

KAHRAMANMARAŞ
METROPOLITAN
MUNICIPALITY

CULTURAL
PUBLICATIONS

NO **VEL**

*To my beloved wife Gülay and my dear daughter
Hatice Kübra, who were among the martyrs of the
Kahramanmaraş February 6 earthquakes...*

ALİ AVGIN
BEAUTY OF
GERMANICIA

Copyright Holder

*On behalf of the Metropolitan
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Fırat Görgel

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ALİ AVGIN

**BEAUTY OF
GERMANICIA**

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FOREWORD

Kahramanmaraş, bearing the traces of our ancient history for centuries, is a place of memory where civilizations have intertwined and where culture has flowed uninterrupted through the ages. This geography stands as a unique embodiment of cultural continuity, faith, and artistic richness extending from the past to the present.

One of the principal missions of our municipality is to preserve and transmit the cultural identity of our city to future generations. The Beauty of Germanicia, published in line with this vision, is a meaningful reflection of our respect for a history spanning millennia and our commitment to keeping our cultural memory alive.

Authored by Mr. Ali Avgın, this work is more than a novel; it is a valuable contribution that brings to life the hidden beauty of Germanicia, its archaeological heritage, its historical narratives, and the spirit of this land with refined literary sensitivity. Guiding its readers through a broad historical panorama from Rome to the present day, it powerfully conveys the depth of Kahramanmaraş's cultural fabric.

This work, which reveals the story of Germanicia long concealed beneath the earth, serves as a reminder of our city's civilizational legacy, artistic tradition, and cultural diversity. The mosaic-adorned past of our region reaches contemporary readers through this book, gaining a universal voice.

I extend my gratitude to Mr. Ali Avgın, the publication team, and all supporters who contributed to the realization of this work. I hope that this book will help bring the historical and cultural heritage of our city to wider audiences, and I wish all readers an inspiring and enlightening reading experience.

Fırat GÖRGEL

Mayor of Kahramanmaraş Metropolitan Municipality

ALİ AVGIN

Ali Avgin was born in 1958 in Kahramanmaraş, where he completed his primary and secondary education. He graduated from the Adana Academy of Economic and Commercial Sciences in 1980 with a degree in Finance and Accounting, marking the beginning of his professional career.

A passionate advocate for culture and the arts, he has been actively involved in numerous cultural organizations and associations. He has served as the President of the Kahramanmaraş Literary and Arts Association and as the Secretary General of the Kahramanmaraş History, Culture, and Tourism Platform. Mr. Avgin is a dedicated musician and ney* player, continuing to contribute to the region's musical culture as a member of both the Association for Research and Preservation of Hz. Mevlâna Culture, Turkish Sufi Music and Folklore, and the Kahramanmaraş Music Association.

Throughout his career, he has contributed extensively as a columnist, researcher and writer to local newspapers and magazines, and online news platforms. His literary journey gained widespread recognition with the release of his novel *Han Duvarları / Kalbe Düşen Kor* [The Inn Walls / The Ember That Fell into the Heart] (2017), followed by *Kayıp Seveda / Yasaklı Yılların Gizemli Aşkı* [Lost Love / The Mysterious Romance of the Forbidden Years] (2018) and *Germanicia Güzeli* [The Beauty of Germanicia] (2021). His extensive research on the Maraş Mevlevi Lodge, conducted and co-authored with academic Mesut Bilginer, was compiled into the book *Hz. Mevlâna, Mevlevilik ve Maraş Mevlevihanesi*** [Hz. Mevlâna, Mevlevi Order, and the Maraş Mevlevi Lodge], offering readers valuable insights into Mevlevi traditions in the region.

In recognition of his lasting contributions to literature and urban cultural memory, Ali Avgin was honored with the Jury Special Award at the 2025 International Kahramanmaraş Literature Awards.

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Explanatory Notes:

* The ney, one of the traditional Turkish musical instruments made of reed and classified as a type of end-blown flute, is known for its distinctive, soulful sound. It is deeply rooted in Sufi culture, and has a spiritual and emotional significance, often symbolizing the connection between the human soul and the divine in Sufism.

** Hz. Mevlâna refers to Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–1273), a renowned Islamic scholar, Sufi mystic, and poet, who is widely known as Mevlâna in Turkish. "Hz." is an abbreviation for *Hazretleri*, a title of reverence similar to His Holiness. Mevlevilik, originated in Konya, Türkiye, is a Sufi order founded by the followers of Rumi, known for its whirling dervishes and spiritual practices. Maraş Mevlevihanesi refers to the Mevlevi Lodge in Kahramanmaraş, which historically served as a center for the teachings and practices of the Mevlevi Order.

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I also extend my gratitude to Educator and Author Salman Kapanoğlu for his Turkish editorial support, Historian and Author Mehmet Işık for his insightful publishing consultancy, and Educator and Author Ramazan Avcı for his invaluable literary contributions.

Lastly, I extend my deepest thanks to my beloved family and my dear children, Mehmet Sait Avcın and Ayşe Nur Tekin, for their constant support in every moment of my life. With a heart full of love and remembrance, I pray for God's mercy upon my late wife, Gülay Başkonuş Avcın, and my daughter, Hatice Kübra, who were among the martyrs of the February 6 Kahramanmaraş earthquakes.

A.D. 521

Germanicia

Suddenly, the skies over Germanicia were enveloped in a reddish dust cloud. The square began to shake like a cradle, and people moved back and forth like wheat fields caught in the wind. At first, everyone thought they were dizzy. Then, with a deafening roar that seemed to tear at their ears, marble columns began toppling onto each other. Desperate screams echoed in the sky. The area was thick with dust, and making it hard to see. The crowd, bewildered, ran in all directions; some clung to their loved ones and wept, while others searched for a place to hide. It was as if the apocalypse had come, and a struggle for survival was underway.

A dreamlike city where enigmatic lives and legendary romances of its artistic people are brought together through elegant art and depicted in colorful mosaics...

The Great Germanicia Earthquake, which would bury this mysterious city with its enchanting beauties and magical secrets deep into the earth for centuries, had begun with all its fury.

Chapter I

A.D. 39

Imperial Palace, Rome

After the death of Rome's cruel emperor Tiberius due to an assassination, his nephew and adopted son, Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, was crowned as Rome's third emperor in a grand ceremony.

The Roman soldiers gave the new emperor the nickname "Caligula," which means "Little Boot," and the people also addressed the emperor by this name.

Although Caligula initially appeared to be a successful emperor, he soon began committing atrocities that surpassed even those of Tiberius. Having grown up hearing the screams of people torn apart by wild animals in the arenas since his childhood, he derived pleasure from the death cries of those he had executed once he became emperor.

His erratic behavior continued to increase day by day. Alongside his cruelty, Caligula led a wildly extravagant and immoral life in the Roman palace. At times, he felt so powerful that he would go as far as to declare, "I am a God!"

He believed that the senators had played a role in Tiberius's death. Fearing that the same could one day be done to him, he viewed the senators as potential enemies. Often,

he punished them on trivial pretexts as if to take revenge. On one occasion, after returning from a spectacle, he made the elderly senators run after him on foot, even though he was riding in his chariot.

When Caligula arrived in the grand hall where his throne was located, the most beautiful girls of the palace were always ready to entertain him. This time, he signaled for the girls to leave. As he took his seat on the ornate chair adorned with precious jewels, he shouted “Nepos!” so loudly that the flames of the nearby candlesticks flickered suddenly.

Nepos rushed over:

“Sir, yes, sir!”

Caligula, in an angry tone, ordered:

“Bring the senators here!”

As Nepos quickly moved away to carry out the order, the emperor called out to him from behind, but this time with a softer tone:

“First, bring me Incitatus!”

Nepos was Caligula’s most trusted man and the chief guard of the palace. He could not make sense of the emperor’s last statement but still said, “As you command!”.

After a while, when around twenty members of the Senate arrived, they were surprised to see a decorated horse with a diamond necklace, embroidered saddle, and golden stirrups standing in the hall. Nevertheless, they arranged themselves in a semicircle in front of the emperor, as usual, in silence.

The senators were in a state of hesitation. While some held their breath in fear, others bowed their heads and were lost in dark thoughts. Some were adjusting the hems of their white toga garments, which left their left arms exposed, with involuntary movements.

As Caligula sipped from his wine glass, he scrutinized the senators in front of him with meaningful glances. Meanwhile, his horse, Incitatus, seemed to fit into the scene, swishing its tail. Annoyed, he said to the senators:

“I wish you could be as loyal as this horse!”.

The senators were momentarily stunned. They all looked at each other in fear.

Caligula turned to the chief guard Nepos, who was standing by, and, pointing to his horse, said angrily:

“I have appointed my horse Incitatus as a senator of the Roman Senate!”

With these words, the atmosphere suddenly grew icy. Everyone was stunned, even Nepos...

The senators might have had many things to say, but when they remembered their friends who had been brutally killed on trivial pretexts, they chose to remain silent.

Caligula's tyranny and immoral behavior had so exhausted those around him that no one even dared to think of opposing him.

The emperor, as if nothing had happened, continued to discuss other topics on the agenda and issued orders as usual. The speech dragged on, and the elderly senators began to struggle standing. While everyone waited patiently for the meeting to end, activity started to occur at the door of the hall. When the chief guard Nepos left the audience and quickly went to the guards, a palace servant at the door said something to him. Nepos then returned to the emperor and said:

“The envoys who arrived at the city gate have been brought to the palace. What would you like us to do?”

The emperor said in a soft voice:

“Let them wait in the reception hall!”

As Nepos was leaving to carry out the order, the emperor called out sharply after him, so that the senators could hear:

“I’ve changed my mind, have the envoys come here!”

It wasn’t long before the envoys were admitted to the presence with the guards. Their felt hats and top boots made it clear that they had come from distant lands. Both envoys knelt on their left knees in front of the emperor simultaneously and placed their hands on their chests as a gesture of respect. After this greeting, the older of the two stepped forward, extended the letterbox to the emperor, and, bowing his head in respect, said:

“I present the letter from King Antiochus.”

The chief guard Nepos swiftly took the extended letter and handed it to the emperor. Caligula, after inspecting the seal on it slowly, began to read the letter in silence. Everyone in the hall held their breath in anticipation as they watched the proceedings. After reading the letter from beginning to end, the emperor took the golden key from the box and, with a proud expression, turned to the senators and said:

“The letter is from King Antiochus IV of Commagene!”

The people in the hall felt a bit relieved with these words, but their unease had not completely dissipated. Caligula continued his speech with the same pride:

“When I appointed Antiochus as the king of Commagene, all of you opposed me. However, he did not remain idle. He named the new city he added to his lands, Markasi, after my esteemed title, calling it Caesarea Germanicia. And he did not stop there—he also sent me the golden key of the city.”

After these words, the people in the hall took a deep breath. Senators, occasionally to stir up the emperor, would chant slogans they knew he liked. This time was no differ-

ent. They all raised their right hands and began to shout in unison:

Long live Rome!

Long live Caligula!

Long live Germanicia!

In the Anatolian territories under the protection of the Roman Empire, there were small states that maintained their existence. These were kingdoms known as “vassal kingdoms” in relation to the Roman Empire. Appointments of kings had to be approved by the Roman Emperor. They were obligated to provide military support during wars as well as pay tribute during peacetime. One of the most prominent of these kingdoms was the Kingdom of Commagene, centered in Samosate in the Euphrates River.

King Antiochus IV, who sent envoys to Caligula, was a powerful ruler descended from King Antiochus I Theos, who commissioned the colossal statues on the region’s highest mountain, Mount Nemrut.

King Antiochus IV, knowing that he owed a debt of loyalty to Emperor Caligula since the day he was appointed as the king of Commagene, wanted to make a gesture to both maintain smooth relations with Rome and to gain favor with the eccentric emperor, reflecting his gratitude. He renamed the new city he had added to his lands, Markasi , to “Kaisereia Germanicia,” inspired by the heroic title “Germanicus” in Emperor Caligula’s name, which means “Imperial City.”

Emperor Caligula turned to the envoys and said:

“Your king has done a commendable job in demonstrating the greatness of my lineage and my power...”

Then, suddenly becoming serious, he added:

“But I must say that I am also catching some unpleasant odors from that region!”

The envoys were taken aback by these words and exchanged puzzled glances. Caligula continued with the same intensity:

“In Galilee, in Palestine, there is a Jew named Jesus the Nazarene who claims that the religion brought by Moses has been corrupted and that he himself is sent by God, asserting that he is a prophet!”

The envoys bowed their heads even lower as if they themselves were to blame. The emperor continued:

“The number of followers has been increasing every day.”

Raising his voice a little more:

“These lunatics who reject our gods have even reached our province of Antioch . They even gather secretly in a cave there to worship in their own way. If your king cannot stop them, this danger will spread into the heart of Anatolia. We consider this a threat to Rome.”

His angry demeanor suddenly turned into laughter:

“And some even say that he is ‘the Son of God’!”

Caligula stood up angrily. Raising his right hand and extending his index finger forward rapidly, he pointed at Antiochus IV and said forcefully:

“Tell your king to set up a barrier against them to stop their spread. It is my command—if necessary, he should kill them all!”

Caligula, with his angry demeanor, turned to Nepos and said:

“Remove one of my statues and give it to the envoys!”

Nepos, without hesitation, responded:

“As you command!”

The emperor then turned to the envoys and said:

“Let your king remove the statues of the gods in Com-magene and replace them with mine!”

After a brief silence, he shouted so loudly that:

“Those seeking a god to worship should look no further; I am the God!”

When Professor Dr. Ahmet arrived at his office at the university, his eyes were bloodshot. As he sat down in the chair at his desk, he felt extremely tired. He had been working on a topic for a long time, which had occupied his mind for days and left his body exhausted. The fatigue must have been too much for his eyelids, as his head drooped forward in the chair, and his eyelids closed.

In just a few minutes, as usual, he had once again drifted back centuries, with the topics he was researching coming to life in his dreams, as if he were living through that time.

When he came to, he looked at the files on the desk and felt relieved. His gaze involuntarily shifted to the wall clock:

“The kids will be here soon,” he murmured.

Chapter II

On the desk, there was a file among the stacked ones that had occupied his mind for months. He put on his reading glasses and began flipping through its pages one last time to review it.

Despite his advanced age, Professor Ahmet was both teaching classes and conducting academic research related to his profession, which he loved as much as one loves. His archaeological research, widely recognized around the world, and the articles he wrote were setting scientific agendas in international journals.

Ahmet's entire life had been spent in excavation sites with his students. He would get very excited and rejoice like a child as the mysterious doors of archaeological knowledge were opened by the finds he made. For him, mythology, art history, and archaeology were synonymous with life itself.

Students who wanted to build a career always preferred him. Many of his graduate students were working as academics at universities in Anatolia.

As he reviewed the thesis files he was about to give to his students, the silence of the room was broken by a knock on the door from Ayhan. Ayhan, along with one girl and three other students, entered the room. He glanced at them over his glasses. Two of his students were missing. The professor

placed great importance on harmony and coordination, as he paid close attention to group work. Even though it was already time, he waited for the other students to arrive.

At seven minutes past the hour, there was another knock on the door. When Serap and Metin entered, they were out of breath. Serap, deeply embarrassed, said:

“Sorry, Professor. We got caught in the morning traffic in Istanbul.”

Professor Ahmet checked his watch again. The meeting starting eight minutes late had irritated him because he knew how precious time was. He often advised his students, “Science requires seriousness.” He stood up and gestured with his finger for the students to take their seats at the oval table on the right side of the entrance door. Once everyone was seated, he said:

“One should pay attention to their appointments.” With this warning, Serap and Metin lowered their heads. After a brief silence, the professor continued:

“You have all successfully completed your studies. Now, I see you as young and enthusiastic archaeologists before me. As you know, we are now colleagues. I hope you will complete your master’s and doctoral studies as well and embark on your careers as excellent academics.”

Serap listened carefully to what the professor was saying. With her large, seablue eyes, long, straight blonde hair that reached down to her waist, and graceful demeanor, Serap was the most beautiful girl in the class. Sitting directly across from her was her classmate Ayhan.

While the professor was speaking, Ayhan kept looking at Serap, trying to catch her eye, but although Serap was aware of his gaze, she remained completely focused on listening to the professor.

After a lengthy introduction, the professor pointed to

the files in front of him and said:

“The research topics for your theses are in these files; you will receive them shortly.”

As the students eagerly awaited the topics to be assigned, the professor continued:

“The academic committee I chair has selected a very important research topic this year. As you know, I am now getting older, and I want to complete my academic career with this project, with your efforts. With the archaeological findings you will uncover, we will bring a lost ancient city to light together. Therefore, I want to give this special file to someone who is confident in their abilities. The student who successfully completes this research will have a bright academic career,” he said, and everyone’s eyes lit up.

After this explanation, as the professor scrutinized his students through his glasses, Ayhan spoke up:

“Professor, where is the area you mentioned?”

At this question, the professor slowly stood up. Walking with heavy steps, he went to the large map of Turkey on the wall. Pointing with his index finger, he drew a circle with his hand on the eastern part of the Mediterranean Region:

“We are searching for the lost city I mentioned in this region.”

Continuing his speech:

“Despite all the research pointing to this area, no scientifically valuable findings have been made yet.”

Serap asked wonderingly:

“Professor, which city will we be researching?”

The professor, after a moment of silence, lifted his head and said in a decisive tone:

“Kahramanmaraş”.

After the professor’s response, the students’ curios-

ity grew even more. This was because many of them knew Kahramanmaraş as a small city in Eastern Anatolia, despite its location in the Mediterranean Region.

When Kahramanmaraş was mentioned, some of those present frowned, but Serap's raised hand caught the professor's attention. Without delay, he said:

"Go ahead."

"Professor, which period is the research focused on?"

"The Roman Period."

This time, Metin spoke up:

"Do we know the name of the lost city from the Ancient Age, Professor?"

"Germanicia..."

Ayhan, who was observing what was happening, said to himself:

"Germanicia, hmm," he murmured.

The professor continued:

"You know, one hand with paper and pen, and the other with pickaxe and shovel. The land we walk on is both our homeland and our textbook. With our small tools, we bring great civilizations to light. We are special people assigned to this task, that is, archaeologists... The historical heritage of thousands of years ago will come to life and breathe through your hands and magical touches. If we neglect and fail to uncover and protect these artifacts, history's destroyers, the looters, will come and break, shatter, and destroy everything. They will erase our priceless artifacts that we can hardly bear to touch."

After his speech, the professor set aside the file on the ancient city of Germanicia and gently placed the other files on the table:

"Your thesis topics are in these files; you can share them

among yourselves,” he said.

The students stared silently at the files in front of them for a while without touching them...

All of them had the ancient city file on their minds. While they looked at the files on the table, they were also curious about what the professor would say next. Metin couldn't wait any longer and pulled the file closest to him towards himself. While the others took the files they had their eyes on one by one, Serap did not touch any of them.

Noticing this, Ayhan said to Serap:

“Why didn't you take one?” he whispered.

Serap, already annoyed by Ayhan's staring throughout the meeting, glared at him sharply in response to the question. Then, turning to the professor with determination, she said:

“Professor, I want to take the Germanicia file!”

All eyes turned to Serap at once. The professor, smiling at her bold move, raised his eyebrows and nodded in approval. The others could not hide their astonishment as Serap took the file they had hesitated to choose. Metin, unable to make sense of Serap's attitude, watched the scene silently.

Although the professor was very pleased with Serap's firm desire to take the Germanicia file, he wanted to give her a warning:

“Have you thought it over thoroughly? You are committing to a difficult and laborious task!”

Serap, without hesitation:

“I've thought it through, Professor!”

Ayhan slammed another file he had previously picked up onto the table and said loudly:

Ayhan, as if competing with Serap, slammed another file

he had previously picked up onto the table and said loudly:

“Professor, I am also claiming the Germanicia file!”

Ayhan’s unexpected move surprised everyone present. He continued:

“Professor, the research topic is very risky. Moreover, it’s quite difficult for a young woman to conduct research alone in Anatolia. If you agree, let’s take on this task together with Serap.”

As Serap and Metin exchanged glances, the professor’s eyes were gleaming with excitement. He looked at the file in front of him again and thought to himself, “This is it!” Indeed, the professor also believed that it would be more appropriate for two students to undertake such a challenging project.

The Professor:

“I also think that having such a significant project undertaken by two students is appropriate. This way, you will be more successful in your fieldwork.”

Metin, who was already irritated by Ayhan’s constant attempts to get close to Serap, was now deeply troubled by the thought of his close friend Serap being in a distant city with Ayhan. Unable to tolerate it any longer, Metin interrupted the professor, saying:

“Professor, I am also interested in that file. I’ve been meaning to say this for a while but couldn’t muster the courage. I believe that Serap and I will work well together and be a great team.”

Ayhan was quite irritated by Metin’s outburst. He wanted to object but couldn’t, so he decided to wait. The professor was very pleased with his students’ eager initiatives. Turning to Serap, he said:

“You were the first to volunteer for this task, Serap. Therefore, I’m leaving the choice to you. Pick your partner!”

At these words, Ayhan started to huff through his nose. He didn't take his eyes off Serap for a moment. After thinking for a while, Serap said decisively:

"Metin."

Ayhan looked at Serap with such an angry glare that...

A few weeks had passed when Serap called Metin and asked, "If you're available, shall we meet at a café?"

Metin was so delighted by the invitation that it felt like a breath of fresh air to his soul. He was very happy because he would get to express his accumulated feelings by looking into her seablue eyes. Without a second thought:

"What do you mean, available... I'll be right there."

"No, not now. This afternoon at 2 o'clock."

When Serap arrived at the café, Metin had already arrived and was sitting at the best table. Metin's joy increased even more when he saw Serap. While he was expecting to have a heartfelt conversation with her, Serap did not engage in any of that. As soon as she sat down, after a brief chat, she opened the laptop she had brought with her and said to Metin:

"I called to gather information about Kahramanmaraş and to research it together."

Metin didn't expect this at all...

"Of course," he said.

As Serap researched Kahramanmaraş on the internet, the information about the city was listed one after another. She turned to Metin and said:

"Let's read it together, come closer to me." Metin took advantage of this and snuggled closer.

Serap and Metin read the information in silence for a while. They had never been to Kahramanmaraş before and

only knew the city as a place famous for its ice cream. Metin looked at her with astonished eyes and said:

“Wow, it’s a historic city that has been home to many civilizations, from prehistoric times to the Mama Kingdom, and from the Hittites to the Rome.”

Serap, leaning back in her chair, said:

“Yes, yes, and after becoming acquainted with Islamic civilization... It served as the capital for the Dulkadiroğlu Beylik, one of the Seljuk Turkish principalities. The first spark of the War of Independence was ignited by the first shot fired by Sütçü İmam at the invading French. Due to its heroism during the National Struggle, the entire city was awarded the Red Stripe Independence Medal by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and was later honored with the title of ‘Hero’ by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey...”

Metin, with astonishment, said:

“Now I understand, so the university must have taken its name from the War of Independence hero Sütçü İmam.”

Serap:

“That’s right, I must admit that I’ve always been curious about this name. This information will be very useful for us in the city. Now we can go to Kahramanmaraş with peace of mind.”

Three months had passed quickly, Serap and Metin were very tired when they arrived in Kahramanmaraş after a long bus ride. They wanted to lie down on a comfortable bed and rest as soon as possible.

Serap looked out the window of the teachers’ lodge where she was alone, as nightfall was settling in, and found herself eyetoeye with a star that seemed to be looking back at her from the sky. The star shone so brightly it almost

seemed to smile. She watched the star for a while, until a sweet sleep gently embraced her delicate frame once more.

When two friends, Serap and Metin, walked through the streets of Kahramanmaraş after breakfast, there was a distinct calmness around. As they wandered the streets of the city, there was neither the traffic chaos of Istanbul nor the endless rush of people.

After wandering for a while on Trabzon Boulevard, which divides the city in two, they mingled with the crowds of the historical Grand Bazaar, which was covered in the smell of spices. In the Carvers Bazaar, they sensed the trousseaus of young girls from Maraş in walnutcarved chests. In the coppersmiths' bazaar, they felt their souls caressed by the sounds of hammers and embroidery on copper. In the jewelry bazaar, they saw that gold became even more precious in the hands of a goldsmith.

After enjoying the spirit of the city in the atmosphere of the bustling Grand Bazaar, they went to the big square. When they saw a famous bakery they had heard of before, they both had a sweet feeling as if they had met someone they knew. As soon as they stepped inside, it was as if they were immersed in a different world.

The inside of the bakery resembled a museum. Antiques were displayed everywhere. The old kitchen utensils used in this region, pewter pots, copper pans, historical swords, rusty pistols, and many more adorned each corner, as if giving life to an old mansion, lined up on the shelves on the wall.

Beside their table was an old gramophone, a wooden spinning wheel further ahead, a stone hand mill on one side, and on the other side, ancient rugs and carpets. All these elements added a layer of mystery to the place.

Visitors to the bakery not only enjoyed delicious Maraş

sweets but also immersed themselves in a sweet daydream, as if they had stepped into an old Maraş mansion and were transported back in time.

Under the dim lights of the bakery, with Turkish classical music melodies drifting among the antiques, Serap and Metin savored their baklava and ice cream with pleasure, while discussing what they would do in the city.

Serap had previously listed the places they would research in Kahramanmaraş in her notebook. Turning to Metin, she said:

“First, let’s start with the museum.”

Metin:

“Then we’ll go to the university, to see Professor Oktay.”

Serap pointed to the man beside her and said:

As they were leaving the bakery, they noticed the friendly behavior of a man in a white apron with an ice cream spoon at the counter. Serap, pointing to the man, said to Metin:

“He takes care of his work as if it were his own, such people are rare nowadays.”

“Yes, it caught my attention as well. He clearly enjoys his work.”

A waiter who had overheard their conversation stepped in and said gently to Serap:

“Madam, he’s our boss.”

Serap got even more excited:

“How is that possible? He works like an employee!”

The waiter:

“They come to the shop early after the fajr prayer. They never leave their work until the bakery closes.”

Serap, with curiosity, asked:

“Who are they?”

The waiter continued, pointing to the middle-aged man in the white apron at the counter:

“Atila comes to the shop every morning before dawn. He takes turns with Mehmet and Erdal. The three brothers work just like us, staying until the shop closes at night.”

Serap couldn’t believe her ears. She looked more closely and turned to Metin:

“Do you see his hands?”

The waiter intervened again:

“Ice cream making is their family trade. Since their apprenticeships, all three of them have developed callouses on their hands from churning ice cream.”

Serap thought for a moment, to herself:

“So, it seems that becoming a brand isn’t easy.”

With admiration, Serap and Metin approached the counter and:

“Thank you so much. Your ice cream is unique, and your bakery feels like a museum. This place is wonderfully different.”

After Mr. Atila, one of the bakery owners, said “Enjoy your meal,” he added:

“You must be students, right?” he asked.

Serap:

“Yes, we came from Istanbul for an academic research project.”

“What’s the topic?”

“We’re archaeologists, and we’re searching for a lost city.”

“Where is it?”

Metin intervened:

“Sir, we don’t know exactly where it is either.”

Serap immediately intervened:

“Our professor said it’s somewhere in this region.”

While Mr. Atila was serving ice cream to his customers from the ice cream scoop in front of him, he also gave some advice to Serap and Metin:

“In Kahramanmaraş, you’ll find history beneath every stone you lift. If you approach your work with passion and diligence, you’ll surely find what you’re looking for. I congratulate you. You have an exciting profession that requires patience. We’ll always be here to welcome you.”

Serap and Metin thanked the bakery owner and left. While Serap’s feet were taking her toward the museum, her mind was still occupied with the ice cream seller’s words: “Success comes from working with passion, perseverance, and enduring hardships.”

When they arrived at the museum, they were greeted at the entrance by the imposing Hittite lion gate. After taking a quick look at the Roman sarcophagi, relief stone artifacts, and statues displayed in the open area of the museum, Serap said to Metin as they moved to the enclosed section:

“Judging by these artifacts, it’s clear that Maraş has truly hosted great civilizations in the past...”

Metin:

“And that’s exactly why we’re here.”

After introducing herself to the receptionist, Serap requested to speak to the museum director. When the attendant told her that the director was outside, Serap asked, “Well, isn’t there anyone else in charge?”

After giving them both a thorough onceover, the person at the reception desk picked up the receiver of the fixed phone, explained the situation to the person on the other end, and then said to Serap:

“Please go to the room on the left side of the corridor.”

Serap and Metin reached the door indicated by the attendant. After knocking a few times, Serap heard a voice say, "Come on in!" and slowly opened the door. As Serap stepped inside, the beams of light coming through the back window momentarily dazzled her eyes.

The man in the room was studying a map, not in his office chair, but with his back to the desk next to him. Serap, as if speaking to a shadow in the dim light of the room:

"Sir, we are archaeologists. We came from Istanbul to conduct research for our graduate studies."

After keeping them standing for a while, the man, whose face they couldn't see, indicated the chairs in front of the desk. Serap and Metin thanked him and took their seats. The man must have finished with the map, as he turned around:

"Welcome."

Serap and Metin were suddenly startled. The voice was one they recognized very well. As they looked back at the man with excitement, they were stunned by what they saw. Serap thought to herself, "This can't be, it can't be!" while Metin stood frozen like a statue.

Sitting in the chair, Ayhan said meaningfully:

"Ms. Serap, Mr. Metin, it's wonderful to see you here."

Both of them were so shocked that they didn't know what to do. Metin thought to himself, "I knew you wouldn't give this up!" meanwhile, Serap swallowed and coldly said:

"How did this happen?"

After taking a deep breath, Ayhan said:

"The world is small, and life is short. I wanted to dive into life as soon as possible. As you know, my father's circle of friends is very large. Thanks to his friends in politics, I started working here as an archaeologist two months ago."

Serap:

When you asked, "You really wanted to work at the uni-

versity,” Ayhan turned to Serap and said:

“Academia is not for me. My perspective on life has changed a lot. I love Anatolia, I love my profession, and I love the people...”

“How did your surroundings respond to this situation?”

“Everyone is very happy.”

What was happening felt like a nightmare to Metin. Ayhan continued:

“As your classmate, supporting you would be both a duty and a source of pride for me.”

Ayhan, during the conversation, raised his head as if he had remembered something:

“By the way, where are you staying?”

Metin’s unease had vanished, but he was still cautious. Serap, taking the floor, said:

“We had reserved a room at the teacher’s lodge. I want to rent a separate house to get to know the local people better, but Metin doesn’t share my view.”

Ayhan, with a twinkle in his eye:

He murmured, “That’s great.”

Serap and Metin felt at ease. Ayhan’s previously intense demeanor had faded, replaced by what seemed to be a genuinely helpful attitude. Ayhan continued:

“I know that your research topic is challenging and will be quite demanding. I will speak with the director and provide you with all the support you need. Hopefully, you won’t lose any time. As you know, Professor Ahmet is a stickler for not making any concessions...”

Turning to Serap:

“If you’re set on a separate house, there’s one just like the one you want.”

Serap, hesitantly, said:

"I'm not sure; if it's suitable, we could take a look."

After inquiring about the available house for rent on the phone, Ayhan turned to Serap and said:

"Great, the house hasn't been rented yet."

Serap was astonished by this change in Ayhan, while Metin remained cautious. Ayhan, allusively, said to Metin:

"If you want, we can also find a house for you close to Serap."

Metin:

"No, I'll be renting an apartment."

"As you wish."

Ayhan continued:

"There are some very nice modern buildings in the west of the city. If you like, we can also find an apartment for you there."

"This will do nicely."

At the end of his words, as if to add a touch of humor to the conversation, Ayhan said:

"I hope to find a girl to marry here," he said after a brief pause, "and you can find Germanicia..."

They all laughed together at this remark. As the conversation progressed, Serap seemed to develop a bit more trust in Ayhan. She thought to herself, "It seems that when faced with his conscience alone in Anatolia, he can think logically. The civil service has changed him a lot."

After they finished their tea and conversation, and as they parted ways with plans to meet again, Ayhan made sure to see his friends off to the museum's exit. He watched them with a long, resentful gaze until they were out of sight...

Chapter III

Serap's rented house was located in the southeastern part of the city, on sloping flat land in the new district of Namık Kemal. The neighborhood's residents were mostly poor families who had come to the city for work from surrounding villages. Most of the houses here were singlestory, makeshift, unplastered, and constructed from brick. Each house had a small courtyard in front. The people living in these homes seemed to be completing their unfinished village lives in this area.

Ayhan, by directing Serap to this neighborhood, intended to distance her from Metin. By having Metin rent an apartment in the western part of the city, he had also separated him from Serap. This way, he aimed to keep everything under his control. With this plan, he sought both to stay close to Serap and to send them back to Istanbul emptyhanded. Ayhan nourished his uncontrollable desire for revenge through these schemes, finding solace in them.

Serap was eager to start the research as soon as possible. She called Metin early in the morning and asked, "Shall we go to see Professor Oktay today?"

Metin:

"Let's call him and see if he's available. If he is, we can go."

Dr. Oktay Dumankaya, an archaeologist and academic at Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University, was one of Prof. Dr. Ahmet's previously successful students. When they spoke on the phone:

"Professor Ahmet had already called me on your behalf. Please come, I'll be waiting."

When Serap and Metin went to the faculty, they were very pleased to see someone who was very sincere and warmhearted. This pleasure was also reflected in their conversation. After listening to what had happened, Professor Oktay said:

"I will support you with all my effort to help you succeed. However, you have undertaken a difficult task. Hopefully, we will not let our professor down."

Professor Oktay was an academic who created quick and practical solutions. He immediately picked up a pen and paper:

"You have limited time. Let's make a plan first. I also have some special research on this topic. If you want, we can start this weekend from the castle in the city center," he said.

Serap and Metin were very pleased with Professor Oktay's sincere and heartfelt remarks. After a deep conversation, as they said their goodbyes, Serap was very happy with the excitement of starting the project, but Metin's look of gloom had not faded. To comfort him, Serap said:

"Don't lose hope; we will succeed."

Serap and Metin met with Professor Oktay at the Kahramanmaraş Castle teahouse on a Sunday. While engaging in a deep conversation under the shade of acacia and pine trees, they were also sipping their tea. Professor Oktay took out a map from his workroom and spread it on

the table. He began explaining with his characteristic brisk speaking style:

“As you know, Kahramanmaraş is a city located in southeastern Anatolia as well as in Central Anatolia and the eastern Mediterranean. Due to this strategic position, it has always been an important city throughout history. Indeed, archaeological excavations and surface explorations in the region show us that the history of the area extends back to the Prehistoric Age...”

Pointing to the location of Kahramanmaraş on the map with his hand, he continued:

“Mesopotamia, Syria, Cappadocia, and Cilicia trade routes intersect in this area. Therefore, it is evident that the city was a wealthy trading center in ancient times.”

While Professor Oktay continued his explanation, Metin, unable to wait any longer, interjected:

“Professor, is this the Germanicia we are researching?”

After taking another sip from his tea, the professor continued his explanation, which would answer Metin’s question:

“In research conducted by scholars on the ancient city of Germanicia, unfortunately, no definitive source has been found regarding the city’s localization. However, ancient authors, such as the geographer Ptolemy who lived in the second century and mentioned such a city by the name ‘Germanikeia’ in his work *Geographica*, and Gaius Asinius Quadratus, who lived in the third century and mentioned it in *Parthika*, clearly refer to the existence of such a city in this region.”

Serap was taking notes on what the professor was explaining. Professor Oktay continued to describe with the same enthusiasm:

"It is known that there were four major cities in this region during the Roman period: Samosata in Adıyaman Samsat, Perrhe in Pirin, Doliche in Gaziantep Dülük, and Germanicia in Kahramanmaraş. These are widely accepted facts in the academic world. While the first three have been discovered and are known, unfortunately, the ancient city of Germanicia has yet to be unearthed. I believe that uncovering it would greatly please Professor Ahmet."

Serap interjected:

"Germanicia seems like a different and unique city to me... Are there any other studies on this subject? Could you explain Germanicia in detail?"

As an expert in his field, Professor Oktay never kept his research secret from anyone. After glancing at the file in front of him, he began to explain. He spoke with such enthusiasm that it was impossible not to be impressed.

As Serap listened to the professor, she was utterly engrossed. The light of hope in her eyes was brighter than the stars in the sky. In the face of what she was hearing, she felt as though she had discovered herself in the mysterious corridors of human history.

As secrets related to human history were revealed in Serap's world of thought, the mysterious rooms of history seemed to open one by one.

Serap felt as light as a feather. She seemed to spread her wings toward new horizons, breathing in the air of Germanicia as if from two thousand years in the future. She closed her eyes, cupping her face in her hands. With her entire being, she drifted back into the depths of centuries past...

It was dawn when I set Rome on fire

Chapter IV

A.D. 65

Palatine Hill, Rome

Rome's third emperor, Caligula, was stabbed to death by soldiers from his own guard in the palace tunnels during his fourth year on the throne, which greatly pleased the Roman people.

People increasingly wanted to forget the dark and tyrannical era of Caligula as soon as possible. They awaited their new rulers with great hope. However, the emperors who succeeded Caligula, Claudius and Nero, did not lag behind in oppressing the Roman people.

Emperor Nero sometimes wrote poetry to demonstrate his grandeur and his passion for the arts.

On a warm July evening, Nero sat on the expansive terrace of his magnificent palace on Palatine Hill in Rome, sipping from his wine glass while watching the afterglow.

The city of Rome, held captive by the scorching heat, seemed to be burning with flames.

Nero's mind was suddenly surrounded by muses. He was struck by the fire to write a poem. He thought, thought, and thought...

Nero took another sip from his glass. The crimson light of the setting sun cast its glow on his face. For a moment, he felt a desire to command the sun. However, the sun seemed to ignore him, slipping behind the mountains. At that moment, a faint smile appeared on his face, for the first line of the poem had taken shape in his mind:

“It was dawn when I set Rome on fire!”

He wrote the first line. However, he waited for minutes for the rest, but it didn’t come. He couldn’t channel his inner drive into verses.

The sky had grown dark. Nero, quite frustrated with the situation, stood up and paced back and forth on the balcony. He leaned with both hands on the marble railing of the expansive terrace and gazed out at the city of Rome for a long while.

His eyes were searching for the lanterns illuminating the streets of Rome. The torches appeared as faint, flickering, yellow dots scattered across the city like stars from the sky. He watched them for a while, lost in deep thought, when suddenly the voice of the palace’s faithful servant came from behind:

“Is there anything you need, sir?”

Nero was startled by the sound and suddenly turned around. He stared blankly into the servant’s eyes for a moment. This gaze seemed more like that of an ordinary person than an emperor. The excitement of the poem overcame his anger and his movements calmed down. Nero looked at the elderly servant and said to himself:

Nero had the excitement of a poet who was immersed in poetry. Looking at the elderly servant, he said to himself:

“It was dawn when I set Rome on fire!”

The palace servant, in astonishment, asked again:

“Is there anything you need, sir?”

Nero, as if he hadn't heard the servant's question, kept repeating the same line of the poem over and over.

Nero wanted to depict the fire in his poem, but he couldn't translate the vivid flames he envisioned into verses. He told himself, “I must complete this poem,” and began searching for solutions.

The devil within him, while spurring him on, whispered in his ear, “Burn Rome!” He paused for a moment and said to himself, “Should I really set Rome on fire?”

