north where an encampment of goat-hair tents was watched over by Maryam's overseer and slaves, as well as by Kisil's own men.

Maryam had talks with Pakembo and these convinced her that her preparations were now well warranted. A storm was brewing. Pakembo knew it, but he would disclose nothing that he knew, for he said that he could do nothing to avert the effects decreed by karma and it was only because

he loved Kisil that he was remaining, unwanted and unnoticed, by the youth's side.

Maryam feared the effects on Kisil that the guru so gravely hinted. At times Kisil was boyish in his zeal to play the part of governor; then, at a word, the cloak would drop from his shoulders, leaving him naked, a prey to unspoken fears. One day when Kudarshin said that she wanted to learn to ride, Maryam thoughtlessly said, "It is a good idea. I have a white pony that will be just the thing for a beginner."

"Not white!" Kisil shouted. Then he apologized lamely: "I never go near a white horse."

Maryam was careful after that to see that all white horses were weeded out of the herd.

Entering her gate, Maryam was surprised to see men and horses in the compound. Then she realized with a joyful lifting of her spirits that these were the Tanguts she had sent with Sanang and Mahmud Yelvaj north. They were back at long last. She gave orders for the men to be fed, then hurried back to the yamen.

At the gate of the compound surrounding the governor's residence she saw Sanang unsaddling a horse while he chatted to Pakembo, his boisterous good humor crackling like thorns round a pot. Sanang raised his hand in greeting.

"You have been a long time, Sanang—we had almost given you up for lost! Did you have a good journey? Are you and Mahmud Yelvaj well?"

His face broadened in a grin that showed the strong white teeth of the eater-of-meat. "Yes, we are both well, lady. And it is not our fault we have been so long. Blame Temujine, blame the Mergueds, blame anyone but us!"

"My daughter, the lady Cholan, is she well?"

"As well as one can expect when she has been so greatly worried about her husband. She skipped about when she heard about you and knew that Kisil was alive and well."

"And my grandson?"

"*Eckh!* Two now—those boys will gladden your heart!" Then he asked, "Kisil, my lord, is he well? I can't get much out of old Holy Bones here."

"He's well in body but sick in mind and spirit. Perhaps the news you bring will work wonders. It makes me feel better just to hear you laugh!"

Kisil also was laughing—the old boyish laugh Maryam remembered so well—when she entered the room where he sat talking to Mahmud Yelvaj. "Said Temujine that?" Kisil said, and laughed. Then, seeing her, both men rose to their feet.

Mahmud Yelvaj's face was alight with pleasure. "Greetings, O Rose of Camul, whom time makes ever more beautiful!" He bowed to her with courtly grace.

"Greetings, Mahmud Yelvaj! You are evidently well for your tongue is as glib as ever. But do not let me interrupt."

"Mahmud Yelvaj was just telling me the message Temujine sent." Kisil laughed again.

"And what was it, that makes you so happy?"

" 'The flea needs his dog!' " Kisil slapped his leg.

"And the dog is going to the flea?" she asked eagerly.

He nodded. "As soon as the king sends my successor. A messenger shall ride east this very day bearing my resignation."

"Sanang tells me my daughter is well."

"We left her much happier than we found her, O lady of delight. I have a message for you from her, as well as a written one for her lord." The Uigur went to a small bundle and took out a parchment.

"Thus says Cholan Goa to her long-absent lord—"

He paused to enjoy the suspense on Kisil's face.

" 'There are as many fair girls in the land as there are swans in the lakes, and even kings' daughters are fortunate, indeed, if they come under thy favor. May the thongs that bind the spars and felt of thy house be strengthened by this alliance. May success attend thy efforts to tame the intractable horse that tosses thy spirit. Bahatur thou wilt ever be to me, for the victory of the spirit is more hardly won than conquest by the sword, and the one brings life, the other, death. Thy love is more prized by me than the favor of kings.' "

"Ha! Said she so? No recriminations for my absence?"

"None!"

"And Gesikteng? What said the khan's sister?"

The Uigur smiled wryly. "That young woman was more terse, and her eyes flashed fire as she bade me write this—"

He coughed and cleared his throat.

" 'Are not our breasts as fair as Kudarshin's? Are not our wombs as worthy as hers to receive thy seed? The pine has borne many cones since you took me once beneath its cover. Tarry no longer, husband, lest the infecund mare seek cover by another stud!' "

"That is a strange message for a wife to send her husband!" Kisil said with some indignation. "Is there no more?"

The Uigur covered his smile.

"She thought it sufficient." He cleared his throat. "Your wives, Kisil, are two *very* remarkable women. You are to be envied—when you get back to the Onon!"

"And I now have two sons. What of Subotai?"

"A son worthy of his parents. Although he is only five, he rides his own pony given him by Temujine, having graduated—so I was told—from the back of the ewes he bestrode at two. His bow, which Temujine had made for him, twangs the death knell of many a rodent, and he has already taken part in a deer hunt in the company of the khan."

"And you approve of Temujine?"

"By the Seed of the Prophet! There's a man anyone would be proud to serve! Even I—" Mahmud Yelvaj raised his hands, shrugged his shoulders and made a face half comical, half serious— "even I came under his spell. Strong willed, inflexible of purpose, ruthless he is—yet generous withal. And such is his reputation for generosity and fairness that men and their families from many clans and subclans are beating a path to his yurt. Then, too, he has the shamans on his side, and they are openly touting among all the tribes to strengthen Temujine's bid for supremacy. Young men, often the sons of chieftains unfriendly to him—inflamed by stories told around the fires of this young leader's courage and resourcefulness—are leaving their fathers' tents to join his band of youthful paladins—for only the youthful aristocracy will he accept to guard him. The 'Avalanche' is now a thousand strong."

Kisil's breathing came faster as he listened. His hands clenched and unclenched; his stiffened bow arm twitched. "Why did he send me away!" he growled. "I should still be their captain!"

