

GHANI JAMALZADE

In 15 Volumes

Volume V

NOVEL

“THE LAST BATTLE OF CYAXARES”

**Haji Ghani Jamalzadeh. *THE LAST BATTLE OF CYAXARES*  
(novel). Volume V**

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The novel *THE LAST Battle OF CYAXARES*, included in the fifth volume of the writer's selected works, was published in 2021. This time, the author turns to an ancient and majestic period of our history—the Median era. The novel portrays the vivid image of the great king Cyaxares, who ruled for forty years, highlighting his victories and offering extensive information about the tactics of the Median army and Zoroastrianism.

Karl Marx wrote the following about the ancient Median ruler:

"Commander Cyaxares is one of the prominent figures of antiquity and will go down in history as the founder of cavalry forces."

The novel also features a depiction of Astyages, heir to the throne and future ruler of the country. It is precisely due to his

incompetence that the Median Empire will eventually fall.

We invite readers to explore and learn about our ancient history.

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# FROM THE AUTHOR



In the novel *THE LAST BATTLE OF CYAXARES*, I have portrayed an ancient and honorable period of our history—the rise of the Median Empire. The great king Cyaxares, who ruled for forty years B.C., brought an end, in 486 B.C., to the twenty-eight-year existence of the Scythian kingdom established on the Mughan plain. He destroyed a portion of the Scythians and drove the rest northward, back through the Narrow Pass (present-day Derbent) to the lands from which they had come.

The novel had long been completed, but I was hesitant to publish it. The fact that our lands were still under Armenian occupation held me back.

Soon, this obstacle was removed as well. President Ilham Aliyev dealt with the enemy as King Cyaxares once did. In forty-four days, he ended the twenty-eight-year-long occupation and drove the Armenians out of our lands.

Truly, history loves repetition. Glory to both rulers.

# UNEXPECTED GUESTS OF THE CAPITAL



**I**t was the winter of 586 B.C. Dusk had already fallen, torches were lit, yet the moon, rising high in the sky, illuminated the surroundings even better. It was the hour when the gates of the city of Ecbatana were being closed—no one else was being allowed in. By order of the chief guard, the spear-wielding sentinels were pushing back travelers who still hoped to enter, while slaves helped close the heavy gates. The chief of the guard spotted a tall young priest among the crowd pushing forward. From his belt hung a fire container, and a begging bowl was slung over his shoulder. His shaved head gleamed under the torchlight, and he wore a thick brown robe.

The chief guard shouted:

— Hey, infidels! Make way for the great Hormuzd's mobed!

The crowd parted. The priest stepped forward and slipped into the city through the half-open gate, quickly disappearing into the twilight.

Just then, another figure arrived—a cavalry soldier. He tried to push through the crowd gathered in front of the gate. But no one paid attention to his cries of “Make way!”

From his bronze helmet, it was clear he held the rank of *tenman* (onbaşı). Constant wars meant that his arrival didn’t surprise anyone. People were used to seeing armed men at all hours. So no one was inclined to move aside for him—everyone was caught up in their own urgency, desperate to get into the city.

The soldier’s foaming horse had been suddenly reined in and was now gnawing at its bit in protest, shaking its head angrily, splashing sweat from its mane under the torchlight. The large stallion’s chest rose and fell like bellows, and the steam from its nostrils melted into vapor in the cold air.

The guards, wielding long spears, pushed back the pressing crowd—beggars, vagabonds, prostitutes, and drifters—all trying to slip through. Seeing the new arrival in the dim light, the chief guard again shouted:

— Medians, let our brother the tenman through!

Only then did the people reluctantly part, letting the soldier pass. The number of royal seals stamped on his bronze helmet

indicated that this warrior had taken part in five battles. His leather coat, worn over woolen armor, was old and weathered, torn in several places. Though his eyes radiated resolve, his face was darkened by the cold. His felt trousers were tucked into muddy socks and tightly bound with leather straps. Yet despite his rugged appearance, the bronze hilt of his sword, the bronze tip of his long spear, and the helmet pressed low over his brow all gleamed—showing that while the old soldier neglected his clothing, he guarded his weapons like his life.

The city of Ecbatana, built on the foothills of Mount Bikini (an ancient name for modern-day Mount Alvand in Iran), was surrounded by seven fortress walls, each painted a different color and nested within one another. The sprawling city pulled everyone toward it like a magnet. It was as if the Median king's subjects saw the capital in their dreams—people from every corner of the land streamed toward it.

The chief guard urged the tenman forward:

- Move quickly, soldier! But he couldn't hide his curiosity.
- Where are you coming from?

The tenman decided to indulge him:

- From the banks of the Halys River!

The chief whistled knowingly:

— Oh-ho! Tell me, soldier, how long will this war last? Isn't His Majesty the King planning to end it?

The tenman gave a vague answer:

— Not much longer!

But the other pressed on:

— What's the matter, can mighty Media not defeat little Lydia? Will this war drag on for three years more?

— Don't worry. Soon, all of Media will hear news of victory! — the tenman replied as he passed through the guard lines. Then he asked in return: — Why aren't you letting people into the city?

The chief guard replied reluctantly:

— It's Crown Prince Astyages' order. Only respectable folk are allowed in. Now move along, soldier.

But the tenman didn't move on. He leaned forward from his saddle and pulled a golden tablet from his coat, waving it in front of the guards.

— Call your commander! — he ordered.

The guard immediately understood that this was an important person. Not everyone carried a golden decree of the king.

The older commander quickly approached, examined the tablet, listened to the soldier, and respectfully bowed:

— Sir, your orders will be fulfilled! Horses will be sent at once to fetch your companions. Where are they?

The horseman answered quietly, satisfied:

— Two of them are one “tree” away from Ecbatana on the Babylon road; the other three are five trees away.

*(Note: 1 "tree" = 15 km)*

As the tenman prepared to move, the commander added respectfully:

— Sir, the streets are dark. I'll assign a torchbearer to escort you!

The tenman did not decline the offer and nodded his agreement. Then he moved off without delay. As soon as he cleared the fortress gates, he tapped his horse with his whip. The stallion, having rested for a few minutes, sprang forward, galloping after the torchbearer ahead.

Though bathed in moonlight, the city wasn't asleep yet, but night had driven most from the streets. In truth, the people of Ecbatana were used to armed cavalry patrols and soldiers roaming the streets. In the Median Empire, soldiers—like priests—held vast authority. At the sound of hooves, citizens would immediately press themselves against the walls in fear, making way without question.

The city center was still several *farsakhs* away. (*Note: 1 farsakh = 4.5 km*) The tenman didn't spare his mount, whipping it mercilessly in his haste. The journey had exhausted him so completely that, when he finally dismounted in front of the massive palace beyond the silver fortress walls, his legs gave out and he stumbled.

No longer in need of the escort, he dismissed the torchbearer with a wave of his hand.

## **Darasp**

After moving quickly away from the fortress gates, the priest soon had to slow his pace. He found a dry spot near a protruding section of the fortress wall and sat down. The hilly mountain roads stretching from Parsargadae to Ecbatana and the harsh winter cold had completely worn him out—his legs

no longer obeyed him. But he didn't rest for long. Once he'd caught his breath, he continued toward the temple, where the bonfires cast their flames into the dark sky.

The streets, used for draining the city's waste, were muddy, and it was hard to distinguish the path in the gloom. The priest trudged through the slush, step by step, until he reached his destination. Near the fire temple, behind a stack of firewood, an old woodcutter living in a small hut was chopping wood by torchlight. He wasn't surprised by the unexpected visitor.

— What news from your home, Parsargadae, brother Darasp? How are things there? — he asked.

The hut's owner was a native Persian and served as the fire temple's woodcutter. This was not unusual—most of those working in temples in Media were Persians. The woodcutter wasn't a simple man—he was one of Darasp's trusted allies. His son, Zukray, held influence in the royal court, which greatly aided Darasp in his affairs.

Darasp answered reluctantly:

— Parsargadae is still standing, sister. But it hasn't recovered since the last rebellion.

— But that priest's robe suits you well, brother Darasp, — the woodcutter teased. — You really shouldn't have given up the priesthood.

Darasp, of course, wasn't a priest. He was the head of King Cambyzes' agents in Media. This wasn't the time for jokes. He made a polite request:

— We'll talk about that later. Right now I need a place to sleep. I'm exhausted—and I've caught a chill.

The woodcutter asked:

— Why not go to Father Saccam's house? His place is more comfortable...

Darasp sniffled.

— I don't want to disturb old Saccam at this hour.

The woodcutter thought for a moment, then said:

— All right, you can stay in my hut. I have to haul firewood to the temple's bonfires anyway. I gave my assistant the night off—he'll be back at sunrise.

# CHIEF SPY TƏTÜR ATXA



The tenman allowed himself to be handed over to the lantern-bearing servants who rushed to meet him. With their help, he shed his heavy armor and weapons and went straight to the bathhouse. In truth, this tenman was no ordinary soldier—he was Tətür Atxa, the mighty Chief of Intelligence of the Median Empire.

He had come from the military camp on the banks of the Halys River. He had covered the two hundred *farsakhs* (about 900 km) to the capital in ten days, riding his horse without mercy, showing no pity for himself or those under his command. He hadn't waited for the ones who fell behind, utterly exhausted. Though he was nearly sixty years old, he had borne the hardships of the journey like a young man, not hesitating to put his own health at risk.

After washing off the dirt of the road and relaxing in the hot pool long enough for a brief doze, Tətür Atxa felt revived. He climbed out, dried off, and changed from his soldier's

uniform into the rough robe of a priest. Then, turning to his assistant waiting in the corridor, he commanded:

— I must hasten to His Highness the Crown Prince. Tell me only what's urgent. Leave the state of the satrapies and news of the provinces for later. I'm only interested in what's happening in the capital—in the palace. Be quick!

Tətür Atxa had devoted his entire life, knowledge, skill—in short, his very blood and soul—to the Median Empire. He disliked grandeur and preferred to move among the people dressed as an ordinary soldier, a priest, or a carefree city dweller. He enjoyed traveling the kingdom in disguise. He had no other concern in life beyond serving the state. Though he had married twice, neither wife had borne him a child.

Once, King Cyaxares had advised him to marry again:

“Brother, with the help of the Great Hormuzd, perhaps your third attempt will bring you a child.”

Tətür Atxa had smiled and replied:

“My crowned brother, Great Khan, I can barely tolerate the whims of two wives—if I take a third, I might lose my mind!”

The king, who himself had three wives and countless concubines in his harem, teased him:

“So I see you're not planning to follow my example?”

Tətür Atxa had pressed his forehead to the carpet before the throne and said:

“I am amazed by the Great Khan’s endurance! But I have no intention of walking his path.”

The king had asked playfully:

“Why not?”

Tətür replied:

“My crowned brother, Great Khan, I haven’t tired of life yet—I still want to live!”

The king, amused by the jest, did not insist further.

There was nothing strange in calling the king “brother”—they were truly milk-brothers. Sixty years earlier, royal physicians had chosen the healthy fifteen-year-old wife of the priest Atxa—Mataxa—to nurse the newborn Cyaxares. And so, Tətür’s acquaintance with his royal brother had begun from the cradle. The bond of shared milk had tied them together so

tightly that even the storms of life had not managed to part them.

Tötür Atxa cut off his assistant, who was unloading all the capital's news:

— Are the princes getting along?

The assistant smiled faintly:

— It's hard to say, Your Excellency. All I can tell you is that for the past month, Prince Astyages' armed guards have kept Prince Urra's palace, and that of Lady Agniya, under siege.

Tötür Atxa raised his hand:

— That's enough! — Then he briefly relayed what had happened on his journey and added — Take care of the men left behind on the road. The fortress guards cannot be trusted too much.

He had not expected the conflict between the two princes to escalate to this point. But when King Cyaxares, engrossed in the war with Lydia, entrusted the governance of the kingdom to Crown Prince Astyages, he had not concealed his doubts:

“The princes will not get along.”

Cyaxares, who had hoped his sons would learn to work together, did not change his decision:

“Let them take example from us.”

Everything unfolded exactly as the Chief Spy had predicted—the princes did not get along. But the king, initially indifferent to their quarrels, was content to hear weekly reports brought by the spies from the capital. When the covert squabbling turned into open hostility, Tətür Atxa could no longer stay silent and cautiously voiced his concern:

“Surely the Great Khan does not want a fratricidal war?”

But Cyaxares had replied:

“Tətür, you know: without conflict, there is no strength! Let the princes quarrel. My heir must prove himself capable of holding the throne.”

Only when the situation got out of hand did the king finally intervene:

“Tətür, go to the capital. Knock some sense into my foolish sons and, as we agreed, prepare Prince Urta for the Mughan campaign.”

# TƏTÜR ATXA AT THE HEİR'S RESIDENCE



**B**ehind the golden fortress walls, hundreds of torches burned, illuminating the royal palaces that shimmered in the darkness of night. The residence of Crown Prince Astyages, who was fond of luxury, shone the brightest and most lavishly of all. When Tətür Atxa, having left his armed spies at the gate, attempted to enter, he encountered two unknown men exiting. Their massive build, stern faces, and fur garments clearly showed they were not from the capital.

Astyages greeted Tətür Atxa with genuine joy, to which Tətür responded with a slight bow. Inside, aside from the commander of the prince's cavalry guards, Zukray, and Shaum the High Priest of the White Temple—deputy to the Supreme High Priest—there were also two or three jesters and a snake charmer. In the center of the room, a large clay jug held a viper that rose and fell as if dancing to the tunes of the charmer's flute. Around the jug, the jesters leaped and clowned about.

One of them seemed intent on touching the snake's head. Tətür Atxa, after exchanging greetings with the prince, took a seat.

— Who were Your Highness's guests? — he asked.

Still watching the fearless jester, quicker than the snake, with delight, the prince replied:

— Well done, Motul! — Then, answering Tətür's question — They came from Peshtesar. Tribal chiefs. Brave men who blocked the southern advance of the Scythians. Shaum says that if it weren't for their resistance, the Scythian king Işpak would've already taken over the entire satrapy of Tarmakiz.

The moment Tətür Atxa realized who the guests were, he glanced sideways at the priest seated near the prince's throne. Visitors from Peshtesar could have only gained access to the court through his mediation.

— What do they want? — Tətür asked.

The prince didn't respond directly but instead posed a question of his own:

— What do you think, uncle—is it time to drive the Scythians out of Mughan?

The prince loved and trusted Tətür Atxa deeply, calling him *mamu*, meaning uncle. He had been attached to him since childhood. Now, noticing a shift in his uncle's expression, he turned to Shaum for support.

— Master, am I wrong?

Shaum, the Avesta instructor of the prince, was a respected figure in the court. Avoiding Tətür Atxa's gaze, he answered the prince:

— Of course it is time, Your Highness. When I roamed the Scythian steppes last summer, war was raging everywhere. The Scythian kings were fighting among themselves. Their forces are scattered and distracted. If the Median army attacks Mughan now, King Işpak's forces will be defeated easily. I believe no help will come to him from the north.

Commander Zukray thumped his chest:

— If Your Highness commands, I will drive the Scythians from Mughan with my guards by tomorrow!

Tətür Atxa suppressed his anger:

— First, you must know that His Majesty the King has other views! King Işpak is our ally—our kin. — Then he turned on

the priest sharply — You shaved-headed meddler! Your job is to worship the great Hormuzd, not dabble in politics. Stick your nose everywhere, and you'll lose it! Don't lead the prince astray!

Shaum, originally from Mughan, was known for his unwavering hatred of the Scythian kingdom. His repeated visits to the sacred city of Shiz had not gone unnoticed by the chief spy. But Tətür had not intervened—yet. He knew that as a subordinate of the Supreme High Priest Amitaxah, Shaum's travels to Tarmakiz were only part of a larger mission. Fluent in Scythian languages, Shaum could easily move through Mughan disguised as a beggar and even cross the Narrow Pass to roam the Scythian steppes. After sharing the intelligence he gathered with Amitaxah, he would not forget to report to Tətür Atxa as well.

After Tətür's scolding, all three—Shaum, Zukray, and the prince—lowered their heads. Astyages's narrow brow furrowed. Tətür offered a suggestion:

— It would be best to dismiss the jesters. I have confidential matters to discuss. The Great Khan has sent me on an urgent mission.

Once the jesters and the snake charmer left the room, the prince asked reluctantly:

— Is my *atashgah* displeased with me, uncle?

(Astyages referred to his father as *atashgah*, meaning “temple of fire,” a term of reverence.)

Tətür Atxa did not hide the truth:

— Yes, the Great Khan is very displeased! Frankly, Your Highness’s antics have angered the king. You are not treating your brother justly.

— He doesn't listen to me, uncle, — Astyages tried to justify himself. — Do you even know what a little serpent that Prince Urra is?

Tətür raised his hand:

— I don’t want to hear it! Immediately withdraw the guards surrounding the prince’s palace and summon him here. The Great Khan has a secret mission for him.

Before his father’s decision, the prince backed down. At his signal, Commander Zukray rushed out of the room. Then Tətür Atxa began to explain the details of his mission.

# DARASP'S LIFE



Darasp did not leave the warmth of the woodcutter's hut for an entire week. The cold from the road had settled deep in his bones. Burning with fever, he couldn't fully recover—but he endured the hardship with quiet resilience.

His family lived in a village near the city of Parsargadae, surviving on the income from a small plot of land. Though distant kinship with the Persian kings brought them no material wealth, it did grant some privileges. Any Achaemenid descendant could become a priest, a soldier, or a court official. They were considered among the chosen—*the Aryans*. His father had wanted fourteen-year-old Darasp to become a priest. He took him to the fire temple in Parsargadae. With the recommendation of the elderly High Mobed, himself of Achaemenid descent, the boy was accepted as a novice fire-keeper.

Darasp quickly excelled. His memory was so sharp that he could easily memorize the chants sung by the chief priest during

ceremonies and recite them flawlessly. In less than two years, he became an indispensable figure in the temple.

To rise to the priesthood, however, he needed to study in the distant city of Shiz. But Darasp had fallen in love—and had no desire to leave. He avoided the High Mobed and his own parents, who tried to convince him. Each day, as soon as the temple ceremonies ended, he would journey back from the city to the village and run straight to the date grove. He couldn't sleep without seeing Kijø. She wasn't even twelve yet, but her beauty was the talk of the town.

Kijø's father was a sturdy farmer who made a living through daily labor. He would have gladly given his daughter to the child of such a respected family.

Their houses stood close together, separated only by a small narrow stream. Kijø spent her days playing with Darasp's little sisters. Sometimes she would get so caught up in play that she'd forget to go home. When night fell, she would start begging Darasp:

— Walk me home, I'm scared to go alone!

Often, to keep her feet from getting wet, Darasp would lift her onto his shoulders and carry her across the stream.

One day, Kijə said:

— Darasp, you have a fever today—your neck and shoulders are burning hot, like you've come straight out of an oven! You're burning my legs.

Darasp couldn't find words to reply. Had it been daylight, Kijə would've seen how flushed his shaved head and thick neck had become.

Another day, as he was walking her home, the spring waters had swelled the narrow stream. The scent coming from the girl sitting on his shoulders overwhelmed him, and when he set her down on the bank, he couldn't help himself. He embraced her and covered her face with kisses. Startled by Darasp's sudden move, Kijə flailed, and the two of them lost their balance, falling into the stream together. As they emerged laughing and soaked from the cold water, the foundation of a genuine affection between them had quietly been laid.

Between pressure from his father and the High Mobed, Darasp eventually agreed to go to the city of Shiz. The time of parting came, and it weighed heavily on both lovers. Though Darasp tried to comfort Kijə, she was inconsolable. That

evening, he walked her to the stream, her eyes filled with tears. Feeling ashamed before her sorrowful gaze, he promised:

— I'll be back in five years—don't be sad.

But five years had not passed when a rebellion erupted in the satrapy of Pars, turning Darasp's life upside down. He left his studies in the sacred city of Shiz unfinished and rushed home in alarm. But there, he found neither his family nor his beloved. The Medians had razed their village—leveled it to the ground.

# DARASP'S HATRED



Only someone who had lost loved ones could understand the depth of Darasp's sorrow. For the first time, bitterness and rage against Media took root in his heart. The quiet, peace-loving priest disappeared, and in his place emerged a warrior ready for anything.

He learned from others that Median soldiers were selling looted goods at auction markets. He wandered from city to city, visiting every auction site he heard of. On the advice of fellow sufferers, he even searched through brothels and taverns. Still, he found no trace of his family or beloved. After a year of fruitless searching, he gave up and returned to Parsargadae.

There, he learned the full story from the High Mobed. It turned out the rebellion had begun without preparation. The emissary of King Cyaxares had referred to the Persian monarch merely as a "satrap of Pars." Everyone knew how proud King Cambyses was. Furious at being called a satrap, he had expelled the envoy from his court and, without consulting anyone, sent Persian troops against the Median peacekeepers.

In response, King Cyaxares's army invaded Pars and easily crushed the uprising. The slain king was replaced by his son, Cambyses, who had been held in Ecbatana as a hostage. To show trust, Cyaxares later even gave his daughter in marriage to the young king.

After hearing the full account from the High Mobed, Darasp spent a couple of days wandering through the city. The neighborhoods destroyed by Median forces were slowly coming back to life. Darasp returned to the High Mobed. The old man, with regret in his voice, said:

— I'm too old now. I had hoped to see you take my place as High Mobed. Without the endorsement of the Sacred Temple of Shiz, the Council of High Priests in Ecbatana won't confirm you. But I'll try—I'm sure Father Amitaxah will honor my word.

But Darasp had other plans:

— Holy Father, even if the priests of Ecbatana agree, I will no longer accept the rank of High Mobed. In the current state of my homeland, it would be shameful for me to withdraw into the comfort and safety of a temple cell.

— You are on the wrong path, my son! Opposing the Kingdom of Media, which was established with the blessing of the Great Hormuzd, is a sin. Our duty is worship, not rebellion. The altar we serve is the fire temple.

— The altar I serve is Pars, — Darasp replied firmly. — Holy Father, I can no longer be a Mobed. My faith is shattered.

Seeing the bloodthirsty fire in the young man's eyes, the High Mobed did not try to dissuade him further. He saw that Darasp had lost his way—but as an Achaemenid, he still offered his support. Through his connections, he arranged for Darasp to enter the royal service. More than his Achaemenid lineage, it was Darasp's education in the sacred city of Shiz and his mastery of the *Avesta* that secured his place.

# DEPUTY CHANCELLOR ӨRDӨM SEEKS REFUGE



**T**өтүр Atxa had finished his business in the capital and was preparing to depart. King Cyaxares had already dispatched a courier after him. He was to return immediately to the royal military camp on the banks of the Halys River—but a single day’s delay became inevitable.

He cast a cold glance at the imposing figure of Deputy Chancellor Өрдөм, who had taken refuge in his underground realm. Normally, the court elite kept their distance from Atxa, seeking his help only when absolutely necessary. His very appearance struck fear into everyone’s heart.

— Honorable Өрдөм, what brings you here? — he asked, adding immediately, — Keep in mind, I don’t have time. I must depart shortly. Be brief.

Өрдөм was visibly shaken. Standing, eyes wide, breath short, he nervously recounted what had happened and asked for help:

— Your Excellency, we must urgently find the thief who has been targeting the royal chancery archives. Several golden tablets have disappeared from the *lemeler*. They're highly valuable documents. — He motioned toward the door. — Come, Your Excellency, you should see it for yourself.

The urgency of the matter was clear. But the Chief Spy didn't move, keeping his icy gaze fixed on the deputy.

— Who do you suspect in the chancery?

— I trust my staff. I personally selected each of them. They are all from noble families.

Tötür Atxa asked:

— Are the documents in the chancery accounted for?

Ərdəm licked his dry lips:

— Your Excellency, I won't hide it—only the golden tablets are tracked. They're inspected weekly by the head scribe, against a checklist. But there are so many clay and bronze tablets, no inventory is kept.

Tötür Atxa asked calmly:

— Are the locks, doors, and walls of the archives intact?

— Yes, yes! — Ɔrdəm responded impatiently. — Your Excellency, this is a matter of state importance. If we don't act quickly, the trail will go cold.

But Tötür Atxa didn't flinch. Cutting him off, he said:

— Don't worry. The thief isn't far—he's in the chancery. There's no need to search elsewhere.

The deputy chancellor froze. He knew full well that the Chief Spy never spoke without certainty.

# THE LETTER THIEF



That very day, Tötür Atxa’s spies turned the royal chancery upside down. They questioned the scribes, the assistant scribes, the scribe messengers, the attendants, and the couriers one by one. Among the suspects, one scribe’s messenger stood out. He was promptly shackled.

Tötür Atxa’s underground headquarters had a terrifying reputation. Among palace officials, it was infamous. Only the most “distinguished” criminals were sent to those dungeons—ordinary offenders were locked up in filthy, overcrowded prisons elsewhere in the capital.