Nero believed that the city's burning was necessary to continue his poem. He looked at the historic city again, closed his eyes, and his sadistic emotions surged. He imagined Rome burning in flames, almost hearing the cries of the people. The poet's spirit had vanished, replaced by the cruel, tyrannical emperor. Turning to the servant angrily, he said:

“Who set Rome on fire?”

The servant involuntarily raised his head and looked excitedly toward Rome. There was nothing burning around. He lowered his head again in silence. But the emperor was waiting for an answer. The servant, being the most senior and cleverest of the palace, knew well that burning Rome was a display of power. He thought to himself, “If Rome is to be burned, then Nero will be the one to do it!” As a compliment:

“Emperor Nero!” he said.

This answer seemed to please Nero, as he burst into laughter. Speaking to himself:

“The servant is right.”

Holding up his empty glass and showing it:

“Bring me some wine!”

As the elderly servant turned to leave, he said, “Yes, sir!”

Nero called after him:

“Prepare the girls; tonight will be a long one!”

As Emperor Nero’s shouts mingled with the flirtatious laughter of the palace girls, the sounds of revelry began to echo around. The palace’s most agile dancers showcased all their skills, accompanied by instruments such as the lyre, cithara, and flute, while Nero wildly enjoyed himself, the glasses constantly filled and emptied.

At the peak of the revelry and in the later part of the night, one of the dancing girls suddenly stopped. Seeing a red light seeping through the window on the western side of the palace, she became excited:

“It looks like dawn is coming.”

The most beautiful girl in the palace, sitting on Nero’s lap:

“Fool, your head is spinning, does the sun ever rise in the west?”

Lost in the midst of the girls and caught up in his drunken state, Nero:

“I command it; today the sun will rise from the west!”

The girls entertaining the emperor, in unison, shouted with enthusiasm:

“Long live Nero!.. Long live Nero!.. Long live Nero!..”

The girls’ flattery seemed to delight the emperor even more, as he pressed the girl, squirming like a kitten in his arms, closer to his chest. Gently biting her earlobe, he whispered the same line again.

“It was dawn when I set Rome on fire!”

The girl on Nero’s lap let out a flirtatious laugh in response to the flattery and made sure to plant a kiss on the emperor’s cheek. Nero, this time leaning in towards the

girl's other ear, said:

"Tell me, my dear, who set Rome on fire?"

The girl, without hesitation, replied:

"Emperor Nero!"

At the peak of this revelry, in the middle of the night, the elderly servant hurriedly reentered. With a trembling voice, he said:

"Rome is burning, Rome is burning!" he shouted.

Drunken Nero turned to the girls and said:

"Did you see? Rome is burning!"

The servant continued to shout with the same excitement:

"Rome is burning, my emperor, Rome is burning!"

Nero could barely stand. He looked out the window, and this time Rome was truly on fire. Faced with the flames reaching into the sky, Nero seemed mesmerized. He repeated the same line once more:

"It was dawn when I set Rome on fire!"

To the deepest depths of the sea of imagination...

Chapter V

As the afternoon call to prayer echoed from the Grand Mosque next to the Kahramanmaraş Castle like an epic, mingling with the calls from other nearby mosques, Professor Oktay fell silent for a moment. He immersed himself in the spiritual atmosphere of the call to prayer. He began to watch the pigeons flying in clusters around the castle. The pigeons, fluttering in rhythm with the calls to prayer, seemed to accompany the clouds.

As the breeze at the castle stirred Serap's blonde hair, her soul seemed to delve deeply into the depths of history. Metin, meanwhile, was lost in Serap's jasminescent hair, silently wishing, "I hope this tedious historical discussion ends soon so I can be alone with Serap."

Professor Oktay must have noticed this, as he checked his watch; indeed, quite a bit of time had passed.

"Shall we get up now? We can continue later," he said.

Serap, unlike Metin, was so impressed by what Professor Oktay had told her that she got up and pointed to the thick walls of the castle as she left:

"Did the Romans build these as well?" she asked.

Professor Oktay:

"No, the castle dates back to the Hittites, but it was also used during the Roman period. Due to its strategic location,

it has been like the heart of the city in every era.”

Professor Oktay, pointing with his hand towards the northern districts of the castle, said:

“Researchers initially searched for Germanicia in this area, but the findings indicated that the remains belonged to even older civilizations.”

On the way home, Serap was almost dizzy from what the professor had shared. She felt as though she were bursting with happiness, barely aware of where she was going.

The following week, early in the morning, Professor Oktay’s phone rang insistently:

“Professor, it’s me. Serap and I are together right now. If you’re available on Sunday, could we meet?”

“Of course, we can meet at eleven o’clock.”

“As you wish.”

“Then let’s meet at Şelale Park in the center.”

“Alright, professor, thank you...”

Serap and Metin hadn’t seen Professor Oktay for a week. During this time, they hadn’t been idle. They had been reading various books about the city and conducting research.

When Serap woke up on the Sunday morning she was going to meet the professor, she was very excited. After having her breakfast, she checked the watch and said, “If I leave in half an hour, I’ll make it.” Since she had gotten up early, feel very sleepy. She sat down in a chair, and her eyelids couldn’t hold out any longer. She fell asleep in the chair where she was sitting.

Serap had a terrifying dream during her little nap. In the dream, Ayhan was choking her, shouting, “I’m going to kill you!” so loudly that... She suddenly jolted awake. After the

few seconds of that frightening dream, she was drenched with sweat and very scared. As she headed to the kitchen to get a drink of water, her phone rang. Metin was calling:

“Hello Serap, what are you doing? Are you coming?”

“Yes, I’ll come.”

“Your voice is trembling. Did something happen?”

Serap, after a moment of silence, said:

“Nothing!”

“Alright then. I just wanted to remind you that we have a meeting with Professor Oktay today.”

“Alright, alright, I’ll come.”

When Professor Oktay arrived at Şelale Park, Serap and Metin were already there. After greeting each other, he, as always, with his usual excited demeanor:

“You guys, let’s not sit down. Today, we want to take you to a historic place with a very esteemed professor of ours.”

Serap and Metin, with excitement:

“Where is it, professor?”

“It’s related to your research topic as well: the Afşin Eshabı Khef Cave...^{*}”

^{*} The story of the Seven Sleepers, also known as Eshab-ı Khef (The Companions of the Cave), is a legendary narrative that bridges the worlds of Paganism, Christianity, and Islam. It tells of seven individuals who sought refuge in a cave to escape persecution for their belief in a divine religion during the Pagan era. Miraculously, they fell into a deep sleep, only to awaken centuries later in a time when Christianity had become the dominant faith. This powerful tale, also included in Qur’an, the Islamic holy book, echoes across multiple religions and cultures, and symbolizes faith, endurance, and the passage of time. One of the most sacred sites strongly associated with this legend is the Eshab-ı Khef Kulliyeh (a complex for social gatherings) in Afşin, a district of Kahramanmaraş. In recognition of its cultural and historical value, the site was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List on April 13, 2015. There are different sets of names for the sleepers. For example, in the modern Catholic Church, they are called Maximianus, Malchus, Martinianus, Dionysius, Joannes, Serapion, and Constantinus. The names of the sleepers included in this novel, which will appear in the following chapters, symbolize the Turkish/Eastern version of these names: Yemlîhâ, Mislînâ, Meksîlînâ, Mernûş, Tebernûş, Şâzenûş, Kefeştatayyûş, and Kitmîr (the dog).

When they got into the car, Serap said to Professor Oktay:

“Is the place we’re going to very far?”

“Believe me, I’m going there for the first time with you as well. I think it’s about a one to twohour drive.”

After driving for a while, Metin said:

“Did you say we have another guest, professor?”

“Yes, yes, we’ll pick up the professor from his home on the way. He kindly agreed to join us. We’ll hear about the Eshabı Kehf from him.”

“Our professor is one of the esteemed academics at our university. He is a skilled art historian.”

Serap:

“Oh, that’s great! It’s going to be a wonderful day for us. I’m already starting to get excited.”

When they arrived at the professor’s house, Metin opened the car door to greet him. He then sat in the back next to Serap. As soon as the professor got into the car, he:

“Hello, how are you?” said.

Serap and Metin, straightening up from where they were sitting, said:

“Thank you, professor. Welcome!” they replied.

Professor Oktay interjected:

“Let me introduce you. This is Professor Dr. Mehmet Özkarcı, and these are our students, Serap and Metin...”

When Serap learned that Professor Mehmet was also a lecturer in TurkishIslamic Art History, she bombarded him with questions throughout the journey. She was very pleased with the detailed information she received. The trip to Afşin was delightful.

As Professor Oktay’s car ascended towards the slopes

where the sacred cave was located, Serap and Metin, while admiring the expansive, greencovered plains of Afşin, also listened to Professor Mehmet's explanations about the region's history:

"Afşin, one of the northern districts of Kahramanmaraş, is surrounded by mountains on three sides, yet as you can see, it has a vast plain. There are numerous mounds in these flatlands. The historical remains here show us that, during the early period of the Middle Ages, Afşin was one of the most prosperous cities in the region. In the Roman Period, the city's name was Arabissos and Efsus; during the Ottoman Period, it was Yarpuz, and in the Republic Period, it became Afşin."

Professor Mehmet continued his explanation:

"That Eudoxios, one of the bishops of Antioch, and Emperor Maurice were born in Arabissos, and that Saint Chrysostom also lived here, indicates that this city was a significant center during the Byzantine Period. Now, we will go to a completely different historical site from those times."

When they arrived at the historic complex where the Eshabı Kehf Cave is located, Serap, unable to hide her amazement, said:

"Professor, I thought it would be an ordinary place, but it's really something very different."

Professor Mehmet faced the historic site and, with his unique style, continued to describe the place with the same excitement:

"This historic structure, which includes the sacred cave, is a mosque built on the ruins of a Romanperiod church. It also incorporates a madrasa, ribat, and caravanserai from the Seljuk and Ottoman periods within the same complex. If you like, we can start our tour from the cave itself."

The Eshabı Kehf Cave could be entered through the

interior of a historic mosque. Professor Mehmet turned to Professor Oktay and the young people, who were listening attentively, and said:

“Previously, on the site of this mosque, there was a church known as the Church of Jesus, believed to have been commissioned by Byzantine Emperor Theodosius II.”

Professor Mehmet, both narrating and moving through the mosque, proceeded towards the cave section:

“Christian sources state that the Seven Sleepers awoke in the 38th year of Emperor Theodosius II’s reign. According to this, it turns out that the Church of Jesus was built in 446.”

Professor Oktay interjected:

“So, it appears that during the years when Germanicia was at its peak, this place also served as a religious center.”

Professor Mehmet:

“Exactly, professor. This place attracted so much attention that some sources mention Emperor Theodosius II visiting the cave with his wife. In fact, the ancient road the emperor used to come here has been named the ‘King’s Road’ by the locals, and its remnants still exist.”

Serap interjected:

“Very interesting. So, what happened in the following years, professor?”

“When this region came under the rule of the Anatolian Seljuks, Nusreddin Hasan Bey of Maraş built this historic mosque and the complex you see on the ruins of the church. During the Dulkadir period, Alaüddevle Bozkurt Bey valued this structure in his endowment named after him and allocated significant income sources to support the complex’s expenses. In the Ottoman period, the site’s popularity continued to grow. Over time, additional buildings were constructed, and worn sections were repaired. As you can see, the mosque was so well designed that, despite being intertwined

with the sacred cave, it does not clash architecturally.”

Metin interjected:

“Professor, is there nothing left of the church?”

Professor Mehmet:

“We’re currently right where the Church of Jesus once stood. The marble mihrab you see next to the small door that provides access to the cave, along with the four column capitals across from it, have survived from the time of Emperor Theodosius II to the present day. It’s also said that the mihrab was used as a ‘Baptismal Font.’”

Professor Mehmet led the way, with the others following behind, as they passed through a narrow space known as ‘Kısıktaş’ by bending over. The inside of the cave was spacious enough to accommodate five or ten people. The ceiling was lower than a person’s height. At the qibla side, there was an old mihrab carved into the rocks. In one corner of the cave, there was a deep pool formed by clear water collected in a depression among the rocks. Seeing the water container there, Serap turned to Professor Oktay and asked:

“Professor, it seems like this water is drinkable.”

When Professor Oktay hesitated, Professor Mehmet spoke up:

“Of course, visitors drink it with the intention of it being Zamzam water. You can drink it too.”

Professor Mehmet sat down on a rock in the dim light of the cave. In the spiritual atmosphere of this sacred place that witnessed the story of the Seven Sleepers, he wanted to recount what had happened here centuries ago.

He began to recount with such enthusiasm how, during the Roman Period, seven young men took refuge in this cave to avoid worshipping the tyrannical ruler Decianus. He vividly described how they remained here for 309 years,

how everything had changed when they awoke, and how the cruel rulers had disappeared over this historical period, capturing everyone's attention with his passionate storytelling.

As Serap silently listened to Professor Mehmet's narration, savoring the spiritual pleasure of the water she had drunk, vivid scenes of the events unfolded before her eyes like a film reel.

With these feelings, Serap delved into the deepest waters of the sea of dreams. She ventured further and further...

*“No one can serve two masters;
for either he will hate the one and love the other,
or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.”
(Matthew 6:24)*

Chapter VI

A.D. 67

Arabissos, Efsus (Afşin)

Claims that Emperor Nero was responsible for starting the great fire that began in the outskirts of Rome and spread throughout the entire city, lasting for ten days, had been increasing with each passing day.

Nero's wild lifestyle within the palace and his drunkenly uttered one-line poem, “It was at dawn; I set Rome on fire!”, must have been leaked outside the palace. This [poem], fueled by the agitation of the emperor's opponents, led to rumors spreading throughout the empire that Nero was the one who started the fire.

Although Nero initially dismissed such rumors, as time went on and he began to consider that his throne might be at risk, he treated it seriously. He started to counter these claims by asserting that it was not he, but rather the Christians, who had started the fire.

Nero used the fire as a pretext to launch a massive persecution against the Christians, who sought to spread the monotheism. Not stopping there, he also issued orders to

the governors in the most remote corners of the empire, instructing them to deny any right to life to those who believed in the one God.

The new religion, Christianity, had been established in Antioch, one of the largest provinces of the empire, and had begun to spread throughout the world in waves.

According to claims, Jesus of Nazareth, who was said to have been killed by the Jews, had left behind his Apostles—his twelve devoted followers—who were still alive. Some of these distinguished individuals traveled to important centers such as Rome, Babylon, and Carthage to undertake the mission of spreading Christianity. One of these saints, after staying briefly in Germanicia along his route, arrived in Arabissos. He then planned to travel further into Anatolia, dedicating himself to spreading Christianity to wider audiences.

The people of Arabissos, under the pressure of the empire, lived a life distant from the belief in one God. The city was governed by a cruel governor named Dakyanus.

Emperor Nero had sent instructions to Dakyanus, commanding him to “Kill those who oppose,” referring to the Christians.

Dakyanus, Emperor Nero’s command as a sacred duty and initiated such a massacre against the Christians that...

Using spies within the city, he secretly captured those who worshipped and had them killed through unimaginable tortures.

It was known that he hung the bodies of the people on the city walls for days as a warning.

Dakyanus’s cruelty towards the people of Arabissos had reached such extremes that it seemed to rival even Emperor Nero in its severity.

An apostle assigned to spread Christianity in Anatolia had first reached Germanicia and then, after a long and exhausting journey, arrived in Arabissos. When he attempted to enter through the main gate on the northern side of the city, one of the guards stood in his way and said:

“Stop, stranger, where are you going?”

Saint John, taken aback, replied:

“I have come to visit Arabissos.”

The guard, pointing to a large stone statue nearby, said:

“You must first bow down to our god!”

The saint paused for a moment, as his beliefs prevented him from worshiping a mere piece of stone. He said to the guard:

“I will only bow down to the God who is the Lord of heaven and earth!”

“It is Dakyanus’s command! Will you worship or not?”

The guard, aiming his spear at the saint, said:

“Are you one of them, then?”

“Who do you mean by ‘them’?”

“Don’t act like you don’t know!”

“I am a stranger; how would I know?”

“Haven’t you heard of the followers of Shepherd Jesus?”

Another guard, approaching them angrily, said:

“Either worship or leave immediately!”

Pointing with his hand to a dry log a short distance away, he said:

“If the commander comes, he will cut off your head! If you don’t want to lose your life, leave here immediately without being seen!”

The saint, not wanting to harm the cause he believed in right at the beginning of his journey, still had a long way to

go. He mounted his horse and, reciting Bible verses to himself, headed northwest towards Arabissos.

At the foot of Mount Bencilius, there was a large water source in the shade of willow trees. As he advanced through the valley, he came across an old stone building amidst the gardens, resembling a bathhouse. Crossing a primitive wooden bridge, he reached the building. Having traveled a long distance, his hair and beard were covered in dust. He tied his horse to a tree, slung his satchel over his shoulder, and walked towards the building. The old man at the door said:

“Have you come to bathe?”

“We wish to cleanse ourselves of our dirt.”

“Leave your satchel on the shelf here, go inside and clean yourself as you wish. You can also wash your clothes with the hot water.”

After thanking the old man, the saint thoroughly washed both his body and his dirty clothes in the bathhouse. When he came outside, he saw the old man seated under the shade of a tree, having a meal. Calling out to the saint, he said:

“It’s clear you’ve come a long way. You must be hungry. I’ve boiled some eggs; come and eat with me.”

The saint, having put on the new clothes from his satchel and tidied his hair and beard, sat down at the table. The old man said:

“Where have you come from, and where are you going?”

“I have come from Antioch. I wanted to enter Arabissos, but...”

After a brief silence, the old man looked around to ensure no one was nearby, then said:

“They didn’t let you in because you wouldn’t worship Dakyanus, and then you made it all the way here, is that right?”

The saint replied:

“That’s correct.”

“You probably don’t have a place to stay now.”

“Everywhere is the Lord’s domain. Those who believe in Him do not suffer from solitude. Look, He has brought you to me.”

“Don’t make any noise; there are informers everywhere.”

The old man was a fatherly figure. Despite being in his seventies, he was still vigorous. He was weary of the taxes imposed by Dakyanus and seemed to have retreated here to avoid witnessing the oppression inflicted upon the people. He rarely went into the city unless absolutely necessary and ran this bathhouse, a family heirloom, on his own.

His house was right next to the bathhouse. He always had guests. He hosted his friends in his small home after they visited the bathhouse. He sustained himself with vegetables grown in his garden according to the season and the meat and milk from the few chickens, sheep, and goats he kept. His days passed in this way.

The bathhouse was a wellknown establishment in the region. Occasionally, noble families would also bathe here.

The old man Tityos, no longer able to move quickly due to his age, worked alone because he had not found anyone suitable to work with him. Suddenly, raising his head from the table, he said to the saint:

“Will you work with me?”

The saint had not expected such a thing. Without thinking, he answered instinctively:

“Why not! I couldn’t enter Arabissos, but perhaps I can be of help here.”

“Alright then. Rest today, and we’ll start working to-

gether at dawn tomorrow. We'll share what we earn. Wealthy patrons give generous tips, so make sure to accept them; otherwise, they might get upset..."

Though the Nazarene saint initially faced some challenges in his new role as a bath attendant, he gradually adapted more with each passing day. While performing his duties, he began to subtly share the message of Christianity with the bathhouse visitors, particularly the youth, even if only through indirect means.

One morning, Tityos arrived with excitement:

"People from Dakyanus's palace are coming. Quickly clean up the place. Throw plenty of wood into the praefurnium so that the furnace doesn't go out and the water stays warm."

Just as he was about to leave, he turned back:

"Ah! By the way, keep your mouth shut. Otherwise, it will be the end for both of us."

"Don't worry."

After Tityos warmly welcomed the two young men from the palace at the entrance of the bathhouse and had them tie their horses in the garden. The older of the two was Santikos's son, one of the palace officials. He often bathed at this bathhouse and claimed to find peace here. Today, he had come with a friend. Pointing to his companion, he said to the old man:

"The son of the palace scribe."

Tityos thanked them and ushered the young men inside. He took them to the section reserved for the bathhouse's special clients and, pointing to the attendant who was waiting for them, said:

"He has just started working here. The visitors have

been very pleased with him. I hope you will be satisfied with his service as well.”

Both young men had been raised in the palace. Their father placed great importance on their education to ensure they would become competent administrators. That day, Dakyanus had organized a grand festival in a highland near the city and had compelled everyone to attend.

The young men who came to the bathhouse, not enjoying the palace festivities, had secretly come here, disobeying Dakyanus’s orders. Since everyone had gone to the entertainment, the bathhouse was quiet. After a few customers had bathed and left, there was no one left inside.

The saint was looking for an opportunity to talk with the young men. When they were alone, he began:

“Could you please tell me your names?”

The elder one said:

“Yemliha,”

The other replied:

“Mislina.”

Tityos stood guard by the bathhouse door, watching over it as if on duty, just in case. The saint was attending to the young men with special care, washing them individually. Yemliha, surprised by this unfamiliar level of service, could no longer hold back and said:

“You seem to possess more courtesy than just a mere attendant.”

The saint, momentarily fearing that his secret might be exposed, but in order not to lie:

“Thank you, Yemliha,” he simply said.

Seeing that the attendant was apprehensive around him, Yemliha stopped bathing to make him more comfortable. He sat down next to the attendant:

“You can speak comfortably with me,” he said.

Knowing that the young men were from the palace, the saint was paying extra attention to his words. He remained cautious, keeping Tityos’s warning, “keep your mouth shut!” in mind. At Yemliha’s comment, he was unsure where to start the conversation.

Yemliha glanced around, plucking up all his courage, and then slowly said:

“I know who you are!”

With these words, they both stared deeply into each other’s eyes, as if they were watching each other’s souls in all their reality through their gazes.

Yemliha:

“You’ve shared some things with a friend of mine who is one of your clients. I was curious, so I came here today for that reason. We would like to hear what you’ve said as well.”

The saint to ensure its accuracy:

“What is your friend’s name?”

“Mekselina.”

After thinking for a moment:

“I remember now, he was also from the palace,” he said, and continued:

“Did he tell you everything we talked about?”

“Yes...”

Pointing to his friend, he said:

“Did Mislina hear these things too?”

“Yes, he knows everything as well.”

The Nazarene saint faced both young men. This time, he delved into more sensitive and profound topics, rather than speaking as he had with ordinary people before.

He explained at great length the reasons for the creation of the world, the origin and destiny of humanity, the truth of death, resurrection after death, destiny, the prophets, the principles of Christianity, and the conveniences of monotheism, providing examples throughout.

During the conversation, he had also read passages from the Bible:

“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

(Matthew 6:24-34)

The spirits of Yemliha and Misliha had been so lifted by what was being said that Yemliha could not hold back:

“Are these your words?”

“No! These are things we heard from our Lord Jesus.”

“Did He say that?”

“It was revealed to him through revelation.”

None of the three noticed how time passed. They left, promising not to reveal this secret and to meet again at another time and place.

One day, Dakyanus’s spoiled son, accompanied by a loose woman, arrived at the bathhouse door and said to the old Tityos:

“Immediately remove the customers inside!”

Tityos aghastly said:

“But sir,” Tityos began to say. Before he could finish his sentence, Dakyanus’s son, pointing to the girl beside him, said:

“It seems you didn’t understand what I said; we are going in!”

Tityos was having difficulty responding.

Dakyanus’s son could not tolerate it any longer:

“Are you defying my orders?” he shouted.

Tityos, with his trembling voice:

He could only manage to say, “I am not defying you, sir.”

He seized Tityos by the collar and pushed him:

“You asked for this, old man!” he said.

When Tityos collapsed to the ground, Dakyanus’s son, along with the girl, quickly burst into the bathhouse. Once inside, they forced out a few of the bathhouse patrons and the attendant the saint, locking the door from the inside.

Tityos and the saint were powerless to do anything. Both had sat down under a tree and engaged in conversa-

tion when suddenly they were jolted by a loud noise. Tityos sprang up and ran toward the source of the sound. With a shoulder charge, he broke down the bathhouse door and rushed inside. He couldn't believe his eyes at the sight. The saint, who followed closely behind, was equally stunned.

Just now, Dakyanus's son, who had entered the bathhouse for entertainment with the woman accompanying him, had perished beneath the collapsing large dome.

When the news reached Dakyanus, he screamed the place down. He set the palace in an uproar. With fury, he said to his aides:

He shouted, "This cannot be an accident; this is murder!" and issued orders:

"Whoever did it must be found and killed immediately!"

A few days later, one of those who had heard what the saint said in the bath, fearing Dakyanus's wrath, went to the palace and denounced him to Dacian, as if he wanted to keep himself away from these affairs:

"A bath attendant, who presented himself as an apostle of Shepherd Jesus, was inciting customers against you. Even your assistant Yemini's sons, Yemliha and Mekselina, were among them. The sons of Yesar, one of the palace officials, Mernuş, Tebernuş, and Sezernuş—are also in contact with this sorcerer and listen to his magical words. From time to time they gather in secluded places to plot against you and plot to take your throne from you. That bath attendant cast a spell that collapsed the dome. He could do the same to your palace..."

At these words, Dakyanus, enraged and shouted at the guards:

"Immediately capture that sorcerer and bring him to me!"

The Saint must have foreseen what was going to happen, because after that incident, he met with the most zealous youths from the circle of followers, Yemliha, Mekselina, Mislina, Mernuş, Tebernuş, and Sezernuş, whom he had been teaching. He put them in the picture. The youths saw the danger and told the Saint to leave, lest he incur the wrath of Dakyanus.

After giving his last advice to the youths, the Saint embraced each of them individually and said goodbye. In the twilight of the evening, in tears, as he said goodbye to Arabissos, he knew neither his fate nor what might happen to the young people he had left behind.

The six youths from Efsus, unaware that they had been denounced, were gathered as usual at their meeting place, engaged in prayer and worship. Suddenly, Dacian's soldiers burst in, insulting them, chaining their hands, and bringing them before Dakyanus.

When he saw the young people standing in front of him, their clothes torn, covered in dust and dirt, their hair disheveled, bruised and battered, Dakyanus:

"You are the sons of my closest friends. You grew up in my palace. While everyone in my country worships me and sacrifices to me, you followed the words of a madman when you should have been setting an example for the people of the city. If that murderous sorcerer hadn't fled with the bath attendant, I would have killed them myself!"

Dakyanus stood up, his anger so intense that he was at a loss for what to do. After taking a few steps in front of the youths, he said:

"You should be in the dungeon now, but I'm giving you some time. Either you will worship me like my people, or you will die by my hand!"

The eldest of the youths, Mekselina, responded resolutely:

“The God we believe in is the Creator of the heavens and the earth. Those who are mortal cannot be creators. It is our Lord who created you and granted you your rule.”

The youths were all risking death. They made it clear to Dakyanus that they would worship no deity other than God.

For a moment Dakyanus grabbed his sword, but he could hardly hold himself back. Some of the guards had raised their spears, while others had raised their swords, but at the last moment, Dakyanus:

“Stop!” he shouted, and the soldiers’ hands remained in the air.

At that moment, all eyes were on Dakyanus. While those present wondered what kind of torture he would use to kill them, Dakyanus turned to the youths and, with all his composure, said:

“I still can’t believe what kind of a spell that treacherous bath attendant cast on you to make you like this.”

After thinking for a moment, he said:

“I am in no hurry to pass judgment on you now. When the spell is broken, you will all regret what you have done. I’m going to Germanicia for a short time. Until I return, everyone should think carefully. The choice is yours: either you will live like lions in my palace or you will become prey for my lions!”

Turning to the guards:

“You can unchain them.”

The youths knew what would happen to them. To escape Dakyanus’s wrath and practice their faith freely, they decided to go to another town. A few days later, they sneaked out of the north gate of the city.

As they had just left the city, a shepherd appeared on

the rural road. Thinking that they were travelers, the shepherd, after a short conversation, handed them food from his saddlebag:

“You can eat on the way when you get hungry.”

They were tired, so they sat down with the shepherd and talked a bit more. When the shepherd heard words he had never heard before, he must have warmed to the youths, for he said to them:

“I want to come with you as well.”

Yemliha:

“How could it be? Won’t your sheep be left unattended?”

The shepherd:

“You mentioned that everything has an owner... Besides, don’t worry, they know their way back to the pen better than I do.”

“Won’t wolves tear them apart on the road?”

“Isn’t the owner of both the wolf and the lamb the same?”

Seeing the shepherd’s sincerity, Yemliha said:

“Go on then, say goodbye to your flock and come with us. We’re leaving.”

The shepherd went to his sheep, stroked them, and kissed the lambs on their eyes. Then, he wanted to say goodbye to his dog and he was surprised to find that the dog had already reached the youths before him. Despite his best efforts to persuade the dog to stay with the flock, the dog did not leave.

The youngest of the youths, Mernuş, was frightened when he saw the dog. However, the dog looked so sorrowful that it seemed to communicate with its expression, “Don’t be afraid of me. I am your friend. I will keep watch and guard while you are asleep.”

Yemliha said to the shepherd:

“What is your dog’s name?”

“Kitmir.”

“Everything happens for a reason.”

Speaking as if to the dog:

“Kitmir, you come with us as well.”

When the dog heard these words, it turned towards the flock.

Yemliha:

“It seems Kitmir doesn’t want to travel with us,” said.

The shepherd:

“No, no, he’s just saying goodbye to the lambs he has never been apart from since birth. Don’t worry, it will catch up with us.”

The shepherd and his dog joined them. They traveled through places where no one could see them. The time had long passed, and the sun had long since passed over the mountains. They came across a small cave entrance on the eastern side of a hill that they had never noticed before. When they entered and looked inside, Yemliha said:

“We can spend the night here.”

Before going to sleep, they all prayed together:

“O our Lord, grant us mercy from Yourself and make it easy for us to reach salvation and righteousness in this situation we are in.”

In the morning, Yemliha said to his friends:

“We know that believers face oppression in the places we are going. This place is secure.”

Inside the cave, pointing to a small pool of water among the stones:

“Look, we have water here as well. We can secretly go

to the city to get the rest of our supplies. This way, we'll also hear about what's happening."

They all agreed to stay in the cave.

A few days later, Yemliha said to the shepherd Kefeştateyyus:

"Dakyanus's soldiers won't recognize you. Go to the city; you can get the supplies and find out if Dakyanus has returned."

Kefeştateyyus knew the secluded paths to the city. He secretly got the supplies and returned to the cave.

The shepherd could go in and out of the city with ease. On his last visit, he learned that Dakyanus had returned from Germanicia. He came to the cave excitedly and told his friends:

"Dakyanus's soldiers are searching for you everywhere!"

Upon hearing this news, they all prostrated themselves. Yemliha, maintaining his composure, said to his friends:

"Brothers, do not be afraid; lift your heads! We embarked on this journey knowing the risks. He is the Most Merciful and Forgiving. Let us be patient with faith."

At this time, the sun was directly overhead. After eating their meal, they sat and talked, discussing among themselves. Mekselina, the eldest among them, raised his hands to the sky and prayed with the most sincere feelings. After the prayer, they fell into such a deep sleep that...

Their dog, Kitmir, always kept watch at the entrance of the cave. Under the influence of the same spiritual atmosphere, he extended his paws forward and fell asleep along with them.

When Dakyanus returned, he first inquired about the youths. When he ordered them to be brought to him, his assistants, with their heads bowed in shame, said:

“After you left, they secretly left the city. Since that day, we have searched everywhere but have been unable to find any trace of them.”

Dakyanus, getting angry, said:

“How is that possible! Do they not know my wrath? Find and bring them back immediately, no matter what hideout they have gone into!”

Growing even angrier, he said:

“Bring me their father!”

When their father was brought before Dakyanus, he said:

“Why did your sons flee?”, he screamed the place down.

Their father pleaded:

“We have not rebelled against you. We follow you. But our children have betrayed both you and us. They did not listen to us. We do not know where they have gone. If you catch them, hand them over to us so that we can punish them with our own hands and offer them as a sacrifice for you. This is the only way we can prove our loyalty to you.”

They pleaded, cried, and begged for mercy. Dakyanus did not want to blame the sins of the children on their father. He believed their words, accepted their plea for clemency, and released them. However, Dakyanus did not let the matter rest. He did everything in his power to find them and offered substantial rewards for their capture.

After a while, the special troops were deployed and found the traces of the youths in the cave where they were hiding. Although the soldiers tried to enter the cave, a sudden and violent gust of wind blew everyone away. No matter what they did, they could not get in. Dakyanus, who

claimed to be a god, was also there. Faced with this situation, he too was ridiculed. One of his men said to Dakyanus:

“Isn’t our goal to capture and kill them?”

“Certainly, to kill them...”

“Then, let’s seal the entrance of the cave with stones so that they die there.”

Dakyanus’s eyes gleamed:

“I would never have thought of killing someone with such a torment.”

Shouting to those around him:

“Immediately seal the entrance of the cave!”

The youths showed no reaction. They no longer needed anything.

In Dakyanus’s palace, there were two others who, like them, hid their faith. Amid the chaos, these individuals approached Dakyanus and said:

“After years, no one will know that you were the one who killed these youths. However, future generations should be aware of your power.”

“What can I do?”

“If you inscribe the names of these youths and what happened to them on a metal plate and leave it in the cave, future generations will know what you did and understand your power, even after centuries have passed.”

“You’re right!”

As the entrance of the cave was about to be completely sealed, they placed the prepared metal plate inside the cave. Dakyanus did not neglect to have his soldiers keep watch in front of the cave for days. From time to time, he couldn’t help but wonder, “How did they die?”

Germanicia was now a Roman city

Chapter VII

A.D. 72

Germanicia

The last king of Commagene, IV. Antiochus, had been on the throne for over thirty years. Antiochus' collaboration with the Parthians must have angered the new Roman Emperor Vespasian, as Emperor Vespasian soon abolished the Kingdom of Commagene. He incorporated its lands into the Roman province of Syria.

From the second century onward, Germanicia had become entirely a Roman city. Its location at the crossroads of trade routes made it strategically important. Thus, Germanicia established itself as one of the wealthiest cities in the region.

Perhaps for this reason, the empire also granted Germanicia the right to mint its own coins.

The symbols on the coins minted in Germanicia were quite significant. On the obverse of the silver coins, the name and title of the emperor were inscribed, while the reverse depicted the city's name within wreath, alongside an image of the goddess Tyche, who was associated with fate and good fortune, seated on a rock, and the River God Ge-

nus, with flowing rivers beneath his feet.

The city officials of Germanicia, by imprinting these symbols on their coins, demonstrated their loyalty to the emperor while also highlighting local values by featuring the image of the Pyramos River, which flowed near the city, on the coins.

Despite all the difficulties, Christianity continued to spread and strengthen every day. One of the closest cities to Germanicia, Antioch, had been a significant religious center in both political and military terms since the early years of Christianity. For this reason, Antioch played a crucial role in reaching out to communities beyond Jerusalem.

While the Church of Jerusalem was composed solely of Jews, Antioch was made up of people from various groups who had embraced the new religion, including Hebrews, Assyrians, and Greeks.

Over time, the Church of Jerusalem became quite apprehensive upon witnessing the acceptance of the Christian faith by various ethnic groups in Antioch. To manage the situation under their own control, they sent Saint Barnabas to oversee and inspect the developments.

Barnabas, upon arriving in Antioch and assessing the situation, quickly grasped the local realities. He soon adopted the methods of the Antiochene Church himself. Despite the resistance from Jerusalem, Barnabas sought ways to further strengthen Antioch. He brought his friend, Saint Paul, from Tarsus to the city.

Both saints found a more conducive working environment in Antioch. Leveraging the privileges of Roman citizenship enjoyed by the region's inhabitants, they rapidly increased the number of converts to Christianity. Christianity thus became a continually growing and strengthening community in the region.

The term “Christianity” for the organized new religion began to be used for the first time in Antioch.

With the growth and strengthening of the community, disagreements began to emerge from time to time especially between the Hebrew origin Christians and those who had converted from paganism to Christianity in Antioch.

To resolve the issues, the Church of Jerusalem supported the establishment of a Theological School in Antioch by sending St. Peter, one of Jesus’s apostles, to create a peaceful environment there.

St. Peter became the first patriarch of the theological school, while Eupheus was appointed as the second patriarch.

However, Emperor Nero saw Patriarch Eupheus as a threat and did not hesitate to have him brutally killed.

The city of Germanicia, while being governed by the strict rules of the empire, also strived to be one of the peaceful cities of the region within the spiritual climate of the new religion.

As the city underwent social changes, it also continued to develop in terms of construction activities day by day.

While Germanicia initially appeared as an old city centered around a fortress, it quickly transformed into a new and modern city with wealthy and aristocratic Romans when the water brought from the springs was transported to the wide slopes suitable for settlement in the eastern part of the city.

In this newly developed area, modern villas and new mansions were quickly built while new temples and churches were built. The society was steadily moving towards a freer and more liberated lifestyle with each passing day.

By the end of the fourth century, a great miracle occurred in the region. People flocked to visit the site of the miracle, eager to see and experience what was happening there.

It seems they vanished...

Chapter VIII

A.D. 377

Arabissos (Efsus)

In Arabissos, seven young men who had sought refuge in a cave to escape the tyranny of the rulers of the time woke up 309 years later. This great event caused a tremendous excitement among the people.

When the young men in the cave opened their eyes after a long sleep, their state of mind was as if they had gone to bed in the evening and woken up in the morning. First, they washed their hands and faces in the nearby water pool. Feeling hungry, Yemliha said to his friends:

“Let me go get some food this time.”

Mislina:

“Go, but don’t get caught by the soldiers of Dakyanus,” said.

As Yemliha exited the cave, he climbed over a small pile of rubble. He couldn’t make sense of it, but he didn’t dwell on it too much.

When Yemliha entered the city, he didn’t notice the changes around him. He went to the bakery where they always got their bread, but it was no longer there. Thinking he might have lost his way, he wandered around the streets of

Efsus (Arabissos) in a state of confusion.

He entered another bakery he came across. When he handed over the money for the bread, he was caught like a deer in the headlights. He looked first at the coin and then at Yemliha. Excitedly, he passed the silver coin to his master, saying:

“Will this money be accepted?”

The baker took the coin, examined it thoroughly for a long time, and then said to himself:

“It has the image of Dakyanus on it...”

Turning to Yemliha, he said:

“Do you have any more of this money?”

“Yes, I have more.”

The baker said to those around him:

“Have you seen this man before?”

They all responded:

“We haven’t seen him before, master.”

Thinking they had stumbled upon a treasure, the baker held Yemliha by the arm and handed him over to the guards.

The guards brought Yemliha before the governor:

“This man has an old coin. When we saw Dakyanus’s image on the coin, we suspected he might have found a treasure. We thought you should know,” they said.

Seeing that Yemliha was frightened, the governor, in an attempt to reassure him, said to the guards:

“Wait outside.”

He seated Yemliha in a chair there.

“Tell me everything from the beginning,” he said.

Yemliha kept explaining that they had fled from Dakyanus’s persecution and that they would be killed if caught.

The governor could no longer tolerate it and said:

“Dakyanus is no more; he is dead. Why are you afraid of him?”

After calming down a bit, Yemliha said:

“Is Dakyanus really dead?”

“Yes, and three centuries ago.”

The governor continued:

“Where have you been? How could you not know that Dakyanus is dead?”

Yemliha repeated that they had hidden in the cave to escape Dakyanus’s tyranny.

The governor found it hard to believe:

“How can a man live in a cave for three hundred years?”

Then, as if answering his own question, he said:

“If God wills it, He can make one live not just three hundred years, but even longer. Don’t our grains stay in the caves for years? When they fall to the ground, don’t they come back to life and sprout?”