"Temujine thinks you have done much! Your maps and reports filled him with admiration. 'In truth Kisil kept his eyes open. I did well to send him,' he said more than once."

Kisil's mood changed immediately. Pleasure rang in his laugh. "So he said he did well to send me?" Kisil asked with gratification.

There was a shout and a sound of scuffling at the door. Sanang burst in twisting the arm of a servant. "I caught this rat listening at the door!" he said heatedly.

Kisil looked at Maryam. It is well we were talking Uigur, he thought. Turning to Sanang, he said lightly in Chinese, "Let him go, Sanang. One would think by your indignation that we were talking secrets."

Kisil turned to the Uigur. "Tell us more. But let us go out onto the roof. It is more pleasant there—and more private."

They were interrupted by the sound of a horse galloping into the compound. Kisil jumped to his feet and looked over the parapet. "A courier—on a white horse!"

They all stood up and joined him. The king's messenger was dismounting in front of the garrison commandant's house.

"He's gone to the commandant! Don't the couriers usually come here first?" Maryam's voice was tinged with anxiety, for she saw the whiteness of Kisil's face.

"He is probably a new rider who doesn't know—" Kisil's hands were clenched on the edge of the parapet. At last he turned and they all went back to their cushions.

"I'm sorry I interrupted you, Mahmud Yelvaj. I don't know why I am so nervous. I shall know what it's all about in time." Kisil ran his fingers through his hair. "That messenger can carry my resignation back to the king. Come, let us hear about Temujine."

The interruption had unsettled them all and it was some time before Mahmud Yelvaj could gather up the threads of his story.

Then Mahmud Yelvaj told Kisil a piece of news that made him blanch again—Temujine had allowed the envoy from the King of Hia to return to Chung-hsing!

"He let Li-ngan-tsuen's envoy—that spy—return?" Kisil said aghast. "He let him go back, while I am still here—in spite of my warning?"

"Yes, he couldn't see why he shouldn't—especially as he was sending him back with a demand for a daughter of the king as wife."

Kisil jumped to his feet in agitation. "Why wasn't news of this sent to me immediately?"

"I came back as soon as Temujine would let me leave."

"But Lob or Sanang should have come at once to warn me!"

"We were not our own masters."

Kisil saw the urgent question in Maryam's eyes and answered it: "We must get away at once!"

She smiled gratefully. Her expression changed to anxiety and then stark fear. She was looking at something behind him. Her hand flew to her mouth to stifle a scream. Kisil spun round.

Ku-kang, the garrison commander, stood in the doorway that led from Kudarshin's room onto the roof. His soft felt soles had made no sound. The smile on his face was evil as he stood aside to let soldiers file past him, their spears pointing toward Kisil in menace.

Kisil sprang back to the parapet with the thought of leaping to the ground, but soldiers were standing below with bows drawn. He turned and faced the commandant. "What does this mean? Are you mad?" Kisil's face was livid.

"It means that you are under arrest by the order of the king!"

"On what charge?"

"On the charge of treason and conspiracy with the Khitan governor in Bish-baligh to take over this territory belonging to the King of Hia! Also," the commandant said blandly, "there is a charge I have added on my own. I charge you with being a spy—the eyes of the Mongol khan!"

Kisil laughed, but it was a forced laugh that held no mirth.

"What nonsense! Wait until the king hears of this—"

Kudarshin bravely pushed her way in front of Kisil. "How dare you treat the prince-governor, my husband, in this way! I shall write my father the king about it unless you withdraw immediately!"

Ku-kang's smile was broader than ever. "I dare, Princess, for many reasons. First, this man you call husband is no prince and is no longer governor. Second, I dare because my authority comes from the king. And third, the king your father is dead and Li-tzun-hien reigns in his stead!" He appeared most gratified at the look of consternation on their faces. "Come, Princess, stand aside. I have no commands to act against you—as yet. Soldiers, take this man away!"

A soldier lowered his spear and laid his hand on Kisil's arm.

Despair gave Kisil blind, unreasoning strength. He seized the soldier and threw him over the parapet. There was a heavy thud as the man struck the ground. Kisil looked down and saw the figure stretched spread-eagle in death. He had killed again!

Two soldiers seized his arms and dragged him from the parapet.

"Maryam—" he looked back over his shoulder—"take Kudarshin away. Ask Cholan to care for her."

She saw his frantic look at the sky as they hustled him away. "I will pay you to let him go," she said quietly to the commandant.

"Go? Go where?"

"Free—into the desert, where he planned to go, for today he was going to write to the king and ask his permission to resign and go back to the Mongol khan who is Hia's ally."

"My information leads me to think otherwise. However . . . I have nothing against him, personally. I shall even be sorry to see him die." The officer spoke with an air of boredom.

"Die? Oh, no!"

"You can't mean to put him to death here, surely?" Mahmud Yelvaj said sternly. "He must be given fair trial and—"

"He'll get it, but the result is sure." Ku-kang examined his long fingernails.

"Are you saying this so that I'll increase my bribe?" Maryam asked despairingly, putting her arms around the sobbing Kudarshin.

The commandant laughed. "You western women are so crude—there is no delicacy in your choice of words. However, come and see me tomorrow, and see that a donkey staggers under the weight of your 'bribe'—as you put it—or I'll make you watch him die and it won't be pleasant, I assure you! Now remember—you don't leave this city! I think I'll post a guard to watch both of you."

"If you do, you may raise a riot in the Moslem quarter!" Mahmud Yelvaj said indignantly.

"I warn you, Uigur, threats will only increase the donkey's load. Now get out of my house!"

By dawn most of Maryam's remaining assets had been turned into silver bars and loaded on a donkey. The hours passed slowly. Maryam could not sleep and she walked to and fro in agony of spirit. When the city gates opened she sent the Mongols to see that the hillmen were ready to leave.