The suspicious messenger was dragged through the torture chambers and eventually thrown into a dimly lit cell. Though clearly shaken by what he had seen, the prisoner kept a bold front. He seemed like a tough man—even the sight of torture instruments didn’t faze him.

When Tötür Atxa entered the cell, the jailer was sweating in the torchlight as he tortured the man. The prisoner, despite his miserable condition, was refusing to confess.

The jailer rushed forward:

— Your Excellency, there's nothing left to try! — he declared. — Either this son of Ahriman talks, or he dies.

Tətür Atxa frowned. His subordinates, though cruel and ruthless, were never foolish. He scolded the jailer:

— Fool! I need him to talk, not to die!

The jailer wiped the sweat from his bloody hands:

— Your Excellency, what else can I do? The bastard's like a rock. Flogging has no effect. I branded him—he didn't flinch. Tore off his fingernails—he stayed silent.

Tətür thought for a moment and then gave instructions:

— A man who can endure pain must be reached through the heart. Tend to his wounds. Serve him wine spiked with poppy juice. Then bring him to me. And don't be stingy—let him drink as much as he wants.

Soon after, the scribe messenger was brought into the Chief Spy's chamber. He was so drunk he was almost unrecognizable. His whipped, swollen lips smacked as he giggled. Scratching at his branded chest, he eagerly answered questions, laughing

between responses. Tətür Atxa, satisfied with his approach, asked:

— What did you do with the stolen golden tablets?

— Ha-ha-ha! I sold them to a nobleman from Pars, my lord!  
Ha-ha-ha! I was desperate, my lord!

— How did you meet this nobleman from Pars?

— It happened like this—ha-ha-ha! I'm from Kij village, near Ecbatana. Our family was doing alright until last year when a flood swept everything away. Left us with nothing. I often visited home. Whatever pennies I earned, I gave to my family, but we couldn't escape poverty. One day, I met this nobleman from Pars on the road. As soon as he heard I worked in the royal chancery, he pulled a silver coin from his purse and forced it into my hand. I didn't want to take it, but he insisted. After that, he came to my lodging in Ecbatana regularly, always helping me without asking for anything in return. One day I asked how I could repay him. He said, "Bring me a few of those useless clay tablets." I asked, "What for?" He said he wanted to learn to read and write. Ha-ha-ha! Said he liked educated people. Then it turned to the silver and gold tablets...

Once Tətür Atxa confirmed the identity of the Pars nobleman—someone called “Dara”—he handed over the giggling, drunken traitor to the executioners. A traitor had no right to continue living.

He then instructed his assistant:

— Even if he’s hiding in the belly of the earth, you will find this Pars! — he ordered. — And once you do, bind his hands and feet, and send him under guard to the royal camp. I must interrogate him myself.

# DARASP LEARNS ABOUT URRA'S EXPEDITION



**D**arasp had only just recovered from his illness. Now he was able to move around again, leaning on walls as he walked. One day, the host entered with his son, Commander Zukray. After exchanging pleasantries, Zukray began to speak about events in the palace...

Listening intently, Darasp remarked with a trace of sarcasm:

— That's the kind of news you should've delivered immediately.

Zukray raised his hands:

— What can I do, *qunyaz*? Tötür Atxa loves secrecy. I only found out after Prince Urra had already set out for Mughan.

Darasp, doubtful:

— So it seems King Cyaxares has become helpless against Lydia and is seeking help from the Scythian king? Are you certain?

Zukray didn't just nod—he thumped his armored chest with a fist:

— Yes, Dara, the report is accurate. I can say with confidence that aside from my own regiment, there are no troops left in Media—they're all on the battlefield. — He rubbed his hands together. — If mighty Media is truly being humbled by little Lydia, then the time to act is now. If we make a move, Urartu and the Scythians will likely join us.

Sweat sparkled on Darasp's shaven scalp. He tried to suppress his agitation, shaking his head:

— No. Media is still strong. We cannot challenge them yet. Cyaxares still commands an army of a hundred thousand. And what do we have? What can we do with ten thousand men against the might of Media? — Then, with a bitter smile, he added: — It seems the lesson of the rebellion three years ago hasn't sunk in for the Persian clans.

Zukray looked embarrassed. The old woodcutter sided with the nobleman:

— Yes, son, Dara is right. We mustn't rush. Let us not forget our king whose head was paraded on a spear... — With that, he closed the subject. — No, it's not yet time for rebellion.

# TƏTÜR ATXA BEFORE THE KING



**K**ing Cyaxares welcomed Tətür Atxa in a tent at the royal camp on the banks of the Halys River—his return coming after a month and a half away. The king was in poor spirits. His favorite jester had mysteriously vanished, and despite ongoing searches, no trace had been found. No one could console the sorrowful monarch. His first words to the Chief Spy, dressed in travel attire, were:

— Brother, they couldn't find my jester.

Tətür Atxa tried to conceal his smile and bowed respectfully:

— I know, Great Khan. I share your sorrow—may this be the last loss.

Reading the unspoken thoughts behind Tətür's courteous expression, the king asked reproachfully:

— You've been gone two months. Where were you? What business did you have in the capital while the war raged on?

Then, to soften the rebuke, he added jokingly:

— You know I'm helpless without you...

Of course, Tətür Atxa hadn't been idle. He had reconciled the rival princes, reined in the crown prince's eccentric orders, and arranged Urra's mission to Mughan. He had even visited Lady Agniya multiple times to persuade her to allow her son to travel—fully understanding the fear of a mother whose child was being sent far away.

But Tətür didn't think it proper to justify himself with self-praise. With a guilty tone, he simply said:

— Great Khan, His Highness the Crown Prince would not release me.

The king responded indifferently: “Hmm,” and changed the subject:

— Tell me everything in detail.

Tətür Atxa gave a full account of his work in the capital and ended with:

— By my reckoning, Prince Urra should already be on his way back. Most likely, he will present himself to Your Majesty within the next day or so.

Seeing the king relax, Tətür hesitated briefly before adding:

— Great Khan, the crown prince wishes to join the war.

Tətür chose not to disclose every nuance. He didn't want to step between father and son. The mission given to Prince Urra had infuriated Astyages, who had been caught speaking recklessly about his father.

The king replied coldly:

— Let the crown prince stay in Ecbatana and learn to govern. When I lay my head to rest, the kingdom will be his to rule as he pleases. In short, war is a great science, not a jester's game.

Seeing a smile play across Tətür's face, the king grew curious:

— What's behind my brother's amusement?

The Chief Spy chuckled:

— The crown prince knows how much your jester's absence pains you. He's sent you the best of his own as a gift.

At Tətür's signal, servants ushered in a tiny creature:

— His name is Motul...

The jester's skin was ghostly pale, as if he had never seen sunlight. In a high-pitched voice, he chirped:

— The little world-conqueror greets the great world-conqueror!

Dressed exactly like the king, Motul's expression mimicked a royal bearing. His walk, his stance—all mirrored Cyaxares perfectly, instantly lifting the king's mood.

— The crown prince has foresight, no doubt! A fine gift, — he said, then joked: — Though he didn't send his best snake?

Everyone in the tent, knowing the prince's sense of humor, burst into laughter. Tötür was about to say something when loud noise erupted outside. The king frowned:

— Chancellor of the Realm, go see what that racket is. Who dares disturb our peace?

Bixur rose quickly and went outside.

# DARASP FINDS KIJƏ



When Father Səccam, who was leading the ceremony, spotted the young Persian nobleman Darasp among the pilgrims, dressed in a kahin's robe, he wasn't surprised—he had already heard of his arrival in Ecbatana. But what did surprise him was something else. Darasp had never come to such places in person before—he would always send his assistants. Seeing him appear in this temple, where the poor and outcasts of the city gathered, told Səccam that something serious had happened. He passed his duties to another priest and hurried over.

After a brief greeting, he asked:

— What happened?

Darasp didn't keep him waiting:

— For some reason, the crown prince has removed our friend Zukray from office and reassigned him to command a garrison on the Persian frontier. Since the reason is unclear, I came to tell you to be cautious.

Səccam, already aware of the news, replied indifferently:  
— I am always cautious.

Darasp didn't like his indifference. He frowned and said:  
— Fine. Go finish the ceremony. We'll speak afterward.

Səccam returned to the altar. Meanwhile, the nobleman sat and watched the dance of the fire maidens around the bonfire. The voices of the girls singing ceremonial hymns moved him to tears with their power. A soaring, vibrant refrain that seemed like the breath of Ahura Mazda earned the applause of everyone present.

The flight and circling of two birds, followed by their landing on the altar and chirping, enchanted the pilgrims.

— Praise be to the voice that glorifies Ahura Mazda!—  
Praise be to the miracle of Ahura Mazda!

After the song ended, and Səccam had returned and stood silently by his side, Darasp couldn't hide his admiration:

— Only an angel could possess such a voice!

Səccam chuckled:

— Not at all! The voice belongs to our Kandül. You could pour a whole bushel of millet over her head and not a single grain would fall—every seed would get stuck in her hair.

— Still, it wouldn't hurt to meet the owner of such a voice!

Səccam misunderstood his intent:

— Master, she's not for you! Her face is like a crow's nest,  
— he sighed. — Imagine, such a divine voice gifted by Ahura Mazda... and to *her*!

Darasp ignored the kahin's sarcastic tone, musing:

— When I studied in sacred Shiz, I witnessed something similar. A fire maiden named Vəçə used to sing like this—birds would throw themselves onto the altar during her songs. That same year, Prince Astyages had fallen ill, and the temples were preparing a sacrifice...

He fell silent before finishing the story.

— And? What happened next? — asked Səccam, intrigued.

— Then, the fire maiden fled the day before the sacrifice, —  
Darasp finished.

Səccam was stunned:

— You don't say! Did they ever find her?

— No one knows for sure. They say two days later, she was caught and burned alive as a criminal.

Darasp smiled, but before he could finish that thought, his smile froze on his face. He stepped forward, parting the crowd, unable to believe his eyes. There, in the third altar, among the girls in fire maiden garb—stood Kijə. Once certain, he was struck motionless, and sweat poured down from his shaven head like a stream.

# THE PRINCE BEFORE THE KING



Prince Urra's entourage arrived at the royal encampment on the banks of the Halys River around midday. The camp buzzed like a beehive—soldiers were busy preparing for lunch. The prince's escort, reinforced by a select regiment of Scythian cavalry, drew attention from all corners. Troops came out to watch, amazed by the splendor of the procession, and cheered the prince's guard with joy.

Urra dismounted at the base of a low hill in the center of the camp. There, he stationed his escort and attendants. The priest Şaum, who had shadowed the prince throughout the journey, now separated from him.

— Brother Möbid, remain at the temple. If needed, you'll be summoned, — he said, and without waiting for a reply, walked alone through the tight ranks of spear-bearing guards and climbed the slope to the inner circle of royal tents.

Approaching the magnificent royal pavilion, surrounded by dozens of tents, he was met by Bixur, the Chancellor of the Realm:

— Your Highness, welcome! — he greeted respectfully, then couldn't help but comment, — What a splendid display, Your Highness!

It turned out the Scythian cavalry had been sent by the prince's uncle, King Ishpak. Once Bixur had satisfied his curiosity, he escorted the much-anticipated guest to the royal tent.

Urra's arrival brightened the court. The jester Motul quickly disappeared behind the curtain dividing the great tent, knowing full well that Prince Urra loathed jesters and fools.

A trace of a smile flickered on the otherwise expressionless face of Tötür Atxa. The young prince, newly come of age, was as radiant and beautiful as a young maiden. Though he carried himself freely, his behavior stayed within the bounds of decorum.

He rushed toward the throne. King Cyaxares welcomed his beloved son with overwhelming joy and grandeur. Without rising, he embraced his son's bowed head, stroked his golden

hair, and for a moment forgot all his troubles. Then, he offered a seat beside him and asked eagerly:

— Well, tell me—how was your journey?

Urta was weary from the road but in high spirits. He wasted no time sharing the good news:

— My Atashgah, the Scythian forces are already en route!  
— he said, unable to resist boasting. — My royal uncle didn't let me down. He's sent a powerful cavalry detachment.

The king's anxiety faded. For years he'd struggled with the Gordian knot of Cappadocia, with no end in sight. Clearly, he had underestimated certain factors when initiating military operations—perhaps due to his age. Though Lydia was small, it had proven to be a formidable opponent. Now in the fourth year of conflict, the Lydians still resisted the great Median Empire, blocking Cyaxares's advance to the sea.

Finally, their strength had started to wane, and defeat seemed imminent by winter. But just then, the neighboring Kingdom of Cilicia abandoned its neutrality and sent military aid to Lydia—a well-equipped force with over twenty thousand cavalry. On top of that, the ruler of Pontus, alarmed by the

approaching Median army, joined in—backing Lydia with both gold and soldiers.

Everything had changed. With this support, Lydia now counterattacked and no longer hid behind its walls—it sought open battle.

Fearing isolation, the king halted offensive operations. Now he focused only on defense. He had already taken precautions—and now, with news of incoming reinforcements, a smile crept back onto his face. He looked proudly at Tötür Atxa:

— Is he not a praiseworthy son? — he asked. — Look what glad tidings he brings from Mughan!

Indeed, the king's fatherly pride was understandable. Compared to his other sons, Urra stood out. The dangerous expedition to Mughan had been worth it. Winning the respect of the mighty Median army and the admiration of the nobility was no small feat. The prince was methodically working to consolidate power. Even the phrase “my Atashgah,” originally coined by heir Astyages, sounded better when Urra used it.

Accepting the king's question as an invitation, the Chief Spy began speaking calmly. He first offered warm greetings to the prince, echoed the king's praises, then asked a critical question:

— Might King Ishpak break his word?

A shadow crossed the prince's face, but his answer was clear:

— Lord Tətür, my uncle is not one to break his word. He is a man of honor.

The subtle change in the prince's expression did not escape the spy's notice. It struck him as odd, and he resolved to look into it.

Then, the High Priest Amitaxah spoke:

— Your Highness, you've come a long way. How did you find the realm? Are the provinces and satrapies at peace?

Urta replied calmly and seriously:

— I won't take your time with all our troubles. Overall, I witnessed peace and obedience everywhere. Only in Urartu, when we passed the city of Tushpa, did we face difficulty. Our exhausted horses could not be replaced. They even ignored the royal decree engraved on golden tablets. They said they obey

only their own king, Rusa IV, and recognize no other. We had to buy new horses.

*(Tushpa was the ancient capital of Urartu, now in modern-day Diyarbakir, Turkey.)*

To ease travel for emissaries and messengers, the Median court issued golden plaques inscribed with royal decrees. Yet Urartu had shown blatant disregard.

The satrap scoffed:

— Apparently that fool Rusa of Urartu has regained courage after our temporary setbacks in the war!

The king cut him off:

— He won't remain the last Rusa for long. After I settle accounts with Alyattes II, Urartu will get what's coming. — Then, seeing the prince's tired eyes, he dismissed him kindly: — Go and rest. You've come a long way.

# THE REPORT OF PRIEST ŞAUM



**O**n the very day of his arrival, Priest Şaum was summoned to Tətür Atxa's tent to give a detailed report. The conversation took place in the presence of the High Priest of Mobeds. The Chief Spy had assigned the kahin to accompany the prince on his journey to Mughan at the recommendation of Amitaxah the High Priest.

Tətür Atxa was searching for the root of the suspicions growing in his heart. The detailed answers given by the priest didn't ease his concern. He kept repeating:

— Brother Möbid, are you sure you haven't forgotten anything?

The soft-natured Şaum finally lost his patience and addressed everyone:

— O Exalted Möbid, may I ask why His Excellency shows such mistrust in what I say? I have served the realm with loyalty, — he added firmly. — I haven't let a single step of the

prince escape my notice. I've only left him from the time he slept to the time he awoke.

— So you're saying the prince was unsupervised while asleep! — Tətür Atxa said, drawing out his words with feigned indifference. — You should not have left him alone in bed! I told you so, didn't I?

Priest Şaum responded humbly:

— Had it been possible to remove Lady Aspaz from the prince's bed, I certainly would have, — he said.

There was a subtle note of irony in his submissive tone. A faint smile touched the priest's weathered, wind-chapped face, but he showed no sign of resentment. He fully understood the importance of the questioning and took no offense.

Aspaz was the prince's lover. Upon returning from the journey, she had immediately been sent back to Ecbatana. The king could not tolerate the presence of women in military camps. He always said women were the cause of all misfortunes—though whether he meant it seriously or in jest was unclear. No one dared ask.

High Priest Amitaxah stroked his white eyebrows, trying to rescue the kahin from Tötür Atxa's grip:

— Our brother must understand that His Excellency Tötür is only doing his duty, — he said. — I have a couple of questions for you myself.

At that, Tötür Atxa released the priest and yielded the floor to Amitaxah:

— Brother, I want to know—have the fire temples in Mughan been restored by King Ishpak? — he asked. — Has Lady Aqniya's request been fulfilled?

Şaum breathed a sigh of relief. He had risen to high rank at a young age and now, aware of the weight of every word, spoke slowly and deliberately:

— Exalted Möbid, the fire temples have indeed been restored. But there are no more fire-worshippers left to pray in them.

The High Priest sought clarification:

— Are you saying there's no population left in Mughan?

Şaum paused briefly, then got to the point:

— Exalted Möbid, part of the population has abandoned the faith, some have fled the province, and others have been massacred by the Scythians.

The High Priest again stroked his white brows and shifted the topic:

— Did you visit your native lands?

Şaum nodded:

— I did, Exalted Möbid, — he said, and then unexpectedly added with emotion, — The people live in misery. The Scythians take their last crumbs. Even the slaves fare better than the Medes.

As the conversation took a displeasing turn, Tətür Atxa felt compelled to end the meeting. The topic of the Scythians was taboo in the king's court—everyone avoided discussing it.

# SCYTHIAN CAVALRY ARRIVES TO HELP



**T**he promised reinforcements arrived only in mid-spring. A force of ten thousand Scythian cavalry, sent by King Ishpak, reached the camp under the command of the old general Atey. Their arrival and strategic positioning on a high hill at the edge of the forest caused panic in the Lydian camp. It was as if hens had seen a hawk. This reaction was not surprising—Scythians had a fearsome reputation as warriors from the Caucasus to the pyramids of Egypt. Whichever side they joined, that side always emerged victorious.

Observing through a telescope the enemy forces, who had been preparing to attack for days, now retreating hastily behind defensive fortifications, the shahanshah was pleased. He ordered a servant to cover the precious instrument—an object capable of magnifying distant scenes, gifted to the High Priest Amitaxah by Egyptian priests.

The shahanshah returned to his tent. During military campaigns, such gatherings with close advisors were called "war councils" (məsləhət-məşvərət); in peacetime, they were called "small councils." General Atey was seated with honor near the throne. After settling into his place, the shahanshah asked graciously:

— Prince, is our brother-king well?

General Atey placed a hand on his chest and replied:

— Your Majesty, our king sends his salutations to the exalted Khagan.

The shahanshah pressed:

— We expected your arrival at the beginning of spring. What caused the delay? Prince Urran, who returned from Mughan, said otherwise.

General Atey spoke quickly:

— Great Khagan, we were caught up in battle. After seeing off the prince, the army was to move toward the Halys River. Suddenly we received word that nomadic tribes were trying to breach the Dar Pass. We had to redirect all our forces there to block them.

— Were there really that many nomads? — the shahanshah asked, surprised. — Explain further.

— Great Khagan, their numbers were beyond counting—like a swarm of ants. You’d cut down the front ranks, and more would pour in from behind. But the war didn’t last long. We scattered them quickly and chased them back to the Scythian plain. That’s the main reason for our delay.

Chief spy Tötür Atxa, with the shahanshah’s permission, asked:

— Prince, are there other tribes living in the Scythian plain besides the Scythians?

General Atey cautiously answered:

— Of course, Your Majesty. Although all are referred to as Scythians, many different peoples inhabit the Scythian plain, — and he took the opportunity to praise his king. — It was King Ishpak who stood in their way, or they would have devastated Media.

High Priest Amitaxah was curious:

— Honorable general, is the Scythian plain a large territory?

Atey respectfully responded:

— I assure the Exalted High Priest that the Scythian plain is vast—many times larger than the Median kingdom. To cross it from end to end, one must ride six months without rest.

The shahanshah concluded:

— Yes, we believe the gates of Dar Pass are in trustworthy hands.

— Scythians do not take the Exalted Khagan's bread in vain! — Atey replied proudly.

The northern borders of the Median Empire were protected by the Scythians. This was part of an agreement made twenty-eight years prior. In return for their service, Media paid King Ishpak generously from its royal treasury. Bolstered by reinforcements from the north, the Scythians had established their own kingdom on the Mughan plain and were recognized as an independent state. Yet King Ishpak continued to participate as an ally in all of Media's military campaigns. Family ties also played a role: his sister, Lady Aqniya, was one of the shahanshah's consorts. Their son, Prince Urran, was admired for his beauty and intelligence by both monarchs.

The shahanshah frowned slightly at the general's boastful tone:

— Alright, Prince. Tell me—are your cavalry ready for battle?

As if expecting the question, Atey replied without hesitation:

— Great Khagan! The troops have come a long way—both men and horses are exhausted. With your permission, we'd like to rest for a day or two. After that, we'll be ready for battle. — Then he added with some hesitation, — Great Khagan, my soldiers have been on the road for fifteen days. They are asking for their wages.

From the moment a Scythian warrior departed for campaign on the order of the Median state, he was considered to be in the service of the shahanshah. The ruler did not object and ordered the chief treasurer Barrin:

— Double the monthly wage due to the Scythians. Give them half today, and the rest after the battle!

The shahanshah knew Prince Atey from the Assyrian war. While he was a brave leader, he had a tendency to act independently and often disregarded orders in the heat of battle. During the siege of Nineveh, Kiaksar had become so

enraged by Atey's recklessness that he had ordered his slaves to beat him with sticks.

Treasurer Barrin, placing a hand on his chest, expressed a hint of concern:

— Great Khagan, will doubling their wages not make the Scythians arrogant?

The shahanshah smiled without turning to look at him:

— I don't believe they will become arrogant, — he said, then commanded the general, — Prince, your troops must be ready for battle at any moment.

Overcome with enthusiasm at the shahanshah's generosity, Atey exclaimed:

— Give the order, Great Khagan! The Scythian army is ready to fight this very moment!

The shahanshah was pleased:

— That's even better, — he said. — If you have nothing more to say, you are dismissed.

General Atey sprang to his feet, struck his chest with his fist twice, and backed out of the tent. Just then, the vizier Bixur burst inside, unable to contain his excitement:

— Great Khagan, enemy envoys wish to approach your court, — he said, not hiding his guess. — It seems fear has entered their hearts—they seek peace!

Everyone in the tent perked up at the unexpected news. The shahanshah and the chief spy exchanged knowing glances. Their calculations had proven correct.

# DARASP'S PASSION FOR THE "FIRE MAIDEN"



Priest Səccam didn't know what had happened to Darasp, but he was alarmed and tried to escort him to his chamber. However, Darasp wouldn't budge—his eyes were fixed on the rituals at the altar. He said he wished to continue watching the ceremony. The priest followed his gaze. Dara was staring longingly at the fire maiden circling the third bonfire. Səccam whispered softly so no one around would hear:

— That's not how one looks at "fire maidens"...

— That girl is my beloved, — Dara's voice trembled like a flute.

— Even if she is, you must give her up! — Səccam whispered firmly. — On the shahanshah's birthday, the "fire maidens" will be offered to the flames in the name of the Great Ahura Mazda!

Dara, unexpectedly grief-stricken, whispered:

— I cannot give up my love!

Səccam, unwavering, repeated:

— You know that “fire maidens” are untouchable—they belong to the Great Ahura Mazda!

— I know! But most of these girls didn’t come here by choice—they were forced or deceived!

Səccam replied with certainty:

— Then that must be Ahura Mazda’s will! After all, we are fire-worshippers!

Suddenly, Darasp muttered in rage:

— The Medes are fire-worshippers too! — he said. — But that doesn’t stop them from pillaging our villages, burning our homes, murdering our men, raping our women, and keeping Pars in chains! Is *that* Ahura Mazda’s will? Or is Ahura Mazda really Angra Mainyu himself?

— My lord, you mustn’t speak blasphemy in the temple! — Səccam tried to calm his companion.

Darasp collected himself a bit and continued with bitter sarcasm:

— The greatest blasphemy is your High Möbid’s delirium! Seven altars? Seven fire maidens? Since when?! I studied priesthood for five years in the city of Shiz. I’ve memorized the sacred *Avesta* written on twelve thousand ox-hides by the prophet Zoroaster himself! Nowhere does it mention such a thing.

Sæccam frowned:

— True, it’s not written in the sacred *Avesta*, but the tradition of raising seven fire maidens to the altar has been adopted by many temples. It has been approved by the Supreme Council of Median High Priests. You know well that sacrifice is a foundation of our faith.

Darasp gestured toward the altars:

— One sacrifice, maybe two, but seven? That’s madness! Tell me—is it just to burn seven beautiful girls in one day to heal some sick old tyrant named Zahhak?