The governor’s mind was in turmoil. He offered Yemliha refreshments and tried to put him at ease. He said to Yemliha:

“Can you take me to the cave?”

Yemliha hesitated at first, unsure of how his friends would react. However, he believed in the governor’s sincerity. He thought to himself, “Since Dakyanus is dead and no one is following us,” and then said to the governor:

“I can take you there.”

The governor was very pleased. Without loss of time, he took his guards with him and set out. When they reached the hill where the cave was located, Yemliha said:

“Wait here. I’ll go ahead and inform my friends. They

might be afraid of your soldiers.”

When Yemliha entered the cave, Mislina was waiting at the entrance with excitement. Calling out to his friends, Mislina said:

“There’s noise coming from outside, and it sounds quite crowded. Dakyanus has probably found us!”

Yemliha told his friends everything that had happened. When he mentioned that Dakyanus was dead and that the new governor was a good person, Mislina said:

“Don’t let them deceive you. We have only been asleep here for a day or even less. How is that possible?”

Yemliha:

“At first, I didn’t believe it either, but when I went to the city, everything had changed. Even the name had changed; it’s now called Efsus. The shops where I used to shop had been replaced by large buildings. All of this didn’t happen in just one day, did it?”

Mislina fell silent for a while:

“So, does that mean no one is looking for us now?”

Mernuş interjected:

“If Dakyanus is dead, does that mean we’re safe now?”

Mislina:

“So why are the soldiers outside here?”

Yemliha:

“The governor is very worried about us; he has come as well.”

“Why would he be worried?”

“We’ve been in the cave for three hundred years. Everyone has been wondering about us for years.”

“Is that so?”

“It seems that way...”

When there was no news from Yemliha, the governor grew impatient. Turning to his guard, he said:

“This boy is very late. Take a look and see if they might have escaped.”

The guards went to the cave but found no one inside. They came back to the governor and said, “There is no one in the cave!”

The governor, with excitement, said:

“How is that possible? Is Yemliha not here either?”

“There’s no one here.”

The governor, increasingly curious and angry, said:

“Let me take a look myself!”

The governor, along with his guards, entered the cave. Seeing no one, he said:

“Look everywhere and see if there might be another hidden exit.”

After a thorough search, the guards found a metal plate with inscriptions on it in a corner. They handed the plate to the governor and said:

“There is no other exit from the cave, but we found this.”

The governor studied the plate for a long time. He read what was written on it, had difficulty in standing. He sat down on a nearby rock and said to himself, “Everything that was said is true.”

After a brief moment of reflection, he lifted his head slightly and, with a deep sigh, said:

“It seems they vanished...”

*“And they remained in their cave for three hundred years
and exceeded by nine.”*

Surah Al-Kahf, Ayat (Verse) 25

Chapter IX

A.D. 377

Efsus (Afşin)

From that day on, the story of the Seven Sleepers spread from mouth to mouth. The people regarded the cave as a sacred place. People from Germanicia, Antioch, and other distant and nearby cities flocked to see the cave.

The events in Efsus soon became a topic of discussion at the heart of the empire as well. Emperor Theodosius II, along with his wife, visited Efsus. They visited the cave and offered their prayers.

When Emperor Theodosius II saw the excitement and affection of the people who welcomed him and the crowd gathered in front of the cave, he instructed the governor of Efsus to build a grand temple, including the cave, which would be known as the “The Church of Jesus” with the characteristics of a complex.

The governor of Efsus quickly carried out Emperor Theodosius II’s order.

The Church of Jesus, built to cherish the memory of the Seven Sleepers, served not only as a place for visitors from

near and far to stay overnight but also became a boarding school for training clergy.

The governor of Efsus, occasionally feeling weary of state affairs, would come here and find solace by standing before the mihrab and praying for a long time.

The reverence for the Cave of the Seven Sleepers in Efsus continued to grow and persist over the centuries.

With the spiritual tranquility from the water she drank in the cave, Serap went to the marble mihrab, a remnant of the Church of Jesus from the era of Emperor Theodosius II. While her friends explored other parts, she took a headscarf and a Quran from a shelf on the wall. She withdrew to a quiet corner, knelt down, and began to silently read the verses of Surah AlKahf from the Turkish translation of the Quran.

She began to silently recite the verses of Surah AlKahf:

11. So We cast [a cover of sleep] over their ears within the cave for a number of years.

12. Then We awakened them that We might show which of the two factions was most precise in calculating what [extent] they had remained in time.

13. It is We who relate to you, [O Muhammad], their story in truth. Indeed, they were youths who believed in their Lord, and We increased them in guidance.

14,15. And We made firm their hearts when they stood up and said, "Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. Never will we invoke besides Him any deity. We would have certainly spoken, then, an excessive transgression. These, our people, have taken besides Him deities. Why do they not bring for [worship of] them a clear authority? And who is more unjust than one who invents about Allah a lie?"

16. [The youths said to one another], "And when you

have withdrawn from them and that which they worship other than Allah, retreat to the cave. Your Lord will spread out for you of His mercy and will prepare for you from your affair facility.”

17. And [had you been present], you would see the sun when it rose, inclining away from their cave on the right, and when it set, passing away from them on the left, while they were [laying] within an open space thereof. That was from the signs of Allah. He whom Allah guides is the [rightly] guided, but he whom He leaves astray – never will you find for him a protecting guide.

18. And you would think them awake, while they were asleep. And We turned them to the right and to the left, while their dog stretched his forelegs at the entrance. If you had looked at them, you would have turned from them in flight and been filled by them with terror.

19. And similarly, We awakened them that they might question one another. Said a speaker from among them, “How long have you remained [here]?” They said, “We have remained a day or part of a day.” They said, “Your Lord is most knowing of how long you remained. So send one of you with this silver coin of yours to the city and let him look to which is the best of food and bring you provision from it and let him be cautious. And let no one be aware of you.

20. Indeed, if they come to know of you, they will stone you or return you to their religion. And never would you succeed, then – ever.”

21. And similarly, We caused them to be found that they [who found them] would know that the promise of Allah is truth and that of the Hour there is no doubt. [That was] when they disputed among themselves about their affair and [then] said, “Construct over them a structure. Their Lord is most knowing about them.” Said those who pre-

ailed in the matter, “We will surely take [for ourselves] over them a masjid.”

22. They will say there were three, the fourth of them being their dog; and they will say there were five, the sixth of them being their dog – guessing at the unseen; and they will say there were seven, and the eighth of them was their dog. Say, [O Muhammad], “My Lord is most knowing of their number. None knows them except a few. So do not argue about them except with an obvious argument and do not inquire about them among [the speculators] from anyone.”

23. And never say of anything, “Indeed, I will do that tomorrow,”

24. Except [when adding], “If Allah wills.” And remember your Lord when you forget [it] and say, “Perhaps my Lord will guide me to what is nearer than this to right conduct.”

25. And they remained in their cave for three hundred years and exceeded by nine.

26. Say, “Allah is most knowing of how long they remained. He has [knowledge of] the unseen [aspects] of the heavens and the earth. How Seeing is He and how Hearing! They have not besides Him any protector, and He shares not His legislation with anyone.”

There must be a solution to this problem...

Chapter X

One evening, Ayhan went to Metin's house and said:

"Shall we go for a drive?"

Metin, without hesitation, replied:

"Sure."

Ayhan hadn't seen Serap and Metin for two weeks. Being so close to Serap yet feeling so distant from her was driving him nearly insane.

After picking up Metin and driving a little ways, Ayhan, in order to satisfy his curiosity, asked:

"You haven't been around at all. What have you been up to? You haven't called even on the weekends."

Metin:

"We were with Professor Oktay. We went to Kahramanmaraş Castle, and he told us about the city's history."

As soon as Ayhan heard Professor Oktay's name, his expression changed dramatically.

"Oh, is that so?"

Metin continued:

"Recently, we also went to Afşin."

Ayhan, as if favoring Professor Oktay, said:

“Professor is very tired at school. It would be better not to trouble him. I can offer you any kind of help you need.”

“Professor Oktay does this on purpose and with pleasure. In fact, he even said he would take us to Andırın Fortresses next week.”

“With these words, Ayhan began to harbor even more ill will toward Professor Oktay. Seeing the silence in Ayhan, Metin said:

“If you want, you can come with us.”

Ayhan’s morale further declined. His friends’ growing closeness to Professor Oktay meant they were distancing themselves from him. For a moment he became anxious that he wouldn’t be able to implement the clever plans he had conceived in his mind. He thought to himself, “I have to do whatever it takes to free them from Professor Oktay and bring them under my control.” For this reason, he accepted Metin’s offer without hesitation:

“Why not? I really like the professor. We can go with my car as well.”

Ayhan, to cover all his bases, raised his head as if he had just remembered something and said:

“Serap will be coming too, right?”

“Of course she’ll come. She listens so attentively to what the professor says...”

With these words, Ayhan’s resentment towards Professor Oktay intensified even further. He had begun to feel jealous of Serap from Professor Oktay. Although he had considered provoking Metin against the professor, he decided against it. He didn’t want to stir up trouble.

Metin was warming up to Ayhan more and more each day. Believing that Ayhan had moved past his feelings about

Serap, he began sharing everything with him. He no longer held any resentment towards Ayhan. In fact, he often thought to himself, “I misjudged him; he’s not like that at all.”

To regain control over his friends and get closer to Metin, Ayhan wanted to take him to Pınarbaşı, one of the city’s most beautiful recreational spots, known for its centuries-old plane trees, and spend some time there.

As they slowly drove through the city’s old, narrow streets, their conversation was getting deeper. At one point, Metin interjected:

“I don’t know how I’m going to get out of this situation.”

Ayhan’s eyes lit up. He thought Metin was going to talk about his feelings for Serap and, with excitement, said:

“What do you mean?”

“I’m very curious about how this will end!”

Ayhan became even more excited:

“Come on, tell me, I’m really curious now!”

“What will it be, Germanicia...”

Ayhan took a deep breath. Metin continued:

“I’ve started to feel like a treasure hunter.”

With these words, a light bulb went on in Ayhan’s head. He quickly took his foot off the gas, turned the steering wheel sharply to the right. Metin, excitedly, said:

“Did something happen?”

“I think I got the streets mixed up.”

Ayhan began driving his car towards one of the outskirts instead of Pınarbaşı.

In response to Metin’s earlier comment:

“Don’t worry, I’ll support you.”

“Thanks, I’m sure you’ll help.”

As Ayhan and Metin drove through the side streets of Kahramanmaraş, their conversation continued. The car slowed down in the middle of the street they had just entered. On the right side of the road, there was a twostory, old, detached house with a cafélike establishment on the ground floor. As they passed directly in front of it, Ayhan pointed with his hand:

“This is the treasure hunters’ café.”

Metin turned his head toward the café. The interior was not clearly visible in the dim light, but in front of the door, a person dressed in tattered clothes was sitting on one of the chairs and smoking a cigarette, with his foot on the other chair.

When the man in front of the café saw the car slow down, he suddenly became agitated. He looked carefully into the car. Upon seeing Ayhan, he seemed to relax a bit.

There was always someone stationed in front of the café as a precaution. During his visits to Kahramanmaraş, Ayhan, due to his work as a museum curator, had occasionally encountered people here. The man at the door recognized Ayhan but had never seen the person with him before. Not sensing any danger, he did not signal to his associates inside:

With resentment, Metin said to Ayhan:

“These are history killers!”

Ayhan hadn’t expected such words from Metin:

“Don’t say that; some of them are licensed.”

“Well, have they ever delivered anything they found to the museum?”

After thinking for a moment, Ayhan replied:

“You’re right... But just in case you ever happen to pass by...”

“Why would that ever happen?”

"I don't know, I thought maybe they might have something related to your research topic or know something about it."

"God forbid!"

Ayhan didn't linger there any longer. He drove off quickly and continued on his way.

It was clear that Ayhan had taken a meaning from Metin's words, "I feel like a treasure hunter!" He had suddenly abandoned the idea of going to Pınarbaşı and instead tried to cloud Metin's mind by showing him the location of the treasure hunters' café.

Professor Oktay had given Serap and Metin his research file the last time they met. Although Serap had reviewed it briefly, Metin hadn't reviewed it at all.

Metin's mental state was deteriorating more with each passing day. As Serap immersed herself in academic work, Metin felt that Serap no longer showed him the same interest as before, which inevitably bothered him. On top of that, since they hadn't found any tangible clues about Germanicia, he found himself muttering, "What was I thinking, coming all the way out here!"

Confused, Metin didn't know what to do when he got home. He went out on the balcony, needing a moment to clear his head. The surroundings were dark, and there was no one in the streets. Thinking that his tea must be ready, he went back inside and sat down at the table. As he sipped his tea, he couldn't shake the thoughts of his conversation with Ayhan. He muttered to himself, "Relying on those history killers, getting involved with them..." "No, no, that's not like me; I'm an archaeologist!" as if he had committed a crime, he paused for a moment, "But there must be a solution to this problem."

Even though Metin thought of contacting the treasure hunters and seeing if they had any relevant materials, the internal conflict he experienced troubled his conscience significantly. As he pondered this dilemma in his mind, he continued to sip his tea.

As he drank his tea, glanced at the files that Professor Oktay had given him. Unconsciously, he flipped through a few pages. He began to casually read the sections about the rise of the ancient city of Germanicia and the period's belief systems—topics that Professor Oktay hadn't had a chance to explain.

His curiosity was further piqued when he read that Nestorius, the founder of the Nestorian sect in Christianity, who believed that Jesus was not God but a human with divine attributes, was born in Germanicia. This intrigued him even more, especially since he had a friend from Nusaybin at university who shared a similar belief. He recalled his friend for a moment and continued reading with great interest.

He casually read through a few pages. The content transported him so vividly that he found himself suddenly taken back centuries to Germanicia, a city where art, architecture, and aesthetics reigned. He envisioned wandering alone through the city's marblepaved streets, squares, and avenues. He explored the modern villas, mansions, and temples of Germanicia, interacting with its inhabitants, Monophysites, and Nestorians. He observed their struggles with faith and daily lives.

As Metin lost himself in the chair he was sitting in, his mind had already plunged into a dynamic realm of dreams, embarking on an astral journey far away...

*"I cannot teach anybody anything,
I can only make them think."
Sokrates*

Chapter XI

A.D. 395
Germanicia

By the late 4th century, the Roman Empire had expanded significantly, and the country could no longer be governed from a single center. To address this issue, Emperor Theodosius II divided the empire's territories among his sons. He granted the Western Roman Empire to Honorius, making Milan its capital. His other son, Arcadius, received the Eastern Roman Empire and declared Constantinople as its capital.

The city of Germanicia, being located in Anatolian territory, fell within the borders of the Eastern Roman Empire. Positioned at the crossroads of Mesopotamia, Northern Syria, and Anatolia, it was a crucial hub for trade routes. As a result, Germanicia retained its strategic importance during the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) period, continuing to exist as one of the region's significant centers.

In the new era, there were no longer the cruel emperors who had tormented the people as in the early years of Chris-

tianity. The new religion, embraced by the populace, spread across the country, and large churches were built in major centers. It wasn't long before Christianity was declared the official religion of the empire.

With these developments, the people of Germanicia breathed a sigh of relief. Roman merchants, nobles, and artisans now felt safer in Germanicia.

The spring waters emerging from the foothills to the north of the city were channeled through ceramic pipes to new residential areas, and the city quickly became prosperous. New buildings, villas, squares, temples, fountains, inns, and baths continued to be constructed everywhere. The threecentury period of stagnation in Germanicia seemed to have vanished, and the city appeared to have entered a period of remarkable growth and prosperity.

By the end of the fourth century, Germanicia had become one of the most livable cities in the region. People from both near and far, including traders and artisans, were settling in Germanicia and practicing their trades there. The city's leaders had provided significant opportunities for the popular mosaic artists, offering them full support to live and work in the city.

A Persian blacksmith named Kyrios had also arrived in Germanicia, settling in the city after marrying a Syrian woman.

Kyrios, in a small blacksmith shop he opened in the back streets of Germanicia, not only made various agricultural tools but also crafted hunting and warfare equipment such as arrows, spears, javelins, and shields.

Blacksmith Kyrios quickly expanded his business and became one of the best blacksmiths in the city. As in other places, blacksmithing was one of the leading professions in Germanicia. It was a respected and lucrative trade, just like goldsmithing, silversmithing, and coppersmithing.

Blacksmith Kyrios had a son in Germanicia, whom he named Nestorius.

When Nestorius was around seven or eight years old, his talkativeness and intelligence made him stand out in every environment he was in, drawing attention to himself.

The people of Germanicia had a very rich social life. Occasionally, when they achieved something significant or escaped a calamity, they had a custom of sacrificing an animal at home. The children of the household eagerly looked forward to these days. This was because the astragalus from the joints of the animal's forelegs, were very important to them. They would line up to get these bones, and the children played such elaborate games with them...

They mostly played Astragolos. The game involved throwing a stone from a certain distance to try to knock the bones, which were placed inside a circle drawn on the ground, out of the circle. However, the game often ended in arguments. To avoid disputes over whether the bones were inside or outside the line, they would always appoint Blacksmith Kyrios's son, Nestorius, as the referee for the more competitive games. They would always adhere to his decisions.

The game was so popular that among the neighborhood children, the one with the most bones was considered the most prestigious and gained considerable respect. The older kids took it a step further by combining their bones to form alliances among themselves.

The girls, on the other hand, never got involved in such quarrelsome games. Instead, they would occasionally sneak a few bones from their brothers' hidden and play a game called "Pentalitha" in front of their homes, where they would sit at the top of the steps. In this game, they would try to quickly pick up the bone on the ground before the bone they threw into the air fell, attempting to keep the bone in the air.

Nestorius was remarkably mature for his age. His father had sent him to a newly built church in the Germanicia square to learn prayers. While a young priest there was trying to teach the children the fundamentals of Christianity, the other kids listened without objection. In contrast, Nestorius would first reflect on much of what was being taught in his mind, and he would question and probe the topics he didn't understand until he was convinced.

One day, while the priest was explaining the unresolved Christological debates about Jesus from the birth of Christianity up to that day, Nestorius raised his hand to ask a question. The priest, glancing sideways, said:

"This time, who are you objecting to?"

Nestorius, his distinctive stance, replied:

"You call Jesus, the son of Mary, 'God.' At the same time, you say that divine revelation came to Jesus at the age of thirty. If so, doesn't that mean Jesus was born as a human from his mother Mary? If that's the case, doesn't Jesus, until the age of thirty, count as a human like us rather than as a god?"

The priest hadn't expected such a question from Nestorius. He fell silent for a moment... He hesitated whether to answer or not, absently leafing through his book. As if giving advice to Nestorius, who was eagerly waiting for his answer:

"These matters are very delicate. If we use incorrect terms, we risk falling into blasphemy. You are still very young. You love to read, and I am confident that one day you will find the answer to your question yourself."

After quickly closing the book in front of him, the priest said to those present:

"Children, that's all for today's lesson. You may now go home!"

While the other children ran out the door, Nestorius stayed behind. After looking around, the young priest leaned close to Nestorius and said in a low voice:

"Don't discuss these thoughts in front of everyone. Tell your father to let me visit his shop sometime; I'll talk to him about you."

A few days later, the priest Daimos came to Blacksmith Kyrios's workshop under the pretext of having the temple's candlestick repaired. Kyrios greeted him at the door as soon as he saw him:

"Welcome, Master Daimos."

Daimos, showing the candlestick in his hand, said:

"The hanger is broken; I've come to have it repaired."

Blacksmith Kyrios knew that Priest Daimos wouldn't come here just for a simple repair.

"Let's talk in a quiet place, if you'd like," he said.

The priest placed his hand on Kyrios's shoulder as if blessing him and said:

"It would be for the best."

There was a small door in the back of the shop that led to the backyard. Kyrios had built a modest cabin there, where he would go to rest when he was tired. He went to the cabin

with Daimos and brought a few apples he had picked from the garden. As soon as the door closed, Daimos immediately began to speak:

“I’ve come regarding your son, Nestorius.”

Kyrios, with curiosity, asked:

“Has he done something wrong against you?”

“No, no, quite the opposite. I came to express my satisfaction.”

After recounting what had happened in the lesson, Priest Daimos said to Kyrios:

“Nestorius’s intellect is much higher than his peers. He questions everything. If his doubts aren’t addressed, it would be a shame for the child.”

Kyrios, thoughtfully, said:

“What do you recommend I do?”

Daimos, as if he had been waiting for this moment, said:

“Send him to the theological school in Antioch. There, he will find answers to all his questions.”

After looking around, the priest continued:

“Master Kyrios, you are a forwardthinking man. Others may not understand, but you will. I once studied in Antioch, and on the wall of the theological school, there was a plaque with Socrates’ words that are still engraved in my mind: “Do not teach your students anything; instead, make them think. For once they begin to think, they will learn on their own... And knowledge gained through effort is the most enduring, never to be erased!” These words had a profound impact on me.”

“It seems that you also teach your students to think rather than just imparting knowledge.”

Daimos, smiling, replied:

“Let’s say so.”

“Alright, but Father, is Christianity different in Germanicia compared to Antioch?”

Priest Daimos, taking a few sips from the water in front of him, said:

“You know, after Jerusalem, there are three main centers of Christianity: Alexandria, Antioch, and Rome...”

Kyrios interjected:

“Even if there were ten, isn’t the same religion taught in all of them?”

“Therein lies the problem...”

“What do you mean?”

“The Church of Alexandria holds ‘NeoPlatonic’ ideas. This school interprets our holy book in three ways: spiritually, literally, and symbolically. On the other hand, the Church of Antioch, influenced by Ancient Greek thought, bases our religion on the logical philosophy of Aristotle. In other words, they adhere to a literal interpretation of the Bible, focusing only on its literal and linguistic aspects.”

Blacksmith Kyrios smiled and said:

“Father, you know I’m just a simple blacksmith. Could you explain this in a way I can understand?”

Daimos continued:

“The essence of the matter is related to the nature of Christ. It’s about whether Mary is the ‘Mother of God’ or not...”

“That’s exactly the issue our son is questioning.”

“That’s right. The theologians of Antioch accept that Jesus has both a divine and a human nature, and they argue that reverence towards Jesus is actually directed at the Word within Him, not at Jesus Himself. Meanwhile, the

theologians of Alexandria express that the divine and human aspects of Jesus are completely unified.”

“Thus, the divisions begin, right?”

“Exactly. The theological differences between the two streams led to the emergence of two opposing groups that disagree on almost everything.”

“Then, what about the situation in the other churches?”

“They hold different views. Some major regions, influenced by the Church of Alexandria, use the title Theotokos, or ‘Mother of God,’ for Mary, while others do not accept this.”

After a moment of silence, Kyrios said:

“What do you think?”

Daimos:

“Reason is on the side of Antioch.”

“We know reason is infallible. But I asked for your opinion?”

Daimos glanced around again. Slowly leaning toward Kyrios, he said:

“The number of our friends who share this view is growing every day in Germanicia. The Alexandrians have more political power, but we also have a significant presence in Constantinople. From time to time, prominent figures from Antioch come here to consult with us, guiding us on how to present these ideas to the people without causing division.”

After a brief silence, he continued:

“Even Master Biton, who hammers away in your shop, attends our discussions.”

Blacksmith Kyrios, with astonished eyes, asked:

“Really? He doesn’t show it at all.”

“Still, act as if you haven’t heard anything.”

Blacksmith Kyrios peeled one of the apples in front of him, cut it in half, and handed it to Priest Daimos:

“As I understand it, we should prioritize reason in these matters...”

Daimos, as if to wrap up the topic, said:

“That’s why I say we should send Nestorius to Antioch so he can continue his studies there.”

Blacksmith Kyrios bowed his head, and after a moment of thought, said:

“I will do whatever is necessary for my son’s education. However, his mother’s consent is also required.”

“Of course, you should get her opinion as well.”

“He has relatives in Antioch. I don’t think she’ll object.”

Daimos:

“If Nestorius goes to that school, with his intelligence and abilities, I believe that when he completes his education, he might become a bishop of a major church...” After a moment’s thought, he added:

“Or he might become a patriarch in Constantinople!”

He suddenly opened his eyes, as if waking from sleep, in the chair he was sitting in. He was so impressed by the notes he had been reading, he murmured to himself, “Nestorius must go to Antioch.”

*Becoming a patriarch in Constantinople
isn't the end of the matter! We have a falsified book
and a mentality that regards man as God.*

Chapter XII

A.D. 415

Antiokyus (Antioch)

When Nestorius arrived in Antioch to receive religious education, Priest Theodoret was at the head of the theological school. Throughout his studies, he was deeply influenced by Theodoret's rational ideas. In a short time, he began to attract attention by adopting the theological assumptions of his environment.

After graduating, Nestorius took up a clerical position in a church in the city center of Antioch. During this time, he engaged in struggles against those unfamiliar with the Nicene Creed. His persuasive style and diligent efforts were wellknown and, as it turned out, had not escaped the emperor's notice. His name began to be spoken of in Constantinople as a fervent defender of this cause.

Emperor Theodosius II personally invited Nestorius to his palace. During this meeting, they got to know each other better. It became clear that Nestorius had earned the emperor's admiration for his efforts in spreading Christianity to broader communities.

Patriarch Sisinius of Constantinople has died, and during the discussions about his successor, Emperor Theodosius II surprised everyone by appointing Nestorius of Germanicia as the new patriarch, as if he wanted to show his own power. The emperor, who had previously visited the Cave of the Seven Sleepers in Efsus, also had the opportunity to get to know Nestorius's region more closely.

Nestorius's appointment as Patriarch of Constantinople was a point of pride for the Antiochian Church and brought great joy to his hometown of Germanicia.

When Nestorius bade farewell to Antioch, the scene was deeply emotional. The entire city poured into the streets to see him one last time and to receive his blessings. Especially the Antiochian School of Theology, along with its priests and students, did not leave his side on this day of farewell. At the city's exit, they embraced him one final time, sending him off with prayers and hymns.

As Nestorius traveled to Constantinople, he took his close friend, Priest Anastas, along with him. Nestorius trusted him completely, seeing him as a loyal companion since childhood and having been by his side through all his successes.

Nestorius knew well that Constantinople was a den of intrigue, which is why he brought his confidant Anastas along with him.

Nestorius chose to travel to Constantinople overland rather than by ship. Although he had numerous mounted guards for protection, he strategically kept the route a secret, revealing it only to Anastas.

Once they had left the city and traveled a considerable distance, the road split into two paths. Anastas looked into

Nestorius's eyes. When Nestorius nodded "okay", Anastas suddenly turned his horse to the right. The guards following them also moved in the same direction.

As the horses trotted along the path, everyone engaged in conversation with those beside them:

Anastas turned to Nestorius and said:

"I wish I had a mother and father of my own, so that I could kiss their hands and feet and set out on my journey like this."

Nestorius:

"Don't go against fate. Who knows what troubles they had that led them to act that way? If they had left you somewhere else instead of the church when you were a baby, who knows where you would be now!"

"True enough..."

Nestorius, with a hint of a smile, said:

"Since you were born without a father and a mother, don't be surprised if the Alexandrians, upon learning this, declare you a god like Jesus!"

If someone else had said this to Anastas, he might have reacted differently, but since it was his friend Nestorius who made the remark, he couldn't help but laugh and responded with a smile:

"While we're trying to unify the gods, are you trying to add another one?"

Nestorius, aware of the difficulties he would face in Constantinople, knew the Church of Alexandria would not be idle and that Patriarch Cyle would employ every trick. Turning to Anastas, he said:

"Becoming a patriarch in Constantinople isn't the end of the matter! We have a falsified book and a mentality that regards man as God. Our struggle is just beginning. Let us

dedicate all our strength to conveying the truth and winning hearts so that we can heal this wound as soon as possible.”

Anastas:

“Saint, there’s no giving up. We’ve committed ourselves to this task. I know our work won’t be easy.”

Nestorius:

“That’s why we turned our horses towards Germanicia, to seek the blessings of our elders...”

They had reached Germanicia by passing through the broad plains and taking the Amanus Mountains to their left.

Germanicia was not located at the site of the ancient city of Markasi but rather a bit southeast of it, established on gently sloping, broad plains. It was a prosperous and verdant city.

The city was still governed from the ancient Hittite Fortress. The mint and city treasury were located there, and senior officials spent their working hours in the fortress’s administrative buildings.

The fortress was guarded not only by the regular sentinels but also by bold warrior families living around the fort. These individuals were seasoned veterans of battle, often former Roman soldiers, who were the first to defend the city and the first to fall in combat.

The nobles, aristocratic bureaucrats, and other wealthy families resided in the new district of Germanicia. In the mansions and grand villas they had built here, they enjoyed a life of luxury.

When the new Byzantine Patriarch Nestorius arrived in Germanicia, he entered through the southern gateway of the city, passing the square where the healing spring of

Saint Tetyus was located. Nestorius was taken aback by the bustling activity and initially mistook the crowd for caravan travelers arriving at the inn.

When Nestorius learned that the crowd in the square had gathered to welcome him, he could not hide his emotions. He greeted them warmly, dismounted from his horse, and immediately joined the throng.

It felt as though the entire city was there. Among those welcoming him were not only relatives, friends, and admirers but also clergymen and priests. Together, they sang hymns and shouted, "Welcome to your homeland, Patriarch Nestorius!" showering him with expressions of affection and joy.

Nestorius climbed to a higher vantage point, greeted the crowd once more, and expressed his gratitude. His eyes scanned the sea of faces, searching for someone. When he spotted that person in the back, he descended from his position, parted the crowd, and made his way toward them. He clasped their hand to kiss it and embraced him so warmly that...

With this embrace, Nestorius seemed to be transported back to his childhood, as if he were finally experiencing the heartfelt hug he had longed for but never had the chance to give. Priest Daimos, unable to hold back any longer, embraced his former student and the new Patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius, and with tearful eyes said:

"Welcome home!"

Nestorius was still searching for someone with his eyes. Daimos, knowing exactly who Nestorius was looking for, said to him:

"Your father has aged greatly and couldn't come. He and your mother are waiting for you at home."

The demonstration of affection continued. After Nesto-

rius and his guards thoroughly washed their hands and faces at the healing spring, they made their way through the joyful crowd to the city square of Germanicia. Their home was just a street behind the square. Nestorius said to those present:

“If you’ll permit me now, I would like to go to my family home, as I have missed them dearly.”

Blacksmith Kyrios had grown very old and could no longer practice his trade. He had spent all the money he had earned throughout his life on his newly built house.

Kyrios was a man with a deep appreciation for aesthetics, and this passion was reflected in the house he lived in. He had personally chosen every material according to his taste. The house was surrounded by a wide garden adorned with colorful flowers that emitted delightful fragrances, resembling a piece of paradise.

As Nestorius arrived at their new home for the first time, accompanied by his travel companion Anastas and Priest Daimos, Daimos gestured with his hand and said:

“This is the place.”

Nestorius was so struck by the magnificent structure nestled among the trees that he momentarily stood frozen at the doorway.

As they entered through the garden gate, they were unaware of the tearful eyes observing them from the terrace. His mother, unable to hold back any longer, sobbed from above:

“My son, my dear, Nestorius, where have you been?”

Upon hearing her words, Nestorius was instantly transported back to his childhood, as if he had been lost in play on the street while everyone at home was waiting for him. Embarrassed, as if apologizing to his mother, he could only

manage to say, “I’m here, Mother. I’m coming.”

Nestorius, upon catching the scent of fresh bread and his beloved oat soup coming from the kitchen, leapt up the stairs with the agility of a child, as if...

His mother was waiting at the top of the stairs with open arms. As Nestorius approached, she embraced him as if he were a small child. His father, unable to leave his room, could only watch. Nestorius quickly ran to his father after his mother’s embrace. Meanwhile, his friend Anastas watched the heartfelt reunion and, following Nestorius, joined in the embrace.

Nestorius could never be certain if he would ever experience again the taste of that day’s meal or the bliss of that night’s sleep...

As Nestorius said goodbye to his parents at the time of his departure, the moment was deeply emotional. They all knew it could be their last meeting. Constantinople was a city where becoming a patriarch was extremely challenging for a clergyman from the provinces—it was like a bird trying to grab a share at a den of intrigue. As he was about to leave through the door, his father made sure to give him one last piece of advice: “No matter how difficult things become, don’t hesitate to speak the truth.”

Nestorius took his father’s advice to heart, making it a guiding principle for his life. With these emotions, he set out on his journey. After taking one last long look at Germanicia from the peaks of the Taurus Mountains, he turned his horse northward. After traveling for a while, he turned to his companion Anastas and said:

“If we go faster, we’ll reach Efsus and the Church of Jesus before sunset.”

Metin's eyes had closed tightly. He left the table and went back to the kitchen. He poured another glass of tea from the now very strong brew. It was already quite late. The streets of Kahramanmaraş had become deserted, people had fallen asleep, and the pitch darkness had draped over the entire city like a thick blanket.

Metin sleepily was determined to read the last lines.

*The people were divided into two groups:
those who accepted Mary as the 'Mother of God' and those
who did not.*

Chapter XIII

A.D. 428
Constantinople

When Nestorius became Patriarch of Constantinople, the empire was embroiled in theological debates concerning Christology. In particular, there was intense discussion about whether Mary could be given the title of Theotokos, or "Mother of God." Nestorius's tenure as patriarch coincided with this period of heightened controversy.

When Nestorius assumed the role of patriarch, his first action was to appoint his friend Anastas as his assistant. He assigned Anastas to preach in important churches. Anastas was a fearless clergyman, known not only for his persuasive abilities but also for his powerful oratory.

Nestorius often to him:

"I know you present our faith's teachings without convolute them. That's why I support you. However, this is the center of the empire. It would be better for both of us if you made your speeches a bit more measured. There are still some hostile factions that are eager to disrupt our efforts. As you know, the anger of Patriarch Cyril of Alexandria has not yet subsided."

Anastas replied surely:

“We read and teach exactly what is written in the holy scriptures. We speak only of what we have heard from our elder, Theodoret.”

Nestorius:

“Still, try to be a bit moderate in your sermons.”

New temples were being built in Constantinople. The largest of these was the Hagia Sophia, whose construction had begun during the reign of Emperor Constantine I. The church had suffered a major fire in previous years and lay in ruins. Emperor Theodosius II, aiming to demonstrate the power of Byzantium to the entire world, repaired the Hagia Sophia as if rebuilding it and reopened it for worship.

On a Sunday sermon, Priest Anastas was proclaiming with all his excitement from the pulpit of the newly restored Hagia Sophia:

“Mary is not the Mother of God! Those who believe this are committing the greatest blasphemy!”

Anastas, in every sermon and speech, did not hesitate to speak out his firmly held beliefs. His bold statements were met with praise from some segments of the public, while others reacted with discontent. Patriarch Nestorius tried to smooth over complaints he received about this issue, but he too occasionally did not shy away from making similar statements in his own sermons. This was because both he and Anastas were students of Patriarch Theodoret of Antioch.

Theodoret, his commentaries on the holy scriptures followed a literal interpretation method. In his teachings, he completely denied the divine attributes attributed to Jesus. He even openly stated these views in his work titled “The

Hymns,” where he expressed that “Jesus was not a divine being, but a human like Plato, Mani, Ebikoros, and Marcion.”

As a result of this understanding, Patriarch Theodoret was a clergyman who believed that Jesus, as a prophet, was humanly capable of sinning and, like any other person, could be affected by emotional events.

When Nestorius became patriarch, he brought with him the belief system he had inherited from his teacher, Theodoret, and introduced it to the center of the empire.

The views proclaimed by Patriarch Nestorius and his assistant, Priest Anastas, from the church pulpits further intensified the existing unrest in society, significantly increasing tension and creating a highly charged atmosphere.

The people were divided into two groups: those who accepted Mary as the ‘Mother of God’ and those who did not. As a result, those who embraced Nestorius’s views were labeled as “Nestorians” and began to be referred to by that designation.

In the third year of Nestorius’s patriarchy, with the instigation of Cyril of Alexandria, unrest and divisions within the country intensified significantly.

Despite Emperor Theodosius II’s warnings for Patriarch Nestorius to be more cautious with his speeches, Nestorius did not tone down his activities. This situation further disturbed both the emperor and those with opposing views.

Unable to tolerate the situation any longer, Emperor Theodosius II decided to put an end to it. He called upon all religious authorities in the country and ordered the convening of a council in Ephesus. He directed that the council address and resolve the contentious religious issues, reaching a definitive decision on them.

From the beginning, the Church of Alexandria had been opposed to Nestorius becoming the Patriarch of Constantinople. Patriarch Cyril of Alexandria was known as Nestorius's greatest adversary during this period. He did everything in his power to undermine Nestorius and to make him fall out of favor with the Emperor.

Nestorius's open defense of his dyophysite views on Mary and Jesus as a patriarch in the heart of the empire made Cyril's job even easier. This was because these debates had now caused unbearable unrest among the people.

Emperor Theodosius II, although he appreciated some of Patriarch Nestorius's ideas, was compelled to withdraw his support due to the escalating divisions that he believed were threatening national security.

*And so, Nestorianism branched off from
the main body of the Church...*

Chapter XIV

A.D. 431

Council of Ephesus

The Council was held in Ephesus in June 431 at the command of Emperor Theodosius II. Sixteen bishops sent by Nestorius and fifty bishops sent by Cyril were able to attend the meeting. The Emperor had also sent two of his representatives to Ephesus to represent him.

Although Bishop Juvenal of Jerusalem and Bishop Flavian of Thessalonica attended the council, Patriarch John of Antioch, who supported Nestorius's views, was still not present in the hall. Patriarch John had faced various obstacles during his journey; bridges he needed to cross were destroyed, and bandits had crossed his path, preventing him from attending the opening of the council.

Patriarch Cyril of Alexandria was very concerned about the possibility of an unfavorable outcome at the council. He feared that one of the representatives sent by the emperor might be sympathetic to the views of the Nestorians.

Patriarch Cyril did not want to leave things to chance. Rumor had it that before the council even convened, he had distributed large sums of bribes to the delegates to secure support from the palace and its surroundings. It was also

said that he had somehow delayed the Patriarch John of Antioch and other opposing delegates who came from afar, using various schemes to prevent them from attending the meeting.

Cyril, through incredible intrigue and by securing the support of the Patriarch of Ephesus, managed to have himself elected as the president of the council sessions.

Patriarch Cyril's decision to hastily start the meeting before all the delegates had arrived was notable. Nestorius asked for the floor to intervene in the situation. In his impassioned speech, he addressed the delegates:

"In this council we are about to discuss and decide on very important matters regarding our faith. Therefore, we have a great responsibility to both the future and humanity. The more broadly we make these decisions, the more successful we will be in resolving divisions. I see that Patriarch Cyril wants to start such a historic meeting that will shape our future before all the delegates have arrived, effectively creating a *fait accompli*. I find his approach very significant. My proposal is to begin the meeting only after all the delegates have arrived... Otherwise, the decisions made will always be open to debate and will further exacerbate existing divisions. For this reason, we will all be responsible to history. If the council is held a few days later, all of our delegates will be able to participate. This way, decisions will be made more soundly. I wish to submit my proposal for postponement for your consideration to avoid this responsibility."

The people in the hall looked at each other. Some of the delegates:

"It is very reasonable; let's wait. The Patriarch is right," while others were saying:

"Why did we arrive on time then?"

"We can't cater to everyone's convenience."

The chairman, Cyril, to restore calm and respond to Nestorius, said:

“Please, let us remain silent!”