"I'll bring the Tanguts here!" Sanang said grimly.

"No! Leave them outside. We want no fighting—it would add to our difficulties."

At last, the hour being reasonable, Maryam rode out of her gate with only an escort of trusted servants.

Ku-kang met her with a smiling face. To her inquiries about Kisil he answered vaguely. "He still lives," he assured her blandly, his eyes on the donkey, "but he's had a bad night, so I'm told. Ah! All silver! That was very shrewd, but I'm afraid it's going to delay your departure as it will take my clerks such a long time to weigh the bars. However, come back this afternoon—and bring that Uigur with you!"

Mahmud Yelvaj was awaiting her. He was ready to leave. "Where is he? Wasn't the bribe enough?"

"I don't know," she answered wearily, almost at the breaking point. "The silver is being counted. He said you must come back with me this afternoon."

The Uigur's face blanched.

In the afternoon they set out once more.

The "new governor" greeted them jovially. "The tally is only fair—you evidently don't value your friend's life very highly. I had ordered his execution for this afternoon; that was one reason why I wanted you both here. However, I can postpone it if you care to add to the scales some light but excellent jewelry. See what you can do. Come back tomorrow morning."

Another night of tears and anguish passed.

At dawn they were at the yamen gate once more, to endure the further torment of being kept outside, subjected to the ridicule of the soldiers. When they were at last admitted to the house, "His Excellency" rose from his meal and, wiping his fingers carefully, closely examined the pieces of jewelry Maryam submitted.

"Yes, I think that will do for your share, woman—but against you, Uigur, I have a score that must be settled before your friend can be freed. There was a threat, if I remember rightly? Now threats come rather high, so that not only the freedom of your friend our late governor is at stake, but also your own!"

"I have nothing more to give," Mahmud Yelvaj said sullenly.

"That's a pity, but I want to help you. You still have a house, I think. Give me a deed to it!"

"How do we know that you are not playing us a trick?" Mahmud Yelvaj asked stoutly. "How do we know the prince is not already dead? Do you guarantee to deliver him to us alive?"

"How suspicious you barbarians are!" was the pained answer.

"Let me see him then—let me speak to him!"

The commandant considered for a moment, then he called an officer. "These people think I am selling them a dead horse!" He laughed. "Take this Uigur to the cells and let him see the prisoner through the grating—that is, if he can see in the dark. When he is assured that the prisoner is alive, bring him back here."

When Mahmud Yelvaj came back he looked deathly sick. "The stench from the vile hole is enough to kill any man! It was so dark I couldn't see," he explained to Maryam.

"Oh, he doesn't need light—it hurts his eyes," Ku-kang said, and laughed. "But do you know he is alive?"

"I heard his groans as he stumbled in his cell. Send for the notary—I'll sign the deed."

When he had signed the parchment, Mahmud Yelvaj threw down the pen. "Now free the prince!"

"Yes—all in good time. I think that completes our transaction." Ku-kang smiled, folded the deed and put it away. "Of course, you both understand I could have seized all you possess, but I think it was nicer that you gave it to me of your own free will, don't you?" Then his mood changed. "You are both banished from this city and if you are seen again in this district you will be imprisoned. Be outside these walls within an hour—if you stay longer it will be at your peril. At dusk your fellow conspirator will walk through the gates a free man. Then get you to the desert, quick! Now go!"

The day hushed as the breeze dropped. The leaves above them no longer rustled and a chill spread along the ground. Maryam watched the gates through which Kisil would be released.

The peasants were beginning to leave their fields when Mahmud Yelvaj and Lob came up leading horses, and with them—Maryam bit her lips in vexation—Pakembo.

"Why did he have to come?" she said impatiently—then to Pakembo: "If we have to ride in a hurry, we shall have to leave you behind, guru. Why did you come? There was no need."

The guru's face looked drawn, but there was something about the dark brown eyes as they gazed benignly on Maryam that gave her a sense of peace and stilled the rising tumult in her heart.

"I came," he said quietly, "lest in distress he be tempted to shatter the fragility of hope. Fear not, Maryam—it is fruitless, if not unjust, to wish him to escape a lesson he was

born to learn." His eyes left hers and fastened on the city gates.

"Hadn't we better move closer?" Maryam asked Mahmud Yelvaj.

He shook his head. "Why add to your misery by suffering the taunts of the ill-favored ones a moment longer than necessary. It isn't dusk yet. See, the soldiers are still lounging in the gate and making no move to close it."

Presently he said, "Now, I think."

They led their horses down the road behind the last straggling group of peasants. The guards were levering up the bars that locked the gates and there sounded the ominous creak of hinges. The people ahead of them shouted and hurried through. The little group holding the horses stood still. One side of the gate swung across the gap, the other creaked slowly. Then, just as Maryam was abandoning hope, two soldiers appeared, supporting a limp figure between them. They thrust the man roughly out of the closing jaws, and he fell with outstretched arms to the ground.

"Kisil," Maryam cried, "we're here!"

Her words were lost in the slamming of the gate and the dropping of the bars. Kisil lay sprawled face down in the dust and did not move.

Maryam was the first to reach him. Her cry, "What have they done to you?" was answered only by mocking laughter from behind the gates.

Sanang and Mahmud Yelvaj lifted Kisil to his feet.

"Oh, God!" Maryam cried.

His cheeks were puffed and seared. The raw scar of a cruel burn disfigured his brow. Eyebrows and eyelashes had disappeared, and the lids were shriveled.

"By Allah the Merciful, the Compassionate — they've blinded him!"

47

KARMA

KISIL BECAME CONSCIOUS of sounds and heard a woman weeping. "What woman weeps here?" he asked thickly.

"Kudarshin, Kisil." The sobs broke out afresh. "Oh, my beloved, what evil have they done to you!"

