

Tserents

Theodoros Rshtuni

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Chapter 1 – Grigor arrives in Vardanaberd

A small group of 10-12 horsemen hurried to the east side of Bagrevand, north of Kogovit. Evening was approaching, and it was evident that this group had come from a distance. Anyone could see from their silence that they were exhausted, sunburnt, their clothes covered in dust and their horses in pools of sweat.

A well-dressed young man on a fine steed was riding along, sadness and care written on his face in spite of his soft and attractive features.

Focused on his journey, he said nothing and did not look around. From his entourage and their armaments and stern, military appearance, it was clear that they were the bodyguards of this young man, a prince.

The fog and smoke of fall had engulfed the land when the leader of this group, a robust man of about 50 with the head of a bull, riding to the right of the young man, turned to him and said in a coarse, low voice, “This is the Fortress of Vardan. You can see the torches, prince; we have only another quarter of our journey to go. You look tired.”

“I’m not really tired, Zaven,” answered the young man, “I am concerned that my mother is already beside herself with anxiety.”

There was silence again. Only the sound of the horse hoofs could be heard. A rider road off in a storm of dust and the group, riding around a small lake and ascending a promontory, halted before a gate.

The horses started to neigh and stamp on the ground when the gates creaked open, and the chapel of Vardanaberd appeared in the glow of torches. The young man had barely dismounted when he saw a young woman dressed in black standing at the top of the stairs of the great hall, looking at him.

There was something inexplicable in her gaze. All one could say is that it was the look of a caring mother, fraught with all her yearning and hopes for her son, although they had been separated for only a month.

The mother and son approached each other with hugs and kisses, “my son,” “my mother,” “my dear,” “my precious,” and a couple of tears on their elated faces. Then the gentle young mother took her son’s hand as if she were stealing him away, took him inside of the hall to his room, sat down and offered him a seat; and the questions followed each other in rapid succession, barely leaving time for answers.

They talked about everything. The journey, the dangers, how the Lady Rshtuni was doing, had Vostan liked her son, whether Lake Van and the Lake of Vardanaberd differed. It was clear that she was a doting mother and that the son adored her. But suddenly, as if she woke from a stupor, the mother let go of her son’s hand.

“But you, my son Grigor, arriving at this late hour, must be hungry. Why didn’t you say something? And here I am, all ears, I completely forgot to ask . . . Maids,” she called to her servants, “quickly prepare some dinner.”

“In fact, my dear mother, it’s been eight or more hours since I had anything to eat or drink, but when I saw you, I forgot about hunger and fatigue.”

“Oh,” said the mother, looking at the young man covered in dust and sweat, “Quickly, bring some water, bring some fresh clothes.”

Then the maid-in-waiting held a pitcher while another filled it with water, and the Lady herself, the mother with her snow-white arm and delicate hands, washed her son’s head.

With a gold-embroidered washcloth, she wiped his hair, holding his handsome head in her hands, kissing him on his forehead; and he with filial affection and heartfelt gratitude kissed her hands. The young man then ate dinner while continuing to answer his mother’s questions.

The Citadel of the Rshtunis cannot be compared with our small castle and lake, but if size and expanse are impressive there, then the splendor is attractive here. There Lady Seta rules over a vast province, she is so busy all the time ordering, reprimanding arranging things that she barely has time to eat and rest regularly, whereas here Lady Byuregh quietly goes about her business in her small province in a motherly manner.”

“It’s true, my son, that they have a large province to rule, and I must confess that I could not handle everything that Seta does. We were about the same age. When we were children, she was already as tall as she is now, and at home, she exercised a kind of power over young and old with her directness, activity and energy. Nothing could be decided without asking Seta first. As for me, I thought of myself as her little sister. I was always amazed that the maid of the Amatuni family ventured out often with her brothers to go hunting and boldly rode her horse over the mountains, just like the boys. What was more amazing, it was during one of those hunting expeditions that Theodoros met her and without knowing that she was a girl, befriended her.

Thus, one day, he went to the Amatuni’s castle and after spending some time with her brothers, he asked for Sisak. Her brothers didn’t know how to answer. When Sisak appeared before the Rshtuni prince with a grave and solemn demeanor and carefully attended to every matter, Theodoros, who was 15-16 years old, thought he was meeting a boy and was taken by maturity of his interlocutor.

Later when he learned that Sisak was actually the Amatuni Princess and knowing how strict and traditional his father, Vahram Rshtuni, was, he secretly told Seta to temper her outlandish behavior, and soon after with their parents’ blessing, they got married.

So don’t be surprised and don’t try to compare our very different characters, just as you cannot compare your father, calm, peaceful man that he was, God bless his soul, with Theodoros’s stern and militant nature.”

“But how is it that if everyone in that expansive Rshtuni province is content with Lady Seta’s rule, the people in Kogovit province are even happier with their Lady’s rule.”

“This too is easy to explain. Seta is obligated to provide supplies, funds and soldiers for Theodoros’s military exploits. Who knows what kinds of excessive taxes she must impose? While we, as you know, especially since your father’s death, live more modestly . . . I know Seta’s personality . . . she is lavish . . .”

“No, mother dear, you are mistaken about this. The Rshtuni Citadel is even more frugal than here. The Lady employs an old military man by the name of Husik to oversee here affairs. He personifies frugality as if the word had been created for him. Everyone complains about him, starting from the Lady herself, but it makes no difference, he goes about his business unperturbed.”

“How does Seta put up with him. It must be the prince . . .”

“No, Seta herself appointed him, and although she argues with him every day, she keeps him saying that Husik is indispensable.”

“It seems that Seta is trying to discipline herself,” said Byuregh, laughing. “But how did you enjoy your time there? Did you see Vard? I knew him when he was little.”

“He is a lively youth, whose great joy in life is hunting. I would go along with him sometimes.”

“It sounds as if you didn’t really want to go.”

“Naturally, mother, I do not believe that man is solely created to run around the mountains. Man has a spiritual side too, and it is important to cultivate that along with the physical.”

“Now that you have had supper, it’s time to get some rest.”

“But, mother, what about my two sisters? Are they asleep? Are they well?”

“Both are fine and resting.”

“What about uncle Kamsarakan?”

“Two or three days after you went to Vaspurakan, he went to Shirak. You know him. He can’t stay still when you’re not around. It is as if Badrevand is a desert for him when you’re not here. He’ll probably be back tomorrow.”

“I like him a lot as well, but I wish he would give me a break from his sermons and military lectures, which always begin, “A scion of the Mamikonian and Kamsarakan families should behave thus or should not behave so.”

“Very well, my son,” said his mother with a smile, “I think you’ll have three more free days before your uncle returns. Unfortunately, your mother will not leave you in peace after a month’s absence as she missed you.”

“That, you know well, dear mother, is a source of happiness for me.”

After saying this, Grigor kissed his mother’s hand and the two of them were ready to leave, when there were three knocks at the fortress gate. It was nearly midnight. Mother and son looked at each other, curious to know who it could be at this hour.

The same question was repeated at the same time below in the guard house. Zaven, the head guard, had already taken his shoes off and was snoring in his chair, digesting his dinner. He jumped to his feet and fixed his two deep, shining eyes on the gate. All of the guards were preoccupied with the visitor and busy talking with his entourage. Zaven quickly snatched the sword he kept by his side and headed for the gate.

“Open the gate, open the gate, the prince is here, Armenia’s commander-in-chief, Theodoros Rshtuni,” said a voice from outside.

“The gates of the castle do not open at this hour,” answered the gatekeeper, “no matter who it is. Come tomorrow during the daylight and we will be more than glad to welcome you.”

“What do you mean? Aren’t you also Armenian? Christian? You would leave Armenia’s Commander-in-Chief outside all night?”

After this exchange, Zaven approached the gatekeeper, whispered a few words to him and disappeared into the dark. Shortly, it was quiet outside the gates as well.

Zaven went around the outside of the castle, to one side of the promontory, where there was a small, secret door, which he carefully opened. There he placed a guard and without a sound he went out and descended to see who the visitors were. He saw a couple of horsemen, who were standing there complaining that Armenia’s commander-in-chief had come himself only to find the doors closed before him, and that they had been brought to Vardanaberd for some unknown reason. Upon hearing this, Zaven quickly returned through the secret door and told the gatekeeper to open the gates at once.

“Welcome, welcome, brothers,” said Zaven. “Do not be surprised at our caution at this hour of the night. If you were in our places I think you would have done the same.”

“What you say is true, brother, but we announced that Armenia’s Commander-in-Chief was at the gate. He diverted his journey to spend the night here at the invitation of Prince Suren Kamsarakan who is accompanying us,” explained one of the guards, who was evidently one of the more seasoned among them, with his dark, suntanned skin, brilliant eyes and powerful neck.

Zaven quickly sent someone in to announce Theodoros’s arrival with Suren. The Lady and Grigor, overhearing the conversation from their window, had already ordered the servants to light the lamps in the hall, when they heard the neighing of the horses and hoof beats, the clanging of weapons and the flickering of the torches, an unusual and unexpected bustle in the chapel of Vardanaberd in the middle of an otherwise silent night.

The inner door of the palace opened and the servants with torches in hand followed Grigor down to greet the visitors. There climbing up the stairs was the Commander-in-chief along with Suren Kamsarakan.

“Grigor, my lad, welcome,” said Suren, giving the young man a hug, “I didn’t think I’d be seeing you this evening. I brought a distinguished guest to you. Let’s see what kind of reception you will give him.”

“The Lord of Rshtuni brings honor to our modest abode. He is the lord of the house, and he is the hope and refuge of the entire nation.”

“Our hope and refuge is God alone, my young prince,” said Theodoros with a deep and meaningful glance at the young man.

Thus the three of them entered the great hall with several members of their entourage and guards, as the servants were already putting wood on the fire and lighting candles. It was fall and the nights were already quite cold in this part of Armenia. Theodoros eyed the fire and moved closer for warmth by the fireplace.

And when the Armenian commander-in-chief left the fireplace and turned around, Suren and Grigor had disappeared. His guard looked around and then someone came out. He took off his helmet and his famous face appeared. Lord Theodoros Rshtuni was of medium height and appeared to be barely 50 years old at that time. He had a high forehead and his eyebrows formed a strong arch; his grave and unflappable look, his aquiline nose, his broad chest projected strength. Moreover, his succinct, decisive manner of speaking, left the impression of a remarkable individual, a born leader

Those who were acquainted with him, knew of his sense of justice, his courage, his unwavering resolve, his fidelity to the faith of his fathers and what is even rarer, especially among nobles great and small, they knew of his empathy for the people, the commoners and artisans, which could only be understood as genuine love for his countrymen.

Often, when speaking with peers, he would remind them that it was their duty to be a father and protector of the people and to refrain from oppression, for God would demand accounting for such injustices, which they committed in various provinces on a par with foreign oppressors.

And the princes, who thought God too far away to bridle their brutality, restrained themselves out of fear of Theodoros's justice. His righteous heart and upright mind had a sense of true patriotism that was the golden mean between boasting and maligning. He saw and understood well that the wretched condition of the Armenian people was due to a lack of a strong national government and took precedence over the noble's insatiable appetite for power. Their rivalry had reduced the country to the anarchy of petty tyrants, lackeys and toys in the hands of foreign powers.

While he, a man of deep intelligence, tried to convince the prominent nobles to unite in a confederation for the liberation of their homeland from foreign powers and establishment of a just king, there were many lazy, malicious, shortsighted men, who eschewed the obligations of joint action, pointing to the expanse of the country and its rugged, isolating terrain. To these, Theodoros would fairly pose the question, “Well then, how did the Armenian language and Armenian religion manage to spread throughout this vast territory in order to unite and create the Armenian nation?”

This man, who had his eyes fixed on the Sassanid Persians, foresaw the fall of their mighty dynasty. He saw that corruption and rot were rampant in the capital of Ctesiphon and the situation in Byzantium's treacherous and toxic capital of Constantinople was no better. And now out of nowhere a brutal, barbaric mob of religious fanatics emerged from the Arabian desert. Like lava flowing from a volcano it was on the move, scorching everything in its path, from Damascus, to Ephesus, Jerusalem,

Aleppo, Antioch, Memphis, Alexandria, Ctesiphon. It spared no one and nothing, having no regard for age, gender, the sacred or religion.

He saw that this fiery flood had now gathered and was threatening the borders of Armenia. Deeply distressed, he devoted his every thought and action to preventing this calamity from overtaking his homeland. To this end he had gone to see the Byzantine Commander-in-chief in Karin. As delicately as possible, he marshaled the facts and presented the catastrophe they faced to try to convince him that it was time to act, and act with overwhelming force, to avert disaster. As for himself, he could not sit still. He went from province to province, urging everyone to prepare, strengthening the Armenian militia.

It was on this mission that he had gone to Shirak, which at the time was under Kamsarakan rule. There Suren joined him. At the Kamsarakan prince's request, they left most of their forces in Vardanakert and rode with a small contingent from Vardanaberd to rest awhile.

Chapter 2 – Suren and Grigor head into battle

Suren Kamsarakan was in his forties, a broad-shouldered man and skilled warrior, with a strong hand and mind to match. The youngest of the Kamsarakan brothers, he had no children and had lost his much beloved wife, after which he left his ancestral home in Shirak and took up residence in Kogovit, where his sister Byuregh was raising her son, Grigor. Day by day as Grigor grew, so did his uncle's affection for him. Grigor was a well-behaved, intelligent boy, like his father David Mamigonian. Due to ill-health his father did not share the Armenian nobles' penchant for festivities, hunting, battle, polo, lavish excess and carousing. He was more sedate and cerebral, preferring scholarly pursuits, a trait which he passed on to his son.

Vardanaberd had a rich library of Armenian and Greek manuscripts, and the Mamikonian prince's main joy and consolation was to see his son advance in learning and wisdom. He was precocious for his age in acquiring the learning of that era. The palace was frequented by scholars and world travellers, and Grigor would listen attentively to their conversations which opened his mind to new ideas. Although his parents were pleased with his educational progress, the same could not be said for his uncle.

When David was away, Suren would go into Grigor's room and take away his books, saying, "You already know enough for a Mamikonian boy; let's work on your military skills." Without telling his sister, he would take the boy out for training in fencing, jousting and horsemanship. Often they would head into the mountains to go hunting, hiking the peaks and valleys. By the time they went back in the evening, Grigor was stiff and so exhausted he could not move. At such times, Suren would always say, "This is how we raise Vardans and Vahans, not by spending hours pouring over books."

David for his part would see that the boy was getting stronger by the day, and would smile, "Suren and I complement each other. I'm a man of the mind, he of the body. May God grant that Grigor have the best of both."

Suren had a robust constitution and steady mind. For the most part he just focused on the present and lived in the moment. He was neither a great patriot like Theodoros, nor like Grigor devoted to his sweetheart. Early to bed and early to rise was his way of life. Even so, when he arose the next morning, just before dawn, Theodoros was nowhere to be found.

A servant had given him a letter that had been delivered for Theodoros by messenger that morning before dawn. Theodoros had ordered that regardless of the time, his guards should inform him of any messages, so they entered his room and gave him the letter. Theodoros, fully armed, set out on horseback after giving the letter to one of Suren's servants. Suren read the short letter from Atom Shahuni addressed to Theodoros Rshtuni.

"Please be advised, Commander of Armenia, that the Byzantine army has invaded our territory. The Arab army has divided into two battalions: one has crossed the Araks and invaded Nakhichevan, and the other has invaded Artaz."

Suren pondered for a moment, then got dressed. He was heading to see Grigor, when his sister greeted him, and with a sweet smile, spread out her arms not letting him pass.

"No," she said, "Let Grigor get some rest."

"But don't you know, Theodoros has already left."

"Of course I do, I saw him leave. But my son is not the Commander of Armenia. He needs his rest so that he can grow up and be strong."

"This is just what you'd expect from a mother," shouted Suren, "if we left it to you the boy would become a hermit or priest or at most a feeble Catholicos . . . Do you have any idea about the times we are living in?"

Do you have any idea what calamities could befall us tomorrow? No, all you care about is Grigor's comfort, that his every wish be fulfilled, that he stay close by. But I think that Grigor, with his intellect and learning, should do more than sit around in Vardanaberd, ruling over Kogovit and Bagrevand like his mother, to be satisfied like the rest, including Theodoros Rshtuni. I want him to surpass the Lord of Rshtuni, in spirit and physical strength, I want . . ."

"I know all that and you are right, but you are talking so loud that you'll wake up Grigor. Come, my dear brother, and say your piece in my room."

The elegant lady then gently took her brother's hand, and let him to her room to talk.

"Now, what is it you want to say? Your sister is all ears," she said with a smile on her lips.

"This is no time to smile, sister," answered Suren, showing her the paper and reading aloud the last lines of the letter.

"If the Byzantine army has entered Bagrevand, that means that we need to get ready to defend ourselves. If Theodoros rushed off early this morning, that means he has gone to Nakhichevan."

"Is there any reason to forbid smiling?"

“This is just what you’d expect from a woman,” said Suren, “Do you think that those words were an answer to my concerns? In these circumstances, is it sufficient to merely say that Theodoros went to fight the Arabs, and we should sit here, throw up our hand and do nothing? That man, that Theodoros, when he said, “Give the letter to Suren,” expected that Suren would move, that he would take the Mamikonian lad, and set out to confront the Arabs, to hold them off, like a bulwark against that ghastly force, or there’s no stopping them, no end to the devastation they bring in their wake.”

“But this tender shoot of the Mamikonian clan is but a youth of 17. He’s exhausted from yesterday’s trek and barely got to sleep at midnight. There’s no rule that at his age he should confront those ferocious brutes and risk his life and soul, and perhaps extinguish his father’s line.”

“I very much would like you to say this once directly to Theodoros.”

“There is no secret or shame in what I have said that I would flinch at saying it to him. I did not see Vard with his father yesterday and I do not think he had supper with the other soldiers. His father did not take his son, depriving his mother of her child, to battle the Arabs or build a bulwark.”

When Suren was about to answer these words indignantly, Byuregh without giving him a chance, spouted with a chuckle, “Just what you expect from a woman, huh?” At just that moment they heard footsteps from inside the room. He turned around and a pretty six-year-old girl ran up and sat in Suren’s lap. Suren hugged and kissed the girl with a hearty laugh,

“Sweetie, my one and only Arpeni,” he said, “You are the best thing about women, and when you grow up, you will be smarter than your mommy and make sure that your children do not grow up to be soft and lame.”

“No, no, I will not tolerate such slander against my child,” and seeing her son in the doorway, “You came just in time, Grigor, to give your uncle a response and teach him that you are not soft or lame or slow.”

“All I want to hear from Grigor is the opposite: that he is tough, active, zealous and knows when it is time to take up arms to fight for the rights of his nation, faith and country.”

“If those are in danger, then what man could shirk this responsibility without bearing the mark of shame on his forehead,” said Grigor, and coming forward, he lifted Arpeni up, as she wrapped her dainty arms around his neck, and with kisses of glee and words appropriate to her age, answered this question.

As for Byuregh, no sooner had she silently taken in this scene than she left just as silently, so that neither brother nor sister could see her tears.

A teardrop often contains secrets that a self-confident and fool-hardy man might not feel and cannot understand, but might give a contemplative man pause. This woman, young, attractive, sweet, sensitive, ready to go toe to toe with her brother to protect her son from any danger, not only saw in this boy a defender, hope, scion of a great family and national legacy, but also the living image of his father, the happy by-gone days, which would never return once they have poignantly passed. A person wants to keep those in her memory, to bring them back, to bring the dead back to life. Those tears were testimony to this tenderness.

As for Suren, although he had a sharp eye, he only saw one side of those tears, parroting the same old words to his sister, “What do you expect from a woman . . .”

At that point, Grigor’s other sister Nazenik came and hugged her brother. She was already a mature girl, with fine, blond hair, soft eyes and a face tinged with bittersweet sorrow. She was pleased to see her brother, who, though not yet an adult, smiled on his sisters with fatherly affection.

The family went down for breakfast together. Suren was silent, because he did not want to distress his sister. Grigor spoke now and again, but Arpeni was a chatterbox full of questions. From the refectory one could see the silvery mirror of the placid lake below, a small boat moored on the shore, inviting them to a short spin around its tree and flower lined banks. But this did not even cross their minds. Suren got up first, then the rest, finally Arpeni, who was the only one not sensing the tension in the air before the coming storm.

The poor mother felt that her son would be separated from her and that this time it was not she who would send him, but the demand of necessity, and the bugle call to war had a whiff of death about it, about to tear her one and only hope from her embrace.

So with a bowed head speechless, she envisioned her son fully armed, fallen. There were tears no longer since she was crying in her heart as she kissed her son’s hand and head and with closed eyes gave him a long hug at the top of the stairs. It was hard to tell whether it was a hug or a prayer. Twenty armed horsemen awaited Grigor when he got on his mount and without looking back went out of the castle gate behind Suren.

“Zaven, Zaven,” called a melodious voice from above. The head guard turned and, seeing that the Lady was speechless, got off his horse and went up the stairs.

“Zaven, I am sorry to trouble you with this, but forgive a mother’s tender heart. It is unnecessary, I know, but please look after my son,” she said.

“Oh, my Lady, believe me, Zaven will not appear before your eyes without your prince.”

“God be with you,” was all the poor woman could utter as she turned her head away. She could say no more. She went straight to the chapel and there opened her wounded heart to her Creator, the only comforter for her grief.

The old soldier could not endure seeing this motherly anguish. He turned his head and wiped a tear from his eye, got back on his horse, gave it a lash, and disappeared in a cloud of dust, catching up with the rest of the entourage, as it was making its way toward Vardanakert in silence.

Suren, who had not opened his mouth until then, pointed out to Grigor an old general in the distance, standing on the town wall watching them. “See,” he said, “that old man is Theodoros’s deputy and great comrade. That is Atom Shahuni, who never knew the meaning of fear and made a habit of scoffing at death. Now he is over 60 years old, yet he fights better than most young men and would not flinch at killing his own son for dishonesty or treachery. I don’t think anyone has seen him laugh, so

when you greet him, if he seems severe, do not recoil; he doesn't deem anyone except Theodoros worthy of such courtesies, so consider it a blessing if he does not greet you with contempt.

And indeed, when they approached, the old general hardly twitched his eyebrows to acknowledge their presence and stood there like a statue without the slightest movement. Suren, trying to coax him to speak, showed him the very letter he had sent to Theodoros, and asked where the Commander of Armenia was.

"Who gave you this letter, Kamsarakan?" asked the old man harshly.

"The prince gave it to me this morning."

"You were asleep when he was here," said the old man sternly, then as if muttering to himself, "This is the way our princes and nobles behave, and the worst of them are doing us a favor if they do not turn traitor and cavort with the enemy."

"Can you tell us, Prince Atom, who the enemy leaders are?"

The old man ignored the question and continued, "by leaving you this letter the Commander of Armenia wants to tell you to go and find him and the Byzantine army. So go, be quick about it. See, he told me to keep my troops ready," he said, pointing to his troops, waiting with weapons in hand. Having said these words, he turned his back on everyone.

As for Suren, without saying anything else, he got on his horse and continued the journey, assuming that asking for further information about the Byzantine army from that sweet old man was a waste of time and would probably seem frivolous to him and occasion a scolding. Thus, he held his laughter and hurried ahead. Meanwhile after they had gone away a bit, Grigor let out a chortle and rode behind his uncle until they reached Vagharshakert, where the Byzantine forces came into sight.

Chapter 3 – Vardanaberd Attacked

Kamsarakan and his nephew entered the Byzantine camp, located near Vagharshakert. Although they retained the name Roman Emperor along with the external luster, everything there was in decline and decay, starting with military discipline. There was still a Roman eagle with wings spread over the legionnaires heads, but at the enemy's first blow, they would fly away. Indeed, the legionnaires showed more bravado in settling internal scores than fighting the enemy.

And while misconduct and disorder were rampant in the rank and file, their commanders, though often titled, were nothing more than presumptuous palace bullies seen bossing people around in peacetime, but nowhere to be found on the battlefield. One of this ilk was Procopius, the Commander-in-Chief of this so-called Byzantine Army. After much coaxing and cajoling, Theodoros had barely gotten him to move at all; he took his sweet time to get from Karin to Bagrevand.

Thus, when Suren and Grigor entered their camp, they were escorted to the Commander-in-Chief's tent, in front of which the Armenian general's guard was arrayed. When Suren tried to enter, the Greek adjutant informed him that entrance was forbidden, although loud and angry voices could be heard from within.

Theodoros, being a seasoned fighter, understood at first glance that although this army was large, it was useless to the country because of its lack of mobility. It had successfully dealt with a bold and fierce enemy in campaigns to date and had become so overconfident that it would split into two divisions to face a large invasion. For this reason, he urged Procopius to send one division to march on Artaz quickly and destroy the large Arab force there and another to block the other Arab army's path of retreat across the Araks river and eliminate them there. But the Byzantine general reacted with contempt at this straightforward plan.

The great commander of the imperial army had no need of advisers, let alone the advice of an Armenian prince, saying, "your duty is to obey and not give counsel. The loss, destruction, captivity of your country is no concern of mine."

"I see your words convey deeper meanings which I think it inappropriate to address right now. However, the Emperor has appointed me to this office and charged me with the duty of governing and protecting this land, and when I see danger that threatens the country and this army I feel compelled to give warning. Please do not take what I say the wrong way. We are dealing with a formidable foe, one that should not be taken lightly. In a short period, they have snatched away Syria and Egypt from the Emperor's control, and just yesterday in one fell swoop, they took down the Persian monarchy."

"The Emperor did not send me here to get lessons from you about the enemy's forays or my duties. Do not try my patience with your prattle. Now shut up and get out."

"I know how to respect the Emperor's orders as well as his commanders," said Theodoros, standing up and suppressing his annoyance. "But I also know and have seen those who give thunderous orders beyond their station in their own home, then get weak kneed when facing the enemy on the battlefield and flee. I hope, Byzantine commander, that the latter is not your fate."

And having said his piece, he left the tent. Procopius threw a fit and flung his general's mace behind the exiting Armenian prince, who without turning around, told the Armenian guard awaiting him, "Let's go, boys. Time to deal with the children of Ishmael." And they all mounted their horses and rushed off to Vardanakert. Through the whole journey no one dared to say a word to Theodoros, not even Suren.

Although it was nearly nightfall, the tireless general led his small contingent to the high country, called the Saryak hills, and there, at the mouth of the crevices, waited in ambush for the invaders. The autumn nights were chilly in the mountains, but not a complaint was heard. After all, Theodoros himself was on the look out all night without a campfire to avoid giving away their position to the enemy. They waited there three days and three nights, but the enemy did not appear. They also awaited at least one defensive move by the Byzantine commander. If he at least redeployed his forces forward a little, he could block the enemy advance.

This new enemy had made a grand name for himself. With his fanatic religious fury, he had overwhelmed every opponent to that day. Nevertheless, the Rshtuni prince remained firm and wanted to test the invader's strength. When it was ascertained that the din of the enemy's assault arose from the ravine below, Armenian forces, already deployed on the heights on both sides, let loose a barrage of arrows, catching the attackers by surprise. Then from the crags above, well-armed detachments poured forth before the Arabs could regroup and cut them down left and right unsparingly. Seizing the booty from those who had fallen, the Armenian forces proceeded past Vardanakert to the banks of the Araks river to reinforce their comrades who had come under ferocious attack by another Arab army.

The situation was critical and Theodoros pressed on without giving his soldiers any rest; but the invaders with Satanic fury had already destroyed everything in sight from Nakhicheven to Goghtn, not a village or town was spared. Fire, sword and death. All the barbaric marauders left behind them were piles of corpses and pools of blood everywhere.

Villagers who had taken refuge in the mountains and fortresses began to come down in groups, wailing as they looked for their loved ones. But in vain. Either they had fallen victim to the sword or even more atrocious, been taken captive. Homes, cottages, churches, everything was up in smoke, everything covered in blood. The seasoned warriors, who thought they had seen it all, were shocked by the cruel and heinous attack. Bodies hacked away, women torched, dead babies. In helpless shock and rage they surveyed the devastation.

Atom Shahuni, who had fought with and against the Persians, battled the Kushans and every Caucasian tribe, taken part in every one of Smbat the Conqueror's wars, had many stories to tell if he wished, but when he saw this brutality, he could only frown and sigh in disgust.

As for Theodoros, who had made every effort to try to save these poor people, suddenly looked for Suren Kamsarakan, and taking him aside, said,

"Prince Suren, you should quickly take David's son and leave this place, for if the useless Byzantines are defeated, which is likely, who knows what brutality and destruction await Kogovit and Bagrevand at the hands of these merciless barbarians. Go quickly. You can't leave your sister there alone. I would come too, but I must try to catch up with these barbarians and at least try to rescue the captives from their clutches." So Suren and Grigor with their contingent departed for Kogovit, where indeed the situation was as Theodoros imagined it.

After Theodoros's attack, the Arabs brought in more reinforcement and proceeded more cautiously. Based on reports of Byzantine laxity from their advance force, they did not wait for the Byzantines to attack. Instead with the full ferocity of their religious fanaticism, they launched a preemptive attack on the Byzantines, who having heard that the Arabs had been defeated by the small Armenian force, grossly underestimated the threat from near or far.

The battle did not take long. Sixty thousand Byzantine troops were routed and fled within hours of the attack by ten thousand Arabs, leaving behind all their booty and supplies, which the Arabs quickly seized and then proceeded, trampling and destroying everything in their path.

A large group of these barbarian hordes scoured the countryside, desolate and abandoned after the inhabitants learned of the Byzantine defeat. The Arabs spread out through Kogovit and finding an access route proceeded to destroy everything until they reached Vardanakert, which put up a strong defense against the invaders, who eventually gave up their siege. At the same time, a small force, which had spotted the splendid buildings of Vardanabert from a distance, circled around it, in anticipation of great wealth and treasure. They went to their general, a sheikh named Ali, and suggested that the castle of this region was not far away and should yield great riches if they succeeded in capturing it.

Sheikh Ali took his troops to investigate and when he saw the height of the walls and the solidity of the doors, he shook his head in disappointment. But a young man with devilish eyes then approach him and said,

“No need to be discouraged, my Lord. If we put our all into this this night, we can take the castle.”

“How?” asked the Sheikh.

“If it is not possible to take it from above, we need to try to take it from below by digging out the foundations under the walls, Inshallah.”

“That’s a good idea,” said the Sheikh, who was in his sixties and enjoyed the respect of his soldiers because he was among the Prophet’s inner circle.

So they readied their shovels and hoes and that night began like fiends to dig a deep tunnel toward the castle, working like ants in shifts through the night, one digging the other removing the mounds of earth, until they reached the wall. Meanwhile the guards at the castle were clueless. There were no seasoned warriors within because the Lady had sent all the experienced soldiers to protect her son. They sat inside confidently counting on the high walls to protect them. But the fatal operation was underway and as if by some black magic they neither ran into boulders nor any other obstacle. By morning they were under the wall and were digging upward into the castle floor.

And to distract from this operation, a group of soldiers pretended to surround and attack the castle from without, shooting arrows and rocks, and bringing ladders to the walls. As there were only a few guards, this picture caused little concern. Thus they were terrified when standing on the tower they heard that the enemy was already inside. Before their eyes they saw the fiendish Arabs with swords unsheathed right at the castle entrance.

They were increasing by the minute. The guards rushed down from the walls and a pitched battle ensued around the hole through which the brutes were clambering out. It was clear that the guards could not carry this uneven battle. The citadel did not have major fortifications, so the women and children were wailing at the clanging of the weapons, the cries of the wounded guards, the ferocious howls and curses of the intruders. It was terrifying to watch or listen.

At that point, the attackers opened the castle’s main gates and there was no longer any way to resist their attack as Arab detachments poured into the castle from all sides. Who could defend the women and children from these brutes? Inside there were only a couple of armed servants who had blocked the

doors and windows with heavy furniture as a last resort, making one final effort to hold off the intruders. At this point a couple of crazed women threw whatever they could lay their hands on through the high windows onto the attackers, who were trying to knock down the doors and pry loose heavy metal bars over the windows with axes and hammers.

Grasping the desperation of this situation, Lady Byuregh kept her head about her and focused on something more precious to her than her own safety. She entered her daughters' room, saw Nazenik on her knees praying and beside her her sister sound asleep in her bed. This woman whose eyes were filled with blood, not tears, picked the little one up and took the other by the hand without saying a word, and with lightning speed ran down the stairs to the garden below, toward the lake. There she laid the little one in a boat, helped the other board, and together they pushed off from the shore. She said, "Glory to you, my Lord," and began rowing with an oar into the middle of the lake.

She became giddy, and wrapped her hands around her daughter. "Well, we managed to escape, Nazenik, my dear, our honor will remain intact here buried in this lake," she said. But the delicate and innocent young girl asked, "So those brutes cannot reach us here, mommy?" And the little one, confused and disoriented, rubbing her bright, black eyes as she awoke, said, "Where are we going, mommy, you know how to row?"

"Yes, my child, I am going to row today," she said, taking the oars in her hands and rowing away with all her might.

There was just a small island in the lake, and they were heading there, as she kept her eyes on the castle. She was well aware how small the lake was, and she was hoping against hope than none of those brutes would spot them escaping. But even that hope evaporated when she saw, one, two, three and even more of them talking among themselves. Although she did not understand their language she could tell from their gestures that they were talking about her and trying to find a way to get her. Her desperation gave her extraordinary strength. She was rowing with amazing strength and saw that several of the attackers had jumped into the water with their clothes on, coming after her.

Some of them turned back very quickly, but one very dark man, swam like a fish. As she reached the shore of the island, that brute was already half way there. She picked up the smaller child and told the other, "You stay here at the lake shore, my sweet Arpeni, my one and only beautiful angel. May God protect you. May our misfortune become your fortune and spare you." Covering her face with kisses, her eyes moist with tears for the first time during this ordeal. She put her in the ferns along the island's edge, behind a curtain of reeds, and said, "You hide here, where no one can see you until we come back."

The child was bewildered by her mother's words but hid as she was told under the ferns and reeds. Then the Lady lifted her hands to heaven, prayed to herself, undid her belt and tied Nazenik to her waist along with the small anchor from the boat. Eyes wide open she began looking for the dark-skinned brute, who was getting closer, while the rest had given up and returned to shore. Seeing him only a few boat lengths away, in a wretched voice she whispered, "Lord, do not count this against me as a sin," and threw herself and Nazenik into the water. Wretched fate, she did not see the arrow that flew past at that very moment and struck the dark brute who was pursuing her. Nor did she hear the voice that

called out, “No, my Lady, don’t . . .” The waters of the lake parted near the island, and a moment later the placid water covered this victim of chastity and her beautiful angel.

At a short distance away, a terrible curse was heard, the water became red, and a splash was heard, as the body of the dark brute sank to the bottom of the lake.

The lawless intruders milling around the lake saw with their own eyes how the woman and her daughter threw themselves in to the water, and they called the name of their dark-skinned comrade a few times. And when they saw there was no response, they wasted no time, left the shore and starting plundering the castle.

Then, in the reeds the water moved, and someone else was swimming, but his nose barely showed above the water and his arms did not move, but only his feet, and this swimmer, approached the island without making a sound, like a thief, without appearing, and using the reeds as cover, he reached the island and crawling on the ground, looking for something which he finally found. Arpeni was sitting there, in a ball, her arms around her knees, half covered in the high grass. She was repeating to herself, “Mommy is late,” when she heard a rough, but familiar voice, “Arpeni, Arpeni, my sweet Arpeni, what are you doing here?”

“Zaven *hayrik*, is that you? I’m waiting for mommy,” said the little girl, jumping from her hiding place.

“Mommy sent me for you. Come on, let’s go.”

“But, Zaven *hayrik*, you’ve fallen in the lake, you’re wet from head to foot.”

“Don’t worry about that, my daughter.”

“But mommy said, if you fall in the water, you’ll drown. Why are you turning your face away, Zaven *hayrik*?”

“The sun is in my eyes. But now is not the time to talk. Come with me, my child.”

“What are you doing, Zaven *hayrik*? If you put me in the water, I’ll get all wet.”

“Don’t worry about that, Arpeni. Don’t make any noise, don’t say a word until we reach land.”

Holding the poor child on his chest, Zaven swam until they hit dry land. At that point, he stood up and got out of the reeds, and when he looked toward Vardanaberd, he saw the smoke rising. He howled a terrible curse, clenched his teeth, and saw red. Arpeni was frightened and asked, “What happened, Zaven *hayrik*?” and started to run away.

“Stop, my child, stand still. I forgot that when dealing with angels one must always speak in their tongue,” he said, and he gave a loud whistle. In less than a second, his horse came running, trampling through the reeds. And when Zaven had Arpeni in his arms, the intelligent horse leaned down so that the soldier could easily mount and set out on the road to Kaghzvan.

Chapter 4 – Zaven saves Arpeni

A soul of sadness deep and still lives in this place where your steps pass.
Nothing but the echoes of the past can be heard.
Memory captivates you, but the present cannot be sensed.
Like the ringing of the bell with its mingled sounds from afar,
the peaks of the trees weep in the wind.
Nature is silent as if dead in the tomb.
I alone am alive.
- Schlegel

Arpeni loved to ride in Zaven *hayrik's* lap, so the journey was pleasant for her, although there were two things on her mind which needed to be addressed, so she asked,

“Where did Mommy and Nazenik go, do you know?”

“Yes, my child,” the old soldier answered although his voice was so tearful that she asked,

“Are you crying, *hayrik?*” And she turned her head up toward Zaven’s face to take a look, but all she saw was his beard.

“No, my child, what is there to cry about? I’ve got a little cold, that’s all.”

“You got wet, that’s why. Mommy always says that when you get wet, you catch a cold. I will also catch a cold. Right, *hayrik*. My clothes are all wet.”

The old man was so befuddled by these questions invoking her mother’s words that he could not answer and waited for Arpeni to change the subject. And in time Arpeni raised another issue.

“*Hayrik*, when are we going to have breakfast? I’m hungry.”

“Now, in a couple of minutes,” said the old soldier looking around and wondering where they were, his mind still swimming with the horrors that took place before his eyes, and then he snapped out of it, recalling that he had to get to the village in a quarter hour; so he signaled his horse to go faster in anticipation of the child’s happy voice when they arrived.

The village appeared, but there wasn’t a sound, not even a dog barked. “My God,” said the old soldier to himself, “have the Arabs already reached here too? But no, there was grass and greenery.” Finally, he got off his horse, walked around, called out, but there was no answer. It crossed his mind that he should knock on a door, when he saw an old woman sitting in the sun on her porch, so absorbed in her knitting that she did not hear footsteps and even the clanging of the weapons did not disturb her.

“Good morning, ma’am,” he said with a natural voice. There was no answer. Zaven true to his military type was observant. He knew that people generally liked to be treated as younger than their age, so he called again,

“Good morning to you, sister,”

But again there was no answer. The soldier approach and when his shadow fell on the old woman, she calmly looked up and gave him a once over, then asked,

“What do you want? What news is there of the invasion?”

“I am looking for something to feed this young child, sister.”

“Are they nearby or have they disappeared?”

Zaven understood that the woman was hard of hearing. So speaking close to her ears, “A little bit of food, some food for this child,” he yelled, using a tone of voice reserved for the battlefield.

“I hear you, I heard you. I’m a bit hard of hearing, but I’m not deaf . . . What a sweet child you have . . .” said the old woman, looking at Arpeni, then she got up. Arpeni got down from Zaven’s arms and began to walk around, while Zaven stood there thinking about what had transpired, as Arpeni was running in and out.

“Zaven, *hayrik*, this woman did not come. Did she forget about bringing us some food?” she asked, “I’m so hungry.” But Zaven seemed not to hear, so the child went over and tugged on his pants, “Zaven *hayrik*, Zaven *hayrik*,” she called. When she saw that he was not listening, her lips started to tremble and she was about to cry, when Zaven snapped out of his thoughts and picked her up.”

“What is it, my dear Arpeni? What’s the matter, my angel? Don’t cry.”

“I was afraid that you were unable to hear, like that old woman.”

“Don’t be afraid, I can hear. Let’s go see what the old woman is doing and what she’s bringing for you.”

When they went in, they saw the old woman carrying a clean wooden tray with cream, yoghurt, cheese, grapes, and lavash bread. Fortunately, children do not carry their noble sensibilities with them. Arpeni, though accustomed to eating on silverware, ate with gusto from the clay bowls. And Zaven, though still distraught, found some solace watching the innocent angelic girl, who did not seem an orphan in his eyes. But the old woman tugged on his arm to invite him to eat. The old soldier had been on the road since before midnight but had no appetite. Only after Arpeni asked him again and again to join her, did he finally have a bite to eat and some wine to drink.

The old soldier was in a daze. When the child was full, she asked for her mother, while the old woman asked about the invasion. To cut the conversation short, he gave the old woman a quick farewell, got on his horse, and arrived in Kaghzvan in a couple of hours. Arpeni did not notice the time go by, because she slept in his lap for most of the journey. When they arrived she opened her eyes and saw women and girls, who were hugging her and passing her from one to another. One complimented her on her blue eyes, another kissed her cheeks. Soon she was playing with the other children her age. Thus, the child was well entertained in this house that was not quite a village house and not quite a city house, but a bit of both. It was Zaven’s home.

Zaven’s wife, an intelligent woman who knew her husband’s disposition well, did not ask anything at first but waited until they were alone to inquire why he was so downcast, whether the Arabs had

actually invaded Kogovit and whether the Mamikonian lady was indeed in danger. At that point, Zaven briefly recounted how he, Suren and Grigor had parted from Theodoros. As they were approaching Vardanaberd, because Grigor and the others were tired, he decided to go ahead alone to make preparations. He arrived shortly before midnight. From the distance he saw the mob of people and the flash of arms.

