

Tserents

Travails of the 9th Century

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Translators' Preface

This public service translation of Tserents's 1879 historical novel is brought to you by the Arak-29 translation team. Several different translators and editors worked on this translation, completed in a short period in the spring of 2018. The team leaders, Hovhannes Asryan and Tom Samuelian, express their thanks to all who contributed to this project, including Nshan Matevosyan, Tatevik Danileyan and Haik Hakobyan. Special thanks to Julia Hintlian, PhD student in Religion, Harvard University, who kindly revised the translation of several chapters as well as doing a final review of the entire book, to Nareg Seferian who reviewed and enhanced the website, and to Tamar Hajian, who kindly edited the final version. As with every translation, there was tension between literal rendering of the original and assuring readability, which given the purpose and intended audience for this translation, was weighted in favor of readability.

To make the book a bit more intelligible, the team prepared an online study guide, where you can find a map, timeline, list of characters and some background materials on the sources of the historical content, as well as the literary models that appear to have inspired this landmark work of modern Western Armenian literature. These can be accessed on the www.arak29.am website under Literature.

Why this book? Why now? The 9th century was a time of ferment, not unlike our times, when people were struggling to secure a safe and peaceful habitat where they could “live and let live.” The travails of 9th-century Armenia, remote though they may seem, are symptomatic of the human condition in all times and all places. Tserents's portrayal of the nobility of spirit necessary to overcome the setbacks and hardships of this all-too-human struggle tell a universal story through the experience of some remarkable and memorable characters facing harsh realities and choices that test their virtue, perseverance and faith. Interwoven elements of mystery, intrigue, treachery, brutality, romance, compassion, valor, close calls, and suspense make this a good read, as captivating today as it was over a century ago.

Translators' Note on Armenian Terms

Sparapet – the hereditary title of the commander-in-chief of Armenian forces

Nakharar – an Armenian noble title; head of a dynasty/leading family of a region

Catholicos – the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church

-tsi/-etsi/-atsi – ‘a person from’ as in *Sassoontsi* – a person from Sassoon; *Khutetsi* – a person from Khut

To you, my dear child, my joy and comfort, who sometimes in mourning, sometimes in silence, and sometimes in desolation over the sadness of both our lives, inspired your father's feeble pen to write *Toros*, receive this as a gift prompted by you, this work, the voice of sighs of my fatherly heart – Tserents
1879, June 1, Tiflis

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman . . . being with child cried, travailing in birth and pained to be delivered. And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and [to] his throne:
Rev. 12:1-5

Chapter 1 Sassoon

In the year 300 of the Armenian calendar and 851 of our Lord Christ, a severe winter snow blanketed the province of Taron, and Mt. Sassoon was a glacial mass of ice. The weather was fit for neither man nor beast. Who would have thought any living being could survive on those inhospitable rocky climes?

Below, on the plains, a deathly silence engulfed the city of Moush, yet that peak of the Tauros mountains buzzed with activity. The blizzard winds swirled about. Only natives of those mountains could navigate the snowy conditions, sliding and slipping as they wended their way up and down the trails. These mountaineers faced the freezing cold and the summer's heat with the same woolen clothes on their backs and the same goat-skin boots on their feet. They subsisted on barley and more often millet bread, because this was all that would grow in the thin, rocky soil at that altitude. Their homes were far from each other, and for that reason they often did not even understand each other; for although they spoke Armenian, their ways of speaking had diverged from those around them and they needed a translator to be understood. In these mountains, a shepherd's staff was constantly at hand, for protection against wild animals, invaders and the nobles who resided in Moush and expected their every whim to be obeyed without question.

But why was Mt. Khut bustling in the middle of a blizzard? Night had begun to fall, and the Sassoonites were heading to the northern side of the mountain, down toward the plain. There, in front of the church, a group of young men had gathered, staring at the desolate plain below. Many had tears in their eyes, and not just because of the cold. These young men were from the

plains. They had escaped bondage and taken refuge in the mountains. Some were armed, others not.

At that moment, the parish priest came out of the church, and together with another clergyman called his fellow mountaineers with a commanding voice,

“Boys, quickly, light the fires in the lodge, bring our brothers food. Can’t you see, they are plains folk unaccustomed to our frigid conditions. We’ll join you later.”

The other priest stood aside, without a word, glancing toward the plain, but nothing was visible in the windblown snow. Then he turned toward the young men, whose heads hung in dismay as they continued to look at him through the corner of their eyes.

“God is great, and great is the intercession of our Enlightener, my sons,” he said, “Do not be discouraged. Today’s victor, could be tomorrow’s loser. Take heart. Our leaders are to blame for trusting the invader’s promises, foolishly falling into their clutches and subjecting the people to brutal destruction. But God is great. Do not lose heart.”

And half running, half walking, they all followed the highland pastor, who had gone ahead and was leading them to their lodgings. The building was fairly large, half under the ground and half above ground. It had only one door and a hearth, in which a large log was burning brightly and radiating warmth, which was some comfort to the half-frozen young men.

“Generous, hospitable and honorable,” the Sassoons filled the table with their plain barley and millet bread, hot yogurt soup, dry, salty cheese, and mountain honey before their brothers from the plains, once in a while taking a bite themselves to encourage the poor fellows to eat and regain their strength. “Who knows, brothers,” they said, “we may need to work tomorrow, and you’ll need your strength. Eat up, and make yourselves at home.”

“Sure,” said one of the young men from the plains with a bitter laugh, “our homes are now under the open sky, and our families, who knows where they are, in Arabia somewhere, if they are alive at all.”

“If they are alive, at all,” a couple of others echoed, while some wiped their eyes with their fists and others soaked their bread with salty tears.”

At that point, the mood had changed and no one had the appetite to eat any more, so the priest rose and gave the after-dinner blessing, “Bless God who gives us nourishment,” making the sign of the cross. Then he looked at the crowd and saw in the refectory the large number of lances, which glimmered in the dark. The crowd was growing so large that a cloud of human breath was forming.

“Brother village heads, come forward,” said the priest. “Why are you hiding in the dark? It is a day filled with expectation, St. Karapet, Taron, the nakharars, princes, priests and people have lifted their eyes to our Mt. Sassoon. Here is the message from the great monastery.” And he stretched out his hand and showed the people a parchment with double seals. “Even if I could read this document, it would be of no use. You wouldn’t understand its language. but we all know what it means. Today is nothing new. It is the same old story. For more than a hundred years, the horrific Arabs have invaded our fields, overrun them. But for St. Karapet’s blessing and the Enlightener’s strength, not a Christian would remain on the face of this plain and the Armenians’ name would be wiped out of Taron. But Christ’s power is great. Today the Arabs

may come to wreak havoc, taking Armenians captive, but tomorrow the Armenians will attack the Arabs and destroy them all, and take back our countryside. Not one will get away, but what's the point? In less than two years, the invaders will be back again in greater numbers. The Armenians must bide their time, until the knife cuts to the bone. When left with no other choice, even the trembling lamb becomes a lion and the dead come back to life, and the plains will be manured with the blood of the invaders. For a hundred years, I say, and for a hundred fifty to come, if we play this game, neither will they get tired of slaughtering and taking us captive, nor will we relent in repelling them and driving them out. But may God's will be done, until St. Karapet shows his power and we are able to drive out these lawless hordes completely. You know, brothers and sons, that in a demonstration of friendship, our Prince Bagarat went to the Arabs, and even swore an oath to their prophet and laws for a promise of safety, and you know what happened. Because their prophet is false and their laws unjust, they violated his oath. Bagarat, his children, family and their entire entourage was put in chains and carried off to Arabia, and the Arab is now sitting in the Moush palace comfortably, cursing the Enlightener's faith five times a day, right before St. Karapet's eyes and right under his nose. God will not ignore such an act: vengeance is the Lord's. So, until when will we sleep? When have Sassoontsis ever been affected by the cold to such an extent that they should be numb? If the sun's rays have strengthened that swarthy people, then the cold must be a source of strength for the Armenians. Brother village heads, think well and decide what to do, since St. Karapet is in danger."

At the end of the priest's long sermon, a deep murmur rose in the refectory. Each man was talking to his friends about what had happened and what they should do, but no one spoke up. Everyone had an opinion, but no one had the courage to stand up and say what was on his mind.

Finally, a young man with a strong voice rose and said, "Everyone is talking, but no one makes any suggestions about what to do. Where is the village leader Hovnan? Why isn't he speaking up? Doesn't he have an opinion? If he has no opinion, then why are we still standing here? Let's all go home."

"Young man, hold your tongue," scolded an elderly man, "is it your turn to speak?"

"Brother Mko, don't scold him, what he said was correct."

"Where is Hovnan, . . . Hovnan! Hovnan!" forty voices shouted in unison. And then a man of medium height stood up at one end of the hall. His face was like those of all the rest. The sun, wind, heat and cold had struck that face, but his deep piercing eyes sliced like iron and peered into the hearts of those upon whom he fixed his gaze. This round headed, square faced, solidly built man of forty years or so, was called Hovnan.

Hovnan not only had the lance that Sassoontsis always kept at hand, but in plain view, he had a double-edged sword hanging from his belt.

"Speak, Hovnan, tell us what you think," said the people in one voice, and when things quieted down, Hovnan addressed them:

"Mark me well, O people of Khut, if you want to save St. Karapet Church from the Arabs, if you want to avenge Prince Bagarat, do not miss the Feast of St. Sarkis this week. Do not sit back idly. This storm may be the last of this winter, and while these invaders from hell are

numb and frozen and do not venture to leave their firesides, now is the time to attack. Thank God we have strong limbs that can withstand the cold and the heat. So, if you ask when we should attack the city, I say now, in this storm, in the snow. It's four hours from here to Moush and we'll be in the city when the thugs are numb from the cold and deep in their morning sleep. And when we enter the city, let everyone ask his conscience what should be done. This is what I have to say."

Silence reigned upon these words, and not a sound could be heard. Only the good father felt it his duty to speak up.

"Brother Hovnan, do you have information about their operations, their strength, that you are able to speak so boldly?"

"How? It's only been two hours since I got home. From the day Prince Bagarat was taken captive by those invaders, I've had no rest. I've gone everywhere, looked from all angles for a way to free him. With 20-30 stalwart Armenian Christians, I continued to follow them for eight days. But when I saw that there was no hope, all efforts to free him would be in vain and our brave young men would be sacrificed for naught, I changed course and went to St. Arakyal Church to spy on the invaders. I saw how relaxed and careless they were, sitting there. After all, they had turned Taron into a cemetery, and not a soul was left alive. If I had had 500 men at my disposal this morning, not one of those thugs would have gotten away."

"So, boys, what are we waiting for . . . let's go! Hovnan will lead the way. Follow him," one shouted.

"Onward! . . ." a hundred voices said in unison, and there was great commotion in the crowd, some of whom remained outside since they could not even get through the door.

Chapter 2 The People

The fierce snow continued to fall, drifting in the strong winds, making it almost impossible for people to leave their houses. But when nearly a thousand people came out in the middle of the night with their staffs and gathered before Sarasep village, facing Moush, Hovnan could no longer hold back. He started to slide forward on his wooden snow shoes, which had been developed by the mountaineers of these parts in days of old to permit them to walk around without getting stuck in the snow. He had correctly calculated that the wind was at their back, so it was fairly easy for him to make that treacherous journey, especially when destruction of the entire Islamic horde was virtually assured. He relished every hardship, and it was common knowledge in Sassoon that he grew neither tired nor faint of heart for danger never shook him. He dashed forward while everyone else followed behind on foot. Later, as was customary on such journeys through the snow, those at the forefront gradually fell behind, and those from behind gradually moved ahead. From time to time the dismal moon, invisible in the storm, cast its dim glow on the white snow, making dark objects visible though everything was frosted in white. Our hearty band of men quietly proceeded on their journey. Hours passed and morning was nigh when the leader of our group, who never pulled back, stopped short. Everyone behind him wondered what could have happened.

A suspicious mound of snow had caught Hovnan's eye, and his first impulse was to strike with his lance, but he quickly thought better. Instead, he poked the mound with the blunt end of his lance. He felt something hard and heard the cry of human voices, the snorting of horses, and the clanging of weapons. Then, from beneath mound, four men with horses burst forth, scattering the snow into the air.

"Who are you: friends or foes?" asked Hovnan forcefully.

Then the tallest of them let out a laugh and answered,

"If we weren't friends, even though the weather is so pleasant and the rose garden so pretty, would you expect us to be living under this canopy of snow so that you could run into us on your way?"

"This is no time for jokes," said Hovnan, "What business do you have here?"

"Actually, I should ask you the same. What business do you have here? Indeed, I have stronger grounds, since you destroyed our shelter but ironically may have saved us from death. Who knows how long this snow will last . . . But you, my friends, are a fairly large group, so where are you off to in this snowy weather? If I supposed a wedding or some festivity, I probably would not be wrong, for it is common knowledge that the brave people of Sassoon never go anywhere without their weapons."

"Yes, we are going to a wedding, Prince Gurgen," said Hovnan, after carefully inspecting the tall man's face. "So don't waste time and miss out on the fun. Come along and join us."

"Where are you heading, brother?" said the Prince with a serious and deliberate tone.

"Moush."

"Are you close?"

"Just a few steps away. I'm worried about daybreak. We don't want to be detected by Arab invaders."

"I can hardly see you and you're walking right in front of me. How could those invaders see you?"

Hovnan didn't bother to answer, instead starting to walk more quickly, since he figured Gurgen and his men had been caught in the blizzard and had no choice but to huddle together with their horses and to stay warm under the tent as the snow covered it. They had survived unharmed until that point, and were even in good spirits. But now, having been released from their confinement, it was natural that they should follow this group on its foray against the enemies of the Armenian nation and church.

Finally, Hovnan caught sight of the dome of Moush's towering church, which had been built in the center of the town by Prince Bagarat. He waited until the forces had gathered around him and then divided them into three groups. One would enter the city from the south under his lead, the second would circle and attack from the east, and the third would approach from the northwest. And thus, the three groups attacked and entered the city. The clamor of the Sassoonitsis entering the city took the Arabs by surprise. Confronted by imminent danger, they let out a wretched howl. Then cheers arose from the liberated captives, whom the Arabs had

condemned to hard labor hauling water and wood. The governor Yusuf, son of Abuset, was ensconced in Bagarat's palace, happily sheltered from the cold and lounging on a featherbed. He bolted up at the commotion, and still in a stupor, demanded to know what was going on. When he was informed that the wild, blood thirsty mountaineers had surrounded and entered the city, he fled the palace in shock and ran to the Holy Savior Church, where he climbed to the top of the dome and saw that even there he was not safe. He was trembling in fear when a group of Sassoontsis stormed the church and entered the dome. They struck him with blows to the nose and ran him through under his arms and into his lungs, doing him in.

At that moment, Prince Gurgen discovered his relatives, the Artsrunis, who had been taken hostage, and he released them from prison. Having slain their oppressors and dispersed the darkness of those days, the victorious Sassoontsis celebrated, dividing the bounty among themselves. There was general jubilation, and the poor mountaineers, now warmed up and even a bit tipsy on Prince Bagarat's wine, forgot the bounty recovered from the Arabs. Songs filled the air, while a small group of Hovnan's men went to clean up the carnage and put Holy Savior Church in order after the melee. The next morning, the mountaineers ascended to the church, and under its dome, in place of the Arab Yusuf, they stood, offering praise and psalms for the glory of God who granted victory.

The same day, the sun shone clearly and through the blinding glare off the snow, they took everything from Moush to Khut. Hovnan looked at this scene with his arms folded, ever alert, when he suddenly sensed someone silently approaching from behind and he turned his head.

"Brother Hovnan," said Gurgen, "why are you just standing here, when everyone is bustling around?"

"God keep me from this kind of business, Prince," answered Hovnan, "everything they are carrying away belonged to Armenians. What do the barbarians bring when they come to Armenia? Nothing but their dark faces, the preaching of their horrid religion, their deceit, their sword. All that recovered bounty is the property of Armenians of Vaspurakan and Taron. The Sassoontsis have the right to claim it, since their owners no longer exist. But if it were up to me, I'd distribute it among the captives whom we liberated, who have lost everything. Who knows into whose hands their property has fallen or what has become of their wives and children?"

And speaking these words, this stalwart man turned his head aside, hiding the tears which glistened in his eyes but did not stream down, for he had control over everything, even his own tears. At that moment, Gurgen observed this extraordinary figure, a typical Armenian man of the people. Hovnan's face expressed conviction and vigor, and sensing that he was being watched, he fixed his piercing eyes on the prince and perceived in one moment Gurgen's effortless gravity and strength, his youthful vigor, and his confidence bordering on boldness. There was not even a small wrinkle on his face and his big, bright, cheerful eyes spread a sparkle of joy wherever he looked. A handsome, well-built man, his clothes, although plain, had their splendor. His weapons and iron armor had gold and silver ornaments. His horse, attended by a servant, was standing at a distance, a purebred, genuine Armenian steed, whose eye never strayed from his master and whose periodic neighs were a reminder of his presence. The prince, turning to his horse, said, "Just a minute, Tsolak, I'm coming," so the horse would quiet down.

"You're planning to leave, Prince Gurgen?" asked Hovnan, in his indifferent manner.

“Yes, Brother Hovnan,” answered Gurgen, “but the conversation we just had was so important that I cannot leave before I ask you a few things. For now, you Sassoontsis have accomplished this brave feat. But what will you do tomorrow, when the Emir sends Yakub, Ibrahim, and Abdullah instead of Yusuf, and they surround your village of Khut with 150,000 troops? I’ve been thinking since yesterday, and I’m concerned that your joy will turn to grief and this recovered property will end up in Arabia in less than a year.”

“It’s very likely, because our Armenians aren’t like other people.”

“Ah! I’m tired of hearing that ‘Armenians are not united,’ ‘Armenians are self-hating,’ ‘Armenians prefer foreigners,’ ‘Armenians are useless,’ ‘Armenians are fearful,’ and other stereotypes. As if the people saying these things were not themselves Armenians and children of the Armenian nation! As if every other nation, Greeks, Persians, Syrians, Arabs, are united in word and spirit! All over the world, just as people have different facial features, so too they have different interests, positions, and characters. It is foolish to expect something that is unrealistic. I have one thing I want to ask you to do, since you are a man of action as well as intellect. If the Armenians were like other people, tell me, what would they do?”

“That’s a good question and the answer is clear, but it could offend and wound the heart of a noble and brave young prince like you, so I would prefer not to say it.”

“Please, tell me. It is your duty as an Armenian and a Christian.”

“Okay, I will. Armenians, wherever they are, must unite and find solutions to their problems without the noble lords. Only then will the Armenian people stand a chance of salvation.”

The prince was shocked at these unexpected words and he blushed. But trying not to let on, he said,

“What have the lords done to earn this degree of disdain from you? I know, our lords, including myself, have many faults. We count among our nobles more than our share of foolish and unworthy people. But alongside them, there are also personages whose greatness would earn places of honor and glory even in the history of great nations. And if I thought that ridding ourselves of them would be useful for the salvation of the nation, as God is my witness, I would support and commit myself to that grim decision. But I have serious doubts about whether anyone better will come in their place. . . What you suggest already happened in Nakhichevan. The Arab whom you slew today may have been the grandson of Kasam or Abdullah, who burned the Armenian nobility and warriors alive there. All that is missing from this scene is that the Arab’s bonfires be set by Armenian hands. But I was thoughtless and impatient. I should have waited to hear the reasons why you harbor such enmity toward the princes and nobility. After all, you have often been in their service, eaten at their table, and lodged in their homes. And I know how much Bagarat likes you.”

“First, you should be aware, Prince, that I have not set foot in my home in days, just so that I could free Bagarat. You should also be aware that when everyone advised him to respond to the Governor’s summons to avoid provocation, I alone begged him, over and over, not to go and warned him that the Arabs would not keep their word; that for them the spilling of Christian blood is counted honorable, praiseworthy and virtuous; that they would betray him and take him captive, confiscate his estate and double-cross him by deceitful and false promises. But he didn’t

listen. I do not say these things to prove my loyalty or to show my wisdom, but to let you know that I am not hostile toward princes or nobles or lords. I have always been happy and content, living in my mountains, in my village, and would have continued to live that way if Bagarat had not sought me out, made me his liege, and forced me to learn that the nobility is the source of the Armenian misfortune. Yes, it was only after long observation as an eyewitness for twelve years that I came to this conclusion. For when an individual or a class of people take on the leadership of the nation and receive all honor, glory, respect and tribute, there follows a reciprocal duty not merely to protect but also to guide. But has the noble class, the lords and princes, fulfilled that duty? It pains me to say this, but let me tell you how I see it, Gurgen. There was the time when a Persian king killed the Armenian king through a treacherous plot, and the nobles gave their allegiance to the author of this treachery without flinching. And when one of the king's sons survived persecution, grew up, and, with the help of foreigners, drove out the enemy, restoring the country and the people and becoming the nation's second Enlightener, what did the nobles do? They made his life so miserable that he abdicated the throne, then they begged him to come back, only to poison him to death. That's what they did to a good king. Then they installed a useless king, a foolish and undisciplined boy, whom they betrayed into the hands of the Persians, a foreign power of non-believers, and thus put an end to the king and the kingdom. I will not start on the Meruzhans, Vasaks, and Gideons, because of whom the people shed rivers of blood and suffered captivity. And now, we come to our times: what have the nobles done and how have they protected the people? As of now, Vaspurakan gives tributes, offerings and hostages to the Arabs, and Taron has become a sea of blood. Those who were spared the sword are now in the chains of captivity. As if foreign forces did not pose enough of a threat, for over a year, Lord Grigor Siuni and Nahapet Babken Sisakan have been fighting each other."

"You are the heir to two great noble houses, the Artsrunis and the Mamikonians, so you know why Bagarat, with no hope of help from his neighbors, ended up on his knees before the enemy: because Lord Ashot Artsruni did not trust him! And tomorrow that same fate awaits all our princes. They don't act like responsible masters for Armenia in hardship, but rather like bullies, because they can't defend it from outsiders nor from their own blind ambitions. For their petty rivalries, they undermine the entire nation. These brave warriors, pitted against each other, mercilessly spill the blood of their countrymen and destroy their opponents' realms, which are also Armenian. What does being Armenian mean to them, anyway? It is after witnessing such things, brave Prince, that I have uttered such harsh words about our bitter reality. Believe me, I have never been tempted either by envy for greatness or by thirst for power. I simply ache for my people, who sacrifice their lives and souls every day in docile obedience to these temporal and spiritual rulers."

Silence reigned after this long conversation. The man of the people had said his piece, staring at the ground. Likewise, the young nobleman could not raise his eyes. After standing like that for a few moments, as if waking from slumber, something else came to the prince's mind. Without comment, he placed his hand on his heart in a gesture bidding farewell to Hovnan and ordered his horse to be brought around. He mounted Tsolak, and headed east, followed by his entourage of three servants and the freed Artsruni hostages.

Chapter 3 The Magic Mirror

Leaning on his lance, Hovnan looked for a moment at the departing entourage, and said to himself,

“Oh, I guess Sir Gurgen was irritated by my words, taken aback, but all I said was the truth. Yes, he could have responded in all fairness that if the lords and princes are useless and foolish, then the people are even more so for following their whims like sheep. Yes, that would have been a just response to my tirade, but then what? Incite the people against their centuries’ old lords and masters, and now, of all times, with Arabs pressing from one side and Greeks from the other? They have trampled across this poor country, and made a habit of wiping out the Armenian name. Mohammed exhorts his followers to mercilessly and relentlessly persecute Christians, while the Greeks stand back and do nothing to stop abuse toward Armenians. Indeed, the kings of both nations are at war with each other and are destroying Armenia in the process. Yesterday, a certain Theophilos came from one side and went on a rampage, slaughtering and taking prisoners, and today a certain Abujafar sprouted from the other side and wreaked just as much destruction and mayhem, leaving the land in desolation. And as if this were not enough, our lords, instead of forming a common front to address the situation, are foolishly engaged in their petty rivalries and mindless profit, fighting and betraying each other. And you, poor Hovnan, you an Armenian, a Christian, must witness this dismal situation. You stand there, like a stone statue, while your brothers fall in torment, your children forget their Enlightener, your people perish in the turmoil, your wives and daughters are carried away to foreign lands as maids and consorts to these murderous brutes, choking on their cries in chains. This has been the Armenian’s lot for several hundred years. And the clergy, who are the comrades and bedfellows of the lords on their thrones, have the gall to say, ‘These are the wages of our sins.’ But how is it possible for God to see only the Armenians’ sins and not forgive them?”

Muttering to himself, Hovnan began his trek back to the city with a bitter and downcast heart. No, destroying the invaders, liberating the captives, rescuing the hostages, none of these activities brought any joy to his face. He was troubled. He couldn’t get Lord Gurgen’s ominous prediction out of his mind. And from time to time, he couldn’t help thinking of the small entourage and looking in the direction of the road they were taking to Vaspurakan.

Although everyone was still carried away dividing the bounty, he managed to gather them and remind them that they had another mission to accomplish: the liberation of St. Karapet Church. When he mentioned this, they dropped everything, jumped to their feet, and began shouting in thunderous voices, “Onward to St. Karapet, to St. Karapet!” Brandishing their thousands of pikes, they followed Hovnan, who was leading the way with determination. However, distracted by the nagging thought of Gurgen’s entourage, he would from time to time look back into the distance. Sometimes, he looked to the sky, for the sky was beautiful and bright and the sun was radiant like the summer sun, though it provided little warmth. But the warriors of Sassoon took no notice. All that was on their minds was the liberation of St. Karapet Church, which had been seized by the Arabs, and they were striving to get there before nightfall.

Only their leader, Hovnan, looked up to the sky. And when he did, he prayed to God that Lord Gurgen’s prophecy would not come to pass. He couldn’t get those words out of his mind. “Lord God,” he would say, “is it possible that I could become the cause of more Armenian

bloodshed? I, whose only goal has been to help my people, without ever so much as giving a thought to my own interest?” Although troubled by these apprehensions, he did not pull back, and the mountaineers, who held him in high esteem, followed him without hesitation. Hovnan exercised great authority on Mt. Sim, leadership which derived neither from election, nor blood, nor wealth but from his selflessness to which every man could attest. Although favored by Prince Bagarat for many years, he was just as poor or poorer than many of them, yet his generosity in word and deed toward the destitute and defenseless and his unwavering ferocity toward the unjust and oppressive were legendary. On top of these qualities, it is worth mentioning his penchant for reading and writing, which was not common in those trying times and was indeed considered almost supernatural in the mountainous hinterlands. Often, after the priest had administered the healing blessing, a family would call Hovnan to read the Gospel for their ailing relative; it was said that on many occasions, even before Hovnan had finished, there were signs of improvement. In such situations, Hovnan’s spirituality was visible; he would focus his gaze, his generosity showing forth, and he would humbly say that he felt the strength of Christ’s words, “the force has gone out of me (Lk. 8:46).” Indeed, brother Hovnan was a kind of saint for the people of Sassoon. And when work took him away, many of the villagers felt as the Israaelites when Moses would disappear into cloud-covered Mt. Sinai. Even jealous and mean-spirited folks, never in short supply anywhere, did not dare to speak ill of him.

It was nearly sunset when suddenly a group of Arab horsemen appeared, as if to greet the Sassoonis. Upon Hovnan’s signal, the Sassoonis formed into groups of four, spears raised like a thicket, and surrounded the Arab horsemen, blocking their furious advance. Although many were knocked off their horses and the white snow was stained red with blood, one group of horsemen managed to break through the mountaineers’ line in a frenzied retreat, and they swiftly fled Armenia to report that the Arab forces had been defeated and the Chief Amir killed by mountaineers on Mt. Sim.

Thus, St. Karapet Church had been fully liberated, and some of the troops were already heading back, but Hovnan, deep in thought, stayed and entered the church to pray. This upright man had only one wish: that God would protect his poor countrymen from the disastrous fate Gurgun predicted, for his heart was troubled by the thought that he might have put the nation in peril.

Finally, the abbot of the monastery, together with the rest of the monks, offered prayers of gratitude for their savior and led Hovnan and his cohort to the refectory, where they recounted the day’s exploits over supper. Hovnan alone said little. He excused himself on account of fatigue and went to lie down on a pile of grass. He arose after only a few hours’ sleep, full of vigor as if he had done nothing all day.

The bells sounded, calling the monks to prayer. Hovnan was among the first to enter the church and start reciting the Psalms, when suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned his head and saw a tall, withered old man, with a snow-white beard down to his waist and a gray cassock flowing down to his feet. He had a tanned, wrinkled face, and his large, black eyes sparkled with a charismatic sweetness. Without saying a word, he took Hovnan’s hand and led him out into the pale moonlight and then he said, “Hovnan, follow me, if you want to lift the curtain of the future and see the divine plan that is in store for you. Come, do not be afraid.”

“When have I been afraid that I should be afraid now?” said Hovnan, “A Sassoonis warrior is never afraid.”

“But you are a mixture of warrior and priest, a combination of faith and skepticism, a juxtaposition of courage and, if not fear, at least doubt.”

“I am stalwart in my faith. I am a warrior. . .”

“No need to introduce yourself to me. When you were a child, I saw you, as you were leaving here toward the mountains, and my eyes fixed on you and discerned your being and hidden fate, so let’s just keep walking. Don’t you want to know the future? Wasn’t that what you were praying for? Weren’t you worried that you might cause misery to befall Armenia because you attacked the Arab marauders? Isn’t that what’s troubling you?”

The old man’s iron hand held an icy grip on Hovnan’s palm. They kept walking without a word, only the sound of the crunching snow breaking the silence. They went up, and then down, and again up, crossing frozen streams along the way, until they reached a large river, which Hovnan could tell was the Aratsan. They crossed and continued in the faint light of the moon, wandering through hills, crags, gorges, precipices and crevices, along a route that caused even Hovnan to lose his bearings, until they came upon a cave. The old man entered the palpable darkness without slowing his pace. With a tight grip on his hand, the old stranger pulled Hovnan deeper and deeper into the cave. Hovnan, fearlessly thought to himself, “I have been trekking with this old man for more than four hours, yet he shows not the slightest sign of fatigue, his hand doesn’t shiver, nor does it get warm; if it were made of ice, the warmth of my hand would have melted it, whereas his hand has frozen mine.”

“Hovnan, bend down and follow me like this,” said the old man, “and don’t stand up until I tell you to.”

And so, after a short while, the old man instructed him to stand up, and Hovnan felt he could take a deep breath, although deep in the bowels of the earth and without a flicker of natural or artificial light. Then, at last they reached a place where a light could be seen in the distance, and continuing, they entered a large, well-lit hall, where candles on gold covered candelabras and silver lamps gave off flickering light. An amazing statue stood in the middle on a bronze pedestal: a gold depiction of Anahit, the protector of the ancient homeland. On her right, stood Vahagn, and on her left, Astghik. The statues were mounted on a gold-leafed tripod. It was impossible to tell whether this cathedral, for it truly was a cathedral with its main dome and four smaller domes on each side, was under or above ground. All of the walls were decorated with statues and carvings, and a crystal chandelier hung from the main dome, probably brought from some distant land to illuminate the darkness of this pagan place of worship.

This scene so amazed Hovnan that he did not notice when or how his ancient guide had disappeared. He looked around and examined these ancient wonders of art and tradition, whose likeness he had only seen in Constantinople, or was it Baghdad?

And then his train of thought was interrupted by the sound of chanting, and the cathedral became fragrant with incense from Arabia or India. Upon the tripod, there was a censer that emitted an enchanting wisp of smoke, which had a calming and mesmerizing effect on that man of iron nerves. Hovnan looked for a door, but could not find the place where he had entered. He strained his eyes to find the entrance, and then realized that he was in a prison, albeit a splendid prison.

These thoughts had hardly crossed his mind when the hidden doors under the bronze pedestals of Vahagn and Astghik opened, and a procession of chanting pagan priests and priestesses entered in pairs and lined up in front of the statues. With their magnificent gold brocade vestments, they were a marvel to behold, and while Hovnan was transfixed by them, the chief priest and priestess entered through a door under the statue of Anahid, and the chanting ceased. Our mountaineer immediately recognized the chief priest as the old man who had escorted him there, despite his new and glorious robes. The chief priestess was a young, beautiful woman. Upon taking her station before the tripod, a pall came over her face. At that moment, when the chanting had stopped, the soothing, melancholy sounds of reed flutes arose, within moments evoking bliss in even the most reluctant listener. The chief priest then took the priestess' hand and seated her on the golden tripod. Surrounded by the other priests and priestesses, he stood before his divinities with hands outstretched in silent prayer, his lips hardly moving. And within a few moments, right before their eyes, they could see the priestess twitching as she entered a state of enchantment, becoming as pale and still as a marble statue, until her eyes opened with a strange, fixed gaze. Then they brought the chief priest a book, with pages of thin sheets of silver, which he opened to a page on which nothing was written and presented it to the priestess. And with a commanding voice, he said, "You, who are inspired by the gods, read this passage." The music stopped, and silence reigned. Everyone waited with bated breath. Only the sound of the priestess' breathing could be heard. All eyes were upon her. And as she looked at the page, the color of her face, her expression, and her movements changed in agitation, and finally her cold eyes came to life, sparkling. She appeared to be reading voraciously until her eyes became a flood of tears, her clenched jaw opened, and a stream of moans and sighs came forth. At that moment, the chief priest repeated, "You, who are inspired by the gods, read this passage. Read it aloud."

And the priestess, with a sobbing voice, said, "Armenia, your torments and your suffering have not been severe enough, your cities and temples are still standing, the joyful voices of your brides and grooms are still heard, your babies still cry in their cradles, the flames in your hearth still crackle, the smoke still rises from your chimneys. Your sons still stride, heads high, with swords gleaming in their hands and hanging at from their belts, their helmets still shimmer on their heads, and your daughters still don purple necklaces and bracelets. But this will all come to an end. Your cities will be deserted, your towns devastated, your temples in ruins, and your homes abandoned. The sounds of feasts and weddings shall be replaced by wailing and tears, the clanging of your weapons into the jangling of shackles and chains, the tinkling of necklaces and bracelets into the cracking of whips. Yes, your warriors will be taken captive in their own land and in exile, and your daughters, who are the mistresses of their homes, will suffer the bitter fate of refugees. And when you look to the east, you will find enemies, and to the west, you will again find enemies. You will seek help, but instead receive insults and disdain. You will lift your eyes to heaven, and lightning and hail will pour down. Your children will turn on each other and break their mothers' hearts."

Hovnan, arms folded, was dumbstruck. He looked at the color of the woman's face, her eyes, and eventually her tears, and he listened to her otherworldly voice, thinking to himself, "Even if this woman were an actor, she's played her part well. I have not seen her likes even in the Greek plays. And if what she said is true, woe to us and our Armenian nation. What evidence can she adduce for her bizarre prophecy?" At this point, the priestess' head fell to her chest as if she were in a deep sleep, the flutes resumed their mournful melodies, and then there was a

sudden jolt. Even the tripod shook, and she opened her eyes, which were filled with sadness and worry, and pointed a finger at Hovnan. “O you, you want proof from me? Mark well what Artemis has shown me. I see you as a handsome youth, energetic, with a fiery personality and a warm heart, like the moon with a halo around it. But what foolishness, you wretched mountaineer from Khut, how dare you raise your eye, lift your hopes, set your heart on the daughter of the crown prince?”

Hovnan was stunned by these last words, as if a snake had bitten him, and he looked for the door, which he couldn't find.

“Where are you looking? Where are you running off to?” said the priestess, “You wanted proof. Remember those nights, those beautiful spring nights, when you entered the rose garden with a small key in your hand, the night of your first love, whose sweetness is beyond compare? When you heard the words, ‘I love you,’ from the mouth of your beloved, which in later life have become a source of bitterness and torment. Yes, that was the first night, when you, a servant, a peasant, a mountaineer, on bended knee before a noble maid, dared to kiss her hand and imprint the seal of your affection upon it. But the happiness of those surreptitious meetings soon passed. The maid, veiled, was banished to Byzantium in the west to repent, while you were flogged, imprisoned, and then hauled away in the dark of the night to a monastery in the east to do penance for your impudence. For you crossed the line that separates freeman from servants, nobles from peasants, princes from commoners, rich from poor. Yes, you were punished for that transgression, because you dared to love that maid without a thought for her crown, and you got carried away by her beauty and by the kindness in her heart. Forgetting that you were a miserable, lowly creature, you thought you could fly like an eagle in the sun. So, through those years of contemplation confined in the solitude of the fortress-like monastery, all you thought and dreamed about was to soar over those walls and find out what happened to the goddess of your heart.”

Everyone's eyes were fixed on the two of them. The woman was a supernatural creature, her every word like a dart that wounded the poor mountaineer. Each and every thing she said was like a slap to the wounds of his broken heart. Wretched Hovnan, who thought that the injuries in his heart had healed like the physical injuries he had sustained in battle, who withstood so much pain with stoic patience and without so much as a whimper, was now crying from the depths of his soul in a cold sweat. His body had turned into a stone statue and his feet were nailed to the ground. The memory of that first, passionate love, which he thought had long been extinguished by the many and bitter events since that time, was now fanned by this strange breath from embers into a blazing flame. He wanted to cry out and ask about the fate of the goddess of his heart, but his tongue would not obey him and his mouth was parched dry. But the priestess, who could read the poor man's heart, perceived his inner turmoil, and expressed it for him.

“You want to know what she thinks, the one whom nature made for you but whom the brutal laws of man separated from you? Do not worry. The time will come, perhaps in the not-too-distant future, when you will see her again, up close, and you will once again shed tears. But you must strive, until that time, to show and to be an example before this wretched world, that the Armenians are not a people to be pitied nor despised and that their blood is every bit as noble as those who take pride in their lineage, but who do not live up to their name. . . go, the field of battle is wide, and the trials and tribulations terrible, for the day is not far off, when shields shall

be battered, spears splintered, and swords shattered. Go, protector of the people, and may the heavens be with you.”

And then a cloud of fragrant smoke encircled the tripod and all the lights went dark, and Hovnan was overwhelmed and bowled over by the last words. Barely able to breathe, he groped around the thick darkness until he felt a helping hand.

“Come, Hovnan, follow me,” said the familiar voice.

And they began to walk back in the darkness the same way they had entered, the old chief priest leading the way. When they reached the mouth of the cave, moonlight lit the landscape like the sun.

“Go, my son Hovnan, and may the heavens be with you.” And Hovnan walked for a while in a daze. When he came to himself, he recognized where he was, amidst the ruins of Ashtishat. And then he knew that the ancient Armenian cults, 550 years after they had disappeared from the face of the earth, had gone underground and were still active.

Chapter 4 An Artsruni Prince

Let us leave Hovnan in his thoughts, in the midst of the ruins of Astishat, near the tomb of Sahak the Great, while he contemplates his fate and the fate of the nation, trying to discern the path he should take. And let us turn now to Prince Gurgun, whom we saw as a prominent leader during that period and who, surprisingly, has remained largely unknown.

Gurgun was an Artsruni on his father’s side and a Mamikonian on his mother’s. As fate made him the scion of two such noble families and endowed him with all the personal qualities worthy of his ancestry, he was in an awkward position. He did not want to, and indeed could not, respond to Hovnan’s grave allegations against the nobles of the day. Yet, even though he was already quite a distance from the city of Moush, the words of the people’s man still occupied his thoughts. It was as if Hovnan’s last word were still echoing in his ear.

“That man is no ordinary man, and he is right to complain about us . . . but don’t we also have a right to complain? Who among the nobility has not received the blow of a sword, or betrayal, conspiracy, or pillage or injury by his ilk? Hadn’t my father died a violent death at the hands of his fellow Artsrunis, and hadn’t they stolen my entire inheritance? Who can I complain to? These past eight years I have wandered, bereft of my native Vaspurakan. And what have I seen? Everywhere the same brutality among men, the same evil, greed, flattery and cruelty, arrogant in victory and shameless in defeat. Human beings are ultimately quite pathetic creatures. That day, when I saw the valiant general Manuel Mamikonian fleeing from the Byzantine emperor, whose life he had saved, into the embrace of his enemy in order to save his own life, I became so disillusioned with mankind. I felt that even without becoming a miserable ulcerated lump of flesh like Job, every man should curse the womb that bore him. Here I am, a true scion of the Artsruni and Mamikonian dynasties, Gurgun, son of Abubelch, a nobleman from a nakharar family, who enters his own ancestral realm as a captive, a slave, a serf with no place to lay my head. My sword and my horse are the sum total of my estates, my riches, my property. . . Perhaps it is she, the one who awaits me, who is my sole purpose, my only treasure, my life? You, my dear Heggine? Yes, I am more fortunate than Ashot. I would not trade my Heggine for all the glory of the Artsruni throne. I would not trade my small castle at Tortum, with its charming lake, gurgling streams, and orchards, for the spacious Van palace in the realm

of Vaspurakan, with its lake, islands and sprawling forests. Who needs the infighting among unruly princes, their intrigue, or the Arabs' ruthless swords and constant desire to foil Armenian plans? I prefer my rustic Tortum village chiefs, simple Greeks who wouldn't cross you unless you were foolish enough to let them. Yes, with my Heghine, I can be happy anywhere in the world. As I told her in my native land when we parted, 'Either I will die, or I will return and take you away, princess of the Rshtunis, to my country, where we can find respite from cares and woes. We will be out of sight of those princely families, and far from their murderous intrigue and lies, which they didn't hesitate to use in order to dispossess two orphans of their ancestral inheritance.'"

"During my last visit, I asked the great Prince Ashot to return my inheritance, and he said, 'What do you mean? I am well aware that my grandfather committed a great injustice when he killed your father and seized his lands, but if princes returned ill-gotten properties to their rightful owners, they would hardly have a hut with a garden to their names. You are a nobleman, young, brave and strong; serve me faithfully and I will reward you well: you'll have a home, land, an orchard, and if you please me, I'll appoint you lord of a fortress and villages. But if you ever bring up the issue of your inheritance and past wrongs, be forewarned, I will not forgive you. Mark my words.' Such miserly generosity and such lavish threats did not sit well with me. Rather than serve you on those terms, I would rather serve the Emperor, I said to myself, and so I crossed the Aratsan and the Euphrates, just as the two armies were going into battle, and I joined the Byzantines. What a stroke of fortune. The Byzantine general was an Armenian, and a Mamikonian at that. General Manuel was renowned for his valor. He had rescued Emperor Theophilos from captivity and saved his life. When he saw me, I was but a beardless boy of 18, and he asked about my family. He knew my grandfather and my uncle, and he looked me over head to toe, and said, 'Although you are just a youth, you are of Artsruni and Mamikonian stock, so you are sure to be bold. Let's go, my son. You're in luck. The path to glory, the battlefield, is before us. And you'll be fighting for Christ's cross, so that is a blessing.'"

And his thoughts returned to his beloved, "Let us go to the Rshtuni capital, there's no time to lose. I've prepared everything in Tortum to make my Heghine happy and comfortable in her new surroundings. If she loves me as much as I love her, I'm sure she will be happy, even if she is far from the shores of Lake Van."

So, the mounted entourage rode for hours. Prince Gurgen's hushed pensiveness compelled the others to remain silent. The frigid weather chilled their spirits and restrained his cohort's familiar banter. But there was one thing that could break the silence, and that was hunger. When they passed the Monastery of the Apostles, and started down the road to Morkha, the sun began to set, awakening Gurgen from his thoughts.

"Boys," he said, "aren't you hungry? Why didn't you speak up? Are we going the right way? Vahrich, you know these parts well. Where are you? I can't hear your voice. Are your tongue and lips frozen so you can't speak? Aren't you going to eat?"

"My lord," said Vahrich, approaching, "we've done well under these snowy conditions. We will soon reach Norashen and if the weather is with us, tomorrow we'll arrive early in Datvan and from there the journey is easier."

"Is the road from Norashen to Datvan really that long and difficult?"

“It’s neither long nor difficult, my lord, but it is treacherous in the winter. If there is a wind, travelers are doomed, because even a slight wind over the lake raises a wicked storm in the Grgur and Nemrut mountains.”

“When do you expect we’ll reach Norashen?”

“If we push the horses a bit harder, we can arrive before sunset.”

“Well then, press ahead, if you are not too tired nor too hungry.”

“It’s fine for me, but these noble lads are probably tired and hungry, even if they are embarrassed to say so.”

“What do you mean, Vahrich, aren’t they Artsrunis?”

“Yes, they are, my lord, but not every Artsruni is a Gorgen.”

“Princes,” said Gorgen, “what do you say? Isn’t it better if we push the horses a bit harder so that we can reach Norashen in an hour? We can munch on something on horseback, to hold off our hunger, so that we can have a good supper tonight and get some rest. So, Vahrich, give each of the princes a bite to eat so that we can get on our way.”

“I can give them bread and meat, and even a sip of wine. The foolish Arabs destroyed everything, but they forgot the wine. It is a fine wine from Taron. I don’t know whether it is true that St. Karapet drank only this wine before he went to heaven, but I do know that my winesack is full.”

“Let me see that wine.”

“Enjoy, my lord,” said Vahrich, and taking out a large winesack, he handed it to the prince. From his bag, he took out lavash bread and meat, and divided it among the company. Gorgen laughed.

“Your St. Karapet wine is good, but you should have been more careful and filled your winesack to the top.”

“But, my lord, I’m sure I filled it to the top. How could the wine hold up in this freezing weather? It must have condensed.”

With a hearty laugh at this miracle, they set out again and arrived in Norashen before dark. Norashen was a fairly large village at that time, and seeing that they were Armenian nobles, the villagers with traditional Armenian hospitality spared nothing to give the travelers a princely welcome. Needless to say, Vahrich’s winesack was drained dry to the great chagrin of all.

It was still dark when Gorgen roused everyone to continue their journey to Daduan by moonlight. Taking no breaks, they rode around Lake Van. The prince said not a word, nor felt any hunger. Instead, snapping the reins around Tsolak’s neck, he urged the horse along, “Attaboy, Tsolak, you understand me better than most human beings.” And the horse, a truly smart steed, galloped even faster. The rest struggled to keep up, spurring their mounts on, while Vahrich brought up the rear, muttering to himself as he squeezed the last drops from his wine sack.