Another horse came alongside. He could smell the sweat on hide and leather. A cool hand touched his burning forehead.

"Maryam, Kisil." There was no sobbing in the calm voice that sought to bring him reassurance by its very tone. "We have you safe. We are well into the desert on our way to the Onon—to Cholan and your sons. Courage, Kisil!" There was a smile in her voice. "The worst is over."

Is it? he thought. She can say so. It is not her face that is burning with fire—not she who is doomed to gaze forever into a fathomless pool of dark water and see no more the blessed light of day.

A stream of imprecations ripped from his tortured throat. He cursed them all—cursed Maryam for saying the worst was over, cursed Kudarshin, cursed her father who, at his astrologers' behest, had thrust her starveling body into his bed. He tried to throw himself from the litter. Strong hands held him down—the hands of Sanang and Lob who silently did the Uigur's gestured bidding. And he cursed them all for cowards, Mahmud Yelvaj the most of all, for not drawing sword to put up a fight. Then he cursed Mahmud Yelvaj's god—and Maryam's too. Cursed the spirits of the upper air and Bogdo the Everlasting. He called on evil spirits to avenge him on all men—and women. At last, worn out with his vehement outburst, he sank back exhausted, and the rocking of the litter brought him needed sleep.

He lost all track of time. Only the sounds, or the lack of sounds, about him gave any inkling of the fleeting hours and passing days.

Time, he thought—what is time? There is no such thing. He remembered a saying of Pakembo's. "That which is to be hath already been, and that which hath been is now. Only this *now* is yours." This instant—this *now*—that's all there is. And that is more than I want!

"Give me a knife," he pleaded. "Leave me and let me die."

And when they gave him no answer, he cursed them all again.

There came a day when they let him mount his horse, but Sanang and Lob rode ever at his side lest he be tempted to do mischief to himself. Then he would let a tide of self-pity surge over him. Wallowing in it like a pony in a mudhole, Sanang thought.

So they let him ride wrapped in his shroud of gloomy thought, only answering him when he spoke civilly, which was seldom. He drew deeper into himself, and began once again to burrow into his thoughts. But now he was drained of all religious mysticism and spiritual yearnings, so that his present life seemed empty and his future a barren hope. But, as the days passed, he gradually acquired a keener perception of sounds and smells. A pungent odor of sour mud sucking at the roots of lake reeds brought memories of the time when he had crawled through reeds foul with marsh-bird droppings to escape the Taijiuts. He sniffed the air, now aromatic with the autumnal dying of steppe vegetation. Once he had lain with Cholan in the dew-wet, sun-ripe grass; the strong fingers of her white, outstretched arms had torn it by the roots in ecstasy. When they left the desert and their way led upward, he drew deep breaths of the pungent fragrance of pine. Gesikie had given herself to him under a pine tree, and the thought was sweet—and bitter. He became aware of the mists in the silent depths of mountain chasms, of the sun radiant on ridges, of the icy remoteness of surrounding mountain peaks.

His burns were healed; he fingered the scars on his tanned face. But the sense of outrage still lay heavy on his soul. He seethed inwardly, though to the others his face now seemed an empty mask. They were tired of his long silences

and rather wished he would curse them than bottle up his thoughts to himself. And whereas at first he had been deeply suspicious of all they said and did, he now seemed profoundly indifferent, accepting their ministrations to his comfort like one bereft of reason.

Kudarshin longed to take him in her bed, to see if in her arms she could melt his frozen heart, but she feared to suggest it.

Maryam, too, longed to take his head to her breast and comfort him as she would comfort a hurt child.

Pakembo, now getting used to riding, ambled on his horse wrapped in deep meditation, apparently unaware of his surroundings. When Maryam urged him to combat Kisil's evil moods he shook his head.

"The time has not yet come. He is at present entangled in a net of foolish words and wrong thinking. He is like a colt that hates the man who branded him. Yet God has marked him for His own and in His good time Kisil will feed gladly from His hand. And, too, his soul will be given the opportunity to learn the lesson it has to learn, just as he will be given the time to do the work he has to do."

A desire to live began to assert itself in Kisil. The fires of youth were not extinguished; they were smoldering fiercely under a black crust of resentment. His memories were now of women he had known, and he began to think that he was the injured partner of the marriage bed and that Kudarshin was anxious to avoid its intimacies. He thought perhaps his face was horribly scarred and mutilated and that might be the reason. It was a new experience for women to avoid him. Had there been any unattached woman in the camp he would have taken her as a concubine, but his guarded inquiries from the Uigur brought the emphatic denial that there were any unattached women—with the exception of Maryam. Maryam? Why shouldn't he take her as a wife? It was an idea. She was still beautiful, still had that soft musical voice, still was slender although two men had owned her as wife. Obtaining her might take time. But Kudarshin was his. He could take

her tonight—now! If his face repelled her . . . It would be a new experience to take a woman who didn't want him. The vindictive thought gave him energy. He got to his feet and left his tent. He didn't care who heard him. He blundered into the tent where Kudarshin slept with Maryam, awakening them.

"What is it?" There was alarm in Kudarshin's voice.

"It is your husband," he said brusquely.

Kudarshin crawled out. "What is it, Kisil?" she asked, and he thought he detected a falter in her voice.

"Come to my bed," he ordered. "I think you forget your father gave you to me for wife." As she made no move he said sarcastically, "Come, you are no shrinking virgin whose heart flutters at the thought of the marriage bed." He wished he could see the expression on her face which he imagined was one of disgust. The thought gave added zest. He seized her by the wrist. "Now lead me to my tent."