Sensing the danger, he decided to take the road to the lake, and from the distance he saw the lady and her daughter in the boat heading toward the island. Recognizing Lady Byuregh, he thought up a plan to rescue her. He had already shot the dark-skinned man who was pursuing her. Then he saw mother and daughter throw themselves into the water and disappear. So he focused on trying to save this child from death. The poor soldier got choked up. His good wife listened attentively and her tears began to stream down her face. The two of them reminisced about how kind hearted the Lady was, how virtuous and gentle. Her gifts were the treasures of their house. Zaven remembered the days when she had come as a new bride from the Mamikonian family and how she endeared herself with her kindness to young and old alike.

“So what are you going to do now?” asked his wife.

“I will go tonight. Those brutes have no intention of staying. They burned down the castle. I will go and try to find the prince and tell him about his mother and sister’s deaths and hope Arpeni’s rescue will be a small consolation, although the loss is so great what can one say. That poor boy. How he adored his mother! When we last parted, she said, “I entrust my son Grigor to you, Zaven *hayrik* . . .”

And the strong, old soldier got choked up again.

Outside in the yard the children were playing happily. The boys and girls, large and small, were celebrating Arpeni’s visit. At one end of the garden there was a promontory looking out toward the banks of the Araks River. They set a table under a green village canopy. The housewife was busy preparing the food. Zaven, who had fallen into a deep sleep, exhausted and emotionally drained, awoke at close to midnight, his strength restored.

During dinner, Arpeni announced that this house was better than the castle, so she wanted Zaven *hayrik* to bring her mommy there. After dinner, the children went to sleep and Zaven got on his horse to Vardanaberd.

It was close to midnight, the misty fall moon cast a dim glow over Kogovit lake. The flames from the remains of the castle cast a secondary light on the water, as he approached with great caution. Hearing no sounds after long observation, he got off his horse and left it to graze, carefully walking around to the castle gates. The gates had collapsed. He saw the Mamikonian palace, half-burnt, half standing, and the piles of charred corpses in the large tree-lined courtyard. He understood that the once splendid castle had been turned into a cemetery. He went outside the walls, and set out toward the south side of the lake to check out the situation. He had hardly taken a few steps when he stumbled upon a corpse, then another, then another, until by his count he had passed 10 or 12. The moonlight was too dim for him to recognize them. So he got a little close and heard some moaning. He ran in that direction, “Ah, a little water, for the love of God, a little water,” someone groaned lying on the ground. He entered the castle and rushed to the gatekeeper’s room under the tower, where there was a small spring. There were

ordinary clay bowls there. He took one and filled it up and gave the man something to drink. When the man regained consciousness, Zaven asked,

“My son, who are you?”

“Trdat, Tatos’s son,” said the wounded man.

“Were you with the princes when we came?”

“We arrived here at noon. When we saw the castle in smoke and flames, we turned back and began to retreat, but we ran into a group of more than two hundred horsemen returning after plundering the country side. They blocked our path, so we desperately fought with the invaders. I was wounded. I do not know what happened to the rest.”

“My God, my God, what calamity has come upon us,” said the old soldier.

He went out to look around and checked the pulse of the rest of the fallen to see if any were perhaps still alive, but they were all dead. He returned to the wounded soldier, bandaged his wound as best he could, put him on his horse and headed to the nearest monastery, which, being located in an inaccessible place in the mountains, he hoped had escaped the barbarians’ attack. And indeed, he found it as he had hoped. The monks had gone down to bury the Christian victims. Meanwhile, Zaven was looking for Grigor’s body, but did not find it or Suren’s either. He thanked God and said, “One day he will return and I’ll entrust his sister to him in person.”

From there he went down to the shore. The lake was calmly lapping against the shore, indifferent to the human misery and turmoil around it. He got into the boat and rowed to the place where he had found Arpeni waiting for her mother. The water was clear and through it he saw mother and daughter side by side. He jumped in and pulled them ashore with great effort, and said, “Here, may this island, the silent witness to this wonderful mother and her angelic child’s virtue, be their final resting place. This may be the only safe place in the future from the bloodthirsty barbarians, until the prince returns.”

He got back in the boat, and brought what was necessary to dig a grave under a plane tree, and then he performed the burial rites as their gravedigger, their servant, their mourning father and brother and everyone else, drenching the grave site in tears. He was also amazed as a veteran soldier that his eyes, so fiery in battle, could pour out so many tears, more than ever in his whole life.

And when he wiped his tears, he gathered the clergy, stood them in front of the castle, then set fire to the boat, so that no one could ever go to the island, and then said, “Everything is done now,” and dropping his head to his chest, the past was buried, all the celebrations, name days, merriment, mourning and sadness as well; everything that happened there passed before his eyes in sequence, for he had served there for many years, and it took less than 24 hours to obliterate it all from memory. He proceeded on his way to Kaghzvan, forgetting even his horse, who walked silently and sadly behind his master as he understood his master’s inner turmoil.

Finally Zaven came to as if he awoke from a deep sleep. His knees no longer obeyed him, a heavy fatigue overtook him. He got on his horse with a new feeling. He was so dizzy he had to take care not to fall from the horse. Analyzing these symptoms, he realized that he had not eaten all day; the sun was

about to set, so he hurried to reach the village where the deaf old woman had received them as guests the day before.

The old woman was still sitting alone on her front porch, and the village was still abandoned. Although he only asked for a piece of bread, the kind old woman put out bread and cheese and a jug of wine before him. And when she saw that he had a good appetite, she said,

“I have poor eyesight, but you seem very hungry. Everyone in the village took refuge in the hills out of fear of those thieves.”

“And are you not afraid, staying here alone?” asked Zaven, partly in words, partly in gestures.

“What do I have left to fear? The invaders want young girls; not old women like me.”

“That’s what you think, but these new invaders put people like you to the sword.”

“Well, what can I do?” said the old woman, dismissively shirking her shoulders. “If they want to kill me, let them. I’m not going to live a thousand years. I’m already nearly 100. I have grandchildren, children, daughters-in-law. You go, hide in the mountains, I told them; I will die here in my house, in peace.”

Zaven had no answer for this philosophy of life, so he stayed silent, and when he had finished eating and drinking the last drop of wine, the old woman said,

“My son, don’t move. You haven’t eaten anything since morning. Yesterday that child ate well. Stay here . . . “ And she got up and without giving Zaven time to stop her , returned a few moments later with more food and wine. And when Zaven started to eat, the old woman began to tell old stories, which were beyond even Zaven’s memories. “Son,” she said, “do you remember the days when the Persian Suren trampled all of Armenia, and later, Vardan Mamikonian slew Suren, and after that the Persian king came, and after that we all took refuge in the mountains . . .

“I did not know about all those . . .

“Did you know?” said the old woman, trying to read his lips.

“No, no, I had no idea.”

“But you know, that when the Byzantine Emperor came our Catholicos renounced St. Gregory the Illuminator (Zaven of course knew that she was talking about Emperor Heracles and Catholicos Yezr, so he nodded, yes), May God have mercy on your father’s soul. That year the Byzantines from one side and the Persians from the other trampled our mountains and valleys, destroyed our homes and everything in sight. We spent two summers and winters in the mountains. What difficult days those were . . . This is nothing. Today it was those Byzantines again, who came like chickens with their heads cut off, hungry, thirsty . . .”

“Today?” asked Zaven.

“Yes, I gave each of them a little bread and sent them on their way. Behind them came one old man with 30-40 men, pompous, in fancy clothes, really stuck up. It appears that he did not like our village, so he left and went in the direction of Kaghzvan. Good riddance.”

Zaven was already full and his eyes were growing heavy with sleep. When he heard about the Greeks, who were of course fleeing from the Arab invaders and seeking refuge in the various mountain paths going toward Karin, he thought, if they were caught, they would certainly be treated brutally. Shaking off his fatigue, he bid the old woman farewell, got on his horse and headed toward Kaghzvan as quickly as he could. It was already three in the morning when he reached the next town, which was completely upside down. There were a couple of people standing in front of the church talking about how to deal with the Byzantine’s demands. When Zaven pulled the reins on his horse, they immediately recognized him, and before he could even open his mouth, they started to complain and bemoan the situation.

“A hundred-fifty, two hundred Byzantine soldiers sought refuge in our town. They had a general with them. They quartered themselves in our homes. We took pity on them. They were fighting the infidels, we said, they are Christians, we said, it is our duty to be hospitable, we said, but they were never satisfied. They started to steal our clothes, demand weapons, empty our wine jugs, and ogle our women . . . The leader went to your house, brother Zaven, and in all likelihood he’ll behave no better than the other marauders . . .

“Let’s go and see what they’ve done and think what to do about this.”

Zaven got off his horse and headed directly to his home with his neighbors. Even before he reached the door, he could hear the bawdy Greek songs and conversation, which Zaven understood well enough to know that the singers were Byzantine soldiers under his roof. Without paying any attention to them, he entered the house. First, his three sons came, the eldest of which was 15, robust and strong headed. Father and son quietly conferred as to what to do.

“What kind of person is the Greek leader, Nerses?”

“What can I say, father. He appears to be about 40, a sweet talking and civil man. He asked for a sheep to be slaughtered and talked big, as if he were going to pay for it. He acted as if he knew the Emperor personally. He asked whose home this was and whose daughter Arpeni was. He was also scrounging for information about Vardanaberd, the Mamikonian lady, Prince Grigor. He ordered that his soldiers be given what they need, and promised that payment would arrive from the imperial treasury shortly.”

“Is that man’s name Procopius,” asked Zaven gruffly.

“No, father, his name is Tuma.”

“Where are your mother and sisters?”

“They are all inside. They did not appear before the foreigners.”

“Who is with them now?”

“Only the priest is there. The rest left.”

“Let’s go in, friends, and meet what remains of the Byzantine army,” said Zaven to his neighbors.

Chapter 5 – Kidnapping and Captivity

Tuma had settled in next to the fireplace and did not even notice the new arrivals, who had respectfully greeted him. Two of his soldiers were standing guard near the door. The priest of Kaghzvan was relegated to the corner, slighted by the Byzantine general. Zaven seeing this, called the Armenian priest forward to sit by the fire. Seeing that he hesitated, he took him by the hand and helped him to his seat, then sat next to him. When the Byzantine general saw this movement in his presence, he understood that his slight had been answered, but he did not let on.

As for Zaven, who spoke Greek, he started to raise the people’s complaints in a calm manner. He pointed out that the soldiers were making improper demands, and hoped that “by alerting such a high-level Greek general to these issues, such improprieties would no longer be permitted.” Zaven’s final comment was so sarcastic and pointed that the Greek’s anger was provoked. He sat up stiffly and glared at Zaven, and asked,

“You look like a soldier, whom have you served until now?”

“Perhaps I was unable to express myself. I made a request that you order your soldiers to cease making improper demands. And you ask me with whom I have served? That question amazes me. So let me be so bold as to ask you what the meaning of your question is?”

“You are an ordinary peasant, and you dare to interrogate me, a Byzantine prince?”

“What’s wrong with that? A person always has the right to ask what he does not know. You asked me whom I served. I also took the liberty of asking you why you asked that question. If I were trying to be cruel, I would have asked whether you were the one who organized that great victory over the Arabs or Procopius.”

“Even after this, you dare to insult me, you impudent peasant,” said Tuma, standing up and putting his hand on his sword.

“Calm down, Byzantine Prince,” said Zaven with a grave and contemptuous voice and without flinching. “When I say Byzantine Prince, you should know that this “impudent peasant” has a yet more disrespectful word in mind. No one is afraid of your sword here. I’ll bet that that miserable sword of yours has not been out of its sheathe in years and has grown rusty. And if this miserable peasant’s sword is taken out of its sheath, as the Illuminator is my witness, it will take several people out with it.”

Observing Zaven's stillness, his calm voice and dismissive manner, the Byzantine general changed his approach and restrained himself, taking his seat while feigning aloofness.

"Yea, let's sit down like gentlemen and talk. You are our guest. It is our national custom to treat guests with honor, but if that guest behaves like a thief, even then we do not completely dishonor them. So now let me tell you in a friendly manner that if even a single wrongdoing takes place in our town, I will see to it that all of the Byzantines are killed, and so that this will not be counted against me as a sin, in your presence I issue this order." Then turning to the senior priest, who was sitting beside him, he said,

"Reverend Father, go to the church and let everyone know that they should be armed and ready and at the first sign of mischief they should let the church know; as soon as they hear church bells they have the right to kill any Byzantine they find. Understood, now go and tell them."

The priest spread his arms and got up to leave, when Tuma, who as sitting there listening, changed his tone and manner at once, saying to the priest politely,

"You are a disciple of Christ and the Gospel. Can you preach and deliver such a ruthless order?"

"Since when did Christ preach protection of thieves, Byzantine prince," answered Zaven. "I saw in the imperial cities Karin and Ctesiphon plenty of criminals hanging from gallows. Your Byzantine Christ does not preach forgiveness of criminals, but you want our Armenian Christ to do so? Order your men to refrain from any wrongdoing, no thefts, no abductions, no dishonoring women, and no more carousing and bawdy songs.

When you give your order, if anyone does not obey and you punish them, then we'll know whether this is a gang of thugs or an army. But if you remain silent and pretend not to hear, you will be an accomplice, and I will have the right to seek retribution on you and yours; it will become a sacred obligation which started with you and will end with you. If you had any idea of the dangerous situation you are in, you would be grateful that I came when I did. The town's entire population was ready to slit your throats and the slaughter would already have begun, but fortunately I arrived in time.

At these final words, the Byzantine general changed his tune entirely. He quickly went out and ordered his soldiers to go to all the neighborhoods and put down any disorder with force, saying that the villagers had the right to use force in self-defense and to answer brutality with brutality. Then turning to Zaven, who sat without moving in rapt attention so as not to miss a word or gesture, he said.

"I am truly grateful that you acted prudently in this matter and prevented bloodshed. I could not believe that our soldiers behaved in such a disorderly manner that they would incur the wrath of the population. And truthfully until you came, no one made a complaint. So I am very thankful to you." And with these words, in the hypocritical Byzantine manner, he extended his hand to Zaven, who anticipating this move, turned to the person next to him, as if he did not see this evil hand, and said,

"You go, too, brothers, and calm down the young men so that they do not do anything out of youthful anger. You heard the prince's words and orders. Place an armed guard at the head of every street, to prevent disorder from whatever side. Go in peace."

The people were contented and bid farewell as they left. Zaven also got up, put his hand to his chest, took his leave of the Byzantine General and went inside where his family was gathered. The children were already asleep. He then told the three boys to keep watch in shifts over the Byzantines' movements through the night. He got on his horse and rode around town to counsel the neighborhood leaders to be vigilant and cautious, and only then returned home to get some rest after that long day's physical and mental labors.

Hearing the morning church bells, Zaven headed to church. The women had prepared breakfast for their Byzantine soldiers, who having cleaned up their act, were treated as guests. The children were playing, and Arpeni had already made friends with everyone in 24 hours. When she saw Zaven returning from church, she ran up to him and asked, "Did you bring Mommy?" Zaven, who had decided to take the child to the Kamsarakan Castle in Shirak, answered, "I'm going to take you to your mommy, Arpeni dear." This plan soothed the child, who ran around, playing in the garden and outside, sometimes entering the room where the Byzantine prince and Zaven were sitting.

Everything about her, except for her pretty face, told the Byzantine that she was different from the other children he had seen: her decorated, muslin clothes, her white skin, her clean hands and feet, as if her noble origins were stamped on her forehead. It was an unexpected pleasure that she spoke Greek, since in noble families, along with Persian, for some time now, they also had started to speak Greek, and Greek nurses and teachers were engaged for the children in many palaces.

From various conversations, he learned that the child was orphaned and he came up with a nefarious scheme. While everyone in town was busy distracted by the half-thug, half-soldier Byzantines, he played with Arpeni, talked with her, made jokes, and when she was alone with his two servants, he laid her down, put a handkerchief in her mouth, wrapped her up tight so she could not move, and put her in a sack; giving her to one of his porters to carry along with the rest of his belongings, he mounted his horse and with a Byzantine smile hastily bid Zaven and the Kaghzvan town folk farewell heading for Basean province.

When they were outside the town limits, with five or six mounted guards, they rode hard to get away from his army. Then they took the poor child out of that horrible sack, and saw that she had nearly suffocated. They took the gag out of her mouth, and although she had nearly fainted, the prince took her on his horse and galloped away until they reached a village. Then, he covered the child under his large cloak and quickly rode by, to leave no evidence of this horrible kidnapping. Finally, he reached a desolate place, and stopped next to the water, got off his horse and gave the child a little to drink, and washed her bloody mouth. The child was completely pale, her eyes were lifeless, she could not lift her head. He asked if she wanted something to eat. When she did not answer, he got back on the horse, gave the child to one of his guards, who fortunately had a compassionate nature and tried to the extent he could to keep her comfortable, until they reached Karin. There after lying sick for over a month, she barely recovered, the spring sun bringing life back to her eyes.

As for Zaven, when he saw that Arpeni was missing, he turned Kaghzvan upside down, looked in every nook and cranny, organized a search and when all else failed, he wept head in hand, looking to the waves of the Araks, to the birds in the sky; all were indifferent and gave no answer. Finally, he went to the church and prayed for hours, then returned home dejected. Once a week, he got on his horse, and

sat by the lake, staring at the island, and returned. When the lake was completely frozen, he went to the Lady's grave site, mourned and returned. One day, the second Sunday of Lent, he went out and was completely lost in thought. He asked for his horse and rode to a hermit's lodge, where he had sought help with the wounded man and the burial of the dead.

He picked up the priest, put him on a horse and went to the lake. There walking over the frozen lake, he took the priest to Lady Byuregh's grave, and after administering the memorial rites, he asked that he place the Gospel on the frozen ground and open it. The Priest opened it to a random passage, and Zaven placed his finger on it, and said, "Read these words, Reverend Father,"

"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." (Luke 11:9), read the priest.

Zaven then spread his arms before heaven and cried out, "Glory to you, my God." At that moment, the old soldier was young again, his eyes were alive, and when he returned home, everyone saw the difference and was amazed.

He was his old self, the husband his wife was accustomed to, the father to his children, the companion to his neighbors and friends. He celebrated Easter joyously, in merriment with his family and relatives, and on Wednesday morning, wearing ordinary farmer's clothes, with his sickle, overcoat, a short double-edged sword in his belt, sandals on his feet and staff in his hand, he gathered his wife and children and spoke with them to obey their mother, respect their brother, and treat everyone with kindness and love; he blessed them all, kissed each, one by one, and set out to find what he had lost.

Zaven was on the road to Karin, searching for Grigor and Suren. Since he did not find their bodies, he had hope that one day when the prince returned, he would at least be able to present him with Arpeni, the lone memento of the ancestral Mamikonian splendor and angelic mother and sister.

The wounded man had said that Suren, Grigor and a group of riders, seeing the castle of Vardanaberd in flames, proceed there, confident that in the worst case they had an escape route. Suren, after attacking a few of the invaders' mounted gangs, found himself surrounded and started to fight. Suren lost a few of his men, saw the imminent danger and decided to withdraw with his men to a small hill nearby at Vardanaberd cemetery.

Using gravestones in that cemetery as a barricade, this small group of Armenians forged a desperate battle, making sure that it cost the invaders dearly. Suren called out in a strong voice, "Boys, we may die, but first we must kill the enemy so that we die with honor." His words echoed thunderously in everyone's ears. Those 40-50 soldiers, surrounded by thousands, put up such a fierce fight, holding them off for two hours with their arrows and slings, swords and truncheons, that Sheikh Ali, impressed by their bravery, called a truce and sent an emissary offering to spare their lives if they surrendered. He gave them half an hour to consider the offer. Suren was in favor of entering the truce, but the Arab had only one condition, "spare your lives." While Suren was considering compromise, he faced an unexpected difficulty. Grigor was like a lion and fought well beyond his years, "it's better to die" was all he could say. Seeing the flames and smoke rising from his ancestral castle, he was certain that his mother and sisters had perished, so "let's die, let's die" was all he kept saying.

All Suren's persuasion would have been useless if the fighters refused to accept servitude in exchange for their lives. Thus when the young man stood alone and the rest had put down their weapons, he at that moment, collapsed on a grave in a flood of tears. He gave no response to Suren's pleas and urging to think about the future. This son of the Mamikonian nobility was no longer cognizant of chains any more than he was of his uncle's voice, which in a tender tone, said, "Grigor, my son, these days too will pass. Misfortune no matter how horrible is not forever."

Willingly or unwillingly, he had to accept this harsh fate, especially when he saw Suren, the man who never in his life had flattered, engaged in pettiness or malice, but instead silently and stoically bore all insults, curses and blows. That unbending Kamasarakan, who was completely indifferent to his own fate, only asked that the Sheikh not separate him from the young man; the Arab promised and stood by his word. During this entire, harsh journey, weighed down by chains, hungry and thirsty, with parental care, he deprived himself of food and water, just to make sure that Grigor survived until they reached Damascus where the Sheikh resided.

Thus, the two Armenian nobles were in captivity in exile, and Armenia was trampled underfoot. The happy homes of the great and humble had been destroyed and leveled to the ground by hellish invaders. The Byzantine Empire had reached such levels of corruption that it could not defend itself or the people it had a duty to defend, and everyone paid the price.

Chapter 6 – Armenia between East and West

Armenia was divided between two great empires, the Byzantine Empire and the Persian Sasanian Empire. It paid tribute to both and was oppressed by both, and was in constant turbulence as a result. These two great empires suffered from the same ailment. From the outside they appeared to have the sheen of power, but on the inside they were equally corrupt and decaying, both in the process of collapse.

The autocratic Byzantine emperor who sat on the golden throne in Constantinople, before whom the Armenians' forebears appeared as supplicants with arms spread when the Persian King Yazdegerd threatened to wipe out the Christians in Armenia was "The blessed Emperor Theodosius, peace-loving in Christ." Theodosius had a shameless vassal Attila. This was the Attila who was forced to retreat to Darbent by the mighty arm of Vardan the Great, before Yazdegerd's eyes. It was the same Attila, before whom the Byzantine/Roman Empire trembled in the east and in the west, and it was the same Attila that the Blessed Theodosius failed to poison, from whom he received no mercy and had to endure all manner of insults. In those days, the Empire was fortunate and happy in comparison with the situation in these times. In the course of those 200 years, it became more and more corrupt, its religious fanaticism and immorality, arrogance and dishonorable behavior, laxity and malice, lavishness and greed, recklessness and cowardice, ruthlessness and compunction, and all manner of vices always in amazing counterbalance, but lacking totally in any manifestation of virtue in any sphere.

After Theodosius the Great, one would be hard pressed to find a worthy person on that throne or one without fatal shortcomings. The best known was Justinian, a great-builder, lawgiver, victorious conqueror thanks to two brave generals, but completely at the beck and call of his wife Theodora, who made him a tool of her every whim and iniquity. One would be astonished at the metamorphosis of this hero, who won laurels through the victories of general Flavius Belarius in reconquering vassal states, while in his own home, he fawned over his wife and her scandalous behavior, pledging her eternal fidelity.

"The Emperor and his wife recruited every scoundrel to do their bidding," as long as they were slavish in their loyalty and adulation of Theodora and Justinian.

As time went on, even pettier personages were elevated to the imperial throne, and those who were considered great, always were a mix of virtue and vice. There was Maurice, also known as the Armenian (despite his name he was not partial to the Armenians), who was more noble on his deathbed than on the throne, and then Heracles, whose reign started heroically and ended dismally. Although he recorded great victories over the Persians, the two empires were so weakened as a result that neither could withstand the blows of the Arab invaders, and consequently both fell and met their demise.

There is no need to expound further on the people of the Byzantine Empire, how the corruption of its capital, mores and habits, its baseness and tawdriness, its viciousness and brutality, infected all the

cities of the empire in its last days. These vices were compounded by religious obsessions that made everyone from the emperor to the lowest fisherman think himself a theologian. Circus performances began with theological disputations ending in bloody melees. The incomprehensible tenets of faith became the province of frivolous and half-educated men.

In the capital of this vast empire, the way one sang the Trisagion Hymn to Holy God was more important than the loss of Africa. Their enemies were beating down the gates of the capital of Constantinople. Huns, Avars, Bulgars, Arabs, people from all ends of the earth with their fire, swords, plunder and destruction were attacking from all sides. Yet within the city, theological disputes were of higher priority while what was happening outside was secondary. If one was defeated, it was not attributed to carelessness or weakness, but to divine retribution. If one won, it was by the grace of the Mother of God. This religious pastime gave birth to new heretics every day and engendered fresh disputes.

This same spirit it was manifested in Persia another form. The prevailing king of kings would attribute his victory to the sun and fire. Subject peoples of other faiths were harassed and oppressed from time to time. Except for a few great figures, a violent and abusive government ruled over all, the concept of justice never extending beyond the mind of the Great Khosrov, who was known as Nurshirvan and was the glory of the Sasanian dynasty because of his daring feats and conquests and long reign. He liked the epithet, "just" and on his deathbed gave his heirs counsel to be good, saying "Do justice, curb the iniquitous, comfort the downtrodden, care for the young, respect your elders' counsel, do not entrust the government to inexperienced youth and make the happiness of your people your goal. I leave you a vast kingdom. If you follow my advice, you will keep it. If you ignore it, you will lose it."

After these words were uttered, his kingdom did not last another seventy years. None of his successors died a natural death and his dominion, before which everyone from Mesopotamia to India, China, and Arabia quaked, disappeared in an instant at the fierce attacks of infidels who had neither a name nor religion only a few years before.

It would not have been necessary to write at such length about these two autocracies had Armenia not been a vassal state constantly, a tributary, battlefield and bone of contention between them ever since the fall of the Arshakuni dynasty.

The Armenian nation was actually divided into three estates, of which only two really mattered; the third was of no significance. The first was the church, which was headed by the catholicos, elected by the bishops and nobles, which enjoyed various privileges because it established the laws. The nobles and freemen were the second estate, working hand-in-hand with the church, as lords of the land. Giving orders, ruling, and fighting was their job. They preserved the customs and privileges of their ancestors, bravery being hereditary in those families; their manners and estates respected even by the Byzantine autocrats and Sasanian kings, they exacted taxes, like the clergy, but they did not pay; they were exempt from corporeal punishment, like flogging, and like the monasteries, their cities, castles, forts and fortresses were securely situated, protected by solid walls from attack by enemies and marauders.

In general, they were pious and they devoted more of their treasure to the building of churches, monasteries and church estates than to their own palaces. Persian and Byzantine customs, vices and degeneracy as might be expected spread easily among them. Nobility everywhere looked down upon the

ordinary people and oppressed them, and the Armenian nobles were no exceptions. As for the third estate, the people, they had no rights, at least none that have been recorded anywhere; they had no institutions on which to rely, no system of laws to protect them, and even if they did, when has the law ever protected the powerless?

For laws to have any force, they must be supported by institutions, and laws can only be embraced and planted in the hearts of the people and become habitual if they are just. The laws of Armenia never extended beyond canon law. The Justinian Code was only translated into Armenia some 600 years later. Thus, how were the people governed? By customs and conscience. The laws of Vagharshak were designed for noble splendor and royal thrones.

Along with Christianity, Jewish law and practice had gained such esteem that the Bagratunis, Amatunis, Gnunis, all claimed Jewish origins, which in all likelihood was fiction. The Artsrunis, Mamikonians and Kamsarakans also claimed foreign descent. And these nobles were the lords and masters of the Armenian people; they were free while the people were not. In the law code, one provision imposed a fine of 100 drams for priests and freemen, but for serfs 50 drams and a lashing, because it was prohibited to administer corporal punishment to a noble. What was the basis for this norm?

At times the nobles were so heavy handed with their extortionate taxes on the people that one author characterized it as follows, "A man who falls in the sea and has no way to get out," or "a sick person who is so ill that he cannot even speak."

Whoever delves into history will see, as many think in modern times, that Armenia's geographic location was the reason for the weakening of the Armenian people before its enemies; it divided and sowed dissension, and the nobles, who subjected the country to misdeeds large and small, undermined the central government, and became tools of foreign powers' rivalries and meddling in Armenia. Thus, there is the misconception from ancient times that the Armenians were disunited and that dissension is an inherent character flaw of the Armenian people. But the Armenians were united in 300 AD and able to adopt Christianity in one accord, then by their example influence the Georgians and Caucasian Albanians to do the same; and the Armenians succeeded in spreading their language, like their religion, beyond their borders to the Kur River and Korduk mountains.

If Trdat had devoted as much energy and thought to managing the nobles as he had to driving out the Persians and paganism, the Arshakuni dynasty would not have faltered the moment he died and Khosrov would not have needed the Byzantine's arrogant intervention to put his son on the throne. What need was there after eliminating the traitorous Slkunik dynasty with its roots going back to Hayk Nahapet to appoint the Mamikonians with the same privileges to that position?

But when the nobles were not restive, the kings could be less stringent in their rule, but only if they were strong kings. Understandably it was not possible to tame nobles with such deep roots, but it was also not easy to eradicate paganism which had been practiced for thousands of years, yet Trdat succeeded with his firm hand. He should have reined in the nobles and not left that for his incompetent Arshakuni successors, whose fatal moral flaws and intellectual shortcomings were unequal to this task.

As a consequence, in the contention between the two rival empires and the nobles, the first king disappeared, and the second became a puppet of foreign powers in Persia and Byzantium. The thought of independence never crossed their minds even though there were many opportune moments.

Instead, his bravery was wasted serving foreign powers. He joined the Sasanians on their campaigns against the Huns and Hephthalites in Turkestan and joined the Byzantines on their campaigns in Africa, Italy and the Danube River against the Vandals, Goths, Bulgars and Sarmatians.

Undeniably, the nobility had its heroic moments. Vardan Mamikonian fought valiantly against the great and powerful Persian king Yazdgerd and Vahan Mamikonian subdued the Persian king Balash (Vagharsh) and checked the Persian usurper Kavad's religious oppression. And Vardan II overthrew the yoke of Khosrov Nushirvan. In all these contests, the nobles overwhelmingly acted in a united front because they were fighting in defense of the faith, a great unifying cause for the scattered forces. Religion drew them together because the nobles by their nature were independent and anarchic. As for their internal divisions, the Armenians were as divided as any other people who did not have a strong central government. They never had a 20- or 50-year civil war like the Greek Peloponnesian war.

Although the tiny principalities of ancient Greece were in many ways similar to Armenian's noble realms, there was a key difference. In Greece the people were free and supreme, and rational thought uplifted people; whereas, in Armenia the people were nothing and their oppressors were everything. Greece was surrounded by oceans which acted as a natural defense and enabled it to grow into an empire under the leadership of Alexander the Great and his exploits. Without well-organized government and strict laws, it is not possible to establish this sort of unity because narrow interests trump and stymie the general interest. And the general interest should have the power to respond to those narrow interests.

Even the most incompetent strict government is preferable to anarchy. Yet anarchy was deep rooted in the Armenian nobility. And because it was unable to organize itself and form an aristocracy, it toppled and took the nation down with it. If the Armenian nobility had been able to form an aristocracy, it would have opened the path to a brighter future for the nation. But in order to organize anything, there must be willingness to submit to justice and the rule of law. The nobility has shown this will only a couple of times in history, because anarchy is more forgiving of unbridled behavior, and the will to exercise self-restraint is a rare virtue.

The Armenians were generally united only at those times when their faith was being violently repressed by foreign powers. Armenians who were indifferent to all else were always ready to fend off violence with violence if necessary, and if it was not possible, to endure persecution while remaining steadfast in the faith of their forefathers. Everyone knows, as already described, how Armenian Christianity withstood Sasanian paganism and persecution, and they did the same in the face of Byzantine harassment and all manner of calumny.

This was love of religion writ large. But those that believe that anarchy and discord are part of the Armenian character, attribute this successful resistance to the institutional strength and organization of the Armenian church, with its solid hierarchical structure and discipline. Ignorant or scholarly, the institutional church was able to fight and compete effectively against all the Byzantine theological doctrines in all their philosophical subtlety.

It rejected those justified or unjustified orthodox or malicious demands and remained impervious to every argument and persecution, keeping unshakable the faith instituted and inherited from St. Gregory the Illuminator.

This or that catholicos might submit to Emperors Heracles or Constantine on this or that point, nevertheless the body of the church and the people remained steadfast in the faith of their forefathers, irrespective of whether they fully understood all the details. And such a catholicos would sooner or later have to come to terms with the people and follow them if he did not wish to be treated like a satanic schismatic.

If a king or noble could create a strong government like that of the church, then Armenia would be secure from the danger of anarchy and could command the respect of its neighbors. But unfortunately, the nobles never thought this way, especially during the period of the Arab invasions.

Theodoros Rshtuni thought otherwise. Instead of benefiting from Rshtuni's advice, the short-sighted, arrogant, decadent Byzantine Commander could not overcome his own indifference to act, and thus suffered humiliation. Now Theodoros witnessed what he had predicted: destruction and scorched earth, tears and wailing. He was doing what he could to address the damage and continued on his way to Goghtn, Nakhichevan, Kogovit, bitterly gazing on the remains of Vardanaberd.

From there he went to Tayk Province with his small group of guards and Tavuskert, the old estate of the Bagratuni princes of Tayk where in those days Lady Hamaspruhi resided alone, the mother of Varaztirots, the wife of the late Smbat, Governor of Armenia and Georgia, whose bravery was renown throughout the East, who was revered by the Persian King for his loyalty, and whose memory Theodoros Rshtuni honored calling him his father and teacher in military arts. His visit there was especially important since Theodoros had good relations with Smbat's son, Aspet Varaztirots, exiled with his family to an island in the Archipelagos by Emperor Heracles.

Chapter 7 – Lady Bagratuni

It was already wintertime. The cold was severe that winter in the highlands of Armenia. The widowed Lady, who had seen much splendor, magnificence and honor during her husband's life and her son's early years, was now withdrawn in the palace of Tavuskert. She reminisced about those times when the king of kings would send them gifts and the delegations would come one after another, messengers with uplifting news of victories would knock at their door, and the triumphant name of the Bagratuni prince echoed through Persia and Armenia. But now the Lady was forgotten and ignored. The former first lady among the Armenians in honor and wealth now sat alone like the desolate winter and counted the days that she had not had word of her beloved oldest son.

Although death and exile brought gloom to that palace, and the Lady was in perpetual mourning, still the number of servants, maids, guards and attendants had not diminished. For while the country's government was in the hands of Sargis, a native of Tayk, he never did anything without consulting the

Bagratuni lady first, because Sargis was among the warriors who had the good fortune to serve under the standard of Governor Smbat and share in the glory and greatness of those days.

One day when the Lady was sitting downcast and alone, they let her know that Prince Sargis had asked to see her accompanied by another young man. Sargis entered, and after respectfully greeting the Lady, introduced Officer Nerses, who had just returned from Byzantium and had a letter from Aspet Varaztirots to the Lady and Theodoros Rshtuni.

The Bagratuni Lady took the letter from her son and after reading it quickly, read it a second and a third time because it was cryptically brief, and turned to the officer,

“You see, my son,” she said, “My child’s letter is very short. I must receive a report from you as to how he wrote it. How did he look, was he well, how is his health, how is the island on which he is exiled, is there any hope that he’ll be released . . .?”

“His health is fine because the island is quite beautiful, with clean air amidst orange and lemon trees; but he is strictly guarded and cannot escape. All his family is well. As for release, it is not impossible. As you know the emperor gave his word that he would be released, but there are enemies in the palace who are doing everything they can to delay the release, as far as I was able to ascertain.”

“Can you tell us who the people are who gave you this information?”

“Yes, princess, General Theodoros Yerizatsi, appears to be one of your son’s friends. He instructed me to go and report on the prince. The emperor is not the man he was. As he grows older, he has become weaker. Empress Martina rules the country, and unfortunately she is not the type of woman who knows how to govern well; rather her entire focus is on securing her son’s place as heir to the throne, so she supports her protégé, putting everything into disarray. “

At this moment, a servant entered and announced that Theodoros Rshtuni had arrived. When the general came in, he greeted the Lady and the others present with great respect, and Nerses took out two letters, one from Aspet and the other from Theodoros Yerizatsi. Rshtuni read them carefully. It was not possible to tell what the content was. The Lady could no longer wait, and asked,

“Can you tell us, Prince, whether those letters give any indication of when my son, Aspet, will return?”

“If only that desire, Princess, which is mine as well as yours, were realized. The return of Aspet to Armenia at this juncture would give us a new lease on life. You here on this end of Armenia have no idea what is happening on the other end. The east is in turmoil after horrible invasions.”

And he began to tell them about what had happened in Nakhichevan, Goghtan, Kogovit. And after recounting everything, he turned to Nerses and said, “So these are the result of the brave exploits of the Byzantines.”

“Please, Prince, do not lump me in with the Byzantines. Even though I am in their service, I have never renounced my Armenian heritage. In my heart and soul, I remain and will remain an Armenian. The fact that I have lived among them, learned their language and sciences is a different matter. I do not see harm in that.”

“If you plan to put that knowledge to use for the benefit of your nation, my God bless you. We do not oppose their knowledge, but we have paid dearly for their mischief in this war. They did something very harmful in the course of their brave exploits, when they stirred up religious matters in Armenia and caused turmoil in every home.

Theodoros said these words with an angry glare and turning to the Bagratuni princess, he said, “At the instigation of the Byzantines, the Armenian nobles ganged up and deposed Catholicos Christopor who was a saint, calling him a loudmouth, sacrilegious, evil man, and we bore the punishment and continue to bear it to this day, with a Catholicos whose cowardliness and ignorance have cost us everything including the Illuminator himself.”

Aspet, my Lady, put that man on the chair, he was exiled, and I remained in Armenia alone, where, if there were but a few people of heart and compassion, we could put this country back on its feet. We face hardships from all sides. The Arabs are a new kind of divine retribution that struck like a storm and left a path of destruction behind them. The conniving and impudent Byzantines were snapped like a reed. The Georgian, Albanians and Syunik forces can barely hold off the barbarian invasions from the north, and the Artsrunis and Andzevanis together are hardly able to handle defense from the east. Mushegh and Hamazasp Mamikonian give vague answers to my requests, and prince Arduk of Mok, notorious for his shamelessness, actually joined in leading the Arab forces.

From outside, we face enemies of plunder, fire, sword, destruction, and from inside, indifference, weakness, oppression and betrayal. . . you do not know where to turn or whom to rely on for help. I say to myself, ‘God’, but God’s representative, the Armenian Catholicos, is, as best I can tell, afraid of the Emperor and even his own people. He abandoned the Holy See and does not venture outside the walls of Karin. When I invite him, he declines on account of age or illness. This is our situation, and I do not see any remedy for it.”

A long and somber silence ensued after these words. Theodoros was in thought, his face bitter. Prince Sargis an old soldier stared straight ahead with a guilty look, and Nerses who had just returned to his homeland was trying to digest what he had just heard, when Lady Hamaspruhi raised her head and said, “Prince, is it really true that the Persian empire has completely collapsed and can do nothing in this situation?”

“What you are thinking of, my Lady, might have been possible in our younger days, when there was a king of kings in Ctesiphon, whose decrees shook the world and there was a Governor Smbat Bagratuni who had the stature of a king; but those days have vanished like a dream.

The grandson of the king of kings Khosrov is probably wandering around like a refugee now, or he is dead and gone in some unknown parts, no one knows for sure. Ctesiphon, that magnificent capital, whose golden palaces you saw with your own eyes, was plundered by the Arabs, who stripped it bare, setting it on fire and turning it into a desert. The countless troops and fearsome Sasanian military prowess turned to dust, driven out and scattered to the four winds.”

“Is it really possible that the Arabs are invincible beings, and that it is not possible to stop them, that we must permit them to trample Armenia and destroy it?”

“If I were of that opinion, I would not be so bitter, but I tested their strength. If Armenia, though trampled and downcast, were to lift its head up now and stand together with one heart and one voice, then upon my life, no trace of the invaders would be left in our land.”

“But those Arabs, general,” said Nerses respectfully, “defeated the huge Byzantine army, not only here in Kogovit, from what I hear, but also delivered an unexpected blow to Syria, Egypt and Persia. How can Armenia withstand the attacks of such an invader? I once met some tough warriors who spoke with horror about their savage fearlessness.

“I do not deny their fearlessness, but I cannot overlook either that just yesterday two thousand troops defeated a force twice their size by the grace of God. If Procopius were the kind of man I’d hoped, not one of those who attacked Kogovit would have left alive, not one. But when ill-will and arrogance combine and take hold in a general’s heart, it is foolhardy to expect victory. What’s to be done? Especially what did Heraclius do while he was sitting on his throne in the capital? Shouldn’t the first defeat have been a wake up call for him? But no, he is not the courageous warrior we once knew that attacked and defeated the Persians. No, he is consumed by unintelligible theological disputes, a sample of which he gave in Karin.

It is no surprise that when an Emperor, or any soldier for that matter, flees from the battlefield, his victories flee along with him. Instead of taking the cross, the wood of life in one hand, and the sword in the other and fighting the infidels, he has taken the holy cross and fled to Constantinople, and betrayed the Holy City of Jerusalem to the hands of the Moslems.

Theodoros’s eyes were again filled with fire as he spoke these words, and when they heard that Jerusalem had fallen, everyone looked in shock at each other. Nerses was completely nonplussed,

“Are you sure that’s confirmed?” he asked, “because when I left Constantinople, there were military strategy meetings in both Europe and Asia Minor, and the emperor himself had gone to Syria.”

“The emperor went to Syria and engaged in theology, while his army fought and lost, and the Arabs took Jerusalem and turned Syria into a sea of blood. This is what the letter of the special messenger from Cesarea reported. The letter you brought from Theodoros Yerizatsi is four months’ old.

“Yes, we ran into unfavorable winds and were delayed in reaching Trebizond.”

The Bagratuni Lady, sitting silent as a statue, took all this in. And when the conversation had finished, only the sound of the cracking fire and the snow storm outside could be heard. Prince Sargis, who had not opened his mouth to this point, got up to bid farewell. Nerses followed suit.

