

## The Shahbaz Mission

Sue Leather

Orhan watched from the ramparts of the castle as Mehdi galloped away on his white mare, followed by some ten retainers. The emir would be gone away for three or four days to find a new wife, and Orhan felt a glimmer of hope that he, Orhan, would finally be able to complete his mission.

He slapped both his cheeks as if to wake himself from a reverie and walked away from the ramparts. He had little time to do what was needed, and tonight was as good a time as any.

It had been a long two months since Orhan had managed to get into the Shahbaz stronghold as an advisor to the notoriously fastidious Mehdi. In that time, he had not been idle. Through careful, diligent work, Orhan had gained a good idea of the layout of the 60,000 square feet of the castle and the land around it. Now perhaps the time had come to locate and seize the most important intelligence of all: the plans that the Seljuks had devised for the ultimate annihilation of his people.

‘It won’t be easy to capture the Shahbaz stronghold, my friend, ‘ the lord Hassan had told Orhan, ‘but it is necessary to our cause.’ Of course, he was right. For the past five years, the Seljuks had been dividing the Isma’ili’s farmland into fiefs and were levying crippling taxes on the citizens. The peasants had no local representatives, and the Seljuk laws ignored them. Men were killed for petty crimes; men and women both were flogged for daring to stand up to their Seljuk overlords. Hundreds had died from torture in the castle. Everyone was suffering under the yoke of the emirs.

All that was bad enough, but there were worse things coming, Hassan was sure. The Seljuks planned to cleanse the lands of their people and to allow the Seljuk tribes in the farthest reaches of their Empire to take over their farms. Mehdi was the leader of the Seljuk emirs, and, Hassan believed, it was he who had drafted the plans for this genocide. Despite the terrible situation that the Isma’ili people were in, though, they were loath to rise up against their overlords, for fear of what might happen to them. ‘You are Isma’ili too, Orhan! If we can prove to our people that they plan to kill us all,’ Hassan had said passionately, ‘we can raise an army and take the Shahbaz stronghold.’

When Orhan first heard Hassan say this, he thought the lord might be quite mad. The castle itself was built on a cliff about 7,000 feet above sea level. Like the royal falcon, or ‘shahbaz’, after which it was named, it soared majestically into the clouds. The

entire stronghold was massive, an inaccessible fortress protected by a succession of outer walls and moats. To take it from Mehdi and his army would be a huge undertaking. Over time, though, Orhan learned that Hassan was far from mad.

‘Don’t you see, my friend?’ Hassan had said. ‘If we can take this stronghold, we can take more. From these fortresses we can go out and kill the emirs. We can pick them off one by one, as the shahbaz picks off its prey.’ Hassan had laughed his great, loud, good-natured laugh, and pulled Orhan’s beard affectionately. ‘But all that will come,’ he had said, looking into Orhan’s deep brown eyes. ‘Let us think about the first step. *Your* step. It’s not just a job for a burglar, though that’s part of it. I need your skills in...’ Hassan had paused dramatically and whispered: ‘espionage.’

Now, as Orhan walked from the ramparts, there were clouds in the sky, and later the moon would be hidden. After nightfall, he decided, he had to somehow locate the plans, take them, and be gone. He would have to use all his skills.

‘Where are you off to?’

Orhan jumped two feet in the air. But it was only his friend Ruslan.

‘To my quarters, my friend,’ said Orhan.

‘What about a game of chess?’ said Ruslan, ‘while the cat’s away...’

In the time that Orhan had been at Shahbaz, he and Ruslan had become good friends. He was a friendly fellow who, though he was about the same age as Orhan, was Mehdi’s senior advisor. The two of them had often played a game of chess and talked about castle politics, and the women they had known.

‘I can’t right now,’ Orhan answered. ‘Perhaps tomorrow.’

‘A woman?’ Ruslan laughed.

Orhan laughed too. ‘Wouldn’t you like to know?’ he said, slapping Ruslan on the back. Then he went to his room, lay on his bed and waited for nightfall, thinking about his role as Hassan’s spy.