Sæccam quietly replied:

— Everything we have belongs to the Great Ahura Mazda...

But his voice was weak and lacked conviction.

Darasp noticed it and sneered:

— There's not a drop of Pars blood in your veins, is there? Don't you see? Most of those beauties are Pars girls! — he said, glancing around, then suddenly made up his mind. — Let's go to your chamber.

# THE ENEMY'S PEACE OFFER



**T**he enemy's peace proposal gave the shahanshah pause for thought. It was revealed that the King of Lydia, Alyattes II, was willing to relinquish most of Cappadocia—the source of conflict—in favor of Media. He even had no objection to setting the border along the Halys River. Once the envoys had delivered their message, the vizier escorted them out with a command:

— Await our response!

A deep silence fell over the tent, broken only when the shahanshah spoke:

— So, what shall be our answer to the Lydian envoys? — he asked. — The word belongs to the prince. Let us see if our son is in favor of peace—or war.

By now somewhat experienced in military matters, Prince Urran raised his voice passionately:

— My fire altar of a father, I vote for war! — he said. — Unless we crush Lydia, this war will not end. And Media cannot be satisfied with just Cappadocia! We must push forward until our horses bathe in the waters of the Amshan Sea! We must extend our empire from sea to sea!

The shahanshah, who had expected no different from his twenty-year-old son, turned to the seasoned Tötür Atxa:

— Brother, do you also favor war?

The chief spy, knowing well the shahanshah's hidden ambitions, began his response with a broader perspective:

— Great Khagan, you know the Lydian king still commands considerable forces. According to our spies, Alyattes II has secretly gathered a large army that is already on the move. By tomorrow, they may reach the banks of the Halys. Perhaps he's using these envoys to stall us and buy time?

The shahanshah, after a moment's thought, turned teasingly to the impatient deputy commander Satrapaq:

— There's no need to ask your opinion! Naturally, the deputy commander can't be in favor of peace! — He raised his

hand, and everyone quieted. Then he turned to the High Priest of the Möbids, Amitaxah.

— Father, what is your counsel?

Though Amitaxah was over seventy, he was still vigorous. He accompanied the shahanshah on every campaign, enduring the hardships of military life with the fortitude of a much younger man. Before speaking, he performed a ritual considered sacred among Zoroastrian priests. He removed the *kustī*—the sacred cord—tied around his sleeveless robe, laid it on his knee and smoothed it, then wrapped it around his waist three times, tying four cross-shaped knots at the ends. Only then did he speak:

— Great Khagan, if I were to say that our soldiers are weary from war, that we’ve suffered many dead and wounded—you’d say, “I know.” If I said the common people are dissatisfied, that donations to the temples have decreased—you’d say again, “I know.” If I said we are becoming isolated—you’d respond, “I understand.” Of course, the Great Khagan knows everything; he has no need of our advice. May the Great Ahura Mazda bless the Khagan—his wisdom is greater than ours!

Having expressed his preference for peace indirectly, silence once again settled over the tent. The shahanshah turned once more to Satrapaq with a jest:

— You see, our holy father wants to let the prey we've caught slip away...

Then, turning again to Tötür Atxa:

— So you believe this peace offer is a trick?

When the chief spy, uncertainly, replied that it might be so, the shahanshah asked with a hint of doubt:

— Or perhaps Alyattes himself has grown weary of this cursed war? What say you all?

The discussion, lit by torchlight, continued past midnight. New arguments were raised. After much deliberation, the final decision was made: they would go to war.

The vizier quickly asked:— Great Khagan, what shall we say to the envoys waiting in the neighboring tent? After a moment's thought, the shahanshah replied:

— Let them be well-fed and treated kindly! And send them home safe and sound—before the battle begins!

# PREPARING FOR BATTLE



The *Naibi-ləşkər* (Deputy Commander-in-Chief) jumped up joyfully. During the campaign, kneeling in the royal tent was not permitted. That was the rule set by the *Shahanshah* (King of Kings). Satrapaq, who had spent his entire life in wars, did not consider days without battle as part of his life. Clanking his silver-braced right arm against his armored chest several times, he applauded the *Shahanshah's* decision for war. The ringing of metal echoed through the tent.

Satrapaq said:

“Great Khagan, the commanders are lined up in front of the tent. Shall I call them in?”

Before an attack, the *Naibi-ləşkər* would invite the commanders one by one into the tent, where their duties would be announced in the presence of the *Shahanshah*.

The *Shahanshah* gently replied:

“No rush, it’s still night, morning is far off,” then he joked, “Try to move more quietly from now on. The enemy might

hear the metal clang, mistake it for the hiss of a weasel, and flee in fear—we won't have anyone left to fight! Go on, take your seat.”

The hulking Satrapaq, flustered, took off his helmet and sat down again amid the amused smiles of those present. Silence settled in the tent.

The *Shahanshah* broke it:

“Naibi-ləşkər, tell me, who will lead the Median cavalry against the enemy this time?”

The *Shahanshah* Kiaksar appreciated practical observation. Once he saw the superiority of the Scythian sword, bow, and short spears in battle, he had the Median cavalry rearmed in the Scythian style.

“Your servant will lead, Great Khagan!”

After some thought, the *Shahanshah* made his decision:

“From today onward, Harpaq will command the Median cavalry!” he declared. “He will lead the attack from the right flank in tomorrow's battle.”

Harpaq was Satrapaq's son. He had earned the emperor's favor at a young age. He was the commander of the reserve

forces. The emperor, still shaken by previous battles, had reinforced Harpaq's cavalry with additional archer and slinger regiments.

Satrapaq asked:

“Great Khagan, to whom shall we entrust our reserve forces?”

“You will entrust them to Captain Kittan!” said the *Shahanshah*. “He is a brave young man! Let's see how he fares as a commander.”

In one of the previous battles, Kittan's cavalry regiment had forced a large group of enemy horsemen to retreat. The *Shahanshah* was referring to that event.

“Kittan is still very young, Great Khagan!”

“It's time to give way to the youth! You won't be *Naibi-ləşkər* forever!” said the *Shahanshah*, chuckling. Then he immediately turned to Prince Urran.

“You'll ride to the Scythian camp and stay there. Tell the *Knyaz* that we'll attack at dawn. As soon as the signal is given, he should advance on the enemy's left flank!”

The prince complained:

“My sacred father, let me stay by your side. The smell of horse urine in the Scythian camp makes me nauseous.”

The *Shahanshah* mocked:

“You’ll manage to endure! We can’t disown the Scythians as kin just because they smell of horse sweat!”

The prince stubbornly insisted:

“I want to be with my father!”

The *Shahanshah*, touched by his son’s affection, still gently objected:

“My dear son, even though Commander Atey is experienced, he’s also unpredictable. It’s better if you keep an eye on him,” he said—but couldn’t finish his sentence. His face suddenly changed.

“Continue without me!”

As he slowly stepped down from the throne, the palace physician and his assistant rushed to him, took his arm, and led him into the adjacent small tent. The elder Amitaxah also followed, leaning on his staff.

Lately, the emperor had been complaining of physical ailments. Sometimes, the pain became so intense that he struggled to breathe and would suddenly lose consciousness.

The court physician, who was always by his side, had devised an unusual treatment method. He would expose the painful area to the smoke of *beng* herbs. Under Amitaxah's supervision, after such a treatment the emperor would recover, and the pain would temporarily subside.

# THE BATTLE BEGINS



**O**n the 69th day of the Great Idin — to be exact, on May 29th — even more precisely, just as the Mobeds completed their dawn prayers at the mobile fire altar, the mighty Median army awoke at the command of Shahanshah Cyaxares. The air was cold, and the frost pierced to the bone.

The Shahanshah's pains had eased thanks to the physicians' remedies. He did not change the time for the assault.

"I'm tired of this cursed war. It must be ended," he said and stepped out of his tent.

The banks of the Halys River, its green slopes, meadows, and forests, were shrouded in a light mist. The Shahanshah's close companions followed him and proudly looked down from the high ground where the royal tents were pitched upon the quietly stirring army in the gray dawn. They knew not a single soldier would make a sound until the attack began. Experienced commanders always sought to gain the upper

hand by catching the enemy off guard. Imposing battle terms on a surprised enemy was far easier.

Of course, Shahanshah Cyaxares did not believe that such a simple trick would earn him a great advantage. So when he saw that the enemy had also risen early, he realized that secrecy was now meaningless.

“Chief Marshal, let the war horns sound,” he commanded.

The bed of the Halys River that separated the two armies was two arrow-shots wide. Even though it was spring, the river's water barely reached the ankles.

Everyone was preoccupied. No one paid attention to the jester, who wandered about pretending to be important. Tötür Atkha called him over. Motul was dressed in armor. A small helmet crafted by the royal armorer gleamed on his fist-sized head. The chief spy couldn't help but tease him:

“You look ready to be chief marshal yourself, Sir Motul! Perhaps it's time to give up jesting,” he said.

“At His Majesty's command!” the jester replied, placing a hand on his chest and giving a military salute.

What made the situation unique was that Motul, one of the few spies assigned to the crown prince by Tötür Atkha, had long performed his duties without raising any suspicions. The ever-suspicious Astyages usually handpicked his own servants and rarely approved of anyone. Over the years, Motul had become his favorite. But the sudden dismissal of the crown prince's jester hinted at deeper matters.

"Your Excellency, you're underestimating me!" the jester squeaked. "Had you taught me the art of command in time, you'd now see my greatness!"

Tötür Atkha smirked.

"It's not too late. I can still teach you. Shall I tell you how the assault will begin?" Without waiting for an answer, he continued. "Sir Motul, know that shortly, five ranks of heavy Median infantry will take position along the riverbank."

"That can't be, Your Excellency! I thought Satrapaq would deploy the archers first."

Tötür Atkha pointed toward the misty riverbed. Motul saw that indeed, forty thousand armored soldiers armed with long spears and curved swords were slowly descending toward the riverbank. The ground trembled under their heavy steps. They

raised shields plated with metal to head height, rushing forward, shielding themselves from enemy arrows.

“The archers will position themselves behind the heavy infantry,” continued Tötür Atkha enthusiastically. “They will hide behind the infantry’s shields during battle. Archers can’t wear armor. They kneel with bows at the ready and only stand to draw and fire. This continues until the quivers are empty. Soon, you’ll see it yourself...”

“What then, Your Excellency?” Motul eagerly asked, nearly pressing his nose to the chief spy’s face.

Still watching the field, Tötür Atkha answered:

“Then light infantry with shields and axes or swords will take position. And finally, slingers dragging baskets of stones will arrive.”

“But, Your Excellency, where are our cavalry?” the ever-curious Motul asked.

“Sir Jester, cavalry decides the fate of battles. They are sent last,” he said, then waved him away. “Now go! Don’t get underfoot.”

Daylight had fully broken, and the mist had cleared. The warm rays of the rising sun promised a hot and sunny day ahead.

The Shahanshah, removing his eye from the spyglass, summoned Tətür Atkha to confirm his observations:

“It’s worth looking...”

The chief spy didn’t spend long looking.

“Yes, Great Khan. The enemy has no intention of retreating. On the contrary, they’re preparing to attack.”

“What do you make of the sparse formation at the enemy’s center?” the Shahanshah asked, impatiently. “What do you conclude?”

“If we trust our spies’ secret reports, Lidia’s cavalry outnumbered ours two to one. True, their cavalry isn’t as skilled, but they might use that numerical advantage. Most likely, they’ll create a corridor through the infantry to send in the horsemen.”

“Well done,” the Shahanshah praised. “You’d make a fine general.” Then turning to Satrapaq standing nearby, he commanded:

“Chief Marshal, bring our cavalry into battle position immediately.”

Satrapaq hesitated:

“Great Khan, isn’t it too early to deploy the cavalry?”

The Shahanshah’s patience snapped.

“Don’t delay. We must strike first. Their plan is to open with cavalry.”

The order needed no explanation. Satrapaq instantly summoned three messengers — one to Harpaq’s camp, one to General Atey’s, and the third toward the infantry. Just then, the Shahanshah added:

“Move the reserve troops closer to the left flank.”

Satrapaq interpreted this to mean that the Scythians couldn’t be entirely trusted. As he hurried off to execute the command, the Shahanshah rubbed his hands together:

“Let’s wait and see what the enemy’s next move will be.”

“Great Khan,” asked Tötür Atkha, “do you mean that Aliattes intends to introduce a new method of warfare? That he wants to strike first with cavalry?”

The Shahanshah, who had spent forty years at war, smiled:

“My brother, this method is nothing new — it’s the forgotten Assyrian tactic. But Aliattes forgets that the unfortunate Ashur III fell victim to this very strategy.”  
Then, turning to the court regent:

“Has Amitaxah returned yet?”

# HOMELAND BEFORE LOVE



They made their way through the crowd into Sëccam's cell. The guest, without waiting for an offer, picked up a cup, filled it from a clay jug of wine, and drank it in one gulp. Smacking his lips, he sat down:

“Now tell me, what news of Aspaz, servant of the Scythian girl?”

Sëccam knew that by “Scythian girl,” Darasp meant Aqniya, wife of Shahanshah Cyaxares.

“She hasn't been seen at the temple for a year. I hope she hasn't fallen into Tötür Atkha's trap,” said the priest.

“Then why haven't you checked on her fate until now?”

“Who dares approach the palace with Tötür Atkha watching?” Sëccam justified himself. “His spies have even infiltrated our temple. I sometimes see suspicious figures lurking around.”

Understanding the truth in his words, Darasp rubbed his shaved head:

“So what do we do? We need Aspaz urgently.”

“Aspaz is a clever girl. Nothing will happen to her,” said Səccam confidently. “Perhaps she’s being kept close by the Scythian queen, who’s in mourning for her son.”

After some thought, Darasp asked:

“Still no word on the kidnapped prince?”

“None. Likely the Scythians killed him.”

But seeing his master shake his head, Səccam sensed he knew something and awaited further orders. Darasp began indirectly:

“Brother, Zohhak is nearing his end. May the cries of the maidens thrown to the flames reach him! As soon as his head hits the ground, chaos will engulf Media. Astyages is weak. He won’t be able to rule such a vast realm. This time, our rebellion must succeed.”

“They said the same thing six years ago! And look what happened to Pars after the uprising,” Səccam said, pale with worry. “I think we should leave it all to time. May Almighty Ahura Mazda protect us — I fear bloodshed and death.”

Darasp reassured him:

“Don’t fear. This time, we’re not alone. The Scythian king Ishpaka from one side, Urartu from another, and we from the south — Media will be crushed. From now on, keep an eye on the palace.” Then he asked, “Can you get in touch with Aspaz?”

Sæccam thought for a moment:

“It’s possible. There’s a young *mobedyar* who delivers coal to the Golden Temple. He’s a close relative. I’ll see what I can do,” he said, explaining his hesitation. “But... he’s not very bright. I’m afraid to tell him too much. I’ll see if I can use him.”

The fire temples near the royal palaces didn’t use wood, as the smoke would disturb the court. Fires there were lit with coal and fanned with bellows.

Darasp instructed:

“Good idea, but take care of yourself. We need you.”

“I will,” said Sæccam. Then, with a sly tone, he asked, “I suppose I’ll be seeing more of you at the White Temple from now on?”

“Yes, you’re right,” Darasp grinned. “Let’s see if we can seal our kinship.”



# THE BETRAYAL OF THE SCYTHIAN COMMANDER



It didn't take long before their wait was over. The messenger sent to Harpaq's camp had just returned when the Median cavalry appeared on the plains to the right flank. The Shahanshah, pleased, remarked:

"No one can fault Harpaq's swiftness!" Then he turned to Satrapaq. "Well, where are the Scythians?"

The deputy commander shaded his eyes with his hand and looked toward the Scythian camp. He spotted the messenger he had dispatched dismounting his horse at the base of a hill and said:

"We'll find out now, Great Khan!" He hurried to meet the rider scrambling up the hill.

The messenger, like a guilty man, knelt before his master. Whatever he whispered made Satrapaq's face darken.

"What do you mean, *you couldn't find the Scythians?*! Ten thousand horsemen aren't a needle in a haystack!"

Then something struck him, and he fell silent, stunned. The Shahanshah, who had heard the exchange, walked toward them with heavy steps. He already understood that betrayal had occurred. The messenger, still not daring to lift his head, kept muttering nervously:

“My lord... Commander Atey’s camp was empty. Not a soul in sight. The fire pits were cold, the ashes damp. The hoofprints show the Scythians headed south.”

He had brought bad news and knew punishment might be near. Desperately, he repeated the same words again and again, hoping to save his life.

The Shahanshah asked hoarsely:

“What about the prince?!”

Suddenly, he staggered and lost his balance.

Tötür Atxa rushed forward and caught him by the arm:

“Great Khan, return to your tent and rest. I will take care of this...”

But the warrior-king, tempered in blood and battle, would not be brought down so easily. Calmly, he replied:

“I need you here.”

Then he turned to the Grand Vizier Bixur and commanded:

“Take two regiments of armed guards. Find out where the Scythians have gone! And why the prince has vanished.”

The grand vizier ran off toward the troops. Meanwhile, the Shahanshah gave further orders to Satrapaq:

“Let the reserve forces take position on the left flank.”

“As you command, Great Khan,” Satrapaq replied, placing a hand on his chest in salute. But he could not hide his concern:

“Kittan’s ten thousand horsemen won’t be enough to hold the left. We expect an enemy cavalry attack there — twenty thousand strong.”

The Shahanshah scolded the aging general:

“Fool! By the time the enemy counts Kittan’s cavalry, it will be too late!”

He added firmly:

Go. Now!”

Unaccustomed to such simple math being thrown back at him, Satrapaq hesitated for a moment, then hurried away in confusion.

# THE SCYTHIAN COMMANDER'S BETRAYAL



**I**t wasn't long before their waiting came to an end. Just as the messenger sent to Harpaq's camp returned—*1 The priests carried the sacred fire from the fire temple with them.*

—Median cavalry appeared on the plain to the right flank.

The *Shahanshah* said with satisfaction:

“Harpaq's swiftness is beyond question!”

Then he asked Satrapaq:

“Well, where are the Scythians?”

The *Naibi-ləşkər* shaded his eyes with his hand and looked into the distance. When he saw the messenger he had sent to the Scythian camp dismounting at the foot of the hill, he said:

“We'll soon find out, Great Khagan!”

He hurried to meet the courier running up the hill. The messenger knelt before his master like a guilty man. Whatever he said caused Satrapaq to lose his temper:

“What do you mean, you couldn’t find the Scythians?! Ten thousand horsemen aren’t a needle in a haystack!”

Then something occurred to him—he fell silent, stunned.

Hearing the words, the *Shahanshah* approached slowly. He had already understood that a betrayal had taken place.

The messenger, not even seeing who was standing before him, stared at the ground and muttered on:

“My lord, Commander Atey’s camp was deserted. Not a soul in sight. The fire pits were cold, the ashes damp. The horse tracks showed that the Scythians had gone south.”

The messenger had brought dire news and knew he would be punished. Hoping to save himself, he repeated the same words again and again.

The *Shahanshah* asked hoarsely:

“And the prince?!”

Suddenly he lost his balance and staggered.

Tötür Atxa rushed forward and grabbed his arm:

“Great Khagan, return to your tent and rest. I will handle this.”

The emperor’s spirit, blood, and mind were tempered by war. No hardship could break him. Calmly, he said:

“I need you here!”

Then he ordered *Naibi-səltənət* Bixura:

“Take two regiments of armed guards. Find out where the Scythians went. Why has the prince disappeared?”

The *Naibi-səltənət* ran toward the armed guards. Meanwhile, the *Shahanshah* ordered Satrapaq:

“Let our reserve forces take up position on the left flank.”

“Yes, Great Khagan!” Satrapaq replied, pounding his chest. But he couldn’t hide his concern. “Kittan’s ten thousand cavalry won’t be able to hold the left flank. We expect an assault of twenty thousand enemy horsemen from that direction.”

The *Shahanshah* rebuked the old commander:

“Fool! By the time the enemy starts counting Kittan’s troops, it’ll already be too late!”

“Now go!”

Stunned by the unexpected simplicity of the emperor’s plan, Satrapaq hesitated, then withdrew reluctantly.

# SOLAR ECLIPSE



They say calamity never comes alone. Just as the Shahanshah was grappling with the Scythians' betrayal and the mysterious fate of the prince, more bad news arrived from the deputy commander. Satrapaq, while inspecting the troops' pre-battle positions, had been killed by a stray arrow to the throat.

Meanwhile, Harpaq's twenty-thousand-strong cavalry took up position on the right flank of the front, while Kittan's reserve forces formed ranks on the left. Seeing this, the Shahanshah momentarily forgot the string of misfortunes and declared with resolve to Tötür Atxa:

"Now let II Alyattes see what war really is!"

The enemy, not expecting Median cavalry to appear so quickly, was thrown into confusion. War drums sounded. The Lydian cavalry, who had been preparing to descend into the riverbed, withdrew. Again the drums sounded, and the Lydian infantry began to move forward and enter the water.

On the Median side, the blast of signal horns echoed. Both armies, step by step, approached within arrow range.

The noonday Sun shone brightly like a polished copper disc. The heavens seemed to tremble in anticipation. Two bloodthirsty armies were on the verge of a battle to the death.

But then, the Sun began to darken. Slowly, gradually, it was fully eclipsed, and twilight fell upon the battlefield. The once-beautiful green forests, velvet meadows, and scenic hills lost their color. Valleys blended into the mountains in the dim light.

Although drums and horns still called the soldiers to battle, both armies halted instinctively, without awaiting orders. Panic set in. Then chaos erupted, and many began to flee.

Even someone as worldly as High Priest Amitaxah was shaken by the solar eclipse. He dropped to his knees, raised his arms toward the sky, and began reciting prayers. Then, lifting his head, he pleaded with the Shahanshah:

“Great Khan, for the sake of the Almighty Hormuzd, halt the battle. This omen bodes misfortune!”

Tötür Atxa, too, paced in the gloom, urgently advising the Shahanshah and hinting at greater dangers:

“Great Khan, now is the moment! If the Scythians’ betrayal becomes evident, our situation will be dire. The Lydian forces will breach our defenses.”

The Shahanshah’s sorrowful voice rang out:

“We cannot call off the attack! The enemy will sense our weakness. Our only salvation is in pressing forward!”

Tətür Atxa pressed the spyglass to his eye and suddenly shouted:

“Great Khan, the enemy is retreating! They’re falling back behind their fortifications!”

Only then did the Shahanshah relent. Soon, to the sound of signal horns, the Median army returned to its former positions.

Chroniclers say that the kings took the eclipse as a bad omen and halted the battle. Peace drums were sounded on the Lydian side, and signal gongs of truce rang on the Median side. The rulers did more than settle for peace—they established family ties. Lydian king Alyattes II gave his daughter, Princess Aryenis, in marriage to Prince Astyages, son of Shahanshah Cyaxares. Thus, enmity between the two empires came to an end.

# ENVOY AQAR BEFORE THE SHAHANSHAH



No sooner had the forty-day wedding festivities ended than the slave regiments dispatched after the treacherous Scythian army and Prince Urra returned empty-handed to the banks of the Halys River under the command of the Deputy Regent. The experienced court official, unable to lift his head from shame, spoke quietly:

“Great Khan, we found no trace of the Scythians or the prince. We followed every lead, reached the borders of Babylonia and even Cilicia. But not a single person said, ‘I saw them.’”

The Shahanshah flared up with anger:

“What, did such a massive army vanish into thin air?! Executioner!”

The deputy regent Bixur was stricken with terror. His teeth chattered as he pleaded:

“Forgive your guilty servant, Great Khan!”

He collapsed at the Shahanshah's feet, fully aware that death was but a breath away. Just then, Tətür Atxa intervened, rushing into the tent before the executioner could arrive:

“Envoy Aqar wishes to enter the royal presence, Great Khan.”

The Shahanshah's rage began to ebb. His mind distracted, he waved the executioner away and turned to Bixur with unexpected mercy:

“Let him in. And enough trembling—go take a seat.”

Envoy Aqar, permanent representative of King Ishpak of the Scythians in the Median capital, had set out for Mughan upon learning of Commander Atey's betrayal and had arrived at the Halys River. Bowing low before the Shahanshah, Aqar was interrupted:

“Rise, prince—you are not my subject! Kneeling is not required of envoys in my court.”

Prince Aqar rose and said:

“This is by command of our king, Ishpak. We offer our sincerest apologies for Commander Atey's treachery.”

He gestured outside.

“Our sovereign has sent Atey’s bound wives, children, relatives, servants, concubines, all his possessions, and livestock as a gift to the Shahanshah. Let this be a lasting lesson to all traitors.”

The Shahanshah’s face lit up. Accepting the envoy’s apology with warmth, he shifted comfortably on his throne:

“I trust my royal brother.”

# THE SHAHANSHAH AT A CROSSROADS: WAR OR PEACE



**A**fter the wedding, by decree of the Shahanshah Cyaxares, the hundred-thousand-strong Median army was withdrawn from Lydian territory and settled in tents on a vast sandy plain south of Ecbatana.

