



during the reign of Queen Thomas, XII century A.D.

during the reign of

Queen Thamar, XII century A.D.

K I N G D O M  
O F T H E  
I P C H A K S

B L A C K  
 S E A

( *Podiceps Lusitanus*,  
*Marx Colchicum*,  
*Iberian Sea* )

# EMPIRE OF TERRAZONS

SULTANATE  
OF  
RUSSIA

A R M E N I A

# REPORT

SULTANATE  
OF  
ALEPPO

EMIRATE OF  
MOSUL

P E R S I A



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Shota Rustaveli

# THE KNIGHT IN PANTHER SKIN

A free translation in prose by  
KATHARINE VIVIAN

London  
THE FOLIO SOCIETY  
1977

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საქართველოს  
პარლამენტის  
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ბიბლიოთეკა

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TO  
THE GEORGIAN PEOPLE  
AND TO  
TESS AND VIVIEN

1	Introduction	1
2	The Georgian People	2
3	And to Tess and Vivien	3
4	The Georgian People	4
5	And to Tess and Vivien	5
6	The Georgian People	6
7	And to Tess and Vivien	7
8	The Georgian People	8
9	And to Tess and Vivien	9
10	The Georgian People	10
11	And to Tess and Vivien	11
12	The Georgian People	12
13	And to Tess and Vivien	13
14	The Georgian People	14
15	And to Tess and Vivien	15
16	The Georgian People	16
17	And to Tess and Vivien	17
18	The Georgian People	18
19	And to Tess and Vivien	19
20	The Georgian People	20
21	And to Tess and Vivien	21
22	The Georgian People	22
23	And to Tess and Vivien	23
24	The Georgian People	24
25	And to Tess and Vivien	25
26	The Georgian People	26
27	And to Tess and Vivien	27
28	The Georgian People	28
29	And to Tess and Vivien	29
30	The Georgian People	30
31	And to Tess and Vivien	31
32	The Georgian People	32
33	And to Tess and Vivien	33
34	The Georgian People	34
35	And to Tess and Vivien	35
36	The Georgian People	36
37	And to Tess and Vivien	37
38	The Georgian People	38
39	And to Tess and Vivien	39
40	The Georgian People	40
41	And to Tess and Vivien	41
42	The Georgian People	42
43	And to Tess and Vivien	43
44	The Georgian People	44
45	And to Tess and Vivien	45
46	The Georgian People	46
47	And to Tess and Vivien	47
48	The Georgian People	48
49	And to Tess and Vivien	49
50	The Georgian People	50
51	And to Tess and Vivien	51
52	The Georgian People	52
53	And to Tess and Vivien	53
54	The Georgian People	54
55	And to Tess and Vivien	55
56	The Georgian People	56
57	And to Tess and Vivien	57
58	The Georgian People	58
59	And to Tess and Vivien	59
60	The Georgian People	60
61	And to Tess and Vivien	61
62	The Georgian People	62
63	And to Tess and Vivien	63
64	The Georgian People	64
65	And to Tess and Vivien	65
66	The Georgian People	66
67	And to Tess and Vivien	67
68	The Georgian People	68
69	And to Tess and Vivien	69
70	The Georgian People	70
71	And to Tess and Vivien	71
72	The Georgian People	72
73	And to Tess and Vivien	73
74	The Georgian People	74
75	And to Tess and Vivien	75
76	The Georgian People	76
77	And to Tess and Vivien	77
78	The Georgian People	78
79	And to Tess and Vivien	79
80	The Georgian People	80
81	And to Tess and Vivien	81
82	The Georgian People	82
83	And to Tess and Vivien	83
84	The Georgian People	84
85	And to Tess and Vivien	85
86	The Georgian People	86
87	And to Tess and Vivien	87
88	The Georgian People	88
89	And to Tess and Vivien	89
90	The Georgian People	90
91	And to Tess and Vivien	91
92	The Georgian People	92
93	And to Tess and Vivien	93
94	The Georgian People	94
95	And to Tess and Vivien	95
96	The Georgian People	96
97	And to Tess and Vivien	97
98	The Georgian People	98
99	And to Tess and Vivien	99
100	The Georgian People	100

# CONTENTS

Foreword by Professor D. M. Lang	9
Prefatory Note by Academician A. G. Baramidze	10
Introduction and Acknowledgements	11
Prologue	34
1 Rostevan, King of the Arabians	39
2 The Shooting Contest between King Rostevan and Avtandil	43
3 King Rostevan's Encounter with the Knight in Panther Skin	45
4 Tinatin Sends Avtandil in Quest of the Knight	49
5 Avtandil's Letter to his Vassals	53
6 Avtandil's Departure on his Quest	54
7 Avtandil's Converse with Asmat	60
8 The Meeting of Tariel and Avtandil	64
9 The Story that Tariel told to Avtandil	67
10 How Tariel first saw Nestan-Darejan	71
11 Nestan-Darejan's First Letter to her Lover	74
12 Tariel's First Letter to his Beloved	75
13 Tariel's Letter to the Khatavians and their King's Reply	76
14 Tariel's Meeting alone with Nestan-Darejan	78
15 Tariel's Military Expedition to Khataeti	80
16 Tariel's Return from the Khatavian Expedition	84
17 Nestan-Darejan's Letter to Tariel and his Reply	88
18 The Arrival of the Khvarazmshah's Son and his Death at the hands of Tariel	93
19 The Disappearance of Nestan-Darejan	95
20 The Story of Nuradin-Phridon	98
21 Nuradin-Phridon's Victory aided by Tariel	100
22 How Phridon saw Nestan-Darejan	102
23 Avtandil's Return to Arabia	107
24 Avtandil's Visit to the Vizir	112
25 Avtandil's Interview with Shermadin	117
26 Avtandil's Testament	119

27	Avtandil's Prayer	121
28	King Rostevan Learns of Avtandil's Flight	122
29	Avtandil's Departure and Second Meeting with Tariel	124
30	The Slaying of the Lion and the Panther	132
31	The Return of Tariel and Avtandil to the Caves to find Asmat	133
32	Avtandil's Visit to Nuradin-Phridon	136
33	Avtandil's Search for Nestan-Darejan	143
34	Avtandil's Arrival in Gulansharo	147
35	Phatman's Letter to Avtandil	149
36	Avtandil's Letter to Phatman	150
37	Phatman's Story concerning Nestan-Darejan	153
38	Phatman's Account of the Capture of Nestan-Darejan by the Kadjis	162
39	Phatman's Letter to Nestan-Darejan	168
40	Nestan-Darejan's Letter to Phatman	169
41	Nestan-Darejan's Letter to her Lover	170
42	Avtandil's Letter to Nuradin-Phridon	173
43	Avtandil's Departure from Gulansharo and Meeting with Tariel	174
44	The Arrival of Tariel and Avtandil in the Kingdom of Nuradin-Phridon	178
45	Nuradin-Phridon's Plan	180
46	Avtandil's Plan	181
47	Tariel's Plan	182
48	The Assault on the Kadjis' Fortress	183
49	Tariel's Visit to the Kingdom of the Seas	184
50	The Wedding of Tariel and Nestan-Darejan at the Court of Nuradin-Phridon	188
51	The Return to Arabia	191
52	The Wedding of Avtandil and Tinatin at the Court of Arabia	197
	Epilogue	203
	Bibliography	205

# ILLUSTRATIONS

Shota Rustaveli by Mamuka Tavakarashvili	<i>frontispiece</i>
A knight was seated on the bank with the reins of a black charger in his hands	<i>facing page 48</i>
Tariel led the charge and rode into the thick of their ranks	80
Tariel seized a boat by the prow and plunged it into the sea	97
Avtandil rose at dawn and rode to the vizir's house	112
The two young knights talked through the night	129
Avtandil went swiftly to the Chachnagir's couch	152
Avtandil clasped the feet of his lord Rostevan	193

*All the illustrations are taken from a manuscript (H599) dated 1646 in the Institute of Manuscripts, Tbilisi, and are here reproduced by kind permission of the Georgian Academy of Sciences*

## FOREWORD

Shota Rustaveli and his romantic epic, *The Knight in Panther Skin*, mean as much to the Georgians of the Caucasus as does Dante to the Italians, Camoëns to the Portuguese, or Firdausi with his *Book of Kings* to the Persians. Not for nothing was it the ancient custom for every Georgian bride to include a finely illuminated copy in her trousseau.

Rustaveli's appeal is not confined to his fellow-countrymen. Over the last century translations, in both prose and verse, have been appearing in a whole range of languages, including Russian, French, German, Italian, Hungarian and Czech. The most recent – and highly successful ones – have been renderings into Hebrew and Japanese.

Rustaveli was a great humanist, universal in his outlook and appeal. In his philosophy, traces of neo-Platonism, together with elements of Sufism, have fused with Rustaveli's own natural genius to bring about a wholly original synthesis, a *Weltanschauung* which even today astonishes by its relevance and its profundity.

Every generation needs its own version of Rustaveli. England was fortunate to begin with Marjory Wardrop's scholarly prose translation, published in 1912. Marjory's rendering, incidentally, helped to inspire the Russian poet Konstantin Balmont to undertake his own verse translation – the first of several successive Russian renderings by various hands. Honourable mention must also be made of Venera Urushadze's poetic re-creation of *The Knight in Panther Skin*, published in the Soviet Union.

Katharine Vivian is the latest recruit to the distinguished band of Rustaveli's interpreters. Her translation displays an intuitive understanding of him as poet, sage and story-teller. She has attempted a new approach to the problem of rendering the poem into English, in part a re-creation, in part literal translation. I warmly commend this new translation to the reading public.

DAVID LANG  
*Professor of Caucasian Studies,  
 University of London*



## PREFATORY NOTE

The translation of *Vepkhistaosani* made by Katharine Vivian, which has been brought to the Institute of the History of Georgian Literature by the translator herself, came to our attention as an interesting attempt to render Rustaveli's poem in prose – not to give a literal, word-by-word translation, but rather a free rendering which may bring to the reader the contents of the poem and thus contribute greatly to Rustaveli's popularity throughout the English-speaking world. The method of rendering Rustaveli which is used by Katharine Vivian may cause a certain controversy. It should however be acknowledged that the aim which the translator pursues is masterfully achieved. This is an attempt that can arouse only feelings of gratitude among all friends of Georgian culture in the Soviet Union and especially, of course, in the heart of every Georgian.

The translation has been carefully revised by a group of senior workers of the Rustvelological Section of our Institute, including Manana Gigineishvili, Tsiala Karbelashvili and Sergey Serebryakov, who tried to do their best to help Katharine Vivian to understand some obscure passages of the text and to bring the translation as near to the original as possible.

We firmly believe that this translation will serve not only to be a contribution to the English 'Rustveliana', but also to bring our peoples to closer cultural relations.

A. G. BARAMIDZE

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Georgian Academy of Sciences, Tbilisi*

## INTRODUCTION

During the twelfth century a renaissance of art and letters in the Mediterranean lands and Western Asia gave rise not only to religious works but also to some of the finest secular poetry and fiction in the Christian world. Shota Rustaveli's epic *The Knight in Panther Skin* is among the masterpieces in the poetry of that period:

"The great poet enchants, astonishes, delights us by the daring of his venture, his incomparable artistry of language and exquisite beauty of verse, as his song of the idea of human freedom and the noblest emotions of the human heart rises out of the intellectual suffocation and religious fanaticism of those remote times."\*

The poem belongs to the classical age of Georgian literature, and was composed about the turn of the century during the reign of the illustrious Queen Tamar. Now, eight centuries later, it is still not only known and venerated by the poet's countrymen but is an active influence in their lives. The exact date of Rustaveli's birth is not known, but was probably in the later part of the twelfth century. He may have been in his youth when Jerusalem fell to Saladin's forces in 1187 at the end of the Second Crusade — that is, two years before the Lionheart Richard I was crowned King of England. It was a period when the legends of King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table were circulating in England and France — a cycle of stories whose influence has been as long-lived as that of Rustaveli's poem.

Georgia today is a flourishing republic of the Soviet Union, with her own government and state planning organization. She is rich in natural resources, which are extensively developed in industry and on the land. There are valuable mineral deposits, and nearly a thousand thermal springs with a variety of waters make Georgia a popular resort for health and tourism. Citrus fruit, wine and tea are produced to supply the whole of the Soviet Union, and Georgian engineers were the first in the world to invent the

\* A. G. Baramidze, *Shota Rustaveli and his Poem*, p. 5.

mechanical tea-picker, which they named after their own country 'Sakartvelo'. There is not space enough to give more than the briefest impression of the Georgian scene – certainly not to do justice to its warm-hearted, generous, laughter-loving people – only to say that the visitor carries away the picture of a thriving, vigorous, fast expanding economy enriched by a cultural life full of vitality and creative force. Tbilisi State University with its excellent library has some fifteen thousand students, while the Georgian Academy of Sciences is one of the leading centres of research in the Soviet Union. *The Knight in Panther Skin* has been illustrated by artists of every generation in a variety of styles, and among those of today one may see Koba Guruli's distinguished portrait of Rustaveli in traditional Georgian chased metal work, and Levan Tsutskiridze's fine illustrations to the story, one of which provides the basis for the cover design.

The territory of the Georgian Republic, now considerably less than that of the medieval kingdom, extends from the Black Sea in the west to the Autonomous Republic of Daghestan in the east; it is bounded in the north by the main range of the Caucasus mountains and in the south by the frontiers of Turkey and Soviet Armenia, with the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan in the south-east. Medieval Georgia was an independent mountain kingdom, whose suzerainty during the reign of Queen Tamar extended from the Persian frontier – now that of Azerbaijan – to Trebizond on the Black Sea; it included certain regions in the east, south and south-west that are now outside the territory of the Georgian Republic. The kingdom lay on the great caravan route between East and West, and from her beginnings as a nation Georgia's history was one of continuous struggle to hold her independence against the aggression of powerful neighbours. The country had been a battlefield in Persia's wars with Greece and Rome; she had been an adversary and vassal of Greeks and Romans, Persians and Arabs. Certain of these peoples contributed in a great measure to the economic advancement and artistic life of the nation. The earliest influences in the development of the Caucasian peoples were those of Persia and Hellenic Greece, and a number of Greek and Persian words have entered the language. In Rustaveli's work there are many references to the Wise, the Sages, in Georgian *brdzeni*, whereas the word *berdzeni* means Greek; and in the modern tongue

one will find, etymologically, a Greek orange in a Persian orchard. The philosophy of Plato, the religion of Zoroaster – introduced by the Persians – and in their turn Christianity and Islam, all were absorbed into Georgian thought and institutions. Yet throughout all such changes the sense of themselves as a nation persisted in the Georgian people, who remained distinctive and individual in race and language, culture and way of life. As a visitor one soon becomes aware of this special flavour, compounded of character and tradition, which permeates so many sides of life there. Partly it is sensed as a natural creativity, expressed not only in such tangible forms as art and sculpture, dance and decorative design, but also in charm of manner and speech, the flair for giving to most actions however trivial the quality of grace.

### *The Georgian Kingdom from its origins to the reign of Queen Tamar*

Eastern and Western Georgia are the Iberia and Colchis of ancient times. The two regions are divided by a chain of mountain ranges, and are markedly different in climate, tradition and political orientation. They were not united under one rule until the end of the tenth century. The capital of Iberia – Eastern Georgia – was the ancient city of Mtskheta where the first Christian church was built. In the fifth century, according to tradition, the heroic King Vakhtang Gorgasal founded the new capital of Tbilisi – or Tiflis, in Persian, Arabic and European usage. The city stands on the bank of the Mtkvari (Kura), the river that flows out of Anatolia through the central valleys to the Caspian Sea. Early urban populations were concentrated in a chain of fortified towns along the Mtkvari valley. Tbilisi is in the province of Kartli in Eastern Georgia, which gives its name to the whole country – in Georgian *Sakartvelo*, the land of the people of Kartli. The western capital, in Colchis, was the very ancient city of Kutaisi.

From the earliest times Georgia's powerful neighbours – Greeks, Romans and Persians – had contended for dominion over the strip of mountain country that lay between them, with its rich resources of upland pastures, fruit and crops – and its martial and independent people. According to the *Georgian Chronicle*\* the kingdom

\**Kartlis-Tskhovreba*, the *Georgian Chronicle*, translated by M. Brosset as *Histoire de la Géorgie*.

of Iberia was founded in the fourth century BC, when the legendary Pharnavaz, ruler of one of the south-eastern provinces and partly Persian by descent, overthrew the Greek governor whom Alexander the Great had appointed to rule in Colchis, or Western Georgia. With his capital at Kutaisi, Pharnavaz reorganized the army and rebuilt many of the cities and strongholds destroyed in the Alexandrian invasion. He is said to have established his rule on the Persian pattern – a structure which developed later into one resembling the feudal system of medieval Europe. Pharnavaz is a figure of legend rather than of history; but a feudal monarchy, with the kingdom divided into a number of provinces whose governors owed allegiance to the crown, was the political structure which prevailed in Georgia in various forms until the Russian annexation in 1801.

After Pharnavaz' reign came a series of wars with Persia followed by a Roman conquest under Pompey's legions. Three centuries of Roman rule brought social and economic advances to the kingdom. This ended when the increasing power of the Persians enabled them to divide the kingdom and bring Iberia under Persian domination.

A landmark of Georgia's history was her conversion to Christianity in the fourth century:

'The adoption of the Christian faith had momentous consequences for the entire nation, which became a bulwark of Christendom in the pagan Orient. Christianity imparted to the people a unity which transcended the political vicissitudes arising from the struggle of the great powers for mastery of the Near East.'\*

Progress towards unity and independence was retarded, however, and the nation's energies absorbed, by internal struggles between the feudal lords as well as by the aggression of the great powers. The country also suffered from the savage and devastating raids of Persians, Khazars and nomad tribes from the marchlands and northern steppes. Internal unity was the measure of Georgia's resistance: only when the seven or eight provinces were brought together under a strong monarchy had the kingdom a chance of gaining and keeping her independence. Tariel's account

\* D. M. Lang, *A Modern History of Georgia*.

of his father's offering allegiance to King Pharsadan and thus bringing the seven kingdoms of India under one rule (p. 68) is a message to the Georgians on their need for unity. For two centuries the country was a battlefield for Persians and Byzantine Greeks, until a new force entered on the scene. The great wave of the Islamic conquest swept over Western Asia to submerge Transcaucasia, and in 654 Georgia became a dependency of the Arab caliphate. Arab rule continued for nearly four centuries in Tbilisi and part of Eastern Georgia; the south and west were at times under Byzantine domination or independent. It was a period when Tbilisi, standing at the crossroads of important trade routes, became a centre for traffic in a variety of merchandise – silks and furs, carpets and inlaid metal – and also in ideas and works of learning of Moslem and other faiths.

From time to time there came to the throne a ruler who possessed the power – of paramount importance in Georgian history – of bringing the provincial governors into subjection and thus strengthening the kingdom against invasion. At the end of the tenth century a king of the Bagratid dynasty, Bagrat III, brought the greater part of Eastern and Western Georgia under his rule and established sovereignty over a united kingdom. His throne was in Kutaisi, the capital of Western Georgia, one of the oldest cities in the world. The eastern capital of Tbilisi remained for a century longer in the hands of the Arab emirs; it was not until 1122 that it was recovered for the Georgian monarchy by King David IV (David II in the *Georgian Chronicle* and early histories), great-grandfather of Queen Tamar; he reigned from 1089 to 1125.

David, surnamed the Builder, had his seat of power in Kutaisi, where the ruins of the magnificent eleventh-century cathedral can still be seen. On a wooded mountainside outside the city stand the remains of the monastery and academy of Ghelati:

‘The lovely landscape, the captivating harmony of the various buildings, the beautiful paintings and mosaics and, lastly, a glorious history give this inimitable monument its aureole of fame . . . David the Builder founded the monastery in pursuance of his ambitious plan of creating not only a religious institution but also an important centre of cultural, educational and scientific activity. He invited Georgian scientists from all parts of the country and

from foreign lands, giving them every possibility to work fruitfully.

‘At Ghelati literary activity was started during the lifetime of David the Builder. The new monastery soon won fame as a centre of philosophy. Creative work was launched at the Ghelati Academy, which was built at the monastery . . . The subjects taught at the Academy were philosophy, geometry, arithmetic, rhetoric, grammar, astronomy and natural science . . .’\*

Many of Ghelati’s buildings were destroyed by the Ottoman Turks, and partially restored in the sixteenth and later centuries. David’s gravestone can still be seen under the archway of the southern gate, where – by his own wish – the footsteps of all who enter pass over his grave.

In this region on the Black Sea coast, the Colchis of Hellenic times, settlements are known to have existed from the eighth century BC and by the sixth century a well-organized agricultural colony was established.† Kutaisi is said to have been the birthplace of Medea – and indeed, the episode of Avtandil’s gallantry in Gulansharo calls to mind how Jason came with the Argonauts to Colchis and made use of Medea’s infatuation with him to obtain the Golden Fleece.

David Aghmashenebeli – the Builder – was an outstanding military commander and a wise and skilled administrator. His reign was the beginning of that era in Georgian history in which military power and political stability made possible the highest achievements in the arts, the greatest advances in social and economic conditions. He was the creator of the distinctive military strategy which was adopted long after his reign in view of its success, and became traditional in the Georgian army. This was a form of warfare specially developed to suit the national terrain of mountain and forest, combining guerrilla tactics with battle on the open field. In 1121 David obtained a decisive victory at Didgori, near Tbilisi, over the combined forces of Arabs, Seljuq Turks and other Moslem troops, his sixty thousand men destroying an army six hundred thousand strong. This secured the kingdom from the

\* L. Menabde, *Centres of Ancient Georgian Culture*.

† For early history see D. M. Lang, *The Georgians*, and W. E. D. Allen, *A History of the Georgian People*.



threat of invasion by her neighbours, as well as relieving the pressure on the armies of the First Crusade under the leadership of Godefroy de Bouillon. Aided by the successes of the Crusaders in the Holy Land, he went on to extend the frontiers of the kingdom until at the end of his reign Georgian dominion extended in the south-west as far as Trebizond.

The advent of Christianity had brought Georgia into close relation with other Christian cultures, in particular that of Byzantium. David IV was a contemporary of the Emperor Alexius I Comnenus, whom the records portray as one of the great figures of his age. One of the superb mosaics at Ghelati was a gift from the Byzantine emperor. The links between Georgia and Byzantium were strong, and the renascence of interest in Hellenic philosophy and literature early in the century, with its centre in Constantinople, soon penetrated to Georgia.

David IV's reign was a period of great activity in art and learning. He built and restored many Christian places of worship in Tbilisi, for centuries under Moslem occupation. The architecture of that era was a prototype for later forms, one of its finest examples being the cathedral built for the monastery of Ghelati, where David set up an academy of religious and philosophic studies under the direction of Ioane Petritzi, the great Georgian neo-Platonist. Petritzi had been educated in Greece, and perpetuated at Ghelati the traditions of the Mangana Academy, seat of neo-Platonic studies in Byzantium. About that time, or possibly earlier, the Academy of Iqalto where Shota Rustaveli is believed to have studied was founded in Kakheti, in Eastern Georgia.

'David was well versed in Moslem laws and customs and in the teaching of the Koran . . . attending service at the mosque and making donations to the Islamic priesthood.\* It was in accordance with the spirit of enlightened humanism now increasingly to characterize Georgian art and letters that he founded in Tbilisi - the city he had established as the capital of a Christian kingdom - a centre for Moslem and Sufi poets which became a forum for exchanges of literature and learning between East and West. As Professor Fatemi observes, 'the early publicly known Sufis . . . developed an ecumenical doctrine linked with the ideas of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, neo-Platonism and

\* A. G. Baramidze, *Shota Rustaveli and his Poem*, p. 17.



Islam. Sufism thus showed that it regarded more or less all religions as perfect shadowings forth of the great central truth which it seeks fully to comprehend.\*

In 1184 David's great-granddaughter Thamar came to the throne. In 1178 during the lifetime of her father Giorgi III she had already been proclaimed Sovereign of Kartli and associated in the government of the kingdom. The finest poetry was composed in her honour by a circle of courtier poets among whom Shota Rustaveli was the Bard of Bards. She is called *Thamar-Mephe* – Thamar the Monarch – and historians have found no language too exalted for her. It is now thought possible that Rustaveli may have been her chronicler. The account of her reign begins:

'As at the lightest touch of steel the hidden spark is struck from a stone, so shall my words bring to your eyes a tiny part of the deeds of Thamar, a glowing coal drawn from a blazing furnace. God Himself exalted Thamar . . . of seven-fold brilliance: He who in six days brought forth out of nothingness all that is, rested the seventh day in the sweet and gentle spirit of Thamar . . . When she had raised up the seven pillars of wisdom, she built a temple thereon to be the stainless dwelling-place of the seven spiritual gifts; she who glorified God seven times in the day was seven times purified in speech.'†

Thamar's reign was the age of Georgia's greatest glory. She possessed those qualities that the times especially demanded of a feudal monarch, and under her enlightened rule the nation rose to its zenith of military supremacy, economic and cultural development. With a firm and sensitive hand she kept under her dominion the lords of the provinces whose insurgence had so often divided the kingdom – a crippling weakness in Georgia's situation. She was twice married; her second husband, David Soslan, was a distinguished commander in the field. Their joint reign was crowned by successful campaigns against Arabs, Turks and Persians, until a wider territory than ever before was brought under Georgian suzerainty.

\* L. F. Rushbrook Williams, *Sufi Studies East and West*.

† *Georgian Chronicle*, tr. M. Brosset.


In the tradition of the Georgian monarchy, Queen Thamar was an active patron of the arts, and the poets of her court addressed their eulogies to her in some of the most brilliant of Georgian verse; several are named in the final stanza of *The Knight in Panther Skin*. As well as epic poetry and odes, their work comprised tales of heroic and romantic fiction, much of which – possibly including early works by Rustaveli – was lost in the invasions and devastation that followed that golden age of power and prosperity.

Among them all, Rustaveli was the poet especially devoted to Thamar, whom he is said to have loved with an unrequited passion until the end of his days. Little that is certain is known about his life. He may have held the post of Royal Treasurer, one of the four which carried with them the rank of Vizir. He is believed to have been born in the latter part of the twelfth century and educated in Georgia, and to have studied further in Greece. It was the custom for young men of his time to be sent to one of the Georgian foundations in Greece, such as the monasteries of Athos or Olympus, and it is probable that Rustaveli knew Greek, Arabic and Persian and studied works of literature and philosophy in those languages. Towards the end of his life he retired – possibly as an exile – to the Monastery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem, where he remained until his death.

### *The Poem*

*The Knight in Panther Skin* has a place among the masterpieces of the world's literature, as a rare and perfect conjunction of an artist's genius with a natural movement of thought and belief. It has been translated into most languages of Europe and the Soviet Union as well as into Chinese and Japanese. 'Seldom has a poet's vision been so vast, comprehensive and turbulent, so that it seems that the universe is about to clash in primeval chaos, until the creative breath of a great poet subdues this chaos to a severe harmony.\*' Although it is rendered here as plain prose narrative, this work in the original Georgian is a poem of some sixteen

\* D. M. Lang, *The Georgians*, p. 173.



hundred quatrains in which the use of metre and rhyme, word-play and alliteration displays supreme mastery of the poet's art. Poetry has always played a special and highly important part in the life of the Georgian nation, with a practical as well as an artistic function. It was learnt by heart and passed on by word of mouth from family to family, village to village. The beauty of the ideas, the interest of the story and the pattern of rhyme and metre made it singularly easy to memorize, a perfect instrument for preserving the distinctive character and language of the country; while in the periods of conquest and oppression so frequent in Georgia's history it was an effective means of communication, transmitting ideas and ideals, feeding the flame of patriotism and keeping the people's spirits high. In social as in national life it forms one part of a threefold tradition of poetry, dance and song, all of which contributed to preserve a vigorous sense of national identity. This tradition has persisted to the present day, and for the eight centuries since Rustaveli's birth the poem has remained an unending store of riches, not only for his successors in the realm of poetry but for his countrymen throughout the generations, as an influence in their world-picture and the ordering of their lives, as a reminder too of the true nobility of character to which men and women can aspire. Bards of old invoked the name of Rustaveli as the true Muse of poets, and in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries his influence is seen in works such as those of the great poets Nikoloz Baratashvili and Akaki Tsereteli. 'In joy and sorrow,' Pavle Ingorokva writes, 'the Georgian people turned to this poem as to an inexhaustible source of wisdom.'\* Georgians in all walks of life are familiar with *The Knight in Panther Skin* and will often quote from it, reciting a line or a verse. It has always been the custom that a Georgian bride's dowry should include a copy of the poem, since it will fall to her to teach it to her children. Social occasions are graced with song and crowned by some recital of verse, in which the field or factory worker is likely to acquit himself as well as the man of letters. Poets are held in especially high esteem, and the funeral of Akaki Tsereteli – 'uncrowned king of Georgia' – in 1915 was attended by a hundred thousand people, out of a total population of two million at the time.

\* 1938 edition, Wardrop translation. Introduction.

The qualities that have gone to make this poem loved, known and honoured throughout eight centuries go beyond its content of ideas, beauty of phrase and imagery, well-told story and masterly verse technique. It has the nature of a living organism, with roots deep in native culture and tradition, receiving nourishment also from the surrounding lands, the various streams of creativity and thought converging on Georgian soil. Rustaveli took from them all the elements he needed, so that the setting of the story and many of the characters and events in it have historical parallels familiar to every Georgian of the time, in the framework of a broad and humanist world outlook. The poem is closely linked – as the poet's life is thought to have been – with the resplendent figure of Tamar, whose name recalls to her people the epoch of the nation's greatest glory. It is dedicated to her, and the crowning of Princess Tinatin by her aged father reflects that of Tamar by her father Giorgi III – a figure who might well be recognized by any who served under him, in the fiery-tempered Rostevan. There is a close parallel between the kingdoms of Arabia, in the story, and Georgia. Cave dwellings such as Tariel inhabited can be seen in parts of the country and were then commonly used in mountain villages. The discovery of the Devis' treasure in sealed caves recalls a legend of the first King Pharnavaz who reversed his fortunes by just such a lucky find.

While Rustaveli is in every sense Georgia's national poet, a quality of his work particularly striking to the foreign reader is its universality. His characterization is expert, and many figures in the story can be recognized in modern dress, although kings and serfs have become scarce, and the special relationship of *gamzrdeli* – upbringer, guardian, tutor, master or foster-father, with his or her charge – is hardly conceivable in present-day western thought. A lasting bond of dependence and obligation attached to this relationship on both sides, and there are many allusions to it in the poem, as between Rostevan and Avtandil – it was common practice for a boy to be adopted by a prince or nobleman and educated under their charge – and between Tariel and the Khatavian who came to give him warning of an ambush (p. 81), as an obligation to Tariel's father who had been his 'upbringer'. On the other hand, characters such as the lively bourgeoisie Phatman with her weakness for distinguished young

men, the elderly statesman Sograt (Socrates) with his courtier's tact and ironic humour, the loyal steward Shermadin unwilling to take a ruler's responsibilities – these are people who live on to this day. Even now, too, personages of high standing may have occasion to say to their juniors – as King Rostevan to Avtandil – 'Do you find something about me to amuse you?'

### *Religious Background of the Poem*

However, the poem's universality is most remarkable in the sphere of religion. Georgia was a Christian kingdom and Rustaveli a court poet, at a time when religious orthodoxy was often narrow and oppressive; the Georgian Orthodox Church exercised far-reaching power. While Georgian secular literature had taken a different course from the main stream of medieval Christianity, even so it is surprising to find in the whole of the poem no allusion to the outward forms of Christian worship – an omission that later exposed it to attack by the Christian priesthood. Yet, the central theme of the poem is expressed in a quotation from the Scriptures (p. 119), and there are other Biblical allusions. Some scholars trace the poem's philosophical and religious outlook to the neo-Platonic doctrine of the Areopagite or pseudo-Dionysius. In particular, the much-discussed phrases 'sunlit night' and 'timeless in time' (p. 125) are interpreted according to this doctrine as signifying the union of opposites in God the One. Others however reject this view, holding that they should be interpreted according to the inner or esoteric essence of the Christian faith. One chapter is headed by a verse from Dionysius (omitted in this version), now thought to be a later addition.\* Much of the story takes place against an Islamic background; Georgia had suffered a long period of Arab domination; but there is a note of irony in the mention of the mullahs' prayers for Tariel (p. 72), while the freedom of women in Arabia and the insignia of sovereignty at Tinatin's coronation (p. 40) have no place in Islam but belong to the Christian tradition. There can be found also traces of the religion

\* 'The sage Dionysius revealed that which was hidden: that God sends only what is good, He creates nothing evil but reduces ill to the duration of an instant and causes the good to endure, perfecting and not marring Himself.'

of Zoroaster, early introduced into Iberia by the Persians – a faith which in parts of the country had survived the orthodoxies of later rulers.

These great religions, and possibly others less well known, are invoked in *The Knight in Panther Skin*. Yet in some of the finest passages in the poem Avtandil calls for aid on the sun, the moon and the five planets – the ‘seven stars in the sky’ of the ancient Ptolemaic system – in the names the desert Arabs gave them before the coming of Mohammed. Likewise the three heroes at every crisis in their fortunes turn to the Creator of all or His image the sun, the source of life – just as Socrates after a long vigil ‘with the return of light offered up a prayer to the sun, and went his way’.\* There was something in the poem for every Georgian, whatever his faith or upbringing. It was Rustaveli’s genius to unite and harmonize these different elements of religious faith in a single complex design, stressing the inner truth that is the essence of all religion, rather than the difference in its manifestations.

#### *Literature of other countries in Rustaveli’s time*

‘This Persian tale I found in the Georgian tongue’ – thus it is announced in the Prologue; but the story has never been identified in Persian literature, and – as S. Tsuladze suggests – Rustaveli may have used this stratagem to escape persecution by the Church. Allusion to an untraceable work, from whatever motive, is a not uncommon literary device. Earlier in the century Geoffrey of Monmouth had claimed as his source for the *History of the Kings of Britain* ‘a certain very ancient book written in the British language’ which was never brought to light. It may be questioned whether the story of Tariel had in fact any single source, or whether it was itself a source for other works. Georgian men of letters had access to a wide variety of material, both in other languages and in translation. They were skilled copyists and translators, peculiarly well placed for the role of literary transformer. Translation of Greek texts was carried on both in Georgia itself and in the monastic settlements founded by Georgians in Christian countries of the Near East, such as the Iviron Monastery

\* Plato, *Symposium*.

on Mount Athos; an interesting account of their work is given by Michel Tamarati in *L'Eglise géorgienne*. Before Rustaveli's birth there had been an awakening of interest in Hellenic studies in Georgia, particularly at the Academies of Ghelati and Iqalto, where he is believed to have been a student. It is probable that he had an extensive knowledge of the philosophy and literature of ancient Greece as well as the Christian texts. At the Monastery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem – the Georgian foundation he had done much to support, where he retired to end his days – in the time of the Byzantine Empire, every work of importance in Christian literature was translated, from Arabic as well as Greek. In Georgia itself, Persian poetry and fiction were being translated from Arabic and adapted from classical Persian.

Translations were not then the literal affairs that scholarship now demands, but renderings freely adapted to accord with current ideas and tastes. A story, a legend or a piece of history or folklore would be told and retold with many variations. The season of 'original creative work' as distinct from adaptation and synthesis had not yet dawned, and an author might gather his material from diverse sources and rework it to his own design. A classic instance of the way a good story would travel is *The Wisdom of Balahvar*, an ancient tale based on the life of the Buddha. Professor Lang in his English translation gives an interesting account of its peripatetics: from an early Pahlavi version it was put into Arabic, and in the ninth century retold in Georgian in terms of Christian ideology; the Georgian version was taken by St Euthymius – a celebrated scholar of the Iviron Monastery on Mount Athos – as a model for the Greek *Tale of Barlaam and Ioasaph*. The same chain of transmission is found in secular literature.

Rustaveli was born on a rising tide of creativity over all the known world. The noble heroic epic *La Chanson de Roland* of the century before had been followed by a sparkling stream of songs and ballads that flowed out of Provence over southern Europe. Schools of architecture were perfecting the techniques of Gothic: in France Notre Dame de Paris was building, in England Fountains Abbey, while the first *studium generale* in England was developing in the town of Oxford. In Germany the great medieval epics of *Tristan*, *Parzival* and *Nibelungenlied* were all written



during Rustaveli's lifetime. An abridged version of Homer appeared in a Georgian translation, and in England the legends of King Arthur – tales embodying the ideals of love, courtesy and knightly valour that have been one of the strongest influences to shape English civilization. Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Britain* was translated into French in a version that was to give rise to the *Brut*, or *History*, of Layamon – probably a contemporary of Rustaveli. In Persia a school of Sufi poets was flourishing whose work reached its peak in the mystical love poetry of Hafiz and the *Mathnawi* of Jalaluddin Rumi. Both these poets were born during Rustaveli's lifetime, and a contemporary of his was the Persian Nizami, whose version of the romantic epic *Layla and Majnun* became known in Persia in 1188. This poem, translated into Georgian in the same year, brought together several traditional versions of the most widely known love story of the Islamic world. In one passage of it (quoted by Suhrawardi in *The Gifts of Knowledge*) the lover Majnun faints at seeing a glimpse of Layla's skirt through the raised flap of her tent, just as Tariel faints at the first sight of his beloved (p. 72). Other incidents in *The Knight in Panther Skin* recall some of the deeds of Rustum, a hero of Persian legend, who appears in Matthew Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum*. Likenesses can be found in folklore and fiction to various points in the story of Tariel, but no prototype for the whole of it has ever been identified. While C. S. Kekelidze believes it is Nizami's work\* that most strongly influenced Rustaveli,† there are grounds for thinking it was possibly a question of interaction, Rustaveli's poetry and ideas being themselves an influence in the literature of other countries. Medieval Georgia was a relatively stable society, with important centres of learning where the study of philosophy, literature and the classics was highly advanced. Ideas as well as goods from neighbouring lands met and mingled on the trade routes through Tbilisi. The world of learning in those times was a small one; and a writer of Rustaveli's stature, a country of Georgia's level of cultural development cannot have failed to exercise an influence on the peoples with whom they were in contact.

There is abundant evidence of the intermingling in the medieval

\* G. Nizami, *The Story of Layla and Majnun*, translated by R. Gelpke.

† C. S. Kekelidze, *History of Georgian Literature*, vol. 2.



world of the streams of thought and artistic expression of power groups who in a political and military sense were vigorously opposed. Thus Richard I, King of England, is known to have kept up a correspondence with the Saracen commander Saladin and to have offered his sister to Saladin's brother in marriage. Arabic was a language eagerly studied in France at the time, and Richard learned something of Arab culture from his upbringing in Aquitaine where the court of his mother Eleanor was a centre of troubadour poetry and the cult of courtly love. A French version of the Arthurian legends was dedicated to her; Greek and Moslem philosophers were read at Montpellier in the south of France, and a Latin translation of the Koran was made at Cluny under the auspices of the Abbot Peter the Venerable. It is possible that Rustaveli, with his classical education, was acquainted with some of these works; while *The Knight in Panther Skin* is deeply rooted in the soil of Georgia, it is also a part of the whole body of medieval literature.

From Western Europe to Central Asia the theme of poetry was love and its power to exalt mankind. Earlier poets had written of the ennobling love of man for man as brothers and comrades, in battle and heroic deeds. In works such as *Beowulf* and *The Song of Roland* women play a minor part; but heroic love between men later gave place in literature – as in *Tristan and Iseult* – to the romantic love of man for woman. Rustaveli wrote, as the troubadours did, of courtly love and the lover's code of conduct; he also described love in other forms – the love of friends, of master and pupil, master or mistress and servant. Lower forms of love may imitate the higher and become the means to acquire nobility of character. Phatman, mocked by the poet in her passion for Avtandil, yet surpasses herself in selfless devotion to Nestan and becomes a strong link in the chain of events that lead to the princess's release. Sograt, the cautious old vizir, is moved by his love for Avtandil to overcome his fear of Rostevan. The breadth of perception in Rustaveli's view of humanity takes him beyond the Middle Ages to a place among the great humanists of the Renaissance.

Professor Baramidze draws attention to the great stress laid by Rustaveli on the theme of friendship, of brotherly love and its obligations, which rank even higher than a knight's love for his

lady. This is shown in Avtandil's choosing to abandon the service of his beloved if he can serve Tariel (p. 66).

'The victory of pure and exalted love depicted in *The Knight in Panther Skin* would have been impossible without the sympathy of friends and the self-sacrifice of sworn brothers. The concept of men's friendship in its noblest sense, the devotion of friends and brothers, is expressed in one of Rustaveli's most brilliant aphorisms:

"A friend for friendship's sake of himself should be unsparing,  
Heart exchanging for heart with love as the bridge, the way."

"... A knight sworn to brotherhood and a knight as a lover are two aspects of one and the same form." \*

S. B. Serebryakov, basing his observation on an article by the Rev. A. J. Denomy in *Medieval Studies*, points out that there is clearly a connection between the ideals and concepts embodied in troubadour poetry, and the teaching of Moslems and Sufis:

'From the tenth to the twelfth centuries there existed among the Arabs a moral concept expressed in the word *Futuwwa*, whose basic meaning was *youth*. This was a Sufi ideal, originating at the time of Islam in ancient Arabia.' †

He goes on to show that this concept also embraces the qualities a lover ought to possess. The teaching of Sufism alluded to was 'based upon love, operated through a dynamic of love, had its manifestation through ordinary human life, poetry and work'. ‡ The love of which Rustaveli wrote was the way by which a man might ascend from earth to Heaven – in Bowra's words 'a school of manhood' § – and one may think that he extended this idea to others besides the courtier and the knight, according to people of all conditions their proper dignity and worth, a code of conduct and a prospect of reward.

\* A. G. Baramidze, *Shota Rustaveli and his Poem*, p. 146.

† S. B. Serebryakov, *Rustaveli and the Provençal Troubadours*.

‡ I. Shah, *The Sufis*, p. 27.

§ C. M. Bowra, *Inspiration and Poetry*, p. 54.

According to N. Natadze and S. Tsaishvili, 'the earliest known fragments of the text date back to the fifteenth century... probably the result of oral tradition, handed down from father to son' (*Shota Rustaveli and his Poem*). Few manuscripts of early Georgian literature survived the Mongol invasions that followed soon after Tamar's reign; and the earliest complete copy of the poem dates from the seventeenth century. In 1712 the first printed edition appeared. Many interpolations occur in later editions. Most of the Prologue, the closing stanzas and several other passages are now thought to have been the work of later writers and not of Rustaveli. The major problem confronting Rustavelian scholars is to compile a perfect edition.