Orhan had learned and practised his tradecraft in the service of the Shahs and that he spoke the Seljuk tongue fluently. He had studied the ancient martial arts of the assassins under the lord Alamut. Furthermore, he was a stranger to this place, and he

had no history. He could see why Hassan had thought he was the man for the job, and after some hesitation, Orhan had agreed to the mission. It wasn't his usual kind of thing, but Orhan was a mercenary, and the pay was good. Then there was something else: on occasion, spying finds the moral high ground, and this was one of those moments. It was a noble enterprise, he thought, a matter of survival.

And the truth was, you couldn't help but follow Hassan. Even in hiding from the Seljuks, he was man of dignified bearing and authority, a true leader. Like a chess grandmaster, he had all his moves planned in advance.

Orhan had worked hard. In the months that he had been at Shahbaz as Mehdi's advisor, he had completely mapped out the ancient castle and its grounds in his mind. He had discovered the secret passages that led from the dungeons below out onto the surrounding steppe. Above all, he had, he believed, found out where Mehdi's plans were, in the huge library in the heart of the castle. No one but Mehdi ever went into his library; other residents of the castle were barred from entry.

About an hour after the sun went down, Orhan put his knife into his jerkin, crept out of his room, and went towards Mehdi's. The castle was silent. He knew that Mehdi kept the keys to the library in his quarters, and over time and with careful observation, Orhan had narrowed down the possible hiding places to just two; the cabinet beside Mehdi's bed, and the great oak desk by the window where Mehdi wrote letters.

In his poverty-stricken youth, Orhan had had some success as a cat burglar, and it was the skills he had acquired in that capacity that he used to full effect now. He made no noise as he sidled along the corridor and arrived at the door to Mehdi's quarters. The door was locked as he knew it would be, but weeks ago, after Mehdi had 'lost' one of his keys, Orhan had suggested to him that he have the castle locksmith make a duplicate. Mehdi readily agreed. Orhan had simply asked the locksmith to make two copies, and Orhan had pocketed the extra one.

Once inside Mehdi's room, Orhan carefully closed the door and moved towards the bed. He opened a drawer in the bedside cabinet and felt around it. Nothing. Hmmm. This meant that he would have to get over to the desk which was on the other side of the room. It was completely black, and even with his eyes somewhat accustomed to the lack of light, Orhan could barely see anything. He closed his eyes and recreated the layout of the room in his mind. Slowly, carefully, he made his way over to the oak desk.

Orhan opened the desk drawer and put his hand inside. He felt around. Papers, a pipe and yes, right at the back, a key. He took the key and carefully closed the drawer. He crept just as carefully over to the door of Mehdi's chamber, went through it and locked it. Once outside in the corridor, he faced the wall and softly breathed a sigh of relief.

'I've been watching you.'

Orhan jumped and turned round quickly. Ruslan was two feet away from him. He put up his arm to block the attack, but it was too late. Ruslan lunged forward and wrapped his arm around Orhan's neck. Orhan saw the knife just under his nose. He wriggled to get away from Ruslan, but it was no good. Ruslan twisted Orhan's wrist with his other hand, and the library key dropped to the floor.

'Spying on the lord Mehdi, eh?' said Ruslan menacingly.

'Ruslan!' said Orhan hoarsely.

'I've suspected for some time that you are not of us. You are an Isma'ili! You may have fooled him, but not me.' Of course. Ruslan had been with Mehdi since he was a child. It made sense that he was aware of any threats to the emir.

Orhan pushed against Ruslan's arm.

'Listen, my friend,' Ruslan whispered into Orhan's ear. 'It's useless to struggle. I must have you killed for this treachery. But before that, I will find out what you know.' Orhan knew that they tortured people here; indeed, he was aware that many of his countrymen had ended up in the dungeons below this very castle.

Thinking quickly about his best chance of escape, Orhan slumped and feigned submission to Ruslan's power. He allowed himself to be dragged down the corridor towards the stairs which led to the dungeons. At the top of the stairs, Ruslan grabbed a torch which was burning on the wall. He dragged Orhan down a series of corridors to a small cell right at the end of the labyrinth.

It was not the first time that Orhan had been in the dungeons of Shahbaz; he had spent many a night exploring them. It soon became clear where Ruslan was taking him. The cell right at the end of a warren of passageways was a small dark space about six feet square, with nothing but a latrine in the corner. There was a single narrow

window high on the wall, but there was no light now, save that from the torch which Ruslan held.