Commander Harpaq had chosen a suitable location for his thirty-thousand cavalry: the bank of a seasonal river, perfect for their needs. Though nothing but scrub grew there, the wind-sheltered lowland was an ideal wintering ground for the herds.

Feeding and sustaining this massive force required wagonloads of supplies every day—brought from the royal treasury, military depots, and surrounding villages. As autumn neared its end, the weather worsened. Bitter cold set in, and an unexpected heavy snowstorm made transporting food and fodder difficult. Tents needed heating to prevent the soldiers from freezing.

Following the Lydian war, Shahanshah Cyaxares never quite recovered. He deteriorated day by day. His thoughts

drifted increasingly to childhood memories, often recalling his royal grandfather Deioces and his father, King Kashtariti. It seemed the forty-year reign of the conqueror of Manna, Urartu, Izirti, Persia, Assyria, and Cappadocia was nearing its end. He longed for peace, not battle—yet still maintained a standing army and refused to demobilize even in the dead of winter.

One day, the royal treasurer Barrin finished his report, knelt, and sighed deeply:

“Great Khan, may the Almighty Hormuzd aid you. Maintaining the army is draining the treasury!”

During campaigns, the army was sustained by local governors or conquered lands. In peacetime, the burden fell upon the treasury. The Shahanshah had upheld this forty-year-old policy without change.

“Which gold are you spending?” he asked.

Barrin, who had grown old in the Shahanshah’s service, kept meticulous accounts, storing tribute from each satrapy or vassal state in separate chests.

“Great Khan, I’m still spending the gold from Cappadocia...”

Knowing the treasurer to be loyal and honest, the Shahanshah didn't rebuke him. He simply nodded:

"Then don't complain. When you reach the Assyrian gold, consult with me."

They both knew that half the royal treasury consisted of Assyrian gold—taken after Cyaxares allied with the Babylonian king Nabopolassar in 614 BCE and crushed Assyria. Together they razed the rich capital of Nineveh and took possession of unimaginable wealth.

Even then, their anger hadn't been sated. The last Assyrian king, Ashur-uballit III, notorious for his cruelty, was treated not like a monarch but like a criminal—chained and paraded from village to village until he died.

Now Barrin tried once more to persuade the Shahanshah:

"Great Khan, action must be taken. These bottomless-pit soldiers will bankrupt the kingdom. Soon we'll run through the Assyrian gold and then some."

The Shahanshah smiled with unease.

"And your suggestion?"

Barrin, worried he'd overstepped, bowed low again.

“Who am I to advise the Great Khan?”

But the Shahanshah insisted.

“Don’t be afraid—if you were in my place, what would you do?”

Barrin spoke cautiously:

“Great Khan, I would either send the seasoned army back to war...”

The Shahanshah interrupted with praise:

“That’s a good idea! You think like a true warrior. And the other option?”

“...or disband them and send them home,” Barrin finished.

The Shahanshah shook his head with sadness:

“That’s foolish. Releasing battle-hardened soldiers is madness! Remember, a kingdom without an army is no kingdom at all. The people must feed the army—even with their last crumb—so they may live in peace.”

That same day, despite his frailty, the Shahanshah summoned the Great Council. He gathered high priests, court nobles, generals, all Median satraps, regional governors, and

tributary kings. After a brief consultation, he decreed that the army would remain mobilized and under arms.

Moreover, the royal treasury would cover all military expenses. This delighted the satraps and vassals, who were eager to avoid spending their vast personal fortunes—gained during the Shahanshah’s many victorious campaigns.

Clearly, another war loomed. But against whom—it was still unknown.

# THE SHAHANSHAH'S BEDCHAMBER GUARDS



Those summoned to the palace by Crown Prince Astyages were doing everything they could to lift the spirits of the Shahanshah, who had become withdrawn and forgotten how to smile. Yet neither the antics of jesters, the illusions of magicians, nor the dances of performers had any effect. Only Motul's jokes occasionally hit the mark and brought a faint smile to the sovereign's lips. Encouraged, the crown prince coached the jester with enthusiasm.

Tötür Atxa disapproved:

“Your Highness, there must be limits.”

But the crown prince ignored him:

“Uncle, I *will* make my father laugh!”

Yet sometimes the jester's impersonations backfired. When he mimicked the Naibi-ləşkər (Chief Marshal), it moved the Shahanshah to tears:

“Poor Satrapaq... I couldn't protect you.”

However, when Motul appeared dressed as the Scythian king Ishpak, the Shahanshah genuinely burst out laughing:

“Cousin! How are things in Mughan?”

Quick-witted as ever, Motul responded immediately:

“Great Khan, the air in Mughan no longer agrees with me!”

“What do you want?”

“I’m looking for a pleasant place for the Scythian kingdom. I rather like the area around Ecbatana. If you permit, I’ll settle here...”

Suddenly, the Shahanshah flew into a rage:

“Executioner!”

If Tətür Atxa hadn’t intervened, Motul’s head would’ve rolled. It was unclear whether the furious outburst had been caused by the jester himself or by the reminder of the traitorous King Ishpak he portrayed.

As the autumn days passed in anxious anticipation, winter of 585 BCE arrived. News spread across the empire that the Shahanshah had become bedridden.

In addition to the Great Idd Festival, Medians revered two other major celebrations—traditions established forty years earlier. The Shahanshah had been born on the 46th day of the Great Idd, and crowned on the 56th. Every season, ten days of festivities followed: people feasted and drank at the treasury's expense, watched performers, listened to music, and danced in joy.

Whether it was due to the Shahanshah's illness or the loss of those free festivities, the people seemed plunged into a sea of grief. All preparations for the birthday and forty-year jubilee were halted. Everyone now expected the end: the Shahanshah, weak, forgetful, sometimes unrecognizing and incoherent, would soon die, and the throne would pass to the heir.

Only three people were allowed near the sovereign's sleeping quarters. No one else—not even his harem—was permitted entry. The fate of the entire empire lay in the hands of these three: Crown Prince Astyages, Chief Inquisitor Tötür Atxa, and the High Priest Amitaxah.

The threat of the ever-ready army kept all provinces and satrapies in peace. Even those seeking to secede from Median rule seemed to have gone into hibernation. This deceptive calm unsettled the suspicious Astyages.

“What’s the situation in Pars?” he asked Tətür Atxa.

“So far, it’s quiet,” Tətür Atxa cautiously replied. “We’ve had good reports from Princess Mandana.”

Astyages scowled:

“I don’t trust the Achaemenid brood. If they don’t stir up trouble, it’ll be a miracle. They can’t be relied on in a crisis.”

The High Priest Amitaxah disagreed:

“Your Highness, the King of Pars, Cambyses, would not betray us. After all, there’s kinship between us.”

During the Lydian war, Shahanshah Cyaxares had strengthened Median security by forging ties with the Achaemenids—marrying his daughter Mandana to King Cambyses of Pars and thus transforming an unreliable vassal into a loyal ally.

Astyages, however, responded with grim certainty:

“Holy Father, let’s just hope this ‘kinship’ doesn’t bring disaster.”

Tətür Atxa respectfully bowed to the prince’s insight:

“Your Highness is right.” Then, turning to the High Priest, he added, “Holy Father, our spies report that the Persian nobles maintain exceptionally well-armed retinues. Yet King Cambyses acts as if he’s unaware. Suspicious, no?”

Astyages summoned Harpaq. The commander had just returned from the Persian front. It became known to those present that, by order of the Shahanshah, ten thousand Median cavalry remained stationed near Pars since the last rebellion. Harpaq assured them:

“Your Highness, all major roads leading toward Pars are under surveillance.”

Astyages, satisfied, glanced triumphantly at Tətür Atxa and Amitaxah, then ordered Harpaq to send two additional cavalry regiments to the Persian frontier.

“What will be their task, Your Highness?” asked Harpaq.

Astyages shot him a cold look:

“It’s a precaution. Also, mountain passes leading to Pars—not just the main roads—must be monitored.”

Harpaq left to carry out the order immediately. He knew that Astyages was a vengeful man—he remembered even minor

offenses and punished them when the chance arose. Harpaq's experience had taught him that the best course was to obey Astyages' commands instantly and without question.

# THE TIME FOR THE SACRIFICIAL RITUAL



**T**he royal court was teeming with physicians—one arriving as another departed. But it was all in vain. The Shahanshah's condition worsened day by day. Physicians and healers summoned from Babylonia and Assyria failed to find a cure. The High Priest Amitaxah, supported by the Council of Archmagi, offered a different solution:

“Ahriman is insatiable—he demands sacrifice. The Council of Archmagi recommends holding sacrificial ceremonies. Perhaps Ahriman will relent and release the Great Khan.”

Tötür Atxa responded cautiously:

“Holy Father, you know well the Shahanshah has little regard for sacrificial rituals,” he said, then added his own view. “One death cannot restore another to life.”

Amitaxah was irritated:

“Your doubts are baseless!” he snapped. “Don’t you remember? A few years ago, when the crown prince fell ill, he recovered after the sacrifices.”

Crown Prince Astyages interjected:

“Holy Father, I wasn’t sick. I was bitten by a snake.”

“What difference does it make?” insisted Amitaxah. “You recovered after the offering, didn’t you?”

Tätür Atxa gently countered:

“May the Great Hormuzd protect our Shahanshah—but he wasn’t bitten by a snake,” he said with a sly smile, though he quickly hid his amusement out of respect for the elder priest.

Amitaxah was of such venerable age and conviction that no logic could sway him. He remained resolute. Both men turned to Astyages, knowing that until the coronation, he alone had the authority to approve any decision—even if others could advise. Though Astyages personally agreed with Tätür Atxa, his love for his father led him to side with the Archmagi. By royal decree, the sacrificial ceremonies were scheduled to be held simultaneously across all temples of the empire on the 46th day of the Great Idd.

Though Shahanshah Cyaxares had spent most of his life in war and held little value for individual human life, he had always opposed the burning of the “fire maidens”—a grim ancient custom. In his forty years of reign, he had only once sanctioned such a practice—in 590 BCE.

That year, the heir to the throne, the 25-year-old Astyages, had been bitten by a snake. The Shahanshah, who had pinned all hope on his only son, was shaken to the core. His sister, who had borne five daughters and two sons, had recently passed to the realm of Hormuzd. His eldest son had also recently died. With no surviving brothers or nephews, if Astyages were to die, the Median royal line would come to an end. The priests would be forced to search among distant relatives for a successor of pure blood.

So, though he didn’t believe in it himself, the Shahanshah had endorsed the ancient tradition under pressure from the Archmagi. It was proclaimed that to drive away evil spirits, all the faithful across the empire must gather in the temples, pray in the name of Great Hormuzd, and hold rituals—most crucially, offering “fire maidens” to the flames to appease Ahriman.

# ASTYAGES IS DECLARED HEIR APPARENT



Astyages loved no one but his elder brother. He despised Urran. Yet Urran, his half-brother, posed no real threat to the throne. Astyages had no reason for anxiety. Even if Shahanshah Cyaxares had wanted to leave the empire to Urran, the Council of High Priests would never have allowed it.

Astyages admired his elder brother's intellect. He harbored no jealousy over the heir-apparent title, nor did his brother's existence trouble him. He knew his brother was terminally ill—he had little time left. And even if a chance arose for him to seize power, it would be short-lived; the Shahanshah would not wear the crown for much longer.

His elder brother, however, refused to accept his fate and would occasionally speak with bitter hope:

“If I recover from this illness, I’ll live a long life!”

Shahanshah Cyaxares favored his older son among his heirs and treated the frail Astyages with little regard. From a young age, Astyages had been surrounded by physicians, mystics, and magi, developing a special interest in medicine. By adolescence, he knew almost as much as the court doctors. He could distinguish hundreds of herbs and recognize poisonous plants in the wild. From the mystics, he had also learned a few secrets. He had no fear of snakes and matched them in agility. In his chamber stood a large earthenware jar containing two vipers—one docile, which he handled without fear, and one aggressive, always looking to strike. That temperamental one had bitten him several times. But whether it was due to the constant potions he drank or something else, the venom had no lasting effect. He would develop a fever on the day of the bite but recover quickly. Few people were allowed in his rooms, and only he knew what substances were stored in the labeled jars.

Once, his brother came to visit him. There was both pain and determination in his expression.

“If you let me meet your snakes, I’ll give you the heir’s title,” he said.

Astyages was angered:

“May Great Hormuzd guide you—cast that thought from your mind. I could never be a fratricide!”

His brother sneered:

“Well then, let’s manage without poison!”

And so it was. On the eve of the war with Lydia, his elder brother passed away. Astyages was declared the heir apparent.

Only then did Shahanshah Cyaxares fully turn his attention to his younger son. One day, he visited the section of the palace where Astyages lived and was horrified by what he saw. Astyages had a viper coiled around his neck, its head gripped firmly in his hand.

“My son, cast this creature away—it might strike you!” the Shahanshah cried.

Astyages turned calmly at his father’s voice and slowly unwrapped the snake, placing it back into the jar.

“It won’t bite me, dear father—we are friends,” he said.

To the Shahanshah, his son’s life was more valuable than his own.

“You can’t be friends with a snake. Such closeness is bound to end badly.”

“Snakes are more loyal than people. Though it's in their nature to strike, they don't unless provoked. People, on the other hand, sting worse than snakes. I believe what I’ve learned will help me in the future,” Astyages replied, disarming his father with reason.

People at court feared him because of his obsession. They blamed him for every mysterious death.

Yet Astyages had good qualities too. He was not like those princes who lusted for the throne. He did not wish for his father’s death. In fact, the Shahanshah once scolded him for it:

“Power is such a sweet thing that unless you love it more than your own parents, you’ll never hold on to it.”

Astyages firmly replied:

“You can’t tempt me, my fire-temple father. The longer you live, the better it is for me. If this crown will eventually be mine, what’s the rush?”

# THE SHAHANSHAH'S RECOVERY



**H**undreds of couriers raced across the empire's roads. The Shahanshah could no longer wait for the sacrificial ceremonies planned in his honor—his death rattle had already begun to sound.

Though Astyages was a stern and unyielding man, he was not devoid of a son's love for his father. He turned to the other guardians of the royal chamber and asked:

“Is it time to prepare the Eternal Resting Place of the Great Khagan?”

Years earlier, having recognized the impermanence of life, the Shahanshah himself had laid the foundation for a modest “death chamber” on a high hill between the palace and the “Golden Temple.” But the construction had been left unfinished due to his involvement in wars. The site was a lush, flower-covered corner of the city, from which all of Ekbatana could be seen—the seven-colored city walls, the quarters between them, and the distant military camps.

Tətür Atxa and the High Mobed Amitaxah, having lost hope, agreed with Astyages:

“It seems the time has come.”

Astyages ordered the “death chamber,” whose foundation had been laid by the Shahanshah, to be completed swiftly. Its walls and floor were to be covered in gold, decorated with gems. The balcony’s flooring and ceiling were to be crafted and engraved with ivory. After the great conqueror’s death, his body would be placed in a golden sarcophagus in the open chamber. So as not to defile sacred soil, it would be left to be devoured by beasts and birds. What bones remained would be gathered later, burned, and their ashes scattered into the wind.

But, as the saying goes: *Man counts his days, but fate counts its own.*

Contrary to all expectations—and despite Astyages’s private grief—the Shahanshah Cyaxares unexpectedly recovered a week before the Great Id festival. He cast off the robes of death, returned from the grasp of Ahriman, and once again stepped onto his golden throne.

In just a few days, the Shahanshah regained full control of the court and became reacquainted with the affairs of state. He

approved all of Astyages's decisions except two. The first was the extravagance of the "death chamber":

"Dear successor, know this—an empire cannot be ruled with extravagance! What good is gold to the dead? Care for the living! Mourn for Media! You will rule the kingdom after me," he added with regret. "The gold spent on my death chamber was wasted—we could have maintained several regiments with it!"

Tətür Atxa and Amitaxah, who had guarded the Shahanshah's chamber for months, bowed before his wisdom and secretly wished for Astyages to one day be such a ruler.

After a pause, the Shahanshah addressed Amitaxah:

"The heir is still young and inexperienced, but we both know—life is a heavy burden! Leaving the world at the right time is a blessing."

Then he mocked the sacrificial rituals with a hint of irony: "It doesn't suit us to prolong our lives by throwing hundreds of beautiful maidens onto pyres!" His words left the chamber guardians speechless. Yet, for some reason, the Shahanshah did not cancel the sacrifice ceremonies planned for the 46th day of the Great Id.

# DISCUSSION OF A CAMPAIGN AGAINST EGYPT



The empire soon began preparations for renewed festivities. The Shahanshah, meanwhile, issued secretive decrees and orders whose meaning was known only to him, leaving everyone uneasy. His most frequent companion during this time was Tötür Atxa.

After brief preparations, the Shahanshah summoned a trusted circle for a private council—commonly referred to as the “Lesser Council.” These gatherings usually included the High Mobed Amitaxah, the heir Astyages, the spymaster and executioner Tötür Atxa, and the deputy of the realm, Bixur. In the past, no such council would have occurred without the army commander-in-chief. But since the late Satrapaq had passed on to the Great Hormuzd, that position remained vacant.

As always, military matters were the Shahanshah’s top priority. He summoned the commanders one by one to inquire about the soldiers’ state and needs. This time, he gave no time

to the various infantry divisions—those equipped with spears and shields, or with axes and swords—nor to the archers, slingers, or engineers of siege machines. He questioned only the cavalry commander, Harpaq, in depth. Then he declared:

“Your father, Satrapaq, served the crown loyally for nearly thirty years. I trust that you too will serve me—and when I pass to the Great Hormuzd, my heir—as faithfully as he did.”

After a short pause, he continued:

“From today, you are appointed commander-in-chief. You are now part of the Lesser Council. Sit by the jailer—your place is there!”

Everyone chuckled. The Shahanshah laughed as well:

“You two have something in common!”

A chill ran down Harpaq’s spine, but he did not rise. He humbly crawled on his knees to the spot indicated.

The Shahanshah also listened to a report from chief treasurer Barrin. When he heard that gold was increasing by the *misqal* but disappearing by the *batman*, he was unfazed:

“And you want the opposite?”

Barrin replied with his head still bowed:

“It wouldn’t be a bad thing, Great Khagan.”

Barrin was a witty man, and the Shahanshah enjoyed teasing him.

“You fool, lift your head—I can barely hear you!”

When Barrin looked up, the Shahanshah asked:

“You do know that to increase gold by the batman, we need war?”

“Yes, Great Khagan, I know.”

The Shahanshah stepped down from the throne, strolled around the council chamber, then returned to his seat and asked:

“What else do you know, old fox?”

The treasurer showed his nervousness:

“Great Khagan, I know this too—if the treasury doesn’t grow by the batman, we can’t maintain the army. And for that... we need war.”

The Shahanshah scanned the room and again fixed his gaze on Barrin:

“So you’re saying war is absolutely necessary?”

“More than necessary, Great Khagan!”

The heir, one of the few allowed to speak without permission, interjected:

“My Fire-Temple Father, all the surrounding lands are already subject to us. Nabuchadnezzar is our kin, Babylon our ally; Alyattes is our kin, Lydia our friend; King Ishpak guards the Narrow Pass—he too is kin. Is there even a nation left to make war on?”

The Shahanshah responded absently:

“You hear that, Barrin? The heir says there’s no one left to fight.”

Then, glancing slyly at the treasurer:

“What say you?”

Barrin gave a roundabout answer:

“They say there’s a land in the east—its name escapes me—where gold is so plentiful they build mountain-sized pyramids

of it for their dead kings. Just one of those pyramids would suffice—we could raise the world’s greatest army with that gold.”

“Well done! You’re an informed man!” the Shahanshah praised him. “Go sit on the other side of the jailer. You’ll have good conversation—he’s well informed too. That’s your place now.”

Barrin knew the Shahanshah valued him and wouldn’t punish him. Still, he acted as if he were trembling in fear:

“Great Khagan, spare me! Punish me yourself if you must, but don’t throw me into Ahriman’s hands.”

The Shahanshah laughed heartily:

“Don’t worry—your time hasn’t come yet. In fact, your loyalty deserves reward,” he said. “From today, you’re also a member of the Lesser Council.”

The treasurer, now crawling to the other side of the jailer, joined the council. No one laughed—the Shahanshah’s intent was clear.

Everyone knew the name of the distant land with golden pyramids.

A military expedition to far-off Egypt seemed tempting, though the outcome was uncertain.

The council knew full well that the Shahanshah had defeated Assyria thanks to Egyptian neutrality. Even the High Mobed had played a role in that victory. In 615 BCE, he had journeyed all the way to the Nile to sway the priests of Amon-Ra. A telescope presented to him as a gift was both a gesture of trust and a warning—it signified that the Amon-Ra priests, like the device itself, saw far and clearly.

The toothless mouth of High Mobed Amitaxah now smacked thoughtfully:

“Every decision of the Great Khagan is a sign of wisdom,” he said. Then cautiously asked, “But is Media strong enough for this war?”

The Shahanshah leaned back confidently:

“That’s my concern, High Mobed. We’re not alone! I believe Nabuchadnezzar, Alyattes, and Ishpak will all accept my offer and join us.” No one else in the council spoke.

The Shahanshah, tired, concluded:

“Everyone may leave—except Tötür Atxa.”

# PREPARATIONS FOR THE HEIR'S ARRIVAL



Spring was unusually late that year. The weather was bitterly cold, and attendance at the fire temples had noticeably dropped. Only the *Ilakhir Charshanbas*—the last four Tuesdays before the spring festival—were still celebrated with grandeur. On those days, neither snow nor storm could keep people away.

All temples were making preparations for the Great Id festival. Roofs and stones were being whitewashed, courtyards and grounds cleaned, pillars polished, cracked floor tiles replaced, and altars repainted.

The priests, junior priests, apprentices, and servants of the “White Temple” worked tirelessly. Every day, bonfires were lit, “brides of fire” ascended the altar to music, sacred chants were sung, and the ceremonies were conducted in full accordance with tradition, ending by evening amid applause from pilgrims, worshippers, devotees, and guests. The temple’s broad courtyard and the surrounding streets became the domain of

beggars, street women, fixers, and adventurers. Though they dressed more neatly than on ordinary days, their faces and behavior gave them away.

When the chief priest of the “White Temple,” Father Shaum, received the message from the royal envoy, he did not panic. He considered the news carefully. After morning prayers, he delayed the priests heading to the dining hall and shared the information:

“Brothers, His Highness Astyages will soon visit our temple. We must prepare the fire temple without delay. We must welcome our noble and honorable guest with the dignity he deserves!”

Everyone dispersed to their duties. The chief priest kept his brother Saecam and his assistant behind.

The prayer chamber was large and windowless. Even with five or six torches burning, darkness lingered. It could be called the temple’s armory. Swords, spears, and axes hung on the walls were not for decoration—they were real weapons. A priest’s first duty was to protect the fire temple and the eternal flame from any threat. A sentry constantly patrolled the rooftop, and if danger arose, he was to strike the copper bell

with a bronze mace three times. At that sound, every temple servant was to rush to the chamber and arm themselves.

Saecam sat facing the chief priest and immediately voiced his concern. The weight of the welcoming ceremony would fall on him.

“Father, we were expecting the Shahanshah to visit—what changed?”

Shaum replied solemnly:

“They say His Majesty the Great Khagan—may the Great Hormuzd protect him—has not fully recovered from his illness.”

The assistant priest asked cautiously:

“Father, when exactly is His Highness the prince expected?”

“Impossible to say,” Shaum replied. “He might come tomorrow... or a week from now...”

Saecam frowned:

“Father, do you know what state the pilgrims leave our temple in? It’s all filth, mud, and litter. Can we get it ready in time?”

“What are you suggesting, brother? That we tell His Highness the prince we’re not ready for him and ask him not to come?” Shaum asked sharply.

Saecam swallowed:

“Father, it’s unlikely we can clean and organize the temple in just a couple of days. It will take at least a week.”

The chief priest looked at him and replied, with a touch of sarcasm:

“Of course, we’re unlucky to have such slovenly pilgrims and not enough time, but none of that changes anything. Let me remind you: if His Highness is displeased, we’ll end up like those dirty pilgrims you mentioned. You know what his temper is like.”

Saecam grew anxious:

“That’s exactly what I fear! When Prince Astyages is angry, it’s best not to look at him—he shows no mercy, not even to

priests! He sends them off to the stone quarries on Mount Bikini.”

The assistant agreed:

“True. Oh, how I miss Prince Urrana! What a kind heart he had!”

Saecam lit up at the memory:

“And his generosity! Every visit he gave us gold coins!” Then he asked, “Father, you go to the palace often—surely you must know. Is there any word on the poor man’s fate?”

Shaum had no intention of sharing what he knew with his subordinates:

“I have no information,” he said coldly, then dismissed them. “Brothers, go make preparations. No more idle talk!”