“Prince Sargis,” said the Lady, “we would be delighted if you and your officer would stay with us for dinner.”

Sargis politely accepted the Lady’s invitation, leaving the Lady and Theodoros alone. Hamaspruhi rose. Although she was over seventy and her beauty diminished, she projected a dignity in appearance and bearing. She went to the door, latched it and took out a small key, which she inserted in one part of the wooden wall opening a hidden door.

“Theodoros, my son,” she said, “you see that I care for you, not only like a son, but with high esteem for you. This is a secret door, which only my eldest son Varaztirots knows about. Now I have revealed it to you as well. I opened it before you not only so that you would know it exists, but also so that you would know that the Bagratuni treasury is open before Theodoros Rshtuni as well, and when the national interest requires it, you should amply take and use as much as you need. So come here, and take a look.”

When Theodoros approached, he saw a small room filed with racks of coins, piled on one another. The old lady opened another door in that room, which opened into a larger room and which could truly be called a royal treasury.

Thousands of gold bars, lined up from the floor, fine wooden chests, which no doubt held gems, gold and silver ornaments and vessels, pearl hairpins, and stunning, priceless gold adorned weapons that had been collected and accumulated over centuries dazzled the eyes and mind. Although the Bagratunis had a reputation for frugality in Armenia, Theodoros could never have imagined or believed such wealth if he had not seen it with his own eyes. Then the Lady said, “Without money, things will not go forward, Theodoros, my son. You are the only hope for our nation today. Without flattery, I can truly say that even if my son Aspet were here today I would have more faith in you.

I know too that after God, Armenia can only place its hope in you. If our nation is to perish, let the Bagratunis’ treasure perish with it. Again I repeat, whatever you need for the nation’s welfare, this treasury is open to you. I know it is unnecessary to say that you should spare no resources to bring my son back from exile. Take as much as you need.”

Theodoros after thinking a bit, answered solemnly, “Princess, I have always admired you, as you know; the Lord of the Bagratunis, your husband, our commander, was like a father to me. Not only I but nearly all of the Armenian nobles were his protégés in the art of war. No one could deny his excellence, and if he were still alive now, there is no doubt Armenia would be peaceful and secure. No one would dare disobey him. And you, Lady of the Bagratunis, know that the offer you have made, as you have already made clear, is the expression of his living spirit. When the nation has the need, I will come to you, be sure. For now, you can instruct Sargis to form an elite corps of 1000 men under his command, which I can deploy where needed. This spring it is likely that we will need this elite corps. Who knows what fate has in store for us.”

“But,” said the Lady, “when you visited the ruins and survivors in Goghtn, Nakhichevan and Kogovit, I know you, I’m sure you gave them some assistance, and now you need funds; the land of the Rshtuni’s is far away. So come and take what is required for urgent needs,” and then she closed the doors. And he did as she said.

Calling her treasurer, she gave Theodoros a couple of sacks of gold. And when they were alone again, he began to explain to her his plans for rescuing Armenia and Aspet, deeming her involvement in that great mission essential to its success.

Chapter 8 – Theodoros's Plan

In this world there are big-hearted people, who like Diogenes, or the desert fathers, or certain philosophers disdain wealth and are often critical of the rich and their opulence; but experience shows that there are few people who express the true convictions of their hearts because to gain and maintain just or unjust advantages demands an instinctive adaptability and expedience.

It is worthy of note that often people who go from poverty to wealth not only change their way of life, but the way they speak. Contemptuous money ascends the fitting throne upon which humanity has firmly and immovably placed it. For without money, no great deed can move forward.

The day Sparta decided to become the master of Greece was the day it left behind iron coins and started to use gold. Theodoros was one of those high-minded, noblehearted people who did not worship money, but he well understood its importance for any great undertaking. So he took heart in the Bagratuni Princess's offer to assist with her treasury, and when they all sat down for dinner that evening, the furrows on his brow were smoother and his demeanor brighter and more positive.

Nerses was a prince from Tayk. He was about 40 years-old, handsome, and pleasant. The son of simple commoners, he pursued a military career. He was sharp and studious from a young age and learned Greek along with his mother tongue. He had traveled widely throughout Armenia, and after leaving his home and native land, he was promoted fairly rapidly to military posts in Greece, Antioch, Alexandria and Constantinople, not only for his military prowess, but also for his skill in theological disputation.

In those times who could be a man, educated or ignorant, who was not versed in this vast and incomprehensible field. From the heights of the imperial throne, the Emperor, gold miter in hand, seriously engaged in the investigation of the nature of God. So too the cook, no less seriously, his spoon in hand, mulled over these topics, one ignoring the duties of governance, and the other, the state of the stew.

The lord of the Rshtunis was well-versed in Greek customs, having constant dealings with the Greeks, who since the anarchy and decline of the Persian kingdom, considered themselves the rulers of Armenia. He peppered this officer from Greece with all sorts of questions, searching for intelligent and well-informed answers and was impressed by his sober assessments. So with his usual guarded gravity, he asked,

"I see that you have answered my questions skillfully, but I have one more issue to probe. I sense a sadness about you, may I inquire why?"

"It is the anxious conditions of our times, Prince. It has taken its toll on everyone in some way. And of course I too have not been left unscathed in this world of vanities. I have seen a lot, so it is not surprising that I am not cheerful."

"For a person barely past forty to speak so and to have such a melancholy heart, one must have had many hopes dashed. I do not wish to pry into your secrets, but I have a piece of advice: when confronting any misfortune or fate, if a man is a man, he must apply all his energy and never give up until his last breath. You are still young and have borne arms on the battlefield. How can you talk in this manner before a

veteran general, pointing to Prince Sargis of Tayk, who was governor Smbat's comrade-in-arms, who took part in the horrific battle against the Hephthalites, when 100 men were surrounded by thousands, and not just for one day, or one week, but for months, yet fought this desperate fight?

Change your tone, my brave warrior. Come with me, and see how much work there is to be done and how expansive a field of action opens before us. Let us put downtrodden Armenia back on its feet, this fallen homeland, or let us go down with it in glorious defeat . . . But no, it is quite likely we may go down, but Armenia will still live, it must live, because God cannot allow our innocent people to pay the price for the misdeeds of the nobles and princes; for commoners to bear our burden, to feed us, to serve our whims, indulgences and roguery, those who we contemptuously label serfs and artisans in our impudent haughtiness and on whose long-suffering shoulders we mercilessly and unceasingly pile load upon load. Yes, I do believe, the day will come, a day in the misty ages of the future when our noble names have vanished without a trace from the land of Armenia, when the homeless and serfs forged on the anvil of oppression, will unite and with one heart shake off their shackles and call each other brothers.”

“If these words had not been said by the Lord of Rshtunik, the Governor and Commander of Armenia, and had been spoken by a mere commoner like me, every noble would have labeled me a rabble rouser.”

“Is it surprising that all our princes consider injustice the rule, when the keeper of the Holy See of St. Gregory the Illuminator is undermining its very foundations. But whose fault is that? I will say, as I always have, that Catholicos Christapor, was blameless, but we dishonored him, called his tongue a “sword of swords”; connivers and blasphemers gave false witness and tried to smear the reputation of that man of God. And he as befits a true high priest of God only said, ‘As the successor of Nerses the Great, I will not disgrace the honor of this throne. Rather to maintain its honor and unity I will resign of my own accord. Christ taught us to shake off the dust from our feet where his apostles are rejected, and I will leave my hood and mantle behind. God who loves his flock will grant it the pastor it deserves.’ And God, who could not love this ungrateful people, gave us Catholicos Yezr who split the flock in two. But let us wrap up our conversation and get some rest. Tomorrow we set out. Let's see where God leads us.”

But what did Theodoros have in mind? He was laboring over a plan to reconstitute Armenia. In light of the fall of the Persians, the weakness and laxity of the Byzantines, he was thinking about establishing a league to unite the leaders of the Armenian nobility, together with the Georgians and Albanians, which would have the wherewithal to stand up to the invaders. Rather than discouraging him, the horrific new forces of Arabs inspired him with new energy. If that barbarous people whose name was unknown a few years before had become a threat to the world order out of nothing with their strength and fierce reputation, then their example gave hope that a country could at least organize its own defense.

His sharp memory recalled the days of his youth when a ragged, miserable, half-naked Arab appeared before the king of kings Khosrov in Ctesiphon, the splendid capital of glorious victors, to deliver a letter from the Prophet of God Mohammed to Khosrov, King of the Persians, who ripped it up in contempt barely deeming it worth a glance. This monarch had 960 elephants, 20,000 camels, 6000 steeds, along with 60,000 guards, 12,000 slaves, and 30,000 infantry, waiting to carry out his royal wishes and oversee the security of the splendorous pride of the East.

Above its gates a filigreed blue dome arose above thousands of silver columns, golden balls hanging from the ceiling like an arch of stars, and other lavish decorations, with gold brocaded muslin and silk studded with gems. Who would have thought or predicted that such a ruler, whose ancestors' centuries of greatness and this renowned capital, would be ashes blowing in the wind in less than 20 years, never to recover after the invasions by that very Mohammed's followers and successors.

"If fate is fickle, then on one hand, the high and mighty can fall, and on the other, the low and weak can rise. What prevents us from reviving our downtrodden people by forming a unified and concerted team of five or six leaders, enough to inspire the resolve to stand again?"

Immersed in these thoughts, the next day the Rshtuni general left Tavuskert, and headed north, taking Nerses with him, sending a messenger ahead to convey his request to meet with the Georgian prince. He proposed a meeting in Shamshulde in Gugark province. They accepted his invitation and when they met, he presented his plan, explaining that he had come to promote the common good and that a united front was the only way the three nations, who had common origins, could withstand the Arab onslaught. He described in detail the state of the Byzantine empire and underscored how hope in them was misplaced. Nerses who had just arrived from Greece confirmed this report. The Georgian princes found Rshtuni's presentation persuasive and pledged an oath to form a league for mutual assistance, regardless of the source of the attack, and set a time and place for each to gather their troops and supplies.

Having reached agreement with the Georgians, without regard for the winter weather, Theodoros headed to Siunik and there gathered the nobles of Siunik and Albania. They concluded a similar pact, signed and sealed with an oath. From Vaspurakan, his relative and comrade, the head of the Artsruni family, came and reported his progress, and thus he returned to the Rshtuni capital to recover his strength after the grueling battles and travels. Though resting, he was constantly busy, reinforcing forts, building new fortifications around the island of Aghtamar, deeming the existing water barrier insufficient and building barns and storehouses, locating places with natural defenses and reinforcing them with earthen walls for the protection of the peasants. He went everywhere to check and make sure everything was being done to his specifications. In the capital, a workshop produced weapons and armor. He added ships to the Bznuni Sea fleet and organized military training for all the young men in the Rshtuni realm, both commoners and serfs.

Lady Seta of Rshtuni was her husband's number one collaborator in this work, often seen following up and supervising projects her husband had started. Since Theodoros had to be away so often, he always entrusted governance of the realm to his wife. As for military affairs, he assigned these responsibilities to the old general Atom Shahuni, whose strict nature and harsh treatment were described earlier. However, he was not harsh without cause. He had been toughened by the hardships of bitter experience. He could never be seen smiling except on occasion in the Rshtuni capital, and that solely thanks to the 12- or 13-year-old Rshtuni princess.

Even Theodoros, who was one of the few people Atom held in high esteem, would only receive short, precise answers. His servants had learned to read his wishes by observing his demeanor and to be fair, he only asked for what was absolutely necessary; if his servants were slow he would do it himself. Although over 70 years old, he was rugged and tireless in battle, demanding in fulfilling his duty toward

his forces, for whom he served as an example, but also strict in punishment and just in rewards. Thus, the soldiers, who were extremely afraid of him were fond of him as well. It was more than 20 years since he had left his native province of Sahunik, on the shores of the Sea of Bznuni, where he had built an impregnable castle where he resided, when peace reigned and the sounds of war were silent. He would sit for hours and watch the languid waves against the shore, and no one would dare disturb him. Once in a while he would get up and take a stroll through the villages, avoiding interaction with anyone, old or young. From Sunday to Sunday and on feast days, he would go to the small, humble monastery nearby, St. Mary, Mother of God. He was the first in and the last to leave. He kept only a few old servants for his personal service, and had a group of approximately 50 guards garrisoned at a distance from his house near the walls beyond earshot.

His furniture was simple and ordinary, but clean. If he had one luxury item it was his weapons, armor and his horses, which he honored with a visit from time to time. If he ventured out from his seclusion, it was only for a couple of months to go to the Rshtuni capital. Only from his preparations did his servants understand that he was going on a journey the next day, and when they saw the old general with his travel bags packed, they knew that he had had his fill of solitude.

But this time Theodoros had just arrived at his capital and sent a special messenger to Atom to visit him, so the next day, Atom was on the road. When Theodoros told him that he wanted to organize military training for all the young men in the province and he entrusted this assignment to him, the old general merely answered, “very well,” and went to his room. The other princes and officers asked Theodoros, “Are you satisfied with that response, that Atom will carry it out as he sees fit?” Theodoros answered, “When Atom says, “very well,” no one has the right to ask him for an accounting, for everything he does, he does well.”

And indeed, he sat down, without any fanfare, and explained the plan in detail. How he would conduct the training and in what manner, so as not to require large movements of people, cause hardship or disrupt their domestic work, yet at the same time be effective for military preparedness. Theodoros was very grateful and said, “Good work, Atom *hayrik*.” The wrinkles on the old man’s face relaxed a bit, expressing his satisfaction. “We’ll begin work tomorrow,” he said and got up; after pacing the room back and forth, he asked,

“Does Teni know of my arrival, commander.”

“I’m sorry, *hayrik*,” said Theodoros, “right this minute . . . and turning to his adjutants . . . Men,” he said, “tell Teni that Atom *hayrik* is here and wants to see her.”

Chapter 9 – Teni’s Confession

Everything is born, passes, and reaches
its destined, but indefinite end,
The lonely waves on the sea,
The winds through fleeting leaves,

The light in evening, man in death,
But who cares, my dear,
The length of our days is unknown,
So at least we can hope that sharp time might
lead us along fragrant paths
and calm seas.

Lamartine

Everyone was amazed when they saw this tall, dry, old man, who was the most stoic man in the world, it seemed, incessantly pacing and his eyes riveted to the door waiting for the girl. Every pain, every love, every emotion, it seemed, were nothing to him. But when the charming Rshtuni princess entered the room, she saw five or six honorable noblemen, the youngest of whom was 40. Everyone's eyes were on her, and she, who only expected to find her father and the Atom, blushed slightly, giving her beauty an even greater glow.

Unflustered, she approached the old man and kissed his hand, and he hugging the princess with his two long arms, said, "Teni, Teni, how are you, my daughter, Teni?" and again kissed her. Truly, these two appeared to be polar opposites. The yellowed, parchment-like face, with its snow white hair and beard, with a lanky, bony frame on the one hand, and the delicate face, soft as a rose petal, with bright, almond eyes, jet black eyebrows and hair, snow-white neck and attractive figure.

The old man asked the same question a few times, but the princess modestly whispered thanks and told him that she was fine. And when he understood from her appearance that she wanted to leave, he took her hand and said, "Come, Teni, let's go out into the garden and talk a bit. The winter sun is good for one's health," he said, as they went out.

This stern old soldier and the princess had barely exited, when everyone released a suppressed smile and chuckle, and Theodoros, himself smiling, said,

"This scene, gentlemen, causes you to chuckle, right? Yes, I too would chuckle with you if this did not conceal a message for all parents. Pay attention while I tell you.

I was just about 20 years old when my father Vahram sent me with a small delegation to the porte of the King of Kings with a letter that our great governor had entrusted me with. Aspet read the letter and laughing turned to the person sitting next to him, a 40-year-old warrior in arms saying, 'General Atom, here is a pupil for you to train along with Varaztirots. The Lord of Rshtuni sent me his son to train. Don't grumble, there are no others, just these two will suffice.' It is unnecessary to relate with what military discipline this man trained us for 2 years. First thing he did was send away our attendants. He had us up at the crack of dawn, winter and summer, and without breakfast, for a long work out. But I am telling you all this because that man would also talk, laugh, joke, especially in the heat of battle.

Two years later, he took us to the great Governor, and said, 'Here, general, are the two boys you sent me. I return them as men. I vouch for them,' he said, 'you can rely on them.' And he returned home, where he stayed for two years. Once a year he came to the Porte as the army was marching by. His valor was well known to everyone, including the King of Kings. They wanted so much to promote him, but he refused, because he did not want to be separated from the Governor. Finally, one time he went, and I

came to Rshtunik by order of my father. He was completely devastated for years when they brought the Governor's body from Ctesiphon. I watched Atom at the funeral, but he was a different man, so sad that one could not even approach him to converse. It became impossible to get him beyond monosyllables.

Later I learned from one of the old servants why he was so sad. Atom was married and had children. He decided to marry off his eldest daughter, but the daughter was opposed to the marriage and not daring to tell her father, she confided in her mother. But who could disobey a man like Atom? And could he even imagine such opposition from a woman, and his daughter at that? Until that time, he had treated his family like a military unit that had to obey his commands without question. Thus he issued his menacing order again, and left the house in tears, going off to hunt, his only form of relaxation. When he returned, he learned that his daughter had taken ill.

He thought she was faking it and made that known with his threatening voice. But when he approached his daughter he saw that she was burning up with a fever, delirious, her face covered with a rash, and he shuddered. It was a great misfortune, all five of his children were sick in bed with the same illness and none of them survived. His wife could not endure the grief and died a few months later, blaming their cruel father for their deaths. Even if he were made of iron, the blow to Atom was severe. Every day he would go to their graveside and pray silently that death would take him too, but death did not come.

Atom was in this state of mind when the word of Smbat's death reached him, and he had come to pay his last respects to his commander. Seeing his unbearable grief, Varaztirots and I, his former pupils, did everything we could to lift him out of his despair. All he would commit to was visiting me in Vostan for a few days. We sat here, in this hall, with a few friends, and Atom was distracted, not paying attention to our conversation, when Teni, a toddler, who had just begun to walk, came tumbling in. When everyone started calling 'Teni, Teni', Atom snapped out of his stupor, and Teni, running away from everyone else, went and fell near Atom's knees.

His unfortunate daughter's name was also Teni. Since that day, Atom and Teni have had a special connection, and this inconsolable man, who never laughs, never talks to anyone, always conversed and laughed for her. Because of Teni, he left Shahunik and came to live in Bznunik, and since that time, whenever his country needed him, he was ready to serve, as he did in the most recent war; at his age he amazed everyone, fighting with the vigor of a young man. During this long story, the heads of the old general and the princess could be seen as they strolled the garden, Atom engaged in lively conversation. This tete-a-tete between opposites at different ends of their lives had transformed him. But strangely, words and tears were flowing from Teni's face, but Atom was putting on a happy face and trying to cheer her up.

"He stayed here for a week, *hayrik*," said Teni, "and he was such a sweet young fellow. I cannot tell you how delighted I was from the moment we met. It was as if we had known each other forever. I could talk to him like a brother, but he wasn't a brother either. I love my brother Vart, but Grigor was different. I wanted to be with him every minute, to talk with him, to hear his voice. I saw him in my dreams, and his image did not leave me during waking hours, even when he was not there. And what is most amazing, I told no one about this, not my mother or brother. I waited for you, *hayrik*, to open my heart. It's been a couple of months. But you came too late."

“But Teni, did you talk with that young man alone? Did he express the same feelings toward you?”

“No, the first days we spoke politely with others present. But one day, my mother was busy, and Vart was out hunting for amusement as usual. I was alone with Grigor in the house. He spent most of the day in the library. I also went there once in a while. I was amazed. He had Greek and Persian books all over the place and was reading them. Later he said, “Your library is not in good order, princess. When I have time, if you want, I’ll put them in order.” And I was grateful and with the maids, I helped him organize it. His jokes and conversation were so genuine, pleasant, but deep and unpretentious, that everyone treated him as if he were a grown up. We would go out in the garden together and stroll.

What was amazing was when we were alone, we became tongue-tied and were at a loss for words. When word came of his departure, I became anxious. I could hardly hold back my tears. I ran to my room and wept by myself until I calmed down, but as the day approached, the night before . . .”

Here the girl could not continue further and got choked up, and the old man was nonplussed and sad, holding her hand and taking her to a terrace.

“My dear Teni, it’s all right, cry. They say that tears cool the heart. Cry my dear child, cry. If I could, I would cry too, but God has not given me that grace. But tell me, what happened the last night?”

“The evening before he was to leave there was a beautiful moon, the sea was calm and shone like a mirror, I couldn’t sleep, so I went out into the garden with a fur coat, and said there in somber thought. Then in the gravel I heard a footstep from the other end of the garden and saw that it was Grigor. He was pacing around with his head hanging, stopping to look sometimes at the sky, sometimes at the sea. I wanted to run away to my room, but my knees wouldn’t move, my heart began to pound, and I froze in place. By the time I saw him, he was heading my way without knowing I was there, downcast, immersed in thought. Seeing his sadness and pain, I mustered my courage, and just as he approached and saw me sitting, motionless, silent, he said, ‘Excuse me, princess, for disturbing you,’ pulling back. I invited him to sit next to me on the bench. It was as if he were bashful about sitting next to me. I was flustered and did venture to open my mouth. It was as if I were trembling and could hear my heart fluttering. Then amazingly a calm came over me at that moment and I started to talk with him. He gave one-word answers. I asked about his mother, whom I know he adored and how eager he must be to return to her. ‘Oh,’ he answered, ‘I am very fond of my mother and she is fond of me.’ And at that moment I said, ‘Is it possible to love without being loved?’ ‘Who knows,’ he said, ‘is it possible that there are such unfortunate people who love but do not know that they are loved in turn?’ I said to urge him along, ‘That is impossible.’ He then said, ‘How could it be impossible? I have confessed not only that I love, but that I worship someone, who, if she loves me, I’d give my life for her.’ I answered, ‘It is impossible for a young man like you to love and not be loved back.’ No sense dragging it out further. ‘He and I, we both confessed our love for each other. . .”

Then her speech was interrupted by sobs. The old soldier, pursed his lips; with one hand he took Teni’s hand and the other he placed under his chin, absorbing this conversation in amazement, the language of love, this sentiment that was new for him. It was the first time in his life that anyone had shared such a story with him. His mind had drifted to his own daughter, Teni, who was almost this Teni’s age, when she imagined that she was a martyr for love, then martyred herself. Thus, when the story was overtaken by sobs, he said,

“Teni, my dear Teni, in the end what happened. You are keeping something from me, you must know that I live in this wretched world solely for you; through you alone will God forgive me my sins, and I do believe that the day my soul will be taken is the day that I see you happy, which will be the sign that I have been forgiven. So do not cry, tell me everything openly; if there was some indiscretion, do not hold back from me, continue.”

“What indiscretion, *hayrik*, we spent the night talking with each other, saying that we would not be another’s even if it meant death. We spoke about our future happiness, he promised that he would go to his mother and tell her about our love and ask for my hand in marriage.”

“That’s all, that’s all?” said the old man.

“Yes, the only thing more is that the next morning he bid my mother and me farewell and departed.”

The princess again wiped her eyes. And the old man said, disconcerted,

“But, Teni, what is there to be sad about here?” he said, “That boy is Grigor, I think I have seen him. He is David Mamikonian’s son, you said, is that right?”

“Yes, *hayrik*.”

“Well, I have seen him when he was still a beardless lad, a good fighter, he was with Kamsarakan. There is no insurmountable problem. Part of Bagrevand and Eraskhadzor are theirs. The whole family live in Vardanaberd. It is a beautiful castle.”

“But, *hayrik*, the Arabs burned down Vardanaberd and Grigor is dead.”

“My daughter, what do you mean. Grigor was with us during the battle. He is alive and well. After that there were no further battles. You are crying for no reason, my Teni. I’ll find out everything quickly. I’ll send someone to Kogovit. Just calm down.”

“But, *hayrik*, if Grigor is dead, I will enter a convent . . .”

“Do not say such foolishness, my dear Teni, Grigor cannot possibly be dead, and even if he is, there are many Grigors in this world, but there is just one Teni. She must live well and be happy.”

“No, *hayrik*, if he is gone, there is no happiness for me, the world is dark for me. . .”

“Teni, Teni, do not cry, and do not say such things. Look, even at my age I can have a change of heart. You are still a child. I’ll inquire and let you know what I find out about Grigor . . . You stay calm. Just like that.”

After saying these words, the old soldier tried to soften his rough tone, and patted her tender face with his cold, dry, long and bony fingers. But he also saw that the poor girl was exhausted from that long teary account, and not noticing that it was cold out, she began to shiver and tremble, because it was still winter and the warmth of the spring sun was a far off. So he urged her to go back inside and warm up. The Rshtuni princess wiped her eyes and acted as if nothing had happened. She left the terrace and quickly entered the small door and went up the narrow stairs and into the powder room upstairs to hide her sadness from everyone. She had only been able to disclose this to Atom *hayrik*.

And the old man with an impenetrable look on his face, natural for him, and his sad mood known to all, returned inside and sat down where Khachian Araveghian, Theodoros Vahevuni, Shabuh Amatuni, Khoten Khorkhoruni, Gagik Kajperuni, Varaz Nerseh Ervanduni and several other generals were talking with the Governor. Naturally their discussion revolved around Armenia. The conversation dragged on as each expressed his opinion, and as always in such company, there are people whose only object was to gain favor, like the Khorkhoruni prince, who suddenly interrupted what he was saying to address Atom, “General,” he said, “you never express your opinion. Everyone wants to know what you think, especially since you have so many years’ experience.”

“My opinion,” said the old man, without turning his head to look at the Khorkhoruni prince, “is with this man, the Governor and commander of Armenia.”

And suddenly lifting his eyes and looking at everyone, he read a kind of ridicule on certain faces, so he raised his voice and said, “Not that way, Armenian princes, no, we have had a Governor and General, Smbat Bagratuni. He too convened councils, but we spoke little and did much work. And we were doing only what he ordered us to do. And everything he undertook proceeded in an orderly manner to a successful conclusion. We called him “man of many victories” and the king of kings considered him one of the supporting columns of his throne, as indeed he was. After all, shortly after Smbat’s death, the throne fell, and the crown too. Yes, that was the man who would tell us that all our successes and victories were the result of your united front and military discipline and your obedience to your general. My hair turned white on the fields of battle and never once have I said, or has it even crossed my mind, to question why I am taking orders from those who are young enough to be my children. Rather I considered it my sacred duty to carry out the orders given to me even at the risk to my life. Consider my experience, my lads, princes, do not laugh at my white hair and beard, and my long-suffering grief. But follow my example. Even at this advanced age I prefer to take orders than to give them.”

Those who laughed covered their mouths, and the Governor himself rose, and approached the old man, and gave his hand a firm embrace, and calling the old man his “tutor” and “master” he lifted his spirits. And Theodoros Vahevuni, who was a humble and virtuous man, said, “I am very glad that my faux-pas was the occasion for such a long declamation, because who can remember the last time that Atom gave such a long and valuable speech?”

But the old general did not even hear these words. He had already headed to the door and taking aside one of his guards, he ordered him to go to Bagrevand and see with his own eyes the state of Vardanaberd, inquire about David Mamikonian’s family, and quickly return. And he let Teni know that he had followed up as promised.

Chapter 10 – Lady Seta of Rshtunik

In this one hall in the capital of Rshtuni, Theodoros together with some of the princes deliberated how to reinforce and build bulwarks for the defense of the county. Given Armenia’s terrain, with its many

ravines and passes, a relatively small force of well-positioned units could hold off a much larger invading force for a very long time. Battles in narrow ravines could bring victory against much larger forces.

Theodoros had ascended to the governorship only a couple of years ago, but his reputation and honor as a Commander of the Armenians stretched back 10-15 years. Thus, during the governorships of Varaztirots Bagratuni and Davit Saharuhi he was not only a general, but his personal excellence, his intellect and military prowess gave him great influence throughout the country, to such an extent that Theodoros's name often carried more weight than the governors', whom people barely recognized. During the summer he would often go to Ayrarat and Upper Hayk, where Teodoropolis and Dvin were located, and during the winter when work was slow, he would return to capital to rest, although by nature he was always busy with something.

The Rshtuni princess Seta ruled the country like a man in the prince's absence, which was quite often. The Rshtuni capital was the perfect image of a royal palace, on a promontory near the sea overlooking the surrounding towns, walled and protected by fortification, the latest of which was on the island of Aghtamar. The great hall looked out at the sea. Winters, Theodoros would ensconce himself there and rule all Armenia.

Summers, Seta would hold court there ruling Rshtunik and Vaspurakan, couriers coming and going, mounted patrols passing before her window, all levels of guests, princes, and high-level clergy visited and that woman, who seemed to hibernate in the winter and allow the prince to rule the country, supervised everything. Theodoros referred all affairs and petitions to her. Thus the inhabitants of Rshtunik knew whom they needed to petition, and they turned the first floor of the maids quarters into a guest and reception room for these delegations, including several rooms set aside for Atom Shahuni, where he managed the military affairs of the province.

It was well known that the princess was an intelligent and perceptive woman. She engaged experienced people to deal judicial and administrative matters, whose advice and counsel she followed, to everyone's satisfaction. The most important figure was her treasurer, the steward of the house, Husik Artametssi, who was an exception.

This Husik, because of his frugality, had no friends in Capital or in all of Rshtuni, for that matter, including the princess, whom he bickered with nearly every day. Husik had an amazing personality, patient, charming, clever, and loyal. When arguments became heated, he would patiently explain his position without getting upset until eventually the other side had no choice but to give in. So the grumbling and complaints about him were endless. The military contingent was particularly disgruntled, and would insult and even threaten him on occasion.

There was only one person, and that was not Theodoros, whose wishes he carried out quickly and without delay, and whatever amount he asked for, he would pay and dispatch on the spot, and that was Ashot Shahuni. The old general was once overheard telling the prince and princess that "this Husik better watch out. I will tolerate his games, but hasn't he ever considered that one day I might hang him on the spot, no questions asked." And when they told the steward about this threat, he thought a bit, and then sniggered under his breath, and then went to the old general and smoothed everything out. Thereafter, whenever they brought a request from Atom, he would expedite it, saying, "Show me another person in the province of Rshtunik who has as much integrity, and I'll give you the entire

treasury.” And then he would chuckle, “What need does that old man have of gold anyway. He is golden already. If you don’t believe me, just look at his face,” referring to Atom’s golden complexion.

And when Theodoros grew tired of complaints about Husik and was thinking about removing him from his position, Seta would always protest, because she knew well that old Husik was a most loyal servant and an excellent administrator. His frugality was not for his own enrichment, nor did he love gold for its own sake, unlocking the treasury, checking his accounts, always making sure that income exceeded expenditures, that was his pride and joy and at that time he would whisper to himself, “Let the Rshtunis see what kind of man Artametsi Husik is and how he performs as head of the treasury.”

And he was once again stunned by this pronouncement, when Atom Shahuni with a stern look entered like a black cloud. His eyes had sunk deeper than usual and the wrinkles on his face more yellow than usual, making him look yet more severe. Husik naturally did not know anything about Teni’s talk or about the impact of the callow princes’ sarcastic snickers in the hall below on the old man. So when he saw the old man so angry, without letting on and with a pleasant and reflexive smile, he stood up and said,

“What is your command, general?”

“You have the census of the entire province of Rshtunik, don’t you, Husik,” the old general shouted with a thunderous voice.

“Yes, prince.”

“Good, this night make a copy and tomorrow morning have it delivered to me.”

“But, general . . .”

“But, . . . what do you mean, but . . . there are no ifs or buts about it. I will knock your head off otherwise.”

“Very well, very well,” said Husik in a meek and ingratiating tone, with his usual smile.

“What,” said the old man exasperated, “are you making fun of me, do you dare to laugh at me . . .?”

“What do you mean, prince,” answered Husik, opening his eyes, pulling back and trying to get away from him, seeing that the old man was getting more and more worked up as he came closer, “who would even think of laughing at such a patriotic, accomplished general as you. If such a brat exists in Armenia, such a man could not be found in Vaspurakan. The people would not let him live, starting from the prince. Is it possible that everyone does not know you? . . . Your wish will be carried out, be assured.”

The old man released his hand from his sword and went out without saying a word. And Husik watched as the door closed behind him, and said to himself,

“What hell spewed forth this furious man?” and he gathered his ledgers disgruntled, “No one knew when this man showed up. This man is like divine retribution to me. It was possible to get through to everyone, laughing at one in the face, flattering another, saying yes, to the third, then doing it your way. But with this beast, there’s no talking. If you are pleasant, he gets furious. If you are disagreeable, he pulls out his sword. If you don’t follow his wishes, he says he’ll hang you. He’s a curse, a curse.

After all, soldiers are covered with blood. How do they differ from rogues? They are legal rogues, who have no respect for people or money. The best of them, the wisest is the prince, who knows his reading, writing and arithmetic, and this man could not have considered removing me from my position without considering that he could not find another Husik in all Vaspurakan. And then there is this soldier, and just because he has a couple of bags of money who knows from where, probably from plunder, he has put it in his mind to get rid of Husik . . . since he has found another source of money.

Fortunately, the princess, although she was in some ways weaker, but someways smarter than her husband, was well aware that the Rshtuni household could not function without Husik, so she stopped him as he confided. . . Sometimes I think, since I have feelings too, perhaps to teach them a lesson, I should quit. Yes, quit, and sit at home and enjoy retirement in Artamet. I would pursue my leisure, but when I think of leaving behind the sacks of thousands of coins I have saved through my frugality over the years so that others can foolishly, wastefully, throw them around here and there, steal, be stolen from, I can't bring myself to leave.

Neither the prince nor the princess understand this. They just do not get it. The Gospel says, "Don't throw pearls before swine." There is great wisdom in these words. And I know well that I should not leave those coins behind after all these years' toil, which are more valuable than pearls. They hold up over time, they do not get yellow from fear, they do not rust, they are impervious to fire. Fortunately, these Rshtunis do not know this, and I am not about to tell them."

Husik was lost in these thoughts when a servant came and said the princess wanted to see him. The chest, iron door, wooden door, each in turn, he locked with care, and headed to the princess's chambers.

The Rshtuni princess was no ordinary woman. She was barely 40 years old, but looked much younger. She was not a blinding, radiant beauty, but had the perfection of one of the great master's portraits, the more you looked, the more it caught your eye and drew you in. She had an elegant figure, a well-balanced face, commanding eyes and eyebrows, and a personality that mixed strictness with sweetness, which were attractive and persuasive, a smile, which could express either pleasure or disdain, her graceful movements and gait, her delicate hands and feet, and above all her physical attributes, the sharp mind combined with her fine taste made her the object of admiration and attention for men among women.

On top of this she was the Lady of the Rshtuni family, and everyone knew that although she did not rule, she had great influence on account of her intellect and her complete reliability. The pearl adorned hair pin upon her muslin kerchief, a lock of hair fell on her cheeks, a silk scarf around her neck, gold brocade slippers on her feet, Lady Rshtuni looked like a queen on her throne. Confident in her value and in Theodoros's love, she surrounded herself with lovely maids. Because of her natural generosity, she was beloved by all, and she would throw such a fit at frugality, which she detested, that she came down hard on poor Husik, although he took no offense at her frowns.

Thus, the tired princess was relaxing on her purple chair when Husik entered and greeted her humbly and asked for her orders. Seta, after repeating her instructions on how to prepare dinner for her princely guests so that the steward would not cut corners, saw Husik getting ready to leave, she said,

“I forgot to tell you that the prince has ordered us to give General Atom as much money as he asks for. You know his character. It is best to try to keep him happy.”

Husik’s face became gloomy for a moment, then upon reflection, he put on a happy expression and said,

“Who could possibly oppose Atom? You are the lords, and if you wish I can give him the keys to the treasury.”

“It seems, Husik, that you have had an argument with him to judge by your face and manner,” said the princess, laughing and casting a delicate glance.

“What argument? I just don’t get along with people, princess, let alone Atom. But to tell the truth, I would be glad not to see his kind face or hear his sweet voice or see him again for years or better yet for the rest of my life, and if it were possible not to meet him in the next life as well, which is quite probable.”

“If you want to avoid meeting him again, it seems that you’ll need to give up on heaven as well.”

“On the contrary, those who do not want to meet Atom Shahuni must make a special effort to go to heaven, because it is clear his place will not be in heaven.”

“Poor Atom, why do you really have such a low opinion of him?”

“Low opinion? Never. But in my conception, heaven is different from a battlefield where people kill, destroy, curse, set fires; a place where people are calm, loving, and peaceful.”

“Of course, those who live frugally go there as well,” said the princess with a chuckle, and everyone began to laugh, but Husik who maintained his usual smile, said,

“Yes, princess, frugality is necessary everywhere, and in heaven it is essential,” he answered, “because there is no eating or drinking or building or dressing up or war.”

“If everyone subscribed to your philosophy, the world would be heaven today and a desert tomorrow.”

“I do not say that people should not eat, be clothed or have shelter, but they should avoid unnecessary expenses that often bring them financial distress. Look at the Kamsarakans, for example, who are disappearing day by day. Just yesterday they sold part of Shirak to Lady Bagratuni. But of course in a few years the Bagratunis will sell it as well. They are known to surpass all Armenians in their greed. Not in their courage, of course, because where else can one find the likes of Atom Shahuni? Glory to our Creator. His hand is always on his sword, there's not a scar on his body even the size of a coin, and he's smart and brave.

At this point, Theodoros entered and upon hearing the names Kamsarakan, Shirak and Bagratuni, he stopped without looking, passed in front of Husik and said, “Where did you hear that Lady Bagratuni has purchased part of Shriak? I was in those parts barely three months ago and heard nothing. I was a guest of the Kamasarakans in Shirakavan, but did not notice anything.”

“If Husik had been with you,” said the princess laughing, “you would have seen lots of signs. . . “ and suddenly her demeanor turned gloomy as she looked around, “but while we are talking about the

Kamsarakans, there are rumors that Byuregh could not be saved from the destruction of Vardanaberd. Some say she was taken captive with her family. Others that she was slaughtered. Do you have any information, my prince?"

"Unfortunately, I do," answered Theodoros bitterly, "It would be less painful had I not spent the night as a guest there and seen that angelic woman."

"So it is true that she died?" said Seta, standing up and shaking.

"They found her body and that of her daughter in the lake."

"Oh, poor Byuregh, what misfortune for a mother," said Seta, who started to cry, covering her face with both hands.

"I knew that this news would cause you great grief, so I remained silent until now."

"But was it those barbarian invaders?"

"In order to protect her young daughter from them, she threw herself and her daughter into the lake and they drowned."

"And her son, Grigor, who was our guest, what happened to him."

"Grigor and his uncle were with us. He fought with valor beyond his age. When we reached Goghtn, I told him to go, and they went, since they were worried sick about Byuregh, and though I inquired, there was no news."

Seta cried softly, while Theodoros paced back and forth with a frown; Husik became pensive, and the servants and maids, like their mistress, mourned.

But a few moments later, Seta collected herself, wiped her tears and said to the prince,

"That virtuous, angelic woman, was she given a proper burial, at least?"

"The funeral was conducted by the lawful Catholicos of the Armenians, Christapor himself, at my request" said Theodoros, "and he promised to place a proper tombstone at the grave, for which I gave him the necessary funds."

The following two days as usual Theodoros delved into work. Seta, though often thinking of her friend, was busy with the cares of the province and her large household. Poor Teni was in melancholy for months; though on her feet, she withered away to the great distress of her parents. As for Atom, without telling anyone, during breaks from his military trainings, he would come back several times a day to console Teni, cursing the memory of all the Mamikonians who had disappeared without trace, especially the heir to Kogovit province. For Grigor's paternal uncles, Mushegh and Hamazasp, as heirs, without searching or investigating for long, spread the news of Grigor's death and with some satisfaction took over Kogovit.

Chapter 11 - Zaven finds Arpeni in Constantinople

It took more than two years for the downtrodden people of those ransacked provinces to begin to get back on their feet. Artisans began to build subterranean houses, colloquially and somewhat disparagingly called “dens”, failing to take into account that in a country like Armenia, without border security, where disorder and lawlessness ruled and bands on horseback, refugees and outlaws roved since the times of Xenophon, no other kind of home was practical.

Theodoros was always at work, traveling around the country, encouraging the people and protecting them, but was unsuccessful in convincing regional leaders to form a league for mutual defense. No one openly opposed it, but there was silent opposition which was not mere indifference. Many nobles feared Theodoros more than foreign powers. His activities, his military prowess, his virtue and good counsel, his reputation abroad and his strict righteousness were reason enough for them to reject his proposals. Distant lands such as Georgia, Albania, Siunik united, but those close-by, the Andzevatsis, Artsrunis, Mamikonians, Mokatsis looked askance at these proposals. Theodoros was too sharp-witted not to understand this; thus he made every effort to bring Aspet Varaztirots back from exile.

He corresponded with his friend constantly. Hardly had a matter, palace squabble, or general’s assignment been squared away when something else went wrong. And indeed, if one of the Bagratuni nobles supporting Theodoros were to appear on the scene, then they could not resist the league.

At this time, Grigor and Suren were in chains near Damascus suffering insult and demeaning servitude. They witnessed scores of people renouncing their faith before their eyes; unable to find any other means to escape the torments of slavery, they betrayed themselves into another kind of banishment and servitude, they renounced their homeland along with renouncing their faith and cut off all their former ties, took Arab wives or went into the service of Arab men.

During this period, Zaven embarked on an arduous search for Arpeni stopping in every town between Karin and Trebizond, eventually arriving in Constantinople. In the meantime, he did all kinds of work to make a living, farming, servant, construction, always focused on one thing, the lost child. It weighed heavily on him. Every time he saw a child running he thought it might be Arpeni. Anytime he saw a noble or soldier or civil official, he thought it might be Tuma. Based on the information he had gathered in Karin, he was convinced that Tuma was the culprit, but to no avail. With Armenian persistence, he was convinced that one day he would definitely find the lost child as he searched each and every neighborhood of the sea of humanity in the capital.