He was brutal with her and was glad when she whimpered that he hurt. What of it? Had she not hurt him? She made no sound after that; indeed, she seemed to meet his driving urge with one that tried to catch up to his. He was sorry now that he had been in such a hurry. He had been smoldering for hours, while she had been asleep. Still, she was putting up a good pretense of mutual enjoyment—even muttering endearments! He had intended to send her back immediately to her own tent, but he suddenly remembered a night spent with this girl in the desert—the night when he had met with such an unexpected response. She had lain silently by his side, her honest, courageous eyes gazing at the moon. Beautiful eyes he had thought them. He touched them now and found them wet with tears. She was trembling all over. So she was frightened of him! He was about to kick her out when she flung herself on him, holding his head between her hands, kissing his sightless sockets, her tears salt on his lips.

"Kisil, my love, my love!" she sobbed. "Why didn't you come for me before? Why did you torture us both? Why did you deny yourself the healing warmth of my love—the comfort of my breasts?"

He was amazed. As he listened to her endearments he was

tongue-tied with remorse and sudden, bewildered shame. It was she who now covered his body. It was she, whom he had taken half in hate, whose lips uttered endearments he never thought to hear woman utter again.

A storm lashed him, not of self-pity, but of self-reproach. He couldn't find words to answer her. His heart had been dried up, but now the sap was suddenly running again, choking him with deep emotion so that he dared not trust his voice.

At last he said, "I have been a fool, Kudarshin. I have stumbled in darkness and refused the hands held out to me. I have been deepening the pit of despondency with the sharp tool of my ill-humor. Take it from me," he pleaded. "Lead me out of the pit with patience, for it will take much time. Stay with me now, and come tomorrow night and the next and the next!"

"Cholan and Gesikteng may be here by then and I must stand aside for them. But I am grateful to my lord for this night's comfort," she said, nestling up to him. "And, until they come, this worthless little person can think of no greater happiness than to lie at thy side. The days will seem so long," she whispered, and blushed in the darkness.

"Little third wife," Kisil said quietly, "perhaps they will not come."

"They will!" He felt her emphatic nod. "But—" she bit her lips—"oh, Kisil!" she said wildly, "when they do come—don't keep me waiting long!"

The next morning all noticed the difference in him. "His spirit shines again," the hillmen said.

Thrice at dawn Cholan heard the ominous croaking of the grave birds coming from the path of the dead that led under the trees to the burial mound. The raucous, foreboding cries heralding the day sent shivers down her warm, sensitive skin. She opened her eyes still bemused by sleep. The languorous smile, of a satisfied woman rising from the embrace of a dream lover, faded. So Kisil hadn't been with her? Those nocturnal delights had been but another dream

like their many predecessors. The croaking of the birds of ill omen chased away her memories. She sat up nervously, pulled on her outer garments and, without waking the children, stepped outside her yurt.

It was a peculiar dawn that had something of the unearthly about it. A pallid yellow sun strove to pierce the clammy blanket of mist that had covered the sleeping camp. The treetops looked like giant birds poised above the mist-wrapped earth, their sable wings enwrapping all in gloom. There was an uncanny silence: the sounds of dawn were lacking; no dogs barked, no cattle lowed.

Later, all seemed as usual. Under the golden, autumnal sun, the familiar routine of her day unfolded like that of any other. Children laughed and women chattered as they went about their tasks; but the croaking of the grave birds echoed in her mind and a cold hand gripped Cholan's heart all day.

Her premonitions were justified when Sanang and Lob, arriving suddenly, spilled the tale of Kisil's dire misfortune at her feet.

Temujine was away, so they had come to her.

A suffusion of blood made a vivid patch of color in the whiteness of her face. Her eyes grew large and a blaze flashed from the pupils.

She knew what she must do. The two men, expecting her to dissolve in tears, watched in silent wonder as she told Gesikteng the stark facts. "Sanang, get a fresh horse for yourself. We ride at once and you must lead us to him. Lob —a fresh mount for you. Ride and find our lord Temujine and give him Kisil's message." She turned to Gesikie. "Your mother will look after the children. Come, Gesikie! Don't stand like a moonstruck heifer! You want to come, don't you?"

Gesikie found her tongue. "You couldn't keep me from him. Of course I'll come. I'll get our horses while you see to the food."

Subotai clamored to come too. "I want to see what a man looks like with his eyes out."

Cholan shivered and looked questioningly at Sanang.

He nodded. "It might do Kisil a lot of good—give him something else to think about." He turned to Subotai. "But you will have to ride fast, young snapper. Your father's eyes are still in their sockets." He added in an aside to Cholan, "But not exactly things of beauty. It's just the sight that the hot iron destroyed," he explained to the boy. "Can you ride all day like a man?"

Subotai nodded.

Cholan suddenly made up her mind. "Then get him a horse, Sanang." She would take both children; the younger could ride in front of her—Gesikie's child, too. From now on, regardless of what Temujine would do or say, Kisil's family must keep together. She was unaware of any individual in the babbling crowd about her until Yulun stood at her side.

There were deep concern and grief on the face of the dowager. "You are going to him?"

"Yes. Both of us. We are taking the children."

"Won't you wait for Temujine and go with him?"

"No!" Then, regretting her curtness, she added, "Surely you understand?"

"But you will come back—you will bring him here?" Yulun asked.

"That is for your son to say. In Kisil's present state of mind he won't come back unless he feels he is wanted, or so Sanang says. It would be the action of a superior man if our lord the khan would—"

"Would what?" Yulun asked gently.

"Who am I to give advice to the khan and his mother? Only Keuktche's advice is considered of value today, and he will doubtless persuade—"

"No one persuades my son!" Yulun snapped. She regretted her anger immediately. "This misfortune of Kisil's will grieve Temujine deeply."

"And so it should—he is responsible for it!"

"That hurts." The reproachful look in Yulun's eyes begged for a withdrawal.

"The truth sometimes does," the unrepentent Cholan answered, and went away lest she wound more deeply this woman she admired.

Gesikie came riding through the throng about her mother and beckoned her aside.

"What is it?" Yulun asked. "What have you to say?"