Cyril, making his speech more assertive and dismissive without even mentioning Nestorius by name, said:

“Patriarch Germanicus, as you know, our emperor clearly specified the date of the council in the invitation letter he sent to the delegates. The absence of some invitees does not prevent us from starting the meeting. Otherwise, we would be opposing the emperor’s decision!”

Turning to the representatives of the emperor seated in the hall, Cyril said:

“None of us here can take responsibility for that!”

One of the representatives, who had initially supported Nestorius’s proposal, hesitated for a moment, chose not to take responsibility, and preferred to remain silent.

The silence of the representatives meant their consent to begin the council.

Nestorius took the floor again:

“Mr. Chairman! The delegates have not failed to attend the council arbitrarily. There is a compelling reason. As you can understand, they are coming from very distant places under difficult conditions. I am confident that all of them will be here within a few days. In fact, Patriarch John of Antioch is very close by at the moment. We have heard reports that Patriarch John has encountered some obstacles on his way, which has caused his delay. However, since we currently have no concrete evidence, we do not wish to accuse anyone.”

Turning to the emperor’s representatives, Nestorius said:

“We always respect the emperor’s decision regarding the date of the council. However, a meeting where such

important decisions are to be made can only achieve its purpose if all delegates are present. Otherwise, the decisions made will always be subject to debate. Since the aim of this meeting is to eliminate such disputes, I believe our esteemed emperor would not have permitted a council with incomplete participation.”

Chairman Cyril, not giving other delegates a chance to speak, said to Nestorius:

“Being the Patriarch of Constantinople does not grant you any privilege here. Moreover, your threatening remarks are being recorded and will be reported to our emperor!”

Following these words, Nestorius and the 16 delegates who supported him chose to protest and left the hall without waiting for the council to begin.

As Nestorius was leaving through the door, he directed his final outburst at Cyril of Alexandria, shouting:

“You are making a mistake. The decisions you make this way are null and void to us; we will not recognize them!”

Cyril could not even respond. He looked angrily at his aides, then turned to the recordkeepers and guards, and resolutely struck the table with his gavel:

“Close the doors; the meeting has begun!”

The Council of Ephesus, under Cyril’s chairmanship, proceeded without a single clergyman opposing the ideas put forward.

At the council, the decision was made to bestow upon Mary the title of Theotokos, meaning “Mother of God.” It was decreed that those who disputed this would be accused of heresy. It was also formally established that Jesus’s divine and human natures constituted a unified whole, and that He shared the same essence as the “Father” or “God.”

The most striking decision of the council was the deposition and excommunication of Nestorius from his patriarchal office, along with the removal of the bishops around him and the appointment of new ones in their place.

Emperor Theodosius II, despite the controversy, was compelled to approve the decisions of the Council of Ephesus. Although he initially granted Nestorius the freedom to go wherever he wished outside Constantinople, he later succumbed to mounting pressure and exiled him to Egypt.

The emperor's stance deeply unsettled both the Church of Antioch and the Nestorians in the country.

The Council of Ephesus had convened to achieve unity of faith among Christians and to restore peace within society. However, the decisions made without a majority proved ineffective in reaching this goal. In fact, they even exacerbated the divisions and disagreements among the people.

As a result, the disputes continued. Nestorianism branched off from the main body and established itself as a distinct sect within Christianity.

As Metin closed the file in front of him with great sorrow, his eyelids began to close as well. When he lay down on his bed, it was nearly dawn. He had slept for only a few hours when suddenly the door was knocked.

Meryem had freckles

Chapter XV

Ayhan arrived early and was ringing the doorbell at Metin's place. Metin's eyes were bloodshot. When he opened the door, Ayhan said:

"What's the matter with you, Metin?"

"I went to bed late."

"Are you feeling unwell?"

"No, no, I was just immersed in the professor's notes."

Ayhan, quickly refocusing the topic, said:

"I spoke with Professor Oktay. Today, we'll be going to the Andırın Fortresses in my car."

Metin, in a groggy state, said:

"We were supposed to go next week."

"The professor had something else for that day."

Ayhan glanced at his watch and continued:

"Come on, get ready. We'll pick up the professor and head out soon."

"What about Serap?"

"She knows. I'll go pick her up while you get ready."

"Alright then."

Just as Ayhan was about to leave to pick up Serap, his phone rang. It was Professor Oktay calling.

“Hi Ayhan, where are you?”

“I’m in front of Metin’s house.”

“Great. Pick up Metin now and wait for us at the Kılavuzlu Bridge on the city’s outskirts.”

Ayhan, curiously, asked:

“What about Serap?”

“I’ll pick her up.”

“Aren’t we going in my car?”

“Professor Mehmet surprised us. He’ll be joining us today. We’ll hear about the Andırın Fortresses from him. Go pick up Metin now. I’ll be at the bridge with the professor and Serap in less than half an hour. We’ll be heading out with two cars,” he said.

During last week’s trip to the Afşin Eshabı Kehf, Professor Mehmet had noticed Serap and Metin’s enthusiasm and mentioned in passing, “One day let’s go to the Andırın region. There are some very important Roman fortresses there.” Today, Professor Mehmet wanted to keep his word.

Ayhan didn’t know how to respond, as the plans he had imagined for Serap had suddenly fallen through. On the phone, he simply said to Professor Oktay:

“Okay”.

With his plans for Serap falling through, Ayhan came up with a new strategy that would also benefit Metin. With a last bit of hope, he said to Metin:

“Metin, it’s almost a twohour drive. Make sure Serap doesn’t get bored with the professors!”

Metin thought for a moment:

“You’re right.”

Ayhan, as if defending Metin, said:

“You have a good rapport with Professor Oktay. Ask

him to let Serap join us.”

“I’m not sure how that would work.”

“We can talk about the old days and reminisce about our university days...”

Unaware of Ayhan’s plan and influenced by his own emotional attachment to Serap, Metin said:

“Leave it to me. Of course, Serap should come with us!”

Ayhan thought to himself, “The Serap issue is resolved. If I can manage to send Metin with the professors, I’ll have a lovely trip alone with Serap.”

While Ayhan and Metin waited at the bridge with these thoughts in mind, they saw Professor Oktay’s car approaching from a distance. The car was moving quickly. Both of them moved closer to the road, waiting for Professor Oktay to stop. As the car slowed down, Professor Oktay rolled down the window, leaned out, and said:

“Follow us.”

Metin had raised his hand to say something to Professor Oktay, but he quickly continued on his way. Metin was quite upset by the professor’s abrupt departure. He muttered to himself as he followed behind.

Seeing all his plans fall through, his entire world came crashing around his ears, along with his dreams.

While Serap was having a pleasant conversation during the journey, Metin and Ayhan, who were following them, didn’t say a word throughout the trip.

When they arrived at Geben Castle, Professor Oktay said to Metin and Ayhan, who were delayed in catching up with them:

“Where have you been? I assume the journey of two old friends went well.”

Snorting with anger, Metin and Ayhan glanced at each other. After taking a deep breath, both of them, feeling helpless, said:

“That’s right, sir.”

Although Professor Mehmet and Oktay were unaware of what had happened, Serap found it hard to suppress her laughter when she saw the expressions on her friends’ faces. To spare them from embarrassment, she turned her face away.

When Professor Mehmet visited the castle the last time, he had heard about it from Sadık, the village headman of Tatarlı, who knew the area well. Impressed by the headman’s local storytelling style, Professor Mehmet had stopped by Tatarlı Village on his way out and brought the headman Sadık along in the car.

The road leading to Geben Castle had likely been left unfinished to prevent treasure hunters from making their work easier. The headman Sadık knew the primitive road to the castle very well. They climbed up to the castle as if they were climbing.

When they reached the southern walls of the castle, a vast, lush green valley stretched out in front of them. Professor Mehmet faced the view directly and began to describe it in his unique style:

“The valley you see here is the narrowest pass on the ancient Silk Road, stretching from south to north. To ensure the safety of the route, around fifty fortresses and watch-towers, visible to each other, were built mainly during the Roman period. The Geben Castle, where we are now, is the largest and most strategically positioned of these.”

To get a better view of the valley, they climbed up to the southern towers of the castle. Professor Mehmet continued

to provide information about the castle, pointing out the areas he was describing with his hand:

“As you can see, the castle strategically overlooks the entire valley. It can easily monitor the two important caravan routes that pass in front of it.”

Seeing the irregular pits scattered around within the castle, Metin spoke up:

“Treasure hunters have damaged this place too, professor!”

Professor Mehmet, agreeing with Metin, said:

“Although the illegal excavations have damaged much of the castle, it has still retained much of its former grandeur. This is a large fortress, spreading over twelve thousand square meters including the outer walls. It has six towers like this one. Do you see the battlements? They remain as they were. It’s one of the wellpreserved fortresses that have survived to this day. It was constructed using rubble, limestone, and cut stone.”

After surveying the surroundings, Serap said:

“Professor, I wonder how they managed their water supply?”

“With cisterns. We passed by some earlier; despite a few sections collapsing, most of it is still intact.”

Serap:

“Was the water in the cisterns sufficient for such a large castle?”

“That’s exactly what I was going to mention. If you see a castle somewhere, it usually means there is a water source nearby, just like here. As you can see, a stream runs right beside the castle. Although water needs in castles are met with cisterns, a permanent water source is always required. When constructing large castles like this, secret passages

and tunnels leading to water sources are also built. During prolonged sieges in wartime, when the cisterns run out, the inhabitants of the castle would use these secret tunnels to meet their water needs.”

With astonished eyes, Serap said:

“That’s very interesting. I wonder if there is such a tunnel here as well?”

“As you can see, the castle is in ruins. If it undergoes serious repairs, I believe the secret passages will definitely be revealed. After all, this is the largest castle in the region.”

Metin interjected:

“Professor Oktay had described Kahramanmaraş Castle. It’s also a large fortress. Were there tunnels or secret passages there as well?”

Professor Mehmet:

“There have long been rumors of such tunnels at Kahramanmaraş Castle as well. It’s said that there are secret passages leading from the castle to the historic Çukur Bath below... Although this is a legend among the people, there is a scientific truth to it. If a thorough investigation is conducted at Kahramanmaraş Castle, I’m certain that remnants of these described tunnels will be found. If not, it would be a significant omission for the castle.”

Professor Mehmet was about to start describing the other parts of Geben Castle when Ayhan, who had remained silent throughout the journey, was now eager to speak. As if to assert his expertise in museology, he said:

“Professor, there are cross motifs in some parts of the castle.”

Professor Mehmet:

“Yes! The castle was built during the Roman Period, so there are cross motifs on the stones and monograms at the

door entrances. We'll visit those marked areas shortly. The Azgıt Castle we passed on the way had the same cross motifs."

Metin took the floor again:

"Professor, is there a connection between this place and Germanicia?"

Professor Mehmet suddenly turned his head toward Metin:

"Of course it does! These castles not only ensured the safety of the trade routes you see but also served as a strong defensive wall protecting Germanicia from attacks from the west. The rugged terrain of this region could only be controlled in this way. So, understanding Germanicia without knowing these areas is impossible. I believe that's why Professor Oktay organized this tour for you."

When their eyes met, Professor Oktay bowed his head, as if to confirm.

The headman Sadık, who had silently listened to everything from the beginning, turned to Professor Oktay whom he met for the first time and said:

"Professor, we call this castle 'Meryemçil,'"

The young people looked curiously at both Professor Mehmet and the headman Sadık. Professor Mehmet:

"As the headman said, the people also call this castle 'Meryemçil Castle.' It has a beautiful legend associated with it. If you like, the headman can tell the story."

The headman Sadık:

"Don't mention it. Let's not show any disrespect in the presence of esteemed professors like you."

"At school, we already tell the story. It would be very nice for young people to hear from you."

The headman Sadık, being a local of the area, had grown

up listening to the stories of the castles. As he was preparing to recount the Meryemçil legend, Professor Mehmet interjected:

“Dear young people, before the headman shares the legend, I want to remind you of something. Before the invention of television and radio, there were coffeehouses where someone who could read and write would narrate while others listened. Often, works like Fuzuli’s *layla* and *majnun*, Sheikh Galip’s *Hüsnü Aşk*, or Rumi’s *Masnavi* would be read. Folk poets like *Karacaoğlan* would also visit such places, playing and singing with their instruments. If two poets met in a coffeehouse, they would engage in poetic duels, and the people would pay great attention to and deeply respect these performances.”

Professor Oktay turned to the young people and said:

“Professor Mehmet is also the Director of the Kahramanmaraş and Regional Cultural Values Research and Application Center at our university.”

Professor Mehmet continued his speech:

“Additionally, in these coffeehouses, storytellers known as *meddahs* would tell various tales and keep their audiences laughing heartily. Some of these storytellers would recount the epic tales of *Köroğlu* during the long, neverending winter nights, and would leave the story at its most thrilling point, saying ‘We’ll continue tomorrow’ and leave it hanging there.”

Serap interjected:

“Just like today’s TV series.”

“Exactly. That was the entertainment of the old days. Now, let’s have the headman tell the story just like in those coffeehouses, and let’s sit on these stones and reminisce about the past.”

The headman Sadık:

“When your professor mentioned the old times, it reminded me of something. Once, in a village, someone who was somewhat educated read layla and majnun in the village common room. It took six months to finish the book. Throughout those six months, everyone listened to the story of layla and majnun with great love and excitement without missing a single session. Finally, when the story was complete, the narrator said, ‘Thus, the story of layla and majnun has ended.’ At that moment, someone who had listened with rapt attention for six months eagerly asked the narrator, ‘I’m curious about something!’ The narrator, exhausted after the long effort, asked, ‘What are you curious about, uncle?’ The man replied, ‘Son, may God be pleased with you. For six months, you read kindly and we listened. What I want to know is, what was layla to majnun?’”

When the young people and the professors started laughing together, the headman Sadık:

“As you laughed, the villagers there also died laughing.”

Serap interjected again:

“Professor, were the old times better?”

Professor Mehmet:

“Yes, that’s true, but every era has its own charm...”

Seeing that his listeners were paying close attention, the headman Sadık began to tell the Meryemçil Legend with enthusiasm:

“Once upon a time, there was a beautiful girl named Meryem, who lived here, the daughter of the Commander of Geben Castle. The sons of the commanders of the nearby castles, Azgıt and Kızılkale, had fallen in love with her without knowing of each other’s feelings. Both commanders wanted Meryem for their sons. Since Meryem’s father

was a close friend of both commanders, he couldn't decide which son to give his daughter to, fearing to offend either of them. Seeing her father in a difficult position, Meryem came up with an idea. She said, 'I will marry whichever suitor manages to reach the castle without getting dust or mud on his horse's hooves.' Both commanders gladly accepted this challenge. However, Meryem had already made her own plans. It turned out that she was in love with one of the young men. 'I'll find a way to ensure he wins the race,' she thought. As the competition approached, Meryem secretly sent a message to her beloved, saying, 'Attach felt to your horse's hooves and come.'"

Serap, excitement getting the better of her, suddenly interjected:

"Did he manage to come?"

"Wait, he endured for six months."

"Alright, uncle, please continue."

He continued telling the story from where he had left off:

"That young man was so confident that he said, 'Love doesn't tolerate tricks, it requires sacrifice,' and spent days collecting colorful stones from the mountains. To keep his horse's hooves free of dust and mud, he laid down the stones one by one, creating a path from Kızılkale to here."

Professor Mehmet, pointing to the valley to the north of the castle:

"Right up to this spot."

This time, Metin, with curiosity:

"So, what happened next, Uncle Sadık?"

"If he had had one more day, he would have reached the castle on the path he made with his horse."

Ayhan, with a meaningful smile:

"Poor fellow, all his effort went to waste."

Metin, supporting Ayhan's comment:

"After all that effort, not being able to win the girl must be very upsetting..."

The headman Sadık continued:

"The son of the Kızılale commander, unable to win Meryem, was consoled by his mother, who kept on saying, 'Meryem had freckles.'* Since that day, this castle has been called 'Meryemçil.' They reached their desires, and we should be content with what we have. Dear young people, this world is a mortal world. Don't blame yourself for everything. Everything is a matter of fate and fortune. If God does not decree it, not even a mosquito's wing can stir. You are still very young. Many opportunities will come your way. Do not rejoice in what you have gained, nor lament what you have lost."

The headman Sadık took a deep breath and, looking into Serap's eyes, continued:

"Above all, don't rush into anything. Don't make decisions without consulting a younger or older person, without discussing it. Let this small advice from your uncle Sadık be a lesson to you."

Sadık seemed to have read Serap's mind. Metin and Ayhan had also taken their share from this advice.

Serap suddenly flinched. She took this advice as if it were directed at herself and was in a brown study.

The changing expressions on the faces of the young people listening to the headman did not escape Professor Oktay's notice. Professor Oktay asked Professor Mehmet in sign language, "Why did the headman give such advice as

* Çil is a Turkish word meaning 'freckle' in English. The expression 'Meryem had freckles' is a form of condescension. In this context, it implies that she was not considered beautiful -or good enough- to begin with."

if he knew these young people's inner worlds, despite not knowing them?" Professor Mehmet replied:

"That's what we call Anatolian Wisdom."

While Metin and Ayhan were trying to decipher the term "Anatolian Wisdom," Serap was still affected by the "Meryemçil" legend told by the headman Sadık. Serap had an emotional attachment to Metin, which is why she chose him when Professor Ahmet said, "Choose your travel companion." However, she also knew that Ayhan had an interest in her. For a moment, she thought about Ayhan and Metin, whom she had set her heart on. She put the devoted young man of legend on one side and Metin and Ayhan on the other. The two of them seemed so insignificant in comparison to the young man from the legend...

As Serap reflected on the legend, she thought to herself, "So, true love must have been far away from our generation." She tried to suppress her emotions, but it was futile.

The williwaw at Geben Castle had already dried the tears streaming down Serap's cheeks. She was very cold, but when she returned home, an inexplicable warmth enveloped her completely.

When Serap flopped onto her bed, she was still shivering from cold despite having an extra blanket on. She was very tired and fell asleep as soon as she closed her eyes.

In the middle of the night, when she woke up drenched in sweat, she had a fever. She struggled to sit up from her bed, took a painkiller, and lay back down, but it didn't help.

She felt very lonely and weak. First, she thought of her mother, then sighed, realizing that the only friend she could turn to in this city was Metin. She rang Metin's phone for a long time, but she didn't get any response from him. She had never felt the pain of loneliness so intensely. She cried

while also moaning in agony.

When Metin didn't answer the phone, Serap desperately called Ayhan instead. Ayhan responded immediately, even before saying "Hello":

"Is everything okay, Serap?"

Through her sobs, Serap said:

"Ayhan, I'm really bad. Can you take me to the hospital?"

Before Serap could finish her sentence, Ayhan said:

"Get ready, I'm coming right away!"

Ayhan arrived at Serap's house as if at the speed of light. He had never seen her looking so exhausted before.

Ayhan placed his hand on Serap's forehead:

"You have a fever. What happened to you?"

Serap was still shivering and crying. Ayhan's heart was pounding with excitement as he took Serap's arm and led her to the car. It was the first time he had been this close to her.

As they drove to the hospital, Ayhan he was driving the car too fast that Serap, despite her condition, had to warn him, "Be careful, you're going to crash!"

By the time they arrived at the hospital, Serap was too weak to even walk. Ayhan helped her into a wheelchair and then quickly rushed to find the doctor.

As the doctor asked Serap, "What happened to you?" he was simultaneously performing checks and instructing the nurses to set up an IV.

While Ayhan darted around, he seemed almost euphoric. Serap was right beside him, and there was no one else around...

Lying on the hospital bed, Serap wanted to call Metin one more time, but she had already fallen asleep, the IV taking effect.

Two hours later, when the nurse ran to the doctor to report that Serap's fever had risen and she had started delirious, Ayhan was also there, holding the test results to show the doctor.

Ayhan, Ayhan, the nurse's words left him unable to control his tears, overwhelmed by fear. He could only manage to say, "Doctor..."

When the doctor quickly reached Serap's side, he first checked her pulse. While reviewing the test results in his hand, he also showed the nurse the medication he had written and explained the steps:

"Add these medications to a new IV drip as well!"

With the second IV drip, Serap began to breathe more easily, but she was still weak. It wasn't long before, likely due to the effects of the medication, she fell into a deep sleep.

Ayhan saw this as an opportunity. He gently moved closer to Serap, who had fallen asleep, and cautiously touched her golden hair with trembling hands. Then, with the innocence of a child, he softly stroked her hair a few times, like petting a docile kitten.

A nurse who entered the room and saw Ayhan in this state said:

"Are you her husband?"

Unable to respond, Ayhan's embarrassment was evident. Seeing this, the nurse said:

"The medication we've given her will lower her fever soon. You can leave in the morning."

After thanking the nurse, Ayhan couldn't help but think to himself, "I wonder how my fever will go down."

After the IV drip, the sun, emerging from behind the distant mountains, seemed to smile with its lights through

the hospital window.

Serap looked in the pink, found Ayhan in front of her when she opened her eyes. Her first question was about Metin. When Ayhan said that he had tried calling Metin several times but hadn't been able to reach him, Serap:

"I've started to worry about him a lot."

Ayhan picked up his phone and called Metin once more in a way that Serap could see. When he still didn't get an answer, he turned to Serap and said:

"Why he hasn't called back, I'm starting to worry too."

As Serap was lost in thought, Ayhan continued:

"Should we try calling Professor Oktay?"

Serap, weakly:

"How could that be at this hour?"

Ayhan, with determination:

"He might be upset if he hears about it later. Plus, we can ask about Metin too."

Serap, upon hearing Metin's name, despondently:

"Whatever turns you on."

Ayhan called Professor Oktay, informing him that Serap had ran a fever and had been under observation at the hospital since the night before. It wasn't long before Professor Oktay arrived at the hospital. After saying, "Get well soon," he looked around:

"I don't see Metin?"

Ayhan immediately spoke up:

"We were actually going to ask you about Metin, Professor! We've tried calling him several times but haven't been able to reach him. He left with you in the evening, and we haven't heard from him since."

Professor Oktay was astonished:

“That’s very interesting...”

Ayhan:

“Professor, if you’re going to be here for a while, I’ll go check on Metin. I’m really starting to worry about him.”

“That sounds good. Go and come back!”

When Ayhan went to Metin’s house, he usually spoke from the door and then left, but this time he went inside. Metin, surprised to see Ayhan so early, said:

“What’s the matter, Ayhan, this early in the morning?”

“Actually, it’s not good news!”

When Ayhan explained what had happened, Metin became agitated:

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“Both Serap and I have tried calling you multiple times since last night, but unfortunately, you didn’t answer.”

“How could this happen?”

Ayhan confidently said:

“It happened. You can check your missed calls if you’d like.”

Metin glanced around to look for his phone. He thought it might be among the papers on the coffee table. Finding it wasn’t there, he quickly got up and went to the coat rack by the door. He checked the pockets of his coat, and when he found the phone there, breathed a sigh of relief. Upon turning on his phone, he saw that both Serap and Ayhan had called one after the other. Reading Serap’s message, “Will you only find out when I’m dead, Metin?” completely devastated him.

Observing Metin’s reaction, Ayhan subtly remarked:

“Serap kept rambling about you all night. Do you know how many IV drips she got? Her fever just wouldn’t go down.

At one point, I was really worried...”

By saying this, Ayhan intended to make Metin feel even more guilty and embarrassed, while also taking some satisfaction for himself.

As Metin hurriedly prepared to go to Serap, Ayhan’s words, “Serap kept rambling about you all night,” were like a nail driven into his heart. He was tormented by the thought, “How could I have not heard my phone?”

As he was about to leave through the door, Metin suddenly remembered what Serap’s mother had said to him...

The situation at the hospital was not very promising. While Professor Oktay was trying to cheer Serap up, her phone rang. It was her mother calling. Serap hesitated whether to answer or not, but she missed her mother dearly. Gathering all her strength, she decided to:

“Good morning, Mom.”

Her mother could tell from her daughter’s tone that something was wrong:

“Are you okay, sweetie? I saw you in my dream and had a rough morning,” she said.

Serap was an emotional girl. As soon as she heard her mother’s voice, she burst into sobs and couldn’t speak... Professor Oktay answered the phone, exchanged hellos, and tried to explain the situation to Serap’s mother without going into details. To shift the focus, he handed the phone back to Serap. Serap’s mother:

“My dear, we’re very worried about you. If you want, you can leave and come over!”

Serap, pulling herself together, said:

“I’m fine, Mom, I’ve caught a cold. I wanted to act a bit spoiled when I heard your voice.”

Serap's mother interjected during the conversation:

"Is Metin there?"

Serap, a brief pause later, said in an effort not to upset her mother:

"He went as far as the pharmacy."

Although Serap was distant, her mother knew about Metin's emotional closeness to her daughter and had a lot of faith in him.

Metin had been very pleased when she told him, while sending him off to Kahramanmaraş, "Look out for each other while you're there!"

For this reason, Metin knew very well that to win Serap's heart, he first needed to win her mother's favor. However, the events that had unfolded since the evening had worked entirely against him.

Serap reassured her mother that it wasn't anything important and said, "I'll call you again, Mom," before hanging up the phone.

Just as Professor Oktay had completed Serap's discharge paperwork, Ayhan and Metin appeared at the door.

Serap gave Metin such a look that his face turned red from embarrassment... Metin's inability to respond made Ayhan slyly smile.

Professor Oktay pulled Metin aside and said, "Your friend is sick, and you're just now arriving? Is this what you call companionship?.. Is sleep more important than Serap? If it weren't for Ayhan..."

Metin, feeling thoroughly crushed by Professor Oktay's words, said bashfully:

"You're absolutely right, Professor. I was tired and fell asleep early. I still can't understand how I missed the sound of the phone."

Professor Oktay:

“How you explain this to Serap now is up to you...”

In her sickbed, Serap took Ayhan’s hand, as if to exact revenge on Metin:

“I’ll never forget what you’ve done for me tonight. I’m so grateful to have you, Ayhan,” she said.

Ayhan, feeling so happy at Serap’s unexpected praise, assumed a heroic demeanor and said:

“Anyone in my place would have done the same.”

Metin was deeply distressed by what had happened... He still couldn’t make sense of it, constantly blaming himself and wondering, “How did I fall into such a deep sleep?”

When Metin came home in the evening after the Geben Castle trip, he was extremely tired. He was always glued to his phone, but that day he didn’t even realize he had left it in Ayhan’s car.

When Ayhan noticed Metin’s phone stuck in the car seat, he simply said, “I’ll give it back in the morning,” and continued on his way.

While attending to Serap at the hospital, Ayhan skillfully turned the situation to his advantage. Knowing that Metin’s phone was left in his car, he had called Metin multiple times on Serap’s behalf. He even called Metin a few times himself to further obscure his true intentions.

When Ayhan went to Metin’s house with Professor Oktay’s knowledge, he used the excuse of hanging up his coat in the wardrobe to secretly place the phone he had brought along into the pocket of Metin’s jacket.

*“To leave behind masterpieces like the masters,
one must work like ants!”*

Chapter XVI

Three months had passed since Serap and Metin arrived in Kahramanmaraş. During this time, they had visited every place they could think of. Despite exploring the city center and protected areas like Andırın Fortresses, Pazarcık Kırkmağaralar, and Türkoğlu Domuztepe, they unfortunately found no tangible traces of the ancient city of Germanicia in the region.

Serap and Metin were quite upset about this situation. They decided to visit the café in the city center that resembled a museum one more time to reassess their situation. They pulled a long face. As soon as they sat down at the table, Metin said:

“I’m starting to get really bored.”

Serap:

“I understand you.”

Metin wanted to know Serap’s opinion:

“So, what do you think?”

“I don’t know; we’ve made some really great friendships, but...”

Serap couldn’t continue, and Metin:

“Friends can be made anywhere.”

“You’re right.”

Metin, the response he had hoped for didn't come, so he decided to speak more openly:

"I want to leave this city now."

After thinking for a while, Serap said:

"Professor Ahmet had told us repeatedly that this wouldn't be easy. We've been to every place we could go and seen everything we could. We've researched all local sources. Unfortunately, we haven't found any tangible evidence."

With his eyes shining, Metin said:

"That's exactly what I've been saying!"

Serap, looking as lost and troubled as a ship captain adrift in the ocean, said:

"I've lost hope completely. We have nothing left to do. My family is already asking me to come back, and winter is coming..."

Serap cut a piece from the ice cream plate the waiter had brought. After taking a deep breath, she continued:

"You can buy our return tickets, Metin. But this time, let's go by plane."

Metin was so thrilled with Serap's decision that...

"Honestly, that would be great. I think so too. How about this weekend?"

"That works for me."

Metin didn't prolong the conversation. After finishing their tea, he said to Serap:

"If you'd like, we can leave now."

The bakery owner, Mr. Atila, was once again at his counter, churning ice cream as usual. When he saw Serap and Metin leaving through the door, he took a careful second look:

“Young people, I feel like I know you,” he said.

After a moment of thought, he continued:

“Alright, you must be those investigative archaeologists. Did you manage to find what you were looking for?”

Before Serap could respond, Metin spoke up:

“Unfortunately, we didn’t find anything. We’re going again this weekend.”

Mr. Atila, though selling ice cream with a scoop and cone like a worker in his own shop, was also an experienced businessman. With a wise demeanor, he said:

“Our fellow townsman Necip Fazıl Kısakürek once said, ‘To leave behind masterpieces like the masters, one must work like ants!’ These things aren’t easy. Success requires patience and effort.”

Serap, these words made her bow her head as if she were guilty. Metin, fearing that Serap might change her mind, quickly said:

“You’re right, uncle. What can we do? It just didn’t work out.”

When Metin got home, he was so happy that he would peacefully sleep for the first time when he laid his head on the pillow.

Metin had never actually thought that Serap would accept the decision to leave. After all, not being by Serap’s side when she was at the hospital had put him in an embarrassing position with both Serap and her mother.

Metin wanted to escape from this feeling of embarrassment and inadequacy. He realized that he might not achieve his dream of winning Serap over. He kept thinking about finding a way out, repeatedly telling himself, “Serap made a great sacrifice, but I wasn’t even there for her when she was

sick and in difficult times.” And he couldn’t bring himself to say more.

As he wrestled with these thoughts in his mind, he was jolted by the ringtone of his cellphone. “I hope nothing’s wrong!” he muttered, picking up the phone. On the other end of the phone was Ayhan:

“I’m sorry for calling so late; You came into my mind.”

Still halfasleep, Metin replied:

“Not at all, you did well to call.”

“Were you sleeping or something?”

“No, I just couldn’t fall asleep.”

Ayhan seemed to sense something from this response:

“You know, true friends reveal themselves in times like these. If there’s anything I can do, don’t hesitate to let me know.”

After a brief silence, Metin, in contrast to his earlier somber mood, responded joyfully:

“We talked with Serap today; we’re going this weekend. I guess that’s why I’m feeling happy.”

When Ayhan heard these words, it was as if a chill running down his back:

“How could this happen? Professor Ahmet... Your research thesis... The years you’ve lost...”

“None of that matters. I came to this city for Serap anyway.”

Ayhan thought to himself, “Don’t lie; you came here to keep Serap from falling for Ayhan.” However, he couldn’t restrain his curiosity.

“How will it be to return emptyhanded to Professor Ahmet? Alright, I understand you, but won’t this be difficult for Serap?”

"I know it will be difficult. She really wanted it, but it didn't work out."

"What can I do for you?"

Metin accidentally blurted out:

"Since Serap didn't oppose my idea of leaving, I want to do something for her. You know, I'm embarrassed about Serap, but I've been thinking about it since last night and haven't come up with anything."

After a moment of silence, Metin continued:

"I wonder if I were to suggest to Serap, 'How about we go on a vacation abroad together,' would she accept it? I'm not sure."

Ayhan's mind was already brimming with cunning ideas:

"I think you should make a different kind of surprise."

"I just can't come up with anything."

Ayhan had been waiting for an opportunity to bring his ideas for Metin to life for a long time. With a reassuring tone, he said:

"Remember when I showed you that café while we were driving the other day..."

After thinking for a moment, Metin replied:

"Yes, I remember. The Treasure Hunters' Café."

"Since you're leaving now, I suggest you talk to the people there as a last hope. They might have some material on Germanicia. I think it would be the biggest surprise you could give Serap. After all, you have nothing to lose. Don't overlook this opportunity."

Metin, surprisingly, became angry again:

"How can you say this to me, Ayhan! How could I possibly meet with those who destroy history?"

Metin stamped the foot. To calm him down, Ayhan said:

“No, no... You’ve misunderstood me! You know how much we fought against those treasure hunters when we were students!”

Metin eased up a bit with these words:

“Sorry, I got really his dander up when I heard that all of a sudden.”

Ayhan, this time spoke cautiously:

“Actually, I’m the one who should be apologizing. I’m not suggesting you collaborate with them or anything like that—how could that even be an option?”

After a moment of swallowing hard, he began to say what he really meant:

“What I mean is; desperate times call for desperate measures. Still, the decision is yours. I’m not saying you should go talk to them. But if they have anything related to your thesis, Serap would be very pleased.”

When Metin heard Serap’s name, he seemed to relax:

“Even so, I don’t want to sit at the same table with them.”

Ayhan had made his point and delivered his message. Not wanting to prolong the conversation, he said:

“It’s your funeral; I just shared my opinion. Sorry for keeping you from your sleep. We can discuss this more later. For now, take care,” he said, and then hung up the phone.

Ayhan’s words were enough to cloud Metin’s mind.

When Metin hung up the phone and laid his head back on the pillow, lay awake for a long time. He was still searching for something to make Serap happy. For a moment, Ayhan’s suggestion crossed his mind. He thought to himself, “That’s not possible!” Despite his efforts, he couldn’t escape the words in his mind. He didn’t even realize how the night passed.

Metin only woke up around noon. After breakfast, he was packing his things while also trying to shake off that confusing idea Ayhan had brought up, but he just couldn't get a handle on it. He went out to on the balcony to get some fresh air, but that didn't help either. His mind was constantly preoccupied with Ayhan's words.

He must have been really bored at home because he decided to go out into the street. He walked aimlessly, like a leaf blown by the wind, unaware of where he was going. How he got there was a mystery, but when he looked up, he found himself suddenly in front of the treasure hunters' café.

He looked around to see if anyone was watching him. There was no one in sight. His feet seemed to be moving on their own, as if they were no longer responding to his commands.

A voice inner him said, "Most of them are licensed anyway." He paused for a moment, considering leaving without going in. But he couldn't resist that inner voice. "What's the harm in just having a tea and leaving?" it suggested.

No matter how hard Metin tried, his feet had already carried him into the café.

The man with the cap was sitting in his usual place in front of the door. As soon as he saw Metin, he recognized him and called out into the café:

"Hey, this guy's not a stranger!"

When Metin entered the café, he saw five or ten people clustered around the tables, engaged in their own quiet conversations under the dim light. As soon as he walked in, they all stopped talking simultaneously and turned their attention to him.

Noticing the silence inside, the man at the door called out again:

"I said he's not a stranger!"

At this, someone from the café approached Metin's table, adopting a reassuring demeanor and said:

"Welcome," he said, sitting down next to Metin. He then asked Metin who he was and what he did.

At first, Metin was very nervous, but as the conversation moved on and the tea was served, he began to relax and shed his diffidence.

When Metin mentioned that he was an archaeologist, an elderly man with long, disheveled hair and a peculiar appearance, who had been eavesdropping on the conversation, said:

"Ah, we're colleagues then!"

Metin looked in the direction of the voice, gave the man the onceover, and said with a dismissive tone:

"Oh, are you an archaeologist too?"

They all suddenly burst out laughing in the café. The man next to Metin quickly intervened, saying:

"He's the best among us at this; he understands charms and always deciphers the secret codes on maps."

Metin, feeling both surprised and overwhelmed by the atmosphere inside, seemed to act as if he were dazed:

"Wow, they never showed us any of this in college. I wonder where he graduated from?"

With this question, another round of laughter burst out in unison in the café. Someone else, referring to the elderly man, said:

"If this guy were given a government seat, he'd pay off the entire national debt in one night with the treasures he finds."

The voice of the tea server was heard from the tea counter:

"Let that fool pay his tea bill first!"

The laughter of one person would end and another's would begin. The person who had been watching the entire scene with composure from his seat, the one whom everyone in the café referred to as 'Ağabey' (Elder Brother), spoke up:

"Forget this idle chatter. These things are a matter of fate. Without that hope within us, how would we live? It's an illness... Once you catch it, you can't escape."

The person, who always understands things partially, heard the words, "Once you're caught, you can't escape":

"That's right, the police have caught Kel Ehmet; they're saying it's hard for him to escape."

The people at the table, smiling, said:

"That's right; He did all this to become rich. Now he's in prison, and his family lives in misery."

The mature man, looking at him, said:

"That's another thing!"

The man speaking with Metin couldn't take it anymore:

"People like you don't just end up here without a reason."

Metin was silent for a while. After taking a deep breath, he recounted everything that had happened to him, concluding his story with:

"Uncle Talip, if I leave this city without finding anything, all my efforts will go down the drain. I'm doing this not just for myself, but mainly for my friend Serap. If you have anything that might help us, I plan to surprise Serap and propose to her. Otherwise, I'll end up losing both the school and the girl."

After looking deeply into Metin's eyes, Talip said:

"Son, it seems you've misunderstood me!"

“Are you not a treasure hunter?”

“No!”

“Then what do you do?”

“I’m a real estate agent.”

Metin looked around in confusion:

“Did I come to the wrong place? Is this...”

Talip intervened:

“You’re in the right place, but...”

Just then, the man at the door came in. He leaned in and whispered something to Talip. Talip nodded as if to say, “I understand.” :

“Yes, I’m a real estate agent. I have a detached house that’s just perfect for you,” he said.

Metin desperately said:

“Uncle Talip, we’re leaving in three days. What should I do with the house for sale?”

Metin looked around again:

“I think I’m in the wrong place,” he said.

“You’re in the right place!”

“What do you mean?”

“Didn’t you ask us about ancient city ruins?”

“I did, but you said you’re a real estate agent!”

“Yes, I’m a real estate agent.”

Leaning in and whispering to Metin, he said:

“Now listen carefully. The houses I buy and sell are not useless. If you have the money, I have a place that’s exactly what you’re looking for.”

“Uncle Talip, I still don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

The man at the door was coming in and out occasional-

ly, overhearing the conversation. This time, he approached Metin and:

“Talip is a man of his word. He doesn’t speak empty words. Also, he doesn’t talk so openly with someone he’s meeting for the first time.”

“But I don’t need a house!”

Angrily:

“He’s not trying to sell you a house, can’t you understand?!”

“What’s he going to sell then?”

“And you’re educated, yet you still don’t get it. He’s telling you that the house will be useful to you!”

“Okay, but I don’t want to buy a house!”

The real estate agent Talip, unable to hold back, said angrily:

“What kind of business is this! You’ve put me face to face with him. Things don’t work this way, for heaven’s sake!”

After the man at the door gave Talip a look that seemed to say “Be patient,” he turned back to Metin:

“This is how things work. To gain access to what’s underneath the house, you first need to buy the one on top.”

Metin:

“I understand, but what’s under the house?”

The man got increasingly angry:

“Mosaics, Mosaics!”

Metin suddenly came to his senses, and had his eyes shine with joy:

“Now I understand,” he said.

The real estate agent Talip:

“Finally, you understand.”

Metin got excited:

“Then let’s go and take a look.”

The man at the door, annoyed, had left. Talip:

“Hold on, it’s not that simple.”