Experts in early Georgian manuscripts find difficulty in reading texts of Rustaveli's time, when the script was in a period of transition. The older script with its square, disjoined characters was beginning to turn into a cursive script with the letters becoming more rounded and joined together. This came to make it extremely hard to decipher, and in the view of Mme Shanidze of the Georgian Institute of Manuscripts 'it could very easily happen that some of the mistakes in the text of Rustaveli's poem were due to misreading the text written in this transitional script'. When one examines a text of the period it is easy to see how the most conscientious copyist of a later date might have been misled.

The present translation is based on the edition of A. Shanidze and A. G. Baramidze, 1966; and also on an earlier edition published in Tbilisi in 1903.

## *The Language*

Georgian belongs to the Ibero-Caucasian family of languages, one which has not yet been proved to have an affinity to any other in East or West. It includes many languages and dialects, some fifty of which are still spoken in Georgia and surrounding territories. Georgian is the official language of administration in the Republic, and is in use at the State University of Tbilisi, one of the most active and advanced in the Soviet Union. Different though it is in structure from any language of the West, there is a likeness

to these in thought and expression. Every language has its special aptitudes, its native genius of expression, and Georgian with its phonetic richness and elegance of construction lends itself most naturally to the art of combining sound and sense, the art of poetry to which the Georgian people are so naturally inclined.

Traces of the written language date from the fifth century of our era. Classical Georgian literature remained the domain of the Church until the beginning of the twelfth century, when a new secular literary language evolved – the language of modern Georgian literature. It was the genius of Shota Rustaveli which stabilized this in its enduring form, and *The Knight in Panther Skin* represents a stage of marked importance in the development of the Georgian language.

### *Metre and Rhyme*

The metre of the poem *Vepkhistqaosani*, called *shaīri*, is well suited to the Georgian language. It was for long the measure of ballad and legend in Georgia, a flexible and popular verse form which prepared the way for the works of the great classical period.

The original text of the poem is now generally believed to have comprised some 1,587 verses, quatrains of sixteen-syllable lines with middle caesura and a lesser break in each half-line, giving four equal sections in each line. The rhyme scheme is *aaaa*, with rhymes of two, three, four and in one instance five syllables; nowhere in the poem is the rhyme confined to the last syllable. The accent in Georgian falls almost equally on every syllable, although – as in French – it is rather weaker on the last two. Georgian verse therefore does not lend itself to scansion by feet – iambic, dactylic etc. – but is measured in phrases rather than single words.

The quatrains are constructed in two metrical forms, called high and low *shaīri*. The difference between them is in the distribution of syllables within the four sections of a line. It has been shown that Rustaveli's versification is based on two principles known to the Pythagoreans – the laws of symmetry and divine proportion – whether these were known to him, or realized through a poet's intuition.

In the high *shaïri* form the distribution of syllables is symmetrical, giving the pattern 4/4/4/4, with variants of 1 1 2/1 3// 2 1 1/4, and so on. In low *shaïri* the distribution is asymmetrical, giving sequences such as 3/5//5/3, 1 4/1 1 1//2 1/2/3 etc. This low *shaïri* pattern is brought into comparison with the Law of Divine Proportion: in a line divided according to the Golden Section, the greater part is in the same geometrical proportion to the whole as the lesser is to the greater. In a line 8 units long, the division 3/5 is almost exactly in that proportion.

An example of high *shaïri*:

Mietzera, / igonebda, // akhlos cheqra / vit'ha agos:  
 Saoubarman / oumetzarman // shmagi oup'hro / gaashmagos!  
 Khams t'hou katzman / gonierman // dzneli sakme / gamoagos,  
 Ar sitzqnare / gonebisa // moïdzoulos, / moïdzagos.

In this verse, each of the four sections of each line contains four syllables. The following verse is in low *shaïri*:

Rathgan t'havia / sitzroue // qovlisa / oubedobisa,  
 Me rad gavtziro / moqware, // dzma oumtkitzebi / dzmobisa?  
 Ara vikm, / tzodna ras margebs // p'hilosop'host'ha / brdznobisa!  
 Mit'h vistsavlebit'h, / mogvetzes // shert'hva zest'h/  
 mtsqobrt'ha tsqobisa.

G. Tsereteli, who has developed this theme in detail, points out that the verse units in Rustaveli's poem are closely related to the elements of metre and grammar: the breaks in the lines follow the natural divisions of syntax and thought structure. A line begins with the beginning of a sentence or phrase, so that a verse represents the parts of a compound sentence. A word must not overrun a break in a line. 'All these complex relationships of syllables, words, sections of a line, lines and verses are in basic accordance with [the laws of] symmetry and "divine proportion".'\*

It may be argued that Rustaveli constructed his poem in accordance with the concept of beauty that Alberti† was to formulate two

\* G. Tsereteli, ed., *Metre and Rhyme in Vepkhistqaosani*.

† Alberti, *De re aedificatoria*, quoted by R. Wittkower in *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*: 'Beauty consists in a rational integration of the proportion of all the parts of a building, in such a way that

and a half centuries later. Even if that is so, it is not the whole story – for other Georgian poets have tried to work on the same lines, but none has ever been the peer of Shota Rustaveli.

### *Translator's Note*

The feudal society of Shota Rustaveli's day has long since faded from our sight, and the conditions in which he worked are foreign to us now. Poetry was recited more often than it was read, and a long ballad of closely rhymed quatrains was an accepted convention of entertainment. The form of this new version of his poem is chosen with a view to bringing that distant past into focus for a modern reader, with something of the sense of actuality that the story would have had in its own time. This, therefore, is only in part a literal translation: apart from the Prologue and certain celebrated passages such as Avtandil's Testament, the Georgian text has been in places abridged or adapted in order to produce lucid and readable prose. Poetic images and metaphors – as for example 'a light snow falling on the rose', a metaphor often used for tears – are only occasionally translated verbatim.

A choice had to be made between poetry and prose for this new rendering. One factor in the decision was the admirable verse translation in English published by Venera Urushadze in Tbilisi in 1966. Members of Tbilisi State University and the Rustaveli Institute, as well as Mme Urushadze herself, agree that there is room for a new prose rendering of the poem in English in addition to, and not in place of, a classical scholar's text. The essence of Rustaveli's work is its quality as poetry, and no prose version can equal a translation into verse by a poet of comparable gifts – one in which the accord between form and content is so close that the attention embraces both equally and without effort. Without that accord, the sense of actuality is easily obscured. In plain prose stripped of the imagery, metre and rhyme and the intricate word-play which are the language of poetry, still the structure of the narrative bears witness to Rustaveli's genius,

every part has its absolutely fixed size and shape, and nothing could be added or taken away without destroying the harmony of the whole . . . without that organic equilibrium where all the parts are harmonically related like the members of a body, divinity cannot reveal itself.'

standing out strongly in cosmic symmetry of design. It is masterly story-telling, with character expertly defined, and a wealth of finely observed detail bringing every scene clearly to life.

The translator hopes that this version, for all its shortcomings, may serve as an introduction to the work of Georgian writers and of the brilliant and distinguished scholars who have made it available to western readers. The first translation of *The Knight in Panther Skin* into English was made by Marjory Scott Wardrop. Her fine scholarly text, together with the accomplished French verse translation by S. Tsuladze, has given constant guidance in the interpretation of the Georgian.

These notes are intended as a brief introductory sketch of the background, national and historical, to which the poem by its nature belongs. Although parts of the text, whole stanzas even, can be enjoyed out of their context, the work as a whole is inseparably related to the time, the place and the people for which it was composed.

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should be stated that the views expressed in the Introduction are my own and are not necessarily shared by these scholars.

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KATHARINE VIVIAN

*Stonewall Hill, 1976*



## PROLOGUE

1

He who the firmament by His power and might created  
Caused His creatures to breathe with a spirit from on high,  
Earth with its myriad forms assigned to us men for our dwelling,  
Kings in His likeness made: from Him is sovereignty.

2

God who art One, who giv'st to each shape its showing,  
Be Thou my defender: shield me, grant me the power  
Satan to vanquish, love's desire until death to cherish;  
Lighten for me my load of sin in the final hour.

3

Unto the Lion\* who bears with honour arms and shield:  
Unto the Sun, the sovereign Thamar – whom to behold,  
Jet-haired, ruby-cheeked, is nectar's sweets to taste –  
How to offer this ode of praise shall I be bold?

4

Bitter tears I shed – I, of all men best  
Dowered to proclaim the sovereign's high renown.  
A pliant reed my pen, dipped in a pool of jet,  
In heart-piercing words shall make her praises known.

5

It is Rust'veli's task to tell in verse the glory  
Of this fair queen, the beauty hers alone  
Of tresses and crystal gaze, of pearls in a setting of ruby;  
On the soft lead anvil is broken the hardest stone.

6

Now do I need an eloquent tongue, good heart, and skill –  
Mind is from Thee, who giv'st it wing to its highest reach –  
Tariel to serve, and the fair fame to tell  
Of three heroes vowed in service each to each.

\* The Lion: David Soslan, Queen Thamar's consort.

7

Draw near, and let your tears for Tariel –  
All whose fate is like to his by birth –  
Quenchless flow, while I recite to you his tale,  
Giving to this stray pearl a setting to show its worth.

8

I, Rustaveli, by calling a maker of verse,  
This have wrought for the queen whom hosts of men obey.  
Love for her is a madness, a fever that knows no balm:  
Let her bestow the cure, or waste my life away.

9

Like to a loose pearl passed from hand to hand  
This Persian tale I found in the Georgian tongue.  
Here, at the will of my enchantress haughty and fair,  
I have contrived to set it in verse, as a pearl re-strung.

10

Dazzled, my eyes but yearn to look on her anew;  
Love-madness drives me to roam the fields always.  
Torment enough for the flesh! Grant me but ease of spirit  
Those natures three in flowing verse to praise.

11

Whatever Fate may send is for man to take and content him:  
Let the ploughman labour, the soldier his courage prove,  
The lover learn to know what is Love and thereto devote him,  
Censuring none, nor allowing censure him to move.

12

Firstly is poesy a part of wisdom's self,  
Language of the divine intelligence, great in worth  
To men prepared to hear: in a brief line it speaks  
A lengthy discourse, likewise pleasing those on earth.

13

When the course is long the thoroughbred shows its pace;  
On the *maidan*\* at ball the skilful player is tried;  
So the maker of verse throughout a work extended  
Proves and displays his power the course's length to ride

\* *Maidan* – public square, used as parade-ground, market place and playing field, and for public gatherings.

14

Although the foot run lame and the fair Georgian phrase  
Fail and elude him: then his mastery will shine!  
Faltering not in pace, nor falling short in endeavour,  
Sure of hand, he brings to perfection his design.

15

Those rhymesters who by stanzas one or two  
Reckon their work, of poet merit not the name,  
Nor to be called the peer of the great bards – although,  
Mulish, their own halting lines to excel they claim.

16

Minor poets, again, are they whose lot it is  
Heart-stirring phrases not to command: their aim,  
As with a youthful archer in the field untried,  
Falling short of the great, finds but the lesser game.

17

Thirdly, songs for the wine-cup and for gallantry –  
Made for a feast, a tryst, a jest between friend and friend –  
Clear in expression, these oft may delight us: yet  
Poet is none but he who a long lay has penned.

18

Not with random step shall the poet pursue his calling:  
When he beholds that one who quickens his heart to love  
He shall court her, toil for her, naught but from her desiring,  
Singing for her alone whom he sets all else above.

19

Now be it known to all: it is my pride to give  
Glory to her whose praise I uttered heretofore.  
She is my life – she as a tiger pitiless.  
Here I conceal her name, and sing of her once more.

20

I speak of the Love that is highest, Heaven's in kind –  
Hardly to be described or by the tongue expressed –  
Love that exalts and gives man wings for upward flight:  
Great trials are his who ventures upon that quest.

## 21

Not by the thinker's wit is that one Love attained  
Though the tongue grow weary in telling, the listener tire.  
I tell of human passions that, not impure,  
Imitate the divine and to the heights aspire.

## 22

Madmen,\* they who love are called in the Arabic tongue –  
Mad from the pangs of love beyond attain.  
Some in their high ascent approach to the divine;  
Others here below flutter in beauty's flame.

## 23

Fair as the sun to behold is the lover; wisdom and wealth  
Are his, generosity, leisure, wit and youth,†  
Eloquence, patience, might in battle to prevail –  
He who lacks aught of these no lover is in truth.

## 24

Love's nature is delicate, hard to comprehend;  
Liken it not to lust or wanton lechery.  
Mark well my meaning: love is from these apart  
Far as it were sundered from them by a boundless sea.

## 25

Constancy becomes a lover: not faithless he  
Nor in absence ever to venery inclined,  
Long languishing though the belov'd upon him frown:  
Love-play without love detestable I find.

\* Madmen: Arabic *majnun*, a madman. In the most famous of eastern love stories, Layla's lover was called Majnun, being driven to frenzy by his love for her. From this word is derived the Georgian *mijnuroba*, courtly love. Another word for love, more commonly used – *siqwaruli* – has a Georgian root. Both words may be found in the same sentence, with a slight difference in meaning, as when Avtandil says to his squire Shermadin: 'It is not that I have any doubt of your devotion (*siqwaruli*), but . . . I am a lover (*mijnuri*).' (p. 118)

† Youth: The word used here 'means at the same time youth . . . and the sum of those qualities expected of a knight. The poet uses the word *qma* (knight, young man) basically in this sense, and in his view the true lover also should be equipped with those qualities' (S. B. Serebryakov: *Rustaveli and the Provençal Troubadours*).

## 26

Say not that he loves, who but in dalliance roves  
Lightly from one to other as light from day to day,  
Whom parting pains not – his is the idle sport  
Of boys: a true lover rejects the world away.

## 27

Love's first condition is that the lover conceal  
Well his passion, in solitude ever his secret guarding,  
Sighing still from afar, from afar afire with desire,  
Fearing her displeasure, his lady with awe regarding.

## 28

Never may he proclaim the fire that burns within,  
Never by vulgar plaint dishonour her fair name.  
He who loves will keep his secret inviolate;  
Sweet, for her sake, should seem to him the burning flame.

## 29

Who in his wits has faith in one who his love betrays?  
Gain there is none, but both must suffer injury.  
How shall he set in glory one whom his words have shamed?  
Wound not your love thus with contumely!

## 30

Strange is it to me that a lover should parade  
His passion for one who for his sake would die.  
When there is love – not hate – where is the need to shame?  
Base men prefer base words to loyalty.

## 31

Sighing for love befits the lover; as one apart  
Ever in solitude he must wander far afield,  
Having no thought or care for aught but the belov'd,  
Keeping his love in others' presence unrevealed.

# 1: Rostevan, King of the Arabians

In the country of Arabia there reigned, by the grace of God, a king named Rostevan. He was a mighty ruler – generous, just and wise, merciful, approachable, fortunate and far-seeing; possessor of many soldiers and vassals, himself a peerless warrior, eloquent in discourse. He had no son, but an only daughter, the princess Tinatin. She was radiant as the rising sun, born to illuminate the world around her, so fair that the very sight of her would make a man lose his wits. It would need ten thousand tongues and the wisdom of the sages to utter the praise of the king's daughter.\*

One day the king sent for his vizirs,† told them to draw near and seat themselves, and with a proud and calm bearing addressed them in gracious words. 'I have a proposal to put before you on which we will take counsel together,' he said. 'When roses fade and wither, others come into bloom and give beauty to the garden. Now my sun has passed its zenith and the darkness of old age is setting in, worst of all afflictions that can plague a man. Death may visit me at any time, from one day to the next. How can a light shine when it is beset with darkness? I propose that my daughter, who is fairer than the sun, shall take my place and reign as sovereign.'

The vizirs made bold to protest: 'Do not speak of age, O King! Is not the rose, even as it fades, still the loveliest of all flowers, its scent sweeter than any? The light of the waning moon is brighter to our eyes than the light of a star, and your counsel even in imperfection is still better than the best that others can give. Since it is fitting that your wishes should be obeyed, however, let this be done in accordance with your will and let the kingdom be entrusted to her who outshines the sun in radiance. Woman though she is, God has created her to be a sovereign. We may say without flattery that she knows how to rule, as indeed we have often

\* 'Utter the praise of the king's daughter': Pronounce an encomium or formal recital of praise. A brief verse of eulogy, or encomium, is one of the earliest forms of Arabic literature, and it is probable that in early Georgian the *keba*, or eulogy, was the most common form of poetry. This form of speech survives as a custom at Georgian banquets, where the host or someone appointed by him as *tamada* intones a short speech in honour of each person present. See pp. 138, 141, 143.

† Vizir: Arabic, minister of a Moslem prince.

remarked among ourselves. She is brilliant in her actions as she is sun-like to behold. A lion's cubs are lions all, male and female alike.'

The announcement that the king's daughter was to be raised to the throne was heard with especial pleasure by a certain young commander of the royal army. This was the *spaspeti*\* Avtandil, son of the *amir-spasalar*,† a youth as yet unbearded, well-favoured in looks and shapely as a cypress. Tinatin's dark lashes had pierced his heart and her beauty awakened him to love. He had kept his love well concealed, but in absence from his lady his features lost their colour, while the sight of her would set his heart aflame. Now he was filled with hope that when the princess became queen his official duties would bring him often into her presence.

The King of the Arabians ordered the following proclamation to be broadcast throughout the realm: 'I, Rostevan, appoint my daughter Tinatin as sovereign. She will shine upon all with the radiance of the sun. Come everyone and behold her with praise and admiration.'

The Arabians gathered in great numbers for the ceremony of Tinatin's coronation and the ranks of courtiers were swelled with new arrivals. The sun-like Avtandil took his place at the head of an army tens of thousands strong, while in all the concourse of nobles and court officials the vizir Sograt was nearest to the king. When the throne was erected a cry of wonder went up from the crowd at the sight of its magnificence.

Princess Tinatin was radiant of visage as her father led her forward through the ranks of nobles. He set her upon the throne and with his own hands placed the crown upon her head, the sceptre in her hand and the robe of sovereignty about her shoulders. Exalted and far-seeing as the sun, she looked on at the proceedings with wise and penetrating gaze. The king and all his hosts drew back some paces and made obeisance to the throne, blessing the new sovereign, and a great roar of voices hailed Tinatin as queen. Until that moment she had been attentive and composed, but when she saw her father and all the great assembly bow before her, when horns and cymbals sounded in her honour and voices broke into songs of acclamation, she felt herself to be unworthy of that high position.

\* *Spaspeti*: army commander, captain of troops.

† *Amir-spasalar*: Commander-in-Chief.

'How shall I ever be able to take my father's place?' she thought. She lowered her lashes, dark as a raven's wing, and tears fell from her eyes.

The king noticed his daughter's distress and drew close to her to give her some words of advice. 'Every father must give place to his child, and my mind could not be at ease until I myself had done so,' he said. 'So do not weep, but attend to what I say. You are now monarch of Arabia, placed by my own hand on the throne and acknowledged by us all. From this moment it is to you that the kingdom is entrusted and it is for you to act wisely, with discretion and restraint. Be tireless in well-doing in great matters as in small, as the sun shines equally on roses and noxious weeds. Free men are bound by generous deeds, and those who are in bondage submit of their own free will. Let your bounty flow out like the tides of the sea, and like the tides return to you. Munificence is as fitting in a monarch as a tree in the garden of Eden, and will turn even traitors into loyal subjects. We benefit from eating and drinking, not from hoarding up good things. What you give away remains your own, but what you keep is lost!'

The young queen listened with unwearying attention to her father's sage counsel until he left her to take part, to his great enjoyment, in the feasting and singing that were going on. Then she sent for the trusted retainer who had had charge of her upbringing, and gave orders for all the treasure to be brought to her that she had inherited and that was kept under seal. Everything she possessed, all the treasure accumulated since her childhood, she gave away without reserve.

'I am doing as my father bade me. I wish nothing to be kept back,' she commanded. She called for her Master of Horse and ordered him to lead out her horses and herds of cattle. This was done as she directed and horses and cattle were given away, with thoroughbreds of Arab stock that had never known the yoke, all led out from the royal stables. The soldiers gathered up treasure in heaps as if they were plundering the Turks, as the queen's largesse was poured out like a shower of gold until everyone had been enriched, from the highest to the lowest, and no one was left empty-handed.

On the following day there was a large gathering of army commanders at the banqueting table, which was spread lavishly



with food and drink, with fruit in plenty. The king however sat with bowed head and seemed to be in low spirits, and people wondered what the reason could be. Avtandil, the young commander, was at the head of the table with the aged vizir Sograt beside him – a splendid figure with his lithe, alert form and lion-like presence. He and Sograt commented to each other on the king's pallid looks and preoccupied manner, and wondered what was troubling him. Perhaps, they agreed, it was some thought that had come into his mind, for there had been no outward cause for his displeasure. At last they rose together, filled their cups with wine and with quiet demeanour went to kneel before the king. Both were smiling as the vizir spoke in a light, rallying tone, with practised tongue.

'You have a look of melancholy, sire! If you fail to smile it is with good reason, for when your daughter dispensed bounty with such an open hand she emptied your treasury. Why should you make her queen at such cost to yourself?'

The king looked up in surprise at first; then he smiled, for Sograt's boldness pleased him, and he commended his vizir. 'It is not that, however, that weighs upon my mind,' he said. 'No one can justly accuse me of avarice. No, vizir – what troubles me is this, that old age is drawing near and the days of my prime are running out, while in all my kingdom there is not one man who has learned from me the attainments that are fitting for a knight. I have a daughter, who has been gently bred, but it is my misfortune that God has not given me a son. No man is my equal in archery or sport – although,' he added, 'Avtandil may resemble me in some degree, since I had a part in his upbringing.'

That bold-spirited knight\* was listening quietly with bowed head, and a gleam of white teeth was seen to lighten his handsome features.

\* Knight: This word with its medieval connotations is in most cases the nearest equivalent to the Georgian one used by Rustaveli. A knight, in his sense, was a vassal owing service to his lord. The feudal relationship of lord and vassal was for centuries the key pattern in the structure of Georgian society. Thus *qma*, usually translated as knight, may be a man owing allegiance and at the same time one to whom allegiance is owed, by his own vassals: Avtandil was ruler of a province.

A clear account of the structure of Georgian medieval society is given in W. E. D. Allen's *History of the Georgian People*.

‘Why are you smiling?’ the king demanded. ‘Are you feeling bashful? Upon my soul, what is there about me to amuse you?’

‘I would ask to be spared your anger, sire, before I speak.’

‘How could you say anything to offend me?’ However, Rostevan swore in the name of the sun-like Tinatin that Avtandil should be safe from his wrath; and the young knight resolved to speak out boldly. ‘Do not pride yourself too much, sire, on your skill as a marksman,’ he said to the king. ‘Although I am but dust beneath your feet, yet I will claim my shooting to be better than yours. You say that you have no equal in archery. We shall not decide that by talking – let us have a match between us two. Choose some of your knights to keep the score, and we will have a wager on the result.’

‘That is a challenge I will not refuse, and neither shall you withdraw it,’ the king replied. ‘We will hold a shooting contest. You shall give the necessary orders and I will appoint good men to be judges, and then we shall see who will carry the day.’

Rostevan was now in the best of spirits. He laughed and joked with Avtandil and they were merry as boys as they settled the terms of the wager, ruling that the loser was to go bare-headed for three days.

‘I will take twelve men to attend me and keep me supplied with arrows,’ the king concluded. ‘For you, your squire Shermadin will be equal to all of mine. They will count the number of arrows spent and make a fair report.’

He ordered his huntsmen to go out onto the plain as beaters, and his soldiers to look on and prepare for the next day’s sport. At the end of that day’s festivities everyone was well content.

## 2: The Shooting Contest between King Rostevan and Avtandil

Avtandil rode out early the next day on a white charger, resplendent in scarlet hunting dress. The king attired himself and

mounted and they set forth together for the chase. The hunters were stationed in a circle round the field, and the ground beyond them was covered with cheerful and excited men-at-arms. The king commanded twelve men to follow and replenish his own and Avtandil's supply of arrows, as well as to keep count of the number they discharged and the game brought down. The beaters went to work, and soon game of every kind was driven out from cover onto open ground. Rostevan and Avtandil set arrows to their bows as the creatures fled before them. It was a splendid spectacle as they swiftly covered the ground, deer and goats, wild asses and bounding chamois, with lord and vassal together in pursuit. The horses' hooves drummed up the dust of the plain into a cloud that rose to hang darkly overhead and shut out the light of the sun. They galloped on over the plain driving the medley of game before them, killing and wounding in a fashion to provoke the wrath of God as they dyed the earth red with the blood of slaughtered beasts. As they spent their arrows the attendants brought them more, and those nearest to Avtandil exclaimed in admiration at his skill. In this way they cleared the field, continuing their sport until they came to a stream that crossed their path, coursing between rocky banks. The wild creatures in flight made their escape into a forest too dense for the horses to penetrate.

The king and Avtandil, exhausted after their deeds of valour, were laughing as they drew rein and both claiming to be the winner. They were in high good humour and in the most friendly mood while they waited for the king's men to come up with them. When these drew near, Rostevan ordered them to speak without fear or favour: 'No flattery – let us have the truth.'

'Sire, we make bold to say what is indeed the truth,' the men spoke out. 'Your Majesty is not to be compared with Avtandil. If it were to cost us our lives we could not say otherwise, for we have seen the beasts brought down by his shafts and not one of them moved again. The bag was twenty times one hundred head of game; twenty more fell to Avtandil than to Your Majesty. Not one of his arrows missed its mark, while we had to pull several out of the ground that were sped from your bow.'

The king had commanded his men to speak the truth and he was well pleased by their report, no more out of countenance than

if he had lost at backgammon. The prowess of the young knight whom he himself had trained relieved his mind of a burden, and he felt a great access of love for Avtandil. The two contestants dismounted in the cool shade of some trees, laughing and joking together, contented and at ease. The twelve retainers who had kept the score drew near (it was they, perhaps, who had shown the greatest courage) and the men-at-arms in large numbers came up and gathered round, looking about them at the stream and the fringes of the forest.

### 3: King Rostevan's Encounter with the Knight in Panther Skin

As they were gazing at the stream they saw that there was a stranger at the water's edge. A knight was seated on the bank with the reins of a black charger in his hands; tears were streaming from his eyes. He looked a heroic figure, a lion among men. The whip in his hand, with a handle of chased metal, was as thick as a man's arm, and the trappings of his horse were studded with pearls. His clothing and head-covering were of panther skin. They looked at that strange figure and the sight of him pleased them. The king sent one of his men to speak to him, but the knight paid no attention, remaining quite still with bowed head while his tears flowed without ceasing. The man went closer, but could not bring himself to address the stranger and stood before him, uncertain and confused. At last he took courage to step forward and say softly: 'The king commands your presence.'

The knight made no answer. He seemed not to hear the man's words or even the shouting of the soldiers, but wept and moaned aloud as if his thoughts were far away. Again the man ventured to repeat his message, but still the knight wept and did not speak. The messenger, awestruck and perplexed, went back to Rostevan and made report.

'I spoke to him, but he would not listen. He is like the sun, too

dazzling to look on – I felt abashed in his presence. Although I stood there a long time I could not make him pay any heed to what I said.’

Surprised and vexed at the way his messenger had been received, the king despatched a dozen men on the same mission. ‘Arm yourselves,’ he commanded them, ‘and bring me that man who is sitting on the river bank.’

The men-at-arms went forward with a clatter of swords and armour. The stranger started at the sound, looked up and saw the band of soldiers advancing on him. His tears still flowing, he uttered a single word: ‘Alas!’ Then he brushed the tears from his eyes, belted on sword and quiver and flexed his arms. He mounted his horse, as if disdaining to listen to the talk of slaves, and rode away in the opposite direction. The king’s men followed, but as soon as they tried to lay hands on him he rounded on them, and even their foes would have pitied them as he hurled some against their fellows and split the heads of others with his whip.

The king in a fury shouted to the rest of his men to join the pursuit, but they had no better fortune. The knight never looked back nor paid any heed to the soldiers until they were close upon him. Then he turned and swung one man against another, cut them down with his whip and left them all for dead. Rostevan, in anger and grief for his men, sprang into the saddle and rode out with Avtandil to overtake the stranger, whose haughty and graceful figure on the black horse grew ever more distant. It was a clear and brilliant day, and soon the rider could see that the king himself was coming in pursuit of him. His horse was like winged Merani\* for speed: as soon as he recognized the king he touched it with his whip and instantly was lost to sight, as if he had sunk into the earth or taken flight to Heaven.

The soldiers searched in all directions, but the ground held no mark and they could not find a trace of him. The horseman had vanished as completely as a Devi.† The king’s men wept for their dead comrades and made haste to tend the wounded, while Rostevan himself said: ‘This has brought great sorrow upon us. I have known happiness until this day, but now it is

\* Merani: Pegasus, the legendary winged horse, symbol of poetic inspiration.

† Devi: demon, evil spirit.

God's will to turn my pleasure into bitterness. His will be done.'

They returned to the palace and Rostevan retired to his bed-chamber, weary and sore at heart. Avtandil was like a son to him, keeping guard and turning all comers away. The crowds dispersed, lute and sweet-sounding harp were silent, all merry-making was at an end. There was a sense of unease in the palace. As soon as news of the king's grief reached his daughter, the sun-like Tinatin, she went to her father's room and asked the chamberlain at the door whether he was waking or sleeping.

'He is greatly disturbed in mind, and altered in complexion,' the man replied. 'No one but Avtandil is with him. It is some mysterious stranger they saw when they were out hunting that is the cause of the trouble.'

When Tinatin heard this she did not enter the king's room, but said to the chamberlain: 'If he should ask for me, tell him that I have been here.'

After some time had passed the king called for his daughter. 'Where is she, my joy and treasure?' he demanded. 'Why does she leave me alone at the very time that I need her? Call her to come and console me in my sorrow!'

The chamberlain replied that Tinatin had indeed come to his door, and was only awaiting his summons. Now she hastened at once to her father's room and found him alone, sad and reproachful. 'Where have you been, child? Do you need an invitation to visit your own father?' was Rostevan's greeting, but he was quick to embrace her and make her sit beside him, and soon her presence began to take effect and lighten his mood.

'My lord, the bravest of men might hesitate to enter your presence if he knew you to be out of humour,' Tinatin said. 'Is not your frown alone enough to bring down the stars out of the sky? However, it is better to find a remedy for grief than to give way to it.'

'Dearest child,' said Rostevan, 'even in my darkest moments your presence is a joy to me and banishes care like a healing draught. When you hear what happened to me today, you may think it natural that I should be somewhat disturbed in mind. We came upon a most strange knight, who had such a radiance about him that he seemed to fill the world with light, and yet – for what reason I do not know – he was weeping and in great distress. He

would not come at my command, so that I became incensed, in short I fell out with him, and he mounted his horse and rode away. My men went in pursuit but he killed a number of them, wounded others and then vanished out of our sight. He never spoke or gave us any kind of salutation like a human being, and even now I do not know whether it was a man that I saw, or an apparition. Now I shall have no happiness or peace of mind until the end of my days, for every face that I see will remind me of this grievous affair, and nothing can console me. It distresses me that I cannot be sure whether this really happened or whether it was a dream, an illusion. Certainly the soldiers who were slain were real enough – yet how could anyone made of flesh and blood disappear completely from sight? Pleasant as life has been to me until this day, now assuredly I have fallen from God's favour.'

'Let me remind you of certain well-known words, O King,' Tinatin answered him. 'Do not give way to anger with God or Fate. How can anything that is evil come from the Creator of good, or any harshness be imputed to Him who regards all beings with tenderness? If the knight whom you saw was a being of flesh and blood who lives on this earth, others also will have seen him. You may learn from them whether it was the sight of a man or a spirit that has deprived you of all pleasure in worldly things. Come, do not give way to despair. This is what I suggest: you are the King of Kings and your rule extends as far as your edicts reach. If you send out men through the whole kingdom to report on everything they see and hear, you will soon discover whether the knight was indeed a man or some being yet unborn.'

Rostevan listened to his daughter and lost no time in following her counsel. Men were despatched to the four corners of the earth with orders to spare no pains in their search, to let nothing stand in their way. For a year they sought far and wide before returning, weary and disheartened, to report failure. They had questioned people wherever they went, but obtained not so much as a rumour of the unknown knight's existence.

'We have done all that you commanded us,' they said, 'but we could not find one man who had seen the knight.'

The king concluded that his daughter had been right and what he had seen had been some apparition or trick of the devil. He gave orders for music to be played again, minstrels and acrobats to



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perform. Presents and largesse were distributed, and the palace became once more the scene of feasting and entertainment.

## 4: Tinatin Sends Avtandil in Quest of the Knight

One day Avtandil was alone in his chamber, wearing only a shift, singing gaily as he touched the strings of his harp, when a negro servant of Tinatin was admitted. 'She who is like a tree of Eden in form and the moon in countenance commands you to attend her!' the man announced.

The knight sprang to his feet, overjoyed at the prospect of this first meeting alone with his beloved. He put on his finest attire, a coat of many colours, and rode out to the palace with heart high, fearless for all to see. When he was shown into the queen's presence and found himself for the first time close to her whom he loved, he was abashed before a beauty that eclipsed the moon – the long black tresses falling over a swan-white neck, the graceful form lightly clad beneath an ermine robe and a veil beyond price, the dark lashes like twin rows of lancers. Some grave matter seemed to preoccupy her and her head was bent, until at the knight's approach she glanced up and ordered a seat to be placed for him beside her.

As they looked on each other face to face, Avtandil's awe and confusion melted away and he was filled with a great joy. When Tinatin spoke, it was of her reason for sending for him. 'I would not have wished to speak with you so freely,' she said, 'but you surely know what weighs on my mind. It causes me deep disquiet, so that I can keep silent no longer.'

'How can I find words to speak? Just as the moon is dim in the presence of the sun, so my wits forsake me in your presence,' said Avtandil. 'Only command me – tell me what it is that troubles you, and what should be done to set it right.'

Tinatin answered him graciously, in well-considered words. 'Although I have kept aloof from you until this day, yet I find it

strange that now you should be stricken with shyness. However, I will tell you first of this affair that plagues me like a sickness. You will remember a day when you were out hunting with the king on the plain, and you saw a certain youth – a stranger – who appeared to be in great distress. The thought of him haunts me, and I would ask you to find out who he is, even if the search takes you to the very ends of the earth.

‘Until now,’ she continued, ‘it has not been possible for me to speak to you, but even so I have been aware of your love for me. I know that love has made your heart captive and filled your eyes with tears. Therefore it is doubly fitting that you should perform this service for me: firstly, since you are a knight without equal among men; and secondly, on account of your love for me. Go forth and search for that knight, both far and near. In this way my love for you will grow in strength. Defeat the demon Care and deliver me from this affliction, sow the seeds of hope in my heart, the violet and the rose. Then return to me, as the lion to the sun, and we will be made one. Spend three years in your search. If you find the stranger, come back to announce the joyful news; if you have no success, then I will believe it was a phantom that you saw. In the meantime I swear to take none but you for consort – not if the sun itself should put on human form to court me. By the hope of heaven and the fear of hell, before I wed another may my love for you become a knife to pierce my heart!’

‘O my shining sun, what can I say but that I will do anything to serve you?’ Avtandil replied. ‘You have given life to one who was under sentence of death! God has created you to be a sun whom the heavenly bodies obey, and I will be your slave and go anywhere in the world for your sake. Your gracious words have filled me with joy. The rose will not wither while the sun shines upon it.’

Now there was no constraint between them and they were at ease together, exchanging their vows anew, eating and drinking, laughing in their newly found happiness and talking of many things. In the knowledge that his love was returned, Avtandil forgot the torments he had suffered, and when at last he left Tinatin it was with many a backward glance. He had given heart for heart and as he rode away his eyes were dimmed by tears, a crystal shower that chilled the roses of his cheeks. He wondered how he was to endure the coming absence from his beloved, deprived of

the sight of her perhaps for a long time. 'But that is the law of lovers,' he told himself, 'to withstand all things and be prepared even to die, for love's sake.'

He wept alone in his bedchamber, dreamed of his beloved and awoke to the agony of parting. As soon as it was light he was in the saddle, setting forth to seek an audience of the king. When he arrived at the palace he sent the chamberlain in before him with a letter to announce his intention:

'O King, every part of the earth has been brought under Your Majesty's dominion by the power of the sword. I venture to propose that the accession of your daughter Tinatin to the throne should be made known throughout the realm. Grant me leave to lead a military expedition through the whole length of the marches. The news of the crowning of Tinatin will be a sword-thrust in the hearts of your enemies. It will gladden all loyal subjects and dismay the unruly. I will send many messages of greeting and distribute presents with an open hand.'

This was read with much pleasure by the king, and Avtandil immediately received a favourable reply. Rostevan congratulated him on his wisdom and foresight, which showed a breadth of vision to equal his courage in battle; but in closing, the king asked: 'How can I endure it if you are away for long?'

As soon as Avtandil was assured of his sovereign's consent to his departure he entered the audience chamber, where he did homage to Rostevan and expressed his gratitude. 'Sovereign lord, your praise does me too much honour. May God lighten for me the darkness of absence and grant me the good fortune to behold your gracious countenance once more.'

The old king raised him to his feet and embraced him like his own son. Never were foster-father and son like those two; Rostevan, tender-hearted as he was sagacious, was moved to tears.

Avtandil rode away, a free and gallant knight, his thoughts all of his beloved whom he was leaving. He travelled for twenty days and many a night as well, until he came to the province under his rule. His people came hastening to greet him, delighted to see their lord, and the nobles brought him costly gifts. Everyone marvelled at his radiant looks. However, all their entreaties could not prevail on him to stay, and he continued his journey until he arrived

at a castle of his own in the marchlands, a formidable stronghold with walls of solid rock. There he spent three days pleasurably in hunting, in the company of his squire and pupil Shermadin, whom he appointed to be his vizir during his absence.

This man Shermadin, who had played his part as witness in the shooting match, was one of Avtandil's vassals who had grown up with him from boyhood. He had known nothing until now of the love which had become the ruling force in Avtandil's life. It was to this loyal friend and vassal that Avtandil spoke for the first time of Tinatin and the mission she had given him to undertake.

'Good Shermadin, you know everything that concerns me and I always listen to your counsel. I am ashamed to have kept this one thing concealed from you, this secret of mine – my love and desire for Tinatin. What torments I suffered until the day she called me to her presence and gave me hope, so that I was filled with joy. Now she has charged me to bring her news of the knight who disappeared, and she has promised me her hand in marriage when I return. I wish to perform this service firstly because I am a knight, since loyalty and obedience to the sovereign are a condition of knighthood which I am bound to observe. And then – ah, she has saved me from despair and given me new life! When a man meets with adversity he should not bow before it, but face it boldly.

'You and I, lord and vassal, have always been the closest of friends, and now I beg you to mark well what I say, for I am leaving you in my place. I wish you to be the lord of this province, the leader of my troops, for there is no one else whom I can trust in such matters. Command the military commanders, rule the nobles, send couriers to Court to carry reports and keep yourself informed, send out letters in my name and distribute bounty. If you perform these duties well, how is anyone to remark my absence? Do exactly what I would do, on battle and playing field, just as I myself would do it. It may be, indeed, that I shall return. Wait three years for me, let no one guess my secret and then, if I have not returned, it will be time to put on mourning. Then it will be your task to announce the news of my death to the king. Tread warily in that, for it will not be welcome tidings. Play the drunkard if you will, act like a man who is mazed with grief and say that if death has overtaken me it is a fate that no one can evade. Give my

store of gold to the poor, with all my silver and copper as well. You can be of great service to me in this. Do not soon forget me but look back with tenderness on our childhood, think of me often, pray for me and remember what I have taught you.'

By this time tears were streaming from Shermadin's eyes and he broke out in protest, appalled at the prospect before him. 'What pleasure can there be in life for me without you?' he cried. 'You have set your heart on going and it is useless to try to prevent you, but how can you suggest that I should take your place? How can I, your vassal, play the part of ruler? What sort of likeness should I have to you or any actions of yours? I cannot let you go alone. Rather than that, take me with you and let us slip away together unobserved.'

'Listen to what I say, for it is the truth,' Avtandil said. 'A lover has to be alone in his wanderings. A pearl does not fall into anyone's hands who has not toiled and bargained to possess it. Furthermore, liars and deceivers should be put to the sword. There is no one but you who can do what I ask of you – to whom else could I tell the secret that is now in your keeping, to whom entrust power who would use it well? Only you can serve me in this way. Reinforce the frontier posts so that the enemy cannot establish positions too near the marches. It may be that I shall return safely – misfortune may strike at one man or a hundred, and there is no peril in solitude if the power of the heavenly hosts protects me. Do not give up hope until three years are past – then it will be time to put on mourning for me. For the present I will give you a letter of authority, so that all who court my favour will obey you as their lord.'

## 5: Avtandil's Letter to his Vassals

'Dear people of mine,' Avtandil wrote, 'those of you who have been my teachers and those whom I have taught, loyal and steadfast, attentive to my wishes as shadows: Listen to this letter that I, Avtandil, who am as dust beneath your feet, have written with my own hand. I am about to set out on a journey. For a time I shall be

travelling alone, relying for food on my bow and arrows. I have a task to accomplish that will take me to distant lands, and for a year I shall be absent from the kingdom. I ask of you only to guard the realm well so that our enemies do not make inroads on our land. I am leaving Shermadin in my place, and as long as I am known to be alive he will cause good men to prosper as roses bloom in the sun, and evildoers to melt away like wax. You know that I have brought him up like a brother and son. It will be his part to sound the trumpet, yours to obey him as though he were a second Avtandil and do everything as you would if I were with you. If I do not return at the time appointed, then mourn for me as lost.'

When Avtandil had written this out he gave it to Shermadin and took his last leave of him. Then he buckled on a belt of gold, equipped himself for the journey and left his house. His men-at-arms were drawn up in ranks but he dismissed them together with all his followers and allowed no one to accompany him, announcing that he would mount when he was out on the plain. Once astride his horse he turned and rode away alone through the reeds. His thoughts were all of Tinatin as he galloped across the plain, and soon he was out of sight and beyond pursuit. When the soldiers looked for their commander and found that he was missing they ran from one place to another taking the swiftest horses for their search. There was great confusion and distress until Shermadin summoned an assembly of the nobles and high officials and read out Avtandil's letter. They beat their breasts and bewailed the departure of their prince, declaring that no one but Shermadin could take his place, and they bowed to the squire in homage, acknowledging him as their lord.

## 6: Avtandil's Departure on his Quest

Avtandil set off at a swift pace, riding through the marchlands until he had soon left the kingdom of Arabia behind him, to travel through foreign lands. The parting from Tinatin, his sun, had cut his life in two and he suffered torments in absence from

her, tears streaming down his face like a fall of fresh snow upon roses. He was deprived of all enjoyment, the music of harp and lyre, and in his anguish he sometimes came near to putting a knife in his heart – yet he knew that if only she were near these pains would count for nothing. Then he would say to his own heart, ‘Have patience,’ and once more take courage.