"Bid Temujine hasten if he values Kisil's services—and remind him that Cholan's mother has a thousand horses in her herd—so Lob and Sanang tell me."

"I will see that no one touches your yurts and that the third one is completed at once," Yulun told the girls at parting.

Cholan did not care if she ever saw a Mongol yurt again.

Sanang recognized the black stallion.

"It's your mother," he told Cholan, and dropped back. Gesikie likewise checked her horse. Maryam's horse and Cholan's came together. The women leaped from their saddles and rushed into each other's arms.

"Mother!"

"Cholan!"

They laughed and sobbed together.

Sanang sat by with an amused grin and patiently waited for this emotional, feminine outburst to subside. But now Gesikie was drawn into it with her little daughter and Cholan's younger child, and to Sanang it sounded like the squalling of eagles around their nests. He winked at Subotai—this was women's stuff and men were best out of it. The boy moved nearer to him.

Maryam's outstretched hand beckoned to Subotai; then, as he did not move, she recognized his youthful pride. "The son of Kisil Bahatur is like his father," she said gravely.

"But I have two eyes. I can see like an eagle," Subotai said proudly. "The khan says I shall be a mighty hunter and a great warrior!"

Maryam ignored his boasting. Turning to Cholan, she said, "He is like his father in looks. I hope he has also inherited Kisil's nature—as you and I first knew him."

"Is he changed . . . very much?" Cholan asked.

"There is a little disfigurement where the iron seared his face; the scars are healed, but not yet the scars on his mind.

But he has some spirit left, and you two women must be grateful to Kudarshin for breaking through the wall he was building round himself. He now has some resemblance to the old Kisil we all loved."

She wiped her tears away with the back of her hand. Turning to Sanang, she went on: "Take Subotai to meet his father. It is best we do not all burst upon him at once."

Sanang and the boy galloped off. The others followed slowly.

As they neared the camp their tongues were all going at once. Maryam sensed that both girls were talking nervously, as if apprehensive of meeting Kisil now the moment was at hand. She prayed that Kisil would not make their ordeal more difficult to bear.

They dipped down into the depression and the camp lay before them. Their eyes took in the scene.

Kisil was sitting in front of his tent. Before him stood Subotai, excitedly chatting away while his father's hands felt him all over—just like a horse.

Behind Kisil stood a slender girl, not dressed as both girls had expected a princess would be, but just as they were themselves.

Maryam dismounted and signaled to the others to do likewise. They approached quietly; Kudarshin watched them covertly as they drew near.

They heard Subotai ask her, "Are you also my father's wife?"

Kudarshin did not answer, not understanding the question, so Kisil answered for her. "Yes, she is, my son. This is the Princess Kudarshin, daughter of the King of Hia." Hearing footsteps, he raised his head.

"Then you, my father," said Subotai, "have three wives. Our lord the khan has but one, Burte, and she is not the daughter of a king. And this great horse herd, the largest I have ever seen, is yours, so Sanang tells me!" There was a note of respectful wonder in the boyish voice. "You must be a rich man, father—the richest on the plains!"

"I do not yet know how rich I am, my son."

The plaintive note in his well-remembered voice released

something in Cholan. She let go of her child's hand and ran across the intervening space. She brushed Subotai aside and flung herself between Kisil's knees, her arms about his neck pulling his head down to meet her lips, choking back the sobs that rose in her throat as she saw the scars and dead eyes staring from shriveled, hairless lids.

"If our love means anything, you are rich, Kisil," she said wildly, fighting back her tears.

He held her head to his breast and lifted his own in question. "*Our* love, Cholan? Who else?"

"Yes, our love," Gesikie asserted, "for I too am here, Kisil, waiting patiently my turn to greet my lord who one night was my lover."

Cholan rose to her feet. "My love ever makes me selfish. Forgive me, sister." She yielded her place to Gesikie.

Gesikie's lips were ardently pressed to his, and the fingers of her strong hands held his face between them, lingered on his neck and bared chest before she released him.

Cholan pressed her younger child against his knees. "This is thy second son, husband. As yet he has no name."

"Come, thou nameless one," he said without thinking, reaching out a hand to clasp the boy. Then he remembered. "Thou Nameless One," he repeated in awe, lifting up his face to the sky, his hand outstretched as if imploring aid or—Cholan thought—blessing the child. Frightened, the child withdrew and clung to her.

They could not understand his sudden silence. He was as one who listens for a voice, and their own were hushed. He rose unsteadily to his feet, seemingly unaware of those about him. They fell back as with outstretched hands he felt for his tent and passed inside. Then they heard him sob like a heartbroken child, and Maryam beckoned them to come away.

Kudarshin stood alone, as one uncertain, looking from Maryam to the supple grace of Cholan, now in the full bloom of youthful loveliness, to Gesikteng whose lithe body rippled with the feline strength of a panther, whose hunger for her man Kudarshin instinctively recognized. She longed

to rush into Kisil's tent, to comfort him. But now she hadn't that right.

Maryam gestured to her to come forward.

"These are your sisters, Kudarshin," Maryam said in the Tangut tongue. "This tall girl who has grown out of recognition is my daughter Cholan, and this young lady with the lovely eyes is Gesikteng, the khan's sister." Then, drawing the shy girl to her, Maryam addressed the others. "Kudarshin has become very dear to me. I am a happy woman and I thank God for giving me the rich blessing of family life in exchange for the worthless possessions I once owned in Camul."

"And this splendid herd—were they among your worthless possessions?" Gesikie asked, looking at Maryam with great respect.

"They are Kisil's now—if he will only accept them and look on them as his." Maryam laughed, the deep throaty laugh that Cholan remembered. "As a boy, Kisil always wanted horses and women. Well, now he has them both, horses and women, and three lovelier wives I have never seen."