Thus, the Kaghzvan citizen-soldier wandered the streets of Byzantium, his peasant clothes concealing his honest heart and the mental declaration of war on a high-ranking courtier who thought he had gotten away with a wicked kidnapping. Four long years passed this way. But he saw neither Tuma nor Arpeni. He was downcast, abandoned, his strength flagging, when he said to himself, ‘My God, is it possible that your Gospel deceives us? Before your altar I heard a voice say, ‘This is my son, who was lost and is now found,’ and a saintly mother, from her grave, repeated your words, ‘Ask and it will be given unto you.’ For four years I have been a vagabond looking for an orphan, an angel, but I cannot find her. My God, remember your righteousness and have mercy on me and upon that orphaned angel.’

Poor Zaven prayed thus every morning, a man of iron lying on his cot and weeping in his miserable room. Later wiping his tears he went outside and saw a noisy crowd of people, agitated with fear and hope, as they discussed the news that the emperor had died. They were heading to Hagia Sophia and the palace. Zaven had seen Heraclius in person and had fought under his victorious banner. He could not make sense or believe the feebleness, closer to wickedness, of the emperor's later years. In amazement, he stared at the people and their indifference toward his death and the excitement surrounding his successor.

Some favored his eldest son Constantine III, others supported the Empress and her younger son Heraklonas (later Heraclius II). Thus, Zaven, who had decided to head back to his native land, left his pack in the room, and started to follow the motley crowd, with its roaring waves, cheering in turn for Constantine and Heraklonas. Zaven looked around and took measure as the frenzied mob became larger and more rowdy as it progressed and armed groups joined in. He kept his hand on his belt ready to draw his sword while following the people as they entered the cathedral in which the Emperor's golden casket had been brought that night and placed in the center of the church on a silver dais.

In order to get one last glimpse of the brave leader under whose banner he had fought in Ninevah, he pushed through the crowd with his strong arms until he reached the backs of the guards surrounding the casket. There he saw the deceased in purple, a jeweled crown upon his head. The man whom he had viewed as a lion on the battlefield now filled him with revulsion. He wanted to pull back, but large groups of palace courtiers were pushing forward toward the casket. There he saw Empress Martina and her son Heraclonas as well as the crown prince Constantine, preparing to ascend the throne.

Then he heard the church chants and the patriarch entering with his entourage. Zaven, who was a solemn man, surveyed the splendor of the event and scrutinized everyone's face. He saw Marine, who had her eyes fixed like poisonous arrows on her stepson Constantine. He saw Constantine, prematurely aged, his eyes dull and his strength waning. Then he saw Heraclonas, a frivolous youth among the maids, away from the view of his father's corpse. There were groups of courtiers and senators, as well as other notables from their appearance, who assumed an air of piety listening to the sacred music, while in fact they had other more pressing issues in mind.

While observing all this, Zaven's eye fell upon Tuma standing among his retinue near the crown prince. It was as if Zaven had gained a new life, new hope and new strength. Turning his eyes upward toward the magnificent dome, he said, "Glory to you, God, glory to you." And it was as if he had Arpeni in his arms and he was galloping through Armenia on his steed. His heart pounded with joy as his eyes were fixed on Tuma's every movement and gesture so as not to lose track of him.

But after this initial emotional response passed, he started thinking that after the ceremony Tuma would disappear with the mass of courtiers, and how would he find him? He had to get information about that man's whereabouts immediately, so he started to look around. He saw in the distance a frivolous, talkative man, constantly viewing the courtiers and talking to the people beside him. So he pushed his way toward that man. Standing before him, Zaven acted as if he was paying great attention to every word the man said and then asked some questions about various people on the dais, until he reached Tuma.

The blabbermouth started to recount Tuma's entire genealogy. He said that he was from Thrace and had gone to war in Armenia and returned with Procopius in disgrace. As was the practice of the time, he was then dispatched with the crown prince to Syria and again returned in disgrace. Only a few weeks ago he had returned to Constantinople and had ingratiated himself to the crown prince with his servile personality, but such ne'er-do-wells wouldn't last long, since the Empress was very shrewd and meant to seat her son, Heraclonas, on the imperial throne. Zaven listened to all this with great patience and then asked where Tuma resided and found out that it was on the Propontis, a seaside palace, where he lived with his sister, Philagrius, the crown prince's wife. Thanks to her being Constantine's consort, Tuma received the rank of general.

Upon hearing this, the old man would have jumped with joy like a young man if he were not embarrassed and there had been room to move in the crowd. As soon as the ceremony was over, he was so excited he tried to get out of the church as fast as he could and pushing his way through the crowd returned to his room, gathered his meager belongings and left this central district for the seashore.

Seeing eight or ten palatial houses, he was certain that he would find Arpeni, so he sat on the shore on the wooden pier and watched the waves on the beautiful water. That seaside district was quiet, especially during the day because there were few regular residents and no people on the streets. The crowds were all in the center, further up. A couple of well-dressed servants were talking near the palaces, or rather arguing, because they like their masters were either supporting Constantine or Heraclonas, and people of every station were as taken with politics as they were with theology.

Zaven listened attentively to the conversation in a fairly loud voices between the two servants standing and arguing between two gates.

"What advantage does Constantine have," said one to the other, "from being dominated by a woman, which you consider harmful? At the same time, supposedly during Heraclius's reign this Constantine lost both Jerusalem and Antioch before his eyes, and today Egypt is a complete loss as well because Alexandria has fallen to the Arabs. And this Constantine of yours, even though an imperial general, was unable to do anything; instead he fled and came back. You like the rest of his supporters cover this up. But is it possible to conceal such a fiasco? Tomorrow how will you feed the hungry population of this city, whose grain supply came from Egypt?"

If Constantine who exhibited such bravery in battle could not stand up to the barbarous Arabs and returned defeated, how do you expect a weak person to hold up against Martina's heavy hand, she being imperious by nature? Heraclonas is not yet a man, but a frivolous youth, a pliable tool in his mother's hand."

"Well, you fool, who are you to badmouth women? If you did not kow-tow before that woman, where would you be now? How quickly you have forgotten your haystack, you stable keeper's servant, and now you conveniently want to forget how you tremble at the least mention of your Lady and serve at her beck and call. How can you forget that it is thanks to her beauty that Philagrius, her husband, and Tuma her brother got where they have?"

When Zaven heard Tuma's name, he opened his eyes wide, thinking Arpeni must be in this house he was looking at. So he was particularly careful not to miss a word. He tried to calm the pounding of his heart.

Then the conversation suddenly ended with the sound of galloping horse, and a royal servant jumped headlong off the horse, yelling “Good news, long live Emperor Constantine.”

Zaven, who had moved closer to the gate, could see the anteroom inside where the servants and maids were jubilantly shouting, “Good news! Good news!” through the house, running up the stairs to open the window and see the bearer of tidings. And there a young woman appeared in all her beauty, like Aphrodite, whose face was glowing with joy and whose hand extended a fat purse to the courier.

At that moment in the neighboring palace, where a supporter of Empress Martina resided, the doors closed and the curtains were drawn. And since Zaven could take no satisfaction from what he observed, he returned to the seashore, sat on the pier and thought about how his dear Arpeni must be inside that palace, and how she must be subjected to a bad upbringing in that seductive woman’s clutches.

He stood still with these thoughts and inner turmoil, gazing at the waves of the sea for a long time when he heard the sound of oars and caught sight of a boat with a white painted eagle on its bow and golden ornaments coming to shore. Seven pairs of robust young men were rowing. In the depth of the boat was a beautiful woman dressed in muslin and purple, sitting on gold brocade cushions. She was surrounded by six ten- to twelve-year-old girls, exquisitely dressed, and behind her upon a pedestal stood an immaculately dressed servant whose dyed eyes danced with joy, holding an umbrella of peacock feathers above the Lady's head. This new Cleopatra was the woman whom he had seen a little earlier going to the palace. So Zaven fixed his eyes on her and all but threw himself on the boat.

For in those eyes, he recognized Arpeni’s inimitable eyes. He sighed and then got a hold of himself. How much she had grown up in four years. He wanted to stand up but his feet would not move. The boat glided by in a wake of white foam and left a ridge on the surface of the sea which disappeared in a few moments. The old man fell to his knees and prayed, “Glory to you, my God. Glory to you who granted me this much. And will of course grant my angel’s freedom as well. You will not pardon the fact that this innocent flower of the Mamikonian family has been tarnished by those filthy hands, and may you grant that this poor Zaven will take Arpeni to kneel at her sainted mother’s grave and entrust her to her brother’s care.”

After enduring these mixed emotions, the noble hearted soldier got up and stood there, thinking up a thousand different plans to liberate her from this calamity, when night came and he went to his meager lodgings with the comfort of knowing that his Arpeni was close by.

Chapter 12 – Zaven meets Arpeni

When he left his humble dwelling the next day, Zaven stood staring at the palace, dumbfounded that his Arpeni was there inside, so close yet beyond reach. Although it was morning and still quite early, he saw the august delegations, horses and carriages crisscrossing the harbor square right up to the gates of the house where two windows were open. If he had not overheard the conversation between the two servants the day before, the old soldier would have taken that palace for the emperor’s, but it was now clear to him that since this was the residence of the emperor Constantine’s consort, the supplicants were

gathering to seek her intercession. But what distressed Zaven was the military guard in front of the residence.

In any event, he had to complete his mission, so he went back to his room, put on clean clothes, and began to mingle with the carriage keepers, stablemen and porters, paying close attention to their conversations. At that moment, an old general with a group of attendants arrived and entered. When the stableman brought out the horse, he heard the servants speaking Armenian, which excited him. In the past four years he had run into Armenians from time to time, but had rarely heard them speaking Armenian, so he paid attention keeping his delight to himself.

These were the servants of Theodoros of Yerizatsi, the Armenian general, who loyally served Heraclius and who had no desire to violate the inheritance rights of the legal heir, the eldest son, Constantine. Thus, in the Senate, he did all he could to elevate Constantine to the throne, and he was visiting Philagrius, a member of the royal family who was imperial treasurer.

Zaven then saw the situation clearly. His enemy, who kidnapped his Arpeni, was very powerful and fighting him directly was beyond his capacity. But to up and leave, after God granted him the gift of seeing this lost child, was out of the question. So he said to himself,

“I must be patient and wait. These wicked people will not have their way for much longer. In the meantime, I must see the girl, talk with her. Unexpectedly she might not want to leave, so then what will I do? If I run into that kind of situation, I must be ready to rescue her from that depraved palace against her will. If our Lady were alive and said, ‘Zaven, go, find my child and bring her to me,’ what would I do? Would I think like a child? No, rather if necessary, sword in hand, I would extract her from this mess . . . God made me a witness to that sainted lady’s death and an instrument of this child’s salvation so that this child, Arpeni, would be heir and successor to her virtue. If I see her and speak with her and she wants to come with me willingly, that’s fine; and if not, then I will have to rescue her by force if need be.”

With these thoughts, he hung around the neighborhood doing menial tasks helping Philagrius’s servants for free. And in less than a month, Zaven became a household name among the palace servants. Whenever they needed help to pick up a package or anything heavy, or if they needed extra help, they would look for Zaven and Zaven would gladly lend a hand. Even if they gave him nothing for it he did not complain, and when they did give him something, he put it directly into his pocket without even looking. He never showed dissatisfaction or complained.

Thus everyone was pleased with him, since their first priority was embezzlement. Taking note of Zaven’s disinterest in money, the steward, who could be considered the number one thief in the palace, invited Zaven to be night watchman and offered a small hut at one end of the garden near the shore. That was the perfect proposal to the old man who quickly moved his meager belongings from his shabby lodgings to the hut.

Now he could see Arpeni and would have a chance to talk with her alone if the opportunity arose and was not delayed. Early one beautiful November morning he saw the garden gate open, and the Mamikonian princess going out without looking at the garden, headed straight for the seashore. Zaven watched her from a small window, taking note not only of her appearance but of her every single

gesture. Her jet-black eyes were still extraordinarily beautiful. Her long eyelashes were like a natural veil over her eyes and gave an indescribable sweetness to her look. The sun cast its faint rays from Christobolis toward the European shore. The sea was as calm as a lake. Arpeni sat looking at that beautiful view. Zaven saw that the girl's eyes were full of tears and in her loneliness she shed tears like that of a grown person lost in her thoughts. Those tears did not trouble the old man, but filled him with hope. So he set out from his hut with a stout heart and began to approach the shore.

"Do you recognize me, Arpeni?" he asked.

A long silence ensued. The girl looked at the motionless old man's face.

It was as if she was stunned trying to draw from her memory not only this person's face but the language she had not heard or spoken for four long years. Then a plaintive smile appeared on her face and she said, word-by-word,

"Zaven *hayrik*, is that you?" in her sweet voice.

In these five words, the way they were pronounced, their tone and the lack of expression, contained something inexplicable that shook the old man's heart and filled his eyes with tears. All of this conveyed that the girl understood that she was an orphan, a refugee and a captive in enemy hands; she was defenseless and without hope of rescue, and she understood all this even though she was but twelve years old. So the old man approached.

"My sweet Arpeni, how you have grown up. How pretty you are."

Again there was no answer. The same look. As if the child were searching for something. She was searching for her language. The words were jumbled in her memory, and finally she turned and said, "Zaven *hayrik*" and the rest in Greek.

"How long have I been here, and where were you? I have no one. Everyone has a mother, father, brother, sister. I have no one, but I remember that I used to. I think of my mother as I was lying near her bed. She loved me, she kissed me, near us was our small sea. I remember all that when I am alone. We are barbarians. We should remember such things. That's what everyone says to me, but these things always come to my mind. I loved my childhood, the mountains, the flowers. There no one would get angry at me. Everyone was kind to me. Everyone loved me.

"Don't they like you here, Arpeni?"

"No, I'm not Arpeni here anymore. I'm Zoe. A new man came recently. He's my mistress's brother. He likes me. But I am afraid of that man. I pull away from him. He calls me his little barbarian, when he puts me on his lap. When he kisses me, I shudder, I want to run away. While the others do not like me, I do not want that man to like me."

"But we love you, Arpeni. Do you want to come back to us, we will go to the mountains, to the flowers, which you said you loved."

"Is it possible to go back, to go there? Everything is destroyed there, they say. The barbarians destroyed everything, burned everything. They killed everyone."

“Barbarians want to destroy everything, but we build, with God’s help, and we will not be destroyed. As you can see, I’m here, protected by God, so that I can come and free you and take you back to your mother’s house. Don’t you remember me, Arpeni?”

“I do remember you. You took me on a horse, but I never want to sit on a horse now. I get sick when I ride horses.”

“My poor Arpeni, that brute scared the wits out of you. Now tell me, don’t you want to go to your brothers, your relatives, your home, where they love you, and to be the lady of the house?”

“Of course, why wouldn’t I,” said the child, opening her eyes wide, “but it is possible to go? Tell me that.”

“I’m going to go. Will you come with me?”

“I’ll come, but will they let me?”

“We’ll run away in secret and go.”

“I’ll go anywhere with you, *Zaven hayrik*, but why did you forget me for so long?”

“My poor girl, I’ve been searching for you everywhere the past few years and just found you.”

“Let’s go, then,” said the child, getting up.

“We are not ready yet. You should not tell anyone what we talked about. Do not let on that you know me. You should not say my name. I will prepare everything in secret, and once everything is lined up, we’ll up and go to see your mother.”

“So mommy is still alive?” asked Arpeni, her eyes filled with lively expectation.

“Saintly people are always alive, my dear Arpeni.”

Arpeni did not fully comprehend the meaning of these words, and she squeezed the old man’s hand.

“Quick, make preparations, *Zaven hayrik*,” she said.

“Just wait a bit longer. From time to time, come here when everyone is asleep. We’ll see each other and talk. But don’t forget. No one must find out.”

“Are you a child?”

“Very well,” said that old man laughing at her response, “go my child to avoid suspicion.”

The girl said, “good bye,” and entered the house. Zaven looked as she departed and thought to himself, “what a terrible situation this child is in. What a change has come over her. I thought she would run up to me and jump into my arms when she saw me and heard me call. . . . all she could manage was “*Zaven hayrik*,” but her old spirit, her excitement, seem to have been killed by suspicion, captivity and rough treatment. It seems that if she has not lost the desire to be freed, hope and faith had nearly been extinguished in her little heart.

Yes, the marauding Arabs had stifled the hope of salvation in many people’s hearts. They had ripped out Armenia’s heart. Dear God, what kind of words were those to force a little girl to say, “We are

barbarians,” and in what a plaintive and desperate tone she uttered them. And that a Mamikonian, grandchild of Vartans and Vahans . . . If Suren Kamsarakan were here and saw his vivacious niece in this depressed state and mournful voice . . . But what a mix of childhood and adolescence there were in her manner and words. . . and all of that the consequence of those four bitter years in captivity. . .

“This one example has caused turmoil in my heart. What about those thousands who were hauled off by the Arabs to the deserts where there was no cross, no Gospel, no Christ? If Grigor is still alive, he must have been subjected to such conditions in captivity. What he must have endured at the hands of Arabs . . . but he would have found a way to escape by now. His uncles would have ransomed him . . . if he were dead, I would have found his corpse. So he must have been taken captive, along with Kamsarakan. That abbot, who was such a serious man, gave his word to let the Mamikonians know to send someone to the land of Ararat. . . God, who will save Arpeni, will free Grigor too. I should go now to make preparations to rescue the girl. A boy’s clothes, a boat to Trebizond or somewhere near the Chorokh river bank, we can consider ourselves nearly home on Armenian soil. Time to get up and get out of this cursed city as soon as possible . . . That wicked Tuma, your little “barbarian,” the scion of Mamikonians and Kamsarakans . . . and such people rule the world. You dare to make an innocent, tender beauty into a plaything for your depravity . . . but you, my God, will not forgive such wickedness; you brought me to Arpeni, you will save her.”

While Zaven was going about his plans, Arpine was back in the palace. This Armenian girl returned to her room where, to her relief, she saw all the girls her age were still asleep. She was reassured that no one had noticed her meeting with the Armenian night watchman. Close-by was Lady Angelina’s room plush carpets, gold brocade cushions, down-filled pillows, chairs of all sorts, purple curtains, silver mirrors, silk and muslin garments were all about. Everything that Byzantine luxury had created in its lavishness, excesses and immorality could be found in that room. Even the walls were covered with paintings that would have tempted an ascetic hermit to become a servant of satan.

Angelina had just gotten out of bed and was ensconced on a soft couch, covered with muslin and fine furs, when her brother, Tuma entered.

“I wanted to see you, brother,” said the Lady, “I have something important to tell you.”

“What is so important? You’ve got my curiosity.”

“What’s important is that you leave that Armenian girl entirely to me.”

“What do you mean? Haven’t I always done that. You are her mistress, aren’t you?”

“You are missing my point. I know that you kidnapped that child. You must forget that plan.”

“Now that the girl has finally arrived, you want to snatch her away from me, is that it?” laughed Tuma, “That’s impossible. That little barbarian has such eyes, the likes of which you can’t find in all of Constantinople.”

“Because she has such eyes, you must give her up completely.”

“What does that mean? What kind of pressure is this, Angelina. You are my little sister, who I have cared for so much and sacrificed so much to reach this point, and now you order me around? You have

comported yourself as you wished with your husband so far. But that man is not enough. You want to make me your slave too and trample me under your feet. Think again, my name is not Philagrius. . .”

“I know your name is Tuma, I know as well where your noble heart will end up taking us, but my name is Angelina. . .” said the Lady sarcastically. And suddenly she changed her demeanor, and sat up straight and looked at him with piercing eyes, “who do you think you are to brag about taking care of me, sacrifices to get me to this position? It was all for your own benefit. You made me a stepping stone, my beauty, my body, me, an orphaned sister, you took and groomed, just as you are planning to do with that wretched child for your future debauchery. It would have been better not to have a brother like you and to have remained a simple, modest village girl.”

“Who’s stopping you from becoming simple and humble, from retiring to a village, where you can live on onions and garlic and renounce your wayward luxuries; you can plant yourself on a coarse woolen rug instead of these regal fineries, and receive beatings from a rough husband; instead of being an imperious lady, you can be a lowly maid . . .

“Well, well, enough of your long-winded speeches. You were the one who made me into a haughty lady, so now you must submit to my wishes and whims.”

“You dare to belittle me to this extent, Angelina.”

“Yes, to this extent.”

“But you’ll regret it later.”

“You stupid, foolish man. Don’t you understand, don’t you see, I am stronger than you. Have you forgotten that who I am and what I have acquired is through my own efforts? Do not threaten me. You are evil and worthless. Would you have become a general without my support? You were the reason for the army’s defeat in Armenia and the first to flee the scene. How could you have survived Procopius’s accusations and the military tribunal, if it were not for my intercession? You are corrupt, a thief, who left your armies hungry and unarmed, and only thanks to me did those demanding retribution spare you. And now, you dare to threaten me?”

“But you forget, Angelina, that we are alone in this room, and I have a sword. . . “

“You have a sword and you boast to me, you fool, you are totally stupid. Go boast about your sword to others. Look, if you take this cup, then I’ll avoid it. You can poison anybody. I am aware your so-called bravado.

I’ve seen it. But please, drawing a sword, that is not something for a ‘daring’ general like you.”

“You’ve gone too far, Angelina.”

“Actually, it was not far enough. If you want more, I can find more to say.”

“But you, my dear sister, tell me again what you can do to me, since you boast that you are stronger than me.”

“Yes, talk sweetly like that, forget the histrionics when you are with me. A fox should not pretend to be a lion, nor a cat hiss like a snake. Take up your old ways, you reptile, wriggle on the ground with your venomous bite.”

“I do not deny that I am wicked, but you, Angelina, as a sister, are a match for me.”

“Yes, that is true too. But here is the difference between us. You were born rotten and evil by nature, whereas my wickedness was acquired through your evildoing, and I had the courage to defend myself in the face of this danger.”

“O, my dear sister, what a noble character you have, what a mixture of virtue and vice.”

“Be quiet and let go. Don’t touch me. Get away!”

“Are you afraid of me, your only brother?”

“Tuma, be assured, I am not afraid of you, and you know why?”

“Why?”

“You demon of lies and deceit, you don’t know? I know everything that goes on in your mind. You know that? Well, I’ll tell you, to satisfy you. You need me for without me, you are nothing. For that reason, let us suppose tomorrow you succeed in poisoning me and I die, who would protect you? For this reason and this reason alone, I do not fear you. Just yesterday the emperor said with a sneer, “There is no worse soldier nor more shameless thief in the entire empire. We put up with him only for your sake. Otherwise, we would have condemned him to the gallows ten times by now.”

“Really, the emperor said that?”

“You really are shameless. You have the audacity to laugh after hearing that. Even I am embarrassed. Anyway, all your babbling has given me a headache. You are not worth getting worked up over. So I’ll warn you now once and for all. Don’t you touch a single hair on the head of that Armenian girl in front of anyone. You’ll have hell to pay if I hear about it. I’ll inform the girl to report to me even if you so much as look at her. Don’t force my hand. Do you understand. You may leave.”

“Very well then I will make this sacrifice and submit to your haughty command, but at least tell me your plan.”

“This conversation has dragged on too long, and you know that for several years I have not felt the need for either your nor Philagrius’s advice nor will I disclose my plans to you.”

“It’s my fault that I handed over the girl to a beast like you. It is not as if there weren’t other people,” said Tuma, and he got up and started toward the door.

“Say whatever you want, but don’t forget my order, or you’ll regret it . . .”

And when her brother was out of sight, she shook her head with disdain and muttered, “What fools! Do they know that once my future is assured, I will have secured theirs as well.”

Chapter 13 – Perilous Escape

You, my son, Hermes, you are my beautiful hope.
You are the fruit of my labor, my lasting reward.
The object of my decade-long vigil,
No matter how demanding, it was a sweet duty for me,
Intimate bliss and salve for my grief.
On distant seas, on foreign shores,
My sweet companion, with your unsure steps,
O my child, today what is your fate?

André Chénier

Tuma, like it or not, was compelled to obey his sister's order, no matter how much it went against his grain. Those words, "I'm stronger than you," said it all, since he knew that one word from his noble sister would be enough to have him banished, with or without an office, to some hinterland in Africa or Sicily, as she had threatened to do several times before. So he held his tongue, patiently, curious to know her real motive.

Angelina held a small party one evening at her palace. Only Crown Prince Constans was invited to this family gathering. Arpeni and the other girls her age were dressed in delicate muslin and danced various new dances, which they had been taught by their instructor for the occasion.

These risqué dances were accompanied by seductive music. The crown prince, still a boy, sat next to the hostess, barely paying attention to her fawning words, so engrossed was he in the dance, music and bawdy songs. He blushed and then went pale, his eyes fixed at their feet as they whirled around, the movements of their lithe bodies; he nodded his head with the rhythmic beat, which brought a devilish grin of satisfaction to Angelina's face.

She watched gleefully as the crown prince was mesmerized, sighing from time to time. To goad him on, she served him sweet drinks and fruits. The Lady served him with her enchanting hands and finally no longer able to restrain himself, emboldened by the wine, he said,

"My Lady, your hospitality is priceless. I have never encountered such pleasure before. But who is that girl with the amazing eyes, the likes of which I have never seen, and who dances so well?"

"She's an orphan, a foreign girl without a master, Crown Prince."

"But how did such an amazing flower fall into your hands?"

"A couple of years ago, they offered her to me as a gift, when she was small. I have tried to educate her, but what difficulty I have had taming her character. It appears that she was accustomed to wild highland freedom, born to some uncivilized noble clan. She disdains everything.

“If you couldn’t tame her, who could?” said the boy, stroking the Lady’s hand in a flattering manner.

And the Lady taking on a grave, imperious tone, stopped the dance for a moment, and summoned the girl.

“Zoe,” she commanded. And when Arpeni approached with her black locks down to her shoulders, her white cheeks with a hint of rouge and her incomparable eyes, she glared at the Lady and the boy, making clear that only fear bridled her anger. Angelina ordered her to pour a glass of wine for the crown prince. Arpeni gave him the wine and drew back, but her face was so red and her eyes were so fiery, that the woman herself was shocked, and the boy, sensing this, turned and said,

“Truly, my Lady, this little mountaineer of yours combines an indomitable personality and exquisite beauty.”

“I give my word, in a year or two I’ll tame this wild creature and offer her to you, gentle as a lamb.”

“Will it really take you that long, my Lady?” said the boy, slurring his speech and hardly able to keep his eyes open. . . . The music lulled him to sleep as he sank into the down pillows.

At this point the musicians and dancers stopped, the lights were extinguished, and four dapper servants carefully moved him to the bed prepared for him in advance.

When Tuma, Philagrius and their arms-bearer Valentinus, a handsome youth, were alone, Angelina got up and glaring smugly at Tuma, said,

“You fool, do you now understand how smart and foresighted I am,” then addressing the three of them alike, “You only know how to gather up money and indulge your passions, but I plan and take care of tomorrow.”

Philagrius didn’t make a sound, and Tuma pulled his sister aside, saying with his usual snigger,

“Is the Emperor really condemned to death that you are lavishing such attentions on the crown prince?”

“No one is immortal, you fool!”

“You may have reason to accuse us of unruly passions, but is it fair to say this about Valentinus, my fair and upright sister?” asked Tuma, sneering, but he quickly recoiled when he saw that his sister was getting ready to slap him in the face.

This glory-seeking, power-thirsty woman who fancied herself another Empress Theodora, Justinian’s wife, was busy making preparations for her future, whether successfully shall yet be seen.

A couple of weeks passed after the dance-party. Zaven would go every morning looking for a suitable boat and then wait in the garden to see Arpeni. Happily, he saw a significant change in the child, and after their third or fourth encounter, she regained her Armenian and her confidence returned. His heart was less agitated after Arpeni told him about the order the Lady gave her to refuse and report on her brother’s unwanted attention.

The boat was finally ready. Zaven was only waiting for a southerly breeze, which was late. So one morning, when he went for a stroll toward Hagia Sophia square, he saw an agitated crowd, divided into

groups, in heated debate. He saw Lady Angelina's servant standing on a bench, angrily arguing with people from the neighborhood, so he stopped and listened.

"If," he said, "you think you have an emperor named Constantine on the throne, you are very mistaken. A woman is in charge and he complies with her every whim. She's behind Constantine's opening of his father Heraclius's tomb to snatch the gem-studded crown from the father's head. That woman's insatiable conniving was also behind the demanding that Empress Martina and her son transfer the reserve deposited in the Patriarch's vault to the royal treasury. Winter is just beginning. Prices will go up. There will be famine if this woman continues to run things. . ."

"Who is that woman? What's her name? Tell us her name?" a thousand people cried out in one voice.

"Phiagrius's wife, Angelina, who shares power with her husband and brother Tuma. They have taken over the grain stores and have prevented new stores from entering the city. If this keeps going, what will happen to the poor?"

Zaven listened patiently to what was being said and saw that people were becoming agitated and grumbling. . . he cut through the crowd and ran toward the sea, hired a boat and headed for Philagrius's house, where he instructed the boatman to wait. He was calm and confident. Entering the anteroom and he stood before the gate, saw the guards sitting unarmed, careless and engrossed in their own doings since the master and mistress were still asleep or just awakening. His ears were pealed as his eyes surveyed the entire length of the street. He saw the roof top in a kind of dark cloud descending as he approached. Without a word to the gatekeeper, he calmly entered, went up the stairs, headed for the steward's office. It was a narrow hall from which the street appeared.

There standing in front of the windows, he saw a mob of people moving toward the palace. He waited until their cries rose and were audible. Then he entered the steward's office and playing dumb, said naively, "Outside on the street there seems to be a commotion," to which the steward responded, unconcerned, "Aren't the guards downstairs?" The voices got louder and the palace gates were engulfed in angry cries, menacing voices that would be heard from inside. Everyone in the house rushed out of their rooms, large and small. The Lady, half dressed, hair undone, came out to ask what was going on.

Prince Philagrius and Tuma kept repeating, "What's this? What's to become of us?" The guards downstairs reinforced the gates, the servants in confusion did not know what to do, the maids were crying, "Lord, have mercy," and the steward talking with Zaven, quickly opened a chest and filled his pockets with money. He gave Zaven two purses and shoving them in his hands, he said, "These are for you." And he, as if he had been waiting for this, calmly put the purses in his cloak, and exited through the commotion, when he suddenly saw Arpeni, who was standing there stunned. "Come, my girl, come with me to the garden," he said and started down the stairs.

Arpeni was running with him. They entered his cottage, where he gave her the boy's clothes he had prepared, gathered up her hair and put a cap over her head as they went to the boat awaiting them. Zaven told the boatman to take them to the east. The boat headed to the palace shore, since the current was strong and could capsize them. Terrified that Arpeni would be recognized, he pulled his overcoat over his head, covering the child as well. It was the appointed hour for two large boats, one with seven pairs of oarsman and the other with five, to depart. Philagrius, the Lady and Tuma were seated on the

first and he maids had been jammed onto the second. These boats were moving quick as an arrow, especially the first, in such a frenzy that they did not even notice Zaven's shabby boat as they passed.

The sea was calm and the sky was foggy as the boatman departed the European shores. On the sea were only fishing boats and boats heading for Chrysoupoli. Still Zaven kept Arpine's head under his overcoat.

"Zaven, *hayrik*," she whispered, "we've escaped."

"Glory to God, my child," said the old man, and he remembered the day years ago, when he likewise had the child in his arms, rescuing her from the lake.

"Are they coming after me?" asked the girl.

"They have not yet had time to search for you, my child."

And that was the truth because the frenzied mob had already begun to knock down gates and push their way in. The lords of the palace had barely had time to flee by sea. When they did not find Angelina, Philagrius and Tuma, the mob took out its frustration by destroying everything in sight. They pillaged and plundered all that Byzantine finery, wealth and furniture. If the militia had not arrived, they would have leveled the palace to the ground.

Meanwhile when they arrived in Chrysoupoli Zaven got out and began to think what the sweet young child needed. Without taking his eye off her, he went and bought a small blanket and other necessities and brought them to the boat, which sailed along the Black Sea coast toward Trebizond. It was still winter. The soldier had given no thought to his own comfort. All he could think about was the child, for whom he had left his home, his village, his family and children, to become a wandering exile for such a long time. And now, having found her finally and having wrested her from such powerful captors, he felt fully vindicated. All he prayed for was that as God had helped them that day, he might help the poor orphan on their journey back to the homeland.

God heard his prayer. There were no dark shadows on the horizon of the Pontic Sea. The winter month of January was chilly and they journeyed and arrived in Tayk along the banks of the Chorokh River, where Arpeni revealed herself as a girl before the Bagratuni Princess for the first time, and changing her clothes and with a contingent of bodyguards, he took her as the Princess of the Mamikonians to the Kamasarkan castle of Yerazgavor in Shirak, and entrusted her to her maternal uncle Suren's brother Nerses.

Before turning to the situation in Hayastan, however, a few words about what happened in Constantinople after they left.

Constantine had hardly been on his father's throne a couple of months when his greed surfaced and he plundered his own father's grave and raided his stepmother's treasury. As for Martina, who lacked the virtue of patience, she took her revenge quickly. She poisoned the Emperor and put her son Heraclonas on the throne, and spirited away Constantine's two sons to captivity in a monastery, while purging their supporters from the imperial service.

Constantine's reign lasted but three and a half months, and the reign of Martina's son lasted only eight months before the Senate voted to oust him and the military engaged in the well known revolt headed

by Valentinus. After cutting off Martina and Heraclonius's tongue and nose, they exiled them to the northern hinterlands of the empire, and Constantine's eldest son, Constans became emperor, calling himself Constantine after his father. Valentinus became the regent and was named commander-in-chief, and Angelina again ran things from behind the scenes.

Chapter 14 – Theodoros's Victory at Artsap

²you town so full of commotion, you city of tumult and revelry?

Your slain were not killed by the sword, nor did they die in battle.

³All your leaders have fled together; they have been captured without using the bow. All you who were caught were taken prisoner together, having fled while the enemy was still far away.

⁴Therefore I said, "Turn away from me; let me weep bitterly. Do not try to console me over the destruction of my people."

Isaiah 22:2-4.

As we saw at the beginning of our story, the Byzantine General Procopius out of indifference and neglect lost the war and brought destruction upon Kogovit. This war was called the War of Mardistan, causing devastation throughout the land and enslavement of captives on an unprecedented scale. Theodoros Rshtuni worked tirelessly and valiantly to fend off the Arab invasions and remedy the situation.

Three years had passed since those fateful days. The country was barely getting back on its feet. It was the end of autumn. Upon receiving word of Emperor Heraclius's death, the Armenian general hoped that Varaztirots would be released from captivity by the newly crowned emperor. This hope was not mere wishful thinking; he had received a secret communication that on his death bed, the emperor had instructed his heir in his will to end Aspet's exile.

Thus, with a quiet heart, he returned to the land of Rshtunik for the winter. He assigned the defense of Artaz and Nakhichevan to Nerses Kamsarakan for the country's security, with ample troops plus the Andzev militia if needed to ward off invaders. And in Taron he relied on the Mamikonians, feeling assured that there was no imminent danger.

However, hardly had he return to his capital where he hoped to get some rest with his family, when he received bad news from Vahan Kamsarakan, who was his brother's deputy, that the Arabs with the help of the traitorous prince, Sahur Andzevatsi, had entered Artaz. Theodoros, without a moment's rest, set out with his troops. He had barely reached the lands of Kajperunik, when he received more bad news. Taron had been invaded by another Arab army and had proceeded without hindrance to Dvin under the leadership of the noble Vardik of Mokka.

Theodoros was perplexed. Who was the enemy? He clearly could not count on even his own nobles. But undeterred, he continued his journey and entered the plain of Artaz to help Vahan. But traitors hindered him at every turn. Sahur Andzevatsi not only led the enemy forces, but also turned his

weapons against the Armenians, his own brothers, in a bloodbath, although he eventually received his just deserts at the blade of the brave prince Tiran, who slew him and later fought bravely to the end though encircled by the enemy.

Vahan and a couple of warriors broke through the enemy line and were on the verge of destruction when Theodoros's army arrived. But those retreating were of little help, and indeed demoralized the reinforcements with their accounts of the bitter battle. Nonetheless, Theodoros continued his campaign, pursuing the enemy, whom it proved impossible to catch, because, in the words of a contemporary historian, "With the fleetness of birds, the enemy like poisonous snakes advanced leaving the Armenian forces in the dust." And thus, they attacked Dvin and swept through Kogovit. There were only three generals left to gather the troops and regroup: Theodoros Vahevuni, Khachian Araveghian, and Shapuh Amatuni, who destroyed the Metsamor bridge and went on to warn the city of the impending danger.

Lacking proper arms and training, the people flocked from everywhere to take refuge in the fortress. The enemy under the leadership of the Prince of Mokka, crossed the Araks River and set up camp on the edge of the Khosrov forest. On the fifth day, the Arabs set a large fire below the fortress wall and with smoke and arrows pushed back the guards on the parapets. They then scaled the walls with ladders, entered the fortress, opened the gate, and invaded. They slaughtered 12,000 soldiers, 35,000 women and children were taken captive, and the city was pillaged and plundered. Then they took the same route back through Kogovit.

Theodoros received reports in Nakhichevan of the enemy's attacks and the size of their army. Although his force was considerably smaller, he knew he could not wait, so he headed out to cut them off on their way to Kogovit. He attacked them and after a bloody battle that cost many lives, he was forced to retreat, and this horde of barbarians pressed through to Syria, leaving wailing and destruction in their wake. It is unnecessary to write at length about the catastrophe that befell Armenia at this time. An historian's eyewitness account says it all:

"The holy churches, which the pagans were not worthy to enter, were pulled apart, demolished, and trampled under the loathsome feet of the infidels. Priests, deacons, and worshipers were slaughtered by the insolent and merciless enemy. Delicate women, who had never experienced adversity, were whipped and dragged into the square crying out laments for the fate that awaited them. Similarly, the multitude of captives with their sons and daughters were in the same calamity, groaning and sighing. They did not know who was more worthy of lamentation, those who had been slain by the infidel's sword, or the sons and daughters left alive who were to be seized and taken, to be alienated from the faith of Christ..."
(Ghevond, *History of Armenia*)

And Theodoros looked out from the heights over Kogovit not only at the ruins, but also into centuries to come, harbingers of destruction and desolation, because this misfortune was the work of two known traitors and unknown others in the shadows. Where were Mushegh and Hmayak Mamikonian, why weren't they on the scene when the enemy invaded their lands? And those zealous Speratsi, Bagratuni, Mamanaghik, Daranaghik, Egeghik princes, the princes of Vanand and Dimakseni, with their zealous promises, were nowhere to be seen.

The same for the militias of Ararat, Arani, Varazhnunik, Gntunik and Spandunik, whose operations were barely evident. The Georgians, Albanians, and Siunetsis were the only loyal members of the alliance that

arrived with their battalions, but too late, the major blow having been struck. The Arab volcano had spilled its hellish lava from one end of the realm to the other and scorched the earth beyond recognition.

In the depths of Kogovit mountains, an old friend was in seclusion. He voluntarily relinquished the catholical throne amidst false accusations and lamented by himself for his people. He alone understood the sting of Theodoros's sighs.

This was Catholicos Christopor, who sought to justify himself neither to his contemporaries nor future generations, but maintaining his innocence before God and his own conscience, he bided his time waiting for his departure from this chaotic life which had made his Catholical miter a crown of thorns. Theodoros went to his friend, not looking for comfort, but having learned of Yezr Catholicos' death, to seek advice on who was worthy to elect as his successor. Christopor advised to elect the Bishop of Tayk, Nerses, who had experience in all spheres of life. He was a soldier, a scholar, a learned theologian, a diligent and virtuous man, who could advise and collaborate in rebuilding the country.

Nerses was the officer from the Bagratuni Tavuskert palace we encountered earlier in our story. For a variety of reasons, best known to him alone, he decided to withdraw from secular life and take vows. The Bagratuni princess all but forced him to be ordained bishop, and now at Theodoros's invitation, the nobles and bishops were gathered in Dvin, among the ruins and casualties, they elected Nerses Catholicos.

In the lives of nations there are moments when wise people cognizant of their obligations shun glory and honor. Nerses was worldly wise, an experienced and perceptive man. He saw Armenia's capital was a pile of rubble, a cemetery of unburied and rotting corpses and feeding field for vultures. It was sparsely populated, with oppressive nobles and princes, distrustful, ignorant and jealous men, full of bluster with each other but cowards when confronting foreigners, officials or groups of outlaws or petty bullies. They were brutal toward their own peasants and artisans, tormenting to the point of hysteria with their oppression and deprivations.

This picture was disheartening and he was ready to quit, but the urging of the nobles, especially Theodoros on the one hand, and the ignorance and unworthiness of most of his fellow bishops on the other, forced him to undertake this office and he went to work. He arranged for the dead to be properly buried, the burned down, dilapidated churches and hospitals to be rebuilt, the city walls to be reinforced, the orchards and gardens to be replanted, and an irrigation aqueduct built from the Garni River. Dvin began to come back to life after a few years. Palaces, houses and markets rose out of the rubble. However, the captives did not return and every household mourned its losses. The priests said it was divine retribution from the pulpits and exhorted the people to repent and endure every hardship. However, when it came to the priest, his child, his wife, his parents, his brothers and sisters, his property, it was amazing how quickly he took affront.

Indeed, among this nation whose love of family and religion had protected it from destruction, to this day, family honor is vital and the women of Armenia, compared to neighboring peoples, have been more protective and preserved their modesty. Except for the violence of abduction and rape, moral degradation has been rare among Armenians.

Similarly, the princes and wealthy class built and renovated their estates following the example of the Catholicos. Although unlike the cloth that Odysseus's wife Penelope wove each day and unwove each night to hold off her suitors, the Armenians built each year what the invaders destroyed the next.