Ever further he pursued his search for the one whose tears flowed without ceasing. He passed through strange and distant countries, questioning travellers on the way, with many a friendly encounter. The earth was his couch at night, his arm a pillow.

‘My beloved, you are far away indeed! My heart is with you – I would meet death with joy if it were for your sake.’

All but three years wore away. There was nowhere under the heavens Avtandil had not searched, and still he had met with no one who could tell him anything of the knight who wore a panther skin. One day, when only a little time remained of the three years appointed for his mission, he was riding through a wild, featureless region. For a month he had seen no human being. Day and night his thoughts dwelt on his love – not even Vis and Ramin\* knew such wretchedness as his. Finding himself in mountainous country, he made his way to the crest of a mountain that gave a broad view of the surrounding country. There he paused to look down at the landscape newly come into view. The slopes on both sides were thickly wooded down to the bank of a river, impossible to bridge, coiling round the mountain’s foot. Beyond this an open plain stretched away into the distance, seven days’ journey across. Avtandil rested, gazing at this scene, and reckoned up the time that had passed since his departure. He found that, out of the three years assigned for his mission, only two months remained. Disquieted at the thought that all might be discovered, he reminded himself that no one can turn evil into good, or be born again at his own wish. He pondered, and paused to consider his situation.

‘If I return now, how am I to explain so long an absence? What

\* Vis and Ramin: Lovers in a Persian poem by Gurgani, translated into Georgian early in the twelfth century by Sargis Tmogveli under the title *Visramiani*, the plot of which ‘has basically much in common with the renowned medieval romance *Tristram and Iseult*’. (*Georgian Literature*, Baramidze and Gamezardashvili.)



shall I say to my beloved, when after all these months I have learnt not even a rumour concerning that knight? Yet, if I continue the search and still have no success, it will be time for Shermadin to announce the news of my death as we agreed. He will go to the king, there will be lamentations and public mourning, and after all that I reappear alive and well after years of travelling abroad!

'My God!' he exclaimed in despair, 'Why hast Thou perverted Thy justice towards me? My long journeying has been in vain: I am uprooted, deprived of everything I cared for, and there is nothing but sorrow before me for the rest of my days.' Then he said: 'It is better to have patience,' and took counsel with himself. 'Never seek death before it is due, nor fall into despair, when you can do nothing but by the will of God. No one can alter Providence: if a thing is not to be, it will not be. Death is to be preferred to an inglorious life.\* Tinatin, light of my days, is awaiting my return and she will demand to hear news of that knight. Why am I wasting time?' Thereupon he set off and rode towards the reeds at the outskirts of the forest, thinking as he went: 'Since I have searched every country under the sun and met with no one who can tell me anything of that man, then – as indeed some said – he must have been a Kadji:† no cause for grief in that.'

He descended the mountain, crossed the stream at the foot of it and galloped through a stretch of forest out onto the open plain. Weary and disheartened as he was, even the small sounds of running water and rustling leaves were vexatious to him. Although he had decided to return to Arabia, it was with reluctance that he sought out the trail he must follow. It was a month since he had seen another human being. Savage beasts in plenty roamed the country on his way, but he did not pursue them. After a time however, for all his sighing, he began to feel the need of food according to the law of Adam's race, and with an arm as long as Rostom's‡ he drew his bow and brought down game

\* Cf. *History of the Kings of Britain*, p. 187: 'Death with honour means more to me than living on in disgrace!'

† Kadji: the Kadjis were a race of beings with supernatural powers (see Phatman's description of them, p. 166).

‡ Rostom, Rustum: hero of Firdausi's *Shah Nameh*, whose story is told in a poem by Matthew Arnold, *Sohrab and Rustum*.



enough for his needs. Dismounting near a clump of reeds where there was grazing for his horse, he started a fire of brushwood to roast his meat. He chanced to look up for a moment, and saw a party of horsemen in the distance riding towards his camp. Thinking it likely they were brigands, in that wild and lonely place, he went light-heartedly towards them with bow and arrow in his hand. Then, as they advanced, he saw that they were a little band of six, two of whom – grown men – were carrying a third who was beardless. This youth proved to be their brother, unconscious from loss of blood from a serious head wound.

‘Ho, brothers! Who are you?’ Avtandil called out to them. ‘I had taken you for brigands.’

They besought him to deal gently with them: ‘Have pity on us, and help us if you can,’ they pleaded, and when Avtandil came up with them they explained that they were three brothers from the region of Khataeti,\* where they possessed a stronghold. They were on a hunting expedition and had enjoyed such good sport that they stayed on in their camp beside a river in the shelter of some trees. Then a dispute had arisen among them, each of the brothers claiming to be the best marksman. They had struck camp and sent their followers home with a huge pile of deerskins. Then, keeping three shield-bearers with them to carry their arrows, they had set out to compete with one another, shooting over forests, ravines and open ground and bringing down game of every kind. One day, in pursuance of their sport, they had come upon a solitary horseman riding an Arab charger black as Merani, and clothed in the skin of a panther.

‘He was like no being we have ever seen,’ they said. ‘If the sun were to put on human form he might dazzle us with just such a brilliant presence. We could not bear to let him go without having some speech with him.’

The eldest brother was speaking. ‘I, as the eldest, asked my brothers to leave him to me. My brother here desired his horse as a memento. It was only the youngest who begged to engage him in single combat, and we consented. The stranger came quietly towards us; when he was near we could see that there were tears upon his face. He soon shattered the fair image we had formed of

\* Khataeti, Khatavian: Cathay, the ancient name for China, and its people.

him, and used his whip to ripen the tartness of our speech. We stood back while our youngest brother advanced to lay hands on him, calling a command to halt, but he was brought down to earth for his presumption.'

The encounter had ended with a slash of the whip and a broken head – the knight riding away alone, haughty and austere, never looking back, while the young Khatavian lay like a corpse on the ground.

'See, there he goes!' The unhappy brothers pointed with a swing of the arm to a figure on a black horse now far away on the plain, and Avtandil knew that his search had not been for nothing. When a man finds what he is seeking he remembers no longer the rigours of the search. From following the Khatavians' pointing fingers with his eyes, he turned to the brothers again.

'Brothers, I am a solitary wayfarer,' he told them. 'I have wandered far from my native land in quest of that knight, and now you have been the means of bringing my arduous search to an end. As I have gained my desire, so may God spare you all misfortune and heal your brother of his wounds.'

Avtandil showed the Khatavians the place where he had made camp and begged them to rest there and lay their wounded brother in the shade. Then he wheeled his horse and set off at a gallop towards the horseman in the distance, swift as a falcon, ardent as the moon to receive the radiance of the sun. As he drew nearer to the black horse and its rider, he began to reflect on the way he should approach the knight. Thoughtless words, rash or hasty action might provoke him to anger. A wise man, Avtandil told himself, should keep a cool head in a difficult situation and act with forethought.

'If I try to come up with him as those others did,' he thought, 'there will be a fight – impossible to avoid – and one or the other of us will be killed. Then, whether it is he or I, no one will ever know who he is or the reason for his strange manner of life.'

Avtandil was determined that all he had undergone should not be in vain, and it came into his mind that every living creature has its place of rest. 'I have only to follow,' he concluded. 'Wherever he goes, I will go.'

Two days and nights passed without a halt, with neither food

nor rest. The unknown knight rode on, always – it seemed – in the same state of unchanging grief. Avtandil kept his distance unobserved. They continued yet another day, and in the evening there appeared before them a group of massive rocks containing several caves. At the foot of the rock-face a stream ran through dense clumps of reeds. Tall trees stood out against the rock, their tops rising high out of sight. The knight crossed the stream and rode on towards the caves.

Avtandil dismounted beneath the tall trees and tied up his horse, then climbed to a post of observation in the higher branches of a tree. When the knight in panther skin rode through the wood, a young woman all in black came out from one of the caves. Tears streamed from her eyes as she ran towards him. He dismounted and embraced her, both weeping as if they shared some common grief. Avtandil looked on in wonder. Then he heard the knight speak.

‘Asmat, my sister,’ he said, ‘our bridges are sunk beneath the waves. For all our love and striving, we shall never find her again for whose sake we have suffered so much.’ At that they both broke down and poured out their grief to each other in tears and lamentations. The woman was the first to recover. She unsaddled the black horse and led it away into one of the caves, returning to help the knight to disarm and relieve him of his weapons. Then both knight and woman disappeared into the face of the rock. Avtandil wondered how he was to discover anything about the knight.

In the morning the young woman in black came out of one of the caves, leading the Arab charger. She polished the saddle and bridle with her scarf before putting them on, and stood holding the reins. Soon the knight appeared, wearing the same garments of panther skin. Sorrowfully he embraced the woman and mounted, while she brought his weapons and handed them to him. She stood there in tears, looking after him as he rode away. It had the look of a familiar scene, as if they had parted in the same way many times before. The knight rode out of the grove by the same path he had followed the day before, passing through the reeds and out onto the open plain. Once again Avtandil had a view of him at close quarters – the noble features, the lion-like strength of limb; there was a scent of aloes in the air.

'God is good to me,' he thought. 'What could be better than this? Now I have only to seize the young woman over there and induce her to tell me the story of that knight, and I shall gain my purpose without the risk of mortal combat.'

## 7: Avtandil's Converse with Asmat

Avtandil came down from the branches of the tree, loosed his horse, mounted and rode towards the rocks. The young woman came hastening out of one of the caves. When she saw that it was not the knight in panther skin approaching but a stranger, she cried out in alarm and turned to run away; but Avtandil sprang from his horse and seized her by the arms. She would not yield, or even look him in the face, but struggled like a partridge in an eagle's talons, calling to one 'Tariel' to come to her aid. The rocks resounded with her cries. Avtandil fell on his knees and pleaded with her.

'Hush – do not cry out so! I am a man, a human being, and intend you no harm,' he assured her. 'Only tell me something of that horseman who has just ridden away, whose form is graceful as a cypress, his countenance so bright – who is he, and why is he in such grief?'

The young woman, still in tears, answered in tones of reason rather than entreaty. 'Let me go! Are you out of your mind?' she cried. 'If indeed you are mad, then come to your senses! You appear suddenly in this place – and lightly ask me to speak of a matter that is most grave and hard to relate. Do not waste your time, for I will tell you nothing. What do you want of me? This is something that cannot be told in words, nor even written down with a pen. For each time that you say, "Tell me!" I shall refuse a hundred times. Just as we prefer laughter to tears, so mourning to me is sweeter than song.'

Still Avtandil attempted to persuade her. 'If you only knew what I have endured to find him! All over the world I have questioned people concerning him, but I have been able to learn

nothing. Now at last I have found you – I cannot let you go until you answer and tell me what I have come so far to discover.'

He gained no ground, however; the young woman was unrelenting. 'Who are you?' she asked him. 'Why have you come here to torment me, like a winter's frost while the sun – my sun – is out of sight? Long speeches are wearisome, and mine shall be short. Do whatever you will – I will tell you nothing.'

Avtandil fell to his knees and continued his pleading, until at last his patience gave way. His features became suffused with rage, and he sprang up and seized the young woman by the hair, setting the point of his knife against her throat.

'Enough of this!' he shouted. 'I'll not be denied any longer. If you wish your life to be spared, tell me on the instant everything you know.'

'You choose an ill means to gain your end,' was the maid's answer. 'Living, I will not speak; lifeless, I cannot. O knight, who are you, and why have you come here with your questions?' she went on. 'Do you imagine you can make me say anything that I would not of my own free will? I could, if I desired, provoke you into taking my life. If you did so, you would but release me from an intolerable existence, for life holds nothing more of value for me.' Finally she said, 'Why should I place any trust in you, of whom I know nothing?'

Avtandil realized that, as his captive herself said, he had taken the wrong course in his treatment of her. He decided to find other means of persuading her to speak. He let her go and she sank to the ground weeping.

'Alas – I have greatly offended you,' he said. 'What is there now that I can do?'

The young woman made no answer, and for a time they sat without speaking, some little distance apart. She remained sullen and unresponsive. Gradually, however, her heart softened and she began to feel some sympathy for the young knight. Avtandil became aware of the change in her feelings towards him. He rose and went to kneel beside her, asking her forgiveness for treating her so harshly.

'If I have estranged you, then indeed I am cut off from all help,' he said. 'You are my only hope – and, since sin is forgiven unto seven times, perhaps I may look for your forgiveness.'

Although, in the service of my love, I have done wrong, yet everyone feels bound to take pity on a lover. I am altogether without resources or aid from anyone. I place myself in your hands: what else is there for me to do?"

Fresh tears and exclamations of distress were the reply to these words. To Avtandil, they were a sign that he was within reach of his goal. 'My words have caused her to change colour,' he observed to himself, 'as if she herself were possessed by love.'

Aloud he said: 'A man is pitied even by his enemies, my sister, when the frenzy of love is upon him – even as I am driven by it; he is one for whom death itself has no terrors. I am commanded by that one who is the light of my days, to find out who this knight may be. With her features engraved like an image on my heart, I have roamed the world and searched for him beyond the clouds, abandoning all pleasures. Now it is in your power to end my search – to grant me life and freedom, or keep me a prisoner unto death.'

Upon hearing this the young woman looked more kindly on Avtandil and somewhat softened her words in reply.

'You provoked me to anger at first,' she agreed, 'but now you have chosen a better way, and I will do as much for you as I would for a brother. Yes – I will help you. Only you are to do exactly as I say, and nothing otherwise. If you do not obey me, all your pains will go for nothing – indeed, you may wish you had never been born.'

'We are like the two men on a journey,' Avtandil replied, 'when one of them fell down a well. The other called down to him: "Wait there, friend, while I go to fetch a rope." The first man laughed and shouted back: "What else can I do?" My dear sister, the rope is in your hands! It is for you to direct me.'

Avtandil had gained the young woman's confidence by this gentler manner of address. 'You have endured much,' she said. 'Now if you will listen to what I tell you, you will obtain what you seek. No one will ever learn the story of that knight if he himself does not reveal it; it is beyond imagining, beyond belief. Do not give up hope now, but wait in patience until he returns. This I may tell you: his name is Tarel, mine Asmat. There is a frenzy in him like a fever that drives him onward – I too am possessed by it. More than that I may not reveal. Noble in features, graceful in

form, he wanders alone over the plain, while I take my meat alone, living on the game that he kills and brings back. When he will return I do not know, whether it will be soon or late. Wait here in patience – do not leave this place to look for him. When he returns, I will try to persuade him to receive you as a friend, so that he will tell you about himself.’ Avtandil listened attentively to Asmat’s words, and agreed to them. At that moment they heard the sound of splashing in the grove, and a brightness showed among the trees. Asmat hastened Avtandil into one of the caves, just before the knight rode in on the black charger.

‘God has granted your desire,’ she told Avtandil, ‘but you must stay concealed – for no mortal man can stand against that knight. Wait, therefore, and leave it to me to present you to him.’

Asmat went out of the cave to meet the knight. Once again, both of them were weeping as she unbuckled his armour and led away the black horse. Avtandil, like a prisoner set free, remained unobserved and looked on through a window in the cave at a scene like that which he had witnessed the day before. Presently he saw Asmat bring out a panther skin and spread it out on the ground. She kindled a fire with flint and steel and roasted some meat which she offered, without any garnish, to the knight. He scarcely tasted it however before turning away to fall into a restless sleep. After a short time he awoke with a start, shouting and apparently striking out at some imagined enemy. He looked about him and, finding himself alone, groaned like someone in pain. Asmat, who had been watching in great distress, asked him why he had returned so early.

‘I came upon a party of huntsmen,’ the knight told her – ‘some king with a great host of soldiers, a train of baggage, and beaters surrounding the plain. The sight of them all re-awakened my agony of mind. I wished to spare myself the ordeal of an encounter with them, and I slipped away into the forest where I could stay – if they did not pursue me – until daylight on the morrow.’

Asmat shed even more tears, and said to him: ‘Indeed, living in this way with only the wild beasts for company, you cannot hope to find Her – even though you cover the whole face of the earth in your wanderings. If you were to have but one man as a companion, someone to distract you, stay with you, give you his

support – even though he could not lessen your grief – would not that be better than this profitless existence?”

“That proves your goodness of heart, dear sister, and it is like you to think of it. But there is no remedy in all the world for this wound of mine. The thought of death, the parting of body and spirit, is the one pleasure that remains to me. Where is the man created who would share such a fate – even if I found someone whose company I could tolerate? I know of no one, my sister, except yourself.”

With diffidence, Asmat persisted. ‘Do not be angry with me,’ she begged him, ‘for since it is God’s will that I am left to be with you, surely He has appointed me to be your counsellor. I cannot do otherwise than speak my mind, and this I will say: nothing is achieved by going beyond measure – and you exceed all measure.’

‘What do you require of me, what is it that you would say?’ Tariel demanded. ‘Can I – or anyone but God Himself – create a man at will, for my own purposes? It is true, I have become like one of the wild beasts in the way I live. Yet if my ill fortune is part of the divine plan, how can any effort of mine avail to change it?’

Asmat made another attempt. ‘I weary you – let me ask you only this. If I were to bring a man here who himself should wish to be your friend – one whose presence would come to please you – would you swear not to slay him, or harm him in any way?’

‘Naturally, if such a man existed, I should be overjoyed to see him,’ Tariel assured her, and he swore by the name of her whom he held dear that a stranger should have nothing to fear from him.

## 8: The Meeting of Tariel and Avtandil

Asmat rose and went to Avtandil in his hiding place. ‘He is not unwilling to meet you,’ she told him, and she took him by the hand and led him forward. As Tariel saw him come, Avtandil appeared to him like the sun shining forth. Tariel received him as a friend and they embraced without reserve. Together those two were splendid to look on, with a brilliance like the lustre of the



seven stars.\* Tariel took Avtandil by the hand and they seated themselves on the ground. Both were greatly moved by the encounter, and Asmat spoke some well-chosen words to calm and quieten them.

Presently Tariel said, 'Tell me – I am impatient to hear – who are you, where do you come from? Where is your dwelling-place? As for myself, I am one whom even death has forsaken.'

Avtandil answered him in graceful and polished speech. 'Lion and hero Tariel, gentle in demeanour, know that I am an Arabian, possessing palaces in the kingdom of Arabia. I will tell you, further, that I am consumed with love for the daughter of my lord – a love that burns in me unceasingly with the purest flame. She is the sovereign of Arabia, whom her hosts of strong-armed vassals regard as king.

'Although you do not recognize me, you have seen me once before – as you may remember – on the occasion when many good soldiers of ours met their death at your hands. You were alone beside a stream, a stranger to us. The king desired to speak with you. When you did not come at his command, he became wrathful and sent men to take you by force. You cut them down with your whip – do you remember? – and slew a great many without so much as unsheathing your sword. Then the king himself mounted and rode after you, and you vanished like a Kadji, clear off the face of the earth. Our men were terrified, and that infuriated us even more, for we were utterly at a loss. A monarch, as you know, likes to have his own way, and gloom descended on us. The men continued to search until their tracks drew a chequer-board on the earth, but they could discover no one, young or old, who had set eyes on you. Now that quest is entrusted to me. I received the command from my peerless one, from her who outshines the sun: "Find that knight and bring me report of him. If you do this, I will grant you your heart's desire." Now for three years I have been away from her – three years I have spent in trying to find

\* There are seven stars in the Georgian coat of arms – the sun, the moon and five planets. Avtandil, when he invokes their aid (see pp. 136–7) addresses these by their ancient Arabic names. According to the *Georgian Chronicle*, when Alexander the Great left his nephew to govern Western Georgia he enjoined on him to worship 'the sun, the moon and the five stars and to serve God, the invisible Creator of all'.

some trace of the knight we saw that day. Then three huntsmen crossed my path, who had offered you some incivility and received the sort of answer that I seemed to recognize! So it was that I came up with you at last.'

Recalling various of his encounters, Tariel remembered the day when Avtandil had first seen him. 'It was long ago, but it is clear in my mind still. I was plunged in grief – I remember – thinking of my love, of the disaster that had overtaken us; while you were dressed in finery, a gay and brilliant party of huntsmen. What had we to do with each other? What could you want with me – you who were enjoying good sport, I who was unable to restrain my tears? I beat off your soldiers as they came up with me, but when I saw the king himself join the pursuit I had too much regard for his royal blood to offer battle, and left him the field. This horse of mine is so swift that it can be almost invisible, and in the flicker of an eyelid it can carry me clear away from anything I find displeasing. As for those brothers whom you met, they received no more than their deserts – they had addressed me with an arrogance that ill became them.

'I am overjoyed to see you here and talk with you,' Tariel continued. 'You have shown the courage of a hero, and great fortitude in the face of danger and hardship, in seeking out someone whom Heaven itself has abandoned.'

'How can I be worthy of praise from you, who yourself would call forth the eloquence of learned men?' Avtandil replied. 'You are the image of the one sun, the source of light that no grief or anguish can obscure. This day causes me to forget even that one who overshadows all else in my heart. I will abandon her service, if I can be of service to you. That shall be according to your wish – for my part, I ask no more than to stay at your side, even to the point of death.'

'I find it strange indeed that you should so freely offer this. What have I done to put you in my debt?' Tariel demanded in reply. 'It is true that we are both lovers – and lovers, it is decreed, ought to have sympathy for each other. Even so, if I am the cause of your parting from your love, what can I do for you in return?'

So Tariel reflected; and he went on: 'You have travelled a great distance in your lady's service, and now by God's will you have found me and your mission is completed. It was a valiant

undertaking. And yet – how can I bear to speak of what has brought me to this life of wanderings? It would be an ordeal of fire.’

Now Asmat intervened. ‘Grief and tears will not quench that fire within you,’ she told Tariel. ‘It is not for me to urge you to speak – yet, think that here is a knight who ardently desires to hear your story. He pleaded with me to tell him; if now he hears it from yourself, I believe that it may benefit us all.’

For a time Tariel was silent, overcome by his feelings. Then he turned to the young woman and said: ‘Asmat, you too are concerned in this. You know what it will mean to me. Already, in exchange for the pleasures of this world, I am left with a woollen cloak and a couch of straw; and now, for the sake of this knight and his love, I am to undergo again the torments of fire. I am caught in a net – there is no way of escape.’

He reflected, nevertheless, upon the mercy of God. ‘He who has the aspect of the one sun has shown me His grace, in sending me this man who comes in friendship. I am not altogether forsaken.’

To Avtandil he said: ‘I will tell you what you wish to know, and not refuse you – whatever it may cost me in agony of mind. Between friends there should be no reserve, no shrinking from any trial, any ordeal – even from death.’

Tariel called to Asmat to bring water to refresh them, and to stay close at hand. With clothing loosened and shoulders bared he settled himself on the panther skin and prepared to begin his tale.

‘O my lost love –’ he said aloud – ‘you who were hope and life to me – mind, heart and spirit – would that I knew where you are now, and in whose keeping.’

## 9: The Story that Tariel told to Avtandil

Listen now (Tariel began) and you shall hear a tale of such events as I can scarcely bear to relate. I will tell you of that being who so inspired me with love that her loss has plunged me into unending grief.

The country of India, as all men know, is divided into seven kingdoms. Formerly six of these were under the rule of one sovereign, Pharsadan – mighty in power and wealth, a king of kings, generous, fearless and proud, a lion in strength and a sun in countenance, victorious in battle, commander of many hosts. The ruler of the seventh kingdom was my father, King Saridan. He was a great soldier, fearless in battle and the terror of our enemies. No one dared to oppose him, either openly or in secret. He spent his days in hunting and took his pleasure without a care in the world. That way of life, however, did not long content him. He detested solitude, which made him prone to melancholy.

‘I have driven out our foes and recovered the marchlands. In my own kingdom I have feasting and entertainment. Now I shall go and pay court to Pharsadan,’ he decided, and sent a messenger to the king with a declaration of loyalty and an offer of allegiance.

‘God be praised!’ was Pharsadan’s response when he heard this. ‘This comes from a king who reigns in India like myself.’ He despatched an invitation to my father forthwith: ‘Come, and I will receive you with honour as a brother and a parent.’

When my father arrived Pharsadan gave him a kingdom and conferred on him the rank of *amirbar*.<sup>\*</sup> That is an office that in India includes that of *amir-spasalar*, and gave my father command over all the armies of India. His power was only less than that of the King of Kings himself.

Pharsadan treated my father as an equal. ‘I’ll wager no one has an *amirbar* like mine!’ he would say. The two sovereigns hunted and went to war, together bringing all their enemies into subjection. I am not the man my father was – just as there is no one like myself.

The king and queen of India were childless. Apart from being a great sorrow to themselves, this became a cause of anxiety to the army commanders. So it came about that when I was born I was at once adopted by King Pharsadan and given an education befitting the heir to the throne and future *amirbar*.

‘I will bring him up as my son,’ the king said. ‘He is of my own race.’

<sup>\*</sup> *Amirbar*: Rank corresponding to that of Admiral of the Fleet or Grand Marshal of the Army.

I was taught by learned men and brought up as a prince, schooled in the art of ruling and in the conduct and accomplishments proper to a king. At the age of five I was fully grown and could kill a lion without difficulty. I was comely in looks, and men would say that I was like some plant in Eden. As Asmat will tell you, I am now no more than the shadow of what I used to be. King Pharsadan was consoled for having no son of his own. Then, when I was five years old, a daughter was born to the queen.

(Here Taniel's voice failed him. Asmat brought him water, and he forced himself to continue.)

Even then she was like the sun, and I took fire from her – a fire that is burning me still. I cannot find words to praise her.

The news of the birth of a princess was received with universal rejoicing. Letter followed letter as messengers went out to the most distant parts of the kingdom, and kings and princes came bringing their gifts from far and wide. Bounty was distributed among the people. One would have said the very heavens sparkled with joy. Truly, she of whom I speak is beyond the praise of men.

At last the ceremonies and festivities came to an end, the princes departed to their own countries and the guests dispersed. The sovereigns came to a decision at that time concerning the princess's upbringing and my own. We were both of us dear to them, and equal in their regard. Her name . . . now I will pronounce her name.

(Again Taniel fell silent and it was some few moments before he could bring himself to continue.)

She was called Nestan-Darejan. She was wise from her earliest years, and full of grace, with a beauty that outshone the sun. She grew to maidenhood and a house was built for her, with walls of ruby and jacinth hung with brocade and cloth of gold. Aloe shavings burning in censers scented the air by day and night. A fountain of rose-water played in the garden, filling the pool and making music that mingled with the trilling of birds. Here the princess dwelt, spending the days in her tower or wandering in the shade of her garden. She was attended by Asmat and two slaves, while her upbringing was entrusted to the king's sister Davar – a widow who had been married in Kadjeti.\* The princess

\* Kadjeti: the kingdom of the Kadjis (see note, p. 56).

was placed in her care to be schooled in wisdom, and no one but Davar and her attendants was permitted to set eyes on her.

When I was of an age to go to war, King Pharsadan decided that his daughter should inherit the throne. I was given back into the charge of my father, although I still stood high in favour with the king. He continued to treat me as a son and would keep me at his side the whole day long, scarcely releasing me even to sleep. I had grown to be well-favoured, strong as a lion and an excellent marksman. I could slay a lion as if it were a cat. After the day's hunting I would play games on the *maidan*, and afterwards join my comrades in feasting and diversions. That is the way I spent my days. Now, her face with its gem-like beauty has come between me and that life at Court.

When I was fifteen years old my father died. All pleasure was at an end for Pharsadan, and while Saridan's death was welcome news to our enemies, loyal subjects heard of it with sorrow and misgiving. I mourned my father deeply. I kept to my room and remained in darkness for a year, inconsolable, without going to Court. At the end of that year a party of courtiers came to bring me a message from the king. 'Tariel, my son,' they were commanded to say, 'it is time to leave off your mourning. The loss of your father grieves us, who are his peers, even more deeply than it does yourself.'

They gave me some presents that the king had sent, and conveyed to me the royal command: 'Put off your garments of mourning and return to Court. We appoint you *amirbar* in your father's place. You will take his rank and carry out the duties that were his.'

This summons was most unwelcome to me, as my grief for my father was still fresh. The courtiers who stood before me led me out from the darkness of my house. The sovereigns of India rejoiced to see me appear; they received me with ceremony and also with great kindness, coming some distance to meet me and embracing me as a son. They gave me a seat beside the throne and treated me with honour, and presently both spoke to me gently about the duties I was to assume in my father's place. At that I demurred, for the thought of taking on myself my father's authority and outward demeanour was altogether distasteful to me. However, the king insisted; he would not let me go, and together the

royal couple persuaded me to recognize and accept my new obligations. At length I submitted, and made obeisance to them in the rank of *amirbar*.

### 10: How Tariel first saw Nestan-Darejan

One day when I was returning with the king from hunting he took me by the hand and said, 'Let us go to visit my daughter.'

We passed through the garden of delights with its fountain of rose-water and its singing birds, and came to the entrance of the house which was hung with cloth of gold. The king bade me choose some partridges from our bag to give to the princess. It was then that I first fell in debt to this fleeting world. The king entered the house and the brocaded curtain fell back into place behind him, closing the entrance and leaving me alone outside. I did not follow, for I knew that the king wished no one to set eyes on the sun-like maiden within. I could see nothing beyond the curtain, although I could hear the sound of conversation. Soon the king ordered Asmat to go outside and take the partridges from the *amirbar*.

Asmat drew the curtain aside. As I was standing, facing towards the entrance, my gaze fell upon her who was within. For a moment I looked – and the sight of her penetrated my heart like a shaft of light and set a fire alight in me. Asmat came to me and I gave her the birds that I was holding. That fire burns in me to this day – while she, that being of radiance, has passed from my sight...

(The memory of that moment he had described affected Taniel deeply. For a long time he was unable to speak, while Avtandil and Asmat were moved to tears of sympathy.)

What pain it gives me to recall it (he went on at last). This transitory life has many pleasures to give – we gain ease from them, and various delights – but which of us can escape payment in the end? Listen to this story of mine, for it will show that however much pleasure a man may find in this present life, the time will come to pay his debt.



I handed the partridges to Asmat and she carried them into the house. I could not turn my head away, and as I looked I began to feel faint. The strength went out of my limbs and I fell down in a trance. When at last I recovered consciousness it was to the sound of weeping and wailing. There were people crowding round me as if they were about to board a ship. I was in a large chamber, lying on a splendid couch. The king himself was there and the queen also, both weeping and rending their cheeks. As soon as I opened my eyes they embraced me and begged me to speak to them, if it were but one word. The mullahs pressed round me, praying and reciting the Koran. They pronounced me to be possessed by Beelzebub, or some other fiend – I do not know what they fabricated.

I lay unconscious for three days, baffling the physicians who could find neither cause nor remedy for my strange sickness. At times I started up and babbled a few senseless words. The queen wept many tears in her anxiety for me, while I remained in the palace neither alive nor dead. When at length I came to myself, I remembered – and saw immediately the perils of my situation. I prayed to the Creator for patience and courage, for strength to return to my own house, for there I should be in less danger of betraying my secret.

My prayer was answered and I was able to raise myself up. This was reported to the sovereigns, who in great gladness came instantly to visit me and press me to take some nourishing drink. I told the king that I had recovered my strength and would like to mount my horse and go out to see the river and the fields again. The king accompanied me and we rode out across the *maidan* to the river bank. My spirits rose, and some of my strength returned to me. We turned back after a short time and the king rode with me to the door of my house, where he left me.

When I was alone in my room I began to feel ill again and sick at heart. My chamberlain came to the door and called away my page, and I was wondering what he could have to say to him – when the man came to announce that someone whom Asmat had sent was asking to see me.

‘What has she to say to me?’ I asked him, and ordered him to question her. He went away, and returned with a letter which he gave me. I read this with astonishment, for it proved to be a



declaration of love. Was it possible that I had inspired this passion? I marvelled at her being so bold as to declare her love. It would be churlish to disregard such a letter – I should cut a poor figure if I let it go unanswered. So, suspecting nothing and wrapped in my own feelings of despair, I replied to it as gallantry demanded.

The days went by while the fire in my heart, like a fever, burned my life away. I no longer went to Court, nor could I bear to watch the soldiers at manoeuvres on the plain. Physicians came to visit me, but for my sickness of the spirit there was no cure, and I was always watchful to conceal the cause of it.

‘It is a disorder of the blood,’ they decided, and thereupon the king commanded that I should be bled. I was lying in my room again, weak and low in spirits, when Asmat’s servant was announced. She had come to bring me a second letter. I read this slowly. The writer desired that we should see each other, and without delay.

It was indeed time, I wrote in reply. ‘Do not think me a laggard: I will come whenever you are pleased to send for me.’

Now I began to wonder why I should be so disturbed by these love letters. It was true that in my position as *amirbar*, if I came under the slightest suspicion my every action would be closely observed and weighed and, if the secret of my love became known, I should be banished from the kingdom. Accordingly, when the king sent a man to enquire after me, I told him: ‘My arm has been bled and I am beginning to feel better. I will come to the palace, and the pleasure of attending on the king will speed my recovery.’

I went forth and rode to the palace. As soon as I appeared, the king said to me: ‘Now, do not let this happen again!’ He set me on my horse then and there, without belt or quiver, mounted himself, loosed the falcons upon their fluttering quarry, and led off the hunt amid shouts of applause. All day we hunted over the plain. At the end there was a banquet with minstrels and singers. Presents were distributed freely, and no one who was with us that day went away dissatisfied. Although I took part in these festivities, my heart was not in them – I was aflame with desire, and could think only of Her. Late in the evening I invited some of my comrades to my house, and in their lively company sought to conceal my real state of mind. In the midst of our revelry, when

the laughter and talk were loud, my house steward came and spoke to me in a whisper: a woman was waiting to see me.

'Will the *amirbar* see her?' the man murmured. 'She is veiled, but her beauty would call forth praise from sages!'

I told him that I was expecting her, and that he was to show her into another room. Then I rose from the table, and upon seeing this some of my guests rose also, but I begged them not to leave.

'Do not disturb yourselves – I shall be with you again in a few moments,' I assured them. I took command of myself, and went to meet the woman who was waiting in my bed-chamber. I stood in the doorway, and my visitor – a young woman dressed in black and heavily veiled – came forward and fell on her knees.

'How fortunate is one who has the honour to be received by you!' she said. That caused me to wonder, and to think that she was new to the ways of love, for no woman versed in gallantry would kneel before a lover, but would remain composed and still. When I went to the divan and seated myself, my visitor would approach no nearer than the border of the carpet.

'Come!' I said. 'If you desire me as your lover, why are you hesitating?'

For a moment the young woman gave no answer. Then, when I was looking at her in surprise, she found utterance: 'This is an hour I shall remember to my shame! You are thinking it is for that reason I have come to you – but indeed it is not so! However, the way you receive me gives me some hope and reassurance.' She rose to her feet then. 'It is not on my own account that I am here, but at the command of my mistress. She is pleased to be thus daring. This letter will tell you who it is who has sent me.'

## 11: Nestan-Darejan's First Letter to her Lover

I took the letter that Asmat gave me and read it. It came from that one who had set my heart on fire:

'O lion, do not show any sign of your love for me, but know that I am yours and take heart. Now Asmat will tell you all that I have said. Sighing and raving, wasting away – what kind of love do you imagine that to be? It is better to display your courage to her whom you love in deeds of valour. In the country of Khataeti, where the people owe us tribute, they are causing us trouble and we can tolerate it no longer. For long I have wished to be joined to you in marriage, but the time had not come to speak of it until now. One day when I was in my pavilion I saw you fall senseless, and afterwards I heard of everything that had befallen you. Now I will speak outright: give heed to what I tell you. Go to Khataeti and make war on the rebels. Show yourself to me in martial colours – that is better than sighs and idle tears. The sun itself cannot do more for you than this, for I have turned your darkness into light.'

How my heart leaped for joy as I read that letter! My blood ran hot and cold as in a fever. Asmat's bashfulness had left her and she was now at ease with me. Exalted as in a dream beyond the bounds of earthly existence, I began to compose my answer.

## 12: Tariel's First Letter to his Beloved

I kept her letter before my eyes.

'O moon – ' I wrote – 'whom even the sun cannot outshine, God spare me all that is not of your sending. I feel as if I were in a dream: I cannot believe that this is real!'

I broke off and protested to Asmat that I was at a loss for words. 'Say only this to her: "You have restored me to life, I am faint-hearted no longer. Whatever I can do to serve you, that I will undertake."'

'It is her wish,' Asmat then disclosed to me, 'that no one should know what you and she have said to each other. It is better that the *amirbar* should appear to be paying court to me. In that way no one will suspect anything or discover what is the true state of affairs. She desired me to convey this to the *amirbar*.'

A counsel of inspiration, I thought. How delightful, indeed, I found our converse as long as it was of her! I offered Asmat some choice jewels in a golden bowl; but she declined them, saying that she had jewels in plenty, and would accept only a small ring. When she had left me I returned light-hearted and full of joy to the companions I had left at table and gave a handsome present to each one.

## 13: Tariel's Letter to the Khatavians and their King's Reply

I despatched a courier to Khataeti with a letter to the king:

'The King of the Indians is god-like in might! He is the giver of plenty to all who are in need, but those who defy him will have cause to regret it. Brother and lord, we have no desire to fall out with you. Be prompt to appear before us, therefore, when you receive our command. If you wish to avoid bloodshed, come to present yourselves at the court of India without delay. Otherwise, we give you fair warning that we ourselves will pay a visit to you.'

The letter was written and the man sent on his way. I was well pleased to have taken action, and began to enjoy the pleasure of life at Court with a lighter heart, taking part with my comrades in all kinds of sport and entertainment. At that time, all the favours of the world were mine. Now, as you see, I am stripped of everything and driven to frenzy, an object of repulsion even to the creatures of the wild. As the days went by, the strength of my desires caused those pleasures to lose their savour, until I fell into despondency and called down curses on my fate.

There came a day when I had left the palace and returned to my house alone, to read once more that letter from my beloved which gave me hope and raised my spirits. Thinking of her, I was far from sleep – when a messenger came, discreetly, with a note from Asmat: 'She commands your presence!'

Like a man released from bondage I went with him, as Asmat directed me, to the rose-scented garden where I was left to wait alone. Presently Asmat appeared, gay and smiling. 'You see, I have taken out the thorns from your heart,' she said, 'and now you are to see your rose.' She held aside the heavy curtain for me to enter the house.

Beneath a canopy embroidered with precious stones – sparkling crystals, rubies of Badakhshan – the king's daughter was seated, she of the flashing countenance, more dazzling than the sun. She did not speak, but gazed at me from the lake-dark depths of her eyes. For a long time I stood silent before her while she held me, as one familiar to her, in that gentle gaze. At last she turned her head and called to Asmat. Something was murmured.

Asmat came close to me and said in a low voice: 'You are to leave her now. She cannot say anything to you – ' and then she led me away.

Frustrated, bewildered, I followed her from the house. Fortune, it seemed, had offered to cure my sickness, had aroused my hopes; now she withdrew her favours and I was confronted with the agony of separation from my love. I voiced these thoughts aloud as we passed through the garden. Asmat answered me with promises of happiness to come.

'Do not lose heart!' she urged me. 'Close your mind to such sombre thoughts, admit none but joyful ones. It was but delicacy that kept my mistress silent and caused her to hold herself aloof.'

If there was to be any help for me it would come – I imagined – from Asmat. 'My sister,' I said to her, 'I am in your hands. I beg of you, do not leave me long without some word from her!'

I mounted then and rode back to my house, where I spent the night unsleeping, maddened in heart, distracted in mind.

In due course a deputation arrived from Khataeti. They addressed me in bold and presumptuous terms. 'We are no cowards,' they boasted. 'Our castles and strongholds are well fortified. Who is this sovereign of yours, to assume some sort of dominion over us?' They delivered to me a brief letter from their king, Ramaz.

My letter had provoked him – as I intended – into an insolent reply, which offered the occasion to declare war on the Khatavians. I gave the command to muster the army, and despatched the

Governor of the Marches to call up our forces from every part of India. They converged in their hosts upon the capital until every mountain, valley and forest around it was covered with men-at-arms. They came swiftly and were soon paraded outside the city in ordered ranks. When I rode out to review them I was well pleased to see the soldiers handsomely equipped, high in morale and martial spirit. These were the men under my command – their Khvarazmian\* armour glittering in the sun, their horses full of vigour and in shining condition. I raised the royal standard with its colours of crimson and black, and gave the command to march on the following morning.

Still, as I rode back to my house, I thought that Fate dealt hardly with me. When I entered my room, my spirits sank low at the prospect of my coming departure, with the separation from my beloved.

## 14: Tariel's Meeting alone with Nestan-Darejan

While I was alone, in a downcast state, something like a miracle occurred: a letter was brought to me from Asmat, bidding me attend her mistress. 'Come, as she commands you! Better that, than to complain of Fate's ill usage.'

I was swift to obey and set forth with a glad heart. Night was falling as I rode up to the gateway of the garden, where Asmat was awaiting me. She was smiling as she led me through the garden into that house with its enchanting pattern of roofs and terraces.

'Enter!' she said. 'The Moon awaits the Lion!'

The beauty of the king's daughter in her dress of green shone out like the moon's rays from beneath her jewelled canopy. I looked with awe on that being of mystery, marvellous in face and form. I stepped forward and stood within the room, no closer to

\* Khvarazmia or Khoresmia: a kingdom in Central Asia, later the Khanate of Khiva. Here it is identified with Persia.

her than the border of her carpet. She was reclining upon some cushions and I could not see her face. I gazed at her; it seemed that joy rose up within me like a column of light, until every trace of darkness was dispelled. She raised her head and let her eyes rest on me for a moment before she turned to Asmat.

‘Ask the *amirbar* to be seated.’

Asmat placed a cushion for me. When I had taken that place of honour, the princess spoke.

‘I did not speak when you came to me before, and you were distressed at my silence as a plant deprived of sunlight. Yet it was due only to the modesty that is proper for me in the *amirbar*’s presence. While a woman should be restrained in her conduct towards men, worse even than lack of restraint is dissimulation – she should not conceal what is in her heart. A smiling countenance may be the mask of a troubled mind. When I sent my maid to you recently, it was in order that you should realize the truth. Whatever we have known of each other before, know now that I am yours. By the most solemn vows I swear it: may God turn me into dust, may I have no place in the nine heavens, if I am false to you.

‘Go to war and subdue the Khatavians. Fight well and defend the marchlands from our enemies. God send you victory and a glorious return. As for myself – what will become of me until I see you again? Tell me that your heart is mine, undivided, as mine is in your keeping.’

‘I would go through fire for your sake,’ I replied, ‘but since your rays have shone on me, my sun, and given me new life, I will march on the Khatavians and acquit myself like a lion. What you accord to me, no man on earth could merit! God is the fount of grace and one does not marvel at His mercy, yet this grace of yours is marvellous to me. Your brightness suffuses the darkness of my heart and transmutes it to light. I am yours until I am laid beneath the earth.’

We made our vows to each other and sealed them on the sacred Book. ‘Never shall my heart be given to any but you,’ she swore to me. For some time we conversed, tasted a little fruit, until it was time for me to leave her. When I rode away it was through a world made new: through her radiance all things were transformed, and I was filled with an overwhelming joy.