“Tell me what I should do.”

“First of all, you have to keep your mouth shut. You have to be cautious. You have to read people. Otherwise your life is over, you’ll rot in jail.”

Talip, lowering his voice:

“Do you have any money?”

“If what you’re saying is true, money isn’t the issue. But we haven’t even discussed the price of the house yet.”

“Did you give us a chance to discuss the price? I broke my back to explain!”

As they sipped their tea, they were also discussing the value of the house.

The house that real estate agent Talip was negotiating was located in one of the outer neighborhoods. It was a single-story building with an unplastered exterior, a small courtyard in front, and looked like a shanty. The house’s value was not in its material worth, but in the Roman mosaics inside.

Metin had said, “Okay,” but he was a bit anxious about the deal. Seeing him deep in thought, Talip:

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m a real estate agent. I get my commission and leave. You buy the house with your money. If I fail at this, you can go to the museum, say you found mosaics in my house, and that’s it. They might even thank you.”

“If you want to sell it, I can find a buyer right away. By the way, you’re very lucky. The house has just been put on

the market. The owner came to me last night. My clients abroad don't even know about it yet. Otherwise, they'd buy it for a higher price without a second thought. I quoted this price for you because you're a student and you're doing this for your girlfriend. I just wanted to contribute a small share. That's all there is to it."

With those words, Metin suddenly looked up, with a twinkle in his eye:

"Right, I can just say I found mosaics in my house, and I'll become a hero."

The real estate agent Talip:

"Alright, then we have a deal."

Metin, looking at a distant point, said to himself with joy:

"As long as the mosaics are from the ancient city that Professor Ahmet mentioned... This might be the best surprise I can give Serap. She won't be able to say no to my marriage proposal now..."

Time had passed. Both of them got up from their chairs. As Metin waved goodbye to everyone and left, the real estate agent Talip escorted him from the door. The man with the cap at the door:

"Did you come to an agreement?"

Talip:

"We've come to an agreement. After talking to the owner, I'll show the house to the young man. He's a bit hesitant, but I don't think he'll say no once he sees the mosaics."

This all must be a dream

Chapter XVII

While Metin was doing all this, Serap, was unaware of what was going on, had gone out to the Grand Bazaar to buy a few more gifts for her friends in Istanbul. She was very thoughtful. After all, these were her last days in the city where she had come to pursue her academic dreams. If Metin hadn't insisted, she might have stayed until the end, but she had also lost hope. She thought to herself, "There's nothing more to be done; I guess this is the end of the road."

She was coming home with a tired and sad expression, carrying the gift packages she had bought from the bazaar. The streets of the neighborhood where she was staying were already very narrow. As she came her home and saw the cars parked on both sides of the street, she got excited. She muttered to herself, "Wow, today everywhere is filled with cars."

As she turned into the street where her house was, she suddenly froze at the sight before her. In front of the shared street gate with her landlord, there was a large crowd. The police had blocked off the street and were not allowing anyone to enter or leave.

In a state of shock, Serap tried to make sense of what was happening as she saw her landlord being handcuffed and loaded into a police car. There were numerous journalists and television reporters around, documenting everything.

Serap, having understood nothing of what was going on, told the police that her home was nearby, and they allowed her to pass. She made her way through the police line and arrived at her house.

She was very scared, her eyes searching for a familiar face to explain what was happening. At that moment, she thought she saw someone across the street who resembled Metin. She thought it might be a hallucination and said to herself, "Metin didn't call at all today."

When Serap walked through the door, she schocked again. She knew the landlord had been digging a pit in the courtyard for days, claiming it was for a coal cellar. This time, at the edge of that pit, there were unexpected figures present...

The governor, the regional director of culture and tourism, the museum director, and journalists were all there. She was especially surprised to see Ayhan among them. At first, she observed the crowd from a distance and then listening in shock to the governor's statement to the press.

"Our security forces, acting on a tipoff, have apprehended the property owner engaged in illegal excavation here during a sudden raid. As you can see, mosaic remnants have been discovered one meter beneath the ground. According to our experts, these mosaics, which are considered to have high artistic value, are believed to date back to the Roman Period and to belong to the ancient city of Germanicia that once ruled this region. The investigation is ongoing and will explore all possible angles. It will determine if there are any other individuals involved in this case. We hope to have results soon."

Serap couldn't hide his astonishment at what she was hearing. She didn't know what to do. To herself, she murmured, "This all must be a dream."

Serap's landlord wanted to build a coal cellar in his courtyard before winter. He had heard that mosaic remnants had been found in the foundations of other houses in the neighborhood from time to time. With hope, he couldn't help but check the soil with each stroke of the shovel. When he saw the colorful small stones scattered around from his last dig, his eyes nearly popped out of his head. He picked up the mosaic pieces mixed with the soil, pretended to kiss them, and joyfully exclaimed, "I'm rich, I'm rich!"

After looking around, he immediately stretched a tarp over the hole he had dug to ensure no one could see inside. Under the tarp, he carefully dug the soil this time not with a shovel but with his hands and a small trowel to avoid damaging the mosaics, and soon uncovered an area the size of a small room.

The man, who had been unemployed for a long time, was very pleased to find such a historical artifact in his home's courtyard. The thought of going to the museum to report it didn't even cross his mind.

He knew that some people in the neighborhood collaborated with treasure hunters under the pretext of buying and selling property. He was aware that mosaics found in houses were sold with the house due to the difficulty of moving them. He had taken a few pieces of the mosaic samples he had uncovered and secretly gone to the real estate agent Talip, whom he knew to be involved in such dealings, to explain the situation.

When the real estate agent Talip asked, "Is there anyone else who has seen or knows about this?" the man replied, "Only my wife knows." Talip said, "Very good, tell her to keep quiet about it," and advised him on the importance of secrecy, adding, "Alright, now don't tell anyone else. Don't

let anyone into your house. Don't let your tenant suspect anything either. Cover the hole thoroughly. Don't worry, I'll find a buyer for you!"

The real estate agent Talip informed Metin at the treasure hunters' café that he had a house with mosaics for sale. He mentioned that if Metin liked the house, they could make an agreement to sell it to him.

As Talip and Metin were meeting at a certain point to show the house for sale, they reached the beginning of the street where the house was located. As soon as Talip saw the police there, he grabbed Metin by the collar and shouted, "You reported this, didn't you?" Metin, frightened, responded, "What report? Isn't this Serap's house? What's going on? Where have we ended up?"

The real estate agent Talip, not wanting to stay there any longer, turned to Metin and said angrily:

"Stop talking! If you've made a mistake, I'll be the one to hold you accountable. From now on, you never saw me and I never saw you. We don't know each other!"

Metin wonderingly peeked from the end of the street again and made eye contact with Serap. However, at that moment, Talip quickly grabbed his arm and said, "Get out of here now before the police catch us! Otherwise, we'll both end up in jail!" After giving his final warning, Talip silently had slipped away and disappeared.

Metin, just coming to terms with the situation he found himself in, anguished, "What have I done? How did I get into this mess?" and, without looking back, he also fled the scene, running away.

Ayhan, along with the museum director, had joined the raid as an archaeologist. It was only when he arrived at the scene that he realized the address in question was Serap's

house. He, too, was astonished by what had happened. All his plans and theories had suddenly become worthless with the discovery of the mosaics coming out of Serap's house.

Ayhan had meticulously planned everything. He had directed Metin to the treasure hunters' café to force him into making a mistake. He had gone up to the man in the cap in front of the café's door and said, "The person you saw in my car might come here these days. I would appreciate it if you could assist him."

Ayhan knew for certain that Metin would go to the treasure hunters' café. He thought that by drawing Metin into this trap, Metin would be arrested for historical artifact smuggling. This way, when Metin ended up in jail, Ayhan planned to take the opportunity to step in as a hero and claim Serap for himself.

But none of that happened. A concerned resident from the neighborhood, noticing that the Serap's landlord had covered the pit he had dug with a tarp, became curious. As there was no rain to justify the tarp, the resident wondered about its purpose. Suspecting that there might be something similar to the mosaics found in the foundations of other houses in the neighborhood, he went to the museum as a precaution and reported it.

When Serap realized that what she had been experiencing was not a dream, she suddenly found herself at the edge of the pit where the mosaics had been unearthed. She approached the exposed area closely and examined the designs in the mosaics. When she saw the depiction of a noble Roman hunter with a spear in hand and a quiver of arrows on his back among the deer, she burst with excitement.

Just a short distance ahead, there was a scene where the other half remained buried underground. It depicted a girl

dancing among springtime poppies, adorned with a golden necklace around her neck and wearing a burgundy pink garment belted at the waist. Her melancholic gaze and overall appearance clearly suggested that she was also a noble Roman girl...

Seeing them, Serap suddenly remembered the “Çil Meryem” legend that the headman Sadık had recounted at Meryemçil Castle. She looked at the dancing Germanical girl...

She closed her eyes and was instantly transported back sixteen centuries...

*Just when he had lost all hope, suddenly,
it appeared right in front of him.*

Chapter XVIII

A.D. 520

The Geben Basin

Antinius, in the vast green forests, with a spear in hand and a quiver of arrows on his back, was constantly chasing after deer.

He was from a noble family, the son of Gordios, the commander of Kızılkale, one of the important border outposts of Germanicia. Commander Gordios deeply wished for his son to take a position in the state apparatus, just as he had. However, Antinius had other interests. His eyes were fixed solely on the deer running in the mountain tops, and he paid no attention to anything else.

To the west of the city of Germanicia, there were numerous interconnected fortresses that ensured the city's border security and were built along the trade routes running from south to north. Caravans paid fees for the protection of their lives and goods as they passed through this route.

The largest and most strategically important of these fortresses was Geben Castle. It also served as the customs gate for the city of Germanicia to the west.

There were two other important fortresses neighboring Geben Castle: Kızılkale to the north and Azgıt Castle to the south...

Antinius rose with the dawn. After consuming the oat porridge prepared by his mother, he strapped his bow and arrows to his shoulder, equipped his canteen, spear, and knife, and mounted his horse. As usual, he went down the slopes of Kızılkale, quickly crossed the valley, and ventured into the boundless forest to the south.

In the forest, the great cedar trees were so dense and tall that the sky was obscured. He followed the usual path along the stream. For some reason, he was unusually excited today, felt oats. After going a little further, he suddenly stopped his horse and said, "Today, I must prove myself to my father. He should see what kind of hunter his son is!"

Instead of heading to his usual hunting grounds, this time he directed his horse towards a different direction, into the isolated depths of the forest and up unfamiliar hills. The horse struggled to navigate through the dense trees. Not wanting to tire it further, he dismounted and tied it to a nearby tree. Unable to resist the horse's sorrowful gaze, he kissed its forehead and said, "Stay here."

Antinius tied the laces of his long leather boots, slung his quiver over his shoulder, and began walking on foot into the depths of the forest.

He lost track of how far he had walked under the tall trees. He reached a point where the trees he encountered were vastly different from the ones he had left behind.

To avoid getting lost, he marked certain points along the way, but the mysterious forest seemed to have swallowed him up. Everything looked the same, and he felt utterly alone in the boundless forest.

The forest animals seemed to be seeing a human for the first time. They watched him from a distance with curious and unusual movements.

One of the deer running around was different from the others. It approached Antinius so closely that it stood directly in front of him and began to observe him intently. Unable to resist, Antinius spoke as if to the deer:

“Alright, it seems you’re my prey for today.”

Antinius knelt on his left knee, drew an arrow from his quiver, and nocked it to his bow. The deer remained perfectly still, gazing at him without moving. Even as he aimed and shot, the deer did not flee.

Antinius had never seen a deer so closely in the forest before. The deer’s big black eyes as if tinged with kohl, mesmerized him so much that he thought, “Such beautiful eyes are not even found in palace maidens.”

He put down his bow, thinking he could capture it alive. As he started to run after the deer, it suddenly ran away with all its agility.

Antinius had missed his prey. He obstinately continued in the direction it had gone, searching everywhere but unable to find it. Just as he was about to lose hope, the deer appeared again from behind a distant tree. He readied his bow once more. The deer didn’t flee; it merely stepped back a few paces. Antinius drew his bow, aimed, and shot arrow. The deer seemed to anticipate the arrow’s range, quickly stepping back reflexly. The arrow landed in front of its hooves. The deer continued to watch him, as if mocking his attempts.

Antinius made it a matter of pride. Despite knowing it was futile, he impulsively threw his spear at the deer. Immediately after, he started running after it. However, the deer was faster than him and quickly disappeared among the underbrush.

Antinius saw other deer around, but he was determined to catch this one. He ventured deep into the forest for a long time. Realizing he was tired, he was about to rest against a

tree when the deer reappeared in front of him, completely still. Without taking his eyes off it, Antinius nocked an arrow once more. All eyes, he aimed and let fly the arrow with such precision that, had the deer not leaped suddenly, it would have likely struck its heart.

The deer, having escaped this danger, plunged even deeper into the forest. It ran up the steep mountainsides with such speed that...

Antinius said, "This deer is playing games with me!" Despite his exhaustion, he was determined not to give up. He paused for a moment, trying to determine his location, but he couldn't find his way. Not only had he lost the deer, but he also had no idea where he was.

He was moving through the desolate forest, uncertain of what might appear from any direction. Fear and unease had inevitably begun to set in. As he looked around in desperation, he spotted a cottage in the distance. He felt a burst of relief and joy.

The cottage he stumbled upon was a beacon of hope for him. Near the cottage was a small fountain. Realizing his thirst, he rushed to the water and was guzzling it when he suddenly jolted at the sound coming from the cottage:

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

Antinius, in horror, replied:

"I'm a hunter."

The old man, after scrutinizing Antinius carefully, said:

"From your clothes, you seem to be of noble descent. Even the bravest hunters wouldn't dare come here—how did you dare?"

"I was chasing a deer."

"I think you should return to where you came from without delay, or you might get lost in the forest and become prey the lions!"

Antinius, the old man's fatherly demeanor giving him courage, said:

"Then why are you here, and all alone?"

"It's a long story, but since you asked, I'll tell you. I had a small mill in the valley below. When I got old, whether I abandoned the mill or it abandoned me, in any case, I found myself here."

"Are you not afraid of wild animals?"

The old man paused for a moment, then said:

"Why should I be afraid? Animals are more sensitive and loyal than people."

Antinius, the old man's command to "Go back!" went unheeded as he was determined to continue further in the direction the deer had gone. Seeing that he couldn't convince him, the old man:

"You can do as you wish, but there is an owner of those lands. Don't make him angry!"

"What do you mean by 'owner'?"

The old man, after glancing once more into the depths of the forest, continued:

"Centuries ago, a lion known as 'Markasi Aslanı' lived here. It roamed the mountains peacefully, never harming anyone who left it alone. One day, a hunter like you set such a trap for it that the great lion perished in it in front of its cubs. The cubs never forgot this. They told their own cubs in their language, and so on through the generations. Now, there is a lion in this forest from those descendants, and no one passes through here without its knowledge."

"Well, aren't you afraid of this lion?"

"I've come to an understanding with him."

Antinius, in amazement, asked:

"How is that possible?"

"I told you earlier that animals are very sensitive and

loyal. They can understand your intentions as soon as they see your face and act accordingly. As long as you don't change your intentions, we don't disturb it, and it doesn't disturb us. In the summer, we give it the excess meat we've dried from the animals we've hunted. The wild animals in the forest know of this friendship and stay away because they fear the lion. In short, we share everything with it. Our friendship continues in this way."

After listening attentively to the story, Antinius muttered to himself:

"I had heard a lot about that lion's fame; so it was true after all."

"I'm warning you one last time: don't go!"

Antinius thought for a moment. Just as he was about to give up and turn back, the deer appeared again, almost as if calling him. Antinius excitedly said:

"Don't stand in my way!"

No matter how much the old man insisted, "Don't go!" he couldn't dissuade Antinius. He handed him a piece of bread, saying, "In case you get hungry, you can eat this."

Antinius, with all his strength, ventured deeper into the mysterious forest where the legendary lion was said to dwell, stubbornly pursuing the deer.

Seeing the courage of the Roman young hunter against wild animals in the mosaics that she never took her eyes off, Serap exclaimed, "Oh no, Antinius has embarked on a dangerous adventure." She suddenly looked up and began to admire the mosaic of Antinius holding a spear.

She silently watched the hunting scenes depicted in the mosaics for a while. Then, she slowly closed her eyes... and drifted back to the mysterious era of Antinius, centuries ago.

*The deer seemed to be leading the way, almost as if saying,
“Follow me,” as it darted ahead...*

Chapter XIX

A.D. 520

The Geben Basin

He had followed the deer so far that there was no trace of the old man's cottage or any sign of human presence... He was all alone in the desolate forest. There was no way he could return now, even if he wanted to. He was very tired. He decided to rest by leaning against a tree. As he sat down for a while, he felt hungry. He wanted to take out and eat the bread the old man had given him. Just then, a panic suddenly erupted in the forest. Every animal was fleeing in a panic in different directions. Antinius looked around, unable to make sense of what he was seeing.

It didn't take long before he was startled by a terrifying roar echoing from the depths of the forest. He was gripped by fear. For a moment, he wanted to flee in any direction, but where could he escape to? His mind was in disarray, and he couldn't think of anything anymore.

Soon, he saw a massive lion approaching him slowly with great majesty. He broke out in a cold sweat. He had no strength left to run nor any place to hide. As the lion drew nearer, its grandeur increased, and Antinius's fear grew ever more intense.

As Antinius writhed in desperation, he suddenly remembered the old man's words: "Animals sense a human's intent through their face." Despite his fear, he stood up. He gently placed his quiver, bow, spear, and the bread on the ground. He knelt and sat down like a soldier captured in battle. With this action, the lion's furious growls suddenly ceased.

Antinius took a deep breath. He felt quite relieved when, during the silence, a sound resembling a deer was heard in the forest. With that sound, the lion suddenly roared again. Its roaring turned into chilling growls. The lion opened its mouth like a cave, and its white, sharp teeth looked so fearsome...

The lion lowered its body and took a few steps back. Its mane and fur bristled, its breathing quickened, and its growling intensified. It was adopting a clear attack posture.

Antinius was so terrified in his desperation that he closed his eyes, as if to accept whatever would come, and placed the bread on the ground, waiting. It wasn't long before he felt a swift object pass over his head like a gust of wind.

Antinius couldn't breathe for a moment. After waiting a while, he slowly began to open his eyes. Seeing nothing in front of him, he realized that what had passed over him was the lion.

There was a sound of a struggle coming from the direction the lion had gone. Curiously, he turned around to look. His astonishment grew even more when he saw that a wild hyena, which had come very close to him, was being torn apart by the lion.

Antinius gathered his belongings from the ground and stood up. He approached the tornapart hyena and saw more closely how he had narrowly escaped such a peril.

The mysterious silence of the forest was once again disrupted by the sound of the deer. Antinius looked in the direction of the sound, but he saw no one.

How could Antinius have known that the sound was made by the deer, which had been relentlessly pursued throughout the day, and that it had warned the lion about the hyena's sneaky attack?

Once Antinius collected himself, he tried to check the time by looking at the sun, but it was obscured by the dense trees. Tired of the ordeal and eager to escape, he wanted to leave this adventure behind.

He tried to find the direction he had come from but couldn't determine it. Just as he had slung his quiver back over his shoulder, the deer appeared again, as if toying with him like a cat with a mouse. The deer seemed to be leading the way, almost as if saying, "Follow me," as it darted ahead. Antinius forgot everything he had been through and, despite his exhaustion, began to chase after his prey once more.

He had traveled a long way towards the mountain peaks. Realizing he couldn't get too close to the deer, Antinius decided to follow it without being seen. He hid behind the bushes and moved cautiously. Not seeing its pursuer, the deer didn't advance and began eating the fresh grass nearby, occasionally lifting its head to nervously glance around. This continued for a while.

Seeing that the deer hadn't moved, Antinius approached it stealthily and said, "You can't escape now!" He nocked an arrow to his bow, quietly advancing a few more steps while crouched among the bushes. He knelt to aim, and just as he was about to shoot, he locked eyes with the deer. This time, the deer didn't flee. Antinius drew the bow back even further and released the arrow, which struck its mark, embedding itself in the deer's shoulder.

The deer shuddered slightly but didn't fall. Seeing that it wasn't fleeing, Antinius aimed to capture it alive. For a hunter, capturing a live animal was crucial. After all his efforts, bringing a live deer to his father would be a significant source of pride for him.

Just as Antinius was about to make a move to capture the deer, it seemed to come to life once more. Under Antinius's astonished gaze, with one last effort, the deer ran over the hill in front of it.

Antinius said, "It can't go far now." He began climbing in the direction the deer had gone. When he reached the mountaintop, he couldn't believe his eyes. He felt as though he was greeted by a sea of lush green forest stretching to the horizon. In this green sea, the hills resembled boats, and the mountains looked like ships.

Not from the mountaintop, it felt as though he was observing from the sky. The immense forest of towering trees appeared like a vast green wheat field. The sun, which he had been unable to see earlier, now seemed close enough to reach out and touch.

Antinius was astonished by the sight before him, as if he were living in a fairy tale. He no longer thought about time or place, and it seemed he had forgotten the deer he had been chasing. Overwhelmed by the beauty he saw from the mountaintop, he felt dizzy and sat down.

This sense of intoxication lasted for a while. He asked himself, "Where am I, and why am I here?" He began to examine his surroundings once more. Just then, he spotted the deer he had been chasing down below. The deer was making strange sounds as if calling Antinius to follow. Yet, Antinius found himself responded not to the deer but to the mysterious invitation of the boundless forest spread out before him.

After taking a few steps, he suddenly noticed the chasm in front of him. He had to be cautious. Carefully, he began to follow along the path the deer had gone, holding on to the stunted trees growing among the rocks. The deer seemed to know this, moving just far enough away to keep Antinius always within reach, but never closer.

Antinius glanced at the endless green in front of him and noticed something shimmering and flowing in the distance. As he went further, he realized it was a magnificent waterfall. He was so thirsty that he thought to himself, "Even if I drank all this water, it wouldn't be enough to quench my thirst."

Antinius was captivated by the waterfall's unique beauty, and the deer seemed to be drawing him in that direction. He was chasing the deer when slipped. After tumbling down for a while, he found himself on a large rock just below. He was covered in thorns with his face and body bleeding. Just as he tried to get up, he came face-to-face with a large snake among the rocks. Once again he remembered the old man's words, but this time the situation was very different. Acting on instinct, he stood up and tried to move away from the snake. The only solution was to get away from there. Realizing he couldn't go any further, and seeing the snake was on the rock and preparing to attack, Antinius knew his only option was to jump. As the snake opened its mouth to strike, Antinius beat it to it and jumped himself down.

He could hardly stand up by holding on to tree branches where he fell. Despite bruises on his body, he was relieved there were no broken bones. After clearing the thorns from his clothes, he took a deep breath to relax and then continued to chase the deer.

The deer waited on the plain, maintaining the same distance. Seeing the hunter approach, it seemed that the pain

from its wound had intensified, making it increasingly difficult for it to walk. For the first time, Antinius felt a sense of mercy for his prey upon seeing the deer in such a state.

While following the wounded deer, Antinius first felt a coolness on his face and then remembered his thirst upon hearing the nearby sound of water. Despite being in the boundless forest, he felt as though he were in a desert. He started running towards the sound of the water. As he approached the waterfall, he was once again overwhelmed by what he saw. He was so affected that he forgot about the deer and his thirst entirely.

In the forest, among the colourful flowers, he came across a fairytale beauty unlike anything he had ever seen. She lay down on the grass, with arched eyebrows like a bow, eyes as dark as grapes that would make even the deer envious, jetblack hair, a slender waist, and white skin. He was so spellbound by the sight before him that he was speechless, as if under a magical trance.

Antinius, captivated by the girl's radiant beauty, had failed to notice the deer. The deer he had chased all day now lay trembling and wounded at the feet of the fairytale beauty. Angered by this sight, the girl said to Antinius:

"Did you wound this deer?"

Antinius, still under the spell of the enchantress he had encountered, responded:

"What deer?"

"Can't you see this wounded deer?"

At her words, Antinius finally noticed the deer:

"Yes, that's my deer!"

The girl, growing more angry, said:

"Since when is it yours? It came here covered in blood. And how did you find this place?"

“This deer brought me here.”

The girl looked at the wounded deer again and quietly said, “So you’re the one who brought him here.”

She turned to Antinius and said:

“From your clothes, you don’t seem like an ordinary hunter. Who are you?”

Antinius, not taking his eyes off the girl, replied:

“My name is Antinius. I am the son of the Commander of Kızilkale.”

Antinius asked the girl:

“You don’t seem like an ordinary village girl either. Who are you?”

The girl gave Antinius the once over and then said:

“My father is the Commander of Geben Castle.”

Antinius:

“Aren’t you going to tell me your name?”

After a moment of silence, she said:

“My name is Maria.”

Meanwhile, the deer was on the ground, opening and closing its eyes in pain. Maria could not bear to see the deer in that state. She took the deer’s head in her arms, stroked its back and looked into its eyes. Then she turned to Antinius and said:

“Get away from here immediately. If my guards see us like this, they will kill you!”

Antinius didn’t even remember the direction he had come from. Seeing his confusion, Maria signaled to her horse grazing a short distance away in the grass. The horse trotted over to them with the docility of a child:

“Get on that horse, don’t interfere, it will take you to the road to the castle!”

When Antinius looked at Maria's face:

"Don't worry about the horse; it will find me."

As Antinius prepared to leave, Maria stood up. She continued to gaze deeply into his eyes, wanting to get closer, Antinius suddenly grabbed his spear from the ground and sprang into action. He threw himself in front of Maria, facing the wild boar that was stealthily approaching from behind, ready to attack. In a few moves, he knocked it down, to Maria's astonished gaze.

Maria was terrified by what had just happened. She excitedly looked at the boar carcass in the bushes and at Antinius, who had saved herself from death. After a brief moment of astonishment, she removed one of the two bracelets from her arm without hesitation:

"You saved my life!" she said, placing the bracelet into Antinius's palm.

Antinius looked first at the bracelet, then at Maria:

"If you're offering this gold bracelet as payment for saving you, I will never accept it!"

Maria, with determination, said:

"Of course, a life cannot be repaid with a bracelet. If anything, a life is repaid with another life!"

Antinius:

"Then this gift will always remind me of you."

Antinius wanted to give Maria something to remember him by, but finding nothing suitable, he placed his hand over his heart:

"I would like to give you my heart..."

Maria wanted to change the subject to avoid Antinius further embarrassment. Pointing to the fallen deer, she said:

"It seems that this deer brought you to me."

Upon Maria's words, Antinius looked at the deer. Its wound was still bleeding. He swiftly removed the broken arrow lodged in the deer's back and held out its metal tip to Maria:

"Then you can remember me with this!"

Maria took the arrowhead in her hand as if she had just received a great treasure:

"I will carry this on my heart for a lifetime," she said.

After bidding farewell, Antinius swiftly mounted his horse. As he rode a short distance away, he wanted to take one last look at Maria. When he turned back, Maria was still watching him. They continued to gaze at each other for a while longer.

After Antinius disappeared from view, Maria glanced at the wounded deer lying on the ground. Its silence frightened her. She knelt down and gently stroked the deer's head. When she touched it, she found that all its former vitality had vanished. No tears came from her eyes. She bent down to check its breath but ... She looked at the deer's face once more, and looked... for the deer had already breathed its last.

Maria, as if in a trance, screamed, "My deer is dead!" So piercing was her cry that when the guards rushed to the scene, they found Maria cradling the deer's head in her arms, staring at it blankly. The first guard, filled with concern, asked:

When the first guard asked, "What happened here?" Maria, without lifting her head, replied in a sorrowful voice:

"It was impaled on a branch when it jumped from the cliffs; my deer is dead."

Maria told her guards this, but her heart spoke a differ-

ent truth. When she listened to the voice of her heart:

“How could you be such a hunter, that you have wounded both my deer and me at our very core!”

Tie a felt on your horse's hoof and come...

Chapter XX

A.D. 520

Kızılkale

Ever since the day he saw Maria, Antinus couldn't forget her. He often preferred to let himself into his room and be alone, even sending his friends away from the castle with some excuse when they came to visit.

Even hunting, which he used to enjoy the most, no longer gave him pleasure. Sometimes he would get on his horse into the forest. Everyone thought he was going hunting, but he never saw another deer except Maria. He always returned emptyhanded from the hunt.

On the evening of one such day, he met his father at the entrance of the castle, Commander Gordios:

"I suppose you're coming back from the hunt?"

"Yes."

"I see you've been coming back emptyhanded lately. Is there no game left in the forest, or is your mother right in her instincts?"

Antinius took a moment to collect himself and, after taking a deep breath, said:

"Father, I don't know what you discussed with my mother, but I would like to talk to you about something. I'd

like to share it when you have a moment.”

After dinner, Antinius let himself into his room and began thinking about Maria again. He closed his eyes, imagining the moment they first met, when suddenly his father burst into and said hurriedly:

“Yes, tell me what’s going on with you?”

Antinius collected himself. After a brief silence, he recounted his adventure with Maria just as it happened:

“Is this what has been occupying your mind and troubling you so much?”

“Yes, father, I can’t seem to control my heart, no matter how much I try to clear my mind.”

“I understand you very well. Don’t worry; the girl’s father is a close friend of mine. We’ll go and talk to him for you.”

Antinius was so happy that he couldn’t help but hug his father.

The guards of Geben Castle quickly admitted the commander of Kızılkale and his wife as soon as they arrived. After Commander Markos of Geben Castle and his wife greeted them at the door, they led them into the hall. After chatting for a while, Commander Gordios of Kızılkale got straight to the point and expressed his thoughts about Maria.

This request was a great surprise for Markos and his wife, Diana. After thinking for a moment, Markos said:

“A few days ago, Commander Zorbis of Azgit Castle came with the same request.”

Gordios, surprised, said:

“Really?!”

Markos continued:

“You know that both of you are my esteemed friends.

After discussing this matter with my daughter, we will share our thoughts.”

Commander Markos and his wife, Diana, first discussed the matter among themselves. They didn’t want to upset either commander, as it was important to maintain good political and military relations with both castle commanders. They couldn’t come to a conclusion, so they called Maria to their rooms. Diana sat across from her daughter and said:

“Daughter, you know your father needs to keep both castle commanders balanced due to his position. Your choice is very important, as it is your decision that will free him from this responsibility!”

In fact, Maria had already made her choice. However, she couldn’t put her father in a difficult position. She sat quietly for a moment, thinking, when suddenly an idea came to her that would not offend either side:

“Father, organize a celebration at the castle. Invite both castle commanders here. I will express my thoughts there,” she said.

Her mother, curious, asked:

“What kind of idea is that?”

“It’s a proposal that won’t put my father in a difficult position and won’t offend anyone either.”

Her mother and father exchanged glances and then said:

“Alright, let it be so.”

Preparations were made. Both the commanders of Azgit and Kızılkale attended the celebration at the castle. After the grand feast, music and entertainment began in full swing. Towards the end of the festivities, Commander Markos signaled to stop the music and addressed the guests:

“Esteemed guests, both the commanders of Azgıt and Kızılkalé have expressed their interest in my daughter Maria for their sons in recent days. Both commanders are very dear to me, and I do not wish to upset either of them. Therefore, I have left the decision to my daughter. Now, I give the floor to her to share her thoughts.”

With these words, a murmur spread through the hall. As Maria stepped forward, a deep silence fell. All curious eyes were fixed on her. After surveying the guests for a moment, Maria said:

“I know you are all curious about what I will say. It’s so difficult to make a choice here, as both sides belong to noble families of Rome. To give both families an equal opportunity, if you allow me, I would like to make a proposal now.”

A murmur spread through the hall again. Everyone eagerly awaited what the girl would say, but most of all, Maria’s parents were filled with excitement.

Maria continued her speech:

“My proposal is this: on a specified date, whichever of them arrives here first without getting dust and mud on their horses’ hooves from their castle will be the one I marry.”

Suddenly, chaos and astonishment filled the hall. While Maria’s parents found the proposal clever, it left the other castle commanders in deep thought.

Commander Markos stood up. Turning to Gordios and Zorbis, he said:

“I applaud my daughter’s decision. There could be no fairer proposal. Let your sons showcase all their skills!”

Markos turned to the musicians and said:

“Let our entertainment resume.”

This news surprised both young men. Dorkon, the son of the Azgıt commander, confidently, relying on his father’s

rank, said, "It won't be hard to win Maria!" while Antinus didn't share that view. He locked himself in his room and began to plan how he would win Maria.

Antinius was afraid of losing Maria in this competition. He couldn't sleep for days. He felt sleepy, but he couldn't stop thinking about her. One night, suddenly his eyes lit up. The sleepiness had faded, and he felt energized. He got out of bed and said to himself, "Alright, this is it!"

In the morning, he joyfully ran to his mother to share his thoughts:

"Maria will be mine!"

"How will this happen?"

"I have an idea that you won't believe!"

"Since you're so confident, it must be something significant."

"Yes, Mom, I will pave the road all the way to Geben."

"I can't believe you! How will you manage this?"

"The love inside me is so strong that not only to Geben, but even to Germanicia, I would do it if they asked!"

Her mother couldn't take it anymore and said, "This child has lost his mind." Just as she was getting up to leave, Antinius called out behind her:

"It's not madness, Mom; it's love, love!"

Antinius roamed every mountain near and far, seeking out the brightest and most exquisite colored stones. Day and night, he set to work paving the road from Kızıl kale to Geben.

People passing by noticed Antinius's efforts; some felt pity, while others remarked, "This young man is truly in love."

Antinius paid no attention to any of this. He continued to pave the road with all his strength, working late into the night.

As the road neared the castle, Antinius, who had seen no one, suddenly noticed that Maria was watching him from the castle walls. Instantly, his weary body came alive again, like dry branches finding life in spring. Eager to close the distance between himself and Maria, Antinius set to work with the same excitement as the first day.

As Maria watched Antinius from above, she knew that the love he felt for her fueled his strength. While she couldn't bear to see him toil so hard, she was also pleased by his efforts, touched by female instincts.

Commander Markos, whenever he entered and exited the castle and saw Antinius, would commend his efforts, saying, "A determined young man, he will achieve the impossible."

Maria, as she did every day, began to watch Antinius from the castle window as soon as she woke up. Seeing him struggling with the stones made her heart ache. She closed her eyes, and as she thought of the moment they would be together, her eyes filled with tears of joy.

She had been lost in watching Antinius for a while when a clap of thunder brought her back to reality. She looked up at the sky and saw that dark clouds were covering it. A wave of fear washed over her. "What if he can't finish it by the final day?" she thought.

The fear inside her grew and grew... The feeling of loss began to gnaw at Maria like a ravenous wolf.

As Maria was pondering a solution, she got suddenly a bright idea. She had always trusted Kotas, the old head chef of the castle. She rushed to the kitchen. The head chef was preparing a meal with his assistant when he stepped forward to greet her upon seeing Maria enter. Leaning in, Maria whispered something in Kotas's ear. The head chef

replied, "Don't worry, I've got this."

After showing his assistant what to do, the head chef found an opportunity to slip away and went to see Antiunus. He discreetly relayed Maria's message to him.

Antiunus was happy to hear the news, but he felt confident. Thinking, "I want to win Maria not through favor but by my own merit," he disregarded the message and returned to his work with renewed focus.

While all this was happening, there was a great commotion in Azgıt Castle. Seers and wizards had been summoned secretly, asked to find a solution. Amid the chaos, one of the gate guards approached the suitor Dorkon and said that a horseman wanted to speak with him. Dorkon replied, "I can't meet right now!" and dismissed him.

A short while later, the same guard returned. "He says he comes from Geben Castle and insists on speaking with you," he reported. The moment Dorkon heard the name "Geben," his eyes lit up. "Bring him in immediately!" he commanded.

After meeting with the visitor in his private chamber, Dorkon said as he sent him on his way, "I will never forget this favor. Now leave without being seen, and keep your mouth shut!" As the man exited, Dorkon made sure to hand him a pouch filled with gold.

Dorkon joyfully went to his father Zorbis and informed him that the meeting had concluded. He then told the seers and wizards, "I have no further business with you; you may leave." After they exited, Dorkon shared the exciting news with his father. Commander Zorbis:

"Then let's start the wedding preparations right away," said.

*With the ease of hopeful victory,
he sank into such a deep sleep that...*

Chapter XXI

A.D. 520

Geben Castle (Meryemçil)

According to Antiunus's plan, the road was supposed to be finished today. However, the heavy rains from the day before had thrown his calculations into disarray. Realizing that, despite working late into the night, he wouldn't be able to complete the road, he muttered to himself, "Maria was right; I have no choice but to follow her advice." He stopped working, mounted his horse, and as he went home along the road that sparkled brightly, he felt all his fatigue once again in his body.

When he arrived at Kızılkale, he didn't even notice the magnificent feast prepared by his mother. Anxiously, he set to work on the preparations for tomorrow's race to bring Maria's message to life.

Antiunus had made all the preparations, but he had no idea what kind of preparations his rival Dorkon was undertaking. This curiosity gnawed at him like a relentless wolf. Despite all his fatigue, he hadn't slept a wink.

He kept repeating to himself, "What if Dorkon wins?"

As Antiunus struggled with these thoughts, he never lost hope, but he was torn between fear and optimism. His

eyelids felt heavier from the fatigue of fortyfour days. With the ease of hopeful victory, he sank into a deep sleep.

When morning came and the castle residents woke up, Antiunus's mother went straight to her son's room. She knocked on the door several times, but there was no response. Curious, she entered. Seeing that Antiunus was still in a deep sleep, she couldn't bring herself to wake him with a mother's tenderness. "After all, there's plenty of time until the race this evening," she said.

It was the sun streaming through the window that woke Antiunus, the son whom Heliodora couldn't bring herself to awaken. He sprang out of bed in a panic, racing to the window. The sun was directly overhead. "Oh no!" he exclaimed.

He hurriedly put on his clothes. When he stepped out of his room and saw his mother, he snapped at her with all his frustration:

"Mother, why didn't you wake me?"

Without waiting for his mother's response, he rushed to his horse. He checked its hoof—everything was fine. Antiunus had never whipped his horse so fiercely. He rode so fast on the road he made that he reached Geben Castle in no time. He didn't even comprehend the blank stares of the crowd waiting there. Shouting at the castle guards, he exclaimed:

"Open the gate, I have arrived!"

The old guard at the gate looked at Antiunus with compassionate eyes and said:

"You're late!"

The guard's words pierced Antiunus's heart like an arrow. In an instant, entire world to come crashing about his ears. He hung his head in despair. His horse, as if being well

aware of the the gravity of the situation, which had trotted to the castle like a bird, now returned with slow steps.

There was great excitement in Geben Castle. While preparations were being made to celebrate the victory of Dorkon, preparations for the feast were also underway.

The maidens dressed and adorned Maria, keeping everything a surprise by not saying a word. Maria was bursting with joy, eagerly anticipating her reunion with Antinunus. She was so certain that he would win...

All the preparations outside had been completed. When Maria saw her father enter, she exclaimed with joy:

"I'm ready, Father!"

"You look very beautiful, my daughter."

With a mix of excitement and shyness, Maria said:

"Who won?"

"Let's not spoil the surprise; you'll see for yourself very soon."

With great curiosity, Maria insisted:

"Father, then tell me how the race was won!"

"He's a clever young man. He came with felt tied to his horse's hoof."

With this answer, Maria was bubbling over with excitement. She said to herself, "I'm so glad I sent that message!" Filled with happiness, she hugged her father and kissed his cheeks.

