

Tserents

Toros, Son of Levon

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Chapter 1. Constantinople in 1145

In the summer of the year of our Lord 1145, the city of Constantinople was entirely different from the city called Istanbul today. Enraptured historians and travelers recount its wonders, for it dazzled Europeans from the West and Arabs from the East alike.

Not far from the present Nuri-Osman, there stood the famous Roman circus, called the Forum, with its two triumphal arches leading into an expansive oval arena surrounded by magnificent galleries, colonnades and statues.

Atop a majestic Doric column 120 feet high stood a bronze statue of Apollo by the great sculptor Phidias. Scepter and orb in his hands, the god's head sparkled in the sun's radiance. The Boukoleon Palace, which was the residence of emperors for nearly a thousand years, surpassed the Capitol, Pergamum temple, the Temple of Hadrian at Cyzicus, the Egyptian pyramids and the Pharaohs in its splendor and imposing scale. It had a three-domed cupola, resting on columns of Italian marble that supported the copper gilded roof. It was surrounded by extensive terraced gardens leading down to the seaside and housed five churches. The rooms and halls, marble columns, vaults, mosaics, statues and paintings of the palace amazed everyone who saw them.

Oriental splendor and refined Hellenic taste mingled to adorn this city. Strangers would lose their way wandering its streets, transported by delight; at every step they encountered a gilded door, marble sculptures and massive copper elephants.

In the spring the beauty of nature was beyond imagining. The azure sea framed this land, well-endowed with magnificent trees, lush vegetation, delicious fruits, delightful streams and nightingales' songs. The city of Constantine was more majestic than any other capital, a stronghold with three hundred and eighty-six towers rising to the sky, eclipsing Rome, Jerusalem, and Babylon, in its grandeur, location, climate and imperial presence.

The population of Constantinople, typical of large cities of the day, presented a pageant for the eyes with diverse multitudes from various places and classes, each unique in appearance and dress.

In the vicinity of the palaces and forums, the palanquins of the nobility, the haughtiness of the knights, the swaggering of the warriors, the bustling of the commoners offered onlookers rich entertainment. However, the dismal economic and moral plight of the population did not correspond with this superficial splendor and magnificence of the city

The poor were doomed to languish in the dark stench of the alleys, having been pushed aside to make way for the mansions and boulevards of the well-to-do.

The narrow streets were swarming with thieves and murderers, their villainy plied under cover of darkness. Furthermore, there was neither justice nor shame, for the law neither punished brutality nor held perpetrators accountable.

If there was one constant in this city, unchanged through the ages, it was the sea, winding its way down the Bosphorus, with its lilting waves glistening under the clear, bright sky.

Today like any other day, ships and boats were sailing in all directions, and the air was vibrant with the shouts of sailors on their vessels and the hubbub of the motley crowd on shore. Only then, it was not Turkish but Greek that filled the air, and their movements were more energetic, devoid of Asian languor.

From the direction of the Princes' Islands, a six-man rowboat forcefully cut through the water and approached the palace where the Propontus descended toward the shore. A courtier was seated beside the helm, and next to him was a young man who scarcely said more than an occasional monosyllable in reply to the chatty courtier.

The young man was dressed modestly. His head wrapped in a white mulin scarf, his long, loose gray coat covered a woolen jacket that overlapped his pants, and on his feet were simple leather shoes. He was unarmed. He looked around, listened, observed everything with his sharp, black, penetrating eyes, peering out from behind his long eyelashes, but when he looked people in the eye, he projected an air of naive simplicity, as if his mind were faraway,

However, despite his weak and careless demeanor, his sturdy frame and his seemingly blank eyes unexpectedly casting a piercing glare caught the attention of any keen observer.

His face was young and a curly beard covered part of his chin, while a thick mop of hair topped his head. He had a strong, slim build. Judging by his appearance, he could have been twenty, or at most twenty-two years old. Only a deep crease between his eyebrows gave any indication that deep thoughts lay hidden beneath this simple facade.

When the boat was moored to the shore armed warriors and servants poured out to assist their master, who paced forth with princely gravitas.

Meanwhile, the young man without saying a word, took hold of the hand of a man of about fifty, and alighted, his eyes half closed, and followed the courtier, who, from time to time, cast a backward glance as they passed through gardens with their flowers, decorative streams, bridges and statues; they reached the magnificent gates, where the entourage of palace servants and guards in their finery signaled the sovereign's arrival.

There the courtier came forward, gave a submissive bow of greeting to a haughty young man, apparently the head of the imperial guard. Then he pointed to the young man and said in a low voice, "This is the son of the Armenian rebel, whom I deliver to you at the Emperor's command." The young guardsman, who held the title of count, responded with cool disdain, "Wait here," then turned away.

As for the son of the Armenian rebel, he did not miss a thing, not a single word, not a single movement. Without flinching, he took note of the young officer's haughtiness, while discerning the Armenian origins hiding beneath his Greek title. In the impenetrable depths of his heart, his own contempt was higher than the domes of the imperial palace, and he had already resolved to endure everything with imperturbable patience. Therefore, with the same blank stare, he looked also at the 3500 strong personal guard of the emperor, decked out in gold and silver weapons, who were mostly of Armenian origin.

Within moments, luminaries and nobles, including members of the imperial family had gathered. My pen is powerless to describe the entourage of courtiers-senators, consuls, governors, patricians, majestic statesmen, generals, viceroys, treasurers, archbishops and other high ranking clergy, countesses and young ladies from noble families. Their splendid gilded robes adorned with gems and pearls dazzled onlookers. All these people showered each other with expressions of love, congeniality and courtesy, but God alone knows how much hatred, envy, evil and alienation lurked behind this facade of affection.

The son of the rebel, assuming the air of a simpleton, took it all in. Suddenly a flurry of excitement spread through the assemblage as the doors of the imperial chambers opened. Then, a man of gallant posture and mighty physique threw a searching glance at the young son of the rebel, approached and with mocking scorn, looked him over from head to foot, and said, "I swear, you are the son of the rebel Levon!" Without waiting for an answer, he continued: "In Cilicia, I had occasion to meet your father; here I met your brother Ruben."

Then, turning to his immediate circle, under his breath he quipped, “Indeed, even lions can give birth to bastards.” With this, he departed, his long sword rattling at his side. The courtiers, bowing obsequiously, made way.

An elderly servant of the young Armenian prince, who was always respectfully positioned beside his master like a statue, showing no sign of life, flinched upon hearing this insult and turned his eyes toward his liege, who in a calm, emotionless voice, asked,

“What is the matter, Babken?”

“Did you hear this man's insulting comment, my lord?”

“I did.”

“Do you know who this brute is?”

“I know. He is Andronicus.”

“Oh, just let me ...”

“I know what you are going to say and I know what you would do. However, I have already told you that neither I, nor anyone in my entourage should show any emotion, anger, strength, wit or feelings whatsoever. You must follow my example until our hour comes. Bear up and be silent — this is our rule for now.”

All this was said in a calm, cool manner. Instantly, Babken took on an impassive look and no one noticed that these words contained a pledge of coming retribution.

Then, at last the palace chamberlain approached this group and asked, “Who is Toros, the son of Levon the Armenian?”

“It is I,” answered the young man, as if waking up from a deep sleep.

“The emperor wants to see you.”

When they came to the throne room, the guards, in accordance with protocol, searched Toros for weapons, then the chamberlain instructed him on the etiquette of greeting the emperor. Apparently having some doubts about the mental abilities of the listener, he repeated everything once more and escorted him in.

On a golden throne upon a silver dais sat Emperor Manuel I Komnenos, whom Armenian historians call Kir Manuel, the son of John II Komnenos, who had taken Levon hostage. He was a young, solidly built man, wearing a crown, holding a scepter. The throne was adorned with every conceivable ornament that nature and skillful human hands could create. The throne was flanked by the courtiers and ladies in waiting.

“Arise, son of Levon,” said the emperor. “I grant you sunlight and freedom. Your dwelling, stipend and necessities will be covered by the imperial treasury. Strive to be worthy of my generosity, and let gratitude be your rule.” Then, turning to the large group of clergy, where the patriarch, metropolitans and bishops stood majestically and sedately, the emperor added:

“Holy Fathers, I will see you about my theological remarks later. Now I express the hope that you will not leave this noble young man without your care and spiritual guidance.” The Holy Fathers responded with low bows, throwing sharp-piercing glances at the Armenian youth.

The imperial audience ended. Toros walked out of the throne room and barely walked a few steps, when a man of short stature, stretching his neck upward as far as possible to make himself appear taller and grander, approached him with a pleasant expression on his face: “The emperor ordered that I attend you. Please follow me, I will show you to your dwelling.”

Toros silently followed him. Only a few steps from the great gates of the palace, a simply dressed man approached his escort and spoke to him in a low voice. Having walked on a little more, the short man stopped and dutifully said, inclining his elongated neck:

“Please wait in this room for a moment while I receive further instructions on my duties.” All four entered the room. Toros was offered a chair. Babken stood motionlessly beside him. The two Greeks stepped away so as not to be heard. There, the escort confusedly said to the stranger, “I do not understand. What are my duties then?”

“Your duties are very simple and not burdensome: you should pocket all the stipends and expenses you are supposed to deliver for the care of the Armenian prince and his servants. That's all. This should not be a major burden.”

“But then what is my duty?”

“Apparently, it seems I failed to make myself clear, although, I believe, I do express myself very precisely. Now once again: instead of taking care of this noble young man, spending money on his upkeep, you should do absolutely nothing. When the imperial subsidies are delivered, take them and put them in your pocket. What you do with them is up to you. Give alms, make donations to the church, in a word, do whatever you want.”

“I understood that part, but what am I going to do as my job?”

“You are free to do what you want.”

“Then what should I answer if I am asked questions about this young man's care?”

“I can guarantee you that no one will ask anything, and you will have no obligation to answer anything.”

“But if then, questions arise ...”

“On my part, that is, on the part of those who sent me and on the part of this young Armenian, absolutely no questions can arise. You should only observe prudence in your reports and avoid any excesses, to avoid suspicion. In case of investigation, you'll lose everything . . . and may suffer personally.”

“Now I see,” said the short man, with deep reverence and joy. “I am full of gratitude towards you for your care about me and for looking out for my interests in this way. I do not even know how to express my gratitude for all this.”

“All you have to do is remain silent, nothing more; avoid talking about our arrangement with others. Otherwise, everything will be revealed and you will not get a thing from the treasury.”

“You're right. Then, I will go to perform my duties now that they are clear to me.”

“Excellent. However, at least from these doors, we had better leave together.”

“Good, with pleasure,” said the escort, and took a few steps towards the door. Then, having grasped something, he turned to the provider of the good advice. “But what is your interest, if things go so smoothly for me?” He asked. “Why are you showing me such favor and giving me such benefit? That's what I would like to know . . .”

“Since you display excessive curiosity and ask me about things that I myself do not know, I have no choice but to take my leave because I have to obey orders from above, just like you, perhaps even more than you do.”

Contemplating a little more and coming to the conclusion that it is more profitable to listen to the words of this man, the cautious escort said: “At least let me know where these people will be staying, so that I can answer questions if I am being asked.”

“Fine,” said the stranger, “Let’s go there together.”

Chapter 2. Haven or Trap?¹

Thus, the two Greeks, followed by Toros and his servant Babken, passed through the palace gate that led to the square, then through triumphal arches again and finally entered the city proper. There, long, high walls with huge gates indicated palaces or residences of high dignitaries, sometimes interspersed with small wooden houses. From time to time they encountered gatherings of people, as is usual in large cities, then continued along deserted streets again. At last they arrived at a door set in a high, square wall. It opened promptly when they knocked, revealing the customary garden with its giant trees and many rosebushes. At the end of the garden was a two-story house with windows looking onto a garden on three sides. A one-story servants' quarters stood at the right of the garden entrance, next to the wall.

To judge by his clothes, the man who opened the door was an ordinary domestic servant in a neatly kept house. When the four men entered, an old woman poked her head out of the kitchen door, peering at them with natural curiosity. Once they were inside, the stranger turned to the escort and said:

“Friend, now you know the house. Do you want anything else?”

“No, but...”

“Then our private agreement is concluded,” he said, in a tone indicating the conversation was over. The other understood this and departed, leaving his three companions in the solitude of the four walls of the house that, except for its small size, resembled a harem or a convent. When the door closed, the stranger, simply but respectfully turned to Toros and, pointing to the door of the house, asked, “Do you wish to see your quarters, my prince, and order your servant to get you whatever you wish?”

Toros, who had not been treated with such respect for years by anyone but Babken, stepped forward indifferently without showing any surprise whatsoever. He found himself in a small vestibule with a room on either side. One was the dining room and the other the living room, both appropriately furnished. At the other end of the vestibule was a staircase leading upstairs to two more rooms, a bedroom and a study where in addition to sofas and other necessary furniture, one could see polished arms hanging on the wall. All the clothes that a young nobleman needed were hung in the bedroom. The simple but tasteful bed covers proved that an alert woman with a delicate touch had been there. At one end of the bedroom, there was a door leading into a small bathroom. After they had seen all this, the stranger turned again to the prince and said,

“If you need anything else, my prince, your wish is my command.” The prince, turning his penetrating eyes for the first time toward the man, replied, “Let us go into this room for a moment.” Entering the other room

1 Chapter 2 draws on the translated excerpt by James Etmekjian, printed in Agop J.Hacikyan, Edward S.Franchuk and Nourhan Uzounian’s *The Heritage of Armenian Literature*, Volume 3, (Wayne State University Press, Detroit, Michigan, 2005), p.252-258

for the second time, he went directly to a gigantic curved sword, removed it from the wall, drew it partly from its scabbard, examined it and recognizing his father's sword, replaced it on the wall.

“Friend,” he said, enunciating each word clearly, “tell the person who prepared this house for me that she is an angel and half of my heart belongs to her.”

“When you let me know your commands through this servant, I shall always be at your service,” said the man and left with a respectful gesture.”

Turning to Babken, Toros asked, “Did you notice the location of this house? Go out before sunset and take a look around without seeming to do so. Find out what there is behind this house and whether there is a house or garden behind this wall. Be quick so that you return in time for dinner.”

After Babken left, Toros began to examine the wooden walls carefully, scrutinizing even the slightest crack with his eagle eyes. Finally, he stopped before a section of one of the bedroom walls, and a dismissive smile appeared on his face, as he fell into deep thought:

'This is what I was looking for. Treacherous wood, you are a Byzantine door, but what are you hiding? Truly, this bed, these sheer curtains, and even the folds of these clothes indicate the presence of an angel's hand. It was said a thousand years ago that there are angels of darkness that assume the guise of angels of light, but what an impossible dream to find angels of light in this cursed city, in this Babylon. Then there is my father's sword hanging in the other room. What does it all mean? Who is behind it? A woman? That sword has been taken from the room where victory trophies are kept. What kind of woman can she be?

What an eventful day it has been! I have been released from prison by none other than the person who betrayed my brother and who proceeded to scorn me. Then, I have been summoned before the emperor and subjected to his arrogance. He wishes to make me renounce being an Armenian. This man has stolen his people's soul and parceled it out among his priests, leaving nothing for God. If only he knew what the welfare of his people and throne required. If only I were in his place. If that royal head had learned what I learned from my father in prison concerning my people's past and had had the knowledge I acquired from the dusty worm-eaten books in their Greek monasteries, he would not have uttered such rubbish to me. Instead of humiliating me with his scorn and persecuting my people, he would form an army of Christian of the East, uniting us around him in order to resist attacks from both east and west. Unfortunately, he is destined to fall at the feet of one or the other, and this capital will become a ravished and plundered Ani.

Who called me, a forgotten prisoner, to the attention of that childish emperor who grants me sunlight and freedom? Oh, brilliant sun of Black Mountain, when will I stand on your rocky peaks and see my people, as well as foreigners, not as a boy who is scrutinized from head to foot, but as a giant to whom people must look up when they wish to speak to him? That Andronicus must be convinced that the cub is a lion. Traitors, my brother, my Ruben, was truly a lion's cub with the blood of a lion, the strength of a lion, and the heart of a lion. You blinded him when he was at my age. There were three of us when we entered prison. They wasted away and died, and I alone have come out having learned from their example and their mistakes. O, Lord, enable me to remain unrecognized until I plant the banner with the Rubinian cross on the peaks of the Taurus. My first steps have already revealed to me a friendly hand reaching out to me in the darkness as I stand alone and helpless in this hostile country. However, were there not a thousand friendly hands ready to help my brother? He was handsome, personable, vigorous, fearless, and created for love and friendship only. Who could say that there was a single person who hated him? Women were in love with him. The youth sought his aid. What Byzantine love! What Byzantine friendship! How many cursed passions are harbored within the walls of this city! The shiny golden cupolas of that palace are so many tombs of ugly corruption.

My father's sword moved me. I wonder whether it is Andronicus, himself, who had that sword hung on the wall in order to dispatch me in the same way he dispatched Ruben and to escape from the vengeance of his

brother, if that brother be like Ruben. But where are my brothers Stepaneh and Mleh? There again if they were known to be alive, there is no way I would have been released from prison . . . What is the situation in Cilicia? I wonder who will bring me news. . . . I must go there personally, but until that day I must be like the Roman who feigned insanity in order to save his country. I'll pretend to be a fool, and if he thinks that I am a fool, probably everyone in the palace will also think so. But can a fool love a woman?

The person who put that (secret) door there and hung that sword on the wall undoubtedly wishes to unmask me . . . Let us see who will succeed in this game, who will be the victor. I shall be. I must be, for I shall rule over land and sea. That is the prophecy. . . Yes, the prophecy of a dream. But what is a dream? Who knows where it comes from, and what its meaning is? . . . I am convinced that dreams have meaning, and my magnificent old man had something truly godlike in the aura of his dignified face, with his luxuriant beard and brilliant eyes, whose gaze transformed me from a boy to a man. 'Well,' said my father, Levon, 'the bread is your paternal land, the fish represents the sea. You will rule over land and sea, and I shall not see it.'

Indeed, he died a few days later, and I was left alone, a stranger and a prisoner surrounded by all his enemies, all the enemies of the Armenians....

And since I was released from the dungeon today, probably there are no more Armenians in the world who strive for the independence and freedom of the Armenian people ...

My ancestors - Ruben, Konstantin, my uncle Toros and my father Levon — if they just wished, if they had just chosen to ask for patronage under the shadow of the Byzantine eagle's wings, as did the Oshins and Hetums of Lambron by renouncing the rights of the Armenian people and the love for their homeland and their nation, then they too would have found support among these weak-minded and inert emperors, mired in arrogant dereliction and dissipation under the shadow of their theologians.

However, royal blood flowed in the veins of my ancestors. They remembered the decisive day when the Armenian people: commoners, farmers, peasants, but neither the nobles nor clergy like the schemer Vest Sargis or the apostate Getadardz Catholicos, appealed to Vahram and rallying around his courageous leadership stampeded and smashed the Byzantine army.

This army from Byzantium, to which the keys of Ani had been handed over by the traitorous nobility, demanded the surrender of the city. At the time, our disarmed, abandoned and desperate people shed their last tears of despair and hopelessness on the graves of their kings - Ashot, Smbat and Gagik.

"It was the love of that Armenian people that moved my ancestors. Filled with disdain and righteous anger against the Greeks, they placed the banner of freedom on the peaks of the Taurus. I have the same sentiments. As the heir of my ancestors and as a product of my Greek readings, I feel that they do not know their Lycurguses, their Leonidases and their Aristidases. They argue for hours, for weeks and persecute their co-religionist brothers for the interpretation of a drop of water, a little bread dough, and an incomprehensible word.

They are madmen. If God permits me to realize my dreams, I know what I shall do. My aspirations are high, while my present situation is difficult. We'll see..."

He was in the midst of these ruminations when Babken returned. Silently, Toros took him into the next room and asked him what he had seen, and as he had suspected, Babken had seen nothing but high walls. Wasting no time, they went downstairs for dinner. It was already past dinner time, and they had not eaten since morning. Beyond his hunger, Toros was more curious to know what kind of food was prepared in this unique house, where there seemed to be a secret hand behind everything.

Once in the dining room he asked Babken to sit at the table with him, and upon the latter's hesitation, "Father Babken," he responded, "if circumstances so dictate, I shall let you know when you are not to share the table

with me. Otherwise, we'll not change our prison habits. I also want you to know that it is a greater pleasure for me to eat bread and cheese with my father's faithful servant and my childhood guardian than to enjoy royal viands with strangers." The food was choice and tasty without being extravagant. The wine was excellent and the fruit delicious. Toros left the table without saying a word. When the servant asked what his wishes were for the next day's menu, he simply answered, "Ask the person who ordered you to prepare today's meal."

After he had directed Babken to place a bed in the living room and to spend the night there in wakeful sleep, he went upstairs, "Although," he added with a smile, "such an order was unnecessary for a man who has taken part in every one of my uncle's or father's wars since the age of twelve and knows that it is necessary to be cautious when one is surrounded by the enemy."

Then, without giving it further thought, he went to bed as if he were in his paternal fortress of Vahkh, where he had spent his childhood. Although he lay awake for several hours, he was still at an age when he was unable to resist indefinitely the emotional fatigue resulting from the events of the day, and he fell asleep. When he awoke, he jumped out of bed, as had been his custom since childhood, and naturally his eyes turned toward the secret door that seemed like a wall. He opened the window and saw Babken strolling calmly in the garden. Upon a motion of the young man's hand, he came up, and his first glance, like that of Toros, was directed toward the door.

"Father Babken," said the prince, "why are you looking at that door? What did you see?"

"I didn't see it now," answered Babken. "I saw a trap yesterday, but things didn't turn out the way I had imagined."

"What do you mean?"

"I thought that an enemy would come out of that door armed with a sword. It is true that an enemy came out but not the kind I had thought."

"Babken, I don't understand a thing you're saying."

"You told me to spend the night in wakeful sleep, which is what I had intended to do. However, what was the point of lying on a bed downstairs in that room in wakeful sleep? I had to be in a position from which I could see the activity in the house and watch over the only hope of the Armenian people. Thus, when silence settled over the city, 'Let's change beds,' I said to myself, went quietly to the garden, and unable to find a more appropriate bed than the tree, I climbed it. Everything was dark and quiet until midnight. Suddenly, I saw your wall open and a faint glimmer of light was outlined in the darkness. I gripped my sword. 'Saint Gregory,' I said, 'give me patience...'"

"Were you going to shout?"

"God forbid. I was going to jump into the house. We are good jumpers on Black Mountain, but the distance was too great, and the window too narrow. The intruder could escape, especially since the light was faint and the intruder timid. Therefore, it was necessary to wait. A minute seemed like a year. The long line of light began to move just slightly, and then I saw a head. 'Thank you, Saint Gregory,' I said, and put the sword back in the scabbard. The head belonged to a woman. But what did she want? She listened. She wanted to know whether you were asleep. When she was reassured, the door opened all the way, and she entered the room, holding a light which she was shielding with her hand. She first examined the room, then approached you slowly, and when I saw her, I began to tremble."

"Why, what did you notice on her face?"

“It was as beautiful as the sun. I am frightened when Satan is beautiful, especially now. She observed you. She prayed over you. I prayed, too, that Saint Gregory rescue you from the hands of that beautiful devil. She stayed for a few minutes, and as if shaken by someone, she took her light and disappeared as quietly as she had entered. The vision vanished.”

“This was the sum total of your vision and fear Father Babken?” laughed Toros.

“If that woman had not been so beautiful, I would not have been afraid.”

“I see. You are afraid that I'll fall in love with her and forget our mountains, aren't you?”

“Yes, I am. If that woman leaves this city and comes with you, if she gives up her cursed religion and accepts Saint Gregory's religion, we'll make her queen of the mountains. But Greek women are cursed. You, on the other hand, our prince, are good, prudent, and learned. You read much and know as much as a *vardapet* but you have not seen women. I am afraid that, just as you forgot our Armenian books as you spent your time reading the Greek books in the monastery prison, you will forget our Armenian women.

I used to say to your late father, 'Sire, our prince, Toros, is intelligent, but he is reading that cursed nation's books, and I am afraid that he will forget Saint Gregory's religion.' He used to reply, 'Babken, don't worry about Toros. He is more intelligent than I. He is like his uncle. He will be braver and better than we. Someday, he will make you forget us. Don't worry. You'll see.' I didn't worry, but when I saw you leave your Narek and read those dusty, worm-eaten Greek books secretly, I used to say, 'Lord, protect our prince.' When I saw that woman, with her blond hair hanging down her back in golden braids, as she tried to charm you, I became afraid. May God protect you, and may Saint Gregory enlighten you.”

“Don't worry, Babken *hayrik*. God will protect me. I feel more secure. Just as the Greek books protected me from the danger of the Greek religion, so will Greek women protect us against the danger from their men. You did well last night to borrow your bed from the birds. You can now sleep in peace at night, for the enemy is not as strong as you thought. Who knows, she may even be an ally.”

“The Lord save us from a Greek ally,” said the old man crossing himself.” Ask the Franks how helpful their assistance was. The Greeks readily promised friendship and abundant provisions on the one hand, and on the other, they secretly burned the grass and the crops, dumped the wheat and barley into the sea, and made deserts out of the towns and villages. My father used to tell us that during your grandfather's reign (God rest both their souls), when the Franks reached Cilicia, they had no horses, for they had all died on the way. The men had wasted away, as if they were suffering from an illness, and we thought that they would all die. Those brave barons and frères would never have succeeded in capturing Jerusalem if they had not been fed by the Armenians. Your father, who was a very intelligent man, went to see their king and took care of all his needs, for God's sake as well as his own. They ate and drank freely, and before a week had gone by, they had become as strong as bulls, and they went and conquered everything, including the Holy Sepulcher. What a pity! These Franks are brave and strong, but their heads are empty. They have no brains. The Greeks are the opposite. They are not strong, but they know much, they see much. Look at the eyes of their priests. They look like torches from hell. You'd think that Satan, himself, were there. Since last night, I am more afraid of Greek women than men.”

“All this is in vain, Babken,” said Toros seriously. “Just now we don't have a friend in the world. We must prepare to leave this cursed city. We have no money to pay for our passage. As you say, if we do not act intelligently by taking advantage of the opportunity that presents itself, we'll be as empty-headed as your Franks. Take a stroll today, and observe the city. Perhaps you'll meet an Armenian. Don't listen to every Armenian. You may find a great many Armenian-speaking people who have renounced their religion. There are very few true Armenians. Be especially wary of priests. The good among them are saints, the bad are worse than Satan. If people mention me, tell them that I am a fool, that my mind is hazy, that I have changed

since my father's illness. Talk about me. Express sadness and pity for me. If you meet someone who is true and sincere, inform me after you have seen him several times, telling me his name, location, and past history. Then, when I am ready, you'll bring him to me. Now go.”

“Fine,” said Babken, and got up to go.

Since Levon's father's death, he had not had such a long conversation with his young master. Thus, he was happy in his heart, although his face had forgotten how to smile. Toros called him as he was leaving.

“Babken *hayrik*, do you have any money?”

“I have none whatsoever, but God is merciful.”

“What do you mean?”

“When we had no feet, God gave us feet. Now we have no money. God is great. He will provide for us. Don't worry.”

Chapter 3. The Caring Hand

“Fine,” said Toros smiling when Babken left. “The old man knows well that I don't have any money. He is an honorable man, God help him. Let's see what he comes back with. He's the kind of man who never returns empty-handed.”

What a strange idea to watch out for me from a tree. Anyway, thanks to him I learned who was looking out for me. Assuming, of course, that this concern is not actually a trap. How can one fall in love with somebody imprisoned in a monastery? How could she keep an eye on me? Where did she meet me?

We were completely cut off from the world for four years. We spent that time sealed in a cell, with iron bars on the window, through which only the sea surrounding the island was visible.

My poor father kept staring at two pieces of land – one was Ruben's grave next to which he was to be buried and the other was the shore of Asia Minor not far from us which continued on to Cilicia.

I remembered the statue of the lion of Cilicia from my childhood. The lion was erected on the peak of the Taurus mountains – as if guarding our border and saying: “this is the land God has granted us.” I remembered the mountains and the splendor of the waves on the sea and the country that flourished in the hands of the Armenians.

I also remember the day when my father returned home from a great war. For almost a month he and my uncle had defended our country from the invasion of a massive Scythian army. What an awful month that was.

My brother and I, along with our mother, used to pay visits to the poor refugees with their wives and children, who had escaped the invading hordes and taken their cattle to the Taurus Mountains for safe keeping.

These people, my father and uncle witnessed the onslaught of these barbarians wreaking havoc and terror throughout the land; not content with plunder and captives, they burned villages, towns and cities.

Out of deep respect for my uncle, the impatient warriors refrained from directly appealing to him; instead they turned to my father, knowing of his unflagging bravery and boldness:

“For how long shall we endure this?” They said. “Rise up and all of us will back you. How can we wait anymore?”

My father Levon answered: “Fellows, have you lost your minds? How can I disobey my older brother at such a dangerous time? God forbid!

I have pondered everything well and I know that he is a virtuous leader, a skilled and wise commander. In such precarious times, interfering with unsolicited advice is a mistake. When he commands us, 'Fight!', then we will charge into the battle and lay down our lives, but only then. “

Then we saw Tigran and Splasat arrive with their troops, Vasil the Gokh with his fearless squads and a small detachment of Latins. After that, trumpets of war resounded from the fortress of Vahka all over the mountains and the Armenian army advanced.

I was then ten years old and Ruben was three years older. With a sword in his hands he found me. “Let's go, Toros,” he said, “we will go to war too. Are we women to sit here in the fortress?” I wondered in uncertainty since I didn't have a sword when our mother arrived and ordered both of us locked up – armed and unarmed – in the fortress tower.

We spent the whole day locked up. Then, suddenly we heard shouts of victory and the doors of our prison opened wide. Although everyone's eyes were filled with the tears of grief for the lost warriors, the joy of victory raised everyone's spirits. When we saw our father, we were shocked at first, since we couldn't understand whether he was alive or dead. We thought he was wounded, but then were told that he was just exhausted and that our victory was largely owing to his courage.

It took many days for our father to recuperate; all the commanders came to visit him. They called him the savior of the Armenian people. My uncle was the first to say without envy that next to God, Levon has become the liberator of Cilicia and truly the Lion of the mountains.

He visited my father every day. How happy life was until the days of our captivity came. Oh, I wish I could forget the past. Yes, we have to concentrate on the present, and the present has an indefinite future. This woman, of course, will reveal herself to me eventually and the veil of uncertainty will be lifted. What's going on anyway? If the Greeks wanted to kill me, they could easily have done so. So let's wait and see.

The servant then appeared to invite him to dinner. When the prince went downstairs, he was respectfully greeted by the same unknown person who had brought them to this house and settled them there. The man repeated that he was prepared to carry out his command. Toros assumed his careless innocent appearance and replied that he was pleased with everything and had no complaints or wishes. After dinner, without engaging in long conversations with this man, he again went upstairs, making it clear that he wanted to sleep.

It is no secret that all notable personages, beginning with Alexander the Great, were able to fall asleep on the eve of difficult events. After the strenuous planning required for success, the weary mind is ready to sleep.

So it was with our Toros. In his dream, it seemed to him that a beautiful lady with golden hair and gentle gait, circled his bed like a shadow, but each time, just as he stretched out his hand to her, the vision slipped away. After several such episodes, he finally opened his eyes, but there was no one there.

Toros looked toward the suspicious door and saw that it was half-open. The young prince, firm and intrepid by nature, was quite surprised when he noticed that his usually bold heart was beating unevenly. An unknown force irresistibly drew him to the half-open door.

He got up, his mind still in a fog, and made his way toward the door. With a light touch of his fingers the door slid open and Toros went through to another room, which was quiet and deserted. A dim light shone

through the curtained windows. In the room, there was a sofa and on one side something like an altar. He turned in that direction and stopped, barely taking a step...

On the wall, he saw the portrait of his brother Ruben, in vivid color as if alive, surrounded by fresh flowers. This sight stunned Toros. The storm in his heart settled down and as his agitation subsided, tears poured down his face. In grief, he froze like a statue, his hand on his forehead and his eyes dark with tears. Just then, he was stirred from his stupor by the gentle touch of a small hand and a soft voice that called him by name.

With childlike simplicity, he took the outstretched hand and turned to the voice calling his name. Before him stood a truly beautiful young lady. The simplicity in her clothes and jewelry harmonized with her noble and dignified face.

“Enough, my dear Toros,” she said, looking intently into his eyes, “it is we the women who are entitled to tears. Your destiny is vengeance. I have spent many nights in tears in front of this portrait. “

Toros lifted her snow-white hand to his lips. He wanted to speak, but could not, choked up in tears and emotion. Like a caring mother, his benefactor took Toros by the hand and led him to the sofa. They sat next to each other as she wiped his and her own tears with her gossamer handkerchief. After few long moments passed, these two souls, perfect embodiments of male and female beauty, sat there like long-lost friends, side by side and hand in hand, still in a half-stupor.

Finally, when their eyes brightened again, Toros said gently:

“I do not know who you are, but an angel could not surpass your appearance, voice, care and cordiality. I am a wretched exile, a miserable inmate and an unfortunate captive. Where did you see me, why did you sympathize with me and how did you fall in love? Until I was in front of my brother's portrait, this riddle seemed to have no solution, but now I think I can begin to understand. “

“I also wanted to make things clear,” said the lady. “I do not appreciate tedious, banal and tasteless courtship games. But first, you must learn about me and my past. My name is Euphemia. My father, Alexis, was the governor of Minor Armenia. After Sebastia was transferred to the Armenian kings, he married a girl from the royal family of Artsruni. Later, my father returned to Constantinople, where I was born and became my mother's sole comfort, who, until her last breath, never accepted being a subject of a foreign nation. When I was barely an adult, the Emperor Constantine brought you as captives from Cilicia. Although my mother had never seen you, she grieved deeply after the defeat of the Armenian kings of Cilicia. Through old friends of my father, behind the scenes she used whatever means she could to free you from prison and even open the palace doors for you. At the time, she was hoping to engage me to Ruben, since we were the same age. But the overly sociable disposition of Ruben, his handsome appearance, the flirtatious Byzantine women, his insatiable appetite for amusement made my mother change her mind and before even revealing her plans to others, she started persuading me to forget him, as she had a presentiment of the tragedy that would befall him. However, my heart could not accept these arguments. I was smitten by him and wanted only him, even though I feigned indifference. A struggle raged within me, but I could open my heart to no one. I did my best to obey my mother, not even letting Ruben's name cross my lips. My mother thought I had forgotten him, but the one and only person I dreamt of was him. On several occasions she suggested that I marry one of the eligible bachelors who made proposals, but I rejected every one. In the end, I fell seriously ill and in my delirium revealed my secret to my mother. On the advice of the doctor, my hapless mother promised me that she would do everything she could to arrange my marriage with Ruben. Immediately my condition began to improve. Day by day my pallor went away and I recovered my strength. After a couple of meetings, Ruben mended his ways, and even before we revealed our intentions, he asked my mother for my hand, anticipating also the consent of his father. We were elated, especially my mother. But those days of joy were fleeting. Unexpectedly, we received the news of Ruben's ill-fated demise. My mother, who was stricken even more

than I, did her best to console me, but to no avail. In fevered grief, I became bedridden and my mother passed away in the room next door.

For two years thereafter my spinster aunt cared for me. Then a friend of my father visited, an old and experienced doctor. Though still weak and thin, as soon as I was able to move, he recommended moving me to Prince's Island for a change of scenery. The doctor himself chose the house where we were to live on the island.

My aunt and the doctor's sole focus was my recovery. They often took me to a nearby monastery to meet the abbot. The doctor would arrange for me to sit at the window, and I understood the wise old man's intention only on the day when I saw you with your father walking in the garden.

For a moment, I thought Ruben had come back to life, and I would have fallen down if the watchful elder, who never took his eyes off me, had not caught me. That fainting spell was a shock to my nervous system, and thereafter, life began flowing through my veins again.

Catching sight of you from time to time from the same window became my medicine. Then I saw you walking behind your father's coffin as it was carried from the prison to the cemetery, and I swore to do everything in my power to set you free.

For a whole year, my earnest doctor and I worked to this end, but without success. Only after Manuel replaced his father on the throne were we able to make any progress. Throughout, I never had the least doubt about you, since I was deeply convinced that as Ruben had loved me so, you as his brother could not but have the same heart. Our common devotion to Ruben's memory would be the tie that binds our heart."

"What can I offer in return for such a noble heart, such wondrous beauty and such heavy toil for my release? Alas, I have nothing but a woeful heart; how can this be considered worthy recompense?"

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Euphemia, and such a fire flashed in her eyes that Toros was dumbstruck. "You do have a heart, Toros, don't you? You have a future worthy of your heart. You have a vast country where you will reign. Have you forgotten all this? When I desired your love, I also wished for a share in the glory of your reign. You see, I am very ambitious. Do not consider me one of those women whose mental horizons end at the bed curtain. Oh no! For you as for Ruben I wish a king's throne, and I see in your family the stuff of Plutarchian heroes. Forgive me, I don't yet know the heroes among my mother's kin. But you can be sure that in me you will find a tireless companion-in-arms who will resolutely face any danger. You recognized your father's sword. It was stolen from the imperial treasury. I paid its price a hundredfold (I mean its material price, of course). You deserve to wear this sword."

Without realizing how, Toros found himself kneeling before this wondrous prophetic, having set aside his prudent reservations, and when she fell silent, he said:

"I am yours! Let us do as you wish! You say that you are ambitious, you want to become a queen — so be it, be an Armenian, and I will become your groom and humble servant, and all my people will become your subject as soon as they are released from foreign captivity!"

And he kissed her hand. Euphemia, who had now calmed down, arose, took his arm and went to the secret door which was ajar. When she started to go through, Toros stopped her.

"Do not be afraid," said Euphemia, "the servants in your house are my people who grew up under my mother's tutelage, and you, no doubt, are confident in your servant. Who are you afraid of? In addition, they are under order not to come upstairs unless you summon them. I want to see for myself whether you need anything or if anything is lacking there."

With these words, she opened the drawers, examined the contents, and seeing that he had not touched anything, she added:

“Do I have to say that everything that belongs to me belongs to you as well? Anything you see here is for you to use. No doubt, you need money, and yet I’m sure that you haven’t even turned the key to the chest. Now, that we belong to each other, I hope that everything that’s mine will belong to you, and everything that belongs to you will belong to me.”

“Your care for me is so immense . . . “

She interrupted, “Stop it!” and put her snow-white finger to Toros's lips and smiled. “It would be better if you left the word 'gratitude' out of our conversations from now on. After all, we have an agreement between us, don’t we? Instead of this little house, you will give me a throne, instead of your clothes, royal purple, instead of these two common servants, an entire people as subjects. If anyone gets the short end of this deal, it’s not me, Toros.”

Instead of answering, Toros again kissed her beautiful hand. Suddenly she started: “We lost track of the time . . . I must go,” she said. “When you want to see me, pull this ring in the back of the chest, and I will come.”

“What if I do not dare to pull the ring?”

“Do you expect me to take all the initiative?”

“I thought before that nothing in the world could embarrass or frighten me, but now I do not recognize myself. Even yesterday, at the imperial throne, my heart did not beat so unevenly. What happened to me, I do not know. Now, I tremble like a child before you ... what is it?”

“It means that you are still a child, and I must watch over your upbringing. So, see you tonight after dinner, when everybody has gone to bed.”

Saying this, she extended her hand for a kiss and disappeared through the door.

Toros stood before this door a completely transformed man, with a heart filled with cheer and light that dispelled the darkness of the world for him.

The last rays of the evening sun were of pure gold. The trees and flowers were greener than a few hours earlier. The air was fresher and easier to breath. Finally, he looked out the window and saw Babken, who seemed to Toros to be a spry and handsome man, despite his bushy eyebrows and the wear-and-tear of his fifty trying years. If not for his awkwardness, Toros would have jumped down and embraced the old man.

So he pulled himself together and signaled to Babken to come upstairs.

Chapter 4. The State of Affairs in Cilicia

In his state of exuberance, Toros was more prone to speak than listen. However, Babken's wariness had a sobering effect on the sensitive young man, who was mature beyond his 20 years.

Although Babken was barely able to read and could only sign his name, he was very smart, solid, tough and tireless in battle, a resolute and loyal man and a zealous patriot.

Babken was devoted to Toros, whose uncle and father he had served valiently as a comrade-in-arms. He was convinced that if young Toros's uncle and namesake had lived longer, the cause of Cilicia's independence would certainly not have been so desperate.

On the other hand, in Babken's eyes, young Toros's father Levon, though a man of unparalleled courage, was lacking in the deep insight and vision essential for a prince and commander.

Nevertheless, Babken, unwavering in his loyalty, offered his services to Levon and became his inseparable comrade in captivity.

In prison, however, Levon and his older son Ruben, faded into the background, while the younger son, Toros, became his focus. Everybody considered Ruben and Toros very much alike, but Babken discerned an immense difference between the brothers.

"Ruben," he used to say, "is the true son of his father: strong, quick-witted, brave to the point of recklessness which may enable him perform feats of heroism in a moment of grave danger; however the same qualities may draw him to despair.

Whereas, his younger brother, Toros, will never lose his head. Like his uncle, he will be even-tempered and resourceful even in hopeless situations."

Hence, Toros was the child of the old man's patriotic hopes.

Babken's grief and sorrow upon the death of Ruben and later for Levon could not compare with his agitation, when Toros had fallen ill. Babken was beside himself and sat by the boy's bed day and night, well beyond the call of duty, more like a mother hovering than a guard on watch.

His gruff voice became milder and his massive hands gentler when he offered the boy his cup of medicine, such was his solicitude for young Toros.

Therefore, when he appeared before Toros with an air of apprehension, the prince immediately asked: "What is the matter, Babken *hayrik*? You look somehow troubled today. Is it that you failed to find a single person with a real Armenian heart?"

"I wish I hadn't gone looking . . . It's worse than I thought, my prince."

"What is wrong? Stop shaking your head and just tell me. What's the matter?"

"Pay heed, my prince. After leaving this place, I went around all the bazaars in this boundless city in the hope of meeting at least one Armenian from Cilicia and finding out what's going on in our mountains, what happened to our people.

It was already evening, and I was getting desperate, when suddenly someone called me: "Brother Babken!" I turned my head and saw a tall man in a porter's cloth. I did not recognize him.

"Keep quiet" he said, "and follow me. I was just looking for you."

"I couldn't make out who this man was. We kept walking, I a couple steps behind, until we reached a run-down tavern.

He opened the door to a room and after locking the door, he asked. "Don't you recognize me?" "No," I said.

"That's a good sign. If you don't recognize me, then the devil himself may not either. I am Kostandin from Vahka. Now, do you recognize me?"

And indeed, he was the constable of the Vahka fortress. And he told me how after capturing the fortress, the Byzantines seized him, chained him and sent him to Constantinople by sea.

He managed to break the chains, kill the sailors and guards and approach the coast of Seleucia. From there he made his way day and night along the coastal cliffs of the Taurus Mountains. Often without food or drink, he survived on a few olives until he reached the Black Mountain.

And then he saw the widespread persecution and harassment of the Armenians by the Byzantines, while the turncoat princes of Lambron were untouched and carefree, since they had bought honor and power through their tribute to the emperor.

Moreover, the Byzantine governor of Mamestia vilified the Armenians and their faith every day. Meanwhile, the people prayed to God that one of Levon's sons would appear so that they could take up arms and vindicate themselves.

Therefore, Kostandin had inquired on whereabouts of your younger brothers Mleh and Stepaneh and had found out that they had been carried off to Aleppo in the service of emir Nureddin.

Kostandin had gone there undercover and sought them out. He had barely convinced Stepaneh to return with him to Cilicia, when Mleh showed up and prevailed on Stepaneh to change his mind, going so far as to threaten to expose Kostandin if he did not leave Aleppo at once.

So Kostandin had come to Constantinople on a desperate mission: either he would succeed in infiltrating our dungeon, liberating you and your father and taking you both back to Cilicia or he was prepared to die. Now, he wants to see you.”

Having heard Babken's report, Toros got up, and, without saying a thing, began to pace around the room mulling over his thoughts, while Babken stood motionless.

Finally, Toros spoke with a bitter smile:

“Babken *hayrik*,” he said, “I would very much like to see Kostandin, since I believe he is a brave man even though he is a bit long-winded. However, those damned guards, while ignoring thieves and robbers, are very attentive to such captives as we. How do we know if the police spies are not already aware of the Kostantin's presence here? It is possible that he has been deliberately left at liberty for the time being in order to track down all those with whom he meets here. Since Mleh is so disloyal and Stepaneh is such a coward, and since the Lambron princes have not yet grown tired of Byzantine subjugation, it falls to me to find a way to save my people. Tell Kostandin that it's pointless and risky to see me here. Let him wait for me at the Black Mountain. He has endured for so many years, tell him to be patient one more year, not more. The information that he reported is sufficient for me. But did you inquire what resources he has and how many troops he planned to use to infiltrate the island dungeon right under the nose of the capital garrison?”

“He received some financial support from several Armenian priests, has hired a Genoese ship, picked up five men – as bold as he is, and worked out this plan.”

“Well, what about you, Babken, what did you tell him about this plan?”

“I said it was folly. Lucky we were released; otherwise their futile attack would likely have been the death of us all, taking the last hope for Cilicia's liberation with it. From this I surmise you do not want him to come and meet with you.”

“I don't want to discourage such brave men by declining a meeting, so you must convince them it is wiser not to meet, given the risks.”

“That's what I told him already, but he got very upset. He will be waiting for your final answer tomorrow at the great gate to the market.”

“The final answer will be the same: go to Cilicia and wait for me in our mountains.”

“And that's all? Nothing else?”

“It seems you have got some other idea, Babken *hayrik*.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, then tell me.”

“Since you command me to speak, I do have a question. What’s stopping us from returning to Cilicia on Kostandin's ship? It's just possible that since Kostandin just arrived, the authorities have not yet noticed him? So couldn't we just board his ship and sail without further ado?”