## 15: Tariel's Military Expedition to Khataeti

In the morning I rose and gave the command for bugles and trumpets to be sounded. I cannot describe to you how splendid was the sight of all those squadrons ready to march! We set out on the road to Khataeti, marched through trackless regions and crossed the frontier of India. After some time I was met by an emissary of Ramaz, the Khan of Khataeti. He was the bearer of many costly presents, and a conciliatory message.

'We cannot stand against you – even the goats of India could devour our wolves! The king begs that you will not destroy us, but exact from us a binding oath: we swear to surrender, if you will spare us, ourselves, our families and everything we possess. We repent of our misdeeds and beg to be forgiven them. Halt your troops on the march, therefore, and spare our country the devastation of an army's passage. We swear on oath that we will not resist, but cede our strongholds to you, if you will advance with no more than a small number of men.'

I called my vizirs together to discuss this communication. They were emphatic in their advice to be on guard against treachery: 'As your seniors in age and experience, we make bold to warn you against these people. Already on one occasion they have shown themselves to be extremely treacherous. On no account let them take you unawares, to the undoing of us all. Choose the best of our fighting men, advance with them only and let the rest of the army follow in the rear,' was their counsel. 'Keep close liaison between the two sections. In this way, if the Khatavians are in fact acting in good faith, you will be able to comply with their request; on the other hand, if they are planning a surprise attack, you can call up the full weight of our forces to counter it.'

The vizirs' caution proved to be well judged. I did as they suggested – sent a message to Ramaz agreeing to his proposals and advanced into Khataeti with no more than three hundred men. To the rest of the army I gave the command to follow at a fixed distance and not to close it until they received a signal.

I had been three days on the march when a messenger from





Handwritten text in a medieval script, likely a continuation of the narrative or a title, located at the bottom of the illustration.

Ramaz came to me, bringing presents of many splendid robes. The Khan, his master, had commanded him to say: 'O mighty and noble prince, I await your coming with impatience. Many presents shall be added to these. What I have said to you, through my envoy, is the truth. In my eagerness to meet you I am coming on in advance of my armies.'

To this I replied that I intended to do as he desired, and looked forward with pleasure to our meeting.

We had halted one day to camp at the edge of a forest, when yet another party of Khatavians approached. They brought a fine horse as a present, and repeated their king's message of welcome. He would be with me, they said, on the morrow. I, for my part, received them in the most friendly manner. I insisted that they should remain as my guests and a tent was set up for them, which by my orders was left unguarded, and they shared it lying together as pages do.

After we had parted for the night, one of those Khatavians came secretly to visit me in my tent. No good deed is ever thrown away: 'I am greatly in your debt,' the Khatavian explained to me, 'for when I was a boy I was brought up for a time by your father. That is why I have come to give you warning, for it would grieve me to see you cut down in the grace of your manhood. There is treachery being planned, and I wish to have no part in your betrayal. If you will listen to me and keep a cool head, I will give you a full account of it. Make no mistake, these men are treacherous. At a certain place on your way a hundred thousand men are waiting in concealment, at another, thirty thousand. They will urge you to go forward; the king will come to meet you; they will seek to distract you and disarm you of suspicion, while their soldiers arm themselves in secret. They will send up a smoke-screen and surround you on all sides, then attack - as one against ten thousand, what can you hope to achieve?'

I treated my visitor as the friend he had shown himself to be and thanked him for his warning. 'If I am not slain I shall owe my life to you. I will reward you for this,' I promised him. 'Now return to your comrades so that they will not suspect you.'

The Khatavian left and I kept his news to myself, as if it were nothing more than a rumour. What is to be will be, whatever counsel one follows. At the same time I despatched a runner to

the troops in the rear with the command to advance with all speed by forced marches. In the morning I summoned the Khatavians and directed them to inform Ramaz in friendly terms that I was advancing and expected him to meet me on the way.

For half a day we went forward. I gave little thought to the dangers ahead of us. The day of one's death is as Fate decrees and nowhere on earth can man escape it. We were following a mountain path, and when we came to the top of the ridge I could see a billow of dust rising above the plain. 'There comes King Ramaz,' I said to myself. 'He has set a trap for us, but my sword and lance will prevail.' I drew up a plan of campaign and then addressed my troops:

'Brothers, those men have prepared an ambush for us,' I told them. 'Now is the time to show the strength of your arms and not to weaken. Remember that when any man dies in the king's service, his spirit will ascend to Heaven. We are about to engage the Khatavians and prove our courage in action. Put on your coats of mail and stand to arms!'

My soldiers, mounted and fully armed, advanced in battle order on Ramaz and his party. When the Khatavians saw that our men were armed they sent an envoy to us from the king.

'As you can see, we have kept faith with you,' was Ramaz's message. 'We are displeased that you come to meet us bearing arms.'

I sent answer that I had been apprised of the Khatavians' disposition of their troops and the ambush they had prepared. I invited them to attack us and fight honourably in open battle. The Khatavians sent up a smoke-screen – thus making it plain what their intentions had been. Then they came out of ambush and, divided into two columns, advanced on us in close formation.

I took up a lance and lowered the visor of my helmet. Now that the moment for battle had come, my spirits were high. I deployed my squadrons in a line the length of a stadium and we marched in extended formation on the Khatavians. They stood their ground with unbroken ranks, quiet and well disciplined, in countless numbers – the main body of their army.

'He is mad!' their shouts went up as I led the charge and rode into the thick of their ranks. I slew a man with the first blow of my lance and overthrew his horse. The lance was broken – I drew my

sword and fell upon them like a hawk on a covey of partridge. I struck a man and he spun like a dragonfly, I hurled one man upon another until I had raised a great mound of slain, men and horses. I destroyed their two leading columns in that first attack. I was surrounded, with the battle raging about me. I swung my sword and made the blood flow – wherever my blows fell, horsemen collapsed on their mounts like saddlebags. They began to fall back, out of reach of my sword. When the light was beginning to fail a shout came from the enemy lookout posted on a nearby hill.

‘Retreat!’ he called. ‘For your lives, retreat!’ He had seen our army advancing in full strength. They had started out immediately on receiving the command, and never halted on the march until they came up with us. That was the end. At the sight of that great army about to attack, the enemy turned and fled. I myself unhorsed their king, Ramaz, and fought with him on foot until I had him at sword-point. Our rearguard pursued the remnants of the Khatavian forces as they fled the field in terror. Those who resisted were cut down and the rest, in great numbers, taken prisoner. Many who had kept watch that night were repaid with eternal sleep.

We dismounted, and men came up from all over the field of battle, far and wide, rejoicing and offering me congratulations. The air was filled with their shouts, their praises and blessings raining down upon me. With a slight sword wound in the arm, I received much admiration for my prowess, especially from those who had had some part in my upbringing. I sent out soldiers over the battlefield to collect the spoils, and they returned well laden. The earth was dyed with blood. It had been a great victory. The citadel offered no resistance, and the battle was over.

I turned to Ramaz, who was my prisoner. ‘I have a full account of your treachery,’ I said to him. ‘Now it is for you to do what you can to make amends, if you wish for mercy. Leave your strongholds undefended, and give the command for them to surrender to me.’

Ramaz was at the end of his resources. He asked for one of his nobles to be brought to him, whom he could trust to carry out his commands. I sent this Khatavian lord, with an escort of mounted men, to bring before me the governors of the citadels. The Khatavians’ surrender was complete. I made a tour of the country

to reduce the people to submission, and assured them that there would be no devastation of their land. Every stronghold opened its gates to us; the garrison commanders gave up the keys of their treasuries. When at last we turned towards home, we had a large number of prisoners in our train and spoil to load a thousand camels and mules. In that country are found some of the rarest gems and finest workmanship in the world. I set aside for the king what I took to be the most valuable of the jewels and precious stuffs, and chose for myself an exquisite cloak and scarf of some fabric so miraculously made that one could not tell how it was done – it was neither pile nor woven tissue, delicate as silk yet with the finish of polished steel. These were to be my present for Nestan-Darejan.

## 16: Tariel's Return from the Khatavian Expedition

We began our march homeward. I sent a messenger on before us to announce the news of our victory to the King of the Indians:

‘The Khatavians sprang an ambush on us,’ I wrote, to explain the lateness of our return. ‘It recoiled on their own heads, and I am now homeward bound with a fine burden of spoil and many prisoners – among them King Ramaz himself.’

I had stripped the country of its riches before leaving Khataeti, where I restored order everywhere. Camels were few, and we even used oxen to carry away our plunder. Soon after we came to the marchlands of India I had the great happiness of seeing my lord and foster-father and receiving his praise. He personally tended my wounded arm and bound it up. Tents were set up on the *maidan* where we could converse at our leisure, and a great banquet was held there that lasted throughout the night. The king was most gracious to me and made me sit beside him.

In the morning, after a night of feasting and rejoicing, we rode into the city and the king gave the command for the prisoners

to be paraded before him. I brought forward the captive King Ramaz and presented that man of treachery and double-dealing as a soldier of distinction – a truly heroic act on my part! Our sovereign treated him as gently as a child. He entertained him, showed him every attention and spent some time with him in conversation appropriate to his rank. At last the king called me to him and asked me:

‘Will you pardon this Khatavian, your former enemy?’

In response to his compassionate tone, I said: ‘Since God forgives our misdeeds it is fitting for you likewise, sire, to show mercy to the vanquished!’

Ramaz thereupon received a full pardon – with the injunction never so to disgrace himself again. The Khatavians were ordered to pay tribute in money and precious stuffs. When the prisoners had heard the conditions of their release, Ramaz and all his courtiers were presented with suits of clothing. The King of the Indians treated them with mercy, in place of anger. The Khatavian king bowed low and humbly in homage.

‘May God forgive my treachery to you!’ he said, and swore that he would never again commit an act of treason against the king. Thereupon he was given leave to depart from Court, with all his train.

These ceremonies at an end, I returned to my own house. It was scarcely light the next day, when I received a summons to attend the king on a hunting expedition.

‘For three months while you were absent I have eaten no game killed in the hunting field,’ was the king’s message. ‘Come out now and join me, if you are not too fatigued.’

I ordered a horse to be saddled and was soon on my way to the palace, where I found a whole pack of cheetahs\* assembled and a vast number of falcons. In the midst of it all was the king, splendidly arrayed, mounted and ready to start. The queen was with him; he was speaking to her, and as I made my way towards them I overheard something that was not intended for me to hear. The king was speaking and I heard my own name: ‘Tariel has come back from the Khatavian expedition grown into a man –

\* Cheetahs: In the Middle Ages these were specially trained for hunting, and were very fast. A Chinese pottery figure of a huntsman, of the eighth century AD, shows a cheetah on the horse with him.

truly, the sight of him is one to rejoice the heart. Now, I have a plan. I have not consulted you, but I wish you to do whatever I ask without hesitating. We have decided that our daughter shall succeed to the throne, and it is time that she should make her début at Court. Let her appear today, so that everyone may see her. Have her beside you and be prepared, both you and she, to receive us at the palace when we return in good spirits after the day's sport.'

We hunted over the plains, over mountains and foothills, with a vast number of hawks and hounds. We did not go far afield for our sport, and were not late in returning to the palace. Ball players broke up their game, and on our return every street and roof-top was thronged with spectators eager to see me. I was wearing the scarves I had brought from Khataeti, with my wounded arm in a sling, and the splendour of my attire and the pallor of my features evoked the sympathy and admiration of the crowds. We rode up to the gates of the palace, where the king dismounted and went through. I followed him as we approached the throne-room. Suddenly I began to tremble as a beam of radiance met my eyes. It came from Her – she was there in all her beauty, the brightness of her sun-like presence spreading its lustre even beyond the palace walls. We drew nearer. Her dress was the colour of flame, her smile a row of pearls between the petals of a rose. Her attendants were ranged behind her.

When the queen saw me enter with my arm bound up, she rose from the throne and came towards me. She embraced me as if I had been her son, and kissed me warmly. 'Certainly none of your enemies is likely to attack you again!' she said to me in greeting.

A huge banquet was prepared. The board was covered with jewel-encrusted dishes, bowls and wine-cups of turquoise and ruby. It was a feast such as the eyes had never seen. I was given a place of honour beside the sovereigns, and the Princess Nestan-Darejan was facing me across the table. All that night, while the banquet continued to the sound of music and singing, I gazed at my beloved and she at me. Our eyes scarcely parted for a moment – yet in all that time we did not speak to each other a single word. I had never known such joy – to be so close to my love, to let my eyes dwell on her. . . . The music had ceased, the singers were bowing to the king and queen. The king was about to speak.



‘Tariel, my son, you have made me happier than words can tell. We ourselves are well content, while our enemies are cast into despair! You have returned safely after a successful expedition, and your victory should be rewarded. The proper thing, according to custom, would be to present you with a robe of honour; but you look so well in your own attire that I cannot presume to improve upon it! We offer you instead a hundred stores of treasure. Choose whatever you wish for clothing and do not stint yourself!’

The king then made me a present of a hundred keys, to unlock the treasure chambers. I expressed my gratitude and gave thanks for my good fortune. The sovereigns embraced me and proceeded to extend their bounty to the soldiery. Later they returned to the banqueting table in high content, and once more the music of lyre and harp rang out and the wine-cups were refilled. It was dawn before Their Majesties at last retired, and the rest of us, sated with food and drink, left the table soon afterwards.

I came back to my house with my wits in a daze. I was in thrall to love – a flame that I was powerless to quench. My mind was full of the thought of my beloved, the memory of how she had appeared that night. I was given up to the bliss of these thoughts when a servant entered to announce that a woman, veiled, was at my door. My heart beating wildly, I sprang up – and saw that it was indeed Asmat who was coming towards me. I embraced her, raised her when she would have knelt, took her by the hand and made her sit beside me on the couch.

‘How glad I am to see you,’ I said. ‘Now speak, but only of her – of nothing else in the world.’

‘I will not say this simply to please you, but because it is the truth,’ she assured me. ‘Today, when you met and looked on each other, she and you, it was a delight to both of you. She sends me now as her messenger, and you shall learn more of her from me.’



## 17: Nestan-Darejan's Letter to Taniel and his Reply

Asmat had brought me a letter from Nestan-Darejan. She wrote of how she had watched me riding in on my return from battle.

'You were splendid to see. I thought then that my tears had been shed with good reason.

'If God has given me a tongue, it is that I may praise you. If I were to die for your sake, I should not have the power to praise you. My garden of roses is for you: by your sun, I swear I will belong to none but you.

'Your sighs have not been in vain; but now the time for sighing is past.'

She asked me to give her the scarf I had worn that day, and sent me an armlet of her own to wear upon my arm.

(At this point in his narrative Taniel's self-command broke down. He moaned like a wounded beast as he unfastened the armlet Nestan had given him, to show to Avtandil. He pressed it to his lips, then collapsed and fell back, seemingly lifeless, to the ground. Asmat hastened to bring him water and in great distress, herself weeping unrestrainedly, she ministered to the knight until at last he recovered consciousness and raised himself up.)

Listen yet awhile (Taniel went on). Although I am out of my mind with grief, I will relate to you this story of her and of myself. How strange it is that after all that has befallen me I should still be living.

Asmat had come and I was pleased to see her, for I trusted her as I would my own sister. When I had read the letter she gave me this armlet. I put it on my arm there and then, and unwound the scarf from my head; it was black, made of some rare and strong material. Then I wrote in answer:

'O my sun! Your rays have penetrated my heart and humbled my pride and presumption. I am driven to distraction by your beauty and grace. What service can I perform for you, who have breathed life into me? I would have died for you – you have given me reprieve – what was my state then compared with this? The

armlet that you sent encircles my arm. What words can express my joy? Here is the scarf that you desired, and I send with it a mantle equally rare. Do not abandon me, I entreat you – all my hope is in you.’

I gave the letter to Asmat and she left me. I fell asleep and dreamed of my beloved, then woke again – to think of her, and sleep no more.

It was scarcely light the next day when I was summoned to the palace. I hastened to present myself, and was admitted at once to the royal apartments. The king and queen were together, with only three attendants. They invited me to be seated and I took my place before them. They spoke of their age, their lack of a son, the need for a male heir to the throne.

‘By God’s will we are growing old, and the time of our youth is past. He has given us no son, but we are blessed with a daughter who is the light of our days. Now the time has come to seek a consort for her.\* Where are we to look, for one to whom we can entrust the throne and mould in our own likeness, who will be capable of ruling, of assuring the succession and the safety of the realm, so that no enemy will dare to raise a hand against us?’

I answered as best I could: ‘It is natural that you should feel the want of an heir, yet a daughter who rivals the sun in brilliance may surely realize your hopes. What prince would not rejoice at the honour of such a marriage for his son? What more can I presume to say? Your Majesties will know the proper course to take.’

We began to discuss the question, and in spite of the pain it caused me I succeeded in controlling my feelings and concealing my real state of mind. ‘There is nothing I can say or do to prevent this,’ I thought.

‘If the Khvarazmshah† would consent to give us the hand of his son –’ the king was saying. What was I to say? It was clear to me that the royal couple had already taken their decision. The king turned to look at the queen, and there was some private exchange between them. Impossible, I thought, for me to question their

\* ‘Seek a consort for her: The marriage of Nestan-Darejan, heiress to the throne of India, was entirely a matter of State, with no element whatever of love or personal choice.

† Khvarazmshah: the ruler of Khvarazmia (see note, p. 78), here identified with Persia.

intention or oppose it. I was like a fire burnt out, a heap of ashes; my heart shook. Now the queen was speaking.

‘The Khvarazmshah is a powerful monarch. His son would be an excellent match for our daughter.’

If that was indeed the sovereigns’ wish, how could I presume to question it? I gave my formal assent – like someone setting his seal on the order for his own execution. A special envoy was sent to the court of Khvarazmia to ask for the hand of the Shah’s son in marriage to the princess of India. He returned loaded with presents, and reported that the Khvarazmshah had received the offer of Nestan’s hand for his son as a long-desired gift from Heaven. A guard of honour was despatched to escort the young prince to the court of India, and other messengers followed to urge him not to delay his coming.

On the day when the escort departed I returned to my apartments after the games, weary and sick at heart. I was like a man who has received a knife-wound – but when, in the midst of my despair, Asmat’s messenger was announced, I recovered my strength and pride of bearing. The man had brought a letter commanding my immediate attendance.

You may imagine with what joy I obeyed that summons, how swiftly I rode to the princess’s garden! Asmat was awaiting me at the entrance to the tower; but on this occasion she was silent, unsmiling, and the marks of tears were on her face. I was to have no reassurance from her. As she raised the curtain for me to enter, my heart’s desire seemed further than ever beyond my reach.

Then I saw my beloved like the moon in her beauty, and all was light about me and within – all doubts and cares vanished in the radiance that was hers. She was wearing the green dress that I had seen before, with the scarf that I had given her loosely covering her head. It was the brilliance of lightning, however, that flashed from her eyes, and her form had the grace of a panther gathered to spring: the tears on her face were tears of rage. Half-reclining on her couch, she raised herself as I came near. The seat that Asmat placed for me was some distance away from her. Dread filled me as her brows drew together in anger and she spoke:

‘I am surprised that you dare to present yourself, when you are breaking the most solemn of oaths. By Heaven, you will be fairly repaid!’

'I cannot answer until I know what it is that I have done. Tell me – how have I displeased you?'

'You have lied – deceived me – I can scarcely bring myself to speak to you! It shames me to remember how my womanhood betrayed me. How could I have been so taken in? Did you not know of the proposal that was made to the Khvarazmshah's son? Were you not present when it was decided to marry me to him? You gave your consent, you actually agreed to his proposal. Those sighs of love, those ardent promises and speeches – do you remember them? – lies, play-acting! What is more vile than a man of honour who breaks his word? You have broken your vows before God and betrayed me into a marriage that I detest.

'Ah, but if I am betrayed, I too can turn betrayer! We shall see who will suffer more for this, you or I! Whoever is on the throne of India, certain powers will always be mine, and your plans shall come to nothing – you with your false promises, your lying counsels! I will see that there is no place for you in all the kingdom, on pain of death. You may search the earth and the heavens, but you will never find my equal.' (Here some sound like a moan escaped Tariel, but he continued his story.)

There was hope for me: I found it in her anger, in the very violence of her speech. Now I could look her in the face again. What a wonder it is that I am still living when she is lost to me! Alas for this fleeting world that drains my life's blood away. I seized a copy of the Koran that was lying nearby and held it up; I swore on the Sacred Book, 'May Heaven turn against me if I have broken faith with you!' Then I begged her leave to answer.

She bowed her head in consent. 'God strike me with His lightnings if I have betrayed you!' I swore again. 'You alone are my sun, the light of my days.' I explained to my beloved how it had come about that I had been compelled to agree to her betrothal to a foreign prince.

'It was all agreed beforehand between the sovereigns. They had told me nothing of their plans. It seemed to me impossible that I should presume to oppose them openly. It was better – I thought – to give formal assent to their proposal, while secretly I would stay firm in my resolve.

'No one but myself has any claim to the throne of India. Is Pharsadan not aware of that? As to this person he has chosen for

you, I know nothing of him, nor why he is lending himself to such a project. What could I do, what means could I find to prevent it? My mind sought wildly for an answer, like a wild beast seeking its prey! How can I give you up to another? Why should I not claim you for my own?"

So that tower in the palace of my beloved was turned into a market-place, where I bartered my soul for my heart's gain. When I had made my answer I watched her expression soften and grow gentle, tears falling light as dew upon roses, a gleam of pearl appearing between her lips.

'I do not know, now, how I could believe it of you,' she said – 'that you could break the vows you made to me in the sight of God. Ask my father to bestow on you my hand and the sovereignty of India. Then we will reign together, you and I – rather that, than this bridegroom who is proposed for me.'

She made me sit beside her; her anger gave way to a tenderness she had not shown me hitherto. With sweet words and caresses she soothed and reassured me. It was never wise, she said, to act in haste. One should consider what was the best course to take, not fly in the face of fortune. If I were to prevent the arrival of the bridegroom-elect and so bring down the king's wrath upon myself, a conflict would ensue in which the whole country might be laid waste.

'If, on the other hand, he is permitted to enter the kingdom and the marriage does take place,' Nestan continued, 'then you and I will be parted and our joy all turned to grief, while the Persians are raised to power. Think what that would mean to us – it is not to be thought of that they should become our lords.'

'Indeed, may God forbid that you should be wedded to him! Only let him enter the kingdom with his train, and then – ' I swore – 'I will take their measure and show them the power of my arm and the force of my resolve. I will destroy them all and reduce them to dust.'

Nestan-Darejan, however, rejected this plan of mine. 'As I am a woman and would act as befits a woman, I will not become the cause of conflict,' she said. 'I would have no blood shed if it can be spared. Slay no one but the bridegroom himself: do not attack his men.'

With praise for my valour, with a promise of the glory I

should gain in her eyes, Nestan urged me to carry out this plan. I was to go alone and take the youth by surprise, without raising the alarm. After the deed was done I was to go to the king and declare that I would not permit my country to become food for the Persians.

‘India is your heritage, and you are not prepared to yield the smallest part of it,’ Nestan went on. ‘Give no sign of your desire for me, but take your stand upon your rights as heir to the throne. On that ground you will gain support, and my father cannot but concede your claim. When it is all over I shall be yours – and what a reign of happiness will be before us!’

Good counsel – so it appeared to me at that moment. I swore that my sword should bring death to our enemies. I would have taken my leave then, but she invited me to stay and for a little time we conversed together, I most unwilling to leave her yet not daring to take her in my arms. When at last I went away, I was in a state of torment – for every joy I had a thousand cares.

## 18: The Arrival of the Khvarazmshah’s Son and his Death at the hands of Tariel

A herald rode in to announce the arrival of the Khvarazmian prince, and the king called me to his side. ‘This is a day of great happiness for me,’ he said, and gave me detailed directions for the reception of the royal bridegroom. There was to be a lavish distribution of presents and largesse. I despatched men to bring in quantities of treasure, and soon there was a great rushing hither and thither. Our men hastened out to meet the Khvarazmians – a vast number of men-at-arms, so many that the fields could scarcely contain them – and the king commanded tents to be set up for them on the *maidan*.

‘The prince will wish to retire and rest after his journey. Let others attend him,’ the king said to me, ‘but not you, Tariel. You will receive him here at the palace.’

I gave orders for tents of scarlet silk to be erected. A crowd of courtiers gathered to see the bridegroom's arrival, while our troops formed up in squadrons, region by region. When I had seen that everything was in order I was returning to my apartments to sleep, weary after the long spell of duty, when I was intercepted by a servant. He brought a note from Asmat: the princess desired to see me immediately. Without dismounting, I wheeled my horse and made haste to obey the summons.

I found Asmat in tears. 'Why are you weeping?' I asked her.

'What sorrow you bring upon us! How can I be for ever pleading your cause?' she reproached me as she showed me into her mistress's presence. I took a few steps into the room where Nestan-Darejan was seated, and remained standing before her. She was frowning with displeasure.

'Why are you standing there? It is time now for action – unless you intend, after all, to play me false.'

Her words were like a blow. I could not speak, but turned away immediately to leave her, calling back: 'Now it shall be seen what I intend! It does not need a woman to send me into battle.' I went away in a rage, resolved to slay the prince forthwith, summoned a hundred of my men and commanded them to prepare for combat. We rode through the city unobserved and came to the prince's tent. I slashed the flap and entered. He was lying asleep, and it is a terrible thing to relate – how I slew him, how I took him by the heels and swung his head against the tent-pole, slaying the pretender to Nestan's hand without shedding his blood.

The guards outside the tent woke and raised the alarm. I was in the saddle and away before anyone could come up with me. Shouts echoed from place to place as the rumour spread, and soon figures were springing up out of the night to challenge me. I was armed and wearing a coat of mail, and I beat off all pursuit until at last I came to a fortress of my own where I could stay in peace and safety. I made this my headquarters and sent for my men to join me there. We defended the walls throughout that night against my pursuers, until they decided not to risk their lives any longer. I rose at daybreak, and soon three courtiers arrived with a letter from the king.

'You, whom I have brought up as my own son, have turned my rejoicing into grief,' he wrote. 'Why have you brought upon my house the guilt of Khvarazmshah's innocent blood? If you desired my daughter, why did you not speak of it to me? You have made life a burden to me, who have been like a father to you. From this day until my death, you shall never enter my presence again!'

In the answer that I sent to the king, I denied that I had ever aspired to the hand of the princess. I had killed Khvarazmshah's son – I declared – because he would have usurped the seat of power which by rights should be mine to inherit:

'I am sole heir to the throne of India. Whenever a prince or a ruler has died, his throne has come into your dominion. That is all a part of my heritage, and should be given to no one but myself. Since God has granted you no son but only a daughter, it is less than the justice expected of a sovereign that you should make Khvarazmshah your heir. What would remain for me? By your sun, I do not desire your daughter – marry her to whom you please. India is my heritage, and as long as I wear a sword I will cede no part of it to anyone.'

## 19: The Disappearance of Nestan-Darejan

The courtiers departed, bearing my letter to the king and leaving me in a state of frenzy, without any news of my beloved. I had heard nothing of her – I had no means of knowing what had befallen her. I paced the ramparts, which commanded a view of the plain. At first there was nothing to be seen; then, in the far distance, I made out two figures – people on foot. I descended swiftly and went out to meet them. I could see that one was a woman, accompanied by a servant. They came on towards me and I recognized the woman: it was Asmat, her hair all in disorder, her face streaked with blood.

'What has happened?' I called out.

'The heavens have turned in wrath against us,' she wailed, and I went towards her.



‘What is it?’ I demanded. ‘The truth, for God’s sake! Tell me, speak.’

But Asmat was shaking with sobs, and although she tried to control them it was some time before she could answer. At last, with piteous outbursts of weeping, she told her story.

‘I will tell you it all. Do not spare me – as I shall not spare you in telling it. Have mercy and deliver me from this wretched existence.’

The news had spread quickly that it was I who had slain the Khvarazmian prince, and soon had reached the ears of the king. The blow had fallen hard upon him. Stricken and bewildered, he had sent for me – to be told that I could not be found. When he heard that I had vanished without trace he fell into a violent rage and charged me with the prince’s death; but his anger fell on others also – in particular, upon his sister Davar.

‘I understand!-I see it all!’ he had shouted. ‘He wanted my daughter – so he shed the blood of my guest. They could not take their eyes from each other, he and she. Davar, my sister – it was she who had the care of her. Upon my oath, I will have Davar put to death! She whose task was to teach the knowledge of God, has set the devil’s snares. What did they promise her in their lust, those two, what did they give her for a bribe? By my head, she shall die for this!’

It was rare for the king to swear that particular oath. When he swore by his head to do something, he was known always to carry it out. Accordingly, when the king’s threat was reported to Davar, she could be certain that he would make it good.

With horror – the scene still fresh in her mind – Asmat described the fury of Davar the Kadji, and its consequences. ‘She cried out, she swore that she was innocent – that woman to whom the mysteries of Heaven were no secret! – “What have I done, that he should kill me?” And she went to my mistress, who was in her room just as you had left her. She was wearing that scarf of yours, that set off her beauty so well.

‘Davar abused my mistress and shouted at her: “Wanton! Harlot! What have I done to you, that I should be put to death on your account? Was it not at your instance that the young prince was murdered? The king shall not have me put to death without reason – if I am to pay with my life for a crime in which I had no



part, at least I will make it certain that you never see that lover of yours again, who has brought this disaster upon us!"

"That woman seized hold of my mistress, dragged her about and tangled the long tresses of her hair, beat her until she was blue with bruises, even struck her in the face. My mistress gave her no answer. Not a word came from her – only moans and gasps, forced from her by pain. Alas! I could do nothing to aid her, nor was I permitted to tend her hurts."

When Davar's rage was exhausted, Asmat went on, two black slaves entered who had the appearance of Kadjis. They brought a large chest with them in which they laid the princess, treating her with the roughness of jailers.

"Carry her away and dispose of her in the very midst of the ocean," Davar commanded them – "far from the pure ice of the glaciers and the clear running streams."

The slaves received her commands with cries of pleasure. Carrying the chest between them, they passed through the window and put out to sea, where they swiftly disappeared from view.

Davar had foretold her own fate. 'I shall surely be stoned for this!' she said. 'Rather than that, I will die by my own hand.' Forthwith she had drawn a knife and stabbed herself to death.

Thus Asmat ended her tale. She begged me with piteous tears to strike her dead as the bearer of such tidings, and so release her from an unendurable existence.

"What have you done wrong, my sister, to merit such requital?" I asked her. "Whatever I can do is but some payment of my debt to her, and now it is my task to search for her by land and sea."

For the moment I seemed to have lost all feeling, as if my heart had become a stone. Then the horror of it overcame me, and I began to shiver and shake like a madman or someone in a fever. Yet I told myself not to despair, for nothing could be gained by staying here inactive. Rather, I should set out to search for her and travel far and wide.

"Now is the time for those who will, to go with me," I announced. When I was equipped and ready for a journey I mounted my horse, and a hundred and sixty of my men – all good knights and true – rode with me in formation out of the castle gates on the road to the sea. I found a ship there ready to sail, and we embarked and were soon out on the open sea. We began our search,

sailing on each point of the compass, leaving no shipping route unexplored, hailing every vessel that passed and questioning those aboard. Still we learned nothing. It seemed that God had forsaken me, and my despair grew deeper, driving me near to madness. A year passed in this way, then the best part of another. Still we had not found the king's daughter, nor had we met with anyone who had seen her or had any knowledge of her fate. One by one, through battle or sickness, the number of my companions was reduced. I grew weary of voyaging and decided to continue my search on land. Despair had made me savage, uncontrolled. I no longer heeded anyone's counsel. Those few of my comrades who had survived our misfortunes fell away, until I was left with no one but Asmat and two of my men. Their company was a consolation to me, and they urged me to action when it was needed. And still no news of Her had come to me.

## 20: The Story of Nuradin-Phridon

I landed at night and was riding along the shore when some gardens came into view, and hollowed-out rocks that had the look of dwelling-places. I was in no humour to meet my fellow-men, and when we came among some tall trees I dismounted and fell asleep there, while my followers ate a frugal meal.

When I woke it was in wretched spirits – I had searched for so long without success. Suddenly I heard a shout, and the sound of hooves beating a swift measure along the shore. As I looked about me a knightly figure came galloping past, with so much blood on his clothing that I imagined he must be gravely wounded. He was mounted on a black charger – the same that I have with me now. The sword in his hand was broken – that too was dripping with blood. Haughty and enraged, he went by like a gust of wind, calling down curses on his enemies.

I sent one of my men to intercept the rider. 'Ask that horseman to stop,' I told him, 'and tell me how he got his wounds.' But the rider did not draw rein, and I mounted my horse and rode to overtake him myself.

‘Stay!’ I called out as I crossed his path and wheeled to meet him face to face. ‘Tell me what has befallen you!’

My appearance seemed to please the horseman, and he checked his pace. ‘God! What a splendid figure of a man is this!’ he exclaimed. Then he unfolded to me the tale of his misfortunes.


‘It is thanks to some enemies of mine that you see me in this state – persons I had treated as goats, who proved to be like lions and treacherously attacked me when I was unarmed.’

I was able to calm him somewhat and persuade him to come to my camp. One of my men who was skilled in surgery drew out the arrowheads and dressed his wounds. When his pain was eased, I asked him what had happened before I had seen him pass by.

Before answering me he said, with wonder in his voice: ‘I know nothing of who you are or where you come from. How is it that someone like yourself should have met – as it appears – with great misfortunes? How should the Creator dim the lamp that He has made to shine?’

Then the horseman gave me an account of himself, telling me that his name was Nuradin-Phridon and that he was the ruler of the city of Mulghazanzar, whose outskirts could be seen in the distance. ‘Here, where we are, is the frontier of my kingdom,’ he informed me. ‘It is not large in extent, but it is rich in the quality of its resources. My grandfather divided up the kingdom between my father and my uncle, leaving me an island off this coast which was our common hunting-ground. My uncle and his two sons annexed it for themselves, but I would not concede them the right to hunt there. It is to them that I owe these wounds.’

‘I was hunting here on the shore today when one of my hawks flew out to sea. I wished to follow it, and took only five falconers with me; the rest I left on shore with orders to await my return. I crossed the narrows in a barque and found good sport on my island. I hunted hither and thither, shouting and calling out without troubling to lower my voice. I had asked no one’s leave to land there and paid no attention to my kinsmen – one is not on guard against one’s own people. They were angry at my disdain of them. They did not show themselves, but moved against me in secret and embarked a party of men to cut me off from the shore. My cousins themselves, my own uncle’s sons, mounted and gave battle to my soldiers.’



'The shouting reached my ears and I saw the flashing of steel. I flung myself into the boat and put to sea, to be submerged in a wave of warriors coming at me from all directions. I fought them off until most of my arrows were spent, and then relied on my sword – until that broke in two. Surrounded and without weapons, there was nothing I could do. I gave the lookers-on a spectacle by vaulting this horse of mine clear of the boat and into the sea, where I swam ashore. They slew every one of my men and attempted to come after me, but fled as soon as I turned on them.

'Well – God's will be done in all things! However, they have spilt my blood and I will have my revenge – I will make their lives a torment to them day and night, until the vultures feast on their flesh.'

I found myself much in sympathy with this knight. 'Do not be in too much haste about it,' I advised him. 'I should like to be at your side when you march against those kinsmen of yours. Two such warriors as we are will put the fear of God into them! Later, when we are at leisure, I will tell you something about myself.'

'Nothing could give me greater pleasure,' was his reply. 'I am at your service, as I will be until the day of my death.'

We mounted and rode into Mulghazanzar – a fair and opulent city although not large, whose inhabitants were clothed in flowing brocades. The soldiers were wailing aloud, sprinkling ashes on their heads and rending their cheeks. Great was their joy when they saw Nuradin-Phridon return. They embraced their lord, they kissed the hilt\* of his sword, while they greeted me with exclamations of wonder and admiration.

## 21: Nuradin-Phridon's Victory aided by Tariel

As soon as Phridon had recovered from his wounds sufficiently to mount his horse and wield a sword, he made preparations to

\* *Kota*, basket-hilt, so made as to contain and guard the whole hand.

recapture the island from his usurping kinsmen. A galley was fitted out, a great host of men-at-arms embarked and we put to sea. When we received report that our adversaries were putting on their helmets, it was clear that they intended to attack. We were prepared for them. Their boats, seven or eight in number, bore down on us and closed in. I rammed the first of them: their men hurled themselves overboard and swam for their lives. I over-turned one boat with my foot, seized another by the prow and plunged it into the sea. They went down screaming like a crew of women, and the rest of them did not stay to offer combat but turned their boats about and made speed for harbour.

We continued on our course and landed on the island. No sooner had we set foot ashore than we were met by a charge of mounted men, and the fighting was fast and fierce. Then it gave me pleasure to see Phridon in action, fighting like a lion, agile, strong and full of daring. He engaged his two treacherous cousins, struck them down and disabled them by cutting off their hands. Then he bound them together and made them his prisoners, to the dismay of their followers and the satisfaction of our own.

The enemy were in retreat. We scattered them in disorder with a final charge, and went on to take the citadel. The garrison offered small resistance; we broke their legs with stones, we tanned their hides like leather. Slay me if we could carry off all the spoils! Phridon made an inspection of the treasury and placed his seal upon it; the store of treasure seemed inexhaustible. Phridon himself then put his two cousins to death, shedding their blood in requital for his own.

When we returned to Mulghazanzar the people shouted and sang in the streets, for our feats of arms had won the hearts of everyone who saw them. Phridon was acclaimed as king, myself as king of kings. His people called themselves my subjects and I was to be their overlord. Even so, none could have said that I took any pleasure in the proceedings, for I was heavy at heart for a reason no one there could know.

## 22: How Phridon saw Nestan-Darejan

One day when Nuradin-Phridon had taken me on a hunting expedition, we came to a halt on an outcrop of rock overlooking the sea.

Phridon said: 'I will tell you of something very strange that occurred when I was here before. I had come out for some sport and was riding this horse – it is like a swan on the sea or a falcon in the air. I halted here to watch the flight of my hawk. As I was coming up to this place I looked out to sea from time to time, and chanced to see some tiny object riding the waves. It was moving very fast; I could not make out whether it was bird or beast, and I wondered what it could be. Then as it came closer to land I could see that it was a small barque. A dainty vessel she was, with an awning of some material gathered in thick folds. There was a helmsman, and beneath the awning a litter – and within it a being like the moon in the seventh heaven! Two slaves of the blackest visage hauled the vessel up the beach. There they prepared to land their passenger – and who should step ashore but the fairest maiden I have ever seen, with shimmering luxuriant tresses, and in her face the radiance of the sun!

'I loved that beauty at sight. Impatient, trembling with excitement, I determined to attack those men. My horse is the swiftest creature alive: I set him on the downward path and gave him the spur. Alas! The rushes, as we swept through them, breathed the news of our approach. The fugitives heard it, and before we could reach the shore their ship was far out to sea and the beach deserted. You may imagine my chagrin.'

To Phridon's astonishment I dismounted and began pacing to and fro in great agitation, dashing away tears that sprang to my eyes from the onset of feelings I could not control. His words had seemed to describe the princess whom none but myself had seen, and I was afire with rage, frustration and despair. Phridon, once recovered from his amazement, was moved to sympathy and did his best to console me for he knew not what unimaginable grief. He quietened and soothed me as if I had been a child.

'What can I have said to cause you such pain, misguided creature that I am?' he asked.



'Do not reproach yourself,' I said. 'The maiden whom you saw was mine – the being for whom I am consumed with love. Now, as you are willing to be my friend, I will tell you everything about myself.'

I related to Phridon all that had befallen me. When he had heard my story, he marvelled even more.

'Shame on my idle tongue! How can it be that the great King of the Indians should deign to visit my small kingdom, when a throne of sovereignty, an entire palace would be fitting for your reception? Yet be assured that when God creates such a being as yourself, perfect in form as a cypress newly grown, then although He may pierce him to the heart He will withdraw the spear. His mercy will descend upon us and transform our sorrow into joy.'

When we had returned and were within the palace, I told Phridon how fortunate I considered myself to have gained his friendship.

'God has sent no one like you into the world,' I told him, 'nor anyone who could give me such aid and sympathy as you have. What more can I desire? You likewise have found me a friend in need. Give me your counsel now and help me to decide what it is best to do, for unless I can set her free and bring happiness to us both, I shall not be able to go on living.'

Phridon replied by first assuring me how greatly he felt himself honoured by my presence at his court. 'When the King of the Indians deigns to visit my kingdom, what greater favour can I ask? I stand before you like a slave, ready to obey your commands.'

Then he considered how best he could be of service to me. 'This city is a port of call for ships on many sea routes. They come from every point of the compass and bring news of all kinds from foreign lands. Here, God willing, we may hear of a remedy for the fever that burns in you. We will send out our ablest and most experienced seamen to search for that beauty in captivity. In the meantime, endure with patience – grief, in the end, will give place to joy.'

The sailors received their directions, and at the same time men were appointed at every port on the coast and commanded to spare no pains to obtain tidings of the captive maiden. These steps taken, there was nothing for us to do but await the reports of Phridon's men. He was an excellent host; he paid me the

honour due to an overlord and had a throne erected for me in the palace. At last I knew some relief from torment – how it shames me now to think that I could have had a moment's pleasure away from Her.

'I have been blind to what I ought to have seen!' Phridon declared. 'King of the Indians, how can we serve you, what can we do to give you pleasure? Is there one man among us who would not willingly be your slave?'

I will not prolong my tale. Neither from the ships at sea nor from the coastal stations did there come so much as a rumour of the whereabouts of Nestan-Darejan. As one man after another came in to report failure, hope grew daily less until I was plunged once again into despair. At last there was no reason for me to remain any longer in Mulghazanzar. I did not find it easy to take leave of Phridon, whose friendship had lightened my sorrow. Not only did he press upon me still further hospitality – all pleasure, he swore, would be a stranger to him from the day I left the kingdom – but those of his men-at-arms who had heard of my coming departure gathered round, knelt and embraced me, imploring me with tears to stay.

'It is hard indeed for me to leave you,' I assured them. 'But what happiness can there be for me while that maiden is still a captive? Have you not yourselves been moved to pity for her? I am going from here to search the world over until I find her – do not seek to hold me back.'

This black charger of mine was a present from Phridon. 'If you will take nothing else, at least I beg you to accept this horse from me,' he said. 'You will discover for yourself how swift he is and how well schooled.'

Phridon escorted me to the gates of the city, where we took leave of each other with many tears and embraces. Our parting was like that of master and pupil. Phridon's men-at-arms wept with heartfelt grief at my departure. I went on my way, wandering far and wide in my unending search. I did not spare myself, or stay long in any one place. Still I met with no one who could give me word of Her, and at last I decided that it was useless to continue any further in this way. In the solitude of the wilderness where none but the wild beasts had their habitation, I might find some relief for my tormented mind. I called Asmat to me, with

my two remaining followers, and urged them to leave me and go their own way.