In the castle's inner courtyard, everyone eagerly awaited Maria's arrival. As soon as someone spotted her at the top of the stairs with her father, they shouted, "Maria is coming!" With that, all eyes turned toward her. Suddenly,

a round of applause echoed against the castle walls. While everyone looked at Maria, her eyes searched for Antiunus.

When Maria saw Dorkon sitting in Antiunus's place, her world came crashing down. Her vision blurred, and she felt as though she might fall down the stairs. Her mother quickly noticed and grasped her arm, trying to steady her.

Maria didn't know whether to stay or leave. She looked like a corpse. Although her father stepped down one stair, she remained frozen in place. When her mother leaned in and whispered something, Maria attempted to descend. She was going down, but it felt as if she were being carried rather than walking on her own.

Once the applause died down and everyone settled down, Commander Markos addressed those present:

"Dear guests, I thank you for being with us on this joyful day. My daughter Maria's clever idea for this race was won by my friend, Commander Zorbis's son Dorkon, who solved this challenge with his intelligence. I congratulate him. Soon, we will celebrate this marriage with a magnificent wedding. Now, let the feast begin!"

Head Chef Kotas had first handed the silver serving plate to Dorkon, who replied:

"You're doing it wrong; Maria should be served first."

Maria looked into the head chef's eyes with her tearful eyes, as if she were placing the blame for it all squarely on him. She said to the chef:

"How could you make this mistake?"

Kotas understood very well what Maria meant. With all his innocence, he was left speechless and could only remain silent.

While everyone enjoyed the feast, Maria felt sad. She was constantly lost in her thoughts about everything that

had happened. At urging of her mother sitting next to her, she tried to pretend to eat from the food.

She could only manage to take a few bites. This must have caught Dorkon's attention, as he said to Maria:

"Why has a minor mistake by the chef upset you so much?"

Maria was oblivious to what Dorkon had said. Talking to herself, she murmured:

"This shouldn't have been such a big mistake!"

Dorkon, believing he was being answered, thought to himself, "Maria has really blown a minor mistake out of proportion."

Maria believed that the one who made this big mistake was head chef Kotas, but she was mistaken. While telling the chef about the "felt," she hadn't accounted for the betrayal of the kitchen assistant, who was secretly eavesdropping by the stove. How could Maria have known that the assistant would slyly carry the message sent to Antiunus and deliver it to Dorkon, considering only of his own future?..

Chapter XXII

Metin, seeing the police in front of Serap's house, fearfully distanced himself from the scene. As he walked wearily through unfamiliar streets, he was also calculating how to escape the city as soon as possible. After calming down, he reached for his phone but suddenly pulled back. He thought to himself, "The police might have interrogated Serap too; her phone could be wiretapped!" He decided against making a call.

Ayhan's carefully laid plans had been completely turned upside down. Now, he had only one goal: to draw Metin into this mess. However, that now seemed impossible. The reason was that the house Talip was going to show Metin was the very house where Serap lived. Metin had no idea about this. While on the way to show Metin the house, Talip had been delayed, and at that very moment, the police had raided and arrested Serap's landlord for illegal excavation.

Metin had tried to call Ayhan as well, but Ayhan didn't answer the ringing phone due to concerns about technical surveillance. He was afraid the situation would spill over to him.

Metin was thinking more about Serap than Ayhan. However, when he couldn't bring himself to reach out to her, he started to come up with his own ideas. His selfish feelings surged as he said to himself, "I can't sacrifice myself for a girl!"

Metin seemed to have forgotten his love for Serap amidst the turmoil of recent events. As he walked through the old narrow streets of Maraş, he suddenly stopped. He looked up and glanced around. Realizing he had entered a deadend street, he quickly turned back. At that moment, he locked eyes with a disheveled-looking man passing by. Just as the man was about to walk past him, he leaned in close and whispered in his ear:

“Love is a matter of the heart. It’s not about turning back at the start of the street. It’s about being able to walk the path to the end, even knowing it leads to a dead end!” he said, then continued on his way.

Metin froze in place at those words. He almost ran after the man to ask, “Who are you?” but the strange figure had already crossed the street and vanished. He was completely confused, and fear began to creep in. He told himself, “I need to escape this city’s grip and leave as soon as possible!” He started walking quickly toward his home.

Serap’s gaze was fixed on the girl’s eyes in the mosaics. Despite the sadfaced Roman girl dancing with the bells on her fingers, even a cascade of curly hair could not conceal the sorrow in her eyes.

Serap felt incredibly alone. She lifted her head and noticed that the crowd had long since dispersed. Only a few staff members remained nearby to safeguard the mosaics. She looked back at the mosaics, her eyes were still on the “Beauty of Germanicia.” She thought to herself, “Such beauty shouldn’t bear such a sorrowful face.” For a moment, she entered the world of that girl, trying to unravel the hidden sadness in her expression. With those emotions, she delved deep into centuries past...

Maria had freckles anyway

Chapter XXIII

A.D. 520

Geben (Meryemçil) Castle

Geben Castle was more lively today than ever before. While the prey animals were being prepared for the lavish banquet for the guests arriving from near and far for the wedding, the aged wines from the cellar were also being brought out to the area.

As the music echoed through Geben Valley, the guests were having a wonderful time. The young people were competing among themselves, while throughout the wedding, everyone—men and women, young and old—tried to show their skills. Meanwhile, the groom Dorkon eagerly awaited Maria in the celebration area.

Although Maria was reluctant, she had put on the meticulously crafted dress in shades of pinkredburgundy, which reached down to her heels. It was a Matronastyle shirred dress, chosen from among hundreds of colorful fabrics.

Maria's hairstyle was reminiscent of noble Roman brides. Her thin silky hair was brushed back, with curls flowing down to her cheeks, adding a distinctive beauty to her face.

The Roman Carbatine shoes she wore perfectly matched her outfit in both color and style.

Roman young women always wore crowns at weddings. Reluctantly, Maria placed the jewelencrusted crown on her head with her own hands.

Dressed in her outfit, Maria walked slowly to the mirror under the admiring gazes of those around her. Neither her carefully styled hair nor the meticulously crafted dress brought her any joy; the only comfort she found was in the golden arrowhead necklace made from the arrow fletching that Antinius had given her.

Maria was growing tired of the wedding formalities. She wanted to be alone, but that wasn't possible. Seeking a breath of fresh air, she went to the window and gazed longingly at the marble path that Antinius had painstakingly built up to the castle. To herself, she murmured, "This path was supposed to lead to union, but it has become a path of sorrow. Was it truly harder to traverse this distance, crossing mountains and wild forests, than to overcome the challenges posed by those very mountains?"

She couldn't hold back her tears any longer and began to sob. Despite the attempts of the women in the room to console her, her sobs only grew louder. Her mother, Diana, understood well the situation Maria was in. She turned to those present and said, "It's just the excitement of the wedding," trying to dismiss the matter.

Meanwhile, there was a knock at the door. A few of the girls rushed to the door and exclaimed with joy:

"The groom has come to take the bride!"

Maria suddenly buried all her sorrow deep in her heart, trying her best to hide her feelings. Her mother took her hand and handed her over to the groom. Dorkon held the bride by both hands, carefully examining her face, hair, and dress:

"You look so beautiful," he said.

Dorkon brought the bride to the top of the stairs as if to showcase her stunning beauty to everyone. All eyes in the wedding venue turned to Maria, and the guests began to speak of her beauty in awe. Dorkon linked his arm with hers, and instead of a shy groom, he went down the stairs like a victorious commander, amidst a burst of applause.

Along with the crowd filling the castle, hundreds of Roman villagers outside were all shouting in unison:

“Long live Maria! Long live Dorkon!”

Amidst the commotion, there was someone who had retreated to a hidden corner on the opposite hill, leaning against a rock. With his long hair and beard, and his tearful eyes, he watched the wedding from a distance, unnoticed by anyone.

The bride habitually was expected to perform the first dance at the wedding. When Dorkon placed Maria in the center of the celebration, one of the women quickly handed her a pair of bells. Though she was in deep sorrow, she reminded herself that this was a wedding—her wedding. To avoid disappointing her family, she knew she had to dance.

The music began to play in full course, and everyone around her clapped wildly to encourage Maria to dance. With the grace of a swan, she stepped forward, tossing her veil in the air with a swift motion. At that moment, a gentle breeze caught the white veil, carrying it away towards Antinius, who was watching the wedding from the opposite hill.

Maria danced among the pure white daisies, vibrant red poppies, colorful ranunculus, and crown imperial with a gesture that echoed the elegance of a tulip. She moved so gracefully that it seemed as if she were a part of the flo-

ral tapestry surrounding her, captivating everyone who watched...

As Maria danced, her delicate body quivered like a flame. Her slender waist swayed to the rhythm of the music, twisting like a snake. While everyone at the wedding reveled in joy, she felt a deep ache with every movement, struggling to mask her pain behind a facade of grace.

Antinius had seen the veil carried by the wind as it torn away from Maria. He caught it before it could touch the ground and inhaled its scent deeply, as if trying to draw Maria herself into him. He buried his face in the veil, lost in a haze of longing. How long this trance lasted, he couldn't tell. When he finally opened his eyes, he saw Maria being helped into the adorned bridal carriage, slowly making her way towards Azgıt Castle amid a burst of applause.

Antinius let out a deep sigh, feeling the pain of loss surge within him once more at the sight before him. That day of the competition, when he had briefly fallen asleep, had seemingly stolen his peace for a lifetime. The weight of what he had lost pressed heavily on his heart, a reminder that some moments, once gone, could never be reclaimed.

As Antinius writhed in his pain, Maria was not truly happy either. As she was taken to her new world, she turned back repeatedly to the lush green forests she had once roamed—looking at the trees, the birds, and the flowers—as if she would never see them again. Those glances felt like a farewell, a poignant acknowledgment of what she was leaving behind.

As the bridal carriage entered Azgıt Castle, the iron gate slammed shut with a horrific creak. At the sound, Maria began to tremble like a baby dove. It felt as if the closing door was not just that of the castle, but a cage that had been set up around her, trapping her in a life she had not chosen.

From that day on, Antinius shut himself in his room. He neither ate nor drank, avoiding contact with anyone, even rejecting his closest friends. One day, his mother knocked urgently on his door:

“Your friends are insisting this time!” she said.

Antinius needed comfort too, and he could no longer resist their persistence. He cracked the door open. His friends were overjoyed to see him, but as they stepped inside and saw the disheveled figure with unkempt hair and a haggard expression, they couldn’t help but murmur, “Poor Antinius!” The closest of his friends took both of Antinius’s hands and looked into his eyes:

“We didn’t expect to see you like this. You, who would charge into the forest on your horse, making even the wildest animals tremble. Your arrow would always find its target.”

Antinius, looking at his friends, spoke in a low voice:

“I guess this time we missed the mark.”

Each of his friends, trying to offer some comfort, said:

“You can have any girl you want; if you wish, you could even have the most beautiful girl from Germanicia!”

Heliodora quickly interjected:

“I always told him, ‘Aren’t there any girls for you!’”

To further diminish Maria in her son’s eyes, she continued:

“Maria had freckles anyway.”

His friends chimed in, agreeing with his mother:

“Yes, yes, your mother is right. We all saw at the wedding.”

When Antinius heard the name ‘Maria,’ he became deaf to everything else being said. His gaze fixed on a single point, and he stood there, staring blankly.

*I must have been sitting
on top of Germanicia all along...*

Chapter XXIV

Serap was so distressed by Maria's marriage to someone she didn't want that she involuntarily muttered to herself, "It's fate." She now understood the deep sadness reflected on Maria's face while she danced among the wildflowers.

Serap glanced back at the mosaics in front of her. Seeing the Roman hunter, she lost control of her emotions and spoke as if addressing Antinius directly: "If only you hadn't fallen asleep. This time, you've fallen prey to!"

Time had passed. Serap was so delighted to see part of the Germanicia mosaics revealed that it felt as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

She felt extremely tired. Crossing from the courtyard to her home, she entered her room and took a deep breath, exclaiming, "Oh!" before flopping onto her bed. Usually, her curiosity about Germanicia kept Serap awake, but this time, the joy of finally encountering it made sleep elusive.

For a moment, Metin crossed her mind. His silence had bothered her, especially since they were conducting the same research together. "Has something happened to him?" she wondered, feeling her curiosity deepen. Her hand reached for the phone. Before Metin could even say "Hello," Serap jumped in:

"Where have you been, Metin?"

Metin, looking embarrassed, said:

"I'm in Istanbul."

Serap was surprised:

"How is that possible? Weren't we supposed to go together?"

Metin didn't know how to respond. Trying to play it cool as if he wasn't aware of what had happened, he attempted to salvage the situation:

"Yeah, I had to come quickly due to a special situation. I was so flustered that I couldn't call you. Anyway, you'll be in Istanbul tomorrow too. We can talk about everything in detail when you arrive."

Serap, though she tried to hide it, felt angry with Metin. Inside, she thought, "He must have a good reason." She continued the conversation:

"I guess you don't know about what happened today?"

Metin, feeling anxious and excited, said:

"What happened? Did something happen to you?"

"No, no! On the contrary, it's news that you'll be very happy about."

Metin felt relieved now:

"Tell me quickly, I'm curious!"

Serap, joyfully exclaimed:

"Germanicia has been found!"

Metin asked, as if he were unaware of everything that had happened:

"What are you talking about? How and where was it found?"

"Guess where?"

"Don't keep me in suspense, just tell me!"

"I must have been sitting on top of Germanicia all along."

"This is no time for jokes. Please, just tell me quickly!"

"It really sounds like a joke. I was shocked too. My landlord discovered mosaics belonging to Germanicia while digging in the ground to build a coal cellar in the courtyard. The clever man didn't inform the museum, thinking he could sell them to antique dealers. Before he could sell the mosaics, the police raided the house and arrested him."

After a brief silence, Metin asked with curiosity:

"How did the police find out about this?"

"I think one of the neighbors must have reported it."

"They didn't charge you with anything, did they?"

"No, no!"

"I'm so glad, Serap. Then our research is complete."

"Alright, alright! Now I'll call Professor Ahmet. I need to share this good news with him too."

Serap didn't want to prolong the conversation any further. "Goodbye," she said, and hung up the phone.

Despite it being a exhausting evening, Serap couldn't sleep from excitement. She wanted to share this joyful news with Professor Ahmet as soon as possible. When she picked up the phone, it was already 11:30 PM. She thought to herself, "He must have fallen asleep by now," and decided against making the call.

Serap couldn't even imagine how delighted the Professor would be with this news. She thought back to the day she received that file at the faculty. The adventures they had experienced since then played out in her mind like a film reel. With these thoughts, Serap finally drifted off to deep sleep.

Serap didn't know how long she had slept. She suddenly tumbled out of bed and grabbed the phone again. Without even checking the time, she dialed Professor Ahmet's number.

Professor Ahmet had indeed gone to bed early that night. He woke up to the sound of the phone ringing. Before answering, he excitedly glanced at the wall clock, which read 2:30 AM. Seeing "Serap" on the caller ID, he murmured to himself, "I hope everything's alright!" Clearly, he was quite anxious. With throwing up his hands in despair, he picked up the phone:

"Is everything okay, Serap? Did something happen?"

Serap spoke as if she were calling at a normal hour:

"No, Professor! But your voice is faltering. Are you scared or something?"

"Anyone would be scared at this time of night."

Realizing it was late, Serap understood her mistake but didn't hesitate to share the news:

"Professor, we've discovered very important findings related to the ancient city of Germanicia. I called to inform you. I'm sorry for waking you up from your sleep."

Professor Ahmet was so delighted by the news that:

"What are you talking about? For this news, I'd sacrifice not just one night's sleep but a thousand!"

Serap shared everything she had experienced that day, recounting what the governor had told the journalists, detailing it all one by one. Professor Ahmet was so thrilled by what he heard that:

"I knew it, I knew you would find it! Serap, with this beautiful news, if I wasn't embarrassed, I'd get up and dance joyfully right now!"

Serap's joy grew even more. After finishing the con-

versation and hanging up, she said to herself, “Even if my teacher can’t dance, I’ll dance for both of us.” She turned on some music and was just about to start dancing when Maria flashed into her mind. Like Maria had done at the wedding, she opened her arms wide. She began to dance just like her. Serap danced with joy, but it felt as if sadness was spilling from her eyes.

On one hand, she sighed, “Oh Maria, oh!” while on the other, she muttered to herself, “Poor Antinius, I wish you hadn’t slept in that morning!”

*The doors of the heart are always
open to the truth*

Chapter XXV

A.D. 520

Geben Castle

A lifetime spent in the pursuit of prey, Antinius, unable to fit into the mountains and the wildest forests, was trapped in a small room of Kızıl kale, grappling with the pain of not being able to reach Maria. Alone with all his regrets, he felt like a trapped lion as the days were passing by.

The thought of someone else having Maria was so unbearable for him that life had lost all its meaning. He stopped eating, drinking, and seeing anyone.

Despite being a powerful castle commander, his father felt helpless to save his son from this despair. He tirelessly sought ways to bring him back to life.

In the early days of Christianity, the people living in this region suffered greatly under Roman rulers. Although those difficult days were behind them, they now faced a new kind of oppression. A distorted version of their Christian faith was being imposed on them, and clergy who resisted were excommunicated and punished.

Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, was excom-

municated and punished at the Council of Ephesus due to his defense of the belief in “monotheism”, falling victim to the intrigues of Patriarch Cyril of Alexandria. While some clergymen in Germanicia opposed these decisions, they felt unable to speak out. Instead, they secretly strived to live and spread their beliefs.

The saints of the Church of Jesus in the Cave of the Seven Sleepers in Efsus also roamed the region from time to time, attempting to explain the core principles of Christianity.

The saints’ journey had brought them to Kızılkale. Commander Gordios welcomed them with an unmatched reception. He often wanted to learn about what was happening in the outside world from his guests. During their conversation, St. Peter:

“From our travels, we have witnessed that the devout are more at peace,” said.

The commander:

“And what about those with weak faith?”

“They are always restless, as they do not accept their fate.”

The commander straightened up, becoming more attentive:

“What does it mean to accept one’s fate?”

“It means being content with what God has given to humanity.”

“When we fail to obtain something we desire deeply, we become very sad, even devastated. Does this mean we are opposing God?”

“Humans are powerless. When they cannot have something they desire, it is natural for them to feel sad. If they didn’t feel sadness, the desire and longing within them would fade away. Life would come to a halt.”

The commander:

"It seems there is a contradiction in your words."

St. Peter:

"Yes, it may seem so. However, everything in life is based on measure, harmony, and balance. Those who lose this balance are the ones who do not accept their fate."

The commander eagerly asked:

"So, does this mean we are opposing God?"

"Yes, we should recognize that the trials we face come from God and not try to force the impossible..."

The commander interrupted, saying:

"So, are the challenges one faces in life enough to make them disregard their own existence?"

The Saint:

"Nothing is more important than human life! God has granted us this life, and we must cherish it in the best way possible."

"You are right! But what if a person lacks the strength to escape their situation?"

"I understand what you mean, commander. Whatever has led a person to that situation can be confronted with something stronger."

Commander Gordios wanted to emphasize his son's situation.

"Is there anything stronger than love in the world?"

"Yes, there is, Commander..."

"Surprising, what could be stronger than love?"

"A greater love, one that's bigger than love itself!"

Gordios pondered for a moment:

"What kind of love could be greater than love itself?"

St. Peter smiled and said:

“The love for God is above all other loves.”

Actually, the commander's main thought was to save his son Antinius from the whirlpool of love. This time, he wanted to speak openly with the saints:

“Then how can we free my son from this love affliction?”

The saints now understood the commander's intentions more clearly:

“Only the love of God can save your son from this love.”

“This surely won't happen on its own, will it?”

“Of course, nothing happens on its own in life. This world is one of causes and means.”

“My son has shut himself in his room for months for the sake of a love. He has cut off from the outside world.”

St. Peter:

“Then our task will be much easier.”

The commander, in astonishment, said:

“What are you saying? He doesn't even want to see his closest friends!”

“Look, you love your position as commander very much, don't you?”

“Yes!”

“You love your wife...”

“Yes!”

“You love the soldiers under your command...”

“Yes!”

“You love your friends...”

“Yes!”

“You love to have fun very much...”

“Yes!”

“You also love your wealth very much, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. Can there be a life without them?”

St. Peter stood up. After taking a few steps in the room, he said:

“Could you give up any of these by your own choice?”

“Impossible!”

“But your son has given up all of them!”

The commander, in a state of shock, replied:

“Speak more openly with me!”

“You have filled your heart and soul with many things. But your son has been able to tear them all away from his heart at once.”

“The love my son is experiencing is so great that...”

“We told you our task would be easy!”

“I don’t understand!”

“God first places His servant’s love in a heart before filling it with His own love.”

The commander stood up excitedly:

“Then, only you can achieve this, St. Peter! I want to introduce you to my son.”

When Commander Gordios and the saints went to Antinius’s room, Antinius was curled up in a corner, eyes closed, in half awake half asleep state. The commander, pointing to Antinius with a low voice, said:

“Here is my son’s state; he is always like this...”

When Antinius looked carefully, he realized they were clergymen. He tried to gather himself.

St. Peter:

“Calm down, son.”

Antinius had no strength to speak. The saint continued:

“Would you like to talk and share your troubles with us?”

Antinius’s long hair obscured his face, but his lips moved, though his words were unclear. The saint sat beside Antinius and repeated his question. Antinius, raising his voice, said:

“I don’t want to see anyone, I even want to get away from here!”

The saint turned to the commander and said:

“Your son is speaking the truth!”

“Where can I send him?”

Antinius lifted his head:

“I’ll go anywhere! Just let me escape from this prison.”

St. Peter:

“Are you ready for a long journey with us?”

The commander said:

“Wait, where are you taking him? What kind of journey is this?”

“Don’t you want your son to be saved?”

“Of course I want that! But where are you taking him?”

“We will take him on a journey where he will find healing and relief for his troubles.”

Hearing these words, Antinius suddenly opened his eyes and said:

“Did you say a remedy for my troubles?”

St. Peter looked deeply into Antinius’s eyes and said:

“Yes, a remedy for your troubles!”

Antinius said resolutely:

“Then I’m in!”

“Then a long journey awaits you...”

The saints spoke at length with Antinius's parents. They agreed to let their son stay at the Jesus Monastery built by Emperor Theodosius II in the Cave of the Seven Sleepers in Efsus. As they entrusted him to the saints for his restoration, his parents said:

"We are willing to do anything for the salvation of our son."

As Antinius stepped out of the castle gate with the saints and looked around, he took a deep breath and felt himself coming to. As the horses began their journey toward Efsus, Antinius glanced back occasionally. With each look, the Kızılkalé seemed to shrink, while Maria's love grew ever larger in his heart.

After traveling for quite some time, St. Peter, thinking the horses were tired, said:

"Let's take a break for a while."

They took a break by a stream deep in the forest. One of the saints pointed to Antinius, who was washing his face in the fountain, and said to the other:

"Perhaps he is washing his face for the first time in months."

The other replied:

"Don't look so closely; you'll scare the bird away."

St. Peter interrupted his friends and said:

"Let's see what you have in your provisions."

Antinius was lost in thought, gazing at the forest while the saints began to eat. After watching him for a while, St. Peter said:

"Aren't you hungry?"

“You all eat; I won’t eat!”

“That won’t do! Come here. I have a question for you.”

When Antinius came over and sat down, St. Peter said:

“Have you ever come to these forests and mountains before?”

With those words, Antinius gazed deeply into the forest, the trees, and the birds once more. Memories of his days spent in the forest and his adventures with Maria flashed before his eyes like a film reel. Taking advantage of his distraction, the saint slipped a piece of food into his hand. Unaware, Antinius was both eating and talking:

“This forest was my domain. I know every inch of it. No prey could escape my bow. I’ve hunted countless birds, deer, and stags in these mountains.”

The saint interjected:

“In the end, a deer hunted you, didn’t it?”

Antinius put his hand on his heart, and after a moment of silence, he said:

“Yes, the wound still bleeds.”

The saints wanted to encourage Antinius to speak more freely:

“Then go hunting like in the old days, and we’ll eat during the break.”

Antinius looked again into the depths of the forest and reflectively said:

“I mistreated those poor animals. Now I’m so regretful.”

St. Peter watched Antinius for a moment and then said:

“You understood that the hunter is cruel when you fell prey to her, didn’t you?”

Antinius sighed and nodded as if to say yes.

“You know that it is love that has made you so compas-

sionate, don't you?"

St. Peter turned to his friends and said:

"If he had fallen in love with a greater love, he would have become an angel."

Antinius suddenly turned to St. Peter, feeling a mix of anger, surprise, and curiosity:

"You don't know what I've been through. Could there be a greater love than this?"

St. Peter looked deeply into Antinius's eyes and said:

"There is, son, there is..."

Antinius was about to bombard him with questions, but St. Peter didn't give him the chance. Turning to his friends, he said:

"We're just at the beginning of the journey. Gather yourselves; a long road awaits us."

*Which of us hasn't been
prey to someone...*

Chapter XXVI

A.D. 521

Efsus

After a long journey, the saints arrived at the Church of Jesus the Seven Sleepers in Efsus. Antinius wanted those there to see him as just an ordinary village boy, and St. Peter had introduced him that way.

Despite the weeks passing, there was no visible change in Antinius. He slept and woke alone in his small assigned room. While his friends laughed and joked, he did not speak to anyone, quietly attending classes and leaving.

Some of the disciples staying in the Church of Jesus were disturbed by Antinius' behavior. They could not make sense of the words of St. Peter, one of the most authoritative priests in the Church, "Don't touch that young man!"

Often, after Sunday Mass, St. Peter would take his disciples aside for a chat. The young people would not want to miss his pleasant conversations. Antinius also looked forward to these conversations, even though he never spoke to anyone.

One Sunday, all the disciples had gathered to listen to

St. Peter's enthusiastic sermon. While everyone listened intently to the sermon, Antinius struggled to focus, still affected by the dream he had seen. St. Peter, well aware of Antinius's state of mind, skillfully changed the subject. Pointing with his index finger towards the Cave of the Seven Sleepers next to the church, he said:

"As you all know, the seven young men who took refuge in this cave stayed here for three hundred years. Like you, they had desires and ambitions. Six of these youths were noble, raised in palaces, and at court festivities, they were always the favorites of beautiful girls. Yet, one day, a fire ignited in their hearts. The allure and pleasures of the world could not extinguish this flame. They found the joy they could not find anywhere else in this dark cave."

Upon hearing the phrase, "a fire ignited in their hearts," Antinius jolted. He had a beady eyes on St. Peter and began to listen more intently.

The other disciples wondered, "What kind of pleasure could make them disregard all the earthly pleasures?" Meanwhile, Antinius had long felt a fire in his heart that dismissed earthly pleasures...

When the conversation concluded, Antinius—whose face rarely smiled and who never spoke to anyone—greeted everyone he saw and began to engage in conversation as he stepped into the courtyard. This transformation in Antinius became more evident with each passing day.

When St. Peter noticed this change in Antinius, he felt great joy. Reflecting on Antinius's experiences, he thought, "No matter how skilled we are as hunters, which of us hasn't been prey to someone?"

Across from the Church of Jesus stood a large inn where caravans would stop and pass through. Some traveled from

Mesopotamia to Cappadocia, while others journeyed from Jerusalem to Germanicia.

Antinius would sometimes visit the inn to watch the bustling activity of people from various places. Each traveler had different clothing, languages, behaviors and faces, reflecting their diverse backgrounds. During short breaks, some rested, while others ate and drank, all in a flurry of motion. As Antinius observed this chaos, he found himself lost in deep thought, recalling St. Peter's words: "This world is an inn; everyone who comes will eventually leave. Let no one get swept up in the bustle of this inn and forget their destination!" Each time he reflected on this, he would think, "How true that is."

One morning, Antinius, just like in the old days, armed himself with his bow and arrows and set out for a hunt. After traveling deep into the forest, he spotted a group of deer. To avoid being seen, he hid behind some trees and approached them. Each deer was more beautiful than the last, but as he readied his arrow, he hesitated, unsure which one to aim for. Just then, the deer sensed danger and began to flee, except for one that remained, looking around. Seizing the opportunity, Antinius inched closer, drew his bow, and focused on his target. But when he was about to release the arrow, he couldn't believe his eyes. "No, no, it can't be; it's dead!" he exclaimed, recognizing the deer by the scar on its neck. Realizing this was the deer that had led him to Maria, he felt a burst of rage. "As if what you did to me wasn't enough, now you stand before me, mocking!" he shouted, ready to kill it. Just then, the deer jumped and escaped. Antinius pursued it, and after a long chase, the deer blended into a passing caravan. Antinius followed the caravan from a distance, and realizing he couldn't catch it, he thought to himself, "The caravan will eventually reach the inn," and

took a shortcut to the inn.

He waited near the inn for the caravan to arrive. As the caravan entered the inn, his eyes searching for the deer. At one point, he noticed something rushing quickly through the door. He wasn't mistaken; the deer had entered and was looking around inside. Just as Antinius was about to follow it in, the guards called out:

"Where are you rushing off to, young man?"

"I'm a hunter; my prey has run into the inn!"

"You can't go in!"

"Why?"

"There is safety for life and property in this inn."

"But that deer is my prey."

"Don't disrupt our work; this isn't a hunting ground. And who do you think you are?"

"I'm staying at the opposite social complex."

One of the guards grabbed his collar with his hand and said:

"We told you it's forbidden!"

The other guard said:

"If the saints hear about what you're doing, they will punish you."

Antinius had his mind on the deer. Ignoring the guards, he wanted to force his way inside, undeterred by their spears. One guard, unable to bear it any longer, grabbed him and pushed him back. Despite falling to the ground, Antinius shouted, "That's my prey; I won't let anyone take my deer!" but he got all choked up, barely heard.

When he woke up in his bed, drenched in sweat, his entire body was trembling.

Antinius couldn't shake off the impact of the dream he

had seen. Even while awake, he kept murmuring to himself, "This time, you can't escape me!"

As he got out of bed to put on his clothes, he suddenly changed his mind and turned to the window. The surroundings were pitch black; the inn's doors were closed, and only dogs roamed the square. He murmured to himself, "Let it be morning; I know what I must do." Frustrated, he lay back down on his bed.

Antinius had seen Maria in his dream this time. In the Castle of Geben, surrounded by poppies, daisies, and spring flowers, she danced in such a way that...

*In Roman society, mosaic masters always
held a prestigious position.*

Chapter XXVII

A.D. 521

Efsus

Antinius arrived at the inn at the break of dawn. As he entered cautiously, his eyes were on the guards. Noticing their silence, he greeted them and stepped inside. Searching for the deer from his dream, he sat on a chair when he couldn't find it. I was looking around blankly when a new caravan arrived at the inn. He was astonished; it resembled the one from his dream so closely.

Among the caravan's travelers, Antinius noticed an old man with a beret and long gray hair, who commanded respect. His seasoned demeanor suggested a wealth of experience. They took his suitcase before anyone else in the caravan.

The old man had nothing but a satchel and a small chest to sit on as he rested. Seeing him scan the surroundings, Antinius seized the opportunity and approached him:

"I can help you carry your things!" he said.

The old man looked at Antinius for a moment, and perhaps took a shine to him. He slightly lifted his beret with his calloused hand and said:

“It’s heavy, my boy!”

Antinius confidently replied:

“Just tell me where to place it, sir!”

Antinius’s sincere approach delighted the old man. To emphasize the weight of the chest, he said:

“Alright then, take the chest and follow me.”

Antinius grabbed the chest with both hands, thinking he could lift it easily, but he couldn’t budge it at all. The old man knew he wouldn’t be able to carry it alone. After taking a few steps, he turned back and smiled:

“Never underestimate anything in life, my boy! You never know what’s inside.”

Antinius sighed, thought to himself, “If only you knew what was going on inside me,” and said to the old man:

“Yes, one must not take anything lightly.”

“If we unite, we can bear this burden together!”

With these words, Antinius’s admiration for the old man grew even more. The old man grabbed one end of the chest before Antinius could.

Antinius:

“You’ll hurt your back; I’ll find someone else.”

The old man straightened up, placed his hands on his hips, and frowned at Antinius:

“You seem forgetful too. Don’t take anything lightly; how quickly you’ve forgotten my advice!”

Antinius felt embarrassed once again. The old man said:

“Come on, grab that end so we can take it to the room.”

They lifted the chest, and it was clear from Antinius’s expression that he was struggling. The old man smiled and said:

“If you’re struggling, we can find someone else!”

Smiling like two old friends, they continued carrying it. As they neared the room, the old man noticed that, despite handling it easily, Antinius was still struggling:

“The longer the journey, the heavier the load becomes. Hold your horses, son, hold your horses!”

Antinius thought to himself, “It’s as if he can read my mind.” As soon as they reached the room and set the chest down, both of them flopped onto the straw mattresses. Looking at the chest, Antinius said:

“It really was quite heavy.”

“It’s as valuable as it is heavy.”

Seeing Antinius deep in thought, the old man said:

“You’re still curious, aren’t you?”

At that moment, Antinius was thinking about something else:

“Yes, I’m very curious—where is the deer?”

The old man looked at Antinius’s face in astonishment and said:

“Which deer?”

Realizing the old man was unaware of the deer, Antinius decided to change the subject:

“Yes, yes, I’m really curious about what’s inside this chest.”

The old man passed a key he took out of his pocket and said:

“Go ahead, open the chest and see what’s inside.”

Antinius opened the chest. Seeing the small bags inside the chest, he felt really curious this time. The old man said:

“Don’t hesitate; you can open the bags too.”

Antinius thought, “I wonder if it’s as I guessed.” But when he opened the bags and saw the colorful stone pieces,

he couldn't make sense of it:

"Now I understand why they say it's as heavy as a stone."

"You've missed the mark again!"

"These are just the stone pieces you know!"

"Yes, they're familiar stone pieces, but there's something you don't know."

"For God's sake, don't keep me in suspense!"

The old man reached out with his calloused hands and said:

"With these hands, when those stones find their place, they will become priceless art."

Antinius looked at the man's hands and then at his face:

"I just can't figure you out. Who are you, and what do you do?"

The old man took a deep breath and said:

"They call me Master Arkas. I'm a mosaic artist. I take those rare stone pieces and carve them down to create vibrant mosaics for the villas and mansions of Roman nobles and the wealthy."

Master Arkas did not want to explain further, thinking that Antinius was a peasant boy and would not be able to comprehend what he was saying.

In Roman society, mosaic masters always held a prestigious position. Those who excelled in this craft were rare individuals known for their exceptional talent.

When Antinius learned that the old man was a mosaic artist, he composed himself and began to see him in a different view.

When Master Arkas mentioned being a mosaic artist, Antinius went suddenly back to his childhood. He recalled

the mosaics he had seen in the mansions he visited with his father in Germanica. Days spent running through halls resembling spring gardens filled with a thousand flowers flashed before his eyes. He imagined the magnificent hunting scenes, with wild animals, deer, and birds intricately crafted like embroidery. Perhaps it was then that his interest in hunting had taken root.

Antinius had always admired every mosaic pattern he saw since childhood. He often wondered how those small, colorful stones were arranged in harmony. As he reflected on this, his admiration for Master Arkas deepened. Curious about where this caravan would go, he asked:

“Master Arkas, where do you come from and where are you going?”

“Have you heard of Cappadocia?”

“Isn’t it the city where devout Christians fled underground caves to escape the tyranny of cruel rulers?”

Antinius’s answer indicated that he was not an ignorant person:

“Well done, son, you know the truth,” Master Arkas said, continuing his conversation.

“I was there last week, and now I’m here... You know, a person is but a traveler...”

“So, where are you headed tomorrow?”

After a moment of silence, Master Arkas said:

“To Germanica.”

Antinius paused for a moment, clearly contemplating something in his mind. He turned to Master Arkas and said:

“Do you need a helper on this long journey with your heavy load?”

“Of course, I do need help. But who could bear the burden of this cantankerous old man?”

“If you accept, I will help you, Father!”

Master Arkas was so touched by Antinius calling him “Father” that his eyes filled with tears. He remembered his own child, died young, and with a faltering voice said:

“Will you be able to be patient with me?”

“If I won’t impose on you...”

Master Arkas:

“I don’t even know your name yet.”

“My name is Antinius.”

“So, what do you do? Do you know anything about stones and rocks?”

Antinius recalled the wild forests he had hunted in. He was about to say he was a hunter when, for a moment, the marble paths he had created for Maria flashed before his eyes:

“I’m a laborer; I know which stones are in which mountains.”

Master Arkas’s eyes were out on stalks. He thought to himself, “I think I’ve found a good helper.”

“Let them not object later!”

“Who would object?”

“Don’t you have a family?”

“I stay at the Church of Jesus.”

As soon as Master Arkas heard the name of the Church of Jesus, his expression changed. Noticing this, Antinius asked:

“What happened, Father?”

Master Arkas fixed his gaze on a distant point and began to recount:

“When the young people in the cave awoke, my father was still a child. When everyone flocked to visit this sacred cave, my father could never go. Such is the plight of poverty. At that time, I didn’t understand the significance of it. But

as we grew and became more capable, I decided to fulfill my father's wish. That's why I accepted the mosaic job in Germanicia, a task I would never normally take."

Feeling sad, Antinius:

"Father, if you want, I can take you to see the cave," he said.

"What do you mean, if you want, son! How could I refuse? Let me rest, and after I wash up, come back in the evening, and we can go."

"So we have a deal."

When Master Arkas entered the Cave of the Seven Sleepers with Antinius, he was so moved by the ethereal atmosphere that he thought, "I wish my father were here." He sat down in a corner and contemplated for a while. In the dim light of the cave, no one noticed the tears streaming from his eyes. He drank from the holy healing water, washed his hands and face, and prayed long and hard for his father.

As Antinius left Master Arkas at the inn, the old man called out to him:

"Son, be ready at dawn tomorrow!"

Antinius could hardly contain his excitement. Without revealing anything to anyone, he had already prepared for the journey the night before. He packed all his belongings into a bag and was about to tie up it when he paused and opened it again. He took out Maria's bracelet he kept wrapped in leather, held it in his palm, and inhaled its scent. After gazing at it for a long moment, he gently placed it back in the bag. As he closed it, it felt like he was hiding all his memories inside.

A new adventure awaited Antinius. With those feelings,

he couldn't sleep a wink that night. Before dawn, he went to the inn's door and began to wait.

Master Arkas had got up before everyone and was wandering in the inn's courtyard. When he saw Antinius at the door, he walked over to him:

"You're early, son; I see you couldn't sleep like me, either?"

"Yes, Master, let's get away from here as soon as we can."

"Hold your horses, son, hold your horses! Soon we'll be embarking on a long journey..."

The door of St. Peter's at the Church of Jesus was knocked on quickly several times. A servant who entered said excitedly:

"Antinius is not in his room!"

St. Peter:

"Have you checked the courtyard?"

"We looked everywhere, but he's not here!"

"Neither his bow nor his arrow is here. His friends say he must have gone hunting in the woods."

With these words, St. Peter involuntarily exclaimed, "Oh no!"

Serap opened her eyes with great joy, as if to announce good news to someone:

"Antinius is coming to Germanicia, Antinius is coming," she began to murmur to herself.

*I never imagined Germanicia
like this...*

Chapter XXVIII

A.D. 521

The city center of Germanicia

After a few days of travel, the caravan arrived at the large inn at the western entrance of Germanicia.