As the priests left the room, he called after them:

“Send Sister Kandul to my chamber—I’ll be there.”

# KANDUL BEFORE SHAUM THE FATHER



**K**andul's appearance was enough to strike fear into any onlooker—her face resembled a cold, extinguished hearth. She claimed it was the result of surviving leprosy. But her voice... that was something else entirely. When Kandul sang, pilgrims would fall into a trance. Her clothing and appearance made it nearly impossible to guess her age. Though often referred to as a “priestess sister,” Kandul was not of priestly rank—merely a servant. Yet her competence had made her an indispensable aide to the High Priest.

She oversaw everything related to the women of the temple—the “brides of fire,” their grooming, food, posture, even their sleeping arrangements. During ceremonial preparations, she intervened in every detail of their makeup. If she found anything about their appearance lacking, she would not rest until it was corrected. Since Shaum the Father had established seven altars, Kandul's workload had doubled.

Where she once cared for one bride of fire, she now tended to seven.

When Shaum the Father reached his chamber, Kandul was already waiting at the door. The assistant priest who ran his errands met them on the stairs and disappeared into the pitch-black room. Once seated, Shaum asked:

“Sister, is there anyone disturbing the peace of our girls?”

Kandul appeared surprised.

“That’s impossible, holy father! The sanctuary of Great Hormuzd is calm and protected,” she said, then asked quickly, “Do you have a reason to suspect something?”

One wing of the temple was reserved for the brides of fire, their attendants, handmaidens, and makeup artists. No man, other than the High Priest, was allowed beyond its boundaries.

With a warm smile, Shaum said:

“You seem surprised, sister! Are all humans truly devoted to Hormuzd? Is there no one who worships Ahriman?”

Kandul agreed:

“Of course there are such people, holy father!” she said firmly. “But I guard the realm of the brides of fire like a loyal black dog! You need not worry.”

Shaum moved to the heart of the matter:

“Very well, sister. Yesterday, I saw the Persian girl Kije in tears. Do you know why she was crying?”

Kandul answered immediately:

“Of course, holy father. Kije told me she dreamed of her mother, and the memory overwhelmed her. But don’t worry—I comforted her and she calmed down.”

Whenever Kandul spoke, her enchanting, melodious voice seemed to light up the dim room. Shaum gently said:

“Sister, remind her that weeping does not befit the child of sacred fire at the altar.” Then, without preamble, he changed the subject. “You’re likely aware of our upcoming important visitor?”

Before Kandul, who nodded in acknowledgment, could respond, he continued:

“From now on, you will personally oversee the appearance, dress, and decorum of all brides of fire, their companions,

attendants, bundle-carriers, even their slaves. Don't overlook the singers and musicians either—they must be presentable as well.”

Kandul asked in surprise:

“Holy father, who will even see the singers and musicians behind the altar?”

Shaum explained that the heir, Astyages, had once trained in priesthood. He could not be easily deceived and knew the inner workings of the temple. He might well go behind the altar. Kandul asked when exactly he would arrive.

“We don't know the exact date,” Shaum replied. “Probably in a few days. The girls and musicians must be ready and waiting by the altar. Every temple worker must be on their feet. As soon as the heir and his entourage arrive, the ceremony must begin.”

Kandul did not hide her concern:

“The weather has been terribly cold, holy father,” she said. “If the girls remain in the cold too long, they'll turn blue! No powder or rouge will help—they'll lose their beauty completely!”

Shaum quickly replied:

“Tell the firekeeper, in my name, to keep the bonfires burning every day, ceremony or not. Let the girls warm themselves by the sacred flames. Understood? If you’ve nothing more to say, you may go.”

Kandul leaned forward in the half-light to glimpse Shaum’s face:

“Father... did the Shahanshah cancel the sacrifice?”

The concern in her voice did not move the seasoned priest, but he answered patiently:

“Not yet, sister,” he said, then continued with a note of reprimand. “Stop trying to be involved in everything, Kandul. Our task is to conduct the ceremony properly.”

Kandul pressed on:

“But Father, what if the sacrifice is still in effect on the 46th day of the Great Id? What will we do?”

Shaum tried to calm her:

“Everyone knows the Shahanshah is against burning the brides of fire. He’ll likely cancel the sacrifice.” Then, cutting off

anything more she tried to say, he concluded firmly:  
“Even if he doesn’t, we will carry out his command! Sacrifices  
given in the name of Great Hormuzd must not frighten us.  
Now, go, sister. Be with the girls.”

## TƏTÜR AND THE SHAHANSHAH'S CONVERSATION



**A**fter everyone had left, the chief spy Tətür moved closer and seated himself nearer to the throne. The Shahanshah took a sip of wine and set the goblet on a silver tray. Lately, he had become addicted to sacred *haoma*, laced with opium herbs. The drink dulled his inner pain.

“So, how did it go? Did you enjoy it?” he asked proudly. “Did that mysterious expedition toward Egypt lighten your spirit?”

Tətür Atxa praised him:

“Great Hakan, it was a brilliant maneuver! You convinced everyone. Even the Grand Mobid believed it.”

The Shahanshah voiced his doubt:

“There you’re mistaken! Amitaxah the Elder is not so easily deceived,” he said, pausing briefly before anxiously asking, “Is it certain that Prince Urrana was involved in the conspiracy?”

Tətür nodded:

“It’s certain, Great Hakan! Right now, all spies and informants of the empire are on alert. As soon as there’s word of the prince, I’ll report it. We won’t be intimidated by conspiracies!”

He reminded the Shahanshah of past events. Kiaksar recalled them well. After the death of King Kaştariti of Media, Kiaksar’s own relatives had refused to acknowledge his right to the throne. His uncles even conspired with the enemies of the state. So many claimants rose that the young, well-meaning Kiaksar had to abandon the capital on the advice of his milk-brother. Only after the rivals destroyed each other did he return and take power.

Remembering all this, the Shahanshah said with approval:

“That move of yours back then was a stroke of genius, brother!” Then, sighing, he reached for his goblet again and lamented,

“I can’t escape these conspiracies... Seems they’ll follow me to the end of my days.”

# DARASP CONFIDES IN SƏCCAM



There were Persian spies embedded in all the empire's temples. One such agent, Darasp, roamed Media, gathering the intelligence collected by *mobids*, *dasturs*, and *mobidyars*, sending the most crucial pieces back to Parsargadae.

He had managed to infiltrate the “White Temple.” Nearly every day, he came and stood behind the columns watching the ceremonies, listening to Kandul's enchanting songs. This caused concern in Səccam the priest. He feared Tətür Atxa's network of spies. One day, when Darasp needlessly risked his cover again, Səccam reprimanded him and warned he'd report him to Parsargadae.

Darasp reflected for a moment, unable to think of a better option, and decided to reveal his story to the priest. Səccam, moved by what he heard, pitied the nobleman:

“What a torment you’ve endured, Your Excellency!” Then, apologizing, he added, “Forgive me—I didn’t mean to wound your heart earlier.”

Darasp accepted the apology and then confided his suspicions about Kandul:

“I suspect the woman you call Sister Kandul is actually a runaway bride of fire. She must have changed her name. I believe she disfigured herself intentionally.”

Səccam gasped in shock:

“That can’t be!” But then, with hesitation, he asked, “So... what do you intend to do now?”

Darasp, not raising his head, replied:

“I don’t know yet. I need time to think.” As he left the temple, he gave the priest his new address.

“One of my servants has vanished. I don’t know if he was captured or ran away. Just in case, I’ve changed where I stay. I don’t want Tətür Atxa’s men finding my trail.”

# THE TORMENT OF THE BRIDE OF FIRE, KIJƏ



**A**s the 46th day of the Great Id approached, the Bride of Fire, Kijə, couldn't sleep at night. She wandered her spacious chamber until dawn, fluttering like a bird caught in a trap—desperately searching for a way out, but finding none.

One day soon, she was to be thrown into the sacred flames. Her body would part from the world of light, her soul would ascend to the heavens, and she would unite with Great Hormuzd. For days now, fragrant oils were being rubbed on the brides' bodies, and their hair treated with shimmering solutions. At mealtime, all drinks were laced with intoxicating herbal sedatives and strong wine.

As always, the beautiful Brides of Fire stood in the sanctuary amid applause, listening to the wishes of hundreds.

That day was especially cold. As soon as the crowd dispersed, the "Brides of Fire" hurriedly stepped down from the altar. Sister Kandül stood on the final step, greeting them one

by one and escorting each to her chamber with the help of attendants. Last came her favorite, Kijə. Kandül gently took her arm:

“Let’s go, Bride of Fire... your face is pale. You look tired—you need rest,” she said warmly. “Try not to think about what troubles you.”

Kijə replied wearily:

“I can’t help it, Sister. As soon as I close my eyes, the whole world dresses in mourning. I feel drained. Only the Eternal Flames can lift this weight from my soul,” she added with a melancholy smile. “And that day isn’t far off now.”

Just then, a beggar stepped out from behind one of the columns and blocked their path. He dropped to his knees and rasped:

“Bride of Fire, I have a wish to make! But I must speak to you alone.”

Kijə froze. Despite his tattered disguise, she recognized the beggar's voice—it was Darasp. As Kandül stepped forward to drive him off, Kijə intervened:

“It’s all right, Sister. Let him speak—he has a wish to share.” Then, softly:

“Please, go ahead. I’ll listen and return shortly.”

Kandül, seeing nothing suspicious, walked off. It wasn’t unusual for pilgrims to request private blessings.

Once alone, Darasp looked around to ensure no one was watching and whispered:

“My dearest Kijə... you didn’t expect me, did you?”

With sorrow in her voice, Kijə answered:

“When I saw you yesterday, my whole being trembled. The frozen blood in my veins began to flow again... But alas! It was only a weakness. It has passed. I cannot stray from my path. I wear the sacred ring of the Atashgah. I am a Bride of Fire! They call us the innocent daughters of Great Hormuzd.”

“My beloved Kijə, forget those words! You’re not on the altar now,” Darasp interrupted. “Without me, you’ll perish.”

“So be it,” Kijə whispered. “Perhaps that is my fate. But to cling to life at any cost brings no honor. I cannot break the vows I’ve made.”

Darasp groaned:

“I cannot live without you.”

Tears welled in Kijə’s eyes:

“Stay away from me... you’re tearing my heart apart!”

From afar, Kandül called out:

“Bride of Fire! Are you coming?”

As Kijə tried to leave, Darasp grabbed her arm. Unexpectedly, the girl turned on him with uncharacteristic harshness:

“Let go of me, poor soul! Don’t you know a Bride of Fire is untouchable?”

Darasp instinctively let go. Kijə hurried toward Sister Kandül without looking back.

# A CLIENT OF THE ATASHGAH



**T**raditionally, on the seventh day of the Great Id, the holiday festivities came to an end. By noon, visitors, pilgrims, worshippers, and supplicants would begin to leave the temples. The bonfires would dim, people would return to their daily routines, and solemn silence would once again reign over the atashgahs (fire temples).

Only after that would the mobed brothers, mobed sisters, and all temple workers—who had borne the full burden of the ceremonies—finally get to retreat, exhausted, to rest.

But not this year.

At the “White Temple,” where everyone awaited the arrival of Crown Prince Astyages, no one was resting. When Səccam Brother’s turn for rest finally came, he was overjoyed. But just as he lay down, a guard’s shout summoned him. Evening was falling.

Sticking his head out the door, Səccam asked irritably:

“What is it?”

The guard lowered his voice:

“It’s someone from the shaman temple—they’re asking for wine.”

On the outskirts beyond the city walls, in the Scythian quarter, there was a temple built in honor of the god Ares. Locals called it the *shamanxana*.

Sæccam waved his hand indifferently:

“Not important people. Tell them to come in the morning,” he said, about to go back inside.

The guard rushed forward:

“The shaman refuses to leave. Says he won’t go back without wine. His cart’s right outside the cellar. Can we really turn away a loyal customer empty-handed?”

Sæccam snapped:

“You let his cart inside without permission? Aren’t you afraid of the Chief Mobed’s wrath?”

# THE SCYTHIAN, AGÏT



Realizing it was pointless to argue, Sæccam sighed, threw on a thick sleeveless cloak over his white robe, wrapped his *kushti* belt around his waist three times, tied it with four knots, and headed toward the wine cellar.

There, at the cellar door, sat a familiar Scythian on a cart.

Sæccam scowled:

“Is the daylight offered by Hormuzd not enough for you? Must you creep around like Ahriman at night?”

He signaled to the freed slaves (former market-bought servants now liberated by the temple):

“Take a torch with you—it's dark down there.”

The slaves, out of habit, offloaded the barrels from the cart and rolled them down, taking a torch from the wall with them.

The Scythian, already drunk, called out:

“Esteemed Sæccam, the dusk is just beginning—it's not night yet. Forgive me, we had too many pilgrims today. We ran out of wine early!”

Sæccam sneered:

“Do your pilgrims come to the temple to drink wine or to worship?”

He never liked this particular Scythian—his name was Agit. The man always smelled like a barn, probably slept with his horses. Yet he spoke the local language fluently, almost like a native Mede.

Agit didn't take offense:

“Scythians have many gods! If they don't drink to honor each one, the worship is invalid.”

Sæccam chuckled:

“What a kind of worship! Your temple looks more like a tavern. At this rate, we won't be able to supply you with enough wine.”

Agit laughed along:

“What, are you giving it away for free? We pay you silver by the handful for that vinegar you call wine! Thanks to us, your temple’s getting rich—and you still grumble!”

There was truth in what the Scythian said. Years earlier, Shahanshah Cyaxares had granted permission to the Scythians, Jews, Greeks, and Indians living beyond the capital walls to build their own places of worship.

These new temples bought all their wine from the “White Temple.”

The Scythian shamans were the best customers—buying up wine by the barrel, no matter how sour or sharp it was.

Sæccam changed the subject, softening his tone:

“You usually came in pairs. Where’s your partner? I mean the shaman Bittey. He was always joking around.”

Agit grinned:

“Ah, that jester friend of yours ran off! Stole from the chief shaman’s vault and vanished. They’re hunting him now.”

Sæccam curled his lip with disdain:

“Even your shamans steal?”

Agit shrugged:

“A shaman’s only human. Anyway, from now on, I’ll be doing the dealing. Forget Bittey.”

The laborers returned, rolling the full barrels. Agit jumped down, helping them load the cart.

Sæccam counted the handful of silver coins Agit handed over, clicked his tongue in satisfaction, stuffed them deep into his robe pocket, and walked off toward his chamber without a goodbye.

# LYDIAN GOLD



The priest barely had time to remove his outer robe when Agit burst into the room. Səccam couldn't contain himself and snapped harshly:

“Will you never leave me alone? What more do you want now?”

Ignoring the priest's rudeness, Agit calmly stated that he needed *haoma*<sup>1</sup>. When the priest shook his head, the Scythian pulled out a few silver coins from his pocket:

“Honorable Səccam, our high shaman is ill. They say *haoma* will cure him,” he said. “I don't want much—just a single jug would be enough, and I'd be grateful.”

Səccam finally lost his temper:

“You infidel! Don't shove your coins in my face! You know the sacred drink is not under my control—it's up to the Chief Mobed...”

But Agit countered confidently:

“You can't fool me, Brother Sæccam. I know that after the Chief Mobed, you hold the most authority in the temple. If you can't give it yourself, at least take me to the Chief so I can make my request to him.”

Sæccam chuckled bitterly:

“Right! As if the holy father has nothing better to do than deal with drunkard infidels like you. Get lost!”

Agit didn't plead further. He simply reached into his pocket again and pulled out a gold coin, offering it to Sæccam:

“Give this to the Chief Mobed. He'll see me then.”

When the priest saw the coin glowing like daylight in his chamber, Agit added in a low voice:

“That's Lydian gold.” He gave Sæccam a meaningful look. “Don't ask where I got it—I'll tell that to the Chief Mobed, not you.”

Whatever thoughts passed through the priest's mind, he asked the Scythian to wait, then rushed off to the Chief Mobed's chamber. When he returned shortly after, he said:

“Come tomorrow. The Chief Mobed isn't in right now.”

# DARASP'S PLAN TO RESCUE KIJƏ



**T**he next morning, when Darasp came to the temple and asked for advice, Səccam responded with hesitation:

“What if you're wrong? Kandül sister is the Chief Mobed's favorite. If she goes to him and complains, both of us are finished.”

“We have to try,” Darasp replied passionately. “Without her help, there's no way to get Kijə out of here.”

“If you're absolutely sure...”

“We'll find out right now,” Darasp said with a sorrowful smile. “Send for Kandül. When she gets here, we'll question her together.”

Səccam did as he asked, stepping outside to have a guard summon Kandül. Then he recounted what had happened the previous evening:

“Your Highness, what business would a drunken Scythian have with the Chief Mobed? And where would he get Lydian gold? What do you make of it? Should we start watching them?”

Darasp’s mind was in turmoil. He couldn’t fully grasp the implications of the priest’s story, but said curtly:

“It’s a distraction. We have more urgent matters to deal with!”

*Haoma* – a sacred, expensive ritual drink (sometimes likened to wine).

## DARASP REVEALS KANDÜL'S SECRET



Just then, the door opened. Kandül entered the chamber, and Brother Sæccam, motioning toward the unfamiliar figure seated inside, introduced him:

“Sister, have a seat. This man is one of our fellow priests,” he said. “He has a few questions for you.”

Once she was seated, Kandül’s melodious voice filled the chamber:

“I’m listening, priest brother.”

Darasp, heartened by the strength in her voice, spoke openly:

“I’m interested in one of the ‘brides of fire’ under your care.”

“In what sense do you mean *interested*?” she asked.

“As a man.”

Kandül looked at Brother Sæccam, then at the stranger. Then she replied firmly:

“The ‘brides of fire’ belong to the great Hörmüzd! No mortal man may take interest in them.”

But her curiosity got the better of her:

“Which bride are we talking about?”

“I’m talking about Kijə, sister. I won’t hide anything from you—she was my fiancée before she ended up here,” Darasp said, briefly recounting the story of their love. “Help me, sister!”

“What you say breaks my heart... but I can’t help you. Even if I wanted to, it’s not possible. They’re preparing to reunite with the Great Hörmüzd now.”

She swallowed hard, then added with sudden anger:

“I’m only tolerating this conversation out of respect for Brother Sæccam. I swear by the Great Hörmüzd, if it weren’t for him, I’d hand you over to Tətür Atxa’s spies myself!”

Darasp ignored her threats and looked at her meaningfully:

“I was educated in the holy city of Shiz. There’s a legend still told there—about a beautiful-voiced girl named Vəçə who once fled the altar. People still remember her. The spies are still searching for her.”

Kandül looked as if she’d been struck by lightning. Her tongue faltered:

“Don’t expose me! I’ll do whatever you say,” she pleaded.

“As long as you follow our instructions, we won’t turn you in,” Darasp said with a malicious grin. “But if you try to deceive us, consider yourself dead. You know the order against you still stands! The moment you’re caught, you’ll be thrown into the fire.”

Kandül offered a faint hope:

“Five years have passed... Who would still care about me now?”

“That doesn’t matter! Some betrayals can never go unpunished, no matter how much time passes. Your punishment is needed—for the sake of example,” he said.

“I’ve already punished myself!” Kandül cried, showing her face. “To avoid capture, I joined the colony of lepers. The sores and ulcers made me what I am today.”

Though Darasp felt pity, he muttered coldly:

“It still isn’t enough.”

## DARASP AND KIJƏ'S SECOND MEETING



**T**hat same day, with Kandül's help, Darasp met with Kijə once more—but the meeting brought him no peace of mind. Kijə stood at a distance, like a stranger.

Darasp's voice trembled:

“My beloved Kijə! I've searched all over Media to find you! I've looked until I was utterly exhausted. I never gave up hope,” he said, stepping toward her. “Now, even the eternal flames cannot take you from me!”

Kijə stopped him with a gesture, and Darasp recoiled:

“Aren't you even happy to see me?” he asked.

“A girl who wears the ring of Great Hörmüzd cannot rejoice at the arrival of a strange man,” Kijə replied.

Darasp responded passionately:

“So now I'm a stranger to you? Very well!” he said, then shifted the conversation in a hopeful tone. “Tell me, how did you end up here?”

Kijə sighed:

“As soon as the uprising began, all the men of the village went to Parsargada and never returned. Within a week, Median soldiers stormed in. They burned our homes and drove the women, girls, and young children away. We were taken to the slave market in Ecbatana. A merchant bought your sisters. An old man bought me. I thought he was taking me to be his wife—I wanted to die. But the Great Hörmüzd had mercy. It turns out the old man had taken a vow and gifted me to the White Temple. Once I wore the fire maiden’s robe, my entire world changed.”

“I can still save you! It’s not too late,” Darasp whispered. “There’s so little time left before the 46th day of the Great Id!”

“I’m already prepared. I’m ready to throw myself into the arms of fire.”

Just then, Kandül peeked in through the door:

“Brother, the fire maidens must go up to the altar!” she said, casting a worried glance at Darasp. “If needed, I’ll arrange another meeting for you...”

Without looking back, Kijə walked away from Darasp and exited through the open door.

# THE SCYTHIAN AGIT BEFORE HIGH PRIEST SHAUM



**A**t the appointed time, Sæccam brought the Scythian to the High Priest's chamber. Though Shaum Ata had finished his prayers, he was still kneeling. He motioned for the Scythian to approach. When Sæccam tried to sit, eager to take part in the conversation, the High Priest quietly said:

“Brother, leave us alone.”

The White Temple of Ekbatana, nestled against the innermost of the city's seven concentric walls, was in truth widely known among the commoners as the *Black Temple*. This, too, had a reason. Between the walls of black stone and white stone stretched an area populated by the poorest of the city: vagabonds, beggars, streetwalkers, day laborers, former slaves and convicts, war cripples, and outlaws of every kind. These people were barred from the Shah's Temple behind the golden fence, the aristocrats' Blue Temple, and the craftsmen's Orange Temple. Their only place of worship was the Black Temple.

Shaum Ata had been elevated to the rank of High Priest at a young age, with the blessing of Amitaxah Ata. His service in the Lydian war earned him prestige and the attention of the king. He had established a field temple in the war camp, built tents for the wounded, and trained priest-healers. Even the conservative Grand Mobid Amitaxah had praised the reforms he introduced at the White Temple and recommended them to other fire temples across the empire.

Now, Shaum Ata motioned Agit to sit and immediately questioned him:

“Well then, Scythian, what is it you want to tell me? Where did you get the Lydian gold? Who sent you here?”

Agit interrupted him in a calm and sober voice:

“Holy father, I’m not a Scythian. I’m a Median. A true-born Magus from Mughan. I was captured by the Scythians as a child and enslaved. No one sent me here—I came on my own. I came to serve my homeland.”

Shaum Ata, renowned for his spiritual insight, could read a person’s soul. That was what had earned him his reputation as a true Magus. Suddenly, he grabbed Agit’s hand and stared into

his eyes. The move was so swift, Agit couldn't evade it. The High Priest released his hand and said:

"You speak the truth—you're not deceiving me," then added, "We're from the same land. I'm from Mughan, too."

Agit's eyes filled with tears. He pulled back his robe and showed the brand mark on his shoulder.

"You won't find anyone more wretched than me. I'm a slave in my own country, in my beloved Media. If you knew what I've been through, holy father, it would shake you to your core."

Shaum Ata was moved by his fellow countryman's story but gently steered the conversation back:

"Brother, we'll have time for that story. Tell me about the Lydian gold—where did you get it?"

The High Priest's use of *brother* brightened Agit's face.

"I got the coin from another Scythian. He asked for a cup of wine, and I gave it to him."

"A whole gold coin for a single cup?" Shaum Ata's expression changed. "Isn't that a bit much?"

Agit smiled back:

“Holy father, the man was drunk,” he said. “I’ll tell you everything I know in detail...”

# AGIT REVEALS THE PLOT



Just then, the door of the chamber swung open and Brother Sæccam burst in:— Father, there are men from the palace here to see you, — he said. — It’s General Harpaq’s aide, Commander Kittan, accompanied by two junior officers.

The High Mobid hesitated for a moment, then said:

— Take them to the dining hall, offer them some good wine. I’ll join them as soon as I finish this conversation.

After Sæccam left, Shaum the High Mobid turned to the Scythian and urged him again:

— You see I don’t have much time. Keep your story short.

Agit began to speak:

— For some months now, I’ve noticed the Scythian quarter expanding. New people keep arriving. Of course, a Scythian doesn’t need a house—just a horse and a cart. These newcomers present themselves as merchants, but from their mannerisms, it’s clear they’re ex-soldiers. They carry weapons under their robes.

— Last night, I delivered wine to the tavern. I'd had a few myself and was quite drunk. The tavern was warm, but it was freezing outside. I didn't want to return to the temple, so I crept upstairs and hid in the hayloft. It was cozy, and I fell asleep.

The High Mobid sighed:

— I beg you in the name of Holy Hormuzd—keep it brief.