'I know what suffering I have brought upon you, and you may well reproach me for it,' I told them. 'Now you shall leave me and fend for yourselves. Do not stay any longer as witnesses of my grief.'

They would not listen to me. 'Never think that we shall leave you, or recognize anyone but you as our lord,' they protested. 'God send that we may never be parted from you, who are so goodly in our eyes!' Fate, indeed, may bring the most valiant to his knees.

Those men remained with me even when, as I had resolved, I took to the wilderness and made camp in mountainous regions where the only living creatures were deer and wild goats. One day I came to this place and discovered these caves, which some Devis had hollowed out of the rock. The Devis are a race of giants – evil beings. They murdered my two followers, but they could not stand against me. Their coats of mail did not protect them, and I slew them to the last one and took possession of their dwellings. At times Fate makes men fall into inertia, at others quickens them to action.

Since that day I have lived here, wandering over the plains, out of my mind with grief. This young woman refuses to abandon me. She too grieves for her who is lost. There is no more that I can do: I hope for nothing now but death.

In the grace of the panther I see the image of her grace, and therefore I wear these skins Asmat has sewn for me. She too, as you see, loves the king's daughter more than her own life.

She whom I love is beyond the praise of men: not even the sages could find words to describe her. Now she is lost to me. I remember her, and bear the burden of my days. Deprived of her I have become like the beasts who are my companions in this place. Ah, God, let me die soon! That is my one wish now, my only prayer.

That was the story Avtandil heard from the knight of the panther skin. When all was told they both fell silent – Taniel unable to restrain his grief, Avtandil profoundly moved by all that he had heard. Asmat devoted herself to calming and consoling them, until Taniel had recovered enough to speak.

'Now that I have made known to you who I am and how it is that you find me in this condition – now leave me and return to her whom you love. You have been absent long enough.'

'I shall find it hard to leave you,' Avtandil answered, 'and when I go it will be in sorrow. Now I am going to speak plainly – do not, pray, be angry if I presume too far.'

'Let me say this: to die for the beloved is truly not the way to bring her happiness! Even the most skilled physician calls in another to attend him when he himself falls ill. In the same way it needs someone other than oneself to give counsel in adversity. Listen to me, then, for I am serious, not speaking lightly – listen not once only but a hundred times! One can do nothing in the heat of fever. I wish to see my beloved again, and I will go to her and tell her all that I have heard from you, gain assurance of her love for me. I will be away no longer than is needed. As God's in His heaven, we will not be false to each other, you and I – let us take an oath on it. Give me your promise not to leave this place, and for my part I swear I will return to you here and nothing shall prevent me. God willing, I will find a way to bring you relief and put an end to your distress, if I die in the attempt.'

Tariel marvelled that someone who had met him as a stranger should so soon offer him a friend's devotion. 'Indeed, the memory of this meeting of ours will not vanish with the wind,' he replied. 'God send that you return, and your presence once again lighten and dispel my grief – then my heart will not run wild like the deer and goats of the plains. May the wrath of God descend on me if I do not speak in earnest.'

Thereupon the two knights exchanged vows of friendship, well matched in the splendour of their looks, their wise speech and the love-madness that possessed them both. They loved each other well, and parted with much sorrow the next morning at first light. Asmat went a little way with Avtandil as he rode past the tall reeds to cross the stream. She wept as she entreated him not to delay his return.

'Indeed I shall return before long,' he assured her. 'I shall think of nothing else, and spend no more time than is needed away from him. For your part, see that he does not wander far away. If I have not come back within two months, you may be sure that some disaster has overtaken me.'

## 23: Avtandil's Return to Arabia

Avtandil rode away with a deeply troubled mind after what he had heard from Taniel, and the thought of the trials and sorrows of the knight of the panther skin darkened his way homeward. He pressed his pace, made short work of the long journey and reached the marches of Arabia at the place where he had left his troops. As soon as he was recognized, the news of his return spread quickly and was received everywhere with joy – most of all by his squire Shermadin, who hastened to meet him.

'God be praised!' Shermadin cried as he embraced Avtandil and kissed his hand. 'Can I believe my eyes when I see you alive and well?'

Avtandil bowed low in return and kissed his squire warmly, saying: 'Thank God that all is well with you.'

The nobles and magnates of the province came to pay homage and welcome their lord. A house had been built for him in the city and there he retired, although he spent no longer in it than was necessary for food and rest. All the people of the city gathered to see him and gazed with admiration at his brilliant looks, his proud and easy bearing. From the highest to the most humble, Avtandil's people were well content at his return.

A banquet had been prepared, at which Avtandil set Shermadin at his side and told him of everything he had seen and heard, all that he had experienced since he left the kingdom. When he came to describe his meeting with the sun-like Taniel his voice broke and he said with eyes half closed: 'Palace and hovel are alike to me, if I cannot be with him.'

Shermadin reported that he had been able to manage affairs so that his master's absence had not been remarked. He gave an account of the whole course of events in the province during those three years. Avtandil did not leave his house that night, but rested well and was in the saddle at daybreak. Shermadin went on before him to announce the glad tidings of his master's return. He lost no time, but covered in three days the distance of a ten-days' march. He bore a letter from Avtandil to the king:

'To the king, great in wealth and power, I humbly and respectfully venture to bring news of the knight who wears a panther



skin. I could have no rest until I had discovered who he was. Now I have returned safe and well, to tell you what I have learned of him.'

Shermadin delivered this message to the haughty and powerful Rostevan, with the announcement: 'Avtandil has seen the unknown knight, and now he is on his way to Court.'

The king gave thanks to God, who had fulfilled his dearest wish. Then Shermadin was received in audience by the young queen. She whose lustre turned the darkness into light became more radiant still when she heard the squire's tidings. She rewarded him with a handsome present and gave new robes to all those in his train.

While preparations were going forward for Avtandil's reception within the city, the party of courtiers who rode out to meet him was headed by the king in person – an honour greater than was due to one of his rank. As soon as the young knight saw the king riding towards him, he sprang to the ground to do him homage. Rostevan raised him up, to clasp him in a warm embrace. The king was in excellent spirits as they went together to the palace, where Tinatin awaited them; those who attended them were merry as if flown with wine.

Now the lion of lions did homage to his sovereign, the sun of suns. Her beauty was aglow with tenderness: she seemed to him to be fairer than the stars. No earthly dwelling could contain the joy of those two: the very dome of Heaven became their palace.

A great banquet was held that day in Avtandil's honour. The king showed him the affection of a father for his son, and their eyes were bright with tears of joy. Food and drink were abundant, pearls were given away like small coin. When the dishes were empty and the wine-cups had been many times refilled, the lesser of the guests retired. The king commanded Avtandil to give an account to the lords and magnates who remained of his travels in the quest for Tariel.

In answer to Rostevan's questioning he described the course of his journey, its length and hardships, the manner of its ending. He repeated in detail to the company before him the story of the knight in panther skin as Tariel had told it to him.

'Do not think it strange,' he said to them at the beginning, 'if

I am overcome when I speak of Tariel or use extravagant terms to describe him. If I liken him to the sun, it is because he does indeed resemble the sun in his effect upon mortal men. He is as dazzling to the understanding as the sun's rays are dazzling to the eyes.

'He has taken the Devis' caves for his dwelling. His only attendant is a woman, handmaid of his beloved. For clothing he has adopted the panther skin – he has no use for brocade or cloth of gold. The fire that is in him burns without ceasing.'

His recital ended, Avtandil was much praised by his hearers for his courage and success in his undertaking. The pleasure that this reception gave him was heightened by the presence of his beloved – she had attended the banquet and remained until the end, listening entranced to every detail of his story. When the last of the guests had retired and the knight was in his chamber alone, a message was brought to him that the queen desired his presence.

Avtandil was serene and joyful as he rode to the palace at the command of his beloved. He had accomplished the task set for him and proved himself a knight – a lion among lions, a jewel in the setting of the world, a lover who had given heart for heart. The queen was on her throne, radiant as the sun, with the grace of some fair tree of Eden. Who but the Athenian sages could speak the praise that is her due? A seat was placed near her for Avtandil, and now they looked on each other face to face and talked together freely, at their ease, in graceful and polished speech. Tinatin questioned Avtandil about his search for the knight in panther skin.

'Did you meet with great difficulties in your quest?' she asked him.


'When a man is granted his heart's desire, he thinks no more of the pains he has endured,' was Avtandil's reply, and he went on to describe the condition in which he had found Tariel, the desire he had conceived to aid and serve him.

'She is lost to him – the crystal in which all colours are reflected – and I too am filled with desire to recover that jewel.'

Once again he related the story of the knight in panther skin, and then he told Tinatin of the rigours of his own quest.

'At last, God in His mercy granted me to find what I sought, and I came upon that knight who is called Tariel. Do not ask me





how I would praise him, how I would describe him! He is a light too brilliant for men's eyes to bear. No one who has set eyes on him can ever again be at rest.'

When he had recalled every circumstance of his meeting with Tariel, Avtandil concluded: 'Life in this world no longer holds any meaning for him. He wanders about the plain as the wild beasts do – like a panther following a chosen trail, taking shelter in a cave. He has no companions, no attendant but Asmat to serve and befriend him. The colour is fading from his features as it fades from a dying plant.'

Tinatin listened, deeply attentive, and her face became alight with joy at what she heard, a fair moon at the full. 'In what way can you give aid to him?' she asked Avtandil. 'What can I say that will make it possible for you to serve him?'

The young knight's answer was unhesitating. 'Who will trust a man who gives his word lightly? When Tariel told me what had befallen him he went through ordeal by fire for my sake. For my part, I swore – in your name, my beloved, light of my days, I swore to do as much for him and to return to that same place within a certain time. A man should spare himself nothing for the sake of a friend: the love of friends is a way, a bridge by which heart is exchanged for heart. One who is a lover can well understand a lover's despair. If I were to betray Tariel, my sworn friend, there would be no happiness in life for me.'

Having given his answer Avtandil was silent, waiting for his beloved to speak. She had been well pleased at the way he had carried out his mission, and happy at his safe return. Now her joy was greater still, for the love she had implanted in him had grown and come to flower.

'Now my heart is at ease – the storm is over and the sun shines out,' she said. 'Heaven has sent me all I could desire! Indeed, does not Fate deal with us humankind as the seasons do? Even in our distress, relief is near at hand. I rejoice that you should hold to your word. A promise to a friend is the most sacred of oaths. It is right for you to give Tariel whatever aid he needs.' Then, as Tinatin bethought her of the coming separation from her lover – 'Ah, how am I to bear it?' she cried.

'It could not cost me dearer than this,' the knight answered sorrowfully, as he too began to see the shape of the immediate



future. 'What hope is there for a lover when the beloved is for ever vanishing out of sight like the sun beyond the horizon? If I were not to leave you I might regret it once, but when I am far away I shall suffer a thousand times. Wherever I go the fire of love will consume me. My heart is a target where an arrow has found its mark. This will take years from my life, but the time is past for seeking refuge from misfortune. One desires a rose, but tries to escape the prick of the thorn. I hear your command, my sun, I understand your words. Only, I beg you, give me a token that I may keep as a promise of life.'

The knight then spoke sweet words to his love in the fair Georgian tongue, like a teacher to his pupil; and she gave him a pearl that she was wearing. For a little while they enjoyed the delight of conversing together and gazing on each other, until the time came for Avtandil to take his leave. He rode away from the palace in sorrow, weeping and beating his breast, as the shadow of parting fell between him and his sun. 'I shall never know happiness until I see her again. How strange is love - ' he reflected - 'a glance or two from a maiden's eyes and one's heart is afire, even though it is diamond-hard! It seems no more than a day since I stood secure and firm in my own place, like a tree in the Garden of Eden, growing upright and strong - how favoured I was, how well tended. And now - now Fate turns on me like an enemy with cruel blows. How well I see the folly of trusting to anything on earth, where even the greatest joy can turn in an instant into pain.' Alone in his room, in spite of his torment, he felt himself close in spirit to his beloved. He took in his hand the pearl she had worn upon her arm, and held it to his lips. With calm words and reasoning he tried to cool the fever in his heart.

In the morning a messenger came to summon him to Court. A crowd gathered to see him ride past, upright and assured of carriage. The king was mounted, attired for hunting, amid a great throng of hawks and hounds. Human voices could not be heard above the sound of the copper-drums. Avtandil made his way to the king's side, the hunt moved off and they had a good day's sport. Everyone returned in the best of spirits after a day of coursing the plain. A sumptuous banquet was held which all the nobles were bidden to attend, with singing of minstrels and music of lute and lyre. The king put questions to Avtandil, who was

seated at his side, their teeth flashing white as they talked and laughed. The conversation that evening turned wholly on the knight in panther skin, no one venturing to broach any other topic, and Avtandil spoke about him in response to the questions that were asked of him.

Late as it was when at last the king retired and Avtandil found himself alone, he could not sleep. It was so short a time since he had seen and talked with Tinatin, so clear was the memory of her still. After that hour with his beloved, what else in the world could hold any pleasure for him? Thus his heart protested in anguish until, according to his wont, he took himself to task with the voice of reason. Patience – he reminded himself – is like the source of wisdom. Without it, how can we withstand adversity? If we demand happiness of God we should be prepared to suffer reverses as well. The thought of death came into his mind, and he turned away from it: ‘However much one may long for death, it is better to continue living at any cost – to live, and guard one’s love like a secret flame. It ill becomes a lover to reveal his love.’

## 24: Avtandil’s Visit to the Vizir

Avtandil rose at dawn the next day. Leaving his house, he repeated to himself the resolve to conceal his love and let no one suspect it. ‘Patience!’ he adjured himself as he mounted, and rode to the vizir’s house.

As soon as the vizir was informed of his arrival he hastened out to welcome his guest in person. ‘The sun rises in my house today – a day of rejoicing! A welcome guest should be received by a joyful host.’ Alert and attentive, no laggard in hospitality, he helped Avtandil to dismount, while a Khatavian rug was spread on the ground at his feet. All the household, family and servants, came and gathered round to admire the young commander-in-chief, and sighs and swoons of rapture became the order of the day for everyone who set eyes on him. When the proper salutations had been exchanged, the vizir sent away all the mem-

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bers of his household and Avtandil came to the purpose of his visit.

'You have great influence at Court. Nothing is done without your knowledge, and there is nothing you cannot obtain from the king. He grants your petitions, he consults you in everything. I will tell you what is troubling me and what I wish to do, so that you may do whatever you can on my behalf.'

Then the knight spoke of his desire to return to Tariel. In glowing words he told of the fire that burned in his heart and gave him no ease or rest. 'He is of the nature of the sun, so that all who come within his orbit take fire from him. We are sworn brothers, he and I. He would give his life for me, and I am consumed with longing to devote myself to him. Devotion to a friend should know no bounds. When I left him I swore, to him and to Asmat as well, who is closer to me than a sister – I swore to return to that place and find him again. Everything I have told you is true – I do not exaggerate. This is an oath that I cannot break. When such a man as that has need of me, how can I fail him? What can anyone hope to gain if he breaks his word? He waits for me, and already I have delayed too long. I am leaving the kingdom and I want you, Vizir, to go to the palace and put my case to Rostevan. I hope to obtain his willing consent to my going. If he will not grant it, he will find me of little service to anyone – to him or to myself – for my heart will be consumed with this burning desire. Give me your help – address the king in these words:

'Let all who have the gift of speech proclaim your praise! As God is my witness – He who is the source of light – I bear the utmost respect towards you; but I cannot conceal from you that the knight Tariel captivated my heart from the moment that I first beheld him. Life is unendurable to me without him. In this condition I am useless here, for my heart is set on serving him. If I can indeed be of any service to him, the glory will be yours, while if I fail, still I shall not have broken faith and my mind will be at rest. Do not be grieved or angered by my going. Whatever God wills, so let it befall me. If we win through, I shall return to be with you again. If I do not return, may your reign continue and your enemies be reduced to nought.'

After a pause, Avtandil continued: 'Go early to the palace,

before anyone is admitted to the king's presence. Speak boldly on my behalf – choose your words well – and a hundred thousand gold pieces shall be your reward.'

The vizir smiled. 'Keep your bribe,' he said. 'It is honour enough for me to receive you in my house. Can you imagine the reception I should meet if I went to the king and repeated those words of yours? Without doubt he will heap favours upon me! By my head, he will slay me then and there, without a moment's delay! You will keep your gold, while my reward will be a grave. What can anyone hold dearer than his own life? You are asking the impossible, and I cannot do it. No one can do more than is in his power. If I were not killed I should certainly be ruined. "How dare you?" – I can hear him say – "Why did you not use your wits, you imbecile?" No, no, it is better to be alive than dead – of that I am convinced.'

The vizir proceeded to remind the young commander of his position and responsibilities. 'What of the men under your command? Even if the king should let you go, what would become of the troops without their brilliant leader? Our enemies would grow bold and rise against us. No, no, Avtandil, it is no more possible to do this than for sparrows to grow into hawks.'

In despair, Avtandil made a further attempt to persuade the vizir. There were tears in his eyes as he spoke. 'O Vizir, it is plain that you have never known what it is to love, or exchange the vows of friendship. Otherwise, you would know that there can be no pleasure in life for me without Tariel.

'The sun turns in its course, and the cause of its motion we do not know. Let us go to the aid of the knight Tariel, and like the sun he will fill our days with warmth. No one but myself can know what is bitter to my taste and what is sweet. Ah, it is idle and vexatious to speak with someone who lacks understanding!

'By Heaven, am I to be driven out of my mind by the king and his armies – I who am already distracted with grief on Tariel's account? Who has ever known such sufferings as his? It is right that I should leave the kingdom, and not break faith with him. An oath is a touchstone, which puts a man to the proof. It would need a heart of stone to be unmoved by his condition. Give me your help in this, as you may some time wish for mine.'

Avtandil made one more attempt to prevail on the vizir. 'The

king will not make you suffer on my account, if he has no other reason to be displeased with you. If he will not consent to my going, I shall leave the kingdom by stealth, unknown to him. Tell me what you most desire, and I will do my utmost to satisfy you!"

'I myself feel something of the fire that burns in you,' the vizir replied. 'I cannot bear to see your distress, indeed I am thrown into confusion. There are times when it is better to speak than to keep silence – and times, again, when speaking can do harm. If I am killed, well, that is of no great account, if my life is lost for your sake.'

When the vizir had spoken, he rose and went his way towards the palace. He was admitted to the audience chamber where the king, already attired, observed his arrival with a glance direct as a beam of light. The bearer of unwelcome tidings halted in his approach and stood downcast, with no heart for the battle before him.

'Well, Vizir!' the king called out, seeing him thus dejected. 'What is troubling you? What news have you heard? Why have you come here with such a joyless countenance?'

'I know nothing,' the vizir answered, 'but that I have become my own enemy! Alas, when you hear what I have come to say you will have good reason to take my life. I am fearful – my distress could not be greater – although a messenger ought not to be afraid.\* Well then, Avtandil – he desires to take leave of you, he has a petition to make, but not to distress you – in short, the world and the universe have no meaning for him if he cannot be with that knight!'

Timidly, hesitantly, he repeated all Avtandil's words. 'If I could but convey to you his anguish, his yearning to go to the aid of his friend!' he concluded. 'If I have merited your rightful anger, be it upon my head.'

The king's wrath alarmed everyone who was near him. His countenance paled to whiteness. Beside himself with rage, 'Are you out of your mind?' he shouted at the cowering old man. 'Who but yourself would dare to bring me such a tale? Ill tidings travel fast, and it is evil men who bring them. You come in haste as if this were some matter for rejoicing, yet nothing could wound

\* 'a messenger ought not to be afraid': No one had the right to lay hands on a messenger. Cf. note p. 163.

me more deeply – unless it were the stab of a traitor's knife. Coming with your madman's tongue to strike me this blow, you are not fit to be vizir or anything else! A man should have more care than to vex his lord with stupid, idle chatter – would that I had stopped my ears before I listened to you. I am like to slay you, and your blood be on my head!

Rostevan paused, and then went on: 'If anyone but Avtandil had sent you, by my head, I would have had your head off before this – do not doubt it. Go, out of my presence! Fine words, my fine fellow, a fine thing to do!' And he ended with a stream of abuse, stooped and hurled one chair after another to smash in pieces against the wall. None of them, however, found its mark in the vizir, who stood with tears pouring down his pallid cheeks.

'How dare you speak of his leaving the kingdom?' the king bellowed again. Then the vizir withdrew, feeling that he could do nothing more. Like an old, timorous fox he crept out of the audience chamber. He had entered as a high official: he was leaving in disgrace – which his own tongue had brought upon him. No enemy can do a man such injury as he can do himself.

'What greater misfortune can God have in store for me?' he wondered. 'How could I have been so misguided – why did no one bring me to my senses? Let my fate be a warning to anyone who is rash enough to be the bearer of ill tidings to his lord!'

By the time the unhappy vizir reached his own house and confronted Avtandil his wrinkles were deeper, his countenance downcast.

'What a success I have had at Court! I scarcely know how to thank you! I have done myself much harm and forfeited this excellent head of mine.' Although he could not restrain his tears, yet the old man laughed and jested as he claimed his reward from Avtandil.

'Even in hell, they say, a bribe will smooth the way – and any man is to blame if he does not keep a bargain. I cannot describe how I was treated,' he went on – 'villain, madman, imbecile – I am not worthy to be called a man, nor have I indeed a man's intelligence. It is a marvel that I am still alive! Yet I knew what I was doing – it is not chance that has brought this upon me. I knew well when I spoke as I did that I should provoke the king's wrath. No one who acts thus intentionally can escape retribution.

Death for your sake is welcome to me, and all my pains will not have been in vain.'

Even when he heard how his petition had been received, Avtandil did not alter his decision. 'If he could only understand that I am bound to do this! I cannot endure my existence until I have seen Taniel again. I am like one of the wild beasts restlessly prowling the wilderness. How can the king expect me to go into battle while I am in such a state? Surely it is better to have no man at all, than one who is discontent. I will make one more appeal to him. However great his anger, he may yet understand the kind of fire that burns in me. If he refuses to grant me leave, I will slip away in secret, without hope if indeed there be none.'

Their conversation ended, the vizir provided a banquet to entertain his honoured guest and made lavish presents to Avtandil and all his following, young and old. When at last the young knight departed, to the vizir it was like the going down of the sun in his house.

Avtandil assembled a heap of treasure – a hundred thousand pieces of gold, with rubies, jacinths and satin brocade. All this he despatched with the message: 'How can I ever repay you what I owe? If I survive, I will hold my life at your service and return your devotion with my own in equal measure.'

How can I find words to extol the goodness of that incomparable man? He acted rightly, as the occasion demanded: thus indeed ought men to help each other. It is in time of trouble that a man has need of a brother and kinsman.

## 25: Avtandil's Interview with Shermadin

When Avtandil of the radiant countenance had left the chief vizir he sent for his squire Shermadin. 'This is a day of hope,' he announced. 'It is one of happiness for me, and for you it is an occasion to give proof of your loyalty. King Rostevan refuses to grant me leave of absence and will not listen to my reasons for requesting it. He does not understand what is my most profound



desire and need, apart from which life is empty of meaning for me. I have bound myself by an oath – and God does not forgive a man who is false to his word. Taniel is alone without a friend to aid him, and I have sworn to be his friend. There are three ways in which friends give proof of friendship: firstly, by the desire for each other's company; secondly by generosity, being ever ready to give with open hands; and then by going to each other's aid, however far. Now I will be brief – this is not the moment to tarry. I am leaving the kingdom in secret, for nothing will content me but to keep faith with Taniel. Attend to me carefully while I am still with you and keep clearly in mind what you have learnt from me.

'Be prepared, above all, to serve the king – show all your excellence and devotion in his service. You will be responsible for the care of my house and the conduct of my affairs, as well as for the command of my troops. Keep our forces up to strength and see that the marches are safe from invasion. Make your power felt – be generous to those who are loyal, but requite treachery with death. When I return I will repay you – no man is the loser for serving his lord well and faithfully.'

Shermadin wept at hearing these words. 'Let me go with you!' he implored Avtandil, tears streaming down his face. 'Life will be darkened for me in your absence, and I can be of use to you in this adventure and serve you in any way you wish. Whoever heard of a man setting out on such a journey unattended, or a vassal deserting his lord in time of trouble? What will become of me when it is known that you have disappeared, and you are given up for lost?'

His squire's pleading could not move the knight to change his mind, however. 'I cannot take you with me,' he said. 'It is not that I have any doubt of your devotion – but Fate has turned against me, and it is impossible for me to do as you ask. The management of my estates, my duties here as governor – to whom could I entrust them but to you? Calm yourself, take courage and believe me when I say that I cannot let you come with me. As I am a lover, it is my lot to wander afield – a lover does not wait until he is old to attain his desire, but driven by love-madness he is ever roving, ever alone. That is the way of the world. Accept that it is so, and be content. While I am away, keep the thought of me in your mind and remember the bond between us. I have no fear of

enemies, and as for my own needs, I will attend on myself as faithfully as a slave. A man of spirit should not be discouraged by misfortune, but meet it with a stout heart. I detest such men as do not hesitate at shameful deeds. I am not of those who grasp at the fruits of this world – I could find happiness in dying for the sake of a friend. My queen consents to my going – why should I delay? If I can part from her and leave my own domain, what sacrifice can I not make? I will give you a document addressed to King Rostevan. This is to be my testament, and in it I will request the king to treat you well, as one who is a pupil of mine.’

Then Avtandil took leave of his squire, with a final admonition to show courage in the event of his death. He set himself to compose his testament, which he addressed to the king in moving words.

## 26: Avtandil's Testament

‘O King, I am leaving the kingdom in quest of him whom I am bound to seek. He has lit as it were a fire in me and I cannot endure to be away from him any longer. Grant me the favour of your forgiveness and show yourself merciful as God is merciful. I know that in the end you will not think I am to blame. No one of understanding can abandon a friend who is dear to him. I venture to recall to you the saying of Plato, that lying and duplicity are injurious to both body and soul. Since deceit is the root of all misfortune, how should I desert the friend who is closer to me than a brother? What is the knowledge of the Sages worth to me if I do not act on it? The purpose of their teaching was to perfect our nature and raise us to the order of the heavenly beings. Have you not read what the Apostles wrote of love, how their praise of it resounds? “Love ennobles us!” Their words ring out like a chime of bells. O King, remember those words and let them create harmony in your mind, for if they have no meaning for you how can the ignorant be convinced of their truth?

‘He who endowed me with life gave me the power also to overcome my adversaries. He, the invisible power sustaining every

creature on earth, setting bounds to everything finite, reigning immortal, God in Godhead: He in an instant can create unity from a hundred, hundreds out of one. Nothing can come to pass but that which He has willed. As flowers wither and fade when they cannot behold the rays of the sun, as the eyes have need to feast themselves on beauty, so will my spirit grow weary of life deprived of the presence of Tariel. I am like one who is captive, without the power to resist this longing. If it leads me to act in opposition to your commands, I earnestly beg your forgiveness; but indeed departure is the only cure for this fever that rages in me. What is it to me where I am, so long as I am free to live according to my own will? It is useless to weep and despair, for no man can escape what is ordained for him on high. It is one of the laws of men that they should suffer and endure adversity, and no mortal man can prevail against Providence. Whatever God has decreed for me, let His will be done, so that I may return with a heart free from torment. May I have the happiness of beholding you once again, O King, in continuing power and prosperity. If I can be of service to him, that will be reward enough for me.

'Who can dispute the truth of this, O King? I cannot believe that you will be displeased at my going. How could I encounter that knight in the world to come if I were to be exposed throughout all eternity as a coward and betrayer? One can never do wrong by remaining true to a friend. I think shame of deceit and double-dealing, and I cannot be false to that prince who is like the sun on earth - I cannot break my word to him. What is worse than the man of noble spirit who is laggard in action, or one who shrinks from death and cowers in terror on the battlefield? A coward is no more of a man than a woman at her loom. Glory is worth more than anything a man can gain! There is no path so narrow or so steep that it can halt the advance of death. Weak and strong, young and old, we are brought to the same level in the grave. It is better to die with glory than to live in dishonour.

'With the utmost respect, O King, I venture to say that anyone who does not live in the constant expectation of death is again and again misled; for death unites all things, day and night. If I do not live to behold you once again, may your life be long! If I am struck down in this transitory life, which has ruined everything of mine, I shall die a homeless wanderer without parents, or trusted

friend, or anyone whom I have taught, to give me burial. Then in the goodness of your heart you will feel compassion for me. I have great wealth and possessions. Let my treasure be given to the needy and my vassals freed, and yourself distribute my riches among the orphans and the destitute. They will bless me and I shall live in their memory. Whatever you do not find worth storing in your treasury, let it be allotted to the building of bridges, and homes for the poor. Spend my wealth freely for this purpose, for my sake.

‘After you have received this you will hear no more from me. I commit my soul to you. I have presumed to write thus plainly, without seeking to please you. I will not fall victim to the devil, with all his wiles. I entreat you to forgive me and to pray for me – nothing can be reproached me after I am dead!

‘May I bespeak your favour, O King, on behalf of my vassal Shermadin, the chosen of all my men? This is a leap-year for him, a year with an extra day of care on my account. He will be much grieved at my going and in need of your gracious consolation.

‘So ends this testament that I have written with my own hand. Dear lord and master, I am leaving you, distraught in mind – do not grieve for me, my sovereigns,\* or put on mourning, but may your reign be long and your enemies stand in dread of you!’

Avtandil finished writing and handed the document to Shermadin. ‘Give this to the king,’ he said – ‘it will make the matter clear to him. No one but you could know so well how to perform this service.’

The knight embraced his squire and bade him farewell with many tears.

## 27: Avtandil’s Prayer

Before setting out on his quest Avtandil offered up a prayer:

‘Most high God, supreme in Heaven and earth, who dost send us at times affliction, at other times good things: incomprehensible,

\* Sovereigns: here Avtandil addresses both the king and queen.

inexpressible, lord of lords: Thou who hast sway over the passions of men, grant me the mastery of desires!

‘God, whose dominion extends from the earth below to the heavens on high: Thou who hast created love and ordained its laws: do not, I entreat Thee, uproot the love sown by her whom the world has sundered from me! God of compassion, I have no recourse but to Thee: wherever I may travel, grant me Thine aid against the hazards of the way. In battle, in storms at sea, from the evil one at night, be Thou my deliverer! If I survive, I will serve Thee and make sacrifice to Thee!’

After he had made his prayer the knight mounted and rode out through the gates unobserved. Shermadin, his squire, wept and beat his breast; but Avtandil commanded him to stay. How can a good servant know any happiness in the absence of his lord?

## 28: King Rostevan Learns of Avtandil's Flight

The sun went down and rose again upon Rostevan's wrath. He held no court that day, and early the next morning sent for his chief vizir. The old man was ushered into the royal presence, deferential and pale with dread. As soon as the king saw the vizir's timid approach, he called out:

‘Come, you were telling me something yesterday and now I have no recollection of what it was. It caused me to lose my temper, so that I called you some hard names – you, Vizir, who are so close to my heart. Truly the sages are right when they say that anger is a net to snare misfortunes! Never act in such a way, but think well what you are about. Now, tell me once again what it was that you had to say to me.’

The vizir repeated all that he had said the day before.

Rostevan's reply was brief: ‘Either you are out of your mind, or I am Levi the Jew! Let me hear no more of this – my patience is at an end.’

The vizir retreated in haste. He left the audience chamber and sent men to search for Avtandil, but the knight was not to be found. He had carried out his resolve and slipped away by stealth. The news of his flight spread quickly, and soon his vassals and men-at-arms were bewailing the loss of their brilliant young commander. When this was reported to the vizir, he said: 'I cannot go to Court with these tidings. I remember too well how the king received me yesterday. Let another be the bearer of this news and speak the words that I spoke, to my own undoing.'

After a time, when the vizir did not return, the king sent a man to recall him. The vizir refused the summons and the messenger, upon hearing the reason, likewise did not dare to enter the palace again. No one could be found who was bold enough to inform the king of Avtandil's flight. Rostevan waited, but no one came in answer to his summons and at last he divined how matters stood. Great sorrow descended on him and for a time he remained silent, with bowed head. Then he sighed and looked up, and commanded that the chief vizir be brought before him: 'Let that old hypocrite present himself without a moment's delay, and let me hear the truth from him!'

The vizir appeared, timorous and downcast, and the king questioned him until he had learned the whole story of Avtandil's secret flight. When all was told the aged king displayed such signs of grief that all who stood round him were alarmed. He tore at his face and beard, tears ran down his face and he raised his voice in a great cry of anguish.

'My son, my pupil! Where have you gone, that I shall look on you no more? Solitude is nothing to you, being what you are; but I am poor indeed, a prey to the ills and weakness of old age without you to stand beside me. You have abandoned me and deprived me of all pleasure in life.' Rostevan in his sorrow evoked the picture of the young knight hunting or at games – the splendid figure he made, the charm of his voice, the warmth and gaiety of his presence. 'What are throne or palace to me when you are gone? I have no fear on your account: your bow and arrows will keep you from the pangs of hunger. May God make your way smooth! Alas, if I should die while you are absent, my son and pupil, who is there to mourn me?'

The king fell silent. Outside the palace, a sound of commotion

began to be heard as a great press of people – nobles, courtiers, soldiers – came hastening through the gates. They struck their breasts and plucked their beards, and the air rang with the sound of their lamentations.

‘Why has he abandoned us? What have we done to displease him?’ His courtiers’ sorrow added to Rostevan’s grief. ‘Who will command the army?’ they cried. ‘Who is there who can take Avtandil’s place?’

Gradually the sound of weeping abated. Then Rostevan inquired whether the knight had set forth alone, or with any of his vassals in attendance. It was at this point that Shermadin ventured to make his appearance. He was in some apprehension, in addition to his sorrow at losing his master. In obedience to his orders, however, he presented to the king the testament Avtandil had left with him.

‘I found this in his bedchamber, written by his own hand. His people were weeping and wailing. He has gone alone, sire, without any companion young or old. If Your Majesty should send me to my death it would be no more than justice – indeed, I have no wish to live!’

The king read the testament through to the end. Then sorrowfully he gave orders for the army to put on mourning and for prayers to be said for Avtandil’s safety by the sick and the bereaved.

‘This we will do for his sake,’ he announced, ‘and God send him in peace upon his way.’

## 29: Avtandil’s Departure and Second Meeting with Tariel

The moon shines brightest when she is furthest from the sun; if she approached too near, she would be consumed in its rays. We men are like the rose that wilts and fades in the absence of the sun, when we are deprived of the sight of the beloved.

Avtandil knew that if Taniel were to be saved there should be no delay in going to his aid. He lost no time in setting out and did not spare himself on the way, although his thoughts were ever turning back to the land that he was leaving. Again and again he would look over his shoulder: there he had given his heart away, and his torment was great as he remembered Tinatin and dwelt on every feature of her beauty. Tears would dim his eyes until he could scarcely see where his horse was taking him.

'My own love, as my thoughts are with you so let my heart be also. How my eyes yearn to look on you again!' He spoke thus aloud to his beloved, and reflected that it would be a poor sort of lover who could content himself in absence from his love. He should be prepared to endure anything for her sake. Then as he thought of the long days that must pass before he could hope to be with her again, he wondered if death might not be the easier choice. But that would cause her pain – and it is better to live, than to die by one's own hand.

'O Sun,' he prayed, 'who have been called the image of a sunlit night, one in essence, timeless in the realm of time, whom the heavenly bodies obey to one iota of a second: do not change my fate, I entreat you, until she and I have come together again. Sun, whom the philosophers of old called the image of God, aid me who have become like a prisoner in chains!'

The sense of urgency drove him on and he did not linger on the way. Love burned in him like a fever, to which the cool of night was a kindly balm. He took pleasure in the rising of the stars, which he likened to Tinatin as he gazed at them and spoke to them aloud. He called to the moon: 'In the name of your god – you who inflict upon men the malady of love and likewise possess its remedy, the balm of patience that enables us to bear it – grant me to behold again one who is beautiful as you!'

The days were an ordeal to him, nightfall a relief. He would kill game as he came upon it – the goat and roe-deer of the rocky places – and dismount beside a stream to make a fire and roast his meat, to the sound of the water's gentle splashing. Then without sparing himself, heart high, he mounted and rode on. Great was his rejoicing when at last he saw the lofty rock-face pierced with caves that was Taniel's dwelling. He passed through the grove of trees and Asmat came running out to meet him, weeping for



joy at his return. He leapt from his horse and greeted her with a warm embrace, and after greetings had been exchanged he questioned her about Tariel.

‘Where is he, and how is he surviving?’

Again Asmat’s tears fell as she answered him. ‘After you had gone he was so much disturbed that he could not bear to stay in this one place. He rode away – I do not know where – and I have not seen him or heard anything from him since.’

Avtandil started as if struck by a lance. ‘Not here?’ he cried. ‘Has he then broken faith, when I have kept faith with him? Ah, my sister, no one should act like this! Why did he swear to do what he could not – or, having sworn, why did he break his word? When he knows the world holds nothing for me without him, how could he forget me, why has he not waited as he promised, what does he intend to do? However,’ he added, ‘one more stroke of ill fortune should cause me no surprise!’

Asmat, calmer now, answered: ‘You find Tariel gone, and it is natural you should feel aggrieved. But let me speak plainly – I will explain his case to you. He is a man who has lost heart, and hopes for nothing now but for his life to end. Without heart no one can keep faith, since faith is of the heart. So too are reason and intelligence linked with it, and if the heart fails they will fail also. A man who has lost heart can no longer act like a man – he is an outcast from humankind. You do not yet conceive what kind of fire it is that burns in him. Indeed, you have good reason to blame him, since you and he had become sworn brothers. And yet – if you could only realize what his condition is! I who am a child of ill fortune, I have seen and known all he has had to suffer, and I assure you that heart and tongue would be weary before all the tale were told. No one has ever heard of torments such as his – they would melt a heart of stone. You are right, certainly, in what you say – as one is wise, when it is another who is at war.’

Before Tariel had ridden away, Asmat went on, she had begged him to leave some message for Avtandil. The knight had replied that he would not break his word: until the day agreed, Avtandil if he came would find him, living or dead, somewhere not far from the grove.

‘That vow I will not break – whatever it costs me, I will wait for him until the appointed time. If I die before he returns, let

him mourn me and give me burial. It will be surprising if he finds me still alive.'

Since that day Asmat had been alone. She had passed the time in weeping, scarcely aware of her surroundings, abandoned to despair.

'There is truth in that Chinese saying engraved in stone,' she said: "'He who does not seek a friend is his own enemy.'" Tariel, who was once so comely, has become pale as saffron. Search for him if you will, as I have sought – do whatever you wish.'

Avtandil recognized the justice of Asmat's reasoning. 'If I blamed him at first,' he said to her, 'think of my own position – what I have done to serve him. I have fled my country like a deer thirsting for water and travelled here through field and forest – leaving her whom I love, bringing trouble on my friends and benefactors, giving grave offence to my elders. As for the king – my lord and master, who has brought me up and been like a father to me, gracious and kind – in his eyes I am someone who has deserted his post and betrayed the trust he placed in me. When I have so deeply wronged him, how can I look for any favour from God? These things weigh heavily upon me. Yet, dear sister, I have not broken faith. I have become a wanderer and travelled day and night to come back to Tariel – only to find that he is gone. Even so, I regret nothing of what I have done. Now I will not linger, but follow that sage's counsel and go in search of him. Either I shall find him, or death will overtake me. Why should I complain to God if my fate is a hard one?'

He mounted and rode out across the stream, past the clump of reeds and onto the plain. The wind blew chill in that deserted region, and his thoughts as he set out were sad and discouraged. 'Why should Fate deal so harshly with me? My God!' he cried out – 'What have I done to bring such misfortune on myself? Why hast Thou, the protector of all living creatures, plunged me into danger and grief, parted me from a friend, inflicted this wretched fate on me? Indeed at this moment death would be a release – my blood be on my own head! Tariel and I have sworn the oath of friendship. Even though I have kept my word and he has not, still if it is our fate to be parted I would have no other as a friend.'

Then, more calmly, he reflected on Tariel's conduct. 'It is

strange to me that any man of intelligence should give way to grief and useless tears. What can be gained from it? One would do better to consider the best course to take, and come to some decision.'

Avtandil then put this idea into practice, resuming his search with vigour and scouring the environs, beating through ravine and marsh, forest and grassland, calling Tariel by name. This he did for three days and nights until, driven to despair, he prayed for death to end his sufferings. On the third day, exhausted and disheartened, he rode to the top of a ridge which offered a broad view of the whole region. There he rested his horse and looked about him – and saw, near a clump of bushes at the foot of the incline, a black charger grazing with the reins loose on its neck.

'His horse!' he cried. 'Beyond doubt, it is his.' His heart leapt for joy and warm colour flushed his features, that had been pale with fatigue. He galloped like a whirlwind down the mountain-side, without taking his eyes from the black horse. Then he saw Tariel, and sharply drew rein. The knight was lying on the ground, his clothing torn and his hair dishevelled. Only the tears streaming from his eyes showed that he was still alive. The carcasses of a lion and a panther lay near him and beside them was his sword, unsheathed and stained with blood. He was lying open-eyed and staring, and Avtandil called to him by name; but Tariel, near to death, seemed neither to see nor hear.

'It is Avtandil, your friend – don't you know me?' he urged, but there was no response. Avtandil continued talking while he smoothed the hair from Tariel's eyes and with his own sleeve wiped the sweat and tears from his face. All that a brother could do he did for Tariel, until at last he brought him back to some degree of consciousness. Then the knight recognized Avtandil, kissed him and embraced him like a brother. Truly, two such knights have no equal among men!

'Brother, I have kept faith with you,' Tariel said, 'and waited as long as life remained in me. Now that I have seen you again my oath is discharged. It is only left for me to die – and for you, I beg, to bury my remains and preserve them from the wild beasts.'

'How can it have entered your mind to think of dying by your own hand?' Avtandil protested. 'To take one's own life is an act of



Satan! Do you think you are the first to have been in love or to suffer its pains?

'All wise men are agreed that a brave man should show courage and be sparing of his tears. In time of misfortune he should stand steadfast as a wall of stone.

'You are of the Wise – yet you take no account of what the Wise have said. What is there to gain from roaming the plains among wild beasts, away from the habitations of men? Is it in this way that you can hope to find some trace of her for whose sake you have come near to dying?' Continuing his attempt through reasoning to bring Tariel to his senses, Avtandil went on: 'Where is the man who does not know what it is to sigh and suffer for the love of a fair one?

'When they asked the rose how it is that in all her beauty she is set among thorns, so that without pain she cannot be possessed, she gave answer: "It is best that sweet should be mixed with bitter, and dearly come by: beauty is little valued that is gained at little cost." As with the rose, that has no soul, so it is with greater joys. First come the toil and the anguish, before we can attain to the reward. Likewise, nothing good can come out of what is evil: why complain of the workings of Fate?