Antinius had been coming to this city since childhood, but it was Master Arkas' first time in Germanicia. As the caravan passengers disembarked, they rushed straight to the square across from the inn. Master Arkas, curious, asked:

"Why are these people heading there?"

"Master, this is the famous St. Tetyus Fountain. Its water is healing. Those who come to the city first drink from this water and wash their hands and faces before entering. Some even bathe their entire bodies."

Master Arkas:

"Son, you said they bathe—do they do that in this square?"

"Of course not, Master! Down the way, there's a large bathhouse. People with all kinds of skin diseases, leprosy, and scabies come here to wash and find healing. Some come specifically for this."

“Then it’s essential to drink this water when coming to Germanicia.”

Master Arkas went to the fountain in the square. As he drank the healing water and washed his hands and face, the voice of the caravan leader was heard from a distance:

“Master Arkas, the coachman is asking for you!”

The horsedrawn carriage approached Master Arkas and:

“I’ve been instructed to take you to Merchant Caelius.”

On the right and left of the winding road leading to the center of Germanicia, magnificent villas stood. As the coachman moved along the cobblestone paths, the melody of the wheels, the rhythmic clatter of the horses’ hooves, and the whip created a symphony, making Master Arkas feel as though he was entering the city to a musical feast.

As the carriage arrived the city square, Master Arkas admired his surroundings. Turning to Antinius, he said:

“I had no idea Germanicia was so developed and prosperous.”

The coachman, overhearing the conversation, turned his head back and said:

“There are even more beautiful places than what you see here at our destination.”

As the carriage passed the city square and moved out of town, a cool breeze brushed against Master Arkas’s face. They had arrived in a paradise, surrounded by a green hillside filled with countless flowers and trees, captivating his gaze.

Master Arkas’s happiness was evident on his face. The horse stopped in front of a magnificent mansion with “Caelius” written on the door. As he got out, he looked at the other villas and mansions around, saying:

“I’m seeing architectural styles here that I’ve never seen

anywhere else.”

Caelius welcomed his guest at the door and invited him inside. After enjoying refreshments by the fountain in the garden, he said:

“Master Arkas, if you’d like, we can tour the mansion.”

“That would be great; we can see the place where we’ll be working as well.”

After showing Master Arkas the hall where the mosaic would be made, Caelius gave him a complete tour of the mansion. When Master Arkas gazed at the magnificent view of the city from the spacious terrace on the second floor, he said:

“Germanicia is truly a wealthy city.”

Merchant Caelius was one of the richest in Germanicia. He was a major merchant who engaged in grain trade as well as agriculture. Everything in the mansion was finished, only the mosaic decorations remained.

Master Arkas did not hide his astonishment:

“It’s one of the most beautiful mansions I have ever seen.”

Caelius felt proud in response to these words and said:

“The mosaics you will create with your magical hands will make my mansion even more beautiful.”

Master Arkas, the size of the hall where he would create the mosaic made a quick assessment in his mind. He turned to Antinius and said:

“We have a laborious task ahead, son.”

After a brief silence, he turned to Caelius and said:

“The floor is very beautiful. What kind of design would you like me to create here?”

Caelius looked around once more and said:

“Master Arkas, create figures that make anyone entering the hall feel as if they are in the embrace of nature. Perhaps a magnificent hunting scene with wild animals, birds, deer, and gazelles...”

Master Arkas:

“Your mansion is very beautiful. If you like, I can also depict its exterior alongside all of this,” he said.

“Oh, that would be magnificent!”

Caelius, after thinking for a moment, muttered to himself:

“I wonder what else it could be?”

Master Arkas:

“I understand your vision. Don’t worry, I will create something fitting for your reputation, admirably, tailored to your taste.”

“You understand me very well.”

Caelius, pleased with the agreement, extended a purse filled with coins to Master Arkas and said:

“For now, this will cover your needs.”

He called his steward over and said:

“Show Master Arkas to his lodging.”

As Master Arkas pondered the work ahead of him, Antinius reflected on the adventure he had embarked upon. With these thoughts, both of them fell into a deep sleep that night.

The next day, when they woke up, Master Arkas said:

“Are you ready, son? It’s time to roll up our sleeves.”

“I’m ready.”

“Since you are with me now, it is my duty to teach you the finer points of this art. Mastery requires this. Such arts are not learned alone; they are learned through the master-apprentice relationship. However, you must understand

that the receiver must be more skilled than the giver. Although these works are done with skillful hands, it is the spirit that drives the work. If you don't pour your feelings and soul into your art, the piece you create will lack life—just like a corpse.”

Seeing that Antinius was all ears, he continued:

“Let my words be a lesson to you. In the future, you will understand me much better. Our work is not mere craftsmanship; it is art. Art requires reflection, and reflection demands patience; patience requires endurance, endurance necessitates loyalty, and loyalty calls for a strong surrender.”

As Antinius listened quietly, Master Arkas continued his advice:

“A seed falls from a tree to the ground. The seed endures storms, rain, and snow, becoming a small sapling. Over time, it grows into a tree, just like the one next to it. But one day, a high wind blows, or a worm invades its trunk, and the old tree falls. The young one takes its place. However, all of this takes time. Right now, you are a seed. Are you ready to become a tree?”

Antinius raised his head, looking deeply into Master Arkas's eyes:

“Father, I am a handful of wheat in your hand. Grind me in any mill you want, make flour, make dough, knead me as you wish. Then cook me in whatever fire you want, I am willing to be burnt.”

Master Arkas:

“Son, I like your submission. Man is made of clay. The more you knead the clay, the easier it is to shape it. The shaped clay is not without baking.”

Antinius looked at his master and said:

“I'm ready to be your apprentice!”

Master Arkas smoothened Antinius' messy hair that fell

over his forehead with his hand. After looking at his face tenderly for a long time, he smiled. Antinius also smiled, but Master Arkas playfully smacked the back of his neck:

“Shut up! We’ve got work to do, come on!”

They went to the place where they would work together. When Master Arkas entered the hall, he took his time examining the area where he would create the mosaic. He turned every corner over in mind. He checked the light reflections from the windows. Looking at the geometric pattern templates and sample motifs in his notebook, he made calculations and took some notes.

Antinius was closely watching his master’s every move. After a long series of calculations, he heard Master Arkas say, “Alright!” Master Arkas then said:

“Come on, son, let’s go!”

“Where are we going, Master?”

Frowning, he gently touched Antinius’ chin.

“A loyal apprentice doesn’t ask his master where we are going. He simply follows.”

Antinius, embarrassed, replied:

“I’m sorry, master.”

“Don’t apologize now! Call the steward!”

“Alright, master, this time I won’t ask why I’m calling.”

Master Arkas, laughing, replied:

“Try it and see; you’ll still get a smack on the back of your neck. The steward should take us to the stonemasons. Let’s place our order now so that while they compact the lime and solidify the ground, they can prepare the mosaics. This way, we’ll save time. Consider this your first lesson.”

Antinius:

“This is the second time, master. I just learned my first lesson a moment ago.”

“Well done, son!”

The steward took Master Arkas to the stone and mosaic workshops in the foothills north of the city. Master Arkas first visited each one individually. He examined the stone samples for the mosaic and then went back to the beginning. He arrived at the shopkeeper, who he recognized as an old man with a lot of experience.

He had previously prepared a list of stones in colors for the motifs he would create. According to that list, he had set aside suitable stones on the workbench when, at that moment, Master Arkas's eye caught a rough stone sitting off to the side. He picked it up and began to examine it, holding it up to the sunlight to check its quality, color reflection, and transparency. Seeing this, the experienced craftsman said to his companion:

"The old man seems to know a lot about stone."

After watching for a moment, he said to Master Arkas:

"What are you going to do with that old broken stone?"

Without paying the man any mind, Master Arkas examined the stone closely before saying:

"Is there more of this stone?"

"What do you need more for? Those are very expensive!"

"I didn't ask you about the price. Can you provide more of this stone, that's what I want to know?"

"That stone has been there for a long time. No one noticed it. How did you see it? And you embraced it as soon as you laid eyes on it!"

"I don't like to talk much. Can you provide it or not?"

"It's very difficult to find quality stones like that in the mountains. But my workers are experienced. If you pay the price, we can certainly provide it. However, using this stone requires skill."

Master Arkas frowned and said sharply to the man:

“You’re quite the chatterbox for your age. Can you find as many as I need?”

“If you give us time and don’t argue about the price, we can find as many as you want.”

Master Arkas placed the stone next to the other selected stones and said:

“Alright then, can you break them to the size I need and shape them as I want?”

After thinking for a moment, the man replied:

“I’m the oldest stonemason here.”

Master Arkas handed him his prepared order list:

“Hmm, is that so? Then show your skill. I want you to break these stones to the size of a ring’s setting as listed!”

The seasoned craftsman suddenly said:

“Are you planning to embroider with these, man?”

Master Arkas humbly replied:

“We’ll see how it goes.”

The mosaic maker turned angrily to his companion and said:

“He thinks he’s Master Arkas. No one else can do this but him!”

The steward was about to warn the stonemason that he was speaking to Master Arkas, but Master Arkas held up his hand:

“You pay the price the craftsman asks, and let him not waste words!”

*If you want to learn to swim
you have to throw yourself in the water*

Chapter XXIX

A.D. 521

The mansions of Germanicia

Master Arkas prepared the area for his mosaic like a painter setting up a canvas. Despite working tirelessly with his apprentice Antinius for three months, they had only completed half of the work. He showed each piece of his work to his apprentice, teaching him all the intricacies of the craft. Antinius had long forgotten that he was the son of a noble commander. He was working like an ordinary laborer, apprenticing under Master Arkas.

Master Arkas had his apprentice create various geometric patterns to help him develop his skills. In this way, Master Arkas was helping him to feel confident. Antinius, in turn, didn't disappoint his master; his nobility was evident in the work he produced. When Master Arkas saw that Antinius grasped the tasks quickly, he sometimes gave him the opportunity to tackle more challenging projects.

One day, while he was explaining the process of creating a difficult motif, suddenly there was a knock at the door. Antinius, focused on the motif, was late to get up. Master Arkas:

"Surely you're not going to let your master open the door. Here, take this key and see if you can open it."

Antinius cracked the door open, and Master Arkas called out:

"Apprentice, who's here?"

Antinius announced the steward's arrival, Master Arkas stood up and approached the door. The steward immediately spoke up:

"The merchant Caelius is calling for you!"

"What does he want with me?"

"I don't know; he just told me to summon you."

"I'm currently working on a difficult motif. Tell him I'll come by this evening."

"He said to come now," he replied.

Master Arkas turned to Antinius and said:

"You clean up the area; I'll be back shortly."

As soon as Master Arkas left, Antinius locked the door again. He felt a glow of satisfaction. After studying the difficult motifs for a while, he picked up his master's notebook and examined it closely. His excitement grew even stronger. He muttered to himself, "I can do this."

Antinius lost track of time, so absorbed in his work that he didn't hear the door being knocked at first. When the banging on the door started, he had already finished the motif he was working on. He rushed to the door, and seeing Master Arkas made his heart race with fear. "What if he doesn't like it and gets angry?" he thought anxiously.

Master Arkas entered, grumbling under his breath, and Antinius quickly said:

"Master, you seemed angry. Why did he call for you?"

"He called me because his wife was pressing him; he

wanted to know when the work would be finished. Does time have any meaning in art?"

Master Arkas, in a huff, put on his apron and prepared to work. Just as he was about to grab his hammer, he froze and turned to Antinius:

"Did I finish this motif before I left?"

Antinius, embarrassed and hesitant, replied:

"You hadn't finished it, master."

Master Arkas suddenly stood up, looking again at the mosaics. He couldn't believe his apprentice had done it, and acrimoniously said:

"Then who made it?"

Antinius's fear intensified, and he bowed his head in silence like a guilty person. Master Arkas, looking at Antinius's face, asked:

"You did it, didn't you?"

Antinius was thoroughly scared, his face flamed. He couldn't bring himself to say, "I did it," and instead murmured in a faint voice:

"I'm sorry, master," he managed to say.

Master Arkas, though he didn't show it, was genuinely pleased with how beautifully his apprentice had completed the difficult motif. Putting his hand on Antinius's shoulder, he said:

"I've created many great works up to now, and I've never boasted about any of them. But I am proud of you now. This motif is something that even the best masters would struggle to achieve. I see that you possess a hidden grace within you; otherwise, you could never have given this motif such beauty."

Antinius, embarrassed, replied:

“Thanks to you, master.”

“I told you from the start that one who receives must also give. From now on, I should reconsider calling you an apprentice.”

“I will always remain your apprentice, master.”

Master Arkas looked at his face again and:

“You’ve shown your grace once again, son!”

Master Arkas was giving Antinius advice and teaching him the intricacies of mosaic art. Just as they were about to leave, the steward rushed in:

“The collector Netros wishes to speak with you!” he said.

Master Arkas:

“Who is this Netros, and what does he want with me?”

“He’s a close friend of Caelius and also the chief collector of the city.”

“Let’s see what he wants, then.”

The steward:

“Please, he’s waiting for you in the garden.”

As soon as Netros saw Master Arkas, he stood up and gestured for him to sit. He immediately began:

“Caelius is a close friend of mine. He has always spoken highly of you.”

“He’s flattered me.”

Netros, wasting no time, got straight to the point:

“I’m also having a new mansion built, and I want you to create the mosaics. Caelius spoke to me and asked that I meet with you.”

Master Arkas pondered for a moment and then replied:

"I would love to, but I have no free time. I've got work to do."

Netros was taken aback by the unexpected response and replied:

"The construction only needs the mosaics. You could finish it before you leave. I can offer you whatever fee you desire, master."

Master Arkas lifted his head and said:

"This isn't just about money."

"What is it, then?"

"It's a matter of time."

Netros wasn't satisfied with that answer. He bowed his head and fell silent for a moment, unwilling to give up:

"Master Arkas, if it were up to me, I would wait even two years. But I hope you can find a solution."

Master Arkas contemplated Netros's insistence for a moment and then said:

"If you agree, I have an offer for you!"

Netros, with curiosity, asked:

"Please, I'm listening!"

Pointing to Antinius nearby, he said:

"This young man can take care of your work."

Netros looked Antinius up and down, and upon seeing his messy hair and beard, scoffed:

"How could a laborer handle such a task?"

"Don't be fooled by appearances. He grew up by my side and can outshine many masters."

Netros was having difficulty in deciding:

"I don't know how that would work."

"Don't worry."

Netros turned to Master Arkas, hesitating as he said:

"If you vouch for him..."

"Rest assured, I will check in from time to time."

Netros, after thinking for a while:

"If that's what you say."

"I believe you can handle it."

"So we have a deal."

Master Arkas called Antinius to his side:

"You will create Netros's mosaics!"

Antinius, feeling embarrassed:

"As you wish."

Netros paused for a moment, looked around, and then:

"Master Arkas, I have one request for you."

"What is it?"

"No one but you and your apprentice will see the mosaics until they are finished."

"You..."

"Even me, if necessary."

"Why?"

Netros took a deep breath and then:

"Do you know why I am having this place built?"

Master Arkas, pursing his lips:

"Go ahead, we are listening."

Netros's earlier arrogant, commanding demeanor seemed to fade, as if he had become a completely different person. He began to speak emotionally:

"After the sudden death of my wife, I was despondent for a long time. At one point, I even considered suicide. But my daughter Kipara was motherless, and I couldn't leave her fatherless as well. God later brought a young and beau-

tiful woman into my life. I built a new life with her. I fell in love again. Now, all my efforts are for her happiness. I am having this mansion built for her..."

Master Arkas:

"Then perhaps you should get your wife's opinion while choosing the figures..."

"No, no, that won't do! I want to surprise her. I don't want to ruin the magic!"

"As you wish."

Netros, the comfort of the agreement making, faced Antinius and reiterated his command:

"Listen, young man, no one but you and your master are to enter until the mosaics are finished!"

Antinius, with determination, said:

"Don't worry, no one will enter!"

Netros must have been pleased with the agreement, as his joy was evident when he bid farewell and left. Antinius, however, was still affected by the events, walking slowly and pensively behind Master Arkas. Seeing him like this, Master Arkas:

"I was very scared when I first took a job too, son. But the determination to succeed and my love for my craft brought me here. I see those same feelings in you now. You know, if you want to learn to swim you have to throw yourself in the water."

Antinius, his confidence bolstered by his master's compliment, replied:

"I won't let you down, master."

*If an apprentice does not surpass his master,
that art is doomed to stagnation.*

Chapter XXX

A.D. 521

The rural area of Germanicia

Antinius met with Netros at the mansion to work on his mosaics. Although Master Arkas had vouched for him, Netros still felt a lingering sense of unease.

Antinius examined every corner of the room, taking in all the details, including the light coming through the windows. Noticing Antinius lost in thought, Netros said:

“I understand you; you’re right to feel hesitant. You’ve taken on a difficult task. If you’d like, start at the entrance of the mansion. Showcase your art there before moving on to the grand hall.”

Seeing that Netros misunderstood him, Antinius thought to himself, “I must create a piece so remarkable that neither I nor my master will feel embarrassed.”

Netros’s suggestion had been helpful for Antinius, allowing him to buy time for the grand hall. Nodding as if to agree, Antinius replied to Netros:

“That’s a good call; let’s start with the entrance.”

Netros was pleased with this response. This way, not only would the mansion’s entrance be completed, but he

would also get to see the art that Antinius would showcase.

Antinius threw himself into the work with great passion and excitement. In no time, he adorned the mansion's entrance with beautiful motifs of flowers, trees, birds, and deer. He envisioned it in such a way that those entering would be astonished by the beauty, feeling as if they had stepped into a garden, enchanted by the sounds of flowing water and birdsong.

Indeed, that's exactly what happened. As soon as Netros entered the mansion, he couldn't hide his astonishment. He was faced with a magnificent masterpiece and couldn't believe his eyes. He turned to his companion and said to close the door:

"Are you hearing what I hear?"

Antinius's purpose had been achieved, and those present:

"We can feel it," replied.

Netros joyfully said to Antinius:

"Yes, yes, it truly gives that feeling! Master Arkas had vouched for you, and clearly, he kept his word."

After examining the mosaics from different angles, Netros turned to Antinius with excitement:

"This is complete; what do you think about the grand hall?"

"I'm thinking!"

"Yes, that's exactly what I was saying. If you'd like, we can move there and think."

They moved to the grand hall. Antinius gazed at the space as if seeing it for the first time, contemplating from various angles. Netros was also deep in thought, but rather than focusing on what to do, he was curious about what Antinius was thinking:

"Have you thought it over, son?"

Antinius repeated again:

"I'm thinking!"

Netros felt annoyed by this response but tried not to show it:

"Think, think—how long have you been pondering!"

Peering through the thick hair falling over his forehead, Antinius looked at Netros and said:

"Art isn't achieved just by thinking."

"What else could it be? If it's a matter of payment, just say so!"

"Art isn't something that can be achieved with money alone. My master once said that..."

"Go ahead, tell me what it was."

"Payment is an obstacle to art!"

"Not by a long chalk!"

Antinius, selfassuredly said:

"The payment will certainly be. What I understand is that works created solely for the sake of payment are not art!"

"What are you waiting for, then?"

"My work must first take root in my soul, then it should embed itself in my heart. After that, I should see it and feel it wherever I look. It should almost plead with me..."

"I don't understand artists at all!"

"If you understood, you would understand me! A work that will last for centuries cannot possibly arise from simple thought."

"I won't deal with you! Just deliver my mansion to me soon..."

"Antinius did not do any work at the mansion that day. He went to see his master. When Master Arkas saw him before him:

“What is it, son? I see you looking thoughtful.”

“I came to help you today, master,” he said.

Antinius, looking at the motif Master Arkas was working on, said:

“I suppose you’re going to make a rooster, master?”

“Yes, I’m glad you came. Come, let’s continue from where I left off. I’ll start on another pattern.”

Antinius, in order to satisfy his curiosity, asked:

“Why are we making a rooster when there are more elegant and beautiful birds, master?”

Master Arkas straightened up, looking into his apprentice’s eyes, and said:

“Everything in nature has a purpose, son. Everything expresses a meaning. Just as the lion represents strength and power, the rooster symbolizes freedom, alertness, and vitality. Moreover, the rooster is also a symbol of a cry against injustice.”

“I understand, Master!”

Master Arkas, pointing to the other figure, said:

“The deer you see represents purity and innocence.”

Master Arkas’s mention of “deer” made Antinius startle suddenly. Lightning began to strike in his soul. His face glowed, and his hair stood on end. Noticing this change in him, Master Arkas said anxiously:

“What happened to you all of a sudden?”

Antinius took a deep breath and said, “Nothing!” but within that “nothing,” there was so much more...

Master Arkas wanted to change the atmosphere:

“What does Netros think of the grand hall? Tell me about it.”

Antinius, regaining his composure, said:

“He hasn’t said anything yet.”

“Well, what do you think?”

“Thinking isn’t enough, master.”

“You’re right, thinking isn’t enough. Thinking is effective only after inspiration!”

“Master, when will this thing called inspiration come? I’ve been thinking about it since the day I took the job!”

Master Arkas, reminiscing about his youth, took a deep breath:

“You never know when and where inspiration will come. It might arrive in the middle of the night, waking you from your sleep. Sometimes, it comes in the most unexpected moment, walking hand in hand with your loneliness. Other times, it appears among crowds, leaving you feeling isolated. And sometimes, it flows into your heart like a star. An artist must be awake. Blessed is the one who catches that star...”

Noticing that these words did not comfort Antinius, Master Arkas said:

“You should go and rest today!”

Antinius, his master’s words echoing in his mind, walked away as if in a daze. He wandered for a long time, eventually finding himself at the springs in the lush forest on the northern slopes of the city. As he listened to the birds singing and the murmur of the water, he thought, “How much I have missed the forest and nature.”

He leaned against an old plane tree and became absorbed in watching the flying birds and butterflies. He had dozed off without realizing it. When he opened his eyes, a redness surrounded him; the sun was waving goodbye as it began to rise over the hills. He looked around but saw no one. Only a few bird songs accompanied him. He stood up and, leaving his

companions in the forest, headed back home.

All day long, he kept his master's words in his mind: "The deer represents purity and innocence." With every mention of "deer," he was reminded of the deer that led him to Maria and of Maria herself. These thoughts kept in Antinius's mind, preventing him from focusing on the motifs he needed to create...

For days, he laid awake. He kept thinking of Maria. Although Master Arkas believed his apprentice was going to the mansion each morning, Antinius couldn't control his feet and found himself in the forests instead. This continued for a whole week.

When Netros came to the mansion for a check on the weekend and saw that nothing had been touched, he became very angry. He hurried to Master Arkas. Seeing a breathless Netros before him, Master Arkas exclaimed with concern:

"What happened? What's wrong?"

"Where is this man?"

"I don't understand who you're talking about."

"Your apprentice hasn't touched anything and hasn't come to the mansion!"

Master Arkas, with curiosity, said:

"He claims to go to work every day. Now you've got me curious too."

"How could you not know?"

When he received no answer, Netros continued:

"I see, he must have run away when he realized he couldn't handle the work!"

"Let's not jump to conclusions. There must be a reason for it!"

"You must find him, Master Arkas, or you will have to fulfill your guarantee!"

Master Arkas, with determination:

"We stand by our word, whatever promises we have made. He'll be here by evening, anyway!"

Netros asked in astonishment:

"Does he come in the evenings?"

"Yes, I thought he was coming home tired from work every evening. He wasn't saying anything to me either."

Netros angrily said:

"Then I'll come back in the evening!"

Antinius was so exhausted that day that he imagined Maria dancing among the poppy flowers on her wedding day. As he envisioned her graceful movements accompanied by music, he couldn't shake the image of her dancing like a deer. Clenching his teeth, he writhed in pain himself. He looked up to see the sun bidding farewell, illuminating his dark world once more. Suddenly, Master Arkas's words echoed in his ears: "The deer represents purity and innocence." This time, a sense of relief washed over him. He viewed Maria's dance at the wedding with new eyes, sensing a deerlike purity in her. He became so engrossed in her graceful movements that, in the end, his gaze locked onto hers. He approached closer, recognizing the innocence in her pupils. Suddenly, he jumped to his feet. No longer did the singing birds or the trees he leaned against matter to him. "I've caught it, I've caught it! This is it!" he exclaimed. He ran down the slopes toward the city with all his might...

When he arrived at the mansion, he was out of breath. "I must get to work without wasting any time," he said.

Master Arkas, noticing that a considerable amount of time had passed without Antinius returning home, won-

dered to himself, "Did he really run away like Netros said?" Suddenly, there was a rapid knocking at the door. Master Arkas joyfully opened it, expecting to see his apprentice, but was met with Netros's sour expression. Netros's first words were:

"Where is this man?"

"Calm down; I've been waiting for him too."

"We're waiting in vain; he's probably fled!"

Master Arkas:

"Now I'm really starting to get curious too. However, the belongings are still here. If you'd like, we can go back to the mansion and take another look."

As they approached the mansion and saw the lights spilling from the windows, Netros exclaimed excitedly:

"Who could possibly be inside at this hour?"

When they entered, Antinius was so engrossed in his work that he didn't even notice them. For a while, both of them watched him work. Master Arkas felt relieved at what he saw:

"More power to you, master!"

Antinius jumped up suddenly, startled. Before he could say anything, Netros interjected:

"Are you working on one thing during the day and something else in the evening?"

Antinius hadn't even heard what Netros said. With joy, he grabbed his master's hands and shook them, saying:

"I caught it, master, I caught it!"

Netros angrily replied:

"What did you catch?"

"I caught the star that shines in my heart, master."

Master Arkas understood very well that the inspiration

his apprentice had been waiting for had finally flowed into his heart.

“Do you see, son? This is what patience and being alert can achieve.”

Netros couldn’t make sense of the conversation. He looked at Antinius, then at Master Arkas. With a smile, Master Arkas said:

“If only we could explain patience to Netros!”

Netros, growing more irritated, snapped:

“How much longer am I supposed to be patient?”

Master Arkas turned his back to Antinius and gestured for silence to Netros. In astonishment, Netros said:

“I still don’t understand anything.”

Antinius, unaware of the discussion about him, asked:

“What didn’t you understand, master?”

“Patience, son, patience.”

Despite not understanding any of the conversation, Netros felt relieved seeing Antinius focused on his work:

“You haven’t said what you’re going to do yet, but it seems you’ve started on something. I’m curious – what kind of work will you create.”

Antinius was so engrossed in his work that he didn’t even glance at Netros, replied:

“I know you all love entertainment, so I’ll create something that I’m sure you won’t object to.”

“I trust you’ll produce something beautiful, but I’m really curious—what are you going to make?”

Antinius stood up and looked directly into Netros’s eyes:

“I will give the voice to the sound of my heart in mosaics. If only I could give it words, I would tell you what I plan to do.”

Netros was about to continue his insistence when Master Arkas interrupted him:

“An artist doesn’t speak much; their works speak for them. Don’t pressure the boy too much.”

Antinius felt relieved by his master’s words. Netros didn’t insist any longer:

“Well, let’s wait and see. This will be a surprise for me!”

Master Arkas replied:

“It will be a surprise for me too.”

Antinius was so absorbed in his work that he placed each tiny stone with meticulous craftsmanship and great care, as if he were painting a portrait of elegance. For him, the concept of time no longer existed. On some nights, sleep eluded him, and he would head to the mansion to continue his work from where he left off.

Master Arkas, noticing that Antinius looked tired, said:

“Son, you’re exhausting yourself. Don’t push yourself so hard.”

Antinius would reply, “Master, it’s the work that pushes me.”

Antinius had finished the mosaics in much less time than expected by working day and night, but he hadn’t yet put the finishing touch on them. His returning home early that day must have caught Master Arkas’s attention, as he remarked:

“Son, you’re early today; you must be tired, aren’t you.”

“On the contrary, all my fatigue has vanished. I’ve been a weight off my shoulders.”

“So it seems you’ve finished the work. Your eyes are shining and you are laughing.”

“At the end of the work, there was both the feeling of embarrassment and the chance to embarrass others.”

“Now you’ve got me excited too. I’m really curious; let’s go see what you’ve been keeping a secret tomorrow.”

“If you’re not tired, let’s go now, master!”

Without hesitation, Master Arkas replied:

“Lead the way!”

When they arrived at the mansion and Antinius lit up the room, the mosaics revealed themselves in all their glory, like the sun rising from behind dark clouds. Master Arkas couldn’t take his eyes off them for a while. He gazed at the artwork from different angles, examining each motif closely. Antinius, filled with curious, asked:

“You seem lost in thought, Master. Is there a flaw, perhaps?”

“No, son! You’ve placed the dancing girl so perfectly that at night, the candlelight and during the day, the sunlight will always focus on her. This is not a work made by chance.”

Antinius felt both pleased and embarrassed by the compliment:

“Do you think Netros will understand this subtlety, master?”

Master Arkas looked at Antinius with a smile and said:

“Even if Netros doesn’t, the guests who come to the mansion will. A true work of art will always receive the appreciation it deserves. It may not happen today, but even centuries later...”

Master Arkas studied the dancing Roman girl among the poppies in detail for a long time. To himself, he murmured, “Hmm.” Noticing this, Antinius asked:

“Is there something wrong, master?”

“Nothing, son.”

Antinius was about to speak when Master Arkas continued:

“Did the stone from her necklace fall while the girl was dancing?”

“I told you I hadn’t put the final touch yet...”

“Yes, but why did you leave it empty?”

“I was thinking of consulting with you and placing real gold there.”

Master Arkas, after thinking for a moment, said:

“Son, gold is a value in itself. It adds worth to the piece, but if you place a stone that is more valuable than gold there, the artist enhances their work even further.”

Antinius replied:

“So, mountains are waiting for us again.”

Master Arkas, slightly irritated, replied:

“What do you need the mountains for? What you’re looking for is within you! While you’re searching far away, what you seek is sometimes right next to you.”

“What would you like me to do?”

“Son, when we first met at the inn, you asked, ‘Why is this chest so heavy!’”

“I remember, master.”

“That chest contains a stone that must be the finishing touch for your work.”

Master Arkas crouched down to examine the mosaics more closely, checking each motif one by one:

“Be quick; Netros is getting impatient.”

Antinius nodded:

“Don’t worry, Master; just a few small touches are left.”

Antinius was eager for the stone for the necklace:

“Master, let’s hurry home; that stone is waiting for me!”

“It’s clear who is waiting for whom. Now, let’s go, lead the way!”

As soon as Antinius picked up the stone from Master Arkas’s chest, he rejoiced like a child. When he woke up in the morning, the stone was still cradled in his palms.

That morning, Antinius arrived at the estate earlier than usual. He meticulously prepared the stone, ready to place it in the necklace when an idea struck him; he decided against putting it in its place. Instead, he focused on making the final touches to the piece. As he examined the motifs he had worked on for days like a delicate embroidery, there was a knock at the door.

When he opened the door, he was face to face with a stunning girl, delicate and graceful like a butterfly, with blond silk hair cascading to her shoulders and mesmerizing blue eyes reminiscent of vast oceans, as if straight out of a fairy tale. After sizing up the scruffy-looking Antinius, this fairylike girl asked in a playful voice:

“Aren’t you going to let me in?”

Antinius swallowed hard, unsure of what to say. Noticing his surprise, the girl, with all charm, asked again:

“Aren’t you going to let me in?”

Antinius, gathering himself, replied:

“I don’t know you!”

The girl was so sure of herself that she said:

“I’ll introduce myself inside.”

“There’s a rule; I can’t let you in!”

Ignoring the rule, the girl tried to push her way inside. Suddenly, Antinius extended his arm to the door, prevent-

ing her from entering. In that moment, he found himself face to face with her. They both couldn't help but gaze into each other's eyes for a while. Antinius's eyes wandered to her décolletage, and the girl took the opportunity to accentuate her curves. The scent of the girl overwhelmed him; he felt his heart beat faster, and warmth enveloped his body. He felt a mix of confusion and excitement, unsure of how to respond to the intensity of the moment. He didn't know what to do. He felt lost, as if every devil on earth whispered madness into his ear. He couldn't look at the girl directly, his body trembling uncontrollably. After Maria, Antinius had never even come face to face with such a stunning girl, much less any other girl...

Realizing she wouldn't be let inside, the girl took a step back. With a sulky expression, she looked at Antinius and said:

"Am I supposed to ask you for permission to enter my father's mansion?"

Antinius was taken aback:

"Are you the daughter of Chief Collector Netros?"

The girl stared at Antinius with a condescending gaze for a moment. Although she initially viewed him as just a common mosaic worker, she realized from his confident demeanor that he was someone of noble character. She decided not to resist any longer:

"My name is Kipara; Netros is my father."

Feeling embarrassed, Antinius replied:

"I'm sorry! I didn't know."

Kipara, encouraged by Antinius's apology, said:

"Now, you've learned! Pull your arm back so I can come in!"

After a brief hesitation, Antinius replied:

"Your father has a strict order; I can't let anyone in!"

“Not even me?”

The girl’s fascinating beauty shook Antinius at his core, leaving him speechless. Confident in her allure, she thought to herself, “This is a done deal! No one can say no to me!”

Kipara, this time asked her question in a more flirtatious manner:

“Aren’t you going to let me in?”

Antinius didn’t know what to do. Antinius was torn, wavering between letting her in and refusing. In this daze, he briefly mistook Kipara for Maria, a smile spreading across his face. Just as he was about to invite her inside with joy, Kipara interjected again, her tone a bit more aggressive:

“Now that you know who I am, lower your arm!”

With those words, Antinius came to his senses and:

“I can’t disregard your father’s orders!” he said, firmly rejecting her request.

Kipara was devastated by this response, feeling her feminine pride wounded. After all, she was very wealthy, young, beautiful, and noble; if she wanted, she could have any young man in Germanicia follow her. Yet now, she couldn’t even get a word in with a mere shabby mosaic worker. With eyes filled with resentment, she asked:

“Then why not?”

“Your father said he would make a surprise for your mother.”

Kipara became even angrier upon hearing these words:

“That woman is not my mother. My mother is dead!”

Tears began to stream down Kipara’s ruddy cheeks. In a voice filled with rebellion and reproach, she said:

“I can’t understand my father. He never did any of this while my mother was alive. Now he’s going to spend almost

all his wealth on this woman. I can't fathom how he could do this for a girl half his age."

Realizing she wouldn't be able to see the mosaics her father had praised so highly, Kipara didn't want to stay at the door any longer. Frustrated, she left the mansion, muttering to herself as she walked away.

When Antinius closed the door and approached the mosaics, his body was still trembling. For a while, he didn't touch anything, as the image of the girl lingered in his mind, occupying his thoughts. With those feelings, he barely managed to finish the final touches. Just as he was about to take a break, there was another knock at the door. As Antinius went to open it, he wondered to himself, "Could it be Kipara?" When he saw Master Arkas standing before him, he was very surprised. Noticing Antinius's astonishment, Master Arkas said:

"Looks like you're not too happy to see me."

"Of course I'm glad to see you."

Master Arkas immediately interjected:

"I told Netros that we would deliver the work tomorrow. I came to see the final state of the mosaics, as you know our word is on the line. A promise is made first to the gods."

Master Arkas entered the room and stood in front of the mosaics, gazing at them intently once more. Certain details must have caught his attention, as he leaned in for a closer look. Normally, he praised his apprentice, but this time he said nothing. This did not go unnoticed by Antinius and he asked to satisfy his curiosity:

"Is it good, Master?"

Master Arkas, pensively replied:

"Yesterday, it looked different. What changed today?"

Antinius, with a sheepish expression, replied:

"I only made the final touches."

Master Arkas, gazes fixed on a distant point, said:

"This is something beyond that..."

Antinius fell silent for a moment. Unconsciously, he replied:

"I might have misjudged it."

Master Arkas seemed to have resolved the issue with that response and said:

"Son, when the heart is steady, the eye doesn't waver. Now tell me, who came here today?"

Antinius couldn't reply this time; he simply bowed his head and remained still. Seeing his apprentice's embarrassment, Master Arkas said:

"Son, hold onto your heart so your eyes don't waver!"

Antinius understood very well what his master meant.

Master Arkas didn't want to pressure his apprentice further. He moved to the mosaics and personally completed the missing details with his own hands.

Chapter XXXI

A.D. 521

Germanicia

Antinius woke up and immediately checked his heart. Seeing Maria in her usual place relieved him. With that comfort, he went to the mansion early. He dusted, swept, and cleaned every corner of the hall. He polished the mosaics depicting Maria until they shone. Then he stood in front of them, gazing as if it were the first time, feeling the sadness of how he would say goodbye. For today, he would be delivering the mosaics that had occupied and consoled him for days.

As proud as Master Arkas was, Netros was equally hesitant. As they entered the mansion, Netros said to Master Arkas:

“If the hall isn’t as beautiful as the entrance...”

Master Arkas, interrupting Netros, turned to Antinius who greeted them at the door:

“Son, these words are for you.”

Netros, angrily:

“No, no, I’m telling you, you’re the guarantor!”

Master Arkas, with a calm demeanor:

“Alright, let’s move to the hall.”

However, Antinius wasn’t as relaxed as Master Arkas. He thought to himself, “What if he doesn’t like it?”

When Antinius opened the salon door, the sun, rising high, streamed through the windows as if it were gazing at the artwork, almost enviously. The moment Netros stepped into the room, he froze once more at the sight before him.

As Netros saw the colorful reflections of the mosaics on the floor shifting shapes with the light, Master Arkas and Antinius watched as his previously stern expression transformed into a smile. Seeing them gaze at him, Netros exclaimed joyfully:

“I’m hearing the sound of the bells in the girl’s hands, as if they were ringing. Do you hear them too?”

Master Arkas, noticing Antinius’s silence, said:

“A true artist does not pour their effort into a work they do not feel.”

Netros, joyfully examining the painting from different angles:

“Magnificent! Magnificent! A painting I desired but couldn’t even imagine. It’s perfect in every way!”

Master Arkas, seeing Netros rejoice like a child, asked:

“Is there really nothing missing?”

Netros looked at the mosaics again:

“I can’t see any.”

Master Arkas turned to Antinius and said:

“Put the finishing touch, son, and then we can submit the work.”

Antinius held out the stone to his master, saying:

“Master, I want you to place the final stone.”

Netros, in astonishment, said:

“Who else but Master Arkas could create such a masterpiece?”

Master Arkas:

He took the stone and quickly placed it in the empty space of the necklace, saying, “Every line of this work belongs to my apprentice.”

Netros, in a state of surprise, asked:

“Are you telling me this ragged boy did all this?”

“Yes.”

“It’s impossible; how can you expect me to believe this?”

Master Arkas, proudly:

“This work is the result of my own creation. If an apprentice does not surpass his master, that art is doomed to stagnation.”

Netros, curiously said:

“Then this magnificent painting must have a name.”

The addressee of the question, Master Arkas, responded:

“The work isn’t mine to name.”

Netros looked at Antinius as if to say, “You tell us.”

“My master, if you find it suitable, let it be ‘The Beauty of Germanicia’

This name must have pleased both Master Arkas and Netros greatly, as they both looked at the mosaics and repeated it:

“The Beauty of Germanicia... The Beauty of Germanicia...”

*No one knew that beneath that smiling face
lay a sorrowful heart...*

Chapter XXXII

A.D. 521

Azgit Castle

Maria found herself alone at Azgit Castle after the guests had left the wedding. Having fallen for Antinius but being forced to marry Dorkon filled her with great anguish. She had even secretly sent a message to the head chef to help Antinius win the race. Maria kept asking herself the same tormenting question: “How is it that Antinius couldn’t make it to the castle?”