And at that moment, Theodoros received an appointment as army commander from Constantinople, but what force did such an order have, when there was anarchy in the capital? But he was a person not easily discouraged. He worked tirelessly to protect the country, and the people saw him as their only refuge. He spent the entire winter in Ayrarat province, reinforced the forts everywhere, boosted the morale and security of the inhabitants. In the spring he returned to Rshtunik to recuperate with his family. His return brought joy not only to his house but to all of Vaspurakan. How many times had Aghtamar been a safe haven for the entire province while Theodoros was on duty in Persia fighting invaders? And the enemy didn't truly know when they were more exposed to danger: when Theodoros was in front of them or when he was invisible to them.

Just as he was beginning to be rested and his heart was rejoicing at learning that Aspet Bagratuni had been ordered released from exile by Constantinople, he received the bad news that the Arabs had attacked Ayrarat and Nakhichevan, and had laid siege to Yerevan. Without wasting a minute, he gathered a cavalry of 600 battle-worthy warriors and instructed Atom Shahuni to follow quickly behind him with the infantry. During this campaign there was no night, no day. They pressed ahead, stopping only long enough for the horses to rest. On their way, they learned that the invaders had been unable to do any damage to Nakhichevan, Yerevan or the other forts there, but they had surrounded Artsap fortress where the inhabitants of provinces at the foot of Mt. Ararat had gathered for protection with their families and belongings.

Artsap fort was on the bank of the river of the same name and well fortified. The Arabs saw that over the insurmountable peaks from Daron about 40 well-armed soldiers entered the fort with provisions. That night under cover of darkness, they took the same route, caught the watchmen off guard and killed them, and breached the fortress walls. It was a Sunday morning when their barbaric war cries could be heard within and without. Many of the guard jumped off the steep parapets rather than perishing at the hands of the Arabs. Others managed to escape, but the wailing of women and children was constant and horrifying.

When the enemy had completely taken the fort, they bound the combatants and took the captives and their livestock out of the fort in huge numbers, then feasted on the provisions. When Theodoros arrived with his army this infernal disaster had already begun and people were drowning in a river of blood. Although the enemy force was very large, the Armenian general took them by surprise and did not give them time to come to their senses. His three thousand elite warriors slaughtered them, and those that tried to escape fell victim to Atom's sword. Only a few stranglers survived and headed back to Syria. During this battle both of their generals, Osman and Ogma, were killed.

The multitude of captives was freed, and from the plunder, 100 Arabian horses were sent by Theodoros to Emperor Constans in Constantinople.

At the same time, another group of Arabs had attacked Tayk, Georgia and the Albania. They caused great damage and took many captives, leaving the country in ruins. Even so, Theodoros's victory at Artsap was so monumental that it boosted everyone's morale. The destruction of such a large enemy

force and release of so many captives with so few troops were so impressive that it overshadowed the losses in Tayk, Georgia and Albania and was some consolation.

Chapter 15 – Grigor and Suren in Arab Captivity

It was already four years that Armenia had endured extreme hardship. The casualties of the invasion had been buried, but even a heavy blanket of earth could not cover the pain people felt in their hearts for their loved ones. Nevertheless, people would say almost to a person that compared to those who had been taken captive, “blessed were the dead.” The people of those times were not like the hard-headed people of our day that consider humanity to be descended from reptiles. The Armenian nation, which was built on family values and reverence for ancestors, lamented its countrymen who had been herded away in chains like animals by the Arab invaders and forced out of their homeland into an exile of slavery, religious conversion and sacrilege.

The first captives were Grigor and Suren, who were last seen in Sheikh Ali’s Damascus palace as servants. This beautiful summer home, formerly the residence of a rich Byzantine Greek noble who was unable to tolerate the hot climate, had been designed with every amenity to stay cool. Encircled by thick walls, there was an orchard in the midst of which there was a squarish dwelling with awnings and an inner covered yard with a fountain. On all four sides of the yard, there were rooms with doors and windows facing inward toward the fountain. There was a separate door into the harem. It was a one story structure made of Lebanon cedar.

But the barefoot and half-naked Arabs who had just emerged from the desert sands, had not yet learned to build, only to destroy. Thus the structure had begun to fall apart from lack of maintenance. Outside the house there was a hut where 10-12 Christian slaves were kept in chains. In the course of four years, their number had dwindled to 4; some died and others converted in exchange for release. Grigor, Suran and an Armenian artisan name Gazrik were left.

For the first two years, Suren expected they would be released at any moment, always hoping that the Mamikonians or Kamsarakans would ransom them from captivity. He had written letters to Mushegh Mamikonian and his brother Hrahat Kamsarakan, but on further thought considered this futile, so he decided the best option was to pretend to convert and tried to convince Grigor to join him in this momentary transgression. Grigor was unalterably opposed and gave his uncle such a stern rebuke that for the next year Suren did not raise the issue again, instead taking care of his dear nephew while continuing to wait for word from their homeland.

The poor man did not know that the Kamsarakans had been deceived by Mushegh into believing that Grigor and Suren were dead. As soon as Mushegh learned of their captivity, he started the rumor that they had died, claiming that he had sent spies and messengers to Syria to find out for certain. Thus, he convinced the Kamasarakans, who were in need of funds, to sell Suren’s inheritance to the Bagratunis, as Husik had reported earlier. Suren was a tough and smart man. He saw the situation and heard about the Arabs' victories day by day. After four years, he had begun to lose hope. Thus he deemed it necessary

once again to talk with Grigor. While Gazrik was an artisan, Grigor was a man of the mind, and unwavering in his faith unto death. Thus one day Suren pulled Grigor aside to talk alone,

“My son, Grigor, we have been in chains for four years. Although this is a sign of virtue and fortitude, I must confess that if we could be released and be useful to our homeland, it would be a greater virtue.”

Grigor did not respond to Suren, surmising where the words would lead. But Suren, undeterred by his silence, continued calmly,

“You know well because you understand and speak these barbarians’ language, how much destruction and devastation they have brought to Armenia these days, that they have taken and burned Dvin, and how much harm these brutes have inflicted on Christians; this very dwelling belonged to a Christian just a few years ago, as you well know. So which is better? To die stubbornly in captivity, or to escape and go to our homeland, fight for and defend our country, die with honor and glory, like our forefathers, Vardan, Vahan, Arshavir and their comrades . . . Why don’t you answer?”

“What answer would you have me give? If there was one transgression courageous men rejected with all their strength, it was apostasy. And I cannot commit that mortal sin. Death is a thousand times better.”

“Your forefather, Vardan, spoke like that in his time, but then he prudently reconsidered and gave priority to the good of the nation and church. He set aside his stubbornness and today his name is blessed and glorified throughout Armenia, because his apostasy served as a greater weapon in his hands through martyrdom than if he had died opposing Yazdegerd in captivity in Sagastan.

“Who am I to compare myself to Vardan and Vahan? Their reputation and example could benefit the nation and did, but I am a mere youth, unknown to anyone . . . “

“That’s not true, my son, through this hardship, we experienced captivity, and when we return to our homeland we must not only fight, but advocate by word and deed that we need to arm and be armed, and show the peasants and artisans how to bear arms to be a match for the Arabs.”

“But how, and who knows what’s left in this world? Is there anything left but ruins and plundered remnants as an inheritance?”

“Is that any way for a young man to talk? So quickly discouraged. Did captivity extinguish the vigor of your heart? My lad, do you think when we leave here we will go empty handed back to our country? Give me your word that you will leave behind your qualms before we leave here and will follow me as we return to our homeland so that the nobles will look upon us with admiration.”

“I will ignore your secret and I am not interested in knowing any more. All I ask from you, dear uncle, is that you leave me alone with my scruples . . .”

“Are you going to waste our lives to the detriment of our homeland because of your scruples? Let us no longer speak of education and reading as the path to human improvement . . .”

“Say what you will, but we must not forget Christ’s commandment, ‘But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven, (Matt. 10:33),’ emblazoned in letters that are ever before my eyes.”

“I too have studied enough to quote these words, but this is your childish short sightedness parroting words. You do not understand what you have said and lack the ability to put it into context.”

“What are you saying, my uncle? These words are clear and well known. They need no interpretation.”

“That’s what you think. Christ said these words and just a few hours later, his disciple Peter denied him, and he not only denied him, but denounced him, as told in the Gospels.”

“But you do not have the book in your hands. How do you know these things?”

“You silly boy, I may have not filled my mind with a thousand and one useless facts, but I have only paid attention to and retained and interpreted those things that are necessary. So listen carefully to what I have to say and then respond. I said that Peter was also apparently a bad soldier since all he could do was cut off an ear with the big sword in his hand. Among Christ’s disciples, after Judas, he was the most worthless. Although he denied Christ, Christ did not deny him. Indeed he accepted him among his disciples and we honor him along with Paul as a saint and leading apostle.

“But Paul is one thing and Peter is another . . .”

“How are they different? We honor them both along with the other saints. And what is remarkable is that of these leading apostles, one denied Christ and the other persecuted Christians. Christ, who is God, is magnanimous, and knows how to forgive people’s feigned denial. He said these words to warn us not to take denial lightly, but if he were in our situation . . . “

“Uncle, enough. What you are saying is blasphemy.”

“No, my lad, listen until I finish what I have to say. What I’m saying is that if those disciples were in our shoes, subjected to curses, spitting and grime, beatings and the rod, in chains under the sun or in the rain, forced to carry rocks, earth and garbage for four years, I am certain that all twelve would have denied Christ . . . But wait, do not interrupt . . . And what kinds of men were those apostles? Were they Kamsarakans descended from the Parthians or scions of the Maminkonian Musheghs, Vardans and Vahans? No, they were poor fishermen, who did not even know their trade well, who were scared by turbulence in a small lake, but lucky for them, Christ took pity and took them on as his followers, bestowed holy grace upon them and made them disciples.”

“But our Illuminator suffered such torments so patiently for all those years in the pit . . .”

“My son, our Illuminator is unique among the saints. Are you going to compare him to those miserable fishermen? He was from hearty Parthian stock. And God, who kept him so that he could endure these torments, took good care of him. In the pit, the angels visited him and cheered him up. Look at his situation and look at ours. God gave us brains. Let’s go now to the Sheikh, let’s go and accept their prophet. He will release us from our chains and then we know what we’ll do. Mark my words. In eight days, we will be on our way back to Armenia and with God’s help, after all these travails, we will arrive safely. . . What do you think? The time has come. Speak now. What is your answer? If you want, think it over until tomorrow morning. But I’ll tell you again, Grigor, my son, even if you think for ten years, if you do not have balanced judgment, you will not be able to separate the smart from the foolish, the good from the bad, the useful from the harmful. Everything is vain if we stay here and rot.”

“But you are free, my uncle. Your freedom has nothing to do with me . . .”

“Are you going to repeat that rubbish again? There is no you or me. Get it through your head that Suren cannot leave you behind. He cannot be separated from you. Alive or dead, we will be together. Everything is ready. All you need to do is give the word and in a week we’ll be free.”

At this moment, they heard the sound of chains and Gazrik respectfully said, “The overseer is looking for you, prince,” and Suren laughed and said,

“My man, I still haven’t gotten you to understand that we are not princes but slaves in chains like you here. We carry water, we share a piece of bread with you and like you we make our bed in the sand.”

Then Gazrik bowed his head and said, “What can we do, prince, in this transient life of ours, God has arranged it this way.”

The two of them went out and it was indeed hard to watch descendants of the Mamikonians and Kamsarakans working as laborers wearing only a heavy burlap garment, with chains on their feet, the end of which was tied by rope to their belts. With sweat running from their foreheads and a barefoot Arab with a whip in his hand ordering them around with insults and curses. It was harder for Grigor to watch Suren suffer all this without complaint than to endure his own hardships, especially after their discussion about feigning conversion. Thus, seeing him in this unchanged state, he said bitterly, “Because our captivity has no end and we will not die if we are freed let us do as you wish.”

“Are you sure? Are you ready to follow my plan, my son, Grigor? You know how much I have waited, but to be deceived by you would be worse than death for me.”

“I will do as you wish.”

“Very well, then. I will talk to you later and you will see that this conversion will be temporary and not very burdensome for us. And how much our oppressors will regret it when Suren comes after them for revenge, with fire and sword.”

But Suren was concerned that perhaps Grigor would change his mind after they finished work. So he told the overseer that they wanted to see the Sheikh. He promised to tell him. Only a few moments later, the two princes were before the Sheikh.

When the Sheikh heard their decision, he gave thanks to Allah and ordered that the chains be removed from their feet. He also ordered that the Imam come and give them instruction, so that the next week they could be circumcised and become true believers.

When they left and were no longer in his presence, Suren turned to Grigor, and sneered,

“This barbarian thinks that we’re going to stay here with him for another week. In a week we’ll be on our way to Armenia.”

“But how?” said Grigor, scoffing.

“Did you think that we would return in chains on foot as these infidels brought us here? We’ll enter our country on horseback, like princes.”

“I don’t follow. From your mouth to God’s ears.”

“I’ll spell it out for you now.”

They reached their hut near the gate which had no window, only a small hole through which a faint light barely entered during the day. And now, toward evening, it was getting dark, so no one could see anything. Suren got a small candle he had hidden in a crack in the wall. Taking it to the room across the way, he cleared away the sand on the ground near the wall, and pointed to a large stone.

“You see this stone, Grigor,” he said, “when we lift this stone, we will find a passage and that passage goes to the harem and on to where the Sheikh’s armory and treasury are located.

“I still do not understand. What good will that passage do the two of us?”

“A lot of good. Now that we are freed from our chains, we can go and get ourselves clean Arab clothes and weapons, and extract the price for the past four years of hard labor. We will take revenge and go on our way.”

“It is enough that we get away alive and in one piece. I will give them their just desert and our revenge.”

“I will not forget that. This is enough for now. Let’s go and have something to eat and get some rest.”

After this, he carefully covered the stone with sand again and they returned to their hut.

Chapter 16 – Suren and Grigor’s Escape

It was a restless night for Grigor, not because he was sleeping on the floor, but because his conscience would not let him sleep. He got up without making a sound and sat by the fountains. He lifted his eyes toward the clear, starry Damascus sky and thought about his fate. He thought about his native castle, especially his wonderful mother, whether she escaped or fell victim to the wild flames. He thought about the Rshtuni capital and the eight pleasant days he spent there with the princess and the last night when they confessed their love for each other. He wanted to lift his eyes to God beyond the arch of the beautiful heavens, but his guilty conscience was a barrier that he dared not cross to express his plea to the All-seeing judge of all.

He thought to himself after this apostasy; if he did not dare pray to God who knows all secrets, how would he show himself before men, how would he tell his sainted mother, if she was alive, and if dead, how would she look down from heaven at her infidel son? Would the Rshtuni princess accept an apostate, or would she show contempt rather than love, feeling revulsion toward him? “Oh, my dear chains, you were a thousand times preferable,” said the poor youth to himself, “you were a weight on my legs, but did not weigh on my heart. Now it is hard for me even to breathe. My mother, if she is alive, might accept me back like the prodigal son, but Teni, my Teni, how would she look upon me?

Already after this long captivity she has probably forgotten me, and now with the taint of apostasy what kind of horrid and disgusting creature would I appear to her? I used to dream of her, see her beautiful

eyes in my sleep, her swan-like neck, but I no longer have that consolation. ‘Apostate, infidel,’ is what they will call me behind my back, even our servants. What will Zaven say? Poor man, who loved me so and whom my mother trusted so much. Every time I was out of her sight, she would entrust me to him, even more than to my uncle Suren. He would throw himself into the flame to save me . . . but I would not become an object of pain, a revolting creature in everyone’s eyes. For this is the kind of life I will continue to live in this world.”

Grigor was immersed in these thoughts, when the harem door slowly cracked open with a creaking sound. He recoiled thinking that as an Armenian captive he had no right to be there. But the movement drew his attention and he decided it was wiser to stay there unseen. Through the half opened door, he saw a small girl, 12-13 years old, dressed in white. He recognized her suddenly. It was the Sheikh’s daughter, Esmā. He hoped that she would pass without noticing him, but she had sharp eyes and was looking all around. She moved forward carefully, and when she approached the fountain, she stopped and looked closely, with her wild eyes used to the dark she discerned who the statue leaning against the tree was and headed toward him.

Grigor considered it prudent to pretend to be asleep, and she came for a moment to examine Grigor, bent over and looked so closely at him, that her breath caused the young man to turn his head and open his eyes.

“Are you awake and pretending to be asleep?” asked the girl in a low voice.

“I came out to wash up, sat for a moment and fell asleep. I’ll go back to my place now and sleep,” said Grigor and he wanted to get up.

“No, sit, let’s talk, I came here for you,” and saying this she put her hand on his shoulder.

“Why, for me, please go, you are a noble, and I am a miserable slave. It is not right for you to leave the harem at this time of night.”

“But you are no longer a slave, you are free. My father told my mother. He also said something else . . .”

“I do not want to know. Please leave me, miss, I must go.” and he got up to leave.

The girl, rather than being taken aback by the young man’s serious words, jumped and knelt, putting her right hand on his neck. Her forwardness evoked anger on the one hand and fear on the other. Grigor was completely flustered. He was afraid to make a sound, even to talk, because if someone were to come and see them in this position, his situation would be very dangerous, so he decided to talk with her sweetly.

“You are the daughter of such a grand Sheikh. Is it appropriate for you to behave like this with one of your slaves? Please go to your room, so that I can go too,” he said, with a quiver in his voice.

But the girl, who was already mature for her age, not physically, but socially as is common in hot climates where upbringing is lax, just giggled.

“What are you afraid of? Why is your heart pounding? Don’t worry. My father plans to marry me off to you, he told my mother. Our rule is that when an infidel converts to the true faith, he must marry a believer. You are a handsome young man and I find you attractive.”

“But, miss, please, let go let me go. Now is not the time to talk about such things. It is nearly midnight.”

“No problem. I am not sleepy.”

Sweat was pouring down Grigor’s face and this girl was on his knees, with her hand on his shoulder. He was so shocked that it was as if a tiger cub had climbed in his lap and was clawing his throat, and was even worse, he was afraid to push her away, so he suddenly acted as if something caught his attention.

“Esma, I hear footsteps, someone is coming,” he said, agitated. And the girl jumped up like a monkey and came to her senses. Grigor without wasting a moment quickly moved away and he could hear her muttering behind him,

“You son of an infidel. How dare you try to fool me . . . I’ll show you, just you wait.”

But Grigor was glad to have slipped out of this young barbarian’s hand unscathed. Without looking back, he went and lay down on his grass mat. Then he started to compare that Sheikh’s demonic daughter and the delicate princess of Rshtunik until his eyes grew heavy with sleep and his emotions settled down.

Three days passed after that incident. Gazrik was dejected when he saw the Armenian princes without chains. He, a simple, good-hearted laborer, did not dare ask, but he found out everything from the apostates and Moslem slaves who urged him to do the same. And he responded to these taunts with silence and in his ignorance, he found consolation in Grigor’s profound sadness.

Of course, he said to himself, the poor prince could not handle these hardships, so he renounced his faith. A rough peasant like me can barely handle this kind of life. As for him, he was a soft boy, he has melted away, he’s skin and bones. Once he was like a learned priest who knew every truth, but his depression shows that the true, pure religion is that of our forefathers. How pitifully he looks at the mullah who comes to tell their tales. But this Kamsarakan prince . . . he’s got something up his sleeve. You can read his face, but sometimes he smiles for no reason, just standing there. It’s the kind of smile accompanied with a glint in the eyes. Let’s wait and see.

That same evening, a transformation took place in Suren’s inscrutable demeanor. He went in and out, he sat but couldn’t stay still, he wandered around outside and walked along the garden walls, stopping by the stables where the horses and other animals were. There were only two stable keepers. To one side there was a dilapidated stable, where for a year he had gathered every branch that the wind had blown there. He kept going back and forth. Grigor watched his coming and going from where he was lying down, and although he could not fall asleep, he made believe he was asleep so as not to worry his uncle. It was already nighttime. Everyone was asleep.

Suren approached Grigor and lit his candle and carefully went out. He headed to the room directly across the way, to the same place next to the door where he had shown Grigor the large rock. Grigor

overheard a hushed conversation. It seemed as if someone was talking with Gazrik, but he didn't move and the voices vanished. Finally, a bit more than an hour later, he went to check. He got up slowly and saw that no one was there. The two of them had disappeared.

On his feet before the open gate which the Arabs had not closed, he saw the harem door opening and Esma leaving with caution. She started to walk around the fountain. Grigor's heart started to pound when he considered that that brazen girl could come to his room. And then suddenly he imagined that Suren's secret, which he had not completely comprehended, could be revealed. Flustered, he tried to figure out what to do, when he saw that the girl was heading directly in his direction. He had to divert her from that place, for although the darkness gave some cover, he knew that Arab eyes could see well in the dark. Then Esma indeed saw him and approached.

"Hey, you son of an infidel, last night you tricked me. You said you heard footsteps and thought you could run away and escape from me," she said in a severe tone of voice, taking Grigor's hand.

"But you, miss," answered Grigor most courteously, "do you know what a great risk you are taking going around like this at night? Don't you know that if your father finds out he will take his anger out on me? You wouldn't want that would you?"

"True, I don't want that, but only if you do not trick me. If you trick me, if you try to lie and throw me off your lap, then I will spread such scandalous rumors and have you punished so severely that you will really regret it."

This miserable girl's impudence was hard for Grigor to take, but being in a subservient position, he had no choice. After four years he had learned to let insults roll off his back. Just a few days before, that little fiend threw a handful of sand into Gazrik's eyes and gleefully watched the man squirm. Even before that a couple of years earlier, with her weak arms, she started whipping the slaves left and right just for fun, egged on by her cruel, sycophantic servants. Now that she was a grown up girl, she did not have as much interaction with their living quarters, but she had the same wicked spirit.

And at that moment, Grigor's heart was uneasy. He couldn't let this wicked girl find out Suren's secret activities. So he tried to sweet talk her into going elsewhere; especially with the harem door open, a maid could wake up and cry in alarm, rousing the entire palace. He was in this state of mind when he saw a little light from the room where the entrance to the tunnel was. Afraid that the girl would see it, he dragged her to the room where he slept. She came without letting go of Grigor's hand. Grigor was completely flustered, but the girl was calm as could be.

"Where is your coworker?" she asked.

"I do not know . . . he must be sleeping. It will be embarrassing for the two of us to be here together."

"You infidels are truly cowardly people. You're afraid of everything. Whereas we true believers are stout hearted. You are afraid of my father, you're afraid of me, you're afraid of the servants. Now you're afraid of your own coworker. Sit here, in the grass then."

But Grigor had his eyes and ears open and he heard a rustling outside, so he left his fear behind and calmed down.

“Didn’t you hear me. I told you to sit down,” repeated the girl, ordering him and pulling him by the arm to sit.

“You do not understand anything,” he said, raising his voice a little and changing his tone. “I have been asking you nicely to go to your place and rest and you do not listen. I said it is shameful. You don’t understand. Well, let me go. Go to your place.”

“What, are you ordering me around? You son of an infidel, you know that if I yell the entire house will be on its feet, and when they all gather here I will tell them that you egged me on and came during the night. Do you know what will happen to you? Sit down and I’ll tell you . . . otherwise I’ll yell right this minute.”

She had already raised her voice quite a bit and Grigor was dumbfounded by the fiendish girl’s threats. He considered hitting her on the head so that she would fall to the ground, but then he thought better of it.

At that point, he saw a hand flash before him, take the girl by the throat and drag her away, and a gasping sound could be heard. Suren had her firmly by the throat, squeezed tightly, and she fell to the ground a breathless corpse, then Suren could be heard muttering under his breath,

“You spawn of the serpent, go to your satanic father’s lap.”

“What did you do, the girl’s dead,” said Grigor and he bent over to see the miserable creature’s condition.

Meanwhile Suren said in a commanding voice,

“This is no time for a long conversation or lamenting. Get up and come with me.”

And when they entered the room on the other side, in the dim light of a covered candle he showed him a cloak, overcoat, and a bundle.

“Put these on and take a weapon of your choice. Just make it quick. We have no time to waste.”

At that point he saw Gazrik, who was hidden beneath a pile of branches.

“Good work, Gazrik, is there more?” he asked.

“No, this is the last load.”

“Good, then put that in front of the servant’s quarter doors.”

He lit a torch drenched in oil and started to set all the piles of branches on fire in front of each door. It was the middle of the night and the regular nighttime breeze had begun to blow. In seconds, the entire house was in flames. He took Gazrik by the arm and showed him his weapons and clothes and told him to make it quick. He changed into the new clothes, put on a white head-dress, picked up his bow, quiver, spear and hung his sword on his belt. When the three were ready, they picked up their

saddlebags and went out. In front of the door, he and Gazrik set the branches on fire. The flames rose. Suren then heard a gleeful howl,

“Now, I am at peace,” said Grigor, “see how beautiful it is, how it looks like the flames at Vardanaberd.”

“O, how I dislike such pitiless scenes . . .

“Me too. Because this fire and those who perish in it are much fewer than our losses.”

Grigor then looked at his uncle’s face, and his eyes were glistening with such ferocity that he could not look. Suren then said, “Let’s go,” and they headed to the stable, where their Arabian steeds were saddled and ready. Suren pointed to the Sheikh’s favorite mount and told Grigor, “What are you waiting for, get on.” Gazrik and he did the same taking the best horses and an extra horse to carry fodder and supplies for their journey. The fire spread quickly and there was crackling from all sides. The cries of people were rising, and Suren said,

“Good, good, it is still nothing compared to the wailing and suffering our people endured,” and they rode off at a gallop. Then he said to Grigor and Gazrik, “Look, just as I said. The hardest thing was figuring out how to get us on these horses. For two years I have been plotting our escape. Look at the sky, that star (he pointed out the pole star) will guide you and then will bear right until you hit the Euphrates. After that the river will guide you home.

“What’s the meaning of these words,” said Grigor. “Are we going to go separate ways?”

“We’ll do everything we can to stay together, but if events separate us, then I’m ordering you, ‘save yourselves,’ and you must obey my orders and look out for yourselves. I will now give you some money which can serve as an important weapon in case of such an event.” And he opened one side of the saddle bag with a key and took out a handful of gold and gave it to each to put in their pockets. Then he looked back one last time at the conflagration and rode ahead with them following as they crossed the desert to Palmyra.

Chapter 17 – Arabs in Pursuit

Fortunately, it was winter so they did not have to contend with the oppressive heat of the Arabian climate. When the sun rose, the three travelers welcomed the dawn, although for Gazrik at that moment more notable was Suren’s deep sleep. He turned to Grigor and said,

“Truly, prince, your uncle is an amazing man. How did he manage to plan and prepare everything for our escape? Amazing.”

“How long did you know about his plan and preparations?”

“It must have been a year ago or more when one day in the hot sun, when everyone was exhausted and could not move, I went into that half-dilapidated room by chance and saw the prince with sweat streaming down his face using a long stick to move that large stone. When he saw me, he said,

'Gazrik, you can keep a secret and you are a strong man. Come help me.' And I, woe is me, woe is me, I've moved a lot of stones like that in my time. Not to brag but in our village of Bagrevand I was one of the few people who could lift such a heavy thing, so I said, 'Step aside, prince,' and I tried to lift it, and I saw that it moved, and I pushed and it slid aside. 'Good job, Gazrik,' he said and looked down, at a hole before us that was big enough for one person only. He told me to wait and look out while he entered. I saw that an hour had passed and the prince did not appear, and I feared he had run into trouble, so I went down and looked and saw that there were two passages, one for the house and the other going outside of the walls. Figuring that the prince of course had taken the one going out, I took that and crawled until I saw a fork in the passage. I returned and went in the other direction until I saw a thin sliver of light and the prince leaning against the wall looking in from the light. When I saw him alive and well, I thanked God, because I thought that he might have run into a snake, scorpion or rock slide. Then I returned carefully so that no one could hear the chains on my feet. The prince caught up with me from behind and we came out of the tunnel. I put the rock back in its place and I did not ask what that place was; he went down there a few more times before last night, but I never asked a thing."

"But last night you also went down there, Gazrik."

"Last night I went down with him. He led the way with the torch. And I followed with a pick ax in my hand. I was careful not to make a noise until we reached the mouse hole at the end of the passage. I clawed open the hole with my hands rather than the pick ax, which was easier to do than to open the wooden door beside it leading to a basement. The prince stuck his head in and looked closely finding no one in the room; but when the hole was big enough, he lifted himself up and with torch in hand passed me the weapons first, one by one, then a bunch of keys, then clothes.

Later, he broke open two small chests, emptied the coins into the leather saddlebag hanging from the wall, handed that carefully to me, then we headed out, loaded with all those things. He removed my chains with those keys as we left for the stables where the two horse keepers were having a snack. We knocked them out and then chose and saddled horses and placed the branches and grass bundles before the main doors. He had thought of everything. He even prepared fodder for our horses on the journey. What an amazing man!"

"Why did you not tell me about these preparations?"

"The prince would say, 'he is very kindhearted and against spilling blood. It is better if I do everything and he finds out later.'"

"What do you think, Gazrik, will God not demand an accounting from us for the blood we have spilled and the people who were burned alive?"

"Prince, those men razed our country with fire and sword for years, killed all our people who would not convert, slaughtering them like dogs. When we remind God of those things everything will be settled."

Grigor could see that Gazrik was a disciple of Suren's doctrines, so he ended the discussion. When they continued their journey, he saw a large hammer hanging beside the sword from Gazrik's belt, so he asked whether it was a useful weapon.

“O, my prince,” said Gazrik, “that is better for me than a sword. It caught my eye in the Sheikh’s room. When Prince Suren did not notice it, I asked if I could take it. We artisans are better at using this than swords.”

Now the sun appeared on the horizon and a bit further along their way they saw a city in the distance. Grigor pulled his horse reins and the horse stopped. Suren awoke and rubbed his eyes and asked, “What’s up, what is it?”

He saw a large number of buildings behind the ruined walls and understood that they had reached Palmyra and the Euphrates River was not far off.

“Let’s go, fellows,” he said; “although we are still far from our native soil, the water is close at hand. Let’s go to the bank and refresh ourselves in its waters.”

Grigor was amazed to see such a large city in ruins. He was curious about such a glorious city in the middle of the desert, and involuntarily turned his horse’s head toward the temple of the sun, stopping to read the Greek inscriptions. And Suren, understanding his nephew’s interest, said, “Grigor, my son, let’s leave satisfying your curiosity for another day. Right now, we have to get ourselves out of this cursed land as fast as we can.”

They passed the eastern gate and continued their journey. The Euphrates appeared before them in all its majesty. They drank from its waters, ate their biscuits, fed and rested the horses, then lay down to rest themselves.

“Well, fellows, I think it is time to get going again. We have two routes before us. We can ride along this side of the river, or we can cross the river and go along the other side. Which do you want?”

“You decide,” said Grigor. “We are ready to follow you either way. But it appears there are six men on horseback on the other side.”

“Then those men,” said Suren, “are telling us: If you want to continue your journey peacefully, stay on that side and do not come near us because outlaws breed outlaws. As outlaws we’ll live and as outlaws we’ll die.”

Suren started down the right side of the river. Although he had taken weapons from the Sheikh’s armory, he had not checked their quality. So he decided this was a good time to do so. He took out his sword and admired the steel and sheen, and with a calm heart put it back in its sheathe and turned to his comrades saying,

“Our sheikh had come upon good plunder. He could not grow such weapons or gold in the desert. Look at the gold pieces I gave you. They are all Sasanian and these weapons have the Persian royal seal.”

After saying this, he turned his head and looked from time to time at approaching horsemen boldly advancing toward the river. From the speed of their approach Suren could tell their purpose but did not change his pace, muttering under his breath, “If they are this few they will not get anything from us.” He surveyed the terrain and drove his horse up when he saw a sandy hill. At first he raised his eyebrows and a dark pall came over his face, but it passed in a flash and he grinned a disconcerting grin.

“Fellows,” he said, “there are ten or twelve people coming our way. Our horses are elite Arabian steeds and our weapons are of the best quality. You, Grigor, are the brave grandson of the Mamikonians, and you, Gazrik, although unarmed, have the strength of a bear. Be brave. Grigor, just stay firmly in your saddle and protect yourselves from spear strikes with your shields. You, Gazrik, use your hammer as you know best. All right, now give your horses a lash and follow me.”

After these words, the three riders galloped off in a cloud of dust, and the horse with their provisions, followed Gazrik’s horse closely, as though a pair. When the Arabs saw how fast they were going and that they were getting away, they went to the left and right to cut them off. Two or three with spears were getting ready to attack Suren, who was always in front and who knocked the first rider off his horse with one blow leaving no time to get away. Grigor followed suit and struck the second attacker with his spear with such ferocity that his spear broke when the man hit the ground. And Gazrik, who considered the spear an impediment, yelled, “Take mine, prince,” and gave his to Grigor. Hammer in his right hand and shield ready, he rode forth because the Arab gang quit after two casualties and watched the three furious riders whom they could not beat or catch.

But they did not completely give up their chase. Suren had sharp eyes and a sharp mind. He saw that one of the Arabs was following them from a distance. He slowed down and told his comrades,

“Fellows, there is probably another outlaw gang ahead or these brutes would not be following us. Do not let up, be brave. With God’s help we started out well and we’ll finish well.”

A little later, a larger gang of outlaws appeared. Suren did the same move as the last time. He veered from the path and started to ride in the open since the enemy was far off. The Arabs did the same, trying to cut them off.

This time, Suren saw that it would be a bit harder because a gigantic Arab with a huge spear in his hand was riding toward him. Without getting flustered, he rode his steed directly at him, and when his opponent had taken aim, he gave his horse a lash and held his shield firm, the spear glided over the shield and landed in the sand as he brandished his sword.

The giant wanted to block the sword with his shield, but Suren was riding so fast, that he cut the giant’s head in half and he fell to the ground. At the same time Grigor was fighting with a crazed and wounded man who nicked Grigor’s horse with his bloody spear; the horse rode off furiously taking Grigor away from the battle to the river bank. Suren watched him ride away and turned his attention to Gazrik who was caught between two opponents trying to skewer him from the front and the back with their spears. Meanwhile the mighty artisan holding his shield to the front and swinging the hammer behind, disarmed the attacker with one blow and at just that moment the one in front, whose head Gazrik was getting ready to split open, fell from his horse.

But he was not out of danger yet. Two horsemen with spears rode toward him. Suren was getting ready to attack them, and yelled to Gazrik, “Leave them to me. Go after Grigor. He should be on the bank of the Euphrates. If I reach you in a few minutes, fine, otherwise cross the river without me. We’ll meet up in Armenia. Be brave, do not lose heart. The God of the Armenians is great.”

Gazrik seeing the way clear ahead, spurred his horse and disappeared, but a few moments later, he heard someone pursuing him from behind - the pack horse, his horse's pair, galloping to catch up. So he continued to ride forward and saw Grigor on the riverbank, washing his horse's wound.

And those who were pursuing Suren, seeing that he was getting ready to attack them, took up a defensive position, while watching their other gang of six or seven coming to block his path to the River. Noting that the first group had come to join the second, Suren surmised that Grigor and Gazrik had gotten away, and placing them in God's care, he spurred his horse with two feet, confident that no one could catch up with him, as his steed took off in the direction of the Amanos mountains.

Chapter 18 –Grigor and his Mamikonian uncles

Grigor stood on the bank of the Euphrates, deep in thought, when Gazrik, following Suren's strict orders, said,

"This is no time for standing around thinking. We've got to cross and be on our way. These are Prince Suren's orders. If we delay even a moment, those outlaws will catch up with us and everything will have been in vain, especially since we do not have his strength and ingenuity. Without him, the two of us would have been dead by now.

"But what is his situation right now, surrounded by enemies?" said Grigor sadly.

"What do you think? That man always finds a way out. Now go, my prince. Let's cross the Euphrates and talk later."

"May God protect him and us."

With these words, Grigor took off his coat, tied it on his saddle, and with one hand on the reins, began to swim across the river. Gazrik followed his example and they reached the other side of the Euphrates.

"Now," said Gazrik, "let's have a bite to eat, my prince. By the time we're done, if the prince has arrive, that's great. If not, we must continue our journey as he told us, and we'll meet again in Armenia."

"But, Gazrik, do you think that after crossing the Euphrates we entered Armenia?"

"No, I know that Armenia is still far away, but I also know that once we are out of the Arabs' country, we are on Christian soil and will be saved."

"When do you think we can say we'll be safe?"

"I do not know the names of cities I have not seen. If only we had not been forced to learn the cursed name of Damascus. If we reach a city with the sign of the cross, when I see churches that have pointed domes, people who are Christians and speak like Armenians, that greet us with God's blessing in the morning and the evening, then I will know that we are safe. But now is not the time to talk, my prince. Let's eat something quickly and hit the road."

Thus the kind artisan opened the bag of biscuits and seeing that Grigor was gloomy and uninterested in eating, he said, "I know what's on your mind, my prince, but do not worry. He is the kind of person that will find a way to survive no matter what; as they say, 'he can make bread out of stones.' Suren is that kind of noble man. I have no doubt that we will see him alive and well when we get back to Armenia. In the meantime, we need to make sure we get out of here in one piece . . ."

Seeing that Grigor was not eating, he went and gave the horses some barley and sat unhappily by himself.

"Brother Gazrik, I'm not hungry now. When I am, I'll let you know."

"Very well," said Gazrik glumly, and he gathered the bag of food and put it back.

"But why didn't you have anything to eat?"

"When you do not have an appetite, I do not either."

"Bring it then, my brother," said Grigor with a sigh, and he started to gnaw at a biscuit.

"Well now my appetite has returned," said the simple man, and he began to eat as well.

When the horses had finished eating their barley and were full, they drank some water from the Euphrates, got on their horses and started their journey up the river.

It seemed like an easy journey to follow the Euphrates up to Armenia, but nearly all the towns and villages along the way were desolate, in ruins from the Arab invasions. These two travelers who were not aware of the condition of the country in their absence and unsure whether the wild uninhabited places or the formerly inhabited settlements were more dangerous. With amazing good fortune, they pushed forward night and day, resting little until they arrived safely at BIRTHA, the first place Gazrik saw a Christian face. The next evening they entered Edessa, where there were not only Christians but Armenian Christians. The following morning the poor man went to the church of his forefathers, which he had not been able to set foot in for four years, and heard the psalms and hymns of his youth. Although he was not literate and did not understand it, the familiar sound was sweet to his ears. How many memories of his parents, his wife and children were contained in those prayers! He bowed, kissed the ground and crossed himself a thousand times.

In the distance, Grigor, Vardan's grandson stood near the door. The young man's conscience was roiling in guilt as he stood trying to pray before the icon of crucifixion; the fire that consumed the palace as he stood at the threshold of his homeland was as nothing. All he could think of was his mother, his sisters, his family, Zaven who had taken such good care of him. All these passed before his eyes and he wondered which of them he would see alive again; for whom had he been thought to have perished, for whom would he have been thought taken captive?

His thoughts wandered to the city of King Abgar, where Khorenatsi had gotten to all the libraries, in that church where the father of Armenian history had celebrated the divine liturgy. And the twenty-one-year-old youth, who was versed in his history, especially for his age and those times, mulled these things

over, praying and giving thanks for the blessings of his simple, unlearned, pious companion, who had great hope of seeing his family and tender children again.

Even before entering Edessa, Grigor had asked Gazrik not to reveal their identity. He faithfully kept that order, and like unknown foreigners they gave their clothes an Armenian look and left Edessa with a few other travelers, arriving safe and sound in Amida. Without stopping at the Armenian border, they entered Tsop and Aghdznik and then Taron, the hereditary lands of the great Armenian princes Mushegh and Hamazasp. Based on consultations with Suren, Grigor, had certain suspicions about his uncle and cousin, so he strictly ordered Gazrik not to reveal their identity to anyone, and in this way they entered Mush.

Mush, built on a hill, was the main city of Taron. It was quite expansive. It was the capital from where Grigor's uncle, Mushegh Mamikonian, governed. The palace was fortified with a high wall and towers and surrounded by gardens and orchards that covered the plain of Mush as far as the eye could see. Hmayak Mamikonian, who was a more distant relative of Grigor, lived in Khnus fortress on the other side of the Aratsani River.

The two travelers stopped near a church for the night, but their dress was so simple that they began to attract attention, even more so because of their incomparable Arabian steeds and weapons. Thus a short while later the next morning an invitation came from the Mamikonian prince who wanted to meet the two travelers from Edessa. Grigor already wanted such a meeting, being almost certain that his uncle would not recognize him since it had been ten years since they had seen each other. So he gave only a few instructions to Gazrik so that they would be consistent in their stories.

It was wintertime. The oak logs crackled in the fireplace. The Mamikonian governor was seated on his throne wrapped in sable. He was a 50-year-old man, so changed that Grigor could hardly recognize him, his hair completely white, his cheeks weather worn, but his blue eyes were still full of fire and cunning.

When Grigor entered, according to Armenian custom, he kissed his hand. Mushegh gestured for him to sit down, as was his habit. He scrutinized the young man closely, then said,

"Welcome. I heard you are coming from Edessa. It must be very dangerous in those parts these days."

"Yes, my Lord," answered Grigor with calm simplicity, "but thanks be to God we arrived safely."

"Where are you from, my son."

"I am from Shirak."

"What were you doing in Edessa?"

"I went to claim an inheritance from a relative."

"Were you successful in your mission?"

"More or less. The Kamsarakan prince wanted three Arabian stallions. We bought them on his account and are returning."

“We are on good terms with the Kamsarkans. They are in-laws. If you sold those horses to us, they would be pleased, I think. But let’s leave this topic for now. What are they saying about the Arabs in Edessa?”

“There is great fear that the barbarians will attack because they have already taken over all of Syria and are attacking Cilicia.”

“Those outlaws have caused us great losses as well. They burned down my brother’s home and razed it to the ground.”