Having said his piece, Babken awaited a reply, his sharp eyes under his bushy eyebrows fixed on Toros. It was a look on Toros could understand, so he spoke not to Babken's question, but from his own perspective.”

“Is it realistic to believe that we can escape from this house only a day after we were released from prison and reach Cilicia alive and unscathed? Wouldn't the Greeks be in hot pursuit in their fastest ships. For more than a year after Levon's death the authorities turned a deaf ear to the petitions to release his dimwitted son, and only reluctantly deigned to do so. Don't you think they are keeping a close eye on us, waiting for us to make our first misstep to put us away forever? I love freedom too. I, too remember the bright sun in our mountains, the cool breeze in the evenings, our cloudless sky. Never doubt for a moment, Babken that anything will deter me from my duty or mission. But I've vowed not to undermine our goal by taking reckless actions.”

On hearing these words, Babken was visibly relieved, the creases of his forehead and his knitted eyebrows relaxed. However, Toros could see that these words did not suffice to fully convince the old man, and after circuiting the room several more times, acting unaware of Babken's qualms, he spoke again,

“I will tell you another secret that has finally been revealed, the secret of this door. The maiden whom you saw earlier, to whom we owe our liberation in all likelihood, is an Armenian on her mother’s side and a perfect Armenian in her spirit.”

“Thank God!”

“So let your soul be at peace on this score as well. Take these several gold coins, go to the other side of the city, to Galatia. There is an Armenian church there. Meet with our compatriots; look into their circumstance. Without raising the least suspicion, find out whether there are Genoese ships that sail not only to the Mediterranean, but also to Pontos. Collect information. Any route to Cilicia is fine. The safest place to meet people may be the Armenian church, but it may be off limits for me. It is not clear how much bigger our current prison is than the cell on the island. We'll need to see . . . You are a man of prudence, so there is no need for me to repeat that you should find out as much as you can, but avoid asking any questions that could raise suspicion. Well, it's already late and you must be tired and hungry. Let's have dinner.”

Although Babken was really hungry, there was something still gnawing at him about the maiden: “an Armenian on her mother’s side, who worked hard for their release.” Until he got to the bottom of this, his appetite was secondary. But to avoid disobeying Toros, which for Babken would have been unforgivable, Babken complimented the dishes and drank his fill of the crisp Cyzicon wine.

When Toros went to his room, Babken raised his thick eyebrows and with a contented smile thanked the youth. “God bless you, young prince.”

Then he muttered to himself, “You are too clever a man for a maiden to capture your imagination and make you her puppet. I can sleep in peace tonight. Enjoy yourself to your heart's content. For me, it suffices to know that within the year we will depart the walls of this cursed city. I asked about our mountains and about the state of the people... but I was too ashamed and fearful to ask about my own family . . . Who knows what happened to them? Are they alive or dead? Where are they? It's true that there was not enough time to ask such questions nor would he know anything about them . . . A good Kostandin is a good fellow, a brave man, so what of it if he is a bit long-winded . . . Who knows whether it was really Mleh's fault that Stepaneh changed his mind, or Kostandin's failing?”

Immersed in such thoughts, Babken *hayrik* sat on a chair nodded off. Indeed, such naps had become his habit from his youth, replacing a full night's sleep. A short snooze was enough rest for him to fight for twenty-four hours or march forty-eight hours straight.

Chapter 5. Dionys

The small house where Toros was being held abutted another house. All that could be seen was one room of the house, more precisely, a chapel designed to a maiden's taste, known only to the old doctor, Dionys. To the orphaned maiden, he was not only a doctor, but also a guardian, adviser, teacher and father-figure, all in one.

In Dionys' slight, frail frame, there lived a hardy soul and brilliant mind, which he cultivated from his youth with arts and sciences, in addition to his profession. His frequent travels to Asia Minor, Arabia, Egypt and Assyria broadened and enriched his worldview. Though observant and keen in his curiosity about nature's mysteries, Dionys was seemingly oblivious to matters of the heart.

On the downhill slope of life, he finally returned to Byzantium, sapped of energy and strength from his long years' wandering far and wide, when he opened his eyes and realized that his time had passed.

Thus, Dionys philosophically decided to enliven his solitude with scholarly endeavors. His medical skills brought him into contact with Eupemia's father, Alexis. They became friends, like brothers. In Alexis's vast palace, Dionys came to have his own chambers. And so, Dionys, who had believed that affection for the family or for children could not penetrate his inaccessible heart, suddenly discovered a heart full of affectionate love for all those near and dear to Alexis. Alexis's wife became like a sister to Dionys and Alexis's children became like his own children. The man who believed himself immune to all affection found his heart captivated by the children's babble and laughter, everyday joys and sorrows. Dionys, besides caring for the children's physical health as a doctor, in due course became their teacher and mentor as well.

His duties multiplied when Alexis, on his deathbed, entrusted his family to his dear friend. From that day on, Dionys assumed the role of father of the household, caring not only for their needs, but also for their wishes and dreams. Euphemia, although possessed of a noble character and sympathetic heart, was a demanding child, and the old man, despite his age, was unable to resist her wishes.

Ultimately, he did whatever she wanted. Since he was well known in society for his medical skills and knowledge, he was sought out by the imperial family and other nobles in dire circumstances, enhancing his stature. Thanks to his reputation, Dionys was able to use his influence to procure Toros's release from prison and have him transferred to house arrest in this secret chamber in Euphemia's mansion.

The mansion was typical of its day. Splendorous almost in excess, these palaces were monuments to the nobility's wealth, featuring large halls with gilded ceilings, paintings, carpets, sofa, all of which were

conspicuous in Alexis's mansion. As expected of a long-time governor of a vast province, Alexis enjoyed the fruits of his service in the capital.

A senator and favorite of the emperor for his genial temperament, he took pride in the luxury and splendor of his dwelling, all the more as he sought to please his wife, who was of Armenian royal blood and whom he loved above all else. Though she never complained, in melancholy hours of nostalgia for her native land her eyes glistened, and on rare occasions she would reminisce enthusiastically about the days of her youth, racing horses and tournaments with her friends.

She had been separated from her true homeland, Armenia, for more than a generation. It was her grandfather Senekerim who had moved from Vaspurakan and Sebastia. Yet, her heart longed for her native land, and the further away she was, the stronger the attraction. Therefore, it pained Alexis when he had to deliver her the rare letters from Armenia, which invariably brought news of hardship and devastation.

In the midst of these dismal reports, the successes of the Rubinian nobles in Cilicia were among the few glimmers of hope, and she secretly rejoiced at their achievements. Thus, Alexis himself would bring news of the exploits of Toros and Levon, always adding jokingly, "Again there is news that is depressing for us and uplifting for you."

When Levon and his sons were taken captive to Constantinople, she was deeply affected, and resolved to do anything she could to help them. After her mother's death, Euphemia remained the sole heir both to her father's fortune and her Armenian mother's patriotism.

However, as Dionys sometimes hinted with a faint smile, without offending his foster child, Euphemia's love for Armenia was more likely a consequence of her ill-fated affection for the Armenian prince Ruben. Euphemia no doubt tolerated such half-joking comments from Dionys, but she would not suffer even the slightest hint of criticism from anyone else.

Beneath her exquisite noble exterior, with its tenderness and sophisticated wit, there was a proud and impetuous character which could perhaps be broken or shattered, but never bent or twisted. Hence, the admonitions and paternal advice of the old doctor were of no avail when Euphemia's radiant eyes began to hurl lightning bolts at those who opposed her will. However, with time and the blows of misfortune she endured, Euphemia became more receptive to her guardian's advice and more prudent in the events that were unfolding.

These days, when Euphemia found herself embroiled in a dispute with someone stupid, stubborn and wrong, if she sensed the storm clouds had already gathered around her forehead, she fell silent, smiled in the manner of her guardian, took a few steps around the room and, having regained her composure, again entered the battle, having changed her tactics. These days, her sharp mind threw not lightning bolts, but poisoned arrows, and stinging mockery poured from her lips.

And yet, despite the severity of Euphemia's character, which women found off-putting, she had many male admirers who sought her company, even though they knew in advance that they would not emerge unscathed from their encounter. Such is the powerful attraction of feminine charm and beauty.

Therefore, on that spring evening, bathed in the light of the full moon in a cloudless sky, in the hanging orange garden adjoining the great hall of Euphemia's mansion, several guests had gathered around the noble maiden seated on her throne-like armchair. She responded to their flirtatious flattery with coy smiles, whether of pleasure or contempt it was impossible to discern.

Finally, a young man, whose conceit was evident from his lavish attire and whose pomposity was the mirror image of his spiritual poverty, got up with irritation and, said to the maiden, askance,

“It is a wonder that even for Komnenos, your beauty did not have a tender word. Even a prince like me, whose birthright is the imperial throne, is apparently insufficient to win your favor.”

Euphemia’s first impulse was like a lioness struck by an arrow, but her beautiful forehead showed no hint of agitation and her eyes remained bright, as she remembered her true happiness and destiny. She calmly rose from her seat, and said,

“May I be forgiven, imperial Prince, that I was not sensible of your perfections, from which no one can detract. However, the blame falls on you, since you did not seek the society of your equals.”

Having uttered these words with noble dignity and having said goodbye to everyone, she, with her head held high, majestically like a queen retired to her quarters, rejoicing for having extricated herself from such boring company and happily anticipating the company for which her heart yearned.

And those who remained in the garden blamed Isaac Komnenos of depriving them of the company of the beautiful maiden through his rude comments.

Dionys, who had watched everything from afar, took his leave, and headed toward his ward, who was waiting for him. No sooner had he approached, when she asked: “Do you have something important on your mind?”

“I just want to ask you a question: what are your plans for the Armenian prince?”

“This question surprises me. You know well what my plans are.”

“And what about his plans?”

“Without doubt, my plans will also be his plans.”

“Then I ask for your permission to see him myself, hear directly from him and then act accordingly.”

“Is there any danger? Tell me now!”

“You are too impatient, my child. Better to do as I have asked.”

Euphemia, without wasting a moment, swiftly ran through the suite of rooms and opened the secret door. She found Toros standing there waiting for her. Without a word, she took his hand and led him straight to Dionys. When they approached and stood before the elderly doctor, he changed neither his posture nor made any gesture, instead fixing his piercing gaze on Toros he said,

“Euphemia told you who I am. She is like a daughter to me. You must tell me what your plans are.”

Although the consequences of this laconic question could be very far-reaching, Toros instantly took stock of both his interlocutor and the gravity of this question, as well as the sense of imminent danger.

Hence, he answered without delay:

“Even if the noble maiden were not so beautiful and so worthy of respect, the blessings she has bestowed upon me alone suffice to warrant my dedicating my all to her, that is, my soul.”

“Enough, my noble young man, I was expecting just that answer from you. Now have a seat and listen to me, so we can work out what to do. You are in danger, and its source is one of your compatriots, who was once your father’s constable, but turns out to be a menace. This reckless man has come secretly to Constantinople. But the police spies have identified him and are tracking him. Tonight they are planning to arrest him, after which it would be foolhardy to hope for the continued favor of the emperor. What are your thoughts? What will you do?”

“I learned of this imminent danger only this moment. If there is a chance to escape, I would say, let’s move at once. But is there a safer course of action?”

“Hiding in this house is not the safest course of action. If you stay hidden in this house, the police will assume that you have escaped.”

“As you know, I just got out of prison, I’m unfamiliar with this huge city and I don’t know anyone here. I’ll do whatever you think best.”

“Well, then you and your servant should get ready quickly. Your clothes and impeccable knowledge of Greek will not betray your true identity. I will not remind you to be prudent. I know you. But you will have to set out immediately.”

Dionys got up and, coming to the door, called out “Lazar!” The housekeeper, already familiar to us, appeared at once.

“Is everything ready?”

“Done, my lord.”

“Very well,” said Dionys to Toros, “your servant must get ready, too.”

“He is always ready,” Toros replied as he headed for the door.

Euphemia, who did not miss a word, looked first at Dionys, then at Toros. She took Toros by the arm and went with him to his chamber. She prepared a bundle with some money and clothes and waited there. Then Babken arrived with his master. Without a word she handed the bundle to Babken. Then she took Levon’s sword off the wall and handed it to Toros. He raised her beautiful hand to his lips and tied the sword to his belt. They did all this quickly, as if it had already been planned long ago, and all three of them immediately went to Dionys.

“All right,” said Dionys, “now, Lazar, make sure that there are no servants or maids along the path.”

“There is no one there, my lord, and all the lights are out.”

“Well, God bless you, good luck,” said the old man, embracing Toros’s hand, who responded in kind.

When Toros reached the door, he kissed Euphemia’s hand once again. She hadn’t uttered a word up to this moment and only now, she whispered with tears in her eyes: “God be with you!” Toros looked at the sky, then at her, and quickly turned away to hide his emotions. Without a word, Babken followed him as silent as a shadow.

Lazar led them out of the palace through a small door and all three of them quickly walked through the desolate streets, slipping by darkness and vice along the way. En route to the appointed destination, they crossed paths with night watchmen several times. Before they could ask, Lazar whispered something to the ear of the head watchman each time and they were allowed to pass without further ado. Finally, they stopped at the door of a house.

Lazar took out a key, unlocked the door and, after his companions entered, quietly closed it behind them.

“Give me your hand, prince,” he said, “so that I can guide you in this darkness.” Taking Toros by his hand, he led him into the room. Babken could find his own way as he had good night vision. “Have a seat here for a while,” said Lazar, then disappeared.

The two Armenians remained in the dark, literally and figuratively. At least Toros knew the reason for this escape at night, while Babken could only make guesses as to what this was all about. He thought to himself,

My prince didn't shut his eyes all night, but I slept quite well ... did they find out about Kostandin's arrival? These Byzantines are really devils: I didn't recognize him, how did they? Where are we going now? Well, we'll no doubt see soon ... And the Byzantine girl is really beautiful ... But who was that old man with a high forehead and such a piercing gaze? ... Eh, Babken, we'll find out everything ... May God grant us the good fortune to be at the Black Mountains once again!

Babken was thus musing, when Lazar appeared and said, "Follow me, noble prince."

Taking a few steps, he opened the door, and they found themselves on the seashore in the moonlight. There, a six-oared boat was waiting for them.

Barely had they boarded when boat set off, cutting through the sea, leaving behind them the capital on the left and Galatia on the right. There were only a few fishing boats on the waters, and a couple of patrol vessels. One of the vessels approached the boat, Lazar gave the password, and they were free to continue their journey, all the while heading for the Bosphorus.

The oarsmen propelled the boat forward without stopping, leaving behind the villages known today as Peshiktash, Ortagekh, Arnavut, until they reached the coast of Tarabia where they moored the boat in front of a house.

Lazar went ashore and gestured to Toros, who jumped out followed by Babken. Lazar said a few words to the oarsmen and they departed.

Leaving his companions on shore, Lazar checked the circumference of the house, then entered a small path, and quietly tapped on the barred window. From within, an old woman shrieked when he identified himself. "Holy Mother of God! Lazar, what are you doing here at this hour?"

"Let me in, *mayrig*," he said, "this is no time to talk. It's windy and we are freezing."

The old woman unlatched and opened the door. Lazar entered and gestured to the old woman to keep quiet. He took the candle from her, and, by-passing the gatekeeper's hut, he guided his guests to the house, taking them directly to a neat room, where the beds were already made up and everything they needed set out.

It was already well into the night. The moon reigned supreme in the heavens, quietly following its course. The sea was also smooth as a mirror without so much a wave or ripple. Nature in all its glory was the picture of peace and tranquility.

Seated by the window, Toros looked out, but he could not see or feel this beauty. Instead, he was uneasy and filled with a sense of dread. It was unclear whether this was because he sensed imminent danger or because of the sudden separation from the beautiful maiden. One thing was certain, though: without Euphemia, to his eyes the moon was blood red and the sea was a blurry mirror; to his nose the flowers had no fragrance and to his ears the warbling of the nightingale was as odious as a dirge.

"Alas, without her even the salvation of my homeland will not uplift my heart!" he whispered mournfully and headed for bed when he suddenly remembered Babken, who was standing there still as a statue. Toros recalled that since they had left the house, Babken had not uttered a word, and he himself, in his stupor, had not said anything to Babken. Love may be a stern, jealous and merciless counselor, that rejects all else, but Toros was too big-hearted to forget this noble man who had been so loyal to him and his family. Therefore, he turned around and approached the old man. "Babken *hayrik*, what do you think about this situation?" asked Toros with a dour, yet intimate smile.

"What can I say, my prince? Although our sudden departure speaks of danger, it seems that we will successfully escape because so far everything has gone well. We were not pursued by the enemy, neither was our route blocked nor was there need to draw our swords."

“It’s true, Babken, we could have encountered danger, but after just being released from prison the risk of imprisonment again is distressing. The roosters are crowing. Sunrise is near. Let’s get some rest. Your bed is . . .”

“No matter. My bed is the nearest armchair. May God grant you a good night’s rest, my lord.”

Toros had barely gone to bed when his heavy eyes closed and he was asleep. For the young, cares and exhaustion do not disrupt sleep but make it even sweeter. When the young man woke up, the sun was radiant in the skies and all nature was astir. In the outer room, Babken strolled quietly in the sunlight. Up with the sun, without drawing any attention, he watched the fishermen and their boats, took in passersby on land and sea and looked around the house, muttering and gnashing his teeth: “Damned city, cursed city, may it perish.”

From time to time, he would glance at the bundle with which Euphemia had entrusted him without a word during the commotion of their departure. “Our grand countess in Cilicia,” pondered Babken, “God rest her soul, never glared at me that way. ‘My dear Babken *hayrik*,’ she said, ‘I entrust Ruben to your care, look after him, he is quick-tempered ... As for Toros, he is smart, but he is still a child ...’ Her speech was as sweet as honey. When she died, our fortunes took a turn for the worse. The last time she lay down, she summoned me.” And Babken wiped his eyes with his huge hands. “Where are such women now! Those Byzantine women’s noses are turned up towards the sky ...”

Hearing Toros’s footsteps in the inner room, he rubbed his eyes like a child, and entered the prince’s room.

Chapter 6. The Lion’s Cub is a Lion too

We have seen that Euphemia, without hesitation or so much as a word of protest, helped Toros escape, for her sharp mind had spotted and recognized danger. But when she saw her beloved disappear into the darkness of the unlit rooms, she moaned, “Oh my God!” and fell onto a sofa, covering her face with her hands. Dionys calmly approached her.

“Euphemia,” he said, “now is not the time to indulge in despondency and tears; take heart so that we can completely eliminate the danger.”

“So there is still danger?” She uttered in horror.

“Of course there is if we do nothing, but not if we take action.”

“But I do not know what to do.”

“I have already prepared everything, don’t worry. Just don’t create a fuss.”

“Oh, how can you expect me to be calm when Toros is gone!”

“Toros is gone. Tomorrow I will arrange your marriage.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Yes, this ceremony is a guarantee of your future happiness and, who knows, maybe also a defense against unforeseen hazards to come.”

“I have no reservations about Toros.”

“Neither do I. Indeed, I have a high opinion of him. However time, circumstances and life’s vicissitudes can take their toll on the frail human heart. I cannot entrust my Euphemia, her honor, her estate and her beauty to the fickleness of youth without the guarantee of marriage.”

“I am ready to follow your plan without reservation, but let us not forget marriages are annulled almost daily by patriarchal dispensation.”

“Our church has grown lax toward the sanctity of marriage, but not the Armenian church. As far as I know, even their kings have rarely had the audacity to violate their marriage vows. Still, we have no time to waste.”

“I will not oppose your plans, my father. Do as you see fit.”

That very moment Dionys summoned a servant and ordered him to send two of the servants from the house where Toros had been held to Tarabia before the sun rose. Then he ordered two masons, who were already awaiting his instructions to plaster over the secret door, as he knew well the secrets that lay behind it. Immediately after that he wrote to an Armenian priest with whom he was friends to set up a rendezvous. Having arranged everything, Dionys bid his goddaughter good night and went to his room to sleep.

Seeing her guardian’s imperturbable confidence, Euphemia calmed down. She called for her maids to prepare for bedtime and, preoccupied with thoughts of the happiness ahead, she almost forgot her earlier anxiety and fell asleep into a sweet dream.

In the morning before she woke, Dionys was already out and about, paying visits to several eminent persons, receiving important intelligence and deploying measures to ward off danger. Thus when he entered Euphemia’s room, his appearance alone calmed her down:

“Father, what shall we do today?”

“We shall put on our best clothes and go for some entertainment.”

“Entertainment . . . What a pleasant surprise . . . but what entertainment can there be for Dionys outside his books and his scholarship! Oh, how beholden I am to you, my dear father!” exclaimed Euphemia, giving him a hug and a kiss.

Dionys, for all his philosophical calmness, could not hold back the smiles of contentment. After all, old people naturally enjoy the affection of youth. Then he went on making arrangements to assure everything was in order for the day’s festivities. After the meal, Euphemia asked if it was time to get ready. “Be patient a bit longer,” said Dionys, “I am expecting the police.” And, in fact at that moment, a servant reported that the police chief requested permission from the lady to enter.

The police chief entered and greeted her with all possible deference.

“Your ladyship,” he said, “I ask your permission for my men to conduct a quick search in several rooms.”

“But what is the reason?” asked Euphemia, “Is there any suspicion of an unlawful act or crime committed in my house?”

“No suspicion at all. But who knows, the layout and location of this house is such that there is the possibility of danger. Hence, to completely dispense with . . .

“Well, sir, you are free to inspect anything you like.”

After that, the police went straight in the direction already familiar to us, into the room that adjoined Toros's bedroom. They searched it, and when they saw the plaster wall at the end of the wooden floor, all their doubts

were dispelled. Turning to a thickset man with whom we are familiar, for we had already met him once, the chief said sternly:

“You are responsible this young man’s escape, Michael. It was your job to keep an eye on him. You should have known his every move and whereabouts. Instead, the man has disappeared without a trace, and not alone, but together with the servants you assigned him. And here you are standing like a dumbbell with nothing to say. You will answer in court. Don’t even bother to open your mouth or try to defend yourself.

“But, sir ...”

“Shut up! It’s no use. Save your eloquence for the judge. He’s the one you’ll have to answer to. Officers, take this man to the court.”

“But listen to me, just for a minute. I do not know who the young man’s servants are. I saw them only once, two days ago, and today ...”

“What you just said makes matters even worse. How could you entrust a prisoner under your supervision to people you do not even know? Take him away, away with him.”

And the ill-fated Michael, sweating profusely in a state of complete bewilderment, was led away by two policemen. The police chief respectfully bowed to Euphemia, and in a low voice he shared his amazement with Dionys.

“The rulers of our state are truly unbelievable,” he said, “they set such a dangerous man free in this immense city, without even letting us know. And to top it off, they entrust him to this dunce, who is unable to answer for himself, and now they expect us to track down the fugitive.”

“And you, Sir, I am sure, if you look, will find him.”

“Certainly,” said the police chief, “unless, of course, it was Dionys who led the escape.”

“And what if it was?”

“Well then, I guess we won’t find him,” the official smiled.

“Well, that’s the right thing to do,” said the old doctor, also smiling.

“Say no more. Was there ever any case when I failed to fulfill your requests? Rest assured, the young Armenian can walk around safely. Just let him beware of Andronicus, since he is the chief troublemaker where Armenians are involved. His hatred impels him to perceive danger and treachery, and he goes berserk. After all, how many times have the emperor and the Senate ordered the release of this dull-witted young man Toros, yet Andronicus always found a way to prevent it? And now since they have spotted another Armenian who is a rebel and a real menace in the city, Andronicus is all worked up and wants Toros imprisoned again. This Michael, by the way, is also one of Andronicus’ men.”

Having said this, the police chief left. And Dionys went to his goddaughter and told her to get ready to go. A little later, in two palanquins, they left the palace and headed towards the seashore, where a beautiful boat awaited them.

On that very night, Toros and Euphemia were married in Armenian rites that took place in a large summer house on the coast of Tarabia. Babken was delighted to be the couple’s godfather, holding no malice for the fact that Euphemia was part Greek. He also tried to hide, as far as he could, his involuntary tears of joy mixed with sorrow.

It was nearly midnight when the ceremony ended. Dionys arranged for the newlyweds together with Babken, two servants and a maid to cross the sea towards the Asian coast on an ordinary boat. A mile farther from the coast, surrounded by thick trees, there was a rustic house where everything was prepared to receive them. This beautiful couple's joy added luster to every wonder of nature. For Babken it brought back memories of the spring in his native mountains, and each time his two young charges went out, he followed them from afar and looked out for them, like a large, vigilant watchdog, inspecting every shadow, tree and hillock to protect them from any danger.

Here the couple spent their first eight days of wedded bliss. For Toros his wife was the repository of all the beautiful and high feelings dreamt by ardent youth. His happiness would have been perfect but for his longing for his native highlands and the free spirit of his nation which he had inherited from his forefather Ruben.

Throughout these eight days, there was no news from Dionys. Each morning at dawn, the housekeeper delivered their meals, like clockwork, disappearing immediately to avoid suspicion. Then, one evening, out of the blue, old Dionys appeared. It was very hard to guess from his face that he was hiding something. Yet Euphemia, after giving him warm reception while seated by a stream not far from the house, smiled inquisitively and said,

“My father apparently you have something to tell us and are being slow to do so.”

“Yes, my child. That's true. I have to talk to both of you about a very serious matter.”

“Why are you holding back? It appears that the news is unpleasant.”

“For many days now I've been looking for a ship so that Toros can escape, and today I finally found one . . .”

“But what's the rush, father? There will be space on the ship for me, won't there?”

“I'm very sorry that I couldn't get things in order as quickly as I expected. Today I received a short message that your hideout has been exposed to your enemies. Therefore, I came to take you away, Euphemia. I fear that until fortune smiles upon him and he settles his affairs, you will be more of a hindrance than a help to Toros.”

“What do you mean?” said Euphemia in a firm and decisive voice, “on the contrary, I hoped that circumstances would be such that I would have the opportunity to prove myself.”

“I think it's beside the point to argue about this with me. There is another person, much better positioned to judge and have the final say in this matter,” said Dionys, looking toward Toros.

Toros at this time was staring into the forest, paying no special attention to this conversation.

Then the elder called to him: “Prince, it looks as if you are not following our conversation, but we are discussing something of great importance.”

“Oh, no, I've been listening, but I'm focused on something else right now,” said Toros, his eyes still fixed on the forest thicket.

Then Dionys and Euphemia too turned their eyes to that side, and seeing nothing, turned back to Toros, who, leaving their questioning gazes unanswered, rose and shouted:

“Babken!”

“Babken is not here,” a servant reported.

“Don't worry, he'll be here in a moment,” said Toros, “and he will bring us some news.”

“What news?” Euphemia was alarmed.

“It seems, dear Euphemia, that our enemies, of whom Dionys spoke, are eager to pay us a visit.”

“When you were looking into the distance, were they there? Did you see them?”

“Yes. There are five or six of them, and I noticed their weapons gleaming...”

“What are you saying! Really five or six of them?”

“If all there are are five or six,” said Toros with a smile, “then Babken can take care of them on his own. If there were twice as many, then I’d have to pitch in and help.”

“But that’s not the problem,” he added, turning to Dionys. “Can we find out who ‘our enemies’ are? Are they the emperor’s men and the police, or some other people?”

“At this moment, your enemy is the emperor’s cousin Andronicus. However, if his small detachment is wounded and scattered, then they might come back with heaven only knows how many men.”

“Therefore, you leave us no choice but to make sure no one gets away.”

“I didn’t say that. But it is plain what will happen: one escapee returns as a force of ten.”

“When will your ship come to shore?”

“Tomorrow, early in the morning.”

“Here comes Babken now,” said Toros, “from the coast side. Soon we’ll know the real situation . . . by his leisurely walk, it appears that the danger is not great.”

As they waited, a tense silence reigned. Babken walked up without showing any sign of excitement, as if he had not seen anything at all. Only when Toros made a gesture, meaning “what’s up?” did he speak.

“I walked through the forest and suddenly I heard the sounds of footsteps and muffled voices from nearby trees. So I took cover under a brush-covered mound to get a better look and saw that there were 12-13 armed men walking by in pairs. They were so close when they passed that I was able to recognize one of them. I had seen him 10 days ago. This was the guy that insulted you, the lion’s cub. Clearly, they were on a reconnaissance mission in the forest. I got up without a sound to check out the place where they had come ashore, leaving a boat with a guard behind.”

“Good,” said Toros calmly. “It seems like a good time to have a meal. Let’s have a bite to eat. Quite possibly we will not have time later.”

And all four of them walked towards the house. Entering the gate, Toros surveyed the garden with a searching gaze and gave Babken some orders in a low voice. Babken went straightaway to lay stones at one of the doors and left the other door the way it was. When they sat at the dinner table, both Armenians ate as usual, whereas Euphemia pretended she was eating, and the old man, lost in thoughts, nibbled at the food on his plate. When Toros had finished his meal and seemed lost in thought, Dionys asked him, “What is your plan?”

“We have to defend ourselves, especially since our enemy is a private person who insidiously plots against our life under the cover of night. I know you are a wise man, the likes of whom I have rarely encountered. It seems you don’t have confidence in the martial skills of a young man who is little more than twenty. Rest your fears. I was born and raised in danger, so since childhood I have been in training. I am not worried about this evening. I’m thinking about tomorrow. For this evening, we’ll make quick work of it and be rid of the intruders in less than an hour.”

There was a cool contempt in these words, and the prince's clear and determined voice was steady. If it were not for his fiery eyes that seemed to hurl lightning bolts, Toros could have been taken for a statue. Babken entered:

"It's time, my prince," he said, "they are coming. How should we proceed?"

"Let them in through the big gate. When everyone enters, stand outside and cut down everyone who tries to leave."

"But you will be inside alone, and there are twelve or thirteen of them"

"Listen to me, Babken *hayrik*. Your job is to stand outside the door and make sure no one leaves alive."

All this was said in such an indisputable manner that Babken left for his post without reply, muttering a prayer under his breath. This prayer no doubt was for Toros.

The lower windows of the house had iron bars. Toros ordered the lights to be extinguished and directed Dionys to close the shutters on the top floor so Euphemia would not be frightened by the melee below.

Then he ran down the steps with Levon's huge sword unsheathed in his right hand and a double-edged sword slung over his back. He gently kissed Euphemia's hand who was standing there speechless. "Don't worry, this will all be over within an hour," he said, "This is just a diversion. Tomorrow is what we need to focus on."

His unflappable demeanor soothed her heart somewhat, but although she wanted to say something, the words would not come out. Taking his leave, Toros went off into the garden, closing the doors behind him, and hid in the bushes near the wall.

He himself was in the shadow of the house, but those who entered the gate would be clearly visible to him in the moonlight. Then the half-open gate opened and one by one like thieves they sneaked in as anticipated. Upon entering, each looked around and then headed for the house door.

When seven or eight people had already made their way into the courtyard, and those who were leading in front reached the door of the house and surrounding bushes, Toros bellowed a loud and terrifying battle cry. With one blow after another, he cut down the intruders. In an instant, three were sprawled on the ground while two turned tail for the gate. Then three more intruders rush forward to attack Toros, but with no more success than the first attacker. Two of them were fatally wounded. Toros wielded his mighty sword handily, sending weapons and limbs into the air. The wounded tried to flee the scene, but as planned, Babken blocked their escape and cut them down with one blow. Quickly, he removed the bodies from the scene piling them out of the way beneath the wall to avoid alerting the others of their fate.

Then, he looked inside. He saw three or four bodies on the ground, yet the clanging of swords continued. He decided it was time to go in. "Let's see what's going on," he said to himself; "this has taken longer than expected." He entered just in time, as four or five swordsman had ganged up on Toros and were attacking him from all sides. Coming up from behind, Babken brought one of the attackers down with a single blow, to the shock of the others, who immediately pulled back.

Toros was exhausted, so Babken said, "Let them go. Who cares? As long as that that loud-mouthed lout who dared question that the lion's cub remains a lion is among the casualties."

"Well done, young prince! Look, how many he laid out flat on the ground . . . I knew that he was a brave man, but it's been a long time since he'd seen battle and held a sword; this is a good beginning. When we return our Black Mountain, when he's on native soil, his strength will multiply tenfold."

An eery calm reigned in the garden. The clashing and clanging of weapons had given way the groans of the wounded and dying. “Open the door!” Toros shouted. The door of the house opened, the torches began to flicker, and soon there was light enough to see the aftermath of the melee. There were seven or eight bodies inside and outside the courtyard, and our gallant victor, standing among them, ordered that the servants take the wounded into the house and tend to their wounds.

Euphemia, seeing that Toros was alive and unscathed, though covered with blood from head to toe, joyfully lifted her eyes to heaven and offered thanks to God.

And, without waiting for the servants, she herself brought a basin of water for her husband to wash. Then Toros, exhausted from his colossal labors, finally lay down to rest. To Euphemia he appeared greater than all Achilleses or Herculesees in this world. Turning to Dionys she asked:

“When the ship arrives tomorrow, all of us will leave together, won’t we, father?”

Dionys, without answering, looked at Toros, but Toros was silent, waiting to hear Dionys’s thoughts. Euphemia, seeing that both were silent, said, “But Babken, where is Babken? Babken *hayrik!*” she began to call.

Babken entered, staggering, his head and face in his hands. He barely took a couple of steps when he collapsed. They all jumped up and rushed toward Babken and saw to their horror that his head was covered with blood. He had fallen unconscious, or worse.

Dionys immediately examined the wounds on his head, washed and bandaged them, and reported that although there was a frontal bone fracture from a sword, there was no damage to the brain. So, he reassured everyone that the old warrior would recover completely in a relatively short time. The last words made Toros very happy. However, Euphemia’s question remained unanswered.

Chapter 7. The Scion of Artsruni Kings

Although Dionys reassured the others about Babken, he himself stayed by the wounded man for the next two hours and left only after instructing the servants to continue applying cold compresses to Babken’s head and forbidding him to speak. Then, he made the rounds of the wounded. There turned out to be eleven people, dead or on the verge of death. The old doctor began to calculate: this means, the two of them managed to escape, so in the morning we can expect Andronicus’s second visit. Andronicus himself was not among the wounded or dead; however, Dionys assumed that he was quite likely the leader of the detachment. That meant that Andronicus had escaped and would return, and it might very well be that he was the one who struck Babken.

Therefore, he took a lantern and set out for the shore with a servant to check. At the very edge of the water, he saw a man trying to lift a very large man lying on the shore. Seeing that Dionys and his servant were approaching, this man dropped the other on the sand, jumped into the boat and began to sail off, then stopped to observe them from a distance. Dionys bent down and examined the wounded man on the ground. It was Andronicus, who had sustained a deep sword blow to his right lung. Left as is the wound could be fatal. Therefore, wasting no time, Dionys took a flask from his jacket, dipped a handkerchief in it, and began dabbing the wound. Having stanchd the bleeding, the drug began to take effect. Andronicus regained consciousness and groaned weakly. At this point, after mulling it over, Dionys called to the man on the boat.

“Fellow,” he said, “you see that we are not your master’s enemy. We have bandaged his wound, and if you want to save his life, come and help us carry him away from this death-threatening situation.” With some

hesitation, the man came ashore. Together with Dionys's servant, he picked up Andronicus, and together they headed for the house. Dionys was relieved. No one remained to take word of the incident to the capital, the more so as the chief enemy was now in his hands.

But he could not predict how Toros would react to his mortal enemy being in his hands; thus he was pleased when he lifted his lantern and saw that the young man had only given a dismissive glance toward his sworn enemy. He was thinking of placing the wounded man next to Babken to make it easier to look after both together, but he thought better of it. Though confident in Toros's generosity, he was doubtful that Babken or Andronicus would show similar equanimity, so he decided to place them in different rooms.

At just this moment, Euphemia appeared in the doorway, supporting Babken, whom she calmly guided to his room, signaling to Dionys that she intended to care for this patient herself so others should take care of the intruders.

Dionys assigned one of his servants to stay with the boatman and Andronicus. He then instructed the remaining two servants to dispose of the dead bodies in a deserted ravine nearby. Once everything was arranged, he returned to the house to tend the patients.

Andronicus was raving, so Dionys prescribed some medication for him to the extent available under the circumstances; then he went to Euphemia's room and saw that Babken was sitting in the bed and talking to Toros:

"...I know you ordered me to make sure no one came out of the gate alive, but when I saw them escaping, your uncle's words momentarily paralyzed me. He used to say, "Men, don't touch the escapees. Let them go." Then I came to my senses, and ran after them. I cut one of them down ten paces from the gate, but the other appeared big and strong. When I reached the shore, he turned around, and what did I see? He's that very man.

" 'Stop right there, you fox!' I shouted. 'Did you see the lion cub in action just now?' I had barely planted my sword in his chest, when he struck my head with his sword and then crashed to the ground himself. My eyes went dark and I ran to the stream to wash away the blood. The bleeding would not stop, so I used my coat to bandage the wound and walked back to the house. I was in a daze, when I heard the Lady's voice, 'Babken *hayrik*,' After that, I don't remember what happened ..."

"All this is good," said Dionys, "but I told you not to speak. Just sit there quietly." Babken kept silence. Euphemia dismissed everyone and tended the wounded. After she left, Toros and Dionys began to deliberate on the next day's travel, assuming the ship arrived. They decided that Toros would go alone, and when Babken recovered, he would follow with Dionys and Euphemia.

It was already past midnight when they reached this decision. Toros lay down on the sofa, and Dionys tended the patients and squeezed in a nap before day break.

During the night, Babken urged Euphemia several times to go get some rest, but she would not hear of it. She ignored his exhortations, reminding him of the doctor's orders not to speak, and kept watch over him until daybreak, applying cold compresses from time to time.

Early in the morning, when the steward came at the usual hour with their daily provisions, she went downstairs, gave some instructions, and returned to her patient again.

Toros and Dionys were on the lookout for the ship's arrival, but there was no ship in sight. All morning they walked back and forth to the shore to no avail.

Andronicus was in critical condition, but Dionys did not lose hope. Meanwhile, Babken, although he was feeling well, was, like it or not, under the supervision of his strict patroness. He protested, "I'm sick of resting," to which Toros merely smiled and nodded.

It was already noon. Dionys was worried that Andronicus's absence would cause suspicion in the capital, which would lead the police to look for Andronicus and discover Toros. As for Toros, he was anxious because the ship had not yet arrived, but even more concerned about leaving Euphemia and Babken behind. Despite their apprehension, they sat down for their midday meal.

Babken was flustered by all the attention Euphemia was giving him, but saw no way to extricate himself, while Euphemia, without saying a word, continued to apply cold compresses to his head. As they ate, all she did was stare out the window at the sea. She barely touched her food and as soon as dinner was over, she returned at once to her patient.

Dionys came to check on Babken and pronounced Babken out of danger. He did not have a concussion and his wound was healing well, so there was no need to worry about him.

Euphemia, without reacting to this news, went upstairs. As soon as she entered the room, she glanced out the window at the sea, and then, sneaked down the stairs on tiptoe and to the garden gate, where she asked the steward, "Is there news of the ship?"

"The Genoese ship will come. It will replenish its drinking water and move on."

"Good. Now enter the refectory and let them know."

As for her, she picked up a bundle and quickly went upstairs to her room.

"Babken *hayrik*, the doctor has given permission for you to get up and walk slowly and carefully. How do you feel?"

"May God grant you long life, my lady, I feel quite well. Here, see for yourself." Having said this, he took the bandage off his forehead and stood up.

"No, do not rush things," said Euphemia, conscientiously reapplying the bandage, as she had seen Dionys do before. Now quietly go to the large hall and wait for me there."

This was said with such genuine care and affection that it brought tears to Babken's eyes. Without saying a word, he extended his hand.

Euphemia gave him hers, and the stern warrior pressed his lips to her hand in expression of his gratitude as well as respect, feeling contrite for his previous suspicions. Then he went and sat in the hall. Since the lady said that he was healthy now, he remembered that he was hungry and regretted that he did not ask what there was for him to eat. He was deep in thought about this when Toros and Dionys appeared on the stairs. They were talking quietly to each other.

"Don't you know how persistent Euphemia is?" said the Dionys. "I don't know how you're going to get away without her, nor do I know how I'll convince her to stay."

"I too do not want to leave her behind. At the same time, I cannot bring myself to part with her. My noble counselor, you know the world well and can imagine the dangers that lie ahead. How can a lady like her . . ." And at that moment, the door opened.

Both of them were dumbfounded when they saw a handsome, cheerful young man of about eighteen enter the room, a dagger on his belt and a stern smile on his face. His dress was simple and elegant. Without uttering a word he stood at attention and stared at them. Their immense surprise was only surpassed by Babken's admiration as he raised his hands to heaven, exclaiming,

“Thank God! Long live our brave lady!”

Silence ensued. Finally, Dionys turned to Toros.

“Well, you see, prince?” He said. “Didn't I tell you? . . .”

“Good!” said Toros. “I only have one life to sacrifice for my people, and you have snatched half of it away, Euphemia.”

“Actually, just the opposite. You had but one life to give to your people, and now you have two lives to bestow. Let's not forget that in my veins too flows the Armenian royal blood of my Artsruni ancestors.”

And turning to Dionys, Euphemia continued calmly:

“Let's not waste time. We had better move. Babken is quite well now. What are we waiting for?”

Then Dionys said, “Please understand, my dear. I need to stay here a little longer . . . for your own good.”

She responded, “Our bounty is from God and your friendship. Leave empty talk aside, my father – neither can you live without me, nor I without you and Toros. You here are my treasure, and whatever I cannot take with me is left for plunderers. Either Toros will reward me a thousand-fold, or, if we remain alive, we will live without luxury, but giving thanks to God, like those countless creatures whose needs are in his care.”

And with a smile, she covered Dionys's lips with her hand so he would not object, and took him by the hand, and gestured to Toros to take the bundle from her room. She then led the way downstairs. When Toros entered the room, the first thing that caught his eye was Euphemia's gorgeous hair that lay on the floor. He picked up a lock, kissed it and turning his eyes to heaven, offering praise to the Almighty for giving him such a wife, whose first sacrifice for the homeland was her own head. Then he took the clothes, weapons and the bundle she had prepared and followed her, as her bright and courageous face boldly led the way .

There was a good breeze from the north and the ship was coursing at full sail. Our travelers, doing everything to avoid attracting attention, drew further away from the shores of the Bosphorus, their hearts content and cheerful. Eventually, the imperial capital disappeared from the horizon, and before nightfall they lost sight of land. Thus, they sailed forth on the placid Sea of Marmara.

Poor Babken was still hungry, since they did not have time to eat before their departure, but he was happy, and his joy increased as he saw only the sky and the sea around him.

When our seafarers sat down for their Spartan meal, Dionys examined Babken's wound and found it improving. The whole enterprise, which began so favorably and happily, promised to end in the same way. Babken not only looked healthy, but even seemed younger at heart. Euphemia teased him about his rejuvenation while they had yet to pass through the Dardanelles. He answered with a chuckle, “Do not be surprised, my lady. I can already smell the fresh air of our mountains.”

Chapter 8. The Holy Father

Everyone was delighted, or nearly everyone. Euphemia was delighted since all who were dear were by her side; Babken was delighted since he would see his wife, children and homeland again; Toros, behind his stoic front, was also delighted for the further they went from Byzantine capital, the more his hope grew that everything would come to fruition: freedom, glory and fatherland.

If anyone among them seemed indifferent, perhaps even discontent, though without displaying his feelings, it was Dionys. A thoughtful, contemplative, inquisitive type, he studied everything, asked about everything, and constantly talked with the captain and the sailors. Nothing escaped his keen eye, neither a distant ship, nor an inlet along the shore. Indeed, with the help of the latest invention, the telescope, which he kept close at hand, he could see everything.

Although Dionys hired the ship with the aim of going to Cilicia, he told the Genoese captain that their destination was Cyprus, with the intention of debarking when they reached Cilicia.

He took this precaution, convinced as he was, that the coast of Cilicia was closely patrolled and all Byzantine ships had received orders for Toros's capture.

Thus, alone in his thoughts, Dionys muttered to himself about Euphemia's obstinacy and reproved himself for not having summoned up the courage to stop her from coming on this dangerous journey. However, as soon as he approached his goddaughter, her laughter and mirth swept away all these dour thoughts and forebodings.

The only cause for consolation was that in the ten days since they passed the straits and sailed along the islands of the Archipelago there was a steady tail wind and they had come across neither Saracen pirates, an everyday menace in those days, nor Byzantine warships.

On the left, the rocky peaks of the Taurus Mountains were visible in the distance. Babken could not take his eyes off them. They were, after all, the beginning, the threshold so to speak, of his Black Mountains. Thus, mesmerized, he quietly sang a song that Ruben and his comrades used to sing when they approached the peaks of the Taurus.

*Black Mountains, Black Mountains,
Your summits cloaked in dark clouds.
Black clouds, black clouds,
Where did you come from, black clouds?
Why are you so dark, oh clouds?*

*"We clouds hail from a distant land,
We are from the mounts white and snowy,
Where the sun rays no more shine and
The people strive for them."*

*Black Mountains, Black mountains,
Your summits cloaked in dark clouds.
Black clouds, black clouds,
Where did you come from, black clouds?
Why are you so dark, oh clouds?*

*"Stormy whirlwinds brought us here,
The Great Masis of Armenia was our cradle,
Aragats peaks were our palace,
And where we dwelled were Npat, Grgur and Byurak."*

*Black Mountains, Black Mountains,
Your summits cloaked in dark clouds.
Black clouds, black clouds,
Where did you come from, black clouds?
Why are you so dark, oh clouds?*

*Oh, dear clouds, we aren't aliens for you,
We too are genuine sons of Greater Armenia,
We are exiles here among human beasts,
Waging our struggle for freedom.*

*Black Mountains, Black Mountains,
Your summits cloaked in dark clouds.
Black clouds, black clouds,
Where did you come from, black clouds?
Why are you so dark, oh clouds?*

*Oh, you clouds – our friends,
Bless us with your protection, clouds,
In the tumult of pitched battle,
And help us with your lightning, oh clouds.*

It was a wonderful night, bringing back memories of the beautiful days of youth, love and valor. All this, along with the song, stirred Babken's stern heart. Suddenly he felt a delicate hand on his shoulder.