'Listen to what I say to you! Mount your horse – we will go gently – and do not at this time follow your own counsel or act upon impulse. You should rather do the contrary, and not obey the prompting of your desires. If this were not best for you, believe me, I should not say it – I am not speaking for my own satisfaction.'

Avtandil ended his appeal, and Tariel answered: 'Brother, I have hardly strength to move my tongue or even to listen to you, distraught as I am. How lightly you speak of the fortitude that I ought to show! I am near to death, the hour of my deliverance, and as I wait for the end I have only one prayer – that lovers parted on this earth may find each other in the world to come. Let my friends come and lay me to rest beneath the earth. How can a lover abandon his love, or fail to seek the beloved? I go to meet her in joy, as she will come to me – joy so great that it will overflow in tears. Ask a hundred for their counsel but whatever they tell you, do as your own heart dictates. As for myself, I am fixed in my resolve. I look to the happiness that death alone can

bring, and ask you to leave me until then in peace. It will not be long. What can I achieve as I am now, scarcely half alive? Indeed, in this love-madness I have come to detest the world and long for death to release me. May it come soon – already my elements are dispersed and I go to join the community of spirits. The Wise – who are they, and what is wisdom? What does wisdom mean to someone who is out of his mind – how can a madman act like a sage? You weary me with such talk, when I have little time to live. Go now and leave me in peace.’

Avtandil renewed his protests, seeking with a variety of arguments to dissuade Tariel from allowing himself to die. ‘What good can come from such an evil deed? Do not become an enemy to yourself!’ he urged, but his words had no effect and Tariel was unmoved by all his pleading.

At last Avtandil said, ‘Well, since you will not listen and everything I have said has been in vain, I will not weary you any longer. I will leave you alone to die – since that is your wish – and ask you for only one thing, one last favour. I have left far behind me that land where my beloved shines in beauty, she whose dark lashes guard their treasures of crystal and rose. Not even the king, who spoke to me in the words of a father, could persuade me to stay, and I have come back – only to find that you reject my friendship and send me away. How can I express my delight at such a reception! Still, since I am to leave you, at least give me one moment of pleasure to remember as my last impression of you. If you would not have me go away utterly stricken in spirit, then once more – for the last time – mount your horse and let me see you as you were at our first encounter.

‘Mount!’ he repeated, again and again urging Tariel to get upon his horse. When once the knight was in the saddle – Avtandil was certain – his body pliant and his glance alert, his melancholy would soon be dispelled. At last Tariel consented. Avtandil’s spirits rose high and he saddled the black charger, brought it to stand beside its master and gently helped him into the saddle. He mounted his own horse and they rode together, at an easy pace, towards a stretch of open country.

It was not long before Tariel began to feel the effects of this gentle exercise. Balancing his body to the horse’s motion, he became less absorbed in melancholy thoughts and more ready to

converse. Avtandil exerted himself to distract him, discoursing in light and charming vein. As he observed the gradual improvement in his friend, he felt the pleasure of the physician whose treatment is beginning to take effect. They conversed for some little time; then Avtandil ventured to speak more directly.

‘There is one question I would ask you,’ he said. ‘How much do you value the armlet that was given you by your princess? Tell me this one thing, to set my mind at ease.’

‘How can I set a price on it? How can she be described, whose form is beyond imagining – she who gave it to me?’ was Tariel’s answer. ‘She is the source of my life, of all my torments: I set her above all things on land and sea. It is like the taste of sour wine, to listen to a question so unseemly!’

‘That is the answer I expected. Now I will be so bold as to speak plainly – and say that Asmat ought to be dearer to you than any armlet. I cannot admire your choice in preferring to part with her, rather than that: an object fashioned by a goldsmith that has neither life nor the power of speech, intelligence nor growth. Can you hold to this, and yet reject Asmat who first brought you and your love together, whom you called your sister, who has served you and almost lost her reason for Nestan’s sake, to whom she stood as both teacher and pupil? That is an act of courage indeed, and a rightful judgment!’

Tariel did not hesitate to admit the truth of these words. ‘You are perfectly right, and Asmat is greatly to be pitied,’ he agreed. ‘I had not thought I should live, until you found me and revived me. Even now, my head is still swimming – however, let us go immediately to find her.’

They rode on towards the caves, Avtandil continuing his efforts to restore his friend’s mind to health as he had succeeded in restoring his body. ‘You know I would lay down my life for you, body and soul – let me urge you, then, not to dwell on your misfortunes. All your learning is of no worth to you if you do not follow the teaching of the Wise. What is the use of riches if you leave them buried in the ground? There is nothing to be gained by giving way to grief and despair. No man’s death comes unforeseen. Roses do not die for three days’ lack of sun! Have courage, and by God’s grace you may gain your desire.’

Tariel listened attentively to this counsel. ‘You have taught



me a lesson that I value above anything on earth. Any man of intelligence has love for his teacher – it is only a fool who feels hurt by him. Even so, tell me how I am to endure this anguish of mind. Can you so greatly blame me, when you too have suffered as I have? Men who have undergone the same trials and misfortunes understand how to come to each other's aid. Have you not known from the beginning how it is that my heart is consumed like wax in a flame?

## 30: The Slaying of the Lion and the Panther

Tariel gave Avtandil an account of what had befallen him since they parted. He had waited in the grove near the caves until he could endure it no longer, feeling a need to be in the saddle and out on the open plain. 'I had ridden past the reeds, towards the crest of that hill where you came in search of me, when a lion and a panther crossed my path. They were running together side by side, as lovers do, and the sight of them gave me pleasure and raised my spirits. I rode on up the hill, watching them at their play, happy in what I took to be their happiness – when I was appalled to see that they were fighting bitterly, striking each other heavy blows with their paws. The lion was the stronger: he seized the panther and would not let her go, until she lost heart and grew weak – ah, just as a woman does!

'The lion had no mercy. I could not separate them, and I lost patience with him. "Is this your courage," I cried, "to attack the creature you love?" With sword and spear I slew that lion and released him from the burden of this life. I threw away my sword – I was ready to embrace the panther, for the sake of her who has all of a panther's grace. But I had killed her lover, and with a great roar she sprang upon me and mauled me with her claws. I could not quiet the creature – I lifted her high into the air and dashed her to death upon the ground. At that moment I re-



membered how I had fallen out with my beloved. That was agony beyond words. Does it indeed astonish you that you found me thus sundered from the bonds of life and ready to meet the end with gladness?"

The memory of that incident revived Tariel's grief, and Avtandil wept with him in sympathy. 'Have patience,' he repeated, 'for God is merciful. Indeed, He would not have brought you two together if He intended to part you for ever. The course of lovers is never a smooth one. They undergo many trials, but in the end they attain to joy. A lover may be pursued by misfortune, his life made bitter to him – but the world which at first used him so hardly will bring him happiness in the end. Love is necessary to men: it brings us face to face with death, and causes the learned to lose their wits and those who are untaught to become learned.'

### 31: The Return of Tariel and Avtandil to the Caves to find Asmat

The two knights went their way towards Tariel's former dwelling-place, where they had left Asmat. When she heard the sound of hooves for which she had waited so long, she came running out to welcome Tariel, weeping and giving thanks to God.

'O God, whom the tongue of man cannot describe, who like the sun pourest Thy bounty upon us in full measure, glory to Thee who art beyond our praise! After all that I have suffered, I am living still.'

The young men dismounted and embraced her, and hastened to tell her their news. 'Now our fate is nothing but sorrow in place of all the gladness we have known,' Tariel said. 'Were it not for you, death would be welcome to me.'

Avtandil's thoughts turned towards his love, his sun. 'O my beloved, far beyond my reach, who knows when I shall be with you again? How can I survive this absence from you? Could you but know what agony I suffer, how I burn with love for you!

How can we know what our fate will be? I will make my heart as steadfast as rock until perchance I see her again.'

Both knights grew calmer and fell silent. Asmat followed them into the clearing and spread out a panther skin on the ground as she was used to do. There they sat down and talked at ease and roasted some meat for their meal, without bread or choice of dishes. For all the pleading of Avtandil and Asmat, Tariel could scarcely bring himself to eat. Pleasant converse with a friend, however, is always enjoyable. Where there is sympathy and an attentive listener, to open the heart and speak freely of one's cares is itself a pleasure and something of a relief to the sufferer. The two young knights talked through the night and into a new day's dawn, telling each other everything that had befallen them and renewing the vows of friendship they had sworn to each other a year ago. Tariel urged Avtandil to return to his own country. 'What more have we to say? We have taken the oath of friendship, not wantonly as drunkards do but in sober good faith. You have done much for me and God will repay you, but you cannot deliver me from the fire that is burning my life away. Indeed if you stay with me you too will take fire, by nature's law. It is better that you should go your own way and return to her who is your sun. Even for Him who created me, it seems, it is hard to make me whole. There was a time when I was like other men – men who have not lost their reason – when I did as they do. Now love-madness is my lot and my actions are those of a madman.'

With these words the knight attempted to release Avtandil from the bond that had formed between them. He however replied with vigour, reasoning yet again with Tariel and adjuring him, as one who had shown himself to be familiar with the teaching of the Wise, to bring intelligence as well as courage to bear on his situation.

'How can you say that God is powerless to save you, when it is He who causes every plant and every seed to grow? He who creates, also nourishes and preserves; He who separates lovers, in the end unites them.

'What kind of man is he who cannot face adversity? It is not a personage of rank, that one should bow down before it! Have no fear, but trust in God, and be taught by me. I venture to say that any man is a fool who will not learn. When I asked my queen for

leave to return to you, she praised my request as an act of courage: "Whatever you can do for him I shall regard as a service to myself," she told me. It is at her wish that I have come – not by chance or on some drunken impulse. If I were to leave you now she would think me a coward or a fool and ask me why I had come back. Listen to what I say, and do not talk in such a way. When a man has difficulties to overcome he must bring his mind to bear on them. In your present state you can achieve nothing if I do nothing on your behalf. Brothers should treat each other in brotherly fashion.'

Then Avtandil asked Taniel to agree to a period of waiting, during which he would use his utmost endeavour to find some trace of Nestan-Darejan. In a year from that day Avtandil would come to look for his friend in that same place.

'Go wherever you wish, according to your usual habit – wherever the spirit moves you, be it wisely or otherwise,' Avtandil said. 'Be careful of yourself, preserve your life and health. Only do not fail to be here, in this very place, a year from now. I suggest that time because it will be the season of roses, and the sight of their blooms will be a reminder to you, a signal like the barking of a dog. If I fail to come it will be only for one reason, that I am no longer alive. Do not lose heart – I have to speak of this because I cannot foretell whether my horse will founder or my ship go down. I have not an animal's perception, to know what God or the ever-revolving heavens ordain for me.'

Taniel agreed to this plan of Avtandil's. 'I will not weary you with more words,' he said, 'for you pay no heed to what I say. Some time you may understand what it means to be in my situation. In the meanwhile, it is all one to me whether I stay in one place or wander afield. I will do whatever you suggest.'

The two knights gave each other their word to meet in that same place in a year's time. Then they called to Asmat to bring up their horses, mounted and rode out together to find game for their meat that night. When they returned to the caves they were heavy-hearted at the thought of parting the next day. It is a hard lesson for a man to learn, that separation from his love means death. In the morning at daybreak they took leave of Asmat with many tears and regrets. After riding all day in the direction of the sea, they came to the coast at nightfall. While they were making

their camp on the sea-beach, Avtandil asked Tariel why he had left Phridon, who had given him his horse.

‘Nuradin-Phridon’s kingdom is a place where one might hear tidings of her whom you love,’ he said. ‘I will begin my search there – tell me how to find the way.’

Tariel directed him to travel eastwards and follow the line of the coast. ‘When you meet with Phridon and he asks you for news of his brother, tell him about myself,’ he said.

The young men dined on wild goat, which they roasted over a driftwood fire. They stretched themselves out beneath a tree and slept until the first light. Then they parted sorrowfully with a warm embrace and rode away in opposite directions, calling to each other across the widening distance until they were out of each other’s sight.

## 32: Avtandil’s Visit to Nuradin-Phridon

O world, why do you deal so hardly with us men and betray any who put their trust in you? Even so, when you abandon a man God does not forsake him. Avtandil’s heart was torn by his parting from Tariel and as he rode on alone he wept and cried aloud, his voice reaching to the skies.

‘How hard it is to part from a man like Tariel, when there is no knowing that we shall ever meet again. Men are not all equal, and there is a great distance between one man and another.’ His sorrow was inflamed by the thought of Tinatin, but he did not lack fortitude and steeled his heart against despair. He called aloud on the sun and the heavenly bodies:

‘Sun, who are like to my beloved as she is to you, who give light to mountain and valley, my eyes ever rejoice in the sight of you! How is it that the warmth of your rays does not penetrate my frozen heart? A rock feels no pain from the winter’s cold or from the lack of one sun, but parting from two whom I love is agony to me. Great Sun, power supreme, within whose power it is to raise up the humble, to confer sovereignty and joy on men, do

not deprive me of my beloved or let my day be turned into night.'

He prayed to all the seven stars,\* invoking their aid in virtue of each one's special quality. He besought Zual,† whose nature is calamity, to heap on him afflictions of every kind and say to Tinatin: 'Do not abandon him, for he is yours and in torment for your sake.'

He prayed to Mushtar,‡ supreme judge and arbitrator between heart and heart, not to be guilty of judging wrongly but to show him mercy in his innocence and not add to his suffering. He entreated Marikh§ the warrior and avenger to have no pity, to strike him with his spear and let his blood run red, but let his beloved hear what he had endured.

To Aspiroz|| the fair he appealed for sympathy: 'Show me your favour, you who enhance the beauty of the fair and drive men to frenzy! Otarid!¶ None but you has a fate like mine – I am whirled round by the sun, seized and cast into the flames. Take my form for a pen, my tears for ink, and write down the story of my woes.'

He prayed to the moon to be his advocate in love: 'Let my beloved know what I have endured, how I am waning and perishing for her sake – let her not abandon me. The seven stars bear witness for me – Sun and Otarid, Mushtar and Zual, grow pale and wane on my account! Moon, Aspiroz and Marikh, come, testify for me and tell her of the fire that consumes me!'

Lastly, Avtandil spoke to his own heart: 'Have you turned devil's advocate, to shed tears and pity yourself and dream of self-destruction? Indeed I am mad with love for her whose hair is like a raven's wing, but it is in adversity that one has need of fortitude – not in time of joy.' With tears still in his eyes he began to sing like a sweet-voiced bird. The wild beasts hearing him drew near, and stones leaped out of the riverbeds. Sad though his songs were, they gave delight to all living things. Creatures from among the rocks, fish from the streams, crocodiles, birds of the air – from

\* The seven stars: see note p. 65.

† Zual: Saturn, the planet of adversity.

‡ Mushtar: Jupiter, the planet of justice.

§ Marikh: Mars, the planet of war and vengeance.

|| Aspiroz: Hesperus – Venus, the planet of beauty and healing.

¶ Otarid: Mercury, the planet of learning.

India and Arabia, from Greece, from East and West, Russians and Persians, Franks, Egyptians, from the very ends of the earth came people of every race to hear and praise Avtandil's singing.

For seventy days he rode along the coast. One day he saw a boat putting into land, and made his way down to the sea-beach to question the crew as they came ashore. He asked them who they were, and what was the name of that country and its ruler. The boatmen greeted him courteously with words of praise,\* and replied that the country of the Turks marched here with the kingdom of Nuradin-Phridon, their lord and sovereign. 'He is courageous in battle,' they said, 'a fine horseman and a generous and powerful ruler. He is like a radiant sun that sends forth rays of brightness and that none can harm.'

'Brothers, I have indeed fallen into good hands,' Avtandil answered, 'since it is your king whom I desire to see. Be so good as to show me the way to the capital and tell me how far away it is.'

With further compliments and exclamations of wonder at the knight's arrival in their country, the boatmen set him on the road to Mulghazanzar. From time to time on his way he met with passers-by of whom he could ask further directions. All these people were drawn to him as the seamen had been, by the charm and distinction of his presence. They were eager to offer help, to point out the way, to offer their services as guides, and they told him everything he asked. In this way the distance was quickly covered, and Avtandil soon found himself on the outskirts of Mulghazanzar. His attention was caught by a party of armed men deployed in a circle round a meadow. Men were shouting, arrows flying fast and game being brought down like corn at harvest. Avtandil drew rein to look on, and asked a bystander what was afoot: 'By whose command is there all this noise and commotion?' he enquired.

'It is the sovereign Nuradin-Phridon, King of Mulghazanzar, who is hunting,' the man replied. 'His men have made a cordon round that field of reeds.'

Well pleased, Avtandil wheeled his horse and set off at a gallop towards the ring of bowmen. At that moment an eagle† flew overhead. He spurred his horse boldly, put an arrow to his

\* Words of praise: See note p. 39.

† Bird of prey – possibly a griffin vulture.

bow and dropped the bird with a single shaft. He sprang to the ground to clip its wings where it lay at his feet, and remounted without haste. No one loosed another arrow, and the archers rode towards Avtandil from all sides of the field. When they came near him they lost courage and drew back, however, no one daring to question him.

King Phridon, with forty of his best marksmen, had taken up a position on a hilltop nearby. Thither Avtandil took his way, with the rest of the field following him. Phridon, surprised and ill pleased to see the circle of archers scatter in disorder, sent one of his men to find out why they had left their posts: 'What are they doing?' he demanded. 'Why have they broken formation, where are they rushing to now like blind men?'

The man was swift to obey and ran towards the stranger but, dazzled by his brilliant presence, forgot what he had come to say. He stood speechless before the knight, who guessed why he had been sent and gave him a message for his master. 'Tell your lord that I have come as a solitary stranger from a distant country, being a sworn brother of Tariel, who sent me.'

The man went back to Phridon to repeat this message. 'I have seen the coming of a sun who fills the day with brightness – such a being as would drive even a sage out of his wits! "I am a brother of Tariel," he said, "arriving thus without ceremony to meet Nuradin-Phridon."'

Immediately on hearing the name of Tariel, Phridon's vexation was forgotten. Tears came into his eyes, and he rode off with all speed to welcome the stranger. The two young men dismounted, exchanged the courtesies of greeting and embraced. When Phridon saw before him the knight whom his follower had described in such glowing terms, he thought that here indeed was someone beyond all praise; while Avtandil for his part regarded the king with pleasure and approval. Phridon could have no equal as friend and comrade-in-arms, yet even his glory was dimmed in the presence of Avtandil, like a candle-flame in the light of the sun. They mounted and rode away in the direction of Phridon's palace. There was no more shooting, and the bowmen pressed forward to have a view of Avtandil, exclaiming in admiration as they saw him.

'You will be impatient to hear who I am, how I came to know

Tariel and everything I can tell you about him,' he said to Phridon. 'I spoke of him as my brother, and that is what he himself called me – but in truth I am not fit to be his slave. I am a vassal of Rostevan, King of the Arabians, who has brought me up as a king's son and made me Commander-in-Chief of the Army. My family is noble, my standing at Court unassailable. One day I was with the king on a hunting expedition. Out on the plain we saw Tariel – a strange figure he appeared to us, with tears streaming down his face, and we were curious to know who he was. The king sent a man to bring him to us, but he ignored the man altogether and the king became displeased. We did not know then what a fire was raging in his heart. Next, the king sent men-at-arms to take him by force. Tariel was angry and would let none come near him, but laid about him with his whip until he had either slain or wounded every man. We were made to understand that the moon is not to be diverted from its course! The king, enraged by the failure of his men to seize the stranger, himself mounted and rode out to the attack, quite without fear. As soon as Tariel recognized a royal personage, he sheathed his sword, gave his horse its head and vanished from before our eyes. You may imagine how thoroughly we searched – but no one could find a trace of him. It must all have been some trick of the devil, it was thought.

'The king was so deeply afflicted that he commanded all feasting and entertainment to cease. For myself, I could not rest until I discovered the truth about that strange happening. I left the kingdom without revealing my intention, and searched for three years on end. At length I came upon some Khatavians who carried the marks of Tariel's displeasure – and so I found him. Pale and wasted though he was, he treated me with great kindness and welcomed me as a brother. He is living in caves that he took from the Devis dwelling there, whom he slew with much bloodshed. No one but Asmat attends on him and she waits there in the caves, alone and sorrowful, while he goes out and hunts game for her to eat. Although I was a stranger to him he told me the whole story of his love and the ordeals he has endured. Indeed, he is dying of love, parted from his beloved. He is restless as the moon and scarcely leaves the saddle, but roams the plains on the black charger that you gave him, and like the wild beasts shuns all



humankind. I became fired with his fire, maddened with the same frenzy. My one desire was to find what would cure his condition, be it on land or sea. I returned to my own country and found my sovereigns grieved by my long absence, so that when I asked the king's consent to my leaving the kingdom again he was angry, and I had to leave by stealth. My soldiers too bewailed my departure. I have been searching far and wide for some trace, some rumour that might be of aid to Taniel. You and he, he told me, are like brothers – and indeed I find you to be without peer, and worthy of praise. So it is that I have come to you for aid and counsel.'

Phridon, deeply moved by what he had heard, cried out on the inconstancy of this world; and his men-at-arms echoed his lament and rent their cheeks until the air was loud with their wailing. Phridon uttered an eloquent encomium\* of the knight in panther skin:

'He is beyond our praise – a sun upon earth whose brilliance deflects even the sun in Heaven from its course, the glory of all who come within his orbit, the despair of those deprived of his rays. We count for little to him; but to us who have once known his radiant presence, life without him is meaningless as a dream.'

The young men fell silent and continued on their way towards the royal palace. People gathered in the streets to see them as they went past, delighted and amazed at Avtandil's appearance. The palace was thronged with people – nobles, courtiers, serving-men – who had heard of the arrival of a stranger and hastened to have sight of him. All of them from the greatest to the least were handsomely appalled, the attendants in ceremonial dress, standing in orderly ranks. Against the background of the state apartments, elegantly designed and sumptuously furnished, numerous groups of grantees presented a magnificent display as they awaited the coming of the king. The banquet held for Avtandil's entertainment continued all that day and late into the night. Everyone who attended it was charmed by the knight. Choice wines and delicious food were served in new vessels of the finest workmanship. When morning came he found a bath prepared for him, with splendid and costly garments laid out and a belt of inestimable price.

Avtandil stayed several days in the palace, shooting and hunting with Phridon, who showed him excellent sport. His skill with

\* Encomium: see note p. 39.

the bow found a mark in the self-esteem of the king's own archers. In spite of Phridon's hospitality, however, he was unwilling to prolong his stay. 'Any guest of yours must feel the deepest reluctance to leave you,' he said to the king. 'It gives me much pain to speak of departure – but my mission is urgent, I have far to travel, and already I have stayed too long. When a traveller lingers in one place it is time to take himself to task. Show me now that point on the seashore from which you saw the sun-like maiden brought to land.'

Phridon did not demur. 'I understand well how it is that you cannot prolong your stay, and I will not seek to detain you,' he said. 'May God be your guide, and your enemies be brought to dust! As for myself – how am I to support life without you? At least, I will not allow you to travel alone. You shall have men to attend you, a horse, and a mule to carry your armour and bedding. If you do not accept these you will exhaust yourself in daily cares.'

Avtandil was provided with an escort of four trustworthy men, a complete suit of armour for each and a horse fully accoutred for his own use, and in addition Phridon gave him sixty measures of gold with a baggage mule to carry them. When he was ready to set out, Phridon mounted and rode beside him, sorrowful that the moment of parting had come. As the tidings of the knight's departure spread through the city the inhabitants thronged the streets – soldiery, merchants, vendors of silk and fruit. A great lament like the sound of thunder rose up at Avtandil's going.

They rode out of the city and onto the headland looking out over the sea from which Phridon had seen the barque come in to land. 'There is the place,' he pointed out. 'Two black slaves brought her ashore there. What a beauty she was – teeth gleaming white, dark eyes, lips like rubies! I determined to seize her. I used my spurs, I was prepared to fight for her, but I was too late. They saw me before I could come near them, and put to sea as if their boat had wings.'

The two young men parted like brothers with kisses and warm embraces, loth to leave each other. When Avtandil rode away Phridon remained watching, like a man bereaved, until he was out of sight.

### 33: Avtandil's Search for Nestan-Darejan

As Avtandil rode away from Mulghazanar he bewailed aloud the cruelty of his fate. 'Now my suffering is threefold – for the sake of three. She alone can heal, she who is the cause of it . . . ' and the thought of Tinatin was balm to his tormented heart.

With Phridon's four horsemen for escort he made his way along the coast. Although he questioned all the travellers he encountered, he learned nothing that could lead to discovering the whereabouts of Tariel's princess. After some hundred days he saw, from a cliff overlooking the sea, a string of loaded camels drawn up on the shore below. The party of merchants with them had fallen silent and were standing in attitudes of anxiety and indecision. Avtandil thought that it might be of use to question them, and rode down to the shore. The merchants replied to his greeting in courteous terms, and he asked them who they were.

The leader of the caravan – Usam by name – was a man of intelligence, who pronounced a full encomium\* and a blessing according to custom. 'Your presence illuminates the earth and brings us joy and consolation! Dismount and let us make known to you what has befallen us and what is our present situation,' he said, and when the knight had dismounted he explained his caravan's predicament. 'We are merchants from Baghdad, of the Mohammedan faith – we drink no fermented liquor.† We were on a journey to the city of the King of the Seas with a valuable shipment of goods, but as we were about to embark we came on a man lying here unconscious at the edge of the sea. We succeeded in reviving him, and asked him who he was and how he came to be there.

'The man replied with a tale of warning. Like ourselves, he had been travelling with a caravan of varied merchandise. They had set out from Egypt with an armed guard. Soon after they had put to sea, their ship had been rammed by a pirate vessel and the whole company lost, with all they had aboard.

"Everyone but myself lost their lives – indeed, I do not know

\* Encomium: see note p. 39.

† Machari: freshly pressed grape juice in the earliest stage of fermentation; new wine.

how I come to be here," he said. "If you take ship, the pirates will attack you. It is well that I have survived, and am able to give you warning."

'That is our situation,' Usam ended. 'If we turn back with our goods, we shall incur losses beyond reckoning; while if we put to sea we shall all be killed, for we have no stomach for fighting nor the means to defend ourselves.'

Avtandil's response was immediate: 'Nothing is achieved by regrets and lamentations. Whatever is to come is sent us from on high, and no one can avert it. I will take ship with you, and wield my sword against any who attack you – their blood be on my head!'

The merchants were overjoyed at this proposal. 'The young man is a knight,' one said to another. 'He is not timorous as we are – now our minds can be at ease!'

Thus, taking courage from Avtandil's self-assurance, they embarked and put to sea. The voyage began in fair weather. With the valiant Avtandil for their leader, the merchants' spirits were high – until the pirate ship came in sight. Flying a huge flag and rigged with an iron-tipped battering-ram,\* she bore down swiftly on the merchantman. The number of pirates, their shouts and trumpet-calls fairly terrified the merchants. They crowded round Avtandil while with movements quick and lithe as a panther's he put on his armour, shouting encouragement and pleasantries to Usam.

'Don't let them frighten you with their bravado! Either I shall kill them every one, or I shall meet my death this day. Not all the hosts on earth can touch me if it is not so decreed – and if I am to die, the weapons are prepared and nothing can save me, not friends or brothers or castle walls. Remember that, and you too

\* 'iron-tipped battering-ram': in paintings of early men-of-war the battering-ram is shown as extending from the keel, to strike an enemy ship below the water-line. In such cases, where the ram was designed for naval warfare to hole and sink the enemy, Avtandil's feat of shattering the ram with a blow of his mace from a position on the foredeck would scarcely have been possible. In pirate vessels, however, the intention was not to sink the prey but to hold and grapple her, in order to board her and collect the spoil. The pirates' ram – as a number of paintings show – would have been a spar carried upwards from the keel to project from the stem above the water-line – a structure which makes Avtandil's feat, while still heroic, more easily envisaged.

will have courage! You merchants are not fighting men. Get below, out of reach of their arrows. I will stand alone against them, and you will soon see the blood run off their decks.'

Avtandil took an iron mace in one hand and stood fearless on the foredeck, while the pirates, yelling ferociously, sailed in closer to ram the merchant vessel. Undismayed, Avtandil stood his ground. He swung the heavy mace and with one blow smashed the iron-tipped beam of wood to splinters. Thus he destroyed the pirates' chief weapon, while his own ship was untouched. Terrified and thrown into confusion, the pirates sought some way of escape but could find none. Avtandil dashed some of them onto the deck, hurled others into the sea and flung one against another to topple over eight or nine at a time. Like a herd of goats they fell before him, until the wounded crouched for shelter among the dead. Avtandil had gained the victory to his heart's content. Some of the leaders among the vanquished ventured to beg for mercy and implored him in the name of his faith to spare their lives. These he spared and took aboard as prisoners. Truly, man can do nothing by his own powers if God does not inspire him with courage, and it is idle to boast as men do in their cups; for the smallest spark of fire can destroy a mighty tree, while if God guides the blow a piece of wood may serve as well as a sword.

Avtandil inspected the pirates' store of treasure and ordered that their ship should be grappled to the merchantman. Then he called to the merchants below to come on deck. When Usam saw what the knight had accomplished single-handed he was overwhelmed with joy, and uttered a paean of praise for their deliverer. It would need a thousand tongues to extol the valour of that knight and the brilliance of his mien, which seemed to be enhanced by combat. All the merchants gathered round to praise and thank him, kissing his hands and feet and pouring out their gratitude and admiration. At last he said:

'Thanks be to God, the Creator of all living things; for everything on earth is accomplished through His heavenly power and according to His decree, whether manifest or hidden from the sight of men. As the Wise believe in destiny, so we also should believe. If any of us have survived it is by God's will, and we owe our lives to Him. What am I but dust, what could I achieve by my own powers alone? Now I have made good my undertaking

and slain your foes for you. This vessel with all its booty I present to you as a gift.'

The merchants, who clung to their existence, continued to heap praises on Avtandil. The slight wound he had received added still more to his lustre. They lost no time in going aboard the pirate ship and found her to be rich in spoils accumulated from many raids. They loaded all the treasure into their own ship, and when they had stripped the other they cast off the hulk and set fire to it. Then they conferred among themselves, and Usam came to Avtandil as spokesman for the caravan.

'We are well aware of what we owe to you,' he said. 'We have profited from your strength and courage. Without question, all that we possess is yours by right – on that we are agreed. We beg you to accept it, and let us take from your hands only what you desire to give.'

Avtandil however refused the merchants' offer: 'Brothers, it is only a short time ago that your prayers were answered. It is God, and not myself, who has saved you alive – I take no credit for it. What should I do with so much wealth? I have myself and my horse! In my own country I have countless possessions, riches, silken furnishings – how can I wish for more? For a certain time I am a traveller in your company, but I have interests far apart from these. Keep all the treasure for yourselves, share it out as you please. I lay no claim to any part of it. Only one thing I will ask – it is nothing to alarm you. For reasons of my own, I wish to conceal myself and join your caravan as one of yourselves, wearing the dress of a merchant and carrying on the business of trading just as you do. Support me in this and do not address me as a knight, but treat me as your leader and let no one suspect that I am not your master.'

The merchants were much pleased by Avtandil's proposal and agreed to it immediately. They made obeisance to him and lavished their praise on him, presenting him with a lustrous pearl out of their store of treasure.

'We hoped that you would ask something of us, so that we might in some measure repay you, whose countenance is radiant as the sun,' they said. The ship was set on her course again, fair winds filled the sails and the rest of the voyage passed pleasantly for all the company aboard.

## 34: Avtandil's Arrival in Gulansharo

Thus Avtandil of the noble form crossed the sea in the merchant ship. As they came within sight of land they discerned the outlines of a city rising from the shore. It was a city all in flower, with gardens flowing in streams of variegated colour down to the sea. They made fast to the quay at the foot of one of these gardens, and Avtandil in his merchant's dress went ashore to supervise the unloading of the cargo. He seated himself in a chair on the quay and called to some men to act as stevedores, playing well his part of caravan leader and maintaining his disguise. Soon a gardener came down to the waterfront. Avtandil questioned him, in terms appropriate to his role of merchant. He asked him his name and that of his master, and who was the ruler of the country. The gardener stood gazing in wonder at the stranger, whose brilliant glance and noble features no costume could disguise.

'Tell me in detail,' Avtandil enquired, 'what goods command the highest prices in your markets, and what kind are sold most cheaply?'

The gardener spoke at last, and Avtandil learned that the seaport was known as Gulansharo, the City of Flowers. 'You are in the country called the Kingdom of the Seas,' the man told him. 'Ten months' march is the distance between our frontiers. This is Gulansharo, the capital, and our king is Melik Surkhavi, blessed with riches and prosperity. You have come to the land of good fortune! Our city is full of fair and marvellous things, brought to us from over the sea by ships from every part of the world. Everyone who comes to this land finds life enjoyable. There is feasting and music in abundance, and flowers in every season – yes, in winter as in summer. Old men here grow young again. We in Gulansharo are the envy of the world! As to conditions in the markets, I can tell you that the great merchants can find nowhere better to sell their goods. No, indeed – they buy and sell, make profit and loss, and within a single month a poor man can make his fortune! This house with its fine gardens – ' he pointed to the clusters of glowing colours above them – 'belongs to the chief of the merchants, Ussein,\* and I am his head gardener.'

\* Ussein: pronounced *Oossenn*, Arabic *Hussein*.





He went on to explain to Avtandil the trading laws of the kingdom. A traveller arriving in Gulansharo with goods to sell would first pay a visit to Ussein, offer him presents and show him the best of his wares. Ussein had the first option on everything that was brought into the country: only after he, as agent for the king, had made his choice were traders permitted to display their goods elsewhere.

'It is my master Ussein who should receive a personage of importance such as yourself and arrange for your lodging. He is at present away from home, but my mistress Phatman Khatun\* is here. She is a very hospitable lady, amiable and refined. I will go myself to inform her of your arrival. She will receive you and send some of her men to you, so that you will enter the city at day-break.'

'Very good – do as you think best,' Avtandil told him. The gardener, happy and perspiring, hastened up to the house to announce the new arrival to his mistress: 'A young man has arrived, a merchant with a large caravan. He is handsome as a well-grown tree, brilliant as a seven days' moon! He looks so well in his robe and purple turban. He questioned me about the prices in the markets here.'

The lady Phatman received this news with pleasure, and at once sent ten of her men to attend on Avtandil and arranged for the storage of his goods. The news of a caravan's arrival spread quickly through the city and people hastened to see the handsome young leader. Everyone was charmed by him – women in transports of desire for him took aversion to their husbands.

In the absence of the chief merchant his wife, the lady Phatman, stood in the doorway of her house to receive Avtandil. She performed the salaam of greeting, and did not conceal her pleasure at his appearance. They spoke a few words to each other, and entered the house. The arrival of this merchant was by no means unwelcome to Phatman, it appeared. The lady was pleasing to the eye – vivacious and seductive although no longer young, ripe in her charms and not yet faded. Her dress was one of many elegant costumes. She delighted in minstrelsy and did not abstain from wine. The banquet she gave that evening was especially sumptuous and provided the occasion for Avtandil to offer her, in

\* Khatun: lady, mistress of the house (Arabic).



Ussein's place, some of his choicest wares. He had brought some splendid presents with him.

On the following day Avtandil commanded that the bales of merchandise should be opened. He set aside the best of their contents for the king and directed the merchants to dispose of the rest in the market of Gulansharo. 'Carry on your trade as usual,' he told them, 'only do not let it be known who I am.'

The knight stayed on in Gulansharo, continuing to play the part of a merchant. A house was appointed for his use. Sometimes Phatman would come to visit him there, sometimes he would go to her, and they had conversation in formal and polished speech. It became as hard for Phatman to bear the time apart from Avtandil, as it was for Vis from Ramin.\*

## 35: Phatman's Letter to Avtandil

Women know how to charm and please a man, arouse his desire and gain his trust besides. Once they have your secrets, they will betray you and sever the ties of love: keep your distance from them, if you can! The lady Phatman became consumed with desire for Avtandil. Her love for him grew like a raging fire. 'What will become of me? If I let him know of my love, and he is angered – then I shall be deprived of his presence altogether. On the other hand, if I do not speak – ah, how can I bear this any longer? I will speak, come what may. A physician cannot heal, if he does not know of the pain.'

She sent the knight a letter revealing her passion in the most poignant terms – a letter that might have been thought worthy of a place in any man's keeping.

'O sun, whom God has created to give joy to all who are near you, and sorrow to those deprived of your presence! How marvellous is the sight of you to behold: I perish if you shed not your light upon me,' she wrote; and in the language of love, the image of rose and nightingale, she implored Avtandil to tell her that he

\* Vis and Ramin: see note p. 55.

returned her passion. 'I am faint with love – I live only to hear from your lips what my fate is to be.'

Phatman despatched this letter to Avtandil. 'She does not know what is in my heart,' he said when he read it. 'She is courting me – while I court one to whom she cannot be compared. What nonsense she writes – like the croaking of a raven. What has such a bird to do with a rose? She knows nothing of my love, and sends me this rigmarole – how graceless and ill-conceived.'

Such was the knight's immediate reaction to the letter from his hostess in Gulansharo. Another voice however soon made itself heard in his mind. 'In this quest of mine I have no resource but in myself,' he reflected. 'I set out with one purpose alone, and whatever I can do to that end, I will do – I need no other counsel. This woman, who entertains travellers from all parts of the world, is in a position to hear tidings and rumours, to receive all kinds of confidences. When a woman loves, she gives herself with all her heart, without reserve or any thought of shame – and gives her confidence as well. If I were to play this woman's game – however distasteful it is to me – I might learn from her something to aid me in my quest.

'A man can do nothing except by the favour of his planet.\* At present I do not have what I desire, and what I have is not of my choosing. Twilight is the nature of this world, and many things in it are obscure,' Avtandil told himself. 'Whatever is in a pitcher, that will be poured out of it.'

## 36: Avtandil's Letter to Phatman

Avtandil wrote a brief answer to Phatman's letter: 'You have anticipated my desire, which burns even more fiercely than yours. Let us come together, since both of us desire it.'

Phatman in her joy instantly sent a note to tell him that he would find her alone that evening at the fall of darkness. However, scarcely had Avtandil set out for Phatman's house when he was

\* *Elli*: planet, fate.

intercepted by a slave, bringing him a second message: 'Do not come tonight – I cannot be ready to receive you.'

The only effect of this was to anger the knight and he did not turn back, but continued on his way and entered Phatman's house. She was alone. He perceived as soon as he saw her that she was troubled and uneasy, although in deference to him and from the wish to please she concealed her disquiet as well as she could. She made a place for him on the couch beside her. They kissed, and had begun to enjoy the sport of love, when a graceful and comely youth appeared on the threshold of the apartment. Followed by his sword-bearer he stepped into the room, but stopped short upon seeing Avtandil – here was an obstacle unforeseen.

Phatman was seized with terror at sight of the stranger. She started and trembled, while he stood looking at them both in astonishment as they lay embraced. When he spoke, it was to break into a tirade of abuse and threats.

'I am not going to disturb you here in the midst of your raptures – but tomorrow I will see that you regret them! You have shamed and humiliated me, you whore, you trollop, and I will make you pay for it! You shall be forced to swallow the flesh of your own children – I myself will see it done,' he ended with an oath, and touched his beard. Before either of the lovers could speak, he had swung round and gone from the house.

In a frenzy of terror, Phatman screamed and tore her hair. 'May I be stoned to death – it is I who have brought this horror upon us all,' she wailed. 'I shall see my husband slain, my children murdered, our wealth all lost. Ruin, ruin to those I love, to those who nurtured me and those whom I have nurtured, and all through my foolish, reckless tongue!'

Avtandil, understanding nothing of the situation, did his best to calm the lady and persuade her to explain it.

'Why does he frighten you so much, what is wrong? Compose yourself and tell me who he is and why he came.'

'Do not ask me anything! I am out of my mind with fear!' It was her impatience for his love, she sobbed, that had brought a hideous death upon her children and herself. 'I am a gabbling fool, besides, who can keep nothing to myself. It is my unguarded tongue that has brought us to this. Pity me, come to my aid, and I will tell you everything. If you would save us, O lion among men,

go in secret tonight and slay that man. Then you will deliver my family and myself from a fearful fate. When it is done, return to me and I will answer all your questions. Otherwise – if you will not do this – load all your possessions onto mules, leave the country tonight and never return. If that man lives to reach the palace, he will force me to devour my children.’

When Avtandil heard this, gallant as he was and compassionate of heart, he rose and took a mace in his hand. ‘So much mystery!’ he said – ‘it would be a pity not to unravel it. Send for one of your men to go with me, but only to show me the way. I need no help in combat, for I do not regard that man as an equal.’ Phatman was to wait for him, he told her, and remain quietly in her house. She called for one of her men to serve as a guide, and took courage to beg Avtandil to bring back a ring that she had given to the youth.

Avtandil of the peerless form went through the city and came to the seashore. There stood houses built of green and rose-red stone, a flight of beautifully decorated roofs and terraces rising one above another against the background of the cliffs. The guide conducted Avtandil towards these buildings and in a low voice indicated the palace of the young man, the Chachnagir.

‘Do you see that terrace?’ he said, pointing upwards. ‘That is where he will retire to sleep, if he is not sitting in the apartment below.’

Silently Avtandil made his way upward and came to the threshold of the Chachnagir’s bedchamber. Two guards were stationed outside; before they could give the alarm he had seized them by the throat and smashed their heads one against the other. He flung the bodies aside and entered the room.

The Chachnagir was lying in his bedchamber, alone, in a burning rage. Avtandil entered and went swiftly to the young man’s couch – a figure with bloodstained hands that seized him, flung him to the ground and plunged a knife into his heart. It was done so swiftly and so secretly that no one could have detected it. That brave knight of the shining presence wore a different look as an adversary. He severed the finger of the dead youth bearing Phatman’s ring; then he carried the body to the window and hurled it out to fall far below, deep into the sand, where the sea would cover it. The Chachnagir was to have no burial at the hands of men.



The enterprise had been carried through without a sound, and no alarm was raised for the death of the Chachnagir and his two guards. Avtandil descended from the terrace by the way he had come, and returned straightway to Phatman's house. She was waiting, distraught with suspense and fear. The appearance of Avtandil and his eloquent words reassured her.

'I have slain that youth,' he told her. 'Never again will he see the light of day – as your follower will bear witness, as well as this ring of yours and my knife stained with his blood. Now explain to me what was the meaning of that man's threats: who was he, and how is it that he was able to terrify you as he did?'

Phatman flung herself down at Avtandil's feet and embraced them, in her relief and gratitude. 'I am not worthy to look upon your face, O lion!' she cried. 'You are my deliverer – you have saved me, and my husband Ussein, and all our household. What words can I find to praise you? Now that he is dead, I will tell you about the whole affair from the beginning.'