“God help us, Lord Gurgun. I don’t know what’s gotten into you, or is it what’s gotten into Tsolak? No, if it were Tsolak, you’d have gotten him under control by now. So, it must be you who is hell bent on killing that horse and us as well.”

“Vahrich, you have to talk to him again,” said the others. “We’ve never seen him like this. It’s like he’s possessed. Usually he’s so proper and levelheaded. Until yesterday, everything was fine. Yesterday, he didn’t say much, but he was thinking. Today, he doesn’t even look back to see what’s become of the rest of us. Anyway, Vahrich, let’s catch up with him.”

So, spurring his mount, Vahrich rushed ahead until he and his breathless horse caught up with the prince. But neither Tsolak nor the prince would hear any of it. Tsolak, for all his intelligence, was still a horse and would not tolerate another horse passing him. And his master, encouraging him with another “Attaboy,” sent the steed off to the races. Gurgun surged ahead, and as best Vahrich could tell, he was oblivious to what was ahead of or behind him.

“And this is our prince, the best of men,” said Vahrich, alarmed and exhausted. “He could care less about the ruin of the men and beasts behind him. He’s carried away, and his steed has wings, it can fly; but as for the rest, whoever can’t keep up, that’s his problem . . . So, let him go wherever he wants and I’ll go as my horse takes me.”

And so Vahrich slowed his pace, while Prince Gurgun disappeared in the distance.

Chapter 5 The Lady of Rshtuni

Neither the cold, nor the distance, nor the waning day, nor the coming of nightfall deterred Gurgun on his journey. On his left, sometimes from a distance, sometimes up close, he caught sight of the Sea of Aghtamar, and he pressed forward along the narrow path of packed snow, stopping only to ask the name of the village or to let his horse catch its breath. He rode without rest until he reached the capital of the Rshtuni province. It was near midnight when he jumped off his horse near the gate of the citadel. He banged the iron gate furiously, but the dead silence made clear that they had no intention of opening the gate. Gurgun was not easily discouraged, however. After riding for 24 hours in the snow, rendering Tsolak half-dead, he was not about to turn back from the fortress, when his heart was pounding longingly for Heghine. He had so much to tell her! He raised such a racket, screaming, clanking, shaking the fortress gates, that everyone in the vicinity opened their doors to look out, expecting to see a mob, and were amazed to see only a lone man and his horse in the dim moonlight. At that moment, a voice emerged from the watchtower beside the gate, which was positioned so that the guard could see intruders without being seen.

“Hey, sir, who are you? What do you want? Do you expect to be received as a guest at this hour?”

“I am Gurgun Artsruni, open the door, guardsman,” he yelled from outside.

“Okay, boys, bring a torch! It’s the prince’s brother. Be quick about it,” and a bustle stirred within.

Gurgun was oblivious to the commotion he had caused. His only thought was to enter as soon as possible.

When the gates finally opened, the guards saw before them Gurgen, a tall youth, composed and cheerful, who entered with his horse in tow. He had no entourage, and after giving his greeting, hand to his heart, he calmly headed for the stairs, calling out, "Boys, take good care of my horse. You'll be well rewarded." And without further ado, he bounded up the stairs 2 or 3 at a time, entered the armory, went through the freezing reception hall, and turned to the page holding the lantern behind him.

"Page," he said, "Is everyone asleep? The queen and princess have withdrawn to their chambers, and no one is here?"

"Prince, there is no one here," the youth said, "the watchman will come now. I am new here and I do not know."

In the meantime, Gurgen happily surveyed everything around him, as the page lit the candles and cleaned the dust from the chairs and mats. Another young man came with wood and started a fire in the fireplace. Then the watchman came, a man of medium height with a square beard, and he stood motionless, waiting for the Prince to speak first. Gurgen fixed his eagle eyes upon him.

"Brother Khuren," Gurgen said, "don't you remember me? Do you forget old friends so quickly?"

"Forgive me, Prince," answered Khuren, a bit suspiciously, "The only Gurgen Artsruni we know is the brother of our great Prince Ashot."

"So you have forgotten Abubeji's son Gurgen, who is also an Artsruni and who spent eight years in this fort alongside Mushegh Rshtuni?"

"How could we forget? Of course I remember the young prince," declared Khuren, approaching him with surprise, now smiling. "How much you've changed. My God, the young boy has grown to be a strapping young man, and how handsome, may the Holy Cross protect you. . ."

"Okay, okay, enough, Brother Khuren; yes, I am that boy, but now tell me about Queen Rshtuni and the princess. The page said they've withdrawn to their chambers. But is it not possible to let them know that Gurgen has arrived?"

"It seems you have not heard. Our queen passed away a year and a half ago, God rest her soul."

"And what about the princess?" asked the prince, bolting forward with glistening eyes.

"The princess, you really haven't heard? She was disconsolate, without any protector, and willingly or unwillingly was married off to Prince Movses of Andzev."

"How can this be, Khuren . . . how long has it been?"

"I'll tell you straight, Prince. The poor Princess kept saying, 'Let me stay in my father's house. I have no desire for power or marriage. You can have everything, but leave me alone.' But no one listened. Everyone, from the smallest to the greatest, prevailed upon her. Starting with King Ashot the Great, they gave her advice and the Lord of Andzev pursued her relentlessly with proposal after proposal. They weren't satisfied taking over all of Artsrunik, occupying fort

after fort, nor was it enough to take all the tribute for themselves. They used every angle to marry the princess off to that prince. Only later did we learn why. Movses had given his word and bond that if the princess married him, he would lay no claim upon the Rshtuni inheritance, instead leaving everything for the great prince of the Artsrunis. This was the true reason for his endless pursuit of her hand in marriage. The princess could not move about freely. There were guards, men and women, who kept watch and followed her so she could not escape. Eventually, the poor girl was a virtual captive in her father's own house. She would often spend hours in silence, not uttering a word, at the gazebo on the promontory by the sea, and would stare long and hard at the road. And when evening came, she would release a small sigh and withdraw to her chamber. It was as if she detested all people. She refused to meet anyone. Everyone up to the bishop of Rshtuni preached the same sermon: everything would be fine if she would only marry the Prince of Andzev. The only comfort in all this misery was that a priest from St. Karapet Monastery would show up without notice, once or twice a year, and deliver a letter to the princess. It was a missive of blessing, which would bring joy to her face. Then one day, toward the end of autumn, the same priest delivered a letter and departed. For several days thereafter, the princess was nowhere to be seen and never left her room. When she finally emerged four or five days later, her eyes were sunken, they had an indescribable sadness, and were encircled in an ashen blue. She no longer went to the promontory, and her grave and noble smile was never again seen. Her sweet disposition was replaced with severity and disdain. Even we, her blood relatives, in whose embrace she grew up, could not approach her. She had always exuded kindness, but she exchanged neither a smile nor a word with us. She had been in this state for barely a month, when a magnificent entourage arrived, headed by the prince of Andzev, with all of the princes of Vaspurakan in tow. We were startled when they said they had come to take the Princess as a bride. We were completely unprepared for this. To our amazement, the princess emerged from her chambers, completely veiled. All of her father's servants had assembled. Everyone was in tears. We could not even see her face. Her ladies in waiting came out with gifts on large platters from her own belongings, neatly wrapped and labeled with our names. She distributed them herself. We were sobbing. She said, in a calm and steely voice, 'Don't cry. Remember me in your prayers. God will favor you.' With these words, she mounted her horse and departed as the Rshtuni princely family came to an end. . .” The poor man was choking back tears and ashamed to look at Gurgen, whose face in turns went from pale to red during this long account. Gurgen was devastated. Each word was like an arrow to his heart.

“What a fool I am, prince. You must be tired from your journey. And here I am telling you this sob story, instead of offering you food and drink.”

Khuren exited at just the right time, for Gurgen was stunned. When the door closed, left to himself, he tried to shake off the shock and wondered whether what he had heard could be true. Was this a nightmare? If he entered the inner chambers, might he find her there, ready to greet him?

The pain was unbearable, but he clung to the comforting belief that she loved him with all her heart. But what use? Heghine now belonged to someone else. She had been tricked. There was treachery in this bitter fate. He was beside himself. Deep sighs erupted from his broad chest and his hands were holding his pounding forehead, the veins about to explode. He did not notice that Khuren and his boys had come with food and drink and set the table. He rushed out of the hall. He was suffocating. He opened the door leading to the promontory, put snow on his face, and began beating his head. This seemed to calm him down a bit. When Khuren came to tell him

that supper was ready, the Prince asked to be left alone in a commanding tone to which no one dared object.

There, on that high plateau, Gurgen's sighs were drowned by the roar of the sea. The wintry gusts tossed his long black hair, but that was not enough to cool his rage. He continued to pour snow on his head. The Armenian youth could not stop mulling over this bitter tale.

“So this was the outcome of my eight years of valor and toil? All this was bearable because of the hope of happiness with Heghine, a new life together after these dark years. A new life indeed, a life of bitter sighs and grief! I had dreams of paradise when I entered this hall, and instead my heart was engulfed in the flames of hell. . . But Heghine received all my letters, and in the last I confessed my plan. Did they switch my letter? Altered its contents? Who would have done such a dastardly thing? The Artstrunis, a curse on you all, sons of traitorous Meruzhan. Such insatiable greed for power and expansion you have! But am I not also of Artsruni stock? Doesn't that entitle me to anything? Should I just sit back and take this? No, never. I've got to set things right. My revenge will be fierce and bloody and will shake the foundations of Vaspurakan. Fortresses will fall and cities will go up in flames. Villages will be leveled, and everyone will say, “That's the way the Artsrunis are. Ruthless. No one surpasses them when it comes to mayhem and destruction. When one commits betrayal or treachery, the other does not flinch to respond with fire and sword, poison and plots. But what I am thinking? O my God, take away this pain in my heart. Remove this hatred and vengeance from my soul. I, who to this day recoiled from brutishness, now, when bitter fate and mortal vice have snatched away my happiness and all hope of a good life, should sully my conscience. No, God forbid. It is preferable to bear injustice than to do injustice. So, Gurgen, don't forget all the choices you have made from your childhood until now. It was better for your father to die by the treachery of Ashot's father than to plot fratricide himself. It was better to lose all one's estates and possessions than to leave a legacy of stolen goods . . . still . . . what they did to my Heghine . . . the horror of it . . . it would have been better if they had just killed me with a strike to the heart than to have stolen her from me. Heghine's tears, her torment, are more bitter than any wound I might receive. But Heghine remained faithful to me to the end . . . who knows what they wrote her, no doubt that Gurgen had died . . . poor Heghine, she enshrined me in her heart, and exchanged her body to the prince of Andzev to free the Artsruni realm from rapacious oppression! She left them her entire inheritance and went to bury herself among the rocky pits of Andzev.”

Thus, the hours passed, and Gurgen, absorbed in such thoughts and roaring against the raging seas, gradually came to himself, but the poisoned arrow had already pierced his heart.

So too, Khuren, below, in his quarters, with his wife, children and daughters-in-law, huddled together, wide awake in apprehension of what this new Artsruni's arrival might portend. His wife, who naturally ran the Armenian household and was responsible for the welfare of her children and daughters-in-law, asked her husband,

“Khuren, isn't that Prince Gurgen, Prince Ashot's brother? Who is he to call himself an Artsruni? He is handsome and majestic, a robust young man, but it seems that he presented himself as an Artsruni in order to open the gates of the fortress.”

“No, Seta, the young man, Gurgen, is indeed an Artsruni, just as much as the other Artsrunis. He is the grandnephew of Prince Ashot, whose father killed Gurgen's father Abubelch

in order to take his inheritance. This orphan was the ten-year-old boy Gurgen, whom Atom, our Prince of Rshtuni, a wise and just man, bless his soul, saved from the murderer's hand and brought to his house and raised as his son. Our princess and this boy grew up together as sister and brother. I would often take them on excursions on horseback or by boat. Our queen, after her husband's death, resisted the demands of the Artsrunis, and kept Gurgen here. The queen was a wise woman, 'Sure, they want him back,' she said, "they slew the father with the sword, and now if I give them the boy, they'll poison him. As long as there's still a crumb of bread in the Rustuni house, I'll raise this boy as my child. This was the last wish of my husband on his deathbed.' He lived in this house another six or seven years. He was like a brother to the princess, and I thought they would get married one day, but then he went off to Byzantium, and for the longest time there was no word of him. And then he returned, out of nowhere, a young man, with a lot on his mind. I'm not sure if the heat of the fire went to his head, having suddenly come in from the cold, but in this blizzard, he went up to the promontory, and walking back and forth, and he asked to be left alone for a while."

"In that case, go see how he's doing. Perhaps he'll want to see you now."

"I left Grigor there to wait for the prince and told him to call me when he came in."

Thus, for more than an hour, they reminisced about the past and Gurgen, but the prince did not appear. So Khuren, at his wife's behest, went up and found Gurgen sitting at the table together with Grigor, whom Khuren was about to scold.

"Stop, Brother Khuren, I ordered the boy to join me," said Gurgen, taking hold of Khuren's arm and seating him.

Gurgen himself was amazed that he could eat, after being so upset, but his brawny body after the exhausting journey craved physical sustenance, and with each bite all he could think about was when he would have some time to himself in the coming evenings to tend to his wounded heart. Food had lost its taste and brought him no pleasure. He was quickly sated and rose from the table. After washing, he asked,

"Do the Artsrunis come from time to time to visit their new possessions?"

"It's been four months since the princess left, and no one has come. They entrusted me with the management of the entire fort, gave me the keys, and this is the first time I've opened the doors of the hall and lit the fireplace."

"So they have also entrusted you with the bed chambers, brother Khuren?"

"You should get some sleep, prince. You've certainly earned it," said Khuren, and he took out his key ring and headed for the guest rooms.

"Brother Khuren," said the prince, "you know when I was a child I lived here with the Rshtunis for many years and I had a room. Could I stay tonight in that room?"

"As you wish, Prince, but shortly after you left, the Princess made that her room, and due to our chagrin at her departure, we have not had the heart to clean it or put it in order."

"No problem, Brother Khuren, the memories of my childhood are interwoven with hers. Let's go there and perhaps it will bring back thoughts of happier times."

Khuren stood straight with the torch in his hand. As they entered the room, Gurgen could sense a tasteful women's touch, with no hint of extravagance. The rugs, couches, chairs, chests, and wardrobes were all perfectly selected to please the eye.

"So, Prince, let me go and get you some bedding," said Khuren.

"No, no need," said the prince in a decisive, commanding voice.

Khuren then cast a glance at the smallness of the bed, and Gurgen's ample size, and making a silent calculation in his head, he tilted his head to the side. Lighting two lamps, he placed the small pitcher of water that Grigor had brought on one of the tables.

"Good night," he said and withdrew, leaving the prince to find what melancholy solace he could by spending the night in Heghine's former room.

Now we shall leave the Prince in that chamber with his conflicting emotions, bitter thoughts, and passions, where love, hate, revenge, forgiveness and disdain struggled with the sweet memories of childhood, crashing against each other like waves on the stormy seas. Eventually, nature had its way and Gurgen sank into a deep slumber.

Chapter 6 The Villager

We left our travelers on the road as they were racing to catch up to Gurgen, except for Vahrich, who was weighed down with supplies. He was bringing up the rear of the caravan and eventually, for fear that his horse would collapse, he dismounted and took the horse by its reins and led it slowly on foot. As night fell, he reached the Tukha River, and with the sea to his left he reached Yarzit. A bit chilled, a bit tired, a bit hungry, and a bit thirsty, for the winesack from St. Karapet's was completely dry, he muttered to himself, "If the prince is not here, all the better. That means he's resting somewhere. Who would serve an Artsruni prince? Particularly a prince like this, who was sweet as honey when pleased, and was fire-and-brimstone when angry?" Tired, he paused, "for this night, I am an Artsruni, and by God, I've earned a night's rest in this village. I'm sure I'll find someone I know, a relative or friend, who knows if the prince may be here as well."

Thus, when he reached the village, the dogs came out to greet him, barking and jumping, and he stopped for a moment to consider where to spend the night. After pondering a bit, he decided to drop in on Gevorg, his godfather, and went there straight away.

But when he reached the house and knocked on the door, the door opened by itself. He entered, but there was no one there, to his amazement. "My godfather Gevorg must be out, perhaps he's dead, but what about his sons, his wife, they couldn't all be gone?" So, he decided to go a bit further to his old friend Karapet's house. This time he knocked on the door, and after some time, a man opened it, muttering and complaining.

"Good evening, brother," said Vahrich,

"God bless you, welcome," Karapet answered, and turned, "Boys, bring a light, light a fire," he said. When the torch came and the two old friends recognized each other, they embraced.

“Brother, why didn’t you call for me,” said Karapet.

“I didn’t call out because I wanted to see whether Armenian hospitality had changed after all these years. But I see it is still alive and well. The man of the house still mutters before he opens the door, but bids the guest, ‘Welcome.’ So I’ll say it again, ‘Long live our Armenia and the Armenians, my brother.’ You cross the Euphrates and the Chorokh, with money in your hand but nowhere to rest your head, and on this blessed soil, in the middle of the night, they open their doors to you, and not only their doors, but they venture out and rescue you from the snow and storms. May God show Armenians his favor.”

“May God hear your voice, my brother, but how many years is it that He has seen only our transgressions and poured endless punishment upon our heads? You probably can’t even remember how long you’ve been off in foreign lands. What misery we have have suffered at the hands of these lawless, ruthless invaders. Everywhere they set foot, they bring ruin and destruction. The Byzantines and Persians paled by comparison.”

“Tell me about it. The day before yesterday, I had a run in with them and twisted their necks like a chicken with my own hands.”

“May God give you strength and fortitude in your endeavors.”

“Boys, unload the horses and take them to the stable.”

“But you, brother Karapet, tell me, did any princely folk come your way?”

“We haven’t seen any princely folk, brother.”

“Around noon a majestic young man passed through,” said Karapet’s son, “he stopped in front of the church for a couple of minutes. It seemed as if he was planning to stay, but then he changed his mind, and headed off on his horse. It was a white, dappled horse, a solid mount.”

“That must have been Prince Gurgen. He must have stopped in Mokhraberd.”

“What do you mean, brother, is that possible?”

“For Gurgen, the impossible is possible. You should have seen him in Byzantium. Among the Greek troops he was very popular. Our Armenians have a good reputation in the military. Twenty years ago, the Byzantine emperor was an Artsruni. The Supreme Commander was a Mamikonian. We were in Turtum when we learned of his death. What a valiant, wise old man he was!”

In the meantime, they had lit a fire which illuminated the room, and Vahrich, saying “Thank God,” warmed himself. The master of the house told the boys to bring some food and wine, and to feed the horse.

“But you, Brother,” said Vahrich, “Tell me, how is Fr. Sahak, is he still alive? What is he doing, what about our friends? I see you here all alone. Our godfather Gevorg, and our elder Petros, how are they doing? Are they well?”

Here Vahrich formulated his question with care and tact, to avoid letting on that he had gone to his godfather Gevorg’s house first.

“What are you talking about, Vahrich?” answered Karapet, “Do you have any idea what we’ve gone through the past few years? God has forsaken us. The lawless Arabs attack us. One year, they strike here, another they wreak havoc, slaughter, enslavement, and destruction. Poor Gevorg sold everything he had, he abandoned his home, and went to Baghdad to rescue his wife and twenty-year-old son from captivity, as if he could find them safe and alive in the hands of those barbarians. Half the village is destroyed. We don’t know what would become of us by the spring. It’s a miracle that you have managed to make it back from the Byzantines through Taron. We heard that the Arabs had taken over the entire countryside and those they did not kill, they took captive. It’s been a couple of years since there was any word of you. When I went to Moks a couple of years ago, I asked but they said you were abroad. At least you’re here now. Have some supper and tell us about your journeys, what you’ve seen, and about your Prince Gurgen. What kind of man is he? Will he cure our pains, or cause us more trouble?”

The host and his guest ate and drank, and after they had rested, our friend Vahrich started to tell his convoluted tale. It started when he killed a couple of Kurds in his native Moks. Because they were after him for revenge, he considered it wise to absent himself for a while and set out for Tper. On the road, he met Gurgun. He saw that Gurgun was an innocent, young lad of noble lineage, unaware of the ways of the world, who had set off to seek his fortune in distant lands. In contrast, Vahrich believed himself to be a worldly and tough man, dealing with a naive lad from whom he could reap benefits, and so he decided to become Gurgun’s servant.

“Because I was on the run,” said Vahrich, “I figured I could serve anyone and go anywhere. So, entering the service of this 17-year-old youth, I said to myself, ‘seeing me with him, at first, they would take me for his guard, and later, as his affairs fell into place and he became better off, I would naturally become his steward and become richer than him. Finally, as a strong and seasoned warrior, skilled in the use of weapons, who had slain several Kurds, I would overwhelm this young prince when we were alone and naturally dominate the relationship. Thus, meeting him on the border of Taron, with these intentions, I offered to become his servant. I found his naive questions and comments amusing, especially when he accepted my offer and informed me that he had an aversion to lying and injustice and would not tolerate such things. It took all my strength not to burst out laughing. After all, I was a mature man of thirty. So, I said fine and agreed.’”

“On the third day of our venture, we reached a town on the Euphrates river and spent the night. The next morning, as the prince mounted his horse for the journey, a man from the village came running up and complained that I had tried to kiss a young lass in the village against her will and was only deterred by her cries for help. He also said that I had been discourteous to the older women in the village who came to her defense. When the prince, whom I had taken for a boy, asked me point blank whether the allegations were true, I snickered yes. Who could be afraid of a such a fair youth? Then he said to the villager, ‘Uncle, you can see that my servant cannot tell a lie, and I’ll make sure that he’ll never do this again.’ I got on my horse, and we set off. We crossed the Euphrates, and when evening had fallen and the village where we were going to spend the night was in sight, we reached a spring. There was no one around. The prince dismounted and ordered me sternly to get down. He tied his horse to a tree and told me to do the same. I tethered my horse, but did not see what was coming.

“With his boyish calm, he said, ‘You admitted your wrongdoing this morning, and since I gave my word that you would not do it again, I must punish you.’ It was all I could do to hold in

my laughter, when he took my neck with his left hand using such force that I felt as if I had been hit with a metal sword, and I fell to the ground. He put one knee on my back and began whipping me with his right hand. Unable to move, I begged for mercy. But he continued until I said, sheepishly, 'I'll never do it again.' Then, as he let me go, he started to lecture me with such composure as if nothing had happened. 'You should have said that sooner. I was not going to let you off so easily, but I remembered that you had kept my first order not to lie, so I held back. So watch your step from now on.'"

"I wanted to get up, but my back was numb where he had pressed his knee, and I could not move my neck, which he had crushed in his iron grip. Having been thrashed, I was in no condition to get on the horse. Somehow, I managed to get back on my feet. Meanwhile, the fearsome prince, whom I had mocked as a boy just a quarter hour earlier, untied his horse, and rode to the village. Standing there by the spring, I began to think, perhaps I'd be better off leaving the service of such a stern young man. I didn't want set foot in the village, but I needed to tend to my wounds. It took me an hour to go that 15-minute journey, and when I finally reached the first house on the edge of town, I sought lodging. The Armenian villagers were kind-hearted; when they saw my condition, they understood right away that I had been beaten and called an old lady to fix some salves to tend to my wounds. That salve stung more than the thrashing. When I started to bellow like a cow, I suddenly heard a voice from above, 'Vahrich, aren't you ashamed to yelp like a boy?' I recognized the prince's voice and was really embarrassed. The old woman unflinchingly said, 'Because you wanted to get better quickly, I put on the strongest salve. Tomorrow you can get on your horse and ride away. Everything will be fine, don't worry.' All I could do was lie face down. When they brought me some food, I could barely swallow. So they brought the old woman back, and when she saw my neck, she exclaimed, 'Looks like three people beat you. One held your head, the other stepped on your back, and the third whipped you.' She applied more salve to my throat as I moaned myself to sleep, but awoke all better."

"Lying there, I started to think again, 'Yes, this is a prince and no longer a boy. With this strength, he'll go far. And when he becomes great, he'll naturally reward me out of his largess. So Vahrich, stick with him, don't tell lies. Luckily, I had not lied to that boy . . . that prince . . . he would surely have beaten me to death otherwise. Was kissing a girl such a great crime? During our journey today, I will confront him with this and see what he has to say about the number of injustices. Who would have thought that such a fair young lad would be so strong? Only our Hayk was that strong, and later King Trdat. When he reaches twenty, he'll move mountains. I won't leave this prince, and if the devil tempts me again, I'll just fess up and promise not to do it again and he'll let me go.' So I got up and saw that I could move again. I gave thanks to God and kissed the old woman's hand, as there was no danger of being punished for this."

"She said 'be well,' and we departed. Eight years have passed since that day, and I have never been beaten again or heard a stern word. Knowing his character, I have never crossed him." Later, Vahrich described how the prince had served General Manuel Mamikonian, and how, as the head of a battalion, through the general's intercession, he had been rewarded by the Byzantine Emperor for his service with a large sum of money and Tortum province. General Manuel was fond of him and wanted him to marry one of his daughters, but Prince Gurgun refused, to everyone's surprise. They thought General Manuel would be upset, but he looked favorably upon him just the same until his death. They went to Tortum, where the prince rebuilt

the beautiful castle and constructed a splendid summer home on the lake near a waterfall, importing all the furnishings from the imperial capital.

“Although he does not speak of it himself, it appears that he was engaged to be wed and that his betrothed was not far away, because he rode off like a demon and completely disappeared in the distance. Who knows what became of his horse Tsolak.”

“Princes, ministers, bishops, and priests have it easy, Brother. We need to think about us ordinary people, who are beholden to the princes and priests and thugs. What do you get out of serving that prince, tell me that?”

“As God is my witness, my gratitude to that man is high as the sky. He has taken care of me and my family for years, writing them letters, giving me news about them, caring for me when I was sick, and not only me, but he looks after all of his servants this way.”

“That man is an Artsruni?”

“Yes.”

“Why did he leave Armenia? We need princes like him. He’s the kind with the weight and goodness to protect our country from invaders and marauders and to make a man out of a useless fellow like you!”

“You can say that again, brother Karapet. So, who is your prince now?”

“It’s Ashot, also an Artsruni. He’s not a bad man, but no matter what he did, the country could not have been protected. When the invaders were few, the princes would overrun them and send them back where they came from. But when the enemies are many, the princes retreat to the safety of their forts and castles and watch from above, as these invaders slaughter and take the people captive, pillaging and burning our homes. And when the enemy is gone, they come down from their perches and have the nerve to order the people to work their fields and orchards and rebuild. This is our reality. The Arab invaders just yesterday came through and laid waste to the country. What did the great prince Ashot do? He went to his castle and sent tribute to the Arabs to save his neck. True, he also saved us, but it was too little too late. We’d already been devastated.”

“I tell you, only the Sassoonsis are real men, brother. They managed to do what all the ministers, princes, Artsrunis, and Bagratunis were unable to do. Taron is free of Arabs now.”

“What do you mean, brother? Only two weeks ago, they were here in Taron. They attacked fiercely. We found out and prepared so that we would not be slaughtered like sheep. If we had to die, at least we’d die fighting, we said to ourselves. Then we heard they had disappeared. Those invaders attack from all sides. They deserve a good lesson so that they never return.”

“If it would take a good lesson for them to think better of coming here again, then the Sassoonsis gave it to them three days ago. Not one is left. The governor, general, cavalry, infantry, all of them fell at Moush.”

“Are you kidding, brother?”

“No, I’m not. St. Karapet as my witness, not one is left.”

“How do you know? Who told you?”

“I was there, and we were together. I cut down a few like chickens, as I said a few minutes ago. Weren’t you paying attention?”

At this point, Vahrich recounted the battle from beginning to end. The entire family gathered and listened attentively. When they got to the part where the enemy was vanquished and the governor was struck down, unrestrained cheers arose from the gathering. Karapet sent his sons to run and get the village priest, his neighbors, the relatives and in-laws, and his godfather. Even though it was snowing, they filled the room, and Vahrich told of the brave exploits of the Sassoontsis a second time, with more embellishment. Everyone was captivated. They opened the amphors of wine they’d hidden away, and the bard of the village, with his three-stringed instrument in his hand, sang of the heroic Sassoontis. The celebration continued into the night, and at midnight, everyone bid each other good night and good light and went home, thanking Vahrich heartily for his lively tales were praised in the songs of the bards. Young men stayed behind talking in the snow after the old folk went home. “Brothers, why can’t we do what the Sassoontsis did? When danger comes, instead of running around like chickens looking for a place to hide, why can’t we resist and mount an attack on the enemy? How long are we going to tarnish the Armenian name?” and so on, as they made their way home.

Meanwhile, Vahrich, exhausted from the day’s events and the wine, fell into a deep sleep, and snored up a storm in Karapet’s quiet room. And when morning came, he got on his horse and asked his way through the village to get to the Rshtuni capital where his prince had arrived the evening before. And when he arrived, to his amazement, he learned that the prince had gotten on Tsolak and ridden off without leaving any orders.

So, he turned his horse around and decided to go to Moks to see how his wife and son were doing. Entering Moks, he could see that all was well. Under Commander Smbat Bagratuni, calm and peace reigned throughout the land.

Chapter 7 Lady Hripsime

The city of Berkri in the province of Arberuni on the northeastern shore of Lake Bznuni, now known as Lake Van, was in these times a beautiful city with an impregnable fort on its hilltop.

The fort was the stronghold of the Artsruni princes, who ruled the vast region of Vaspurakan, daily expanding their realm by consolidating smaller adjacent principalities. Even if the word diplomacy had not yet been coined, the concept existed and the Artsrunis from the cradle knew how to snatch away the legacy and authority of their neighbors, gathering it in their own hands. The greater the hardship in Armenia, the greater the Artsrunis’ appetite for expansion. To observers of those times, it was clear that Armenia was on the way to being divided into three realms, under each of the three princely families of the Bagratunis, Artstrunis, and the Siunis. The Mamikonians existed only in name. And we have already seen what had become of the Rshtunis in Vaspurakan. The Amatunis, Untrunis, Gnunis, Kajberunis, Havnunis, Vahevunis, Andzevatsis had become vassals of the Artsruni prince Ashot, a bold and ambitious young man. His mother, Hripsime, well-known for her intelligence, prudence, cleverness and piety, was the sister of the great Bagratuni princes Smbat and Bagarat. Ever since her brother had

been taken prisoner to Bagdad, she was anxious and despondent, for it was unthinkable for such a great prince to be in chains. She was also concerned that he might be forced to renounce his faith. Thus, unbeknownst to her children, she sent a loyal prince, Khosrov of Ake, a resourceful and wise man, with a letter inquiring into the situation and seeking a means of release. Thus, in a fretful state of mind, every day for three months ensconced in her estate in Berkri, she awaited Khosrov's return, but there was no word.

When danger loomed, Lady Hripsime became calm and deliberate. Even at times when men would lose their heads, she would analyze the facts and circumstances and counsel them how best to proceed. And when her husband, the elder Arstsruni, and now her son, Ashot, followed her advice, they steered clear of harm. Having family ties with both the Artsrunis and the Bagratunis, she spared no effort in strengthening their relations. She had plans to draw two great Siuni princes into an alliance and might have succeeded but for the calamitous Arab invasions. When everyone had given up hope and was heading for their strongholds in the mountains, it was she who went in person with gifts and hostages to the Governor Yusuf to persuade him to make peace with her son Ashot. And now, consumed with thoughts of her brother Bagarat, she was informed that Khosrov Akeatsi had returned and was waiting to see her. As she ordered him to enter directly, she assumed a calm disposition and showed no sign of distress, as was her habit.

"Welcome back, Prince Khosrov. Your expression indicates that you have seen Bagarat," she said.

"Yes, my Lady, I have seen him and spoken with him, and there are signs that the harshness of the Emir may soften soon since there are many seeds of unrest in the land. While I was there a plot was uncovered and many people were put to death. There is discontent in various provinces and signs of uprising. We Christians must pay our tribute calmly and patiently. If we revolt, it will kindle their religious fanaticism and they will unite, directing their rage against us."

"I have always advised that we proceed cautiously with such lawless people, and try to gather and unite our leading princes, without agitating them, while governing our country well and strengthening our nation. My advice falls on deaf ears. Our boys don't listen. They just say, 'you're right, ma'am, you're very smart.' But they carry on as usual with their amusements, and act on one out of ten or twenty of my suggestions."

"Everything you say is right, my lady, and Prince Bagarat, despite his arrogance, admitted that 'this misfortune would not have befallen me had I listened to advice of two people. God has created only two brains in Armenia and put one in the head of a woman and the other in a mountaineer.'"

"Who is that mountaineer?" asked the lady, a sharp glare in her eye.

"A certain Sassoontsi, Hovnan."

"Hovnan?"

"How do you know Hovnan, my lady? I had never heard of him before the prince mentioned him."

“How could I not know him? This is one of the thousand stupidities of our arrogant nobles, who look with disdain upon commoners, one and all. They are completely unable to make use of our people’s intelligence, courage or abilities. I’ve told my brothers and my children a thousand times, they should learn from the Arabs, even the Byzantines, who do not dismiss the intellectual or physical capacities of common soldiers or even foreigners, but instead enlist them and honor them. In contrast, our Armenian rulers consider it offensive to view them as people, let alone as equals, even when one of them demonstrates intelligence and ability, instead deeming it their duty to put them down. Don’t these fools see that our Armenian Church has been able to withstand so much persecution and endure internal and external strife, avoiding destruction because it has opened its doors without discrimination to those with intellectual ability, embracing all regardless of their status as peasants, artisans or serfs? It has nurtured them, raised them, and even elevated them to the catholical throne.”

“But you said you know this Hovnan, my lady, so he must be a prominent person.”

“If all you look at are his clothes, his family name, his wealth or his estates, he would be inconsequential. But when you take into account his courage and brains, I do not think you can find ten to match him among all the princes, not only in Vaspurakan but in all of Armenia.”

“But how could a lady of the Artsruni family know such a villager so well? I’m amazed.”

“I first met him before I was a lady of the Artsruni family, only a young princess of the Bagratuni court. I saw him as a youth in my uncle’s palace in Taron. He played with the princes who were his age, resilient and strong, holding his own in physical training and competitions. At the same time, his intellectual development was tended to by the priest who was a teacher and scribe in my uncle’s household. And his prowess was so well known that even when he was 15 or 16 years old, whenever there was trouble, everyone sought his help. When the scribe fell ill, Hovnan took over his station. When there was a confidential message to be conveyed, the assignment was entrusted to Hovnan. When my uncle’s sons were in tight spot, Hovnan would come to the rescue.”

“Then, all of a sudden, one day, without a word, Hovnan disappeared and his name was no longer mentioned. If it had been Hovnan alone, it would not have been such a shock. At the same time, my uncle’s cleverest and favorite daughter, Vaskanush, was confined for life to a convent on the Byzantine border. This surprised everyone but me. I knew that this Bagratuni princess and Hovnan had fallen in love, and I had spotted them on rendezvous a few times in the garden together. I could see that this would come to a bad end, so I urged Vaskanush to forget him and stay away from that young man. With her, this mighty lion was as docile as a young puppy. But the princess, though acknowledging that I was right, found it too hard to abandon her beloved.”

“Thus, when I heard she had been banished, I was not surprised but saddened, especially because after this incident, at my uncle’s behest, I went to see her, and I found out that her father had been punished. The poor father loved me like a child because I looked like her and she was his favorite. But to avoid any harm to his precious family honor, he was ready to sacrifice his daughter, watch her waste away and perish, and even to kill himself. A few days after I went, he took me to the same garden where the princess had her rendezvous. We walked around, and that stern man broke down into tears, and said, ‘I am a wretched father, Hripsime, have pity on me.’ And at that moment, without justifying my friend, I mustered up the courage to ask him to

consider her punishment sufficient. The subdued man turned fierce, his tears dried up, and both eyes like lightning bolts, he yelled, ‘Do not say another word. Only death will release them from their imprisonment. My decision is unalterable.’ I returned home, heartbroken and bitter. My uncle grew weaker by the day, but lived long enough that when word of his death was sent to Vaskanush, and she was invited to come home whenever she wished, her answer was merely, ‘I am happy with my life of spiritual equality, where there is no nobility and where we are all equally God’s creatures.’”

With this, the lady fell silent. But Khosrov could not restrain his curiosity.

“But what happened to Hovnan?”

“Punishment by death might have been an option, but it was foolish to condemn him to life imprisonment. My uncle ordered him confined in the harshest conditions in a monastery in Shirak province, which was under his domain. Two years later he went to see the prisoner with his own eyes to verify that his order had been carried out. Concluding that Hovnan was not sufficiently broken, he condemned him to harsher conditions in a damp and noxious underground cell, locked up like a beast whose sole crime was to love a beautiful, lovable girl, thus violating the rules of social rank that separated a mountaineer from a princess.”

“But God, it seems, provided a way to expose the foolishness of our rules; that dark, damp cell, so like Khor Virap, contained the entrance to an unknown, underground passage through which Hovnan crawled out to freedom one night. And the Bagratuni prince, having foundered in his vengeance and full of hatred, moved to Taron where he died a few years later after burying his two young children. Meanwhile, I heard that Hovnan, had gone to Sassoon eight or ten years later, repatriating to the mountains and his native village, living simply among the peasants. Later, I saw him a couple of times as an invited guest at my brother Prince Bagarat’s house. I learned that whenever the Sassoonites needed to communicate with their prince, they did so through brother Hovnan, who took care of everything. And this meant that whoever wanted anything in Sassoon had to deal with Hovnan. And you, Khosrov, didn’t you bring a letter from my brother?”

“No my lady, it was not possible, since they were guarding the prince closely. When I got there, he was still in double chains, but later they reduced his restrains and took him to a different cell, and an order was given to permit him to see his family from time to time. Demands and threats of forced religious conversion ceased. At that point, I bribed the jailor and was able to see him. He was happy to see me and hoped to be released. He asked me to tell your ladyship that everyone should remain calm to avoid provocation and commotion with these brutal and agitated people.”

“That was my wish as well, and I have consistently given Ashot the same advice and will continue to do so. But you, prince Khosrov, should get some rest, then lose no time. Go to Moks and tell my brother Commander Smbat about your visit with Bagarat.”

“Your wish is my command, my Lady,” said Prince Khosrov, kissing her hand, and just as he left the hall, he stopped in his tracks turned around and reentered the room.

“What is it, Khosrov? What brings you back?” said the Lady getting up from her armchair.

“Look what we have here, my Lady!” responded Khosrov.

And indeed, the Lady was amazed to see Artsruni hostages entering the room single file, with joyful faces offering their greetings to the great lady of the Artsrunis.

“What is this, how have you returned?” said the lady crossly. “How could you do this to us? Don’t you know that your flight will rile up the Arab governor and come back to harm us?”

“But that’s not the case, my Lady; the Governor wishes you long life. As for him, he and his entire army no longer exist. They all perished.”

“What are you saying? Who could have done such a foolish thing?”

“The Sassoontsis.”

“The Sassoontsis?”

“Yes, the Sassoontsis, under the leadership of Hovnan, conquered Moush, slaughtered all the Arabs, killed Governor Yusuf, and freed us. Then they went to attack the group that had captured St. Karapet Church.”

“Was there anyone else leading the Sassoontsis?”

“Prince Gurgen was there as well, but he was not in charge.”

“Prince Gurgen Artsruni, my son? He got mixed up in such foolishness?”

“No, my lady, not our Price Gurgen. This is another Prince Gurgen. We have not seen him, but he is also an Artsruni.”

And the youths all began to chatter with each other at these words, while the lady, who had turned pale and was still standing in outrage, sat down, and said, as if speaking to herself, “My God, what a mess, what a catastrophe,” and then, pointing to one of the young men, she asked, “Prince Grigor, come closer and only you answer. Were you able to find out who that Gurgen Artsruni is?”

“Yes, my lady,” the young prince answered. “I asked his servant, and found out that they had just returned from Byzantium, and that he is an Artsruni on his father’s side and a Mamikonian on his mother’s side. He is handsome, imposing, with black eyes, black eyebrows, a black beard, approximately 25 to 30 years old. The Emperor of Byzantium looked with great favor upon this young man for his bravery, rewarded him with land, and offered his daughter to him in marriage, but he declined and returned to his homeland.”

“Did you find out his father’s name?”

“Yes, my lady, he was one of the sons of Abubelch.”

“All that was missing in this lovely mess was that,” said the lady in dejection. Then, turning to Khosrov, she asked, “Did this Gurgen have troops with him?”

“No, my lady, just two young guards and a servant.”

“Did the Sassoontsis obey him?”

“No, my lady, he didn’t get mixed up in this operation and except for Hovnan, he did not speak with anyone. He only traveled with us for one day, and barely spoke a couple of words. On the second morning, he only said ‘good morning,’ got on his horse and rode off. We thought we would catch up with him, but he had vanished, spending only one night in Vostan to rest.”

“Very well, I understand, go get some rest, boys,” said the lady. And when they had left, she said, “You see, Khosrov, what this man has done! He just did the very thing we feared! Where this will lead us, God only knows. And having Abubelch’s son show up in the midst of this, is that not divine retribution? How many times I begged the prince to spare his blood relative Abubelch’s life. But what weight does a woman’s voice have? Who pays attention to a woman’s advice? Instead, he unconscionably spilled that man’s blood, and compounding wrongs, my son Ashot, following in his father’s footsteps, snatched away that orphaned boy’s inheritance. Now my mind is unsettled. That young man, Gurgun, having grown up amid war and having witnessed only destruction, would he not become a tool for Arabs to use against us? Just what we needed, a righteous adversary, a vengeful rebel, dear God.”

“What do you mean, my lady? After all, that young man has Artsruni blood running in his veins. He would not act so spitefully.”

“What foolish words to utter, Khosrov. Such words bring back even more terrible memories. Have you forgotten the betrayer, apostate, and conspirator Merujan from the time of Nerses the Great, who was slain by a Bagratuni knight with a skewer? Have you forgotten the apostate conspirator Shavasp Artsruni, who was struck down by Vartan the Great’s sword, or the second Meruzhan, who is almost our contemporary and who converted to Islam and vanished? I have reason to distrust the Artsrunis who do not produce any ordinary, moderate people, Khosrov; they are either very good or they are the most lawless invaders.”

After uttering these words, Lady Hripsime rose to her feet. Although she was over 50 years old, she was still of beautiful stature, vigorous and noble in demeanor, eliciting admiration and respect from everyone. Khosrov made no response, and silenced reigned until the Lady awoke as if from slumber.

“Khosrov, go, get some rest. If I need anything, I’ll let you know,” she said, and when Khosrov left, she entered the chapel adjacent to her chambers to pray.

Perhaps out of all the people in that house, this vigilant woman alone had the prescience to sense the coming storm, and because she had no faith in people and was particularly suspicious and doubtful, she fell to her knees before God and bewailed the loss of her country.

In the meantime, Prince Ashot and his brothers Gurgun and Grigor were off hunting, amusing themselves with games and engaging in debauchery; when they learned of the incident and saw the hostages, not only did they not react with their mother’s concerns and suspicions, but they nonchalantly redoubled their merriment. And they completely dismissed Gurgun’s appearance on the scene. They had seen him as a youngster and they could not imagine that this boy had become a robust young man.

What a great gap between the world of the ruling class and poor Hovnan. During this period, the mountaineer had gathered his brothers and taught them how to use the weapons taken from the Arabs. He did not allow the stores from Moush to be scattered here and there, but instead had them taken for safe keeping to an impregnable place in Khuyt; he undertook to

reinforce the vulnerable villages on the mountain, and in all these operations, he neither issued orders nor acted like a prince, but instead inspired the rest to join in the work by setting a good example and taking the initiative.

Chapter 8 The Fortress of Kangvar

At this juncture, at the Artsruni estate in Berkri, Lady Hripsime was baring her aching soul before God while Prince Ashot was carrying on with his usual revelry and carousing. Hovnan was trying to reinforce the fortifications in his native mountains while Vahrich was off with his wife and children enjoying himself. In the foothills of Varag, a lone horseman wrapped in a broad, gray cloak, which covered his weapons and protected him from the frost, was making his way to Khoy immersed deep in thought. Although there was neither a church nor an altar before him, only the cloudy sky and the snow-covered countryside, this man would from time to time raise his head to the sky and release a great sigh from his broad chest, sure that no one could hear the sound of his despondent heart. That man was Gurgun, for whom the air in Vaspurakan had become unbearable. So he decided to remain not a minute longer in the country that was the source of his sorrow. Although there was no cure for his wounded heart and no physical remedy, he nevertheless said to himself, "If only I could see her again, offer her my broken heart and hear her once more, then I could leave this country, go to Tortum, and instead of the happiness I had dreamt of, I could live a bleak life, away from the land that bore me, far from the person without whom my life would be eternal torment."

Thus, even though the journey was not pleasant, for a burned heart it was preferable to be alone and away from people. Whenever Gurgun reached a village, he would hurry to leave in order to avoid having to speak, answer questions, or deal with people. After spending two or three nights in obscure villages, as the road forked on his approach to Khoy, instead of heading east he turned north and entered the mountainous realm of Andzev.

His heart's yearning to see Heghine one more time was as strong as his resolve to avoid her lest he compound her misfortune, so his mind wavered, but the force of his love prevailed and drew him toward the north, toward Kangvar Fortress. As big-hearted and high-minded as he was, he could not resist the urge to find out about this Prince Mushegh Andzevatsi, since his beloved Heghine's life was now entwined with his.

When he approached Hogi Monastery, which was not far from Kangvar, Gurgun could see the towers of the fortress on the horizon. This daunting fort in the mountains of Andzev was known to be impregnable: first one had to pass through cave after cave to reach the foot of the cliff at its base, and then, on top of the cliff there were walls and towers, which no military strike could even reach. And finally, there was only one path up to the top of the cliff, and numerous fortifications along the way to stop any intruders.

From this position, Gurgun looked at the fort, his heart pounding. Neither the height, nor the fortifications deterred him, since Heghine lived there, though having a private conversation with her might prove more difficult than getting there.

Lost in thought, he could not decide which direction to go, straight to the fort, or to the monastery, or to one of the villages hidden in the mountains, when suddenly he saw two men in flight running in his direction, yelling, "Get out of here, brother, get out." One passed, but as the

other went by, Gurgen caught him by the arm and stopped him in his tracks like a statue. “Brother, you broke my arm,” he cried. Gurgen easing his grip, said, “Man, what are you fleeing, tell me.”