— I'm nearly finished, Father, — Agit continued calmly. — Just before dawn, I was awakened by voices. I peeked through the slats and saw the place full of people. But I didn't recognize a single face. These weren't the usual drunkards; they were Scythian nobles. They were gathered around a table where two men sat—one addressed as Prince Atey, the other as Prince Urran.

The High Mobid jolted:

— Prince Urran? Are you sure?

Agit nodded:

— Holy Father, I was even more surprised than you. It seemed to be the end of the meeting. The Scythians approached one by one to kiss the prince's hand. Just then, another Scythian

entered. Prince Atey exclaimed, “There’s our emissary! Honorable Aqar, we’ve been waiting for you!”

He took off his lynx-fur coat and said, “Tətür Atxa’s men never sleep! They’re always lurking near my house. I had to lull them before I could sneak out!”

Then he embraced Prince Urran and said, “Don’t worry, everything will go as planned. One day, we’ll place you on the throne of Media!”

Agit paused, glanced longingly at the wine goblets on the shelf, licked his lips, then continued:

— Prince Urran frowned and stepped aside. “You said the same thing last time,” he grumbled. But Aqar reassured him, “Don’t hold a grudge. We are all working for you. I’m building a large army in the Bikini forests, and you’ll be its commander. I promised your mother Agniya that her son would become king of Media.”

The two embraced again. They didn’t linger long. Prince Atey said they would meet again soon for a proper discussion. They dispersed just as the first rooster crowed. That’s all, Holy Father.

The High Mobid placed his hand over his heart and bowed to Agit:

— You’ve acted like a true son of Media, — he said. — From now on, report everything you see and hear directly to me without delay.

Agit looked worried:

— And what about me, Father? If the Scythians find out I’ve betrayed them, my life won’t be worth a jug of wine.

The High Mobid smiled:

— From now on, you needn’t worry about your life.

# PREPARATIONS FOR WAR



When the High Mobid entered the dining hall, both junior officers were already drunk. Even Commander Kittan's speech was slurred. He stubbornly explained the reason for his visit:

— Deputy Commander Harpaq instructed me to visit every temple with vineyards and assess their wine reserves, Holy Father, — he said. — Let's begin with the *haoma* stock.

What the priests referred to as the “sacred drink,” the common folk simply called *haoma*. From Kittan's manner, it was evident that he came from a humble background. This was unsurprising — Commander Harpaq preferred men of lower class, keeping his distance from the sons of nobility.

The High Mobid subtly corrected his phrasing:

— As of today, we have fifty jugs of the sacred drink. I assure you, it is well protected, — he said. — As for ordinary wine, we have plenty — thousands of full amphorae.

Kittan pulled a small clay tablet from his wide armband and began recording the High Mobid's statement with a bronze stylus.

The wine reserves in the temples were under the army's jurisdiction. When war broke out, the wine was poured into leather wineskins and loaded onto the supply carts. Sometimes, when provisions were delayed, soldiers had to survive on coarse barley cakes. In such cases, wine came to their rescue. They would soften the hard bread with wine and eat it. Haoma, however, was reserved only for high-ranking officers.

Kittan tucked the tablet back into his armguard and, with drunken insistence, asked:

— Can't we double the haoma supply?

The High Mobid hid his smile:

— That's not possible, honorable Kittan. Preparing it takes time — it's not up to us.

Kittan nodded as if he knew something more. When he stood up, the junior officers quickly followed. They bowed silently and left the dining hall. Kittan, clearly inebriated, climbed onto his horse with difficulty:

— Holy Father, I have a feeling the king is preparing for war again. I doubt he'll have time to visit the temples, — he said, then answered the High Mobid's unspoken question. — The target country is not yet known. Once the troops assemble, it will be revealed. It seems the Shah cannot live without war.

# TƏTÜR'S EXPANDING DUTIES



**T**ətür Atxa came from a noble line of Magi. Though he dressed as a Mobid, he had left the priesthood at a young age and chose a path more suited to his nature. He began his service as the warden of the royal prison. Many nobles who had incurred the wrath of the king passed through his hands. His reputation for ruthlessness preceded him.

Tətür Atxa was not only the head of the prison — he was also the Shah's chief of intelligence. He was the eyes and ears of the state. Nothing escaped his notice — not in Ecbatana, not in Media, not even in the distant satrapies or neighboring kingdoms. Under his command served hundreds of spies, agents, informers, and provocateurs. He spared no expense from the royal treasury, determined that no event unfold without his involvement.

After King Cyaxares once had a traitorous chief eunuch thrown into the dungeons, he entrusted that position to Tətür Atxa as well. At first, the chief spy was shaken by the prospect.

Overseeing the harem was a risky duty — one that could invoke the king's wrath at any moment.

# A COOK



As soon as Tətür Atxa left the royal court, he returned to his chamber beside the dungeon. Entering, he whispered something to one of the guards at the door. The eldest of the scribes working at the table immediately stood up and, as was customary, poured a few sips of *haoma* from the goblet into a decanter, offering it to his master. With the drink, Tətür Atxa slowly felt his fatigue slip away and moved into the next room. He addressed the woman the guard had brought in ahead of him:

— Seems like you've forgotten who you owe your gratitude to?

The color drained from the beautifully dressed woman's face:

— How could I ever forget? I am forever my master's humble servant!

Tətür Atxa had served the king for forty years. Like a spider spinning a vast web, his influence spanned the entire empire. He found useful people among the lowest classes, especially

beautiful women living in destitution. He would have them trained, fed, clothed, and furnished with fake noble lineage. Over the years, these women became servants, beauticians, seamstresses, or handmaidens in the royal harem and noble households. Some were even gifted by the king to satraps, governors, vassals, or lieutenants. The invisible strings tied to their feet were in Tətür Atxa's hands. When needed, a simple gesture would set them in motion.

The woman standing before him was one such example. Once assigned to the service of Lady Aqniya, sister of the Scythian king İşpaq and one of the king's wives, she quickly earned the lady's trust. Her name was Aspaz, a native of the Pars satrapy. She was a true find — skilled in cosmetics, tailoring, herbal remedies, cooking, and even bloodletting. Both the lady and Prince Urran relied on her presence during their baths. The playful games she performed with her hands, feet, and body were enough to bring the dead to life. In short, Aspaz lacked no talent.

She regularly reported to Tətür Atxa about Lady Aqniya. But the chief inquisitor often reminded her with threats to stay in line and not get too bold.

— So, tell me, what's the reason for Lady Aqniya's sudden break from mourning?

Aspaz, pale with fear, gazed at Tötür Atxa's corpse-like face, hollow eyes, thin lips, and shaved head, then whispered hastily:

— I don't know, my lord! We're all bewildered. She was mourning Prince Urran's disappearance... Then, out of nowhere, she summoned musicians, began dancing, and forced all of us to join her.

Tötür Atxa cut her off:

— Fine, and when did this change in her start?

He moved to the table and lifted a white cloth to organize the instruments hidden beneath it.

— Speak in detail...

— Yesterday, after midday, my lord! — Aspaz glanced fearfully at the torture tools on the table and quickly confessed. — On the fourth day of the Id festival, the lady dressed up and ordered us to prepare. She informed the eunuch she wanted to go to the White Temple. The palanquins arrived quickly, we boarded, and the guards led the way. The temple was crowded

with pilgrims and worshippers. On the way back, the lady was already cheerful, lighthearted — no longer the same person.

— Did anyone approach her at the temple?

— No, my lord, the guards allowed no one near. Only an old beggar's cries caught her attention. At her signal, the beggar was allowed near the palanquin. Merciful Lady Aqniya gave him alms, and in return, the beggar offered a small copper token from around his neck.

Tətür Atxa pondered:

— A token? Was anything inscribed on it?

— No, my lord. There was only a circle etched with two eyes, a nose, and a mouth inside. That's all I remember... The token is now on her vanity table.

Tətür Atxa paced the room with a clamp-like tool in hand, then sat cross-legged against the wall:

— If there's nothing else, leave.

# TƏTÜR ATXA BREAKS ASPAZ'S RESISTANCE



**A**spaz fled Tətür Atxa's chamber as though escaping death, yet the fear didn't leave her. As she ascended toward the golden-walled royal palaces, her mind gradually cleared. Suddenly, she stopped, fought her fear, and turned back.

Passing the guards silently, she re-entered the chamber. Tətür Atxa hadn't moved, as if expecting her return. She knelt before him:

— My lord, forgive me! I lied. Ahriman led me astray.

A smug smile crossed Tətür Atxa's face. He was not fooled by her submission:

— I knew you'd come back. Now, tell me what you hid.

— My lord, the copper token was sent by Prince Urran. That token...

He cut her off with a gesture:

— ...is a replica of the golden pendant Prince Urran wore around his neck. The circle and facial features etched on it represent the Scythian Sun God Agni. Lady Aqniya brought this talisman from Scythia and always kept it around her son's neck for protection. The two small "suns" below the image refer to Lady Aqniya and *you*. With this token, Urran expresses that he cherishes both of you as much as the Sun God himself. If that's all you had to say, I already knew it.

Fear, amazement, and awe battled on Aspaz's face. In a trembling voice, she asked:

— My lord, is there anything in this world you don't know?

— Of course there is. For instance, I don't understand why you lied. If you're the smartest of my women, I can't imagine what the foolish ones are like!

Aspaz stammered:

— I love the prince, my lord! I lied to protect him.

Tətür Atxa smiled coldly:

— Such romantic nonsense! It's hardly a convincing lie. — Then, mocking her: — Still, I suppose no one doubts your

loyalty to the prince. Lady Aqniya doesn't swear by your name for nothing.

— In short, I will obey all your commands. But I will not spy on the prince anymore.

Tətür Atxa stood and looked down at her:

— You know it wouldn't be hard to punish you. Scarring that pretty face would be easy.

— I cannot be the cause of harm to the one I love, — Aspaz whispered. — I'm ready for any torture.

Tətür Atxa ignored her emotional outburst:

— If you insist, then Lady Aqniya, the prince, and the entire court will learn that you're not a noble Pars girl — just a common tavern dancer. Everyone will turn their backs on you.

Aspaz stayed silent, her defiance amusing Tətür Atxa rather than angering him:

— That's nothing. Don't forget, I hold the lives of your real father, mother, and your younger siblings in my hands. So far, they've lived comfortably on the money I've given you to send them. One misstep from you, and they'll all be swallowed by disaster.

Aspaz began to sob. Were it not for her loved ones, she would have taken her own life long ago. Their constant peril paralyzed her. Tears streamed down her face. Tətür Atxa waited for her to calm down and asked:

— So, what do you say?

Aspaz fell at his feet:

— Mercy, my lord...

Tətür Atxa, pleased with her surrender, gave her a new assignment.

# ŞAUM BEFORE THE HIGH MÖBID



**T**he Möbid of Möbids, the High Möbid Amitaxah Father, received the news brought by the head priest of the White Temple calmly. The reappearance of Prince Urran, who had vanished during the Lydian war and whose fate remained unknown, gave strength to the old man's long-held suspicions. He knew that every event had meaning—nothing in the world happened without a reason.

— Are you sure this man isn't deceiving you? — the old man asked.

Shaum Father shook his head:

— It's impossible to deceive me, Father.

Amitaxah Father had elevated Shaum, despite his not being of priestly lineage, to the rank of head priest because he wished to refresh the ranks of the clergy. His disciple could not only read hearts but even see through the wall to the other side. The

High Möbid had made use of this talent many times and had no doubt about his abilities.

A serious decision had to be made. The High Möbid slowly untied the *kushti* — a wide belt braided from white sheep's wool — from around his waist, placed it on his knee and stroked it, then wound it around himself three times and tied four knots at the ends. Only then did he speak:

— From experience, I know we cannot proceed in this matter without Tətür Atxa. What do you think?

Shaum had a different opinion, but he trusted the High Priest's wisdom more than his own judgment, so he folded his hands across his chest and bowed his head:

— I bow to your wisdom!

The old priest looked at Shaum with a light smirk, reading his thoughts as easily as an open book. Then he called one of the junior priests standing at the door:

— Invite the honorable Atxa here!

# SHAUM'S PAST



Shaum's childhood was spent in Mughan. His father earned a living as a woodcutter — his job was to bring wood from the forest, clean the ashes from the temple hearth, and follow the orders of the fire master. The temple had been built at the point where the Peştəsər mountains ended and the Mughan plain began. In summer, villagers would take their herds to the mountains, and in winter, return to the plain, always stopping at the temple during their migrations.

Having lost his mother early, little Shaum was always at his father's side. He dreamed of becoming a priest, but his father tried to make him understand:

— My son, we are not of priestly descent, you cannot be a priest. Our destiny is coal-making. If you're smart, maybe you can be the fire master's assistant.

But little Shaum disliked his father's trade. He had seen too many times the screams, the writhing pain, and moans of brides thrown into the fire in the name of Great Hormuzd. The stench was unbearable. Despite being a coal-maker's son, he would

circle around the High Möbid, enthusiastically fulfilling his orders.

When he turned fourteen, disaster struck their village. It was mid-autumn. The community was preparing to bring livestock down from the highlands. Suddenly, Scythian riders raided the village. Some armed priests resisted, but it didn't last long. The old High Möbid lay unconscious from a severe wound. Somehow, half-alive, he crawled into the hearth, where young Shaum was hiding. When he saw the boy, a smile appeared on his wounded face:

— Great Hormuzd has sent you to me as a gift! — he said and called him closer. — My son, I am dying. The relics of Prophet Zoroaster are now your responsibility. For the sake of Great Hormuzd...

With tears in his eyes, Shaum replied:

— Holy Father, for Great Hormuzd, I will even face death.

Groaning, the old man whispered:

— Don't interrupt me, this is my last breath, listen! Wait until dark, then go to my cell. Take my staff, my copper bowl, my veil, and my seal. These were passed down to me from

Prophet Zoroaster. Take them to Amitaxah Father in Ekbatana, the Möbid of Möbids. He was one of my disciples. I taught him when he studied at Holy Shiz. With his help, you will become a priest.

— Holy Father, I am not of priestly blood, I cannot become a priest — Shaum whispered. — Besides, I do not know the way to the capital!

— You'll find it by asking. Do not interrupt! — the old man rasped again. — From this day on, you are my son! You will carry my name, and always honor it! Aghhh...

Before he could finish his words, the old man passed away. Shaum hid in the hearth for two more days, fearing the Scythians. On the third day, certain that things had quieted down, he went to the ruined cell of the High Möbid, retrieved the relics of the Prophet Zoroaster, and set off for Ekbatana. It took him six months of travel. Whether it was due to the relics' blessing or his own luck, no one knows, but he reached the empire's capital safely. He went straight to the main temple.

Though the boy's story sounded like a legend, the Möbid of Möbids believed him. Honoring the memory of his old teacher, he took Shaum under his wing.

# THE GREAT KING INQUIRES ABOUT URRAN



**W**ith the king's permission, Tötür Atxa knelt beside the throne and whispered what he knew into the monarch's ear.

It was nearly impossible to surprise King Cyaxares.

— What's with the hushed voice? — he asked.

— Just in case, O Great Khagan, — Tötür Atxa whispered again. — There may be those who wish to overhear our conversation. Our enemies have even infiltrated the royal court.

The King knew his spymaster didn't speak idly.

— Speak, — he ordered quietly.

— Great Khagan, Prince Urran is alive...

The old conqueror flinched, though he maintained his composure.

— That is good news, — he said.

Tötür Atxa tried to understand him:

— It is not good news at all, Great Khagan. The story of the prince's abduction or death was a lie. It seems the prince has taken the path of treason!

After recounting everything he knew, the old warrior's face lit up — as if he had just received joyous news. He could conceal his thoughts from anyone except his chief spymaster. When Tötür Atxa was wrong, it gave the King a childlike delight. This time was no different.

The King smiled bitterly:

— See what a clever son I have? That's exactly why I loved him more than anyone else! Imagine — right under the nose of the chief of Midia's intelligence, this whole affair unfolded!

Tötür Atxa was disconcerted. He knew the King was right. He had failed to foresee the prince's descent into betrayal. Apparently, Urran's Scythian mentors had outmaneuvered him — more cunning, more calculating. But Great Hormuzd protected the throne, and the conspirators' desires had crumbled. Tötür Atxa's blood was boiling:

— Great Khagan, with your permission, I'll bring that clever prince before you! I'll surround the Scythian quarters with two or three battalions. Those who resist will fall; the rest will be captured. I'll drag the prince here in chains.

— What's wrong with you? Has Ahriman taken your senses? Do you think the prince is foolish enough to sit around the Scythian quarter waiting for you? Fool! Wait and see where this trail of treason leads, — the King gave his final order.

Then, turning to the newly arrived regent who appeared at the door, he asked:

— What is it?

Bixur stepped forward, hand to his chest:

— The envoys of Babylon and Lydia are requesting an audience.

With a firm gesture, the King dismissed the regent and, without looking back, quietly asked Tətür Atxa:

— And what do you make of my wife's involvement in this conspiracy?

Tətür Atxa shrank under the sharpness in the sovereign's voice, but cautiously defended the queen:

— Lady Aqniya is not a conspirator, merely a mother who loves her son.

The King said regretfully:

— A mother who loves a son that defies his father.

— A mother with only one son has no other choice, — Tötür Atxa replied quickly.

That answer somewhat soothed the King — it echoed his own heart.

# THE ENVOYS



Only then did he clap his hands, and the regent returned with the foreign envoys. But the King did not spend much time with them. He didn't even invite them to sit.

He said:

— Envoys, tell your kings that Shahanshah Cyaxares is preparing for a campaign in Egypt. I won't waste your time speaking of the great spoils ahead — you're informed men. In short, I wish to see my royal brothers as allies by my side. I hope they will join my expedition.

He gave each envoy a turn to speak, but listened with distracted indifference. After a few polite replies, he dismissed them with a final command:

— What interests me is the number of Babylonian and Lydian troops that will join the glorious Median army. Return swiftly to your lands. Bring me the replies of my royal brothers.

Then, turning to the regent who had just returned, he gave another order:

— Tomorrow, summon Prince Aqar to my court. I have a message for the Scythian king.

# THE THORN IN MEDIA'S FOOT



Once again alone in the audience chamber, the chief spy, seated on the final step of the throne, returned to their earlier conversation without preamble:

— Great Khagan, Prince İşpaq cannot be forgiven for plotting against the Median Empire, — he said. — And it's time to remove the thorn that pierced Media's foot twenty-eight years ago and has since festered.

The Shahanshah immediately responded:

— Brother, to be honest with you — I fear being remembered in the chronicles as a dishonorable man.

— I am ready to bear your guilt! — Tətür Atxa declared with courage. — Just like when we were children, I'll take the punishment too!

— Just like when we were children? — the Shahanshah joked back lightly.

Whenever Cyaxares saw Tətür Atxa, he was reminded of his gentle wet nurse. Her warm memory always soothed his heart. When he was a boy, and caused trouble, she would punish her own son, Tətür, in his place. Tətür would endure her slaps without a word.

— Brother Khagan, you cannot deal nobly with a dishonorable enemy! There's no need to search for justification! If you want Astyages to sit firmly on the throne, you must untangle the Scythian knot! Do it for Media's future, — said Tətür Atxa firmly.

Seeing the Shahanshah deep in thought, he added another wish:

— After cleansing Mughan, a campaign to the south wouldn't be a bad idea.

This time, the king had a swift answer:

— No, brother, leave Pars alone! — he said. — On her last visit to Ecbatana, Princess Mandana told me that Kambiz loves the Shahanshah like a father!

— Great Khagan, Kambiz doesn't love the Shahanshah — he fears him! — Tətür replied, speaking his version of the truth.

The king paused with a sarcastic smile:

— What's so bad about fearing one's father?

Tətür reminded him:

— And what about those armed bands of Persian nobles?

The Shahanshah frowned:

— You know those bands are meaningless! Such a force could never threaten the Median Empire. Even if Pars wanted to, it couldn't field more than twenty thousand troops! — He then added with mockery: — A Kambiz who was afraid to fulfill his marital duties wouldn't dare rise against Media's power.

One of the eunuchs assigned to Princess Mandana when she was sent to marry in Pasargadae was a close informant of Tətür Atxa. He had reported that due to his fear of the Shahanshah, King Kambiz had not dared consummate his marriage for some time. Mandana had remained a virgin until Kambiz, upon hearing rumors of the Shah's death chamber being prepared, finally summoned the courage to claim her.

Tətür Atxa relented:

— If Great Khagan has considered everything...

The king cut him off:

— I've already undermined the Persian royal order for the next fifty years! The rest is the business of my heirs. If only it were possible to rule this world from the next...

# PRINCE URRAN



Prince Urran was no fool. In fact, among those who vied for the throne of Media, he was likely the most cautious and calculating. He knew it would only be a matter of days before his presence was discovered. To avoid Tətür Atxa's men, he remained invisible during daylight hours in the Scythian quarter and changed his lodgings frequently.

As soon as Atey returned after a brief absence, he urged Urran:

— If you stay in Ecbatana, you'll be caught, prince. Come with me. In the forests of Bikini, I've prepared a splendor for you that would make kings jealous.

Despite their age difference, they had bonded during their time in exile. Their friendship had grown stronger by the day, and there were no secrets left between them. Atey was even aware of Urran's love.

That's why he couldn't resist teasing him:

— Ha-ha-ha! What's with your obsession with Aspaz? Are you out of women? I swear, in the forest, a whole entourage of Scythian beauties will serve you day and night — they'll fulfill your every desire.

Urran made an excuse:

— Your Scythian beauties reek of horse stables! Leave me alone! You're not my matchmaker! I don't want any woman but Aspaz! — he said, turning away.

Atey tried to convince him:

— Dear prince, once our affairs are in order, we must leave Ecbatana. It's dangerous here! I promise, no matter the cost, I'll bring your beloved Aspaz to the forest.

# ATEY TRIES TO PERSUADE URRAN



Outside the fortress walls of Ecbatana, another large city had formed. Foreign merchants and artisans had built vast neighborhoods at the foot of Mount Bikini. It had become a chaotic settlement — no one knew who was who. It was there that the prince had found refuge. He had purchased a small two-room hut. He stayed in the relatively decent room himself, while his servants lived in the other. To the curious, he presented himself as a merchant. He rode a mule, not a horse. The servants' room also served as a stable, where they kept the mounts.

Commander Atey, visiting for two days, didn't bother finding separate lodging and instead stayed with the prince. After casting a look of disdain around the hut, he wrapped himself in his fur cloak and said:

— This hut will be the death of you, prince!

The prince was standing. He threw a few sticks into the fire in the middle of the room.

— You're right. This wreck never gets warm. Outside it's spring, but inside, your blood freezes. Let's hope I don't fall ill.

Atey mocked him:

— You deserve worse! If you hadn't dreamed of kingship, you'd be living in comfort now. Would it have hurt to polish your brother Astyages' boots? Would his dagger have lost its shine?

Of course, Urran had no legitimate claim to the throne. Only the children of Cyaxares' first wife — his sister — could inherit the crown. Urran knew this, yet refused to accept it. Angrily, he snapped at the prince:

— Shut up! If not for your cowardice, I'd already be Shahanshah!

Atey immediately became serious:

— You know I'm no coward! — he said. — A Scythian is never a coward...

Urran knew that too. He'd grown up among Scythians. His mother insisted that his nurses, attendants, and servants all be Scythians. Scythian soldiers had taught him to ride, shoot arrows, and wield a sword. The priests of Media had taught him to read and write.

But Urran didn't back down:

— Either way, because of you, we're now stuck in this hut! — he shouted as he stormed around the room. — You should have attacked the camp, captured my father and his nobles!

They had been arguing for nearly a year now, each blaming the other for the failed coup. Although Commander Atey never admitted guilt, he knew deep down that he bore part of the blame. Still, every time, he found a way to justify himself:

— Prince, launching your plan on the banks of the Halys River was foolish. We had agreed on everything beforehand! Remember, in this matter, haste is dangerous — rushing will bring disaster. I swear to you, the day will come when you will rise to a golden throne with a golden crown upon your head!

Prince Urran also knew that even with ten thousand Scythians — no matter how brave — it would be impossible to defeat Media's hundred-thousand-strong army in open battle.

— At the time, our task was to guide the Scythian cavalry through Media's territory without resistance and position them near Ecbatana. We accomplished that. Now we wait for the right opportunity.

# ATEY AND AQAR'S PLANS



Just then, envoy Aqar entered the hut. He too was dressed simply. Upon learning the essence of the argument: — By order of the Shahanshah, I must depart tomorrow for Mugan. I'll be away for quite a while, — he said, then added with disapproval: — And here you two are bickering instead of joining forces.

Atey rose and made room for the guest beside him:

— Envoy Aqar, the prince and I aren't quarreling — we're analyzing the roots of our mistakes! If we forget yesterday's failures, we won't find success tomorrow, — he said, then asked mockingly: — So, how did your meeting go with the Dead Emperor?