## 37: Phatman's Story concerning Nestan-Darejan

Phatman began her tale by explaining to Avtandil that it was the custom in Gulansharo that no one should carry on trade or begin a journey on the first day of the year. Everyone put on their finest attire, their brightest ornaments. Great banquets were held at the palace by the king and queen, and the leading merchants would take presents to the palace and receive presents from the sovereigns in return. For ten days there were games on the *maidan*, horse racing, feasts – everywhere the air was loud with the sound of tambourine and cymbal, the click of the ball and the clatter of hooves.

'My husband Ussein leads a party of the chief merchants to present their gifts to the king,' Phatman continued, 'while I conduct their wives to pay court to the queen in the same fashion. We spend a pleasant hour or two at the palace, and return home in

a festive mood. On this last New Year's Day we went as usual to take our offerings to the queen. She accepted the gifts we had brought and rewarded us with lavish presents. It was my house to which we returned after leaving the palace, since I was to entertain these ladies. We were quite at ease together, gay and unconstrained. Singers and musicians were performing in the gardens, while we walked about amusing ourselves and joining in their song. I re-arranged my hair and tried on different veils – we were merry as children. There are some delightful pavilions in the gardens, beautifully designed and built high overlooking the sea, with a view on every side. Our banquet was to be held in one of these, and I led my guests in to a well-laden table. They were lively and full of enjoyment, and I felt as kindly towards them as if they had been my sisters.

“Then suddenly, as we were drinking wine together, a sense of malaise came over me. Those who were still at table observed it, and one by one rose and took their leave, until I was left alone. At last I too rose, striving to throw off the depression that had fallen so heavily on my spirits. I went to the windows and opened them wide upon the sea, so that the fresh air might dispel it, and as I stood there looking out to sea I saw something tiny riding the waves. At first I could not make out what it was, but when it came nearer I could see that it was a small barque gliding in towards the shore. Then appeared something truly strange – two black men came ashore and carried that vessel up the beach to the end of my own gardens, looking about them to be sure they were not observed. They could not see that I was watching from the pavilion. They lifted a chest out of the vessel, and when they uncovered it a young woman stepped out to stand upon the shore. She was dressed in green, and covered with a black veil. That maiden was beautiful as the sun! When she turned in my direction the rocks and the earth around her were made bright by her radiance, and my eyes were dazzled. I closed the shutters in order to remain unobserved, called four of my slaves and pointed out that wondrous apparition to them.

““Go down to the shore – swiftly, but quietly, so that you do not alarm them,” I commanded. “Bring that maiden to me – if they will sell her, give them whatever price they ask. If they will not, then kill them and take her by force of arms.”

‘I watched from the window. My men attempted to bargain, but the blacks appeared ill pleased. When I saw that the beauty was not for sale, I shouted: “Slay them!” It was swiftly done – my slaves cut off the heads of the blacks and threw them into the sea, then stood guard beside the maiden while I hastened down to the shore to greet her and bring her up to my house. How can I describe her beauty to you, the grace of her form, the brightness of her countenance! Her presence outshone even the sun in brilliance.’ Here Phatman broke down in tears, and Avtandil also wept as he thought of Nestan-Darejan. Both he and Phatman forgot each other in their remembrance of her.

Soon the knight urged her to continue her story, and she told him how she had taken the strange maiden into her house, how she had been fascinated by her beauty and caressed her, covered her with kisses, entreated to be told in what way she could serve her. For a long time the maiden had given no answer to any of Phatman’s questions – indeed, she seemed to be distressed by them and by all that was said to her. She wept heartbrokenly, until at last she said, speaking through her tears, ‘You are like a mother to me, and better than a mother – but my story is nothing but a fairy-tale for idle tongues. What use can it be to repeat it? I am simply someone who is alone, the victim of an unhappy fate. If you question me, you will be defying the power that watches over all living beings.’

Phatman had recognized that it was, indeed, inopportune to carry off such a celestial creature and weary her with questions. ‘There is a right time for every kind of request – how could I have failed to realize that my questions were untimely? I provided a dwelling for her, well appointed, with a negro slave to attend on her. There she could remain in perfect secrecy – although,’ Phatman added, ‘such shining beauty was hard to conceal, even behind many folds of heavy brocade! Beauty seemed to radiate from her as light from the sun. I told no one of her existence. I visited her often, but always when I went to that house I went alone. It was long before I could persuade her to speak to me. She wept unceasingly. “Be calm!” I would implore her, and for a time she would strive to please me; but then the gentlest of questions – “Who are you, and how did you come here?” – would provoke heartrending outbursts of tears.



'She would have no covering or bedding; her arm was her only pillow. Not all my entreaties could prevail on her to take more than a little food. Many things I have seen that are rare and precious, but nothing to equal the cloak and scarf that she wore. How the fabric was made I cannot tell: it was soft and supple as silk, yet it had the toughness of steel.

'So she stayed in my house, that divine creature, for many days while I kept the secret even from my husband's knowledge. Should I tell him? I had no faith in him – he would not keep silent, I feared, and might let it be known when he went to Court. Yet if I did not tell him and obtain his help, what was I to do? I did not know what to do for her – and if he discovered her, he might have me put to death. Beauty such as hers could not be hidden for ever, any more than the light of the sun; nor could I long continue to bear the burden of my secret alone. Surely, I thought, I could trust Ussein. If he pledged himself to silence he would not break his word.

'I went in to his chamber when he was alone, and beguiled and caressed him. "I have something to tell you," I said, "but first you are to swear that you will not reveal it to any living soul." And my husband, in that hour of his love for me, swore by a fearful oath that he would never repeat what I should confide to him: "I will tell it to no living being until the hour of my death – young or old, friend or enemy!"

'So I told everything to that good-hearted man. "Come with me," I said to him, "and you shall behold the very image of the sun!" I rose, and he accompanied me to the house where I kept my treasure concealed from sight.'

Ussein was amazed by the maiden's beauty, as Phatman had been. 'What sort of being is this?' he marvelled. 'Surely she is not a creature of flesh and blood.'

'Whether she is mortal I do not know. Let us question her, and perhaps she will answer our entreaties and tell us something of herself,' Phatman proposed.

'We addressed her with deference and ventured to ask: "Tell us, O sun, how we may restore fullness to the waning moon? What is the cause of your distress, and what can we do to relieve it?"

'We did not know whether she had heard us. Her lips like rose-petals were closed over the pearls within, and the brightness

of her glance was veiled. There was the grace of a panther in her pose as she sat before us unmoving, the dark hair coiling in disorder round her shoulders. Our questions wearied her; suddenly her eyes filled and overflowed with tears and she cried out: "I do not know! Leave me in peace!"

Full of remorse, husband and wife had wept with her and begged her to forgive them. At last she grew calm. They offered her fruit, but she would not take it.

'The sight of her is enough to banish a thousand cares!' Ussein exclaimed. 'What man can aspire to her, who is fit for the sun's embrace? Wretched indeed is he who cannot look on her. God slay me if she is not dearer to me than my own children!'

From that day the merchant and his wife had devoted all their leisure to visiting the maiden, even neglecting the affairs of trade. Ussein had been in the way of paying frequent visits to the palace. After some time it occurred to him that he had been absent for longer than was his custom.

'Perhaps I should go to Court, my love, and take some presents to the king. What do you think?' he asked his wife.

'Do as you think best,' Phatman answered. 'Only, when you are in the company of those brave slayers of thirst at the palace, remember that you are sworn to say nothing of our maiden.'

'Oh! I had nothing to fear, he told me - let him be struck dead if he should break his word! He prepared a tray of pearls and precious stones, and set off for the palace.

'He found the king at the banqueting table. My husband is a favourite with him, and as soon as he appeared our sovereign called him to his side. My husband displayed the presents he had brought - and soon displayed himself as a babbling sot without wit or breeding. The king was already well wine, and wine was being poured freely. Cup after cup was drunk, one after another, until the Koran was out of mind and Mecca too - and Ussein's oath forgotten. Truly is it said that a rose looks no better on a crow than horns on a donkey. My husband had become foolish in his cups. The king was admiring his offering of jewels. "Where do you find such superb stones?" he asked, turning over the plump pearls and unflawed rubies. "I myself have not wealth enough to give you one-tenth of what these are worth!"

'Ussein bowed low. "O mighty sovereign, giver of light and

sustenance from on high to those on earth! What do I possess naked as I came forth from my mother's womb – what is mine indeed that I do not owe to your munificence? If I make you a present, I do but return to you what is your own. These unworthy gifts do not merit your notice; but I have something to offer you that will surely evoke your gratitude – a bride for your royal son!" And the wretch went on to violate his oath, his sacred word. He painted such a picture of our unhappy maiden that the king, delighted, gave the command that she should be brought to the palace immediately.

'I was alone in my house, content, without a care in the world. Suddenly there appeared at my door the chief of the king's slaves, with his customary escort of sixty men.'

Phatman was taken by surprise. She supposed they had come on some affair of state. But the chief slave announced that he had orders to bring to the palace a maiden whom Ussein had offered to the king that day – one, he had been told, of celestial beauty.

'When I heard that, it seemed that my world had collapsed in ruins about me. I affected to know nothing of the matter. "What maiden is this?" I asked the man.

"She whom Ussein would present to our lord the king is a maiden whose countenance is dazzling as the sun."

'Useless to resist! My hour had come. The shock was so great that I could scarcely move my limbs, yet I forced myself to rise and went to the maiden's house, and there abased myself before her in tears as plentiful as hers.

"Alas, O sun! Fate has betrayed us, the heavens have turned in wrath against me. Indeed I am stricken to the earth – the king has come to know of your presence here and has sent for you to be taken to the palace."

The maiden would not allow Phatman to reproach herself. 'Dear sister, do not grieve too much. Fate has ever treated me cruelly,' she said through a rain of tears like pearls. 'If any good thing were to befall me, that would be wonderful indeed – but no stroke of ill fortune can ever surprise me.'

'She rose to prepare herself –' Phatman continued – 'graceful as a panther, fearless as a warrior. Joy she did not regard as joy, nor sorrow as sorrow. She asked me to give her a veil for covering,

and I went to my store of treasure and took from it a number of priceless pearls and gems, as many as I could carry. These I set into a girdle, every one of them worth a city's ransom. "Some time, my dear one, you may find these of use," I said as I fastened the belt about her delicate waist. The darkness of night was in my heart when I delivered her to the slaves.

"The maiden was taken away and the king himself came out to meet her, to a flourish of drums and a great ringing of bells. She walked in silence, with bowed head, through the crowds that pressed forward to look on her. The guards could not hold the people back, and there was much uproar and confusion. The king marvelled when he set eyes on her.

"How is it that the sun has taken on earthly form?" he wondered. "None but God Himself could create such a wondrous being. She would drive any man to distraction."

"He caused her to be seated beside him and questioned her gently as to who she was and who were her people; but she gave no answer, remaining silent, and did not raise her eyes. Her thoughts were far from her surroundings. Those who were nearest to her wondered at her calm bearing, and the king pondered on how to understand the strange and lovely creature.

"Either she has a lover," he surmised, "and has no thought for anyone besides – or she is one of the Wise, exalted beyond the reach of joy and sorrow, and wings her way like a dove untouched by fortune or mischance,"

The king had looked to the homecoming of his son to resolve the perplexing situation. The young prince, whom Phatman described as eminently handsome and a fearless soldier, was at that time away on campaign. He, the king thought, would know how to approach the maiden and persuade her to tell them about herself. In the meantime, she was to be treated as the prince's bride-elect. She was given a dress embroidered with many jewels, and a crown of matched rubies. At the king's command an apartment was made ready for her and a throne of red gold erected. The august monarch himself set her upon the throne, to the delight of everyone present. Nine eunuchs were appointed to guard the door of her apartment.

The king then took his place at a great banquet at which, according to usage, Ussein received splendid presents as a

reward for his services. Trumpets and drums were sounded; the feasting and drinking continued for many hours.

The maiden herself reflected on her cruel fate. 'What will become of me? How can I ever be his, for whose sake I am driven to frenzy? What am I to do, how shall I survive, when life treats me so cruelly?' In the very midst of her despair, the thought came to her that it was not yet time to lose hope. 'If I do all that I can for myself, it may be that God will come to my aid,' she thought. 'It is senseless to look for death before it comes. It is in time of trouble that the wise have most need of their wisdom.'

She called to her attendants: 'Listen, and do not be deceived. Your sovereign is mistaken as regards my rank: it is not for me to reign over you as queen, or to marry the king's son – God preserve me from him, however handsome he may be! The pipes and drums, the ringing of the tocsin are all in vain. My way does not lie here among you: it leads elsewhere. If I am kept here by force, I shall take my own life. Then the king's anger will fall upon you, and your lives may well be short. Leave me free to slip away, and take these jewels for yourselves.' She unfastened the belt from her waist, heavy with Phatman's treasure, and unburdened herself of the ruby crown. All that wealth she laid before them: 'Take this, I entreat you, and God will acquit you of your debts.'

The attendants eagerly fell upon the spoils, forgetting even their fear of the king in their greed, and letting go that beauty beyond compare. Those who love gold have no joy of it, for they become its slaves. Never satisfied, unresting in greed, they curse even the stars in their courses; their spirits are in chains and cannot rise from the earth. After the eunuchs had shared out the jewels among themselves, one of them took off his clothing and gave it to the maiden for a disguise. The banqueting hall of the palace was filled with drunken revellers, and the attendants brought the maiden out by another door before they too made their escape.

'She came to my house,' Phatman went on. 'I was amazed to see her here, but I recognized her in that disguise. I embraced her and begged her to enter, but she would not. She told me how she had bought her freedom with my jewels.'

"May God repay you! You cannot conceal me any longer. Give me a horse," she asked me, "so that I can escape before the king hears that I have gone and sends men in pursuit."

'I went to the stables and saddled the best of my horses. There were no sighs or tears as I helped her to mount. She was radiant as she rode away, while I was left with no reward for all my pains.

'By the end of that day the alarm had been given and a search begun. The pursuers occupied the centre of the city and searched every house. When they came to question me, I said to them: "If you find her in this house, may I be held guilty before the king!" The king's men returned in disorder, to report failure.

'The Court went into mourning; everyone put on sombre garments. Her going was like the setting of the sun, leaving the world darker for us all.

'I will tell you more of her; but first, let me explain how it was that the youth came here to threaten me. He was my lover, that young buck, and I his doe. Ah! if a man is disgraced by want of spirit, it is wantonness that shames a woman. My poor ill-favoured husband is not the man to satisfy my desires, while the Chachnagir was so handsome, so distinguished, with a high position at Court. Indeed, I loved him for a time,' the lady sighed, 'although now I would gladly drink his blood by the cupful! So it was that, in my folly, I told him my story as I have told it to you.'

Quarrels had been common, it seemed, between those lovers. When the Chachnagir had come to know Phatman's secret, he had threatened her repeatedly with exposure. Lovers, however, they had remained – until the day when she had been unable to forestall Avtandil's visit and the Chachnagir had found them together.

'I had invited you before I knew that he had returned to his house after a journey. He sent word to me that he was coming. I was filled with terror – I sent a slave to you with a message, but you would not turn back, and so the two of you met. Then at last in that dreadful moment I realized that his threats and raging had been more than idle words. He did, in very truth, wish to see me dead. If you had not slain him, he would have gone to the palace and given vent to his rage. He would have denounced me to the king, and then my house would have been forfeit, and I should have been stoned to death after being forced to devour my own children. May God reward you! How can I express my gratitude?'

Phatman gave Avtandil heartfelt thanks for restoring her to

happiness and delivering her from the ever-present fear of death.

'You need have no fear,' he reassured her. 'It is written that of all your enemies the one most to be feared is the one who is closest to you. It is wise never to trust that one. Now, think no more of your fears, but tell me everything you have heard concerning the maiden from the sea, whom you sheltered and sent on her way.'

Phatman wept again as she thought of that radiant being now lost to her. At Avtandil's request she took up the story where she had let it drop.

## 38: Phatman's Account of the Capture of Nestan-Darejan by the Kadjis

After the maiden's flight from Gulansharo Phatman had felt as desolate as if the sun had gone down, leaving her world in darkness.

'Her presence gave light to my whole existence, to everything I did. When she had gone I was inconsolable; even my house and children became distasteful to me – I could think of nothing but her. As for Ussein, who had broken his word, I could not bear the sight of that accursed faithless man.'

One evening at the hour of sunset Phatman was passing the gateway of a rest-house, when a party of men entered to take up their quarters for the night. One of them appeared, by his dress, to be a slave; his companions wore the rough garb of travellers. They brought food and drink with them which they had purchased in the city, and were a merry and convivial company. They proposed to entertain themselves by telling, each in turn, the story of their lives and adventures. Phatman, her thoughts all of the departed maiden, had been arrested by what she overheard and stayed to listen to the talk of these men.

'We have good cheer in this place, and good company,' one of them was saying, 'but since we are all of us strangers to one another, let each one tell who he is and whence he has come.'

According to the custom of wayfarers, each in turn told his tale. The slave was the last to speak. He likened his companions' stories to a sowing of grain. 'Now listen to me,' he bade them, 'and I will set before you a harvest of pearls!' From that moment he held everyone's attention – Phatman's especially.

'I am a slave of the mighty ruler of the Kadjis,' he began, and told them that the king had lately died and the rule had passed into the hands of his sister Dulardukht. 'In our former sovereign we lost a benefactor of widows and orphans. The new queen, though she is a woman, is hard as rock – even her fighting men cannot excel her in feats of arms.'

Dulardukht had assumed charge of the upbringing of her two nephews, sons of the late king. It was not long before news of her sister's death had arrived from over the sea.

'There was a council of the vizirs. No one wanted to be the bearer of such tidings to the queen, you may imagine! My master Roshak is chief of the king's slaves; he commands many thousand men. "Even though I be slain for it, I will not take part in the court mourning," he announced to us. "I will go and grow rich on plundering the countryside. If the queen leaves to attend her sister's funeral, I will return in time to escort her."

'He took a hundred of us with him, all picked men. We raided the valleys and lowlands, keeping watch day and night on the trade routes and attacking the caravans from ambush. By plundering and pillaging we amassed much wealth.'

One dark night when they were wandering over the plains the slaves had seen something shining in the distance, like the light from a huge lamp. 'The moon!' one cried, another – 'It is the dawn!' So bright it was that they wondered if it could be the sun come down to earth.

'We could not tell, and we all rode towards that brightness, keeping close formation and spreading out in a circle to surround it. A voice called out to us from the place where the light was glowing: "Who are you, O horsemen? Speak, and tell me your names! I am a messenger\* from Gulansharo to Kadjeti. Make way for me!"

\* a messenger: No one had the right to lay hands on a messenger. Nestan's call was a command, not a request. Cf. p. 115: 'A messenger ought not to be afraid.'



'At that we rode forward and made a close circle round the centre of the radiance. We could see that it was somebody on horseback – a being as lustrous as the sun, whose dazzling countenance gave light to everything around. Teeth like pearls we saw, eyelashes like a row of lances. The voice that had spoken those few words to us was low and gentle. Again we addressed the shining apparition. We realized that we had been deceived – it was no slave, as she pretended, but a maiden who had fallen into our hands. Roshak rode to her side. In our presumption, we laid hands upon her and questioned her again. "Who are you, and to whom do you belong? How do you come to be here, shining as brightly as the sun through this dark night?"

'We persisted in our questions, but the maiden had no answer for us but tears. She would tell us nothing – neither openly nor in whispered confidence. Like a viper coiled she remained on her guard, defiance flashing from her eyes. At length Roshak ordered us to leave her in peace.

"It may be that this is not the time to speak," he said. "Indeed, this is a strange matter and hard to understand. This maiden is as it were a gift from God, whom we can present as an offering to our queen – fortunate that she is! – and thereby gain favour with her. If we should attempt to keep the prize to ourselves and say nothing of her to the queen, the queen would certainly come to hear of it, and moreover it would be shameful on our part."

The band of slaves agreed on this course of action, and continued on their way to Kadjeti without molesting their captive again.

'I asked leave of Roshak to attend to some affairs in Gulansharo,' the slave ended his tale, 'and so I have come here to collect certain goods of mine. Then I shall go to rejoin Roshak and his men.'

The slave's story had greatly entertained his companions. To Phatman it brought hope and comfort – for she became convinced as she listened that the slave was speaking of the maiden she had sheltered. She had the man brought to her and made him repeat his story. 'I heard it as one who is dying receives the breath of life!' she said. 'I have two black slaves who are practised in sorcery. They have performed spells for me, and they have the power of making themselves invisible. I sent for those men and

gave them orders to go to Kadjeti and discover for me the truth of what I had heard. They returned within three days – how swiftly they travelled! – and brought the information I desired.’

The slaves reported that they had seen a maiden of dazzling beauty, and had learned that the Queen of the Kadjis was about to embark on a voyage. When the maiden was brought before her she decreed that the beauty should be married to her nephew Rosan.

‘At present I have no time to celebrate the wedding, for I am in mourning and bound upon a journey,’ the queen announced. ‘When I return, this maiden radiant as the sun shall be a bride for Rosan.’

In the meantime, Nestan-Darejan had been confined in the fortress, alone and inaccessible. Dulardukht had heard that she would meet with dangers on her way and attacks from armed men. She included in her train every man who had some skill in the magic arts, while a garrison of picked fighting men was left in Kadjeti.

The slaves went on to describe the plan and structure of the Kadjis’ stronghold. They declared it to be impregnable: it had never been taken by assault. It was built round a natural tower of rock, a huge and sombre eminence approached by a single underground passage.

‘The entrance to that tunnel is never left unguarded. Ten thousand young gallants are stationed there, the best of all their men, and in addition there is a force of three thousand at each of the three gates to the city.’ With these words Phatman came to the end of her story. ‘Dear heart,’ she added, ‘the world is against you! Who can tell what your fate will be?’

When Avtandil heard Phatman’s story after his long search, he rejoiced with all his heart and gave thanks to God. Then he turned to her, full of tenderness.

‘My well-beloved, this is what I have been seeking to discover – joyful tidings indeed. I should wish only to hear in more detail about Kadjeti. If the Kadjis are not beings of flesh and blood, how do they come to take on human form? While I am consumed with pity for the maiden they hold captive, I do not understand what those fleshless creatures can want with her.’

‘Let me explain this to you and make it clear,’ Phatman

replied. 'These Kadjis are not spirits or demons but a race of men, whose domain is bare rock. They are known as Kadjis because they are a community of men expert in sorcery. They do harm to all and themselves are harmed by none. Men who go out to do battle with them return blinded and defeated. They have strange powers: they can strike their enemies blind, raise tempests and sink ships at sea; they can scorch the rivers dry, turn day into night or darkness into day. That is why everyone calls them Kadjis – because they have these powers; but in reality they are people of flesh and blood as we are.'

'It makes me glad to hear this and sets my mind at ease,' Avtandil said to Phatman. Silently in his heart he gave thanks: 'Praise be to Thee, O God, who dost relieve affliction, inexpressible, inapprehensible, who bringest everything to being! Thy grace is poured forth upon us men, how and when we cannot foretell.'

The tears of exaltation that came to the eyes of the knight were misunderstood by Phatman, who imagined him to be thus moved on her account. Her desire for him flared into a consuming flame. Avtandil took counsel with himself – and did not repulse her. She had joy of him that night, but he – while making semblance of desire for her – trembled inwardly, possessed by the thought of Tinatin, his heart maddened with longing. How his tears flowed!

'See me now, O lovers!' he cried within his heart – 'like a nightingale with a rose of my own, perched like a crow upon a rubbish heap!'

Phatman however heard nothing of that silent cry. She gloried in him, as a crow that for a moment imagines itself to be a nightingale.

In the morning when Avtandil went to the bath he found a variety of costumes and scents laid out for his choice. 'No ceremony!' Phatman said as she invited him to put on whatever dress he pleased. It had been his rule while he was in Gulansharo to attire himself as a merchant. Now he decided that the time had come to abandon his disguise. Phatman had prepared a meal. She called Avtandil to the table and was astonished when he appeared, smiling and resplendent, in the habit of a knight – one that enhanced his handsome looks. 'Now everyone will find you more fascinating than ever!' she exclaimed.

The knight made no answer but only smiled to himself. He realized that, close as they had been, she understood nothing of his true nature. Her talk seemed to him foolish, her advances misplaced, and he gave her no more than a light caress. After they had eaten together he left her and returned to his own house, where he drank some wine and enjoyed a pleasant hour of rest. In the evening he awoke refreshed and sent for Phatman. She came hastening, with sighs and tremors of expectation. Avtandil placed a cushion for her beside him. He spoke briefly to prepare her to hear the truth about himself, for he knew that it would cause her pain.

‘What I am going to tell you will sting like the bite of a snake – but you must learn the truth about me. I am not what you believe me to be – a merchant, the chief of a caravan. I am, in fact, commander-in-chief of the army of a great king, Rostevan of Arabia. In my own country I am rich in land and possessions.

‘I have found you to be a good friend, loyal and worthy of trust. Now I will tell you that Rostevan has an only daughter, a sun who illuminates the land: she it is who has set my heart aflame. At her command I left my lord and sovereign to search for that maiden to whom you gave shelter. I have travelled far and wide, from that place where I found the lion couched, pale and wasted, desolate of heart.’

Avtandil related to Phatman all his own story. He told her of Tariel and of how he came to wear a panther skin. ‘You have the power to save that knight whom you have never seen: you can be the means of bringing him back to life. Come, and let us go together to the aid of those two lovers. Perhaps it will befall them, like twin stars, to come together again. If we succeed, we shall be famed throughout the world!’

‘Call up that slave of yours, the maker of spells, and send him to Kadjeti to tell the captive maiden everything we know. Let her, in her turn, inform us about the conditions of her imprisonment. We will do as she directs us – then may you soon hear that we have conquered the kingdom of the Kadjis!’

Phatman marvelled at what she heard. ‘Glory be to God,’ she cried, ‘for giving me a part in these events!’ She sent for her sorcerer slave, black as a raven, and gave him his orders.

‘I am sending you to Kadjeti,’ she told him. ‘Leave immediately,

for the way is long. Here is an occasion to put your magic powers to the test and bring relief to my troubled heart. Go with all speed, and discover by what means the maiden of radiant countenance can be released from captivity.'

'Tomorrow I shall be able to tell you all that you desire to know,' the slave replied.

### 39: Phatman's Letter to Nestan-Darejan

Phatman entrusted to the slave-magician a letter that she had written to Nestan. He wrapped himself in a short green cloak and vanished, skimming the roof-tops in flight as swiftly as an arrow from the bow. It was dusk when he arrived in the city of the Kadjis. Invisible to the soldiers at the gates, he passed unchecked into the fortress, to present himself in the chamber where Nestan was confined. There he became visible again – a cloaked apparition with black visage and streaming hair – a sight at which the startled maiden turned pale and gazed with widened eyes.

The slave reassured her and gave her Phatman's letter. 'Why are you afraid? I am a slave of the lady Phatman, as this letter will bear witness. Have patience and do not despair. Soon the light of the sun will penetrate even into this place!'

Amazement came into Nestan's eyes, opening them like almond shells. The long lashes quivered and bright tears fell as she took the letter held out to her, unfolded it and read:

'O heavenly star, sun that illuminates the world, from whom to be separated is to be cast into darkness! Fair of form, eloquent and sweet-voiced, crystal and ruby joined in one design! Now, although not from your lips, I have learned everything that has befallen you, to my heart's relief.

'Will you not send tidings of yourself to give hope and reassurance to Tariel, who is mad with love for you? His friend and sworn brother Avtandil – chief of the army of King Rostevan of Arabia, an Arabian knight held in high esteem by all – has come to Gulansharo in the course of his search for you.

'O proud and wise one, send us information by the slave who brings you this letter, so that we may know these things about Kadjeti: have the Kadjis yet returned, what is the exact number of the garrison, who are your guards and who is in command of them?

'Write to me in detail and tell us everything you know of your surroundings. Send also something as a token for your lover. May your sorrow be turned to joy, and may it be my good fortune to bring you two together who are destined for each other!'

Nestan's tears fell upon the letter. When she had read to the end, she looked up at the slave and asked: 'Who is this who is searching for me? Who knows that I am still alive?'

'I will tell you as much as I know myself,' the man replied. 'When you went away it was like the going down of the sun. My mistress was heartbroken. She has scarcely ceased to weep since I brought her the news that you were held captive here. Now a handsome young knight has come to Gulansharo and she has told him everything. He is searching for you, and they sent me to you as the swiftest messenger they had.'

Nestan was now persuaded that the slave was speaking the truth.

'Good man, I believe you and I will give you letters to take back,' she answered him. 'Phatman herself could not have known who I am: she could only have learned it from him for whom my heart burns with love. Therefore, without a doubt, he is somewhere on this earth. I will write, and you too shall tell her how my heart is in turmoil!'

## 40: Nestan-Darejan's Letter to Phatman

She of the sun-like countenance wrote thus to Phatman:

'Lady Phatman, who have been like the best of mothers to me, see what has now befallen me. It is my fate to be a prisoner, and after all I have endured your letter has brought me great hope

and consolation. Twice you have delivered me from the hands of sorcerers and comforted me in my distress, but here I am held in conditions that make my deliverance impossible. I am utterly in the power of the Kadjis, alone, guarded by several thousand strong-armed soldiers. This is the outcome of all my hopes and plans! Beyond this I can tell you only that their queen has not yet returned, nor the Kadjis themselves. Even so, heavily guarded as I am, it is useless to attempt to reach me – you must believe that it is altogether impossible.

‘You write of someone who is searching for me. He too, then, must be afire as I am, the same ardour burning in us both. He is more fortunate than I, for he has been in the presence of that sun without whom I live in darkness. When I was with you I could not bear to speak of my sorrows. Now I entreat you to prevail on my beloved not to come in search of me. If I should be the cause of his death my grief would be beyond enduring. Let him spare me that dread, for it is certain beyond any doubt that no one can bring me out of this stronghold. I have torn a piece from the scarf that he gave me, and I send it to you as a token for him. Dark in hue as my own fate are that cloak and scarf, yet they are fair to me since it is he who sent them.’

## 41: Nestan-Darejan’s Letter to her Lover

In heartrending phrases Nestan wrote this letter for Tariel, strewn with tears:

‘My own one, I send you this letter that my own hand has written. Myself am the pen, dipped in gall, and for parchment I bind my heart to yours – may it never be loosed from that bond. Now see what is the way of this world: for all the light that illuminates it, darkness is mine in equal measure. Do not the Wise, who know the world, disdain it? How hard is life for me without you! See, my own, how the world and accursed Time have parted us – never again shall I rejoice in the sight of my beloved. What will become of my heart without you? Now my innermost thoughts

are revealed to you. By your sun, I swear that until now I did not believe that you were living. My own life and all my strength seemed to have passed away. When I heard news of you I glorified the Creator and praised God, and all the sorrow I had known was transformed to joy. To know that you are alive – that is enough to give hope to my wounded heart. Remember me, keep me in your thoughts, as I who am lost to you tend the love implanted in me.

‘I will write no more about myself. The tongue grows weary and the listener too. Phatman – whom God preserve – saved me from one captivity. Now the world, as is its nature, has piled woe upon woe and my fate, not satisfied with my many afflictions, has made me a prisoner of the Kadjis who are hard to defeat. It is Fate that has brought about all that has befallen us. I am kept in a stronghold so high that it towers up almost out of sight. The only entrance to it is by an underground tunnel which is guarded day and night, and any who attack will be slain as swiftly as if they were swallowed up in flames. Do not imagine that the Kadjis are fighters like ordinary men – do not, I entreat you, attempt my release or increase my sorrow with grief for your death. Harden your heart to accept that I am beyond your reach and do not grieve, my beloved. None but you shall ever possess me – without you, life holds nothing for me but sorrow. Rather would I hurl myself down from the height of this tower, or slay myself with a knife. By your sun, I swear I will belong to none but you, even though three suns should appear before me! I would cast myself down from these great rocks and entrust my soul to you – may Heaven give me wings.

‘Pray to God for me, that He deliver me from the travail of this world, from the bonds of fire and water, earth and air. May I have wings to fly into the heavens where I shall attain my desire, day and night to behold the radiance of the sun’s majesty. How can the sun exist without you, who are a particle of its substance? Surely its satellite will not be repulsed: in the realm of the sun I shall behold you, who will flood the darkness of my heart with light. Then, however bitter life has been to me, death will be as sweet.

‘Now since I have given my spirit into your keeping, death has no terrors for me. I keep my love for you in my heart and it rests



there. The thought of parting from you adds to my pain. Do not grieve for me, my own, but go your way to India and bring aid to my father. He is beset by hostile forces, with none to support him. He has suffered greatly at losing me: go to him and give him comfort. Remember me, who weep for you quenchless tears. Enough of protesting against Fate. By the path of true uprightness, heart can meet with heart. For your sake I will die and become food for ravens; for as long as I am living I can cause you nothing but sorrow. I send you as a token this piece of the veil that you gave me: let it remain a symbol of that great hope of ours. The wheel of the seven heavens has turned in wrath against us.'

Nestan uncovered her head to cut a piece from the border of her veil, revealing the richness of her hair that was black as a raven's wing.

The sorcerer departed and returned to Gulansharo, reappearing within a few minutes at Phatman's house. Avtandil gave thanks to God that his plans had been successfully carried out, and addressed himself to taking leave of Phatman.

'Now that I have accomplished what I set out to do – and your aid has been more than I can possibly repay – it is time for me to leave you. I cannot stay longer, for this is the season at which I left Tariel a year ago. I will find him again and show him the way to the Kadjis' stronghold. He will annihilate them, every one.'

'O lion, you will leave my heart in darkness! Do not delay on my account, however, but hasten to reach Kadjeti before the Kadjis return; otherwise it will go hard with you. Lovers will ever act like madmen.'

Avtandil sent for the men whom Phridon had appointed to go with him. 'I have had such tidings as would bring the dead to life!' he told them. 'You will soon see our enemies defeated and helpless. Return to Nuradin-Phridon and give him this account of what I have discovered. I cannot visit him myself, for I am in haste to be on my way. Let him raise that mighty voice of his and make it fiercer still.'

'I am giving to you all the treasure and spoils that I have with me. I am greatly in your debt, and if I meet with Phridon again I will show my gratitude in a different fashion. Until then, I make you a present of all the wealth and goods that we took from the

pirates. Here, far from my own domain, I have nothing more to give you.'

Avtandil gave to Phridon's men a whole shipload of fine merchandise and commanded them to take it with them, returning by the way they had come. 'Take with you also,' he said to them, 'this letter for my sworn brother Phridon.'

## 42: Avtandil's Letter to Nuradin-Phridon

'Mighty Phridon! Favourite of fortune, King of Kings, lion in courage, sun in brilliance, Heaven-born, victorious in battle: as your younger brother I send you greetings from afar. After a few trials I have had my reward, and things have fallen out as I intended. I have discovered what became of the maiden beautiful as the sun, who is as dear to Tariel as life itself. She is held captive by the Queen of the Kadjis in the fortress of Kadjeti. We shall have little difficulty in reaching her there, although there will be some fighting on the way. The Kadjis are at present abroad and have not returned, but there is a large garrison. I am well content and my cares are at an end. When you and I stand together as brothers, all difficulties will be removed: obstacles will melt away, men and rocks alike bend to your will.

'Now I am going with all speed to Tariel. I beg your forgiveness that I am not coming to visit you on the way. As long as that maiden remains in captivity there is urgent need for haste, and I have far to travel. Soon we shall have the joy of meeting again, and stand by each other as brothers in arms.

'Your men have served me with a devotion I cannot repay. This I know it will please you to hear, although it is scarcely necessary to praise any man who has been under your training, since – as the Wise have said – like engenders like.'

Avtandil wrote this letter, folded and sealed it and handed it to Phridon's men. Smiling, he gave them also a message for their master by word of mouth concerning action to be taken. He then set about finding a ship in which he could take passage, and made

everything ready for his journey. The moment had come to say farewell to Phatman, Ussein and the people of Gulansharo. They wept at his going, which weighed most heavily upon the heart-sick Phatman.

‘O sun, we have been consumed in your flame,’ they said. ‘Now your going will leave us in darkness.’

## 43: Avtandil’s Departure from Gulansharo and Meeting with Tariel

Avtandil embarked, alone and unattended, in a passenger-carrying vessel. His heart was light as he crossed the sea; full of joy at the tidings he had to give Tariel, he raised his arms to Heaven in faith and gratitude to God.

When he came to land it was summer and the season of green things: the sun had entered the House of Cancer. Everywhere verdure was springing from the earth, and the roses were opening their petals – the signal appointed for the time of his meeting with Tariel. Their sweetness evoked for the knight the memory of his love. He put a flower to his lips, sighed, wept a little – thought of Tariel, and pressed forward again. The way became rougher until he was travelling through pathless, uninhabited regions. Lions and tigers appeared in marshy places; he slew every one that he saw. He was thankful when at last he recognized the caves that were Tariel’s dwelling-place.

‘That is where he should be, among those rocks,’ he thought. ‘This time, with the tidings that I bring, I need not be ashamed to look him in the face! Will he be there? What shall I do if he has not kept our appointment, if all my wandering and searching have been in vain? Sure it is that if he came he would not have waited long – he would have ridden out onto the plain, to wander about like a wild creature.’ With these reflections he rode away at a canter through the tall rushes, singing gaily and calling Tariel by name.

He had not gone far when the sun shone forth in all his brilliance – Tariel appeared, and stood with drawn sword at the edge of a clump of reeds. He was on foot, his horse nowhere in sight, his sword dripping blood from a lion he had slain. Avtandil's shouts had surprised him, but as soon as he recognized his friend he flung the sword away and ran forward to meet him. Avtandil sprang from his horse and the friends embraced with tears of gladness. Tariel was overcome with joy at the knight's return, and eloquent in his greeting; while Avtandil for his part was all smiles and laughter, teeth flashing white in a radiant countenance.

'When you hear what I have to tell, you will be as joyful as someone risen from the dead!' he promised.

'Ah, brother, it is happiness enough to see you here and I ask no more of God than this. How can we find anything in this world if it has not been conceived in the world above?'

Tariel's disbelief made Avtandil still more impatient to reveal what he had discovered. He could not restrain himself, and drew out the piece of silk that Nestan had torn from her veil. Tariel recognized it immediately. He seized it from his friend's hand and Nestan's letter also, which he unfolded and pressed to his lips. The next moment he had fallen senseless to the ground. Not Cáin or Salaman\* suffered more than he! For an instant Avtandil stood appalled, then he rushed to kneel beside Tariel and in his gentlest, most persuasive tones attempted to revive him. However, it was in vain. Tariel's very life, it appeared, was bound up with those tokens of his love.

Avtandil wept with remorse, rent his cheeks and tore his hair. 'Joy, when it comes too suddenly, is more than the heart can bear. Why was I in such haste to tell him? A madman or an imbecile would not have been so rash! If he is dead, it is I who have slain him and the blame is mine. A fool cannot straighten something that is bent. How rightly is it said that it is better to be blamed for caution than praised for haste.'

Tariel lay motionless as a felled tree. At length Avtandil rose and went to search for water. Finding none nearby, he took a little blood from the dead lion and sprinkled it on Tariel's breast.

\* Cáin, Salaman: heroes of Arabic love stories; Cáin is another name for Majnun (see note p. 37).

At that, the lion-like Taniel raised himself up and opened his eyes. He looked at Nestan's letter that was still in his hand, remembered what had gone before, and read it. Too great a joy, too sudden a relief from pain may cause pangs as sharp as the ills they heal. Taniel wept and cried aloud, like one in agony from the thawing of frozen limbs, until at last Avtandil protested in forceful terms that it was beneath him as a man of intelligence to behave in such a way.

'This is unworthy of anyone of your upbringing! What is the use of tears, when we should be all gladness at the news of your princess, and preparing to set her free? Up, get on your feet, and I will show you the way to her whom your heart desires. Let us rejoice in our good fortune. We will mount and advance upon Kadjeti with our swords to guide us – together we will slay them all!'

By now Taniel was himself again. The colour returned to his features, he looked up and asked Avtandil to tell him what he had discovered. 'How can I find praise enough for you, who merit the praises of the Wise? God alone can repay what you have done for me!'

The knights mounted and rode back in joyful spirits to the caves to give the waiting Asmat the tidings for which she had hungered so long. They found her seated at the entrance alone, her head uncovered, clothed only in a shift, for she had not expected to see Taniel at that hour, nor had she known of Avtandil's return. She sprang to her feet in confusion when the two young men came laughing and singing towards her. They called out as soon as they saw her. She was bewildered by the note of gaiety in their voices, for hitherto whenever she had seen Taniel ride into the grove he had been in the depths of despair. She went towards them hesitantly, not knowing what news they had to bring.

'Asmat!' they called to her, their teeth showing white in laughter, 'the grace of God has descended on us from on high! We have found her who was lost, and Fate has turned our sorrow into joy.'

Avtandil dismounted and Asmat ran to embrace him in transports of joy. 'What have you discovered? What have you done? I have been calling to you, out on the plain.'

'Here is a letter from her who has suffered so much. Soon now our cares will vanish like shadows in the light of the sun,' Avtandil said as he gave Asmat the letter from Nestan. Although she recognized the handwriting of the maiden who had been her charge, Asmat could not yet believe her own eyes and ears. She was trembling from head to foot as she asked, 'What are you telling me? Is it all true?'

'Have no fear – it is true indeed,' Avtandil reassured her. 'We may rejoice, for our griefs and trials are at an end. We have come out of darkness into the light of the sun, and good, that is by its nature eternal, has prevailed over evil.'

Now Tariel, King of the Indians,\* came forward to speak to Asmat, and they all gave thanks to God for their great joy: 'Thou hast done what is best for us, and now indeed we have learned that Thou hast not used us ill!' Tariel raised his arms to the heavens and praised God aloud.

They entered the caves, where Asmat played hostess to them and Tariel told Avtandil of a discovery that hitherto he had kept to himself. It had held no interest for him until then, he said, but now it might be found to have some use for them. He had taken possession of the caves by driving out the Devis, a race of giants who inhabited them, and after slaying them all he had found their hoard of treasure, which he had never troubled to examine.

'I had no need of it at that time. Let us go and unlock the treasure chambers, to see what there is of value in them.'

Avtandil agreed with a good will, and with Asmat following the two young men went to investigate the Devis' hoard. They broke open the doors of forty rock chambers without difficulty, to disclose such a store of treasure as the eye had never seen. The forty caverns were filled with jewels of every hue, huge gleaming pearls and massive heaps of gold. One of the chambers contained weapons and armour of all kinds, stored in orderly fashion like preserves in a stillroom. In the midst of these a chest with its seal intact addressed them in the words of an inscription: 'Herein lie arms of miraculous power: a helmet of mail, a sword of Basra steel. If the Kadjis attack the Devis, that day will be a hard one; but any man

\* King of the Indians: up to this point in the story Tariel has been referred to as a knight (*qma*, *moqme*), but from now on he is called by his title.

who opens this chest before the day appointed will be a slayer of kings.'