“But when we were in Edessa, my lord, we heard that your nephew and his uncle Suren Kamsarakan had escaped captivity and had come to Malatia.”

Grigor said this very innocently to see how his uncle would react. When he heard it, he knitted his brow, but then regained his composure a moment later.

“If only those rumors were true, but is it possible to escape from those brutes’ hands? How many times have I sent petitions to the Arabs, but to no avail? My emissaries always returned empty-handed.

The province of Kogovit was in ruins. I helped the inhabitants and resettled the refugees. I tried to rebuild, I said to myself, so that when my nephew returned he would find the estate standing. But last year, the Arab invaders came again, razed Dvin and this summer they invaded Ayrarat I was ill and could not get up. God grant long life to the Lord of the Rshtunis. In Artsapa, he dealt a blow to the invaders. I sent Hamazasp to protect the country, but it was devastation upon devastation. May God have mercy. I do not know what else to say.”

“You, lord of the Mamikonians, as an Armenian and governor, have done your duty. It is possible that thanks to your petitions, that Mamikonian and Kamsarakan have been released.”

Upon hearing this, the old fox gave an emphatic and inquisitive glance at the young man, but judging from his simple appearance, his suspicions disappeared, and with a broken and aching heart, he answered,

“My emissaries were sent more than two years ago and they returned dismayed. Both of them were confirmed dead. May God hear our prayers for their souls.”

After he said this, he crossed himself. Grigor had to do the same to avoid giving himself away. And he decided not to raise the issue of their escape again, for he saw that the greedy old man’s lust for the inheritance was so great that he would do anything to reach his goal. So he got up to bid him farewell,

“Where are you rushing off to, my son? Sit down,” he said, “we have not yet finished discussing the steeds. It is too bad for you, I know, that the Kamsarakan lords of Arshakunik cannot give you a good price for these, since they sold their brother Suren’s inheritance to the Lady of the Bagratunis. So you would be better off if you sold those horses to us and receive your price from our treasury.”

“Your wish is our command, prince, but my family and I live in Bagaran and if we return empty handed, without having carried out the Kamsarakan prince’s orders, you can well imagine how difficult a situation we would find ourselves in.”

“Yes, that is true, but the Kamsarakans are kind and forgiving. Only Suren was strict and hardhearted. I have never seen such a willful, vengeful man among the Armenian princes, God rest his soul. But Nerses is a good man, who does not hold a grudge. You can sell the horses to me without fear of retribution.”

“Very well, but we are little people and we are afraid. Please ask your scribe to write a note to the Kamsarakan prince that in obedience to your high command we left the horses here and your humble servants will leave with a calm heart.”

“Will you be leaving so soon?”

“No, we will stay here a few more days. We still have to make a pilgrimage to Surp Karapet Monastery . . . “

“Very well, then there is still time to talk this over. Tomorrow morning come and let’s talk.”

“Your wish is our command, prince.” said Grigor, humbly saluting him as he left. A servant then came to him and handed him a piece of paper and said,

“My Lord, a courier from the Prince Nerses Kamsarakan has brought this letter for your Lordship.”

Mushegh took the letter, wrinkled his brow and with a distracted face, motioned to Grigor that he could leave. Grigor left, but naturally wanted to see his uncle’s courier and find out about his mother’s family. He was in such despair about his mother but he dared not ask, especially since he saw that his uncle Mushegh was so strongly disposed to believe that he was dead rather than alive. Thus, it was not wise to stay in this palace too long, so he left quickly and asked for Gazrik. When he saw him, he carried a mysterious air and whispered, “Let’s go, my prince, I have something to tell you.” And as they were leaving the palace for the city, Gazrik began to recount what he had heard.

“First, I have to tell you that, according to the servants, your uncle is not a very nice man. They say that he is a liar and a cheat. One said to the other, ‘You knave, you went to Brnashen and slept at your home for 4 months, and then you spread the word that you went to Arabia to find the prince’s nephew, whom you swore was dead and buried. But now there are rumors everywhere that Grigor and his uncle Suren are alive, have escaped captivity and are on their way back to Armenia. Those men suffered so because of your deceit and you gave false witness under oath that those looking for Kamsarakan came and took their corpses away.’”

“Well, what does this mean, Gazrik? Only that my uncle has a dishonest servant who deceived him.”

“But first hear the whole story, then judge. That servant held his temper, taking it all as a joke, but then a few moments later, he started to curse, ‘I didn’t make this up, brothers, the great prince ordered it and even advised what I should do.’ he said. At that moment I thought everyone would be silent, but then another added, ‘The prince is a master at plotting things like this,’ he said, ‘last summer, when we told him in Amida that the Arabs are coming, he did not say a thing. Instead he made believe that he knew nothing. When he came back to Taron, he barely gave word to the villages that they should prepare their defense, so many people died as a result, and he pretended to be ill when Rshtuni asked military assistance from him

Everyone told similar stories. They openly said that he hoped for your death so that he could take over Kogovit. Now, do you see, we should waste no time and get out of here. I would not dare to say such things about your uncle, but all three or four of his servants all said the same thing.”

“But Gazrik, I have another thought. Prince Nerses Kamsarakan’s messenger came to Mushegh. I would very much like to meet the messenger. But from my uncle’s face I could tell that he would not want me to meet him because he wants to buy our horses, and I said that they were for Nerses.”

“I can go to see that man.”

“It is easy to go, but what excuse will we give to get in?”

“I do not know . . . what do you think? Perhaps, I who am from Shirak, heard that someone from our parts had come and he is a relative, so I have come to see him.”

“Let’s go and find lodging and think this through.”

Chapter 19 – Grigor and Zaven Reunited

At the same time, the great prince Mushegh Mamikonian, with the letter from Nerses still in his hand after Grigor left, thought a moment and then relaxing his brow and lifting his eyes to look at the servant who as waiting, said,

“Bring the messenger here, but be careful that he does not meet that young man, and for that matter that they not see each other at all.”

Receiving this order, the servant left, and when Grigor went away, he fetched the messenger and brought him to the great prince. He stood still, looking over the man who entered and immediately recognized him as his brother David’s faithful servant, Zaven, who in his military uniform and gear, looked quite a bit younger than in his gardener’s attire in Constantinople.

“Welcome, brother Zaven,” said Mushegh, “your letter brings us good tidings. My niece has returned from Constantinople, as hard as it is to believe. We received this news with great joy and we are grateful to the Kamsarakan prince for letting us know. However, the letter says something I didn’t quite understand. ‘If Grigor does not turn up, then Arpeni would be your brother David’s heir, so the Mamikonian and Kamsarakan lineage has not ended. This is cause for rejoicing for you as for us.’”

“Great prince, I am not a learned man,” answered Zaven, “so I am not in a position to interpret princely words, but it seems to me that this means that if, God forbid, Grigor is also dead, then his sister would be the legal heir to her forefather’s realm and estate.”

No sooner had he uttered these words than Mushegh’s faced grew dark, so he quickly added,

“But I repeat, this is beyond me, and I know nothing about these laws. I merely felt obliged to venture an answer because you insisted.”

“Indeed,” sneered Mushegh, “if that’s what the Kamsarakans think then they will completely overturn the nobles’ laws and customs, and Babylonian chaos will reign in Armenia.”

“I have never been to Babylon, your lordship,” he answered in his simple-minded way.

“Of course, you have not been to Babylon, but you have been in those parts.”

“I have heard, your Lordship, when I was in Ctesiphon, and you were also there, at the sublime porte of the King of Kings, that Babylon was not far away.”

Mushegh knew people and had no intention of entering into a discussion with a mere common soldier. So he acted as if he had not heard Zaven’s pointed answer, and asked gruffly, “When did the prince write that letter? Who else was there? It says that the letter was written in Dvin.”

“Yes, your lordship, they were with the Rshtuni prince in his palace along with the Catholicos and other nobles, when the Kamsarakan prince summoned me to bring this letter to you and return with your response.”

Mushegh’s face grew yet gloomier, but restraining himself, he said, “Did you come alone, or were there others with you?”

“As you can see, your lordship, I am already quite old. The Kamsarakan prince sent two guards to accompany me.”

“And where are they now?”

“They are in the city below. Only I came up to the palace.”

“Well you must know that I cannot respond to this letter on my own. I must consult with Hamazasp Mamikonian and respond accordingly.”

“He told us that this letter’s response was the prerogative of the head of the Mamikonian family. Thus he promised to answer the Kamsarakan prince accordingly, because on our way here, we stopped at Khnus and gave him a letter, as we were instructed.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said the prince angrily. “The catholicos, generals and nobles appear to have joined forces against me, and with a smooth, friendly letter they are trying to overturn our ancestral laws and customs. How could they send a letter to Hamazasp at the same time as they sent one to me? It appears that they are trying to sow dissension in the Maminkonian family.”

“Your lordship, I am not able to comment on such matters. I have just followed orders, said what I was told to say, and done what I was told to do. And whatever response you order me to convey I will take back.”

“Well, what are you talking about, man. Who’s addressing you? I am consulting with myself.”

“Very well you are quite correct in your reprimand, forgive me for being so simpleminded.”

“How old is that girl now, and by what miracle did she suddenly turn up?”

Zaven stood silent and looked at the ground.

“I’m talking to you, man. Why aren’t you answering me?”

“Forgive me, your lordship, I thought you were thinking aloud so I was not paying attention to your question.”

“The Kamsarakans found the right man to send here as a messenger.”

Again Zaven stood silent. Then Musghegh got up and with a stern look said, “You go and get some rest outside. When you have rested up perhaps you will speak in a manner more fitting to addressing a prince.”

Saying this, he started to pace around the room. This letter from the Kamsarakans had turned his plans upside down. He thought he had a clear claim to a portion of Bagrevand if Grigor were dead, but now, some little girl had turned up and could snatch that way from him. If it were just the Kamsarakans he knew exactly how he would answer, but now that this involved the council of nobles in Dvin, the catholicos and especially Theodoros Rshtuni, who was more of a doer than a talker, it was a different matter altogether.

Theodoros was a formidable neighbor who controlled Bznunik on the east and Baghesh to the south, thus encircling his realm of Taron. For this reason, he was always apprehensive and suspicious. And now after Theodoros’s victory in Artsap, Nerses Kamasarakan had become a tool in his hand, using the specious rights of a little girl against him. “What kind of inappropriate nonsense was this?”

He said to himself, “who ever heard of a law that a girl could inherit a noble estate? What will become of our ancestral, noble ways? And Hamazasp is easily influenced. He will foolishly respond approvingly to this letter instead of protesting it.

And Theodoros will accomplish his fiendish goal of weakening the Mamikonians and dividing us. I must quickly see that boy, yes, that mama’s boy, who has never grown up. If I do not take him by the hand, he will end up losing everything. Fortunately, he is not like those headstrong young princes who are so sure of their knowledge and learning, who talk and argue, and spout logic, philosophy and theology, like long-winded clerics. He will listen to my advice and respect the head of the family’s instruction.”

In this frame of mind, Mushegh had completely forgotten about the young man from Shirak and the Arabian horses. Without a moment’s delay, he dispatched a messenger with a letter to Hamazasp in Khnus, that he should hurry to see him before answering the Kamsarakans. Thus, he calmed down a bit and started to think more cold-bloodedly. He regretted showing such emotions before Zaven, who was a wise, Christian man, who rarely showed his temper or his heart; so he asked where Zaven was staying and sent a messenger to bring him.

As for Zaven, in the face of Mushegh’s greed and disdain, he could hardly control himself and was very glad to be out of his presence. After leaving, he went down the stairs four at a time, leapt on his horse, and quickly went down to the city.

When he reached the inn where he had left his two guards, he dismounted and saw that they were merrily talking with someone, who had invited them to dinner. In a good mood from the wine, one of them said,

“As the holy cross is my witness, I have to hand it to you, you are a martyr, a witness, Gazrik. You are the first person I have ever seen who, by God, escape from those barbarians’ hands. Let’s go and have dinner. Our brother Zaven will of course have dinner with the prince this evening. So let’s go and enjoy the wine of Mush.”

“Fellows, you’ll have to excuse me. My prince is waiting. Thanks be to God. You have given me news that my family and children are safe and sound. But how will I tell that noble young man that his mother and sister are dead, and only his little sister has survived?”

The snow was falling softly in large flakes. Like a curtain it hid Zaven and his horse from those men’s eyes. The unknown man’s words startled Zaven and without stopping to think, his heart pounding, he put his hands on Gazrik’s shoulders, holding him as if to prevent him from disappearing, and with a fatherly voice said,

“My son, tell me, who is your prince, the noble youth whom you do not dare tell that his mother and sister are dead and only his little sister has survived? Tell me his name.”

And Gazrik, flustered, turned and recognizing Zaven kissed his hand. Without even noticing this act of honor, which every Armenian young man showed his elders, Zaven repeated,

“Tell me, what is your prince’s name.”

“Grigor Mamikonian.”

“Where is he? Tell me where he is.”

“Upstairs, in his room.”

“Well, let’s go.”

The old man ran up the stairs so quickly that his young companions could not keep up. When he reached the door, Gazrik said, “here,” and the old man’s joyous face suddenly became gloomy. For a moment, he held Gazrik’s arm to stop him from opening the door. He paused and recalled Gazrik’s words, “his mother and sister are dead.”

But what would have held another back could not restrain his heart. He opened the door and entered. There was a window in the small attic room and right next to the door a fireplace with a warm flame that gave the humble lodgings a warm glow. On both sides of the fireplace were a couple of mats, some saddles, leather bags and weapons on the wooden floor. And there sat Grigor in pensive sadness. When the door opened he saw Zaven, a bit grayer than four years ago, and cried out, “Zaven *hayrik*,” and wrapped his arms joyfully around his neck. And Zaven said, “O, my prince, may God protect you,” as tears flowed down their faces. After the first emotional moments had passed, Grigor asked,

“Tell me, Zaven *hayrik*, what happened to my mother and sisters . . . Don’t tell me that all all of them died, O my God,” said Grigor as he crouched to the floor, hands on his head.

“No, not all of them, my prince. God protected Arpine for you, and you for her.”

He began to sob, “my mother, my mother . . . my dear angelic mother,” were all that could be heard. And it was as if the four men stopped breathing as the young man lamented his loss. The fire crackled, but there was no other sound in the room. After the sobs came a mournful silence, and again more sobs going on for nearly an hour. Zaven left him to mourn until he asked for some water, drank and washed his face. Then he said,

“Zaven *hayrik*, for four years I expected and imagined the worst, but the human heart is so weak that I kept nursing hope . . . I was deceiving myself . . . where is Arpeni now? Is she well? Is she healthy?”

“Thank God, she he healthy and strong, so pretty and smart, and so . . .”

“Where is she now?”

“She is in Maghasberd, with your maternal aunt, Lady Mamer, waiting for you.”

“She is waiting for me . . . did you really believe I would return? That you’d find me alive?”

“When others thought you were dead, I always believed that I would see you return alive, but I expected to see prince Suren with you. Weren’t you together?”

“We were together, but on the journey here we got separated against our will . . . it’s a long story.”

“Yes, we have a lot to talk about, my prince. Hopefully God will put an end to these mournful and wretched stories, and we will live happier lives than these past few years . . .”

Just then, the door opened and the abbot came and addressing the people who were outside the door, said, “Here are the people you are looking for,” and he left.

Two of the Mamikonian prince’s guards entered, and greeted Zaven, saying, “Brother Zaven, the prince wants to see you.”

“Very well. It is quite late now. I’ll go to see him first thing in the morning.”

“Our orders are to bring you this evening.”

“Please give him my respects. My age prevents me from coming this evening. Tomorrow I would be pleased to be his guest.”

The men paused and then a bit disgruntled, bid him farewell.

“Have you seen your uncle, prince,” asked Zaven.

“Yes, Zaven *hayrik*, but I did not reveal my identity.”

“That I understand,” said the old man smiling, “What did you think?”

“I decided that it would be best to leave Taron as soon as possible.”

“You are quite right, my prince. I always said that you were very smart. So let’s have dinner and then ride away.”

“Tonight?” answered Grigor, amazed.

“Yes, my prince, there is an old saying, ‘Don’t sleep in the shadow of a fox.’ Fellows, go prepare some dinner and feed the horses.”

The men arose, leaving the two of them alone.

“But what’s the rush, *hayrik?*”

“He may be your uncle but he is a wily snake, my prince. I know him well. It will be a bit slow going with the snow for two hours, but it will be safer and calmer if we go. We can spend the night at Arakelots Monastery and tomorrow morning we will decide direction to go next.”

“Very well.”

They quickly got up as the barbequed meat was ready. The wine of Taron was excellent and plentiful. They ate their fill and when the horses were saddled, Grigor gave the orders to move out.

“Gazrik, have the third Arabian horse saddled for brother Zaven, and put our provisions on the new horse.”

It was a calm, snowy night. Zaven, who knew Armenia like the back of his hand, rode ahead until they reached Arakelots Monastery. The abbot was an old friend who welcomed them graciously. Grigor and Zaven spent the long snowy night recounting the past four years and hearing about their family’s misfortunes. It was just before dawn when the two of them finally got some sleep.

Chapter 20 – Grigor in Rshtunik

Although Mushegh was upset that Zaven had not accepted his invitation, he did not let on as he expected him to come the next morning. He also expected the young man from Shirak to return to discuss the horses, but either of them turned up. It snowed, then stopped, then started again. He wondered whether Hamazasp would make it. Then from his window in the north he saw a spot in the white landscape and something glistening from time to time. It was an armed contingent so it had to be Hamazasp. As for Zaven, when he did not come by noon, he sent his men to the inn to find him. The abbot responded that his guests had left for St. Karapet Monastery during the night despite the often heavy snow.

Being suspicious as well as cunning by nature, Mushegh had not liked Zaven from the day that they first met during his brother David’s time, always looking at him askance, so the fact that he had disappeared in the night with that youth from Shirak piqued his suspicions. He sent some guards to St. Karapet monastery to bring them back, willingly or by force.

Just then, Hamazasp arrived, a plodding young man, kind, calm, with a pleasant way about him, considered studious for his time.

Faithful to tradition and respectful of ancestral ways, albeit unwillingly, he complied with Mushegh's often illicit and inappropriate orders, although some attributed his submissiveness to ambition because Mushegh did not have heirs and was known to be a stubborn man.

The head of the Mamikonian family received him warmly and naturally his first question was about the contents of the letter from the Kamsarakans. What he learned was that it was virtually the same as the one he had received, so he asked, "What answer did you give?"

"I have not answered yet since I wanted to ask you first as the issue related more to you as the head of the Mamikonian family."

This answer brought contentment to Mushegh since Hamazasp respected his rights.

"But what do you think about this suggestion? What answer should we give? It is possible to entrust the governance of a province to women?"

"If you look at it that way, we already allow women to rule. Even before us and during our times, widows have had complete power over their late husband's realms as regents until their children came of age. For thirty of the past 100 years, Sahat, a woman, has ruled Siunik and the same in the days of Lady Byuregh, and the inhabitants were often more content with their rule. But is the question whether women have the right to inherit noble rule? They can inherit a farm, house, palace, but they do not have the right to rule an Armenian province.

"This is just the issue that I wanted to put to those people who shamelessly made such a suggestion to us."

"But we need to consider, your Lordship, that this suggestion was made with the approval of the catholicos, the commander-in-chief of Armenia and the council of nobles."

"That's what makes me angry. Because I see that the catholicos and those other nobles are under the sway of one man's caprice, and that man is Theodoros. You don't know him, but I do and I can tell. We grew up together in the sublime porte of Ctesiphon. When he came, he was restless, quarrelsome, violent, and willful. He wanted to boss everyone around. Even at that age he showed his true intentions, which he brazenly carries out now, acting as if he were the protector of the weak in order to garner their support to dominate the powerful.

He does not care about the law of our forefathers or tradition or rules. He ignores all and tramples everything to get what he wants. What was the Rshtuni realm when he inherited it from his father? A small province. Now it is a very large region. In Vaspurakan, the Artsruni's eagle has had its wings clipped as the Rshtuni's falcon has soared to dominate the horizon. He took over Bznunik and Baghesh is one of his strongholds. He became the absolute ruler of the sea of Aghtamar. Khorkhorunik is now his humble servant. We and Mokka are the only ones that are not under his control. He even has far-flung alliances with Georgia, Albania and Siunik. Since Vasak Siuni we have not had such an arrogant and haughty leader who rides roughshod over Armenia. His only ambition is to become king.

His wife suits him well. She does not stay home but goes from city to city. Accustomed to hunting since childhood, she looks for opportunities to go hunting during her travels. She sets a bad example for noble women who tomorrow will start demanding to share power with their husbands, and every house will

be the scene of a revolt and turmoil. It was through this woman's conniving that Bznunik came under Rshtuni rule. Two or three princes peacefully ruled that province. That woman behind the scenes managed to pit them against each other. At that time, while I was preoccupied with affairs in Hashtiank province, the prince had started a battle with the people from the north. She, a woman, shamelessly came to Datvan and installed herself as governor, in royal majesty, she convened a tribunal, concocted charges, had the people judge and condemned the princes, all without ever even showing up, as if she had nothing to do with it, and all she did was enforce the judgment.

One she locked up in the Baghesh fortress for life, and the other whose crime was to appeal to me she banished to an uninhabited island with his family, and then took their lands. She left only Garegin Bznuni, who was as docile as a sheep, in his land, and still considering the Rshtuni's authority insecure, she installed the crusty old general Atom Shahuni on the shore of the lake as her lookout. And she, of course, always had other fish to fry. This was the third catholicos she had installed; she found reasons to call nobles' council meetings in Dvin, during which she would speak and through which she would act.

She may as well have been a soldier as she argued about military matters and decisions; or a prince, who understands government and has the right to issue orders. But what are we to do when she silences the catholicos, bishops and vardapets as if she is the head theologian? I know that her goal has always been to set up a standing council of nobles at Dvin and through their authority rule Armenia, but Mushegh is still alive."

Hamazasp listened to this discourse, although he knew well that enemies who have axes to grind can never be fair in their judgments. So he sat, and wrote out the long response Mushegh dictated to the Kamsarakan prince's letter, rejecting the right of women to inherit the authority to rule over a province, and only grudgingly accepting that Davit's child would have a right to their ancestral residence in Vardanaberd. This letter was written in Hamazasp's hand and sealed with Mushegh's seal, while they awaited Zaven's return from St. Karapet monastery to give it to him to deliver. At just this moment, Mushegh's servants brought a letter which an artisan had dropped off. The prince did not open it. He gave it to Hamazasp to read, as follows:

"Felicitations to powerful prince Mushegh, Lord of the Mamikonians. I bring joyful tidings. Your nephew Grigor has succeeded in returning from captivity. Thus, naturally, my duty to take your answer back to the Kamsarakan prince ceases with his return. Your lordship's humble servant, Zaven Gaghzvanetsi."

"There is no date or place, city or village, only a seal, 'Zaven, servant of Jesus Christ'," said Hamazasp looking up.

"There is something fishy here," said Mushegh; "when they saw that I would not accept the girl's supposed rights, they prepared this scheme."

"But . . ." said Hamazasp, looking closely at the letter, "I remember Grigor's penmanship. This is exactly like his writing."

Mushegh ordered his servant, "Go quickly. Whoever finds that artisan, will receive a large reward from me."

The servants all ran out and within an hour they brought a muddy, miserable villager before Mushegh.

“Were you the one who brought this letter?” asked Mushegh sternly.

“Yes, my lord.”

“Who gave it to you?”

“A white-haired soldier on horseback.”

“Where did he give it to you?”

“On the royal highway. As I was going out of Norashen, I saw them near Arakelots monastery. There were 5 riders. The old man gave me the letter to bring to you. A young man on a very fine horse gave me this gold coin.”

“Let me see the coin.”

“Here is it,” said the peasant, quickly opening up his bundle to take it out and give it to the prince.

“It is a Sasanian coin,” said Mushegh after examining it. Then he threw it aside. “What direction were they headed?”

“They were headed to Baghesh.”

“What kind of man was the youth?”

“He was twenty, twenty-two years old, with a light beard, kind, handsome eyes.”

“Very well, I’ve got it.” and he gestured for them to leave.

When the peasant went out, he put the coin in his pocket. Mushegh fell into deep thought mulling over the young man with the Arabian horses, his kind and attractive eyes, age, beard, and the fact that Hamazasp verifying that it looked like Grigor’s handwriting. And the fact that they said they were going to go to St. Karapet Monastery, but instead of going north, they when south. That’s why the men he sent that night to spy on them came back and reported that they were not at the monastery.

“But why were they going to Baghesh?” Zaven must have decided that. Just in case Mushegh was suspicious and sent out a search party, they would have gone in the other direction and reached the realm of the Rshtunis.

And that’s exactly what happened. They entered Baghesh that evening safe, sound and to the extent that the sad circumstances permitted, Grigor was in a good mood. Zaven’s advice was not to reveal Grigor’s identity to anyone until they reached the Rshtuni capital. And Grigor, since the loss of his mother, had set his heart on Teni, but did not dare tell anyone about his love, since he wanted to check in person.

Thus after spending the evening in Baghesh, the next morning they headed for the capital. The closer they got the more anxious Grigor became. He wondered whether Teni had perhaps given up on him and given her heart to another.

After five days' journey they entered the capital. Theodoros was not there. The servants took them to the winter hall and there Husik came to greet the guests and ask how they were. Grigor was dressed somberly, his beard was enough so that Husik did not recall him. Thus, when he found out that Grigor Mamikonian had escaped captivity and come there, he ran to tell Lady Rshtuni.

The news of his arrival spread quickly through the palace. Seta received Grigor most graciously; when the conversation turned to his mother, Grigor tried to hold back his tears, but she said, "Grigor, my son, don't be ashamed of your tears. Don't think that everyone has a heart of stone or is so emotionally cold. Look at our Husik. The world could be destroyed and he wouldn't shed a tear. But before an unsheathed sword he shakes in his boots."

To change the subject and at the same time to glean information, the princess started to ask him about his life in captivity. Just then, Teni entered and Grigor's eyes gleamed. Teni had grown and her beauty had grown with her. She was much changed, tender, a rosy blush on her face, and her bright eyes radiated joy while at the same time projecting her expectations and despondency. In her mind, she quickly compared his former self to this sunburnt, windswept face from the Arabian desert, the hardship of his captivity, the long journey, dangers and traumas, that had wasted away his body, and clouded his eyes.

But when the Rshtuni maiden came and spoke with him at some length, held his hand and squeezed it firmly, she encouraged him. Answering the Lady's questions, he described his life of the past four years, in terms one could only call torture. He saw Teni, who was secretly wiping her eyes, and when he told them how the three of them had stood up to the 20 outlaws, he could see the change in her expression. When he described how they crossed the Euphrates and were finally free, he saw her happiness, and he took heart that indeed she still loved him.

Seta's sharp eyes noticed the bond between her daughter and this young man for the first time. She was not opposed to that affection, because she did not underestimate Grigor and could see his attraction in the traces of the harsh climate he had endured, erasing any softness, and giving a look of manly vigor. She also observed and assessed his intellect and the way he praised Suren's role and spoke modestly about himself.

Grigor omitted the part about their apostasy because it weighed on his heart so much that he could barely muster the courage to confess this to a priest in private. Public confession was beyond him.

Although Grigor had begun to count on Teni's love and although he sensed Seta's affection and her maternal care, still having been through the forge of misfortune at such a tender age, having lost a father, mother, sister, freedom, home, power, and to top it off, having met his closest relatives who wished for his death, forcing him to see them as enemies from which he had to take refuge, he looked circumspectly and wondered whether he might be mistaking the daughter and mother's pity and sympathy for love. Thus, his heart swung back and forth between hope and fear, and he awaited the appropriate time to meet Teni alone. But it was not summer. There was no garden, no flowers, no placid lake, no moonlight. His only chance for a private conversation was the library.

They had evening dinner, then Zaven told the entire tragic story that he had witnessed without embellishment and everyone listened in tears. Even Husik paid attention to every detail. It was

midnight and Grigor told them how they prudently left Taron, and everyone fell silent. Lady Rshtuni stood up, and so did everyone else. “It is late, my son Grigor,” she said, approaching him, “and we forgot how tired you must be from your journey. Rest tonight. We have tomorrow and the rest of the winter to see each other. The Prince will come in a couple of days. When he learns of the injustice against you, his nature will not tolerate such wrongdoing. Without doubt he will do everything in his power to defend your rights, and time will heal the many wounds of the afflictions you have suffered. I am glad that you turned to the Rshtunis when faced with your uncle’s iniquity. You are the child of my cherished friend. Do not be surprised that I treat you like a son and want happy days to replace your grief.”

Grigor answered these heartfelt words with only a kiss to the Lady’s hand. When the Lady and her daughter retired to their chambers, Husik took Grigor and Zaven to the rooms he had prepared for them, where for the first time in four years, Grigor found a down quilt, night clothes and all the comforts of a princely life, which he had completely forgotten about since his last night at Vardanaberd. But Grigor did not forget Gazrik, his companion in captivity and flight, and went to see him with Husik to make sure that he was comfortably situated with the guards. Only after he entrusted him to Husik and was assured that he would be looked after well, did he go to his chamber to sleep.

Chapter 21 – Grigor leads Rshtuni Troops to Victory

In the morning when Grigor awoke, the rays of the winter sun shone through the window. The Sea of Aghtamar shimmered and nature came alive. He quickly got up and when dressed, he saw to his surprise, that his tattered clothes had disappeared and in their place found attire fitting a prince.

It was clear that Seta did not want her guest to go around in clothes beneath his stature. And despite his stoic bent, with understandable satisfaction since he wanted to look presentable to Teni, he put on the clothes, although he kept this to himself.

When he entered the hall, he was surprised to see Atom Shahuni sitting next to the Lady and Teni by their side. Grigor did not know anything about the old general or his close relationship with Teni. Indeed, he could not imagine it, even though her soft hand was covered by the old man’s rough, long, yellowed hands. And how much more would he be surprised to know that only that old man knew their secret love. But without letting on, he greeted him with due respect, and lifting his head, said,

“General, do you remember Grigor Mamikonian, David’s son?”

Atom, after looking at him for a moment, with a kind voice said,

“My lad, were you with Suren Kamsarakan during the Battle of Saryak?”

“Yes, General.”

“I remember you. You fought well for your age.” With this word of approbation, the old man paused, and turning to Teni, added, “He is a good boy.”

Grigor could barely hold back a smile at this compliment because from the first campaign when he met the old man he knew he was a man of few words and having said this much was high praise. He had also heard that the old man did not like laughter or talkativeness. So he remained silent. And for a moment the old man remained still, then asked,

“Do you have word of Suren?”

“We left Damascus together, but we got separated by a group of Arabs during our flight, and we crossed the Euphrates, while he took the road to Commagene, after which we have no word from him.”

“He is a brave man,” said the old man again turning toward Teni.

And Seta, who had finished reading a letter, turned to the young man and said,

“The general brought this letter from the Prince. He writes that he will be away for another month because there is some commotion in Constantinople. Emperor Constantine was poisoned by his mother and died. In his place, his younger brother Heraclonas will rule.

Now the people and army have revolted. The lawful heir, still a child, has been placed on the throne. The prince hopes to secure the release of Aspet Bagratuni this time because a decree has been issued to release him from exile. An Armenian general has been named to head the Byzantine batallion in Karin, and he will be going to Theodosoupolis to see him and then will return here.

“If the prince is delayed, what must I do, your Ladyship?” asked Grigor.

“Don’t worry about anything. I will find things for you to do. Here is another letter, from Prince Sahak Artsruni who is seeking an army from me to help his forces in Mardistan defend against a Persian invasion. If Vard were here, I would send him, but he is with his father, so I will send you, who are like a son to me, if you will accept this mission.”

“I will gladly accept this assignment. I’m ready to go right now if you give me the order.”

“Today is out of the question. Tomorrow morning everything will be ready and you’ll set out.”

Grigor was overjoyed at being useful. It was written all over his face. And the old general, who had been silently looking on, was very pleased, and slowly raised his head, in a sign of approval. Teni in turn gave no sign of approval or disapproval.

“Now in this letter there are a couple of obscure points. It says General Atom can explain. So if you would, could you please explain further, Prince Atom.”

Atom let go of Teni’s hand. She stood up and asked the old man smiling,

“Shall we go, *hayrik?*”

“Yea,” said the old man with an imperceptible wrinkling of his brow, which was meant to be a laugh that was only understood by Teni.

Grigor at this point went out as well, and Teni said,

“Prince Grigor, are you thinking of that time when we put the books in order in the library?”

“Yes, miss. Since that time, as I was deprived of everything else I enjoyed, I was also deprived of looking at books.”

“Except for me, no one has visited those books since that time.”

“Shall we visit them together?” asked Grigor.

“I too would like that, especially if you are going to be leaving us tomorrow, and with much happiness.”

“That happiness is the expression of my desire to be useful to the Rshtunis after having been so useless up till now.”

And when they entered the library, the two young hearts beat, and Grigor took his beloved’s hand and pressed a long kiss on it. Teni then asked with a smile, holding herself back,

“So you have not forgotten me, Grigor,”

“Is it possible to forget you? What would I have in this world if it were not for the memories of you? The happiness of our last meeting, when such dark times ensued . . . The only doubt I had while I was chained in captivity, and it was a desperate hope, was that you Teni had not forgotten me and still loved me. That was the only thing that kept me going.”

“My poor Grigor, and did you really doubt my love?”

“Forgive me, Teni. So many blows and hardships befell me one after the other that I thought that all that was missing in my crown of thorns was that. I was trembling in anxiety as I looked at the capital’s towers. Until I saw you yesterday and your shining eyes and your hand . . . O, say once more that you love me.”

“Yes, I love you and only you.”

After these words, they gave each other a long embrace until Teni elated jumped from Grigor’s arms and sat on a couch, gesturing for Grigor to sit down on a chair near the desk.

“Not here,” she said, “there,” showing him where to sit.

And Grigor feeling somewhat awkward sat where she had pointed, and then said,

“You are unkind. Will this moment return again?” he said.

“God who granted us this moment will give us many others. I shed so many tears at the rumor of your death. I wanted to go to a convent, but the hope of seeing you again, my parents’ opposition, and Atom *hayrik*’s encouragement . . .”

“Who is Atom *hayrik*? Do you mean the old general?”

“Yes, he knows everything. He is the only one I have shared this with.”

“What do you mean? Is it possible that such a gruff old man . . .”

“That gruff old man is the kindest father to me. He comforted me when you disappeared, because only he knew of our love for each other. Now go be brave in battle, but do not forget to protect yourself for your Teni.”

“O, what happiness, you love me that much, Teni.”

“As much as I can. But have you told your uncle, that wonderful man, Suren about our secret?”

“What, how could I tell him when we were in chains and the situation hopeless about my dreams? I was sure he would laugh.”

During this conversation, Grigor had moved his chair so close to the couch, that his knees were touching Teni’s.

“Now, from this library,” said the princess, “give me that book.”

Grigor went and took the book off the shelf and when he turned around he saw that the chair was back where it was to begin with, and Teni looked and laughed.

“Be assured that wherever Atom *hayrik* is, he will come now and find us. So you should sit calmly in your place. Take that book, don’t open it, don’t break its spine, do not read, just put it in your bag until you go tomorrow. Promise me.”

“I swear on our love. If you want, I will give it to Zaven to keep only giving it to me when . . .”

At just that moment, the door opened and Atom entered.

“Have you finished your discussion, *hayrik*?” asked Teni.

“Yes. Are you content now, Teni?”

“Yes, I am very content, *hayrik*, and for your consolation I am very grateful. You encouraged me and I have no other confidante but you. There is no one other than you who knows about our secret love.”

Atom smiled as was his custom, and then approached Grigor, and put his hand on his sword saying,

“Son of David, leave this book. You are going off to battle. Be brave, be smart. You will find Sahak Artsruni there. He will be your commander. Obey him like God, and demand similar discipline from those who serve you. Be strict, but fair. Beware of people speaking sweet and peasant words and keep them at a distance. Most if not all are fake, dishonorable flatterers. Reward the brave. But be merciless in your punishment of wrongdoers. A soldier must fear his own commander more than the enemy. Then he will scoff at death. This is victory, indeed the whole secret of being victorious. Always keep in mind and know that today I have vouched for you before the princess and act accordingly. So leave that book here.

Grigor looked at Teni, who said,

“*Hayrik*, this book is a history book about the Mamikonian wars and their bravery. I gave it to Grigor.”

“Very well, if you gave it, Teni, then let him keep it. Be like your ancestors. Now you go and find how many troops will be going with you to battle, where you will join the Artsruni forces, how many days’

provisions you will need, whether your troops' weapons, coats and shoes are in good order. Before you leave, while you are here, prepare well and you will not regret it. Know that the Rshtunis are one of a kind. The only unforgivable sin is that stingy Husik. Whatever you need or want to have, you must not ask but take by force and keep that in mind as you set forth. If you do not demand, you and your soldiers will die hungry. So go, and figure out everything in detail. Horses, mules, provisions, supplies, everything that you need, get it. Don't pay attention to that rogue's protests."

"I am very grateful for your advice, general. I will go to see Lady Rshtuni now."

When Grigor left, he followed the old general's advice exactly. Lady Rshtuni had entrusted him with 400 troops. He had to prepare a register, so he went to Husik to ask his assistance, coaxing him and making threats, eventually obtaining what he needed from him.

The next morning Teni saw the young commander from the balcony of the castle. He would sail with his small group and their provisions to the east and north side of the Sea of Aghtamar. When he left, he took the book by Parbetsi from Zaven's hand, and on the last page of that book, he found a colophon in beautiful, fine print, in which she recorded all the despairing and sad moments, which Teni had endured during their four years' separation, when she at times mourned the death of her beloved, when she felt hopeful, when she yearned to retire to a convent, when she refused suitors. In this writing Grigor finally saw her commitment to their love, and the remarkable evolution of her intellect as she came to understand the people and country around her.

There was no telling Zaven's joy, when he saw Grigor at the head of his own small fighting force, which he considered a new beginning of his prince's career. Already even without knowing of their affection for each other, he had in his mind given his blessing to their marriage. For him, it was just a matter of time. Thus, one reading, the other dreaming, catching some sleep now and again, they landed near Berkri, and from there headed to Mardistan, where they found the Artsruni governor had some doubts, especially after learning of Grigor's youth and seeing he barely had a beard. But after seeing the young man in action, with circumspect boldness, caution, his ability to foresee and counter the enemies' every move, his uprightness and fairness commanding the confidence of young and old, he entrusted his force to Grigor and went to Vantosp.

Then he wrote a letter full of compliments to Lady Rshtuni for the fine choice. And Grigor, to his merit, after leaving the service of the Artsruni, went on a campaign attacking and raining terror on outlaws large and small who had sprung up after the fall of the Persian empire, all the way to the Kaputan Sea (Lake Urmia). And in the spring, he returned to Rshtuni triumphant and with great rejoicing; but that joy soon turned to sorrow.

Chapter 22 – Theodoros Betrayed

Theodoros Rshtuni awaited the arrival of his namesake, Theodoros Yerizatsi, the commander of the Byzantine Army of the East. He was also very hopeful that Varaztirots Bagratuni would return to Armenia with his family since the imperial decree for his release had been issued. Then his plans would

be easier to bring to fruition without turmoil or bloodshed. It was the beginning of winter. His son Vard was engaged to the Princess of Siunik. After sending some reinforcements to assist the Siunetsis and Albanians in Darand, he discharged the rest to return to Rshtunik with Atom Shahuni. Because of the disorder among both clerics and lay leaders, Catholicos Nerses convened a council in Dvin, where a large number of bishops and princes gathered and adopted new canons to reform the church and rein in the disorder that had arisen during the period of anarchy. Theodoros tested the waters to see if the delegates were ready for his proposals for a central government.

He took a small force with him and made the rounds of Ayrarat, Gugark, Tayk, and then Upper Armenia, finally arriving at Karin. There he received a letter that Martina and Herclonas had been deposed, and Constans had ascended to his father's throne. Constans decided to keep Theodoros Yerizatsi at his side, and named a certain general Tuma to take his place at the head of the Byzantine Army of the East. He also heard that Aspet Bagratuni had been well received by the emperor in the capital. Upon arriving in Trebizond, a courier was sent immediately to announce Tuma's appointment as commander, and summoning all the forces of Asia Minor in Yekeghyats province. There Tuma spoke highly of Theodoros and his bravery and expressed his desire to confer with him on military strategy.

The letter also deemed it worth criticizing Procopius's foolhardy arrogance, dismissing the Armenian general's wise counsel a few years ago with disastrous consequences that brought disgrace to Byzantium and destruction to the country and people, and mentioned that the new emperor wishing to keep Theodoros Yerizatsi close at hand, upon his recommendation appointed Tuma to this post and expressed hope that the new Byzantine commander would be well-received and work together to bring greater glory to himself and the Armenian general.

Taking this letter, Rshtuni left Karin quickly and arrived in Yeriza, where a couple of thousand Byzantine troops were gathered. There he was well-received by the Byzantine generals, with due respect and courtesy. Several days later Tuma arrived with his Pontic forces and with customary Byzantine duplicity expressed his gratitude that Theodoros had come to meet him and gave his assurances that he would not make a move without consulting Theodoros.

If he had not had the letters in hand, especially from Yerizatsi, he would not have trusted the Byzantine at all, but he trusted Yerizatsi. Thus, he let down his guard and talked freely with the Byzantine generals about the Arab invasions. Then suddenly, a few hundred armed soldiers encircled his tent. They disarmed the Armenian prince, and shamelessly bound his hands and feet in chains. Then Tuma appeared, with a sarcastic and contemptuous look on his face and lips.

Theodoros was never one to feel fear because he scorned death since his childhood days. Then, he thought about his family which was waiting for him and his people who would remain leaderless, and the nation that so few cared about; the Byzantine treachery, the Arabs' ruthlessness, the Armenian nobles' petty rivalry that could not combine the common good with their own advantage and salvation. In light of these grave concerns, Tuma's dishonorable behavior had no effect on him. He just looked at him indifferently, like someone with other things on his mind, like an unhewn stone or a tree stump.