The unique thing about this cell lay not in the cell itself, but in what lay outside the door. There, there was a lever. As the lever was pulled, the ceiling in the cell descended slowly. Before long, the prisoner inside the cell would be crushed to death. The prisoner had an hour or so to contemplate his impending doom.

Ruslan unlocked the door of the cell and pushed Orhan towards the floor.

As Ruslan pushed him, Orhan quickly turned from submission into attack. Summoning all his strength and pushing backwards, he slammed Ruslan against the wall and quickly ducked from the knife that came dangerously close to his neck. In one move, he wrested the knife from Ruslan's hand and overpowered him. He pushed his shoulder into Ruslan's chest and threw him over it; within seconds, Ruslan was on the floor with Orhan's knee to his neck. Orhan used his right hand to take the library key from Ruslan. 'Not so fast,' breathed Orhan. Holding Ruslan's neck in a choke grip, Orhan pushed Ruslan further onto the hard floor of the cell. He sprang up, took the torch, went through the door, and quickly locked it.

Orhan took a breath. 'Where are the plans to annihilate my people?' he asked through the bars of the cell. As he spoke, he pulled the lever and the ceiling in the cell began to descend. 'I don't need to tell you what will happen if you don't tell me.'

'I don't know what you are talking about,' Ruslan said.

Orhan pulled the lever again, and the ceiling descended further.

'Oh, I think you do,' said Orhan.

Ruslan looked up at the ceiling and clung to the bars of the cell. 'Please,' he said. 'Believe me. I am just a servant, like you.' By the light of the torch, Orhan could see the fear in Ruslan's eyes, and he tried to quell his feelings of pity and regret. The fate of his people was at stake.

'You are a torturing, murdering dog,' said Orhan, as if to remind himself that this man, who until a short time ago had been his friend, was now his enemy. 'Where exactly are the plans?' Orhan moved again towards the lever.

'We can come to some arrangement...'

‘And I mean exactly.’ Again, Orhan pulled the lever, and the ceiling moved towards Ruslan.

‘Alright, alright.... The library,’ said Ruslan. ‘there is a special place under the lord Mehdi’s desk. If you touch it, the wall opens. Inside there. you will find them. Now please.... remember our friendship.’

Orhan looked into Ruslan’s eyes, then looked at the lever. He had a choice before him. The man who he had spent long hours with, playing chess and laughing, that man was here, pleading for his life. And yet.... he pulled the lever hard and ran down the passageway, back to the stairs. He could hear Ruslan’s pitiful cries all the way to the staircase.

.....

‘This, my friend,’ said Hassan. ‘This is the day we have longed for. Your good health!’ Hassan raised his cup towards Orhan. They were both sitting at Lord Mehdi’s great table, drinking the wine from his cellars.

‘The first step is done,’ Hassan continued. ‘From here, we can pick off the emirs at will. We can follow the example of the assassins.’

As Hassan had predicted, the plans that Orhan had taken from Mehdi’s library had detailed an ethnic cleansing of unparalleled ferocity. It had not been difficult to convince the Isma’ili menfolk that they needed to fight for their survival. They were not soldiers of course, but farmers, potters, farriers, labourers, simple men all. They were untutored in the ways of warfare, but they were emboldened by the knowledge of what the Seljuks were planning: the annihilation of their race.

Besides, they had the lord Hassan beside them. Hassan, on his beautiful Arab steed, held the Isma’ili standard aloft, and the men would have followed him to the very ends of the earth.

The battle had been long and arduous. Mehdi and his men defended the stronghold fiercely. But Orhan’s knowledge of the layout of the Shahbaz had enabled one part of their force to enter the complex through the underground tunnels from some distance

away on the steppe. Though they had lost men, this surprise element of the attack had ultimately made their success inevitable.

‘You are right,’ said Orhan.’ It is the day we dreamed of.’

‘Then why so gloomy?’ asked Hassan.

‘I’m not gloomy,’ said Orhan. ‘....I was just thinking, my lord, of the friends we have lost.’

‘Think rather of the children we will save from enslavement. Hassan smiled at Orhan.

‘Think of our glorious future. There is more to do.’

‘You are right again,’ said Orhan, pushing away the black thoughts. ‘There is more to do.’