"Is that you, my lady? Anything I can do for you?"

"Babken *hayrik*," came Euphemia's tender voice, "what were you singing?"

"Well, this is a song about our mountains, fond memories from our youth. Who knows what songs our boys are singing now, perhaps funeral dirges. Let's see how we'll awaken the dead from their slumber."

"What do you think: if we arrive now in Cilicia would it be possible that your princes will ignore Toros's appeal?"

"Our princes, my lady, are perennially indifferent. But our mountaineers will rouse them up, and if necessary, they will force the princes to join Toros and obey him.

Our princes, brave though they may be, are given to one upmanship and filled with self-importance. If it were left to them, we would always remain in miserable subjugation, captives of both Byzantines and Saracens.

But when it comes to the people, that's a different story. To the last, they are warriors, always ready for battle. It was the people who responded to Ruben, Kostandin and Toros I, when they issued the call to fight for our country's defense.

Oh, if only you could have seen Toros I. Indeed, our prince is just like him. What a splendid man he was! When he looked at you, it seemed that he was reading your soul. And everyone, whether with bad or good thought, avoided his gaze.

Our famous *vardapets*, our bearded bishops, all were in awe of him. They weighed every word before saying a thing in his presence. There are lots of monasteries and convents in our mountains, filled with clergy, all of whom revered him.

Toros I did not let them speak much. He was like a prophet. Before they said a word, he already knew why they had come to him and what they needed. We called them black angels, and Toros, the white angel. He was smarter than them. But you know, my lady, the day came that we gave him a piece of advice cleverer than his own, but he did not listen to us.

It was during the great war. Levon, our prince Toros's father, a lion worthy of his name, showed such courage . . . one man doing the work of an entire army. All the princes were stunned, and the people chanted: "Long live the Rubinians, all we want is the Rubinians."

We were among those couple of hundred people who had a good grasp of the situation. And we said, "thanks to the courage of Toros and Levon, these princes today fended off the Seljuk hordes, but tomorrow these same princes will turn against them. While we are all here, let us pluck the princes like chickens and send them to kingdom come. Not necessarily all of them. Eliminating fifty or sixty of the big shots would be enough to establish peace in the country; then everyone would obey the Rubinians and the Armenian people would be united, one heart and one soul."

At this point, the princes, grand and petty, were in the fortress of Vahka, sitting near the fountain, while we stood at the end of the courtyard.

Grand duke Toros rose and told the princes word-for-word what we had counseled him in private, namely, that the people outside advised him to get rid of them for the sake of peace. We were stunned. Toros was scolding us and reassuring the princes, exhorting them to live in peace and conciliation.

He said to them: 'From those to whom God has given much, much is expected. His merciful bounty should not be a cause for pride or envy, but should be used to do justice for the benefit of the people and love of nation.' Then he sent the princes off with gifts and tokens of his friendship.

That was the kind of person he was. On the spot, he knew how to turn even enemies into his friends. All it took was one look.

But then, as we know, during his brother Levon's time, the Armenian princes and Crusader dukes allied themselves with your emperor, who was their friend and drinking companion. If we had killed them all then, we would have spared ourselves much grief. Recoiling at ruthless deeds, one becomes prey to the ruthless."

"No, it is not so, Babken!" Toros's low, but firm voice came from behind. "It is always a bad thing to do wrong. The anticipated short-term benefit may also bring much unforeseeable harm. It is better to die righteously than to rule unjustly."

"I know you think the same way as your uncle. Thank God, you are much like him. I hope you'll succeed like him too. But where is this ship planning to make landing?" asked Babken.

"Don't ask me. Here comes the man who took responsibility for getting us to our destination. Once we land, his duty is discharged, and I will take over."

"True," said Dionys, who constantly examined the Cilician shores with his telescope, "However, prince, we cannot land here. We have to continue to Cyprus, because the shoreline is swarming with ships, and we need to be careful."

"He who does not know how to obey is unable to command. You're in charge. Do as you see fit."

Dionys went to the captain, and after a short exchange, the ship changed course and headed to Cyprus. The wind was favorable and the mainland soon faded in the distance, while the island came into sight. Our travelers were already tired of the sea and missed the feel of firm land under their feet. Euphemia, cheerful as ever, was anxious to go ashore.

When the northern most point of Cyprus with its high palms appeared on the horizon, Dionys, who was the incarnation of vigilance and foresight, asked the captain as a precaution not to sail to the city of Kyrenia, but to drop anchor a little to the east, in a deserted area with a few scattered huts.

Soon a skiff carried our four travelers to shore, and the ship went on its way.

Although Babken was disappointed because they had gone away from the Cilician shoreline, he was amazed by this island which looked so much like his native land: the same trees, the same fruits, the same mountains peaks, the same climate and crops – all that was missing was Armenian speech and Armenian faces.

So, they walked along the coast in search of lodgings, when Euphemia, who was walking arm in arm with Toros, exclaimed:

“Look, over there on the mountainside, there’s a bearded man in a strange, black hooded cloak, riding on horseback.”

Toros immediately let go of her hand and ran in that direction, since he could tell from the hood that it was an Armenian cleric.

When he shouted loudly in Armenian, "*Hayr surp!* Holy Father!" the clergyman turned his horse and calmly approached them. When he stood before him, Toros took stock of the stranger with a quick, attentive glance. He saw a tall, broad-shouldered man of about sixty, with lively eyes, who, his vestments aside, looked more like a warrior than a messenger of peace who served at the altar. The clergyman with his sharp gaze also studied Toros.

“God be our helper, holy father.”

“God be our protector, my son.”

“Where can we find Armenian lodgings in these parts?”

“The Armenian monastery of St. Makar is right over here.”

“We did not want to impose on you, but since we are in a foreign land, it would be much preferable to stay with our compatriots. Is the monastery very far from here, holy father?”

“Two hours away.”

“Then would you mind if we, as your compatriots, join you?”

“With joy and pleasure, my son,” said the priest, and looking intently at everyone, he leapt off the horse as spry as a young man. Looking at Euphemia, he added:

“I see that in your group there are also some young and weak travelers who are tired and flushed from walking on the sands, so it may be difficult for them to climb the steep slopes. Therefore, I will gladly offer you my horse.”

Toros thanked the priest, lifted Euphemia like a feather and settled her on the horse and entrusted her to Babken’s care, while he went ahead in the company of the holy father.

For a while they made their way in complete silence. Both were waiting for the other to strike up a conversation. Finally, the holy father, who could not endure the silence any longer, gave in to Toros's stubborn reticence, and said with a smile, "I am surprised, my lord, that you subject this young lad to journeys with you in alien countries."

"Surprises are worthy of the times in which we live, holy father," Toros said calmly, "and therefore, as you see, nothing surprises me, not even the sight of a double-edged sword on a man of the cloth. Moreover, I am glad that we have gained the company of a courageous warrior."

"Well, my son," said the priest, "I am glad that you have understood the demands of our times. Seeing such insight in man of your age has restored my hope. I see my most ardent aspirations and dreams coming to fruition."

"Your speech is too vague, holy father."

"I express myself very clearly. It is you, prince, who do not wish to comprehend and take your prudence to the extreme. You are being overcautious in not trusting a person who has risked his life forty times, actually a thousand times, to save you and our people. You are hesitant to trust me and recently, even refused to meet with me."

"Favor me to state your name," Toros said, casting a searching and commanding gaze at the holy father.

"I am Kostandin of Bardzrberd, who met with Babken in Constantinople about a month and a half ago. You do not know me, neither I have met you before, but I guessed who you are, only because Babken accompanied you."

"And Babken again did not recognize you?"

"Last time he saw me in different clothes and with a black beard."

"But in Constantinople you were in a danger; you must only recently have arrived here."

"Yes, those damned Byzantines sniffed out my arrival in Constantinople and that very night they plotted to capture me. So instead of leaving through the door, as they expected, I climbed out the garret window and went on my way. Instead of landing in Cilicia, as they anticipated I came to St. Makar and decided to lie low here as a hermit for several months until there's a sign from the Lord."

Toros smiled slightly at these words. Kostandin could not help laughing, but immediately took on a serious look, for the young man's solemn appearance commanded respect.

Kostandin said to himself: *Truly, Toros I has come back to life in his nephew, of the same name and character. If he matches his uncle in courage as well, then we'll have a Toros II in Cilicia.*

They had already come quite a distance from the shore and were now walking through brush-covered mountains and woods. A winding path along a ravine led them up the hill. Babken, who was very pleased that they had found an Armenian monastery at such an unexpected place, saw lots of similarities between the landscape of his native Black Mountains and this island. He was pleasantly surprised as well at Euphemia's bright face and intrepid equestrian skills.

He explained to Euphemia the holy father's status in the church and the hierarchy of the Armenian clergy. As it was beginning to get dark, he told her about their ascetic way of life to prepare her for the simple supper at the monastery.

And then, lo and behold they saw large ponds, lush gardens and clusters of orange and lemons trees, which indicated they were approaching a place of habitation. Next, they arrived at the edge of a pine forest, beyond

which St. Makar monastery appeared. A few minutes later, the five travelers were greeted by the abbot of the monastery, who having seen them in the distance, had already prepared their food and lodgings.

Chapter 9. The Monastery of St. Makar in Cyprus

With great joy and merriment our travelers enjoyed the monastery's hospitality. Babken was surprised to see a gray-bearded man in layman's dress at the next table, silently focused on eating his meal with great gusto.

Babken stole a glance at the man from time to time, but the man ignored him entirely. The atmosphere in the refectory was monastic. Finally, the abbot broke the awkward silence surrounding the man whom he had recently released from his "monastic" station.

"Babken *hayrik*, are you looking for the priest who accompanied you here?"

"Holy Father, I really hoped to see him here, but you are in charge. We are soldiers and understand discipline. We have heard that like soldiers, monks obey their abbot's commands."

"In his place, I have found you another friend; he is also from the Black Mountains. Why are you not asking him for news?"

Babken looked him over again with inquiring eyes, but did not recognize him. Thus he resumed supper, enjoying victuals of veal, partridge and cheese, not to mention the selection of Cypriot wines. Finally, he got annoyed by the stranger's stubborn silence and said:

"Holy father, this fellow, apparently, is even hungrier than I am. He has not uttered a word and has not introduced himself."

"Babken," said the stranger, looking straight at him, "don't you recognize me?"

"As God is my witness, it's Kostandin! It's his voice!" said Babken, turning to him wide-eyed. "Praise the Lord, you're alive!"

"Well, thank God, you recognized me."

"Upon the holy cross, if I it were not for your voice, I would not have recognized you."

Everyone laughed and the table resonated with good cheer. The abbot, a respectable and prudent man, having been informed who his guests were by Kostandin, received them most cordially and promised to assist the Armenian prince and help him get to the Taurus mountains.

On this night, in these secure and reassuring surroundings, Dionys let down his guard a bit. Babken was relieved tensions had subsided, and Toros, though laconic, was glad that everything had gone well so far. Last but not least, Euphemia was glowing in proportion with her beauty, seeing that everyone else was pleased. And as for Kostandin, he was elated beyond words.

He talked non-stop about his travels to Greater Armenia. Indeed, over the previous five years, he had visited every country where there were Armenians from Georgia to Mesopotamia and from Spir to Atropatene. There was not a place he had missed. Always on the look out for some glimmer of hope for Armenians outside of Cilicia, he was often disappointed. He saw how the fortresses and walled cities built to protect the Armenian crown had been turned into means of foreign domination and oppression.

Even in Ani, the great Ani - the city of a thousand churches - there was no hope for revival, and the people who commemorated their kings in years past no longer believed their spirits would rise again to save Armenia.

The neighboring Christian realm of Georgia, purported ally of the Armenians, oppressed and persecuted the Armenians, sometimes with Armenian commanders at the helm. And the noble family of the Artsrunis had all but vanished after leaving Vaspurkan, while some misguided people foolishly sought consolation in establishing a schismatic Catholical See in the ruins of the Artsruni realm.

In the course of this long story, everyone began to doze off, except for Toros, who did not miss a word of this eye-witness geographical and statistical report. Moreover, he interrupted for clarification and additional details along the way.

Kostandin marveled at his incisive and pertinent questions, and provided more precise information about places, conditions, and distances.

When everyone had retired for the night, these two continued a lively conversation about Cilicia, the size of the Armenian and foreign populations, the current situation and hopes for the future, princes and the form of government, about strongholds and fortresses. They sat and talked until the roosters crowed and Kostandin felt obliged to persuade Toros to get some rest.

When Toros went to his room, he found Babken on watch outside his door, half asleep. Babken went to his assigned room upon Toros's return, where he and his old comrade-in-arms Kostandin were lodged. When he entered, he said:

"As God is my witness, Babken, this evening convinced me that Cilicia has found its savior. This young man, if he is as courageous as he is intelligent, will surpass both his father and his uncle."

"You can say that again, my friend. Just recently he single handedly struck down seven out of the thirteen intruders as they attacked us."

"And what of the old Byzantine man and his daughter?"

"The girl is not Byzantine, but the rightful wife of our prince. She is from the Armenian royal house of Artsruni."

"So the prince got married? He took a wife from the Artsruni dynasty?... Well, well ... And now, Babken, all you had left to do is baptize the old man as Armenian."

"The old man is not Armenian, but he is not a Byzantine either. He is a very decent person and wishes well for Armenians."

"You've gone crazy, Babken, you have lost your mind. This person is a Byzantine, and therefore cannot be a good person and cannot wish well for Armenians."

"What do you mean? Look! Here is my head, this is the head of an Armenian, stick your finger into the fracture. Can you feel it? The Byzantines broke my head and this man healed me! Now, do you believe me? How could we have gotten out of that prison, if not for this man, if not for this girl? They are the ones who freed us. We would have been imprisoned again due to your visit, but for the intervention of this old man who planned our escape . . .

But for him, we would surely have been arrested and rotting in the hold of a Byzantine warship by now. Do not underestimate him. He keeps a powerful miter in his vest. When he puts it to his eye, he can see what is happening to the edge of the world."

“Well then, I will believe that he is a good man, and not a Byzantine,” said Kostandin, taking off his shoes and lying down under his covers to sleep. Babken did the same on the other couch, and they both fell asleep.

The next morning, the Abbot set out with his brethren for matins in the simple chapel, but he did not sound the bell, so as not to disturb his sleeping guests. Nevertheless, everyone was present at the service, and when the Deacon sang the litany, “Let us beseech the Lord for freedom for our brothers in captivity,” Babken thundered in his deep bass voice, “Amen!” All heads turned to him, but unfazed he continued his prayers with great piety.

When they returned to the monastery, the abbot ordered a sumptuous dinner for the guests, and then having slaked their appetite, he went with them on a hunt.

Kostandin rejoiced watching Toros’s keen eye, strong arms, and precise marksmanship. He was impressed that he had the speed, agility and stamina of a mountain goat, leaping along the ravines and steep slopes, and concluded that during the long years immobilized in captivity he not only managed to sharpen his wits but also honed his strength.

“This is the only person who will save us,” Kostandin said to himself. “What a fool I was to go looking for such a man in the palace of the Aleppo amir, where instead I found only two frivolous youths, one of which, at least, had a heart as depraved as his head was empty. Verily, God must love our poor mountains.”

Then he turned his attention to Euphemia, who was walking with the old man, not for a moment taking her eyes off Toros.

“Yes, our son of Levon is a lucky man. This woman is beautiful and noble and she is devoted to our prince with all her heart. But what a character this old man is, with his scowling face? He is a man of few words and sparingly responds to his young ward. It seems his thoughts are far away, very far away ...”

Lost in his own thoughts, Kostandin occasionally remembered that they were out on a hunt and every once in a while shot an arrow or two, never missing his target.

After Toros had had his fill of hunting and the quarry sufficed for a feast, the abbot ordered that the table be set on the green near the monastery, in the shade of the fir trees. Before them was the sea, beyond which lay the Taurus mountains billowing like clouds.

Everyone raised their glasses to the freedom of Cilicia and to the good health of those who risk their lives for this sacred quest.

The next day, Toros, in disguise, together with the abbot and Kostandin, set out on fast horses, to explore the city of Lefkosia. Thereafter, for eight whole days he scoured the neighborhood, studying the inhabitants, their habits, the defense of the island and the state of its fortresses.

Nothing escaped his keen eye. Euphemia was the prince’s constant companion on these ventures. Besides being inquisitive by nature herself, she wanted to be a full partner in everything that Toros was doing.

But among all those who traveled with Toros, there was no one who seemed to understand his thoughts better than Dionys. Watching the young man from afar, Dionys grasped the goals to which this indefatigable, earnest young man had committed himself, and discerned vengeance alongside his patriotism.

The old physician devoted himself completely to the study of nature and had no desire to observe the political passions that roiled about him. He preferred examining plants, stones, grass shoots over other preoccupations.

As was his wont, Dionys wandered the mountainside. One evening Toros, returning from a hike, saw him, hammer in hand studying the geology and approached him,

“My father Dionys,” he said, “we’re flitting around this way and that, while you are here doing hard labor. Why are you crushing those rocks?”

“Look,” said the old man, “see the petrified crabs in the broken fragment. They are evidence that in prehistoric times the sea level was above the mountaintops.”

And indeed, Toros could see lodged deep in the rock a fragment of a petrified crab. A long silence ensued. The old doctor sat down and invited Toros to sit beside him. Looking with his penetrating eyes at the young man, he spoke with gravity:

“My fine young fellow, I see the great contrast between us: you are young, full of strength and energy, you see only tomorrow, and you are concentrating on the future, while I am old, feeble and slow, looking to the past, to what was yesterday and millennia ago.

But there were days when I too looked into the present and the future and craved fame and glory, power and authority in my circle. Fortunately, these desires did not last long, and the study of nature, the human heart and the human past cured me of the aspirations that now burn in your soul. That is why you see me descending into the depths of the past, and I see you climbing the heights of the future.

I am not surprised by this. You are young. You bear a name well-known among your people. Your homeland has been lost and devastated. You have endured insult and injury, personally and to your family, imprisonment, death of loved ones. It is only natural that you are stirred by thoughts of restoring former glory, erasing dishonor and avenging your people.

Please be assured that I say these not as a member of this or that nation, but as a child of humanity, the kind of person tyrants despise most. So heed my heartfelt counsel to you, young warrior: do not be unrighteous and ruthless or act in the spirit of vengeance. Indeed it is hard to be righteous in this unrighteous world, but you have a big heart and as a student of human nature, I share my thoughts with you. I do not adhere to the absurd pseudo-philosophical school, which banishes love of fatherland and promotes only philanthropy. Those who preach such doctrines try to cloak their cynical indifference and selfishness with this false and faulty argument. If today we cast away the concepts of homeland and native people, where do we go tomorrow for the concept of family and kindred feelings?

So, understand me correctly, Prince. I would very much like your Armenia to be the pillar of the Byzantine Empire in Asia, but since hatred and streams of spilled blood divide us, no such politics or doctrines can compensate and atone for the losses. You will never forget that the hands of the Byzantine dealt the last treacherous blow to your kingdom of Ani, and our Byzantine pride will never forgive you for the seizure of Cilicia and the independence of your Armenian Church.

That’s the way of the world. When they are strong, people want power, and when they are weak, they want freedom.

Therefore, today you must win your rights, and tomorrow you will start revenge. However, for your good and for the good of your people, bear in mind these last words of an old man: always be moderate and do not let your luck blind you, for in the life of a person good luck and bad luck follow each other. As I express this last will and testament to you, I consider it unnecessary to bequeath Euphemia to your heart, as I know how much she loves you, and I know that you love her the same way ...”

At these words, the old man's voice quivered and his eyes misted over,

“You are endowed with a good mind and a courageous heart, and you will understand this old man’s wishes after his voice is no longer heard. Go forth, the Lord be with you! May the realm you build be long-lasting . . .”

“And what should be done,” asked Toros, “so that it could become long-lasting?”

“If God is merciful, and you have four or five successors like you, then you will be able to move Armenia to these mountains for a long time. Otherwise, you will leave in this country only a passing shadow and a few more ruins next to the grave of Sardapalus.

Try to raise your sons to be brave, diligent, and enlightened men. If you, during your imprisonment had not had the monastic library and a passion for reading, neither your good looks, nor your sharp mind, nor the power of your muscles could elevate you. Without this cultivation, despite all these gifts of nature, you would have still remained an unfinished being, reckless instead of prudent, careless instead of mindful, and petulant instead of judicious.

I will give you an example, an example that is regrettably tragic, but you have a strong constitution, so hear me out: Your brother Ruben was smart, handsome and strong, but he had neither your patience, nor your diligence, nor your prudence, and that is why he lost everything, even his life.

I know, people say his demise was caused by others’ envy; but the ability not to arouse envy is also a kind of wisdom. For years you demonstrated patience, but he did not, not even for a single day. In the palace of his enemies, he held nothing sacred in his rage. He had barely set foot outside of his dungeon, when he started to roar. I warned and advised him, to no avail. I am telling you this now only so that you will temper your thirst for vengeance and avoid taking hostility beyond the point of no return.”

The old doctor’s words were not wasted on the young man who took it all in with somber contemplation. Meanwhile, Euphemia was climbing up the hill. The two of them watched her from a distance. Finally, she arrived and sat between them. After catching her breath, she said,

“How long are we going to sit around on this island? I’m already bored. Unlike you, Toros, I cannot find amusement ambling through every nook and cranny of the mountainside, villages and forts, and I cannot like you, my father, become enraptured by cracking stones with a hammer or examining the veins of some plant. No, this is not for me. It’s time to get to our destination and get down to work.

“Oh,” said Dionys with a slight, ironic smile, “since Euphemia is going to get down to business, we have no time to lose. When the battle trumpets echo in the mountains along with the clanging of swords, when cities and villages go up in smoke, the wounded moan, and widows and orphans are left homeless and in grief, then it will be your time to get down to business.”

“Yes, then my hour will have come!” Euphemia exclaimed with fervor. “My duty is to heal the wounded, give food, shelter and consolation to orphans and widows, instill courage in the fallen. I know that this is my mission, and if I do not fulfill it, then I am not worthy of being a house servant, let alone wife of the Armenian prince.”

“I am well aware of your lofty notions of duty, Euphemia, and I also know your courageous heart, but I also know that such bold and great sacrifices are fraught with unforeseeable danger; therefore, do not take my words the wrong way. I counsel prudence. You have set your mind to being Toros’s inseparable companion, but with this frame of mind you could be more of a hindrance than a help.”

“Look, father, the constant repetition of these sermons does not discourage me. Instead they offend me and rouse my anger and determination . . .”

“No, no,” said Dionys, seeing that the conversation was taking an unpleasant turn, “do not be angry. Since we have embarked on this journey together, let us proceed together.”

“Yes, that is what I was hoping you would say. Now I am content. I promise you will not hear a word of complaint from me about fatigue, fear or despair. I would rather die in silence than whine.”

Toros solemnly stood up and said, "Let us follow the principle of prudence, adapting to necessity in difficult circumstances, and thus, dear Euphemia, never be parted from each other even for a moment."

And together the three of them soberly descended the mountain.

Chapter 10. Rocky Cilicia

At the gates of the monastery, the abbot was speaking in a low voice with a muscular, broad-shouldered young man, who had a dark tan from working under the sun. The priest asked him question after question, and it was evident that the answers he received were not to his liking. Nevertheless, when his guests returned, he put on a cheerful face and greeted them affably. Everyone entered the monastery, and the abbot ordered the gate to be latched as it was already nightfall.

After dinner, he invited Toros to a separate room and introduced to him the young man.

"So, Prince," he said, "this young man has just arrived from Cilicia. I do not know of a person who knows the lay of the land better than he does. If despite the alarming reports you will soon receive, you still decide proceed to Cilicia, you'd be hard pressed to find a more courageous, useful and faithful guide than he."

Hearing these words, Toros took a hard look at the young man, whose forehead bore the seal of fearlessness, and whose gaze conveyed defiance - defiance of enemies, catastrophe and death, if need be.

"What is your name, my friend?" asked Toros.

"Sargis, your humble servant," the young man replied, putting his hand to his heart.

"How long since you left the shores of Cilicia?"

"This morning."

"On what ship?"

"On my own."

"So, you have a ship?"

"A small one," answered the young man smiling and glancing at the abbot.

"Do you command the vessel?"

"Yes."

"Then we should look no further. The holy father vouches for your bravery and ingenuity!"

"But my ship, prince, has many enemies - the entire Byzantine navy is trying to sink me. I'm wanted, all along the coast, so I came here to lie low for a few days."

"Then, we are 'comrades in misfortune,' as they say; it happens that the Byzantines are after me too."

"Yes, I know they are after you too."

"How do you know that? And how do you know who am I? Do tell me what you have heard."

"First of all, I have known you for ages. In childhood we met every day in the fortress of Vahka. I am Tatul's son Sargis. And today, when I saw you approaching the entrance of the monastery, with no prompting from

the holy father, I immediately recognized you and blurted out, 'It's Prince Toros.' (the abbot nodded at Sargis's words).

I have been engaged in sea raids for several years. The Byzantines have burned three of my ships, and I have robbed and burned twenty of theirs. But for the past fifteen days, things have been on high alert and security is tight.

Every rock and inlet along the coast is under surveillance, and on land, they have sent reinforcements to the Byzantine prince at Mamestia, which has made them yet more brazen and brutal. They are chasing down Armenians everywhere on the pretext that the Armenian prince has escaped from prison in the imperial capital, and they vow to slaughter every last one of us. The older generation says it has never been this bad before. Wherever the Byzantines see a tall man with dark eyes and dark hair, they seize him, tie him up and send him to the dungeon at Mamestia. And as you can imagine, we have many mountaineers that fit this profile. Already twenty to thirty people have been arrested. Yet as God is my witness, all you need to do is set foot on Cilician soil, and everyone will band together and rise in revolt. But getting there is the problem since the coast is closely guarded."

"Are you being cautious, Sargis, or is it fear?"

"God forbid, prince, that I fear anything. Just give me the order and I'll sail my small vessel up the river to the city of Tarson. This body (here he beat his chest with a hefty blow) is destined to die but once!"

"Well," said Toros with an appreciative smile, lightly patting him on the shoulder, "I see that you are a brave man. Your ship will take us to Cilicia."

"Do you mean it? . . . Now I am really beginning to be afraid," said the young man, stepping back a little and thinking aloud, "At this location, the west wind always picks up three hours after sunset. We can slip into one of the bays of Amanur and Korikos. Once we land in Cilicia, who can catch us in the rocks and forests? I have five comrades and each equal to ten ordinary men. Plus I saw Babken earlier. Although he's aged, he's still formidable and is equal to another ten men. The seven of us can make our way over the mountains and with God's help, we'll succeed. On that day, there will be a great joy in the Black Mountains, like a wedding feast."

With these last words, Sargis had regained his unshakable confidence and, with his right hand on his belt, awaited his orders. Now Toros fell into thought. Clearly, his concern was not for himself, but for Euphemia, as he recalled the rough terrain, precipices and cliffs of the Taurus Mountains. Such an expedition would be arduous for hardened warriors, let alone for a young woman raised in the luxury of a Byzantine palace. Would she be able to handle it?

"Well, when will we be able to leave this island then?" asked the prince.

"In four days. Tomorrow I will return to Cilicia and make the necessary preparations there. If there are no unforeseen obstacles, on the fourth night at daybreak, I will be here and that same evening we sail back."

"Why don't we go now, all of us together?"

"These preparations, prince, are neither for you nor for me," said Sargis, after a pause. "As I understand, you do not want to leave behind that older man or that . . . young man who came down the mountain with you this evening. So we'll need to arrange for at least two mules, stow away some rations in the rocks in advance, and post some reliable companions along our planned route so that they can light the way."

"Well done, Sargis! Go and prepare what you need. Maybe you will need some money for this purpose," said the prince and held out a purse. Sargis stepped back.

“Thank you, prince, but there’s no need. Praise the Lord, I am not poor. As long as the Byzantine ships sail these seas and I sail them too, I will not be short of money. I do not touch ships of other nations, God knows, but after what the Byzantines have done and are still doing to us . . . Be well, then prince.” And the young man took his leave.

The abbot and Toros were again alone.

“Well then,” said Toros, “It looks like we will have to impose on your hospitality for another four days.”

“I wish you could stay even longer,” the abbot replied, “but it seems the Byzantines here are rearing their ugly heads and attacking our countrymen in Lefkosa. Our defenseless people are embattled on all sides. Oh, if only God would heed our prayers and place the banner of salvation in the hand of him whom he has already chosen, granting him power and success in this sacred cause! This is our prayer, day and night. May our voice be heard on high.”

“Holy Father, if your prayers are like your hospitality and like the young sailor you introduced to me, then our plans will succeed. When this young man said his name, I recalled him as a childhood friend. He has grown up to be a very brave and clever man. I am very grateful to you.”

“It is we, the people and the church, who will be grateful to you when you successfully accomplish your mission. After you and your father Levon were taken prisoner, the Byzantine arrogance knew no limits. They violently persecuted our people in every imaginable way, harassing them, demeaning them, insulting them. They desecrated our churches, our cross and our gospel. We were never able to get it through their thick skulls that the cross and gospel are the same for all Christians. May God rescue our people from their suffering! How many times have we petitioned the Catholicos to ask the princes of Lambron to intercede with the Byzantine emperor to cease this persecution. But to no avail. The Emperor has his own plans, and Cyprus has no sway. Moreover, half of the princes of Lambron have converted to the Byzantine rite, and but for the fact that the others are blood relatives of the Catholicos the rest would have converted as well. So again, I pray that God may make your sword mighty, prince!”

They parted with these words. Toros went to Euphemia and told her about the expedition and the dangers that lay ahead. After calmly listening, she said with a smile, “This Sargis of yours sounds like a real character. With God’s blessing, if all goes well, we already have an admiral for our kingdom. Now let me count the days. So, Sargis should be here on Friday morning and we set off that very evening.”

Ready to confront any danger, this heroic woman eagerly awaited Friday. Every evening, she went to the shore escorted by Babken hoping the ship perchance would arrive early, and having waited in vain, returned to the monastery as night fell, disappointed.

It was already the second Friday and Sargis had yet to appear. Even Toros had begun to worry, although he didn’t let on in the least. Euphemia, who was more sensitive by nature and cried in private. She felt suffocated on the island. She whined a bit about Toros’s passivity, and he did his best to calm her down, counseling patience. Toros began to look into alternative ways to escape the island, which had become a second prison to them. He talked to Kostandin about another ship scheduled to leave for Antioch, trying to convince him that this was the only safe option for reaching the Black Mountains.

In the midst of their conversation, Babken burst into the room breathless, “Good news, prince! Sargis has arrived, he’ll be here in no time.”

“How is he doing?” asked Euphemia.

“Well, madam, very well,” answered Babken.

And shortly, Sargis's tanned face appeared in the doorway, his eyes sparkling with joy. It was not yet nightfall.

"Forgive me, prince," he said, "but I do not like leaving things half-done. In order to prepare everything, I had to go to the region around Vahka fortress and arrange an armed escort for your safety. Had I mentioned your name, it would have been possible to rouse the entire mountain population, but I did not think this would be wise. Instead, I inquired for volunteers, "Whoever honors the Illuminator, let him follow me, no questions asked." I selected twelve men. I assigned them their posts in the mountains, arranged for their provisions and pack animals, and instructed them to wait for us. Everything is set. Only you are missing. If you wish, we can set off tonight. Thank God, the weather is perfect."

"Where are you going?" asked the abbot. "You can't go on an empty stomach."

He immediately ordered the table to be set and dinner to be served. They drank to the success of their mission, and then went to the chapel to pray for God's mercy. When they came out, it was already dark, and they headed for the ship. Euphemia rode a mule, escorted by Babken who was always at her side. The ship was ready so the sails were raised as all of them climbed aboard. With a strong tailwind, they cut swiftly across the sea.

It was completely silent on board except for the voice of Sargis, who occasionally gave terse orders sitting at the helm. In the silence, the travelers grew drowsy. Euphemia had long since fallen into a deep sleep, leaning her head on Toros's shoulder. The shores of Cyprus had almost disappeared when Sargis said to the man sitting in silence beside him,

"Holy Father, take the helm for a while - I need to go to the bow of the ship and arm it."

Sargis's sharp eyes could see everything even at night. With the help of his sailors and Kostandin, he dragged an iron instrument similar to a big ax to the ship's bow and fastened it there. Then he returned.

"Bring on the enemy vessels now!" He said to the helmsman, whom he called "holy father." "I will send the enemy to the bottom of the sea with a single blow!"

"Better that they not turn up, my son," answered the man, "so that we get to shore in peace."

Toros heard this conversation, but could not move, lest he disturb Euphemia. Finally he could not restrain himself, and asked, in a low voice,

"Sargis, who is the holy father?"

"The abbot, prince."

"He's here with us?"

"Yes, prince," answered the priest. "I also know a bit of language of the sea. For 25 years I served as a sea captain. So I joined you, in the hope that I could be of some help."

"Thank you, holy father, thank you." Then Toros turned to Sargis, "Say, what kind of weapon is this you have, Sargis, that can sink an enemy vessel with one blow?"

"A new kind of ram, prince, cast by Avetik of Antak. As of today, I have sunk ten Byzantine ships using it. Well, the wind is good. We are halfway there. Let's now go on a little in this direction. I'll lower these sails and leave only the black ones."

"That way the enemy will not see us. Good thinking," said Toros.

They sailed along smoothly and peacefully. There was not a sound on the ship. Toros silently kept watch, when suddenly Sargis jumped up.

“Ok, mates,” he said, “Get ready! There’s a ship in our path! Lower the sails!” Instantly the sails were lowered. The blocks had been so carefully oiled that there was not so much as a squeak. Toros strained to see but could see nothing. He thought to himself that one must have the vision of an owl to see in the dark like Sargis. They passed the ship in the distance and continued their journey in safety.

It was already well past midnight, no more than two hours before daybreak, when Sargis exclaimed, “Praise God!”

Toros asked what happened, and Sargis said, “Do you see the flickering light in front of us, which makes the sign of the cross? This is our signal. The coast is clear and we’ll be there soon,” said Sargis. “Well, mates! To the oars! Raise all the sails! We are ready for whoever comes our way.”

Everyone woke up. The setting moon cast a dim light on the waves. The ship hit land in less than half an hour, and six stalwart fellows with torches in their hands surrounded it.

“The ladder!” Sargis commanded, and a ladder was tied to the ship.

“Prince,” said Sargis, “this is the land of your fathers! It is only right that you should be the first to go ashore!”

“In the name of Almighty Lord!” Toros exclaimed and leapt to the ground. Extending his hand to Euphemia, who was already on the ladder, he helped her down to the shore.

Right there on the sands of the shore, a small detachment headed by Kostandin stretched their hands to the sky and swore in the name of the Lord to commit their lives to the Armenian people and to prince Toros.

In a matter of minutes, the ship was unloaded. The sails, rudder, weapons, supplies were stowed away in the high, inaccessible thickets and rocks. Then Sargis invited his guests to breakfast at the foot of the mountain near a spring, a shimmering fountain the likes of which existed nowhere else; and through the ages, in every language, it could only be described as a beautiful, serene, wide open eyelet, from which crystal clear water gushed forth.

“But first of all, Babken *hayrik*,” said Sargis, “here are your sons.”

Two stout young men rushed into the arms of Babken. True to Eastern customs, the old warrior sought to hide his father's love in the depths of his heart, but tears of joy overwhelmed him.

A table had been set with traditional fare, a large roast sheep was hoisted from the barbeque pit. Sparkling Cypriot wine poured abundantly from jugs into goblets. When everyone quenched both hunger and thirst, Euphemia, joyful and cheerful, offered a toast to the health of the lord of the sea, Sargis, who brought them safely to Cilicia.

After they finished dinner, they prepared for the next leg of their journey. The Armenian soldiers brought three sturdy mules, one each for Euphemia and Dionys, which they promptly mounted, and the third for Toros, but he gave his up, and ordered that it be loaded with casks of water. Toros, following Sargis, set out on foot and briskly ascended the hill.

Babken was just behind him, leading Euphemia’s mule, followed by Dionys and several warriors and sailors, while Kostandin and the Abbot with their men brought up the rear. The entourage was heading in the direction of the cape between Seleucia and Korikos. Since ancient times, this splendid place had rightly been called the ‘beautiful mountain’ or ‘protruding city.’ Its rock formations, forest, sea and streams, sky and earth displayed rare beauty. Rocks and tenacious shrubs crowded each other too thickly, so that it was

sometimes hard to find a foothold, but our travelers preferred the company of wild rocks to the enmity of men.

The Taurus Mountains were punctuated by narrow crevices through which streams flowed and broad round amphitheaters leading down to the bay, forcing the travelers to cross along the peaks or descend to sea-level. Each ascent and descent posed danger, but the caravan proceeded without a word along its treacherous journey. The gleaming spears, shields, swords and helmets, and the young men's confident pace testified to the strength of this small but select force.

They had been on the road for three hours, when Sargis, surveying the mountain peaks, spotted the white signal flag. He reported to Toros, "The coast is clear, prince, and that is the sign." A little later, an armed young man joined the group and confirmed that there was no threat or enemy force in the vicinity.

"What is the Korikos guard doing?" asked Sargis.

"They are completely disengaged," the young man answered, "and have locked themselves behind the fortress gates. The villagers here do not know who poses the greater threat: the do-nothing guards or the rapacious robbers."

A little later, the land and sea fortifications of Korikos came into view. The fortress with its high quadrangular towers and round lookouts and iron gates gave the impression of small city. Before it, in the sea, was a walled island, which was connected to the fortress by a man-made embankment. At this point, Sargis paused for a moment to assess the situation:

"What are you thinking about?" asked Toros.

"You see, prince, there are two routes, a short one, which runs along the base of the fortress walls, and a long one, that circles along the mountain peaks."

"Let's take the long way. An arrow or a stone could cost a life. Vain bravado is sin."

So they took the longer route, which passed through a cemetery that had been desecrated by marauders and invaders leaving no gravestone intact. The pillars of mausoleums had been knocked down and the impious hands of the barbarians had scattered bones, ashes and monuments on all sides.

The caravan made its way through this haunting landscape, when there was a shout from below. They stopped in their tracks. A guard on patrol from the Korikos fortress below was approaching and shouting at them to take the lower route. Instantly, Kostandin's arrow whistled through the air and the guard staggered to the ground. A second arrow would surely have fatally wounded him, but Toros exclaimed loudly,

"Halt, that's enough!"

Kostandin lowered his bow. "If we fight like this," he grumbled to himself, "later we'll regret it. You can be sure, they will show us no such mercy."

The caravan continued its journey, under the scorching midday sun. Toros looked back and saw Euphemia flushed from heat and fatigue. In the distance he saw a beautiful castle near the shore, and was tempted to seek hospitality there, but being ever discreet and prudent, he turned to Sargis, and inquired,

"Where is our next rest stop, Sargis?"

"Here in this castle before us. See, our white banner is there."

And indeed, Toros was pleasantly surprised to see the banner flying there.

"So, there is no one there?"

“No, my lord. This is an abandoned castle. The Turks named it Ayash, and we call it the White Fortress. When the coast is clear, we come here to harass the Byzantines for a few hours. We exchange a few arrows as a token of the long and enduring affection and friendship between our two nations, then we return to our ship and sail away.

With this short explanation, they marched through the castle entrance, long since bereft of its gate.

Chapter 11. The Taurus

The daunting descents and ascents of the trail and the burning sun took their toll on the travelers, who were greatly relieved to take break for the refreshments Sargis had prepared for them. They had worked up an appetite on the road, so they ate the barbequed meat with gusto. They had barely finished eating, when to their amazement, Euphemia was already raring to go and took off with Toros to examine the castle. The castle was an architectural marvel of its time, with spacious halls and an exquisite chapel, a water system with lead pipes, and an expansive orchard, with olive, palm, lemon, laurel and mulberry trees.

Sargis was never one to leave things half done. He posted two sentries on the road, on half hour shifts, and gave the order to stop trespassers and to slit the throats of anyone who dared disobey. Toros was impressed by this military discipline. He saw the mountaineer’s voluntary adherence to military rules as assurance of national freedom. Dionys, meanwhile, as usual, busied himself with historical research. For him everything was a subject for study: in what era was the building built, had the chapel formerly served as a pagan temple before it was put to use for the Christian faith. Babken sat with his sons and asked about his wife, daughters and younger son, hanging on their every word as they recounted the hardships and oppressions they had endured after his capture. The problem was that after demolishing Rubinian rule, Byzantium was never able to defend Cilicia from the violence of Turks, crusaders and Kurds. As a result, the country was in perpetual turmoil and easy prey for all manner of invaders.

In the distance, another group of five or six young men exchanged views about Toros and Euphemia in hushed voices. Two of them believed that the prince’s companion was a Byzantine youth he had befriended. Others, more perceptive, were of the opinion that the companion was a woman, while still others concluded that the companion was his wife, based on the honor and deference Babken displayed, even the care with which he carried her bundles on his shoulder.

Elsewhere there was a group of young sailors who had gone the night without sleep and were now snoring away in the grass under the trees, enjoying the refreshing sea breeze.

Meanwhile Toros was conferring with Sargis, Kostandin and the abbot about their journey. They decided to follow Sargis’s advice to set out again at daybreak rather than risk the dangers after dark. Thus, as the sun dropped toward the horizon, having rested, they organized a reconnaissance mission to scout out the route for the next day. The highland path ahead, though not lacking in rocks and forest, was nothing in comparison to the terrain they had traversed the past day, with stream, thickets, and sandy beaches stretching to the sea.

The reconnaissance squad slipped by the lightly guarded Lamos fortress without attracting any enemy attention, then entered the thicket under the dark and silent canopy of ancient trees. A fast brook cut through the forest. They walked along this stream and climbed to the top of a hill covered with pomegranate groves until they encounter one of Sargis’s watchman with a white flag in hand. With the night watch posted on all the roads to the castle, everyone got a good night’s rest. Early the next morning, they set out before sunrise, the sea to their right side, leaving behind the ruins of Pompeopolis. They proceeded along the unbroken highland path through the Taurus mountains, trying to bypass Lambron fortress undetected, aware of the

close surveillance by the enemy along the main roads. Sargis was on edge, his keen eyes monitoring the mountaintops for the white flags signaling safe passage. However, as evening approached, there was still no signal and Sargis's advance guard was not at the rendezvous point.

Then Sargis spotted a pile of stones. He halted the caravan, ran over and pushed them aside and found the hidden rations of crackers, butter and olives. Carefully concealing his anxiety, he invited everyone to take a break and eat, since they had a hard journey; however, due to the proximity of enemy forces, he did not risk starting a fire. Meanwhile, he pulled Toros and Kostandin aside and told them about the disappearance of the advance guard, which could mean trouble during the night ahead. Upon hearing this, leery of Kostandin's petulance, Toros launched into rapid fire questions, not giving Kostandin a chance to get in a word edgewise.

"How long does it take to get from here to Lambron fortress?"

"An hour."

"How many warriors do you think they have?"

"About forty to fifty, but they are an elite force."

"How long is the journey from here to the gorges of Cilicia?"

"Four hours."

"And are there also fortresses and guards along the way?"

"Everywhere."

"Are the soldiers Byzantines or Armenians?"

"Both, half and half."

"And how long is the journey to Tarson from here?"

"At our current rate, about four hours."

"How about Adana?"

"Just about the same."

"And, from Adana to Misys?"

"Roughly the same."

"Ok, then," said Toros, "we will continue on our present route. If the enemy show up, let them try to find us in these mountains! Sargis, keep an eye on the peaks along our path. Let's try to bypass the Lambron fortress at a safe distance."

"Actually, there is a bypass, but it is three hours longer that way."

"So what are we talking about? Lead us along that road then."

"But it will take three more hours!" said Kostandin.

"Yes, it is three more hours, but fighting with Armenians on their native mountains would be folly," answered Toros in a tone that brooked no response.

Thus, the caravan set out on the remote path through rocky terrain. Sargis led the way. Toros followed him with the hooded abbot at his side. They held their swords tightly to avoid making noise, lest they scrape the

rocks, and they wrapped their weapons in cloth so they would not reflect the sun. They marched this way for an hour during which Toros asked the Abbot to recite prayers.

Sargis, who was leading the way, turned round and whispered to Toros:

“Prince, the enemy is not far off. You see, there’s a stone barrier across the road. Most likely, a few soldiers are lying in wait. What should we do? Attack them?”

“Wait a minute!” said Toros. “Hush! Send four warriors with spears to take positions just below the barrier. Tell them to strike down anyone who approaches, no questions asked. Then, the three of us, you, Kostandin and me, should be able to make our way around and attack them from the rear. But we need to move quietly, not a peep from anyone.”

Then going over to Babken, he instructed him to be on the lookout and shield Euphemia from arrows or stones. After that, Toros with his two comrades made their way around the enemy position, through the treacherous, rocky terrain, in the dark, with cliffs and precipices on all sides. The advance was ponderous and slow. One false move could cost them dearly and clambering in the dark often took several attempts to find a secure foothold. Finally, they hit a path. Kostandin wanted to go first, but Toros, wary of his rashness, took the lead. Approaching the enemy position from behind, he saw four soldiers, fast asleep, lulled into a false sense of security behind their impregnable rampart.

Drawing his sword, Toros exclaimed “Guards! Don’t make a move, or you’re dead.” The startled guards tried to get up, but Toros’s voice thundered again: “Don’t move, or you’re dead!” The guards froze. Sargis and Kostandin disarmed them and knocked down the stone barrier. In seconds, the enemy guards’ hands had been tied and they were being led away subdued. The caravan with the captives proceeded on its journey.