This infuriated Tuma, so he taunted him, "What's on your mind, Armenian? Are you thinking about the day when you had the audacity to open your mouth and disagree with Procopius, the Byzantine

commander, incurring his justified anger to the point that he was forced to fling his baton at you for insubordination. I was there. I know.”

Theodoros gave the despicable creature the once over from head to foot, the same kind of look that a caged lion gives when surrounded by a crowd of gawking humans who have neither seen Africa’s deserts nor jungles, where his roar sends fear through man and beast.

That look was Theodoros’s answer.

Immediately, Tuma ordered the Armenian general be taken to Constantinople, with no rest, night or day, until they reached the capital. That was Theodoros’s desire as well so that this unbearable situation would come to an end as soon as possible. However, it weighed heavily upon him that he could not at least give word to his family, which was his only concern at that moment.

Tuma’s big rush was that he had heard that David Saharuni, who was a relative of Theodoros, was so angry at Mzhezh Gnuni, that he had broken his chains, escaped and dealt a severe blow to the Byzantine forces and taken his revenge on Mzhezh by killing him. Thus, to remove this danger from his midst, he rushed to dispatch the captive, placing him under heavy mounted guard, with menacing threats to the head guard should the prisoner escape and with strict orders to kill the Armenian prince if he made the slightest move to break away.

With these orders, the group stopped in the town of Arorok in Aryuts province, since they needed to rest. They locked Theodoros, who after eating a bit had barely fallen asleep, in a room when the door opened and a young man entered with a torch, paper and pen in his hand, approaching respectfully, and putting a table before him, saying in fluent Armenian,

“Brave prince, if you would trust an Armenian boy who respects and loves you, having only heard of your bravery and name, and if you want to give orders to Rshtuni or send them a report, I will vow to take this message at risk of my life, if such an oath had any value in such times . . .”

“Say no more,” said Theodoros, casting an inquisitorial eye over the youth, “What you have said is enough.” And he took the pen, only wrote a few lines and gave the message to the boy.

All he wrote in his letter was “To Lady Seta of Rshtuni: I have been betrayed by the Byzantine general and am being taken captive to Constantinople. Do not tell anyone but Atom Shahuni. Rule the country as you know how. Teach Vard how to govern. Strengthen the country and if necessary, take refuge on Aghtamar. The rest is in God’s hands. Theodoros.”

“Do you have any orders, prince?” asked the young man, putting the letter in his pocket.

“Tell the situation as you see it.”

“I hope that shortly after you have reached Constantinople I will bring the response to this letter.”

“That is possible,” said Theodoros, in a cold tone.

The young man did not say anything else. He gathered the things he’d brought, respectfully saluted Theodoros, closed the door behind him and went. A couple of hours later, as they took Theodoros in chains toward Kerasun, the youth was headed in the other direction toward Rshtunik in Armenia.

This young man's behavior should not be surprising. In all times, just as there are egotistical, lying, contrary, repellant people, there are also those who are inclined to the true, good and beautiful, who are prepared to sacrifice themselves for faith, country and honor. Theodoros, well-experienced in the matters of the human spirit, received the young man with a cold look because it could have been a trap or a set up as Tuma had that kind of dark streak. Then again it could have been as it probably was a genuine person, so when he gave his note to the boy, the contents, if revealed, would present no danger and he knew what Seta would have done even if he had not written.

A galley awaited him at Kerasun, taking him to the imperial capital by sea early that spring morning. They entered the Golden Horn and dropped anchor. A couple of soldiers stayed at the harbor, but the head and most of the rest went to town. Theodoros found this an opportune moment to call over one of the young soldiers whose greed had been the butt of jokes, and said to him,

"If you want, I can give you 100 gold coins this minute without much work."

"Really?" he said intrigued.

"Yes, and very easily."

"Please, tell me, prince, how?"

"Call one of those boats, board and go to the palace next to the church on the opposite shore. Tell them that you have been sent by Theodoros Rshtuni. I have to see the Stratelates. They will take you before him at once. You show him this boat and tell him that Rshtuni is there in chains and asked you to give me 100 gold coins."

"And they'll just give me those 100 coins like that?" he asked, his wide wide open.

"If you wait much longer, the Stratelates will go out and when he finds out later from someone else about my arrival, you will have lost 100 gold coins. And if you go now, if he doesn't give you 100 coins, I'll give you 200."

The young man thought for a moment, but it did not take long. He jumped on a boat and when he arrived on the opposite shore, it was not long before he gave Rshtuni's name, and they took him before an old general, who was Theodoros Yerizatsi himself. He was preparing to go to court, when the boy said, "he is in chains in that boat." The Stratelates jumped from his seat, went to the window and could not believe his eyes. He asked again whether he really was in chains in that boat. The young soldier repeated his answer. He called his servants and ordered them prepare a boat posthaste, and started down the stairs.

"But the prince did not ask for you to come, Stratelates," said the young man, "but only that he asked you to give me 100 gold coins."

"Just wait here, you'll get your gold coins. But where did you meet Theodoros?"

"I was in the Yeriza army, when Tuma ordered an Armenian to be tied up. Then he ordered our detachment to bring him here and hand him over to Valentinus."

"So this is how Tuma understands his assignment. Fool . . ."

“But the Armenian told me to go and ask for 100 gold pieces in his name.”

“Just wait here, and I’ll settle the account.”

Saying this, he boarded a boat with 6 oarsman and in a couple of minutes he was on the galley across the way, where Rshtuni was seated looking out at the new Babylon for the second time in his life. Then his old friend and namesake came running toward him and threw his arms around his neck, ordering the ship’s blacksmith to remove the shackles, which were an offense not only to the Armenian prince but to his friends.

Then the two Theodoros’s returned to the palace. Rshtuni’s first order of business was to pay the young soldier his 200 Byzantine gold coins. After that the two old comrades chatted. Yerizatsi told Rshtuni,

“I am very sorry that because of me you trusted that rogue Tuma. But you arrived here just in time, since we need someone brave like you right now.”

“What do you mean?”

“The new emperor is just a youth of sixteen. During his early days, Philagrius influenced him and he ruled, but little by little Valentinus, who is the head of the palace guard, increased his forces, and things got violent. He started to order the emperor around. Now there are suspicions that he will foment a rebellion and declare himself emperor.”

“Does he have so many troops that he can undertake such a scheme?”

“When Martina and her son were deposed, the effective head of the guards was Valentinus, with 3000 men under his command.”

“With three thousand soldiers you can elevate or depose an emperor? That’s beautiful.”

“But the senate is also among the 3000.”

“Those despicable opportunists.”

“Yes, but there are also people, who . . .”

“The mob, the rabble-rousers.”

“But very often they are just punishment for those who rule them. But we do not have long to think, general, because who knows what will come of the people gathered at Hagia Sophia. Day and night it is like a circus and the squares are filled with people vehemently against Valentinus because they know he has influence, so the ignorant and common people are under the spell of the sister of that rogue Tuma. She controls the boy emperor, just as she controlled his father, and now she wants to become co-ruler of the empire. With the loss of Egypt and Africa, she brought famine to the capital, and that foolish man imposed tax upon tax and increased his military forces. I, who was against Martina and her son, now am forced to fight against that soldier.”

“Where is Bagratuni? You wrote that you had received the decree for his release from exile and I was waiting for him.”

“He came and went, but again under Valentinus’s influence, an order was issued to hold him on the Prince’s Island with his family for a few days. This was a blow against me, because Valentinus is suspicious of Armenians. After word of your victories in Artsap and the gift of Arabian horses reached Constantinople, it gave some hope, but among much of the military it caused displeasure. Ever since those barbarians emerged from the desert sands and invaded our world, they had never suffered a defeat. But when you sent the heads of the two generals, Othman and Uzza and I had them displayed in the circus so everyone could see, Procopius was infuriated, and the military exercised its influence and Valentinus now distrusts the Armenians since he wants to stamp out any other center of power, starting with me since I am considered an Armenian general here. For this reason, they suggested the young emperor appoint Tuma in my place as general of the East on the pretext that the emperor did not want to part with me.”

“I understand the situation now. But what are you going to do? How are you going to take action?”

“There are two options, my brother. The first is to pretend to be Valentinus’s friend, as I have up till now while trying to open the emperor’s eyes to the danger. The second is to confront him and his partisans and unfurl our banner of opposition, and stand at the helm of the senate and people.”

“But for the latter you must have a least some military base.”

“I’m preparing that military base now. All of the servants in the palace are experienced Armenian soldiers, now almost 300 men. Nearby lives Gevorg Magistros, with whom I am on good terms. He has nearly 200 men in his palace. Manvel Arshakuni has the same. They are all solid men, unafraid, fearless.”

“And is all of this enough to be certain that the navy does not appear before your palace?”

“There is no threat on that front. The Byzantine admiral is Valentinus’s sworn enemy and I am his protector in the imperial court.”

“So what are you waiting for, brother. It’s time to act. From what you have described, the time is ripe.”

Yerizatsi began thinking of himself as more prudent, more of a politician than a soldier.

“But I have been waiting for our Greek supporters at any moment to take the first step so that this movement will not be seen as an Armenian operation; but they stand there with their arms folded and will not let us act. I am certain that the famine on the one hand and the weight of taxes on the other will cause some kind of commotion. I am expecting this to happen at any minute.”

He had hardly uttered these words when a young man entered, out of breath, and said,

“There is a disturbance at Hagia Sophia. The people are in a frenzy and have burned Antonius.”

“Catch your breath and tell us what happened,” answered Yerizatsi without losing his composure, and turning to Rshtuni, he said, “you see, my brother, this is what I have been waiting for.”

The young man, whose face was flushed, dripping with sweat from his forehead and hair, took deep breaths, his chest heaving, and tried to catch his breath so he could make his report.

“For the past two days, as you ordered, I have gone undercover among the crowd that had filled the cathedral, clamoring to see the patriarch. And the patriarch, who had gone into hiding, finally came out and sat on his patriarch throne. Then some of the rabble rousers began to complain to him about Valentinus and his soldiers' disorderly conduct, the oppressive taxes, the high price of bread and demanded that the patriarch himself talk to Valentinus. He sent two metropolitans and several of the leaders of the crowd as a delegation to general Valentinus as the people waited there for an answer. Then, Antonius's deputy entered the church with 1000 armed soldiers and ordered them to beat the people with their batons. The patriarch then rose and reprimanded Antonius, saying “This is God's temple. Only barbarians and criminals behave like this with God's people. You dare to do this? Don't you fear God?”

Then Antonius attacked. He ascended the altar and said to the reverend elder, “You evil old man, who are you to dare to encourage this rabble against their masters and reprimand me?” He slapped the patriarch. Then a thunderous clamor arose from the crowd, and the unarmed people became frenzied like wild animals. Knives appeared in a flash. The chairs, candle sticks, torches, fans and patriarchal miter all became weapons. The temple was in complete chaos, like a battle field. There was blood everywhere. Waves of people kept coming, taking the place of those who had fallen, until Antonius's thousand men were gone; they carried him out, tied him to a stake and burned him alive. The people were going wild, women were dancing around the fire, when I left to make my report to you.

Chapter 23 – Varaztirots Curopalate

After they heard the report and the young soldier left, Rshtuni looked out the window scornfully as if in deep thought. And Yerizatsi approached as if awaking him, patted him on the shoulder and smiled,

“Brother, what you are thinking I have thought long ago, but remember, we live in Constantinople, and as this empire came, so it will go. Not only will a bad soldier become a general thanks to his wife, but he will try to put the imperial crown on his head. I am going to the royal court now. Have breakfast and get ready. You can find any weapon you want in this room. I'll let you know when we are ready to move. Be well.”

In less than an hour, Theodoros Rshtuni received a message from his friend urging him to take leadership of the guards that he had prepared and to arrive with the head of his personal guards to the circus without delay. When Theodoros, fully armed, descended to the portico of the palace opening to the street, rather than the sea, he saw a magnificent horse and three hundred mounted soldiers waiting for him. He barely emerged on the street when he was joined by two groups of combat-ready soldiers. Before that force of nearly 1000, the mob parted at his command allowing him to reach the circus without obstacles.

But when he got there, he was confronted with a horrible scene. Valentinus had occupied the square with 5000-6000 armed troops. He had driven the people out of Hagia Sophia and the slaughter

continued in the portico of the cathedral. Theodoros turned to the head of Yerizatsi's personal guard and asked, "My lad, who is the enemy?"

"Those are Valentinus's army," answered the young man.

"Follow me, men," called Theodoros in a commanding voice.

He unsheathed his sword and attacked Valentinus's army in the middle of the circus, dividing the enemy forces in half to the left and the right, one part started fleeing the circus, while the other was caught between the cathedral and Theodoros's army and were completely slaughtered and almost disappeared. Theodoros himself was amazed at the easy victory, when the gate to the royal court opened and a small contingent of imperial guards entered at the end of whom was Yerizatsi, who invited Rshtuni and his troops to the imperial palace, to appear before the young emperor.

The emperor was still young with confusion and fear on his face. He had barely ascended the throne, when he saw Valentinus who had been instrumental in his rise also become a traitor aiming to depose him; thus he viewed everyone around him with suspicion, veiled of course with Byzantine courtesy and pretense. When Yerizatsi told him that "all danger has past and Valentinus is now fleeing because of the valor of Theodoros, who had been brought in chains from Armenia by order of that same Valentinus," the emperor said, "tell him to bring Valentinus's head, now!" But at that moment, imperial spies entered to report that the people had killed Valentinus in the cathedral plaza and burned his corpse, and he rejoiced. It seemed to Yerizatsi an opportune moment to raise the release of Aspet Bagratuni and obtain the decree for his release. Boats were already on their way to the Prince's island to retrieve Varaztirots.

In a single day, Rshtuni had been released from his shackles, destroyed Valentinus's power, and been reunited with his childhood friend in the Byzantine royal court. Rshtuni and Aspet had a tearful reunion embracing each other because they had grown up together in the Persian sublime porte of Khosrov. The Emperor appointed Theodoros Yerizatsi to replace Valentinus as commander of the imperial military, ordered Theodoros Rshtuni to return to his homeland and sent a royal courier to recall Tuma to the court in Constantinople. As for Varaztirots, he granted him freedom to live with his family in Constantinople, which was again for him a kind of exile, since he longed to return to his homeland from which he had been separated for so many years.

That night the three old friends celebrated in the Yerizatsi palace. For years they had lived in different places, in different stations, at home and in exile, in triumph and defeat, through royal favor and persecution, through the whims of fate; yet they were always prominent figures, even in the eyes of their enemies and foreign rulers. Thus when they were alone, the condition of Armenia came up, and Aspet Bagratuni lamented,

"What can a person in my situation do? To my eyes, this capital city, with all of its splendor, cannot measure up to a simple village in my native Taik. You, Stratelates, can be helpful to our homeland and us, as you were up to this day. But I can be of service to my nation only if I am on my native soil."

"And it would be a major service," said Rshtuni, "as I told you, because you with your personal stature can bring together all the nobles in a way that I cannot due to the air of suspicion and rivalry they have developed toward me."

“Today I nearly managed to convince the young emperor to send you back to Armenia,” said Yerizatsi, “but Philagrius intervened and twisted everything around. When will we succeed in convincing these Greeks that the only way to work together effectively is by treating the Armenians fairly?”

“What do you expect from them. They cannot even discern what’s in their own interest and advantage. And they have it in their heads that by harassing Armenians on religious ground, misrepresenting their religious beliefs, leaving the country vulnerable to marauders and invaders, overtaxing and impoverishing the people, they can subdue and take over Armenia,” said Rshtuni.

“But that young emperor,” answered Yerizatsi, “I have hope, that I can convince him sooner rather than later of the truth, since corruption has not become deeply rooted in his heart, and so it might be possible to put him on the path of decency and righteousness.”

“We can welcome this, my honorable friend. May God give you strength. Do you still have hope that in this city of religious fanatics and fools it is possible to sow the seeds of decency and righteousness in the seat of power? Let us leave these innocent dreams aside, and think about how we can work together to save our native land.”

“Speak your mind, openly. I am prepared to do whatever I can.”

“At this point, my only aim is to get Aspet back to Armenia with me, the rest God will take care of.”

“That . . . will not be possible in a few days. The emperor must be disabused of Philagrius’s machinations. If that’s your goal, we must wait for an opportune moment.”

“Who can guarantee whether opportune occasions will come or not in this damned city. Indeed, for all we know, they may find occasion to throw me in prison on an island with Varzatirots; such backbiting is common pastime here. Let’s leave aside that the young emperor’s appearance and demeanor did not inspire confidence. When the emperor says, “Bring me Valentinus’s head, now, now!” I sense ruthlessness as well as cowardice. If you want to serve the nation and your friends, find a way to liberate Varzatirots.”

“Do you mean we should kidnap him? But that would not be easy. For now, at least, there is strict surveillance of all comings and goings in the capital. To try to smuggle such a prominent person as Varzatirots would not be easy, but if we think hard a way could be found. You are right not to trust this city and if you listen to me, you should not stay here another minute, but should leave at once since you have the order to return.”

“So we agree. Let the Lord of Rshtuni return and you will find a way to smuggle me out of here?”

“That is my obligation,” said Yerizatsi.

A little over a week later, Theodoros Rshtuni got on a boat and went to Trebizond. The unfavorable winds delayed his departure, but helped Tuma reach the capital.

However, even though he arrived in the capital quickly, he was unable to get an audience with the emperor, because he was seen as Valentinus’s ally and his sister Angelina was also out of favor because the young emperor was very suspicious. He barely took advice from Philagrius. Philagrius, to curb

Yerizatsi's influence in the court, had him appointed to be the commander of the Army of the East in Tuma's place. Thus, Varaztirots remained in the capital without a sponsor.

At this time, Varaztirots changed his life style. He rented a large and splendorous palace, giving himself to the high life and wasting his Bagratuni inheritance on feasts and parties. Byzantine nobles of all sorts enjoyed his hospitality, even Philagrius was on familiar terms with him.

In two or three months, Varaztirots through his debauchery, began to sing the praises of the good life in imperial capital over his mountain lairs. Carrying on this way, he petitioned the emperor to send four people he trusted to Tayk province to bring his wealth back to the capital. And having received the decree, he disguised himself as a guard and boarded the boat. The winds were favorable and he reached the banks of the Chorokh River safe and sound and then as fast as an eagle, he went to Tayk province. The people of Tayk were jubilant. The old Bagratuni princess was overjoyed, needless to say, at her son's return. But there was no time for celebration. On the one hand he had to reinforce his strongholds, and on the other the people were leaving the villages seeking safety in the inaccessible mountains.

Soldiers needed to be gathered under a single banner. He undertook all this in a couple of days, as if the entire Byzantine army were preparing to come after him and invade. On the other hand, Aspet sent a secret messenger to Dvin to let Rshtuni know that he had just arrived. And that Rshtuni should make preparations in his province; so he sent a letter to Seta to let her know that he was coming and in need of an army.

At the same time, an imperial order was issued to Theodoros Yerizatsi to keep a close watch on all the roads to capture Aspet Bagratuni and send him back to Constantinople. However, even if Yerizatsi had wanted to carry out this order, he could not, because Varaztirots had taken all necessary precautions.

Thus, he decided to try to mediate. He wrote to the emperor and sent an emissary to Catholicos Nerses to tell Aspet not to be rebellious, but to obey the emperor, and he promised to bring his wife and children from the capital, if he would write a letter to the emperor pledging his loyalty. Bagratuni quickly sent a letter to the emperor saying, After enduring all those years in unjust exile, he had no intention of rebellion. His only fear was that if he returned, he would be placed in exile again, so he was forced to flee for love of his homeland. In exchange for this letter, he received the title of Curopalate, a crown, a silver throne, and his wife and children from the emperor.

Theodoros Rshtuni was pleased with these developments. He finally saw the opportunity to accomplish the ideas he had pursued for so many years. Thus, joining Aspet and the catholicos, he sent letters inviting all of the nobles to a meeting in Dvin to consider a national compact. Rarely do such opportune moments arise. The majority of Armenian nobles were convinced that something had to be done, so they were willing to cooperate. And Catholicos Nerses was not only politically savvy but well-educated and well informed of everything happening in the empire, so he had already outlined the main points of the compact; and Aspet, who had complete trust in the direction Theodoros was proceeding, accepted these principles without reservations. There were only two possible sources of opposition – the Mamikonians and the Mokatsis.

The terms of the compact were simple and the purpose was to lift Armenia out of its unstable condition of the anarchy and establish a central government, that could fend off foreign invasions, domestic insurrections, protect the people from oppressive taxes and the country from destruction.

The emperor had already designated the Governor and General, so the high tribunal had been established, the council of nobles, whose decisions would be compulsory for everyone had also been formed. An assembly was also created for the fair allocation of tax revenues and the provision of soldiers for Armenia's security based on population.

And just as this great deed was about to be accomplished, Varaztirots died after a short illness in Dvin, and the compact was threatened. Even though the Emperor had named his son Smbat to succeed him, Smbat did not have his father's influence or stature.

Chapter 24 – Yerizatsi's Revelation

The first religion of all religions is to keep one's religion, and the greatest happiness is believing that it is the best religion.

- Buffon

But this stroke of fate did not deter Theodoros. He went to Karin to see his friend and namesake Theodoros Yerizatsi and before he had even entered the city he saw a major change in the Byzantine officers' corps. Without paying any attention to this, he headed for the Stratelates's residence and saw that the officers' and guards' faces were pale and that they were getting ready to move out. When he entered his friend's office, he saw that he was busy burning papers.

"You got here just in time, my friend," said Yerizatsi, "I was afraid I might have to depart without seeing you. Your assessment of the young emperor was quite accurate. We have elevated a beast to the throne."

"Has he dismissed you from your position?"

"If that were all, I would be satisfied. Imagine in three days I have received four couriers from the capital, and the fifth arrived this morning with strict orders that I turn over my command to Maurianus and return to Constantinople. If my wife and children and all my worldly possessions were not in that beast's hands, I know what I would do."

"But what is his motive, tell me, my friend?"

"This young man is obsessed with theology. Apparently this is a hereditary disease in the imperial family. After his grandfather Heraclius in his final years had left the battlefield and returned to Constantinople, it was my solemn obligation to tell him that Egypt and Alexandria had fallen to the Moslems. The old emperor was surrounded by his clerics. Seeing that I was downcast, he asked what news I had. When I, cautious and with some trepidation, told him of his losses, he answered,

“Theodoros, what do you think? Does Christ have one nature or two? Does he have one will or two?” I was confused and this unexpected question and answered, ‘you are inquiring about such matters that are beyond my competence. Whatever the church decided, I’ll accept it.’ But it pained me that this man, whom we had looked on as a hero on the battlefield, was afflicted with this malaise. Imagine this, if you will, his grandson has now issued a new theological creed, and Patriarch Maximus, because he wrote and preached against this new creed, calling it heretical, had his tongue and hand cut off by the emperor.”

“Is that all?”

“No, there’s more. He had his only brother, Theodosius, ordained, and took communion from him, but finding him wanting, had him killed.”

“Anything else?”

“The prisons are filled with people whom he suspects on religious ground or of opposing him.”

“Anything else?”

“What does it take to convince you he’s a despot. Isn’t this enough?”

“Not really. You are mistaken. I have no problem with despots, but with stupid despots, who have no purpose or goal, do not know what they want or where they are going. My idea of a despot . . .”

“There is no such thing as a good despot, Rshtuni, I am amazed that my head is still on my shoulders after 70 years. I have seen eight emperors, of whom the first two as best I can judge were the best, but starting with Maurice through this Constance, they have been bloodthirsty despots. What good have they done for the world, or themselves or their families? As for the Armenian nation, what hardships have we endured during their reigns, how many nobles and princes have been sacrificed, I have lost count.”

“Don’t try to count them, it is useless, I know. If I could take you to our capital, I could show you the list of the tens of thousands of Armenians who have perished at the hands of the Greeks and Persians, accurately recorded from the times of grandfathers and forefathers. But who’s fault is that? Those who perished, or those who killed them?”

“Both equally. I, here in Karin, in this office, learned more about our country than what I learned about the Byzantine royal court in all those years. The Karin archives contain the correspondence between the Persians and the Greeks, in the times of Maurice and Khosrov. You should see what they say to each other.”

And saying this Yerizatsi took out the copy of a letter and gave it to Rshtuni, who read it to himself. In the letter, the Greek wrote to the Persian about the Armenians, “They are a crooked and unruly people, that muddy the waters and sow dissension between us. But I propose the following: I’ll gather those loyal to me and have them fight the Huns in the West, and you can gather those in the East to fight your enemies there. If the enemy perishes, they perish too, and if they kill the enemy, they also get killed, and we can live in peace. If they stay in their country, we will never have any peace.” He read this aloud a second time and gave a scornful laugh,

“What a pathetic policy, that is blind to their own internal problems and try to extract benefit from the hardship of others, destroying their country, and thereby weakening their own and making them more vulnerable.

Khosrov revealed the content of this letter to Smbat. But unfortunately for Armenia, and for Khosrov himself, Smbat died very young. If he hadn't died, he had grand and beautiful plans, having received the king of king's promise to rebuild Armenia after destroying the Kushans. What I am trying to accomplish from a weak position, he could certainly have accomplished with his strong hand. But he took those plans with him to the grave. . .

“And now with the death of his son, Aspet, all our hopes are dashed.”

“What can we do? As long as we are breathing, we must continue to work. But you have decided to go.”

“What else can I do?”

A ponderous silence ensued, when another special courier brought a letter for Erizatis telling him about the new creed, new arrests, and new bloodshed. The historians of that day record, “There was not a counselor left in the court, for he completely eliminated his subjects and princes.” The letter also reported the deaths of Grigor Magistros, Manuel, and Marduni, who was the brother of Aspet Bagratuni, and urged Theodoros to return as soon as possible before the suspicious emperor took out his wrath on his family.

The old Stratelates read the letter, and told Rshtuni everything, then gave his final farewell, since he had no hope of seeing him again. And as Rshtuni headed to Dvin, Yerizatsi headed to Pontos to return to Constantinople, where he arrived in ill health, and died a natural death which spared him from Constan's hand.

Theodoros Rshtuni upset by these unexpected events, but not broken in spirit, arrived in Dvin. He had resolved to put the country in order and then return to Rshtunik. Lady Rshtuni had sent courier after courier alerting him that there were family matters that required his personal attention and were hard to explain by letter.

But hardly had he put the country's basic administrative affairs in order with the assistance of Catholicos Nerses, Curopalate Smbat, and a few other princes, when a man, versed in theology named Davit, brought a decree from the Byzantine emperor that all differences in church doctrine were to be eliminated and Greek orthodoxy was to be established throughout the land. So the Catholicos and nobles were forced to convene all the princes and bishops from all the provinces in Dvin and for months to debate how to respond to this decree.

There were Armenian nobles, people like Hamazasp Mamikonian, who was versed in theology and could hold his own with the bishops and dragged out the discussion while Theodoros hardly said a word but listened sullenly, and when asked his opinion, one day, said,

“Almost fifteen years ago, in Karin, Emperor Heraclius convened a council. Yezr Catholicos and I watched similar consultations and debates about these matters. People argued, talked, and gave speeches. As a result, the Catholicos, bishops and clerics, took communion with the emperor and confessed the

same creed, they exchanged gifts, and when they left the council, the Armenian people showed that they were different from those who took part in the council and refused to follow any of the decisions of that council; then Yezr Catholicos became an estranged father to his people and died a despised man.

I am Shavarsh Rshtuni's grandson. When the entire Armenian nation was baptized in the Euphrates by St. Gregory the Illuminator, he was in Syria with his army. When he returned he went to Vagharshapat, and by order of King Trdat, he accepted Christianity. The Illuminator and King were in Taron, so they say a Syrian bishop was going to baptize him, according to recorded history. When he was about to put one foot in the baptismal font, he asked, 'Where are the souls of my fathers, the Rshtuni princes, now? Are they in the same heavenly kingdom that you preach to be about, or somewhere else?' The unsophisticated bishop answered without stopping to think, 'They are in Hell.' Shavarsh stepped back, 'If so, then I'll go with my ancestors, keep your heaven for you Syrians.' Later when the Illuminator tried to convince the Rshtuni prince that God's judgment is a mystery and that he would be merciful to nonbelievers. Man cannot condemn those who did not and could not know the Gospel of Christ, and those bishops had been grossly arrogant in giving such a definitive answer. The annals do not say anything, but I imagine that without Trdat's help, even the Illuminator would have had difficulty convincing Rshtuni to approach the baptismal font again.

As for me, Theodoros Rshtuni, I am the grandson of that Shavarsh I just spoke of, and I think just like the most backward peasant who speaks without theological training. Did Yezr Catholicos know Armenians and Christianity better than Thaddeus, Bartholomew or the Illuminator? God forgive me, who are we to renounce the Illuminator's doctrines, because some Yezr took over a salt mine in Koghb? God forbid. Let him eat salt and give us sweetness. Moreover, there is no end to these demands. Everyday the Greeks concoct some new doctrine. Emperor Constans disagrees with his church, he tortures patriarchs and bishops, and banishes people due to religious opinions. If the emperor wants our loyalty, we are ready to serve him, but he would do well not to touch our faith or our conscience."

After discussing how to answer the decree at length, the Armenian Catholicos, princes and bishops stated that it was impossible to accept any other creed other than that of Nicea. At this point the Greeks and their few supporters began to increase their opposition and in the western provinces of Armenia they unleashed persecution and violent harassment of Armenians. Smbat Curopalate was a weak man, Nerses Catholicos with his Greek education started to backslide, and the Greek nobles indifferently cut off their alliances. After so many cares and troubles, Theodoros saw that all his work had unraveled and everyone was working against the ideals he held dear.

Chapter 25 – Plot against Theodoros

Theodoros was restless. He wanted to return to Rshtunik, when he heard that the catholicos had stepped down and fled to Tayk with Smbat Curapalate. These two high officials of Armenia had not only left their offices in a grave state but had also spread rumors that they were fleeing for fear of Theodoros, whom they claimed was plotting against them. The night before his flight, the catholicos gave a letter to one of the clergy loyal to him containing bitter complaints against the general. On the other hand,

Theodoros had to contend with the Byzantine army, which was in Karin and advancing toward Bagrevand and slowly approaching the capital. Thus unable to leave Ayrarat, he appointed a locum tenens for the catholicoi and wrote to his wife Seta to send reinforcements.

Lady Rshtuni quickly sent 2000 infantry and 300 cavalry under the command of her son Vard. Although Vard was reluctant to leave the Rshtuni capital, he obeyed his mother. Why was he reluctant? One would have to go back two years to understand what had happened in Rshtunik at that time.

When Grigor returned victorious from Her, he found Seta and the entire province in turmoil. Everyone was expecting Theodoros's arrival. Instead, word came of Tuma's treachery as Theodoros was being taken to Constantinople in chains. And soon after the note on a scrap of paper with just one line, advising Seta, arrived, "Oversee the country and share this with no one but Atom Shahuni."

In the meantime, Seta was faced with another misfortune. Atom was bedridden in his castle in Bznuni and Vard was still in Siunik. Thus, when Grigor returned triumphantly with his army, Seta arranged a suitable welcome and informed him of the situation, entrusting him with military matters, including military training, recruitment, and fortifications.

He acquired all of the boats in Vaspurakan and became the master of that small sea, commanding from Aghtamar, which at that time was larger because the water level was lower. He built storehouses and armories. Seeing Grigor's tireless efforts along with his deep sadness, she sent Zaven to Nerseh Kamsarakan to bring Arpeni to the capital to console her brother.

Suspecting correctly that Mushegh Mamikonian and Artuken Mokatsi were plotting something, she deployed most of her troops to Baghesh under Grigor's command and gave him strict orders to take all actions necessary to suppress the slightest hostile action. Similarly, she garrisoned a large force in the capital under Vard's command. Meanwhile she personally toured the region, its forts and settlements, to see if in fact they were in good condition. In each town and village she investigated any complaints. She took two humble judges and the bishop of Rstunik with her on this mission and quickly implemented their decisions. Outlaws, crooked tax collectors, mayors or village heads, freemen or serfs, whoever was unjust was arrested and taken in chains to work in the prison on Aghtamar island.

The Rshtuni realm was indeed a sight to behold in those days. Farmers, shepherds, artisans, youths, everyone was a citizen soldier and there was no disorder anywhere because the use of weapons to settle disputes was strictly forbidden and severely punished.

Thus in Theodoros's absence, there was not a single enemy incursion, and when the word of his return came, Seta's heart was at ease as she waited for his arrival; but time passed and a year later, she was still expecting his arrival, any day now. She instructed Grigor to come and reside in the capital as she was considering discharging the troops in Baghesh. With Theodoros's return, everyone in the region viewed him as a friend and gradually the troops were sent home.

Grigor wanted to return to Bagrevand, to the ruins of his family estate, to visit his mother's grave. Although Teni was a great consolation and he was pleased with the love and kindness shown toward his

sister, he was puzzled why with Theodoros in Dvin with his uncles and almost all the other Armenian nobles he had not been invited to come and claim his ancestral estates. So he had a talk with Seta.

“Now that the general has returned, thank God, safe and sound and there is no longer any threat, my Lady, I think you can give me orders to make the rounds and go to Dvin and Bagrevand.”

“Grigor, my son,” answered Seta, “it is possible that you think that over the past two years I have not considered this and have not appreciated your service as my right hand. I cannot ever forget what a great help you have been. I must tell you that the general wrote me several times and urged patience. The Mamikonian family opposed the national compact and the matter of your inheritance would have complicated things further and could not be resolved in your favor. But he has never forgotten your rights and intended to assure them. And now, he has summoned you. He gave me a new instruction not to discharge the troops and to stand ready, I am not sure for what purpose. He did not say. You should know as well that in each letter he expresses his affection with deep gratitude for your upright service and needless to say, I consider you my son just like my Vard.”

“For these kind words, I have nothing to say but words of gratitude. I will always be grateful for your motherly care. Even a short absence from the Rshtuni household is difficult for me. But further delay in visiting the ruins of Vardanaberd and my mother’s grave seems wrong as well.”

“Your sentiments are quite justified, my son; you should do as you see fit.”

“We still have a few days, princess. I will think this over. I only have one request. If possible, give Husik instructions to pay the merchants of Her for their grain. They have been waiting for two years to be paid. I spoke with him today and he keeps putting it off, but the merchants are constantly hanging around and complaining.”

“How unfair! He has not paid these people for two years! All right, I’ll take care of that,” she said, annoyed and got up.

“Please, princess, I did not mean this as an accusation.”

“I know, my son,” said Seta, lightening her annoyance with a chuckle, “but I have to have it out with Husik a couple of times a year. So this is as good a reason as any. Those people have approached me with this issue a couple of time as well, and I instructed that the payment be made. I have to look into this myself. You stay here. I’ll be right back.”

The Lady had barely left the room when Teni entered. Teni was sad. She did not look herself. And Grigor could see the sadness, although he kept asked why, but she wouldn’t say, and she even became more downcast. So after a short silence, he said in a teasing tone,

“It appears that Teni does not trust me enough. If it were Atom *hayrik*, the grey clouds over her mood would have passed.”

“Why, Grigor, do you make fun of my love and my heart. Is it not possible that I can be upset for no reason, feel sick and appear sad?”

“No,” said Grigor, “today you appear to have some other reason that you are keeping from me.”

“And don’t I have the right to keep things from you?”

“I don’t think so. If I am right to judge your heart by my own.”

“Then I will tell you the reason. I might seem very selfish to you, but since you are so interested, I will tell you. The problem involves us both. First, . . .”

“I see,” said Grigor, “there are two or more reasons, so you are beginning with the first.”

“You will see now. My bedroom is separated from my old nurse’s quarters by only a thin floor. Whatever is said there I hear. Yesterday while I was sleeping, I suddenly woke up and heard two old women talking to each other. We were the topic of their conversation. ‘Well,’ one said to the other, ‘it is impossible that Grigor’s uncle Hamazasp has married the prince’s niece, so it is not possible that our princess can get married to Grigor. . .’”

“I understand now, so that is what is on your mind. Teni, there is no need to worry. Hamazasp is from the Mamikonian family and that is the extent of our relationship. His father’s name was also David, so some outsiders think that we are brothers, but we have not seven, but seventeen degrees of separation between us. So let’s get to the next issue and see if it is this grave . . .”

“No, I think this one is actually a bigger problem, Grigor. You know how much I love your sister Arpeni, but on a few occasions, I felt uncomfortable, not about your sister, who is still a child, but on account of my brother Vard, who was inseparable from Arpeni. He was always kidding around with Arpeni and that boy who had no interest in anything but hunting, even stopped that, and started to spend all his time with her.”

“This is a bigger problem. If we were not already attached to each other by love and shared hopes, this new affection could lead to heartbreak for them or us. We must find a solution.”

“So, you agree there was reason for me to be concerned.”

“I asked your mother if I could go to Bagrevand, but she saw various obstacles and wrote to your father. If he sends him to Shirak, then this issue will be resolved.”

“If Atom *hayrik* were here and well, it would help a great deal.”

“What would he say?”

“He would tell my mother everything.”

“What would he tell her?”

“He would tell her that we love each other. Vard would back off and everything would be fine.”

“What would your mother say? Wouldn’t she say that it is not possible to give the hand of the Rshtuni princess to a homeless, penniless young man?”

“My parents will never forget your two years of meritorious service to the Rshtuni family, and they would be prepared to give a small reward, my hand in marriage . . .”

“For me this would be the greatest reward of all. Oh, Teni, when will that day come . . .”

“Be quiet, someone is coming,” said the girl. And Lady Rshtuni entered. The gleam in her eyes was visible. It was clear that she was returning from a great achievement.

“Your merchants will no longer bother you, Grigor,” she said, “I have paid all of their claims.”

“But Husik!”

“Husik, I brought that oaf to tears.”

“So what happened for that huge mountain of stone to spout water from his eyes?”

When Seta went to the treasury and suddenly entered, Husik, who was usually unhappy when she visited, stood up, put on a pleasant smile, without even looking suspicious.

“To what do I owe this great honor, princess,” he said, “What is your command?”

And Seta took a seat on the wooden bench, refusing the sheep skin blanket, which Husik offered.

“How embarrassing,” she said, “that we have not had a decent armchair made for visitors.”

“But this is a workplace, princesses, and those who come here when they have completed their business, leave here quite satisfied. It never crosses their mind whether they are seated on wood or a cushion.”

“You make it sound as if the people who come here are coming to a torture chamber, and that may not be far from the truth, for every day I am inundated with complaints. Every day I receive petitions against you. Some seek travel expenses, others’ wages, some disabled their stipends. They said that you have suspended them. If the prince finds out, he’ll make the ceiling of this treasury collapse on your head. How many times have I asked for an accounting of income and expenditures, and you have always avoided showing me. As the years have passed, your frugality has increased.

Hearing this, Husik turned on the charm,

“That’s what they say, princess, but you should not listen to them. Wasteful, careless people say such things. Please be assured, I keep your accounts with utmost accuracy. Those looking for travel expenses are rogues, I know they entered with full pockets. The servants who claim disability are able-bodied, flexible as copper, but they refuse to do a stitch of work. Yes, everyone complains about me. Atom Shahuni used to complain. Why doesn’t prince Grigor complain? He is happy with me, and I with him, because he is a perfectly upright fellow.”

“Please explain, what do you mean by perfectly upright?”

“You know him better than me, Lady, what’s there to explain?”

“No I want to hear your opinion.”

“Very well. First, he is content with his lot. He is not greedy. They call me greedy, but I am the opposite. I despise greedy people, princess, believe me. I do not want to see the face of greedy, grasping people who have an insatiable desire for gold and silver. You remember, princess, that you gave him a substantial stipend when you sent him to Her with the army. I pointed out that that stipend was excessive. And you got angry with me and scolded me. I, your patient and humble servant, put that

stipend in silver pieces before him, and to my amazement, like a purely truly upright man, he did not reach for it, he did not even look at it, but he said politely, “When I need this, Husik *hayrik*, I will ask you.” And never once in the course of these two years has he come looking for money. Isn’t that amazing . . . Please, princess, do not be angry, everything is in order . . . thank God, he eats well at your table, he has a servant and his horse has ample fodder . . .”

“That’s just great, Husik,” the princess said in a rage, jumping to her feet, “what have you done? For two years you have giving a young man who returned from captivity nothing . . . and you shamelessly boast about it . . . Oh my God . . . how will I ever be able to look that noble young man in the eye . . .”

And Husik, unperturbed, calmly said,

“Please, princess, do not be upset. He is not going hungry and he wants for nothing. He is very content, and we are on good terms with each other, very pleasant . . .”

“Be quiet, you fool. He is very happy with you! You are quite mistaken. How could he be happy with you when for two years you have not paid for the flour and barley for his troops, and the merchants are hounding him and me for payment? Is it not embarrassing that people are blandishing the general’s seal in his face?”

“Yes, princess, it is very embarrassing. I know these rogues well. The general is not to blame, but those thieves and outlaws, who have cheated him, demanding twice the payment they are due. . . Do not give this another thought, princess, they will let up and I will straighten everything out, and no one will bother your ladyship about this. You, princess, are a good governor. You know how to win over people, young and old, nobles and commoners, fittingly strict and fittingly kind, but forgive me for saying this, you do not know how to manage your finances and contain your expenditures.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” said Seta with an angry snicker, “it seems that you are now blaming me. I do not know how to manage finances. When have you given me accounts so that I could?”

“Forgive me, princess,” said Husik with his sweet smile, “that is also part of the calculation.”

“How?” said Seta, this time completely enraged.

“Please, do not get upset, princess. The less you see or know about your accounts, the better for you.”

“So you mean to say that the treasury is in good shape, but you are afraid if I know that I will make unnecessary expenditures, so you keep me in the dark?”