Envoy Aqar began:

— Not bad. The Shahanshah openly declared his intention to attack Egypt. According to him, the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, has pledged fifty thousand troops, and the Lydian king, Alyattes II, sixty thousand. Then the Shahanshah turned to me and admitted that it would be good if the

Scythians joined the war with their own forces to earn wealth and spoils. On the fifty-sixth day of the Great Id festival in mid-spring, the 40th anniversary of his coronation will be celebrated. By then, the armies will be assembled, and after the festivities, the campaign will begin.

Atey didn't quite follow:

— You're saying the Babylonian and Lydian forces will come to Ecbatana?

— No. Their armies will join the Median forces along the way. The Scythian army, however, is expected to come to the outskirts of Ecbatana and march out with the main Median force. I'll try to persuade His Majesty Işpaq to send thirty thousand troops...

Atey responded firmly:

— Media already has thirty thousand cavalry. I'm not even counting their infantry. We can't challenge Media with just thirty thousand men.

— Don't you know each Scythian warrior is worth three Medians? — Aqar raised a finger. — Where's your ten thousand troops? You need to bring them into Media's borders.

Atey answered with conviction:

— They're stationed at the Babylonian frontier, waiting for my order. But I can't move them yet — it would raise suspicion.

The envoy explained:

— Prince, the best position is at the foot of the Zagros Mountains. It's most advantageous to station troops as close to Ecbatana as possible. You can also benefit from the friendly attitude of local Persians toward the Scythians. Moreover, splitting the warriors into small units and sneaking them into the capital with merchant caravans will be easier. There are still two months left before the coronation festival!

— That's settled then, — said Atey, then with concern, tried to persuade the envoy further. — My friend Aqar, even forty thousand troops may not be enough to confront Media.

Aqar reminded him of something:

— Don't forget, we already have ten thousand cavalry in our camp at Mount Bikini. Are you not counting them?

Atey sighed:

— I am. But they're our reserve force. You must persuade the king to send fifty thousand more to Ecbatana.

Envoy Aqar didn't argue further:

— Fine, I'll try. I believe he'll agree. Our friend Işpaq dreams of expanding his territory... What does His Highness the prince think of all this?

Without hesitation, Urran replied:

— If this plan succeeds, I'm ready to gift the land around Zikertu (modern-day Ardabil) to my uncle. I'm sure he'll be pleased.

Both Scythians bowed with respect. Naively overjoyed, Urran failed to notice the mocking smirks they exchanged.

## DARASP IN ENVOY AQAR'S PRESENCE



Envoy Aqar, preparing to depart for the Scythian kingdom in Mugan, was interrupted from his work by his scribe. — Prince, there's a visitor at the door who wishes to see you, — he said.

Without looking up, the prince replied:

— If he's a stranger, send him away.

The scribe, a blond middle-aged man who had served in the household for a long time, hesitated, then insisted cautiously:

— The visitor is indeed a stranger, prince, but he seems important. Though he speaks the Median language fluently, I believe he's of Persian origin, — he added knowingly, and handed over a bronze figurine. — He pressed this into my palm and told me to deliver it to you.

The gleaming bronze piece was a three-pronged Scythian arrowhead, inscribed with the initials of King Işpaq's childhood title. These were specially forged by weaponsmiths and handed

out by the king only to trusted agents as tokens of identity and authority.

King Işpaq was known as a prudent ruler. He had a secret envoy stationed in King Cambyses' court, unknown even to Shahanshah Kiaksar. The man who sent the bronze arrowhead was that very envoy. Because of Tötür Atxa's spies, his name was never recorded anywhere.

Though Aqar was aware of the secret Scythian agent's existence, he had never met him in person. The Persian was allowed inside. The prince studied the guest — a man whose name was never written in any document — carefully. He liked the Persian's confident demeanor. Upon learning that he was a noble named Darasp, he respectfully gestured:

— Sit, take a seat, nobleman. Welcome to my humble hut!

Aqar, who lived in lavish comfort like Median nobles, calling his luxurious home a “hut” out of false modesty, caused Darasp to smirk. He smiled subtly:

— Prince, I won't take much of your time, — he said. — I know you're preparing to travel and are in haste to reach King Işpaq.

Aqar swallowed nervously. Very few knew where and why he was going. With a hint of arrogance, he replied:

— It seems the nobleman is well-informed.

Darasp didn't let the prince's prideful jab go unanswered:

— Yes, the prince is not mistaken. Nothing within the empire escapes our notice, — he said, then added solemnly: — I've been entrusted to convey His Majesty Cambyses' displeasure to King Išpaq's envoy.

Envoy Aqar responded curtly:

— And what exactly has displeased His Majesty Cambyses?

— His Majesty is troubled by King Išpaq's secretive behavior, — Darasp replied just as curtly.

Aqar's tone softened:

— We don't keep secrets from our friends.

Darasp ran a hand over his shaved head:

— That's what we believed too. But after learning about the concentration of scattered Scythian regiments within Babylon's borders, we've changed our view.

Prince Aqar was rattled that such a closely guarded secret had been exposed. In an uncertain voice, he said:

— I'm unaware of such regiments, but I'll investigate what you say.

Darasp smiled:

— Come now, prince, there's no point hiding it! This is a fact. In truth, the appearance of Scythian forces on the Zagros plateau — within Persian territory — is a good sign. It's a prime position from which to strike Ecbatana. If we combine our forces, Media won't be able to stand against us.

Prince Aqar gave in but clarified that he wouldn't discuss this matter before consulting King Išpaq:

— We'll talk after I return. For now, I can't say anything, — he said, then took his leave. — Until we meet again in a month, nobleman.

Darasp stood and, as he left, offered a parting remark that made Aqar pause and think:

— Perhaps we'll meet sooner than that. Everything depends on the decision of King Cambyses.

# AQNIYA'S FURY AND SECRET MISSION



Lady Aqniya was in a dark mood. Since the Shahanshah had recovered from his illness, he had only once — and even then just briefly — opened the door to her chamber. The eunuch now brought not good news, but bad. His hairless face bore a shadow of cunning, though his voice remained sweet as syrup:

— The Shahanshah won't be able to come today, my lady. He said once he's finished with state matters, he'll pay a visit to Lady Aqniya. His exact words.

Lady Aqniya's voice changed with anger:

— But today is my turn! He was supposed to spend the night with me! — she hissed. — I've been waiting for this day for a whole week!

All the palace knew that the Shahanshah now spent most of his time with his young wife, the youngest daughter of Satrap Tarmakiz. Lady Aqniya stomped her foot in frustration:

— Of course! What would His Majesty want with me now? He's so taken with Tarmakiz's little doll that he's completely forgotten about me!

— Don't say that, my lady, the "doll" you speak of is a true beauty! The Shahanshah's wives cannot be plain! — the eunuch cautiously corrected her.

Despite her fury, Lady Aqniya acknowledged her misstep:

— Yes, the Shahanshah enjoys his pleasures with someone younger and prettier than I! — she cried with a tremble in her voice, then turned her rage on the eunuch. — May the favors I've shown you turn to dust, eunuch! May Ares strike you with lightning! You son of Ahriman! Why can't you bring the Shahanshah to me?

The eunuch lowered his head. It was true — Lady Aqniya, once the Shahanshah's favorite, had shown him much kindness. He tried to calm her:

— My lady, the Shahanshah was not in pleasure, he was discussing state affairs with Satrap Tarmakiz.

Lady Aqniya raised her brows:

— The new wife's father is at the palace?

— Yes, the respected Satrap Tarmakiz is here. I believe he departs tomorrow, — the eunuch replied, then made a firm promise. — My lady, I swear, as soon as the Shahanshah finishes his work, I will bring him to you.

After the eunuch left, Lady Aqniya, somewhat calmed, greeted Aspaz with displeasure:

— And you, you're never around when I need you! Where were you at a time like this?

The maid replied gently, reminding her she had been given leave:

— I asked yesterday to visit my parents.

Lady Aqniya recalled granting permission and asked more mildly:

— Is your family well?

— They're doing alright, — said Aspaz briefly.

The trace of hurt in her voice made Aqniya pause. She softened:

— You know I can't manage without you, — she said to win her back. — I have a secret task for you. Tomorrow, go to

the White Temple and find the beggar who gave me the tablet.  
— She took the copper plaque from her vanity, kissed it, and handed it over. — Show him this and say that Mother Aqniya wishes to see Urran. Let's see what reply he gives...

The maid stood up at once, hiding her joy by lowering her head:

— As you wish, my lady.

To encourage her further, Lady Aqniya added:

— If you serve me faithfully, you'll soon be a lady yourself! I'll grant you freedom and marry you off to a Scythian prince.

Aspaz threw herself at Lady Aqniya's feet:

— Please don't separate me from Urran, my lady! I'll serve you till my dying breath, — she said, then sprang to her feet and asked, — Should I go to the temple on foot tomorrow?

Pleased with her maid's loyalty, Lady Aqniya replied:— No, it's too far to walk. Carts often pass near the Shah's temple carrying supplies. Stop one, use my name, and ride there.

Aspaz sighed longingly, remembering the days she had spent with the prince.

# URRAN'S INDIFFERENCE TO WOMEN



**T**hough the delicate beauty of the adolescent Urran charmed Lady Aqniya, his indifference to the palace's young women left her puzzled. She shared her concern with the Shahanshah. After some deliberation, they brought Tətür Atxa into the matter. The chief spymaster listened carefully to the lady and, after several inquiries, said:

— I will try to uncover the reason behind the prince's disinterest in women.

The opportunity fell right into the spymaster's lap. He now had the chance to place one of his own agents into Lady Aqniya's retinue. After observing the young Urran for a few days, he reviewed the girls in his service. He selected four or five of the most beautiful, intelligent, and flirtatious among them to achieve swift results. Each girl was given instructions to try and catch the eye of the prince as he played in the courtyard.

As Tətür Atxa had predicted, that's exactly what happened. Among them, the twenty-year-old beauty Aspaz triumphed in this covert, unofficial contest. The prince was instantly captivated by the stranger. One day, he abandoned his archery training midway and followed her, trailing her all the way to her home near the silver city walls.

Thanks to the false genealogy the spymaster had crafted for her, everything went smoothly.

Lady Aqniya summoned the spymaster and told him about the girl who had caught Urran's eye. Tətür Atxa feigned ignorance and promised to find the girl.

— No need to search! — Lady Aqniya said excitedly with a smile. — My son followed the girl all the way to her home. She seems to come from a noble family. They live right next to the silver city walls.

— I can bring the girl's parents to you. I believe they would agree to a union.

Lady Aqniya frowned:

— I don't want a wife for the prince — I want a mistress! I have no intention of marrying him off at such a young age.

— If she is to be a mistress, we can purchase her from her parents.

— That's a good idea, — Lady Aqniya agreed.

After the prince took Aspaz into his bed, Lady Aqniya felt somewhat relieved — but not entirely. Her son still showed no interest in any other girl or woman. It was as if Aspaz were the only one he could see.

# SATRAP TARMAKİZ'S HOSTILITY



Satrap Dandon of Tarmakiz was urgently summoned to the capital. As the Shahanshah's father-in-law, he was a powerful noble and the High Mobed of the sacred fire temple in the holy city of Shiz. His kinship with the prophet Zoroaster's family and lineage from an ancient priestly clan gave him the right to sit near the throne — only after the Shahanshah and his heir. No other nobles, not even High Priest Amitaxah, could precede him.

The satrap sat close to the throne, bowed low, and touched the hem of the Shahanshah's robe before speaking:

— Great Sovereign, dealing with the Scythians is no easy task. They are expanding their territories step by step. First they seized Greater Mugan, then Lesser Mugan, and now they've infiltrated the mountain villages. Before long, they'll cross the peaks and reach the heart of the satrapy.

The Shahanshah interrupted him:

— My dear kinsman, we discussed this at length in the harem chambers last night. You failed to convince me, — he said. — Remember this well: the Scythians are our allies. I will not turn against them.

Dandon retorted boldly:

— Great Sovereign, for twenty-eight years the Scythians have occupied part of the Tarmakiz satrapy, established their own state within the Median realm, enslaved our Magi, and destroyed our fire temples. Are we still to tolerate this?

There was nothing unusual in the satrap being summoned to a private council, but his insistence on voicing his opinions so strongly in front of the Shahanshah was bold. Such arrogance and stubbornness often ended poorly.

But the Shahanshah responded with a veiled warning:

— Kinsman, you would have made an excellent Commander-in-Chief — shame that post belongs to Harpaq.

Surprisingly, the crown prince Astiaq came to Tarmakiz's defense:

— Kind Father, Lord Dandon is right! It's senseless to wage war on Egypt without first settling accounts with the Scythians. I'm certain that İşpaq is preparing to stab us in the back.

The Shahanshah merely gave his heir a pointed look and remained silent. Then Harpaq requested permission to speak:

— Great Sovereign, His Highness the Crown Prince speaks the truth! Satrap Tarmakiz has ten thousand cavalry and ten thousand infantry ready. If needed, he could raise more. If we march our forces from the main camp into Mugan, we could crush the Scythians completely.

The Shahanshah didn't ask the opinion of the chief treasurer, nor Tətür Atxa, nor Father Amidaxah — he knew they, like the crown prince, were enemies of the Scythians. Instead, he turned to the satrap and said:

— From now on, stop stirring up trouble, kinsman! I repeat — I will not turn against the Scythians. First of all, they guard our northern borders and the pass between the Andiya Sea and Mount Qaf. Second, the Scythian king is our close relative... Shall I continue, or is that enough?

# ASPAZ IN SƏCCAD'S PRESENCE



**A**spaz did exactly as Lady Aqniya instructed. To reach the far side of the city, she boarded one of the supply carts. Not even an hour later, she was at the *White Temple*. She joined the sparse flow of visitors. Among those collecting alms at the fire temple entrance, she spotted the familiar beggar. As she passed him, she waved the token in front of his dimmed eyes, then calmly dropped a donation into his bronze bowl.

— His mother wants to see Urran, — she whispered.

The beggar, feigning indifference, pressed a piece of cloth from his sleeve into her donating hand.

— May Tabutu bless you! — he murmured so softly it was almost inaudible. — Urran doesn't want to see his mother; he wants to see Aspaz. He's calling her to him. On the eighth day of the Great Month, let her come to the Scythian quarter. A guide will be waiting.

Aspaz knew that Tabutu was a Scythian household god and that the devout followers of the Supreme Hormuz had no need for foreign deities. But the beggar's message filled her with such joy that as she walked away, she praised the unfamiliar god:

— Glory be to Tabutu! — she said.

She then hurried into the fire temple, performing her visit in a distracted state. When Priest Səccam suddenly appeared before her, she lit up like a child and followed him silently. They walked behind the temple. Brother Səccam told her it was a secluded place where they could speak freely. He then looked around once more and rebuked her:

— Where have you been? Why haven't you contacted me? Is this how you serve the Motherland?

The woman pleaded:

— For almost a year now, I haven't been able to leave the palace, Brother Səccam! Lady Aqniya never takes her eyes off me. And besides, I'm terribly afraid of Tətür. He has eyes everywhere — if I fall into his hands, I won't survive...

— Enough excuses — speak! What have you learned? — Səccam snapped, annoyed. — Any of us could fall into Tətür's

hands. But no matter the danger, we must serve our homeland. We were trained for this.

Aspaz nodded in agreement, then shared everything she had heard with a precision only a woman could possess. The importance of the information stirred the priest. After tying and untying his *kushti* (sacred girdle), he managed to calm himself.

The return of Prince Urran — kidnapped by the Scythians a year earlier — now secretly back in Ekbatana, confirmed Sæccam's suspicions. A thought raced through his mind. He remembered the drunk Scythian who, just two days ago, had been conversing closely with the High Mobed. He now had no doubt that another conspiracy was brewing and preparations were underway.

He praised her from the heart:

— Bravo! You truly are a brave Persian daughter! The moment you learn the prince's exact hiding place, find me at once.

Pleased by his praise, the woman made a request:

— Please stop sending messages through that charcoal boy! I think he's fallen for me.

Sæccam laughed:

— We can't do without the charcoal boy. But don't worry, I'll scold him — he'll behave, — he said slyly, sighing. — With your beauty, how can he not fall for you? Even I, an old man, feel dazzled just looking at you.

Aspaz brightened up:

— I'm not afraid of your gaze — it's the charcoal boy's that worries me! And he doesn't even know how to act properly — now he's taken to standing guard over me, — she said and stood to leave.

But the priest delayed her and gave one last instruction in a hushed voice:

— Before you leave the temple, approach each priest one by one. Exchange a few words and receive their blessings, — he said, then explained the real reason. — If anyone's watching us, let them be confused and misled.

# DEPUTY COMMANDER HARPAQ



**H**arpaq, having grown up at his father's side, had learned much from a young age. He knew that the duties of a *naibi-ləşkər* (deputy commander) were never-ending. The army's weapons and ammunition, provisions and kitchen, carts and pack animals, the horses' barley and fodder, and the craftsmen's workshops—all were under his authority.

As soon as he left the Small Council, he rode straight to the army camp. He saw that the commanders had already lined up in front of the deputy commander's tent. The fact that the army was already informed of his appointment pleased Harpaq. But he silenced their cheers with a wave of his hand and spoke briefly and commandingly:

— We have a long campaign ahead of us, toward Egypt. Don't waste any time—tend seriously to the army's needs!

He concluded:

— If a soldier is well-fed and has warmth at rest, he'll endure any hardship in war.

He then summoned his aides. He ordered them to inspect the stores of wine, hay, and grain. He appointed a trustworthy man to oversee the weapons and armor workshop. Lastly, he called in the old engineer Darzə and explained the task: the fortresses of Egyptian cities were said to have solid walls. To bring them down, a hundred new catapults would be needed.

Speaking gently, he said:

— Whatever you need will be provided, just make sure the catapults are ready by late spring. This time, we face an enemy that avoids open battle—they prefer to hide behind high fortress walls. The equipment must be battle-ready by then.

— That will be difficult, — the old engineer said, his head trembling.

— If you fail to obey my order, I won't hesitate to load *you* into a catapult and fire you off myself, — Harpaq growled, narrowing his eyes. — Go, and get those catapults built!

# PREPARATIONS FOR WAR WITH EGYPT



Not even two days had passed when Harpaq was summoned to the presence of the Shahanshah. The conqueror listened indifferently to the comprehensive report of the *naibi-lāṣkār* (deputy commander), then turned to the heir apparent, Astyages, seated slightly below him to the right, and asked:

— Did you, in my place, visit the temples and make the necessary offerings?

Diverting the conversation from the topic of war preparations, the heir informed the Shahanshah of his pilgrimage:

— Yes, my sacred father, I visited all the temples! I also went to the “White Temple.” The dance of the seven fire maidens around the bonfire—what a magnificent spectacle it was! High Mobed Shaumat has truly created something remarkable! It’s beyond words!

The Shahanshah turned to his left, to Grand Mobed Amitaxah, and said:

— Father, what do you make of this? When Shaumat is mentioned, the heir can't contain his excitement—and he's not easily impressed. Isn't it time we acknowledge the priest's service? Invite him to the High Council of Mobeds. Let him work under your supervision, become familiar with affairs of state, gain experience and competence.

The Grand Mobed knew the Shahanshah's intentions well. He was to appoint the heir's favored priest as his own successor.

— The decisions of the Great Conqueror are always signs of wisdom! Two members of the Council still hesitate, but their doubts will pass, and Brother Shaumat will take his place among us.

— Excellent! — the Shahanshah said, forcing himself upright and turning to the deputy commander. — Our royal brother İspağ's cavalry will soon arrive at the camp. They must be received with dignity.

The deputy commander immediately inquired:

— Great Conqueror, how many men are the Scythians bringing?

— I don't have exact numbers yet, — replied the Shahanshah. — But by my estimate, Īspaḡ can muster up to fifty thousand cavalry. Therefore, have five thousand tents erected facing east, in the center of the camp. Ensure our guests are settled comfortably and spaciouſly.

Harpaḡ, kneeling, touched his head to his knees. The Shahanshah continued:

— The new tents must shine in bright red. Our kinsman loves scarlet—let him be pleased by it.

Harpaḡ again bowed deeply. After a long pause, the Shahanshah gave a few other instructions, whose meaning wasn't immediately clear to the others present:

— Have spears made, each five *qaz* (cubits) long. Arm all our infantry with them! Hold daily drills so the troops get used to them. Organize weekly spear-throwing competitions and reward those who stand out...

Though Harpaḡ didn't fully understand the reasoning, he responded:

— It shall be done, Great Conqueror!

The Shahanshah gave his final instruction:

— Stock up on plenty of Median oil—we'll need it soon.  
You are dismissed.

Stunned and weary, the deputy commander left the royal presence. After he was gone, the Shahanshah turned to the heir and asked:

— So, are you satisfied with my choice? I believe Harpaq will make a fine deputy commander!

Astyages answered skeptically:

— Time will tell, Great Conqueror. A commander's worth is proven only in war. The coming campaign in Egypt will reveal everything.

Kiaksar agreed with his son:

— You're not wrong! I truly hope my successor will be a better king than I was—may he hold the throne firmly, uphold the glory of the empire, and elevate our name!

— What troubles you, my sacred father? — asked Astyages, trying to understand the ruler's concern.

The Shahanshah replied:

— I worry about the future of Media!

He then looked into the cold, expressionless face of the Grand Mobed but found no words of comfort there, and sighed deeply.

# URRAN AT THE REBELS' CAMP



Prince Urran rode at the rear, with two servants and a guide leading the way. Though they had departed Ekbatana at dusk, they did not arrive at commander Atey's camp until midday the following day. The forests surrounding Bikini were thick and nearly impassable—the guide occasionally lost the path but always managed to find it again, and they reached their destination without incident.

Atey's camp was more than a camp—it could rightfully be called a military base. Nestled between two mountains by the river, with pointed-topped yurts, soldiers training on the open fields, and well-fed horses grazing on lush pastures, it was obvious that this was no ragged force that had marched from distant Babylonia. This was a strong and well-supplied unit.

Commander Atey welcomed the prince with joy. He led him to his personal tent, which appeared no different from the others on the outside but was lavishly decorated within. With pride, he asked:

— So, Prince, do you like the camp?

Urran did not hide his excitement:

— Of course, I like it! — he said, then added confidently — These are not like your troops in Babylon! They're well-fed and decently clothed.

— You guessed right! — Atey confirmed. — My Babylonian forces will be arriving here soon too, and we'll clothe and equip them just as well.

— Are these the troops Envoy Aqar mentioned?

— “Troops”? Is that what you call them? — Atey rebuked. — There are ten thousand cavalrymen hidden in the forest!

From Atey's words, Prince Urran understood that this time Scythian King İşpaq intended to launch a massive campaign against Shahanshah Kiaksar. For now, they were waiting on reinforcements from other Scythian chieftains scattered along the Black Sea. İşpaq knew that Media was no longer the same as it had been twenty-eight years ago—it would not be easily defeated.

Urran, sensing the seriousness of the matter, asked directly:

— But is this the kind of location one chooses for launching a war? Hiding in forests and mountains?

— The prince should know that the road from Ekbatana to Babylonia passes right at the foot of that mountain over there! Any army headed to Egypt must take this road. We'll strike the first blow right here. This was İşpaq's own idea.

Urran scolded Atey:

— You speak of my uncle İşpaq as though he's a drinking companion! Speak of the king with respect!

Atey smirked at the prince's naivety:

— He *was* my drinking companion. Before we established our kingdom, we would often cross the narrow mountain pass between the Andiya Sea and Mount Qaf, raid Media, plunder the locals, take their livestock and goods, and capture them. By the time the Median army responded, we would disappear—back to the Black Sea coast. Life was good.

— So you were not nobles but bandit leaders? — Urran exclaimed in surprise. — And how did my uncle become king?

Atey explained that İşpaq had both strength and brains. After one successful raid, he gifted the Scythian king a herd of

the finest Median horses and was granted permission to raise an army.

— We led Scythian regiments southward, — Atey continued. — We settled in the Mughan plain, and İşpaq declared himself king. At the time, Media was entangled in war with Assyria. Caught in a difficult position, Shahanshah Kiaksar welcomed İşpaq's emissary, agreed to peace, and even relied on the fearless Scythian units to help defeat Assyria. That's how we solidified our presence in Mughan.

The prince said with barely concealed anger:

— So you seized our lands when Media was vulnerable!

He then lost interest in the story and asked indifferently:

— Has this camp been here long?

Atey did not hide the truth:

— A year or two, — he said, then clarified — Ever since İşpaq began eyeing the throne of Media.

— So, my uncle's not working for me—he's working for himself? — Urran said with bitter disappointment.

Atey tried to soothe him:

— Don't worry, it's you who'll come out on top! You see, Prince...

But the noise from outside interrupted him. Without finishing his sentence, Atey rushed out of the yurt in alarm:

— Let me see what's going on.

# URRAN'S ADVICE



Atey returned shortly. The prince, impatient, asked:—  
What happened, Prince? Has the god of war, Ares,  
arrived?— It's something like that! — Atey said,  
frowning. — Can you believe it? Even in these impenetrable  
forests, strangers have appeared! The guards spotted two men  
in a clearing across the river and shot arrows at them.