Cholan put out her hand to Kudarshin and drew her to her side. "Our little sister *is* beautiful. It is a pity that Kisil is denied the sight of her loveliness. As for me, when I am old he won't see what I look like—that is one comfort."

"But his hands and fingers are now his eyes!" Gesikie said. "I find the idea rather exciting."

"You would!" Cholan said, and laughed in spite of her annoyance. She turned to Maryam. "But what about Kisil? Shouldn't one of us go to him? What was it that upset him?"

"He is troubled in spirit more than in flesh," Maryam said. "He inadvertently called on the Nameless One and was deeply moved. He is at a crisis. I think he is wrestling with God. It is his teacher, Pakembo, who can be of most assistance to him now."

Maryam had given orders for three tents to be erected and furnished. At dusk she took the girls outside. "We now have a properly organized ordu," she said. "Kudarshin has

been sharing my tent, but now she must have one of her own, as I have just explained to her."

Cholan took possession of the tent nearest her husband.

But that night it was Pakembo whom Kisil sent for, and Cholan, lying awake, heard the murmur of their voices—Kisil's sometimes angry, Pakembo's always soothing.

She had waited so long, but she could wait longer.

When Lob brought word to Temujine of Kisil's blinding, a confused and momentarily frightened expression swept across the young khan's face. His eyes narrowed as if the fate of Kisil also threatened them. He drew a long, shuddering breath, trying to still the sudden tumult of his heart.

To this had his ambition brought his friend! To this dark pit had Kisil's loyal acceptance of his commands led his brave spirit! To this dire fate had his own avarice—nay, surely not avarice but his beggarly need—sacrificed the happiness of Cholan, the desires of Gesikie, the well-being of Kisil, that he might grasp Hia's subsidy.

Then Temujine flung off his morbid imagining. He could not have known what would happen—only Bogdo knew that! It must be the Will of the Everlasting, whose envoy he was on earth. This reassuring thought swept smooth the ripples in his mind.

An uprushing, white flame of anger swiftly consumed the last fragments of illogical reasoning.

"Lead me to him!" he ordered Lob.

He rode into Kisil's encampment like a cyclone, with his laughing, whip-cracking followers. Cholan had led Kisil to a space before his tent, tactfully turning him to face the oncoming Temujine, and now stood behind him a little to his left. As if to reassure him that she was near, she reached out her hand and touched his. There was defiance in her attitude.

Pakembo also stood in the group behind Kisil. Here is one who was old at birth, he thought, looking at Temujine. And Pakembo's usual placidity was shaken so that he trembled at the core of his being. In a flash of insight he knew this

one was a destroyer, destined to plow up the choking weeds of civilization; and, because he loved mankind, Pakembo wept.

Kudarshin, clinging to Maryam, looked with fascination at this young god on horseback—this khan who, so her father's astrologers had warned, might bring disaster to Hia were he not appeased. He was magnificent in a barbaric way, she thought. Two eagle's feathers adorned the crown of his fur-banded felt hat, giving a false impression of great height. Over his burnished oxhide cuirass he wore a long riding cloak edged with black sable. His baggy trousers were gathered into soft riding boots of antelope skin dyed red. The long jeweled handle of a dagger projected from a green sash swathed about his hips. The tip of a long curved sword in its scabbard showed beneath his cloak; a lance was hung across his shoulders.

For a brief moment his eyes took them all in.

At the sound of Temujine's voice, Kisil vibrated in every nerve; impulsively he put out his hands, but the words of welcome that he had rehearsed choked in his throat. His outstretched hands looked so pitiful the voices and laughter of the young men died.

"Do I face him?" he asked Cholan plaintively. His words rang out in the hush.

"You face me," Temujine answered for Cholan, "but how can I face thee, Kisil, who hast suffered more in my service than any other man? What thanks can I give to one so steadfast as thou?" His hands grasped Kisil's shoulders. "How can I repay—?"

Cholan looked on in amazement. She had not expected to see Temujine humble himself thus. She could almost believe his humility was genuine and not assumed; but genuine or not, it was having the effect she feared—Kisil was succumbing to Temujine's domination. To Cholan, her husband's face was piteous to behold. The brave front he had thought to present—crumbled at Temujine's words.

"I loved thee, lord." His hands took Temujine's wrists. "Thou wert more to me than brother . . . though we never drank the blood potion together. We had no need . . . I would

have done thee this service had I never sworn oath to your father." He sensed Temujine's embarrassment at having his wrists held and let go.

"I need no thanks, lord—and to talk of payment is to traffic as a merchant, and—" Kisil's face twisted into a smile and he changed his tone—"you never did like merchants, Temujine. You often derided me, saying I was one whose nose twitched at the smell of profit. . . . There has been little profit for me in this adventure."

Cholan detected the falter in his voice and she bit her lips hard, as if by doing so she could prevent his breaking down.

"Now I must live on memories, Temujine. But . . . if, as Pakembo says, this was my karma, the fruit of my husbanding in a previous life . . . I am thankful for those memories and for the many wondrous things which, at thy behest, I saw before they took away my eyes. I have been your eyes and ears, Temujine. I have much to tell . . . much to warn you against if you can have patience with one who must seem dead to you. It would be worth your while, for, as the old shaman Tatengri discovered and as my guru has pointed out, one sometimes sees more clearly when one's eyes no longer bemuse the mind with the sight of early delights."

Cholan flung her hands to her face. The memory of last night, when his exploring sensitive fingers sought to conjure to his mind the delights of her body, haunted her.

"Stay with me, Temujine, for a few days," Kisil pleaded. "I would like to sit around the fire with you for a night or two before—"

"Before what?" Temujine broke in. "One would think, to hear you talk, you had in mind setting out again."

"Would it not be natural?"

"And where do you think of going?" Temujine's voice sounded so disinterested that Cholan looked at him with hope in her eyes.