Lambron fortress disappeared in the distance. The caravan emerged from the forest and reached a grassy meadow on the mountain top. Toros, after consulting with Sargis, gave the travelers a rest break, while he summoned the four prisoners for questioning. As he suspected, they said that the prince of Lambron had captured Sargis’s advance men and had learned that their caravan was en route to the Black Mountains. The prince dispatched forty-five soldiers to intercept them on the lower passage and had only sent four to the high passage they expected no one would dare to use, just in case. The four guards likewise thought that no one would risk the high road, so they fell asleep.

After an hour’s rest, the caravan continued its arduous journey. Seeing Toros, the Rubinian prince, silently leading the way on foot, sharing the danger and travails of the journey, it did not even cross their minds to grumble or complain.

Finally, they approached the renowned gorges of mountainous Cilicia. Along the way they came upon a dilapidated fort occupied by an armed band, which was more of a nuisance to passers-by than a deterrent to invaders.

Toros, who preferred to proceed as peacefully as possible, avoiding senseless clashes, sent Sargis to the leader of this band with a few gold pieces to bargain for safe passage. Kostandin was scandalized by Toros’s action. It was inconceivable to him that a person of such valor as Toros could opt to negotiate with ruffians. However, Kostandin hadn’t read the story of Philipos, while Toros knew it well.

Finally, amid the mountains, along the tributaries of the Saros river, they came upon Armenian villages. Everyone was under strict orders not to reveal Toros’s identity. Then on the mountain peak, the eagle’s nest appeared - the fortress of Vahka.

Babken shed a tear as he looked at the summit, where he had witnessed so much bloodshed in defense of the Armenian people and where he himself risked his life many times. And now, now these mountains had fallen into enemy hands . . .

Although the immediate danger to the caravan appeared to have past, nevertheless, Toros needed a secure base of operations before revealing his identity. To this end, Toros, Kostandin, Babken, Sargis and the Abbot convened a council to discuss their next moves. Euphemia joined their deliberations.

As a high priority, it was decided that Babken would take Euphemia and Dionys to his home in the northern end of Amason. Sargis would give his contingent home leave, on condition that they remain on alert, ready to respond to Toros's command. Kostandin would recruit some stout-hearted men, ready to join Toros in battle as soon as the trumpet sounded.

At the conclusion of their deliberations, Toros summoned the captives and ordered them to be unbound and released. Kostandin was again astonished. As they were leaving, Toros admonished them in a grave voice:

“You are the sons of the Armenian nation, so take heed and reflect on your misdeeds. You were about to shed your brothers' blood and thereby condemned yourselves to death. We could easily have slaughtered you all like chickens. The only reason you were spared and are now released was that you are Armenian. Go, report to your masters in Lambron, and tell them that you have seen Toros, the son of Levon. Tell them that Toros has taken an oath in the name of Almighty and All-knowing God, that personal glory, power and reign will never be his aim, but that he will act only for the benefit and happiness of his people and will treat every Armenian who shares this aspiration as a father, brother and son. Do you understand what I'm saying? Will you be able to repeat it?”

The captives of Lambron left for their journey astonished by these words. Such treatment and such speeches did not accord with the customs of the time. It was an unprecedented gesture of good will not only for the bewildered soldiers, but also for the Abbot, seated at Toros's side.

Chapter 12. The Black Mountains

It was just before dawn in the heavily forested area around Vahka fortress, the scene of the previous night's encounter.

“Well, it's time now for everyone to start for their appointed destination,” said Toros. “With God's help, in less than 10 days you'll hear the trumpet summon us to action.”

This time Euphemia had no choice but to yield to necessity and part with her husband for the time being. She kissed Toros, who helped her mount the mule, and together with Dionys, headed towards the Black Mountains, escorted by Babken and his sons. A short distance ahead, Sargis's contingent was on the march toward their village, just a few hours away. Toros watched his wife as she faded into the trees and night shadows, and then looked around their encampment, where only Kostandin and the abbot remained. Toros bid Kostandin a safe and successful journey. As he departed, Kostandin pledged to recruit stout-hearted men ready for the call of battle, and he too disappeared among the rocky terrain east of Vahka.

Only the Abbot and Toros remained.

“Now, holy father,” said Toros, “we need a plan for the two of us. As I understand it, you’re of the opinion that the Syrian metropolitan may provide a more reliable sanctuary than the Armenian clergy . . .”

“Prince, you misunderstood me, I did not say I mistrust our clergy,” said the abbot. “What I said is that the Byzantines are ransacking our monasteries looking for us, whereas the Syrian monastery is less likely to rouse suspicion. There you will have a quiet and secluded place to make plans. I will lead you there via the backwoods path. You will observe for yourself how pleased the Syrian bishop will be to see Levon’s son. Your father and uncle’s protection permitted him to build his monastery, and since their departure, the Byzantines have treated him harshly.”

“Let’s go then, holy father.”

So our two travelers ventured forth into the rocks and bushes. They proceeded in silence, sometimes stopping at a stream or brook to refresh themselves. Two hours later, they found themselves on the high peaks of Amanos, from which they had a panoramic view of the monasteries, villages and fortresses, all appearing to be minuscule objects rather than formidable obstacles. Two hours later, descending a little lower and to the south, they reached a monastery that looked like a fortress amid the cliffs. The gates were latched and entry was strictly forbidden without the dispensation of the abbot. After protracted negotiations, they finally admitted the Armenian priest, and after a quarter hour of further negotiation, Toros was permitted entry.

When the aged metropolitan saw Toros, his eyes filled with tears. Holding his hands to heaven, he offered praise to the Almighty for raising up a young man so like his valiant uncle Toros Ist, for the sake the salvation of the Armenian and Syrian churches, which always lived in peace and harmony and did not quarrel with each other in the name of Christ. And as is the wont of the elderly who are fond of telling stories, Metropolitan Atanas recounted his many visits to Vahka fortress to see Levon and Toros Ist, and their cordial reception, financial support and military protection from infidels, Byzantines and crusaders. Carried away with his stories, the metropolitan suddenly recalled his guests’ hard journey, and he ordered a meal and lodging for them. After Toros had had a short rest, the old bishop reappeared and inquired about Toros’s plans and intentions. Toros said that had come to the monastery to prepare a liberation plan, but first he needed to get a sense of the lay of the land and conditions.

“Therefore,” said Toros, “I would like to request from you several goats and shepherd’s clothing so that I can move around freely and investigate without arousing suspicion.”

The bishop, pleased at this modest request, immediately complied. Soon Toros with a shepherd’s cap and gear was wandering alone through the mountains and valleys. That his goats preferred to graze near Byzantine fortresses was no surprise.

As he wandered through the villages, he saw Armenians cringing at the Byzantine mercenaries, who insulted and harassed the people. He also heard the Byzantines mocking the Armenian faith, and witnessed the arrogant Byzantine princes demeaning his native land. Thus, for eight days he made his way on foot around Cilicia from the Gulf of Alexandretta to the northern edge of the Amanos, observing and studying, noting in his memory step-by-step the trees, bushes, rocks, hills, mountains, fortresses, towns, villages and ruins.

All sorts of people crossed his path, travelers and bandits, robbers and victims, and people of every ethnicity: Armenians, Syrians, Greeks, Arabs and Turkmen swirled around him. Without saying a word or making a sound, like the Biblical good shepherd who spares no effort to save his people, he proceeded on his journey in thought.

Eventually, he arrived at the foot of Amut Castle. Avoiding the main gate, he took his flock of goats to graze on the slope behind the impregnable castle where he saw a hole about the size of a window in the fortifications atop a steep cliff, apparently for rain drainage. Cautiously Toros got closer to examine it and found that the bushes had covered two other passages on either side. Parting the bushes with his staff he slid

through the passage into the fort. Clambering up another 20 meters higher, he reached an exquisitely landscaped mound, covered with flowers and trees, and in the distance the splendid residence of the prince of the fortress. He hid among the trees, from where he watched children playing and heard the voices of women and servants. Were it not for his innate prudence and his ability to bridle his boldness, he might have taken the entire castle single handedly.

Shunning such recklessness, Toros withdrew with the same caution and descended the cliff to the ravine where he quickly drove his goats away, burying his treasure like a greedy man and covering his tracks. Now all he needed to do was find out whose fortress it was. Toros looked around and saw several houses scattered here and there at the foot of a nearby hill. He chose the furthest one and set out with his flock. As he approached the house, he let his flock spread out among the bushes to graze. Toros noticed a handsome boy, about ten to twelve years old, watching him warily and just about to slip away, had Toros not called to him in a friendly voice:

“Can you give me a drink of water, son?”

“Just a moment,” the boy answered and ran into the house.

Toros sat down near the house, pretending to be very tired. When the boy appeared with wooden bowl, the prince drank his fill, and said:

“God bless you, dear boy. Whose son are you?”

“I’m the son of Varosents Babken.”

“Your father just recently returned, right?”

“Yes ... Do you know him?”

“He is my good friend. Where is he now? Is he home?”

“Yes. Want me to call him?”

“Yes, call him, son.”

The boy entered the house and shortly Babken appear with a stern expression. When he saw Toros in this shepherd dress, with a huge staff, he said:

“God help you, prin...”

“Babken *hayrik*.” Toros interrupted him, “I need to talk to you alone.”

“Yes, right this minute,” and he turned to the boy, who was standing at the door, looking at them, “Grigor, you go inside.”

And when the boy left, he said:

“How did you get here, Prince? How did you find my house?”

“By chance. Tell me, how is Euphemia, how is your family?”

“Thank God, He is merciful to me, unworthy though I am. The lady is calm and cheerful, and I returned to find my entire family alive and well. But to tell the truth, they have had it rough since I left. My poor wife Shushik struggled to raise the children alone in my absence. As they grew older, it became easier I suppose, but it was the ease imposed by necessity. They had given up hope of my ever returning, and even held a funeral service for my soul. But enough of that, what about you, my prince. What are you doing dressed up as a shepherd? Won’t you come in and do my home the honor of receiving you?”

“I am working undercover, Babken. Can you tell me about this fortress?”

“It’s fortress Amut.”

“Whose it is? Who occupies it now?”

“Your uncle Toros bestowed this fortress on Prince Abugharib Piri as a reward for giving him refuge when the Crusaders had seized your family’s lands and forced him into exile. Later after we were taken captive, a Byzantine prince seized the fort and lives there with his family.”

“Do you have any idea how many guards they have?”

“No, prince, I have not looked into it yet. Come in, stay the night with us, and my sons will get this information. If my lady learns that you were at our doorstep but did not stay and see her, she will be very upset.”

“Babken, stop talking nonsense. You know that our mission comes first for me. It’s been a week that I’ve been sleeping under the stars for fear of giving away my identity.”

“I give you my word, not a soul will know that you spent the night here. My sons have not said a word to anyone. They have not so much as uttered your name since you sent us off. I’ve been lying low to avoid rumors lest the Byzantines get wind of your return. In fact when you asked Grigor, you became the first person to have heard my name since my return. My lady and Dionys only go out under cover of night to get some fresh air. So come in and bring joy to the modest dwelling of Babken.”

“Very well, Babken, let it be as you wish.”

And he entered the house, leaving his five-or-six grazing goats to Babken, who called Grigor to gather them in the stable. Although Babken’s house was far from being a palace, its natural surroundings and fresh air made it pleasant. It was built at the foot of a hill. On one side, the house overlooked a deep ravine with a gurgling stream. The hill was covered with fruit trees of all kinds, the rich foliage of which shaded the house. It had large wooden deck, about five feet off the ground, with simple wooden benches and a vine covered trellis that doubled as a bedroom on Cilicia’s warm summer nights.

At that moment, Shushik, Babken's wife, her two daughters and Euphemia were seated on one of the benches. Euphemia, having set aside her men’s attire, was now dressed in lady’s garb. She looked fittingly regal and was treated graciously by her mountaineer hosts, whose hearts overflowed with joy and gratitude for their father’s return. Indeed, they revered her, like a superior being, with utmost respect and appreciation for having freed Toros and their father.

As for Euphemia, she was struck by the girls’ simple beauty and deeply impressed by the fire in their large, black, almond-shaped eyes. Although these eyes sparkled with the spirit of mountain freedom, the girls were extraordinarily attentive to their parents’ admonitions. Their hair, black as ebony, tightly braided, covered their shoulders, and only a simple, dyed linen dress adorned their tall, robust frames.

When Babken and his companion the shepherd approached the deck, the sun was already sinking below the horizon and in the semidarkness the outlines of figures could barely be discerned.

The girls seeing their father approaching stood up, whereas Euphemia cast an indifferent glance and looked away into the distance where the stream was gurgling, her thoughts turned to Toros.

The stranger silently greeted everyone, putting his hand to his broad chest, then sat down near Euphemia. In response to this impudence, she shot an angry glare at him, looked him in the eye and suddenly recognized Toros. Her demeanor changed completely as she joyfully threw herself into his arms.

“What are these clothes?” She said. “What a transformation!”

And Toros told her jokingly that he should be weaned off aristocratic manners that are inappropriate for life in these rustic and freedom-loving mountains, and that while Euphemia spent time in idleness, he, Toros, was keeping goats and sleeping under the open sky.

“Kidding aside, Toros. How long will you continue this mode of life?”

“Until tomorrow evening.”

“And then?”

“And then I will proclaim you the princess of these wild mountains.”

“And now?”

“I’ll have dinner with you and leave.”

“At night?”

“For a man of action, there is no difference between night and day. But where is Dionys?”

“Down there, sitting on a rock and pondering, looking at the rapids. Father, father, come here!”

A dark shadow below moved, got up and came to the deck. Seeing Toros cheered Dionys up. Meanwhile, the members of Babken's family also gathered. The elder sons came and respectfully welcomed Toros and their parents. Babken was overjoyed. This worthy man could not sit still because his prince was his guest; meanwhile he was disappointed that Toros would not spend the whole night in his house. However, as was his custom from childhood in the service of princes, he held his tongue and did not dare object.

“Babken *hayrik*,” said Toros, “do your sons know where Sargis’s house is? Can I call him here now?”

“Right this minute, prince. Boys, will one of you go over and tell Sargis to come here.”

No sooner said than done, one of the boys went to fetch him. Meanwhile, the girls hung a lantern and began setting the table. Even before the food was served, Sargis had arrived and they broke bread together. Toros was unusually cheerful, and his good mood was infectious. Euphemia observed several times that there must have been a reason he was in such a good mood.

After dinner Babken took his cue from Toros, cleared the deck, leaving only himself, Euphemia, Dionys, Sargis and Toros. Without delay, Toros resumed his investigation:

“Who rules the Amut fortress?”

“A Byzantine prince by the name of Zenon, brother-in-law of the ruler of Mamestia.”

“How many warriors does this prince have in the fortress?”

“A total of twenty to twenty-five, plus the same number of servants who could be armed if necessary. Given the fortresses impregnable position, gates and strong walls, this number is probably more than enough.”

“Very well,” said Toros. “Can you muster up twenty of our men, armed and ready for battle by tomorrow?”

“Sure, I can muster up 20 men.”

“I mean, good, strong, elite warriors.”

“Yes, good, strong, elite warriors.”

“Is there any news from Kostandin?”

“Kostandin sent a messenger this morning, asking for news about you. His message was that he is ready to report with 50 stout hearted warriors, day or night, upon your command at the ruins of the Red Monastery.

“Tomorrow at noon you, Sargis, report here with your twenty warriors. That’s noon sharp, not an hour earlier or later. And send a word to Kostandin to be in front of the Amut fortress gates precisely at noon as well. Noon sharp.”

“I see.”

“I am counting on you, Sargis. You must be precise.”

“Do not doubt my precision, prince, but ...”

“What?”

“That is ... if I may say with your permission, perhaps the Amut fortress should be left for later.”

“You will not be attacking Amut fortress, nor will Kostandin. All he needs to do is show up with his forces and stand at a distance, but precisely at noon.”

Sargis did not press the issue. Then Toros continued:

“So, my brave Sargis, go and get ready.”

When Sargis left, Toros turned to Babken:

“Well, it is probably unnecessary to tell you your assignment. You and yours should wait here ready to move.”

“It goes without saying,” replied Babken.

Toros said goodbye to Euphemia and everyone in the household. He picked up his shepherd's hat and staff and drove the goats ahead of him toward the Syrian monastery. There the Armenian abbot and the Syrian metropolitan were already worried because of his long absence. It was after midnight when he reached the monastery, knocked at the gates and went through the same long examination process before the guards opened the gates and let him and his goats in.

Chapter 13. The Rubinian Cross-Flag

In the morning, the gates of the Syrian monastery opened, and twelve armed warriors emerged. In front, was their leader, fully armed, mounted on an Arabian horse. His tall figure, fearless and shrewd eyes, spoke volumes. He rode the horse confidently, looking every bit the true prince and rightful ruler of these mountains.

The twelve warriors silently followed him along the rugged roads of the Black Mountains. The prince had almost forgotten that the infantry was bringing up the rear. Sweat streamed down their faces, but they showed no sign of fatigue or discontent.

From time to time, the rider cast a backward glance of encouragement, without breaking stride. Occasionally, without the slightest criticism, but rather out of genuine concern, he checked with them, “Guys, anyone who

is too tired should head home.” But no one showed any inclination to take up this offer. Everyone remained steadfast in his mission.

After three hours of hard driven advance, the knight on horseback at the front of the column, none other than Toros, halted near the bushes and boulders, jumped off his horse and handed the reins to one of the younger men. They he issued instructions to the expeditionary force: “You should stay behind and wait here until a boy of ten or twelve approaches with a white flag. Then follow him forthwith.”

With these words, he rushed down the slope toward Babken's house, where they had been the night before. Entering the yard, he saw warriors waiting in groups of three or four, some sitting, some leaning against the trees. As soon as they saw Toros, they all stood at attention as if animated by an invisible force. Without regard for station, he mingled among them, talking to them casually, and looking them straight in the eye. Sargis, Babken and the entire entourage from the Taurus crossing were there, along with many new faces.

“Men of Armenia,” he said. “I am Toros, son of Levon. I escaped from the shackles of captivity, only to come here and see that you too are suffering in captivity. Our fathers left their fields and cities in Armenia and came to these mountains to liberate themselves from captivity. If captivity is intolerable, then to suffer the same conditions in exile is yet more unbearable. I came here to break these chains of captivity, shame and disgrace together with you. Whoever in his heart shares this same yearning for freedom as I do, and who does not fear death, let him follow me, follow unswervingly and do as I do.”

Every single one stayed in line at attention and awaited his command. He signaled to Babken and privately gave him orders. When Toros saw Euphemia, standing on the ridge and looking at him, he greeted her with a nod and left the yard. The other twenty-five warriors followed him. Toros led them up the slope toward the impregnable side of Amut fortress.

These were the hot days of summer and the noonday sun beat down. No one was outside and our warriors did not encounter a soul along the way. Still, many were tempted to doubt their commander's bold maneuver, considering it a bit of youthful exuberance that would pass soon enough. Nevertheless, seeing that Sargis trust in the prince, following his order no questions asked, they likewise followed him, until Toros was standing before the bushes at the fortress wall.

Without a word, he pushed aside the bushes with his sword, and then crawled on the ground, carefully passing through the opening and then vanished. Everyone was stunned. Sargis followed Toros, and then the rest, eight, ten, twenty, eventually all the warriors had penetrated the fortress. When the last warrior made it through, Toros, standing amid the trees, arrived, calmly waiting for them to arrive, and said,

“Men, remember, wanton bloodshed is an atrocity. Anyone who raises a weapon against an unarmed person who is not resisting is no better than a murderer. Now, let's go!”

It was just past noon. Toros, fully armed, launched the attack and the troops roared. Amidst the flashing of their weapons, as they advanced to the door of the prince's dwelling, the din caused the residents to scramble in panic. The fortress guards rushed for their weapons, while the women and children wailed and shrieked. They slammed closed the doors, windows and shutters amidst the turmoil.

Toros, in complete control of the situation, ordered Sargis to go with a couple of his men,

“Open the main gate to let Kostandin and his forces in as soon as they arrive. No one should be allowed to escape the fortress alive.”

Sargis found his way to the gate, striking down and disarming the few soldiers on guard there. Kostandin had not arrived yet, so Sargis waited for him.

Meanwhile, Toros wasted no time. He knocked down the door of the dwelling and struck down the one or two soldiers who were foolhardy enough to oppose him, constantly calling out in his loud voice,

“Whoever gives up will save his life, but woe to those who resist!”

But the screaming only intensified. Every door, stairway, hall, and window had become a battlefield. Shields, spears, swords, axes flashed everywhere. Distraught women, half-dressed, their hair in disarray, were throwing anything that came to hand out the windows.

The Byzantine prince, fearing for his family’s life, lost his head and stood, frozen at the entrance of the narrow passage to the citadel, sword and shield in hand, desperately flailing. Several of Toros’s men had been wounded confronting him. Then Toros himself appeared and appealed to him to lay down his sword and surrender. Instead, the prince brandished his weapon at Toros, who responded with a lightning fast blow that knocked the sword from his enemy’s hand. The Armenian warriors then seized and bound the disarmed Byzantine.

Meanwhile, Kostandin and his forces and Babken with the Syrian contingent flooded into the fortress, filling the garden with armed men. Faced with this overwhelming force, the Byzantine guard dropped their weapons and surrendered. Soon the desperate women’s frenzy subsided. Toros ordered Babken to lock the women and children safely away, while he instructed the soldiers to secure the fort and clean up the bloody bodies.

When everything was put in order, Babken was seen climbing the roof of the citadel with one of his sons, to tear down the Byzantine eagle and raise the cross-flag of the Rubinians. On seeing this, the warriors cheered in triumph that resounded through the mountains.

The local population in the neighboring villages, men, women and children, upon seeing the flag, were elated, shouting and crossing themselves, turning their gaze to heaven to give thanks to the Lord. The old men and women wept tears of joy.

And behold a beautiful woman, dressed in gold-brocaded linen, entered the fortress gates on an Arabian steed, accompanied by Babken’s wife and daughters. Everyone lined up reverently before her, lowering their weapons in respect. Both those who knew her and those who surmised that she was with Toros, received her with affection like a queen, as she warmly greeted them as her people. Toros approached Euphemia and helped her dismount. Right there, before the citadel gates, he signaled to the crowd that he wanted to speak.

“O Armenians, my people!” he began. “Toros, son of Levon, speaks to you. The Lord Almighty opened the doors of the dungeon for me and brought me here to help you too, and together we will wash away the insult and injury of bondage suffered by the Armenians and assure that these mountains shall be the land of the free and home of the brave. The Lord, who has shown favor toward our endeavors so far, will no doubt make all my aspirations a reality and bestow upon us a new Armenia reaching from these peaks to the sea. We must unite, in love and one accord, to help each other, to banish envy and pettiness, and to put national interests above our personal profit. I owe my freedom to the lady you see beside me. She restored my father’s sword to my hands and has been my inseparable companion throughout the ordeal of my escape. Now, I present her to you; her honor is your and my honor — just as the honor of your husbands, wives, and children is my honor.”

The crowd roared with exclamations of joy, cheers of “Long live, Toros,” and vowed commitment to the cause. In their excitement, the people began chattering with each other, telling of Toros’s valor and wisdom, sometimes, as is only to be expected, with embellishments and exaggeration.

The trumpet had sounded all over the mountains summoning the Armenians to take up arms and converge at Amut fortress where Toros, son of Levon, had raised the Armenian cross and called them to action.

Gradually, the people dispersed and headed to their homes. After they left, Toros beaming with joy and satisfaction, stood before the whole army and announced, “Babken *hayrik*, this fortress has no master now, for the Abulgharibs are gone. By right of proximity, you are now the owner of this fortress with all its estates. And we all are now your guests who have come from afar; and since it is well after noon, we are tired, thirsty and hungry and await your solution to this problem.”

“My prince and sovereign!” stammered Babken, barely able to speak, his eyes wet with tears, for he saw in Toros’s words the prince’s gratitude for his many years’ devoted service. “Everything that is here is yours, and it goes without saying, I am yours as well, as I have been and will always be. Now, let’s see what these Byzantines have stored away in their larder and celebrate.”

Immediately Babken summoned the Byzantine prince’s steward. He ordered him untied and offered him freedom as a reward if he was ready to serve loyally and take good care of the guests.

Shushik, as befitting the hostess of the house, rolled up her sleeves and together with her daughters organized the feast. The aroma of roasted lamb, veal, goat and chickens filled the air as the flames and smoke reached the sky, while urns of wine were emptied, glass by glass. The Armenian warriors celebrated their new realm. They had cast their eyes over the vast lands of Cilicia as onlookers for far too long. Starting tomorrow they would be its masters.

And Toros, who was always alert and always thinking about the improbable, walked past the guard posts on the pretext of celebrating, but in reality to inspect the physical condition and morale of the troops in person. He took along Kostandin, Sargis and several village elders who had voluntarily joined in this operation resulting in victory almost without a fight. For them, the hard, long mission started tomorrow as they embarked on the liberation of the whole country.

In the short span of a few weeks, they had already witnessed Toros’s shrewdness and military prowess. As they made the rounds, Toros gave Kostandin instructions, “It’s fine for the soldiers to celebrate, but a guard should be posted here, and we need a watchman there, and over here the gate should be reinforced,” and so forth. His companions looked at each other, and Kostandin, who had served Toros’s father and uncle and who was critical of the prince only a few days ago, now expressed his approval, nodding his head at each of Toros’s instructions. Having completed their rounds, they returned to the celebration,

“My Prince,” said Kostandin, “forgive me, but I must go and attend to your well-justified instructions. Forgive our laxity. We were taken by surprise by this astonishing victory, which we owe to you alone.”

“No one can win alone,” said Toros, “even the last troops who arrived and cared for the wounded had a share in our victory. This is just the beginning of our mission. Go, Prince Kostandin, and return quickly so that we do not go hungry.”

At the head of the table, next to Toros, sat Euphemia. Shushik, was busy preparing the feast behind the scenes, but Babken’s daughters took their place behind their mistress and served her. Just as they sat down to eat, the Armenian abbot from Cyprus arrived on his mule, scorched by the midday sun. With his arrival, the mood grew yet more convivial, as he joked that he arrived just in time for dinner.

“Welcome, Father, bless our table,” exclaimed Toros.

“What a joyous occasion for a servant of the church!” he chuckled.

“And even more so when it comes to a priest, such as you,” Toros interjected, “who treated us with hospitality fit for a king when we were fugitives and who came to our aid as the helmsman of our ship, risking his life on the arduous journey through the Cilician peaks. One should never forget that beside the

crafty and greedy clerics, there are hardworking and active clergy who love their people and are ready to lay down their lives for their flock and nation. They too have a place of honor at this table . . .”

Before he could complete his speech, the soldiers raised their voices in a song about Ruben Ist, substituting Toros’s name.

The Song to Ruben

*Bitter winds swept us from our native country
to foreign lands as exiles in the Black Mountains.
There was no Moses to lead us back or a pillar of fire to show the way.*

*From the noble lineage of our ancestors, a new branch sprang forth,
and gave us hope and became our pillar of light, our brave and valiant general Ruben.*

*The strings of the bows of Hayk’s scions had grown slack,
and the ax, shields, swords, spears and slings had grown rusty,
Even the name “Armenia” was forgotten and unheard,*

*Until out of our fallen grandeur
From the noble lineage of our ancestors, a new branch sprang forth,
and brought a new dawn, our brave and valiant general Ruben.*

*Our gardens were covered in thorns, and our wine turned to vinegar,
joy was banished and mourning reigned in our hearts.
Instead of the songs of brides and voices of grooms, only the owls lamented.*

*Until out of the ruins,
From the noble lineage of our ancestors, a green branch sprang forth,
and brought a new dawn, our brave and valiant general Ruben.*

*Now our vineyards overflow with golden bunches of grapes and sweet wine,
and our maids warble with their sweet voices and lyres.
Our valiant lads protect our liberty with arms and swords/*

*For upon our fallen throne,
From the noble lineage of our ancestors, a green branch sprang forth,
and brought a new dawn, our brave and valiant general Ruben.*

Chapter 14. Toros’s Country Takes Shape

The sun had not yet risen. Toros was still resting in the princely chambers of the Amut fortress. The gates of the fortress had not yet opened, but the mountains, hills and fields around the fortress were already teeming with thousands of armed men. Soon weapons glistened in the morning sun, banners waved in the wind, and the roar of voices, like the distant sound of the surf, reached Amut castle walls. From time to time, the eager young men let out a thunderous “hurrah” for the glorious future, while smaller groups here and there reveled in the joyful free days of old. Finally, the gates of fortress opened, and Toros, surrounded by his comrades-in-arms, went forth among the people.

After exchanging a few words as he passed through the crowd, he instructed the senior and experienced soldiers and the village elders to organize their forces and elect from each village a captain to report to him.

Elections were quickly conducted and without wasting a moment, this militia, headed by Toros, attacked the fortress of Vahka, which had been the Rubinian's ancestral stronghold until it fell into the hands of a group of Byzantine brigands after Levon's fall.

The Byzantines were stunned by the mass of armed men at their gates, unable to comprehend how, after such brutal subjugation, so many Armenians had managed to survive and recover their strength.

Toros had brought a negotiator with him. From among the Byzantine guards of Amut fortress, he had selected a venal windbag and promised him not only freedom, but also considerable reward if he could persuade the commandant of the Vahka fortress to surrender without a fight. Moreover, Toros instructed the negotiator to promise the commandant a secret reward if his demands were met. On the other hand, Toros swore by the memory of his ancestors that if they resisted and forced him to take the fortress by force, no one would be spared.

When the negotiator presented himself to the commander at Vahka fortress and conveyed Toros's messages, both official and secret, as instructed, the commander summoned his council. Sobered by ease with which Toros had captured Amut fortress, they began weighing the costs of resistance, the insufficiency of provisions to withstand a siege, the inadequacy of their guards to withstand the large force outside the walls, and the prospect of reward being offered and decided that surrender was preferable to devastation.

That very evening, the gates of the fortress opened and the keys were handed over to Toros, who triumphantly took possession of his ancestral castle. He immediately gave orders for restoration of the castle, as he was planning to settle there. That same night, Toros divided the Armenian troops into several groups under the commands of Babken, Kostandin and Sargis and instructed each which fortresses to liberate. Meanwhile, Toros himself took a force of 3000 warriors and headed to Mamestia, where the Byzantine governor resided.

Before dawn Toros advanced with his troops toward the fortress, his fierce reputation proceeding him and striking fear in the inhabitants. Toros brought a prisoner with him: the prince of the Amut fortress, who was the son-in-law of the Byzantine governor in Mamestia. Toros called him and spoke to him in a friendly manner, promising to restore his wealth from Amut fortress and return his children, wife, servants alive and unharmed, on condition that he convince his father-in-law to surrender Mamestia to the Armenian forces. If they surrendered without resistance, Toros promised to spare the Prince of Mamestia, his family and guards and allow them to retreat unharmed. However, if even a drop of blood were shed, Toros told the Amut prince that he would send an order to sell the Amut prince's wife, children and servants into bondage of the Aleppo emir.

Toros also warned that if the Byzantines did not meet his demands, they should expect neither peace nor mercy. He sent the Amut prince to the besieged fortress of Mamestia and gave him three hours to complete his assignment.

Of course, Toros was not one to sit idly by or put all his eggs in one basket. Just in case the negotiations were not fruitful, he deployed his troops fully armed for attack before the gates of the fortress, and ordered a tunnel to be dug under the fortress. He personally supervised the work, giving advice, inspiring the soldiers by his own example. He brought the captive Byzantine soldiers to watch these operations and gave secret instructions to the Armenian guards to turn a blind eye on the prisoners who tried to escape to Mamestia. All of Toros's actions were aimed to end the campaign without bloodshed, as quickly as possible, so as not to give the enemy time to regroup; for he knew that the first show of force would strike lasting terror in their hearts.

The Armenian camp was buzzing with activity. Carpenters were busy with making siege ladders. A detachment was dispatched to the road to Tarson to head off Byzantine reinforcements. An appeal was sent

throughout the Black Mountains to deliver several day's rations for the army. The entire population, men and women, young and old, mobilized and even before nightfall the army larder was fully stocked.

Night was approaching, yet the prince of Mamestia had made no response and the prince of Amut had not reported back. Hence, Toros, having carefully studied the lay of the land, personally blocked escape routes and set up floating barriers across the Biramos River to cut off all communication with the city.

Just then he received a report that several prisoners managed to escape to the city, but he bided his time. His patience was not in vain. Soon the city gates opened and an emissary emerged proposing a settlement with the following message:

In the name of the emperor it was promised that Toros would be pardoned; Amut fortress was to be transferred to his possession, and the inhabitants of the Black Mountains were to be exempted from taxes for a year, provided that Toros withdrew his army from the walls of Mamestia and returned the wife and children of Prince of Amut.

Toros calmly listened to these conditions. "For someone who took Amut fortress, Mamestia will be a snap." he said then. "I only grieve that blood will be shed senselessly, but the blame for that is on your prince. I am blameless since I have come to reclaim the legacy of my fathers and restore my rights. Woe to them who, not realizing their situation, try to bargain with me. When Mamestia is taken like Amut fortress, of which I have no doubt, the troops will be relentless and unstoppable. Their hearts overflow with the pent-up anger at the injustices that have accumulated over the years. Tomorrow morning the floodgates will open and battle will begin. Relay this your master."

Toros had earnestly hoped that the city would nevertheless surrender the next morning. The Byzantines had not had time to store up provisions and the population of Mamestia would likely be restive. There were not only Byzantines but also many Armenians within who could rebel. Finally, the Prince of Amut had a lot at stake and might still, out of personal interest, prevail on the governor of Mamestia to surrender.

Toros also expected that the communications blackout would intensify the fear within the besieged city. Inside the fortress they placed their last hope on the desperate attempt to send a messenger to Tarson asking for reinforcements, but Toros foiled all these efforts with his vigilant guards who sealed off all access on land and river.

At dawn, Toros still hoped to see a messenger from the fortress, but this was not to be. Thus, Toros ordered his best archers to aim at the ramparts easiest to scale by ladder. The archers were to shoot down the city's defenders atop the ramparts, allowing those scaling the walls to climb up without hindrance. The tunnel beneath the wall was progressing rapidly as well. At the head of the force ready to charge the walls was none other than Toros himself.

Then, suddenly the gates opened and the emissaries appeared. This time, the arrogant Byzantine, if not yet humbled, was at least ready for compromise. The delegation was headed by the Prince of Amut, who conveyed the message that the governor of Mamestia had agreed to surrender the city on Toros's terms.

Toros immediately sent a messenger to Amut fortress ordering his guards there to bring the family of the prince and his possessions. He also offered safe passage to the governor of Mamestia, who appeared shortly thereafter with his sizable caravan of guards, family and all the property they could manage to carry.

Toros duly received him and expedited his departure, taking charge of the city forthwith, as his scouts soon confirmed his suspicion that the Byzantine Governor of Tarson was already en route to Mamestia with a large reinforcement battalion. The same governor had also sent orders to all the Byzantine princes in the region, as well as the Armenian princes allied with the Byzantine emperor, to assemble their forces at Adana. To the Governor of Tarson it was utterly inconceivable that Toros – a half-witted young fool as he was characterized

in the intelligence briefings he had received from Constantinople – could possibly have mustered enough strength to withstand him.

Many of Toros's forces were disconcerted when he let the duplicitous Governor of Mamestia go free with his entourage and wealth. They would have preferred to have given him a taste of his own medicine. They criticized Toros for not double-crossing the Byzantine officials as the Byzantines had done so many times to the Armenians in the past.

Nevertheless, Toros stood by his promise. Perceptive and discerning of the spirit of the times, he was aware of the latent discontent, but he believed in practicing what he preached and refused to apply treacherous methods to others that we find contemptible for ourselves.

As soon as he entered the city, Toros had ordered that the fortifications be reinforced. As he expected, unrest among the Armenian population had been a major factor in the city's surrender. Thus, that very day, after giving his troops a brief respite, he ordered three days' rations be distributed to each. Entrusting the defense of Mamestia to its Armenian inhabitants, he moved out at the crack of dawn with his three thousand elite troops for Adana. They were the most able fighters in the region, and before the governor of Tarson could muster reinforcements, Toros intended to make a surprise attack and emerge victorious, boosting his reputation yet further.

He had only a small cavalry detachment, all the rest being infantry. But these were not ordinary foot soldiers. Native to these mountains, their feet were tougher than bronze. More importantly, they saw the heir to the Rubinians, marching at the front, like a giant fully armed, unfazed by the hardships, scorching sun, dust, thirst or hunger.

Truly he was an amazing leader, with his robust build, his stately gaze, brief and stirring speeches, temperance in food and drink, all of which inspired respect and obedience as a commonplace reality for those around him.

The army advanced soundlessly, only the muffled tramping of three thousand feet could be heard. When they reached the Sarus River, the thirsty soldiers rushed forward to quench their thirst but stopped short when the forward guard, headed by Toros, caught a shocking sight.

A group of eight or ten dead or wounded Armenian mule-drivers lay on the road, covered with blood. Only one or two of them showed signs of life. They were administered medication and wine with water, which helped revive them somewhat. From them, Toros learned that the Mamestia's governor's forces had intercepted this caravan and attacked them out of revenge, killing and wounding the muleteers and robbing their loads of grain.

Toros dismounted, ordered several of his cavalry to dismount and load the wounded and dead onto their horses. Soon the entourage reached an Armenian village, where he entrusted the local villagers to care for the wounded and bury the dead. They continued to Adana, with its lush groves. There Toros ordered reconnaissance to check on the enemy's position.

Meanwhile, he and the rest of the forces stopped at the river bank and partook of their meager rations. Toros, like the rank and file, contented himself with just a few olives and a piece of cheese, while waiting for the scouts to return. It was worth the wait. The scouts brought good news: the Byzantine force, exhausted by the midday heat, were resting in a grove along the Tarson road, just two hours away from Adana. Though it would be easy to attack and capture Adana, which had no fortifications, that would be of no real benefit. On the other hand, launching a surprise attack to eliminate and scatter the Byzantine forces would be an impressive and worthy feat.

He was tempted to be sure, but the fact that his troops still had a two-hour march before attacking a well-rested force gave him pause. So, Toros decided to put his soldiers to the test. He assembled and addressed them:

“O, Armenian warriors! During these few days, I have witnessed your courage, and I can see that you are stout-hearted and disciplined. These are marks of military integrity. It’s been a hard day today. Nevertheless, we need to ferret out the Byzantine forces. I’m looking for volunteers for this mission. Whoever wants to, follow me. The others can rest a bit longer and then catch up with us.”

Upon hearing this short, but decisive speech, there was an uproar. Everyone was shouting and raising their hands, vowing that they would follow him, even to death. Without wasting a moment, Toros took the lead and ordered the march, sending scouts ahead.

In high spirits they quickly reached the Byzantine encampment. The Byzantines were barely roused from their slumber when the air thundered with the battle cries of 3000 men. A group of tough, tanned warriors attacked the Byzantines furiously and laid them low in no time. The terrified Byzantines were certain that it was over for them.

Still with twice the number of soldiers, the Byzantines were a force to be reckoned with. Their rear guard had been ordered to stop the soldiers from fleeing the battle scene and managed to regroup them for battle. Toros, leading a squad of able warriors, fiercely intervened. The retreating enemy was in disarray.

On both sides, rivers of blood flowed, spears broke, shields crashed, fragments of swords flew, until finally the Byzantine line was broken. Scattered groups of Byzantines beat an erratic retreat. The enemy losses would have been even greater had the Armenian warriors not been so tired.

But Toros could not rest until the job was complete. He jumped on his horse and chased the enemy’s army for another three hours with a small cavalry unit. In all likelihood, he would not have stopped the chase, even to the very walls of Tarsos, except that he caught sight of a large cloud of dust on the horizon, indicating that a large cavalry detachment was on its way to rescue the retreating Byzantines. The reinforcements came from the direction of Lambron. Toros surmised who they were and thought it more prudent to turn back, deeming the day’s accomplishments sufficient for the time being.

The enemy had 2000 casualties. The Armenians about 500.

Toros’s first order was to bury the dead with honor and transport the wounded to their villages to protect them from the harsh midday heat, return them to their families and obtain medical attention. He allocated a goodly portion of the booty captured from the Byzantines to the families of the dead and wounded, who had bravely shed their blood in this battle. After this, he distributed the booty fairly among the remaining warriors, keeping none for himself to the astonishment of all.

They spent the night at the camp, where the enemy had settled the previous day. Early the next morning, Toros laid siege to the city of Adana and demanded a ransom of one thousand gold pieces as a condition for lifting the siege. He gave them an hour to consider his offer.

Once he received the ransom, he returned with his army to Mamestia, where, from a distance, he saw Euphemia and Dionys together with Babken waiting for him. Toros and his forces were greeted with a triumphal welcome.

In just a few days, Toros’s name resounded throughout Cilicia, and his fame spread beyond its borders. Levon’s son had returned, filling the Armenians’ hearts with joy and their enemies with trepidation.

Chapter 15. The Governor of Anarzaba

An unusual situation had developed in Cilicia in those days. Day by day, the Armenian population in the Taurus Mountains was increasing. The infidels who had taken over Armenia and Asia Minor were inflicting unbearable persecution on the Armenians, their country and religious and political freedom. Bondage and captivity was now the fate of all.

The people, like other Asian nations, never imagined a free system of government called a republic such as Greeks and Romans had from time to time in their history, and which brought honor and glory to their homeland and humanity in general. The ancient patriarchs of our church barely had time to translate and disseminate Christian holy books and teachings. Meanwhile, our national history, as far as Movses Khorenatsi was able to convey to us, was so brief and vague in the memory of the people that the Armenian generals were forced to look to the Hebrew Bible for examples to inspire their troops.

There is nothing surprising in this. If the European peoples barely adopted the concept of fatherland and nation a hundred and fifty years ago, it would be naïve indeed to expect the same thing from the Asian peoples some seven centuries before our times.

Hence, the Armenians who gathered in the mountains of Taurus, as foreign sources of that time attest, had two virtues: military prowess and the Christian faith. Each man was a warrior and each man was totally devoted to his faith. The national flag for him was the cross, and all religious views boiled down to one thing – to maintain the integrity of the Apostolic faith of St. Gregory the Illuminator.

Let other refined nations make changes in religious teachings and rituals, whereas the Armenians who sacrificed everything to protect their faith from the Persians, Byzantines and Arabs with all their power, were unshakable in this. Therefore, persecution against the faith by the Seljuks, the caliphs and countless Muslim emirs, persecution by the Byzantine emperor, as well as by the Georgians, had driven them from their native lands to the Taurus Mountains.

Here the people gathered and accumulated like a cloud, and it was unthinkable that they, at first, like a stream, then like a river, and finally, like a stormy flood, would not come down and inundate the valley. But the people needed a leader, ever thus. Absolute equality is unworkable. Even the lawmakers of Sparta understood this, as nature has not endowed humans equally in physical and intellectual capacities.

The Armenian people have always distinguished two types of men. Their religious leaders who always preached, like St. Paul, to be obedient to earthly masters, and the nobility, descendants of the old princely dynasties, who felt entitled to glory and who considered reverence, homage and power to be their inalienable right.

Every fortress, every fortification, every castle was the property of the princes, who, as a rule, belonged to the Artsruni, Bagratuni, Kamsarakan, Syuni, Pahlavuni, Mamikonian or other noble families. From time to time, one or another family, according to natural virtues and shortcomings, advanced or receded in stature, to the benefit or detriment of themselves and the Armenian nation. The people, following the voice of their heart and the arguments of reason, always paid higher allegiance to those princes and constables, who were more diligent defenders of their own independence and their native ancient faith, thereby also defending the rights of the nation. Hence the popularity of the Rubinians, who in the eyes of the people were the true representatives of the Armenian nation. By the same token, population viewed the pro-Byzantine and pro-Roman Armenian princes as foreigners and had contempt for their fancy titles and honors from the Byzantine Emperor. Among such princes were also those who not only ignored the interests of their people, but catered to the foreigners, making sport of putting down and mistreating Armenians.

Toros was different. Returning victorious, to the cheers and songs of the people, with whom he shared the battles' bounty, Toros entered Mamestia, accompanied by his wife, whose noble beauty added to people's elation. There he was joined by his commanders, also returning victorious from their missions: Kostandin had liberated the Bardzrberd fortress and Sargis had taken the fortress Aryuts.

A lesser man might have been carried away by the exhilaration of victory, but not the astute and self-disciplined Toros. Instead, he remained sober and alert, inquiring about enemy movements, fortifications, positions and possible threats. The name of a city kept recurring in his mind, a place that was part of his patrimony, where he had spent many happy days in his childhood. He was keen to liberate this city as well, but first he wanted to hear what the others had to say.

In due course, Kostandin said: "If we want to rid this land of weeds, we need to focus our strength on Anarzaba."

"And who is the governor there?"

"It is probably not fair to call him a governor. He's more like an autocrat or tyrant."

"Do you mean he rules by his own whim?"

"He was the lord of Paperon and has sided with the Byzantines. After the Byzantines took your father captive, he became the governor of Anarzaba. I brought back a few Armenians from there. They sought me out, trembling in fear, and their reports about their conditions and misrule were revolting. Hear them out and judge for yourself."

Kostandin ordered his assistants to bring in the Anarzabans. Three or four individuals, their nakedness barely covered in rags, entered. Their appearance expressed the situation more effectively than words could. They were bent over, heads hanging, completely demoralized, a far cry from the confident and formidable demeanor characteristic of the Armenian highlanders.

"What do you seek? Why have you come to us?" asked Toros.

"Oh, our prince's son," said one of them, an elderly priest, "it has been ten years now since you were taken away, and during those ten years we, the Anarzabans, have been suffering endless cruelty. If the tyrant were a Persian, an Arab or a Byzantine, we would say: he has no cross, he has no true faith, he does not recognize the Illuminator, and we might put up with it. But this unholy offspring is Armenian by birth, and his name is Smbat. He boasts that he is a Mamikonian, but he is playing the part of the traitor Vasak. Under the weight of his extortionate taxes, our people are starving to death. Yet his greed knows no end.

He has appointed one of his own man as a so-called judge, but he does anything but justice. He fabricates cases, brings false witness, does anything to find a way to punish, impose penalties, take bribes, shed blood and amuse his evil heart.