They broke the seal and flung open the chest. Within it there were three suits of armour, fit for three young warriors: coat of mail, sword, helmet and greaves, all laid out like sacred relics in their cases. They chose a suit each for themselves, trying on the helmets and the impenetrable chain-mail, striking the swords upon iron which they clove as if it had been thread.

'This is an omen of good fortune. God regards us with favour,' they said to each other as they shouldered the armour they had chosen, taking the third suit for Phridon. They took with them besides enough of the gold for their present needs, as well as a few choice pearls, and sealed the doors of the forty caves.

'From this moment my sword shall never leave my hand,' Avtandil declared. 'Let us spend the night here, and set forth at daybreak.'

## 44: The Arrival of Tariel and Avtandil in the Kingdom of Nuradin-Phridon

The two young men rose early on the morrow to set out for the kingdom of Nuradin-Phridon. Each in turn carried Asmat mounted behind them, until they met with a merchant on the road from whom they were able to purchase a mount for her. Avtandil knew the way and they had no need of a guide. Soon after they had entered Phridon's domain they saw a herd of horses grazing. Tariel recognized the herdsmen as Phridon's men and suggested a way for himself and Avtandil to make their arrival known.

'We will have some sport with Phridon! Let us drive off those horses of his and surprise him when he comes out prepared for battle.'

They cut off the best of the herd and drove them away, while the herdsmen shouted and lit a fire to give the alarm. 'O knights! Who are you and what are you about?' they called. 'This herd

belongs to a mighty swordsman, who shows his enemies no mercy!' Their threats failed to alarm the strangers, who took up their bows and rode down upon the herdsmen. The unfortunate fellows took to flight with cries of 'Brigands! Murder! Help!' They ran together in a body, making a great outcry, to appeal to their king for protection.

Phridon mounted instantly and galloped, fully armed, to encounter the intruders, while his men assembled in haste and covered the field with their numbers. The two advanced with vizors lowered to hide their features.

'There is the man I have come to see,' Tariel said as Phridon came near. He took off his helmet and smiled. 'Are you so ill pleased to see us? You are a poor host, coming to meet us sword in hand!'

Phridon was out of the saddle in an instant and on his knees, bowing to the earth. They too dismounted, embraced and kissed him, with those of his following who were known to them.

Phridon gave thanks to God. 'Why have you been so long in coming?' he asked them. 'I have awaited you with impatience, always prepared to put myself at your service.'

The three together made a brilliant cortège as they rode to Phridon's beautiful palace. There they dismounted and Tariel and Avtandil presented to their noble companion the suit of armour from the Devis' store.

'This is all that we can offer you at present,' they said, 'although elsewhere we have many things that are fine and rare.'

'It is a gift that well befits the givers,' was Phridon's reply as he bowed low. He, for his part, offered to his friends a king's hospitality – and a soldier's counsel. When he had placed Tariel upon a throne covered with brocaded velvet, and Avtandil his sworn brother beside him, and when he had feasted them, shown them to the baths, given them robes of honour and jewels in a golden bowl, he said:

'What I am going to say will make me appear a reluctant host, who finds it troublesome to entertain guests of distinction like yourselves. Even so – in my view, it is better that we should lose no time in starting for Kadjeti. Our task will be far harder if we do not reach the citadel before the Kadjis return. We need take with us no more than a small force of men. Three hundred should



be enough if they are carefully chosen, and then we can start without delay. We will use basket-hilts\* during the battle with the Kadjis, and we shall soon reach that fairest of maidens. I have been in Kadjeti once before. When you see the fortress you will be aware how strong it is, and agree that it is impossible to take by assault from without. Every side of it is solid rock. The only way to penetrate it is to enter by stealth and surprise the garrison. For that reason we should keep our numbers small, so that we can approach unobserved.'

Tariel and Avtandil approved of this counsel. Asmat was to remain in Mulghazanzar, and she received presents from Phridon. Three hundred horsemen, all brave and seasoned warriors, were chosen as their fighting force. They crossed the sea and then travelled by day and night without a halt, with Phridon showing the way, until he announced that they were approaching the marches of Kadjeti.

'From this point we should advance only by night,' was Phridon's counsel, and they proceeded by night marches, halting at first light. In this manner they arrived undiscovered, close enough to the citadel with its bastions of rock and guard of massed soldiery to hear the sentries shouting to each other. At the entrance to the subterranean passage there was a guard of ten thousand men. The three friends reconnoitred the citadel's defences by moonlight, and held a council to decide on their strategy.

'A hundred men can defeat a thousand if the operation is planned aright,' they agreed.

## 45: Nuradin-Phridon's Plan

'As I view the situation,' Phridon began, 'it needs a large force of men to take the citadel, and we are few. We cannot defeat the garrison in open combat. If they were to close the gates against us,

\* Basket-hilts: see note p. 100.

it might be a thousand years before we could breach those walls. This, then, is what I propose.

'In my boyhood I was taught gymnastics by the best of masters. I learned to jump and walk the tight-rope so that I became the envy of all in moving swiftly unobserved. Now: let him who is most skilled in throwing the rope cast a noose over one of those pinnacles. That will make an easy path for me to enter the fortress, and I will leave you not one man unscathed within the walls! I will carry my sword and shield with me – no difficulty in that – and in a single leap fall upon the guards like a tempest and strike them down. Then I will open the gates, and you will enter where the clamour is loudest!'

## 46: Avtandil's Plan

Avtandil, giving counsel in his turn, pointed out the weaknesses in Phridon's plan and put forward one of his own.

'Admirable, Phridon! Your friends cannot complain of you, with your confidence in your own strength and indifference to wounds! What you propose, however, would be difficult to carry out. While you are engaged in intimidating the enemy, can you not hear the shouts of their sentries? They have heard the clink of the sword on your coat of mail – in an instant the rope is cut, and our chances with it. Then you are lost, and nothing is gained. It will not do – we must find some other plan.

'It is best that you two stay in concealment while I enter the city alone disguised as a merchant. These sentries do not concern themselves with solitary travellers. They will welcome me in if I come to trade – and my sword and armour will be hidden in the pack on my mule. One man can pass unchallenged where three might be halted and exposed.

'I will go alone. Once inside the walls I will arm myself in secret; then shed my disguise and, with God's help, make their blood flow! I will account for the guards within, while you strike

at the gates from without. I will smash the locks and open them, the ramparts shall not withstand me!

‘That is my plan. If you know of a better one, let us consider it.’

## 47: Tariel’s Plan

‘You are both heroes of proven valour, as these plans of yours testify,’ Tariel said. ‘It is when there is need to fight that real courage shows itself. Grant me also some voice in our decision, however, and consider this: if we follow one of your two plans, and if Nestan-Darejan should look down from her tower when she hears the sound of fighting, it is not I that she will see in the thick of the battle, but strangers come to deliver her. I shall be put to shame, and appear but a backward lover! I will put forward a better plan.

‘We will divide our troops, each of us taking a hundred men. We charge at dawn and deliver an attack at three separate points. The enemy will see how few we are, and counter-attack – the signal for us to draw our swords. Then we move swiftly and surround them, so that they have no time to shut the gates against us. One of us will enter the fortress and engage the guard, while the others press home the attack outside the walls. We will use our swords well, and victory will be ours.’

‘I understand you,’ Phridon retorted. ‘That horse of mine has a turn of speed that will carry you into the citadel ahead of us all. At the time when I made you a present of him I had no thought of paying a visit to the Kadjis in their own city – otherwise, miser that I am, I should have kept him for myself.’

With much laughter and jesting they began to prepare for battle. In all their pleasantries, their speech never grew coarse or lost its elegance of phrase. In high spirits they dismounted, remounted, put on suits of armour and chose their favourite steeds. They were agreed on Tariel’s plan, and each of them was to take a hundred men under his command. Finally they mounted and donned their helmets.

## 48: The Assault on the Kadjis' Fortress

The three princes in battle array outshone the sun in radiance. They appeared as if sheathed in a column of light from the seven stars – a sight to dazzle the beholders, as it was to confound their adversaries in battle. Avtandil and Phridon were peerless in brilliance; and yet, as the brightest constellations grow dim in the light of the sun, so Taniel of the graceful form bestriding the Arab charger outshone his comrades in arms.

They divided their men into three sections, every man of the three hundred a warrior of renown. Each section was to attack at one of the three gates. During the night they made a rapid and thorough reconnaissance of the enemy's guard posts. At first light, bearing their shields, they advanced in the guise of ordinary travellers upon the unsuspecting guards. They had no fear; they were quite at ease as they halted outside the walls for long enough to don their helmets.

In a flash the scene changed as they put spurs to their horses and whirled their whips. They charged the gates and burst them open. Up roar broke out within the fortress as they led the attack simultaneously from three directions, creating havoc among the guards. The ramparts resounded to the clamour of drums, trumpet calls, the ringing of the tocsin. The wrath of Heaven descended upon Kadjeti, and soon the bodies of the slain were piled high.

At Taniel's ferocious shouts, men fell senseless even before his sword had touched them. Meanwhile the remaining forces were having no difficulty in breaking down the gates. The fighting was fierce, with blood flowing like a river, until at last the Kadjis were completely overcome. Avtandil and Phridon met in the centre of the citadel and hailed each other joyously.

'Where is Taniel?' they asked – but neither of them had seen him. They moved towards the gateway of the fortress, without giving any thought to the enemy. At the entrance to the underground passage they found a mass of wreckage – broken weapons, pieces of armour, bodies of the guard in their hundreds cleft in two from head to foot. The gates stood open, wrenched from their hinges. Avtandil and Phridon looked about them. 'This is Taniel's work,' they said, and entered the tunnel of hewn rock and made

their way along it until it gave onto an open terrace. There they saw Taniel – his long hair astream, his helmet flung to the ground. He was holding Nestan-Darejan fast against him, heart pressed to heart, lips to rose-petal lips. Like Mushtar and Zual\* were those two in their coming together again.

The two knights went forward to present themselves and bowed low before the princess. Smiling in her joy, beautiful, proud of bearing, she gently embraced them and praised them in charming words for their gallant action. They in turn congratulated Taniel, and the three comrades-in-arms exchanged accounts of the battle. Little had they to regret after fighting with the valour of lions, but when Phridon called his soldiers together he was grieved to find that of his three hundred men only a hundred and sixty were left alive. He mourned his dead deeply, and did not spare the enemy survivors. The three victors assembled a baggage train of mules, camels and beasts of burden and loaded them with the Kadjis' treasure – vast quantities of pearls and jewels, gold and valuables. Sixty of Phridon's men were left to garrison the citadel, and with Nestan-Darejan carried in a litter the three set out on their journey to the Kingdom of the Seas. The way was long, but they said: 'We will visit Phatman, for we have much to repay her.'

## 49: Taniel's Visit to the Kingdom of the Seas

A herald rode in advance to Gulansharo with a letter for the King of the Seas from Taniel announcing his arrival in the kingdom with Nestan-Darejan:

'I, Taniel, am entering your kingdom in triumph after a great victory. I have conquered my enemies and brought out of Kadjeti the sun-like maiden whose love has pierced me to the heart. It is my desire to visit you and pay you the honour due to a kins-

\* Mushtar and Zual: Jupiter and Saturn (see notes p. 137).

man and parent. The land of the Kadjis is now mine, with all their wealth. It is to you, O King, that I owe this present good fortune. Phatman has been like a mother and sister to the princess and freed her from captivity. What can I offer you in recompense?

‘I have no use for vain promises. If you will make a journey to meet us while we are passing through your country, I will ask you to accept from me the whole of the Kadjis’ kingdom. Do not fail to send a strong force to occupy the citadel. I am in haste, and cannot prolong my journey by a visit to Gulansharo. Do you come to meet me on my way, and of your goodness convey to Ussein, Phatman’s husband, that it would greatly please the princess to meet her deliverer again. Phatman, without doubt, will rejoice to see the maiden she befriended, whose radiance outshines the sun.’

When the King of the Seas received this letter he gave thanks to God, and without waiting to hear more he straightway mounted his horse and prepared for departure. Accompanied by Phatman, with a huge baggage train of gold, and rare and beautiful treasures for the wedding celebrations, he set forth and came upon Tariel after ten days’ journey, when he rejoiced to see the splendour of the lion and the sun. The three princes went a long way to meet the great King of the Seas. When they met him they dismounted and paid him homage, and before all the assembled troops embraced him and exchanged courteous words of greeting. The King of the Seas was full of praise for Tariel, and marvelled at the radiance of Nestan-Darejan. When Phatman saw her she ran with heart aglow to embrace and cover her with kisses.

‘O God, how can I serve and repay Thee, who hast turned darkness into light?’ she cried. ‘Now I am assured that evil is short-lived, while Thy goodness is enduring.’

Nestan embraced her and spoke to her in sweet and gracious words. ‘God has illumined the darkness of my heart and filled my being with light, so that now you see me no longer frozen with grief but alive with happiness.’

At the place where they had met together, the King of the Seas held splendid celebrations for the marriage of Tariel and Nestan-Darejan. He expressed his gratitude for the present of Kadjeti, and would not release his guests for seven days, offering them the finest of presents from the store he had brought with

him. The earth was scattered with a carpet of gold pieces, while silks and brocades were piled on satin stuffs, gorgeous to behold. Tariel was given a crown without price, cut from a single jacinth of golden hue – a jewel for a king – and a throne of pure gold. Nestan-Darejan received a jewel-embroidered mantle, and Avtandil and Phridon each a horse with a splendid saddle and a mantle glittering with gems of many colours. They returned thanks, and Tariel made an eloquent speech to which the King of the Seas replied:

‘O sovereign, lion in valour, whose presence is life-giving, so that all who are deprived of it must perish, what have we to offer that is worthy of your acceptance? What pleasure will remain to us after you are gone, who are the light of our eyes?’

Tariel bestowed upon Phatman the whole of the treasure they had brought from Kadjeti. ‘You shall be as a sister to me,’ he said to her, ‘for you have rendered me invaluable service.’

The lady Phatman did homage – nothing could exceed her gratitude. ‘O King, I am thrown into torment at the thought of your leaving us. When you have gone, what will become of me? I shall be out of my mind with grief. Fortunate are they who are with you, and wretched those deprived of your presence!’

The three princes made smiling and courteous farewells to the King of the Seas. ‘Life will be sad indeed without the pleasure of your company,’ they said, ‘but it is time for us to go our way, and we should tarry no longer. You have been like a father to us, and now we would ask you as a last favour to provide us with a ship.’

‘For you I would lay down my life,’ the king replied. ‘Since you are in haste I will not seek to detain you. Go, and let your arms go ever before you!’

A ship was fitted out at the King of the Seas’ command and Tariel embarked in it with all his company. The people of Gulansharo raised a cry of lamentation as for a great loss, tearing their hair and beards, while even the waters of the ocean were swelled by Phatman’s tears. The three friends were close as brothers, laughing and jesting in high spirits throughout the voyage, renewing their oaths of brotherhood. As soon as they came to land they sent a messenger on before them to give their good tidings to Asmat, and to give Phridon’s nobles an account of the course of the battle, as well as to herald the arrival of Nestan-Darejan. They

placed her in a litter and made their way along the coast towards the kingdom of Nuradin-Phridon, gay and light-hearted, sportive as boys in their joy at the ending of their misfortunes. As they approached the marches they heard the sound of singing: all the nobles and magnates of the kingdom had come out to meet them. Asmat was among them, no longer careworn but full of joy. She flew towards the litter, and Nestan descended from it and held her close. She had served faithfully and well, and now her task was done.

'Ah, my dear, what sorrow I have brought upon you!' Nestan said. 'Now by God's grace that is past, and I know not how to repay you for your unfailing devotion.'

It was reward enough for Asmat to see her mistress happy and unharmed. 'All things become clear at last in the light of reason,' she said, 'and if I can but look upon your happiness, death seems as sweet to me as life.' The love between lord and vassal surpasses all other forms of love.

The great lords came forward and made obeisance, kissed hands and gave thanks to God for the appearance of Nestan-Darejan among them and the safe return of their king. Tariel, King of the Indians, then addressed them and spoke of the losses sustained by their army in Kadjeti.


'Your brothers have given their lives for us. Now in truth they have gained eternal bliss: they are magnified a hundred and twenty times, in communion with the One. I grieve for their loss as you do – yet they have gained the great reward of life eternal.' He wept, and the nobles and all who saw him wept with him, most of all those who had lost friends or kinsmen in the battle. When they had regained their composure they replied:

'Since the Wise liken you to the sun, those who have the good fortune to look on you ought rather to rejoice than mourn. Who can be worthy of your grief, when it is better to die for your sake than to walk the earth?'

Phridon added his voice to theirs, begging Tariel not to distress himself. 'May God send you a thousand joys in recompense.'

When Avtandil likewise had expressed his sorrow for the fallen and his sympathy for the bereaved, after a few graceful compliments Phridon's noblemen said, 'Now let us rejoice and be merry, since the Lion and the Sun who were parted have come together – let us weep no more!'





To a flourish of drums and trumpets and the harmonies of hautbois and copperdrums they entered the great city of Mulghazanzar. The streets were thronged, with merchants who had left the bazaars, with people who had gathered from every part of the city. The civil guards who moved among the crowds with their batons ready were impeded in their task by whole families swarming in the streets, pleading to have a view of the cavalcade. The three princes dismounted at Phridon's palace, where many slaves girdled with gold were waiting to attend on them. A carpet of velvet was spread at their feet, and gold pieces were scattered among the crowd.

## 50: The Wedding of Tariel and Nestan-Darejan at the Court of Nuradin-Phridon

Phridon made lavish provision for the wedding celebrations of Tariel and Nestan-Darejan, excelling himself in hospitality. Thrones of purple and white, embellished with many jewels, were erected for the bridegroom and the bride. For Avtandil there was a yellow throne striped with black. When the noble guests had taken their places, a gasp of admiration went up from the on-lookers. There were minstrels to fill the air with delicious harmonies. Many presents of fine silk were offered to the bridal pair, and a sumptuous wedding feast was prepared. Nestan-Darejan was smiling and radiant.

At length Phridon – by no means at the end of his resources – called for certain treasures of his to be set before him. These were presents beyond compare: nine pearls the size of goose's eggs, a jewel that shone like the sun and gave light even in darkness, a necklace for each one, of stones cut in round from a whole jacinth. A generous friend, he gave to Avtandil a tray of large pearls, too heavy for one man to carry, which he presented with well-chosen words. The whole palace was spread with fine velvets and brocades. Tariel, proud in bearing, expressed his thanks to

Phridon in gracious words. Every day Phridon offered still more costly presents to his guests. The festivities continued; the music of harp and viol was unceasing, day and night. After eight days Tariel took Phridon aside and said to him, speaking with heartfelt warmth:

‘Your goodness and generosity to us have been greater than a brother’s. If I were to give my life I could not repay you – it is owing to you that I am healed of a mortal wound. You know that Avtandil also has made great sacrifices on my account. Now I wish to be of service to him in return. Go to him on my behalf and ask him to tell you what his wishes are. My trials are at an end, and he too has suffered enough. Say to him words somewhat like these:

“Brother, what can requite you for all that you have suffered on my account? May God grant you His favour! I will not seek a dwelling-place for myself, either palace or hovel, until I have seen you attain what you desire. Now let me know what you wish to do and in what way I can be of service to you. This is what I would propose – that I go with you to Arabia and there set matters straight, either by peaceful parley or by the sword. I will be no husband to my princess until I have seen you married to yours.”

This message was received light-heartedly by Avtandil, who laughed when Phridon repeated Tariel’s words. ‘Why should I need help from anyone,’ he protested, ‘and against what foes? My love is not a prisoner of the Kadjis nor in any sort of distress. She, my sun, reigns honoured and exalted on the throne that is hers by the will of God. She is not beset by evil nor bewitched by spells. When the day comes that is ordained on high, then by God’s will happiness may be mine: then at last some ray of the sun’s light may fall upon this mortal creature. Until that day, there is no use in wandering from place to place.

‘Give Tariel my answer in these words: “From one as generous as you, O King, there is no need of thanks. Was I not destined from the day of my birth to be your slave? God turn me into dust if I do not see you acclaimed king! ‘In the goodness of your heart you wish to bring me and my beloved together; but that cannot be attained by eloquence or force of arms. It is for me to await the working of the powers above. My desire is this: to see you, with your bright star of the radiant countenance, raised to the mighty throne of India, with your enemies overthrown and none to stand

against you. When this, my heart's desire, has been fulfilled, then I will return to Arabia to the presence of my queen. Then it will rest with her to quench the fire of my love.

"I have nothing but this to ask of you – nothing more to say."

'And my answer is –' Tariel said when he heard Avtandil's message – 'that I will not agree! It needs no prophet to tell him that! He has been the means of finding her who is the breath of life to me: now he shall see how resolute a brother can be on his behalf. Go to him and say, without ceremony, that I will not leave his side until I have met the king who has been like a father to him. Since I once slew a number of the king's vassals, I would ask his forgiveness before I return to my kingdom.'

'Tell Avtandil that he is to send me no more messages. I leave tomorrow – without further dispute. I will make myself agreeable to the King of the Arabians and ask him for his daughter's hand in such a way that he will not refuse it.'

Again Phridon repeated Tariel's words to Avtandil. 'It is useless for you to ask him to stay longer,' he said.

Avtandil was deeply perturbed. He was well aware of the deference that a vassal ought to show towards his sovereign. He went to Tariel and appealed to him on bended knee with eyes downcast, clasping his feet. 'I have done injury enough to Rostevan this year already,' he said. 'I would not again violate my oath of loyalty. What you propose is against God's laws – that I should approach my lord and teacher with treachery, or raise my hand against him. Shall a slave bear arms against his master? If I were to do this, it could but estrange me from my beloved. In her anger she would send me away and deprive me of all communication with her. No one would be able to obtain a pardon for me.'

Tariel took his friend by the hand, laughing, and raised him to his feet. 'It is through you that my misfortunes have been brought to an end and I have come to a great joy,' he said, 'but your own joy will increase mine many times. Where there is friendship, I dislike too much ceremony. Fear and reserve, an excess of deference – in a friend, these are out of place and they weigh heavy on the spirit. Someone who is at heart my friend will turn to me of his own accord – if he does not, it is better for us to part. Your beloved, as I know, has given her heart to you, and therefore it cannot be unwelcome to her to meet one who is your friend. There

will be no need for any evasion or discord in speaking to the king. I shall simply request him, with all proper respect, to bestow his daughter's hand upon you. Since you and she are to be made one in the end, how can you endure to be parted any longer? You two were created for each other: do not wither away in separation!"

When Avtandil realized that Tariel would not delay his departure any longer, he said no more to dissuade him but gave his assent. With an escort of picked men provided by Phridon, the three friends set out together on the journey to Arabia.

## 51: The Return to Arabia

The cavalcade that rode out from Mulghazanzar was a galaxy of brilliant figures, with Nestan like a sun in their midst. Her laughter rang out, her gaiety lighted their way: their whole company evoked wonder and delight in all who saw them pass. They travelled through many lands, at times in regions that had never been explored. By day the three princes hunted together over broad grasslands, enjoying each other's comradeship in sport as they had in battle; in the evening they would hold thoughtful converse while their meat was roasting over a fire of thorns.

After some days' travel in this fashion they found themselves in the mountainous country where Tariel had made his dwelling. They came to the caves, and Tariel said:

"Today it is proper that I should be your host, since this was my dwelling-place during the time when grief had driven me to distraction. Here Asmat shall be our hostess and prepare meat for us, and you shall admire the variety of treasures that I will offer you as presents."

They rode forward and dismounted in the clearing at the foot of the high rock-face. Asmat, as their hostess, carved some venison and they made a convivial meal. Then they explored at leisure the rock chambers sealed up by Tariel. The young men were merry as boys: how different from the time of their former woes! They thanked God for the reversal of their fortunes.



When, at Tariel's command, the seals of the treasure chambers were broken and the wealth of the caverns revealed to everyone's astonished gaze, no one had reason to be disappointed. Many and splendid were the presents that all received. Everyone was rewarded according to his due, including Phridon's men from the highest to the lowest in rank. Even so, the piles of treasure seemed scarcely diminished.

'My debt to you is greater than I can repay,' Tariel said to Phridon. 'However, it is said that no man ever comes to grief through doing a good deed. Take all that remains here in the caves and carry it away – all of it is yours.'

Phridon bowed low in homage and expressed himself overwhelmed by Tariel's generosity. 'O King, for whom no enemy has more substance than a straw, my happiness will endure only as long as I am able to look on you.' He commanded some of his men to find camels to transport the Devis' wealth to Mulghazan-zar, and the three heroes then continued on their way to Arabia.

Now Avtandil began to lose colour – a moon growing dim with increasing nearness to his sun. After many days' travelling they came to the marches of Arabia with their villages and fortifications, their inhabitants in clothing of blue and green, and Tariel despatched a herald to King Rostevan to announce their arrival:

'O King, I who presume to address you am the King of the Indians, bringing to your royal abode the rose in all her beauty. On a former occasion my presence in your domain offended you and caused you to take the mistaken course of attacking and attempting to seize my person. I was compelled to show your men-at-arms something of my displeasure, and indeed to slay a number of your vassals.

'I have come out of my way to appear before you and beg you to put away your anger and forgive me for the wrong I did you then. I have brought no presents with me – as Phridon and his knights are witness. All that I have to offer you is – Avtandil.'

This communication was received by the old king with inexpressible joy. A new radiance brightened the fair countenance of Tinatin. Drums were beaten and sounds of laughter and rejoicing were heard on all sides as the glad tidings spread, while soldiers ran hither and thither in their eagerness to see the princes arrive. Horses were saddled and a great troop of knights,



with all the grantees and army commanders, rode out with King Rostevan to welcome them, while people came from far and wide to join the throng as they heard of Avtandil's return. All gave thanks to God, and their cry of praise rang out: 'Evil has no being, but good things ever await you!'

When the cortège of the Arabians came within sight of the princes encamped on the plain, Avtandil said to Tariel in tones of appeal: 'Do you see that cloud of dust out there on the plain? My heart is in turmoil – for there is my lord and foster-father riding out to receive you. I cannot, I dare not appear before him. I am overcome with shame – no man living has been disgraced as I have, nor even anyone in legend. You will know how to speak to him – and Phridon also, who will go with you.'

'You do well to hold your sovereign in such high regard,' Tariel replied. 'Do not go out to meet him, but wait here alone while I speak to the king and explain matters. I have no doubt that God will unite you with your beloved.'

A small tent was erected, where Avtandil remained and Nestan-Darejan with him, to the wonder and admiration of all who looked on her. Meanwhile the King of the Indians accompanied by Phridon rode forward with lordly bearing towards the King of the Arabians and his court. Together the two princes covered the long distance over the plain. When they had come near enough for Rostevan to recognize the graceful figure on the black charger, Tariel went forward alone. Then Rostevan, august and mighty as a lion, dismounted and did homage to the King of the Indians even as to a father. Tariel likewise made obeisance, and the two sovereigns exchanged greetings and embraced.

'We behold in you a sun whose departure will turn our day into night,' Rostevan said as he marvelled at Tariel's distinction and grace of form, the beauty of his features and the strength of his arms. Phridon then came forward and did homage. Rostevan was becoming increasingly impatient to see Avtandil; his attention became withdrawn, his countenance downcast.

'O King,' Tariel said to him, 'I am honoured by your gracious reception and entirely at your service. When you have Avtandil, it is indeed to be wondered at that you should have thought for anyone but him. You are surprised that he has not yet come to present himself to you after so long an absence. If you will



consent, O King, let us sit together for a while in that pleasant green meadow, and I will explain to you then why I have not brought him with me. I have a certain request to make, and I will entreat your royal favour.'

The sovereigns seated themselves in the grassy meadow. A smile like the glow of a lamp illuminated Tariel's features. A crowd of spectators gathered round, entranced by the grace of his demeanour, as he began to address the king in sage and courteous speech.

'O King, it is in all humility that I venture to speak on Avtandil's behalf. I have come to make entreaty for him; and she who is like the shining sun, the source of all radiance and the light of my days – she joins her petition to mine. We presume, she and I, to address to you this solemn request. By making great sacrifices, Avtandil was able to bring aid and deliverance to me. He had no thought for his own sufferings, but devoted himself to my needs. I will not weary you with a long account of this, but only say briefly that there is love between this knight and your daughter – Avtandil loves the maiden, she returns his love. Pale and wasted with love, he is truly an object of compassion. I entreat you on my knees to give your daughter's hand in marriage to this knight who is so strong of arm and so steadfast of heart.'

As he finished speaking Tariel drew out a kerchief and knotted it about his neck. He rose, and like a pupil before his master knelt before the king in an attitude of submission. Rostevan rose and stepped back in confusion at seeing the great prince upon his knees. He himself bowed his face to the earth and protested, in tones of distress, that Tariel should not so humble himself.

'Sovereign! It distresses me to see you thus. Who would not accord you anything you could desire? I am honoured to accede to any request of yours, even if it were to slay my daughter or sell her into slavery! She would never find the like of Avtandil, if she were to take wing and search the heavens, while I could not wish for a better son-in-law. I have yielded the throne to my daughter. She is in the flower of youth, while I am old and withered. If this is her desire, I will not oppose it – as I would oppose no command of yours, even were it to marry her to a slave. Since it is to Avtandil, who is so dear to me, then as God is my witness I gladly give my consent.'



When the king had finished speaking, Tariel bowed to the earth in homage and Rostevan did likewise; then both sovereigns rose and sealed their agreement with expressions of gratitude and joy.

Phridon, delighted at seeing the two kings in amity, mounted and galloped off to tell Avtandil of the success of Tariel's petition. He called to him to come forth, and stayed at his side as they rode towards the Arabians. But Avtandil's heart failed him. Overcome with shame and remorse, when he saw Rostevan advancing to meet him he dismounted to await the king on his knees, his face covered with a kerchief. When the old king, in his gladness, would have raised him up, he bowed his head and clasped the feet of his lord.

Rostevan commanded him to rise, and embraced him warmly. 'You have shown your mettle,' he said, 'and you need not be abashed before me, since it is you whom I have chosen to unite to my beauty of the jet-black lashes, as the lion to the sun. You are a water-carrier come to quench the fire of my longing - although you have been somewhat tardy about it!'

The king made much of the hero returned - kissed and embraced him, conversed with him and gazed into his face. The knight and his sovereign together were a well-matched pair, and their happiness was great after many tribulations.

Avtandil reminded the king of the presence of Nestan-Darejan among them. 'I marvel that you can think of others when she is here, or wait an instant longer to look on the very countenance of the sun! Will you not go to welcome her and escort her to the palace? You will feel her presence to be like a garment of light about you. Let that radiance shine out for everyone to see.'

He spoke to Tariel also and they all mounted and rode to where Nestan was waiting. The three heroes, mighty as Goliath, were aglow with joy since by the force of their arms they had attained their hearts' desire. The king dismounted and approached the princess on foot and she, seated in her litter, kissed him in greeting. Awestruck by her brilliance, he ventured at last to say some words of praise, comparing her to the shining stars in the heavens. Like a blaze of lightning she dazzled the eyes of everyone who beheld her, and wherever she appeared the people came to

through her path and the sight of her filled their hearts with joy. The sovereigns and their retinue proceeded with Nestan to the palace: her beauty was beyond belief, her radiance that of the seven stars.

Within the palace Queen Tinatin waited to receive the princes. Her countenance alight with joy, her beauty enhanced by the purple robe, the crown and sceptre of sovereignty, she excited admiration in all who beheld her. The King of the Indians entered the palace with his bride and made humble salutation to the young queen. Then they all embraced one another and conversed together at ease. Tinatin invited Tariel to ascend the throne with Nestan of the shining presence, but he answered: 'The throne is yours by the will of Him who is the Judge supreme. Today of all days it is fitting that you should take your place upon it, O Sun of Suns! Then I will set beside you Avtandil, Lion of Lions.'

They two took her by the hand and set her upon the throne. Then they led forward Avtandil, who had grown faint with longing, and enthroned him beside her. Truly there have never been lovers like those two – not even Vis and Ramin can be compared to them!

Avtandil's nearness, so strange to Tinatin, made her tremulous – her colour came and went, her heart seemed to beat faster. The king her father said to her, 'Do not be abashed before me, child. Remember the saying of the Wise, that in the end love conquers all!' He invoked the blessing of God on the bridal pair, to give them length of days, happiness, good fortune and constancy. 'Finally, may it be your hands that lay me beneath the earth!'

Then Rostevan commanded the army to do homage to Avtandil as their sovereign. 'This day he is created king by the will of God, and he receives the throne from me. For myself, there remains only the affliction of old age. Serve him well, as you have served me: this is my command to you.'

The magnates and the soldiers made profound obeisance. They said: 'We are as dust before him who is our protector, who destroys traitors and exalts those who obey his will, repulses our enemies and inspires our hearts with valour!'

Tariel addressed the queen and spoke of his hopes for their continuing friendship: 'Your consort is like a brother to me. It

## 52: The Wedding of Avtandil and Tinatin at the Court of Arabia

On that day Avtandil ascended the throne as lord and sovereign ruler of Arabia. Tariel was beside him, his countenance aglow with the warmth of friendship; and the two queens, Nestan and Tinatin, like twin stars enchanted all who were present.

A lavish feast was provided for the soldiery. There was slaughter of a vast number of sheep and oxen, and everyone was made well content by a generous distribution of largesse. Vessels of jacinth were set out, goblets of ruby, dishes in a variety of colours elaborately engraved. No one could have attended such an occasion unmoved – there were minstrels from all parts of the kingdom, the sound of cymbals, gold and rubies piled high, wine flowing in fountains. The drinking went on from dusk all through the night, and the hour of dawn passed unobserved. No one went empty-handed. Pearls were scattered freely, and there was more satin and gold than could be carried away.

For three days the King of the Indians acted as groomsman to Avtandil. The hospitable Rostevan provided still another banquet. He commanded thrones to be set up for Tariel, whom he honoured as King of Kings, and for Nestan-Darejan his queen. Avtandil and Tinatin were enthroned a little below them. 'It is not fitting that we should sit with you as equals,' Rostevan said to Tariel. The presents offered to the King of the Indians rose from the ground in a huge pile.

In this manner the King of the Arabians dispensed lavish hospitality, going about freely and without ceremony among his people, open-handed in bounty to them all. He was widely extolled for his liberality and goodness of heart. Nuradin-Phridon, himself of royal rank, was boon-companion to Avtandil.

Rostevan treated the princess of India and her consort with love and honour, as a son and daughter by marriage. The celebrations continued for a month, with ceaseless merry-making and an unstinting flow of wine. Rostevan bestowed ever more magnificent presents on his illustrious guests, giving to Tariel and Nestan a sceptre, a robe of purple and a jewelled crown, with jewels – as they say – laid by a Roman hen and pearls like pigeon's eggs, a thousand of each, and a thousand thoroughbred steeds. To Phridon he gave nine trays of pearls and nine thoroughbred horses, richly accoutred. The King of the Indians did obeisance and expressed his gratitude in stately and sober fashion; he had taken wine without loss to his wits or the majesty of his bearing. Rostevan made him yet another present of superb diamonds and rubies.

The time passed thus for everyone in much gaiety and contentment, until Tariel sent Avtandil to the king to announce that he was to return to his own kingdom:


'My happiness is complete as long as I remain with you, and I want for nothing. I know, however, that my country is in the hands of enemies and they are despoiling it. It is time for me to return and, God willing, teach them a lesson. Ignorant men can be destroyed by the knowledge and skill of the enlightened, while any losses that I suffer will be felt by yourself as well. I will not stay longer with you now, but I shall hope to have again – by God's will – the pleasure of beholding you mighty in power.'

Rostevan returned answer that Tariel should feel free to do as seemed best to him, without ceremony. 'Avtandil shall go with you, with an army large enough to crush all who oppose you, foes and traitors alike.'

Avtandil himself put forward this proposal; but Tariel refused to agree to it. 'How can the sun forsake the new-found moon?' he demanded of the bridegroom of a few weeks.

'I am not deceived by such talk!' Avtandil retorted. 'Am I to let you leave the kingdom alone, and say of me that I would sooner desert a friend than leave my bride? No, indeed! To forsake a comrade is to court ill fortune!'

Tariel laughed. 'Believe me, I have no wish to be deprived of your company! If that is truly what you wish, we will leave together.'

  
НАЦИОНАЛЬНАЯ  
БИБЛИОТЕКА  
РЕСПУБЛИКИ  
АРМЕНИЯ

Avtandil gave the command to call his men to arms. From every part of the kingdom they came, until all the armies of Arabia were ready to march – eighty thousand troops, men and horses all arrayed in Khvarazmian armour.

The princes' departure was like the taste of gall to Rostevan; and the two princesses parted with many tears. They had become like sworn sisters, sharing confidences, and their parting was not of their own volition but – like the movements of the stars that they resembled – by the decree of their Creator. Each made to the other a most loving and gracious farewell and promised to send letters and tidings. At length they kissed for the last time; while Rostevan at the final leave-taking was altogether overcome with grief, and Tariel was not unaffected. The old king said to him:

'Your presence here until this moment is like a dream. When you have gone, I shall be left in misery twenty times greater than before, since you have given us life and your going will deprive us of it!'

They embraced; Tariel mounted and gave a last salute; and the heroes rode away – three gallant and loyal friends – with troops, horses and baggage, eighty thousand men splendidly equipped and armed. They travelled for three months, no one opposing their passage. When they arrived outside the capital, they halted on the plain at first light and refreshed themselves with bread and wine.

Now Tariel and his bride attained their desire. They entered into possession of their kingdom of the seven thrones with joy such as they had never known before. Enthroned together, those two outshone the sun in brilliance. The sound of trumpets greeted the proclamation of Tariel as King of the Indians, and copperdrums made a pleasing accompaniment. The keys of the treasury were presented to him. The people acclaimed him as their sovereign and protector. There were meat and drink in plenty, with a large assembly of the royal household. All the preparations were made to celebrate a wedding. Each of the newly wedded four received a present of equal value, and largesse was distributed to everyone.

Thrones were set up for Avtandil and Phridon: they also were given a royal reception, and related all the story of their adventures. The Indians felt that they owed all their present good

fortune to these two princes who had fought their battles for them. They regarded them as overlords and were eager to pay court to them and satisfy their every wish.

The King of the Indians called for Asmat, who had given up everything to serve him. 'You have done more than master or disciple would have done for each other. Now I appoint you ruler of a seventh part of the kingdom of India. Take the man of your choice for consort. Reign, and serve us henceforward as our vassal, in peace and amity.'

Asmat flung herself at his feet and embraced them. 'What more could I desire than to serve you, who are my strength and support?' she answered.

For some days the friends remained together at the court of India. They enjoyed many diversions and received incomparable gifts of rare pearls and superb horses. Lines of dejection, however, began to appear in Avtandil's features so that Tariel, observing them, understood that the knight was heartsick for his bride.

'Now you have turned against me,' he said, 'and I am sorry that it should be so – but woes are seven times increased by dwelling on them, and since Fate begrudges me the pleasure of your company it is time for us to part.'

Phridon likewise begged to take his leave. 'It is time for me to return to my own dwelling-place, but I will come again often to this land of yours. Command me as you would a younger brother, send for me – I shall be always at the service of one who is dear to me as the stream to the thirsting stag!'

The King of the Indians gave a safe-conduct to the two princes, who left the court of India with deep regret on all sides. They were sorrowful at parting from Tariel, while his people were unwilling to let them go. Tariel charged them not to forget him, and to come and visit him again. Both he and Nestan loaded Avtandil with presents – costly mantles for Rostevan, and a vessel full to the brim with finely cut jewels. Queen sent to queen a cloak and a fillet for the hair for a sovereign to wear, and a jewel that gave light in the darkness visible to all.

For a few days Avtandil and Phridon travelled together, until their ways diverged. They were reluctant to leave each other, but well pleased that they had so successfully accomplished what they

had set out to do. When Avtandil entered his own country once again, without further incident, it was after travels and trials that had not been in vain. The Arabians came forward to welcome their lord, whose presence so splendidly adorned the kingdom. He was united once more with Tinatin, his torments at an end, his desire appeased. His was the crown of Arabia, endued with sovereignty from on high.

The three sovereigns did not forsake their friendship, but visited one another as often as they pleased. Gloriously they reigned, increasing their renown, suppressing insurrection and enlarging their domains. Their bounty like snow levelled inequalities, enriching the poor and bereaved so that none had need to beg. They were the bane of evildoers – not a lamb could steal another's milk under their rule, and wolf and goat would graze together.

## EPILOGUE

Like a dream in the night they passed through this world and  
vanished.

Now their story is ended: those who have found it long  
See but a trick of Time – it is of a moment's tale  
That I, a Meskhian poet of Rustavi, make my song.

For David,\* lord of the Georgian people, who attends  
The Sun† in her course, I write this poem, and for the pleasure  
Of her who arouses terror in all from East to West,  
Destroying traitors, rewarding the loyal in fair measure.

How can words recapture the sound of David's‡ harp?  
Strange stories of kings of a far-off ancient time  
In other lands – their wondrous deeds, their manner of life –  
These I have found and striven to set in well-chosen rhyme.

Such is the world – a flash in Time, the glance of an eye –  
None can trust in it, for whatever he may pursue  
Fate at his heels will mock him: that shall be as a guide  
In this and the world to come, for those who hold it true.

Amiran, Darejan's son, was praised by Mose Khoneli,  
Abdul-Mesia, in verse of high esteem, by Shavteli,  
Dilarget by tireless-tongued Sargis Tmogveli  
And Taniel with undrying tears by his Shota Rust'veli.§

\* David Soslan, Queen Thamar's consort.

† Queen Thamar.

‡ David the Psalmist.

§ In Rustaveli's time it was usual – as in the Persian *ghazal* – for a poet to 'sign' his work in the last line of the closing stanza. The rhyme scheme of this verse is based on the Georgian, in which however the last *three* syllables of each line are rhymed.



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KINGDOM  
OF THE  
KIPCHAKS

THE KINGDOM OF  
GEORGIA  
during the reign of  
Queen Tamar, XII century A.D.

0 100  
Miles

BLACK  
SEA

(Pontus Euxinus,  
Mare Caucasicum,  
Iberian Sea)

CASPIAN  
(Mare Hyrcanicum)

EMPIRE OF  
TREBIZOND

SULTANATE  
OF  
RUM

ARMENIA

IBERIA

KARTLI

SAMTSKHE

ORTUK

SULTANATE  
OF  
ALEPPO

EMIRATE OF  
MOSUL

ALBANIAN

PERSIA

My Elders

My Kinfolk

Mtskheta

Tbilisi

Ghatali

Batumi (Bathys)

My Ancestors

Baku (Petropolis)

Lake Van

Tabor

Lopkha

Antioch

E84.837  
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