“We’re running away because a band of Kurdish outlaws ambushed us and wounded our prince, and they are coming this way, and if they do not kill us and you too, they will take us prisoner.” And the man again tried to break away.

But Gurgen squeezed his arm even harder.

“Man,” he said, “tell me the name of the prince, if you want me to let you go.”

“Ouch, you broke my arm. Mushegh, his name is Mushegh, the prince of Andzev . . . look out the outlaws are coming.”

At that moment, Gurgen let the man go, “Ok, then run away, you good-for-nothing,” he said, and he sized up the band of marauders on horseback, who were heading toward him. There were eighteen or twenty, armed with spears, and from their appearance and actions, it was clear that they were the forces of the Arab Amir of Khoy, who besieging the fortress of Kangvar, planned to take Mushegh hostage and exchange him for control of the fort. Gurgen flung off his cloak, and with a small shield in his left hand and long sword in his right, he shouted, “Well, show me what you’ve got, Tsolak,” and pulling the reins, man and horse stormed off to attack the band that was approaching them. His fearsome sword flashed side to side, like a dazzling bolt of lightning, and the dead and wounded staggered to the left and right. In barely a few minutes, there was no one left standing. Anyone who was able to stand had fled. There was only one person remaining on his horse, his hands tied and his feet bound with chains under the animal’s belly. That was Prince Mushegh Andzevatsi, who was in a daze. Without saying a word, Prince Gurgen approached, dismounted, and severed the ropes on his hands with a stroke of his double-edged sword. After examining the chains, he determined that the lock would require a key or a blacksmith to open it. At this point, people came running from every direction, some armed, some unarmed, gathering with great concern and excitement around the liberated prince. One brought the prince’s hat, which had been recovered, another his sword, and yet others attended to the wound on his right shoulder. As for Prince Gurgen, it was as if he were a mere spectator, until Mushegh came to his senses.

“Brave warrior,” Mushegh said, “pray, tell me your name, so that I know to whom I am indebted for my freedom and can give you a worthy reward.”

“My name is Suren Shaghgumetsi,” said Gurgen.

“Very well, lord Suren, if you please, come stay at my fortress. You shall receive rewards for your service. Let’s go.”

And Gurgen, deeming these words unworthy of a response, looked Mushegh over. He seemed like a simple man, of average physical and mental ability, neither loved nor hated by his people, forty-something years old, but worn out from revelry, drunkenness and dissolution, the epitome of a prince in those days. Silently following the crowd, who walked at a respectful distance from Tsolak on all sides, Gurgen thought to himself, “How pitiful, a thousand times over, for my poor Haghine!” Those nearby whispered among themselves, “This is the man who singlehandedly dispatched 20 to 30 men and saved our prince.” And those coming up from

behind, in louder voices, recounted how there were more than a hundred Kurds, who fled the scene. Meanwhile, the man who warned Gurgen to run away was showing off the bruise on his arm.

“Look,” he said, “these are the places where his fingers pressed into my arm and crushed my bones. It is no surprise that such a mighty man could perform such a feat.”

There were four dead and three wounded, who may as well have been dead because they had no chance of recovery, not only because of their wounds, but because in addition to remaining untreated in the snow, they were trampled underfoot by the procession. This was common practice in those times, and is still followed not only in Asia to this day, but even in some parts of civilized Europe.

They left the monastery behind and headed to the fortress, where the people had already heard about the day’s exploits and were descending in groups to meet the returning entourage, amidst whom Mushegh stood out because his loyal subjects had placed his hat on his head. Gurgen followed from a bit of a distance, also surrounded by a crowd, for people always glorify might and victory.

When they reached the citadel atop Mount Kangvar, which was the spacious princely residence, the crowd gradually receded and dispersed. The freed captives entered the gates to the clip-clap of horse hooves. Once inside, the prince ordered the chains on his feet to be broken, since no key could be found, and from there he headed toward the palace to tend to his wounds.

Gurgen first looked after his horse Tsolak, since he figured that the horse would be more agitated in the prince’s palace than in a villager’s stable. While tending to the needs of his sole living companion, he paid no attention to the treacherous cliffs and rocky shores that constituted the Andzev province. His mind was elsewhere, with Heghine. Stifling his sighs, he entered the hall which had been the armory and reception hall of the princes of Andzev for centuries, but because it was winter, they showed him to a warmer room. There, he left his weapons and immersed himself in melancholy thoughts, not noticing that behind the curtain every young servant and maid had gathered to catch a glimpse of the wondrous warrior.

At that point, Mushegh was groaning, not because of his wounds but because of their treatment. Although his injuries were not serious, the top of the shoulder is very sensitive and the old woman who was treating him (it should be noted that old women handled most medical care in Armenia at the time) was sticking her needle into the prince’s skin without any delicacy and sewing up his wounds, applying a salve of vintage wine, honey, and various herbs while repeating the ritual saying, “God willing this will help.”

Mushegh sighed with a sour face, and with tears in his eyes, glared and repeated, “Old woman, make it quick.” The lady of Andzev, having brought and collected all the necessary items, stood there like a marble statue. The pathetic prince would sometimes lift his eyes to look at her for even a shred of pity, but she was unmoved and to a perceptive eye it was clear that her heart was dead. She had an air of gravity about her. The first thing that struck anyone who met her was her eyes, whose depth and long eyelashes hid their hue and made them appear black, though their real color was a deep purple. Her fair forehead was crowned with jet black hair, her face was pale white, and it seemed she never wore a smile. Everyone who saw this grave woman respected and admired her, but few people liked her, because she was impervious to any kind of

friendship or familiarity. Now she stood before the prince with the same indifference as she displayed when she heard about his capture and ordered everyone to take up arms and pursue the outlaws. With the same impassivity and distraction, she received the account of the foreigner's bravery, but expressed no interest in seeing him.

After the prince had calmed down and rested a bit, he began to speak.

"My lady," he said, "we have a benefactor here. Even if he is not a notable person, his service has been so great that it is unthinkable not to invite him to join us for dinner. Thus, as he was my rescuer, I should receive him as a brother and equal, and invite him in."

"It is entirely up to you, Prince. You are lord and master."

"It is amazing that you and I have been in this fortress these past several months, and I have yet to hear you even inadvertently express your own opinion. When a woman is this impassive, she clearly does not have any secret hidden in her heart, but is just extremely aloof. I know full well that you entered this marriage against your will as a victim of circumstance."

"Why did you stop? Do continue," said the lady with the same unflappable manner and unwavering demeanor.

"Why should I continue? Out of the countless women I have known, I never encountered such a cold fish, devoid of cheer or sadness. Neither you nor I are to blame, but rather the Artsrunis."

"If you find no fault with me, then I have no interest in the faults of others . . ."

"Where are you going? Please invite this man in, and arrange for a table to be set. There is no human decency left in this world."

Once again the lady went out, called the maids, and gave the necessary orders. And a few moments later, Gurgen came before the prince, who was seated in the corner.

"Please come in, Lord Suren, and be seated. Forgive me for leaving you by yourself so long. We were busy tending to my wounds. What brings you to these parts? In such treacherous times, one must have your strength and bravery to travel this far without any guards, servants, or travel companions."

To these questions, Gurgen gave abrupt answers while attentively surveying the room, its corners, curtains, and furniture. The table was set. The Prince invited the lady to eat, but she was indisposed. Mushegh himself had no appetite, and he was amazed that Gurgen hardly ate a thing before excusing himself. The prince went to his chambers, and thus all the inhabitants of Kangvar had gone to bed. Princess Heghine, following the old woman's instructions, brought juice prepared to help Mushegh sleep; again he muttered, "old woman," emptied the glass, and fell into a deep slumber.

Heghine then called the one and only maid whom she had brought with her from Rshtunik, not only because of her loyalty, but also because she was discreet, and ordered her to report the prince's movements, while she headed unabashedly for Gurgen's room. When she opened the door, it appeared that he had been sitting by the fireplace, looking at the flames in deep thought.

As Heghine stood before him, a frightful shiver went through Gurgun's body and he stood up. But when he stepped forward, she pulled back.

"Don't come near me," she said, "only one man has the right to approach me, and those who do not keep their word, who deceive and betray orphans and the defenseless, such people are only worthy of disdain."

The Prince stopped in his tracks, and containing his emotions, said, "My poor Heghine, they have deceived you, and you despaired too soon. Now you have put us both in this desperate situation."

"What do you mean? Isn't this your letter?" Saying this, she flung the paper angrily at his face.

The prince scrutinized the document, scanning it from top to bottom, and then started to read it aloud:

"Most noble lady of the Rshtunis,

I would like to write a letter that satisfies both your and my desires, but Providence has decided otherwise. By the time you receive this letter, I will already be married to the daughter of one of the great courtiers of the Emperor. I wish you good fortune. The lady of the Rshtunis will not lack for suitors. As for me, I find myself in such circumstances that by accepting this marriage, I save my own life.

Gurgun Artsruni Abubelch."

"A curse on the hand of the person who forged this letter. The handwriting is not mine, nor is the signature, nor the seal. The content is not mine either, for neither snow, nor cold, nor blizzards, nor hordes of enemies could prevent me from reaching my Heghine. For eight years, I sweat blood and tears, undertook every kind of campaign, accomplished the impossible, all so that I could build a home for you and me to replace my lost inheritance. I sought a small, scenic place with a lake and a stream so that my Heghine could take consolation in some semblance of home in those far off lands, and having accomplished this, I considered myself happy, until everything collapsed."

"This letter is not yours?"

"They really tried to make it match my handwriting and seal, but look and compare the two seals."

He took his seal from his pocket and pressed it on a piece of paper to show Heghine so she could compare. And she, examining it with her sharp eye, quickly saw it was a fake, and her demeanor changed completely. Rubbing her eyes, that tough woman broke down in tears.

"Tell me, Heghine, who do you think was behind this? At least punishing him would be some consolation."

"What good will it do to punish the villain? Can we undo this mess?" the wretched woman said despairingly, staggering backward to sit on the couch, since her knees would no longer hold her. And Gurgun knelt on the ground before her feet in deep thought.

After a long silence, he said, “These tears reveal that you still love me, Heghine. God is just, his judgment will eventually be done and these villains will be punished. I give you my word to remain faithful. I have no regrets for having saved this man today. But the villain who switched my letter promising to see you with that forgery, I will break his hand, that’s my duty.”

“You are more fortunate, since you are free and have no obligation to remain beside a person whom you neither love nor have affection for. Whereas I . . .”

“Yes, you are right, your situation is more bitter, for me everything is wide open. But still, a lot has changed for me as well. When I would attack the enemy, when whole armies trembled before my sword and would flee in the commotion of battle, the Emperor and Commander Manuel would look upon me with joyful eyes and say, ‘Long live our eagle.’ But I could barely notice their presence, since my mind was always with you. Everything was easy for me because I did it to be worthy of you and for your happiness, and that gave me strength. And now, there is nothing left for me. Everything, both physical and spiritual, has lost its sweetness.”

“Have you already forgotten how you rescued Mushegh today?”

“It is the duty of any Armenian to rescue an Armenian prince from those invaders who oppress our nation.”

“So, my noble Gurgen, my dear Gurgen, you live for your nation, live for your people, whose honor, life, and lands have for so long been reviled and trampled and continue to be abused. I remember well every incident, every plea, when people would come to my mother, the Lady Rshtuni, bemoaning the injustice they had suffered. That poor, saintly woman would go out and comfort those unfortunate villagers herself because she could do nothing to protect them from the violence of these barbarians and because those whose duty it was to do justice instead shamelessly committed every manner of wrongdoing against her. So, go my one and only beloved, go and be brave, be just, defend the dispossessed, be a father to orphans and a consolation to widows. God will reward you and when I hear them blessing your name, when I know that the Gurgen in my heart has been a protector and father to the people, then I will find comfort for my aching, wounded heart.”

“The desire of your heart is truly blessed, my angel. Before the year is out, you will hear my name, for although God protects us, I have a terrible premonition that this spring will be dreadful and Armenia will become a sea of blood.”

“May God Himself protect this woeful land,” Heghine said as she stood and prepared to leave.

“So this will be our first and last visit after eight years?” said Gurgen.

“Yes, this is God’s will. May that very God help you.”

“Be well, my angel,” said Gurgen, wrapping her in his embrace and showering her fair head with kisses.

Heghine was impassive and motionless, like a statue.

“May God protect you, my only love,” she said and departed.

The next morning, when the inhabitants of Kangvar, great and small, arose, they looked for Shaghgumetsi Suren, but he was nowhere to be found, and they were bewildered that after doing such a great deed, he had disappeared without receiving his reward from the prince.

Chapter 9 Ghe-vond! Ghe-vond!

Although Gurgen went away disappointed, things had nevertheless changed. A great weight had been lifted from his heart. Heghine's parting words had made an impression on him. Thus, he set out on his slow and difficult journey, stopping in whatever poor village where he could find lodging, casually talking with the villagers, who at first looked at him with suspicion, but later befriended him and helped him with his things. And so, for days and sometimes weeks, he continued his slow journey, bypassing the castles along the way, stopping only in simple villages where he was content to share barley bread and yogurt. He passed through Artaz province and through the expansive plain of Avarayr, where his renowned ancestor Vartan was enshrined in the Armenian heart. He saw the peak of Ararat in the distance, where according to tradition Noah's Ark had landed. Immersed in these thoughts, he approached his destination, the province of Bagrevand, where his uncle Prince Kurdik ruled. The weather had already started to warm up, the snow was melting, and the brooks and streams had merged into one great river. Suddenly, he saw a man a short distance ahead, his head down, proceeding with a spear in hand and firm, steady steps. His gait and movements reminded Gurgen of another extraordinary man, whom he could not recall, so he rode on to catch up with the man.

"Is that you, brother Hovnan?" he said.

Hovnan, without lifting his head, answered, "Yes, Prince Gurgen, it's me, Hovnan."

"Without lifting your head, did you recognize my voice?"

"I've been watching you for the past hour, as you descended from the top of that hill and crossed the field."

"Where are you coming from?"

"Taron."

"But why are your answers so curt? Should I stop talking?"

"Why, prince, when have you ever addressed me and I failed to answer?"

"I was just about to ask you where you're off to."

"Okay, I'll tell you. I'm going to see the Catholicos of All Armenians."

"You must have a proposal for him."

"Of course, and I suppose you want to know what it is. I'm going to propose that he issue a decree throughout all Armenia, sending emissaries and preachers everywhere, that the time for a holy war is upon us, and any Armenian who is able to bear arms, but refuses to do, anyone that can give our soldiers shelter and support, who has a horse or weapon he does not use, but does not contribute it, should be excommunicated. Finally, I will urge him to immediately move the

seat of the Church to St. Karapet Monastery together with his clerical retinue, and if the princes do not act, he should raise his voice so the people will take action.”

“So that’s your mission. Well, good for you, Hovnan. You are a very honorable Armenian, and no doubt there is no more patriotic person in all Armenia than you.”

“So, prince, you agree with this plan.”

“With all my heart and mind.”

“And do you think the Catholicos will accept my proposal?”

“I doubt it, knowing the weakness and indifference of our churchmen, but I do not think that they will reject it. Rather they will make promises and show approval.”

At this point, Gurgen dismounted and the two men walked as they talked, Tsolak meandering slowly behind his master.

Then Hovnan, completely out of character, inquired, “And where are you going, Prince?”

“I am going to Bagrevand, to see my maternal uncle, Prince Kurdik.”

“That man may be a Mamikonian, but he is no Vartan.”

“You find me one Ghevond, and I’ll find you ten Vartans.”

“To tell you the truth, if I find a Ghevond, I’d have no need to look for a Vartan.”

Prince Gurgen quickly recalled Hovnan’s critical attitude toward the noble class, and without giving an answer, he continued his journey until nightfall and until a village appeared on the horizon. When he turned toward the road to the village, his companion did not leave the main highway, continuing his journey.

“Brother Hovnan, perhaps you want to keep traveling to avoid spending the night in the same house and village with a noble.”

“There is another village ahead, barely an hour away. I wanted to get to Sassoon as soon as possible so I didn’t slow down. Nevertheless, so that you, Prince Gurgen, do not get the wrong impression about me, I will accompany you and spend the night in this village.”

A few minutes later, the two companions were warming themselves before a fire, engaged in brisk conversation and finding many points of agreement. They were both certain that the spring would bring turbulence to Armenia, but that Armenia could fend off any attack if it were united in solidarity, which would be possible only if the church leadership took action. They also agreed that they should not wait until the barbarians attacked and reached the country’s heartland, but should act strategically and ward off the enemy on the border, as the Armenians had done several years ago during the Aghdznî war, defeating the Arabs. They further concurred that whoever had dealings with the enemy should be considered an enemy of the country, whom everyone had a right to eliminate by any possible means, so long as the enemy was encamped within the borders of Armenia.

After this long conversation, the two exchanged promises to come to each other’s aid and keep each other informed, whether in victory or defeat. And they spent that night in the remote

village of Bagrevand, setting out the next day to Blur, where the prince was going to meet his uncle. Hovnan continued his journey crossing the Arax River and heading toward Dvin, where he learned that Catholicos Hovhannes had convened an assembly of prominent nobles; thus he picked up his pace to reach them before they adjourned.

Although Hovnan was a very serious man, hardened by long years of trials and tribulations, when he entered Dvin and approached the Catholical See, the mountaineer seemed thoroughly insignificant compared to the entourages of nobles, guards and horsemen arrayed around the square. Just to get through the gates took a great deal of coaxing and cajoling with the thickheaded gatekeepers, and to enter the main hall involved the same exhausting rigmarole and more artful pleading.

But to be fair, the assembly in the main hall was, by all appearances, quite serious. In addition to the Catholicos, the participants included Armenian Commander-in-Chief Smbat Bagratuni and his son, Prince Ashot, as well as two other representatives of the House of the Bagratunis, Ashot and Davit, the sons of Bagarat, who was being held hostage in Baghdad. The House of the Artsrunis of Vaspurakan was represented by Prince Gurgen, the brother of the great prince Ashot. From the House of Siunik nobles, there was the great prince Vasak and his vassals. Also in attendance were Prince Ktrich of Gardman, Prince Yesayi of Aghvank, Prince Stepanos of Utik, Prince Atrnerseh Lord of Khachen and other notable princes and nobles, plus archbishops and bishops from the various provinces of Armenia.

With Commander Smpat on his right and Vasak Siuni to his left, Catholicos Hovhannes had launched into a long harangue the highlight of which was that “God was angry over the wrongdoings and sins of the people of Armenia and that he had poured out his displeasure on the Armenian nation; thus, we must repent and confess our sins and without delay dispatch an emissary to the Grand Emir of Baghdad, who was God’s staff of anger, and appease him with offerings and sacrifices, so that all Armenia would not suffer punishment for the foolish acts of the Sassoontsis.”

Each attendee echoed similar sentiments until it became a deluge. At this point, a young priest approached the Catholicos to report that a mountaineer from Sassoontsis sought to enter the hall to make a very important proposal. The Catholicos, who was unable to take any action on his own without the Commander’s counsel, looked at Smbat Bagratuni and receiving the nod, gave the order to admit the mountaineer. Hovnan entered, leaned his spear in a corner, and proceeded into the center of the hall with his rustic peasant clothes and his simple, humble manner. Immediately, all eyes were upon him and chattering ensued among the gathering as they commented to each other that in the mountains, people lived uncivilized lives like wild beasts.

Finally, the Catholicos raised his voice, “You have requested our leave to appear before and address this august assembly. We frankly thought that you useless Sassoontsis would be ashamed to show your faces before the nation because your foolhardy acts have jeopardized the safety of us all. But I see you are unable to comprehend this and have come here to give us advice, so let’s see what your Sassoontsi brain has managed to come up with.”

The mountaineer raised his bowed head and shook his long hair, casting a glaring glance around the hall. The disdain in the air subsided and an attentive silence came over them all as Hovnan, with a firm and clear voice, began speaking.

“Your Grace, most honorable princes of the land of Armenia, I am cognizant of the great favor you have granted by hearing out a miserable mountaineer like me. I have come from my mountains not to seek forgiveness, but on a mission to present a proposal to save the nation from impending danger. However, I see that first I must justify the actions of Sassoon and then make my proposal. What exactly did the Sassoonis do, after all? Nothing more than Prince Bagarat and Lord Ashot of Vaspurakan had done five or six years ago. Governor Abuset transferred power to Museh, who, by the custom among the Arabs, made a surprise attack on Taron together with the wild hordes from Aghdzni. Bagarat Artsruni sought assistance, and Ashot with his brothers and the entire armed forces of Vaspurakan came to Bagarat’s aid.”

“I took part in that war and Prince Gurgun, who is in attendance here, was one of the young generals in that same war, during which the enemy was defeated and their army driven away. We pursued them to their strongholds and drove them into forests, laying siege to Shahastan. Shortly after this war, this same Emir Abuset Ali sent a large army to Vaspurakan to collect tribute, and as is the custom among this lawless people, he invaded all Vaspurakan from his encampment in Aghbak, taking captives, pillaging, plundering, and laying waste to everything in sight. The invaders captured men and women, stealing their inheritance. This wave of brutality reached the borders of Andzev. The Lord of the Artsrunis sent an emissary, promising to pay taxes and tribute, in order to put an end to the destruction and brutality, but the emissary was treated with disdain and the unlawful actions continued.”

“So, we attacked the invaders with all of Vaspurakan’s forces. The Emir barely escaped with a few of his men from this battle. The Armenian forces completely routed the enemies, including the Emir’s brother. The battlefield was littered with dead and wounded. On the right flank was Prince Gurgun, brother of the great prince. Now let us ask, Reverend Father and great princes, what did the Sassoonis do when they saw that Prince Bagarat had been betrayed and taken captive along with his family in chains to Baghdad, when all of Taron province had been plundered and destroyed by the invaders, when men, women and children were condemned to destruction and bondage, and when St. Karapet Monastery was surrounded by the barbarians and the only hope left was the Sassoonis? They came down from the mountains and did just what Princes Bagarat, Ashot and Gurgun had done.”

“Is it a crime to save a fellow Armenian Christians from the sword and chains? Is it a sin to restore to Christ the Armenian churches that had been converted into mosques? Is it wrong to take up arms against those who attacked St. Karapet Monastery with fire and sword? If what the Sassoonis did deserves reprimand, then the evil acts committed by the brutes against us are just and lawful. But consider the consequences, great lords, the consequences which could finally eradicate the seeds of faith that Sts. Thaddeus, Bartholomew and Gregory the Enlightener had sown in the land of Armenia with their blood.”

“We don’t need a long-winded lecture from you,” said Commander Smbat with calm sternness, “just make the proposal for which our spiritual leader granted you leave to speak, and make it as quickly and concisely as possible.”

By this comment, it was clear that Hovnan was wasting his time trying to convince these people to do anything beyond what they had already decided, but because it was a sacred duty to tell these foolish nobles the truth and try to save them from destruction, he tried again.

“We mountaineers are simple people, my lords, and we do not understand the ways the country is governed. But it pains our hearts when we see that those who hold the reigns of power often fall prey to the deceptions of our enemies. They are great, wise people, and have the right to their wealth and estates, yet in my humble opinion, it would be good if, when they withdraw to their fortresses, they would at least let the people and clergy defend the faith. For this reason, the people of Sassoon petition the Holy Father to issue a decree to all the people of Armenia and give your blessing so they might defend the faith by taking up arms against the barbarians preparing to eradicate Christianity and the name of Armenians from our land. The people invite Your Holiness to come and reside at St. Karapet Monastery until the war ends, send emissaries throughout Armenia to gather money, horses, arms and supplies so that when the Armenian forces are arrayed for battle against the invaders, the invaders will have no choice but to beg . . .”

“What problems, what challenges, this foolish mountaineer has dared to come and propose to this assembly! We are a thousand times more foolish to tolerate such proposals. Let me get this straight: we’re supposed to go and sit in our fortresses, while arming our villagers for war, so that they can later use these arms against us? And you expect us to patiently tolerate such talk?” Prince Ktrich of Gardman remonstrated, already on his feet and ready to walk out, while the others pleaded with him and eventually forced him to sit down.

At this point Commander Smbat turned to Hovnan and said in a scolding tone, “You have misunderstood our civility and toleration and gotten carried away with yourself, offending the assembled nobles. If this is really what the Sassoontsis are planning, then our first order of business should be to punish them. For the time being, until we conclude our deliberations, you will be held captive here, since it appears that you are the one who is spreading these ideas among the people. Guards! Take this man away and keep a close eye on him.”

The guards came and escorted Hovnan out and took him down to the dungeon of the Holy See. Meanwhile, upstairs, the Armenian princes and nobles continued to discuss Hovnan’s proposal and the dangerous consequences they would have for their positions, seeing treachery behind every word.

And as for taking action against the enemy, there was no consensus. No one wanted to part with his own soldiers and no one wanted to go beyond the borders of his realm. And so, just as they had come to the meeting without purpose, they left without a plan, mounted their horses and each along with his entourage went away to his own province, suspecting the others of conspiring against him.

But among the assembled nobles, a group of young princes gathered at one end of the hall and did not get mixed up in the discussion, their sole purpose being to stand and display their respect for their fathers, uncles and older brothers with their presence and attention. Among them was a solemn young man, who had attentively followed the proceedings. When everyone had left, he approached Commander Smbat.

“Father,” he said, “hasn’t that mountaineer from Sassoon been held long enough? If you give me the order, I’ll send him on his way.”

“Yes, his punishment has been more than enough; nonetheless it’s not appropriate to spout truths just anywhere. You know, that Hovnan enjoys the favor of your Uncle.”

“I’ll call for him, father, and take my leave.”

Ashot went down quickly and gave the order to the guards to bring Hovnan. Ashot was pacing around the room alone, when the Sassoontsi entered just as unflustered as when they had taken him to the dungeon.

“Brother Hovnan,” said Ashot, “was it really necessary to express all your thoughts in the assembly of princes? Wouldn’t it have been better to take discrete action, to prepare the people and to launch operations when the time comes?”

Hovnan was a plain man, but he was not a simpleton. He looked deep into the eyes of the young man who was speaking with him so earnestly, and with a cold and resigned voice said, “Prince, you appear to be a smart young man, and there is no reason to talk to me with such complicated thoughts. If I could do as you suggested, to prepare the people and mobilize them at the moment of peril, whether against their foolish lords or the repressive enemies, I would do it this very minute. However, the faith and power to move that mountain is in the hands of that pathetic, decrepit old man. But what good is it, even he doesn’t know his power or how to put it to use to benefit the people? And as for the foolish nobles, who shouted at me or grumbled under their breaths, they won’t last five years. Not one will be left that has not been hauled off to Baghdad, not to mention how many of them will have converted to Islam. Ghevond, Ghevond, where are you? Armenia has only had one such individual, one such servant of Christ, a priest and a great man, like you. Alas, our land has not brought forth the likes of him since.”

“Brother Hovnan,” said the young prince, “why are you so distraught? Patience is a virtue. By biding their time, the wise and far-sighted reap benefits when circumstances allow. Our enemy’s strength wanes daily, and although he expands his rule over a wide territory, still he is growing weaker, and sooner or later must perish.”

“O, young man, you can see your enemy’s demise, but you ignore your own downfall and destruction. If you had a way to protect yourself from harm, I too would take some comfort in these thoughts. But let’s leave this depressing discussion for another time, and turn our attention to the order you have received from your elders.”

“You are free to go where you want and do as you wish.”

“Good, then my time has not yet come.”

And saying these words with complete composure, he surveyed his surroundings on all sides as if he was looking for something. Ashot understood from his movement what he was looking for and quickly unbuckled his own sword from his belt and presented it to Hovnan.

“Although the owner of this sword has not been so valiant a man as to bring you honor, still as a token of our friendship I ask you to accept it.”

“The sword of a Bagratuni prince always brings honor.”

He spoke these words as he secured the sword on his belt and they brought him his spear. Then, putting his hand to his chest, he bid the prince farewell and headed toward the door.

“Another young man of promise,” Hovnan said to himself, “but what use? Can his intellect prevent Armenia from being drenched in blood or trampled by the enemy? Let’s be on our way, Hovnan, to our mountains of Sassoon. There we can await our fate and the day of wrath that is coming, and place our faith in God, not in men.

Thus, deep in thought, Hovnan, spear in hand, continued his journey home, placidly and steadily, but with an air of sadness, because he could not mobilize the clergy, on whom he had set his hope.

Chapter 10 Council of Princes

Hovnan reached the banks of the Arax, its stormy waves rolling proudly. He sat down on the riverbank. What was this man, who had not eaten anything all day, thinking about? His heart sank from anguish. On the opposite bank of the Arax, much lower than Bataran, where the Akhurian joins the Arax, Hovnan could not take his eyes off a small monastery. This had been the place of his imprisonment for many years. He looked at the tower, where he spent many long, sleepless nights, and recognized a small grated window, impenetrable even without iron bars. He had seen only a sliver of sky from that cell, and from the time of his imprisonment to this very hour, for twenty years, he had felt no joy. He recalled those terrible days and painful years when his soul was suffering from sorrow; human language has no words to describe those agonies.

He had thought unhappily of the one thing that he had loved hopelessly, and he asked God to help him end his life and rid himself of the heavenly sweet love which was made bitter by the hellfire of separation and hopelessness. He recalled the restless dreams of those sad nights, when he could see the angelic image of Vaskanush. The poor prisoner did not have enough time to admire her and was tormented for hours, tossing and turning on his hard, straw bed.

Exhausted by these heavy memories, Hovnan unconsciously raised his hand to his forehead to sweep away any thoughts of the past. But even after so many years, the unhealed wounds to his heart ached, inflamed by the priestess's prediction of another meeting with his beloved. He jumped up in a start, undressed, and took off his weapons, wrapping them in a bundle atop his head. Paying no heed to the roaring turbulence of the Arax, he went into the water and swam down till he reach the other bank, where he dried off, got dressed, and headed to the monastery, attracted by a magnetic force. The memory of that prison where he landed due to his love for Vaskanush was dear to him. At that moment, he could think of nothing but her. Everything faded before the beautiful vision of his love: the nation, Sassoon, the Arabs, the ministers and the Catholicos. Lost in these thoughts, he passed by a village, when two young men having exchanged glances with each other approached and asked him:

“Brother, aren't you Hovnan from Khut?”

“Yes, son, it's me.”

“Please come with us. Someone is waiting for you at our house.”

“All right,” Hovnan said after a moment's thought, and without the least bit of curiosity, he silently followed them.

When the young men stopped at the door, Hovnan entered and the first thing he saw was Gurgen, who rose to meet him.

“Come in, come in, brother,” Gurgen said. “As soon as I learned of the catastrophic and rude reception you received, I became agitated, fearing that you would go to Taron before I

could meet you, so I instructed the peasants to follow you and arrange a meeting to consider what, if anything, can be done.”

“There’s nothing to be done, Brother,” replied Hovnan sadly. “I have no expectations of the Catholicos, the bishops, princes or ministers. And the people, like sheep without a shepherd, will be sent to slaughter by the barbarians’ sword tomorrow and taken into captivity. If the Catholicos wanted to do something, he would have followed my advice, moved to the monastery of St. Karapet and mobilized the faithful. A people’s army of hundreds of thousands would rise and we, the Armenians, would shake off this miserable condition. We would no longer be divided, jealous and armed only with stones. We would drive out the enemy, which has insolently trampled our children, our wives, our princes, our church and our faith... May God forgive me, Gurgen, but it is not the first time in such bitter moments that I asked Him to take my life, just to spare me the sight of the wretched fate of the Christians of the East, whose misery grows daily, to the relish of the Muslims and the shortsightedness of the Christians of the West. It pains me that we could effectively protect our country from the despots on either side, without outside help, but for the idiotic system of government by princes and nobles that has fragmented our country into hundreds of pieces dominated by foreign invaders.”

Having said his piece, Hovnan, exhausted, sat down. Gurgen, noticing how this iron man turned pale, asked, “When did you leave Dvin?”

“Last night.”

“Came by walking and without rest, right?”

“That’s right.”

“What did you eat?”

“Nothing.”

Gurgen quickly calculated that this man had covered a three-day journey in twenty-four hours without stopping for food or rest, so of course he would be starving.

“Vahrich!” He called to his servant.

“Yes, my lord,” responded our old friend Vahrich.

“Tell them to bring us dinner.”

Vahrich left the room. Hovnan sat motionless, with downcast eyes, while Gurgen paced about, reflecting on the dire situation and this man of the people. Here Gurgen was, of princely lineage and yet embarrassed to be descended from the noble Mamikonian and Artsruni families, forgetting that he himself was one of the victims of their misrule.

They ate in silence, barely exchanging a word, and then Gurgen turned to Hovnan.

“You should get some sleep, Hovnan. We have something important to do together.”

“If it’s important, I can do it without sleep.”

“No, get some rest, and we’ll leave at midnight.”

“All right,” said Hovnan. A little later, Gurgun saw that his companion was resting in the sleep of a righteous man. It was not yet midnight when Hovnan woke up. His sturdy body did not need much rest. Gurgun arose too, and soon both friends galloped along the shore of the Akhurian on their way to Bagaran, with their old friend Vahrich in the rear, trying to keep up with them, not only because he did not want to lose them, but also out of curiosity. This respectable man, who fancied himself Gurgun’s mentor at times, was now appeased by the small role of satisfying his curiosity, especially since he had lost his master and tracked his footsteps from village to village until he caught up with him in Bagrevand.

But what a dramatic change in the man in just a couple of weeks! Gurgun was a different person. His demeanor was sullen, he spoke sparingly in single syllables, and if and when he laughed, it was but a mordant smile. There was no question about returning to Tortum. Vahrich was forced to give his regular horse to Hovnan, and now had to ride on a miserable nag, cursing Hovnan and Sassoon, the Armenian princes, Gurgun, Tsolak and all the horses in the world. He cursed so quietly that Satan himself could not have heard him, because Vahrich was very cunning and not a single careless word crossed his lips.

“That Hovnan! I wonder if he ever saw such a horse in his mountains! And here I am, stuck with this worthless nag. Nothing has gone right since this guy turned up. This guy, who never opens his mouth, never says a thing until you ask him, yet once he opens it he can’t shut up! This guy is possessed, and whenever he shows up he casts a spell of gloom over the prince. Yesterday, we were sitting peacefully on a mountaintop. You’ll never believe what happened! Out of the blue, the Prince says, ‘Hurry to the banks of the Arax, alert the peasants to be on the look-out for Hovnan.’ ‘The people in the village? Who? What?’ ‘Tell them to bring Brother Hovnan to see us.’ And what do you know, Prince Gurgun stands up to greet him, shaking hands with a simple highlander ... Hovnan and Gurgun are long-lost friends, buddies! Can you imagine! It turned my stomach! And as if that wasn’t bad enough, he’s on my noble horse, racing ahead with Tsolak . . . But what are they talking about? Where are we headed, and how long will our journey last? That’s the question, but whom to ask? Really Vahrich, you made a big mistake leaving your family to follow the prince . . . How could I know that when I finally caught up with him again, all I would get is a ‘glad you could make it,’ and that he would start looking again for that troublemaker Hovnan, give him my horse, and leave me to ride his miserable gut-churning creature? It will be the death of me.”

But then Vahrich’s thoughts were interrupted. Through the darkness, the silhouette of Bagaran and its basilica appeared and both horsemen dismounted. Vahrich followed them and, slinking along behind, tended their horses. Without even so much as turning toward Vahrich’s sullen face, which in any event was hard to see in the dark, Gurgun ordered, “Wait for us at this spring,” and then continued his way to the city with Hovnan.

Though he had gotten no satisfaction from the trip and was offended that the prince considered him unworthy to enter Bagaran, Vahrich was comforted by the fact that his torment came to an end. Having tied the two horses to a tree, he wrapped himself in a cloak and fell asleep. The poor servant had barely slept a quarter of an hour, when he felt warm breath and two large lips near his face. It was Tsolak, giving him warning. Vahrich jumped to his feet upon hearing the hoof beats, and in the distance, he made out a group of princes riding by. He resumed his former position, with a stone for a pillow, but hardly had he fallen asleep, when Tsolak, his

faithful sentry, woke him up again. This happened several more times; each time a small group on horseback passed by in the distance and entered the city.

Let us leave Vahrich here to sleep and follow our two companions walking towards the city.

“You speak well,” thought Hovnan to himself, “You want to believe in this young man. Our unfortunate nation is in such a desperate situation that one must reach for any helping hand. He looks smart and diligent. But only time will decide whether he will justify himself or not.

“Let’s see what he proposes. He was the one who invited us, and let me know that I should go to Bagaran for a very important meeting. I am already sick of this world. I decided to go to Byzantium, but when I received the invitation, I decided to meet this young man, whom everyone speaks well of.”

“Everyone means no one! If I praise everyone who smiles at me, and if I announce every time that the sun of justice has risen, casting a shimmer of light on the sea of inequity, then I, of course, should praise this young man, for he has released me from the dungeon. But is my one case or that of a thousand others enough to see the salvation of the Armenian people in one prince Ashot, the son of Sparapet Smbat Bagratuni? Let’s see who he really is, and what he can do for the people.”

At that time, hoof beats could be heard and several men on horseback passed by and rode to the citadel, which is situated on a high hill overlooking the Akhurian. When our friends reached the fortress gate, another small detachment galloped up. Judging by the silence, the meeting was shrouded in secrecy. The grooms, standing right there, took the horses away, and the servants escorted the guests to the hall, where, having broken up into groups of two, three or four people, the early arrivals were conversing quietly. A few lamps illuminated the faces of those gathered in dim light.

Hovnan surveyed the gathering and saw that they were all younger generation princes, no one from his own generation. He looked around for Ashot, but he was nowhere to be seen, so Hovnan said himself, “It’s okay, let him be imperious, it doesn’t matter, let him stick to presiding, which is all he knows.” Then he quietly receded to one corner.

Gurgen, who was known not only by his name, but also by his gigantic figure, greeted all the princes with confidence and, looking around, searched for Hovnan. Then the doors to the hall were opened, and Ashot Bagratuni appeared with his brother Shapuh and other Bagratuni princes. Everyone rose from their seats. He greeted them in a friendly and modest manner, placing his hand over his heart, then went to his place, sat down and invited all those present to sit down. When everyone was seated, he looked at Gurgen, whom he had not seen before, but guessed that it was him, and called out in a clear voice, “Prince Gurgen!” To which Gurgen replied, “Yes, it’s I, brave prince! but I’m looking for my companion.” Locating Hovnan, Gurgen led him forward and seated him between himself and Ashot.

Gurgen’s action surprised everyone, including Prince Ashot. Gurgen alone seemed unperturbed, as if it were perfectly fine to treat this simple mountaineer, a peasant, with such honor.

When the gathering had quieted down, Ashot Bagratuni began to speak:

“My noble and honorable friends and princes, our homeland and our faith have never been in such a grave and dangerous situation as they are now. Compared with the present danger, the danger in the days of Vardan was insignificant, for even though the enemy at that time was the mighty king of kings of Persia, nevertheless, Armenia had no other enemies on its land, other than the traitors at home. But today, the Baghdad Emir extends his power not only to Asia, but to all of Africa, and up to Europe. The enemy has ensconced itself in Armenia. Dvin, Nakhichevan, Bagesh and Gandzak have come under Arab rule. Neither submission, nor loyalty nor payment of heavy taxes can guarantee the security of our religion, our life, our property or our nation. For these foreign rulers make promises only to deceive, swear to lie, give a letter of security to rob, take prisoners and raze everything to the ground.”

“They have destroyed our cities and left the villages uninhabited. They have burnt our fields, condemning our people to exile, forcing Armenians to wander aimlessly through mountains and valleys; such is the current condition of our Armenia. When our elders, the fathers and princes of our land, deliberate and cannot find a way out of our predicament, it is natural that we become desperate. But despair and resignation suit neither men nor Christians. If we act wisely, reasonably and bravely, I believe that God will help us and we will be able to find a way out of these bitter circumstances. The Bible, Armenian history and the events of our days show that even our forebears bravely fended off our enemies. Prince David Saharuni, my grandfather, Ashot Msaker and others inflicted heavy blows to these Arabs, and even very recently our brave Sassoontsis drove many out with the governor. Let us then decide what needs to be done, what can be done, and if we can do it. Let’s give it our best. I ask you to speak confidently here. I know all of you and trust you, and I assure you that our secret will remain confidential and will be disclosed when we act on our plans.”

When he finished his speech, a loud whisper rose in the hall. Everyone spoke in low tones with their friends, but no one dared to speak up and express his thoughts out loud.

Gurgen and Hovnan were silent. Ashot, seeing the situation, asked “Don’t you have any suggestions to make?”

“Two days ago I made my proposal at a big meeting,” Hovnan said, “I hoped that the ecclesiastical authority, as the head of the people, could work miracles. However, the head of the church, the Catholicos, did not want to move. You may have the right to hope and look for at least a glimpse of salvation. Here at this meeting, I feel out of place. I am neither young nor of princely pedigree, so silence seems to be appropriate.”

“Brother Hovnan, two days ago at the meeting where you spoke, I don’t think any of the younger generation of princes were present. It was just a meeting of the Catholicos and older rulers.”

Taking no notice of the derisive nature of these words, Hovnan answered straightforwardly.

“It is possible that I, being a simple peasant, was mistaken in daring to speak. Seeing the gray-haired Catholicos as the head of the meeting, I thought that he understood the Armenian people just as I did, as the apostle who saw not freemen or slaves, but just followers of Jesus Christ. I presumed this equality, not by power and princes, but due to the dire danger which our poor homeland faces.”

“The danger remains the same. If one forgets about the fate of the people, some because of old age, others out of personal interests and still others due to rivalry and grudges, they are all equally guilty.”

Gurgen answered these words in a low but tough voice, “Brave prince, when you invited us to this meeting, you undoubtedly thought about some kind of solution. You, of course, have your own proposals. Why should we waste time? Speak confidently!”

Gurgen’s mild voice, like the silent roar of a lion, drew the attention of the whole hall to this conversation. At that moment, Ashot, who knew exactly what he wanted others to say, calculated his own words.

“Prince Gurgen,” he said as if they were alone in the hall, “In a situation like this, the people are obliged to save themselves by their own means, and for this to happen, we must form an unbreakable alliance. The source of all our disasters is the lack of such a powerful connection between us. The Arabs are strong, because they have an emir whom they obey unquestioningly. The Byzantines are strong because they have an emperor to whom they are all submissive, while they enslave all other nations that do not have strong and stable leadership. Hence, I think our task is to establish a similar body, which we would recognize wholeheartedly and commit ourselves to obey. No need to concentrate power in one hand. It is better to entrust it to several people, and if they are competent to rule the country, they will obey and assure that others obey. We must know that Armenia’s weakness lies in the lack of such a body, and this is the main source of our calamities, ruin and subjugation.

When he finished, several young princes approached him and said, “Prince Ashot, we consider you the worthiest of this power. Take it in your hands and act; we are ready to obey and support you in all ways.” The rest expressed similar sentiments.

Ashot mulled it over in silence, and when everyone started asking for the same thing, he gradually and modestly began to refuse, noting his youth, and finally saying: “Why are you not giving this power to my father, the Sparapet, whose courage, prudence, and experience are known to all of Armenia?”

“Long live Sparapet Smbat!” almost all unanimously exclaimed. “He, indeed, is the worthiest, he will be able to save Armenia ...”

When everyone calmed down, Ashot promised to tell his father about the decision of the meeting and asked everyone to come to the specified place when they would be notified.

It was already dawn when the meeting was over, and everyone began to leave. Exiting the fortress, Gurgen asked Hovnan, who was staring at him, “Well, Brother Hovnan, what do you say about this? I have not seen the Sparapet and I do not know him. Is he able to save our people?”

“The only person, in my opinion, who could save the people, is the Armenian Catholicos, but he refused. God be his judge.”

“But can Smbat really do anything?”

“Who knows, we’ll see. I have no expectations of anyone. I’ll go back to my mountains and do what I can. My duty is not to fear death and not to run away from it, and I will do that with God’s help. Peace be with you, Prince Gurgen; if the Lord wills it, we’ll meet again. “

Hovnan headed to Yervandakert and the prince headed to Bloor, although he could not resist looking back at that mountaineer who, with no regrets, took his duty-bound path, since he was the only one in Armenia who knew what he ought to do.

Chapter 11 The Commander from Khut and Sparapet of Armenia

April had arrived, but who took notice of spring this dreadful year? Who could admire the migratory birds? The news constantly traveled from Bagesh to Sassoon that endless Arab hordes were coming directly to Khut to avenge Abuset’s son by exterminating the population. This is no exaggeration. The Emir mobilized all Muslim forces and sent them to Armenia. Turks, Khujaks, Syrians, Babylonians, Medes, Muslims, Egyptians, and peoples from the remote regions of Persia all the way to Sakastan sent their selected troops to Armenia to raze it to the ground and turn it into a desert. The Emir gave the strictest order to Sparapet Bugha in front of all the troops, “Wreak havoc in Armenia through hunger and sword and captivity, send their nobles to me, convert the beautiful to our faith, exterminate the peasants, and inherit the country.” With such orders, bloodthirsty hordes of barbarians marched towards Armenia.

What did Sassoon do during those days?

All eyes in Sassoon were fixed on this one staunch and brave man, awaiting his orders. We know that that man was Hovnan, who had ordered all the gorges fortified, had set up guard detachments in the inaccessible mountains, had provided women, children and the elderly with staples; and in the foothills of Khut he waited in ambush with an army of several thousand people for the enemy’s arrival. The enemy was advancing, having divided its army into three troops, as if its goal was to wipe the mountains of Khut from the face of the earth and not to leave a single living soul behind.

When it was reported to Hovnan that the enemy’s troops had entered the Brnashen region, he gathered his best warriors and using backroads boldly set out to find the enemy in the dark, through mountains covered by oak trees and deep canyons, where they knew every stone and every cave. Thus, after a short break and meal, Hovnan divided his troops into three parts, and when the oblivious enemy fell asleep, the three groups attacked them from different directions with war cries and slew them relentlessly with their swords.