The prince has another favorite. They call this man is a priest, a cleric, a bishop, but we have seen that he is nothing but a greedy, sensual fop. They say that he is a man, but we see him wearing muslin and putting on makeup like a woman. He is a scourge for the priests, a punishment for the people and a friend to infidels and invaders.

Our villages have been destroyed and our houses turned to rubble, while the prince erects palaces for himself and builds gardens on our ruins. All his nobles are robbers, a curse on our head. They treat our boys and girls as if they were servants to amuse them. They insult our language and our faith even worse than the Byzantines, and they aid and abet invaders to do the same. Our city has become rustic, and the mansions of

the citadel are filled with the vices of Babylon, Sodom and Gomorrah. I will not speak any more, the rest you will understand.

We came here to seek a solution. If you do not act, it will be impossible for us to return to our homes. God knows what danger our children are in, for the land is teeming with spies. Once we sent emissaries to appeal to the viceroy in Tarson, and we still don't know their fate. They disappeared without trace, dead or thrown into the dungeon for life. We know only that their wives and children were sold into slavery in Aleppo."

The priest from Anabarza could say no more. Somber silence reigned. All eyes were turned towards Toros, but no one dared to ask a question until Toros spoke:

"Reverend father," he said, "we are all overwhelmed with sadness at your account. Never think that we do not want to help or undertake this arduous task. Just the opposite. We are especially aggrieved that your prince is an Armenian, for you are his brothers, one with him in blood and faith. This means that to save you, we will have to fight against Armenians, shed Armenian blood, which is a great sin to us. Yet, I want to ask one thing: do you know any person whose word would have weight for your prince?"

"No man's voice has weight with him. Even if an angel of God appeared, he would not listen. Word of this bishop's unbecoming behavior and lewdness reached the Catholicos, we don't know how. The Catholicos sent a message with his blessing to the prince and summoned to the bishop to the Catholical See in Tsovk for spiritual guidance. This caused turmoil in the city and castle. It was forbidden to so much as mention the Catholicos during the divine liturgy. One priest, either unaware of that order, or intentionally, uttered 'our Most Reverend Shepherd' and they beat him so hard and jailed him so long that after his release he lived only three months."

"I see," said Toros. "We will send a courteous written notice to him. If he does not come to his senses, then we will not waste words and take the necessary measures."

The Anarabans left the room, but remained outside the door, where they argued that words would be of no avail. The only remedy for their prince was the sword, and even the sword might not be effective. "What can be done against the walls of Anaraba? No wonder the prince of Anaraba ranted when he learned the seizure of Mamestia: 'Let them come here. We'll see who will surrender to whom! God himself will have mercy on us.'"

At that very moment, a young man, Toros's envoy, was already on his horse and galloping along the road to Anaraba, under orders to return that evening. He flew like lightning. Taking no breaks, he arrived three hours later at the gates of the citadel of Anaraba and informed the guards that he was the envoy of Toros Rubinian, son of Levon, Prince of Vahka, Mamestia, and the fortresses of Aryutz, Amut, Bardzrberd and Siman.

Although the young man waited impatiently to be received, Prince Smbat deliberately delayed, forcing the ambassador to wait, as a sign of disrespect toward Toros. But Toros saw this coming, so when he selected this young man as his envoy, he sized up his temperament and instructed him how to behave.

Thus, the young man, although impatient, leisurely passed the time engaging the guards in conversation and regaling them with stories about his prince: how, thanks to his amazing powers, he took so many impregnable fortresses in five or six days, how kind and generous he was, how merciful and gracious he was in peacetime, though severe in battle. Looking at the fortifications of the Anaraba citadel, the young man compared them with the strongholds of Amut and Vahka and said that this fortress was nothing compared to them. He projected such confidence and vigor that doubt and anxiety began to creep into the hearts of even the most fearless of the Anaraban guards. Finally, after more than an hour's wait, the prince ordered the envoy to be brought before him.

Smbat was reclining on a luxurious divan. A marble ornamented fountain nearby filled the air with a cool mist. Armed servants, stood before the prince in silence. He sternly asked the young man, “Who are you and where did you come from?”

“Prince of Mamestia Toros, son of Levon, sent me as an envoy to you.”

“What does he want from me? What business could a fugitive rebel have with me?”

“This, as you were pleased to say, fugitive rebel today has ten to twelve thousand soldiers under his command. In less than a week he has already captured six fortresses. Just yesterday, he crushed and dispersed the army of the governor of Tarson, imposing tribute on the city of Adana, and tomorrow thirty thousand warriors are ready to mobilize at his call. It seems many loyal vassals of the Byzantine emperor would be considered fortunate to have this rebel’s power.”

The eyes of the fierce prince flared with anger, his posture stiffened, and he sat upright.

“Insolent fool!” He thundered. “You must be under the impression that an envoy is inviolable, so you dare to talk to me this way! But bear in mind, I am the type who will take revenge sooner or later when the time is ripe . . . What does your lord want from me?”

“My lord, Prince Toros, son of Levon, the legitimate heir of the city of Anarzaba,” said the young man, “is calm and restrained, but there are limits to his patience. He cannot turn a deaf ear to the petitions and supplications of the population of this city and surrounding villages. Therefore, he sent me on this mission, so that you would temper your policies and halt the abuses committed by your underlings, undoubtedly without your knowledge, lest good neighborly relations befitting Armenian princes be disrupted and Armenian blood be shed in vain.”

“What nonsense is this? Your prince is the legitimate heir to this city? So this fugitive rogue wants to maintain good neighborly relations with me? Has he taken it upon himself to dictate the actions of my officials? No, this is unacceptable! Get out of my sight if you don’t want to be killed here right on the spot. Go tell your prince that he is a thief, like his father and uncle, that soon he’ll be hauled back to captivity, where the gallows await him. Now, get out!”

The young man calmly heard out this tirade, not reacting to the insults and showing no fear at the prince’s rabid face. When it was over, he took his leave with a nod, exited without a word, mounted his horse, and rode off as swiftly as he had appeared.

When he reached Mamestia, night had enveloped the city, but mirth, songs and music overflowed from every Armenian house. Armed warriors filled the courtyards, church halls and city squares. Armenians from everywhere, the mountains and the plains, had gathered, giving praise for the grace God bestowed upon them. Meanwhile, in the Byzantine districts, the people were downcast and despondent, not a person to be found in the deserted streets.

Anarzaba was a completely different picture. There, Prince Smbat raced about the citadel in a frenzy, growling and mumbling curses. But as was typical, his fury passed because when a man exceeds fifty, like it or not, he acquires some measure of prudence.

Therefore, Prince Smbat, even though he had a hot, ferocious and stubborn disposition, finally calmed down and started to think about the message he had heard. Since he was agitated, he failed to comprehend earlier all that had been said. He already knew about the capture of Amut and Mamestia, but the words “crushed and dispersed the army of the governor of Tarson” echoed in his ears. But was this true, or was it a bluff? The trouble was that he was embarrassed to ask others for confirmation.

Meanwhile the clock was ticking, and he paced his chambers frantically. Another problem was that when the prince was in such a state, only a few people dared approach and talk to him. And two of those select few — the bishop and the prince's wife, who everyone called "Madame Bishop" — were off taking a ride in the country on horseback.

Therefore, Prince Smbat, stewed, poised between anger and smoldering impassivity. He was twitching and pulling his speckled beard, when, fortunately, his wife and the young bishop arrived and interrupted his torment.

Their entrance was a sight to behold, an eloquent testimony to this couple's true relationship for those who had eyes to see, though husbands are rarely that perceptive. The woman was over forty. Resolute and cheerful, with a loud, slightly hoarse voice and a firm look, she held herself majestically, almost haughtily. She had rouge on her cheeks, mascara on her eyelashes, rings on her fingers, and a whip in her hand. From her first glance at her spouse and sovereign, she, like an experienced navigator, immediately understood from his face that there had been a storm. But it was necessary to find out the reason, so she exclaimed with her loud voice, which under the circumstances sounded even louder:

"Why are we so sad, my lord? Is there something on your mind? Did something irritate you?"

"No, nothing," the prince answered with a stern frown.

This sullen "nothing" and frowning eyebrows roused fear and consternation in the two consorts. They exchanged a lightning quick look, a glance of guilt mixed with fear of exposure and its consequences.

The woman continued anxiously, "If a person hides the reasons for his unease even from his wife and friends, it means that family, friendship and trust are empty sounds."

"If you were here a little earlier, you would have seen the envoy sent to me by that son of the rebel, and you could judge yourself if I have the right to be angry."

Our lovers breathed easier. A new exchange of glances followed, this time expressing relief.

Now it was the bishop's turn to speak. Until then he had kept a panicked silence. When his fear receded, his face recovered its usual confidence, although it would have been very difficult to discern the fluctuation of emotions beneath the thick layer of makeup on his face. He was just as the poor priest of Anarzaba described him to Prince Toros in Mamestia, a young man of about thirty-five, of medium height, well proportioned and attractive. Due to these virtues, and consequently, thanks to the Mamikonian lady (to be sure that no heavenly grace played any role here) this young man quickly rose to the rank of Bishop. Duly aware of the fact that this heavenly gift, that is, his pretty appearance, was a major factor in his career advancement, his eminence took special pains to groom himself. He procured from Byzantium every manner of grooming tool – razors, tweezers, brushes, various elixirs and powders. Moreover, he affected a soft and seductive voice, graceful, almost feminine gait and ring-adorned hands, the whiteness of which he protected by special treatments. To complete his portrait, it should be mentioned that he was embarrassed by his lowly origin, so he fawned on disgruntled nobles to be listed in their family genealogy.

Turning his head coyly, the priest said in a velvety voice, "O mighty prince, your reign in such an impregnable stronghold empowers you not only to brush off the threats of a rebel's son with contempt but to withstand much more formidable foes."

"This is all true, Holy Father" the prince replied, "but if the envoy's reports are true, this rogue racked up more victories in a week than his father and uncle ever did or could in their wildest dreams over many years.

To gather an army of ten to twelve thousand ... To crush and disperse the army of Tarson prince ... Send us ultimatums and exhortations to rule our people more mercifully! ...”

“What?” The princess jumped to her feet like a wounded tigress. “It is preposterous that yesterday’s ruffian dare to issue us orders on how to behave. What’s next?”

“But in all this,” the bishop said thoughtfully, “there are two points that need to be confirmed first: is it true that he has collected twelve thousand warriors, and is it true that he defeated the army of the governor of Tarson?”

“Let’s see if our men have gathered any information,” said the prince, trying with blasé contempt to soothe his tormented soul. “Hey, fellows, tell Vasil to come here!”

While they waited, the three of them fell silent. The princess pretended to be much more agitated than she actually was, and His Grace sent sly smiles her way. Since the immediate threat of exposure was gone, the problem was postponed to the distant and indefinite future.

Vasil presented himself, a man with sad, feline eyes (this foul individual was the prince’s spy and had the run of the house. He was the number one thief and accomplice of the other two angelic beings).

“Vasil,” asked the prince, “what did you hear about the rebel? Is it true that in addition to Mamestia, he captured several more fortresses?”

“My lord! If what I heard is true, then except for Anarzaba, he took possession of all the fortresses in our area. All the people of the Taurus Mountains, with weapons in hand, have flocked to his banner. They also say that the lord of Tarson hastily assembled an army, went to Mamestia, and the rebel confronted him and won a great victory. This last report needs to be checked.”

“Well, Vasil, we got the picture,” said the prince, and the servant withdrew, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible.

“Well, Holy Father. Did you hear that?”

“Truly amazing. But Vasil also said that the last report requires verification.”

“No need to worry!” The princess bravely said, “I remember tales about his father were rife when I was a young bride. But not for long. The emperor came, tied up his father, mother and their children, and took them all captive to Constantinople, thus restoring peace to the country.”

Everything said by the lady was true, except for the reference to her age, because by that time she could hardly be considered a newlywed. She had crossed the threshold of thirty and was the mother of a twelve-year-old son. On the other hand, Smbat, despite being a Mamikonian by birth, was a fainthearted man, arrogant only at times of success. For now, he was more concerned about the imminent danger than in correcting the misrepresentation of his wife’s age.

He sat down for dinner but had no appetite, and then went to bed but could not sleep. Finally he dozed off, restless, haunted by nightmares dominated by Toros.

Chapter 16. Margaret

While the high-ranking denizens of the citadel were frantic with anxiety, a group of guards, sitting below, was wrangling about the young envoy's message.

"Listen, here," said a robust man in his prime, with an almost square build and eyes that peered out of his tanned face, "have you lost your mind or what? It is easy to say, 'bring him on' and call the man a rebel. Then what? His father was also a rebel and his uncle was a rebel; however, the Turks, the Crusaders, not to mention the Byzantines, quaked at their name.

All these princes of ours rose to their feet when greeting him and sat only when they were granted permission. People turned to them when we were in trouble, and wrongdoers dreaded them. The Byzantines, who boasted they have an emperor and a great capital city, ten times a year appeared before them to pay their respects and flatter them, since the emperor was far away.

The crusaders, who said that they have a great king in the west, believed that if they managed to get here alive and did not die of hunger on their way they would accomplish much here, but instead, the land and sea were littered with their bones.

That is why both the Byzantines and the Crusaders stayed on good terms with these so-called rebels. This was the case, until one day the emperor came and then these foxes all ran to him, attacked them and violated their home.

I was there with our present prince when Levon was caught and brought to the emperor. God knows, I was ashamed when he looked at the Armenian princes and the army. I can't describe what was in his eyes and his gaze, but the faces of the aristocratic princes of Lambron and other Armenian princes flushed red with embarrassment when they bound Levon's hands with chains. Even I could not hold back my tears . . ."

"You cried?" exclaimed a frivolous young man. "Look, fellows, brother Avag shed a tear! Do you hear? There must have been an earthquake or a storm that day."

"Yes," said Avag, "such a storm that it swept away the Armenians' name and honor. Today everyone, Byzantines, Crusaders, Seljuks and Turks, treat us with contempt. Our prince is the master of the Paperon and we say that he is the governor of Anarzaba, but a few measly Byzantines who live in our city call the shots. They boast day and night that they are the lords of this city and that our prince is just a servant of their emperor. And it is not as if the prince doesn't know of their boasting, let alone the rest of the people."

"But the prince himself trembles in front of the Madam," someone quipped with a giggle.

"Well, the Madam in her turn trembles before the Reverend," said another and the whole group erupted in raucous laughter.

Avag alone frowned, scolding them harshly:

"You fellows should sober up. This is no laughing matter. I'm afraid that all of us will pay the price for his arrogance. Our prince disobeyed the Catholicos's order and that is why he has been anathemized by the church. And now this . . . It is human to err. Today he murders, tomorrow he robs, plunders, the next day he commits atrocities. But then he will have to face God's wrath, and the priest will pray, "Lord, have mercy" and grant pardon. But this is different. Our bishop disobeyed the order of the Catholicos, who is the successor of the Enlightener. God will not heed the prayers of mercy for such an insubordinate priest, nor will sins be forgiven. God knows we are all sinners. The people on this land cry tears of blood on their account. If from time to time our sins are not pardoned, imagine the fire and brimstone that will befall Anarzaba. We will all perish."

"What are you saying, man?" said another guard, "if heaven spills fire, let it spill on the bishop, since he is the root of evil."

“Thank God for Princess Margaret,” another guard chimed in, “if there is a soul in this castle that is pure before the Lord, then it is she. Otherwise, God would indeed have struck us down and leveled everything to the ground.”

“If what the envoy was saying is true, then it is Toros that will level us to the ground,” a foolish lad said.

“You, lad, how do you know what he said?” Avag asked sternly.

“I was here when the envoy was talking with you. Then, when he was taken to the prince I followed him ...

He told the prince, “your officials are thieves; they torment the people. You should not torment the people.” The prince got angry. He jumped from his seat with fire in his eyes. I ran away. Then the envoy came out, jumped on his horse and sped away...”

“Now! Shut up,” Avag said, “you’re about to be beaten.” No sooner had he uttered this, when the boy pulled back a safe distance.

“Joking aside, brother Avag, what do you think?” asked a young guard, “if Anarzaba is besieged, could the fortress be in danger of falling?”

“The siege will tell. When conquering Anarzaba, the emperor laid siege to the city. Had it been someone weaker, could he have taken it from Levon?”

“Today in town I met a friend who serves in the Amut guards. ‘Prepare for the worst,’ he said, ‘your fortress is much weaker than ours.’ As for the rebel leader, he has fire in his eyes and strikes only once, no need for a second blow. Alone he cut down 8-10 men in a single blow, none of whom survived.”

“But, of course, curse him, he is his father’s son,” Avag said with a sour grimace.

“Listening to this sent shivers down my spine. Once he shows up, the townspeople will rush to open the gates for him. Then all we’ll have left is the citadel.”

“Who can blame them? All you’ve done is beat and curse them. No doubt they’ll think they’re better off with the rebel . . .”

“What?” Avag screamed, “are you still here and babbling? I’m not a man if I do not cut out your tongue.” The boy disappeared before he could stand up.

Everyone burst out laughing, and Avag, who did not have a sense of humor, said shaking his head,

“The crackpot is smarter than all of us. Why would they remain loyal? What good have we done to them?”

At this time, Vasil’s sharp nose appeared at the end of the hall and instantly there was silence, as it was common knowledge that he was the prince’s spy. When he disappeared one of the young guards muttered after him,

“Devilish brat, devil take you. I’ll teach you not to spy – sixty lashes with a stick, eight days in prison, stale bread. How’s that?”

“If the princess had not recognized your voice and pleaded for you, it would have been 150 lashes. Consider yourself fortunate.”

“Whatever my punishment, that is my fate, but Vasil better watch his back. One of these days, I’ll take care of him.”

“Do not mess with this dog, boy, I tell you,” Avag advised, “otherwise, you will never have a day of peace. You will lose both your job and your daily bread. I know what I am talking about. When I was about twenty

years old, I served under the Prince of Lambron. There was an overseer – not as useless as this one, but a hard man. For any trifle, he would give us a thrashing as punishment. And then I kidnapped a girl and took her to the mountains. Her father and mother lodged a complaint... Well, what are you surprised at? There, in Lambron, they don't take such things lightly. It's not Anarzaba. This overseer caught me and wanted to take me to the prince. I begged and begged him to let me go. We were already at the gates and there was no other choice. So I stabbed him in the ribs with a knife and escaped. I never returned to that principedom, but it was a good place – people living there had to abide by the law, no fooling around."

"Well, in Anarzaba we do not have that problem. And here comes the young prince."

Everyone jumped up and stood at attention.

A young man of twenty-five, accompanied by three or four armed servants, with greyhounds and hunting falcons, entered the citadel upon returning from an expedition. The young man was handsome and arrogant. With barely a glance at the guards, he jumped off his horse and went into his chambers.

He was known to be his mother's favorite. Prevailing on her husband the prince, she lavished all kinds of luxuries on him. To keep him by her side she arranged for him to be married, even though he was only eighteen. The bride was a pretty, fresh and naive girl, who was convinced that she was created solely for the pleasure of this spoiled young man. Therefore, she endured all his despotic antics and cruel treatment with the submissiveness of a maid. This wretched woman, already a mother of two children, had only one confidante, her sister-in-law princess Margaret.

The princess's keen mind and virtues commanded respect, especially since she was her father's favorite. She was attractive, with black eyes and eyebrows and a high forehead topped with black hair and a gaze that seemed to penetrate the souls of those she encountered; by nature she was perceptive beyond her age. She was well aware of the internal and external dysfunction of her father's house and realm. But seeing no way to uproot this lawlessness, she often wished to withdraw to a convent. She yielded not to her mother's command but to her father's pleas not to go. Her mother was intent on marrying her off and with each refusal concluded that her daughter was an unfeeling and thankless daughter.

The princess spent her days in prayer and charity-work, consoling her sister-in-law and taking care of her children. If a single benevolent ray of divine providence managed to slip through the cracks of Anarzaba's walls, it was undoubtedly this girl – Lady Margaret. She was the only hope for the afflicted, and if their pleas managed to reach her they always found in her a staunch protector. However, as her protection often ultimately backfired, bringing terrible harm and retribution, many hid their sorrows even from her.

In any event, this was Margaret's position in the palace, a beautiful flower among briars and thorns. She was respected and honored even by the most insolent and villainous, except for one individual whose contemptible pettiness simply could not comprehend the magnanimity of her dove-like soul – that was the bishop.

This slimy creature even went so far as to offer his lurid affections to this gentle soul. Nonplussed, she laughed off the bishop's unseemly attentions, thus crushing his fragile ego. Whereupon, the bishop's temper flared and he grabbed her by the hand and tried to force himself upon her. He had not counted on her irrepressible character. The next moment the bishop recoiled in horror, for in the princess's right hand a gilded dagger flashed before his eyes. Without wasting a moment, the bishop cloaked himself in his vestments and fake dignity, like a serpent in its skin, and made excuses that his actions were but a test of her virtue, of which he was well pleased.

She, in turn, nonchalantly asked the bishop not to test her virtue in the future, because she might mistakenly respond to such tests and jokes with force and have to give her father a full report. Then she put the gilded dagger in her clothing and went on her way.

The reverend father also went on his way, vowing never to engage in flirtation with such wild and indomitable types in the future.

As already mentioned, Prince Smbat had spent the night agonizing. Early in the morning, he went out to the garden to walk among the flowers. To his surprise, he found his daughter strolling there with a rose bud in her hand.

“You are up so early, my daughter. What a surprise!”

“If anything is surprising it is you, father. You always get up late. I am usually here at this hour every morning. You must have something on your mind. Did anything happen?”

“Yes, I have been troubled by unsettling dreams. Shall I tell you about them?”

“No need, I already know,” said the princess.

“What? You know my dreams?” asked the prince, his eyes wide.

“I know. You’ve been obsessing about Toros all night.”

“How do you know?”

“I know that as far as I can remember in the last ten years we have not faced such a threat and it is possible that in a matter of days, if we do not fall into his hands, we will become homeless exiles, knocking on strangers’ doors for refuge.”

“What dire predictions! How could you see everything so black and gloomy?”

“Is it my fault that I see everything in somber colors? For the past five years, my father, I begged you how many times to show a little bit of compassion for the poor people of our city, whose destiny the Lord has entrusted to you, yet you did not listen. How often did I implore you not to surround yourself with hordes of scheming rogues and instead to recruit a few humble, upright and honest men as guards. Even if they were fewer in number, you would feel more secure. But my pleas fell on deaf ears.”

“I don’t understand. If there were fewer guards, how could we be more secure? That doesn’t make sense.”

“Very simple, all the people from the city would be with us. Instead, because of those thugs and your oppressive rule, the people have turned against us. At the first opportunity they will unite to overthrow us, and you cannot count on your unreliable rogues. This was very unwise.”

The prince sank into a depressed stupor, unable to lift his eyes for some time. Then, after a long silence, he grumbled.

“So that means you think I was wrong yesterday to insult Toros’s envoy and reject his offer.”

“Yes, father. Unfortunately, by the time I learned of the incident it was too late. The envoy had already mounted his horse and left.”

“But do you know what an arrogant message this rebel had the audacity to send me?”

“I knew everything as soon as it happened.”

“Is that so?”

“Just a moment, dear father. In order to be fair, put yourself in Toros’s shoes. Just imagine for a moment, being brave, smart and strong, escaping prison, taking six fortresses in ten days, commanding an army of 10-20000 able-bodied, loyal warriors, crushing the governor of Tarson and his garrison . . .”

“So you have fallen for these tall tales, my daughter?”

“But these are not tales at all. They are true.”

“How do you know?”

“In this city I am much better informed than all your spies, including Vasil. I know what’s really going on.”

“What do you mean?”

“Each morning, I go down to the city and make the rounds with my medicine chest. Together with old Martiros, I make house calls, to one and all, Armenians, Greeks, Turks. Along with showing me their wounds and ailments, they also open their hearts. I get an earful. I know that the whole city- men and women, old and young, churchmen and laity – everyone is fed up with us. When the city is attacked, not an arrow needs to be shot or a stone hurled, since the people will open the gates and the thuggish guards will betray us. I also know that the opposing forces which you call rebels are actually much stronger than we can imagine.”

“But how did you know all this?”

“It has been several days that I have been caring for the daughter of a Greek widow who has a high fever. Her brother served the Prince of Mamestia. Then, yesterday afternoon I saw a wounded young man from the Battle of Adana. I examined his wound. It was not a severe injury, but due to lack of proper care, there were complications. Each gave me a full account. I learned that this rebel is no ordinary person. He alone, with his valor, prudence and virtue, is worth a whole army.”

“Let’s leave aside this man and all his virtues. You say that the priests in our city are also hostile to us. I will have them all defrocked. Right this minute I will give the Bishop the order.”

“What use is defrocking them? Will this win them over? As it is, that so-called Bishop is one of the biggest problems. But why am I wasting my breath. Soon enough the course of events will make everything clear.”

A long silence ensued. The prince continued to pace about the garden, when suddenly he was called to his chambers to receive the latest reports from his spies.

Chapter 17. Stepan and Mleh

The Prince of Anarzaba personally checked his larder and ascertaining he had a year’s supplies, he calmed down. The weapons were also inspected and so were the troops. Meanwhile, spies were sent in all directions. Every day the prince received fresh reports from near and far, but none gave him any comfort.

Five days later, a letter arrived from the Prince of Tarson, who wrote that although he could not come to Anarzaba’s aid yet, he expected reinforcements from Constantinople soon. He had reported to Constantinople that because all the Armenians had sided with the rebel, he was put on the defensive.

Every day, one or two “suspicious” persons were seized on one pretext or another, hauled to the citadel, tortured and thrown into the dungeon. By the prince’s orders, these arrests were to be conducted in secret, so “no one,” that is, princess Margaret, would find out; the prince’s respect for his daughter, whom he had loved before, had grown.

All the members of the princely family, each in their own way, respected her. Though she had no affection for her daughter, the Lady of the Castle feared that her philandering might be exposed. Like any mother guilty of such a moral shipwreck, she wanted to look good in her daughter’s eyes. Margaret’s older brother

saw in her a comforter, who wiped the bitter tears of his wife. The Bishop, who was also considered to be in way a member of the princely family and who hated the princess with all his heart, invariably chose his words carefully and expressed himself with polite, correct, ingratiating tones.

As a defensive measure against Toros, a travel restriction had been imposed, prohibiting anyone from leaving the city, which put a wrinkle in the young hunter prince Bakur's amusements and forced the Lady and the Bishop to abstain from their jaunts in the countryside.

The travel restrictions were not unjustified. From time to time, groups of armed horsemen approached the city walls and then rode off. Their appearance brought consternation to those in the citadel, but townspeople were elated and impatient for the flag of liberation to arrive.

Their hopes were not in vain. At last, eight days after the envoy departed, a large cloud of dust enveloped the city early in the morning. When the dust settled, Toros's army became visible, numbering 20000 to an experienced eye. Their discipline and order was remarkable, especially for people accustomed to the unruly ways of the city guard. The tents were arranged in orderly rows and trenches were dug on the four sides of the camp as soil and rocks were formed into a barricade around the camp. Weaponry for the siege was carefully deployed around the city, and the cavalry was impressive, more than half on Arabian mounts.

In the midst of this Toros appeared riding tall on a majestic steed, and the high-spirited troops let out a cheer that shook the walls of Anarzaba. To his right, Euphemia rode on a white horse in fine muslin and royal purple, a crown on her head. She was flanked on either side by two young men on horseback in rich gold helmets and silver shields. These were Mleh and Stepan, Toros's younger brothers.

Upon hearing of their brother's victorious return, they too returned from Aleppo, where they had been in exile, since the gate of Cilicia had been opened by Toros. After so many years in foreign service, the brothers joined Toros with five hundred horsemen and gifts from the Aleppo emir. The two young men resembled their brother in both appearance and courage. They were truly lion cubs. Just looking at them, one could sense that Toros's military strength was enhanced by their prowess.

Although Toros's sharp mind instantly weighed the benefits and potential risks of his brothers' arrival, he did not let on and embraced them with brotherly love before the entire army. He presented them to his beloved wife, who accepted them wholeheartedly as brothers. Joy filled everyone's hearts and they celebrated their reunion.

It was already time to start the march from Mamestia to Anarzaba. After resting a bit, the three brothers joined the march a bit later following up from the rear. On their way, they caught up on all that had transpired during their long years of separation, remembering the loss of their parents, sad and joyful times.

Meantime, Babken and Kostandin, who rode side by side, exchanged glances. Babken's Spartan nature was content with a meaningful look, but Kostandin spoke his mind,

"Babken, remember our meeting in Constantinople. What did I tell you about these guys? Now, I am afraid they will become a crown of thorns on the prince's head ... Stepan may be harmless, but the younger one - God help us! Truly, Babken, at first glance they are brothers in appearance, but take a closer look, watch them - there is something in Mleh's eyes that causes a man's heart to become queasy and bristle. What do you say?"

"What can I say, my friend? Just keep your voice down!"

"You are good man too. You never open your mouth, and if you open it, it's just to give counsel."

"And you are a good man too, man of courage, and in a few years you'll be sixty like me, but you can't keep your own counsel and you're always complaining."

“What do you mean? How can you say that? We’ve been together for months. Have you ever heard me say a word about Toros?”

“Yes.”

“When? ”

“If you take it easy and talk quietly,” Babken chuckled, “I’ll tell you.”

“Very well.”

“Remember the night at Lambron, when the prince ordered the prisoners to be tied up, and you wanted to kill them?”

“I bit my tongue.”

“Uh, if you interrupt, I will not speak.”

“I’ll keep quiet. Go on.”

“And what about the time the prince decided we should take the long route through the mountains. You were among the first to grumble . . . Don’t interrupt, let me finish. And the time that he said for us to gather before Amut fortress, and you said in front of the men, ‘Is it really possible to take this fortress?’ Do you remember that?

The prince takes all this in but says nothing. Knowing him he doesn’t forget either but prefers to see the good in people.”

“Did he say something to you? I guess I should know better than to ask you. You’re so tight-lipped, but since you’ve opened up, I’d be grateful to know.”

“Kostandin, my pal, the prince did not say anything. As I said, he sees and hears everything. He praises your courage, and only one thing saddens his heart, so he told me to ask you to be good with Sargis.”

“What have I done to Sargis?”

“Hush, buddy, or else I’ll stop talking and go my own way,” said Babken and turned his horse aside.

“No offense, Babken. People call me impatient, and you are even more impatient. So what did I do to Sargis that made the prince upset?”

“How do I know? Think yourself and it will come to you.”

“All I said was “Let the prince give him even ten fortresses, that’s none of my business!” I stand by my word. If the prince hands out cities and fortresses left and right to everyone, worthy or not, nothing will be left for himself

I was given the Bardzrberd fortress, you got the Amut fortress, and Aryutsaberd went to Sargis. It seems to me, giving a fortress to the son of a simple peasant is not an act of generosity, but a waste. That’s all I meant? Is it a crime to express one’s opinion? Now that his brothers are back, what will he give them? If he gives one Vahka and the other Mamestia, then the prince will be left with nothing but an open field.”

“Can you repeat these words to the prince himself?”

“Why not?”

“If you repeat these words, then don’t ask again what you’ve done to Sargis, since you have classified him as an unworthy person for whom a fortress is excessive reward simply because he is a peasant’s son. You are

not upset on behalf of the prince. You'll have to reflect and find another reason for your attitude. As God is my witness, I'll never forget the service Sargis rendered to the prince. He's earned his reward. And what is our duty after all, what does Toros want from us? To treat each other with love and work together for the liberation and welfare of our nation. Brother, let us be grateful and thank God for our positions and the state of our nation. Why should we bicker over empty words? I have already grown old, and you are getting older. Get a hold of yourself, wise up, and think about the next generation. Haven't you noticed how many times the prince spoke to the young men, pointing to the two of us: "These are our fathers, our wise counselors; we must listen to their word." Will it be good if we disillusion them by letting them think we are jealous and petty rivals?"

After Babken's pointed words, Kostandin was somber and fell silent. A short time later they heard the roar of the troops cheering their commander before the walls of Anarzaba, jolting the two of them from their ruminations.

Sargis, quick-witted and vigilant, deployed the army below the walls of the city exactly as Toros had instructed. He divided the army into three, assigning each its position along the trenches and barricades. The tents were arranged in regular lines and those who did not have tents were instructed to gather branches and set up canopies, once again all in a uniform and organized manner.

Mleh and Stepan, who had spent considerable time in the military service of the Arabs, were surprised at the organized activity of the troops, prompting them to ask Sargis where he had received his military training. Sargis pointed to Toros, and said, "It's all him. All I do is follow his orders."

Meanwhile, Toros settled Euphemia and Dionys for a rest in his tent, and then made a quick inspection tour around the city to be sure his troops were ready. With his characteristic astuteness and efficiently, he noted anything needing attention and issued concise orders to Babken, Kostandin and the other commanders accordingly.

After completing the inspection, he returned to his tent to rest. He resumed his conversation with his brothers, inquiring in detail about the Nureddin, the emir of Aleppo, his character, actions, strength and Seljuk's military techniques. Then he ordered a meal be served and invited everyone to the table, specifically asking Euphemia as lady of the house to pay special attention to his brothers, who were still treated as guests, having just arrived, though soon to be treated as family.

As for Toros, he went out to have a bite to eat with the soldiers, and continue his inspections and gathering intelligence about Anarzaba, especially from the city dwellers. There were several young soldiers previously in Prince Smbat's employ. He took them aside and questioned them separately. He gathered much information, all of which he analyzed thoroughly, weighing every detail.

By the time he returned to his tent, everyone had eaten. He asked Babken about Vahka fortress, having instructed that everything be restored to the way it was in his father and uncle's time. To his satisfaction, he learned that all was in order, then he dismissed everyone and got some sleep

Although they had been together less than a month, the troops and commanders were already accustomed to the prince's vigilance. Hence, everyone on night watch and patrol was especially diligent, mindful that the prince might appear at any moment. They were well aware that the prince was demanding yet fair, and judiciously meted out due punishment and rewards; thus he commanded both their respect and affection.

When morning came, everyone saw that Toros was already on his feet and, through Sargis, was giving his orders to a group of archers to shoot arrows into the city. He ordered that leaflets be attached to the arrows, saying: "If you want to be spared the hardships of siege and your prince's oppression, then unite and open the gates. Be assured that we are not enemies, but friends. We are here to set you free."

Hundreds of these arrows rained down on the city. Inside, when Prince Smbat learned of this ploy, he ordered that the arrows be collected and delivered to him. Mounds and mounds of them were piled before him, and he gnashed his teeth and spewed invective. Every other word out of his mouth was “rascal,” “traitor,” “treachery.” The more he screamed, the more irrational he became, threatening to take revenge on Toros and the townsfolk by setting the city on fire. There was no talking with him. His wife, son, the bishop, everyone kept their distance.

Princess Margaret, out making her regular medical rounds and house calls with her assistant Martiros, picked up one of the arrows. Her serious face, which wiped the smile off even the most impudent face, took on an angelic expression at moments when her father fell into a rage. So when she heard her father’s angry cries as she went to her chambers in the citadel, she changed direction and headed towards his chamber, arrow in hand.

Prince Smbat had hardly caught sight of her, when he launched into a litany of bitter complaints about Toros, the townsfolk, fortress guard, his servants and even his own family members. Margaret took all this in as still as a statue. When the prince interrupted his verbose rage to catch his breath, she approached him, with a sympathetic look, without saying a word.

Finally, Smbat could not contain himself, and he cried out, “Speak your mind, Margaret. Tell me, do I not have the right to burn this damned city to the ground?” A long silence ensued. The prince then noticed that she had one of the arrows in her hand, and he flew into a rage again.

“So, you too are twirling one of those arrows in your hand?”

“The city, apparently, is flooded with them and I took one.”

“Damned city, it should be razed! Damned citizens!”

These words were still on his lips, when a commotion could be heard just below. From the lookout of the citadel, one could see that the people and guards were shoving and pushing each other, the people trying to open the gates, while the guards were trying to stop them.

Smbat went beserk when he saw this. He grabbed his weapons and paying no heed to his daughter’s pleas, he rushed to the aid of his guards who were fighting back the crowds of town folk.

Far from calming the situation, his appearance on the scene inflamed the people further. Stones poured like hail, and on all sides, from every house and rooftop, the people were throwing anything they could lay their hands on at the prince and his guards. Seeing the desperate situation, the prince wanted to withdraw, but his way was blocked in all directions, so he froze in utter confusion.

Of course, his guards did not stand idly by. Blood was flowing everywhere, but it was a lost cause, when for each person struck down, ten or twenty more charged forward. Then a voice was heard yelling that one of the city’s gates had been opened and the intruders had entered the city.

This left Prince Smbat no choice. He had to get back to the citadel, but this proved impossible. At this fateful moment, shouts boomed out among the people and guards:

“The Princess! The Princess!” they shouted from all sides, and for a moment, the shower of arrows and stones ceased and there was silence. Margaret appeared without guards or protection and with her head uncovered. She rushed down into the crowd, grabbed her father by the hand, shielding him, and led him and the guards to the citadel. As soon as they entered, they slammed the doors shut behind them.

The doors of the citadel had been locked just in time. Toros's troops had entered the city and were being embraced by the townsfolk as their liberators. As was patently obvious to any observer from the citadel lookout, had Margaret been even a few moments late, her father, dead or alive, would have fallen into the hands of the enemy.

Chapter 18. The Triumph of Virtue

Prince Smbat was shocked at this triumph of virtue, when the mere appearance of an unarmed woman caused the combatants to put down their weapons and permitted her to save his life.

After retiring to his chambers, he neither spoke nor ate nor drank. The Lady and the Bishop made several attempts to break his stubborn and detached silence to no avail. So they turned to the Princess to try to break through, but they could not think of what to say.

Meanwhile, Toros's army having seized the town, started preparations for the assault on the citadel. The troops were building earthen barricades, constructing paths and lines of communication to protect themselves from the arrows and other airborne weapons from the besieged citadel, but to their amazement there was no sign of activity.

Within the citadel, there was a state of depressed paralysis due to the prince's stupor. The mercenaries were restless. The Lady, and even more so the Bishop, attributing the Prince's silence to insanity, began plotting to replace him with young Prince Bakur.

As for Prince Bakur, a spoiled child who had never experienced any adversity and whose only thought was amusement and entertainment, had not the faintest idea of how to escape the citadel. The prospect of regency was quite tempting for his ambitious mother.

Princess Margaret sized up the situation and sensed the real danger behind the hints the Lady and Bishop were dropping. To prevent a bad situation becoming worse, she had no choice but to approach her father. She sat beside him and with a simple and gentle manner tried to get him to open up, patiently probing his anxiety and refusal to eat or drink. She asked with such tenderness that Smbat began to follow his daughter's words and finally, with a shudder, came out of his trance, as if waking up after a long, deep slumber.

"Didn't you say, Margaret, that the townspeople will rebel?"

"Yes, father," said the girl, gently squeezing her father's hand in hers.

"They rebelled and betrayed the city."

"Yes, father."

"Didn't you say that these villainous mercenaries would betray me?"

"Yes, father."

"So, there is no way out. All we can do now is wait to be taken captive or be exiled like homeless refugees. It happened just as you said. You foresaw it all. If so, it's better for us to die."

“Why are you in such deep despair, father?” said Margaret, seeing how her predictions affected her father, “My words were not at all prophetic revelations but merely deductions based on observations. If you wish, I can settle everything right now, even though I am just a weak maiden. All you need to do is give me the order.”

“How can you straighten everything out when we are already at the end?”

“We must send to Toros on your behalf . . .”

“I cannot send an envoy or a letter to Toros on my behalf nor will I . . .”

“But, father ...”

“This has nothing to do with father or mother! Do not waste your time or try to pressure me. Each person should follow his fate. What you have done for your father so far is enough, God bless and reward you. No matter how low a villain and a malefactor a man is, if he prays for his child, God will hear his prayer, especially if his child is as virtuous as you.

So again, I repeat, I have lost everything, it’s all over for me. I do not have power or authority or wealth. Everything is gone, completely gone. Here we were mired in inequity. Only you remained untainted in the midst of this abominable state. God bless you! May he give you a life full of goodness and light.”

Saying these words, the prince laid his hand on his daughter's head and raised his eyes filled with tears to the sky.

The princess, despondent and with a heavy heart, took it all in. When her father was done, he calmly stood up and started pacing, then came to a sudden halt and summoned Vasil, who entered, trembling.

“Go,” said the prince, “and bring all the prisoners here immediately.”

In a few moments, about forty men were standing in chains in front of the prince.

“Is everybody here?” asked the prince, “no one missing?”

“No one, my lord, all of them are here”, answered Vasil with a sniffling voice.

“Remove their chains right now!”

When his order was carried out, the prince said,

“Go home. As of this moment, you are free to despise, desecrate, and curse both me and my memory, just be grateful to this girl and bless her, for thanks to her, you have been freed and are still alive. Go and never appear before me again!”

He uttered these words with bitter resolve, as if he were afraid that he might change his mind and take back his order. The stunned prisoners could not believe their ears and only breathed a sigh of relief when they were actually outside the gates. As these events unfolded, Margaret sat there with her hands in her lap and thought about how to soften the prince’s obstinate heart. She gave it one last try. He was her father after all, despite his faults.

“Father, my dear,” the princess begged, moving toward him, “it seems to me that you are planning something awful, but think of me. I have no one else in the whole world. You alone are all my hope and protection. What will I do without you?”

With these words, she hoped to deter him from his desperate plan, but the prince was not so naive.

“You are fretting in vain, my daughter,” he said, “I have not yet made my final decision. As for you, you do not need my protection. After all, yesterday it was you who protected me. I know that you yearn to go to a convent and we have stopped you to this day. Now you have no worries. The whole city will defend you and you will be able to go wherever you want.”

These words were uttered in an emphatic tone that did not permit objection, so the princess, convinced that she had failed, retired to her chambers, disheartened, entrusting to the grace of God her fate and those of three other innocent people—her sister-in-law and her small children—who would end up paying for the sins of others.

While she was speaking with her father, the Lady, her son Bakur and the Bishop together went down into the courtyard of the citadel, where there was a group of the soldiers. The place was dimly lit by a few torches and lamps. When these three emerged from the narrow staircase, the soldiers gathered around to find out the meaning of their unusual visit.

The Bishop explained the seriousness of the situation in a mournful voice and at the end summed up saying that the prince, having fallen into despair, was giving completely irrational orders, releasing those whom he ordered arrested yesterday. Rather than preparing for a battle or negotiations, he was in an uncommunicative stupor, and even the princess had been unable to get through to him.

“Therefore,” added the Reverend, “at this difficult hour he, the Lady and the princess had asked young prince Bakur to assume full authority over the city to avoid anarchy and chaos.”

One of the soldiers could not restrain himself and exclaimed, “We recognize only the prince as our sovereign! Where is he, tell him to come out!”

“We do not believe you!” shouted another.

“Let the Princess come and speak!” another voice said.

“We trust only her”

“Princess! We want the princess!” The shouts of the soldiers rang out.

“You are as worthless as we are worthless and shameless!” yelled the soldiers.

The shouts increased and the courtyard was in turmoil. The three conspirators were now in a tight spot. It was impossible to turn around and run up the stairs, as it is common knowledge that it is foolish to turn one’s back on a riled up beast. Thus the three of them were completely at a loss, having fallen into a trap of their own making. Indeed, even the bravest warrior would be scared to death if he looked into those brutish, bloodshot eyes. The Lady, having collected herself, signaled that she wanted to speak, but things barely quieted for a moment when again turmoil broke out and not a word could be heard. Suddenly Margaret appeared in a white robe with her hair spread over her shoulders.

When she heard the ruckus, she thought that the citadel had already fallen. She ran out of the chambers, holding a lamp in one hand and her little nephew in the other. The princess’s sister-in-law ran after her with her second child in her arms.

As soon as the angry soldiers caught sight of the princess, the crowd began to settle down. The Lady, plucking up her courage, called out, "Come, daughter, come. Our warriors want you to speak." And all three of them rushed to hide behind her for protection.

"Long live the princess! Long live the princess!" The soldiers welcomed her in one accord.

Amid this commotion, the mother tried to explain the situation to her daughter, impressing on her that only she could calm things down. Margaret, stepping forward, went down a few steps, the child in her arms, and signaled with her hand for silence. Beauty, youth, and the seal of virtue on the forehead of a woman have such an effect on people that even the fiercest among them are not immune. Silence prevailed and the princess spoke,

"Many of you have known me since my childhood. There are people among you who have protected me on various pilgrimages and whom I have thought of like a father. Living with you under the same roof, I considered all of you to this day family and so I hope that in these difficult moments we stand together, one heart, one soul, to not increase our sorrows but to look for a solution together.

From your fierce cries and the tears of these children I was under the impression that the intruders had breached our last refuge and that we should prepare to be taken prisoner. Now I see that we are turning on each other and that mutiny has arisen in our own house. Perish the thought that anyone will benefit from this strife. We must clearly understand that whoever opens the doors now for the enemy is a traitor, bringing shame and contempt upon himself, and who among us covets Judah's name and lot?

No one. Your cries and strife can only bring calamity. Calm down, brothers! I see among you a number of prudent, experienced men. Ask them what they think, ask them as your fathers and heed their advice. If you need anything, ask them to convey it to us. As you have heard, my father, the prince, has fallen ill. This noise and commotion will only worsen his condition. It would be to your eternal disgrace if you are marked as the ruler's murderers. Beware!"

These words, spoken with serious and sorrowful reproach, had a much stronger effect on this collection of thugs than any sermon pronounced from a pulpit. The words emanating from these pure lips seemed to baptize them.

Carried away by her words, one or two shouted, "Long live the Princess!" But the rest, stilled by her words, told them to keep quiet. With this, the members of the prince's family withdrew unscathed to their chambers.

Margaret placed the children in her sister-in-law's care, while she proceeded directly to her father's room, ignoring the oily praise of her mother, brother and the bishop, who could not thank her enough for delivering them from the frenzied crowd. She approached the door with foreboding. There she saw her trusted old servant Martiros, who contrary to his usual reserved manner, mustered the courage to plea with her not to enter, "I beg you, please do not enter."