“You are a very intelligent woman, like the Queen of Sheba, who hearing of Solomon’s wealth . . . “

“Very well, I get it, that’s enough. I do not have time for unnecessary, long-winded discussions. I should get things done like the Queen of Sheba and you should go and sit on your money chest.”

“I, your humble servant, would not dare . . .”

“When I give an order, do you obey?” said Seta, with anger in her eyes. At this, Husik set aside his smile, his laughter, his flattery, and went back to his place, sat on his sheep skin blanket, closed his lips as a sign of patient docility, like a school boy, awaiting his assignment.

The merchants from Her and other creditors who had been waiting for months or years were paid in minutes, without further discussion. Every time Husik opened his mouth to point out something, the Princess would say, “this is no time to comment. Just pay,” with a firm, but severe tone. And when there were no further claims or claimants, Seta barely glancing in Husik’s direction, got up and left, as he sulked in his chair.

The treasurer looked mournfully at his empty chest and then at the door through which the princess had exited, and sighed,

“Good work, really good work, Lady Rshtuni. What great courage you exhibited. Our elders knew what they were saying when they said, ‘long on hair, short on sense.’ And she’s the best of them. What a pity!, What a pity!”

Chapter 26 – Suren in Cilicia

Grigor was despondent. In life uncertainty is a malady, especially during youth, when days pass slowly; and when time flies by quickly, it is as if to say, “Wait, hope, your moment of triumph will come, you will realize your dreams.” And he hoped, dreamed, and in his imagination fantasized that he was wandering through paradise, like a fairy tale, and at the same time, in the real world, he was fighting on the terrible battlefield, trying to overcome barriers, circumstances that blocked his way. Triumph and defeat follow each other, and life passes, while the springtime of youth for many passes as well, like a spring where the flowers are beaten down by hail, parched by the sun, leaving behind a desolate garden patch.

It is also good fortune when a youth has a name, an inheritance, a protector, a homeland, and a woman whom he loves. Life's hardships then become easy for him, and they feel like their courage is greater than their fate; and with that strength they forge ahead. Grigor had a prominent name, but his uncles were trying to take it away from him; he had an inheritance, but his relatives had nearly stolen it; he had a protector, who had disappeared from his life for two years; he had a woman, an adolescent girl, who loved him and was his sole consolation.

But this love also faced obstacles, and he could not muster the courage he had when facing enemies when talking with a woman or her mother, to say “I love your daughter. She is mine.” If his defender, Suren were only here . . . But where was Suren, lost on some battlefield amidst the clashing of weapons. There was no word. If he were alive, could he have forgotten his dear nephew? Was he dead or again in captivity? But that man was bold, indomitable. He was not one to be blocked nor to die, of this much Grigor was certain.

Suren was last seen speeding away on his foamy-mouthed steed, heading toward the Amanos mountains. He was being chased by two gangs of Arabs, from whose hands he easily escaped at the first opportunity he could give them the slip. But he constantly wondered whether these gangs were part of a larger army, perhaps their vanguard. And with these thoughts, he saved his horse's energy and figured a strategy so that he and his horse could escape this dicey situation.

The sun began to set and the terrain to change. The highlands were in sight as finally he left the sands and was on solid ground. The danger had subsided since the highlands were inhabited by Christians who had taken refuge from the Arab invaders. He saw some huts here and there and a couple of warriors on foot, who were heading for a gorge, he quickened his pace and asked whether there were any towns nearby. Their suspicious look, their clean clothes, and their weapons let him know that they were Christian Syrians, so without waiting for their answer, he said, "I am a Christian," he said, "do not be suspicious of me. If you are Christians too, speak freely." Their confident and cheerful demeanor signaled that they were Christians too, as they confirmed, but they said that they had suffered dangerous attacks by the Arabs in recent days.

Nearby there were roving bands of outlaws. As for them they were Mardaite Christians who had established a stronghold in the mountains of Lebanon and the Amanos and they were the only remaining bulwark of Christianity in those parts.

Suren who was now safe from the Arabs, went with them as their guest and spent the night in a mountain hut. He learned that they were near Cilicia, so he rested, and in the morning he headed toward Antioch in Commagene. He wanted to reach a city as soon as possible in hope of finding an acquaintance or relative. But when he arrived, the city was deserted like all the other Syrian cities. The entire population had left and taken refuge in the mountains. There were only a few booths where you could find basic necessities remaining.

Thus, he too took the road through the Amanos to Germanik, but after only an hour's journey he climbed to the top of a hill from where he saw two groups in pitched battle. His sharp, experienced eyes could discern Moslem Arabs and the Christian Syrians; without wasting a minute, he charged into the battle. The Arabs and Syrians were not amazed by his fancy clothes or his fine horse, but by his fierce sword flashing swiftly in a river of blood. The two sides thought he was some kind of superhuman being, and when the head of the Arab forces fell cut in half by Suren's sword, the infidels fled for their lives. The victory was to the Christians who saluted Suren on his horse with hosannas and spread their cloaks and sang songs of praise as they led him through the Amanos mountains, called the "Giavur Mountains" in those days by the Moslems.

That stranger was a Christian and had nothing Arabian about him other than his horse, clothes and weapons. He had come to their assistance in their time of need with courage and success. They looked upon him as some kind of saint or heavenly being and begged him not to leave, but rather to stay and be their ruler and general. When they arrived at the village in the mountains, a collection of huts on a mountain pass in the Amanos, they offered him whatever honor and respect they could; women and girls pointed him out when they passed, and the town elders took off their shoes when they approached him as a sign of honor. By the time he reached what passed for the town square, they told him that they had arrived at the church, a hut with a cross on it. There a Syrian bishop and the other clergy received him with the sign of the cross and the Gospel. Suren dismounted before these religious symbols and bowed respectfully, then asked that they take him somewhere to rest since he was exhausted (he could not say, of course, especially from this demonstrative reception).

They took Suren to the most prosperous hut in the Mardaite village, a rough wood construction with no windows and two doors, one of which opened to a stream shaded by an ancient oak. For dinner, they

had ample roast lamb and wine, but no one partook of the meal as a sign of respect to the guest, not even the bishop who humbly sat at a distance with the elders of the town. Suren asked about their conditions and learned that most of these people had run to the hills to escape the fierce Arab invaders. They had been in nearly constant war and their situation grew more desperate by the day because after the withdrawal of Heraclius from Syria and the fall of Antioch, they had another great loss, their prince, a very brave man, perished in an Arab ambush.

More recently, Heraclius's grandson, Constans, had sent a new creed which all their theologians found heretical so they did not accept it. Then they received a letter ordering them all to accept the new creed and threatening to wipe those who did not off the face of the earth. Thus the Moslems were pressing from one side and the Byzantine heresies from the other. They did not know where to turn.

Suren felt obliged to recount his story briefly, and then, after everyone left, he went to the stream, bathed and after a few hours' sleep woke refreshed. When he was preparing to take a look around, the Bishop and elders came and again and this time, with offerings of dates, pistachios, raisins, and other dried fruit, they approached to ask him not to leave, but to stay and rule these mountains in place of their former prince, promising to serve him loyally.

This proposal brought both laughter and anger to Suren at once. But deeming it prudent to restrain himself, he answered, "To reject such a proposal on my part would be as inhumane as the great sincerity expressed by those who propose it. Such a reward is too great for such a small service. But understanding that I am the head of a family and that my family had been waiting to see me for years, how could I as a father ever be forgiven for forgetting my family?"

These words, though kind and sincere, were a rejection just the same, and the elders were disheartened. The bishop, who was not a father, began to preach, citing all sorts of Biblical passages, whether relevant or not, in which Judah Maccabee wanted to make himself the people's liberator, and then he gave his last argument, which was impossible to deflect or deny, as follows, "Now you, O brave and noble man, if you stay in our mountains, whether willing or unwillingly, you will see our princess, who is as brave as a man, whose skin is as white as a lily, and whose lips are as red as roses, who has big, beautiful eyes like a doe, and whose neck is delicate as an ostrich's and height is as tall as a palm tree. You will forget your wife and children, who may be dead, or have abandoned or forgotten you. God will give you new offspring and in his house you will live in splendor. You will be glorified on high, above Mt. Zion, flourish more than an olive grove."

The Mardaite bishop's speech was not to Suren's taste and had many unappetizing features. Suren who rarely cracked a smile could not help himself and these elderly mountaineers responded to that smile with laughter and rejoicing and cheers. Suren seeing that people were so happy made no reply to the speech. It was already evening. They set up dinner right outside his door, where a large fire gave both light and heat, and the night passed with mountain songs and dances. At midnight he went to his hut, thinking about the principality of the Black Mountains and the widowed princess, who indeed lived up to the descriptions of her beauty, until he fell asleep. After two or three hours sleep, he woke up and heard a voice whispering at the door.

He tried to pay attention and in order to hear it clearly, he moved toward the door and through a hole, he saw two young, armed guards and two others sitting with folded knees talking. One said, "Where can

he go? He has the horse of Michael the Archangel. All that is missing is the wings. He is locked away in the Bishop's house. Tomorrow morning the princess will come. He'll see her and without doubt will find her attractive. She doesn't have a white hair on her head or on her chin, although she has some wrinkles on her forehead and has a severe look at times. Our deceased Amir was not that handsome and was not as brave as this. This man's good looks are in his hands."

"Good, but women have their own caprices, especially our princess. She has her own ideas, and that man had a homeland, wife and children."

"But if they give him a wife and rule here, if they bring him people ready to serve him, if he is still not satisfied and if he does not answer their pleas and prayers, then they can use force to persuade him. 'After he spends a couple of days in jail, that should convince him,' that's what I heard the elders say."

"If God gave those men any sense, the princess would want me, and I would not refuse. I would gladly marry her," said one laughing.

"And what would she do with a worthless young man like you. This is a not an ordinary man. He can rule and protect us in time of danger and war. Especially since the emperor has turned against us and wants to eradicate our faith. But it is time to wake up our comrades. They have slept long enough."

Suren heard this conversation, and began to return to his leopard skins, and think about his situation, which was very distasteful to him. After four years of captivity in chains, he was again faced with a grave threat of a new kind of chains, just as he was on the threshold of his homeland.

Chapter 27 – Suren's Escape to Armenia

Morning finally arrived. Suren had been unable to get any sleep, so he got up and looked around the village, which was neither a village nor a city, but an entire mountain with a string of huts and shacks and a few rather nice houses with gardens and forested areas in between. Here and there walls and barricades had been built on the inaccessible parts of the terrain. Women, girls, young men and boys were bustling about like ants while nearly all the men were inseparable from their weapons. It was clear that people from various Syrian towns and provinces had gathered here to form a new people. The residents of the famous large city of Antioch had brought their urbane, decadent habits, while those from Jerusalem had brought their religious piety.

Alongside and on a par with the Syrian language they spoke a distorted Greek dialect. The gold and silver vessels and decorations stuck out in the rundown churches. The Moslems had brought tremendous changes in the physical and moral live of the Amanos and Lebanon mountains. It did not take long for Suren's sharp eye to take it all in.

He saw that there were twelve heavily armed guards around his horse, confirming the bishop's words "willingly or unwillingly" from the conversation he overheard the night before. So he innocently

continued on his way, when a group of youthful messengers came to announce that the princess had arrived and was waiting.

Her name was Kahina. Beneath her Byzantine refinement Suren perceived her mountain-like majesty from his first glance. The Princess greeted him with great respect. She seated him beside her on the same cushion, thanked him for his brave assistance, calling him an angel sent by heaven. Suren told them that his Arabic was not very strong, so he would be brief.

And as the woman looked at him, he also took note of her actions, which were looser than befitted a woman. She wore royal purple, with fine muslin and an Indian shawl, expensive bracelets and necklaces glittered along with her gold waistband on which a gem-studded dagger caught his eye. She was tall and had large, bright eyes, thick seductive lips, and a voice like a man. She was not at all to Suren's liking, especially since no one would be a match for the incomparably beautiful wife he had lost. She was not as rapturously attractive as the bishop had described her the day before, and from the expression on her face, it seemed to him that she felt the same about Suren.

After a light meal, in which only the bishop took part, Kahina invited the Kamsarakan prince to her palace, which was a couple of hours away. She rode in front on a mule decorated in gold, surrounded by some 30 mounted guards. About a quarter of the way there, the palace appeared, as if it were hanging in the air, atop a mountain peak, fortifications visible on all sides. It seemed very close, but there were gorges and heights to cross to get there, so it took several hours. The castle was quite large and splendid, with a magnificent panoramic view of the mountains, valleys and forests. In the distance was the silver sea and the broad Cilician plain.

Kahina treated her guest royally. Nothing was lacking. The servants took him to bathe, and then they set a table of all kinds of delicacies, where the lady, in Roman-style, was lounging on her divan, and invited him to sit on the armchair across from her. There was no one else at the table. What amazed the Armenian prince most was that there was no hint of femininity, and the servers were all handsome youths crowned with flowers. Sweet Arabian incense filled the room. There was a variety of wines, grapes and dates on the table. Subtle music played in the background. In short, whatever they could do to create a seductive atmosphere had been done. Suren expressing no surprise of any kind looked at everything with an air of indifference.

Finally, the lady's server, who was the most attractive of the young men and had been filling the lady's cup, from which she constantly drank, urged Suren to follow her example. After making this comment, the servants withdrew, and then Kahina said to Suren,

"Prince, you see me as I always am. I could have deceived you a few more days and disguised my passions. Yesterday when they told me about your arrival, I decided to act that way, to hide from you my dissolute way of life, but then I said, what is better: deceit, which is a common human frailty, or to freely and openly show myself as I am? I chose the latter. Nature made me this way and my upbringing reinforced it. I grew up unrestrained, according to my whims, like the great oaks of our forests. Seeing your appearance, the expression on your face, I immediately knew that I was not created for you nor you for me. You are like my late husband, with only one difference. You are as smart as he was empty-headed. He was robust and good at martial arts. Fortunately, a stroke of fate liberated us both: him from life, and me from servitude. Now this foolish people, with its ignorant leaders, church and lay, old and

young, deem it shameful to be ruled by a woman. I am no ordinary woman. I ride like a man and wield a weapon like one too. I know no fear and am confident that I could lead them in battle. On various occasions I tried to explain this to them, but they humbly (this kind of humility hardly differs from threats) let me know that I had to choose a husband. While I was considering how to make a selection, our bishop informed me by courier of your arrival, your bravery, your story and your character, and finally at midnight, a delegation of ten men came to inform me of your every word and deed. That is to say, after leaving the choice of husband to me, these fools, excuse me, these geniuses, took it upon themselves to choose my spouse, as if they were the ones getting married. Concluding that it was useless to talk to these nitwits, I decided it was more important to reveal to you, a sharp-witted man, who I really am. Now like an old friend, I ask you, what should we do? You, no doubt, want to escape this place, as do I, perhaps even more so, since I was born and raised in these mountains. I desire nothing more than to leave here at once. But I have not completed my preparations. Until then, how should we spend our time? Think. Just be candid with me as I have been with you.”

“But princess,” said Suren, laughing, “how can I know that after this long conversation, you were not just testing me, and that you have not concealed some secret plan? How can I know that your candor with me was sincere?”

“I have drunk a lot of wine, more than my limit, this evening. You can trust me, according to the adage, *in vino veritas*.”

“Yes, but could this not just be another trap?”

“What, tell me?”

“You said you have military training.”

“That’s easy to test. Come with me. Enter this room. Boys, light the training room.”

A few minutes later, they entered a spacious hall where every imaginable weapon hung from the walls. Kahina took two blunt tipped swords down and gave one to Suren. She rolled up her muslin sleeves and said, let’s start.

They started to duel, sword clanging against sword. Suren first thought he was dealing with a child. So he was relaxed. But after a while, he understood that she indeed was not the usual opponent. She used such moves that he began to wonder whether he could beat her. Sometimes she would feign retreat, only to attack more forcefully in a very controlled manner. But Suren was no ordinary fighter either. His muscles and nerves knew no fatigue.

After a half hour of sparring, he saw that his opponent, though winded and dripping with sweat, was not giving up and he understood that she did not lack in skill.

“We now understand each other, princess,” he said, “well done. This is enough,” and he threw down his sword.

“So you are sparing me,” said Kahina also throwing her sword to the ground.

“No,” answered Suren, “I must confess that in my family, where martial arts is hereditary, there are few who could tire me this much. Well done, you are a good fighter. But . . .”

“Continue, why did you stop. We said we are friends. Give me your hand. Be open with me.”

“I was going to say that you need to keep practicing to build up your stamina.”

“I practice every day. These young men are not just here for my amusement. This is their training hall. Woe to any of them who are weak in their training. Look, see the whip hanging next to the weapons. Those that falter do not return to their bed without my painting them with blood. This evening I drank too much wine in order to muster my courage, my friend. My shortness of breath and sweating are due to that. Let’s return to the refectory.”

“Suren looked at the woman in amazement; she was not a Messalina but rather a Zenobia for him. Who knows if they were her ancestors? History would later remember her as a heroine, when she, on the shores of Carthage, would for a moment hold off the Moslem advance through Africa.

“Now,” said Kahina, “I will tell you what I think. These Byzantine emperors have become so bad that it is an affront to humanity to obey them. So I have decided with a group of my elite troops, no more than a thousand, to go to Africa, where I hear their influence is faltering and the people are discontent. There is a mixed population of Goths, Greeks, and old Phoenicians there. With my mountaineers I can easily take over such a country, since a woman from my people had already settled there some time ago and created a strong state. I am now working toward this goal.

I already have 500-600 young men who love and adore me, and I’ll recruit another 400-500. That will be enough. I’ll bid farewell to these shores and go. But this foolish people will disrupt my plans. I am just a princess in name. The true rulers are the bishops and those elders. Imagine, the emperor sent a decree the other day. I do not understand, I have no intention of trying to understand, about some theological issue, which they called Typos and they say, accept this. I believe the sender is an idiot, but aren’t our religious leaders 10 times dumber for saying, “We will die before we accept this heresy.” They wanted to explain these abstract things to me, but my mind refused. I told them that we can barely defend ourselves from the Moslems in these mountains. What will become of us if the Greeks come after us as well?”

But they kept saying the same thing, ‘We will die, but we will not accept this.’ So I said to myself, ‘Then take a stone to your head and die,’ but to their face, I responded, ‘you have done well.’ They wrote what they wanted, sent it to Constantinople. I figured that it would take a year before the Emperor would pose a real threat, and by then I would have my army ready and have left. As for them, if they want to die, let them. But now you turned up. If you want to stay here and rule this place, I will not stop you, but I will not sell my freedom in marriage a second time. Isn’t it possible for us to hold out for 10-12 months peacefully, and later you can go your way and I mine?”

“I have also vowed never to marry, so let me go and you’ll be free.”

“I would let you go, but those damned bishops and their supporters have filled the country with spies. So it is not possible to take a step without their knowing. They have posted guards in all the gorges. It is not possible to pass with my order alone. And of course they have taken extra precautions and have

given special orders with regard to you. I am imprisoned. As if that's not enough, they want to know wherever I am, so they wanted to fill the palace with ladies in waiting, but none of them endured my harsh treatment. There are a few which I keep at a distance, since all these mountain women are completely devoted to the clergy."

"Can't they poison you?"

"If I had a sister, an heir, any close relative, that would be easy, but there is no one. They want to marry me off so that they can eliminate me once I have an heir. I learned this after my husband's death."

"But what have you done to deserve this kind of hatred?"

"They want me to be like other women, to approve of everything they do and to be their most humble maid, to believe in their fake miracles, to build them fancy churches, monasteries and bishoprics, to waste my entire patrimony on them. But in the end I grew tired of these mountains. Most of them are foreign to me. We used to live in peace and hospitality was our duty. Now we have been forced into the mountains and accept living here with our priests and people as refugees."

"Do you have any loyal allies in the church?"

"There is my father's friend, an honorable old senior cleric. He is the only one that I respect and he cares about me. Tomorrow morning, he will come and I will ask his advice."

"If you have such an ally, he may be able to perform a requiem over us and make the people believe that it was the wedding ceremony that was performed."

"I was thinking something along the same lines. That old man is smart, and he could arrange something for us. I am very pleased, prince, that God sent a person like you to me. At first glance I knew that I could do business with this man and I see that I was not mistaken. We will help each other, get ready, and when the time comes, we will pursue our goal.

I have told you all my secrets as if we were old friends. I showed my serious and reckless side of life. If you have something to reveal, be assured that you are safe. If you need anything, money, weapons, servants, do not hesitate. I'll try to do whatever I can."

"Thank you very much, but I do not need anything. I would just like to follow your example in one respect: I would like to form a small army, but the problem is that no one from my nation is here."

"What is your nationality?"

"I'm Armenian."

"Armenian . . . I have heard that in Germanik there are Armenians . . . But I would not advise bringing foreigners to these mountains. They will raise suspicions. It is better if you follow my example. You see these boys.

Half of them are slaves purchased with money, children of Arabs, and the rest are orphans, who have no father, mother, relatives. Having nothing in the world, willingly or unwillingly, they are devoted to me, body and soul. They know that they cannot count on anyone other than me. I'm the one that pays

them, I'm the one that punishes them. When I have the least problem, illness, you should see how disconsolate they are, and even those who lay on their mats unable to move after a severe whipping, anxiously ask 'How is our lady's health?'"

"That is good advice," answered Suren, thinking.

"If we go through the farce of a wedding, you prince can have your own castle in Germanik, prepare your troops as you wish, and when everything is in order, not as a refugee, but as prince and princess we will each go our ways. I will go to my ships, and you to your homeland. Why rush and put your life in danger?"

It was past midnight when Suren said good night to Kahina and went to his room, thinking about his new wife and the path he was on.

Suren spent almost a year in those mountains, earning the affection of young and old for fending off fierce Arab attacks. He had 300 elite cavalry under his personal command. Kahina would often join him in battle, undeterred by any danger, earning the support of the mountaineers with her army of young men, but she was never happy with them. One day, Suren headed to Asia Minor with his small army, while Kahina headed for Iskenderun with her 1000 troops and treasure and boarded 10 ships. Then she headed for Dide in Carthage, where the last remnants of Byzantine power would seek her alliance and assistance.

Chapter 28 – The Byzantines in Karin

Suren arrived in Germanik without any resistance and continued to Asia Minor. Judging from what he saw, the country was in complete chaos. Supposedly this was a province of the Byzantine Empire, but in reality, neither the Byzantines nor the Arabs were in charge. Thus, Suren settled in Arabisus and started to grow his detachment, establishing a regular military regiment for Armenia. He was very selective, often turning applicants away just by looking at their faces or eyes. He recruited robust, healthy young men who had the stamina to train 5-6 hours a day with him every day. The smallest infraction or disorderly conduct was severely punished. There was nutritious food, proper uniforms, weapons and gear. Their salary was higher than what the Byzantines or the Arabs paid. Half of the spoils of war were distributed among them equally, and the other half went to the generals. The penalty for fleeing the battlefield was death.

Out of fear, the Byzantine prince of Arabisus organized a proper welcome for Suren and sent a secret message to the governor in Caesarea about his suspicious guest, whose strong army was growing stronger by the day, although neither he nor his army caused trouble. He sent word that his guest planned to go to Armenia in a few days via Malatia.

The governor of Caesarea was an Armenian prince named Vasak, and he was in such a precarious position when he received this message that as soon as he received it, he sent cordial invitation to Suren

to come with his army to Caesarea, promising to provide him with everything he needed. Suren accepted the invitation, got to Caesarea and was amazed that Vasak himself came to meeting him with a small guard; when he approached, he dismounted and embraced him like an old friend.

“Brother,” he said, “we have been waiting for you a long time. Theodoros Rshtuni sent many letters saying that he remembered you. Your Kamsarakan brothers were asking about you, your nephew, the Mamikonian heir, arrived home safe and sound. They thought you dead, but I am so glad to see you not only alive and well, but also at the head of an army. You did the right thing to accept my invitation and not go directly to Armenia. Let’s go, I have some letters to show you.”

“But I have no news from the homeland. This is the first time in five years that I have seen an Armenian prince whom I know and who mentions my loved ones,” answered Suren; “tell me how things are in Armenia.”

“Let’s go to my home, prince, and I’ll give you a full report, both about Armenia major and our Asia Minor province.”

When they got home, Vasak told Suren about all the ruthless and senseless brutality Emperor Constans had committed since ascending the throne. When he got to the death of his paternal uncle, Gevork Magistros, his eyes flashed with rage and he said that he was already in negotiations with the Seljuk amir to shake off the Byzantine yoke. He then enumerated the consequences of senseless theological frenzy. By concocting some new religious view every day and devising a new creed, the emperor had stirred up widespread discontent in the people of Constantinople and in Italy, as well as in Armenia and the Mardaites. As for Armenia, it rejected the emperor’s proposals in no uncertain terms, so in Constantinople issued orders to prepare for war. Vasak himself had told Theodoros Rshtuni about this and had sent his son to Theodoros to establish an alliance, but now he heard that the emperor having heard about these underground activities, was preparing an army to go to Trebizond himself. Vasak had received orders to head for the Armenian Highlands with his forces.

“So,” said Suren, what are you doing here? You should have headed out immediately before the emperor reaches Karin.”

“Yes,” answered Vasak, “but Mushegh Mamikonian has formed an alliance against Theodoros. The Catholicos and most of the nobles have sided with Mushegh, according to a letter I received from the Mananagh province. The princes of Yekeghyats and Daranagh and Aper have already begun gathering their forces.

“What fools!” said Suren, “it’s always the same troublemakers, the same rivalry and grudges. That’s what’s sad. There was no one who could knock sense into their heads.”

“What do you mean, brother? When they disappear, what will be left?”

“Be patient. Today or tomorrow my son Tigran will come. He met with Theodoros and will bring us an accurate report.” And indeed, two days later Vasak’s son Tigran came and told them everything. First, after arriving in Dvin, he found the amir’s emissaries, who were signing an alliance with Theodoros and all the other Armenian nobles. Seeing this, he spoke with Theodoros alone and sensed that he was not happy, although he did not say anything. He did, however, say one memorable thing, “We are making

promises and entering into treaties, but our promises are not serious and our treaties have no aim. Let us see how much the signatories of these treaties will live up to their obligations.” The emissaries were still in Dvin when word arrived that the emperor had debarked in Trebizond.

Theodoros gathered everyone and appealed to them to join forces. There was no time left for a preemptive strike against the Byzantines. Instead they would have to hold them off until the amir’s forces arrived. Mushegh Mamikonian and all the nobles from the western provinces were the first to object to this proposal, exaggerating the size and power of the emperor’s forces and adding, “If we promised to obey the amir, he should defend us from the emperor. The emperor is on his way, but the amir is still asleep in Damascus. Nothing is easier than sending emissaries. We need an army.” He recounted in awe Theodoros’s solemn patience with all of this, trying to persuade these people, sometimes with charm, sometimes with chiding, that “it is not acceptable to violate a signed treaty. That would be an unforgivable transgression and such behavior befits only barbarous outlaws.”

But everyone left without any resolution, saying, “Under the circumstances, it’s every man for himself.” Again Theodoros made one final effort and tried to convince the Arab emissaries to meet with the emperor on behalf of the amir and convince him not to enter Armenia. So I went with them, undercover, to Derjan. There we found the emperor and saw that his troops were increasing. He gave a haughty response to the emissaries, “Armenia is my country. I come and go as I wish. No one can stop me.” And he threatened to completely destroy the country, with sword and fire. This was the situation as reported by Vasak’s son.

“Now, brother,” said Vasak to Suren, “You have heard the report. I think that any reasonable person under the circumstances can do nothing but wait. Let’s see what Theodoros will do.”

“What can he do” said Suren, “when he is surrounded by traitors on all sides?”

“But again,” said Tigran, “when I was in Dvin, upon word of the emperor’s arrival, the nobles left the council and went home, but Siunik, Aghuank and Georgia maintained their allegiance with Theodoros and decided to resist the emperor. Calm and confident, he told them that he planned to reinforce strongholds in the highlands wherever he could and to resist until the end, leaving the plains to the enemy. He gave his allies the same advice, saying, ‘That Byzantine emperor cannot stay here for long. He must return.’ Thus, the nobles of those three great realms followed his example. The Lord of Vahevunik gave orders to reinforce Arpa fortress, and Varaz Nerseh, the prince of Dashtkar ordered that all of the wealth of his realm, churches’, princes’ and merchants’, be secured in the inaccessible mountains. As for himself, he crossed to the left side of the Aratsan River and encamped in Aghiovit. To the amazement of all, Hamazasp Mamikonian also joined this brave maneuver and was instructing all the forces to keep up their morale.”

“So,” said Vasak to Suren, “we should prepare to spend the fall and winter here. We will grow stronger with the Arabs’ help and in the spring will attack the Byzantine emperor. Since I did not comply with his summons, he has already made his position clear, if it was not clear already when he killed my uncle. You should go to the military council. You need to start military action. Do what you can in this country. I will provide you with everything you need, and be assured that before summer, our army will join Theodoros’s and your entry into Armenia will be glorious and triumphant.”

“Brother,” answered Suren, “I am looking for neither glory nor triumph. My only desire is to be of some use to my miserable homeland. It pains me to see that we have been obliged to turn to the lawless Arabs for help against a Christian state.”

“What can be done when the Christian state is just as merciless and violent toward us? They betrayed Theodoros Rshtuni and carried him off in chains, yet he still sought to be loyal to that empire. Then what happened that he writes me, ‘The Byzantines’ demonic plan to eliminate our nation over the past seventy years became clear when Theodoros Yerizatsi shared with me the secret diplomatic archive of letters and orders. The disunity and wickedness of our nobles seemed less blameworthy when I saw the major role that Byzantine wealth had played in influencing those unwise and short-sighted nobles.”

Their preparations proceeded as planned, while Vasak continuously received detailed reports of developments in Armenia. As soon as the emperor reached Karin, the Byzantine generals and Armenian princes, in one accord, blamed Theodoros Rshtuni as the root cause of their ills. They placed blame on him for the Byzantine defeat in Mardistan, for agitation and fomenting all of the rebellions and for frightening everyone into signing the treaty with the Arabs against their will.

Nerses Catholicos along with the Bagratuni princes from Tayk, came to confirm these accusations. Thus the Armenian princes cleared themselves of accusations of insulting the Byzantine forces and the Catholicos of the crime of organizing a revolt, piling all the blame on general Theodoros Rshtuni

They anathematized and condemned him and stripped him of all honor and power, and in his place they sent a prince with forty nobles and the emperor’s decree. But Theodoros captured all those men, tied them up, and sent some to the islands and others to the dungeons of Baghesh. When Constans heard what had happened, he threatened to wipe out and destroy the entire country. At that point Mushegh Mamikonian, Nerses Catholicos and the other princes, prostrated themselves before him and tried to appease him. They took him to Dvin and there in the Catholical see they took communion together with the man that condemn them as heretics, along with the clergy. The army was then dispatched to Georgia, Siunik and Aghuank, where they destroyed what they could, but Siunik and Aghunak could not be subdued.

When word arrived before spring had come that Vasak *patrik*, governor of Asia Minor, had revolted, and that there were uprisings in Constantinople as well, he took the main part of his army to Cappadocia to attack Vasak. But he was roundly defeated and returned to Constantinople a broke, confused and disheartened man. And there he made himself yet more despicable with his cruel excesses.

The catholicos, out of fear of Theodoros, fled to Tayk with the Byzantine forces, but they could not resist him, because the Armenian general pursued them and drove them out. All of the Byzantine forces regrouped in Karine. Their commander, Maurianus, was waiting and delaying the war so he could make preparations and gather his forces, just as Theodoros was awaiting the Armenian princes. Some of the princes came convinced that the Armenians had to rely on their own resources, others having lost faith in the Byzantines one way or the other, and others seeing that the amir had finally sent 8000 troops to Theodoros’s aid.

Chapter 29 – Theodoros's Victory and Death

The Karin plain was a field of battle, where the two armies stood face to face, watching each other for days. Theodoros, aware that reinforcements were coming to join him from Taron under the command of Hamazasp Mamikonian, crossed the Euphrates River and set up camp on a hill south of Karin, hoping to cut off any assistance to the enemy from the west. Maurianus understood the importance of this deployment too late. He tried to provoke engagement because he saw that the Armenian army was getting stronger day by day and no help was on its way for him. But Theodoros refused to engage, content to build up the strength of his forces.

Knowing that the Byzantines' relied mostly on infantry, he spread out his cavalry on the plain, cutting their supply line and access to their beasts of burden. With great hope he awaited the assistance of Vasak and Suren from Asia Minor, so he was in no rush to go into battle, although some of the Armenian nobles began to complain about these delays. When Hamazasp arrived, he decided to attack. In the morning, just as the trumpets were about to sound, two thousand fresh troops from Rshtunik arrived under the command of Grigor Mamikonian, which raised the morale of the troops as a portent of victory.

Maurianus was considered the top Byzantine general at the time. He was experienced, skilled and brave, so the battle was tough and bloody. The Armenians' bold move to cut off the enemy's right flank left their middle exposed tempting fate. This caused Theodoros alarm. Meanwhile, Grigor had just arrived from Rshtunik, his troops were exhausted and barely able to hold off the Byzantine attacks. They were at the breaking point then along the banks of the Euphrates a cloud of dust appeared. A thousand cavalry were charging ahead; from their banners and standards Theodoros knew it was Suren, so he said to Grigor's unit, "Men, an army is coming to steal your victory from you, and you're slacking off."

He shouted this short exhortation with a booming voice that was heard by everyone, and the troops began to attack the Byzantines with new furor. When Suren's raging forces arrived, the Byzantines were in complete chaos and completely devastated. They fled the battlefield in disarray. Only a quarter of the Byzantine forces managed to survive, most of them having fallen victim to the sword, and very few were taken captive.

The victory was huge. The enemy army was destroyed and the rest took refuge behind Karin's massive walls. The Armenians were celebrating and singing joyfully, the music of pipes and lyres filling the air; old and young, officers and soldiers, Armenia's north and south, east and west, even those from Asia Minor took part and saw that together they could prevail over invaders, oppressors, religious persecution and repression of freedom. There on that field friends, acquaintances and family members who had been separated for years met, reunited, hugging each other and burying grudges; love was restored, brotherhood reestablished as everyone was happy and joyous. There was only one person who remained unmoved by this general jubilation. He was spattered with enemy blood, sweat dripping from his brow, covered with dust, still seated on his horse, going this way and that, looking after the burial of the dead, making sure the wounded were tended too, and securing the camp with guard posts. That was Theodoros Rshtuni.

It was nearly midnight when Vasak *patrik* with his small but elite corps arrived, just at the moment when the Armenian princes and generals were dining in the Byzantine commander's tent. He saw the great jubilation, men who bore the grand and glorious names of Armenian history gathered around the table, breaking bread together as brothers: the Bagratunis, Artsrunis, Siunis, Mamikonians, Kamsarakans, Rshtunis, Aghvans, Khorkhorunis, Amatunis, Vahevunis, Aravegheans, in short, all the names who a few months before were slandering and accusing Theodoros and rushing to abandon him were now united with him as heroes who defeated the Byzantine emperor. And he praised everyone's bravery showing his admiration and affection for all, addressing them all warmly as brother and son.

Yet something was still gnawing at him. So many years' effort, so many negotiations, so many broken promises, had convinced him that these people worshiped only power, brutality and petty personal ambition, and that patriotism and piety were not deeply rooted in their hearts.

Suren and Grigor fought on the same battlefield that day, but they did not have a chance to see each other. Now they were seated side-by-side reminiscing about the difficult days of the past. Suren seeing Grigor's happiness became cheerful because that young man, whose native compassion and enthusiasms set him apart from his peers, had such a noble heart that could never forget his debt of gratitude to his uncle. There, among the Kamsarakans, there was such joy at seeing both their brother and nephew alive and well, especially after believing them dead for so many years, and now celebrated as glorious, triumphant generals during this decisive battle. Vasak *patrik* praised Suren's bravery and Theodoros held Grigor up as a model for Armenian youth for his bravery, learning and virtue.

And when dinner was over, Theodoros gathered the leading nobles and asked them their advice, and finally decided to leave several thousand troops near Karin and to attack the Byzantine settlements in Pontus. Thus the victorious army set out on a new mission, descending from the Armenian Highlands, striking and taking the entire coast to Trebizond, and returning with great spoils and captives.

Theodoros sent the Arab forces back to the amir loaded with gifts and went as an invited guest to Damascus. Mu'awiya honored him with golden brocade gifts and banners, and entrusted the rule of Armenia, Georgia and Albania to the Chorokh river to him.

During the beautiful spring days in the Rshtuni capital there was a great, double wedding celebration. Grigor Mamikonian married the Rshtuni princess, and Vart married the Kamsarakan princess. Vaspurakan and all of Armenia thought a new dawn had come. Unity prevailed among the Armenian nobles and it seemed as if there were no enemies that dared set foot on Armenian soil.

But when a country is not on a solid legal foundation of limited government, happiness cannot be taken for granted. An incident, circumstance, event which some call fate can turn things upside down and make all hope and effort vain.

That's what happened when Theodoros was struck by long and grave illness.

He gathered the Armenian nobles, presented the country's condition and the strong and weak sides of the two great empires to east and west, the Byzantines and the Arabs, and stated that he considered the rule granted to him by the Amir to be empty and insufficient, and that he was more inclined to be granted the right to rule by a national authority freely elected by the nobles, but only if that power had

bounds and was well-defined. To avoid corruption and to assure them that he was not power-hungry, he vowed that he would not accept any vote cast for him. With these words he left the council, boarded a boat at the Khlat harbor and headed for his palace on Aghtamar, for he was very ill.

What did the Armenian nobles do? To avoid being judgmental, here is what a contemporary chronicler wrote, and let the reader decide:

“Then the princes of Armenia who were in the Byzantine and the Arab sections, Hamazasp and Mushegh and all the others, came together in one place and united, making peace with each other so that the sword and bloodshed would not appear in their midst, so that they might pass the winter in peace and spare the peasants. For the lord of Rshtunik had fallen ill and had gone to the island of Aghtamar, and was unable to go out or to think about anything. The princes divided the country on the basis of the number of cavalymen each prince had and established taxes in gold and silver. One could observe there the misfortunes of doubt similar to the reactions of a sick person when the pain grows severe and he cannot speak. Such things occurred. For there was nowhere for a man to flee and hide, nor was he protected from within. Rather, he resembled someone who had fallen into the sea and was unable to find a way out. Now when the lord of Rshtunik saw this, he requested troops from the Ishmaelites to strike and persecute Armenia and to put Iberia to the sword.”

For any Armenian, it is hard to read these lines, it is hard also for that man who worked his entire life for the salvation of Armenia by the Armenians and to establish unity among them, to see that that unity was being used against the people, as a tool of unbearable oppression, and to see the country being destroyed by Armenian hands. Thus, in despair, he applied the remedy which was poison rather than medicine, and to that added steel, which unlike the surgeon’s knife, does not restore health, but brings death.

The Arabs came when the Armenian alliance fell apart and took over the country, first taking Theodoros and his entire family hostage and then gathered the best of the Armenian nobility and took them to Damascus.

Not long after, Theodoros was buried in the Rshtuni ancestral burial ground. A man who for seventy arduous years was always first to care about his homeland, first to be stung by its pain and torment, first to sacrifice his life in war and peace, sparing no effort to do everything possible; though he came to a sad, hard end, he never despaired.

His last words to his son-in-law Grigor were, “throughout my arduous life, my son, although troubles and hardships were long and constant, my main regret was seeking to overcome my compatriots’ iniquity with foreign arms. I did not foresee that the benevolence of self-serving foreigners was worse than domestic iniquity and I have paid the price for it by ending my life in exile. Indeed, God’s judgment is just. You, I believe, will be involved in the public life of our country and must work hard for Armenia. Urge everyone, counsel them, even if they cannot tolerate each others’ shortcomings, wrongdoing and even crimes with forbearance, they should consider it an unforgivable crime to invite foreign powers to settle their squabbles and allow their homeland to be trampled by foreign invaders.”

Postscript

Like the generations of leaves in the forest, so to the lives of mortals pass. Some leaves fall to the ground, some stay green and blossom when the spring comes. Thus the generations of men sometimes blossom and sometimes fade away.

- Homer

One thousand seven hundred seventy-five captives were taken with Theodoros to Damascus, all of them nobles, leaders of the nation. When Mushegh and Hamazasp could no longer tolerate Moslem oppression and rebelled, all of them were put to death in one day. Like Theodoros, Mushegh ended his days in exile, eating the bitter bread of captivity, scorched by the desert sun, with his eyes always to the north, waiting for salvation that never came.

These are lessons from Providence, but unfortunately they had no impact. Sadly, people do not learn from their parents, nor from the example of their ancestors, nor from their history. Instead they keep making the same mistakes and end up in the same turmoil and torment. The difference between humans and animals is not that human beings can speak, but that they can improve by learning from their past, that is, they can progress.

The Armenian rulers, nobles, catholicos, princes often in history, especially during this era and the following centuries, built monasteries, castles, fortresses and citadels in strong and impregnable places for the security of their own, but there were few that thought about the general population; and those that were found thought only about how to gain advantage over the whole.

If they were truly concerned about the public interest, the public might have protected their buildings, but the nobles never understood this. Instead their glorious monasteries, church and palaces now lie in ruins, plundered and defiled, used as stables by outlaws.

Grigor Mamikonian's buildings were renovated by Zakare and Ivane, yet they are now in ruins. Had they been built by the people together and reclaimed out of the rubble, which Grigor had not done, that would have been expanded, like the school in Harich.

The people's spirit of unity and schools, these two things can breathe new life into the Armenian nation.

The concept of *solidarity* did not exist. It is a new word. The younger generation of Armenians introduced this word into the language and henceforth the concept exists. Thus, they will lend a hand to their brothers and sisters who are devoted to the country and nation, they will share their knowledge freely with those who thirst for learning, and they will share their wealth, however meager, with those who are needy in the spirit of solidarity, caring for their brothers and sisters as themselves.