Hovnan ordered his warriors to shout “Holy Apostle!” with their every strike, in honor of the apostle Thaddeus, a cry resounding in the mountains with a thousand-voice echo. The enemy could find no route for escape through the thick undergrowth, instead facing death by swords’ strikes in the dark. The groans of the wounded, screams of fleeing soldiers and shouts of “Holy Apostle” gave Hovnan an extraordinary feeling. Thus, when the battle was over, foreign cries ceased and only the Armenian language was heard, Hovnan thanked God, and they all started singing psalms of blessing. And when the sun rose and the Sassoontsis saw the field covered with the enemy dead and wounded, and saw that the number of enemy soldiers fallen from cliffs was greater than the number of those who died by the sword, and when they compared their relatively insignificant losses with the Arab casualties, they realized that all this was the result of

the skillful leadership of their commander. Their admiration for Hovnan grew immeasurably; they did not know how to express their gratitude to him. The warriors secretly decided to take all the gold and silver found in the field and give it to Hovnan. They spread a cloak in front of him, and they laid out gold coins, necklaces, bracelets and jewels on it. Hovnan paid no attention to this at first, but realizing their intention, he gathered all the warriors and said to them:

“My dear brothers, my dear warriors of Khut! Does this worthless gold and silver symbolize your love for me? Do you think I would not appreciate you without these gifts? Your bravery and obedience to your brother, whom you chose as your leader, is more valuable to me than any reward. Go and divide this recovered wealth among yourselves. Take special care of the foodstuffs you have recovered. Take these to the warehouseman. Beware that we have a long struggle ahead. The enemy’s army is strong and large. Do not be discouraged and scared, rather be brave and stalwart. And as for me, take no care, for I am content with my lot. What I have is more than enough. I need only a piece of bread, simple clothes and my weapons. Now go, my children, go, my brethren, and try always to be content with modest means.”

When Bugha learned of his losses and of such an unexpected attack, though his men had barely set foot in Armenia, he was shocked and ordered complete secrecy about their losses to avoid disheartening his troops or raising the morale of the Armenians. He thought his Arabs would face no resistance and could lay waste to the whole country without struggle. He again gathered a large army and attacked Sassoon from all sides, cutting off all paths to it.

Meanwhile, Hovnan and his brave men, time after time did the impossible, making surprise attacks and causing disarray among the barbarian hordes of different tribes and languages and setting them to flight. Whenever he noticed the arrival of enemy reinforcements, he retreated to the mountains. There, Hovnan would replenish his ranks and then, like a storm, would again strike the barbarians with thunder, lightning and hail. Neither side showed mercy in war. Prisoners were taken as hostages for revenge to be sacrificed when necessary. If the Arabs took a Sassoontsi in captivity and tortured him to death in front of his fellow mountain dwellers, the Sassoontsis took revenge and cut the heads off of ten Arabs in Bugha’s army.

The Arab troops grumbled: “What’s the use of fighting these poor mountain dwellers? Even if we conquer all of Sassoon mountain, all we’ll end up with is a pile of rocks.” Thus, Bugha was forced to change his tactics and to use a method that had brought him victory over the Armenians on several prior occasions. He sent his messenger to Hovnan, the brave leader of Sassoon, to persuade him to surrender to the “lawful king,” and pay homage to their sacred relics, while giving assurance that neither Hovnan nor to his fellow mountain dwellers would be harmed and that they would have religious freedom if they ended their resistance.

When the Arab emissary was brought to Hovnan and his blindfold was removed, he saw an ordinary man sitting on the rock with his shield and spear laying near his feet. The emissary could not believe that this was Hovnan, the legendary leader of the mountain dwellers, a name known even to the Baghdad Emir himself. The Sassoontsis’ commander did not bother to look at the emissary while he was delivering his fine-sounding words. He waited for the messenger to finish and then lifted his eyes, which burned like coal. “Go,” said Hovnan, “and tell your commander that the people of Khut, though simple-hearted, are not so stupid as to believe the Arabs and their fake promises. If Prince Bagarat and the other Armenian nakharars and princes had followed our advice and, instead of believing you, taken up arms, they would have spared themselves humiliation, torture and apostasy, and Armenia would not have been overrun by your

vicious hordes or reduced to rubble. Unfortunately, our princes naively ran into your embrace when you hypocritically petted them on their shoulders. But here, in these mountains, Bugha should know very well that there are no princes, no nakharars, no nobles, no freemen, but also no serfs and no slaves. There are no people here who can be deceived. Here, everyone is ready to fight to death. We will put our weapons down only when we set our country free. We do not trust your words or promises. My men were wrong only in one thing: they should not have blindfolded you when they brought you to me. I'll show you the way to our mountains to facilitate Bugha's next exploit and the Emir's revenge."

After saying these words, he stood up and led the emissary up the mountains with his eyes open, to where the shelter of women and children was noticeable. He showed him fragments of rocks gathered on the tops of mountains, from where a child's hand could drop them and destroy a regiment. Finally, Hovnan showed the Arab the fortifications built by the Sassoons, who turned the mountains into impregnable fortresses. "Now go and convey our greetings to your commander," said Hovnan, sending the emissary on his way.

When the emissary told Bugha about Hovnan's reception, Bugha gritted his teeth with anger and redoubled his repression of the foolish city dwellers, who naively fell for his ruse and remained in Dvin. Many of them fell victim to the sword or were forced to buy their lives at the cost of apostasy.

Hovnan took the news of these horrors hard. Every day, refugees came telling of the Arab atrocities. Standing on the cliff, he kept watch over the movements of enemy hordes with an eagle eye. When he saw the Arab troops moving out from Sassoon and the Taron Valley toward the Apauni region, he immediately gathered his brave men, attacked the last regiments of the Arabs, and dispersed them completely. When the enemy prepared to attack them full force, the Sassoons withdrew to the mountains to regain their strength.

Bugha, indignant that he had been played by these rag-tag mountaineers, fortified the fortresses and monasteries in the vicinity and filled them with troops to cut off Hovnan's mobility. But this did not stop Hovnan. There was not a day without a sighting or report about Hovnan. One day in Taron, the next with small band at Bagesh, he defeated the Arab detachments. When the Arabs moved forces to Bagesh, they discovered that Hovnan was already fighting against Arab forces in the Rshtunik region and that he had liberated Armenians. The swiftness and boldness of his attacks were truly amazing: with a squad of thirty men, he attacked hundreds of Arabs. The mere mention of his name caused such great fear that when Arabs heard about the appearance of Hovnan's detachment, they fled as fast as they could.

During his campaigns, Hovnan sometimes remembered the council of princes in Bagaran and he waited for a response from Smbat Sparapet. Although he had very little confidence, he still kept asking the occasional traveler if Ashot and Smbat had begun operations. But the father was still in Moks, and his son was still moving around the provinces of Ayrarat and Vananda. There were contradictory reports. Some said that he was gathering troops there, others that he was urging appeasement. From such contradictory rumors, it was difficult to figure out what was really going on. Therefore, placing his trust in God's will, Hovnan returned to the mountains of Sassoon and, seeing that things were peaceful, he took with him a small, select detachment and headed to Vaspurakan to see prince Ashot Artsruni. He had heard that the prince was gathering forces and was preparing to attack the Arabs. Hovnan and his entourage moved quickly and soon arrived in Bznuni, where they were horrified by the devastation. The village of Norashen had

been completely obliterated, its entire population killed. Only a few Arab stragglers were roaming in the rubble. The Sassoontsis handily subdued them, but to what end? There was not a soul left in the village; the Arabs did not even spare the infants. Warlord Jirak, Bugha's deputy, had reached the capital of the Rshtunik and had herded the captive Armenians like cattle to sell them into bondage.

Hovnan sat among the ruins of Norashen. He decided to spend the night there with his detachment, when the night patrol reported some troop movements from Okhtz to Norashen. Hovnan made a practice of building a barricade and fortifying his encampment. He ordered all lights extinguished and complete silence, while he and one scout ventured out to look around. There in the ruins, Hovnan heard a few words and realized that it was an Armenian detachment. Judging by the dialect, these men were natives of Moks. In the darkness, Hovnan made out the figure of Sparapet Smbat, who was riding ahead, surrounded by guards. Without hesitating for a moment, Hovnan climbed up the half-ruined wall and shouted with all his might, drowning out the horses' hoofbeats.

"Prince Smbat, Armenian Sparapet!" The detachment stopped at the sound of his voice. "Where are you rushing off to? Stop, you are heading straight for the enemy and you will meet the same fate as your brothers. O nakharars, o nobles, how long will you sacrifice yourselves, your faith, your nation, your people? How long will you adhere to the folly that you mistake for wisdom? It is a shame, a great shame that you put yourself in the hands of the wicked! If only you betrayed just yourselves! But no, this leads to betrayal of your people, who become miserable slaves in Bugha's hands. Instead of rewards, you will receive chains and dungeons. Mother Armenia will become a wretched graveyard and will mourn not only her children, but also for those of her sons who have become accomplices to butchers and traitors to their brothers."

This powerful voice, heard suddenly in the darkness of the night, made Smbat shudder.

"Who are you?" he exclaimed. "A soothsayer who sees only evil in all good endeavors? Each act you interpret as evil, as if you alone love your people and all other Armenians are collaborators and traitors to the homeland. Do you think you're the only one mourning our unfortunates? Do you think Smbat's heart is not also bleeding for the terrible calamities that have befallen us?"

"Prince, if you really love your people, do not go to Khlat, do not go to Bugha. Death lies in wait there, not only for you and your companions, but for the entire Armenian people. Turn your brave men around, arm them for war and not for chains. Do not confuse appeasement with prudence. Prudence requires us to avoid liars and false promises. How many times do the Armenians have to test this enemy to be convinced of the truth?"

"Whoever you are, sir, it is impossible to talk and argue in such darkness. Let us find a refuge and we will have a discussion there."

"Where is there refuge and shelter for the Armenians now, Smbat Sparapet? I searched all of Norashen by day and found only ruins here. I was looking for people, but I found only two-legged brutes. What do you hope to find in the darkness?"

"Dismount, men!" ordered Sparapet.

The detachment dismounted, and Smbat himself followed the direction of Hovnan's voice.

"Should I come to you, or will you come to me?" he asked.

Hovnan jumped off the wall by the road and drew toward the prince.

"I am always ready to follow the call and to obey the one whom God has placed at the head of the people. But I have a sacred duty: I must warn them of danger, especially when that danger is obvious."

Smbat came closer and, seeing by the light of a starry night the sparkling eyes of Hovnan, whose voice was already awakening memories within him, he stopped and held out his hand.

"Hovnan, where can we talk privately?" he asked.

"Wherever and whenever you want," Hovnan answered.

"Then let us go. You must have already found a shelter for yourself and your people. I hope you are not alone."

"The whole village is destroyed. I arranged a shelter with my friends as best I could. We are satisfied with millet bread, but what will you do? Do you have supplies? Is there barley for the horses?"

"We are warriors like you," Smbat said with a sigh, "our horses can sometimes survive on grass. We have often fought hunger for twenty-four hours. We deserve your reproaches because we have many faults, but to cast aspersions on the Bagratuni commander, who has turned gray on the battlefield, was over the top."

"Forgive me, great Prince," replied Hovnan, noting that the old Sparapet's hand was trembling like his voice. "It was never my intention to insult you, and if in my words there was a personal insult, let the reproach fall upon me. Your life is necessary for Armenia, and only the thought of saving my homeland forced me to go too far with my words."

"Let us forget this, Hovnan, since we do not have much time and I need to speak with you."

So, while speaking, they finally reached the church. "At least for one night let us find a shelter in God's house," said the prince. The guards brought a torch, but before they could go even a few steps, they saw the bodies of men, women, and children, piled on top of each other. The floor was slippery with the pools of blood. Shuddering, they moved backward. Smbat ordered the warriors to find another place, and he continued to roam around the ruined village with Hovnan until the soldiers came to report that they had found appropriate shelter for him. They were taken to a room where a carpet was spread, and here the grand head nakharar of Armenia and a simple mountaineer from Sassoon sat facing one another and talked for a long time. From this conversation, Hovnan was completely convinced that the Armenian governing elite was like a multi-headed dragon leading the country to ruin. For he learned from the Sparapet that Ashot Artsruni, who had been preparing for war with the Arabs, was vacillating because his own nakharars were not in agreement with him.

Chapter 12 Ashot Artsruni and the Traitors

In the morning, the two groups split and went in opposite directions. The Commander-in-Chief's splendid cavalry rode to pay homage to the enemy Bugha in Khat, while the shabbily equipped mountaineers led by Hovnan headed to the capital of Rshtunik to ferret out the enemy. Finding the enemy was not difficult. All it required was following the trail of ruin and bloody battles. Thus, Hovnan and his men soon reached the market of Vostan, which was teeming with prisoners and the dead. The ruthless Arabs captured only the beautiful and healthy, while killing the weak and unattractive on the spot.

In this desperate situation, when the miserable Armenians anticipated death at the hands of their executioners, Hovnan and his band of Sassoons came to the rescue like the heavenly host. The Arabs fled for cover and the prisoners were freed. Hovnan took the Arabs' weapons, armed the prisoners who were battle ready, and thus reinforced his band. It was too risky to attack Jirak in Vantosp, so he rode toward the Atzanai canyon instead, where, according to his information, a large Arab force was persecuting Armenian refugees. There, to his great joy, Hovnan saw for the first time the Armenians fighting back against an Arab detachment on the edge of the canyon. Armed with spears, sickles, slings and bows, the Armenian soldiers bravely repelled the enemy's blows. When the Sassoons, with war cries, rushed to their aid and cut off the enemy's escape route, a great, bloody battle ensued and only a few Arabs managed to get to Artashat to tell their commander about that situation.

The commander Jirak, hearing about this battle, hastily rushed with his army in search of Hovnan. Just as Hovnan arrived at Vostan, he was informed that the Arabs were coming. There was no time for retreat, so Hovnan took up a position in the fortress, built up the earthen blockades, strengthened the gates, and gave orders to find a man who knew the ins and outs of the fortress well. The constable of the fortress was soon escorted to Hovnan. He turned out to be our old friend Khuren, who, upon learning about the Arab atrocities, descended the steep mountains of Artos and came to the fortress to search for his family among the dead, finding to his relief that they were not there.

Hovnan immediately started to ask him about the fort's vulnerabilities: where it needed fortification, and whether it was possible to find rafts and boats, should escape by sea be necessary. Khuren, listening to the questions attentively and seeing that this man was respected by his friends, said out of habit, "Prince ..."

"Don't call me that! I'm just a simple person like you. Can't you call me brother? Tell me, is there a secret way to escape the fortress?"

"Of course, there is, brother. There is an underground passage leading to an exit down below the fortress."

"Down where?"

"Here, do you see the old church? It's right there, near the altar. It is the St. Stephanos church."

“Has it been used recently?”

“Sure, I used it myself this morning.”

“Very well, brother, God bless you,” Hovnan said, and ordered two of his men to go through that underground passage to the very end, and carefully exit the church to check out the enemy’s positions.

Hovnan himself began to observe the Arabs from the tower. He saw the enemy forces spreading across the fortress from all sides. He could not take his eyes off the church of St. Stephanos, where many Arab soldiers gathered. Then, to his great satisfaction, Hovnan saw his two Sassoontsis, who cautiously peeked out of the church doors and then snuck back in. A little later, he noticed one of the men crawl up the church roof, to get a full view of the area.

“Well done men, that is how you should always do it!” Hovnan said to himself, waiting for their return. He regretted coming with such a small force. “If I had a thousand instead of a hundred brave fighters, I would set this Arab army of thirty thousand to flight like partridges. Who knows, perhaps Ashot Artsruni will have some success on his end. I just need a little bit of luck, and if I am lucky enough, I will come to his rescue with two thousand people in a week.”

As he was thinking, his men returned and told him about their underground exploits. He expressed his approval, “Well done, men!” Hearing these words from the usually understated Hovnan, the men were as elated as courtiers of the Byzantine emperor would be if their leader awarded them grand titles.

It was already dark when Hovnan and his forces reached the church through the underground passage. They cautiously exited the church to look around, and then headed back without being caught, walking all night to reach the fortress of Mokhraberd. The dilapidated fortress was a good hideout for the Sassoontsis, who got some sleep while Hovnan, tireless and preoccupied as usual, continued to observe their surroundings carefully. He went down to the shore, sat on the banks, and watched the undulating seas creeping up to the seaside villages. To his patriotic eyes, this was the image of his native Armenia, now in enemy hands, as the rising tide of invasion approached the walls of the Mokhraberd fortress.

His thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of two boats, which, driven by a light wind, sailed near Aghtamar Island to the west. Hovnan joyfully ran to get the Sassoontsi flag, which was a red cross on a white field, and began to wave it in the air. He was happy to see that the boats were approaching the shore, and when they were not so far off, Hovnan noticed several Armenian princely families on them, who were probably trying to escape the enemy. When the boats came closer, Hovnan saw a man of medium height standing at the stern with an oar in his hand, and several women and children who were sitting at the bottom of the boat, quietly shedding tears. Eight to ten young people with their shields in their left hands and their swords in their right hands were looking at him, and their bloody and torn clothes indicated that they were just returning from battle. The second boat looked the same.

“Glory to the Savior, Prince Khosrov!” exclaimed Hovnan, recognizing the Ake prince standing at the stern and sadly staring up to the skies.

“Glory to you, Lord! Glory to you for all, Lord, glory to you!” he said, with a great and doleful sigh.

Several of the men lowered the sails, while others moored the first boat to the walls of the fortress and did the same with the second.

When everyone got to land, Khosrov said, “Brother, I hope we are secure here under this flag bearing a cross.”

“I can guarantee security to you for a day,” said Hovnan. “But now, at this moment, I do not know whether the master of the Artsrunis could promise safety for even this amount of time”

“How can he promise anything when he is in chains?”

“In chains? This soon...?”

“Yes, along with his son Grigor, Vahan Artsruni, and Vahan’s son Gagik. Lady Hranush and Mushegh, Great Lady Hripsime, and many other nobles were tied, loaded on camels, and sent from Atrpatakan to Baghdad.”

“But judging by your appearance, you obviously managed to fight and escape.”

“We were given freedom with God’s help and thanks to our swords, while the others got chains due to the disrespectful actions of traitors.”

“Who are these traitors?”

“It’s not worth uttering the names of these wicked men!”

“On the contrary, not only should we remember them, but their names should be written in stone and taught to the children, who should curse them, shun their shameful example and root them out at the first opportunity. Who were the traitors?”

“Mushegh Vahevuni, Vahram Truni, and another Vahram in the prince’s guard, together with their entourages, sent a secret messenger to Bugha to expose Ashot and his loyal people, who were huddled together in the fortress of Nkan. Upon learning of this betrayal, the prince went and surrendered himself to the enemy. We were supposed to do the same, but when we saw the second caravan with our wives and children who were to be hauled off to Baghdad as prisoners, and when we realized to our surprise that the enemy had not taken away our arms, we gathered together and attacked the enemy, freeing the caravan. But where could we go? The Arabs drove us to the fortress of Amik; we preferred fighting to being captured with our wives and children. The sea was behind us and the enemy in front. We shouted, “Have courage! We’ve spotted some boats!” The shouting spread and our courage grew and we held off the enemy while the women and children boarded the boats. Eight men and I jumped in after them and raised the sails. But what a horrific scene! Here we are, crying for the loss of my little girl; the others lost their fathers, brothers, or siblings, and they will lament this devastation for the rest of their lives. It is hard to say which is worse: the loss of body or the loss of soul.”

“God is merciful and fair. The Meruzhans and Vasaks will not escape His wrath. Let’s see now what these women need and how we can help both you and them.”

“To tell the truth, I do not know who needs what. The only thing I know is that we have not eaten anything for three days.

Hovnan turned around and, noticing that several men from Khut had followed him to the shore, he ordered them to lay hay in one of the best rooms of the fortress and to bring dry cheese, barley bread, and jars of water so that the refugees could have some refreshments and rest.

While the refugees were enjoying the Sassoontsis' hospitality, Khosrov and Hovnan moved away, and Khosrov asked Hovnan about his intentions: how long would he stay in this ruined fortress? Hovnan replied that he could not stay long in that region, especially since the local population did not have the resources to resist the enemy and Jirak would not idle indefinitely in front of the Vostan fortress. He would seek out Sassoontsi forces in order to avenge the losses inflicted on his troops. So, he needed to think like a Sassoontsi to plan his further actions.

“How many warriors do you have?” asked Khosrov.

“Nearly a hundred people.”

“Then our boats can transport you wherever you want to go.”

“Well then we will move tonight, and if the winds are in our favor, we will reach Datvan. If you agree to stay with us in Sassoon until our calamities are over, we will be very grateful.”

“We are now miserable refugees. We will stay wherever we find secure shelter.”

They called the boatmen, who confirmed that if there was at least a weak wind during the night the boats could reach Datvan by the early morning.

Hovnan, Khosrov, and their companions safely reached Datvan, just as the boatmen predicted. The Sassoontsis found Arab horses for the women, and they all headed into the mountains, which, already teeming with refugees, were the only safe place in the region. However, Hovnan was still uneasy. Night and day, he was troubled by thoughts of who was sitting atop the gorges of the road, of how many strikes could be given to the enemy, of what their commander was doing, of who surrounded him, of what Smbat Sparapet and his son Ashot were doing, of where the turncoat nakharars and azats were now and of who betrayed the Artsruni leader.

Hovnan was receiving reliable and detailed information on these issues. The eyewitnesses reported that Smbat was very upset about the betrayal of the Artsruni leaders, but he was relieved that all the prisoners from Vaspurakan, excluding the nobles, had been liberated from Bugha and returned to their homeland. He made sure that patriotic operations were properly conducted, and he also ensured that his son Ashot could keep the enemy at bay. On the other hand, Hovnan found out that the traitors Mousheg, Vahevuni, and the two Vahrams were trying to recruit accomplices among the people in Bugha's army.

Hovnan's attacks made the Arab commander worried, and he ordered a strict surveillance of the Khut mountains. But Hovnan also changed his tactics: his men were often seen in Arab clothing, with Arab flags in their hands as they attacked the Arab enemies.

But what were the heroic efforts of Hovnan compared to the great calamities? He received word that Gurgen Artsruni, the brother of Grand Prince Ashot, was foolish enough to surrender to the enemy despite a great victory over Bugha's troops in the Vorsirank area, where

he had defeated eighteen hundred people. Gurgen trusted the Arabs' promise that he would be appointed Grand Prince of Vaspurakan instead of his brother.

Bravery, rivalry, betrayal and naiveté created such turmoil in poor Hovnan's head that he, accustomed to the ignorance of the Armenian nakharars, preferred to remain silent and not talk about these politics with his people. When he learned that Bugha's troops had left Khlat to winter in Dvin, he decided to go to Khlat and regroup.

Khlat was then one of the most beautiful cities in Vaspurakan. Its houses were surrounded by gardens, and its fruits were famous throughout Armenia. Situated on a slope, descending to Van Lake, Khlat was also known for its magnificent palaces, its churches and its strong fortresses crowned with towers. At a time when Armenia was entirely trampled under the enemy's foot, Khlat escaped destruction. Except for the cathedral, which had been turned into a mosque, everything was intact in the city. The Arabs stored their booty from Taron and Vaspurakan in Khlat, and there was vibrant trade in the city. Therefore, when Bugha announced his intention to leave with his troops, the local population was not pleased. Not only would commerce dry up with the troops' departure, but in their absence many petty chieftains would start vying for control of the city. Anxious about this deterioration in their lifestyle, the inhabitants of Khlat started closing their shops early and retiring to their homes and gardens.

As was the practice in the East, when the king or commander left the city, the head of his secretariat gathered all the records in leather bags and followed the next day. The chief of the secretariat lived outside the city in a house belonging to a noble Armenian whom he had met during the war. Having concluded all his affairs, head secretary Mirza Hassan had just fallen asleep when he felt a slight nudge. Thinking it was his servant, he told the man to go away and leave him alone. However, sensing that the intruder was not leaving, he opened his eyes and was shocked to see not his servant, but a stumpy, short man beside his bed. The intruder's dark, shiny hair fell to his shoulders, and his sharp eyes smiled derisively. Mirza Hassan, seeing the intruder, scrambled to grasp the dagger lying next to his pillow. But before he could, the intruder seized Hassan's wrist and twisted it until Hassan cried out in pain.

With his other hand, the intruder covered Hassan's mouth and said, "How pitiful! Mirza Hassan whining like a child. You are an educated man. What will your servants say when they learn that you whined when your hand was squeezed a bit?"

Mirza Hassan, hearing the mention of servants, raised his voice, "Faithless dog! You look like a robber. Are you not afraid? Do you know who I am and who my master is?"

"First, you should know better than to swear, and you should realize that your servants are alive only because they acted wisely and already surrendered. I advise you to follow their example and act reasonably. Second, you should realize that there are far fewer robbers among the Armenians than among other nations of the world. Finally, I have never felt fear in my life and I'm not afraid of your Bugha."

"What do you want from me? Do you want to kill me, as you did my servants?"

"Never! I do not kill unarmed people."

"Do you want gold? You can have it!" Mirza Hassan, taking a bag of gold from under his pillow, handed it to the stranger.

“Neither gold nor silver. I need something else.”

“Tell me what you need” pleaded the secretary, trembling from head to toe. Unable to endure the stranger’s glare, he closed his eyes.

“Do you have the records?”

“Yes, do you need them? All of them are in the bags. Take them!”

“No, I do not need all of them, I need only one paper.”

“Tell me which paper, and I’ll give it to you.”

“Do you remember when the Grand Prince Ashot Artsruni was besieged in the Nkan fortress, and several Armenian princes sent a secret message to the commander Bugha?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Find this paper and give it to me. That is my only demand.”

“Just this? You frightened me this much just for some insignificant piece of paper?”

Mirza Hassan got out of bed, opened one of the bags with a trembling hand, and took out a paper.

“Here it is!”

“Show me!” the intruder took the paper, holding the lamp up close to read. He looked over the contents, and then slid the document into his shirt. “Good. Now, Mirza Hassan, you must tell me the truth: what are the orders of Emir Jaffra for Armenia?”

“You can already see what his intentions are! Either Armenia must renounce its faith, and accept our religion, or you must perish, leaving no trace or memory.”

“Then I bid you farewell. You see now that I do not kill smart people who understand what is required from them,” the stranger said, and without turning around, he exited the room calmly. “Come on, men,” he said, and disappeared.

Mirza Hassan emerged from his room and saw twenty or so of his servants, some tied up, others stabbed, and asked who the stranger was.

“We know who he was: Hovnan of Khut.”

Chapter 13 Revenge

Winter came, and Armenia was covered in snow and frost. Bugha had halted the massacre, but the mention of his name still caused people to shudder. Bugha ordered his bloodthirsty commanders to take Dvin by spring. Among them were the three traitor nakharars. After accompanying Bugha on the two-day trip to Khlat, these nakharars bid farewell to their barbaric master and returned to their homes.

Mushegh Vahevuni, having parted from his accomplices, the two Vahrams, went to his castle in Eret on the banks of Lake Nazuk. There he decided to wait patiently for spring to reap

his rewards from Bugha, who promised to report to the Emir about his valuable services. Small, yet beautiful, lake Nazuk was the gem of the Kob region. In winter, when covered with ice, it shimmered like a mirror. However, most of the once thriving villages along its shores were now deserted. Mushegh issued a call to the villagers, promising them safety and protection if they returned to their homes. But the villagers did not trust him due to his lawless behavior, so most of the villages remained empty.

During the winter, small groups of young people from Taron would come to that area with their supplies and take up lodging in these abandoned villages. A group of five or six Tarontsis also sought hospitality in the monastery of Kob. They stayed in the rooms for pilgrims. Initially, the abbot, hesitant about the duration of their stay, wanted these Tarontsis to leave. However, the abbot soon changed his tune, as the modesty, virtuousness, piety, and diligence of the Tarontsi leader became clear: he was always present at long church services, and he was never idle for more than an hour. Further, during those winter days, the young Tarontsis went hunting and thus sumptuous meals often graced the table in the refectory. After about ten days, the guests integrated into the monastery's day to day operations as loggers, carpenters, water carriers, gatekeepers and sweepers. It should be noted that the monastery of Kob was built on a hill and surrounded by high walls. But for the dome of the church, it looked just like a fortress. The monastery was dedicated to the blessed St. Daniel, who was buried in the church. The presence of Tarontsis in the church on Sundays did not surprise anyone, for everyone knew of the hardships Taron had suffered and that the pious people sought comfort in prayer.

Prince Mushegh's main winter entertainment was hunting. He often went hunting with his greyhounds and guards. One day on his way back from the hunt, the prince passed by the monastery, where several Tarontsis unexpectedly came forward to meet him. One of them shot an arrow at the prince's horse and wounded its underbelly. The horse rose on its hind legs, threw Mushegh into the air, then collapsed and drew its last breath. When Mushegh's guards rushed to his aid, they were met by a storm of arrows. Tarontsis massed and overwhelmed the guards who had no choice but to flee for their lives. Meanwhile, several of them had captured Mushegh, bound his hands and feet, and taken him to the monastery, where they now felt quite at home.

First, Mushegh tried to intimidate them by saying he was Bugha's ally and that he had rendered valuable services to the Emir, so the Tarontsis would be severely punished for their impudence. Then he tried to buy them off, saying if they let him go, then he would be merciful and would even reward them. But these rough mountaineers didn't dignify his offer with a reply. Instead, they took him to one of the larger rooms in the monastery, untied him, and sat him on a bench, set with some food and even a little wine. Upon learning of this incident, the abbot rushed to see Mushegh, but the Tarontsi guards blocked his entry.

"What is this, brother?" asked the Abbot. "I call my home a house of prayers, and you have made it a robber's den. Must the words of Christ come true in my monastery? What is this ingratitude? Is this how you repay my hospitality? You kidnap the respected prince and set up a den of thieves in my monastery? And now I, the abbot, am forbidden to enter the room where this man is held captive? Who is the owner of this monastery, you or me?"

"Calm down, Father, and do not worry. We Tarontsis are not lawless. Though we cannot let you enter today, tomorrow or the next day you will be able to see him. Just stay calm. We Tarontsis will not abuse your kindness and we are very grateful for your hospitality. But the

prince must be held accountable for his wrongdoing, and you, Holy Father, should be his first judge.”

“Then why do you forbid me to see him?”

“If it’s that important to you, then please go in,” the leader said, signaling to the guards to let the abbot through.

Upon seeing the abbot, Mushegh Vahevuni started ranting about injustice and accusing the monastery of ingratitude, regretting that he had been lenient and pointing out that he could easily have leveled this monastery, which had now turned against him.

The abbot said humbly and politely that when he gave refuge to the mountaineers, he never thought them capable of such insolence. In this moment, the prince noticed that the ring was missing from his finger and he jumped up as if he had been stung.

“Here!” he exclaimed. “Another crime of these robbers! They stole my ring!”

The leader of the Tarontsis, who had been sitting off to the side, raised his head, approached the prince slowly, and said in a low voice, “Do not worry, Mushegh, we will find your ring and return it to you.”

“You have not only committed violence against me, a noble prince, but you continue to humiliate me, daring to call me by name though you are only a simple peasant.”

“We are only simple mountaineers and are not versed in the decorum of dealing with great personages like you,” the Tarontsi replied with a grin.

“Soon, I will teach people like you how to speak to princes!”

“And what exactly are you planning to teach us?”

The abbot recalled the conversation held before he entered the room, and he turned to the Tarontsi, whose name he still did not know.

“Tarontsi, you told me that you were planning to judge this prince. What kind of court is this?”

“The witnesses are not here yet, so there cannot be a trial. It is pointless to speak about his crimes now. Moreover, our time is short and we must leave soon.”

“To go where?” Mushegh asked imperiously.

“To the court that will judge you. If you are acquitted there, then we will let you go.”

“And if I am not acquitted?”

“We will be bound to comply with the court’s verdict.”

“I am not going to court with robbers, ruffians, and rogues! It’s simply out of the question! How dare you judge me! I’ve never set eyes on you before and have not so much as noticed you beneath my feet!”

“There is no need for long speeches and harsh words. It is already dark. Men, saddle the mule, it is time to go!”

“Where are you taking my mule?” asked the abbot.

“The mule will be saddled for you, Father.”

“I am not going to leave on such a cold night. Are you mad?”

“Perhaps your body is not willing, but your spirit as a justice-loving clergyman means you must go, even so.”

“Will you take me by force?” the abbot protested in consternation.

“Would we do such a thing? The prince is also coming. Why would we force someone who is taking up our kind offer?”

The Tarontsis came in and announced that everything was ready.

“Come along, Prince,” said the leader of the Tarontsis.

“I will not take a step by my own will,” Mushegh replied.

“You are a good man. Not only will you take this step, but many more. However, since you are a prince, we will assist you.”

At this, Hovnan (as the reader has already no doubt surmised) took Mushegh by the arm. Mushegh flinched and jumped to his feet.

“Oh, you boor, you almost broke my arm. Let go of me!” Mushegh shouted, trying to break free.

Hovnan, without looking at the prince, went about his business.

“Walk on, prince, walk on.” Hovnan led Mushegh to the door and handed him off to two fellow guards, who, not heeding his cries, tied his feet and threw him like a sack on a mule.

Mushegh looked around and saw the courtyard filled with armed guards. Despair gripped him as he realized that resistance was futile, and he began pondering how to escape.

The holy father obediently put on his cassock and cloak and sat upon the mule. Noticing that the intruders (he could no longer call them guests) were all on foot, he decided that he would turn back at the first opportunity, remain in his monastery, and never again offer hospitality to anyone.

Shortly after departing the monastery, the abbot tried to break away from the Tarontsis and turn the mule around. Urging the animal with all his strength, he exclaimed: “Farewell! Let the God of fortune help us!” However, as the abbot began to rush away, Hovnan shouted, “Men, go after the holy father, for he has lost his way!” Twenty men chased the monk and, catching the mule at the monastery gate, took the animal by the bit and brought the abbot back.

The band had been on the road about three hours when they reached a swamp, overgrown with reeds, and walked along the frozen mud. Past the thickets our Sassoontsis entered a city with winding streets as if they were on home turf. They stopped in front of a large, dilapidated

building resembling a fortress. This was the famous town of Odzn, the ancestral home of the Mamikonian princes, including Mushegh and Gayl-Vahan.

Mushegh was removed from the mule. His feet were so numb from the cold that he could not walk, so they took him by the arms and dragged him to a room where he was placed near a fire. The embarrassed abbot was gently helped to dismount from his mule and escorted to the same room. An ample spread of barley bread and cheese, fine mountain honey, and Meghraget spring water were set before them. Hovnan addressed the guests, "The hospitality of the mountaineers, even in the palace of the brave Mamikonian princes, can only be thus. Do not take notice of our beggarly food and be assured that we feed you not of the crumbs from the table but honor you with the best that we have."

The abbot, realizing that he could not rid himself of the Tarontsis, tried to be cheerful. But the prince was consumed with gloom. When he touched his feet, numb from the cold, he could not help but remember Ashot Artsruni, who had been betrayed and bound in chains and how Ashot and his family were transported to Baghdad by camel. His conscience tormented him as he tried to stave off these unpleasant thoughts.

With nothing to do, he stared at the ceiling, with its skylight between the logs. He looked at the fireplace, where dry reeds crackled in flames of various shapes and colors. These thoughts distracted him only temporarily. He began to think again about what had happened and about his family, who were surely worried about him. He also recalled the Grand Princess Hripsime Artsruni. This clever and noble woman, who, having gone mad, tore out her hair and, with neither cloak nor veil, followed her sons to prison of her own volition.

He rubbed his eyes and brow with his hands, trying to wipe away these heavy thoughts. Glancing around, he met the gaze of Hovnan, whose penetrating eyes remained upon him. Mushegh realized that his fate was in the hands of this man. The band was under his command.

"Who are you?" asked the prince in despair.

"Why do you ask me this, if you believe me to be a robber, a ruffian or a rogue?"

"True, and I will not take back a single word I said. Tell me, though, do you have a wife and children? If yes, then you will understand my family's situation. How many tears and how much sorrow you will have brought upon my house, you godless, wicked man!"

Burning tears began streaming down Musheghs face. The monk and the Sassoontsis looked at Hovnan and then at Mushegh. The young mountaineers, whose hearts were not as hard as the stone of their native land, turned away, imagining events in the prince's house. At these words, Hovnan shuddered all over, dropped to his knees, and exclaimed:

"Mushegh, Mushegh! I have not today, not yesterday, not a month ago, but six months ago imagined and mourned the state of your family. But I did not only mourn for them. How many innocent women and children are moaning under the swords and chains of brutish Arabs? My legs slipped on the pools of blood of so many innocent victims. Towns, villages, and cities which had been full of life were reduced to havens for crows, owls, and wild beasts. Ask your conscience: is not their blood on your hands? Were you not the cause of the bitter tears that these women and children cried? So, you want to know who my companions and I are? We are Sassoontsis, and I am Hovnan from Khut."

“But what do you want from me? What have I done to you, you and your Khutetsis? What sort of court are you speaking about? Where are the judges? Who are your witnesses, and who is my accuser?”

“Until your companions arrive, and until your accusers come, we will not start a trial. But it will not be long, since we have already sent messengers to bring them. Justice must prevail.”

At that moment, a young monk came in with two letters in his hand and gave them to Hovnan, who read them carefully and said, “Very well.” He then took a gold ring from his breast pocket and, folding the messages, sealed them with the ring. Having done all of this, Hovnan approached Mushegh with suspicion, and handed him the ring.

“Here’s your ring. You thought it was stolen by my warriors, but they are not robbers. They brought it to me. For the sake of justice, I had to seal both letters.”

“You dare to seal papers with my ring? You are not ashamed, and you speak to me about justice? What are these letters about?”

“These letters are written to your comrades, inviting them to come and relieve your loneliness. I make no secret of this, and I will not hide it from you. Listen to whom they are written: ‘Deliver this letter with God’s help to the city of Archesh to the brave Prince Vahram of the Truni family.’ Here is another: ‘Deliver this letter with God’s help to the city of Archesh to the brave Prince Vahram of the Gnuni family, the leader of the Arzrunis.’”

After hearing these names, Mushegh, who had been red with anger up to this moment, wilted and turned green with fear. His forehead broke out in a cold sweat, but his curiosity about the content of the letters had gotten the better of him.

“Open them, I want to know what’s written in them,” he said.

“The letters are sealed, and they cannot be opened,” Hovnan replied slowly, “but we have copies. Father,” he said to the monk, “bring copies and read them to the prince.”

There was a long silence in the room. Everyone looked at Mushegh, who was pale and breathing heavily, and then at Hovnan, who stood motionless, the personification of justice. Hovnan continued to stare at the prince.

After a while, the monk brought the copies and, per Hovnan’s instruction, read aloud:

“I, Mushegh Vahevuni, Prince of the Kob region, inform you, brave Prince Vahram Truni, that you must come to the Monastery of Metsop in Archesh at once regarding an important matter. We will either perish or achieve glorious honors together. Hurry, for Vahram Gnuni and I await you here to act in concert. In cities and villages, our meeting would attract undue attention and suspicion. So, I have decided that we should meet in a secluded place. Do not delay, as time is of the essence. Be well.”

“You see, Prince,” said Hovnan, “your seal was needed to invite your comrades, so that you will not be completely alone for the festivities.”

But Mushegh, lost in thought, did not even hear these words. Hovnan left him and went into the next room, where Prince Khosrov, who is well known to us, was sitting.

“Where on earth did you instruct me to come?” said Khosrov, laughing. “Where did you find this rundown stable among the ruins and the swamp?”

“Do you not know, brother Khosrov, that this is the famous city of Odzn? But let us leave the past behind and focus on the present. Can you guess who my guest is?”

“No. I have just come from Sassoon. I have not seen you for an entire month and grew tired of sitting idle.”

“I have a prisoner here, Mushegh Vahevuni.”

“The villain? The bloodthirsty beast who turned Vaspurakan into a sea of blood?”

“Yes, it is he, but he also has two other comrades.”

“The two Vahrams?”

“Yes, I’ll get them too.”

“How? Where are they?”

“They are both in Archesh, and you must help us. That is why I called you.”

“I am ready to follow you wherever you go.”

“We need to find other clothes for you.”

With these words, Hovnan opened the closet and took out a clean leather bag. There were several sets of princely clothing within it.

“Here, you can change your clothes. This is from the Brnashan captives. Choose what you like, and put it on.”

Khosrov quickly changed his clothes.

“Sleep well tonight. Tomorrow, you will rise early and set out. Do not worry about anything. I have a strong horse for you,” said Hovnan.

“I do not need a horse, brother. I can get along just fine whatever the conditions.”

“You will be playing our prince, Mushegh Vahevuni. We must also change your guards. I will go and prepare their costumes for my men. Tomorrow is the week of the pre-Lenten carnival, so it would be a pity to leave them without food and without sleep. I must select those who will go with us. The rest will guard the prisoner.”

“Is it not safer to send this brute to Sassoon?”

“Yes, so that the people can tear him to shreds in a second. Good night, Prince Khosrov.”

Chapter 14 The Trial

Winter was difficult for travelers, but it was nothing for our Sassoonis: what was snow, wind and frost to them? Especially when Hovnan, contrary to his spartan habits, plentifully

provided his men with fowl, meat, and fish at lunch and dinner? So the poor peasants would not feel out of their element and also to keep a low profile, Hovnan preferred to stay in rundown villages. Everywhere you went, Mushegh Vahevuni was there, travelling with more than 100 guards. When the detachment reached the borders of Kajberuni, Hovnan decided to send two messengers to Archesh to deliver letters to the lords there. These couriers first familiarized themselves thoroughly with the contents of the letters, in case they were asked any questions.

Thus, with all due caution, the prince of the Vahevuni reached the famous monastery of Metsop. Hovnan stepped forward to seek an audience with the prince, but to his surprise, did not know him in person. He then turned to a couple of clergy to ask them to meet the prince. Khosrov, a prince by birth, knew the protocol and played his part well. Then Hovnan, with several of his men, took twenty pack animals and headed into the mountains which separated the region of Kajberunik from Archesh. On the southern slope of these mountains, in the village of Harutyun, he left half of his people, and then went down to Archesh with the other half. There he loaded the mules with food and found his two messengers, who reported that the princes were leaving for Metsop in the evening.

Hovnan's main goal was to leave the two Vahrams no path of escape; thus, he quickly returned to the village of Harutyun and waited until he saw the princes passing the village with a dozen bodyguards. He followed them with his mountaineers and the loaded animals. Hovnan posted several men in the ravines, so that none of Vahram's detachment could return to Archesh. Advancing by shortcuts and hidden paths, he arrived in Metsop in time to prepare a reception for the later arrivals.

Khosrov and Hovnan were of the same mind on how to greet the princes. Most importantly, Armenian blood should not be spilled. And in order not to raise suspicion, Khosrov, almost unarmed, met the two princes with only two servants at the monastery gate. Mushegh Vahevuni reportedly might be delayed due to poor health. The princes were suspicious of Khosrov, as they knew him to be loyal to Princess Hripsime, but when they saw him and the guards unarmed, they entered the monastery and were taken to guestrooms. After their tiring journey in the cold, they were glad to be in warm rooms, with good food and drink. Khosrov himself was in a cheerful mood. Disguising his real intentions, he laughed heartily as he carefully took Bugha's fake decree, issued at Mushegh's behest, from under his jacket. It was written in Arabic and no one could read it. This quieted the Vahrams' suspicions, and they sat down to eat, in anticipation of Mushegh's arrival.

When the wine had gone to their heads and their eyes gleamed, they forgot about Mushegh Vahevuni, and became chummy with Khosrov.

Vahram, who was armed, then said to Khosrov, "Finally, desperation brought you to your senses like us. A wise person must think about himself first. I was very suspicious of you: I knew how devoted you were to the princes of Artsruni, but now I see that you were not so stupid after all."

"To tell the truth, I have never been close to the young princes, for I have seen how devoted they are to idle, unreasonable entertainments. I respected their mother, the Grand Princess, as an intelligent, virtuous woman, but her sons did not obey her advice. I was disappointed in them and foresaw their demise."

“Do you know the contents of the letters we received?” Vahram Truni asked.

“I know that an order was issued by Bugha, and Mushegh was very happy, but he did not tell me about the contents of the letter.” Then, turning to the one who was armed, he said, “I’m not such a curious person by nature. I didn’t ask, figuring that sooner or later I’d find out and move on. In any event, now is not a time to talk business, let’s revel!” he said and filled the glasses.

Our princes were no longer able to drink or move. Their guards were in the same condition when the Sassoontsis, hiding in the church, burst into the room, led by Hovnan, and, without giving the princes time to come to their senses, tied them up along with their guards.

As it was not yet midnight, Hovnan ordered everyone to gather, and went to Khosrov, who was resting in his room.

“Prince Khosrov, I think it’s time to go.”

“Yes, but someone in my condition cannot ride a horse.”

“You played your part well, Khosrov, and I’m pleased. Now let’s go.”

“Yes, brother,” said Khosrov and stood up with Hovnan’s help. “I feel that I have enough strength, and the cold air will sober me up.”

When his horse was saddled, Khosrov mounted the animal, and the two Vahrams, half-asleep, were loaded onto mules and tightly tied, not only to prevent them from escaping but to keep them from falling off.

Khosrov looked at them and said, “Brother, I drank the same amount as they did, and look at their condition, for God’s sake!”

“That’s because,” answered Hovnan, “you only drank several kinds of wine, but they also had opium. This is good for them and for us. They will not be able to remember anything when they see Mushegh, and will sleep sweetly until tomorrow.”

“It is possible that they will sleep forever?”

“God forbid, they must be tried and punished to set a good example for the rest.”

Khosrov had barely mounted his horse, when a couple of Hovnan’s scouts came running to report that a group of horsemen was heading to the monastery from Kerman.

“Riders from Kerman should pose no danger,” said Hovnan, “but secure the gate just to be safe. I will go out. You lower a rope on the outer wall. If I shout, open the gate. If not, I’ll climb the rope, and then decide what to do.”

Having said this, Hovnan went out of the monastery, and the gates closed.

He saw that in fact twelve armed horsemen were galloping to Metsop. They had helmets, spears and shields of a snowy white color. A tall horseman was leading the group.