This further confirmed her worst suspicions. She pushed the servant aside and saw her father on his divan, sword thrust in his chest, blood gushing out, and she knew it was all over. She knelt then and there at the end of the divan and lifted her eyes to heaven, with her mind's eye straining even higher, petitioning God, whose mercy is beyond measure or bounds, with prayers for her wretched father. Her pure tears of daughterly love washed away his blood, and she believed that they would wash away his misdeeds before heaven. When the princess finished praying, she came out of the room and found 8-10 seasoned warriors standing outside the door, who addressed her with all solemnity,

"O noble princess, may God comfort you and have mercy upon our prince's soul. On behalf of all our comrades, we express their condolences to you and ask you to heed their prayers and take upon yourself the

responsibility of succeeding your father and rule with wisdom and virtue. The troops want you to know that they will not recognize the Lady, the Bishop or Prince Bakur as successors. And if you decline, they already know what needs to be done, for which they ask your forgiveness in advance.”

“Under the circumstances, it is only reasonable to give me time until tomorrow morning to think this over. This is a delicate situation, as you know, and will turn everything upside down, not to mention what the world will say, if I deprive my only brother of his inheritance, while my father’s corpse is still unburied.

I beg you as fathers, and the rest of the warriors, as brothers, to refrain from any violence and to avoid internal conflict. Please take my words to heart.”

The delegation of warriors left without a word, and the princess entered her chambers and was amazed to see her brother, mother, and her inseparable companion, the bishop. After watching Vasil ripped to pieces as a spy and intriguer, they were frightened and anxious and they begged her to accept the warrior’s proposal. She was their last and only hope, as only she commanded the respect of the people.

The princess told them that as agreed with the warriors, she would make her decision in the morning. At this, all three began to wail, fearing for the worst, especially the bishop, who said, “those vile scoundrels who do not fear God and have no shame before men, will return soon and commit an unimaginable crime if they get a hold of us.”

At that moment, Avag poked his head through the open door, and his eyes flashed like lightning bolts at the three of them. With a stern face and threatening tone, he said,

“Princess, the will of our regiment is that you immediately take power into your own hands. If you decline, let us know, so that we can do what needs to be done.”

“If you are of one mind in this decision and are ready to obey my orders, as you always obeyed my father, then I’ll accept this responsibility. But if this is a pretext to perpetrate all kinds of mischief in my name, I know my father’s methods and will follow them.”

“Do not worry, Princess. We stand together. We will treat your words with reverence, like the words of the Mother of God. Fear not.”

“We are all with you and give our word,” came the voices of a dozen soldiers crowded outside the door. And they thrust their faces through the crack in the door, no less stern than Avag’s.

“Give me the order to announce that you will address the warriors,” said Avag.

“Give me a moment,” said the unfortunate woman. She wiped away her tears, covered herself with a black cloak, and taking only Martiros with her, went down to the courtyard where all the warriors awaited her. There, Avag, on behalf of the princess, announced her decision. The courtyard resounded with the thunderous cheers of three hundred warriors chanting “Long live our princess!”

Margaret then said a few words, instructing the troops to get some rest and give her time to think and gather her strength. The soldiers dispersed to their quarters. The young princess, immersed in thought, slowly returned to her chambers, thinking about the bitter events of this day, and resolved that as soon as she could find a way out of this situation, she would retire to a convent as she had yearned to so long ago.

Carefully considering the situation, she concluded that it was impossible for such a gang of thugs to prevail against Toros’s well organized forces. Therefore, she wrestled with how to reach a truce and honorably secure her family’s freedom. She tossed and turned restlessly, hardly getting any sleep and sat up on her bed when dawn broke.

In the morning, her first order was to prepare the prince's body for requiem and burial. She gathered the family for advice, but preoccupied and only concerned about saving their skins, they left everything on her shoulders.

Therefore, without further delay, she ordered her mount to be prepared and summoned several of the senior commanders to join her as they opened the gates and notified Toros that they would be sending an envoy to negotiate a truce.

Dressed all in black, seated on a black horse, with a mournful face, staring straight ahead, the princess rode with the gray-haired, tanned warriors. The townspeople who always loved and respected her now, knowing that she was in mourning for her father, showed even greater reverence. Women poured out to the doors and stood on their rooftops to see her, voices were heard from all sides: "Lord, comfort you! God bless you! May God grant you long life!"

The rapid spread of the news of Smbat's death was remarkable, as was the people's self-restraint. Though filled with hatred for her father the prince, on this sad occasion not a single insult or word of reproach was directed at the hapless and virtuous daughter.

As Margaret left the city gates and headed toward Toros's troops, she saw a group of people approaching. She was told that prince Toros himself had come to meet her personally. Margaret immediately dismounted.

Toros coming closer, greeted her and invited her to ride on her horse until they reach his tent. But she declined, and silently walked along with him until they reached the prince's tent, where Euphemia gave her respectful greeting to the delegation from Anarzaba.

Margaret was one of those special individuals whose character, even in silence, spoke eloquently through looks, bearing and gestures. People of similar grace quickly understand each other, so this was the case with Toros and Euphemia. They immediately recognized her refined nature and she quickly understood and appreciated them. After a few moments, Toros broke the silence and deemed it time to start their negotiation.

"Noble princess, I consider it an honor that you personally appeared as an ambassador. I hope that your proposals will be such that we will be able to reach agreement to end this fratricidal battle in peace, without shedding even a drop of blood."

"Oh most noble Prince," responded Margaret, "I did not come with proposals. There, inside the citadel, my family is in mourning and I did not have a chance to formulate a peace proposal."

You are perceptive, so I will not be long-winded. I am ready to agree to whatever terms your honor proposes, but I ask you to be guided by your heart and not by our actions."

"I see before me a paragon of virtue that transcends both the dictates of my magnanimity and the state of the noble family in the citadel. Therefore, let the princess order and guarantee that henceforth only laws of humanity will rule Anarzaba and I will give up all hereditary rights and order my army to withdraw right now."

"I should gladly have accepted your generous and humane proposal, but unfortunately I am not able to. Who am I, that my guarantee would have such weight? Just a miserable woman who has set her heart on retiring from this world and who took this post solely for the sake of saving a few innocent souls."

"But I heard that you have been unanimously recognized by the entire military and the princely family as the legitimate successor and heir to the prince, and you accepted this responsibility."

“Yes, I accepted it in order to prevent bloodshed and curb disorder as I could, but only for this reason.”

“Well, most noble princess, I set out my conditions, now it is up to you to set forth yours.”

“My proposals are moderate and befit both our position and our past. I propose that

1. Instead of Anarzaba, our hereditary Paperon Castle be granted to us, where my brother, his family and my mother could settle and live, with the right to transfer their possessions to that castle.
2. Warriors who have served my father to this day be appointed to serve in your army while maintaining their military rank.”

“You forgot only one thing - we have not decided anything for you personally.”

“My destiny would have been settled long ago but for my unfortunate father’s interference. And now let it be as the Lord judged.”

Other than Toros and Margaret, only two people were present for this discussion, Euphemia and Stepan. Everyone was astonished at the frank boldness of the noble princess. Seeing that her resolve to retire to the monastery was unwavering, they were saddened that this exquisite flower should wither away cut off from the world.

“Let’s summarize then,” said Toros.

- “1. The fortress of Anarzaba must be surrendered to me.
2. I pledge to give your family the nearby fortress of Paperon, the keys of which are now in my possession.
3. Your family will have the right to take all its possessions and wealth and retire without hindrance.
4. Those of your soldiers who express a desire to join me in service will be accepted, each in his rank.

5...”

Toros began and stopped.

Margaret waited attentively and seeing that he did not continue, said, “Apparently, this is a harsh condition, if your generosity opposes it.”

“Judge for yourself - 5 - The management of the city of Anarzaba and the income from it are consequently assigned to Princess Margaret.”

At these words the face of the princess turned red and she replied, “Oh, most noble Prince, your fifth condition is the fruit of your generosity, but I cannot accept it. One who leaves the world for a solitary cell to serve God has no need of such worldly possessions or successor rights. In addition, I have lingered too much here, and my heart is restless, for I am unsure whether I will be able to deliver all that I have promised here when I return to the fortress.”

“As for your first words, like a tried and true friend, I ask you to reconsider. However, if I cannot convince you, then I know for sure that there is another person here whose powers of persuasion you will not be able to withstand,” said Toros, glancing at Euphemia, who nodded affirmatively. “And as to your last words, please explain further, since I failed to grasp their meaning.”

Margaret took a quick look at the tent entrance. Toros assured her that no one was listening. Then she briefly described the troops guarding the citadel, and said that only her presence could restrain them.

This short account does not do justice to Margaret’s noble character and actions, but the events and situation were so stark that everyone was in awe. As for Toros, who was insightful enough to surmise the whole having glimpsed just a part, stood up and extended his hand to the princess, saying,

“In whatever circumstances and in whatever position you’ll find yourself now, tomorrow or in the future, I ask, no I order you, to call on me, and if I fail to do everything in my power to help, then I have transgressed before the Almighty. My brother Stepan and my wife Euphemia shall be witnesses to this oath. Right now, I will give an order to the troops guarding the city, to obey all your orders, as my own.”

“Just give the order,” said Stepan, who had not uttered a word until that moment, but followed the conversation between his brother and the young princess with rapt attention, “and I will join the princess and will do everything she sees necessary.”

“That would be excellent, my brother. Follow her orders and do as she asks and nothing else.”

“Right away.”

And here Margaret set off with her retinue. Toros several times instructed Stepan to be vigilant, and after accompanying the princess to the edge of the military camp, he returned.

“Well, what do you make of this, Euphemia?” he asked. “A beast like Smbat has such an angelic daughter! If all the inhabitants of Anarzaba and all her deeds did not testify that she is the embodiment of wisdom and virtue, I would not have believed it.”

“It turned out very well that Stepan was present at this meeting,” said Euphemia with a joyful smile, “if we were so impressed by the sublime nobility of the girl and her beauty, what about Stepan?”

“If Stepan so desires it and Margaret agrees, I cannot imagine or hope for anything better or more useful. Stepan, in that case, will definitely be ours.”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“I want to say that my brothers, whose courage and strength cannot be doubted, for better or worse, were not captives together with us in Constantinople, but grew up among nomadic barbarians, devoid of any morality, religious principles, education or models of decent behavior. They have spent their youth wielding swords and spears in raids and participating in cruel misdeeds. I have no hope for Mleh, he is a lost cause. But I would like to believe in Stepan. If your intuition proves correct, such a wife would compensate for his shortcomings. And for the arduous mission on which we have just embarked, I would find in him a reliable right hand, a source of assistance rather than a hindrance.”

“Don’t give it another thought. I myself will take up this matter and bring it to a successful conclusion.”

“If you need anything for this purpose, I am ready to do my part. I have already declared Anarzaba the hereditary possession of the princess. You may consider this as a dowry or property, as you wish. In her, Stepan will find a superb teacher and a wife for himself and an excellent mother for his children.”

“Well, then I should follow them to the city and get to work.”

Thus, Euphemia went off to Anarzaba with Babken, while Toros returned to his countless responsibilities.

Chapter 19. Impediments to Reformation

Margaret returned to the citadel of Anarzaba just in time. Her suspicions that the rogue warriors were up to no good in her absence were unfortunately borne out. Some of them were already plotting to hold the

princess's family hostage, and after extorting Smbat's wealth as ransom then thought they could cut a favorable deal for themselves with Toros to surrender the citadel. However, Margaret's return foiled these underhanded schemes and dispelled the delirium.

Stepan immediately took control of the citadel gates and soon the cross-bearing Rubenid flag fluttered above the fortress in place of the Byzantine flag, sending up cheers from the city and army from which Toros surmised that his agreement with Margaret had been carried out.

Meanwhile, Margaret told her mother and brother that they had been granted possession of the Papon castle. They accepted this proposal with great joy and began preparations to move there.

The Bishop, however, faced a different fate. When he emerged from the citadel, the clergy and laity surrounded him and demanded that he be tried in court for his misdeed and until then suspended from office. Toros agreed to write a letter to the Catholicos in Tsovk petitioning that the people's just demands be fulfilled. There is little else to be said about the sorry fate of this unworthy and immoral cleric, who received his just deserts. He was demoted and sent to a monastery to repent. One can only hope that his repentance is real, so that he might be spared yet harsher punishment on Judgment Day.

As for Margaret, who had decided long ago to withdraw from the world and do penance in a convent for sins she had not committed, she finally succumbed to Euphemia and Stepan's earnest pleas. Several months later in the princely castle of Anarzaba, with little fanfare, Margaret and Stepan were wed, to the delight of the entire population who loved their princess and esteemed her virtue and wisdom from a very young age.

Toros's hopes for his brother's regeneration were not ungrounded. Under the positive influence of his wife, Stepan earned the people's love, and on many occasions thereafter, he proved useful to Toros and his plans.

In contrast, Mleh's short-tempered, unruly personality turned into a hazard for the emerging principality. While Toros tried to rule the country based on justice and gentility, Mleh turned people's hearts away by his abusive and arrogant actions, putting Toros constantly on alert to clean up after his irresponsible brother.

Taking Anarzaba was a step toward securing the country's stability. Toros exercised sovereignty over all the possessions of his ancestors and initiated reforms in many spheres. He made military training universal. Every Armenian in the Taurus mountains, from adolescents to the aged, was henceforth a citizen-soldier. The prince also kept a close eye on the judiciary and law enforcement, not only because he opposed injustice by his very nature, but also because he was firmly convinced that without justice any state, big or small, was inevitably doomed to collapse.

Strengthening the state treasury with his thrift, he maintained self-disciplined and warned others against imposing excessive taxes. As for religion, he was a believer and honored the church and the faith, but without fanaticism. Nor did he conflate religion with the sometimes ignorant and disorderly clergy. In such troubled times, when no guarantees of security were possible, he deployed scouts throughout the neighboring principalities to be well informed where danger might arise and what situations could be turned to his advantage. Constant vigilance was essential, since in those times promises, treaties and oaths meant nothing. The Christians and Mohammedans made their sacred books instruments of deception to serve their intrigues against infidels and coreligionists alike.

Betrayal had become the rule even within noble families and merciless cruelty and treachery were accepted practice. Greeks and Crusaders, Armenians and Assyrians, Persians and Arabs, Turks and Mongols fought fiercely with each other. Yesterday's king could be a beggar tomorrow, or a captive, hostage or fugitive. In these circumstances, an unpretentious woman could become the ruler of fortresses, villages and cities. Instability and uncertainty were everyone's lot. The people could be in captivity in one place or time, while their compatriots and leaders enjoyed freedom elsewhere.

There was a prophecy about such times as these: “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.” Then, Europe halted its campaigns in Asia Minor and Palestine, making way for the hordes of Tatars and Mongols to invade from the Central Asian steppes. The roots of these ancient nations were shaken as new nationalities were sprouting up. Old cities and forts collapsed and new ones rose in their place. Keen observer of the times, Toros concentrated on building his principality on a solid foundation.

Cilicia spread out before him, inhabited by the most diverse ethnic groups living side by side: Greeks, Arabs, Turks, Armenians, and Syrians. The Byzantine Empire called itself the sovereign of this land, although for many years the foundations of its rule had been eroding. Indeed it was only a shadow of its former self. The Arabs struck the first blow to Byzantine dominion, and after their decline, the country became the stage for constant clashes between various peoples.

Toros made it his goal to gather the Armenians, scattered from Asia Minor, Assyria and Mesopotamia to Egypt, thereby to strengthen Cilicia. He perceived the threats to his principality from all sides. He had a shrewd, deep and sharp mind, and was not prone to rest on his laurels or indulge in idle amusements. Thus, in the course of several months, Toros became not only the ruler of the land of his forefathers, but also the father of a happy, content and joyous people. He, who once under the guise of a shepherd, had wandered with his flock throughout Black Mountains, now made the rounds with a small elite force, tirelessly monitoring the fortresses, settlements and villages in the Taurus Mountains. He was a hands-on leader who took a personal interest in everything. He conducted unannounced inspections of the military and investigated the activities of the courts and police, punished the unjust, rewarded the righteous and virtuous, rebuilt devastated villages and repopulated them and built safe havens for the people. He strictly instructed everyone to refrain from provoking neighboring peoples or inciting enmity for no good reason. These were treacherous times, when it was impossible to find allies, but enemies aplenty were poised for attack.

When his impatient brothers and generals coveted the rich, vast plains of Cilicia, an undefended bounty waiting to be conquered and urged Toros to grab them, Toros responded with a knowing smile. Similarly when Mleh asked him for eight thousand soldiers to capture the territory from Taurus up to the sea, Toros gently counseled,

“I do not doubt your courage, Mleh. I believe that with even a smaller army you could reach not only Taurus, but also Seleucia itself. But not yet. Our small forces may suffice for a local battle but may not be able to manage a full-scale war with the expansive Byzantine Empire, even in its weakened state. Our father tried once, and for many years, he along with us, was condemned to imprisonment and subject to foreign rulers. God has shown us his mercy. Now, our duty is to strengthen our people and rule them well. We shall help each other, love each other, become one heart and one soul, make our people strong, multiply, populate the mountains where the hearty Armenians, native to cold highlands, thrive, mighty and brave. In the not-too-distant future, the day will come when the valleys will become ours as well. Let us cultivate our patience and curb our ambition.”

Mleh and his fellow hot heads had no response, but behind Toros’s back they grumbled and found fault, lamenting that he weakened robust arms and dampened zealous hearts with this sermonizing. Mleh was often seen carousing with his buddies near the fortress of Vahka, feasting and drinking while railing against Toros, especially when Toros was away on inspection tours.

“Look at this prince of princes,” he sneered, “he rushes from mountain to mountain like a messenger boy. And what for? Here, to talk with some ten or twenty peasants’ families to try to convince them about some petty matter; there, to declare a judge’s decision unfair; a little farther, to construct a wall around some cliff, and even further off, to build a church. The person who does this is none other than the prince, whose severe appearance, quiet voice, serious manner of speaking stifle his own brother, not to mention the other princes, nobles and warriors, when they dare to disagree with him.

And what can I say about Stepan? He's at Toros's beck and call. They have tied him down hands and feet with a bewitched wife. She's made a monkey out of him. Whatever you say or propose, he says, looking at his wife, "We need to ask our older brother and get his approval." You'll never see a smile on her face. She is always dead serious, as if standing before the altar.

I am his brother and bosom buddy in exile, yet I have not been able to break bread with him because of his wife's disapproval. Whatever you suggest, he immediately looks at his wife; ask him anything and again he looks at his wife. Without her approval, he neither eats, nor drinks, nor leaves the walls of Anarzaba . . .

But Anarzaba is not the only place that's bewitched. On the contrary, the head witch is just across the way in the fortress of Vahka. Have you noticed that this Armenian-Byzantine woman always has a smile on her face, always speaks so sweetly, always turns your words into a joke, always walks around dressed in purple and fine muslin? She is the real witch.

God knows, how many times I have gone there to pick a fight, spoken harshly and aggressively, and what did she do? As if my words were not about her or her husband – she smiles, laughs, and sweetly carries on, until you get up and leave.

Brothers, I am not used to such a life— just sitting around and waiting to fight until God sends a war. Think I'm exaggerating? Try going to a village with a couple of friends, order a lamb slaughtered to feast on, and the next day, no kidding, the news of this feast, together with your bill, will be already reached your brother.

Well, how can I not call these people sorcerers? From the very beginning, they sweet talk you, make believe they are your sister and brother, but never mention your share in your father's inheritance. They say this is our fortress, our family bulwark, and praise the traditional way of life, saying that it is fitting for brothers to live together under one roof, like he is some kind of holy man. Mark my words, these witches can cast a spell and make devils as well as angels do their bidding.

My brother says, take as much as you need from the princely treasury, do not hesitate. The treasury pays for the rations and salaries of my mounted guards. But if your men are being tried before a military tribunal, do not expect any deference. They are convicted and punished often for petty offenses without your say. How then can I consider my men to be really mine? When Anarzaba was given to Stepan, this fool thought that the fortress is really his, when in fact it was given to the daughter of our rival and enemy . . .

Well, you say, you should demand and take your share. After all, if they gave a fortress to a peasant's son, then surely you'll get something too. But how can I make myself equal to a sea pirate, I, the descendant of Rubinian family.

You, the prince, the grandson of Ruben, should you find it necessary to scold, punish or thrash a peasant, the next day you have to contend with your noble brother with a disapproving long face and wrinkled brows. And then for a week he'll hold a grudge against you, but what for? For such a trifle?

The transformation of our childhood servant into the constable of a fortress is another story. His lips are sealed like a stone statue, except when he deigns to sermonize. Then watch out. He generously dishes out the accusations.

When I served the emir in Aleppo, I was a somebody. When I rode around on my horse, people trembled. But here, if I set foot on a field, a pesky peasant will squawk, "This is a field, prince, go around that way." Who is a peasant to tell me where I can go? I am not answerable to him. So rather than cause a scene, I turn a deaf ear and he wails and gnashes his teeth?

So there you have it. God give me patience. Everyday I have to put up with their sermons on patience . . . but as his name is Toros, mine is Mleh and I'm telling you, my day will come . . .”

Mleh and his cohort carried on like this often, venting their grudges and gall. Word, naturally, reached Euphemia. When the occasion presented itself, she would tell Toros. He, of course, had already heard all about it and just smiled and told her not to worry, he was keeping an eye on the situation. Brushing aside his brother's overheated rhetoric, Toros acted nonchalant, but intervened when people were directly harmed by his brother's unruly actions.

As for Stepan, in fact, he was very content. With Margaret to guide him, he was the epitome of a prince. The inhabitants of Anarzaba, who had suffered much at the hands of Smbat, were now the happiest people in all of Cilicia. The grumbling about the prince, or the judges, or the tax collectors or the clergy had ceased because the rulers heard their complaints.

Everyone, even the lowliest, would point to the citadel and take comfort in knowing that the princess was there for them. When there was a problem or abuse, it was enough to point to the citadel and say, “Look out, the Princess is there,” and the situation was resolved.

It was amusing to watch an abusive person get his comeuppance, when, out of guile or naivety, he would appeal to the Princess. Seeing right through him, she would send him packing, simply pronouncing, “You have no such right.” And the miscreant would immediately admit his guilt because the general public had such faith in the Princess's fairness and good judgment.

Margaret's heart was always uneasy when Toros came to visit. Usually on such visits he had to deal with reports of the abusive behavior by Stepan's mounted guards from Aleppo. Although these soldiers had reformed greatly under her and Stepan's strict oversight, the slim pickings in Cilicia made them long for their rowdy Aleppo days and the enticing “onions and garlic” of Egypt, thus they often reverted to their old habits of robbery and debauchery on the road.

Drawing on the extensive reading of his youth Toros developed a new military strategy. In the East the general practice was to measure military power by the size of its cavalry. This approach was also adopted in the West. However, he focused particularly on improving military skills and weapons of the infantry, which he calculated would reduce reliance on the mounted guards of the often fractious nobility. That was the theory, but effectiveness of this strategy remained to be tested in battle.

Toros bided his time while gathering strength. He stayed on good terms with his neighbors, but kept his eyes open, particular to the West. As the months passed with no activity on that front, Toros took this as a favorable sign. The Emperor was preoccupied with Europe and his wars against the Bulgarians and Hungarians.

Chapter 20. General Andronicus

Several years passed. The Armenians of mountainous Cilicia prospered under Toros's careful and wise leadership. The cities, towns and villages of mountains echoed with joyful songs and music. The Rubinian Dynasty celebrated two births at nearly the same time. Euphemia gave birth to a girl, and Margaret to a boy who was named Ruben and later inherited the throne of his forefathers.

In Vahka and Anarzaba, there were festivals in honor of the new arrivals. When this news reached Amut, old Babken's face beamed, and as we know, this did not happen often. Babken was happy because his prince had a daughter, and hence he now had a goddaughter.

Another old man, Dionys, who was almost never seen in Vahka since he spent whole days enthusiastically fiddling with rock and plant specimens in the mountains of Taurus, had a smile on his face and was inseparable from the cradle, giving the servants advice on how to care for the precious new being. Only Mleh was displeased, grumbling to God about his fate and about his wife who had not borne him an heir, convinced that all nature was plotting to undermine his happiness.

At the same time, Toros received good news from other places as well. Sultan Maksud of Iconium and Mesopotamia, Nureddin, the emir of Aleppo, the Crusader ruler of Antioch, the Knights Templar and the great Catholicos of Armenia sent ambassadors to congratulate Toros on reclaiming his ancestral inheritance and offering to sign treaties of peace and amity.

Armenian settlers by the thousands flocked to Taurus not only from Asia Minor and Mesopotamia, but even from Egypt. With typical foresight, Toros worked tirelessly to help them get settled, improve their living conditions and teach them martial arts. Meanwhile, his scouts sent reports from Constantinople that the Emperor, having taken a break from his theological disputations and wars in the West, was turning his attention toward Cilicia.

The revival of the Armenian principality had drawn the jealous attention not only of the Byzantines but also of the Crusaders. Behind the scenes, the Crusaders instigated and supported the Byzantine authorities to curb this small state, whose future success caused them anxiety. Thus, for example, there was the issue of several fortresses that the Byzantine emperor John II Komnenos took from the Crusaders after the capture of Levon.

Now that Toros had retaken these fortresses, the Crusader princes demanded them back in the name of the Templars, on the pretext that they had come as defenders of the Christian faith. Despite having come with such a pious purpose, sometimes receiving assistance from the Armenians and sometimes rendering assistance to them, they nevertheless did not refrain from all manner of abuse and oppression of the local Christian population, in particular the Armenians. A contemporary chronicler described the events of the preceding thirty years in stark terms,

“Out of envy,” he records, “the crusader princes attacked the Armenian princes, who thanks to their valor and with relatively few soldiers had liberated many provinces from the Persians and settled there. The Crusaders were even more aggressive toward the Armenians than the Turks. And after years of siege, they seized all the provinces from the Armenians.

Some of the Armenians, like prince Abulgharib Piri, had been forced as a last resort to abandon their possessions and flee to the protection of Toros’s uncle in Anarzaba.

There were others, among them Vasil, the lord of Kesun, who fled to Constantinople; Bagrat, a valiant man and the ruler of Arevduni, who barely escaped; Kostandin, the prince of Karkra was chained and imprisoned in the fortress of Samosata.

Thus the flower of the Armenian nobility was eliminated, tortured to death in prison or subjected to barbaric mutilation by the Crusaders, who blinded them, cut off their hands, noses and other body parts, and hung them to die on the gallows. Even innocent children from these families were subjected to unconscionable torture.

The Crusaders, whose brutal greed knew no bounds, ravaged the country with similar vicious and shameful acts, laying waste to the country to amass treasure for themselves. Refraining from any real work, they spent their days and nights plotting treachery and evil, relishing the ways of the wicked, having banished from their minds all memory of human goodness or kindness.

There is much more to tell about their iniquities, but I dare not, as we are under their jurisdiction.” Thus, wrote the eyewitness historian Matteos Urhayetsi.

Toros was fully aware of all this, of course, but he was consistent and unwavering in his policy to refrain from rigidity, adapt to the times, avoid unnecessary confrontation and not incite hostility, for he understood from the gathering clouds of threats that sooner or later, Constantinople would unloose a storm against him. In this, his foresight was borne out. Andronicus, a Byzantine courtier, known for his hatred toward the Armenians in general and especially for the Rubinians, was appointed General by Emperor Manuel and stationed in Cilicia with a large garrison.

Toros also knew that such a large force would have no shortage of allies, for in such times, people gravitate to strength and size in hope of being on the winning side. Taking this into account, he planned accordingly, fortified the cities, castles and mountain passes, secured his family's safety, and, taking with him only an elite force and his two brothers, he deployed to Mamestia to await the enemy.

To placate the impatient Mleh, who never ceased complaining of inaction, Toros sent him with an advance force to raid the Byzantine borderlands. Mleh was a sight to behold. Bursting with pent-up energy from years of idleness, he plundered the Byzantine provinces with gusto and hauled away immense wealth, while adhering to Toros's admonishment to spare human lives and avoid exacerbating the suffering and bitterness of the vanquished with unwarranted cruelty.

Mleh like a falcon that had broken free of its tether, hovered before the walls of Tarson, where Byzantine refugees in rags, terrified by rumors of his ruthlessness, huddled, when he announced, "You Byzantines should offer thanks to God for my brother's order. If it had been up to me, none of you would have been spared captivity."

And although there was a fully equipped Byzantine garrison of about seven thousand men in Tarson waiting for the arrival of Andronicus's contingent, they did not risk engaging Mleh's cavalry of a little more than two thousand. Neither taunts, nor insults, nor the ravaging and burning of the surrounding countryside could draw the Byzantine forces into battle with this fierce Armenian commander. Therefore, Mleh, giving up on drawing the Tarson garrison into battle, attacked Lambron instead, for he knew that the Prince of Lambron was a supporter and an ally of Byzantine. Mleh laid waste to everything outside the fortress walls, and drove immense herds of cattle, sheep and mules to Mamestia, surpassing even Toros's instructions, to put pressure on the enemy by cutting off their food supply.

Andronicus was furious when he heard about Mleh's raids. He vowed to take a thousand-fold vengeance on the Armenians, relentlessly driving his army forward without rest, impatient to reach Mamestia, where he heard Toros was encamped with his troops. In this frenzied state of mind, the road from Tarson to Mamestia seemed interminable. Andronicus's army of twelve thousand was now doubled by local infantry. Among with local reinforcements were several disgruntled Armenian princes that sided with the Byzantines, some of whom had been dispossessed of their estates by Toros and others by popular uprisings in response to their oppressive rule.

All this time, Toros remained encamped with his troops in Mamestia, waiting for the enemy. His calm and cheerful face instilled confidence in the troops, and the reports of the enemy's approach were received with positive anticipation. The prince convened a council of the military leadership and to everyone's astonishment, he ordered Babken to take the best interpreter and intercept the Byzantines to deliver a peace proposal to Andronicus. At this, the commanders' amazement quickly turned to indignation and Mleh went berserk. He formulated the proposal as follows:

"We too are the humble servants of the emperor and we ask only that he condescend and treat us with equanimity. This has been our policy. We did not expand our realm beyond our hereditary possessions, and although it would not have been difficult to take Tarson, we refrained so as not to rouse the just wrath of the emperor. Thus, any fair proposal the emperor has, let him make it and spare everyone senseless bloodshed and devastation."

Babken froze for a moment when he heard these words, but since he knew Toros well and was aware of his courage and his prudence, without saying a word he dutifully stepped forward to accept the assignment. But he had a bewildered look on his face, as if he were unsure whether he had understood the prince correctly; since the prince said nothing more, Babken set out to fulfill his orders.

The general astonishment gradually gave way to heated protests. Mleh's face was red and his eyes filled with blood. Standing beside him, Toros could almost hear the pounding of his heart. Only Toros remained unflustered, and addressed them calmly:

"O my valiant comrades-in-arms," he said, "you were stunned by my proposal to negotiate, and no doubt, some or all of you became indignant and angry as I delivered my message to the envoy. If I followed my heart alone, I would not have sent such message to an enemy, especially such a brutal enemy. But as the leader of a nation and a prince, I need to weigh my actions before God, the people and my conscience. We are answerable to the Almighty for every drop of blood we shed, and therefore should be guided not by our ambition or our pride, but by the interests of our people.

It is no secret that the interests of the Armenian nation demand that we walk side by side with the Byzantines as brothers and work with them as allies in the struggle against the enemies that surround us and become more powerful with each passing day. If the Byzantine empire understood its own best interests, then instead of oppressing us, it would help strengthen us and support us as a barrier against the waves of infidels, whose rising levels, like a huge sea, will eventually inundate Byzantium as well. As a Christian and as the head of state, it was my duty to send this envoy with a peace proposal, to try to establish a powerful alliance between Christian nations. The alliance of these Christian peoples, working together, could hold off the rising infidel tide. Yet now, inexplicably, because of inner divisions and antagonism, they are headed for destruction and annihilation.

If nothing else, we should take a cue from the Mohammedans. When wars arise between them, their clergy spare no effort to conciliate the quarreling sides and stop the bloodshed. Shame and dishonor on our Christian leaders, who for petty and inscrutable reasons shed rivers of blood.

So why then are you indignant and angry? Do you know our enemy? Have you seen Andronicus?

I have. I have battled against him. And if there is one person among us who knows him better than anyone else and has crossed swords with him, it is the envoy whom I dispatched with a message of peace. Andronicus will not only reject the peace proposals, but will also consider our proposal a sign of weakness. And we shall be innocent before the God for the bloodshed that will ensue.

But should the unthinkable occur and the Byzantines agree to our peace proposal, then we will have a fair and justified basis to expand to the east and south, strengthen the country, and gather and save our defenseless people from captivity.

These then are the reasons that prompted me to send this envoy. If anyone needs further explanation, I am ready to give it."

As Toros spoke, passions subsided. Even Mleh calmed down, particularly after Toros said that Andronicus was unlikely to agree to peace. Mleh's face then brightened, and he said, "There is no need for clarifications, as we see that this envoy mission does not impinge upon our honor and valor."

The Council dispersed and gathered again only upon Babken's returned. When the city gates opened and the old warrior entered, everyone stared at him without a word in anticipation,

"Grand Prince," said Babken, "the Byzantines do not want peace with us."

“What was their answer? Tell us, Constable Babken,” said Toros.

“Per your command, I will relate all that Andronicus said and did. You can judge. First off, as soon as we arrived, we were taken and locked away in a tent as if we were prisoners. They spewed forth every kind of invective all around the tent, as usual, insulting the Armenians and our faith in the most derogatory way. Then we were brought before Andronicus, who was pompously seated in a large tent. He listened to our modest proposal, then curtly dismissed us with insults and curses, ‘Go, tell that rebel, that son of a rebel, that we still have the chains in which your father was bound and we’ll bind you with the same chains and take you captive.’ Then he sent us away with a flick of his hand. And we, to the jeers and cackling of the entire Byzantine garrison, mounted our horses and returned. This is the full account.”

Having said this, Babken sat down, boiling with indignation.

“Did you hear that, princes?” said Toros.

“Let's see now to whom God will show His favor. I have always trusted in His justice. God knows, I tried to avoid bloodshed. The emperor and Andronicus did not want peace. So, we shall do our duty. We shall show that we are the sons of our fathers and it is not so easy to bind Ruben’s descendants whenever you want, nor should you trifle with Armenians’ patience.”

Having said this, he rose, and everyone went to their posts. As for the prince, armed with Dionys's telescope, he went to the fortress tower and watched the enemy camp, where an atmosphere of disorderly overconfidence reigned.

He saw musicians and songsters, groups of women cavorting among the warriors and said to himself, “Such a lax army could probably be dispensed with in a single swift and overpowering attack. But better to employ more reliable methods, spare our men and wait for the right moment to arise. It won’t be long.”

When he came down from the tower, he summoned Sargis, whose skills and vigilance he respected, and said, “Tonight you must go to Anarzaba.”

“Right away, prince.”

“Tell Stepan to gather all the troops he has under his command immediately and intercept the enemy. Tell him that this must be accomplished within three days, because all the preparations and precautionary measures we planned during our strategy meetings are excessive for such a pampered and foolhardy enemy. I will see you soon and wish you success.”

Sargis left the prince and headed out a small door in the fortress wall that led to a river. He swam across the river and, under cover of night, quickly made his way to Anarzaba.

Chapter 21. “The Reach of the Brave is the Strength of their Sword”

Andronicus was now yet more confident of victory. After all, the rebel himself had deferentially pledged to be his subject and sued for peace. Therefore, the top priority was to block all escape routes until the time came to put Toros in shackles. As for reinforcing his own position, Andronicus was already in a celebratory mood and ordered the bare minimum preparation—digging some ditches and building some earthen barriers before the gates.

For two straight nights, music filled the air as the Byzantine army reveled and caroused. No doubt there were some people in the Byzantine camp that shook their heads in disbelief when Toros's submissive proposal was delivered, and now were similarly scandalized by the reckless abandon of their army. However, no one would dare question the emperor's cousin, the commander-in-chief of all the troops in the East, even to warn him, "Do not trust this gesture of humility, for sometimes a lion, in order to lure his prey into a trap, will change its demeanor and don a fox skin." Who could tell him, "These festivals would be more appropriate after the victory, not before it." Therefore, the wise were silent, while the foolish and boastful did all the talking.

Meantime, after nightfall, Toros issued orders to break through the city wall on the side opposite from the Byzantine encampment. The work had barely begun, when there was a terrible thunderstorm, rain, hail and lightning. The hurricane-force winds ripped up the tents and sent them flying into the air like kites and the pelting rain caused landslides. The Byzantine troops were drenched to the bone and stuck in the mud the entire night, but Andronicus was oblivious to it all, carousing without break until morning.

At dawn, the Armenian regiments, alert and energized, made a semicircular formation where they had broken through the wall. Breaching the wall, they attacked the Byzantines, who were completely caught off guard. Under the impression that the Armenians were in their fortress, as if confined to a prison, the Byzantines had put away their weapons. What ensued was not so much a battle as a stampede into slaughter. Never one to hold back, Mleh was at the head of his fierce mounted force, roaring at the top of his lungs, "Cut them down, men, spare no one."

Meanwhile, Toros, seeing that his orders were being overzealously fulfilled, urged restraint, thus managing, just barely, to spare some of the Byzantine and Armenian princes from needless slaughter. As for the imperial detachment that first fled the scene and thought it was at a safe distance, they encountered Stepan and Sargis on the road to Adana, who, notwithstanding the terrible storm, had lain in wait with 4000 soldiers.

Among the fugitives was Prince Oshin of Lambron and his bodyguards. He made a desperate attempt to break through the Armenian line, but just then Stepan appeared, delivering a mighty blow with his spear. Oshin fell from his horse, dropped his weapons, and was taken prisoner. After this encounter, less than half of the Byzantine force was left, and of them only those who managed to board the two ships in the harbor escaped, the rest perishing in the ongoing battle or taken prisoner.

As for Andronicus, the root of all this evil, he suddenly awoke from his drunken stupor and barely had time to jump on his horse and flee for his life in the direction of Antioch. Fortunately for him, he managed to escape unscathed, but Babken was on a mission to capture him personally and give him his just desserts.

As for Toros, he did not even have to unsheath his sword this time. Always alert and ready for anything, he could see that there was no danger from the opposing forces. Instead, it was a bloody rout of the enemy. Watching the senseless carnage, he pondered how human recklessness can turn the fate of a people into a toy of a few arrogant, stupid and petty people and cause such bloody calamity.

Immersed in these thoughts, he crossed the battlefield, or rather, the field of ruins, and entered the enemy camp accompanied by his bodyguards. In the aftermath of the storm the night before and the even more violent hurricane of that morning's battle, the enemy camp was in complete disarray, a horrific sight, with shields, spears, swords scattered on the ground, among tents in varying states of collapse, saddled horses with shackled feet, bellowing, and waiting in vain for their riders.

Toros surveyed the battlefield with a mix of contentment that it was over and chagrin, for it did not have to be this way, and entered Andronicus's tent, which was nearly as big as a palace with its various compartments and lavish accoutrements. Strewn everywhere were carpets, muslin sheets, crimson blankets, weapons made of silver and gold, women's jewelry, musical instruments. It was more like the storeroom of props in a great modern theater than a general's battlefield lodgings.

Seeing this wealth, Toros was delighted, not because it would enrich his treasury, but because the Armenian soldiers had obeyed their orders and followed their commanders. The trumpet had not signaled for them return to camp so they were still focused on combat and had not broken ranks to gather booty.

Casting a cold glance at the extravagance of the tent, his eyes were intently searching for something more valuable. Finally, he found it: the Byzantine military logs. He immediately wrapped and sealed them with his ring, and handed them to his aide-de-camp.

Next, the prince ordered that the dead be buried. Meanwhile, Stepan's army, slowed down because of the large number of prisoners, finally arrived and joined Toros's forces. The Armenian princes in the service of Byzantine were very lucky that they fell into Stepan's hands, for Mleh took no prisoners. As for Mleh's mounted battalion, they did not return until late into the night, content that they had completed their mission and covered with blood. Some of the Armenian forces were posted that night in the former Byzantine camp, and the rest returned to Mamestia to celebrate, indulging in the wine and food left by the enemy. However, the night guard did not slacken and Toros personally made random checks on their readiness.

Later that night Toros reviewed the Byzantine logs from Andronicus's tent. The documents revealed how many times over the previous four years, his neighbors, pretending to be friends and sending Toros envoys with congratulations, had at the same time entered into secret agreements with the Byzantines and advocated war against Toros. The ruler of Antioch, Reynald, and the Knight Templars, who had known no harm from Toros, and indeed had only reaped benefits, stood out for his avaricious treachery. There was also a letter from the ruler of Assassins, who having been urged by the Byzantines to murder Toros, refused and sent an irritated response that the Armenian prince had never done the Mohammedans any wrong.

It appeared from the papers that they even schemed to use his brother Mleh against him and his rule. There were also numerous inflammatory letters from the imperial authorities to Mohammedan leaders, Sultan Mahsud and Emir Nureddin, trying to pit them against Toros to destroy the restored Armenian principality.

Insightful as he was, Toros anticipated all this, but it was quite another thing to have the evidence and proof in hand.

Shortly before dawn, Toros managed to get a bit of sleep, and arose fresh and cheerful, for his robust constitution was resilient and quickly recharged after a short nap.

His first order of business was to gather his commanders for a council to discuss the fate of the prisoners. Mleh immediately suggested sending them to Aleppo to be sold as slave, as, he said, such evil people did not deserve to be treated as fellow Christians.

Everyone looked at Toros; no one said a word. Toros pointed out that moderation may be to their benefit, for fortune is fickle and today's victor may be tomorrow's vanquished. Thus following Christian precepts and the rules of human decency may not only be the right thing to do, but may also the sensible thing under the circumstances. Selling Christians into slavery might also open the Armenians to charges of heresy. Instead, it was decided to confiscate the prisoners' possessions and set them free.

Mleh, with his usual ruthlessness, declared that his conscience was clear, for he had taken no prisoners. Then he snickered that if Stepan had acted the same way, then this entire discussion would have been unnecessary. Thus, the order was given to confiscate the belongings of the rank-and-file soldiers and set them free to go back to their homes. The fate of the nobles who had been taken captive still remained to be decided.

Toros ordered that the Armenian and Byzantine princes be brought before the council. He ordered them unbound and invited them to sit down. Then he addressed them in a good natured tone,

“A few days ago, as you know, we humbly offered you peace, and you scornfully rejected it. Apparently, you misinterpreted our motivation, and decided that it was fear that prompted this proposal. Now you should be convinced by your own experience that we were guided only by a desire for peace. After all, for many years we expected your attack and prepared ourselves. Meanwhile, you treated war as if it were a game, and that is why you suffered such a shameful defeat, despite having such a large army. Our only regret is that your commander-in-chief, the viceroy, is not among you, as he managed to escape. But it does not matter; one day perhaps he will come again and we will meet.

As for you, you are the great princes and owners of fortresses, palaces and riches, whereas we are poor, simple mountaineers; you have reached the highest subtleties of civilization, while in your eyes we are Asian barbarians; you are orthodox Christians, while you claim we are the heirs of heresy, yet we have determined to set you free to go to your homes, as we have already done to your soldiers, but there is a condition.

It is a common practice in such situations to pay a ransom for your freedom. But it is difficult for us to put a price on your freedom, so we leave it to each of you to determine what price you are willing to pay in order to go your way in peace.”

The Byzantine princes never expected such a proposal and looked at each other in amazement and confusion.

It was unheard of for a prisoner to determine his own ransom. If they named a small ransom, it would demean their pride, and while a high ransom would feed their Byzantine egos, it would also mean that they would have to pay this high price. Thus, they did everything they could to get out of this quandary and insisted that the prince set the ransom himself. On hearing this, Toros’s mood now changed, and he snapped contemptuously,

“If you were worth anything, I would not let you go.” And he turned to his men and said, “Take these princes away, let them think about their value. We have enough to do without wasting time on them.”

The princes had not yet crossed the threshold when he added, so that they too would hear, “In less than a year from this day, there will not be a single Byzantine left in Cilica. Prepare the troops, brothers, we are off to Tarson.”

Indeed, the army began to prepare for the campaign. The warriors were in high spirits, and Mleh was even more elated.

The captive princes now realized that their situation had taken a turn for the worse. If Toros moved against Tarson and won, it would be well-nigh impossible to negotiate with Toros. Moreover, the possessions of a number of the captive princes were located within Cilicia, and if they did not settle now, they risked losing everything. Thus, the captive princes decided to set high ransoms and notified Toros, relying on his fair mindedness.

Wasting no more time, they sent their servants to Tarson, Lambron, Korikos, Payas, Antioch, and to Cyprus to quickly obtain and deliver the ransom in order to secure their release as quickly as possible.

Meanwhile, after a small show of force by Stepan’s army, the city of Adana surrendered to Stepan and opened the gates to him. The first person outside of Cilicia to receive the news of the Armenian victory was Andronicus himself, who with a mere handful of men had barely managed to slip away to Antioch.

Among the prisoners, the senior figure was Oshin, the ruler of Lambron. Toros did not treat him or the other Armenian princes any differently from the other Byzantine princes, because for all intents and purposes they were Byzantine in their culture and religion. However Oshin, beside himself with fear, had set a large ransom for himself. He was waiting for the money to arrive from Lambron along with his eldest son.

Because Oshin could only pay half the forty thousand ransom, he decided to pay the rest by leaving his son as a hostage.

The mediator for all the negotiations was Babken, who had been assigned to guard all the prisoners.

The army was just about ready to march, when the majority of the ransoms arrived. Toros ordered that the Byzantine princes be summoned along with their ransoms. Once the money was counted and everything was squared away, he said,

“You are free now, be on your way.”

And then, while they were still present, he gave the order to distribute all the money, which was a huge amount, to the army. The released princes, were astounded, and could not contain their curiosity, “Why give so much money to these lowly soldiers?”