"I thought of seeking pastures in the valleys of the Altai among the Naiman clans who are akin to me. There I might find some peace of mind and breed fine sons who, per-

chance, might seek thy service and serve thee as once I thought to serve."

Temujine's voice rang with impatience. "You are no crippled horse whose only use is mounting mares in heat. You have seen too much for such a life. I need you, Kisil, to aid me in counsel! Was it not for this you were sent away to learn?"

"Yet Pakembo advises—"

"Pakembo!" Temujine spat the name out. "Is he this holy man whose eyes are wet with tears? I have no use for such. They would turn the eaters of meat into browsing sheep and wean the race of warriors into effeminate ways."

"To walk barefoot across the burning sands alone—is that effeminate?" Kisil asked with spirit. "To carry no weapon and dare wolves—two-legged ones as well as four-footed—is that the act of a coward?"

"It is a sure sign that either the moon has touched him, or the heat of the sun has addled his bald pate!" Temujine laughed. Then he caught Kudarshin's eye. "Are you Kudarshin, the daughter of the King of Hia?" His voice, to Kisil, was warm with appreciation.

Kudarshin flushed and drew closer to Maryam.

"She doesn't speak our tongue," Kisil said.

"Now I have seen her—and knowing Li-ngan-tsuen has more daughters—I shall the more readily march into his lands. Not that I need more excuse than they have given me—for I shall avenge thee, Kisil! The land of Hia shall pay dearly for thy suffering!"

"Making others suffer on my account would be but to increase my sufferings," Kisil said quietly. "And adding to the burdens of the people of Hia would only add to the load I have to bear, for this—" he pointed to his sockets—"is not their work, but rather the work of the king's nephew, Li-tzun-hien, who now reigns in Li-ngan-tsuen's stead. And many of our men would die in thy attempt, for the Kingdom of Hia is a great power, second only to the might of the Kin. I would not have one warrior die to avenge me."

"If the Kingdom of Hia be so great," Temujine said more thoughtfully, "it will be a testing ground for our Mongol

warriors—the criterion of our success against the Kin!" Before Kisil could reply he added, "But we talk of grass that has not yet grown—'tis this winter's needs we must discuss. In spite of your expressed desire to live among the Naimans, I must hold you to me—if not by the love you once bore me, then must I hold you to the oath sworn to my father." Then, as if he read Cholan's thoughts, he added with a laugh, "There are some who will doubtless malign me and say it is the tithe of the herd increase that I hate to lose to some Naiman khan."

Cholan looked Temujine straight in the eye. As if accepting a challenge, she asked him, "And what answer will you give them, Lord Temujine?"

"I will fling the lie in their teeth!"

His answer sounded so convincing that it almost convinced Temujine himself. He did owe something to Kisil and, though he knew that Kisil might find more tranquility away from him and his ambitions, a flash of insight convinced him that Kisil's greatest need at this moment was to feel wanted—to be assured that his blinding had not made him a worthless tool to be flung aside, that his intellect was recognized as having a greater value than his body. It had hurt Temujine's self-esteem to state, in front of his paladins, a need for Kisil's sage advice when he knew well he had no such need and must ever rely on his own intuitive power—yet . . .

He cleared his throat: "Kisil Bahatur. The time has come, of which my father prophesied, for me to add another title to the one I gave so long ago. Brave thou art, and no title will ever be needed to emphasize the fact. Wise thou art, and as men seldom recognize wisdom, I give thee the title of Sechen—the Wise—a title more rare in this land of brave men."

* * *

That night, around the dung fires heaped high for the festive feast, the *kara-kumiss* flowed—kumiss specially prepared by Maryam and the women for this momentous occasion. Longer than usual had they whipped the fermented

mare's milk so that the liquid they strained off ran clear as rice wine and just as heady.

When they had gorged themselves on the half-roasted horse meat, Maryam's men sat around their fires listening to the songs of Temujine's warriors, their shining faces reflecting newfound content. And though they now looked to Kisil as their lord and had sworn him faithful service, many glanced in satisfaction at Temujine under whom they might serve in battle.

Then the paladins danced, lifting their kumiss-filled horns to Kisil and Temujine, and the dust raised by their stamping feet was red in the glow of the fires.

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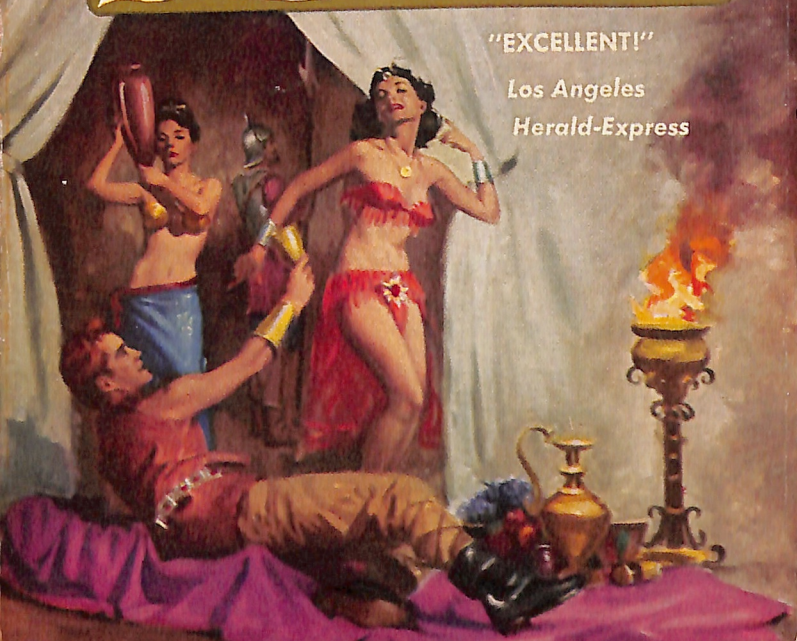

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