Hovnan hid behind the rock close to the gate to try to identify the riders. This didn’t take long, as the rider in front called out in a loud voice, “Vahrich, go quickly and tell the people to open the door! We are completely frozen, hurry up!”

“God bless you, Prince Gurgen. Is that you?” exclaimed Hovnan jumping from behind the rocks.

“It’s Hovnan’s voice! Well done, Hovnan!” Gurgen said, dismounting. “What are these magical rocks from which you miraculously appear? What are you doing out here, brother, on such a cold night?”

“Waiting for you, but we have no time to lose. These doors will not be opened for Vahrich even if he knocks for ten years. Stand over there, Vahrich. Men, open up, it’s me!” The gates were opened at once.

“What does that mean, brother?” Gurgen asked, seeing the armed Sassoontsis. “What, is all of Sassoon here?”

“And where are you off to?”

“I’m going to the Byzantines.”

“Which route?”

“Via Mush.”

“Very well, let’s go together. We can head out now.”

“Now? God forbid. We’ve been on our horses for ten hours straight. Since you’ve opened the gates, let us rest a bit, eat, and warm up.”

“I figured as much,” said Hovnan, turning to his detachment. “Men, let’s rest this night. We will head out tomorrow. Unload the prisoners.”

The men hurriedly cleaned a room and lit a fire, where Gurgen and Khosrov greeted each other and sat to warm up. Hovnan went out to order dinner and check that the prisoners were securely guarded and could not escape. Having confirmed that everything was ok, Hovnan returned and sat down with the princes.

“Brother, you mentioned prisoners, but when I ask Khosrov, all he does is laugh and say that I should ask you. I assume you captured a couple of Arabs and tied them up. It is a sin to treat these fiends in that way, we should hang them from the first tree we see.”

“If they were ordinary robbers, I would not give it another thought and would dispense swift justice and hang them as I have many others. But these are Armenian princes, and I am glad that we now have an additional judge.”

“Speak plainly, Hovnan. Just tell me what’s going on.”

“My prisoners are Vahram Truni and Vahram Gnuni, who betrayed Prince Ashot Artsruni, and I am glad that one more fair and incorruptible person has arrived to judge them.”

“Why waste your time judging such scoundrels? Just hang them on the monastery wall, and be done with it.”

“First, we need to find out whether they are guilty, and to sentence them. I know exactly where to hang them. Let’s leave this question for now. So, tell me, why are you going to the Byzantines?”

“Seeing the desperate situation our nation is in, that the Armenians are being exterminated and the country obliterated, I expected Ashot Bagratuni would finally act and I would join him and do my part. Then I learned that he and his father had surrendered to Bugha. I’m still mystified by this development. I decided to go to the Byzantines for help. That’s my mission. That’s my goal. If I do not succeed, then I will have to come up with another plan. You’re a clever man. How do we get out of this quandary?”

“If I knew, would I be wandering in the mountains and gorges in pursuit of three traitors?”

“All right, then let’s eat, rest, and set out in the morning.”

And they did exactly that. The next morning, the abbot, a quiet, modest old man, wished them a safe journey. Just as they had arrived without problems, they left without a fuss and passed through the same town. Everyone was happy, except for the two princes named Vahram, who were bewildered and had no inkling of what awaited them. Even Vahrich, who had been worried about his horse, was glad to see Hovnan at the head of the detachment.

Mushegh and the two Vahrams were locked up together. The next day, the entourage found shelter in the mountains of Sassoon. The dozen or so princes, village elders, and abbots of the nearby monasteries formed a court.

MusheghVahevuni, Vahram Truni, and Vahram Gnuni were brought in. Hovnan, as the prosecutor, began to recount their crimes. He told how they had sent a secret messenger to Governor Bugha during the siege of the Nkan fortress, promising to turn over Ashot Artsruni and surrender the fortress, and how, in the same message, they committed even greater treachery, disclosing the whereabouts of Ashot’s brother, Gurgen Artsruni, and the strength and condition of his troops. Hovnan went on to describe in detail how they disobeyed Ashot’s orders and undermined the siege. When Ashot learned of their treachery and deceit, he ordered them to go to the enemy commander and ask how long he would hold out. They then dropped pretenses, and said, “You yourself must go and talk to him if you want to dispel any suspicion of your rebellious intentions.”

When Ashot kindly and gently began to remind them of how much good he had done and how his generosity brought him to complete ruin, adding that a meeting with the governor would ruin his family and plunge the country into poverty and bondage, these three, with their adherents, impudently replied, “We lack the power to challenge the Arab kingdom. Our fortresses are poorly fortified, we have no supplies and few soldiers. Therefore, you personally must go to Bugha to make amends. Then the invasions will stop, and the unfortunate refugees who are in exile here will be able to return to their lands. Otherwise our country will perish. If you go on your own, you and your loved ones will reap the benefits, but if you are taken by force, then you will bring only harm to yourself and others.” Because of these threats and treachery, Prince Ashot considered himself doomed and was forced to turn himself over to the governor. Because of the betrayal of these three scoundrels, Prince Ashot’s brother, Gurgen, also surrendered to Bugha. All of Armenia knows the devastating consequences for Vaspurakan after this surrender. How many unfortunate people were slaughtered and how many forced into bondage? How many miserable Christians were obliged to renounce their faith to save their lives? And all this happened because these three princes betrayed Ashot Artsruni, returning ungrateful treachery for the kindness of their lord.

An old judge, a refugee from Moush, known for his directness and impartiality, asked the accused what they had to say. All three unanimously renounced their treacherous letter, and said that the negotiations with Ashot were a slanderous fiction. They said that the fortress of Nkan was, in fact, on its last legs. Emboldened by the fact that they saw many unfamiliar and respectable people, they started attacking Hovnan, accusing him of disloyalty and treachery, of baselessly harboring a grudge against them, and of entrapping them through cunning and cruelty. They showed the rope marks on their hands and feet. Finally, they said that they were princes from noble families and that this entire proceeding was an insult to their dignity!

“Indeed,” said Hovnan, “Arab oppression against my people has become atrocious, and the laws of man and God have become playthings in the hands of such traitors. Our religious leaders have rationalized the yoke of bloodthirsty anti-Christian Muslims. Our spiritual head has denounced the murder of Governor Yusuf as stupidity without a care for the heroism of the Sassoonsis, even though Yusuf had earned such punishment by betraying Bagarat in body and soul, subjecting Moush and Taron to fire and sword, and preparing to destroy the St. Karapet church. Most certainly, in such circumstances, it is the duty of every Armenian to take up arms against such traitors and their treachery, and I have spared no effort to capture them. I could have hanged them from the first tree I saw, since there is no doubt of their crimes, but I did not. I do not want our people to regard human life as a plaything, since it is written, ‘thou shalt not kill.’ Now these princes claim they did not write the letter to Bugha. But I can show you this very letter, containing their seals. The very letter that they used to betray Ashot and Gurgen, turning Vaspurakan into a sea of blood. This is the letter, right here!”

He handed the letter to the old judge, who, in a trembling voice, read aloud:

“The governance of Armenia, entrusted to you by the supreme emir, obliges all Armenian princes and nakharars, mayors and town heads, to obey you. You have the right to punish the rebellious and disobedient, subject them to punishment and torture, to quell insurrections and restore order. Such is the duty of kings and royalty to fulfill the will of God, as faithful servants who love their master. Therefore, we princes of Vaspurakan, nakharars Mushegh Vahevuni, Vahram Truni, and Vahram Gnuni, along with other regiments and soldiers, in whose hands is the supervision of the country, petition you, Bugha, the chief of the Arab troops and the representative of the great emir, for our family and our country to dwell in peace, and to remain in our homes. We turn over Ashot Artsruni to you without any regret on our part, so long as you do not consider us rebels against the emir and your excellency. We should also inform you that the brother of Prince Artsruni, Gurgen, and with him many others from the dynasty of Artsrun and the great number of azats and the brave warriors of Vaspurakan, came to the border of Atrpatakan. There, the brave men of our country have gathered, who are ready to die by the sword rather than surrender, and if the siege should continue, then they may make a surprise night attack and cause great damage to your forces. For Gurgen is a warlike and brave man, and the army is devoted to him and ready to die for the people, for his country and for the entire princely family. Prince Gurgen controls such impregnable fortresses as Jilmar, Sring, Lahouk, and if he gathers all his strength, he can cause you great damage and send you back to the emir in disgrace. They will deal with you as they did with your predecessor, for even a hundred warriors cannot withstand ten Armenians.”

“And look here,” said the old judge, “the seals of the three princes: Mushegh Vahevuni, Vahram Gnuni, and Vahram Truni. See for yourself.”

“Take their rings and compare the seals, to see if it is a forgery,” added Hovnan.

After seals were compared and the sharp eyes of the judges found them identical, they were shown to the accused, who were neither alive nor dead, but rather numb with fear. Then Hovnan resumed.

“They are defendants, and I’m the accuser. We have nothing to do here. It remains for you to judge, you Armenian churchmen, princes, military commanders and peasant elders of Armenia. If you find that these three persons are innocent and should be acquitted, then we Sassoontsis, despite all the effort, blood and sweat it took to obtain this evidence, will let them go in peace. And if you decide otherwise, we will consider it our duty to carry out your decision without deviation.”

The three defendants and Hovnan with his Sassoontsis left the courtroom.

Archbishop Taron, chairman of the court, who had not said a word to this point, announced, “Oh, this Hovnan is a frightening man!”

The old judge, not paying attention to this exclamation, briefly summed up what was said at the trial, and asked, “Do you think with a clear conscience before God that these three persons, Mushegh Vahevuni, Vahram Truni, and Vahram Gnuni, are guilty, traitors to their prince, traitors to their native country and the cause of devastation and carnage in Vaspurakan?”

Everyone stood up, and, putting his right hand on the gospel and his left hand to his chest, said, “Yes, they are guilty, they are traitors, on a par with the apostates Meruzhan Artsruni, Vasak Siuni and Judas Iscariot.”

Then the old man again asked, “What punishment do you find worthy for these criminals?”

All answered: “They warrant death.” They called a scribe, a young monk, to whom the old man dictated the verdict. After the verdict was recorded, it was signed, and many, in place of their names, put crosses. Then they opened the doors and brought in the accused. The people followed them. The old judge read the verdict.

“We, the undersigned, in the year of our Lord 852 and of the Armenian calendar 300, in the first months of Mekhek, meeting in the city of Odzn, have judged before God Mushegh Vahevuni, Vahram Truni and Vahram Gnuni. Taking into consideration the clear and convincing evidence that these three together wrote and sealed the letter to Bugha, betraying their prince Ashot Artsruni into captivity and the province of Vaspurakan to fire and sword, we find them guilty of treason, punishable by death. And we entrust execution of this verdict to Hovnan of Khut, the elected commander of Sassoon, to find an appropriate place to execute the criminals as an example and a warning for outlaws and simpletons alike.”

When everyone began to disperse, Gurgen, deeply preoccupied, took the old judge aside and, taking a small letter from his breast pocket, addressed him, “Father, you are an experienced man. Compare, please, this letter with the message of the traitors to Bugha. Although the handwriting is disguised, is there not a striking similarity?”

The old man, putting both papers side by side, examined them for a long time and finally said, “Son, I’m ninety percent sure that these letters were written by the same person, although he tried to disguise his handwriting.”

“Thank you, Father,” said Gurgen, and then he left the room. He called Vahrich and led him to one of the empty rooms.

“Vahrich, by all means, you must learn from the convicts who wrote the letter to Bugha for them.”

“I will consider it my duty, my lord. Just tell Hovnan to allow me access to their holding cell. The Sassoontsis will not listen to anyone except him.”

“All right,” said Gurgen.

Chapter 15 Monastery of Artanush

In the time of our narrative, on the western outskirts of Armenia, at the borders of Greece, where the Artanush River flows into the Chorokh, there was a convent built by the Bagratuni princes. The monastery, or rather the fortress, with its high walls, towers, and ramparts, standing on a high hill surrounded by rivers on three sides, was unapproachable. Heavy iron gates stood on the side that opened to the land. Surrounding the gate, in numerous buildings, lived monastery servants and soldiers who acted as the security service. The monastery was rich because it derived revenues from the neighboring estates of the Bagratuni princes. Smbatavan and its villages, which were only a few miles from the monastery, were nearly entirely owned by the abbess. The abbess was almost always a princess of the Bagratuni dynasty or a dowager princess, whose lot it was, by her own free will or because of circumstances, to live in seclusion. She always enjoyed deep respect not only of Armenian but also of neighboring Georgian and Greek princes and people.

In the center of the monastery was a magnificent cathedral, decorated with columns. Daily services were held at set times. The new refectory, decorated with carvings, looked more like princely chambers than a somber monastic dining hall. The chapel and the reception hall were also very beautiful. The cells of the nuns were pleasant, their life was modest, and the glory of their virtues was great.

For twenty years, Princess Vaskanush Bagratuni had been the abbess of the monastery and, thanks to her wise rule peace and happiness reigned in the monastery and throughout the whole region. Within the monastery itself and the tribute-paying villages, there was no oppression. Everyone could turn to the abbess with their requests. Woe to someone who prevented a poor person from approaching her!

Thanks to her father’s inheritance, the personally modest Vaskanush provided the monastery with new buildings, improving the lives of those under her supervision. No nun was held against her will since the abbess released them to their fathers’ houses and forgave them the transgressions that other clergy would consider unforgivable. She always said that the yoke of Christ must be easy and the burden light, because only those able should bear it.

Vaskanush, even in black monastic clothes and under a white veil, was still very attractive, appearing much younger than her 45 years. The proud look of her beautiful eyes inspired respect; her presence commanded reverence. Although perpetually busy, she did not miss a single church service, arriving at the first sound of the bell and leaving only at the end of the service. She always dined in the monastery, and she was fervently loved for her noble and virtuous life.

That same winter, when half of Armenia perished under the barbarian Arab invaders, and the rest waited with horror for the summer, Vaskanush learned from refugees of Taron and Vasapurakan about the fate and ruin of her native country. Once, immersed in thoughts about her homeland and looking out the window at the frothy waves of the Chorokh and the Artanush, she heard footsteps and a nun entered the cell. She bowed low to the abbess and handed her a letter with a large seal. Looking at the seal, Vaskanush opened it and cast her eyes quickly over it with raised brows.

“His Holiness the Catholicos have mercy on us; he sends a young girl from Siunik to us. Have you seen her, my sister?” Vaskanush asked. In her simple words, there was a subtle, derisive tone perceptible only to another woman.

“No, princess, but if you order us to open the gates, we’ll take her in.”

“Quickly, open the gate. The poor thing must have frozen completely in such cold. Take her to a separate room, feed her, and report back. How could they send her here in such cold weather from Siunik? What were they thinking! In any event, it’s beyond me.”

These last words she spoke only to herself. And when the nun left, she continued: “I was sent to this prison in warm spring weather, at least . . . But who is this girl? ‘She is of a high noble family,’ writes the Catholicos, with orders ‘to keep her under strict discipline.’ What is her fault? What crimes did this seventeen-year-old girl commit? Maybe she is the same kind of criminal as I am? I, too, was from a noble family ... Perhaps she also imbibed from the cup of love on the shore of the blue Sevan, and they learned about it ...”

She looked pensively at the waters of the Chorokh.

The flow of the rivers, the waves striking the shore, and their monotonous splashing absorbed her attention and her thoughts without disturbing their flow. Vaskanush saw the gold and carved chambers of her father’s palace in Taron in those turbulent waters of the Chorokh. While wearing a gold-embroidered dress made of fine linen, she saw a twenty-year-old Hovnan, this young Sassoontsi lion with dark hair falling to his shoulders. She saw his tall forehead, sparkling eyes which would look down and grow sweet at her glance. She saw a rose garden glowing in the moonlight, herself on a bench with him kneeling at her feet; she saw her father Vasak’s angry head suddenly appearing ... And now the gilded chambers, the fine linen, Hovnan, the rose bushes, everything, all were absorbed into the waves of the Chorokh, and she was left alone in her somber cell, the silence broken only by the crackling wood in the fireplace . . .

It was already late at night when the girl was brought to the Abbess, and they were left alone. Vaskanush saw in front of her one of those gentle creatures, whose skin is whiter than lilies and whose hair had a silver sheen. She was like a sprout, which, it seems, will perish far from home, lacking the strength to adapt to foreign soil.

The moment the abbess asked her name, there came voiceless sobbing. Vaskanush rose from her seat and, like a tender mother, took her by the hand and seated her beside her.

“And now, my child,” she said, when the girl calmed down, “tell me everything and only the truth. Who knows, perhaps I can help you. Tell me, who are you, whose daughter, why did they send you here? If you want me to show you compassion, you must speak only the truth.”

“My name is Zaruhi. I am the daughter of Grigor Supan, Prince of Siunik, whom Babken Sisakan killed this summer.”

“I know this sad story, my child, tell me why you were sent here?”

“My father two years ago betrothed me to Babken’s son, Ashot. Now my brother Vasak wants to marry me to the prince of Gardman, Ktrich, and since I did not agree, he sent me here to prison.”

“Do not cry, my child, this is not a prison. I’ll send you home after a while. Calm down. So, what does your mother say about this?”

“Mother? ... Oh, if my mother were alive ...”

“Do not cry, Zaruhi, calm down,” said Vaskanush. Her eyes were now also filled with tears having learned that this sweet, naive girl was a complete orphan. After walking around the room, she returned to her seat.

“You wanted to marry Ashot, so they betrothed you to Ktrich?”

“Ashot was my fiancé, and I loved him, but when my father fell at the hands of his father, everyone said that it was impossible for Babken’s son to marry me. I agreed with this, but Ktrich is a fiend. I’m afraid of him. They could have left me at home, and if they wanted to send me to a monastery, then there is a nunnery in our region, why send me so far away? How many great princes, monks, bishops took up arms against one weak girl, and in this cold, this snow ...”

“Well, my child, do not worry. In the spring, it will be my duty to send you to Siunik. Now, go to the room prepared for you and get some rest. I’ll think about it and take care of everything. Go now; we must wait for spring.”

Hearing these affectionate and hopeful words, a hint of a smile emerged through the stream of tears on the girl’s face, and her fear and doubts were calmed. Kissing Vaskanush’s hand, she asked:

“And how many days until the spring, kind lady?”

“We are just about halfway through winter, my daughter. When spring comes, you and I will see it.”

“All right, then I’ll rest. I’m very tired.” When the girl left, the abbess started to think, realizing that the daring actions and threats of Ashot apparently caused this hurried imprisonment. Her conjectures were confirmed when, three days later, early in the morning, she was informed that Smbatavan’s village elder had appeared in the monastery with an important report. A humble elderly man came into the room and, bowing respectfully, silently stood at the door.

“Welcome, Tatos,” said Vaskanush. “Tell me what important message you’ve brought.”

“Your servant, Mother Superior, is ready to carry out your order.”

“I see. Sisters, leave us alone. . . Now speak.”

“Last night, twenty riders arrived in the village and demanded an overnight stay. I invited their chief, a young man of about twenty-five and his entourage, to stay at my home and arranged shelter for the rest elsewhere. The young man slyly quizzed me on the whereabouts of the young girl who arrived yesterday and about our monastery, its location and its security. He said that he was traveling as a messenger of the sparapet to Constantinople, but due to ill health he wanted to rest for a few days in Smbatavan. He said that he and his riders were from Shirak, which I took in without letting on that I knew that they were Siunetsis. From the agitated look of the young man, I guessed that he had come to us because of the girl and might do something reckless. So, I considered it my duty to inform you, Mother Superior.

“Did he seem unhealthy to you?”

“Not at all, but he is very sad. He was pensive, thinking long and hard, then blurting out questions.”

“How are his companions treating him?”

“As their prince.”

“Did you find out his name?”

“His name is Nerseh.”

“What do you think he is up to?”

“I think he wants to attack the monastery and kidnap the girl.”

“But who could have told him that we have the girl? Perhaps the Siunetsis who brought her here met him on the way back and told him?”

“Highly likely.”

“Never mind. Now go home, and since your guest is uneasy, he probably hasn’t ventured out yet. Tell him that the abbess of the monastery sends him greetings and wants to see him.”

The old man was taken aback, for this was the first time he had heard the abbess invite a stranger to the monastery. After receiving such a message, he expected her to order that the gates be locked more tightly and guards put on high alert. But as it was his duty to obey, he bid farewell, putting his hand to his chest and started for the door.

Vaskanush added, “Tatos, be sure to tell him that this meeting will take place, only if he agrees to come alone with you.”

“Very well, Mother Superior.”

The old man set out on his mission and arrived just in time, as the guest was about to leave the house. He readily accepted the abbess’s invitation, and soon, together with Tatos, he

found himself at the great monastery gate. When they were admitted, the iron-clad gates closed behind them, and the prince alone was led into a room nearby, where the princess awaited him.

Prince Ashot, the son of Babken Sisakan, somewhat boldly entered the room, but the majestic woman in black who met him, instinctively read his thoughts, understood his purpose, his false position and his false name. He was so embarrassed that he barely managed to raise his hand to his chest to greet her and remained standing at the threshold. Vaskanush calmly addressed him:

“Welcome, prince, to our land. I heard that you are going to Constantinople, and I wanted to see you because I have relatives there, and I may be of use to you, especially since the sparapet is my close relative. How is his health, how does he feel? It’s amazing that he did not give you letters for me.”

These seemingly innocent words were so fraught and distinctly enunciated that Ashot was embarrassed and stammered, “I’m sorry, princess, but he himself did not know which way I would go, and on his orders, I left very hastily ...”

“Very well, Prince, do not answer any other questions, I only ask about the health of the sparapet.”

There was silence, as happens at school when the student does not know how to answer the teacher and does not dare to raise his head. Finally, Ashot, having gathered all his strength and, like all modest people, having changed his indecisiveness to impudence, raised his head.

“Forgive me, princess, I’m not a messenger, I’m not going to Constantinople, Sparapet did not send me anywhere, and my name is not Nerseh.”

“I’m not surprised,” said the princess calmly, without taking her eyes off him. “These days, travelers have the habit of calling themselves high-ranking people for greater security. It surprises me only that you are a man of princely descent from your appearance and self-control, yet try to hide who you are and your name. It would seem that you would want to be presented in a manner fitting your own dignity under your own name.”

“I have no reason to hide my name. I am Ashot, son of Babken Sisakan.”

“Very well, that is the proper way for a scion of the noble family Sisakan to introduce himself, with an open face like a noble man.”

Again, there was a long silence. The princess sat down on the sofa, inviting the prince to follow her example. Ashot wanted to leave, but the situation was hopeless, and the princess, pitying him, reached out her hand, seeking to relieve this awkward situation.

“You, Prince, may have come to these regions to learn about the fate of a noble princess, who, by the highest order, was sent to me. If you want to know, I can tell you, the princess is healthy and feels well.”

“It’s impossible!” exclaimed Ashot, distraught. “I have reliable information that these hangmen chased the wretched girl in the cold through the mountains and gorges to put her in a dungeon. I came to rescue her!”

“It would be better if you say all this more calmly and quietly,” said the princess slowly, “so that the whole world, the servants and the rest, do not overhear us. Tell me, please, how do you plan to rescue the princess?”

“I will resort to the most extreme measures. I will do everything possible and impossible to rescue her from captivity,” said the young man in a trembling voice.

“Prince Ashot, your words are those of a reckless and hot-headed youth. I wanted our conversation to benefit both you and the young girl that you seek to protect. But if you are going to resort to ‘possible and impossible’ measures, then this will not come to a good end.”

“If I had such a cold heart as yours, under that black clothing, and if I had such a calm and serene look that I could cut down my interlocutor and stop him in his tracks, I would consider myself a happy man. Can I be satisfied with my destiny, when I have not had any rest for two years now? Aware of the tension between my father and my future father-in-law, I anticipated misfortune and tried to avert disaster. I went to the Catholicos at the monastery where he lived in seclusion and begged him to intervene to prevent bloodshed. He, tired of internecine quarrels, turned me away, saying, ‘I’m not the Catholicos.’”

“Then I appealed to the Council of Bishops and received an indefinite response. Then I petitioned the Bagratuni and Artsruni princes, but they, steeped in debauchery and diversions, did not pay attention to my request. No one gave me a direct answer, but it appeared that in their hearts, they preferred war between the Siunik princes in order to take advantage of our weaknesses later. The war began, and I pretended to be sick so as not to participate in this ill-fated bloodshed; when it ended with this terrible misfortune, I learned that my bride’s brothers wanted to marry her to a beast. When she resisted, they decided to send her to the monastery.”

“I then turned to the Siunik bishop and again to the Catholicos. And they tried to convince me to be modest and patient and to obey the Lord’s will. They saw in me the ardor of youth, sensed my obsession and passion, and promised to pray for my healing, as if my love for Zaruhi was a curse. Around this time, I learned from the Catholicos’ attendants that the princess had been sent to a remote monastery on the Byzantine border. And now you, Princess, her jailer, tell me that she is in good condition, that she is calm and content. Yes, you deliberately summoned me to show that she was here in these high walls, behind these iron gates, among these armed guards and servants. And she is here, like a corpse in a grave: calm, healthy and happy. All that this girl needed, poor thing, was to be buried alive by a lovely tombstone like you!”

“Your words, though somewhat late, are still timely. I’m not a jailer, but that’s beside the point. What matters is what you want to do. What’s your plan?”

“Free Zaruhi or die!”

“Not all who say they’ll die actually do so, Prince Ashot. I knew many who thought that death was close who then lived for many more years. And their hearts, which seemed dead, continued to groan from time to time. I have heard many confessions; in my position, I know the world and all its sufferings, and more than you know, my stony heart goes out to unfortunate people like you. It is possible that my weak female hand can help you, but only if you promise to be reasonable and patient.”

“It’s the same song again: be prudent and patient,” Ashot said with chagrin, gritting his teeth and getting up.

The Princess turned her angry, stern gaze toward him and said in an imperative tone, “Sit down, you reckless young man! It is typical of people your age to act decisively and passionately and to cause destruction. If I were afraid of you or wanted to do you harm, one word would be enough for you to be tied up and sent to Constantinople! But I want to help you and this unhappy girl! Listen to me and wait until spring. Return to your place and give me time to negotiate with the Catholicos. And in the spring, come back, and Zaruhi will be yours.”

Ashot sat down at the first sound of her commanding voice, and her words struck him like lightning and brightened his face. But this joy did not last long. One misfortune had followed another since his betrothal. If the powerful and mighty could not help him, how could a weak nun?

And Vaskanush, seemingly reading his mind, said, “Yes, God often gives strength to the weak to do what is not always possible for the mighty. But you must promise me to be obedient.”

“All right, I’ll give you my word, I’ll swear to all the saints in heaven and on earth to submit to all your orders. But you must also promise not to let Zaruhi out of your hands, so that nothing will happen to her!”

“Wretched young man! You doubt me, because you do not know me. While these walls are firmly standing, while I’m alive, no one can steal a girl from my hands, and if God will fulfill my prayers, I will lead her to the altar and hand her to you as your bride!”

These words, uttered firmly and majestically, affected the young prince so much, filled his heart with such joy, that he fell down at her feet with tears in his eyes.

“You are a caring mother, you are a woman worthy of becoming a queen, you are a creature worthy of worship, let me kiss your hand once more.”

“Just do not forget that this conversation, like a confession, must remain a secret.”

“Tell me what you want, order me to go through fire and water, just do not forget your promise.”

And taking her tender hand, the prince covered it with tears and kisses, until the princess got up from her place.

“Enough, get a hold of yourself,” she said.

The prince also got up and, already at the door, asked, “Mother Superior, may I ask another favor?”

“If you want to ask for a meeting with Zaruhi, then that’s impossible. It will be only in the spring before the altar of God,” and after a moment’s thought, she added, “Prince Ashot, wait a little, and rest in the next room while I write a letter to the Catholicos. He is now in your land, and you will deliver it.”

“As you wish, Mother Superior.”

“Godspeed on your journey.”

And the abbess disappeared into the next room. Soon, an old nun came out with a sealed letter and handed it to the prince.

Chapter 16 Fortress of Aramanyak

Our two travelers returned from the monastery as silently as they had approached it. The old man, bent over his mule, watched the young prince and observed that the worry and sadness had disappeared from his face. Every so often, the prince stroked his horse’s neck and smiled, as if nature might smile back at him. Suddenly, the prince turned to the old man and said, “Father, your mother abbess is quite an extraordinary woman. I have never met anyone like her in my entire life.”

“Yes, Prince,” the old man replied, “the whole of our land—Armenians, Georgians, and Greeks—glorifies the virtue and wisdom of the princess. And we, her loyal subjects, worship her like the Virgin Mary.”

The old man’s words made a strong impression on the young prince. When they reached Smbatavan, the prince presented the old man with a bag of gold to assist the peasants and then politely bid him farewell. However, instead of continuing to Artagan, Prince Ashot and his detachment turned towards Karin. The prince had heard that, for fear of Bugha, the Catholicos was traveling to Karin and then on towards Byzantium. The prince hoped to meet the Catholicos in Bagaran to give him the abbess’ letter.

However, upon reaching the citadel in Bagaran, Prince Ashot Siuni found Prince Ashot Bagratuni in a state of deep sorrow. Prince Bagratuni revealed not only that Catholicos Hovhannes had died, but he also disclosed that Bugha was hunting down his father, Sparapet Smbat. The sparapet was in Moks, and so young Prince Bagratuni had sent a messenger to his father warning him of Bugha’s plans. Prince Bagratuni described these difficult circumstances to Prince Siuni, detailing the particularly bad reputation of the Sassoontsis amongst the Arabs. Though the sparapet and Prince Bagratuni had hoped to ease relations with the Arabs, the actions of a small group of fighters had now made peace impossible.

“Have you heard about the recent heroic exploits of the Sassoontsis? “

“No. Is there something new? “

“A group of Sassoontsis descended from the mountains, reached Dvin, and hung three Armenian nakharars in front of Bugha: MusheghVahevuni, Vahram Truni, and Vahram Gnuni. They were accused of betraying Prince Ashot and causing the fall of the Nkan fortress. All of Dvin, Armenians and Arabs alike, were shocked by this spectacle. The three had been judged by a tribunal according to the law. The military commander Hovnan of Khut carried out the verdict of the tribunal and hung placards around their necks detailing their crimes. You can only imagine the silent glee of the Armenian population, but you can also imagine Bugha’s wrath at this spectacle. He sent four large Arab regiments to seek out and capture the Sassoontsis by whatever means necessary. A special messenger informed me of these events this morning and shortly thereafter, Bugha’s messenger arrived and delivered the message that my father was to report to

him immediately. This is the dire situation we are now facing. God help us, we will see what this spring brings and what other disasters await...”

Upon hearing about the death of the Catholicos, Ashot Siuni prayed for safe return to Siunik and, having bid Prince Bagratuni farewell, crossed the frozen Akhurian. The Siunetsis pressed on for several hours until they encountered two detachments facing off at the foot of Aragats. The smaller detachment, which occupied a more strategic location, was Armenian, while the larger regiment, which carried white flags, was undoubtedly Arab. Without a moment's hesitation, Ashot exclaimed “To the aid of our brothers!” He galloped ahead, brandishing his sword, and his men raced to catch up with him. The Armenians turned towards Ashot's approaching party. The Armenian detachment was indeed small, only about one hundred and fifty infantry and another thirty cavalry. Three horsemen, who stood apart from the others and watched Ashot approaching, are well-known to us: Hovnan, Gurgen, and Khosrov. When Ashot rode up to them, he received a warm welcome. Gurgen informed him of their plan to attack the Arabs, but decided they could wait to give the new arrivals and their horses a chance to rest. Ashot thanked him, and after a brief and friendly conversation, the troops lined up. The cavalry, riding ahead of the infantry, rushed down the hill towards the Arabs. The enemy forces—more than a thousand of them—met the Sassoonsis with jeers, confident that they would be victorious. However, Gurgen attacked the enemy from the right, inflicting mortal blows with his mighty sword, and the Siunetsis fought like lions from the left. Prince Ashot shouted, “Siunetsis, let us not disgrace ourselves before our brothers!” Ashot struck down the Arabs with blow after blow, and finally, the Armenians noticed that the exhausted enemy detachment began to retreat. When the battle ceased, there were only a few Armenian casualties, while the Arabs lost three hundred warriors. Thanking God, the Armenian troops moved in the direction of the Akhurian. Ashot wanted to continue his journey home, but Gurgen and Hovnan persuaded him to stay with them, noting the risk of attack on the road to Siunik. Then they told him of their plans to form a regiment to protect the honor of the Armenian people and to mete out justice to enemies and traitors. Ashot, who had no plans until the spring, decided that this was a worthy cause and he could represent the Siunik region in the regiment. Thus, the detachment headed for Kars, crossing the frozen Akhurian and arriving in Argina that night.

The regiment spent the night celebrating, sharing part of their spoils with the Argintsis. It was not yet dawn when they learned that a large Arab force was moving to Kars to stop their advance, and so the leaders of the Armenian regiment decided to take the Artagan road toward the Byzantine border. However, two days later when they reached Artagan, they were forced to stop by an unexpected obstacle.

Gurgen and his men, who rode an hour ahead of the rest of the regiment, were suddenly surrounded by Byzantine cavalry and ordered to disarm. For a soldier like Gurgen, this order seemed outrageous, but he decided that it would not be wise to add the Byzantines to his list of enemies. He turned to the leader of the Byzantines and began to speak, “We have come to the imperial border to ask for your protection against Arab persecution. We bear no animosity towards your people and we do not seek to be a burden.” Gurgen added that he himself was a Greek prince, a subject of the emperor, and the leader of a Byzantine province through the emperor's good favor. But the Byzantine troops took no heed of Gurgen's words and continued to disarm the Armenians. Then the leader of the Byzantines rushed toward Gurgen, sword in hand.

At this, Gurgen shouted, “You want to fight? Come fight then! Brothers, turn your swords upon them!”

The first victim of Gurgen’s sword was the Byzantine chief himself, and in just a few minutes, the Byzantine detachment was demolished. The survivors fled, leaving more than twenty dead on the battlefield.

When Hovnan’s detachment arrived to help, Gurgen was already interrogating prisoners, and he soon discovered the cause of the attack. One of the Bagratuni princes, Grigor (nicknamed Ishkhanik), had inherited the fortresses of Aramanyak and Ashkharaberd. Grigor was not paying tribute on these properties to either the Byzantine emperor or the Arab emir, and so the commander of the Karin Byzantine troops decided to put an end to this lawlessness. He was on his way to besiege the fortress of Aramanyak when his guard detachment came across Gurgen’s riders. Those Byzantines who escaped would inform their commanders about the battle, and these commanders would surely seek vengeance against Gurgen and Hovnan. Thus, the small Armenian regiment of men on a defense mission had earned the enmity of both the Byzantines and the Arabs. The four Armenian leaders, whose small detachment was ready to follow them anywhere, sat down to discuss their situation.

Gurgen briefly described the information he had received.

“I will give you my opinion, but we must decide quickly how to act. It is impossible to turn back, so we must go forward, defeating all obstacles in our path. I know the Byzantines well, just as you do, Hovnan. They talk a good fight, but their warriors are weak and stupid. Before they attack us, we must surround and attack them below the fortress of Aramanyak. This is our best option.”

“And how strong is the Byzantine force?” asked Khosrov, “We need to know this at least.”

“According to the information gleaned from the prisoners, there are not many soldiers, perhaps somewhere between three and five thousand. And given that the prisoners were likely exaggerating, I suspect there will not be more than three thousand men.”

“And how many troops does Ishkhanik have?” Khosrov pressed.

“One hundred, or at most two hundred men. But I know them, and they are real warriors.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Ashot exclaimed, “Let’s not waste any more time talking!”

“You’re awfully quiet, Hovnan. What do you think?” asked Gurgen.

“We should feed our men and then move,” Hovnan answered, rising from his chair.

“We are of one mind then and in agreement on how to proceed.” Gurgen declared.

“Let’s have a good dinner at Aramanyak tonight!” Ashot exclaimed cheerfully, rubbing his hands together.

“Exactly, my fellow!” Gurgen laughed, embracing Ashot, “God sent you to our little army to bring us joy. Even Hovnan smiles! All our princes should be more like you, always cheerful and brave.”

“The Siunetsis are always brave, but I lost my joy for a long time. May God grant a long life and happiness to the angelic woman who restored faith and joy to my heart. Let us drink to her health!” Taking a large silver goblet from his guard, Ashot drank its contents in one gulp.

After Ashot spoke these words, there was a brief silence. Hovnan and Gurgen looked first at the young man and then into the distance, thinking about the wounds in their own hearts. Only Khosrov was calm and, taking a bite of food, raised his cup.

“To the angelic woman!” Khosrov cried.

“By God, she is an angel! I have never met another such woman in my life. I only knew her for an hour, but everyone who meets her, praises her. She is the mother of all those unfortunate souls who have lost hope. The peasants revere her like the Mother of God!”

“Come, my fellow, take this cup,” Gurgen said to the guard who acted as cupbearer, “We drink to the health of this woman, the incomparable angel, the mother who brings happiness to young hearts!”

“To the health of the angel,” Hovnan cried, raising a glass of glass of water, as usual.

“Why are you drinking water?” Ashot asked, astonished.

“I’ve been drinking water for several years. Anyhow, it is time to move. The men are ready,” Hovnan said, standing.

However, our regiment did not travel for even thirty minutes before a Byzantine regiment of nearly a thousand men appeared. Gurgen cried in his loudest voice,

“Glory to God, oh sons of Armenia! The enemy shall send us their troops in waves!”

Hovnan turned to his Khutetsis, and said, “First use your arrows, then your spears, and only then your swords! Do not waste a single arrow!”

When the enemy approached, the Sassoontsi archers wounded one hundred and fifty Byzantines, and then a small troop of men marched forward to halt a Byzantine attack. It is easy to imagine the heroic actions of Gurgen, Hovnan, Ashot, and Khosrov. Sweat mixed with the enemy’s blood, and bodies littered the snow-covered ground. When the battle ended, the Armenians tallied their losses: there were no dead, and only a few wounded. The Armenians thanked God for their good fortune and pressed on before the enemy had time to regroup.

When word spread of this easy defeat, the Byzantine forces grew fearful. The survivors of the battle claimed that the Armenian forces were invincible. They described the Armenian men as gigantic, with faces as dark as the devil. According to them, there were not one or two hundred Armenian soldiers, but a countless number. When these exaggerated reports reached the commander, the Byzantine army was paralyzed by fear. He ordered his troops to abort this mission and retreat to Karin. The Byzantines withdrew in such haste that they abandoned their plunder at Aramanyak. The Armenians managed to capture a few Byzantine stragglers, but Gurgen ordered them released.

The Armenians who were trapped in the fortress did not understand what transpired, and so Gurgen sent a messenger to Ishkhanik to explain the circumstances. Ishkhanik was delighted, and he invited all his brave compatriots and liberators into the fortress.

It was already nightfall when hoof beats were heard entering the gates, and Ashot cheerfully exclaimed, “Didn’t I tell you that we would be guests at Aramanyak tonight?”

“Who is this young prince?” Ishkhanik asked.

“He is the joy of our little army,” Gurgen replied.

“Considering today’s success, I have never encountered a greater army in my entire life. I shall measure your joy accordingly.”

“This is Prince Ashot, the son of Babken Sisakan. He is a brave and cheerful young man. I am not referring to his physical appearance, but if you want your affairs to succeed, you should look him in the eye.”

“It appears that you have found not only joy, but also prosperity with this young man.”

“The word happiness does not describe the present state of affairs in Armenia, but today was a lucky day. Let us leave our worries and cares for tomorrow; tonight we shall rest and enjoy ourselves.”

Ishkhanik ordered his men to bring water so the guests could wash and prepare themselves. The fortress was illuminated, fires burned in the hearths, and music reverberated through the halls. The tables were covered with all sorts of delicious treats, including wine and fruit.

Ishkhanik busied himself with preparations, as if he did not trust his own servants to provide sufficiently for the victors. He personally ensured that all his guests had enough fine provisions and a comfortable place to sleep, ordering his servants to spare no expense for these brave men.

When everyone was seated and Ishkhanik gestured for the feast to begin, Gurgen held up his hand.

“Vahrich!” he shouted, “Where is Brother Hovnan?”

“He is downstairs, having dinner with the Sassoontsis.”

“How can I have dinner without him?”

“Which one is he? I will retrieve him,” Ishkhanik said, rising. Gurgen followed Ishkhanik out of the hall, and the two men went to find Hovnan, who declared that he would not follow them back upstairs.

“Hovnan, for the sake of our friendship, please relax, just for tonight!”

“Nobody can resist your friendship, just like nobody can resist your attacks,” Hovnan said. “In less than a year, I am certain that all Armenians will know of your brave feats.”

“I am glad to hear your prediction, but for right now, let us simply enjoy ourselves! Even in the dead of winter there are bright days, so why shouldn’t we enjoy this happy occasion amidst all our troubles?”

Hovnan reluctantly came along, and so all the men gathered around the table to drink and feast. Even Hovnan seemed cheerful, a smile peeking out on his sad face. The musicians played and the singer chanted a song with repeating lyrics:

“Memories of past years return.
Spring comes to wake the sleeping roses,
and love and joy smile for a moment.”

Hovnan closed his eyes, remembering how, twenty-seven years before, an angelic voice had sung this song in a rose garden. Could the good days truly return? Could spring revive the dead rose? Could love and joy rise from the dead? These questions echoed through his mind as he closed his eyes and pretended to sleep. Only one person in the room knew Hovnan’s secret and understood his pain; Khosrov had enormous respect for Hovnan’s selfless devotion to his homeland and disregard for fame.

The feast continued. Hovnan nodded to Gurgen and retired to rest with the Sassoontsis. Khosrov, sitting at the table with Ashot, tried to puzzle out the secret of the angelic woman whose health had been so central to the events of the day.

Chapter 17 Twenty-Seven Years Later

“Who is this Sassoontsi commander, anyway? I know he is brave in battle, but he has a cold personality. His speech is rigid, and when he laughs, it is as if he is grimacing. He does not drink wine, and music and singing make him fall asleep. And yet he is clearly a cut above his men. His appearance, speech, and thoughtful, rational disposition indicate that he has a gift for leadership. I know he is a man of conviction, but when it comes to feasts and entertainment, he is poor company and I am glad he is gone.”

Ashot spoke these words quietly to Khosrov, who replied,

“You speak the truth: he is a man of action, not pleasure. Nevertheless, he could surpass many of our nakharars in greatness, for the mountaineers love and respect him so much that they would face death without flinching on his command. It must be remembered, after all, that these men overcame grave danger to travel the long distance from Sassoon to Dvin to catch and hang three criminals. They traversed unfamiliar lands and suffered terrible weather to carry out Hovnan’s orders.”

“And how should we understand the fact that he ordered these three men to hang from the gates of Dvin? Why couldn’t they hang from a simple tree?”

“There is a big difference between hanging traitors in front of the governor and hanging them in some remote place. He did this to make a point and put all other traitors on notice that even though Armenia suffers great oppression, there are still laws and courts that will punish criminals and renegades.”

“If what you say is true, then why did Ashot Bagratuni complain to me about Hovnan’s actions?”

“Ashot and his father, the sparapet, are a mystery to me. Only God understands what they want and what they believe. We walk very different roads, and yet Hovnan says that we must not judge a person by a single mistake, and we must have proof of guilt before we convict. Thus, Hovnan brought the three traitors to court only after he obtained a letter written by the Arab Governor Bugha proving their collusion. Tell me, why did you leave Siunik at such a young age to come here? What is your motivation? And who is the woman you praised today?”

“She is the abbess of the nunnery.”

“Her name is Vaskanush.”

“How do you know that.”

“She is a member of the Bagratuni family.”

“Do you know her?”

“Yes, I know her quite well.”

“Was I right to praise her so highly?”

“How did you recognize her?”

“What did I see? I saw a woman respected by all her followers for her rationality and her virtue. Everyone living in the region of Artanush honors her as if she were a queen. There is also another reason I revere her, but I cannot discuss it yet.”

Khosrov wanted to know what Ashot had learned, but he fell silent and began listening to the conversation that Gurgun and Ishkhanik were having.

“These Byzantines are frustrating indeed,” Gurgun said, “taking advantage of my absence, they captured the fortress of Tortum, which the emperor gave to me and which I earned with my sweat and blood. But God gave me a strong hand and skill with a sword. Fools! They will not forget the name of Gurgun! Tomorrow, I will return to Tortum.”

“Whenever and wherever you go, I will follow you!” Ishkhanik answered, “But my horsemen, whom I sent after the Byzantines, have not yet returned.”

“A thousand Byzantines will flee to Karin, chased by only two hundred Armenians. Ah, our poor Armenian people! What a curse it is to be slaves and captives to such cowards! Tomorrow we must decide how to proceed,” Gurgun said, rising, followed by the gathered men.

Gurgun’s prediction proved to be correct: the Byzantines fled along the Karin road. Ishkhanik was on his way to share this information with Gurgun when a messenger arrived carrying a letter from Artanush seeking assistance. Roving Arab gangs had unexpectedly attacked the surrounding villages and besieged Smbatavan.

While Ishkhanik was reading this letter, Hovnan, Khosrov, and Ashot entered the room. They already knew about the flight of the Byzantines.

Ishkhanik read the letter aloud, and then gazed upon the others in the room with a grimace of anxiety.

“This is the situation, my honorable friends, I cannot refuse to help the neighboring region, where all the residents are Armenians. They view me not only as an Armenian, but as a Bagratuni prince, for, as you know, Artanush has been the seat of the Bagratunis since ancient times.”

“Who is the leader of the region, and who wrote the letter?” Gurgen asked.

“The signature reads ‘Vaskanush Bagratuni, Mother Superior, Artanush Monastery of the Mother of God.’ She is the sparapet’s cousin, and she is known for her wisdom and virtue in Taik and in the surrounding Armenian regions.”

“What are we waiting for? Let’s go!” Ashot jumped up from his seat.

“Very well, Ashot!” Gurgen said, laughing. “We shall understand this woman to be your angel!”

“She is the very same! Let us not waste time, we must go!” Ashot repeated.

During this conversation, Khosrov, who had not uttered a word, watched Hovnan, who shuddered ever so slightly at the name Vaskanush, though he continued to stand calmly.