“So that when and if the need arises, they will again capture and bring you and your kind before me,” said Toros.

And so, Toros with his army ventured beyond his ancestral lands. Tarson surrendered after a harsh siege and the victorious army expanded Armenian power westward to Korikos and eastward to the Gulf of Alexandretta, which later came to be known as the Armenian Gulf.

The prince rewarded all his commanders. He gave Mleh the fortress of Korikos with adjoining lands, exhorting Mleh to treat the population well, with the exception of the Byzantines. Toros gave the small coastal fortress of Payas to Sargis, encouraging him to periodically conduct sea patrols for the benefit of the Armenians and hold enemy pirates in check. Toros counted on Sargis’s vigilance to temper Mleh’s unruliness and alert him to the prince’s excesses.

Toros’s thoughts kept turning to the secret letters captured from Andronicus, which shed light on the true face of his neighbors and necessitated intervention to stop their conniving. The letters revealed that the prince of Antioch had promised help to the Byzantines, from which Toros surmised correctly that Andronicus’s arrogance alone was the reason that this aid did not materialize.

Engrossed in such reflections, Toros had unexpected visitors, Abbot Barsegh, their hospitable host of the Armenian monastery in Cyprus, along with Kostandin, who were in Tarson, where Toros had set up his center of operations for the time being.

“Oh! - exclaimed Toros with a smile, “look who’s here, my two dear old friars. Reverend Father, where did you find your former monastic brother? Or was it he who found you? How many years have passed, Father? You have completely forgotten us, and we were unable to come to see you. Forgive me. You know, Euphemia reminiscences about you all the time. But you look worried... What’s the problem?”

“Grand Prince, we know that you remember us. After all, how many times has the princess sent donations to our monastery and the Cypriot Armenians? And how many times did I try to reach you to ask your protection for our ill-fated people, but the malevolent Byzantines intervened? They even imprisoned me in Nicosia for a year. Indeed, the Byzantines in Cyprus have made it a habit to persecute and torture us as heretics, and now we are worse off than under the Arabs previously. Our very existence, our lives, faith and property, all hang from a thread.

I was at a loss, not knowing whom to turn to. I vowed that as soon as I got out of prison, I would directly appeal to you in Cilicia. I bribed the jailer with a gold cross, which was my last possession. Upon my release, I went to my monastery.

My ill-fated monastery . . . it was in shambles. The doors had been burned down, the church desecrated, and its holy vessels pilfered. Some of the brethren were killed, others fled for their life and are scattered on the mountainside. But for the Arab ship that brought me here, who knows how I would have met my demise at the Byzantines' hands. This is what I have come to. And had Prince Kostandin not kindly supplied me with these clothes, I would have appeared before you today in beggars' rags."

"We cannot do anything to help the dead, holy father, but for everything else, we will find a solution, Reverend Father, with God's help. You have had a tiring journey. Get some rest, now. I will make sure that your losses are compensated tenfold."

Then addressing Prince Kostandin, "Prince Kostandin, after the abbot has rested, you should work together on compiling a list of damages to the monastery, and submit that list with every civility and courtesy to the Byzantine Archbishop at Tarson. Give my regards to him and urge him to compensate all the losses, for if it is acceptable for the ministers of the church to derive benefit from their positions, then it is also fair for the rich to compensate those that have been pilfered.

In all this time, we have not so much as laid a finger on the Byzantine church, so the least they can do is compensate for the harm their Byzantine co-religionists inflicted on our churches. As for the Cypriot Byzantines, do not worry, holy father, they will receive their just desserts."

The abbot and Kostandin set about this task, making sure to leave nothing out. After factoring in moral damages, the sum was substantial. One can only imagine how the Byzantine archbishop howled when presented with this bill. He, of course, claimed that the church's income had fallen drastically due to the war and then recited a litany of calamities that had befallen the Byzantine Church from the time of the Flood and the Apostle Paul, who was once a citizen of Tarson, to the present.

But neither the abbot in his hood, nor Prince Kostandin, without a hood, were moved by the Archbishop's empty excuses. Stone-faced, they pressed their demands, while observing propriety in their dealing with the bishop. Being a military man, Kostandin's patience wore thin with the petty bargaining over every vessel, cross, chalice, gospel, icon, monastic income and living expenses. But the abbot and the archbishop brought him back to the negotiation table, demonstrating that the men of the cloth knew when to defer to each other, within limits, of course.

Thus they proceeded with tacit understanding of each other's moves. In the end, the Byzantines who plundered the Armenian monastery in Cyprus paid fourfold in Cilicia. When the gold was counted and the sacks of silver were packed, the abbot of the Armenian monastery with humility and with all reverence for the higher ranking Byzantine cleric, took his right hand and asked for a blessing, with a knowing smile hidden beneath his beard. In response, sweet blessings came from the archbishop's mouth, while his heart was seething with bitterness.

Unfortunately, the Gospel's moral precept of selflessness was absent in this exchange, and it is a pity that Christ was not present at this moment to discipline his two beloved disciples with his staff. Having loaded the sack on his mule, the reverend abbot returned with Kostandin to Toros to express his gratitude.

However, when they arrived at the palace gates, in place of the hustle and bustle of valets, officers, and messengers of the day before, there were but two guards on watch.

"It seems the prince has left," said Kostandin.

"Where to?" asked the abbot.

“Who knows? He’s the type that lets no grass grow under his feet. We used to marvel at his uncle’s energy, but the prince has outdone him. He is the solid, silent type. He thinks things through and decides and once he’s set his mind on it, he doesn’t let go. Let’s find out what he’s up to.”

They entered the palace and saw Babken pacing with his hands behind his back. When he saw our two friends with a porter, he cracked a barely perceptible smile. He recalled the difficult old days when they had just escaped from captivity and were hiding at St. Makar in Cyprus, their hearts in their mouths, fretting about the future. Their leader at that time was an inexperienced young prince in whom Babken had faith. Who could have imagined that Toros would display such valor, prudence and perspicacity as not only to match but to surpass his forefathers in a matter of a couple of years.

“Oh, God be our helper, Father, welcome.”

“Greetings, Babken *hayrik*, God bless you,” answered the priest.

“And where is the prince?” asked Kostandin.

“He went to Payas.”

“To Payas? Well, Babken, your former ward, the prince, is truly amazing – he can up and take off . . .”

“In fact, my former ward, the prince, accomplishes feats beyond the ability of kings. There was a time I used to say, if only he lives up to his namesake, that would suffice. But now, we witness that he has surpassed his uncle, father and grandfather combined . . . If God permits, I would liken him to St. Gregory the Illuminator. Not a misstep in all these years. If it had been me, or you, this holy father, with his holy rank or even the Catholicos, with his holy chrism, God knows, we would have been embroiled in a fratricidal melee if we had to deal with Mleh’s antics . . . But our prince, who hears and knows everything, keeps his own counsel and turns a deaf ear.

Just between us, one day the princess even asked me. *‘Babken hayrik, they say Prince Mleh dislikes his brother, and sometimes speaks of him with malice and even threats. Is this true. Are the reports credible?’*

“Believe me Kostandin, may our friendship be my witness, I just froze in shock. The princess seeing that I was perplexed, immediately said . . . she is a very intelligent woman, truly there is nobody like her in our mountains,

‘Babken hayrik, I don’t believe a word of it,’ she said, ‘no matter what I hear - the people are malicious and his words are being twisted and embellished. You, Babken hayrik, are like a father to everyone, and if appropriate, advise Mleh to be prudent. Of course, they are brothers, but there may be some friction between them.’

I was so embarrassed at these words. Do you think I was ashamed for myself? No, the thing is, it’s a waste of time talking to Mleh. But it was my duty, I said to myself, if nothing else to ease my conscience. As I was pondering on how to do this, the prince out of nowhere said,

‘The past several days, Babken hayrik, you seem to have a lot on your mind. I can see that you want to talk to Mleh and are preparing yourself for this. Whenever he comes to see me, you linger around. Don’t worry. He has no malice in his heart. He talks big, but he doesn’t follow through. Don’t worry for nothing. We’re nearly there, not much left to go. Mleh blurts out anything that comes to his mind, wise or foolish. This comes from idleness. In a few days everything will be settled and Mleh will be content and happy. So once again, don’t worry about anything and don’t say anything to anyone.’

And indeed, when we heard that the Byzantines were preparing to attack, Mleh was transformed. No commander could compare with him, neither soldier nor prince.

Now if you go to Korikos, you'll find Mleh on the seashore, in front of the gates of his castle. He sits there, sipping raki and singing his brother's praises, with the same vigor as he ranted at him a few months earlier at Vahka.

But it's not Mleh but Toros whom I marvel at. He knows everything, what his brother says, what's going through my mind; he knows what the emperor is going to do, . . . What is he, a prophet, reverend father? You are a learned man, but our prince may have read more than you have."

"Listen, brother, what do you want from the Holy Father?" asked Kostandin. "If Mleh, becoming the prince of Korikos drinks raki and praises his brother, then what are you waiting for, order raki for us too. The Reverend Father will be blessing our Prince in no time. See this sack? It is filled with gold and silver, church vessels and money. We obtained all this from the Byzantine bishop on the Prince's advice in compensation for the Byzantines' ransacking of the Armenian monastery. And we made the reparation tenfold. You should have seen the sweat pouring off the poor man's beard. Well then, bring the raki. Let's drink!" exclaimed Kostandin sprawling out on a chair.

And our three friends sat around the table, reminiscing about the past, pondering the present, dreaming of the future late into the night until their eyes were heavy. Kostandin and the Holy Father dropped off into a deep sleep and snored through the entire night, while Babken, who was responsible for overseeing Tarson, made the rounds, checking the fort's security.

Chapter 22. The Prince of Antioch

As for Toros, he had rushed with his usual entourage of only twelve mounted guards to meet up with the left wing of his army, which had already reached Payas and was waiting for him at the Syrian border. Toros had no intention of crossing the border of Antioch. He just wanted to leave that impression on Reynald, the Prince of Antioch. Toros's policy was to avoid actions that would provoke his neighbors to gang up against him. He just wanted to put on a show of force to see this man's reaction, whose boldness and ambition he had heard so much about, and who reportedly sought to break ranks with the Byzantine Empire. Without taking a break, Toros dispatched a messenger to Reynald with a proposal to meet in person. He was sure that a proposal from a prince who had won so many victories, would be readily accepted. That was exactly what happened.

Two days later, the messenger returned, and both princes having taken the necessary precautions, each accompanied by hundreds of horsemen, arrived at a hill amidst the gorges where a tent had been pitched for their meeting. There the princes dismounted and entered the tent, each of them taking an interpreter with him, although both spoke enough Greek to understand each other.

After exchanging greetings, in which Reynald offered his congratulations to Toros on his victories and assured him that it was much more pleasant to have a neighbor like him than the Byzantine empire. He said not only the vastness of that empire, but also its treacherous practices precluded the possibility of friendly relations. Toros interrupted the flow of his eloquence, saying,

"I see, both of us are men of action and both strive for the same goal: to strengthen our states and expand their borders. So, let's not waste time talking about friendship and good-neighborly relations. Neither you nor I believe these words." (Reynald burst out laughing.) Hence, better we take counsel on what should be done for our interests. What benefit would either of us gain from smashing each other? If you set foot in my mountains, seize and ravage several fortresses, what amazing benefit will you obtain? Similarly, if I venture

into your lands, even if I succeed, what would I gain? Instead, let us look for places, where a small effort would produce great benefits.”

Toros paused. Reynald's eyes flashed and he, driven by his greed, exclaimed impatiently,

“The place, name the place!”

“That place,” said Toros, aloofly, “that place ... you have all the means to get there, but I don’t ... and all the booty will go to you.”

“We’ll share everything like friends. Let’s settle it.”

“Well, if you give your word, the place is right there,” said Toros, pointing to the vastness of the sea. “Where? In the sea? What...”

“Cyprus! A huge, rich island, without walls, without gates, vulnerable to raids. If I only had ships and time ...”

“I’ll get the ships, don’t worry.”

“At most, I can provide you infantry, if you wish.”

“With great pleasure. Moreover, he who spots the prey has rights to a share in it.”

“As soon as the ships are ready, my infantry unit is ready to join you with its commander.”

From Reynald’s eager fidgeting, Toros saw that this man was fascinated by the prospect of easy and rich target. So he got up and took his leave, and pulling Reynald aside, he added, “Be sure not to disclose this plan, even to your soldiers. You have a guest, perhaps even an ally, staying with you who may divine your intentions. You should beware of him, for he is a very cunning and dangerous man.”

“I see, you're talking about Andronicus. If you wish, tomorrow I will order him to be bound and sent to you as a sign of our alliance.”

“No, I don’t need him; it would be enough if you send him on his way. He is a treacherous guest not only for his neighbors, but also for those who host him.”

“Don’t worry; that is no problem for me. As for the ships, they will be ready to depart in less than eight days.”

The negotiations were over and the princes set off each in his own direction. Toros headed to Tarson to set his country in order and Reynald to Antioch to prepare his troops for the expedition, which was not difficult for such men as he, who had no other occupation but war. Reynald handled this operation with care, and kept the secret secure. Mleh, with a thousand infantry boarded a ship in Alexandretta, taking with him the abbot of the St. Makar monastery. From there the Templars with their allies sailed to their destination.

There is no need to retell the story here, for historians of all three nations—Byzantines, French and Armenians – unanimously record that never before had Cyprus been attacked with such ferocity, not even by the Saracens. This fearsome force encountered faint resistance from the miserable inhabitants of this island. The expeditionary forces were ruthless in advancing across the island, with fire and sword, sparing no one, man, woman or child, regardless of age, faith, or rank. They plundered every house, palace and church, then gathered everyone, young and old, lay or cleric on the shore, and since there were too many to take away at once, only the high-ranking clergy and princes were taken to Antioch to hold for ransom.

There, in Cyprus, Mleh saw that he had met his match in plunder and knavery. Reynald of Antioch and his Templars were on a par with him both in their daring and in their brutality. And then he began entertaining the idea of joining forces with them.

What a contrast between Mleh and Reynald's behavior and Toros's activities during these few months! Toros restored and built up the lands under his rule, protecting the people, their lives and property, regardless of class or nationality, punishing the robbers and bribe-takers, and securing the borders with guards and forts against attack. As already noted, from the start, Toros put great emphasis on upgrading the skills of his troops, leaving a lasting legacy. Even as the Rubinians' power faded, the soldier-citizen was the norm in Armenia.

A historian testifies to this, saying, "All Armenians were warriors, almost as wild as the mountains where they lived. They always had a weapon at hand, and were agile, forming and dissolving alliances as their interests required." And a traveler, who passed through the territory of Armenian kingdom during the reign of our Toros's nephew, says the following about the inhabitants of Cilicia: "This country is inhabited by Crusaders, Greeks, Syrians, Turks, Armenians and other nations, but the Armenians dominate. These Armenians are very religious and true Christians."

Toros threw himself wholeheartedly into these activities, traveling around the country and checking everything in person, which was not without risks. Once, when he was headed to Rapan with his usual mounted guard of twelve and a small infantry unit, he was ambushed by a band of Turks. They had a force of three thousand men in hiding, who surrounded Toros and his men. Undaunted, the prince drew his mighty sword striking left and right, cutting them down and sending the rest fleeing.

Meanwhile, in the capital of Byzantium, reports of Andronicus's disgraceful defeat and the loss of all of Cilicia, followed by the raid by Prince of Antioch on Cyprus with Armenian allies, sent the Emperor into a rage. As he was himself engaged on the European front, he sent emissaries to the Sultan of Iconium Mahsud, promising a large bounty if he would avenge the Byzantines by attacking the Armenians.

As for Mahsud, he saw this as a convenient excuse to invade Cilicia with a large army, expecting to catch Toros off guard. However, he was the one that got the surprise when the Armenians whom he assumed were sleeping, launched a well-organized preemptive attack.

Moreover, the Sultan, who was leading a large army, was nonplussed to have been checked by such a small Armenian force. Thereupon, he sent an emissary to Toros reassuring the Armenian prince that he bore no hostility toward the Armenians, but sought the Armenians' allegiance and restoration of the cities captured from the Byzantines.

Toros received the emissaries with courtesy and charmed them with his eloquent and artful response: "We take no umbrage at maintaining good neighborly relations with the Sultan, but it is not possible for us to return the cities to the Byzantines." Having received a response that satisfied his interests, the Sultan saw no particular advantage in pursuing this campaign further. He withdrew, showing greater deference to Toros than the Emperor.

The tenuous peace did not last long, however. Again at the instigation of the Byzantines, Mahsud prepared to mount a larger scale invasion of Cilicia. But before he could even deploy forces on the Cilician border, Toros had been alerted by his reconnaissance network and had arranged for his subjects to repair to the mountains, forts and fortified cities for safety.

Entrusting them to Stepan's protection, he assigned part of the army to Stepan's command, and made the difficult descent from the highlands via inconspicuous paths to Iconium, where he started to pillage, plunder and destroy the country.

The Sultan was forced to return and defend his country. But by the time he arrived, Toros had already withdrawn to the mountains with booty and captives. Just as Mahsud was ready to conclude peace with Toros to end this senseless war, the Byzantine envoys showed up with gifts and imperial exhortations.

Moved by the emperor's patronage, the Sultan changed direction, mobilized a larger force, and invaded Cilicia. It was hard going. Cilicia was well fortified, with strong walls. The countryside had been evacuated and nothing was left to sustain the invading army, no harvest for the soldiers, not even roots and grass for animal feed. The summer sun beat down on them mercilessly and there was no hope of securing necessities, let alone booty or plunder.

Meanwhile, from Iconium and Sebastia, messenger after messenger arrived, telling how Toros was routing the defenseless countryside, turning villages and towns into ruins. Despite the news, the Sultan pressed on. His hordes flooded the plains and laid siege to Mamestia and Anarzaba.

Toros had entrusted Mamestia to a young man named Tornik, who, having heard of the return and the glorious deeds of the prince, left his native Sassoon to join Toros's army. Toros quickly noted and appreciated his courage and keen mind, inquired who he was and learned that the young man was the grandson of a legendary warrior from Sassoon whose name was also Tornik. Hence, before leaving the city with his army, the prince entrusted Tornik with the defense of the city.

"My brave young man," he said, "I entrust this city not only to you, but also to the glory of your grandfather. Bravery will not suffice. You will also need prudence to defend the city. To die senselessly, without any gain is not bravery. I trust you with this city, and remember that when I return, I do not wish to see your corpse, but the city intact as I have entrusted it to you."

Tornik, who was a man of few words, replied, "The Lord willing, Prince, I will return your city to you."

Toros entrusted Anarzaba to the woman whose story has already been told. Margaret was always straightforward, sensible and elegant. Having learned that Toros had arrived, she came down from the citadel to the city square to meet him. Toros, who was rushing through, spoke to his sister-in-law on the spot, asked if she had enough soldiers, whether there were reserves in case of a long siege and whether she is confident in the townspeople. When he received accurate and positive answers on all counts, he was reassured that this wise woman was prepared even better than he expected, especially when she showed him storehouses full of grain, weapons depots, and detachments of soldiers and townspeople ready for deployment at her command.

Bidding Margaret farewell, Toros asked, "You are aware, Princess, of the huge responsibility on Stepan's shoulders? All inhabitants and fortifications of the Black Mountains have been entrusted to his care. You are no doubt aware that I am leaving with the army. The enemy will come this way; indeed, they must come, since the roads have been left open for them. You have to protect the city even for a year, if necessary. I place my trust in you. May the Lord be with you and help you!"

"If the Lord keeps you safe, he will also save us for your sake," was Margaret's answer.

The Sultan laid siege to both of these cities, Mamestia and Anarzaba, at the same time. However, neither his catapults, nor the siege ladders, nor his archers brought him success. When Mahsud was told that a woman was leading Anarzaba's defense, he said, "If their women are fighting like this, then what about the men who attacked our land? By now our country must not only be in ruins but have become a desert."

And he regretted that he had initiated this reckless war at the instigation of the Byzantine emperor, but what could he do? He was looking for at least a face-saving exit from this morass. Then, the Sultan's cavalry was stricken by disease and their horses died en masse. Soldiers were short of supplies and they could not desert their posts in search of game since the mountainsides were swarming with Armenian operatives ready to strike from behind every tree and rock.

Despairing of ever taking these two cities, Mahsud directed his forces to Hamut, which turned out to be even more impregnable than Mamestia and Anarzaba. The Sultan sent one of his brothers-in-law, Yaghub Melik, with a three-thousand-man army to attack the borderlands of Antioch and take care of the impudent ruler of Antioch.

However, when this fierce warrior boldly rushed forth into the mountains beyond Anarzaba, he unexpectedly found himself surrounded by Stepan and the Templars. Thus trapped, Yaghub and his forces were cut down nearly to the last man; only a couple of warriors managed to flee and take the devastating news to the Sultan. The weather too rose up against the Sultan, battering his army at Til Hamut with storms, downpours and hail. When the news of Yaghub Melik's rout reached him, the Sultan's forces were in turmoil. The soldiers were restive and mutiny was brewing. The Sultan left for Iconium, his huge army making a disorderly retreat, scattering in different directions, leaving equipment and belongings behind.

Toros and his army had advanced nearly to Sebastia without meeting any real resistance. All of Iconium had been plundered and was in ruins. Returning with the booty, the prince offered thanks to the Almighty, for the war booty sufficed not only to cover the people's losses but also to generously reward all the soldiers. And what's more, history records that the two huge enemy armies evaporated before him without causing major losses of his troops or irreparable damage to his people.

Chapter 23. Death and Grief

As we can see, in the course of all these wars, there was no news of Mleh. What happened to the man who craved war and dreamt only of battles? Although Toros sent messengers to his brother to fortify Korikos and, once satisfied that it was sufficiently secure, to join the main army, Mleh, whether out of spite or imprudence, stayed out.

After the Cyprus campaign, Mleh became surprisingly friendly with the French crusaders, but what was hard for Toros to endure was the praise of his ruthless attack on Cyprus. When Mleh boasted about that campaign Toros criticized him severely, saying that even if the idea to attack the Byzantines was his to begin with, he now regretted it after seeing and hearing of the brutal campaign. For Toros it was unimaginable that the two Christian princes could commit such barbarity, tarnishing their names and the name of the Rubinian family with such cruel and senseless acts.

After this reprimand, Mleh cut ties with his brother, and spilled his bile on Toros even more than before. When he got drunk and lost his head, Mleh would boldly declare "Our father's realm should be divided in three. Levon's two sons were not created slaves to their older brother. And even if the antiquated practices of this rotten world today deprive us of our inheritance, the elder has no right to scold his brothers like some slave, especially brothers who are not his inferior in military prowess." After getting this off his chest, he would start in on the cruelty of the Cyprus campaign, "The Byzantines had it coming to them. In time of peace, they did not hesitate to ransack Armenian monasteries, attack defenseless monks and commit mayhem and murder. All the French crusaders and Armenian forces did was give them a taste of their own medicine."

News of these outbursts reached Toros, of course, who took everything in stride and deemed it sufficient to keep an eye on his brother and turned a deaf ear to his ranting since it had no rhyme or reason. Thus, relations between the brothers were strained when Sultan Mahsud, instigated by the Byzantines and the promised rewards, started a war that consumed Toros's time and energy for a full two years. Unsurprisingly, while foreign powers expressed admiration, Mleh was chagrined by the successful outcome of the war and the glory Toros reaped. Then, to everyone's shock, word came that Mleh had abandoned everything, his wife and country, and joined the Templars.

Meanwhile, Toros had no peace. The Emir of Aleppo was planning a war against Cilicia, so Toros was forced to make a preemptive attack. Meantime, he learned that the Byzantines were also resuming hostilities. Toros quickly stormed Aleppo, leveling its fortifications to the ground and returning victorious to Cilicia. No sooner had he returned than he learned that the Byzantine fleet coming from Cyprus was preparing to attack him in Cilicia. Without delay, Toros redeployed his victorious army to the coast, routing the seaborne Byzantine forces under the command of Michael Branas. They sank the flotilla and the remnants of the Byzantine force barely managed to flee for their lives on the few remaining ships.

The Byzantines, however, did not abandon their intentions. A new army, led by a new commander Andronicus Euphorbe attacked Cilicia and clashed with the Armenian army near Tarson. A detachment of French crusaders took part in this battle as allies of Toros. The Byzantines left about three thousand dead on the battlefield, and their commander himself, failing to board the ship and escape with some of his warriors, was caught by Toros. Later he was freed thanks to the mediation of the French King of Jerusalem and went to Constantinople to personally convey the report of his defeat.

Stepan, for his praiseworthy deeds, was held in high esteem by his brother. And for her courageous defense of Anarzaba, Margaret's name earned glory not only among the Armenians but also among neighboring peoples. These were especially happy times, when Euphemia and Margaret, like loving sisters, visited each other, always working together to provide relief to people in hardship. Whoever appealed to them would be sure to find protection. The two women through their mercy comforted many in their sorrows and softened the harsh blows of fate.

Their homes flourished in the radiance of good fortune. Euphemia had a charming daughter. Gohar, who was a marvelous combination of softness and courage. Margaret had two lion cubs, Ruben and Levon. Born amidst the thunder of battles and clamor of swords, they were destined to sit on the throne of Rubinians, and Levon in particular was destined to take the family's honor to new heights. Margaret being a prudent mother raised her two sons with utmost care, trying to tame and channel their potent energies. Still her motherly love was toughened by adversity. Years later, she was to offer herself as a hostage in exchange for Ruben's release from foreign captivity.

At Euphemia's palace, alongside Gohar, another youngster, named Hetum, grew up. As previously mentioned, he was part of the Lambron ransom and held hostage at the court of Toros. However, the young prince of Lambron was treated as a member of Toros's family. Hetum was baptized and received proper upbringing, and since Euphemia cared for him like his mother, the boy never felt orphaned. There was something in Euphemia's character that attracted both the hearts of adults and children. Even her reproaches, with all their severity, were imbued with such gentility that they never wounded or scarred the heart. Indeed, Euphemia had a remarkable disposition. Though she delighted in fame, honor, luxury, fun, her delight was redoubled at the good fortune of others. She did not have a selfish bone in her body.

Toros, who expanded his power to Isauria and Phrygia to the west, and almost to the Euphrates on the east, continued to make spot-checks and quick rounds on border defenses in his down-to-earth manner, shunning the trappings of power.

Euphemia, on the other hand, whether going from Vahka to Tarson or visiting Anarzaba, enjoyed travelling in style. With a princely crown studded with pearls and sparkling stone and a shimmering golden-woven robe of purple and fine muslin, she made her entrance with a retinue of equally elegantly accoutered ladies in waiting and guards wielding silver weapons. And wherever the princess arrived, people flocked toward her beautiful, radiant, joyful presence, which raised their spirits as well.

In this way nine years quickly passed. Toros enjoyed success upon success and good fortune smiled on him. The neighboring princes, great and small, respected and admired his realm, which always managed to avert danger and come out on top. Happiness had made its nest in his house. Those who saw Toros, after his

laborious military and peacetime activities, surrounded by his wife, daughter, friends and confidantes, always counted it a blessing to interact with the cheerful good humor of this disciplined, lion-hearted man.

As is well known, it rains on the just and the unjust; fate is fickle and happiness transitory. Today's laughter is followed by tomorrow's tears, joy is followed by sadness and today's cheerful garments may be followed by mourning attire.

Spring came. Nature awakened with a smile, flowers bloomed, birds sang. Euphemia, who loved the mountains of Taurus and was especially fond of listening to the gurgling of the rushing streams over the rocks, was busy preparing for her visit to Vahka.

But this trip was not to be. The evening before her departure, she suddenly felt faint and retired to her chambers to rest. This was so unlike her that Toros rushed to see how she was and found her voice and complexion so changed that he was beside himself and summoned the old doctor Dionys.

The aged doctor came in, examined the patient and froze in his tracks. This sight worried Toros even more. He led the old doctor into the next room and asked, anxiously, "Dionys, what is it? Why are you so shaken? Is the danger so great?"

"Danger!" exclaimed the old man sadly, stretching his arms to the sky, - "oh, if only it were danger ... this is death." His knees buckled, and Toros barely managed to catch hold of him and help him sit down. Dionys was gasping for breath. He then emitted a great sigh and gave up the ghost.

Startled by the incident, Toros ran into his wife's chambers and took Euphemia's hand; she was cold as ice.

"I am very sick, my dear prince. I am afraid this disease will take me," uttered the unhappy woman. "Where is Gohar . . . I wanted so much to bless her marriage to Hetum . . ."

"She is on her way," said Toros, doing everything to encourage his wife to hold on, but Euphemia was barely able to utter a few words and fainted. She then broke into cold sweat. The prince ordered another doctor to be summoned. When the doctor arrived, he found the corpse of an old man in one room, and a young woman breathing her last in the other.

The pain and sorrow that befell Toros are beyond description. His face had a sadness imprinted upon it that lingered without change until his final days.

The sun still shone as it always did, but a dark shadow had come over Toros that blocked the light shining on everyone else.

The prince's sole consolation was the fate of his people and of his child, Gohar. When Gohar saw her father resting on the balcony of the fortress of Vahka after an arduous day's work, she would sit in his lap, put her curly head on his cheek and stroke his smooth beard with her soft hands, fixing her radiant eyes on his deep gaze, and in her sweet voice whisper the pure words of a child's innocent heart. Then for just a moment, a glimmer of cheer would appear on the prince's face, from behind the ever-present cloud.

The mere thought that he once shared this happiness with her, with his beloved, no longer by his side, the other half of his soul, the one to whom not only he, but also his people owed their survival and prosperity, overwhelmed him at such moments. His gaze involuntarily turned to Drazark, where Euphemia lay in eternal rest and his broad chest heaved with sighs. Gohar, seeing this, would ask,

"Father, why are you taking such deep breaths?"

This was a question with no easy answer. So he avoided it, as best he could. Every day, whenever he had a moment to himself, these thoughts would engulf him, until time dulled the pain somewhat without erasing the memory. But alas, this was but the beginning of Toros's misfortunes.

Chapter 24. The Emperor Manuel I Komnenos

It was clear to Toros that only peace and moreover long-lasting peace could strengthen the throne of the Rubinians and make Cilicia a safe haven for the Armenian people. Therefore, he put the affairs of his realm in order and promoted education throughout the country. To this end, Toros increased the number of monasteries which were in those days the only centers of learning. Whoever wanted to study turned to the monasteries which played the same role in the east as in the west.

Although his wife's death and Mleh's foolishness filled his heart with sorrow, Toros, a man of unyielding character, continued to work tirelessly for the improvement of his realm, traveling all over the country and promoting its prosperity. When he needed a rest, he would withdraw to Tarson, the city of his sorrow and spend long days reminiscing in Euphemia's chambers.

On one such day, a Crusader pilgrim appeared and delivered the bad news that Emperor Manuel was headed to Cilicia with an elite force. Although, as his whole life testified, Toros was a self-sacrificing brave man, he adhered to an unbreakable rule to avoid jeopardizing his people and country. Thus, whenever possible, he chose the path that would spare his army losses while eroding the enemy's will and ability to fight. This irked the younger commanders, especially Mleh and Stepan, who criticized Toros behind his back. Nevertheless, Toros stayed the course, negotiating when possible, sometimes at the cost of symbolic concessions to opponents, while keeping real costs to a minimum.

Toros, as always, kept his head about him, but this matter aroused anxiety in him. In the first place, he was used to being in the know, but now the risk was imminent and Toros could not figure out how he was caught off guard. His sources in Constantinople, who regularly reported the information on the emperor's movements, failed to do the same on this occasion. Second, the emperor had adopted a smarter, more nimble strategy, attacking with a small elite force. This too gave Toros pause as it was the same strategy Toros himself had used successfully against Sultan Mahsud in Iconium.

Time was short. He could not take measures to secure the countryside, bring the people to safe havens, or deprive the enemy of sustenance. Still he had to move without delay. Therefore he left Tarson immediately and dispatched orders throughout the land to withdraw into the mountain strongholds.

Margaret and her sons also received an order to take refuge in the mountains. Only Tornik asked the prince's permission to stay and defend Mamestia. Toros rode through the countryside with his guards, encouraging the people and reassuring them that the storm would not last long and would pass, so they needed to hold fast in the meantime. In less than a month, the people and livestock had managed to take shelter in the mountains before the Byzantine troops could flood the valleys below.

One after another, Tarson, Adana, Anarzaba succumbed to the invading forces as planned. But the emperor hit a stumbling block in Mamestia. He personally laid siege to the fortress. It took him all winter and into the spring and summer of the following year to capture the fortress from Tornik. When Tornik saw no hope in holding the fortress any longer, he and his men escaped descending the steep walls by rope down to the river and swimming away from the enemy to join Toros's forces in the Black Mountains.

"Well," said the prince, upon seeing Tornik, "the Byzantines and their allies have attained their objective. Now, if they want, let them come and look for us here."

In the meantime, the allies of the emperor had multiplied. They included the Crusaders, led by the King of Jerusalem, who had recently married the emperor's daughter, and the Knights Templar, as well as other European barons and princes of various ranks. All of them joined the army of the Byzantine emperor who had made Mamestia his headquarters.

In Mamestia, a pitiful scene unfolded that could not but move even the hardest heart. The prince of Antioch, Reynald, who had transgressed not only against the imperial powers and the citizens, but also against the patriarch and church, whom he had tormented and plundered, was now walking outside the walls of the city, a mendicant in rags, barefoot and bear-headed, pleading for his life. He fell at the feet of the emperor and prostrated himself, offering up his sword to be beheaded. Alongside him were other members of his order, kneeling and begging for mercy. The emperor, deeming this degradation sufficient, pardoned Reynald on condition that Antioch recognize the supremacy of the Byzantine patriarch and permit the quartering of the imperial garrison in Antioch, at the discretion of the emperor."

The emperor then called a council of his generals and nobles and ordered them to defeat Toros as soon as possible, because the imperial army was running short of supplies, its cattle were dying of hunger and disease. It was thus crucial to defeat this elusive rebel without delay.

At this point, those in the council who had experience with the rough terrain of the Taurus and its tough mountaineers, spoke up. They explained to the emperor that it would be difficult and dangerous to wage war against a vigilant enemy force in their native mountains poised to repulse their attack. On the other hand, it would be easier to secure Toros's allegiance if he were offered a treaty on reasonable and honorable terms. The King of Jerusalem, Baldwin III, volunteered to be the emissary.

Baldwin personally met Toros and set out the emperor's conditions, the most difficult of which was for Toros to personally appear in Mamestia as a sign of obedience to the emperor. In return, the emperor promised to recognize him as the prince of Cilicia, taking only Anarzaba for himself. Toros accepted the terms and appeared in Mamestia honorably, as befits a prince, and not as a wretched supplicant like Reynald. The emperor gave him a cold reception, no doubt remembering him as a prisoner of Constantinople.

But Toros was not one to do things by halves. One day the word was out that the Armenian prince had suddenly disappeared. Rumors of a bad omen rapidly spread through the people and the Byzantine troops. Then to everyone's surprise, he reappeared with sheep, cattle, horses, and horses laden with grain. Already having witnessed the wise and mighty character of Toros and after this last action esteeming him even more, the emperor gave Toros the title of Pansebastos (General Commander) and confirmed by edict with a gold seal Toros's right to rule over Cilicia.

Then Emperor Manuel proceeded with his army from Cilicia to Antioch, from whence he launched a campaign against Nureddin, giving all Christians in those parts hope for liberation from Muslims. However, the laxity of the campaign, slow mobilization and ill-conceived strategy soon made clear that the Byzantine Empire had only one strategic aim – to divide and rule the region. When the army approached Aleppo, a messenger from Constantinople arrived and relayed that the Emperor was urgently needed in the capital. Manuel, turning a deaf ear to the pleas of the king of Jerusalem and the Christian princes to delay his return for three days, hastily signed a peace Treaty with the Emir and withdrew his forces. The Christians of the region were overcome with sorrow, but this mode of operations was no surprise to anyone who was even mildly acquainted with Byzantine policy and treachery.

On their way back to Constantinople, the Emperor's army passed through Cilicia. As they approached Anarzaba, Toros, who had a good memory and knew how unreliable the Byzantines were, quickly took precautions, gathering his troops and deploying them in the mountain stronghold of Vahka. The Emperor passed through without incident, and proceeded to Constantinople leaving detachments at outposts along the way. As Toros had predicted, the storm had passed, although it had taken over two years.

Peace reigned again in Cilicia. The fields were covered with grain and the vines heavy with grapes, and songs of joy filled in the air. Cognizant of the people's welfare, the peace-loving Prince of Armenia, upheld his side of the treaties as this was the only way to ensure the security of his borders. But this peaceful policy resulted in constant tension with his brother Stepan, causing the prince no end of heartache.

Stepan, being brave but reckless, was constantly toying with the idea of establishing his own principality. He made forays into Kesun and Marash, which always evoked complaints from neighbors. Under the influence of some clergy and nobility as short-sighted as himself, Stepan not only violated treaties but also his oath of allegiance. Inevitably, this led to war between Toros and Nureddin.

Toros, against his brother's will, made peace with the Emir. This incensed Stepan who began to plot against Toros. To Toros's dismay, he had no choice but to take Stepan into custody, although after giving him brotherly counsel that his was not the way to create a principality, he released him.

Toros pointed to his own example, explaining that he could easily drive the Byzantines out of Cilicia, but he chose to abide by the treaty for the time being, because they had given him no cause to do otherwise. This brotherly advice was to no avail. Reckless men do not know how to measure friendship or enmity. Stepan cozied up to the Byzantines and cultivated close ties with Andronicus, the Emperor's cousin and viceroy in Cilicia.

One day Andronicus invited Stepan to the Amut Fortress for lunch, and ordered him to be killed by being thrown into a boiling cauldron.

When the news of this brutal murder spread through Cilicia, anger and vengeance flared up. Toros led his army against the Byzantines. Suddenly, he saw beside him Mleh, in a rage, accompanied by a detachment of fierce cavalymen, on a mission to avenge his brother.

The Byzantine losses were overwhelming. Historians record that ten thousand Byzantines were destroyed and the Armenians recaptured Anarzaba and all the other fortresses and strongholds in Cilicia. The bloodshed would have been even more devastating had the King of Jerusalem not stepped to mediate.

Toros and Mleh buried their brother Stepan in the monastery of Arkagaghin. His inconsolable widow, Margaret, moved with their sons to her brother's fortress at Paperon.

Chapter 25. The Bride of Lambron

Toros was committed to fulfilling Euphemia's last wish, and Hetum, who grew up before his eyes, seemed to the Prince to be a suitable son-in-law. A scholarly Armenian priest and a Byzantine tutor cultivated the boy's mind, while Kostandin of Bardzraberd was assigned to train the young prince in the martial arts. Toros himself often talked with him, exploring various topics and, without correcting the boy's errors, asked him wise questions to make him seek out the truth on its own.

Despite these good intentions, it appeared to the Prince that the young man's family inclinations toward the Byzantine had taken deep roots in Hetum's heart. It seemed unlikely that education and sound reasoning could counteract the ideas he had absorbed with his mother's milk, which had led the princes of Lambron away from their nation and attracted them to the Byzantines.

Gohar, was still young, but as it is known, girls mature more quickly and she was bright for age. She kept pace with Hetum and had a remarkably inquisitive mind with an insatiable natural curiosity. And no less

remarkably, she found greater satisfaction in her father's answers than those of her teachers' which were often obscure.

The two children grew up day by day and even though they were still of a tender age, Toros thought it appropriate to arrange for their marriage. The wedding took place in Mamestia, the city abounding in memories of his first victories and of Euphemia's joyful days.

Since Oshin could not pay the second half of the ransom, the prince nobly deemed forgiveness of that obligation to be his only daughter's dowry and the young spouses left for Lambron.

The lords of Lambron were dyed in the cloth Byzantine loyalists who had passed their allegiance to the empire from father to son. Gohar, this tender sprout from the Rubinian tree, was like a flower suddenly transplanted to a hostile climate and inappropriate soil. She was surrounded by ideas and conversations that were strange to her.

Everything she had learned to honor in her father's house was the object of ridicule here in Lambron. But what weighed most heavily on her heart was that the sincere openness that she had taken for granted in her parent's house was frowned upon here. Even innocent laughter was something to be suppressed amid the sour faces that cast a pall on all around them. Her every word and action as a new daughter-in-law became an occasion for snide comments and reprimand. Her husband Hetum, who should have been her refuge and soulmate, felt himself more stifled at home than at the fortress of Vahka where he had been hostage. There he had enjoyed a more open and kindred relationship with Toros than with his own father, Oshin.

And then there were times when crude and cruel insults were directed toward Toros and the Rubinians, which caused Gohar pain and wounded her deeply. But despite her youth, she had the composure not to let on. Thus the sad days and months passed, until one day because of hustle and bustle, she surmised that Lambron was expecting a visit by Toros. The chance to see her father was like a ray of sunshine on those dark winter days for the poor girl. Byzantine protocol prohibited a daughter from showing the same affection to her father as before her marriage. But Toros, who had overturned Byzantine influence throughout Cilicia, was not the least constrained by such dusty proprieties.

Toros with a single glance could see that his daughter was unhappy. So he called her over and greeted her in everyone's presence in a formal manner, but before leaving he pulled her aside at the threshold and said in view of everyone, but outside of everyone's earshot, "My child, be joyful, be happy, your father has not forgotten you, and he never will." Then he continued on his way.

Toros was displeased with the servility of the princes of Lambron toward the Byzantines, but his magnanimity was such that he could understand and forgive such human frailty. In earlier times, the Lambron princes were dependent on the emperor, thus their loyalty to Byzantium was understandable; however, Toros could not forgive their scheming against him and his realm, which he considered treason against the Armenian nation. He knew that there had been many secret envoys and negotiations between Sultan Mahsud and the emperor. He also knew that the Byzantines had used Lambron to incite Reynald of Antioch against him, though he did not trust Reynald either. Moreover, when the emperor attacked Toros, the Lambron princes openly joined the Byzantines with their regiments, notwithstanding the fact that Hetum was his hostage at that time. And now Toros had in his hands letters written by the princes of Lambron, inciting Nureddin against him, and what's more, these were sent after he had wed his only daughter to Oshin's son.

He might have ignored these petty intrigues this time too, as he had in the past, but for his daughter's deplorable condition. The plight of his only daughter, Gohar, the living memory of his beloved Euphemia, hardened Toros's heart, and he resolved that he could no longer put off uprooting the arrogant treachery of the princes of Lambron. However, prudent man that he was, Toros first had to rescue his child from their

clutches. Ironically, he had released their hostage Hetum willingly and unharmed and actually delivered his daughter as a hostage to them.

This was, of course, the fulfillment of Euphemia's cherished hope, but also his own hope that following the practices of the time, he might make peace by intermarrying with rivals. Creating such family ties with the bonds of family and amity could replace armed hostility. But this had backfired, and Toros was pondering how to save his daughter without revealing his military plans. After her father's visit, Gohar found herself in an awkward position, the object of suspicious and accusatory glances.

Shahandukht, her mother-in-law, was not evil at heart, but neither did she have the strength of character not to indulge in the customary disdain mothers-in-law had for daughters-in-law. Thus, she could not resist throwing barbs and dirty looks like poisoned darts into Gohar's heart.

As for Hetum, as we have said, he should have been her refuge and consolation; however, he too did not have the mettle to shield his wife from his family's abuse. On one occasion, after dinner, Gohar could barely hold back her tears after enduring cruel remarks against her father and disrespectful comments about her uncle Stepan. Whereupon, her mother-in-law, with understated contempt, chided her,

"My daughter, you need to grow up. Once a girl becomes a wife, she must renounce her parent's home and everything connected with it. Do not make a fuss. It is unbecoming."

Gohar left without saying a word. Clutching a handkerchief to her face, she barely made it to her room before she burst into tears, looking out through her window; then she went out into the small flower garden. There she noticed something moving in the pale light of the moon. Her first impulse was to recoil in fear, but then someone spoke from behind the shadows.

"Princess," said he, "I've been sent by your father, prince Toros."

Upon hearing the name of her father, the fear receded from her face and was replaced by a timid hope.

"You're from my father?"

"Yes. Your father's order is as follows: tomorrow, at noon sharp, when everyone goes down to the refectory, you should go to the upper gate of the castle, and he gave this paper as confirmation." The young man conveyed his message and vanished as abruptly as he had appeared, nimbly descending the lattice on the garden wall as if it were a staircase.

Gohar was flustered. She clutched the paper in one hand as she watched until the young man had descended safely to the ground. Then she collected herself and went to her room, stood by the lamp and read the note, written in her father's familiar hand, "Read this and keep silent. Tomorrow, during the noontime meal, go to the upper gate of the castle . . ."

"Oh, my dear father," she said to herself, "he did not forget me. He understood that I am being tormented here... And he said to me then, 'Your father has not forgotten you, nor will he ever.'"

"But Hetum ... he loves me ... Yes, he does, but he lacked a father like my father . . . If my poor mother were alive now and knew what I had to endure here . . . What would she do? She would talk to my father and, perhaps, the young man, who raced down the wall like a lizard, would have brought my father's order a month sooner . . . But what should I do next? Of course, men will come and rescue me ... but what about Hetum? ... It is my father's order. I must remain silent and obey. As Babken hayrik always used to say, 'he knows everything, sees everything, thinks of everything ...'

What a dear man, Babken hayrik was ... when I was getting ready to move to Lambron as a daughter-in-law, how much did he weep! Until then, I had only seen his tears on the day of my mother's death . . . and I remember that when I came to him in my wedding-dress, jumping for joy, I happened to see him wiping his eyes and ruffling his beard, looking this way and that, to avoid my gaze. The poor old man seemed befuddled.

"Are you not happy, Babken hayrik? Why?" I asked. "Don't you want me to marry?"

"How can I not want you to get married, my dear Goharik," he replied, "just talk to your father, ask him not to send you to Lambron, and stay with us, princess."

And when he said these words, I clearly saw the tears streaming from his eyes. His tears were so profuse, I was especially careful that those tears not leave spots on my gown . . .