After his father’s death, Dorkon became the commander of Azgit Castle. Maria felt less like the wife of a castle commander and more like a prisoner within its walls. She locked herself in her room, refusing to eat or drink, wearing a smile during official ceremonies and gatherings, but she was in deep sorrow. She had entered Azgit Castle in tears and had yet to take a single step outside since then.

Dorkon was unable to conquer his fear of Antinius, as he was terrified of losing Maria. Because of this, he would never allow her to step outside the castle.

One morning, as Maria was lost in thoughts of Antinius, Dorkon entered with a smile:

“Good news, my dear, good news!”

“What is it? You seem very cheerful today.”

“I have news that you’ll be happy about too.”

“You know very well that nothing can make me happy!”

“You are free now! You can go outside the castle as you wish!”

Maria couldn’t make sense of those words. As she tried to understand, Dorkon joyfully exclaimed:

“Antinius is no longer here!”

Maria jumped up from her seat as soon as she heard the name “Antinius,” as if struck by lightning:

“Why is he gone?”

After a mocking laugh, Dorkon said:

“Antinius is no longer in our lives, he’s gone!”

“When was he ever in our lives?”

“I hated hearing you mumble about him every day!”

“Why are you cheerful now?”

“Antinius is gone, he’s dead, he’s dead!”

Maria, hearing Antinius’s name, jumped up but collapsed on the spot as soon as she heard he was dead. Dorkon’s smiling face suddenly fell. With hatred, he said:

“You still love him, don’t you?”

Maria suddenly lifted her head. With tearfilled eyes and clenched fists, she said:

“You won the race, but he had won my heart!”

Dorkon, with the demeanor of a strong commander:

“I always win! I won’t be hunted like Antinius when I go hunting!”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s become prey to the lions in the forest!”

“You’re lying! I heard he went to Efsus!”

“You heard correctly. When he became deranged, the Saints took him to the Church of Jesus. They say he was torn apart by lions during his solo hunt. The Kızılkale is in mourning now!”

Hearing of Antinius’s death, Maria clutched her necklace tightly in her hand and said:

“I want to be alone!”

Dorkon was the youngest among dozens of castle commanders. After inheriting the command from his father, he established significant dominance in the region. By clearing the trade routes of bandits and ensuring the safety of caravans, he greatly increased the revenue from the roads. This gained him recognition from the city administration of Germanicia, declaring him the strongest and most respected commander.

The chief collector of Germanicia, Netros, usually sent other officials to collect the castle’s monthly revenues, but this time he decided to go himself. Despite the insistence of all the castle commanders, Netros told them he would be staying at Azgıt Castle.

Upon hearing that the chief collector was coming to Azgıt, Dorkon welcomed Netros with a magnificent ceremony at the castle entrance to showcase his power. Netros had never experienced such a reception before. As he entered through the castle gate, he leaned toward his assistant and whispered:

“Dorkon has truly demonstrated his power and distinction,” he made sure to say.

As the delegation entered the castle with great pomp,

Chief Collector Netros glanced at Dorkon, as if to ask, "What's all this fuss?" Dorkon felt the need to explain:

"They're preparing for the evening; you must be tired now. Would you like to rest?"

Netros:

"Thank you for your offer. Let's finish our official business first."

"As you wish."

Young Commander Dorkon took the chief collector and his assistant to his study room. He presented the accounts of the monthly castle revenues to Netros. Noticing that the income from Azgıt Castle had significantly increased compared to previous periods and other castles, the collector exchanged glances with his assistant and said to Dorkon:

"These taxes you've collected are much higher than the others. The Governor of Germanicia will be very pleased with this. Your efforts to clear your region of bandits are also commendable."

Dorkon, with pride, replied:

"Of course, your support will certainly play a significant role in making the governor aware of our efforts."

"Don't doubt that for a moment."

Dorkon called for his personal servant, saying:

"Bring in the gifts prepared for our chief collector!"

After accepting the gifts, Netros gave Dorkon compliment:

"I thank the strong, brave, and successful commander Dorkon for these invaluable gifts. He has honored us with a magnificent welcome and precious presents. I also apologize for not being able to respond to the wedding invitation. However, I would be delighted to host him and his esteemed wife at my new mansion. Their presence would

bring us great joy.”

Dorkon was very pleased by this compliment:

“Thank you very much for your kind invitation. I’m also eager to see your legendary mansion, especially the mosaics you’ve named after the Beauty of Germanicia.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Please don’t be modest; it is said that every aspect of your mansion is a masterpiece.”

“Well then, I certainly want to see you at the grand event I’ll be hosting next week.”

Dorkon, without hesitation, replied:

“Gladly.”

That evening at Azgıt Castle, a lavish feast was organized in honor of Chief Collector Netros, one that would be talked about for a long time. Commander Dorkon’s wife, Maria, did not attend the feast. This absence caught Netros’s attention, but since he was there on official business, he chose not to comment.

At the feast, where drinks flowed like water, guests were entranced by the graceful dances of beautiful performers. As Dorkon escorted the intoxicated Netros to his room, Netros leaned in and whispered to Dorkon:

“If you receive an even greater assignment soon, don’t be surprised!”

From now on, I will be the star of
every gathering!

Chapter XXXIII

A.D. 521

Germanicia

Dorkon was scolding Maria with words full of reproach:

“You don’t even know what a protocol is! You’re the wife of a great castle commander. Your absence at yesterday’s event was so obvious that the chief collector’s lack of a wife saved the situation. Netros told me I could be given a greater assignment. So I don’t want any more of these whims!”

Until now, Maria, who had remained silent, finally responded:

“You all are having a great time. What’s the point of being somewhere I’m not enjoying?”

Dorkon, angrily said:

“What do you mean by not enjoying it? You are the commander’s wife. You have a specific place in the protocol. No one cares if you’re having fun or not. But your absence will be noticed. Get ready now. Next week, we will attend the event at Netros’s new mansion together!”

Maria, raising her head, said:

“Ambition has blinded you! Until now, you kept me from leaving the castle, and now you’re going to take me into the city among the crowds, is that it?”

Dorkon was greatly provoked by her words. He was so angry that he mentioned Antinius’s name, which he always referred to as “that man,” and shouted:

“I only envied you because of Antinius! Once the lions tear him apart, there will be no one left to envy. From now on, you will accompany me to official and private events! All eyes will be on you. You will dazzle everyone with your beauty. Everyone will say, ‘Maria, the wife of the proud Castle Commander Dorkon!’”

Maria, with great sorrow, said:

“Well, do you have an answer to the question, ‘Where has Maria been all this time?’”

Dorkon:

“!..”

For Maria, the castle had ceased to be a cage. She declared, “I don’t even want to breathe in a world where Antinius isn’t!”

Maria, not wanting to leave her room, wished to turn a new page in her inner world after giving up hope on Antinius. The memory of Dorkon’s words, “I don’t envy you for anyone but Antinius!” troubled her deeply. Her feminine instincts kicked in, and she longed to be envied. Turning it into a matter of pride, she said to herself:

“From now on, I will be the star of every event!”

Maria had mobilized all the tailors, having them create elegant, eyecatching dresses made of silk, most of which featured daring necklines.

On the day they were to attend Netros’s event, Maria was trying on one dress after another to show her husband her new outfits. For the first time since their wedding day, she was displaying herself like this. Dorkon was so astonished by her beauty that he didn’t know what to say. After watching her for a moment, he finally said, almost apologetically:

“I can’t forgive myself for having confined such beauty.”

With all her grudge, Maria thought, “I won’t forgive you either!” but to silence the rebellion within her, she said to Dorkon:

“Which one would you like me to wear?”

“As long as you have this beauty within you, it doesn’t matter which one you wear.”

Maria, accentuating all her allure, showcased her most

daring dress and said:

“Or should it be this one?”

Dorkon took a closer look at Maria again:

“In this dress, you could even make the goddess of beauty, Aphrodite, jealous. You’ll wear it at the grand event I’ll host when I’m promoted.”

“You know best. Then tell me what I should wear to tonight’s event?”

Dorkon looked at the dresses again. Seeing his indecision, Maria said:

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that many of the guests, including Collector Netros, couldn’t attend our wedding. I want them to see you in that magnificent wedding dress.”

“As you wish...”

Netros and his wife Hermione were greeting guests at the entrance of their new mansion in Germanicia, welcoming each one according to their rank with compliments before leading them to the poolside in the garden. They showed the utmost care and flattery to Commander Dorkon and his wife Maria, a level of attention they reserved for no one else.

After the introduction by the poolside, Netros invited his guests inside. As the attendees stepped into the mansion, they immediately began to examine the mosaic patterns on the floor as if wandering through an art gallery. After a moment of silence, one of the guests said:

“Do you hear the bird songs as well?”

One of the women there said:

“If this scene were by the pool, I would say the bird songs were coming from the trees.”

Another guest remarked:

“The patterns are so vibrant that everything seems to be moving.”

Another person said:

“This riot of colors, combined with the elegance of the stones, has created a magnificent work of art.”

Commander Dorkon turned to Collector Netros and said:

“I commend the artist behind this work. I thought the praises about the mansion were exaggerated, but upon seeing such a masterpiece, I realized they barely scratched the surface.”

The mansion owner Netros felt so proud after Dorkon’s last sentence that he said to his guests:

“Friends, my mansion gains meaning not just from the few motifs you see here, but from your presence. What you see is nothing compared to what you will experience.”

Netros was about to continue his speech when a murmur arose among the guests, who began to whisper among themselves:

“What could be more beautiful than this?”

“If this is nothing, I’m very curious about what we will see.”

Dorkon said to Netros:

“I haven’t seen the ‘Beauty of Germanicia!’”

The guests exclaimed in unison:

“Yes, yes, we are very curious about the Beauty of Germanicia!”

Netros, with even more pride, said:

“My friends, the Beauty of Germanicia is also eager to see you. It is just as excited as you are, but it will make its appearance after the feast.”

When the guests moved to the dining room, they were once again astonished by what they saw. For the wide dining table was laid with such delicious dishes that aesthetics took precedence over the food itself. Although Netros signaled for them to start eating, the guests preferred to admire the beauty of the roasted lamb for a while. One of the guests turned to Netros and said:

“I congratulate you and your chef; a wonderful feast has been prepared.”

Netros:

“Thank you. If you had seen the feast at Azgit Castle last week, you would have been left speechless.”

Dorkon interjected:

“Don’t exaggerate, my friend; it was a modest feast.”

Netros:

“If you are referring to that unparalleled feast, you are the one showing humility now.”

One of the guests, a woman, said:

“What kind of feast could be more extravagant than this?”

Maria, before her husband Dorkon could speak, interjected:

“We would love to host you at Azgit Castle as well.”

The feast continued under the soft yellow glow of the silver candelabra. Everyone was full of joy, engaging in pleasant conversation; as the goblets filled and emptied, laughter echoed off the walls of the mansion.

After the feast, Netros stood up, wishing to give a speech to the guests:

“My friends, I now invite you to the grand hall for a feast

of art and music. For the Beauty of Germanicia cannot be kept waiting.”

The guests, at Netros’s signal, made their way to the grand hall. While everyone entered the hall, Dorkon and his wife had not yet gone in. Dorkon approached Netros and leaned in to whisper:

“You know we came from afar. Could you have them show us a room to change our clothes?”

Netros called one of the serving girls over and said:

“Take our guest to their room.”

As the guests made their way from the corridor to the grand hall, conversations buzzed among them. The women, in particular, were very excited:

“I’m so curious about what kind of scene I’ll encounter!”

“Given how quickly it has gained such fame...”

“If the entrance of the mansion is this beautiful, I can hardly imagine what the grand hall must be like!”

Netros, these conversations filled him with pride as he exchanged glances and smiles with his wife, Hermione. At the entrance to the grand hall, they welcomed the guests inside. Those who entered were left speechless in astonishment at the beauty before them. The candelabra seemed to illuminate not the hall, but rather the Beauty of Germanicia standing in its center.

The guests gathered around the mosaics, gazing in admiration. This awe lingered in silence for a while.

Dorkon had donned his showy commander’s uniform before Maria. After adjusting his outfit, he stepped in front of the mirror and thought, “All eyes will be on me tonight in this uniform.” As he admired himself with pride, Maria suddenly appeared in all her glory in the mirror. Dorkon watched her for a moment as if seeing her for the first time.

Although he sensed the guests' attention would be more on Maria than on him, his pride as a commander prevailed. He told himself, "After all, I am the castle commander."

Maria:

"I'm ready."

Dorkon turned to Maria and said:

"You look beautiful, just like on our wedding day. However, tonight all eyes will be on my uniform!"

Dorkon gestured for Maria to take his arm. As they descended the ladder and walked through the corridor toward the hall, Maria, just like on their wedding day, tried to hide her inner sadness behind a facade of cheerful smiles.

The guests in the hall were still murmuring among themselves about the Beauty of Germanicia, calling it an unparalleled work of art and remarking that they had never encountered such a magnificent scene anywhere else, saying, "It's like a dream." While Netros waited impatiently at the door, Commander Dorkon and his wife Maria appeared in the corridor.

Netros wanted to welcome the young couple as if they were entering a wedding hall. He gestured to the musicians to start the music. As soon as the music broke the silence of the hall, a buzz filled the room. Just as all eyes turned to the musicians, Netros's booming voice blended with the music, announcing, "Newlyweds, welcome!" At that moment, Dorkon entered the hall before his wife, causing the eyes to turn to him amidst the commotion. Dorkon was about to greet the guests proudly when Maria glided into the room like a swan. A storm of applause erupted in the hall at Maria's fascinating beauty.

Commander Dorkon, believing the applause was for him, was secretly quite upset when he realized it was directed at Maria. The guests, who had just admired the Beauty of

Germanicia, were astonished to see Maria in all her splendor and shifted their gazes between the two. Among themselves, they murmured, "Reality has surpassed fantasy." Maria was aware of her beauty, but she hadn't expected such attention.

Dorkon was quite annoyed at all the attention being focused on Maria. He thought to himself, "I am a successful castle commander; why isn't this interest directed at me?" He was internally rebelling against this unfairness. Trying to conceal the turmoil within, he forced smiles around him.

Still recovering from their astonishment at the Beauty of Germanicia, the guests were now captivated by Maria's beauty. The women, in particular, turned to Maria and said:

"It's as if the Beauty of Germanicia has come to life and risen!"

"The beauty on the ground seems to be reflected in the mirror..."

"I can't believe my eyes. How can there be such a resemblance?"

"Yes, yes, the outfits, the hairstyle..."

"The crown on her head..."

"Her necklace..."

"The bracelet on her arm..."

"Look, look, even her shoes are the same."

As the women pointed out these similarities, Dorkon looked from Maria to the painting and back again. With each resemblance he noticed, his face flushed. Frustrated, he began to clench his fists and grind his teeth.

As the women congratulated the young couple, their husbands also entered a competition of compliments directed at Maria. One of the nobles present made a bow in front of Maria and kissed her hand, saying:

“Your beauty is dazzling. It was a great misfortune not to be at your wedding. Please accept my congratulations.”

Another noble, after bowing, said to Maria:

“I can’t help but envy your husband. You enchant us with your beauty. I won’t forgive myself for not being at your wedding.”

Another noble turned to Dorkon and said:

“My friend, you’ve hit the bullseye. It’s impossible not to be enchanted by your wife’s beauty...”

As Maria thanked each of the guests for their compliments, her husband Dorkon struggled to contain himself. He was finding it hard to breathe from anger, his chest heaving. Internally, he rebelled against the thought, “How can the Beauty of Germanicia resemble my wife so closely?” He couldn’t accept it. On top of all this, Netros added:

“Dear beautiful Maria, your fascinating beauty has overshadowed the legendary Beauty of Germanicia...”

Netros’s words were the last straw. Just as he was about to continue his compliments, Dorkon smashed his drink glass against the face of the Beauty of Germanicia, exclaiming:

“Enough!” he shouted so loudly that...

Dorkon’s loud voice made the candle flames tremble. Grabbing Maria’s arm roughly, he pushed her onto the mosaics. Maria fell in such a way that she was face to face with the Beauty of Germanicia on the ground. In response to this resemblance, the women gasped and began to scream in astonishment, asking each other, “Which one is real?” Dorkon shouted again with the same fury:

“Who painted this portrait?”

Dorkon was asking his wife, but the real addressee of his words was Netros. Netros interjected:

“It seems you’ve had too much to drink, commander!”

Dorkon still was unable to control his anger:

“I’m asking again, who painted this portrait?”

Netros wanted to calm Dorkon, speaking softly:

“Dorkon, my friend, let’s discuss this later! It’s not appropriate in front of the guests!”

Dorkon, refusing to back down, replied with the same anger:

“I want the person who created this mosaic here now! Who painted this portrait?”

Netros, facing an unexpected situation, replied:

“It was made by Master Arkas’s apprentice.”

Dorkon replied with the same firmness:

“Doesn’t this man have a name?”

“I don’t know the name exactly either; that’s what everyone says!”

“I want to see him in front of me immediately!”

Netros could no longer hold back and raised his voice:

“I remind you that you are not at Azgıt Castle. You cannot issue such orders in front of the guests!”

“As the castle commander, but more so as Maria’s husband, I feel entitled to this right. Such a resemblance... It cannot be a coincidence!”

Dorkon shook Maria by the arm as she finally got to her feet:

“Did you model for that mosaic artist?” he shouted at Maria again.

Maria, feeling a strange emotion she couldn’t quite understand since their arrival, was devastated by such treatment in front of the guests. With a sense of selfdefense, she turned to her husband, tears in her eyes:

“Have you taken me out of the castle since our wedding

day? What I'm wearing is my wedding dress! There were hundreds of guests that day. You asked me to wear it again today. You can't blame me for this!" she retorted fiercely.

Maria's rebellion astonished everyone present. A murmur rose in the hall, for this incident would soon become a major topic of gossip among the Roman noblewomen in Germanicia.

After Maria's words, all eyes turned to the host, Netros. He felt uneasy under the curious and questioning gazes. Ordering one of his servants, he said:

"Bring Arkas's apprentice here immediately!"

Antinius found solace in the image of Maria while creating Netros's mosaics, unaware of fatigue. But when he delivered the Germanicia Beauty to Netros, he experienced the pain of separation once again, just like on wedding day. Maria slipped from Antinius's grasp like a star, lost to him once more.

Antinius wanted to distract himself. To lighten Master Arkas's load, he took on the hardest tasks himself. That day, he returned home very tired. As every night, thoughts of Maria kept him awake. He fell asleep without realizing it when suddenly, in the middle of the night, there was a rapid knocking at the door. Antinius didn't hear the knocking. Master Arkas, muttering to himself, "Who could it be at this hour?" opened the door. Before he could ask anything, the visitors at the door:

"We've come to take your apprentice!"

Master Arkas:

"Why, where will you take him?"

"To Netros!"

"The child is deeply asleep, he's very tired today; I'll

send him tomorrow.”

“Cut it out, Master Arkas! It’s Commander Dorkon’s order. We’ll take him by force if necessary!”

As the strong guards of Netros took Antinius away in his nightclothes, Master Arkas was getting ready to follow them. When the guards noticed this, they said:

“Old man, it would be best if you stayed out of this!”

Maria was more curious than Dorkon about who made the mosaics. A voice inside her said, “Could it be him?” For a moment, hope blossomed, but it was shortlived. She was confronted with a disheveled, halfasleep man, brought in like a cat between two people’s arms, and all her dreams shattered in an instant.

Dorkon had never met Antinius and did not recognize him. Seeing the person before him as a pitiful, poor mosaicist, he said to Netros:

“Are you sure this is really the one who made the mosaics?”

Netros replied firmly:

“Don’t be fooled by his appearance; his hands are very skilled.”

Dorkon asked sternly, as if interrogating:

“What is your name?”

As Antinius looked around to respond, he suddenly met Maria’s gaze. A deep storm surged within him. However, when he saw Maria looking at him with empty yet compassionate eyes... Antinius found himself unable to speak for a moment.

Dorkon, his assumption that Antinius didn’t understand, asked his question in a louder voice:

“Did you make these?”

Seeing that Maria looked at him as if he were a pitiful creature, Antinius didn't know how to respond to Dorkon. Despite Dorkon's persistent questioning, he could not get the answer he wanted. Dorkon attempted to resort to brute force, but this time, Maria intervened:

“Clearly, the man is pitiful...”

One of the guests present there:

“I can't believe it; he can't be the one who made these!”

Another one said:

“Let's not be prejudiced; he might have made them.”

Netros intervened again to quell the curiosity of those present:

“Don't be deceived by this helplessness. He made all of the mosaics. At first, I couldn't believe it either, but he did!”

Unaware that the person before her was Antinius, Maria watched the events unfold in astonishment. Dorkon, unable to bear it any longer, turned to Netros:

“Send this lunatic to the dungeon!”

Time had passed significantly. No one was enjoying the festivities organized by Netros anymore. Dorkon was struggling to stand. Reflecting on the events, he felt a pang of guilt at the sight of the mosaicist's pitiful state. To himself, he said, “I think I was unfair to Maria.”

Unaware that the person he had sent to the dungeon was Antinius, Dorkon thought he was dead. However, a hidden suspicion gnawed at him, troubling his mind like a worm. To himself, he said, “In the morning, I'll know how to make him talk!”

Despite all his efforts during the interrogation, Dorkon

couldn't get a single word out of Antinius. He resolved to keep him in the dungeon until he finally spoke.

Antinius paid no mind to the shackles behind the iron bars of the dungeon. For he was lost in the joy of seeing Maria one last time, savoring the pleasure of being immersed in love, even in captivity.

Dorkon was nearly furious with frustration as he couldn't get Antinius to speak despite all his efforts. "How can a mere pathetic mosaicist carve the likeness of the commander's wife into stone?" He couldn't wrap his mind around it. A voice inside him continued to gnaw at his thoughts like a worm:

"What if someone else made him do it..."

Since Antinius refused to speak even under severe torture, they locked him in one of the dungeon's most remote cells. Once living life in vast, lush forests, hunting wild animals, he now awaited his death in a cramped cell. Thoughts of finding a way to escape and return to the green valleys filled his mind. As Antinius wrestled with these emotions, the dreadful silence of the dungeon was broken by the sound of approaching footsteps.

Before long, a figure in a black cloak approached like a shadow and stopped in front of the cell. After glancing around, she swiftly pulled back the hood of the cloak. The girl who gazed deeply at Antinius, with all her allure and beauty, was none other than Kipara. Antinius was astonished, unable to believe his eyes. Kipara, revealing her mystery, tossed aside the cloak, displaying her form provocatively. Locking eyes with Antinius, she said:

"I've come to save you."

With those words, Antinius realized that what he had experienced was not a dream, and his eyes sparkled with hope.

Kipara continued her words:

“I wasn’t at the gathering that day because I was angry with my father. I know everything that happened there. If you agree to my terms, I will help you escape from this dungeon!”

Antinius asked curiously:

“How is that going to happen?”

“I’ve arranged everything.”

“What do you want in return?”

Kipara replied without hesitation:

“I want you to be with me! I have great wealth. If you want, we can go to other lands too.”

Antinius remained silent for a moment. He wanted to escape from here. If he regained his freedom, perhaps he could take his revenge on Dorkon. Kipara was so confident in herself that, without waiting for Antinius’s response, she hurriedly said:

“Now is not the time to think; get ready, we have very little time!”

Antinius was happy to be escaping from the dungeon, but there was a doubt within him. He asked Kipara:

“What happens if I refuse?”

If you refuse, the court’s decision will surely favor Dorkon. You won’t even defend yourself in your testimony. Everyone knows this case will end in death. And know this well: Maria, whose likeness you painstakingly carved into stone, will watch your death with pleasure from the balcony, I assure you. Make your decision accordingly!”

As soon as Antinius heard the name ‘Maria’:

“You said Maria will watch too?”

“That’s the procedure. I doubt she’ll miss that scene!”

With those words, Antinius abruptly changed his mind about accepting. He thought to himself, “At least I’ll see her one last time!” and swiftly rejected Kipara’s offer.

Kipara, this rejection shattered her pride once again. She couldn’t hold back her tears. She thought to herself, “What kind of love is this?” She looked at Antinius one last time and, with a voice full of sorrow:

“You deserve death, Apprentice of Arkas...” she said, and then vanished into the dark corridors of the dungeon.

Kipara had embarked on this adventure, trampling all her pride. Antinius’s refusal to accept her into the mansion deeply hurt her. Almost as if seeking revenge, she dreamed of marrying Antinius in exchange for her freedom, binding him to her for a lifetime. But it didn’t happen.

When Antinius’s case file came before the Governor of Germanicia, he was initially taken aback. He glanced at the file again and pondered for a while, as it contained a critical case. On one side was Dorkon, the new commander of Azgit Castle, who had massively increased the road taxes in his region; on the other side was a nameless, pitiful mosaicist. After picking up his pen and contemplating what to write, an idea struck him. He wrote the following note on the file addressed to the court:

“Since the person depicted in the mosaics without permission is Commander Dorkon’s wife, Maria, the sentence for the defendant should be determined by Maria, the victim of this case.”

Maria loved only one person, for whom she would give her life—Antinius—but she believed him to be dead. She couldn’t comprehend who had carved her likeness into the mosaics or why he had embarked on such an adventure. In

order to find a way out of the situation and avoid further blame from her husband, when the governor's decision was conveyed to her, Maria looked directly into Dorkon's eyes and, without hesitation, said:

"Let him be killed!"

*He had seen her beautiful face
one last time...*

Chapter XXXIV

A.D. 521

Town Square of Germanicia

The town square of Germanicia was more bustling than ever. As the hours went by, the crowd spilling into the side streets was immense. Each person gathered there was saying something:

“These people don’t come easily!”

“The end of an artist shouldn’t be like this!”

“They called him the future Master Arkas!”

There were also those who viewed the situation from a different perspective:

“Who told you to carve the commander’s wife’s likeness?”

Another one said:

“So what if he did? He hasn’t even seen the girl...”

“I can’t believe such a coincidence!”

Another resident of Germanicia said:

“The man copied everything, even the comb clip in her hair and the bracelet on her arm. I think there’s something more to this.”

“Could that really be true?”

"If that were not the case, why would they cut off his head?"

"I think the commander will forgive him at the last moment!"

"They call Dorkon cruel and merciless."

"Don't worry, everything will be clear soon."

The crowd in the square was all thinking and saying the same things. A young man who had climbed a tree to get a better view began to shout excitedly:

"They're bringing him! They're bringing him!"

Thousands of people suddenly turned towards the courthouse.

Everyone knew Antinius as Master Arkas's apprentice; he had been taken from the town dungeon to the courthouse for execution. He was placed in a dark, moldy room where other prisoners were also held.

As the eerie silence of the dungeon was shattered by the grating creaks of the rusty iron doors, several large, grim-faced men entered. An experienced old prisoner there remarked:

"These are the executioners!"

As Antinius sat there, exhausted, the person who appeared to be the head guard approached him. In his usual deep voice, he said:

"Time's up, we're leaving!"

Antinius didn't hesitate at all. He got up nonchalantly:

"Where to?"

The guard repeated the words he said to every death row inmate:

"Do you want a priest?"

“Why?”

“He’ll hear your confessions! You’re going to face him soon!”

Antinius waved his hand dismissively, as if to say, “Forget it.” The guard, with the same nonchalance, said:

“Let me make the offer...”

The executioner read the death sentence to Antinius, just as he did for every death row inmate. The order was written as having been given by Maria. To confirm this, Antinius took a deep breath and asked the guard:

“Did Maria really want my death?”

“It seems so...”

Antinius thought to himself, “So she didn’t recognize me.”

Despite knowing he would die soon, there was neither fear nor sadness on Antinius’s face. The guard spoke:

“Maria will watch your death too.”

Even though these words pierced Antinius’s heart like a dagger, the thought of seeing her one last time made him:

“Then, let’s go.”

The guard turned to the execution team beside him and said:

“This man is insane. He’s about to die, and there’s no sign of fear on his face. It’s as if he’s going to a wedding. What is this?”

One of the older prisoners waiting to appear in court spoke up:

“Lovers are fearless, guard!”

The head guard:

“These are delicate matters; I can’t comprehend them!”

One of the executioners interjected:

"It's better that he isn't afraid; it makes our job easier."

The head guard turned to the guard and said:

"Take his belongings!"

The guards searched Antinius's clothes thoroughly. They put what they found in a bag. The guard allusively said to Antinius:

"Do you hear the sounds outside?"

"Yes."

"All of Germanicia is in the square..."

"Why have they gathered?"

The guard chuckled and said:

"Why else? To plead for the commander's mercy and save you from death."

Antinius felt a surge of emotion for a moment, and simply said:

"Fate..."

Seeing Antinius's composure and determination, the guard could no longer hold back:

"So many lives have been taken in this square, and I must admit, I've never seen anyone as brave as you. Now, say your goodbyes to your friends; let's not keep the commander waiting."

Antinius seemed to be going to a wedding rather than facing death. He was led through narrow corridors that twisted like a labyrinth. He climbed the stone steps leading to the square in one swift motion.

When the young man in the tree saw them, he shouted, "They're bringing him! They're bringing him!"

With his hands tied behind his back, Antinius was brought up to the platform in the square, flanked by guards, his head held high. Despite seeing the execution block at the

center of the stage, he still maintained his composure.

Death sentences were carried out in the busiest square of the city to serve as a lesson to the public. When the people of Germanicia learned that the apprentice of Master Arkas was to be executed, they arrived at the town square early.

No one in the crowd could bear the thought of a young mosaic artist being executed for a mere painting. The people chanted "Forgive him, Commander! Forgive him, Commander!" in hopes of swaying Azgit Castle Commander Dorkon and his wife Maria to show mercy.

Everyone's eyes were fixed on the marble balcony of the courthouse overlooking the square. First, Commander Dorkon appeared in his ornate uniform. Following him was his wife Maria, wearing her famous wedding gown. They proudly began to greet the crowd in the square. Dorkon, not receiving enough attention from the people, didn't prolong the greeting. He completely ignored the crowd's cries of, "Forgive him, commander, forgive him!"

Antinius was brought to the execution block in the center of the platform. He stared blankly at the block for a moment. Seeing the dried bloodstains of those who had been killed before him sent a deep shiver through him. Unable to bear looking any longer, he lifted his head and gazed around, when suddenly... he locked eyes with Maria on the balcony of the courthouse. In that glance, he felt neither fear nor dread. His heart began to beat like the fluttering of a baby bird. He took a deep breath. The name that had never left his thoughts spilled from his lips:

"Maria Maria, Maria..."

The guards took a few steps back. It was now the turn of the uglyfaced executioner, standing with his sword at the ready. For him, beheading was just another routine task.

The executioner glanced from his victim to the com-

mander and his wife watching from the balcony. The crowd remained relentless, shouting with all their might:

“Forgive him, commander! Forgive him, commander!” they continued to shout, filling the square with their cries.

The executioner hoped to delay things in case there might be a change of heart. However, Commander Dorkon showed no signs of reconsidering. Beside him, Maria could hardly contain herself and urgently wanted him to be killed. Turning to her husband, she said:

“What is he waiting for?”

Dorkon, proudly:

“That sword will not cut without my signal!”

“Then give the signal!”

“My dear wife, be patient. I want him to feel the fear of death in his very bones.”

The executioner turned to his victim and said:

“Come closer, time is up!”

Antinius had no objection. He approached the block, slowly knelt down, and began to wait.

The executioner:

“Stretch your neck out fully!”

Antinius’s hands were tied behind his back. He didn’t know how to position his head. Seeing his hesitation, the executioner said:

“On your left ear.”

Antinius, as he stretched his neck out as the executioner had instructed, Maria was left behind. He raised his head again to look at Maria. He thought to himself, “I wish I could have given my life while gazing into Maria’s eyes.” He looked at the executioner with eyes full of compassion:

“Would it be okay if I laid my head to the right?”

The executioner did not understand why Antinius wanted such a thing. He did not want to deny his final wish:

“It really doesn’t matter to me.”

Seeing Antinius’s calmness, the executioner leaned toward the guard and whispered:

“What exactly was this young man’s crime?”

The guard didn’t go into detail:

“I guess he’s in love,” he said.

The executioner paused for a moment, as if rebelling against his task:

“Though I happily behead bandits, thieves, and murderers, I just can’t bring myself to do this to someone like him.”

As the executioner spoke, he was also straightening the head he was about to sever. Unable to withstand his victim’s calm demeanor any longer, he felt compelled to make a small gesture:

“Your beard is quite thick; let me place it under your head so that you don’t feel pain when I strike with the sword!”

He knew that what he was doing wouldn’t matter, but the words had slipped out nonetheless.

When Antinius rested his head on his pitchblack beard, it felt as if he had laid it on a soft pillow. From there, he gazed at Maria with his sunken, weary eyes in such a way that...

Commander Dorkon suddenly raised his right fist with his thumb up.

With this gesture, a great murmur rose around them. The people filling Germanicia Square knew all too well that when that thumb turned downward, the executioner’s sword would strike Antinius’s neck at the same moment.

While all this was happening in the square, Master Arkas leaned against the stone walls of his old church across

the way, watching the unfolding events with deep reflection.

Master Arkas had never felt such sorrow in his life. He couldn't hold back the words spilling from his heart:

"Oh, my child, didn't I tell you not to get involved in such things? Look what has happened to you at such a young age. I had taught you all the secrets of my craft so you could take my place after me. What can I say, it's fate... You will leave this world before me. I loved you like a son. I know you are innocent."

Ignoring the pearls that fell from his beard, Master Arkas, like the others in the square, gazed at the raised fist on the opposite balcony.

While everyone was focused on the commander, a guard suddenly appeared on Maria's balcony. Since one of Dorkon's arms was raised, the guard extended the bag not to the commander, but to Maria:

"From the condemned!" he said, and hurriedly turned to leave.

Dorkon glanced at Maria, indicating the package and saying:

"Go ahead, open it!"

Maria opened the bag with trembling hands, her curiosity piqued. As soon as she saw what was inside, she exclaimed angrily:

"Thief!"

Dorkon, astonished, said:

"Thief?"

"He stole my bracelet!"

Dorkon stood like a statue with his fist raised, while simultaneously speaking to his wife:

"Your bracelet is on your arm!" he said.

Maria glanced at her wrist. The bracelet was indeed on her arm. In a panic, she picked up the one from the bag and saw that it was identical to the one on her wrist:

Maria looked intently at Arkas's apprentice, who awaited his death. Suddenly, her hands began to tremble at what she saw. She felt a warm sensation flowing from the depths of her soul to her heart. Her heart raced so fast it felt like it would leap from her chest. She quickly brought her hand to her heart, gripping the arrowhead necklace she never took off so tightly that...

She had accused Antinius of being a thief, but now she looked at him with eyes full of compassion. She thought to herself, "Antinius, what have you fallen into!" She was so overwhelmed with emotion that she didn't know what to do. Glancing again at her husband's raised fist, she was terrified he would bring it down. Her heart raced even faster.

She remembered the day she first met Antinius, how he saved her life from a wild boar at the cost of his own. She recalled his words, "A life's worth can only be paid with a life!" She thought to herself, "Now is the time to pay that price!" She began searching for ways to save him. Turning to her husband, she said:

"Look, everyone is counting on your mercy."

Dorkon, with pride, replied:

"If we forgive everyone who asks for mercy, who will we show our strength to?"

"If you forgive him, you will earn even more respect from the people."

Dorkon, angrily replied:

"What are you saying, Maria! Just a moment ago you said 'kill him,' and now you want me to forgive him? I don't understand you!"

“Can’t you see that people are crying for him?”

The commander replied resolutely:

“Once the fist is raised, it does not come down!”

Maria felt helpless, like a ship’s captain caught in a storm at sea. She had not been able to convince her husband. Holding back her tears, she lamented inwardly, “How did I make such a mistake!” She was mourning so deeply that...

The executioner was waiting for a signal from Dorkon to bring down the sword he held aloft. As sunlight struck the sword, it gleamed like a mirror, casting reflections that illuminated Maria’s face like the brightness of day.

Antinius could now see Maria’s face more clearly. He looked at her with such love that he suddenly forgot everything he had experienced. He had seen her beautiful face one last time... For Antinius, death had become nothing more than a beautiful journey.

Dorkon glanced one last time at the crowd in the square. He locked eyes with the executioner and clenched his fist even more.

Master Arkas could no longer bear the scene unfolding before him. He retreated to a corner of the church. With the innocence of a child, he raised his head to the heavens and began to pray to God for Antinius with such fervor that...

The moment they had been anticipating had arrived. The sounds in the square suddenly fell silent as if cut by a knife. Some people were praying, others were crying, while some shut their eyes in fear. It felt as if even the slightest movement of a fly’s wing could be heard from afar.

As everyone held their breath in rapt attention, Maria suddenly wrapped her arms around Dorkon’s arm. In a daze, she exclaimed:

“Antinius, he is Antinius, you can’t kill him!” she began to shout.

With those words, lightning seemed to strike in Dorkon's mind. He turned sharply to Maria and, in a fit of anger, exclaimed:

"So he's not dead! I was right in my suspicions!"

Dorkon, with eyes filled with wrath, looked at Antinius, who awaited his death, and said:

"You've escaped the claws of the lions, but now you won't escape from me!"

Maria had risked everything. Through her sobs, she kept pleading with her husband:

"No, no! Forgive him. He is innocent!"

With Maria's heartfelt and compassionate pleas, the crowd in the square was stirred into a frenzy. They began to shout in unison, "Show mercy! Show mercy! Show mercy!"

As the cries of thousands echoed through the skies, they failed to sway Commander Dorkon even slightly toward mercy. With each shout of "Mercy! Mercy! Mercy!", his hatred only intensified.

His free hand moved toward his sword. To Maria, he said:

"I must kill you first!"

However, he changed his mind. He wanted her to witness Antinius's death with her own eyes. In this way, he would have further satisfied his savage emotions.

The crowd's cries of "Mercy! Mercy!" softened the executioner's stone heart and made his hand tremble, yet they did not even make Dorkon flinch.

Dorkon, finally consumed by all his hatred, made his decision. He clenched his fist and teeth. Locking eyes with the executioner one last time, he was about to turn his thumb downward to signal "Kill!" when a deep murmur swept through the crowd...

Suddenly, the skies over Germanicia were enveloped in a reddish dust cloud. The square began to shake like a cradle, and people moved back and forth like wheat fields caught in the wind. At first, everyone thought they were dizzy. Then, with a deafening roar that seemed to tear at their ears, marble columns began toppling onto each other. Desperate screams echoed in the sky. The area was thick with dust, and making it hard to see. The crowd, bewildered, ran in all directions; some clung to their loved ones and wept, while others searched for a place to hide. It was as if the apocalypse had come, and a struggle for survival was underway.

A dreamlike city where enigmatic lives and legendary romances of its artistic people are brought together through elegant art and depicted in colorful mosaics...

The Great Germanicia Earthquake, which would bury this mysterious city with its enchanting beauties and magical secrets deep into the earth for centuries, had begun with all its fury.

Serap came back to reality with the turbulence of the plane. She noticed that the photograph of the "Beauty of Germanicia" she held tightly had crumpled. Looking out the window, she realized she had arrived over the skies of Istanbul.

She stared longingly at the empty seat beside her, thinking of Metin. His absence left her with a bittersweet feeling, but the peace of having awakened the Beauty of Germanicia from its centuriesold slumber filled the emptiness in her soul.

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