“Let’s go then!” Gurgen said, laughing loudly. “What do you say, Hovnan? You must feel sorry for this boy, who has arms in hand and is ready to go!”

“Let’s go,” Hovnan sighed, leaving the room.

In under an hour, four hundred infantry warriors and horsemen, carrying a two-day supply of food, emerged from the fortress of Aramanyak and rushed towards Artanush. After stopping to make camp for one night, our brave squad arrived in Smbatavan just in time to find the Arabs trying to break into the village. This time, the Armenian hero was not Gurgen but Ashot, whose fierce attack on the enemy surrounded and overwhelmed the Arabs; they lost many men and the survivors barely managed to flee along the road to Kars. The outskirts of the village were littered with bodies, some floating down the Chorokh River to the Black Sea for days. The residents of the village invited their saviors to spend the night, and Hovnan offered to share the spoils of battle with the afflicted peasants. Hovnan’s warriors dutifully divided the wealth, and the poor villagers, who had lost nearly everything, sat down to celebrate their liberation.

Ishkhanik told the military commanders in the morning that they should visit the princess, but Ashot said nothing. Hovnan, however, declared, “I think you should go, but I do not need to visit, for I am in a rush to return to Sassoon.”

But as soon as Hovnan spoke these words, the elder Tatos, whom we have met before, entered the room and said, “Princes, Princess Vaskanush has come to express her gratitude.”

As Tatos finished speaking, the princess herself entered, accompanied by five old nuns. She bowed before the princes and seated herself. Hovnan had no way to escape. Khosrov, standing next to him, heard how loudly his heart beat and observed how powerfully his body trembled.

Ashot's behavior was unusual, as he hid behind Gurgun so that the princess could not see him.

The princess sweetly thanked all the commanders for their bravery and spiritual fidelity, and she asked them to pass along her message to their soldiers. She then said, "It is a great joy for me to see heroes rise to the occasion in these difficult times that plague the Armenian nation. Your military courage is equal to your virtue and selflessness."

The princess rose and added, "I hope, gentlemen, that you will honor us with your presence for dinner at the monastery this evening." After a few steps, she stopped in front of Ashot.

"Prince Ashot, I see that you are trying to hide from me. But your courage precedes you, and I am very pleased by the rumors I hear of your great deeds. I am forced to admit that you have kept your promise!"

Ashot managed to stutter out only a few embarrassed words before the princess moved along, stopping this time in front of Hovnan. She fixed her clear gaze on his burning eyes, and he could hardly remain standing.

"Commander Hovnan, don't you recognize me?"

"Should I, Princess?" Hovnan answered, his voice strained.

"I am Vaskanush, daughter of Vasak Bagratuni. Now do you remember me?"

"Yes, Princess," Hovnan said in the same forced voice.

"Will I see you this evening?"

"As you wish, Princess."

"Very well," the princess said, and after bowing to the princes, she left the room. Everyone except for Hovnan followed her out, and watched as she sat upon her mule and disappeared down the road.

Gurgun turned to Ashot and said, "You were right, son, she is quite an extraordinary woman and she even looks like a queen! There is so much elegance in the way she moves and speaks. I could not help but feel a sense of reverence."

"And yet you laughed at me!"

"You were right, and I did not even dare to sit down in her presence!" Gurgun turned to Khosrov and said, "Did you notice how Hovnan behaved? Most peculiar. The lion turned into a meek lamb, and even his eyes lost their fire. It was almost as if he were ill."

"I don't think he is feeling very well," Khosrov replied cautiously.

"How old do you think she is?"

"I would guess she is about forty-five."

"She looks much younger. It must be due to monastic life. All they do is pray, eat and sleep. They are totally calm and childless."

“Do not judge her so hastily, Gurgen. Who can truly understand another person’s life or know the secrets hidden in someone else’s past? Princess Bagratuni is a beautiful, intelligent woman. We have no idea what brought her here to the shores of the Chorokh from the banks of the Euphrates. The human heart, as they say, is like the depths of the sea. We laugh, sing, joke, eat, drink, and the crowd, which does not see the wounds on our hearts nor the emotions in our faces, envies us. If a stranger were to take stock of you—a smart, healthy, handsome, brave prince of royal origin—he might conclude that you are the happiest man in the world. But even I, who lack the wisdom of Solomon, can see that your heart is broken. I know there is some shadow over your life. So how can you possibly assume that the princess is without her own troubles?”

“You are right, Khosrov, and you are a far wiser man than I am.”

“I’m not any wiser. I’m just more experienced. And I have always tried to learn from my mistakes and from the world around me.”

Though Gurgen was dissatisfied with Khosrov’s predictions, he held great respect for the wisdom of his years. Ishkhanik, who had just returned from visiting his friend the princess, entered the conversation.

“So now we must spend the night here because Hovnan promised the princess he would eat with her. Tomorrow, we will return to Aramanyak and then we can travel on to Tortum together.”

“Very well,” said Gurgen, “Tell me: what kind of person is the usurper who occupies my fortress?”

“Some unfit Byzantine prince. I warned the Byzantine commander several times that Tortum belonged to Gurgen Artsruni, a well-known and respected member of the imperial troops. He replied that he would hold off on taking the fort for one year, but if you did not return by then, he would assume your fiery temper had led to your demise and would occupy the fortress. Unfortunately, it took less than a year before my relations with the Byzantines soured, so they attacked Aramanyak and rumor has it captured Tortum. What can you do? We are an ill-fated people. Everyone seeks to steal our lands and destroy our culture, and we, confused and desperate, steal food from one rapacious dog and give it to the other. I have seen this pattern repeated throughout my life. Woe to the next generations!”

“No, Ishkhanik, this cannot happen. It is better that we leave this world without children than that we allow our children to suffer this same wretched fate.”

That evening, a supper was held in one of the nicer chambers of the monastery. The princess only attended the event briefly, for she was called away by her monastic duties. However, after dinner, as guests gathered to return to Smbatavan, she reappeared to bid them farewell and turned especially to Hovnan and said, “I cannot yet wish you and your Sassoontsis a happy journey. I want you to stay with me for a few more days, in case these vicious Arabs return to avenge their defeat. And since I am a close ally to the Taron region, I hope you will not refuse me this request.”

Hovnan, who had recovered from his earlier embarrassment, replied with quiet humility, “Your wish, Princess, is a sacred duty to us, and we will be happy to serve you and those dear to you even in times of great peril. This is not only my will, but the will of all Sassoontsis.”

These words were uttered with such innocent simplicity that they could not raise suspicion in anyone who overheard the conversation. Even Khosrov would have found the exchange entirely harmless had he not heard Princess Hripsime’s story.

In the morning, the Sassoontsis separated from the rest of the detachment. Sure that Hovnan would follow shortly thereafter, Gurgen rode off with the other generals toward Tortum.

After his comrades departed, Hovnan was left alone with thoughts that had tormented him for twenty-seven long years. He remembered all the other nights when human voices fell silent, all noise ceased, and he not only saw but spoke to the vision of his beloved of a pure and unchaste love. How much he had left unsaid and how much he wanted to learn from her as the memories of twenty-seven intervening years flashed before his eyes. He recalled the two years in the dungeon when he was completely abandoned, cut off from humanity. One night, closing the door to his frigid, tomb-like cell, he had grasped his head in his hands and whispered only two words: “God” and “Vaskanush.” And then a prophetic voice whispered in his ear that he would see her again and there would be tears. When and where would that moment come? What could Hovnan do now after an entire lifetime had passed in bitter separation?

These thoughts raced through his mind; moments seemed like hours until Father Tatos finally came in and quietly said, “Commander Hovnan, Mother Superior wishes to see you now.”

The old man seemed to Hovnan to be a messenger from paradise, and Hovnan jumped up and hurried toward the monastery. He was brought into the same room where Vaskanush and Ashot Siunetsi had recently met and where, together with the others, Hovnan had first seen the princess after so many years. His heart was beating so fast that he worried it would jump out of his chest, and so he clasped it firmly, as if trying to hold it in. Suddenly, a secret door swung open and Vaskanush appeared. Slowly moving forward, she held out her hand and said, “Hovnan ...” The highlander rushed toward her and, falling to his knees, took her gentle, beautiful hand and pressed his mouth to it. He burst into tears, washing her hands with his sobs, and remained kneeling until the princess firmly whispered, “Enough, Hovnan.” Hovnan raised his head and whispered: “Oh, my lady, if only I could die here and now. . .”

Chapter 18 The Last Encounter

It is unclear how long Hovnan knelt at Vaskanush’s feet, but quite suddenly he noticed that she was beginning to sway. As she was about to fall to the ground, he picked her up as if she were only a child and laid her gently on a nearby sofa. Horror swept over him as he observed a deathly pallor creeping into her cheeks. Her lips were like ash as her eyes rolled back into her head. “Oh, my God,” whispered Hovnan, “This is how you understood my request? I begged for my own death, not her death!” The brave warrior, who knew only war and blood, had no idea how to handle fainting. He could comprehend life and death, but he could not recognize the state between these two extremes. He opened a window and noticed that her sacred body was beginning to weaken. He wanted to give her some water, but her lips were pressed tightly together, and the liquid only spilled across her snow-white skin.

Vaskanush shuddered lightly, and Hovnan realized that she was still alive. He clung to her with desperation, and finally, she took a breath, her lips parting, and then she opened her eyes. “Good God, thank you for your grace,” Hovnan whispered. Vaskanush sighed deeply and sat up. “Where am I?” she asked. “You are with me, my lady,” Hovnan whispered. She replied, “Hovnan, stay here, do not leave me again...Oh, I have been lonely for so long!” Vaskanush fainted once again, and Hovnan rubbed her hands and face until, at last, the color began to return to her cheeks. She sat up, straightened her cassock, and asked Hovnan to close the window and bring her some water. The worst was over, and the princess sat on the sofa. Hovnan worried that she might pass out once again.

“Come to me, Hovnan,” Vaskanush finally said, her voice weak and trembling. But the poor highlander, as if blinded by a bright sun that had not shined for many years, did not dare so much as to look at her. He approached her cautiously and knelt at her feet.

“Tell me, Hovnan, how many years have passed since we parted? What have you been doing all this time? Don’t you have anything to tell me?”

“What can I tell you, my lady? Twenty-seven years have passed, and so much has happened, I do not know where to begin. How brief were those precious days we spent together, and how interminable the years apart! I repent my wrongdoing; I know that I committed a great crime. I was a miserable creature, and I did not deserve even to look upon an angel like you. But was it possible to see you, to know you, and not to love you? My poor heart told me ‘Man is not capable of seeing God, but God has nevertheless given man a divine commandment to love completely and from the heart. If you can see God’s grace in someone else, and you find that you cannot resist, then you must love this person completely.’ And so I adored you, and I was content to leave the Bagratuni palace to fulfill your commands. Hearing you whisper my name, seeing you from afar, looking at your fine clothes ... I climbed to the tops of mountains and spent hours, alone, living by these memories. I felt myself flying through the sky, and it seemed to me that I was the happiest of mortals. But God was displeased with my boldness, and he punished me. I was worthy of this judgment, but I could not bear the thought of your suffering, my peerless angel. You were born to be a queen, to wear scarlet and fine linen, and I could not forgive myself for the fact that you were sent to confinement for my sins. I could not bear to show my face nor dare beg for absolution.”

“Did you know where I was, Hovnan?”

“For the first ten years, I did not know where you were. I wandered the countryside like a vagabond for two years, not daring to utter your name, waiting for fate to intervene. Finally, desperate, I traveled to Byzantium, where I became a soldier. But I grew homesick for Armenia, and so I returned to Taron, where I took on community responsibilities. I went to Prince Bagarat on affairs for Sassoon, and it was during this journey that I discovered you were in the Artanush monastery.”

“And you never thought of coming here?”

“I must admit that every year, I would secretly come to the opposite bank of the Chorokh, hide in the bushes, as befits a criminal like myself, and wait for you to appear. When I caught a glimpse of you, walking alone, I would fall to my knees and pray to God for your happiness. I dreamed that I might hear your voice, but the rush of the Chorokh drowned out other sounds.

And reassured that you were safe, I would return to Sassoon. This was the only summer I was unable to visit.”

“Arise, Hovnan, and listen to what I have to say.”

“Forgive me, my lady, but I am happiest where I am. If I could remain at your feet for eternity, it would be paradise.”

“I command you, Hovnan, and yet you do not obey?” Vaskanush asked affectionately, and taking Hovnan by the hand, she raised him to sit beside her. “I do not want you to think that your love for me is a crime. I do not want you to place human laws above divine commandments. I have loved you, I do love you, and I will always love you. I am so proud of you, and I know about your extraordinary valor. I did not know that you came to see me all those years. I could be perfectly happy with you by my side in this world, but because humans have dared to mangle God’s laws, I am forced to live alone. Parents invented foolish traditions, and then their children subscribed to these customs out of deference to their parents. Our nobility, who hide away in their lofty heights, look upon ordinary men with contempt. They believe that ordinary men were born only to serve their needs at their pleasure, and so these men are punished and condemned to a wretched existence in bondage and servitude.”

“Is there a single nakharar family that does not have loved ones in Baghdad? What did our nakharars do to save their homeland from ruin and humiliation? The doors of this monastery, which you call a prison, were opened to me, and after a while, it became impossible to return to my former life of splendor. But I also had no desire to go back to my family because I knew that you still loved me, and I loved you. If I had returned, I would have been forced to marry a heartless, corrupt man, for among the nakharars noble feelings and virtue are very rare. The Arabs stand at their gates and yet, intoxicated by wine and hypnotized by song, they neither see nor hear the enemy approaching. Eastern and northern Armenia are now under siege, and yet our leaders neglect their duties. No, Hovnan, I did not want to return to that corrupt world. I preferred to spend the rest of my days in this monastery, alone with God and trying to the best of my limited ability to serve the people around me. I could not become an accomplice to lawlessness and oppression. I preferred, like you, to love without false hope, and not to reduce love to a mere commodity to be traded for worldly gain. We must transcend this short, painful existence to be together in the eternal kingdom.”

As Vaskanush spoke, she laid her gentle palm on Hovnan’s powerful hand, her face glowing with love. Hovnan, his head bowed, barely dared to look at the woman who had captivated him from the very first time he had ever seen her. He could not compare her to anything else in the world, and one quick glance into her eyes left him trembling like a child. Vaskanush stood up and, looking back at Hovnan, realized that he thought she was about to bid him farewell. She laughed and said,

“No, Hovnan, it is not time to part just yet. We shall have dinner together. Abstaining from all worldly indulgences, I want to taste this pleasure just once. The desert fathers in Egypt ate two dates and a piece of bread and thought it sumptuous.”

With these words, Vaskanush took Hovnan by the hand and led him through a secret door into a small room, where a modest table was set for dinner. The princess seated herself, and Hovnan followed her example. But it was as if he were sitting on a throne of thorns and he could

barely look his companion in the eye. Vaskanush poured two cups of wine and, handing one of them to Hovnan, declaring, “for our eternal marriage.”

Hovnan gulped the wine to the last drop, and Vaskanush, watching this, asked, “How long has it been since you have had wine, Hovnan?”

“Twenty-seven years, my lady.”

“My poor Hovnan! What privations you imposed on yourself!”

“My hardship was nothing when I remembered that you, a princess raised in gilded palaces, were imprisoned in a monastery because of my misdeeds. I am only a simple highlander, accustomed to deprivation from childhood. Wine and water were interchangeable, and my real goal was to drink wine in the kingdom of heaven. But today, God has given me the cup of heavenly wine to taste, and I bow before his grace and his angel. How did you know that I did not drink wine, my lady?”

“I knew already, but yesterday evening, when you were dining with the princes, I watched your every move from this secret door.”

Although he had only consumed one glass of wine, it was a glass from the hands of Vaskanush herself and so Hovnan grew bolder. The wrinkles on his forehead eased away and his eyes started to sparkle with tenderness instead of their usual fiery glare. Vaskanush’s femininity softened him, turning a lion into a lamb, and Hovnan laughed heartily, his bitterness washed away in a flood of tears.

The dinner seemed to last for ages. The lovers described their experiences and their feelings, sometimes laughing, sometimes crying, until Vaskanush finally arose. It was time to leave.

When they returned to the hall where they had been before, Vaskanush asked, “Are you pleased with my hospitality, Hovnan?”

“To the heavens, my lady.”

“I want us to remember today’s bliss until we meet again, on earth or in heaven,” the princess said, gesturing to the ground and then the sky.

“What do these words mean, my lady?”

“May the Lord always be with you, my dear Hovnan.”

She held out her hand to him, and Hovnan knelt and covered it with kisses. Vaskanush bent down and, taking his face in both of her hands, planted a kiss on his forehead. She then moved toward the door, stopping only at the threshold to say, “Tomorrow at dawn you will see me for the last time. I will be standing on the monastery wall.” And then Vaskanush disappeared, closing the door behind her.

Hovnan rose, wiped away his tears of joy, picked up his weapons, and left the room, afraid that someone might catch a glimpse of the immeasurable bliss on his face. When he reached Smbatavan safely, everyone noticed the absence of the wrinkles and worry on his face.

When Vaskanush ascended the monastery wall the following morning, she recognized the man kneeling on the opposite bank of the Chorokh. When he saw her, he stretched out his arms in longing.

That evening, the Mother Superior learned that there were no Arabs in the region around Kars. The next morning, the head of the Tatos village thanked Hovnan and the Sassoontsis on her behalf, and then the troops departed Artanush. The grateful people of the region watched Hovnan as he vanished on the horizon, and they blessed him for the protection and assistance he had provided.

Hovnan and his Sassoontsi warriors had no problem reaching Tortum, where Prince Gurgen awaited them with open arms.

Chapter 19 Tortum

Although Armenia was blanketed in snow and the melt had barely begun in the Armenian highlands, spring had already arrived in Tortum. Gurgen descended from the mountains ahead of his detachment, as always, but neither the green of the hills and fields, nor the flowering trees, lifted his heart. The sad memories of Heghine, with whom he dreamed of settling there, clouded his soul.

Gurgen was outraged by the lawlessness of the Byzantine princes, who, taking advantage of his absence, had seized the fortress of Tortum, disregarding even their emperor's order. So, Tsolak, full of anger, rode ahead until Ishkhanik Bagratuni shouted, approaching him.

“Prince Gurgen!” Prince Gurgen! You’ll kill the horses! Slow down a bit!”

“You’re right, Ishkhanik,” Gurgen said, “but we are almost there, and I want to enter the fortress first.”

“It is very dangerous to enter there alone, since it is unlikely that the Byzantine prince lives there with only his two servants.”

“How many people can this outlaw have?”

“Who knows? He must have at least thirty or forty armed guards.”

“Am I not enough to knock these weaklings off the wall?”

“But my fellow, why take such risks, if you can succeed with prudence? Take eight or ten warriors with you.”

“No, ten people would be too many against forty of them. Four people and myself should suffice. I know those Byzantines better than you do, Ishkhanik. They are cunning as the devil, and if they see ten armed Armenians from afar they will lock the gate and prepare for battle. If I enter alone, I can gain their trust through my knowledge of Greek, and then it should be easy to take the fortress. You shouldn’t come along, as they recognize you. Atom, Khosrov, and Vahrich are enough. You come half an hour later.”

Ishkhanik did not quite agree with him, but it was impossible to win an argument with Gurgen, so he held his peace. The four of them went ahead through winding mountain paths, and

the rest stayed behind. Soon, Tortum was visible, an imposing fortress on the horizon, a part of the mountain itself, marked by crevices and cliffs. The fortress was surrounded by rivers and streams and had high stone walls on all sides. Gurgen and his companions headed toward the main gate. The guards, seeing only four men, did not close the gate, especially since Gurgen was smiling and made small talk in a Greek accent, inquiring whether the Prince Theophilus was in the castle, how he was, how he had settled there and whether he liked his new residence. So, he sweet talked his way to the citadel, jovially asking the guards to take good care of the horses so as to avoid trouble with the commander of Karin, who had sent them.

When our three friends entered the reception hall of the citadel, Gurgen sat near the window to keep an eye on the Armenian detachment, and Vahrich, as he was instructed by Gurgen, stood near the door. Soon, the Byzantine Prince appeared, theatrical and courteous, along with eight or ten servants. Gurgen greeted him in a Byzantine manner, chatting about this and that from Constantinople, trying to buy time.

The Greek prince noticed that he kept looking out of the window and said, "Prince, you obviously like the view from this window as you keep glancing out."

"Yes," replied Gurgen. Seeing an Armenian detachment approaching, he changed the topic and added, "This view and this fortress are to my tastes. How did it come into your possession?"

"The fortress belonged to an Armenian who died fighting against Arabs, and I took it over by imperial decree."

"And I am the Armenian who owns it, and if you know how to read, here is the decree."

"It's a very old decree," said the Greek prince, dismissively casting an eye over the document. "If you had brought a document from the Karin commander, instead of this order, it might have made a difference."

"If you do not obey the emperor, then we have our ways of making rebels comply."

"How dare you to threaten me in my own house? Don't you understand, you Armenian, that you are in my hands? A mere gesture from me would be enough to have you and your companions bound and thrown over the wall."

"You know neither me nor my companions, so you're making childish threats that you'll regret later, I have no doubt."

Gurgen had hardly said those words when two or three servants burst into the hall to report that some two hundred cavalry were attacking the fortress and demanding to see their friends who were inside.

The Greek prince rose and asked if the gate was securely locked. Receiving an affirmative reply, he sneered at Gurgen,

"You came here with a treacherous plan, not realizing that you had actually fallen into a trap. If you want to save your life, give up your weapons and surrender."

Gurgen stood up quietly and drew his huge swords.

“If anyone should surrender, it is you, not us, you dumb fools,” exclaimed Gurgen and, seizing the prince with his left hand, tossed him to the ground like a rag doll, and stepped on him with his foot. “Now let’s see who dares to set you free.”

Khosrov and Ashot stood there with their swords drawn. Byzantine guards, also exposing their swords, froze at the door and did not know what to do, as Theophilos, sprawled out on the floor under Gurgen’s foot, whined pathetically, “Free me, free me!”

“If you make a move,” Gurgen said threateningly, “I’ll crush your prince like a worm, and I would not turn his body over to you, even if you were ten times your current number.”

The room was quite large. There were a dozen or so Byzantines with their swords drawn on one side, and Gurgen with his two friends and Vahrich on the other side. Theophilos, lying prone under the giant’s foot, was barely breathing. His face turned blue, the veins on his temples and neck swelled, and he was close to suffocating.

“I’m dying! I’m dying! Save me!” he gasped.

“If you want to escape, order your men to drop their weapons and get out.”

“Guards, leave at once!”

“You insidious Byzantine, what about dropping their weapons.”

At this point, one of the foolhardy guards lunged at Gurgen with his sword. Gurgen saw him coming and kicked him in the stomach so hard that he flew in the air, sword in hand, and landed on the floor, dead.

Theophilos gasped again, “Drop your weapons and get out ... I’m dying!” and he sighed.

The guards dropped their swords and lined up behind the door.

“Vahrich, gather the swords, and drag this fool’s body out to his comrades,” ordered Gurgen, lifting his foot from Theophilos, who continued gasping, “I’m dying ... dying ...”

“No, you can’t die yet, we have other uses for you, and if you want to live, give the order to open the fortress gates, then everything will be settled without bloodshed.”

“It’s impossible, oh, I’m dying ... Kill me, but I will not give such an order.” Gurgen stepped on him again. The Greek made no sound, tried to endure, but when his bones cracked, he groaned again.

“Oh, ruthless brute, you have killed me.”

“Your freedom and life are both in your hands,”Gurgen said, pressing down harder and harder.

“Open it, open the gates! Let these dogs in!” said the choking Byzantine.

The guards ran to open the gates and, within seconds, Ishkhanik burst into the fortress with a detachment of two hundred horsemen. He saw Theophilos, bloody foam around his mouth, lying on the floor under Gurgen’s foot. In the corner of the room was a pile of swords guarded by Vahrich, Khosrov and Atom, who were chuckling.

“What does this mean? What’s going on here?”

“Here is what it means,” Gurgen replied. “From a distance, we imagined that the outlaws who had taken my fortress were men, but they turned out to be monkeys dressed as humans. Since they disdain the emperor and his orders, we decided not to fight them with our hands, but to crush them with our feet. But as he threatened to tie us up and throw us off the cliff, now it’s time for us to decide whether to do the same to them or not. We still have time. Let’s give it some thought. Vahrich, stay with Prince Theophilos, give him water and take care of him so that he does not die like an animal before we decide what punishment he deserves from us and what he should receive from the devil.”

Gurgen sheathed his sword and inspected the castle with his men. Everything was as Gurgen had left it, except for a small room where the Greek had settled temporarily in anticipation of his family’s arrival.

“It seems that this castle is not destined to see families,” said Gurgen with a sarcastic grin.

Meanwhile, Vahrich tended to the prisoner. As he gave him some water, the Byzantine rubbed his chest with his soft hands. Vahrich, half taunting, half consoling him in broken Greek, said, “Oh, great prince, I know that man’s strength from personal experience. He’d toss a bear like that, let alone a monkey like you. While still a boy, he handled me like a ball of cotton, but now as a grown man, I can only imagine how painful it was for you, a Greek noble, to be crushed, not by hand, but under foot. But what can you do? The only option is patience. Ah, my Greek prince, my Christian prince, if only our old nurse was here. She could apply some secret salve and you would be put out of your pain and be back on your feet. But it doesn’t matter in this case. If you die, we will take you by the feet and unceremoniously throw you in the Tortum river, and from there your body will be carried down the Chorokh to the Black Sea. Indeed, my friend, a few days ago we sent a horde of white and black Arabs in that direction. You can go with them and when you reach Constantinople, you can tell the emperor about Gurgen Abubelch Artsruni. . .”

When he reached his point in his tragic tale, there was a burst of laughter. And to his surprise, Gurgen, Ishkhanik, Khosrov, and Ashot were standing there, listening attentively to these words of comfort until they could not contain themselves any longer. The pathetic Theophilos was barely breathing, but still moaning.

“What are you up to?” said Gurgen. “Did I tell you to tend to him or to mourn him?”

“I did what I could, my lord. They say that consolation is the best medicine. Under your heavy foot, it appears that his heart and stomach have been mixed up in his belly and he’s lost a lot of blood. Look at this white handkerchief covered in red. It’s not a good sign. It’s a pity, but it looks as if we’ll need to throw his body into the river tomorrow morning . . .”

“That’s quite enough. Go see about our dinner, and assign the most decent of the Greek servants to watch over him. And keep an eye out. These Byzantines are rogues. Make sure they don’t try to poison us . . .”

“Much appreciated, my lord. I understand these things better than caring for the sick,” said Vahrich, leaving the room.

“This man has no conscience,” Gurgen remarked.

“The difference is,” Khosrov replied jokingly, “that Gurgen’s pity is manifested only when the person is already at the last gasp.”

“God knows that it is not in my nature to shed blood. However, we live in such terrible times and being a warrior is such a terrible profession. It is almost impossible to feel real pity. We could have easily handled the dozen Greek guards at the door, but their prince was the guilty one, not them. Indeed, what times these are, my brothers. I shudder to think about the lawlessness, plunder, treachery and devastation throughout this land and abroad. Lord, have mercy on Armenia, and save our people!”

“The misfortune is,” said Khosrov, “that there is not a glimmer of hope anywhere.”

“Poor Hovnan, he placed all his hope on the Catholicos. Last winter, he even went to see him and plead with him to lead the people, to arm them all ...”

“I was at the princes’ council when Hovnan made his appeal. He was thrown into the dungeon to please Prince Ktrych Gardmanetsi,” Ashot said.

“All of them are worthless, the Catholicos and the nobles and the nakharars . . . In all of Armenia, God created only one Hovnan and placed him on the summits of Sassoon . . .”

“So true,” said Khosrov.

“Why do you underestimate yourself?” Ishkhanik asked Gurgen. “You are at least as strong as he is, if not stronger.”

“I listen to the voice of my heart. But he obeys reason. He knows us better than we know ourselves. Actually, I can only speak for myself. I have no right to speak for others! Why should I hide my sin? When I found out that Vaspurakan and Artsrunik were in danger, I still had time. I could have come to their aid. My blood boiled when I learned about the atrocities committed by the Arab outlaws against our people. But I stayed in Bagravand anyway. The night before, I swore I would go, but the recollections of the many injustices I’d suffered held me back. But not Hovnan. He fully understood the depravity of the Armenian nobles, their ambitions and rivalries, and though he and his people were self-secure in the mountains of Sassoon, he set out to rescue the people in Artsrunik. Indeed, I believe that if he had arrived a bit sooner, the bloodbath in Vaspurakan could have been averted, and Ashot would not have been betrayed, for Hovnan would undoubtedly have known about the conspiracy and would have intervened to stop it. Now, Ishkhanik, this is the difference between Hovnan and me. I, like you, like Khosrov, like Ashot, think about comfort and amusement, our grudges and our reputations, whereas he thinks only about the fate of the people. He is focused on finding a cure and puts all his energy into the plight of his homeland. Indeed, I happened upon him when he was on foot going to appeal to the Catholicos to intervene as spiritual leader of the people. . .”

“Now we’ll have to see who will be elected the next Catholicos,” Ashot said.

“What? Has the Catholicos died?”

“Yes, he passed away.”

“Well, let’s hope for the best,” said Gurgen. “Who knows, they may, perchance, elect someone better.”

“But continue what you were saying,” Khosrov said.

“What more is there to say? Everyone is well aware of the situation. I just wanted to say that this simple peasant from the mountains has done more than all the city-dwellers, nobles, princes, nakharars and Catholicos combined.”

“That’s the truth. I can attest to this firsthand,” added Khosrov.

“I invited him to join us here, but for such an ascetic man as Hovnan, worldly pleasures hold no allure: not food, nor wine, nor music, nor sport . . . He is indifferent to all these pleasantries and distractions.”

“In this, Gurgen, I beg to differ,” said Khosrov. “Can we say for sure that Hovnan did not feel any satisfaction when three traitors were hanged? He worked so hard for that moment!”

“When these traitors awaited the gallows, we watched indifferently. But Hovnan was deep in thought, silent and even trembling. He had brought the abbot of the monastery of Kob there against his will . . . He insisted that the spiritual needs of the convicts be attended to and advised them that they could express their last wishes to the monk. When Mushegh took off his ring and handed his purse of coins to the monk, he mentioned his wife and children and I noticed that Hovnan turned aside to hide his tears. That is why I said that he obeys only his mind, but we should know that he also has a heart. And then I came up and said to him, ‘If you feel sorry for them, you are free to release them. It is within your own power to do so.’ Do you know what he said to me? ‘Gurgen, you are like a child, I cannot change anything. I will fulfill the verdict of the court. I feel sorry for these people for deserving death, but I feel sorrier for their widows and orphans. But if justice is not done by those to whom it is entrusted, they will be answerable to God for violating that trust.’ I was stunned by this logic and agreed he was right.”

The princes’ conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Vahrich, who invited them to supper.

That night they rested, and the next morning they went for a walk. The grounds of Tortum, although small, are very beautiful. There are many streams and brooks gurgling through cracks and crevices like waterfalls into the river Tortum. There were stands of pine and cedar here and there and a thicket of shrubs. Huge boulders and sharp rocks jut out and captivate the eye. Finally, water reaches the river pooling into a beautiful lake, with splashing and foam, creating a cloudlike mist. At this very spot, there was a splendid summer castle that looked like a temple to Astghik. And at the gate stood Vahrich and a couple of servants, ready to greet their guests.

More than a thousand years have passed since that day, but the river, the lake, the waterfall, the foam and the spray have remained the same. Travelers from distant countries watch and admire the beautiful spectacle. But where is the magnificent castle? There is no trace left of it. Where are the Armenians, the inhabitants of these places? Only the ruins of the churches remain, themselves gone forever. “Nations come and go, but the world remains.”

The people of those parts rejoiced greatly when they saw Gurgen. Peasants, village elders and priests gathered to greet him. Gurgen made a great effort to be cheerful, though his heart was

full of sadness as he recalled the dreams he had when he built this castle. But now at his doorstep he saw only Vahrich ...

Everything was joyous. The trees were in bloom, the violets fragrant and the grass verdant, but Gurgen's heart ached and he promised himself never to return, never to set eyes upon the castle or the natural beauty of this special place again.

Chapter 20 The Happy Man

Spring came, nature was in bloom, but Armenia remained in tears. The enemy invaders had settled into the Armenian capital of Dvin and were planning to march north and east with the goal of leaving not so much as a handful of Armenian soil untouched by blood and tears. The farmers tilled their fields in vain and the merchants traveled with their caravans in vain as there was not a single heart that did not quiver in fear and anxiety. No one could count on anything or plan even a day in advance. As in the heat of summer, when even the leaves of the trees are motionless and all nature waits in silence for thunder, lightning and torrents of rain from all sides, so the people waited in apprehension of the looming storm.

This anxiety was felt by the whole country, but most of all it was felt by those who saw everything, knew everything, and heard everything that happened throughout the country, and by the one who understood the great responsibility on his shoulders. This man was Sparapet Smbat, a brave and intelligent warrior, who loved his people and was cognizant of the danger of war. He was afraid of lawlessness, for he was afraid of God, and he saw with horror that the country was on the edge of the abyss. Seeing himself as the defender of the nation from foreign invaders, he felt humiliated and betrayed by Bugha's ruthless manipulations. He knew that in Baghdad, most of the Armenian princes followed the example of his brother Bagarat and renounced their faith to avoid immediate imprisonment, torture and death. When Bugha had invited him to his palace, the Sparapet's heart was embittered. Death was more palatable than meeting with this outlaw, but hoping to alleviate the sufferings of the homeland and his compatriots, he set aside his qualms. It was especially hard for him to see Vaspurakan, which had come under his care after Ashot was taken prisoner. Though he tried to come to the aid of the population, he was unable to stop the invaders and the ensuing devastation. He witnessed unworthy, wicked people becoming emirs and overrunning the country, occupying the castles of the Rshtuni, Artsruni, Kajberuni and Bznuni princes. The people had had enough. But for fear of reprisal by the great emir, they would have shaken off their chains and rid themselves of these horrible oppressors.

In these unfortunate circumstances, Smbat counselled patience as he headed to Yerzagavors, where his son Ashot had gathered the Armenian bishops and princes for the election of a new Catholicos. Further delay was not possible, but there was no candidate. The princes and bishops looked for excuses not to serve. Thus, a layman named Zakharia, whose virtue and dedication were known to all, was unanimously elected as Catholicos. Armenia was tired of indifferent, weak-willed patriarchs, whose main concern was their own comfort. All in one day, Zakharia was ordained a deacon, a priest, a bishop, and then he was anointed as Catholicos. The news of the election of this worthy and virtuous man as the patriarch quickly spread throughout the land, filling people with new hope.

No matter his good intentions, how much could the Catholicos do? During his predecessor's time, there was at least time to think. Now that the invaders had reached the heartland of Armenia, with an army of over one hundred fifty thousand troops, resistance seemed futile. The Sparapet candidly confirmed this in his consultation with the Catholicos. The only remaining option was to try to deal with the invaders prudently and to minimize damage. Thus, asking the blessing of the Catholicos, the Sparapet went to Dvin to meet with Governor Bugha.

The city of Dvin, the capital of Armenia, had almost 200,000 inhabitants at that time and was famous for its palaces, churches and a patriarchal cathedral, although the Catholicos did not live there for fear of the Arab governor. The city could not accommodate the huge influx of Arabs, so most lived outside under tents. The Armenian sparapet rode directly to the governor's palace.

Bugha was an ethnic Turk, with features typical of his people. He had a big head, small deep eyes, prominent cheekbones, and a thin redish beard. At the sight of Smbat, a smile appeared his cruel face. It was impossible to tell whether he expressed mockery or contentment. His eyes shone like a bloodthirsty hyena. He adjusted himself in his seat, but did not rise, for it was against his customs to rise to greet an infidel. When Prince Arstruni was still in power, Bugha followed protocol. Armenia was strong then. Now the tables were turned: half of the country belonged to him, and he had an eye on the rest.

When everyone had gone out and left them alone, Bugha expressed his satisfaction with the loyalty of the prince, which he consistently reported to the emir in Baghdad. He now wanted the sparapet's help in completing his conquest of the country. With diplomatic cunning, the governor started his discussion vaguely, stating that he planned to attack Tpkhis in the near future, where the ruler was a Muslim. He began to pepper the sparapet with questions about Tpkhis, its forces, and its military strength. Next, Bugha turned to the other ethnic groups of the Caucasus: the Tsanars and Avrhazes. Only after inquiring about the surrounding peoples did Bugha look the sparapet straight in the eye and ask about the Armenian princes of Atrnerseh and Artsakh: Vasak and Babken of Siunik, Ktrich of Gardman, and Aghvan, the prince of Yesai. This unnerved Prince Smbat but he maintained his composure and calmly responded. His conscience was unsettled, as he thought about how to respond without betraying his people. It was as if the historic traitors Meruzhan and Vasak were peering through the doorway, pointing their fingers and laughing at him. But to avoid raising suspicion, he answered, choosing his words carefully, and then left the room.

This encounter tired Prince Smbat, a robust man, more than the long trip from Moks to Dvin. He was covered in cold sweat as he reflected on his ethical dilemma to neither provoke the emir nor betray his people. Immersed in these ponderous thoughts, the sparapet and his entourage reached his castle, but before he could dismount, he was stunned to see a familiar face among the assembled forces. To find himself face-to-face with Hovnan was like facing the last judgment. The sparapet recalled the night when Hovnan advised him not to go to Bugha. But could this really be Hovnan? Would he dare to enter Dvin? But it had to be him, no? With his piercing gaze focused impassively on the sparapet's face? The sparapet wondered if it were possible that Hovnan could have learned of his meeting with Bugha already. How sharp was the sting of his restless conscience!

Without another word, the sparapet put his hand to his chest and silently invited Hovnan to follow him. When they were alone, Prince Smbat asked, "Now that we are alone, Hovnan, tell

me what brings you to these parts? Why did you come to this city? Maybe,” Smbat added with a grin, “you want to punish traitors and start with me?”

“God forbid! Armenian sparapet, I know you well. You can go astray and mislead Armenia as well, but you cannot betray our nation, because you could never renounce the Christian faith and ruin your people.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I judge a person by his past. I am well aware of you and your past and have seen the prosperity of the population under your rule in Moks and Shirak. Also, after Ashot’s capture, you spared no effort to alleviate the hardships of the people of Vaspurakan.”

“Were you as well acquainted with Mushegh Vahevuni and his comrades?”

“How can you ask such a thing? Do you think me an outlaw, murderer or executor, who hangs people at the gallows without evidence in hand?”

“What crimes did these individuals commit?”

“They betrayed their people, betrayed the Armenian princes and caused the collapse of our homeland.”

“You’re right, Hovnan,” said the old man lowering his head. He closed his eyes and, after a long silence, blurted out angrily, “Yes, indeed, you are right. All of us assembled in Dvin, including myself, turned out to be despicable traitors. The people have the right to hang us all. Dear God, what a mess this is! If we followed your advice, we may not have been well off now, but at least we would not have become a toy in the hands of such a ruthless invader as Bugha. Only you saw this coming. Why did God put you on top of the mountain, and me on the nakharar’s throne, of which you are truly more worthy than I?”

“If you understand that you are on the wrong path, what prevents you from returning to the path of truth again? I, a miserable mountaineer, can promise you twenty thousand brave Sassoonci men, and Vaspurakan, despite its ruin, can probably raise another twenty thousand desperate souls. Your provinces, Moks and Shirak, can also muster another twenty thousand people. If the remaining nakharars will give us forty thousand more soldiers, with a hundred-thousand-strong army, we can drive out these invaders and restore order to our land. Especially now, when we have a worthy Catholicos who is ready to give his life for the people. I know him personally.”

“How do you know him?”

“When I left your uncle’s prison and wandered homeless and without shelter, Zacharia took me in for about a month. I got to know this respectable and virtuous person and was glad that the Armenian bishops and princes at last made a worthy choice looking beyond the clerical hierarchy to select a worthy successor to the throne of Sts. Thaddeus and Gregory the Illuminator.”

“But to pick up where we left off, Sparapet, why can’t you become the second Vardan for Armenia? A more circumspect Vardan, for what’s the point in adding to the number of martyrs? It is my mission to root out the depraved, cruel and unworthy nakharars, and to slay this many-headed dragon. Armenia should have one head and be one people, one shepherd leading one

flock. Is not anarchy the cause of all our calamities, treated as inevitable, attributed to deadly strife? Now tell me, will you step forward as your nation's savior and put an end to this self-destructive situation? Either way, you will earn glory. If you die, you will enter the kingdom of heaven for fighting the good fight. If you live, you will become an earthly king. Both are worthy outcomes."

"I should have followed your advice last year. It's too late now."

"I'm afraid very much that next year, when I am no longer of this world, you will say again: 'What a pity. I should have followed his advice last year.'"

"In saying these words, how do you picture Armenia's future?"

"The fate of Armenia is known. You, the Armenian sparapet, the rightful holder of the Bagratuni throne, know full well that it didn't take even one summer for the invaders to capture half of Armenia! Isn't it patently clear that if we do not resist, by the end of this summer the rest of the country will be under Arab control? And then the unarmed Armenians in bondage shall wait for a crust of bread to be thrown their way to sustain their pathetic life in servitude. Rather than suffer continued humiliation, he will eventually escape this bondage and leave this land to find a way to scrape by elsewhere."

"But aren't you aware of our situation, Hovnan? If I lead an insurrection, all our nakharars will try to save their skins by uniting with Bugha to defeat me."

"What do you mean? Would you join Bugha to destroy them?" said Hovnan, glaring as he headed for the door.

"Wait, where are you going? How quickly did you condemn the person of whom you were speaking so highly before!"

"Forgive me, prince, I'm not of princely descent and not an honored man as I told you before."

"I understand what you mean. You look down on the nakharars and consider your peasant origins a mark of honor."

"How can you even question this, when you with your own mouth said that as soon as you organize an insurrection, the rest of the nakharars will join Bugha to put it down? No, I'll stay with the simple peasant folk, mountaineers like me."

"But wait ..."

"Why should I wait if you do not have the courage to take up my suggestion?"

"How long have you been planning this?"

"Almost a month."

"How can you expect me to make a decision on the spur of the moment?"

"I'm wasting my time here, I can see. You should have long ago considered my advice on your own. Didn't you just permit me to repeat my proposal from last year? We may have a bit of

time, but not much. In as little as an hour, all this may be meaningless. Indeed, we may already be too late, Sparapet of Armenia . . .”

Having said his piece, Hovnan’s sharp ear detected hoof beats and he stole a glimpse out the window. His keen eyes came to life and he turned to Smbat, saying nonchalantly, “The Arab contingent must be after me.”

“What do mean? Are you sure?”

“I saw several suspicious people watching me closely when I waited for you. They undoubtedly let Bugha know.”

“But who will dare in my house ...”

“You’re not at home in Moks, my prince, you’re on Bugha’s turf in the palm his hand.”

“What are you going to do now?” Smbat asked, his demeanor completely altered.

“I will find a way to escape, but I’m sorry that you are not the person I was looking for. I wanted to make you the first among the Smbats, higher than Bagratunis, much higher than Vardan Mamikonian, but you didn’t rise to the occasion. Woe to Armenia!”

Hovnan grabbed his leather shield and spear, ran out of the room, opened the door leading to the next roof and, quickly jumping from roof to roof, vanished from sight.

Smbat, who for all his weakness of character was a noble man, was truly shaken by Hovnan’s sharp words. When the head of the Arab troops entered, and asked permission to search the palace for a suspect allegedly hiding there, the prince granted consent with a sneer. Once the Arabs left empty handed, he reflected on his miserable fate, which had turned him into a toy in the hands of a bloodthirsty tyrant. Indeed, the only exit from this situation was the one suggested by the simple mountaineer. But what to do now? He had left with his accusing glare and biting words.

“What a happy man he is, with his clear conscience, he fears nothing, neither human nor God’s judgment. The Lord sent him to me on purpose to save me from my debased state, and I pathetically argued with him. What a brilliant proposal and what an honorable mission to free Armenia or die, like Vardan and his brave men! Instead, I am falling into the pattern of Vasak and Meruzhan, compromising with our oppressors and making alliances with them at the expense of country and nation. But is there truly no other way? Couldn’t we bring Hovnan back and put him in charge, saying, ‘Give the command and I will obey and follow you . . .’ But who am I kidding? This is just more dithering, more procrastinating. Here is this man who shows up in the capital on his own, staring down the commander of an army of 200,000 men, nearly the size of the great emir’s army, and boldly, without flinching, but always in command of himself, expecting absolutely nothing from me, takes care of himself and his escape while I vacillate pathetically.”

Heaving deep sighs, Smbat talked to himself, when suddenly a loud noise attracted his attention. He rushed to the window and saw a mob of Arab soldiers leading an unarmed man. As they passed through the crowd, hundreds of hands pounded him with wild screams, and the bloody man, without agitation or fear, looked contemptuously at the crazed people. This man was Hovnan.

At that time, the Arabs rode through and dispersed the frenzied mob. Snatching the captive, they took him to the governor's palace.

Smbat turned from the window and disgusted with himself, struck his brow with his fist, and said, "Alas, what has become of this valiant man! And I am helpless to save him. I am the Sparapet of Armenia only in name. His death is on my conscience. He is indeed a happier man than I . . ."

Chapter 21 Two Tombs

We saw how Hovnan, jumping from roof to roof, vanished from sight. When he reached the corner house, he jumped down to the street, leaning on his lance, but when he saw the posse coming he turned into the opposite direction. He barely took a couple of steps when another group came from the other side. Hovnan, though surrounded, continued to look for an escape. The Arabs didn't notice him at first, but then one recoiled in horror and shouted: "It's him, the rebel leader!" He happened to have seen Hovnan up close during a battle in Shirak and knew what a formidable fighter he was. In a split second, everyone's swords were brandished, and Hovnan was surrounded. Hovnan took out his sword and warded off blows from the left and right, and the Arabs began to back off, but then several ganged up on him, knocking the sword from his hand. The head of the Arab force, observing the fight from afar, charged forward and struck Hovnan on the head with a hammer. The blow cracked his helmet and knocked the mountaineer to the ground. The Arabs, who a few minutes earlier had fled, were back and would have killed him in a minute but for their commander Ibrahim's claim that he would smash the head of anyone who killed the captive. With great difficulty, Ibrahim managed to contain the enraged crowd until the cavalry reinforcements arrived. Hovnan had already recovered from the terrible blow when he was taken to Bugha's palace. The governor fixed his penetrating, deep-set eyes on the one called "leader of the rebels."