Oh, if only I had understood the deeper meaning of these tears, now my heart would not be wounded so. Only Babken wept for me ... my father did not... But I wonder, did my father, who knows everything, not know then how difficult it would be for me in these people's hands?

Of course, he knows everything. Who told him that I was unhappy here? I did not say anything to him, and I could not tell him they watched me like a hawk ...

Nor could I write to him, as my letter could fall into the wrong hands ... But why do they hate us? What did my poor uncle do to them? Everyone wept for his death, except my father ... but he never weeps ... he just sits with his eyes closed when he is sad ...

When I go to my father, I will tell him everything ... However, Hetum is sad, he is not one of them . . . I'll talk to him, I've had it with this mistreatment . . . Is that him coming? So much time has passed and he knows how sad I've been . . . I'd better tear this paper up . . . Oh, now there's no chance that it will fall into the wrong hands . . ."

The door opened and Hetum appeared with a gloomy face. He came toward his wife, who grudgingly averted her gaze and hung her head down. Seeing her sad demeanor, Hetum began to make excuses, saying that antipathy toward the Rubinians was only to be expected in Lambron and would only pass when the rivalry between their families had been forgotten. Until then, they should be patient and turn a deaf ear . . .

"So," Gohar said bitterly, "You too are making excuses for these groundless insults? The least you could do is remember that my father and poor mother did not treat you like this when you lived in Vahka. In all my years living there, I never heard a single harsh word about your parents or your kinsmen either from them or from the servants. I considered you to be my brother for a long time. I thought I would be treated the same here as you were in our home, but I can see I was sorely mistaken – alas, alas! A thousand woes!"

And after these words she shed no tears. Hardened by her bitterness, she huddled in a corner of their bed and pretended to be asleep. As for Hetum, ashamed by her reproach, he decided to wait for things to cool off, as was his wont. He lay down and eventually fell asleep, which only angered his wife more. She told herself . . .

"If he truly loved me with all his heart, then he would have consoled me. Why should I stay here for, there's no one who cares for me in this castle. Nothing but gloomy faces and sour words. Babken hayrik was right . . ."

But when one is young, sadness brings on sleep. Gradually, Gohar's eyelids grew heavy and before she knew it, it was morning. Gohar was unusually irritable that day, but no one could fathom why. Sensing that his wife was ill-disposed, Hetum figured it best to go hunting.

Gohar was restless and she could not focus on anything. She paced about the flower garden, absent-mindedly cutting flowers. From time to time, her eyes would involuntarily look off into the horizon in search of something . . . Then, around noon, coming down the mountainsides, several riders in white clothes appeared in the distance. They came down the road to the fortress. Her heart was throbbing. The dinner bell rang. She instinctively began to head down but caught herself.

Slowly, with a longing gaze, she glanced at the door leading to the refectory, peered in, but no one was there yet. She turned to the left down a corridor leading to the upper gate of the castle. where the orange and pomegranate tree tops showed. An old doorkeeper with his staff sat there. When the lady approached, he rose to his feet. Without saying a thing, she went out the door and saw that the three horsemen had already arrived.

“Babken *hayrik*, is that you?” exclaimed Gohar.

“Yes, my princess,” answered the old man.

At the same instant, two mighty hands took hold of her and planted her on the saddle in front of Babken. Even though he was over seventy, Babken was still robust. He struck the horse and galloped along the road to Tarson, holding onto her with his right hand and never looking back.

The old doorkeeper who witnessed all this, was about to sound the alarm, but he got such a jab in his chest, that he fell backwards. A young man in a flash had jumped off his horse, lifted Gohar to Babken’s saddle, struck a blow to the guard, and then jumped back on his horse with a burst of laughter and was now rushing to catch up with Babken.

But Babken had disappeared in a cloud of dust and it would have been impossible to catch up with him had he not purposely slowed down so his comrades could join him.

“Are you comfortable, my daughter?” The old man asked.

“Praise the Lord, I am comfortable and I am overwhelmed with joy, Babken *hayrik*,” answered Gohar, trying to push away Babken’s beard. “But tell me, have we already left Lambron?”

“Do not worry my child, in all of Cilicia there is no horse that can catch up with this one. Tornik himself went all the way to Sgherd to get it.

“But I hear horse hooves, Babken *hayrik*!”

“These are our boys, my dear, don’t you worry. Soon the prince himself will arrive to greet you.”

They rode a bit further, when a cloud of dust appeared before them. A cavalry regiment was on its way. Babken’s horse neighed and began to beat its hooves.

“It’s the prince,” said Babken. “*Flame* gives good news.”

“What Flame?” Gohar asked.

“*Flame* is this red horse of ours, which flies like a flame, understands everything and knows how to make itself understand. He is much smarter than most of the dumb people around him. Your father lent this horse to me today so that I could rescue you.

And with these words, Toros appeared. He had himself come to escort his daughter home. He approached and dismounted, took Gohar and helped her on another horse he had prepared for her to ride. He threw a

cloak over her shoulders and placed a veil of fine muslin on her head, and they rode hard until they reached Tarson.

Although Gohar's rescue from Lambron fortress went very smoothly, she was exhausted; it took several days for her to recover from the shock of this daring venture. Seeing her distraught condition, Toros was beside himself, haunted by Euphemia's sudden and terrible death. As soon as she was able to travel, he ordered Babken and an entourage of mounted guards to take her back to Vahka.

In the meantime, a search party had been dispatched from Lambron to find Princess Gohar. After searching until nightfall, they returned, heads hanging, and reported that the daughter-in-law of Lambron castle had already entered Tarson with her father, accompanied by a large cavalry regiment.

Chapter 26. The Angel of Peace

Lambron was known as an impregnable fortress and Toros knew that its rulers could hold out against him for a long time. However, the prince was also well aware of something else: there would be no outside help for Lambron. The Byzantines had come to a sober recognition of Toros's power and they had resorted to the mediation of the King of Jerusalem to restrain the Armenian sword. Therefore, having ascertained that Oshin would receive no assistance from anywhere, Toros gathered all his forces and attacked Lambron.

It is depressing to talk about this fratricidal war, during which Armenian blood would be shed by fellow Armenians. The ruler of Lambron had no other option but to leave his fate to the formidable walls of his castle. Eventually, Oshin understood that negotiation was his only option, so he tried to temper the anger of the victor. When Oshin's envoy came seeking peace, Toros, gray haired after twenty years of nearly continuous battle, surrounded by his generals and comrades-in-arms, did not dismount but remained seated on his saddle. Toros heard out the envoy and said firmly,

“Your master sends you to seek peace without even a hint of shame. However, I have not lost my sense of shame. I have resolved not to make unworthy alliances with treacherous and dishonest people from now on, because I know that they will not keep their word and will break their promises at the first opportunity. So go back and tell your master that if he wants to save his neck, he has no choice but to open the gates and hand Lambron over to me. After that, I will allow him go wherever he wishes, whether Constantinople or Iconia or Aleppo, that is, to the capitals of the places he has connived with against me, spying for them and inciting them to attack me.

If your master thinks he can weasel his way out of this situation, he is quite mistaken in his perception of Toros. On the very first day when I came down this road, I was but a refugee who had just barely escaped with my life from Byzantine captivity. Still I was determined to shatter the shackles and liberate my people.

The first obstacle I encountered was Oshin. I told him that I was not looking for glory, but was seeking a remedy for the miserable condition of my people. But for Oshin this was incomprehensible because he had long since abandoned his nation and has no concept of what it is to be Armenian. If he had, he would have understood that this great mission was not about me, Toros, but about the Armenian nation that had rallied around me. Everyone standing before you here and all those who have been scattered from the slopes of Masis throughout the world, the exiled, the oppressed, the tormented, abused by foreign forces, all those whose faith, honor, and property were endangered, all of them were with me, supporting and encouraging me. And I must say that now, at this very moment, that same Armenian people, for whom your master has no respect and to whom I have dedicated my life, my blood, and my fortune, are now with that Toros he scorned.

Yet after all this, your master has no shame, no pangs of conscience? Does he even know the meaning of shame? Was he not afraid of God's retribution when he tried to destroy this last refuge of the Armenians in

the Taurus mountains, where, after so much persecution, my forefather Ruben had found a haven for our people and where by the will of God almighty, I restored and expanded our realm.

As God is my witness, I bear no guilt for spilling Armenian blood. And your master is well aware of the fact that to avoid this bloodshed, I wanted his son Hetum to be my son-in-law so that the enmity between us would wane. However, your master did not want peace or friendship. Hence, he must bear the punishment he brought upon himself. I cannot sacrifice the interests and the honor of my nation to the malice of Lambron.

Here, look at these papers that have just fallen into my hands from a messenger intercepted near Korikos. They are irrefutable evidence of Oshin's treachery. These papers, however, speak not only about his betrayal, but also about something I knew all along – that your prince should give up any hopes of receiving Byzantine aid for a very long time . . . So report to him that I am pitching my tent in front of the gates of Lambron and will not leave until I raze this den of iniquity to the ground. That is my answer, and it is final.”

And Toros whipped his horse, giving orders to intensify the siege. His tent was indeed pitched directly in front of the fortress, and from this tent he ruled all Cilicia. As to the impregnable fortress of Lambron, its feigned indifference to danger was now showing cracks. As they looked out they saw that the forces encircling them served in regular shifts, with home leave and an endless stream of fresh troops each month.

From the fortress, it was impossible to launch an attack on the surrounding forces. Thus, after nearly a year, as provisions were depleted, the troops within became restive. This caused Oshin to worry, as well it should. He sent a second delegation to Toros, this time headed by his son Hetum. However, this mission was less successful than the previous one. Toros's front line troops had been instructed to turn back any delegation and not to bring them to the prince.

So Oshin sadly reflected on the situation as it had evolved and was inclined to put it to an end by some daring action, when Shahandukht, his wife, approaching her husband said,

“What good are despair and woeful thoughts? Leave it to me and I will find a way out.”

“Who is stopping you?” said Oshin. “Let's see what you can do. Just remember that I have no intention of falling into the hands of that villain a second time.”

“And who intends to hand you over to him?”

“Well, go and do what you can.”

Shahandukht left her husband and sent for the priest of the prince's chapel, a self-effacing, virtuous old man.

“Reverend father,” the princess told him, “you must save us.”

“If it is in my power, my lady, I'm ready,” the poor old man replied, with a bewildered look, wondering whether she had indeed lost her mind.

“Yes, Father, you are the only one who can find a way out for us.”

“You know, my princess, that I am only a feeble old man. If the Lord had listened to my prayers, these misfortunes would not have befallen us,” the old priest answered, fearing that the princess expected him to do miracles. “You know, my lady, miracles are rare now, and I am a sinner before my Lord.”

“Oh, no, I'm not expecting a miracle,” Shahandukht said smiling, “I just want you to agree to go and talk with Toros. You are a servant of God and if he does not want to accept you as an ambassador, then maybe, he will listen to your request that you do not want to return to the fortress but would like to retire to a monastery

in the Black Mountain. Try to persuade him, stress your ill-health. When he grants permission, which is quite likely, hurry to Hromkla, to my uncles, the bishops, and inform them of our situation. Ask that one of them come to try to soothe this beast. We still have three months of provisions. We can hold on till then. If you hurry, you can save us.”

“Yes, my lady, but do you understand what a difficult journey this is?” asked the aged priest, lost in ponderous thought.

“I know,” the princess replied harshly, “it is a long way, but you have to think holy father that with this journey you will save more souls than you failed to save in your entire life of prayer.”

“It is true, I am old, but I have no illnesses. Must I lie to Toros?”

“Holy Father, now it’s not the time to quibble about qualms. Our salvation is in your hands.”

Finally, the clergyman gave in, sensing he had no choice but to undertake this difficult mission. Being a recluse, he had only seen Oshin’s face on Sundays, and then only when he was giving the sermon from the pulpit. Now, he was being pressed into service to negotiate with a prince who had been portrayed as a brute on a mission that was none of his business, but he saw no other alternative, so he acquiesced. Shahandukht, after thoroughly instructing the old man what to say, arranged a mule for him to ride and ordered the gate to be opened.

When Toros was informed that an aged priest had arrived to talk to him, the prince, without raising his head, said, “Let him go to Oshin and preach the gospel of Christ, which he does not follow. And I’m here to protect that same gospel.”

This response completely nonplussed the old man, so he again begged the old commander who had conveyed his request and rejection to announce him to the prince. That commander was none other than Babken, who took pity on the priest, who was about his age, but did not have his strength and vigor. Babken nodded and pointed to the tent, then went away.

The old priest, expecting to see the prince surrounded by executioners, was quite surprised to see Toros surrounded by several monks in hoods who, sitting on the carpets around him, diligently wrote down what he dictated.

The prince then noticed that someone entered, raised his head and became indignant, but when he saw that the newcomer was an old and meek clergyman, he stood up, silently took him by the arm, invited him to sit down beside him and, looking at him with his large and deep eyes, waited for the priest to speak. This reception completely embarrassed the poor old man.

“Reverend father, you see how busy I am. So go ahead and tell me what you have to tell. Just know that I’ll not accept any agreement but the surrender of the fortress.”

“If this is decided irrevocably,” said the elder, “at least give me permission to retire to a monastery, for I am sick and feeble.”

“But is there any other priest in the fortress besides you?”

“There are two more.”

“Then you are free to go” said Toros, and took up his papers again.

The siege continued. Toros endured the hardships of army life in the field without complaint. From time to time, he made his rounds, returning determined to raze Lambron to the ground. Unshakable in this decision, he continued the siege when he was informed that a bishop had arrived at their encampment with a message and a blessing from the Catholicos. The prince ordered the bishop to be brought to him and went out of the tent to meet him. Toros's first impression was that this was not an ordinary man. He was a gray-haired man of medium height, dressed simply and decently and with polite manners. Without a word, he took out a paper and respectfully handed it to the prince. And the prince, inviting the guest to sit down, read the message carefully, then putting it aside, said,

“Your grace, our duty is to obey the orders of the church and our spiritual head when the question concerns religion. Perhaps, there is no other person among the Armenians who honors these orders more than me, but there is a limit to everything. When the problem is out of the jurisdiction of the church and fraught with danger to the nation, I don't think that the eminent head of the church would suggest an unjust course of action. But since you have made a long journey and are no doubt tired, it is inappropriate to discuss this right now. Please rest a bit and then you can hear what your relatives and I have to say, and if you find even the slightest tilt of justice to their side, I give you my word to fully comply with the wishes of your two most holy brothers.”

“What can I answer to your noble words, great prince,” politely said the bishop, who was none other than Nerses Shnorhali, the brother of Catholicos Grigor. I am happy to deal with such a magnanimous man who puts the interests of our nation above all and who respects religious commandments and precepts. I could not have asked more mercy from our Lord.”

“Now, your eminence,” said the prince, rising, “I will give the order to prepare you a comfortable tent.”

“If you would, could you give the order to permit me permission to entry to Lambron?”

“For you there is no prohibition. You may enter when and where you want, all the doors are open for you.”

Nerses stood up, bid farewell, and headed to the besieged fortress of Lambron. A little later, one of his subordinate clergy, who had stayed at Toros's camp for a while, stuffed some food in his cloak and entered the famished fortress where there had been nothing to eat but bread for several months.

As might be imagined, Shahandukht, who was Nerses's neice and a smooth talker, did not have much difficulty persuading her uncle Nerses and turning him against Toros. She worked every angle, painting vivid pictures of the privations they endured because of the year-long siege and whining about perfidy of her fugitive daughter-in-law and the devastation her flight caused Hetum after less than a year of marriage. She saved Toros's stern responses to their envoys and threats to raze the city for last.

Nerses was taken aback. All this was too much for a gentle soul like his to digest, but Toros's noble conduct and speech told him that this was not the whole story and that there were other reasons that would come to light soon.

The next day, when Nerses returned to Toros's camp and opened the subject of the seige, Toros said bluntly that he was ready to accept him as a judge, but insisted that Oshin be present and respond to the charges. Oshin was categorically against this arrangement but, unable to resist the pressure of his wife and family, he had no choice but to comply, especially since there was no other hope of salvation. And so, Nerses, the angel of peace, was pressed into service as a judge.

Toros, recollecting the many events of the past decades, told in detail how much he hated war and how harmful he always considered it, and how many times he had quarrels with his brothers on this subject. He explained that notwithstanding his attitude towards war, he had to fight against the Byzantines and other peoples for the sake of the honor and freedom of his nation.

He further explained that invariably, in all those wars, Oshin himself had either fought against him or had incited others to do so. Moreover, Toros had evidence in his hands that although Oshin was not a direct accomplice in his brother Stepan's cruel murder, he was among the sympathizers.

Toros went on recounting how he had united all of the Armenians after Stepan's barbarous murder, defeated the Byzantines and driven them out of Cilicia. Yet Oshin was more Byzantine than the Byzantines themselves, appealing to the emperor on numerous occasions to incite or launch a war, "because there would be no peace in Cilicia so long as the Rubinians still walked the earth and were not exterminated."

Mind you, these venomous words were written at the very time when Toros gave his only daughter to Oshin's son in wedlock, forgiving Oshin's ransom and making the hostage Hetum his son-in-law. Toros, deeming his own words insufficient, submitted as evidence the letters bearing Oshin's signature.

Nerses sat there stunned by what he was hearing the whole time, and Oshin was speechless. Toros then turned to the judge and said,

"Holy father, if Meruzhan, if Vest Sargis, were sitting here now, next to this man, my first and only duty would be not to find some way to distinguish these wrongdoers from each other, but to mete out the punishment they deserve. For many years I have been patient and forbearing, but now, there is no alternative but to raze this den of iniquity to the ground, not only for my own honor and safety, but also as a sacred duty to my people. Here, under the protection of these very walls, these plots were hatched and letters written. Armenians marched out of these gates, weapons in hand, to shed the blood of their fellow Armenians. That is why I have been here for almost a year now, waiting in this tent. Truly, you are worthy of pity, Your Eminence, having such a son-in-law, and, perhaps, I am even more worthy of pity, having made the son of such a father my son-in-law."

Although these words were uttered without anger and in a calm tone, the burden of contempt weighed so heavily on Oshin that he hung his head on his chest and stood motionless. Nerses sorrowfully asked if he recognized these papers as his own, and when he only answered "yes" with his eyes, the bishop advised him to return to Lambron, while he remained with Toros and his commanders.

Then Nerses, in his blessed tongue, began to weave words of exhortation, convincing Toros that the first duty of a Christian is to be indulgent, and that if revenge is opposed to the principles of Christianity in general, it suits great and lofty hearts even less.

"Well, holy father, since you are the messenger of peace and harmony exhorting me in the name of Christ and the great Armenian patriarch, I, believing in the first and honoring the second, agree to lift the siege and spare Lambron, which will remain a stumbling rock for the Rubinians.

But, you, holy father, scion of our Holy Illuminator, seated upon his holy throne, do not forget a warrior's spiritual exhortation – keep the small flag of the Armenian church independent, just as I strive to protect the independence of our national flag.

It pains me to say that I perceive similarities in the views of Hromkla and Lambron, and it seems to me that you are going the wrong way if you want to unite our church with the Byzantine."

"Christ's church is one," said Nerses, "and our duty is to try to unite everyone in peace and harmony."

"I do not enter into theological discussions. what I want to say is simply - first weigh carefully and only then act."

A peace treaty was signed. Shnorhali himself stood as Oshin's guarantor. Toros promised that Gohar would spend part of the year in Lambron. Finally, it seemed the families would enjoy good relations, at least until Toros's death.

Chapter 27. Treason

The actions of the church officials in those times were distressing for Toros. Catholicos Grigor entered into negotiations with the Byzantine emperor Manuel, who, pursuing both religious and political goals, sought to establish a union with the Armenian church. In Toros's view, such union was objectionable. First it posed a risk of absorption. Moreover it augured if not schism then at least serious disagreements within the Armenian church itself.

Therefore, he took a negative view of Hromkla's ongoing and planned ecclesiastical initiatives. However, the prince found the envoy who mediated the conflict with Lambron fortress so gracious and humble, that a few words sufficed to convey his concerns, and he saw no need to belabor the point.

Toros still had big plans for expanding his realms, but he was kept occupied by constant wars limiting the opportunities to populate Cilicia with displaced Armenians. Nevertheless he did succeed in this goal but not to the extent he had hoped. His aim was to turn the country into a powerful Armenian state secured with impassable mountain bulwarks and the sea. Thus with the country at peace and free from external enemies and internal intrigues, the Prince directed his efforts to realization of this strategy.

Toros was tireless. He crisscrossed the country, helped settle the displaced, financed the needy and guaranteed the safety of their property. When he needed a break, he would go hunting or engage in lively conversations with scholars. The generals and knights of the realm were the very people who supported him from the very first day he set foot in Cilicia and fought the great battles at his side. They were the ones who secured the realm from the Byzantines, Turkmen, Seljuks and Arabs, and all of his comrades-in-arms were rewarded with fortresses and castles, cities and towns to rule over and protect. And thus he won over doubters and malcontents who could not say enough kind things about the prince. Toros no sooner made a suggestion and the deed was done without grumbling or quibbling, no pressure or compulsion required. People acted out of conviction and trusted the prince's wise judgment.

The one exception, the incorrigible malcontent who would remain so until his death without anyone piercing the courage and daring strength of his Rubinian roots, was Mleh. His thinking never evolved, even after all of these hardships and dramatic events. He was the same old arrogant, restless, foul-mouthed, reckless trouble-maker. Toros grew tired of complaints about Mleh, and the people grew tired of complaining about him, especially since they knew Toros took all this to heart. Thus, his immediate cohort tried to shield him from at least some of it.

Babken, Sargis, Tornik and even Kostandin were loath to relate to Toros the news of Mleh's latest misdeeds as they knew it would pain him. Yet they also knew that Mleh's return to Cilicia and his wholehearted collaboration with Toros in avenging their brother Stepan's death had asuaged Toros toward his wayward brother. Thus Tornik, who was especially highly esteemed by Toros for his and his ancestors' valiant deeds and integrity, was conversing with Babken when Sargis arrived. Sargis was out of sorts and not his usual jovial self.

"Hey, my good fellow," said Babken, "what's the matter? No *hello*? Why the sour face? Are you in mourning or something? Is it the anniversary of your grandmother's death?"

“I don't know the exact day she died, but yesterday was Holy Cross All Souls' Day. As for death, I'm indifferent, but for some reason I'm depressed today, and to tell you the truth, you two do not look very happy either. I need a change of pace. I'd like to go on a hunt. Do you want to come along?”

“So like our prince, you seek diversion through hunting. He'll work 24 hours straight, writing and dictating, then hop on his horse for a hunt. He relieves his fatigue by getting more fatigued. Are you like that too? Not me, son, as I've gotten older, I like to stay put.”

“Even in time of war, Babken *hayrik*?”

“War is another matter. You relive your youth in war. The trumpet sounds, your blood quickens and your heart pounds.”

“If that's what you think, what would Mleh say? If three days go by without his seeing someone cut down by a sword or sphere, he cannot get a night's rest,” said Tornik with a laugh.

“Prince Mleh ...” Sargis grunted sullenly and fell silent.

“Well, well, spit it out,” said Babken.

“No, I'd better not. It will just make you angry.”

There was an awkward silence. Babken squinted and looked around. “Sargis, you are burdened by heavy thoughts because you're itching to tell us a secret. Since you arrived, it seemed like you have something on your mind that you dare not say. God knows, if Tornik were not here and I were alone, you would have told me already. Right? Tell the truth.”

“Brothers, in this case, I'd better leave right now,” said Tornik, getting up.

“Where are you going? Hold on,” said Babken, taking him by the arm and making him sit down again, “Sargis, my son, if there is something serious to tell me, go ahead, don't be afraid. You can speak in front of Tornik too, I know him well.”

“I do not doubt him for a minute and trust him wholeheartedly, but our forebears had a saying, “A secret among three is no longer a secret.” Tornik, dear friend, no offense, please sit down. If Babken *hayrik* had not been here, I would have told it to you anyway.

“To tell you the truth, I'm completely bewildered. It's a difficult situation. It will break our prince's heart, if I tell him.”

Babken forcefully pulled Sargis by the arm, sat him down and whispered, “What's the matter? Tell us, my son, the three of us here are one in spirit. I'm a good judge of character. Come on, tell us the whole story.!”

They huddled together. The three men, with their distinct appearances formed an extraordinary trio. Tornik with his wide forehead and earnest demeanor, Sargis with his sharp and distrustful eyes and Babken with his long gray eyebrows almost covering his eyes, leaned forward to listen to the secret Sargis was about to share.

“You were there, Babken, when the prince ordered me to go to Aleppo for a week, to enter the city in the guise of a merchant, buy some goods there, look closely around and find out what Nureddin is up to, what people are saying, how things are going. Well, I stayed there for a week, loaded the goods on a donkey and headed back. I had taken with me only one of our boys. When we reached Areg monastery I told the boy to take the horse to the fortress, which was an hour away. The sun was already setting. I entered the forest to wash myself in a creek and suddenly heard voices. I crept closer to them. There were five or six Turks sitting

there speaking in their language; by Turks, I mean marauders. To my astonishment, who do you think I see there as the ringleader – Prince Mleh. I kid you not.”

‘No,’ one of the thugs, as big as a bull, protested, ‘even if you give me a thousand gold pieces I will not go against that man. Whoever goes against him goes straight to his own death. You can try to talk these jackasses into it if you want. I was about eighteen when on the way to Rapan we attacked his small contingent with our force of six thousand warriors. We wanted to capture him alive. But then out of nowhere this small contingent multiplied and swelled, and our blood started to flow like a river. It was as if your brother were transformed into a dragon, his sword like lightening, chopping left and right, delivering a death blow to everyone in his path. I hid behind a tree and watched. Then I quietly climbed the tree and watched from there – our warriors were falling under his sword like leaves. Since that time, I have seen many battles and been many places, but I have never seen such a man. Whoever wants to go with you, be my guest, but count me out.’

Mleh then burst out laughing and mocked them. ‘Oh ladies, shave your beards.’ He got up and so did they. Then I slipped away quietly and saw Mleh passing by, still laughing devilishly with the Turks. It’s true, they did not make a deal, but this man was ready to dig his own brother’s grave. He has no self-control when he is drunk. Someday he will do something that will bring great grief upon us and our entire nation. I’m too ashamed to tell the prince what I saw and heard. That’s why I came to you. You are the eldest among us and the wisest - what should I do? Or, better to say - what should we do? Now Tornik’s face has gone pale as well.”

And indeed the face of the noble young man turned deathly white, his forehead was covered with beads of sweat and his companions could even hear his heart pounding, if they were attentive. Unable to hold back any longer, Tornik stood up and began to pace the room. Babken after listening with no reaction, closed his eyes as if he were asleep. But it was obvious that he was mulling over what he had heard.

After a short while, Sargis became impatient and said, “Brothers, I shared with you what I knew. And now, one of you sits here frozen like a statue and the other can’t stay still. Speak up, who knows what this scoundrel is cooking up against his brother this time!”

“Well, speaking of the devil, who do you think I saw sitting with under the canopy, finishing up his bottle of raki,” said Tornik, “I saw him on my way here. What a pity that the Prince has such a brother. I, like you all, have no inclination to tell anyone about Mleh’s foul play, let alone report it to his brother.”

“Then, what should we do?” asked Sargis, turning to Babken.

“What should we do . . .” asked Babken. “I can’t just sit here and watch this madman destroy our country. The prince will be back soon. First, I need to tell him the whole story. You should stay here so that you can fill in the details.”

After this they sat in silence for a long time. Then the silence was broken by hoof beats outside the window. Toros had returned.

After so many years, Babken could discern Toros’s mood at a glance. He told the two guards at the top of the staircase, “The prince is in a good mood this evening. It is a pity that I will have to ruin it. Look how he is rubbing the horse and talking to the groom.”

So Babken held off saying anything, thinking to himself, “Let my prince enjoy his meal in peace.” After the meal, as he saw Toros heading for his chambers, he got up to catch him on the way. From Babken’s behavior, the prince immediately sensed that something was amiss.

“Speak, Babken *hayrik*, speak up. You have something important to tell me. What is it?”

“It’s Prince Mleh, again, my lord.”

“A new folly?”

“The worst of all possible follies!”

“What is it?” Toros frowned.

“He wants to kill you.”

“Says who?” asked the prince, casting a searching glance at Sargis and Tornik, who stood a little further away with a guilty look.

“Sargis, tell him the whole story,” ordered Babken.

Toros listened without interrupting.

“You know, Babken *hayrik*,” he finally spoke, “I once ordered Stepan’s arrest for ten months, and it still wounds my heart. Of course, Mleh is not Stepan. He is just a blowhard. He blurts out whatever comes to his mind. He’s all talk. This needs to be taken into account before taking any action.

“My lord,” said Babken irritated, “at least order me to take adequate precautions.”

“Well,” Toros laughed, “here’s an order for you - do what you think best, just don’t disclose it to anyone and don’t cause me any trouble.”

“At least, let Tornik be your bodyguard.”

“Done.”

“Sargis and I will take care of the rest.”

“Very well, Babken *hayrik*, do as you see fit. It’s fine with me as long as no complaints reach me.”

“Don’t worry, my prince.”

When Toros retired, the three friends exchanged glances.

“Now Tornik, the life of the prince is in your hands.”

“May God help us!” said the brave young man, whose spiritual purity shone on his radiant face. “I will follow his every footstep. Wherever he is, that will be my home.”

“Well done, my fellow. And as for us, Sargis, we have to keep an eye on what Mleh is up to, his comings and goings.”

“Consider it done,” said Sargis, and the three of them retired to their rooms.

From then on, Tornik was inseparable from Toros. Being constantly at the prince’s side, Tornik became yet more polished.

Often, Toros could be seen with two teenagers, his nephews Ruben and Levon, whom their widowed mother brought from Paperon to their uncle in the Vahka fortress. From their robust appearance, there could be no doubt that Stepan's sons were noble heirs of the Rubinians.

Although Toros showed fatherly love and care toward both equally, Babken's innate intuition prompted him to say that "the older brother, Ruben, takes after his father, while the younger brother, Levon, takes after his uncle and is destined to follow in his footsteps." And indeed, Levon had an inquisitive nature and was very fond of his uncle. He hung on Toros's every word, while Ruben was more given to amusement.

A few months passed after the incident Sargis had witnessed and recounted. Toros was getting ready to go hunting near a place known as Peram Springs. Suddenly the sky grew dark and a storm began. "We'll go on our hunt tomorrow," the prince told Tornik. On the next morning, Toros left very early, taking with him only four or five people as usual. Levon, his nephew also joined him.

Having reached their destination, they had barely dismounted, when they dispersed to surround the deer from all sides. Tornik, who was next to Levon, at that moment said, "Follow me." Going in the opposite direction, he rushed to where Toros was, because he had spotted the glittering of a weapon over there. Indeed, as he got closer, he saw that five armed men had surrounded Toros.

In the face of this surprise attack, the prince put his back to a large tree and took a defensive posture, calmly watching his attackers. Before Tornik could move, Toros unleashed his father Levon's huge sword and knocked the weapons from the hands of two of his attackers. Just then, Tornik entered the fray, laying down one of the attackers with a single blow.

Meanwhile, Levon saw a tall man standing a bit in the distance, with his face hidden under his helmet's visor. The man had a sword in his hand but he looked more like a spectator or ringleader. Levon, under the sway of his youthful passion, rushed at him, but the man swatted his sword away like a fly and it landed several paces away. The man remained motionless, watching as his men fell one after another under Toros and Tornik's mighty blows.

Seeing that four or five of them had already perished and three more were in imminent danger, he turned around and jumped a fairly large crevice, then started to run across the thick underbrush and rocky terrain with great leaps and bounds. However, he barely made it ten paces, when his path was blocked by three men, Sargis and his two brothers.

"Get out of my way," said the man in armor in a husky, low, and composed voice."

"Get out of your way?" said Sargis. "Is that what you said? I'm not used to running away from traitors, whoever they may be. Drop your weapon and surrender!"

In response, Sargis received two powerful blows one after the other. Not only was his sword knocked from his hand, but his left shoulder was wounded. His brothers rushed at the man in armor, to avenge their brother, but their blows were nothing to him or his armor. He snickered and sneered at them. Sargis, although disarmed and wounded, with amazing speed managed to dive between the legs of the rogue and shove him to the ground. It seems as if the clash was over as the armored man fell to the ground. But he flared up again in an instant. The man was back on his feet, and ready to crush his three opponents, who backed away, starting to think they were dealing with the devil, and not with a man.

At just this moment, Toros, Tornik and Levon arrived. When the man saw six swords against himself, he calmly took exactly the same stance as Toros had earlier, securing his back against a tree, and shouted, "Well, come on, show me what you've got, give it your best shot," Everyone exchanged glances. Toros planted his sword on the ground, and with a heavy voice said,

“Mleh, drop your weapon! This is the order of your elder brother and your prince.”

Everyone was in shock. These words had barely been uttered, when it was as if an invisible force seized the man in armor. His sword fell from his hand, and he stood, arms folded across his chest.

“Take his sword,” said Toros to Tornik. “Go back to the horses. We’re heading back.”

Everyone was silent. Sargis’s brothers quickly bandaged his wound, and the entourage headed back, with Toros at the head, and Mleh and the rest following behind him. Not a single word, nor a single sound was heard; only the hoof beats broke the silence, until they got to Vahka. Dismounting, Toros turned to his brother.

“Go to your chambers and wait for my order.” Mleh obeyed and left without any response.

Messengers were immediately dispatched to all the surrounding fortresses summoning a council of princes and generals. Mleh was brought before them. The prince recounted all the cruelties, imprudent and irrational acts, threats against him, as well as the last treason committed by Mleh. Then the prince asked his brother,

“Now, Mleh, tell me the truth, if it were I doing all this to you, what would you have done?”

“I wouldn’t have waited so long. I’d have killed you long ago,” answered Mleh sternly.

“But I don’t want history to record that a Rubinian stained his hands with his brother’s blood. So, go away, leave this country. It is more than enough that I have already lost two brothers at the hands of the Byzantines. I thought that Stepan’s ill-fated death was enough to sober you up. I thought you would come to your senses, being the sole legitimate heir to the Rubinian throne after me, but it was all in vain. You should be put to death, but I shall pardon you. Yet I will never forgive myself if you sit on this throne after my death, for you can bring not only dishonor, but also death to this realm and nation.”

Even after all this, Toros once again treated Mleh like a brother and a prince, granting him, according to the Chroniclers, “much gold, silver, horses and mules,” and sent him abroad, where he resumed his dealings with Sultan Nureddin.

Chapter 28. The Byzantines’ Last-Ditch Effort

After this sad incident, Toros had to deal with another fiasco involving his brother, as he had earlier from his son-in-law. Dionys’s words on the legacy of his realm kept echoing in his mind. The Rubinians’ reign would only be secure if Toros were fortunate enough to pass on his throne to one as worthy as himself. But when Toros considered the potential heirs, he was perplexed. Stepan’s eldest son, Ruben, was frustratingly immature. The younger son, Levon, was promising, yet Mleh and Ruben could be obstacles.

At such moments of somber reflection, his thoughts turned to the history of ancient Greece and ancient Rome, where the fate of the state depended not on the abilities of the individual, but on the moral strength of the nation. However, in Cilicia he did not see that kind of institutional stability nor the educational means to generate it.

Though the memory of his Euphemia persisted, these concerns prompted Toros to marry the daughter of Prince Tovmas, in order to give an heir to the throne. Toros’s wife did not disappoint his expectations and soon the Prince had a son. In memory of the founder of the dynasty, and also of his beloved older brother, Toros named his son Ruben.

But fate did not favor Toros with a respite from war. One war barely ended when another was already brewing. While he was off defending his country from the north, south, and east, the enemy moved against Cilicia from the west. Toros received word that Andronicus, the old snake, had reared his ugly head again. Having escaped from prison and captivity and reconciled with Emperor Manuel, who was showering him with rich rewards and honors, he was marching toward Cilicia as the head of an army. Hence Toros took the necessary precautions, and waited, fully prepared to give Andronicus the reception he deserved.

Toros stood with his army in Mamestia, when he received word that the Byzantine fleet had entered the Bay of Alexandretta, and Andronicus had been sighted landing on the shore. Exploiting his opponent's arrogance, he lured them into chasing his main army, while he took several elite units and watched the Byzantine army's disorganization as large and small detachments broke off in every direction to plunder and pillage. Having caught them in his trap, Toros launched surprise attacks on these detachments, destroying them completely.

Andronicus, whose bravado was as great as his malice, and who had grown old not only from debauchery but also from battle scars, was nevertheless blinded by his irrational hatred; to his peril, he ignored the alert toughness of his opponent, of which he was amply aware from bitter experience. He sent hectoring envoys to Toros with empty threats demanding surrender.

Toros, after duly hearing the envoys out, brandished the Gold-embossed Edict of Emperor Manuel, and said in a dismissive tone,

"Go tell your general that I do not consider him a legitimate commander but a leader of gang of bandits. His master, the Emperor, heir of mighty monarchs, fails to abide by his own edicts, and allows his viceroys to break his alliances with treachery; thus we are compelled to defend our honor and banish every trace of Byzantine rule from our land. And now this same Emperor apparently feels no shame in sending this petty bully, whose bravado cannot be described as anything other than military idiocy. The rumors that your Emperor, carried away with theological speculations, has completely lost touch with reality thus appear to be true. He has forgotten that the person he chose for this mission is the same failed commander from fifteen years ago, who, after boasting and bluster, destroyed his army and fled the battlefield half-naked. Not only did he tarnish the reputation of the Byzantine Emperor, he also made a laughingstock of himself and his title of generalissimo.

So, you miserable envoys should go and find a way to escape before he flees again, for my warriors will give no quarter to your Andronicus, or Emperors, or the poor soldiers under their command. They have vowed to take no prisoners and drive every last invader out. Go back to your army with this message."

This answer enraged Andronicus to the point of madness. He adopted a new strategy and military tactics. Historians recount how he arranged his army in the shape of an animal, with a head, legs and tail, and so arrayed, attacked Toros's forces.

Although Toros could make no sense of this spectacle, he knew, as always, how to make the most of his position in his native mountains and forests. He positioned his forces to block the enemy's retreat, as he had last time. Having surrounded the enemy from all sides, he set up an ambush, and circled around the enemy to attack from behind after fortifying the front with ramparts. Andronicus's army was under attack from all side, from head to tail, hands and feet, left and right. Toros's forces dealt blow after blow. The Byzantine army was in disarray and their line broken.

Andronicus was demoralized by the thought that he would yet again suffer an ignominious loss to Toros, when he suddenly caught sight of Toros in pitched battle on his right flank. Andronicus charged like a wild beast with all his might, blindsiding him. Toros barely had time to lift his shield to fend off the unexpected blow, which knocked him from his saddle. Toros was back on his feet and jumped on his horse in the blink

of an eye. When Andronicus saw this, he knew he was in deep danger. He turned his horse around and fled for his life, just as last time, to the Crusader outpost at Antioch

But what a life: Andronicus was evil through and through, a tortured life, even after he took the Imperial throne, it was miserable. When news of his defeat reached Constantinople, Emperor Manuel mobilized a new army, as if the catastrophe was not already enough of a disgrace.

In a last-ditch effort to conquer Cilicia, the Emperor appointed duke Constantine Kalamanos commander-in-chief and sent him to face Toros. The battle took place near Tarson and was a total rout for the Byzantines. Even Kalamanos was captured by Toros's men. The Byzantine Empire had to swallow its pride and pay the "rebel" army a hefty ransom for the grand duke's release.

After these victorious wars, Toros reigned peacefully over Cilicia and most of Isauria and Phrygia. He made Mamestia the seat of government and the center of his realm. He rewarded his comrades-in-arms, who had shared the hardships and the glory of wars for 25 years and were decorated with battle scars to prove it. He granted them titles of knights and endowed them with power, for his principle was to reward virtue and punish vice.

Under his rule, the Armenians, who were previously doomed to persecution and misery everywhere, found refuge and protection in Cilicia. During his reign, soldiers were brave and fearless, and the Rubinian cross-flag commanded respect wherever it flew. The peaks and valleys of the Taurus Mountains resounded with songs of joy and festive music, while their rich ore deposits underground provided amply for their industrious population. The monasteries on the Holy Mountain offered praise to the Lord, while bringing education to the people. The fertile lands of Cilicia became important sources of national wealth and well-being, with fields of grain, fruit-laden orchards, and pastures filled with cattle and sheep.

With his prudence and courage in war and fairness and industry in peace, Toros brought prosperity to his country and people, earning him praise as a great prince and honor as a virtuous and noble man. The princes and kings of neighboring countries sought his friendship and respected him as a protector of the weak and defenseless. As anyone who has diligently studied Armenian history will attest, he earned his place among the ranks of the greatest Armenian leaders of all time, as one who transcended not only fate but was ahead of his time. He had courage and prudence to match, for he knew how to extract benefit even from hard and adverse circumstances, while knowing when and how to compromise and be patient. This is the highest of princely virtues, though rarely appreciated or perceived by the mob. Remarkably he was religious without bigotry, especially as he was raised at a time and in a city where princes and emperors were obsessed with theological disputes, often to the point of ignoring their civic duties. To his credit, he managed to keep his own mind and the minds of his inner circle free from this cantankerous disease, while honoring and promoting respect for religious values in his people.

Chapter 29. Toros's Death

Watching the country flourish after the hard-won peace, Toros now turned his attention to his little son Ruben's upbringing. For Toros, the future of his son and country were inextricably intertwined.

But Providence was otherwise disposed. Suddenly, Toros was stricken with a terrible disease, and this mighty man, who had persevered hardships and never flinched in war, who had overcome anguish and personal grief, now saw that his end was near, stoically facing the inevitable.

The sad news of Toros's illness plunged all Cilicia into grief, from the princes and constables, commanders and knights, to the common people. The roads to Mamestia were packed with pilgrims and the churches were crowded with people praying for their prince. Inquiries about the prince's health were on everyone's

lips, with hope of hearing some encouraging news. Old men and women brought their children with them to church to pray for his recovery, hoping the Almighty would be moved by the entreaties of innocent children.

Warriors of all ranks and ages crowded into the palace halls and courtyards of the castle. These rugged, proud, sun-parched people with rusty complexions, who had kept their composure for twenty-five years, even as the trumpet called to battle and fatal missions, now approached each other with subdued solemnity, avoiding greetings and eye contact, hiding their unaccustomed distress, which they released in private tears. The only person unperturbed among the Armenians of Cilicia was Toros himself. Lying on his deathbed, he collected himself to deliver his last will and testament.

His little son Ruben, a boy of six or seven, was confused by the grief and tears all around. He stood by his father's bed, while his grandfather, prince Tovmas, froze like a statue in despair next to his grandson. On the other side of the bed was Toros's precious daughter, Gohar, on her knees, staring at her father, which eyes red and dull from tears and sleepless nights, raised up to the heavens in search of a glimmer of hope. Toros's nephews Ruben and Levon stood a bit further away, speechless and downcast.

Prominent princes and military leaders lined the walls of the chamber in such grave silence that even their breathing could not be heard. When Toros saw all those gathered, his eyes shone, his heroic body gathered strength for one more act and he spoke to them in a soothing voice:

“O my dear kinsfolk and comrades-in-arms! I longed to see you all again, to say farewell to you, and to perform my last mission as your prince. All of you who have given your all to this day must steel yourselves and muster your courage at this solemn moment. Never weaken, stay strong.

Listen now to the last wishes of a man to whom God has granted the blessing of being your prince for thirty years. Yes, it was a great gift of God. I always remember the day when after so many years in exile, I, an unknown forgotten refugee, landed on these shores with a few comrades.

I confess that I could never have imagined then that I would create a realm more extensive and powerful than under my forefathers. By the grace of Providence, I became the leader and bulwark for my people, and in this great mission, I was blessed with all of you, my courageous comrades . . .

Soon, I must go and stand before the Almighty Lord. I place this defenseless child in your charge. If it be God's will, he will grow up and become powerful, like his father, a protector and leader of the Armenian people, even more so with your stalwart support. Hence, live in harmony and unity with each other for the good of our nation, for your own good and for the sake of this innocent child.

Do not forget that the Armenian cross-bearing flag was established in these mountains by the power of brotherhood and love. The day that love is supplanted by hatred, rivalry and arrogance will be the destruction of this brotherhood, bringing in its wake calamities and captivity for all of our children and upon every Armenian from the four corners of the world who gather here to breathe free.

So be well, my comrades-in-arms. May God provide for you always as in the times when we were together.”

Hearing these words, the gathering broke down. Some choked back their sobs in their hands, others wept in their handkerchiefs. The most restrained, stood in silence, eyes full of tears, and came to kiss the hand, which for so many years had led them in the days of wars and in the days of peace, bringing them glory and majesty.

Toros was still gazing at the door and, without asking anything, was looking for someone – Babken. Babken was not there yet. Despite being more than eighty years old, as soon as he heard the sad news, he rushed from the fortress of Amut. Tornik had arrived shortly before, but withdrew from the room to a quiet corner to hide his emotional turmoil. In the midst of this, the one who seemed most composed was also the one

destined to be the most wretched, the prince's young son, soon to be orphaned. The innocent child could not imagine the misfortunes that would befall him or the risks entailed in being the heir to the realm, after losing his father.

Gohar's future was no less bleak. She could not predict what kind of reception she would receive in Lambron, now that her father was gone. The only reason they had tolerated her was fear of her father. But at this moment, her thoughts were fixed solely on her father and her present grief at this loss.

Toros then looked death straight in the eye, and at that very moment he also saw life eternal, as he placed his people, his two children, and his immortal soul in the hands of Providence.

Last rites were duly performed by the clergy and the next day, chants of mourning were heard in the churches. The entire Armenian nation lamented their sovereign, who was truly a father to his people. This mourning lasted for many years, until Levon, Toros's nephew, took the throne and wiped away the tears of the Armenian people. Toros was buried next to his uncle and namesake Toros I, in Drazark, where Euphemia had been waiting for him for so many years.

The End