"Who are you, and what is your name?"

"My name is Hovnan," he replied calmly.

"Are you Hovnan from Khut?"

"Yes, that's me."

"How dare you, unfaithful dog, villain and wicked man, enter the city where I live, the deputy to the emir and the successor to the prophet?"

In response to these swaggering reproaches, Hovnan only raised his eyebrows and glared at Bugha contemptuously.

"What? You're refusing to answer me? Do you know the extent of my authority? The governor gnashed his teeth with eyes like poisonous daggers, but had to control himself in Hovnan's calm and serene presence. Hovnan then began speaking in a matter-of-fact tone.

"First, if you honored the words of your prophet, you would not call me an infidel, for you should know that I worship the one true God, creator of heaven and earth, and my courage is

a sign that evil has no connection with me. If your memory served you correctly, you would know that I am the same Hovnan from Khut who crushed the troops of your predecessor Yusuf, the son of Abuset, in Moush, and killed him. I am the same Hovnan who defeated and put to flight to fifty thousand of your troops in Brnashen. The same Hovnan who drove out the troops of your commander Jirak and who, right before your eyes, hanged the traitors at the gates of the Dvin. The same Hovnan who, with a detachment of only two hundred men, defeated your regiment in Shirak, Artagan, and Artanush. Now God has betrayed Hovnan into your hands to be tormented and killed, as is your desire, but your taunts speak only of your weakness.”

“Even now you continue to goad me with your insolence. The only way you can save yourself and earn my pardon is by renouncing your faith, and accepting the true faith. Then you will be honored with glory and majesty, you will see God’s mercy in the extent of our prophet’s expanding dominion, and you will understand that any resistance to this power is like a reed in the desert. Obey me and repent, then I will pardon you and give you life and glory. Think about the fact that you are a criminal in my eyes, covered with Arab blood. Your sword has only now claimed twelve of my warriors. A rebel deserves punishment by death, but I am offering you life.

Hovnan reacted with only a contemptuous laugh. Bugha, nonplussed, tried to open his small eyes wider. But Hovnan turned to the scribe sitting there with his reed pen, recording the whole conversation.

“Mirza Hassan, tell me yourself, did I not grant you your life?”

The scribe looked at Hovnan in bewilderment, jumped up, and backed away.

“Yes, yes, I remember how you broke into my house in Khlat at night, tied my servants and crushed my hand. How can I forget you? You deserve a thousand deaths!”

“Yes, I found you on Armenian land, where you served a lying perjurer. Your master, using treason and treachery, invaded my homeland with two hundred thousand soldiers to wreak havoc and plunder the nation. Now that’s robbery, wouldn’t you say? But if I were an outlaw, would I take just one piece of paper from you? Would I give you back your gold? If I were an outlaw, I could demand that you renounce your faith, I could burn down your house with you, your servants and your stupid papers inside. Who would interfere with me if I lived by crime? And you, Bugha, dare to call me an outlaw: I, who have risen to defend the country of my ancestors, the sacredness of my people and my faith? Can I renounce a faith that never forgives false witness and betrayal? Call your executioners, my body belongs to you, but your power will end here. There is no torture that would frighten me.”

Hovnan’s eyes flashed like lightning and were so terrifying that even Bugha couldn’t help but shudder. He ordered Hovnan to be taken away and put in chains in the dungeon, imposing the penalty of death on any who let him escape. He summoned Ibrahim, who brought Hovnan in, and ordered a large reward for him and named him the chief guard.

But what were chains and a dark prison to Hovnan? He scoffed at torture, and considered the reproach of the wicked an honor. During the ensuing twenty days of imprisonment, all the Arab leaders starting with Jirak came to get a good look at the man whose reputation was known throughout the Arab forces. They came to see the “wolf of Sassoon,” as they called him, but when they saw him with his long mane of hair down to his shoulders and his brilliant eyes, they started calling him the “lion of Sasoon.”

But Bugha could wait no longer, as he was preparing for his next brutal invasion, and so he made one last effort to persuade Hovnan to renounce his faith. He sent a cleric to convince him to convert, but the cleric returned saying that Hovnan preferred death and that it would be impossible to change his mind, so the cleric recommended that it was in everyone's best interest to behead him as soon as possible.

The next day, Hovnan, surrounded by numerous warriors and executioners, was led out of the dungeon to the square. Though bound in chains, he raised his hands in prayer for the last time and then bowed his head on the block. Instantly, the sword flashed and his head rolled to the ground. Shortly thereafter, Sparapet Smbat went to the governor with a request. Bugha allowed Sparapet to take the body of the martyr.

Early the next morning, a wagon drove out of Dvin, escorted by Armenian horsemen. At the head of the entourage was the sparapet's second son, Mushegh. Ahead of him was a tall woman in black, with a black veil on her head, and two women dressed in a similar manner. This small entourage was engulfed in silence and grief as they slowly moved toward Bagaran. As they approached the city, the travelers stopped for a short rest, and when they reached Bagaran, they were met by a large church procession. The assembled churchmen escorted the wagon with Hovnan's body to the church door, chanting hymns to the martyrs with incense.

The caravan continued its way for many days to the region of Artanush. The body of Hovnan was buried in the cathedral of Smbatavan with all the honor befitting a martyr and savior. The people revered the Sassoontsi commander, who reached them in their time of need.

A year later, the Mother Superior raised a small chapel on the opposite bank of the Chorokh river and transferred his body there. Before the altar there was a simple marble tombstone engraved with the following words:

Hovnan from Khut rests here
Martyr for the Faith of Christ and
His long-suffering Armenian people

A few years later a passer-by could see in the same chapel on the Chorokh bank another gravestone, just below the first, bearing the following inscription:

Here at the feet of the blessed Martyr
lies the servant of Christ
Vaskanush Bagratuni

If the secrets of the human heart are often hidden beneath flesh and bones, then what secrets lay hidden under these cold stones immersed in the ocean of eternity?

Every year, on a beautiful spring morning, the people of Artanush, drawn by a sense of gratitude, came to this chapel and laid flowers on these graves. The old people told stories about Hovnan, how bravely he fought with his small band against the Arab invaders, how he drove them away and shared the recovered bounty with the people. They would display his carefully preserved sword, shield, and spear with reverence. The women would recount how beautiful and

sweet Vaskanush was and how kindly she cared for the people and how happy everyone was under her guidance.

But who could tell the countless sighs and tears of the two lovers, separated for years and at long last resting beside each other for eternity?

Chapter 22 “Freedom to our brothers in bondage”

Bondage! How easily we utter this word now, yet in past times our ancestors felt it on their skin and in their hearts. When the deacon would sing at the altar, “Grant freedom to our brothers in bondage,” sobs rose in the church and thousands of hands reached to heaven, praying for freedom. For some, it was their fathers, others their spouses, others their children and for many others it was the missing, few of whom were ever found.

In captivity, one was considered fortunate if one happened to be in the possession of a master who was not sadistic and violent. As if it was not enough to be separated from parents and children, one had to endure the chains, beating, humiliation and forced conversions.

Natural law as well as all laws accepted and devised by humanity were trampled upon in the turmoil of those cruel times, especially as applied to the Armenians. A son who converted to Islam looked with contempt upon his parents, as if bondage had bestowed an honor and prosperity upon him. A young man who renounced his faith and married a Muslim brought shame to his former family. By marrying a prominent Muslim, a beautiful girl taken prisoner could attain a high position as a lady, but more often she was forced to be the miserable servant of some cruel woman, whose origins and material condition were higher than her husband’s and whose jealousy was terrible and deadly.

Such bondage was common not only on the periphery of Armenia, but also in the very heart of the country, where the Arabs had thrown down deep roots and not only the people, but the forts and estates were entirely in Arab hands.

The area of Apahunik was a good example. During the times when our story unfolded, almost all its fortresses and castles belonged to Arabs who used their strongholds to control and wreak havoc throughout the countryside. The situation got much worse during the governorship of Bugha.

During this period, Gurgen and his squad of forty men had been fending off the Byzantines with their regiments of thousands, driving them back and reclaiming Armenian property. This continued until, finally, the Byzantine commanders complained to Emperor Michael, who asked the Arabs to open a second front to defeat Gurgen. Together, these strange bedfellows launched a two-pronged attack on Gurgen, yet Gurgen and his stalwart soldiers defended themselves and defeated the Arab-Byzantine alliance. With this plan foiled, the emperor sent one of his commanders to invite Gurgen to Constantinople, promising great rewards and honors. Gurgen, not trusting the Byzantines, refused, negotiating a truce between Ishkhanik and the local Byzantine commander instead and then setting off to see Smbat Sparapet.

Totally consumed with military matters, Gurgen had not yet heard about Hovnan's demise. He was under the impression that Hovnan was in Taron and Vaspurakan. Having decided not to go to Constantinople, it was difficult to part with Khosrov, alongside whom he had shared valiant exploits over the years and who always kept a watchful eye over him.

But as he was leaving the Byzantine border on the eve of his departure for the Armenian heartland, Gurgen turned and said to his silent comrade, "You know what amazes me? You. At the age of fifty something, what drives you to boldly rush into battle and fight as recklessly as I do? I have nothing to lose if I die by the sword, no family nor children, but you have a family and a large province to rule and protect; why are you tempting death with these risky exploits?"

"You are young, Gurgen, and your reasoning is that of a young man. Everyone has his own grief. My guess is that you have a wounded heart that you have disclosed to no one. As for me, my heart bears the deep scars of my daughter Ariga's loss. I am not an old woman and I don't talk about it, but every time I went into my house, I saw her mother's tears and was powerless to comfort her, for I knew that she, like me, preferred death to bondage under the infidels. This is an unbearable heartache, Gurgen. I would give a thousand such provinces as Ake just to hold Ariga once in my arms and give her back to her mother. But who knows where she is, in what condition, whether she is even alive ... My poor daughter! The unknown is terrible, Gurgen. Forgive my tears, they are my solace in solitude, and I did not want to talk about it."

"You poor man," Gurgen said, turning away to hide his tears, for the brave are always sensitive, "Now it will be even more difficult for me to part with you."

"What? So, you had it in your head that I would head home? Never! If you stayed on the Byzantine border, I would then head out wandering, staff in hand, to look for my daughter and rid myself of this oppressive uncertainty."

"Okay, and in which direction would you look for your daughter?"

"First in the Apahunik region, and then from there I will go to Dvin, where there is a slave market. If I do not find her there, I'll continue, even if I have to go to Baghdad itself."

"Then tomorrow we'll go to Apahunik, look for the girl there, and if we do not find her, we'll go to Dvin. There we can decide what to do next."

"God bless you, Gurgen, and make you a happy father."

"If God blesses our mission with success, that will already be reward enough for me."

The old man jumped up and hugged Gurgen, kissing him on both cheeks.

The next morning, ten well-armed horsemen set out on the road to Apahunik. They were brave and agile men, loyal companions of our princes. They knew who to ask for information along the way as they passed through the villages and castles. They proceeded methodically, without rushing, so as not to miss any clues about the girl's whereabouts. They stayed at forts ruled by Arabs, where Vahrich would get chummy with the guards, gathering mainly unreliable information that was, if nothing else, a source of amusement.

Although Eastern hospitality is famous around the world, Arabs do not always welcome Christian guests. Khosrov and Gurgen often set out late in the day, a couple of hours before nightfall, to create the impression that they were coming from afar. Once, after learning about an

Arab fortress at the foot of Mt. Tsaghik, they approached the gates an hour after sunset. Despite their persistent knocking, no one appeared. Then Gurgen ordered one of his soldiers to stand on his shoulders, and another, lighter soldier to jump on his shoulders, until they reached the top of the wall to lower a rope so the entire team could enter without even opening the gate. Judging by the complete silence and absence of any resistance to their entry, it was hard to tell if the fort was inhabited. But at the foot of the hill, a light flickered. After Vahrich asked them to open the gate several times, Gurgen said, “step aside, men” and shouted in a thunderous voice: “Whether you like it or not, you’ll have to open the gates now.” Grabbing a boulder, he rammed the gate with all his might. The doors crackled and loud cries were heard from within, but the door did not open and Gurgen struck again. This time the gate gave way and crashed to the ground. Gurgen then rubbed his hands and, shield in hand, entered, calmly walked around, and ordered the guards to call the owners to bring lamps and receive their guests properly, if they did not want the place leveled to the ground.

Soon, lamp in his hand, a disgruntled, gray-haired Arab appeared and grudgingly and a bit apprehensively bid his guests a “good evening.” Gurgen took no notice of his appearance and asked the man in a commanding voice:

“Old man, and tell me something, is there anyone else here other than you?”

“Yes, Prince.”

“Then why did they send you? You are an old man, and you need your rest. Where are the young people hiding? What is your master’s name?”

“Ali Ermeni.”

“Ali would be good, and Ermeni would be good, if these two names were not uttered in the same breath. Go give him my greeting and tell him that the law of hospitality requires that he should come out and meet us, rather than run away and hide.”

“If he asks who sent his greetings, what should I say?”

“You say, the friend of friends and the enemy of enemies, pure-blooded true Armenians.”

Let’s leave our friends in the guest room and enter with the old man into the harem. Six armed servants were lined up at the door. They could have been mistaken for statues, as they were they not trembling in fear. There were also several Ethiopian slaves in a state of bewilderment. And in one of the inner chambers, fifteen women of different ages and different nations stood in a row in front of a woman in sumptuous robes. She was sitting on the sofa, her legs tucked under her. Her head was covered with a green veil, signifying that she came from the family of Mohammed. She was tall woman, with a dark complexion, black eyes and thick brows that made her look even more severe. A gold-sheathed dagger hung from her jeweled belt, and next to her on the pillow lay the whip she used to keep the maids and servants in line, for her evil, arrogant eyes said she would not hesitate to give them a thrashing for the slightest misstep.

So many girls and women were packed into the big room that they couldn’t even breathe. The deep silence was disturbed only by the rustling of the mistress’ silk robes. The Arab woman’s ugly face was further deformed by her anger and consternation. She was at the end of her patience when the old man, Hassan, entered.

“Come here, Hassan!” cried the lady. “What kind of intruders are here?”

“Mistress, these are Armenians, two princes and about ten warriors.”

“What did they say? What reaction did they have to my message?”

“Madam, I did not have time to give them message. One of the leaders, a real giant, menacingly ordered me not to dare to appear before him again, and demanded the master.”

“Didn’t you say that this fort belongs to me?”

“No, madam,” mumbled the old man with fear, pulling back, because the woman’s eyes flashed with fury and her hand reached for the whip.

“You worthless servant! Is this the way you follow my orders? You did not tell these infidels that the lady of this fort is from the family of Mohammed and a close relative of the great emir?”

“He didn’t give me a chance to say a word, Madam. Even the bravest man would have been at a loss confronting this giant. I am an old, sick man . . . Glory to Allah, you have many better servants than me . . .”

“Shut up, you worthless old man! No need for your advice! Get out of my sight!” The old man hurried out, relieved that he had gotten off so easily.

The lady clapped her hands three times, and immediately a 25 or 30 year-old man opened the door and entered the hall. He boldly approached her, without so much as looking at the group of maids lined up like statues with their heads bowed.

“Go, Ali, find out what these intruders want,” she said furiously, her eyes glaring.

The young man left the harem unfazed by her menacing glare, and went to the vestibule, where Gurgen and Khosrov were seated. Welcoming them, Ali took a seat.

“Are you the owner of this fortress?” “Khosrov asked slowly, not letting Gurgen speak.

“Yes, if it pleases God,” Ali replied.

“Is this the way you accept guests sent by God who knock late at night with a request to give them a lodging and a piece of bread? Your appearance says something else.”

“Some family matters prevented us from receiving you properly. Also, perhaps your warlike appearance frightened the guards. I’m unwell and was taking a nap. Sorry for any inconvenience or misunderstanding. You are our guests, and we will gladly host you and make up for our faux pas. If I could ask you to bear with us a bit longer, dinner will be ready soon.”

The amiable tone and friendly words assuaged Gurgen’s anger and restored him to his congenial temperament. At this moment, Vahrich appeared in the doorway and signaled to his master. Gurgen excused himself from the conversation and stepped out for a moment.

Behind the door Vahrich whispered in delight, “This time I have good news.”

“Speak quickly.”

“Prince Khosrov’s daughter is here.”

“What?” Gurgen was amazed.

“As God is my witness, she’s here.”

“How do you know?”

“As you instructed, I wandered unobtrusively around the castle so as not to raise suspicion. When I got tired, I sat down to rest under a narrow window covered with iron grating. Suddenly a weak voice came from the window: ‘Are you Armenian?’ ‘Yes, glory to God, I am an Armenian,’ I answered. ‘Please speak quietly so that no one will hear us. For God’s sake, free me from here, the Khanum is going to kill me. I am an Armenian like you. My name is Ariga. I am the daughter of Khosrov Ake,’ she said, weeping in such a voice that could hardly be heard.”

“Come, show me this window. Can a person get into it?”

“Not a man like you, but a small man could get through.”

“How high is the window?”

“About the height of a man.”

The window was about as high as Gurgen’s shoulders. Without asking any questions, our giant tested the grate and, leaning his knee against the wall, pulled it out.

“Come here, daughter, you’re free,” said Gurgen, speaking as quietly as he could while leaning his head through the window. The girl, startled by the tremor, moved toward the other side of the room. She ran toward her rescuer and stretched her arms upward. Gurgen took hold of her hands and lifted her up. “Is it true, daughter, that your name is Ariga?” he asked.

“Yes,” answered the girl, not knowing whether to fear him or not.

“Do you want to see your father? Tomorrow morning, I’ll take you to him.”

“Isn’t it possible tonight?”

“Let’s see, I’ll try, my daughter.”

So he carried the girl in his arms to another room and sat her down there, posting Vahrich as a guard and ordering complete silence. He then reentered the first room and sat next to Khosrov, just as Ali was giving his farewell and leaving.

“Khosrov, it seems your daughter is in this fortress.”

“What?” The prince’s eyes brightened.

“I do not know for certain, but a few captive girls spoke out of the window with our warriors and asked to be released.”

Khosrov looked intently at Gurgen and noticed that he was somehow particularly joyful.

“Gurgen! You freed my daughter! God bless you!” He threw himself on Gurgen’s neck. “Tell me, where is my Ariga?”

“Don’t worry, Khosrov, we released one girl, and now we’ll find out whether she is Ariga.”

“Let’s go, let’s go right now,” said Khosrov. When they entered the room, Ariga was sitting, teary eyed, thin, pale, in torn clothes. She hardly recognized her father. Khosrov immediately rushed to her. They embraced and wept for a long time in each other’s arms. Gurgen dared not to interfere, fearing that joy would turn into sadness. He tried to make Khosrov understand that in their situation, they needed a lot of information from Ariga. He began to question her about the number of armed servants inside and then about the khanum, the horrific woman who made life a nightmare for everyone: servants, slaves, maids, even her husband. They found out that the khanum was insanely jealous. If her husband spoke kindly to one of the maids, that was enough for her to beat them, imprison and torture them, even poison them. In the garden, there was a place that the prisoners called “the cemetery of maidservants.”

“I’ve heard enough. I cannot eat anything here,” said Gурgen, “and I will not allow anyone else to put a piece of bread in his mouth. Let’s go!”

“We cannot rush away just like that,” Khosrov said. “We freed my daughter. But there are still Armenian girls who cannot be left in the hands of this terrible woman. Let’s free them too. Tell me, Ariga, are there any more Armenians?”

“Four young girls, one barely my age.”

“Are there any Armenians among the adults?”

“There were two of them, but the Khanum tormented them so much that in desperation they renounced their Christian faith.”

“Why did they lock you in that cell?” asked Khosrov.

“I do not know. A month ago, the Khanum had an argument with her husband about something and beat me mercilessly in front of him, and since then I’ve been locked away alone. My wounds have just begun to heal.”

“You two, father and daughter, stay here, and I’ll take care of the rest,” said Gурgen. As he left the room, the doors of the harem opened and two black slaves brought out a table full of food. The other two carried sacks of barley for the horses. He took the barley, but he sent back the rest and said that their master should come to him immediately to discuss an important matter.

When Ali entered the room, Gурgen took him aside and said, “There are four small Armenian women here, as well as two adults who have renounced their faith. These six girls should be handed over to us.”

“You want the impossible. How can I report such a request to my mistress? These six girls are her maids, she exercises the authority of life and death over them. If I report your wish, it will have bad consequences for them.”

“That is, the lady may order them strangled rather than turn them over to us?”

Ali did not answer and only looked down.

“Maybe you, who introduced yourself to us as a lord, are her slave?”

“Yes,” said Ali, blushing. “She’s been my mistress since childhood: my mother, my teacher, and everything else in the world. I cannot be ungrateful to her.”

“I understand, this is a dog’s loyalty,” Gurgun said. “Then I’ll talk to her myself.”

“That’s impossible! She never shows herself to men. She is very religious and comes from the family of Mohammed.”

“I do not object to her religion, but when she tortures the children of my people and forces them to renounce their faith, I do not care about her lineage or religion. I will destroy this fortress, level it to the ground, and put you all to the sword. If might makes right, then take note that at this moment, I am stronger than you. Tell her that I will come in to talk with her, like it or not.”

“I beg you, prince, do not say this, but let that other man speak, the old man.”

“Well, I understand you, let it be your way, but if anything happens to him, you know exactly what I’ll do, right?”

“I can well imagine. I’ll go to the lady now, wait for me.”

Poor Ali entered the harem and found his mistress on the same couch and in the same agitated mood. Some of the maidservants continued to stand in front of her with folded hands, while others had been sent on errands.

When she saw her husband, she asked, “Why did these intruders return the dinner I sent?”

“I do not know the reason, madam, I only know that we are in the hands of these intruders and they are trouble.”

“No surprise there. We have seven armed guards, but they are about as useful as those maids. They can’t protect the fortress. They are like frightened dogs. I blame myself for keeping and supporting such useless people.”

“Madam, now is no time to for self-reproach. These intruders can force their way in and cause turmoil. They want to send one of their men to speak with you.”

“What? These infidels want to send a man to see me? God forbid that I would accept such a suggestion. Yes, I’d rather die on this couch than see such dogs!”

“What is the point of all this harsh talk? We may not have been able to defend the fortress well, but if you saw the size of that giant, you would see that he is stronger than dozens of our men.”

“Enough! Go find out what they want.”

“I’ll go ... but ...”

“So you know, but you are afraid to say it, you son of an infidel,” she shouted, and grabbed Ali’s hand, “Now speak!”

“They want the four Armenian girls and the two Armenian women you recently converted to Islam.”

“What? They want me to give them the girls? I’ll slit all six of their throats with my own hand. Let them take their heads and get out,” she said, furious, and jumped to her feet.

“But you know, madam, what kinds of consequences this kind of situation could lead to.”

“Let it lead where it may! And you, traitor! You told them about the maidens!” she lashed at him, and he calmly responded.

“As God is my witness, I have no idea how they found out about them.”

At this point, an old maidservant appeared at the entrance.

“May the Lord preserve you, Mistress, the little Armenian girl who was locked up here for a month broke the grate and escaped through the window.”

“What are you talking about? A weak, miserable girl could not possibly break the grate. It’s impossible! Ali, speak up now, who took the girl?”

Exposing her dagger, she lunged at the young man, who quietly squeezed her hand.

“Madam, you are blinded by jealousy,” he said. “You know that without your permission, I do not leave this room. How could I kidnap the girl?”

“Let go of my hand!” raged the Arab woman, screaming at the top of her lungs.

At just this moment, the door crashed open, and Gurgen’s thunderous voice rang out: “Death to the enemy!” The Khanum’s armed guards fled in fear, and he entered the well-lit room, where the enraged khanum turned her eyes aside, seeing and saying nothing.

At the sight of this giant with a drawn sword, the maids hid in the corners, screaming. Gurgen burst out laughing upon seeing the khanum furiously flailing about with the dagger in her hand, screaming “Let my hand go!”

This laughter brought the woman to herself. She threw the dagger into the corner and, turning abruptly, saw the prince. Several armed soldiers stood behind him. She quickly covered herself with a veil and sank into her couch.

Gurgen, continuing to laugh, picked up the dagger from the floor and began to examine it.

“What a pretty toy! One should not deprive a lady of such an ornament,” he said, setting it next to her. The Arab woman angrily grabbed the dagger and hid it under the pillow.

“It’s not good to get so angry,” Gurgen continued calmly, sitting down beside her without any ceremony. “I’m sorry that I was forced to enter the second door by force. But the fault is not mine. I’m used to doors opening before me. And if you are not used to opening them, you need to make them stronger, and not from rotten wood that falls apart at the first blow.”

The woman sitting in the corner of the couch did not make a sound.

“Alright,” continued Gurgen, “you can choose not to speak to me, it’s your right. But you must fulfill my demand. Where are the four girls? . . .” He turned to the maidens: “All the Armenian women should come to this side.”

Instead of six, nine women got up. Gurgen was amazed. He had been told there were only six. He then turned to the khanum again.

“It looks as if after I release these poor girls, there will be nobody left to give you a cup of water.”

Then Gurgen saw the whip on the pillow and picked it up. “What a wonderful tool for preaching faith and education! Do you use it often?”

The woman was silent, like a stone.

“Men!” Gurgen turned to his soldiers, “go and see how rich the khanum’s stables are: horses, donkeys, mules. Get them all ready so that we can take the girls to their homes. Move quickly, otherwise we will starve to death. Thank you, Madam, for dinner, but who knows what blessed poison was mixed into it.”

At this moment, Vahrich entered.

“Sir, there’s a horse in the yard, and I haven’t seen anything like it even in the stables of the Byzantine emperor. It could be a good match for your Tsolak.”

“This lady gives that horse to Ariga as a present,” said Gurgen calmly.

“What? My priceless horse? Faithless dogs! Outlaws! Rogues! How much more do I have to endure?” the woman cried, grabbing the dagger and brandishing it at Gurgen. But Gurgen grasped her hand between his fingers and forced her to release the dagger. He was still amazed by this woman’s stubbornness. Not only did she not cry, but she tried to cover her face with her other hand.

“From whom do you hide your face, which is as green as your veil?” asked Gurgen, examining the dagger. “How many times a day do you use this pretty toy?” And, breaking it in half, he threw the dagger on the floor.

At this point, his men entered and reported that everything was ready.

“Put the girls on the horses! Ariga will ride the lady’s horse. This is nothing compared to her suffering in prison at the hands of this revolting woman.” He rose from his seat.

The exultant entourage exited the fortress and headed to Taron. In Sassoon, they received a warm welcome. But Sassoon could not rejoice and was in a somber mood. Indeed, with Hovnan’s death, each family feel as if it had lost a father and a brother. The entire mountain was in mourning.

Chapter 23 The People of Vaspurakan

History records Bugha’s easy victories, which he gained through manipulation, deception, and betrayal, rather than with weapons and military prowess. Moreover, he merely

destroyed without building, as was the case of Vaspurakan, where he eliminated Ashot and his brother Gurgen and left a power vacuum.

That spring, he launched his first attack on the northern regions of Armenia and Tpkhis. Tpkhis was a city of wooden houses, built on the left bank of the river Kur, and was under the control of a Muslim named Isak. Unwilling to surrender the city to Bugha, Isak decided to burn it to the ground, only to later meet his demise at Bugha's hand.

From there, Bugha advanced northward, and attacked the Tsanar, a rugged Caucasian people. There he suffered an embarrassing defeat, and, retreating to Armenia, he decided to take out his anger on Siunik. Ashot Siunetsi, whom we know well, strengthened his forces in the mountains, and his elder brother Vasak, after a fierce battle, retreated to Gardman, where Prince Ktrich bound him and betrayed him to Bugha. But it did not take Bugha long to turn the tables on Prince Ktrich, whom he lured with false promises and took prisoner.

Then Bugha attacked the Aghvans, where the brave prince Esai Abolmuseh, who was not taken in by Bugha's false promises and was not taken aback by his might, put his trust in God, routed the enemy, and bolstered the faith of the Christians. When the people of Vaspurakan received news of this victory, their morale rose and they started their own struggle for liberation from foreign oppression. Apuzaphr Artsruni and his nephew, brave Sahak Apamkdem, led a four-thousand-strong army and devastated the enemy, taking both Chuash and Tornavan.

To suppress the insurrection, Bugha issued orders for military units of the Arab emirs to be dispatched to Vaspurakan as reinforcements. The war had its ups and downs. The Armenians sometimes won and sometimes lost. Similarly, the enemy sometimes was stronger and sometimes weaker. It was a chaotic situation. A way had to be found to save the country from total destruction.

Sparapet Smbat then told the Arab governor about Gurgen, speaking of his heroic deeds in the wars against the Byzantines and relating how the Byzantine emperor had invited Gurgen to Constantinople, though Gurgen declined, preferring to approach Bugha. Thus, on Bugha's orders, Gurgen was assigned to oversee the Arab forces, while waiting for God's help.

After the death of brave Apumkdem, the situation in Vaspurakan deteriorated. A certain Vasak from the Artsruni family took advantage of the circumstances to seize control of the capital of Rshtunik. But he was too weak to repel the Arabs and soon succumbed to their rule. When Gurgen found out, he felt compelled to discuss it with the sparapet.

"Vaspurakan, Armenian Sparapet, was entrusted to you by Bugha," said Gurgen, "and since you are bound to him, I have learned that there is total anarchy in Vaspurakan. The country is overrun with outlaws, big and small. Isn't it about time to address this situation?"

"I have given much thought to this myself, Gurgen. I do not doubt your courage, and I'm looking for a solution." The Sparapet looked around to see if anyone could hear them. "There must be many who consider me a second Vasak or Meruzhan. Yes, there were moments when I doubted myself, but my conscience is now clear. At one time, it is true, in order to gain Bugha's confidence, I became his counsellor. But I never told him anything but patently evident facts and things he already knew. He himself did not have the gumption to fight the Tsanars, but I incited him to start this war, where a quarter of his military forces were exterminated in battle. I sent

money to Aghvan country secretly and encouraged Esai Abumuseh to fight. And this war also caused great damage to Bugha, just as the war with the Tsanars.”

“Do not think that when I tell you about this, I am patting my own back. It is just that in the eyes of worthy people, I seek justification during these difficult times for our unfortunate homeland. In my heart, I have a hard time dealing with the reproaches of a man who, for his unselfishness, courage, vision and for the martyr’s death that crowned his life, I consider to be the first among all Armenians. If he were alive today, when half of Bugha’s army has already been exterminated, I would have followed his advice and, dropping my mask, would have raised the banner of the uprising. But there is no match for our Hovnan, and he is in heaven, laughing at us from on high. And yet we must try to carry out his plan. If you can gather thirty thousand troops in Vaspurakan, and bring at least ten thousand Sassoontsis from the mountains, I can assure you that I can collect a similar number from Moks and Shirak. Then, mobilizing the clergy, with the Catholicos at their head, we will fight for our faith and fulfill Hovnan’s last wish. Godspeed, Prince! May your sword remain sharp!”

“Will there be any other instructions, Sparapet of Armenia?”

“No. If circumstances so require and you need me, write to my son Ashot and be sure that I will do my best to assist.”

“Very well. Be safe.”

“May the Lord be with you.”

Thus, the two parted. Gurgen arrived in Vaspurakan with 10 soldiers to accomplish a mission that had proved impossible for the hereditary princes of those lands. On the road and on many other occasions he remembered Hovnan, at whose side he had been in battle, whose courage was so great, and whose foresight, prudence and leadership were even greater.

Such were the times and the situation in the country that over the course of a few days, detachment after detachment gathered around Gurgen. With these forces, he entered the Aghbag province and quickly seized control of two notable forts, Jghmar and Sring. Keeping up his pace, he attacked the capital of Rshtunik, where Vasak Artsruni, known by the moniker Kovaker (beef eater), had declared himself warlord of Vaspurakan. Gurgen took him prisoner, but immediately released him, instructing him that he should earn his position by accomplishments and actions, not by reveling and seeking pleasure. And as he traveled the countryside, Gurgen practiced what he preached. Wherever Bugha’s troops had established a presence, he attacked with fury and soon drove all the foreign invaders out of Vaspurakan.

The people revered Gurgen Artsruni, for he was not like his kinsmen. Although as majestic as a lion in war, he hadn’t the least arrogance, did not look for his own comfort, and did not take advantage of his people. He could often be seen sitting with ordinary peasants. He talked with them in a friendly manner and encouraged them to come to each other’s aid to fend off the invaders, to improve their skills in the art of war, and to make provision for hard times.

Eventually, Gurgen reached the village of Vordok near the Armenian Gorge with four hundred brave men, where he planned to drive out the Arab invaders in Berkri and restore the Arstruni capital to its rightful owners. In anticipation of the arrival of the rest of the Armenian troops, Gurgen often ventured out alone. Letting go of the reins of his faithful Tsolak, he ambled

along the bank of a river that cut through the wide plain, where the eponymous father of the Armenian people Hayk had fought and killed Bel to liberate Armenia.

He climbed to the top of one of the nearby mountains, where ruins known as Hayk's fort still existed. Looking at strong stone walls worthy of the Titans and sitting on a rock, he pondered how small and weak he seemed compared to these powerful and majestic monuments.

One morning, when Gurgen, lost in thought as usual, was scouting about, he noticed a dark cloud approaching the "hermitage of Abraham" from the Berkri side. He jumped on his horse and exclaimed, "Come, my brave horse! The enemy is coming to us to save us time!" And Tsolak, having understood these words, took off like a storm, raising a cloud of a dust. When Gurgen reached Vordok, four hundred riders were armed and ready. "Well done, boys! Since you are in formation and ready, let's move out. But how did you find out that the enemy was heading here?"

"I saw them while I was on the road," a young rider answered, "and immediately reported it to our men."

"How does it look? How many of them are coming?"

"Two thousand people are coming from Bugha's court alone. Their commander's name is Butel. They also have forces from Utmanas well as some nobles from Vaspurakan joining them to fight us."

"Where did you get this information?"

"I saw an Arab horseman galloping towards us, hiding behind a rock, and when he approached, I attacked him and his horse with a spear. The horse and rider fell to the ground. The man shouted: 'Aman!' and I said, 'I will not kill you, just tell me the truth and walk in front of me.' He started talking, but as much as I tried, I had to prod him with my spear and was unable to bring him here alive. About halfway here, he fell and began spitting blood. 'I can't go any further,' he said. 'If you want, you can kill me on the spot,' he said, but I kept my word and left him there, half dead in the sand."

"Well done, well done."

After marching forward for half an hour, Gurgen found a well-protected location on a hill, with a river to the left and mountains rising to the right. He positioned his army just below the hill and deployed a detachment of infantry with shields and archers at the front. When the enemy approached, the Armenians pushed them back, inflicting great losses. But while the Armenians were regrouping, the Arabs attacked again. Gurgen could no longer restrain himself. He spurred his horse and broke through the enemy's left flank, setting them to flight, with Gurgen in hot pursuit. By the time the encounter was done, there were more casualties on the ground than those who fled. Then the Arabs attacked the Armenian's left flank and managed to push them back, trying to surround Gurgen, but they could not withstand his strength and withdrew. After this, they did not dare to set foot in Vaspurakan, for fear had seized the enemy's heart.

Despite all this, Gurgen could not get the scout's words out of his mind: "some Vaspurakan nobles have joined the enemy . . ." "What would Hovnan say had he seen these men amidst the enemies of the Armenian people and the Christian faith?" thought Gurgen. "If he

could steel himself to punish the three traitors by hanging, then I too must deal strictly with these men to uproot this evil once and for all from the Armenian nobility.”

As he was mulling over these thoughts, he was pursuing 200 enemy troops as they reached the banks of the Sev-Jur River. The fleeing enemy suddenly stopped and turned around, realizing that they were in mortal danger. Nearly a thousand Armenian peasants, sickles and axes in hand, had caught up with them and would slaughter them mercilessly. The Arabs dropped their weapons and begged Gurgen for mercy. Although he was well acquainted with the enemy’s treachery and brutality, Gurgen had never killed the unarmed. He ordered his soldiers not to touch the Arabs and instead take them prisoner. Among the prisoners was the military commander Butel. Gurgen directed that his sword be returned to him and promised freedom to the rest of the Arab commanders who had come after him to make war. But when he was standing before the Armenian commanders, among whom was Vasak Kovaker, he screamed in his loudest voice.

“You wicked outlaws. You took up arms against your own people, and you have the gall to expect mercy from me? It is true I do not kill the unarmed. I wield a warrior’s sword, not an executioner’s. Instead, I will turn you over to the judgment of your brothers. Here come the people, our peasants. I will place you in their hands. Let them decide: life or death for your transgressions . . . And you, Vasak, are a disgrace to the Artsruni family, a degenerate like Meruzhan, who lacks the brains to be a traitor. I grant you your worthless life, for you are a dimwit. Go, wander like Cain, be a laughing stock before the entire world. You who pretended to be the warlord of Vaspurakan, ended up as the pathetic accomplice of the bloodthirsty enemies of your own people.”

At just this moment, a huge mob of Armenian peasants arrived, their weapons in hand, along with the army. Their eyes burned with hatred and vengeance, but at the sight of Gurgen, they forgot their grievances and shouted in unison, “Long live Gurgen, our deliverer!” Meanwhile, the treasonous Armenian nobles appealed to Gurgen to spare them and not to turn them over to the wrath of the mob. Gurgen’s heart was as soft as his arm was strong. He forgave them and ordered they be released unharmed.

Then, turning to Bugha’s commanders, he said, “Go and tell your master that I will drive out all outlaws and two-footed brutes! I obey lawful rulers, but never outlaws and criminal gangs. You know the rules. Choose your fate, here or there.”

When the enemies and traitors were out of sight, Gurgen thought about it again.

“No, I am not the man I should be. In my place, Hovnan would not have let these outlaws go free. Tomorrow they will again join with our enemies to inflict harm on our people. But why is there no word from anywhere? Smbat is silent. My messenger has not returned with a reply. And where is Khosrov when I need him? I could really use the advice and counsel of a wise and noble comrade.”

Chapter 24 The Brutal Woman

Gurgen’s fame spread far and wide. Friends and foes equally revered him. But unfortunately, those closest to him, his family and friends, inflicted the greatest injury, risking

nothing themselves and taking advantage of his magnanimity and noble character. They did not suffer retribution of any kind. Although Gurgun was inclined to take a break from everything and rest a bit in the capital of Rshtunik, of which he had fond memories, his sense of duty allowed him no respite, as he was continuously recruiting and training new soldiers and had to keep an eye on the Arab governor Bugha's every move.

The people of Vaspurakan called Gurgun their father and savior. The governor, well aware of how formidable Gurgun was, calculated that it was better to put on a show of amity and appease him than risk confrontation. He gave Gurgun a prince's sword and belt, an Arabian military horse, and appointed him ruler of Vaspurakan, to the great joy of the Armenian people. At the same time, he drew all the Armenian nakharars and the Sparapet into his orbit and took them to Baghdad, having entrusted Armenia to Smbat's son Ashot. Then, turning the tables, the emir in Baghdad forced these captive Armenian vassals to convert to Islam. Only Sparapet Smbat and Princess Hripsime spurned his threats, perishing in prison.

Meanwhile, Ashot Bagratuni emerged as a wise and prudent leader, rebuilding the country. And to everyone's surprise, the Armenian people exhibited tremendous resilience, bouncing back from so many calamities.

But the people of Vaspurakan were not destined to enjoy the calm. Gurgun had barely established peace in the country when Grigor Artsruni invaded. Grigor had fled Abkhazia with Georgian forces out of fear of Bugha, and attacked Vaspurakan with the intent of driving Gurgun out and ruling the land. But the Georgians refused to fight after they learned from the local inhabitants how formidable Gurgun was, and they began to retreat. Seeing this, Grigor had no choice but to negotiate with Gurgun, who agreed without bloodshed to share some of his dominion in Vaspurakan with him.

At the same time, Vahan, the son of Prince Ashot Artsruni, returned from Baghdad and, having gathered an army, attacked the capital of Rshtunik, where he was defeated, forced to withdraw and report back to the emir.

Gurgun tirelessly engaged in fending off foreign invaders, always magnanimous and lenient toward compatriots. The chroniclers record how he inflicted blow after blow against the Arabs, dubbing him the liberator and comparing him to the Maccabees.

Gurgun was beyond all praise, combining endless courage with a noble heart, a rare phenomenon in those days, when brother mercilessly fought brother.

Ashot Artsruni, by order of the emir of Baghdad, sent his son Grigor and brother Gurgun to capture Vaspurakan and expel Prince Gurgun (Abubelch). Meanwhile, Gurgun, learning of this plot, retreated to the fortresses of Sring and Gilmar, relinquishing his other dominions. When he saw that the Artsruni family wanted to take these away from him as well, he decided to leave with a small detachment for Byzantium. But before he could leave, Gurgun Artsruni shamelessly plotted behind his brother's back and proposed dividing the country with Prince Gurgun if he agreed to stay. Receiving this message, Prince Gurgun laughed bitterly, saying, "Go and tell your master that I am going abroad, as I do not wish to shed the blood of my compatriots, and I am surprised that he dares to cut a deal behind the backs of his brother and nephew."

Immediately after this exchange, Prince Gurgun set out for Byzantium with several companions on horseback. He soon reached Karin, where his reputation preceded him. The

Byzantine emperor Michael invited him to his palace in Constantinople, but Gurgen's heart was conflicted. He felt a deep tie and duty toward his native land, which held him back, so he declined the invitation.

So he lingered in Karin, where he fell seriously ill. Upon his recovery, his doctors advised a change of climate, and the commander of Karin suggested that he settle in a country house near the Byzantine border. The house stood on a hill, and Gurgen liked to rest in the shade of ancient oaks on the banks of the small river. He had barely recovered some of his former strength and was out on a hike, when a band of Arab warriors ambushed him, bound him, and took him to Ashot Bagratuni. It turned out that the Byzantines had facilitated the ambush.

Ashot was himself in a difficult predicament. His position was under attack. His father, Sparapet Smbat, was being held captive in Baghdad, and he, fearing reprisal by the great Emir, was not in a position to secure Price Gurgen's release. Thus, as the lesser of two evils, he thought it best for Gurgen to be sent as a captive to the ruler of Tpkhis, who was considered the most lenient of the local emirs. But even the emir of Tpkhis applied pressure and threats to force Gurgen to convert to Islam. It was to no avail, so the emir of Tpkhis bound him and put his neck in chains and dispatched him to Artpatakan in Persia. There, he was subjected to demonic torture, but nothing could force this heroic man to renounce the Christian faith of his fathers. Indeed, Gurgen, who fearlessly faced death on the battlefield, was unshakable.

But this only made Gurgen's situation more unbearable. The enemies of Christ tormented him, depriving him of food and water. Finally, they threw him in the dungeon of the Gmbet fortress on the shore of Lake Urmia.

Once in the subterranean prison, Gurgen, who had lost all hope of liberation, had a vision of a man enrobed in light, who said: "Take heed, remain steadfast, like a faithful Christian soldier, do not succumb to pressure, like the other Armenian captives who converted to Islam . . ." Gurgen stared at the man, who looked like Hovnan. He stretched out his hands to him and cried "Hovnan!" The man vanished, but after that, Gurgen felt a new strength within him, always trusting in God.

But did Gurgen really need life? Even in the days when he was the ruler of Vaspurakan, he did not think about himself for a minute. He did not take retribution against those who harmed him and strove to balance his courage with morality. He was tired of worldly evil, seeing only lies, deceit and betrayal around him. With a wounded heart, thinking only of Heghine, he asked God to take his life, for it was hard for him. There, in sad solitude and idleness, he felt his heart's wound more sharply than amidst the clanging weapons on the battlefield.

With a face that had grown thin from hunger and disease, forgotten by people, Gurgen was awakened one day by the jailer, who said, "Let's go, a lady wants to see you."

"What lady?"

"She brings an order from the great emir. Come with me."

Dragging his heavy chains, Gurgen followed the jailor. They entered a clean room, where a veiled woman in a cloak was sitting on the couch. She was flanked by two black eunuchs. The sight of this woman and the eunuchs did not bode well, and Gurgen sensed danger, although he was always courageous and did not fear death. He surveyed the room with an indifferent glance

and looked out the window, from where he could see the lake, sun and sky of which he had so long been deprived.

When the jailer left, the woman under the veil spoke in a hoarse, sneering voice, “Don’t you recognize me, you infidel dog?” She lifted her veil, and Gurgun recognized the Arab from Apahunik.

“There was no need to put your golden face on display for me,” Gurgun said quietly, “Your rude words and disgusting voice told me that I was in the presence of one of the most insolent people in the world. Cover your face so that you do not transgress your religious laws. It is the ugliest thing I have seen in this dark dungeon.”

The woman shook with rage, rose from her seat and, clenching her teeth, exclaimed angrily, “You vile beast! Even in chains, you dare to speak to me so impudently? Know that I own your miserable body and have total control over you. For how many years, I lived with a thirst for revenge, and finally Allah has put you in my hands. I do not need to cover my face, because you are already a corpse. Do not think that you will die a natural death. No, I will tear your body on a rack and roast it over a low flame. A wicked robber, you broke into my house, kidnapped my maids, led my horse away, and took Ali from me. Expect no leniency from me. Here is the order of the supreme emir, who heeded my requests and turned you over to me to do as I see fit. Your only salvation, you unfaithful dog, is to renounce your false faith and spend the rest of your life serving me in chains as a slave . . .”

“What a stroke of good fortune to become a slave to a witch like you! I, who have rejected fleeting comfort and glory for my faith! And if the Lord has decreed that my body perish at your hideous hands, may His blessed will be done.”

“Go on barking, you infidel dog! I will sew up your mouth with a burning needle. I’ll show you who’s boss!”

“It will all be in vain. I know very well what kind of person you are and I have no regret for rescuing those poor girls from your brutal clutches.”

“What did you do to my Ali? Tell me, you insolent man!”

“I have not seen your Ali since that night.”

“You’re playing dumb. Ok, we will listen to what you have to say under torture. But I should not stoop so low as to talk to a slave like you. Tomorrow we will go to my castle. There, you will change both your insolent demeanor and your faith. Many slaves have become pliant wax in my hands. You’re no different . . . you’ll see.”

“I’ve had enough of your revolting presence,” said Gurgun in a disparaging tone. “Jailer, take me to the dungeon!”

When the jailer entered the room, Gurgun silently turned to the door. The woman turned to the jailer and said, “If you want to save your head, keep a close eye on this prisoner. He’s mine. I’ll be back to take him away tomorrow.”

“Whose order is this, your Ladyship?”

“If you have not been informed of the order of the emir of Baghdad, then your superiors surely have been,” said the woman, unfurling a scroll before him.

“I always obey the orders of my superiors,” said the jailer, bewildered by this wrathful woman. Gurgen remained unperturbed and chanted psalms as the jailer escorted him back to his cell.

The Arab woman, who fled after her close call in Apahunik to the castle in Khoy, now quickly left to order her servants to arrange for their departure with Gurgen from the fortress the next day. He imagined with relish the tortures she would subject him to.

Chapter 25 The Noble Woman

On the same day, before dawn, in a half-ruined village on the western shore of Lake Urmia, two men in farmer’s clothes looked at the lake. One of them, an old man of about sixty, yet vigorous and strong, seemed preoccupied by something. The other man, over forty years of age, more common in appearance, respectfully stood by the old man whose eyes were fixed on the lake.

Finally, the old man turned to him and asked in a low voice, “Vahrich, are you sure that the boatmen will be here by evening?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Are they all reliable people?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Is the boat in good condition and fast, as I ordered?”

“You cannot find better on this lake.”

“How long will it take to get to the other side?”

“Three hours, and even less under sail.”

A minute later the old man asked again, “Where are our warriors?”

“Some are behind the hill, waiting for us in the brush, others are posted here among the ruins, while others are disguised as fishermen in a boat.”

“Where did you send my horse?”

“I arranged for the groom and your horse plus three other horses to be taken to the neighboring Armenian village.”

“Where are the ladders, ropes, picks, poles, where is the smith?”

“Behind this cliff, in the cave, my lord.”

The old man was, of course, Khosrov of Ake. He fell silent and slowly began to walk along the shore, when suddenly there was the sound of hoof beats and five Arab horsemen appeared, rushing headlong towards them. Khosrov followed them from a distance, and then his worried eyes and wrinkled forehead showed signs of relief as he made out their identity. Two of the visitors were elderly, two were young men, and one was a youth.

Khosrov silently approached the youth and extended his hand to help dismount, but the young man, laughing, jumped off easily to the ground.

“Prince, you certainly did not expect me,” the youth said to the old man.

“You recognized me, and know that at my age, it is not in my character to make careless errors,” the old man replied with gentle reproach.

He took the young man by the arm and they went to the village, ordering Vahrich to follow them.

“Find us a hideout as quickly as possible,” said the old man.

“A place is ready for you, my lord,” and Vahrich led them into a dimly lit hideout covered with carpets.

When the young man sat down on the carpet, old Khosrov told Vahrich, “Take this young prince’s comrades to the Armenian village nearby to get some rest.”

After Vahrich’s departure, the prince tenderly said to the young man, “Princess, I did not expect such imprudence from you.”

“Prince, after so many years of prudence, I have the right to be imprudent once in a while. I maintained a lady’s demeanor, cared for the sick, and attended to my meek husband as a supportive wife, but it was unthinkable to me that a hero such as Gurgen is rotting away in the enemy’s dungeon. I decided it was time to put my life and honor on the line to rescue him. Indeed, I’m prepared to do whatever it takes.”

“Calm down, my daughter. Just tell me one thing: do you really want to take part in the attack on the fortress with us?”

“I will be with you until the end, and only when I see Gurgen free, will I resume my internment and leave him to his destiny.”

“And what about Mushegh?”

“What can he do, the pathetic creature? He was always a child, even when considered an adult by others, and he is acting like a child again. The doctor from Karin confirm the diagnosis of the doctor from Dvin, that his brain disease is incurable.”

“Did he know about your departure?”

“When I said that Gurgen, who saved his life, was in prison, that we should help him, and that I had decided to give all my gold, silver, pearls and lands for his freedom, he said, ‘Indeed, this is the right thing to do.’ But if I had said the opposite, he would have said the same thing, ‘Indeed, this is the right thing to do.’ So, I took what I needed, said farewell, and came here with

Khuren and the abbot in disguise, because I am very apprehensive. Now you, Father, tell me whether everything is as planned, or have changes been necessary?"

"No changes were required. I arranged everything according to your plan. I spent eight days here, disguised myself as a peasant, and then went to Ake, returning with ten faithful armed men this morning. Vahrich gathered several more men from Gurgen's squad and twelve experienced Vaspurakan boatmen. The iron poles, rafts, ladders, ropes, picks and everything else are ready."

"The blacksmith?"

"Yes, he's here too. Our preparations are actually excessive for such a simple encampment amid the ruins. We're only going to spend a night here."

"But I still have one more thing on the agenda before we get to sleep this night. I'm expecting a visit from a woman."

"What woman?"

"The wife of the jailer."

"Are there any developments?"

"Not for me, but it may be news to you. I'll fill you in now. Greed is the most basic human vice. People of all stations, priests, laymen, bishops, nakharars, noblemen and peasants, are slaves to precious metals. So, I inquired and found out that the jailer Omar has a young wife who lives in Khoy. I arranged for her to meet me in Kangvar, talked to her, and saw that she was very keen on gold and jewelry. She became completely crazed at a string of one hundred Arab gold pieces and a diamond necklace. Her eyes glittered and she trembled from head to toe when I said that I would give it all to her if she helped free Gurgen. She is now here in town and will employ all her charms to persuade her husband. If she succeeds, our preparations will be unnecessary."

Khosrov was struck by Heghine's plot and could only exclaim, "Indeed, you and Gurgen are a perfect match, no other wife would do."

A brief silence ensued. Finally, Heghine broke the silence with another important update, "Did you hear the big news?"

"No. What news?"

"The great Emir is dead."

"What? Abu Jafr died?"

"Yes. It was parricide. The son has taken his father's throne."

"My good daughter, what amazing news! How did you hear?"

"As I was travelling through Khoy, there were already rumors and the city was in upheaval. After I sent the jailer's wife to her husband yesterday morning, I left in the evening."

"You must be exhausted. Rest a while, and I'll check if everything is all right. Tell me, Princess, did the wife of the jailer know about the death of the emir?"

“How could she not know? The Arabs are in turmoil. Many have taken up arms fearing the Armenians. The new emir ordered the proclamation to be read in the streets, threatening severe punishment in the event of any unrest. To tell the truth, I am unfazed by this event. For me, the most important thing is that we reach our goal.”

Khosrov left the hideout, posting a guard at the entrance. He walked, thinking about the death of Abu Jafre, about its impact on Armenia, and more importantly about their efforts to free Gurgen. Considering that the son had killed his father and made himself the emir, and that love between child and parent had vanished, the foundations of the royal family had very likely also crumbled. Thus, he concluded that the fall of Arab rule and hence the liberation of Armenia would not be far off. But to liberate Armenia, a wise head would be needed, someone who could promote morality and virtue and a generous church, for it would take decent role models to put the people on their right path.

His mind absorbed in such thoughts, Khosrov, disguised as a peasant, walked down the road to the village. He felt satisfied with their preparations, and on his return to the hideout, he found Heghine rested and cheerful.

Chapter 26 The Bargain

That evening, in the same room where the Arab khanum was ranting threats against Gurgen, we find the jailer Omar. But the jailer was sitting beside an attractive Arab woman and chatting on familiar terms. The woman’s seductive, almond-shaped eyes looked slyly at Omar as if to imply some insidious design and with inquiring glances, she tried to measure the impression her words were making on him. This woman was Omar’s wife.

“Honey, what are you proposing? Sure, I know that fifty gold pieces are attractive, but we’re dealing with the emir. The khanum who approached me was no ordinary woman. She obviously has influence in Baghdad.”

“Why are you afraid of the emir? Stop worrying. God keep the emir. He’s dead.”

“Are you trying to trick me with lies, foolish woman?”

“What lies? The rumors were flying throughout Khoy yesterday morning. If you don’t believe me, ask the muleteer or our servant who took me home. If he weren’t dead, how could I propose such a bold plan? We need to take advantage of this situation, my dear husband. It would take you three years to earn this much. Believe me! Am I your enemy? Would I do you harm?”

“You are not my enemy, but as the proverb says, ‘A woman’s hair is long, but her mind is short.’ You are a woman, and you may not be aware of the danger.”

Omar spoke with gravity, convinced of his male superiority. But the woman, having made him dance to her tune, could hardly restrain her laughter.

She continued, “Tell me, what exactly are you afraid of? The emir is no more. His patricidal son has now inherited his throne and has no intention of continuing his father’s

policies. It is quite possible that tomorrow he will order the release of all the Armenian princes from prison. Then what will you gain?"

"Even if the emir is dead, the Tabriz and Khoy emirs are still alive. Do you have any idea the kinds of threats that woman made?"

"Rather than listen to that woman's rants, listen to me. We'll be a lot better off."

"But it's very risky and could cost me my life."

"Think a little, my dear husband. Suppose the relatives of this prince come and destroy the wall and release him. What would you say to this woman who is terrorizing you this morning, despite the length of her hair?"

"I would say that it was my misfortune, which I would have to deal with."

"Do you think that you could be hanged for this?"

"Who knows, maybe they would hang me. But I do not want to die on the gallows."

The woman, seeing she was making no progress in convincing her husband, decided to use a different tactic. She began wailing, beating her chest, and bemoaning her fate. Her husband, dejected, escaped deep into his thoughts. Finally, his wife, as if she had come up with a solution, wiped her tears. She said, "And if someone attacks you, binds your hands and feet, pulls keys from your pocket, gives you fifty gold pieces, and releases the Armenian prince, what do you say to this?"

"Well this . . ." the husband said in a stupor, "this might work. Then I would be taken before the emir of Tabriz for questioning. But to get off, it would be necessary that the prince's people attacked with at least eight or ten men to overcome our guards."

"Don't worry about it. There is not much time left, it's getting dark, and they'll sail to the shore with a boat and twelve oarsmen. I'll send away a few guards to the nearest village. I'll tell them to tie you up, then you'll get your fifty gold pieces, and I ..."

Then, having outlined her plan, the woman flashed her fiendish eyes at her husband and started giggling.

"What? Are you getting something out of this too?"

"Yes, they will give me a beautiful diamond necklace. Just keep your mouth shut and don't do a thing. I'll take care of everything. . ." and she disappeared through the door.

"Honey! ... Listen! Cursed woman ... She'll be the death of me. I wanted to tell her to make sure that the intruders do not tie me up very tightly . . . But fifty gold pieces is not a small amount of money ... Let's see if works. God help us."

His wife took off like a bat out of hell toward the guards. She sent two of them away from the castle on a mission, and then went down to the lakeside. As two boats approached instead of one, she was confused; a young man, not the woman she expected, jumped onto the shore and with a bright voice said, "Wait. Don't be afraid. It's me." The Arab woman calmed down, recognizing that Heghine herself had jumped from the boat.

Heghine asked the woman, “So did your husband agree?”

“He was quite resistant.”

“If you cannot persuade him, then take a look at how many armed men we have. The prisoner will be released, but you will lose your reward.”

“Do not worry, stay with me and tell your people to do what I say. Bring a dozen men. Even that may be too many.”

Then Heghine proceeded from the shore. “Prince Khosrov, please come here” she said, and exchanged a few words with him while the armed men came ashore.

The Arab woman and the princess led the way while conversing. When they entered the jailer’s room, several guards at the door looked at each other in confusion. Heghine again said something to Khosrov. He approached the jailer and said in an imperative voice, “Give me the keys to the dungeon if you do not want to die!”

“How can I follow your order? I’m not a traitor.”

“And I have no time to waste. Fellows, tie this man up and find the prison keys.”

Then the Arab woman put on a show as if she was crying, praying that her husband would not be killed, and when they began to bind him, she pulled the keys out of the jailer’s pocket and gave them to Khosrov. She begged Khosrov to spare her husband’s life and promised to hand over Gurgen unscathed. With a lantern in her hand, she led the way into the dungeon along with the most reliable of the guards; they found Gurgen in a stupor.

“Here’s your man, only for God’s sake spare the life of my husband and our guards!” begged the Arab woman.

Khosrov took a lantern from her hands and entered the dungeon.

“Gurgen! My son, Gurgen, where are you?” he called.

There was a clank of chains, as Gurgen awoke and sat up.

“Gurgen! Don’t you recognize Khosrov’s voice?”

“What? How did you get here?”

“Get up and come with me. We came for you! Come to your senses.”

Gurgen was not yet fully awake when Khosrov rushed to embrace him. The old man’s tears fell on his gray beard. The prince, shaking his chains, rose from his seat. Khosrov took his hand and led him into the room, where the pathetic jailer, bound hand and foot, groaned in pain, begging for the ropes to be loosened. Heghine, standing aside, looked at Gurgen’s pale, thin face and dead eyes, struggling to hold back her tears. The jailer’s groans moved her. She went to order the soldiers to loosen the ropes a bit, when the Arab woman, without giving her time say a word, took her hand and turned her aside.

“Here’s your brother, and he is free. Now leave my husband alone and keep your promise.”

“Fair enough . . . Khuren, give me the package I entrusted to you earlier.”

They went into a small adjoining room and there the princess gave the woman a diamond necklace and a string of one hundred gold pieces. While the blacksmith smashed the last link of Gurgen’s chains, the woman hastily counted the gold, and the sparkle of the necklace blinded her eyes. She counted fifty gold pieces and cut the thread with sharp teeth. Half of the gold, along with the necklace, she dropped into one pocket and the other half of the gold into the other. She was elated as she muttered to herself, “This is for me, and this is for my husband. The rascal ... I’m very glad that he was firmly tied up. He deserves it. How hard it was to convince him. Well let him suffer a bit, and then he’ll come to his senses. “

Heghine had already gone into another room and did not overhear the woman muttering to herself. She was distraught over Gurgen’s terrible condition. Out of Gurgen’s sight, she could hardly contain her tears as she gazed from a distance at his ragged clothes.

When he was freed of his chains, he turned to Khosrov, saying, “I can’t believe this is happening: is this a dream, or is it real?”

“I’ll explain everything to you, my dear Gurgen. We’ll talk on the boat.”

“But I’m hungry, Khosrov, you have no idea how these Arabs tortured me, no food, no water.”

“I know. Hold on a bit longer,” Khosrov said rushing out, “Men, we have no time to lose. To the boats!”

In less than five minutes, Gurgen found himself seated between Khosrov and Heghine, with Khosrov at the helm. A spread of roasted chicken and fish was set before him, while Heghine poured him wine.

The moon cast a glow over the blue lake. The night’s silence was interrupted by the measured strokes of the oars. Gurgen had regained his strength after eating, and he looked at Heghine.

“Khosrov, who is this silent youth? I’m sure I’ve seen him somewhere before.”

“This is my nephew,” Khosrov replied. “I did not want to bring him with me, but I could not dissuade him. I’ll explain everything when we reach the other shore safely.”

“We need to find a secure place to rest. I would like to wash and get out of these dirty rags ...”

“We’ve already taken care of all this,” Heghine said.

“But wait, young man, I’m sure I’ve seen you somewhere and your voice is vaguely familiar to me,” said Gurgen.

“It seems to be a coincidence. People’s faces and voices are often similar,” Khosrov chimed in.

“I guess so,” Gurgen replied, and then there was silence.

The boat continued its course, and by midnight our friends had already reached the opposite shore.

They went to a small hideout in a dilapidated village and lit a torch. Khosrov's nephew cut back Gurgen's hair and beard and then took a bundle from Khuren and gave it to him.

"Here, Prince, everything is ready," Heghine said.

"There's a river nearby. You'll find soap and clean clothes in the bundle. My uncle will show you the way."

"Khosrov, your nephew is a godsend. Well done, son, God bless you" Gurgen said, and then he left the hideout. "But this young man," he suddenly turned to Khosrov, "couldn't possibly know what size clothes I need. Will they fit?"

"Don't worry, Gurgen, everything has been taken into account."

After washing up, Gurgen changed clothes and returned to the hideout, thanking Khosrov and the young man, he said, "And now, tell me, Khosrov, why didn't I hear from you even when I succeeded in sending you a messenger? Do you have any idea how many scouts I have sent to look for you in Vaspurakan and Taron? Where have you been?"

"Just as I was getting ready to find you in the capital of Rshtunik, a messenger from Princess Hripsime came to me, begging me to come see her in Baghdad. You sounded like you were doing fine and good fortune was with you, while the princess was languishing in prison, and I said to myself, 'If Gurgen were in my place, he would go to Baghdad.' That's exactly what I did. I thought that I could be useful to the princes of Artsruni and help obtain their release from captivity. The plan initially went well, but Abu Jafr is like a vulture, unpredictable and capricious. Even his minions had no idea what was going on. It was a mess. Therefore, we pinned our hopes on the arrival of the Sparapet, thinking that he might be able to free the captive Armenian nobles by influencing the Arab governor Bugha."

"But the Sparapet was delayed, and upon his arrival, he too was captured and thrown into prison for refusing to convert to Islam. He could no longer be of help. Meanwhile, the Princess was in despair, having learned that, by the order of the governor, her son Gurgen and grandson Derenik had renounced Christianity and been sent back to Armenia. She urged me to return with them and act as their counselor. I too wanted to return to Armenia, but Bagarat, maliciously and out of a desire to curry favor with the Arabs, used dirty tricks to prevent me from leaving Baghdad for another year. There, I heard about the plots against you. When I managed to escape and return to Vaspurakan, I learned that you, fed up with unreliable people and misfortune, had left for Byzantium. If I had arrived sooner, I would have stopped you. So I went to Sassoon, fetched my family, and rode through Taron and Vaspurakan, where the population sang your praises. Once, we spent the night in the capital of Rshtunik. There, an inconsolable old man, the constable of the fortress, told us about your childhood, recollecting your first return from Byzantium on your last visit. He was a man of few words, but I understood a great deal I had never known about your difficult past. Everything became clear then."

"And what great revelations did you learn about my life?" asked Gurgen bitterly, suppressing a sigh.

“All the missing pieces. When our caravan began preparations to depart that morning, I was surprised to see that Khuren and his family were joining us. He told me that he could no longer stand serving the princes of Artsruni, and he was going to return to the service of the Rshtuni princess in Andzvev. Thanks to him, we were invited to the fortress of Kangvar. The princess of Andzvev, who was ruling the province instead of her ailing husband Mushegh, invited us to stay for a few months while my castle in Ake was being restored. There, in Kangvar, we learned that you had been taken prisoner, so we launched plans for your release. It was challenging. The barbarians kept moving you from one prison to another. Poor Vahrich, who found me in Ake, searched high and low to the four corners of our land before he found out that you had been transferred to the fortress of Gmbet.”

Gurgen, in silence, listened intently, and then asked, “Where is Vahrich now?”

“Somewhere nearby.”

“The rogue, why hasn’t he shown up yet?” asked Gurgen with a grin, and then shouted in a strong voice, “Vahrich!”

“At your service, my lord,” replied the faithful servant, who approached to kiss his master’s hand.

“Where have you been after worrying about me so much during my captivity?”

“Could your faithful servant serve any other person or fail to worry about you?”

“Everything is fine now. Go get some rest,” then turning to Khosrov, Gurgen said, “So what’s the plan now?”

“We will head out after we’ve rested a bit, then we’ll spend the night in one of the villages of Khoy, and the next day we will arrive in Kangvar.

“Perfect.”

At this time, the young man who had left the hideout during the conversation with Vahrich brought in a fearsome sword, a shield, and a spear and placed them in the corner.

“Khosrov, your nephew is amazing, he took care of everything,” Gurgen smiled.

“Yes, he he did.”

“Where did he go now?”

“He has his own room. He’ll sleep there for the night and we’ll see him in the morning.”

“God protect him.”

Gurgen said nothing more. He stretched out and fell asleep. Khosrov went out and checked the encampment one last time. He posted guards and then went back to the room where he’d left Gurgen to get some sleep.

Chapter 27 The Wandering Benefactor

Two days later, our friends came to the fortress of Kangvar. Abbot Theodoros of the Holy Spirit Monastery, Khosrov, and Gurgun were getting some rest when Princess Heghine entered the room to welcome them on their safe arrival. It was the very room in which Gurgun had seen his beloved the last time.

Gurgun behaved in a formal way towards Heghine until the abbot's departure, but when only Khosrov was left in the room, he said, "Heghine, I cannot thank you enough. I can appreciate your actions with all my heart, which I am ready to give you without reserve. You truly amaze me: in all your plans, I see so much foresight, so much wisdom, that the possibility of losing you again is for me yet more painful. Accept not my gratitude, but my congratulations for your foresight and wisdom. I knew about this, but I did not comprehend your magnanimity. I did not think that my Heghine would become a woman like Vaskanush. Poor Hovnan, poor Vaskanush ..."

After these words, there was a deep silence. Heghine finally spoke, asking Khosrov, "Who is this Vaskanush?"

"One of the Bagratuni princesses," answered the old man, "I'll tell you later the story of Hovnan and Vaskanush, for they cannot be separated. Although they spent their lives apart from each other, they were always together in spirit. Now, before the throne of God, they rest side by side."

And again, there was silence. Heghine left the room. During her journey, many matters accumulated that required her attention.

After Heghine left, Gurgun asked, "Khosrov, when did Vaskanush die? I did not know about her death."

"She died a year or two after the martyrdom of Hovnan."

"What a mysterious fate," sighed Gurgun, and told him about his vision in the dungeon.

Our princes stayed in Kangvar for two days. On the third day, on Gurgun's advice, Khosrov told Heghine that he had invited his friend to Ake to recover after the many hardships he'd suffered. And the lovers, with soundless tears in their eyes, departed again.

Khosrov watched their love with amazement. He compared Heghine with Vaskanush, who in public could joke and laugh gaily, hiding her pained heart under the smiling mask. Now he saw Heghine, a younger woman, intelligent and far-sighted, a wise ruler. But she seemed to be a marble statue, without life, without a shadow of a smile on her lips, nothing could be read on her clear brow.

Khosrov knew that while Mushegh was ill, it was due only to this woman's able rule that the provinces of Andzev and Kangvar hadn't fallen into enemy hands long ago. On the one hand, concern for the people, and on the other, stern discipline, not forgiving betrayals and treacheries, had helped her to successfully rule the land. Protecting the land from enemy invasions and devastation, Heghine fortified the fortresses of Noraberd and Kangvar and stockpiled enough weapons and provisions to last several years of hostilities. The people were not only granted the

right to be armed, but a network of messengers was organized to warn the villagers of approaching enemies so that they could take refuge and find safety. The fortresses of Kangvar and Noraberd had been under siege several times, but each time, the enemy, having run out of provisions, finally had to withdraw. The people of Andzev were well-fortified.

And all this was thanks to the princess, who ruled strictly and fairly. The commanders she appointed were vigilant and brave, and the judges were just and unselfish. Khosrov tried to ask for pardons for several criminals, but met with a refusal from the uncompromising ruler. "Given this situation," Heghine said, "I have made a vow not to change a single court verdict, not one iota. In these times, when the enemy exterminates our people and our land flows with blood, I consider any leniency for traitors and conspirators who violate their duty to their homeland and faith to be betrayal and treachery. Forgive me, Prince, I respect you as a father, but I cannot grant your request. I swore to God and I cannot break my oath."

When Khosrov shared his thoughts with Gurgen, the latter answered with a bitter laugh, "How lucky were Vasak Kovaker and other traitors like them, and how unhappy I am that Heghine is not my wife. Hovnan's strict justice, surely, was a model for me, and I had no choice but to hang miscreants!"

Khosrov did everything he could to keep Gurgen at his home in Ake to recover. His pleas went unheeded. Upon learning of the disorder in Baghdad, Gurgen could not restrain himself and went to Vaspurakan, to his native province of Mardastan.

Learning of Gurgen's return, crowds of rejoicing people came out to welcome him. The eldest son of Ashot Artsruni, Grigor Derenik, who ruled Vaspurakan in place of his father in Baghdad, was despised by the people for his arrogance and greed. All the small local tyrants, hearing of Gurgen's arrival, united around Derenik and launched an attack on Gurgen. But Gurgen, with his small detachment, repelled the attack and set his enemies to flight. He himself sustained a wound to the arm that needed tending.

Derenik and his supporters took advantage of this. They again attacked Gurgen, who had not yet fully recovered from the injury. Gurgen fell captive to his rivals and imprisoned him in his own ancestral castle in Adamakert.

One night, while he was in the dungeon, wounded and sad, one of Derenik's servants entered, unfastened the chains, and placing weapons before him, said, "You alone can vanquish this foolish and arrogant young prince. Please come with me. With one stroke, you will become a ruler, not only of Mardastan, but of all Vaspurakan."

Gurgen, with his sword drawn, entered Derenik's bedroom and shouted loudly, "Hello, my son, Derenik!"

Derenik opened his eyes and, seeing the giant with his sword drawn, managed only to say, "My father, spare me ..."

Gurgen, whose great heart never harbored vindictive feelings, answered nothing, left him there, and went away. He found refuge in a monastery, near the village of Yerazani, in the cell of a monk whom he had helped on many occasions. But the monk, after taking him in, treacherously betrayed him to Derenik, who again threw Gurgen in prison.

Khosrov, hearing about this, went to Vaspurakan. Catholicos Zacharia also came along with the prince of princes, Ashot Bagratuni. They came to ask Derenik to release the hero. Derenik could not reject the request of such powerful leaders. He freed Gurgun and granted him Mardastan province, which had been Gurgun's inheritance from his father.

But Gurgun, now fully recovered, was revolted by this treachery and even at the calculated policy and ambitions of Ashot Bagratuni. His hopeless love for Heghine left him numb and uninterested in worldly power or ambition. After putting affairs in Mardastan in order, he decided to turn his attentions to a forgotten region in Taron, liberating it of villains and establishing law and order for the people there.

During this "knight errant" period, he earned the heartfelt love of the people for his care and courage.

At the same time, the prince of princes Ashot, having set a goal of capturing all the Armenian, Georgian, and Aghvan principalities, suddenly entered Vaspurakan. Derenik failed to resist him and was captured. Gurgun was in Taron when the news reached him. Without wasting time, he left Taron with a detachment of four hundred well armed brave men. Ashot was in the capital of Rshtunik with his troops. Without inquiring about the strength of his troops, Gurgun arrived in Noragegh and wrote the prince of princes a letter, demanding that he release Derenik or risk the loss of his army and his life. Gurgun was prepared to launch an attack that very night.

Ashot, a wise and cunning man who did not want a confrontation with such a dangerous adversary as Gurgun, wrote him a conciliatory letter, reassuring him that he was not going to cause Derenik any harm. Then, Gurgun wrote back an even more conciliatory letter, respectfully asking Ashot to marry his daughter to Derenik, who would thus become Princess of Vaspurakan. Ashot agreed, took Derenik to Bagaran, and arranged a lavish wedding feast there. This established peace throughout the land of Armenia.

Chapter 28 An Old Traitor

Meanwhile, Gurgun continued to move with his detachment through Vaspurakan, Taron, Apahunik and the Andzev provinces to the Byzantine border, instilling fear in the oppressors and joy in the oppressed.

Once, after returning from a long trip, when he was resting at his Mardastan castle, he was informed of the arrival of Khosrov.

The arrival of his old friend was a great delight for Gurgun, especially when he saw the old man cheerful and in good health. The friends dined, talked about many topics, and especially about the wise policies of Prince Ashot Bagratuni, which gave rise to lengthy conversations.

When everyone left, and they were alone, Khosrov, as if waking up from a sleep, said, "Gurgun, I didn't forget about the main purpose of my visit, but deliberately waited for the right moment," and then he took out a sealed letter.

Gurgun took the letter.

“It’s Heghine’s handwriting!” he exclaimed, turning pale with excitement, but instead of opening it, he stared at Khosrov’s face.

“Open and read it, what are you waiting for?”

“From Princess Heghine of Andzev to the prince of Mardastan, Gurgen Artsruni.” While reading these words, Gurgen’s hands trembled. For the first time in eleven years, Heghine had written to him.

“How young you are still, Gurgen!” exclaimed the old man impatiently, with a barely perceptible grin, “Quickly open and read it!”

“Mushegh has died. If you agree to become the father of a sick, orphaned boy and take ownership of the Andzev province, then don’t delay. We are already surrounded by enemies and greedy suitors. Follow your heart. Heghine.”

Gurgen jumped on the spot. “And you delayed with this letter! Does Heghine doubt my decision? Let’s go, Khosrov!”

“Gurgen, you forget that your friend has grown old. I’ve only just arrived after a long trip. Can’t you wait for one night?”

“You’re right, but I’ve been suffering for nineteen years. Everyone considered me a man who longed for blood and war, for I could not sit still for a week. Everyone thought that war was amusing for me, but you, Khosrov, know me. My heart and soul were gnawing away at me day and night. Why did you make her write such a refined letter? Why didn’t Heghine write directly about our marriage?”

“You’re wrong in judging me that way, just as you are with Heghine. I didn’t give her any advice, because she has enough brains for ten people. She asked me to come see her. When I entered Kangvar, Mushegh had just passed away. After an elaborate funeral, Heghine truthfully told me about your love, which I already knew about, even though you didn’t disclose it to me. And you were right to do so, since your duty was to be silent, and mine, to make a guess. She asked me what she should do now, being a mother and a lady. She said that Derenik Artsruni, through the abbot of the Holy Spirit Monastery, forced Mushegh to sign a new will, taking advantage of the old man’s faltering memory. She recounted how the arrogant prince Artsruni snatched away the province of Rshtunik, which your honest heart prefers to forget. But this lady, neglecting the loss of the province, could not forgive them for wronging you, Gurgen. When she remembered this, her lips quivered and her eyes flashed with anger.”

“‘As you know, it has been four years,’ Heghine said to me, ‘that I have ruled this province in Mushegh’s stead. I held off intrigues, rebellions, conspiracies and quarrels. But now I see Derenik Artsruni back on the scene with his old tricks, exploiting the patronage of his father-in-law, prince Ashot. I am apprehensive, nothing is out of bounds—fraud, money, wine—in order to deprive this unfortunate, sick boy of his inheritance.’ I then told her that she should not waste a minute. She should write a letter to you. I was sure that love for Heghine lived in your noble heart evermore and that the alliance of Gurgen and Heghine would make it possible to withstand all the Ashots and Dereniks.”

“Very well, Khosrov, your words are in tune with my heart. Lie down and get some rest. Early tomorrow morning we will leave. Yes, you are right, and if Heghine is mine, I can

overcome all worldly forces. You can't imagine the night I spent in the castle of Rshtuni, when, returning after eight years of wandering, I learned that Heghine belonged to another. If Mount Artos fell down on me then, I would have felt relieved. But what can weak human hands do? And I, a weak man, asked God for mercy, to prevent me from doing anything unworthy, which would then torment my conscience for the rest of my life. I could have betrayed the captive Mushegh into the hands of the Kurds, I could have strangled Derenik with two fingers, I could have ... But what rubbish! God put an end to my torment, and I am happy that in these joyful moments my beloved friend is here. You get some rest, and I'll go and prepare for our departure."

That night, Gurgen gave all the instructions for Mardastan, ordered reinforcements for the fortresses, and appointed constables for each castle. Then, the next morning, with a detachment of a thousand select soldiers, he left with Khosrov for Andzev.

But when the prince, busy with preparations to leave, impatiently called Vahrich, who, with all his virtues and shortcomings, had long since become an important person, he heard no reply. For Vahrich was off somewhere, sitting quietly in a long-lost orchard near Adamakert, behind a moonlit table piled high with fried partridge and quail, beautiful Vaspurakan wine, and pears from Sassoon.

Opposite to Vahrich sat a man with a long, disheveled beard and a black cassock and hood. This garden belonged to a monastery, a poor church and a dilapidated house which testified to its miserable fate.

It appeared that Vahrich was tipsy.

"Ah, Holy Father," he said. "Your pathetic monastery and these wonderful pears and wine are completely incompatible. I didn't think when I saw you at the gate that my assignment would take me to such a splendid scene."

The monk, whose sparkling eyes attested that he was no less tipsy than Vahrich, was flattered by these words.

"Brother Hunter, I love guests who bring their food. Your partridges and quail invited this wine to the table. Otherwise, I have a lot of poor vintages."

"This wine is worthy of the princes," Vahrich continued, "I have tasted such wine only once, in Taron, and I still remember its taste. I filled my wineskins with the wine from the amphora of the princes of Bagratuni. God knows the vintage of that wine."

"This wine is a match for the wine you tell about, Brother Hunter. This was produced for the princes of Artsruni. Prince Derenik sent it to me in the past ... no, in the year before ... Er, I can't remember."

"You deal with great men, Father, these princes must build you a new monastery."

"It's possible. A wise person should take advantage of the opportunity. You must have been to the church of St. Karapet. The monks there live like cattle. I know this life well, and if it were not for my savvy, I would have been stuck there. In any event, I've managed to get this far. With a bit more time, I would have become a bishop!"

"To your bishopdom!" toasted Vahrich, having drunk his cup to the bottom.

“And to your successful hunting always!” replied the monk, not to be left behind, “Yes, many times already I could’ve become a bishop. I was quite sure on several occasions that I would, but it kept slipping through my hands.”

“Is it so difficult to become a bishop?”

“Do you think it’s easy? And yet it was within my grasp twice: here, when I was the scribe to Prince Ashot, Derenik’s father, for several months ... But then Ashot was taken prisoner ... So, all I got was this dilapidated monastery. Later, Derenik promised to make me the bishop of Mardastan. But he lost this area and thus I lost my opportunity.”

“I’ll drain this cup to the last drop for you to become a bishop,” said Vahrich, drinking. The monk promptly followed his example. Vahrich became interested in the story of the monk and decided by all means necessary to learn his secret. It obviously had something to do with the princes of Artsruni, and since Vahrich did not separate himself from Gurgen, he also shared the same enemies and friends. Finding this half-drunk monk, who was Prince Derenik’s friend, at the gate of Hadamakert, Vahrich was determined to make the most of this opportunity. Together, they polished off the amphora of wine and Vahrich was fairly sure it had loosed up the monk’s tongue.

“It’s a pity that such an intelligent monk like yourself is stuck in this backward place. The princes are ungrateful people. Here, you served the father, and served his son, but how did they treat you? Thanked with a jug of wine? Of course, I do not know what kind of service you rendered to the prince, but in such difficult times he should have rewarded you more amply.”

“The service provided to Derenik was unusual ... Well, let’s not talk about it ...”

Vahrich, knowing very well that the amphora was already empty, still lifted it up. The monk immediately called the servant and told him to bring another. His tongue was already twisted and his eyes were like slits, memories of princely ingratitude swarming in his head. Vahrich, comforting him, poured cup after cup of wine. Though he was a faithful servant, Vahrich nevertheless did not fully agree with his master in everything. He did not understand his generosity and lack of animosity toward his enemies, but at the same time, he did not dare say a word. Only on rare occasions when Khosrov was in good mood did he dare to hint at Gurgen’s “unnecessary kindness” toward Derenik. Therefore, having found this monk in Mardastan, a friend of Derenik Artsruni and the enemy of Gurgen, Vahrich was determined to find out everything he could.

“I see, Father, that like me, you are also an unfortunate man. And you haven’t had the good fortune of meeting a clever person. Here, I also served a prince for many years, and when he reached glory and majesty, he sent me away. I, thank God, now do not need anyone. I am well enough off because of my cleverness, so I spend my time hunting.”

“Which prince did you serve?”

“He is also Artsruni, such an ungrateful sort.”

“What kind of Artsruni?”

“Gurgen Abubelch, a brave man, but a fool of fools.”

“Um ... Gurgen ... I know very well.”

“How do you know him?”

“I know him very well. Once he was in my hands, like this cup.”

“Is it possible to hold such a giant in your hands? Bugha himself could not do it. You say incredible things, Father.”

“You can believe it or not, that’s up to you. If he now possesses Mardastan, it’s only due to Derenik’s foolishness. There is no fault of Father Martiros. He was in the hands of Derenik. And it is not my fault that the Catholicos and prince of princes began to crumble before him and persuaded him to return the province of Mardastan to Gurgen.”

The monk’s tongue twisted, the moon reflected in his eyes, and Vahrich, already sobering up, at that moment grasped the bigger picture.

So, trying to hide his satisfaction and interest, he said, “Father, you are clever, a man of parts. You are good at writing, since you were a scribe from Ashot Artsruni. And this worthless prince, it seems, has forgotten you.”

“Sure, I rendered to him such a service that the devil himself could not have done it. I wrote a document that brought him a whole province as a dowry. Are you surprised? Now I regret it . . . I did such a good job, and what for? To be stuck with this dilapidated church? For a whole year, I wandered for fear of your Gurgen. Only then did I learn that he is a forgiving person who does not distinguish friends from foes . . . I can’t go on . . . my head is spinning . . . is spinning . . . I’ll sleep here...”

The monk immediately stretched out and fell asleep. Vahrich lay down beside him, covered himself with a cloak, and spent the night in a daze. As soon as the monk stopped snoring, Vahrich opened his eyes, afraid that he would run away. At dawn, Vahrich stood up and rushed headlong into town.

Chapter 29 Beautiful Day

The gate of the fortress of Kangvar opened to welcome Gurgen Abubelch with honors and acclaim. And on the next day, in the fortress chapel, he and Lady Heghine were wed, to the great joy of the people of Andzev, who had long waited for this brave prince to become their mighty protector. But if, on the one hand the newlyweds were happy beyond measure and the people rejoiced, on the other hand all the malicious fiends were on the verge of despair. The priest of the Holy Spirit Monastery, abbot Theodoros, who prepared Prince Mushegh’s will in which he secretly disinherited Heghine’s son in favor of Derenik, was completely at a loss, for his dastardly plot had been foiled.

Meanwhile, Derenik began to prepare to go to war against Gurgen. Derenik dispatched Abbot Theodoros as an emissary, demanding from Gurgen half of the Andzev region, including Noraberd, which allegedly had been bequeathed to him under Mushegh’s will.

It’s not worth going on at length about the war. Gurgen handily defeated the pretenders and took possession of the entire Andzev region. He established peace throughout the land, built many churches, and held a great celebration.

But this peace didn't last long. Upon his release from captivity, Derenik's father, Prince Ashot, returned from Baghdad and again demanded that Gurgen give half of the Andzev province to Derenik. Gurgen replied with the following letter:

"You have deprived me of my father's inheritance and misappropriated it, and now you want to take away from me what has been granted me by God. Are you the only one who has the right to live on earth? God sees everything, and I have faith that he will do justice and judge you accordingly."

His nephew, the brave prince Grigor, having learned that father and son were attacking Andzev from both sides, sent a detachment of two hundred soldiers against Ashot. Ashot, on learning of the small size of this detachment, let down his defenses. Grigor's detachment made a surprise night attack on Ashot, sending his forces to flight. Ashot himself barely escaped and took refuge in the capital of Rshtunik.

When Derenik learned of his father's defeat, he thought it best to withdraw his troops, which were marching against Gurgen, and return to Vaspurakan.

The Artsruni princes tried again and again, even with Bagratuni reinforcements, to get Andzev under control, but, finally recognizing the futility of a military solution, they settled for peace. Ashot and Gurgen met face to face, reconciled, and established amicable relations.

A year passed after Gurgen's marriage. Heghine bore a robust, active boy who comforted her after the death of her frail, first-born child from Mushegh. Prince Khosrov, who arrived in Kangvar to act as godfather for the child, rejoiced at the sight of the three of them. Gurgen, who had almost forgotten all the blows of fate and the sorrows of his life, was enthralled in happiness, unable to take his joyful gaze off his wife and child, except to occasionally raise his eyes to heaven to thank God for the blessings he had received. Just then, he caught sight of Vahrich, who had quietly entered the chapel and was standing at the entrance.

"Is there anything you want to discuss, Vahrich?" asked Gurgen.

"Yes, my Lord."

"Tell me what's on your mind."

"Nothing, my lord, except your health. I just wanted to remind you that many years ago in the city of Ots, you instructed me to find out who wrote the letter to the Arab governor for the three princes, the traitors? I learned that the letter was written by a monk named Martiros. You told me not to forget his name and to try to find him. I found this man, and it's almost a year since he's been sitting in our dungeon. All this time, by your order, I was in Noraberd and could not recall him, and you did not have the time to do it either. This morning, Khuren reminded me of him and said that we would be in trouble if the princess were to find out that this person has been chained in our prison without trial for a year."

Gurgen frowned, looked at Vahrich, and gave a sidelong glance at Heghine, who listened attentively to them. Vahrich, seeing that his report was not to the liking of the prince, added, "From the confession of this monk, I learned that a few years ago he betrayed you to Derenik when you, hiding from the latter, sought refuge in a monastery. I didn't know about this. He himself told me."

“What a fiend!” Gurgen burst out laughing loudly, “What a fool he is if he has chosen such a virtuous man as you to be his confessor! Go now and release him, for he has already paid for his wrongs by a year’s imprisonment.”

Vahrich stepped back to leave the room, when Heghine stopped him with a gesture and turned earnestly to her husband, saying, “If this man is not guilty or a fool, and he spent a whole year in prison, he should be rewarded with something. But, if he is a traitor and a conspirator and can cause harm to people, then how does your conscience allow you to release him?”

“No, this scoundrel can’t be called innocent, but so much time has passed since then ...”

“Can time alone atone for a crime?” asked Heghine, turning to Khosrov. “What do you say to that, Father?”

At these words Gurgen approached Vahrich, took his hand by force, led him to the middle of the room and made him face Heghine.

“Leave me and talk to the princess.”

“My lord,” said Vahrich, grimacing with pain, “I have no right to take your hand, so let go of mine.”

Gurgen went to the balcony and began to pace, not missing a single word of Vahrich’s story. Vahrich, rubbing his hand, told the princess in detail about his hunting, about his supper with the monk, and about how they got drunk and the monk confessed everything. Gurgen, grinning under his breath, said in a low voice, “Oh, you rogue, the years have not changed you at all, you are the same ...”

Heghine listened to Vahrich’s whole story seriously and with attention, and then she said, “What did his words mean: ‘I wrote a letter that brought him a whole region as a dowry?’”

“I don’t know, Princess. When the holy father told me about this ...”

“Holy father?” Heghine cut in severely, “How can we call such a scoundrel a holy father?”

“I’m sorry, Princess, it’s a habit leftover from that evening.”

Gurgen laughed loudly. Khosrov, who had been attentive but had not expressed an opinion so far, smiled slightly, and Heghine looked angrily at Vahrich and said, “Go take off the chains from this man and bring him to the great hall. Wait for us there.”

When Vahrich left, Heghine called the maids, handed the baby to the nurse, and, taking Gurgen’s hand, brought him to Khosrov.

“Gurgen,” she began gravely and reproachfully. “I wonder how you managed not to forget me after many years? Can we forget the crimes of this wicked man and let him go free, let him continue his treachery, let him cause grief and tears, and maybe even the bloodshed of innocent people? This is not responsible governance. This is not how princes should rule the country! I am very glad that Prince Khosrov is here and can judge us.”

“Who told you, my dear Heghine, that you have no rights? It has been almost a year now that I have been engaged in wars, and have thus given you the reins of government. And now I

have no desire to interfere in your affairs! It's up to you, if you want to hang this man or cut off his hand. I approve of anything you see fit, if he deserves punishment. But outside the battlefield, I cannot kill people in cold blood, any more than I can kill a tiger or a lion in a cage. I have to let them go, and then attack them."

"Yes, with a lion and a tiger you must do this, but a snake that wants to bite you in the heel, poison you, you must smash its head ... Oh, father, how can you remain silent ... If so, I will not open my mouth any more ..."

"No, my daughter, you're right," Khosrov said, taking her by the hand and inviting her to have a seat beside him. "But I know the character of Gurgen. He can capture and release an enemy ten times, only to regret it afterwards. This monk, chained in handcuffs, must be sent to the Catholicos. Our spiritual father, is a wise, fair, and virtuous person. If he learns of the monk's dastardly deeds, he will banish him to some monastery to spend his days in penance for his sins. Let's go and interrogate him."

The monk confessed to all his treacherous misdeeds and explained how he forged Gurgen's letter to Heghine, how he became an instrument in the hands of Ashot, an adherent to the three traitorous princes and finally, how he betrayed Gurgen to Derenik in hopes of elevation to the rank of bishop.

The next morning, Vahrich, having loaded his living bounty onto a horse, took a small armed entourage with him to the Catholicos, who ordered the sacrilegious monk to be sent to the island of Sevan to do penance for his misdeeds. So, the words of the old prince Khosrov to Heghine came true.

Chapter 30 An End to Travails

Gurgen's life may be considered a vivid mirror of Armenia in those times: persecution, betrayals, conspiracies, prisons, chains, wars, wounds, disease, victories, defeats, separation from loved ones and finally the peace and happiness of hearts reunited in love.

The newlyweds had a joyful life together. They had children, and carefully and fairly managed both their house and the country. Gurgen and Heghine were happy, and if they had not completely forgotten the sorrows and sufferings they had endured, the events of the past were fading behind a light haze.

Mother Armenia, this long-suffering martyr, was finally able to wipe her tears after being resigned for generations to repression by ruthless invaders, devastation by barbaric hordes, bondage and captivity. She shook off her bloody, dusty rags and arose from her bed of anguish. Her torments gave way to happier days. She once again donned a purple robe and crowned Ashot Bagratuni as the king of Armenia. The bright sun dawned and dispelled the gloom. Mother Armenia saw the return of her children from shameful bondage. The name of Christ was again glorified, the destroyed and abandoned church-domes rose above the ruins, the cities were rebuilt, the villages blossomed and "they plowed the fallow land and sowed not among thorns" (Jer. 4:3) "the voices of mirth and gladness the voice of the bride and bridegroom shall fill their homes" (Jer. 7:34) "they shall have children and bear fruit" (Jer. 12:2) and "each shall live in his inheritance and the Lord shall visit them and make them prosper in goodness" (Jer. 32:41).