— And what did you decide?

— I sent a scouting party across the river. Ordered them to  
bring back the intruders, dead or alive. — He added with  
regret: — We'll need to move the camp.

Prince Urran searched his memory:

— What if they're spies sent by Tötür Atxa...?

Atey cut him off:

— No, they're not spies. What kind of fool of a spy steps  
into a clearing? — he objected. — They look like lost travelers.

Urran continued his earlier thought:

— If they *are* spies, then yes, the camp must be relocated. But rather than setting up a whole new camp, why not cover the yurts with branches and brush, make them look like shepherd huts? No one suspects a shepherd's hut deep in the forest.

Atey was amazed by the brilliance of the suggestion:

— That's a strategy worthy of any commander! — he said with respect. — Simple, yet brilliant! I'll give the order immediately...

Urran dismissed the praise and brought up what had been on his mind:

— Wait, Prince. You haven't forgotten to bring Aspaz, have you?

Atey reassured him:

— Of course not! Your beloved will be here in a few days. We've already delivered the cloth scrap you gave us. — He added slyly: — For now, you'll have to make do with the company of some Scythian beauties.

# THE SEARCH FOR THE UNKNOWN INTRUDERS



**T**he appearance of unknown figures in the forest caused real alarm in the camp. Anything left in the open was cleared away, and the yurts were covered with tree branches. The horses were moved to deep, newly prepared pastures in the woods.

The scouting unit returned two days later, empty-handed. The squad leader—a stone-faced, tight-lipped Scythian—reported to Atey. Though Urran understood a bit of Scythian, he couldn't make out half of what the man was saying. The commander did not try to justify himself, simply standing silently through Atey's curses and scolding.

— You idiot! Did the people you were tracking sprout wings and fly away?

The squad leader repeated himself:

— Prince, we scoured the forest, even reached the caravan road. Asked all the caravans we saw. No one had seen them. On the far side of the mountain, in the valley, there was a

Turkmen encampment. We went there and asked them. I swear on the thunder of our god Ares—they said they saw nothing...

— May Ares's lightning strike you down! — Atey cursed, calming slightly. — Fine then, fool, tell me about this Turkmen encampment. Where are they from, and where are they headed? Will they be lingering near the road?

Finally freed from scolding, the squad leader replied eagerly:

— According to them, they came from the west and are heading east. They often travel all the way to the pyramids of Egypt before returning. They said their route takes them toward China. They'll rest for a day or two, then move on. Their herds, flocks, and caravans fill the whole valley. They welcomed us, treated us as guests, we talked, then left.

Atey grew suspicious:

— And when did you learn to speak Turkmen, fool? We've been trying to teach you Median for twenty years!

— I swear to Ares, we spoke in the Median tongue. They consider themselves Medians. They claim the land from Egypt to China is their pasture.

Atey, trying to mask his surprise, dismissed the squad leader:

— Get out of my sight, idiot! — he shouted after him — Half of what you said is a lie!

Urran objected:

— Not so, Prince! If what the mobeds who taught me say is true, then the squad leader isn't lying. The Median state was originally founded by the Turkmens. They united all the Turkic and Pars-speaking tribes into an empire.

Atey was intrigued:

— Then why are the Pars people so dissatisfied? They keep starting uprisings here and there! Strange thing is, most Medians speak Pars anyway.

Urran offered his political insight:

— I think it's because the Pars aren't content with second place in the state—they want to be first.

## AQAR BEFORE KING İSPAQ



A qar dismounted far from the center. He could hardly contain his excitement as he gazed at King İspağ's red tent, surrounded by tens of thousands of sharp-topped yurts, standing slightly elevated at the heart of the plain. As he stepped onto the red carpet under his feet, he felt pride in the stature he had achieved. He nodded to the assembled Scythian nobles around the tent, then stepped inside and knelt before his old horse-herding companion, bowing and crawling toward the throne.

Inside, there was no one but King İspağ. The king rose from his golden throne in the middle of the tent and lifted Aqar to embrace him:

— When it's just the two of us, brother Aqar, this is unnecessary! — he said, motioning for him to sit near the throne. — Sit, now tell me, what news do you bring?

Their conversation was brief. Couriers sent by Aqar from Ekbatana to Muga had been arriving non-stop. King İspağ was already well-informed and interrupted Aqar:

— Have you seen my sister Aqniya? Is she well? And how is our friend Atey?

— Majesty, Lady Aqniya has been well since she heard news of Urran, — Aqar answered each question in turn. — Atey is doing fine too, though he misses his family terribly.

— You know, the moment I learned of Atey's betrayal, I didn't keep his family here in Mugan. I sent them north — if Kiaksar had found out, the whole ruse would have been exposed, — said İşpaq.

Aqar praised the king:

— A brilliant move, deceiving Kiaksar like that! You sent servants and handmaids disguised as Atey's family back to Ekbatana.

— I'm still not sure Kiaksar was truly fooled.

— I wasn't sure at first either. But after meeting with Lady Aqniya, I was reassured. And don't forget, we have people listening in on the Shahanshah's throne room! — Aqar thumped his chest. — I don't eat your bread for nothing, nor do I waste your gold. The Medians are greedy for wealth — I bribe and buy them!

King Išpaq frowned:

— Don't boast too soon. If this attempt fails, twenty-eight years of effort will be wasted. We won't get another chance to convince Kiaksar of our innocence. We'll be facing the empire alone.

Aqar grew anxious:

— No, no! This time we'll succeed. We've prepared well. And we're not alone, my king. Our envoy in Parsarqad has won the support of the Pars people. They're ready to help. Soon, Cambyses' messenger will visit you.

— What about Urartu? Any word from them?

— Still waiting on their reply. To be honest, Urartu's King Rusa is not to be trusted, majesty. He seems to enjoy Midian domination, — he added. — On this visit, I want to finalize everything with you. Once our cavalry settles in the Ekbatana encampment, everything will be under our control. The army will be celebrating the 40th year of the Shahanshah's reign. Everyone will be drunk and distracted. The next day, on the 56th day of the Great Iden festival, the infantry will march out first, followed by slingers and archers, then the catapults and supply wagons. They'll be on the road to Babylon in five days.

Atey's cavalry, waiting in ambush near Mount Bikini, will strike. They'll light signal fires on the mountain. When our cavalry at the camp sees the fires, they'll attack the Median forces. Once they're cut down, Ekbatana will be ours.

İşpaq was satisfied:

— Not bad — quite a fine embroidery! — he said, rubbing his hands together. — Once you seize the palace, execute Kiaksar, the crown prince, all claimants to the throne, their women, and close companions. Then proclaim Urran as the new Shahanshah!

— Perhaps we should capture Kiaksar and the crown prince alive and bring them here?

— No, that wouldn't be wise. Too many things can go wrong en route. If even one legitimate heir escapes, the Medians will rally around him, — İşpaq repeated firmly. — You will declare Urran Shahanshah immediately.

— You mean to hand this vast empire to Urran? Entrust a giant kingdom to a boy still wet behind the ears? — Aqar asked with frustration.

King İşpaq, though also burning with concern, remained cautious and deliberate:

— There's no other way, brother Aqar. This way, we can control Media more easily! If I take the throne, Zoroastrian priests will rise up against me across the empire. But Urran is Kiaksar's son. They'll soon accept him.

— Majesty, I think that—

— I know what you think! — İşpaq snapped. — You'd like to see our old herdsmen on the Median throne, one as vizier, another as commander of the army...

King İşpaq looked Aqar in the eyes. Then both burst into laughter.

# THE LIVES OF THE FRIENDS



**T**hey had indeed first come to Mugan as simple horse-herders. They remembered it with pride. The friends were only fifteen years old then. Who would have thought that three Scythian horse-herders from a raiding party would one day become masters of these lands...

At the time, the Scythian steppes were home to many petty principalities. These small realms grew stronger day by day, fueled by the arrival of tribes from the North, East, and West. To avoid clashing with one another, they turned southward. Every bold young man would gather a band around him, cross into Media's borders, and tear into the vast empire like lone wolves.

In the midst of such raids, İşpaq's family—having lost its protector—lived in poverty. His mother, desperate for support, fell at the feet of a princeling who had grown rich from southern expeditions and begged him to take her son into his

company. At fifteen, İşpaq was tall, strong, and fearless. The princeling agreed to take him in as a stable boy:

— I'm taking you into my troop as a horse-handler. Go prepare for the campaign; we leave tomorrow! — he said.

İşpaq, with boyish cheek, asked what would happen to his share of spoils. The princeling frowned:

— You'll know if you return alive, — he snapped, then added angrily as the boy tried to ask another question. — Foolish child, this isn't a sightseeing trip. We're going on a raid. There's death and loss on this path. If you survive, you'll get your share and grow rich like everyone else. If you die, I'll entrust your soul to the goddess Agniya.

That night, İşpaq found his friends and told them about the opportunity. Aqar and Atey agreed to join him. The next morning, all three showed up at the princeling's camp. Things were chaotic, so no one noticed the teenagers. Only two days into the journey did their presence come to light.

The princeling shouted furiously at İşpaq:

— May the thunderbolts of Ares strike you! What kind of insubordination is this? Get out of my troop!

İşpaq waited for the outburst to subside, then spoke calmly:

— Honored prince, you yourself said that those who die in battle are taken under the care of the goddess Agni. I brought my friends with me so that if I die, you can give them my share — and not trouble the goddess unnecessarily.

İşpaq's wise response pleased the princeling, and he decided not to expel the youths. But his terms were firm:

— Fine, let these milk-drinking friends of yours be your assistants. But you'll be responsible for them yourself — and you'll divide your share with them.

# THE STABLE BOY'S AMBITIONS



**T**he friends had been lucky — they returned safely from every campaign and received their share of the spoils. İşpaq, with his skills and leadership, soon formed his own band. Through successful raids to the south, he gained fame across the Scythian plain.

On their last campaign, they had stolen the herd of the satrap of Tarmakiz. Although İşpaq divided most of the loot, he was in no rush to distribute the horses among the “legal thieves.” When asked, he claimed the animals had been worn out during the chase, that some might be lame or injured, and that it was better to wait before dividing them.

After several expeditions into Median territory, İşpaq reached a conclusion — one that was both simple and brilliant. But convincing Aqar and Atey took some effort.

— Let me explain it again, — İşpaq said, struggling to remain patient. — All our neighbors fear the Scythians. As soon as they hear we’re near, they abandon their lands and flee!

Things have gotten to the point where small Scythian bands cross the Dar Pass and reach deep into Media. If we had just a little more strength, we could settle permanently in the Mugan lands. We would become their rulers.

— So, you mean you'll be king? And we'll be your princes?  
— Aqar whistled in surprise. — That's a far-fetched dream!

İspağ nodded:

— If you follow my plan, even your wildest dreams will come true! Of course, we can't do it with just a small band — we need an army.

The friends were stunned. Finally, Aqar said:

— How? You can't grow an army like mushrooms in the field. — Then he added pleadingly, — Friend, explain your plan. We're not as sharp as you. We need help understanding what you're aiming for.

İspağ paused for effect, then revealed his plan to his closest companions. The strategy was simple — and brilliant.

# THE FRIENDS AT THE HORSE RACE



First, İşpaq chose a hundred prize horses from the common herd. Unlike the short and scruffy Scythian horses, the Median horses were tall and majestic. İşpaq summoned skilled saddle and bridle makers to his camp and paid them handsomely in gold to craft ornate tack and breastplates in the Median style.

Next, he inspected his warriors' outfits, ensuring they looked sharp. He didn't forget Aqar and Atey either — their gold-embroidered garments and glossy palfreys would make any noble jealous. İşpaq himself planned to arrive in a war chariot drawn by powerful Median horses.

Once a year on the Scythian steppe, games were held in honor of the god of war, Ares. These contests of horsemanship and archery lasted three or four days. All tribes participated, and the games showcased the finest Scythian warriors. The most breathtaking event was archery on horseback. From a

platform on a hilltop, the king personally judged the contests and awarded prizes to the victors.

Among Scythians, the horse was sacred. A man without a horse was not considered a true Scythian. Horses were ridden, their milk and blood were consumed, their meat eaten, their hides worn. Every event began with a parade of the finest, fastest stallions.

İspağ had waited for this moment. He entered the arena at the head of his procession — himself in a chariot drawn by powerful steeds, followed by his warriors leading the elegantly equipped Median horses. Cheers filled the air. Just as he hoped, he was summoned before the king.

The king asked:

— Warrior, these horses are unlike ours. Where did you get them?

— These are Median horses, Your Majesty. I bring them as a gift.

— A gift fit for a king! — the king praised him. — I accept your gift, warrior. These horses will grace my royal herds!

— I am ready to bring you thousands more, Your Majesty  
— enough to adorn all your herds!

— What is your wish, then, brave one?

İşpaq stated his request. Without hesitation, the king granted it:

— I give you permission to raise an army of ten thousand. If you can win such spoils with a small band, then you are truly a bold man. With a larger force, you could move mountains! Besides, a Scythian sword rusts in its sheath. Go, my brave one — forward!

# TETÜR ATKHA'S CONCERN



**A**spaz's sudden appearance at the White Temple, now in disguise, hinted at hidden motives. Her attempt to move unnoticed among beggars hadn't escaped the eyes of the royal spies. It was clear she was trying to avoid surveillance. Eliminating her might have been a way to prevent further trouble — but although she had lost her reliability as an informant, Aspaz was still useful to Tetür Atkha as bait.

For several days, the chief spy had been waiting for new information, but his agents returned empty-handed each time. Prince Urran and Commander Atey had vanished like a piece of bread soaked in water. Even after scouring the districts around Ecbatana, they had found no trace of them. Frustrated and gnawing his lip in helplessness, Tetür Atkha saddled up with a few cavalrymen and galloped toward the White Temple.

His unexpected arrival sent waves of fear through the temple. Without waiting, he marched straight into the High Mobed's chamber. Shaum the Elder was kneeling in prayer before the sacred fire. At the sound of the door, he lifted his

head, interrupted his worship, and stood to greet Tetür. After exchanging pleasantries, they sat silently. Tetür broke the silence:

— Brother Shaum, your Scythian friend hasn't been around, has he?

— Your Excellency, if you mean Agiti, he was here just yesterday. Says the guests have vanished. Neither the tavern nor the shaman's hut has seen them since.

Tetür didn't linger. He left the temple quickly and returned to the palace. As a last resort, he summoned a few experienced spies stationed in the neighborhoods around the White Temple and ordered them to monitor Aspaz's every step.

# ASPAZ GOES TO URRAN'S SUMMONS



Urran's message had lifted Aspaz's spirits so much that she didn't report the beggar's words or the scrap of cloth he had slipped into her hand. She was drowning in her own schemes, trying to undermine Tetür Atkha and Brother Sajjam alike, waiting for the right moment. Now such a chance had finally arrived — and she wasn't about to miss it.

Thinking the message concerned only herself, she initially planned to hide it even from Lady Aqniya. The scrap of cloth had been cut from the blindfold she had once used to cover the prince's eyes in their secret games. But after some thought, she changed her mind. Upon returning from the temple, she withdrew to Lady Aqniya's room. Together, they discussed the prince's message. Aspaz didn't lie — she told the truth.

— Most likely, the Shahenshah knows Urran is here, my lady. Tetür Atkha wouldn't keep so many spies for nothing. But

there's no need to worry — Urran is very skilled at hiding. If they'd found him, they would've dragged him out long ago.

Lady Aqniya, stroking the scrap of cloth thoughtfully, said:

— I suppose Urran misses you... and he's calling you to him. — She deliberately downplayed the message so Aspaz's pride wouldn't swell. — He needs a woman.

Aspaz, who longed desperately for the prince, understood the teasing tone but answered without offense:

— My lady, even if you called me the prince's kennel dog, I wouldn't take it to heart.

Lady Aqniya hugged her with affection and envy, kissing her:

— You'll get to see Urran. And I... I don't know when I'll see my son again.

Aspaz comforted her:

— With the help of the great Ahura Mazda, you will see him again, my lady. I'm leaving tomorrow!

— Will you be able to leave the palace without raising suspicion? — Aqniya asked.

Aspaz, determined to free herself from all three shackles around her neck, replied firmly:

— At this point, it doesn't matter anymore.

# AQAR RETURNS TO ECBATANA



Envoy Aqar crossed the fertile lands of Mugan, followed the shores of the Andiya Sea, and entered the province of Zukertu. All of this territory belonged to the satrapy of Tarmakiz.

He was in high spirits, having succeeded in his mission — but he remained cautious. Convincing Īšpaq had not been easy. At last, his old horse-hand friend had agreed to place a handpicked cavalry of forty thousand at his disposal. Aqar knew that this was all the military strength Īšpaq commanded, keeping only a small reserve force under his control to protect the civilian population — women, children, and artisans — from northern nomadic raids. Īšpaq no longer feared Midia. With Kiaksar distracted by the Egyptian campaign, the time had come to deliver the final blow.

The Scythian army was to reach Ecbatana by crossing Urartian lands, per the Shahenshah's demands. But Aqar,

traveling independently, chose a shorter, more developed road leading directly to the Median capital.

To his surprise, the Tarmakiz satrapy was in turmoil. Rebellion was in the air. Peasants armed with hoes and pitchforks were seen along the way. Fires could be seen in the distance. Yet curiously, the caravan routes remained clear — traffic flowed freely, as if the unrest had little to do with those paths.

Prince Aqar summoned one of his servants and taught him a “song” dedicated to King İşpaq. The song’s lyrics reported that there was rebellion in Tarmakiz, Midia was distracted, and that their plan would succeed. After humming the tune a few times, the servant galloped off toward Mugan.

Just as they were nearing what Aqar believed to be the rough border of Ecbatana and expecting to reach the city by evening, they were significantly delayed. Median cavalry had blocked the entire route. After the cavalry passed by in formation, the way was opened for the infantry battalions.

At the rear of the army, a commander rode surrounded by high-ranking officers. Aqar immediately recognized the

commander — it was Kittan. Kittan also identified the envoy and brought his horse alongside him.

— Prince, where are you coming from?

Aqar explained his mission in a few sentences, then asked with a smirk:

— And you, dear Kittan? Have the Egyptian pyramids relocated? Or have they perhaps migrated east?

Kittan appreciated the joke and smiled:

— No, Prince, the pyramids are where they've always been. Our eastern march has a different goal: to suppress the uprising in the Tarmakiz satrapy. They say the common folk have risen up...

— But the satrap has his own army!

— Of course, Prince, — Kittan replied. Then, not hiding his suspicion, he added, — But it seems the rebellion is widespread, and the satrap couldn't handle it alone. He must've requested reinforcements from the Shahenshah.

— I suppose the Shahenshah holds his relative in very high regard...

Kittan clearly didn't appreciate the insinuation. His expression hardened:

— Safe travels, Prince, — he said coldly, then muttered as he rode off, — Foreigners would do well to keep their noses out of Midian affairs. This has nothing to do with them!

## DARASP LEARNS OF THE ENCAMPMENT



**D**arasp had just returned to his shelter in the Scythian quarter when Brother Sæccam entered with an unfamiliar priest. The nobleman immediately sensed something urgent had occurred.

— What is it, have you missed me already, Brother Sæccam?  
— he joked.

Sæccam, visibly anxious, replied:

— My lord, this man is our brother priest from Parsarqad, currently traveling from Babylonia. We've known each other for a long time. He stopped here on his way home. When I heard what he witnessed on the road, I thought it best for you to hear it too.

— What does our brother say? — Darasp looked the stranger up and down.

The visiting priest cleared his throat.

— My lord, I told Brother Sæccam about a strange incident I encountered on my journey. He advised me to share it with you as well.

— I'm listening.

— The caravan I joined was heavily loaded and moved at a crawl. When we reached Mount Bikini, we stopped to rest. The sluggish pace was unbearable — they said it would take fifteen days to reach Ecbatana. A fellow traveler from Ecbatana suggested we leave the caravan and take a shortcut. He assured me we could be there in five days. Said he knew the mountains well, having grown up there. I believed him and we headed into the forest, climbing steep cliffs until we reached the foot of Mount Bikini. In the valley near the river, we saw something astonishing: a massive Scythian military camp.

We were alarmed and retreated into the woods.

Darasp was stunned.

— A Scythian camp right under King Kiaksar's nose? Unbelievable! And then?

— They spotted us from the far side of the river and began shooting arrows. Thankfully, we were far enough away that the

missiles didn't reach us. We fled the way we came and after two days reached the caravan route. We joined another caravan and made our way to Ecbatana. That's when I parted ways with my companion.

Something clicked in Darasp's mind. He stood abruptly.

— And the Median fellow — where did he go? Do you know where he lives?

The priest was flustered.

— I didn't think to ask! — Then tried to recall. — He often mentioned a relative named Kittan. Said, "My nephew is an important man. I'll go to him for help."

Brother Sæccam smiled.

— Kittan, you say? I've met a commander by that name. If your travel companion is related to him, we should search for him in the military camp.

Darasp began pacing the room, then asked the foreign priest to wait outside. Once alone, he turned to Sæccam with urgency:

— The Median might start talking about what he saw. The longer Tötür Atxa stays unaware of the Scythian army near Ecbatana, the better for us.

He gave his order with finality:

— Find the Median and silence him immediately.

Səccam's smile vanished. Alarmed, he asked:

— How?

Darasp revealed the blade hidden under his robe.

— You and our brother from Babylonia can handle it. Give him my command.

He stood, visibly agitated.

— I must deliver this news to King Kambiz in Parsarqad at once.

Səccam reminded him:

— Tomorrow is the tenth day of the Great Id — the sacrificial ceremony.

Darasp winced.

— I know! But I couldn't convince Kijani. It's too late now! I can't stay in Ecbatana a moment longer. I must deliver the priest's message to King Kambiz immediately.

— They'll burn the poor girl!

— What choice do I have? I can't risk the fate of Pars for one girl.

Brother Sæccam bowed to the nobleman who was prepared to sacrifice everything for his homeland.

## POSTPONEMENT OF THE SACRIFICE...



**T**he High Mobed Amitaxah would not back down from his position: — Great Khagan, if this happens, all the priests and believers will rise in protest! Then it will be difficult to calm the people. The Supreme Council of High Priests firmly insists...

The Shahanshah could no longer restrain himself and cut the High Mobed off:

— Father, are all the members of the Council in agreement with you?

The High Priest did not hide the results of the secret vote from the Shahanshah:

— Great Khagan, only one of the nine priests supported the proposal. The rest are opposed.

— Who was it that voted in my favor?

— Great Khagan, I cannot say.

The Shahanshah already knew from Tətür Atxa that the supportive vote came from Father Shaum, so he didn't press further. He could, if he wished, suspend the sacrificial ceremony scheduled for his birthday without the Council's consent. But he was fully aware of the power wielded by the Zoroastrian priesthood. Had he failed to grasp that, his reign would never have lasted this long. For forty years, he had kept peace with the clergy, never angering them, always striving to persuade.

Now too, he tried to reason:

— After all, since the sacrifice is related to my health, it falls solely within my authority.

— That's not quite so. The Great Khagan's health concerns all of Media.

The Shahanshah helplessly scanned the faces of the Small Council. Only in Tətür Atxa's eyes did he see a trace of sympathy. The crown prince, the regent, Harpaq, even the usually jolly chief treasurer — all sided with Amitaxah.

He resorted to his final option:

— We can reschedule the sacrifice, originally set for the 46th day of the Great Id, and instead hold it on the 40th anniversary of my coronation. What say you to that, Father?

This proposal seemed reasonable even to Amitaxah:

— Great Khagan, this is a wise decision! I believe the Supreme Council of High Priests will accept this. I must relay this to my brothers...

The Shahanshah dismissed Amitaxah. As the old Mobed leaned on his staff and exited the throne room, the crown prince asked:

— Father of our Fire Temple, is there any point in postponing the sacrifice?

Tətür Atxa explained with a flat tone:

— Your Highness the Crown Prince, once the 40th anniversary of the coronation approaches, changing the date of the sacrifice again will be impossible.

The Shahanshah ordered the regent:

— Send my decree about the postponement of the sacrifice to all satraps. Dispatch the couriers without delay.

The regent hesitated:

— Great Khagan, the empire is vast. The couriers will not reach some satrapies in time.

The Shahanshah frowned:

— What can we do? We must accept what comes! In any case, we must do all we can so that at least some of these poor souls survive.

# PREPARATIONS FOR THE EGYPTIAN WAR



**H**arpaq carried out the Shahanshah's commands unquestioningly and observed the army's daily drills. The soldiers, now adept with four-gözl spears, were showing skill—and occasionally clowning around. During one session, Harpaq couldn't suppress a smile. Ten soldiers formed a pyramid with their spears; the eleventh climbed atop and, placing his hand over his brow as if surveying the horizon, cried out: "I see the pyramids of Egypt!"

Descending from the viewing platform, Harpaq boarded his single-horse chariot. The drummer struck the drum ten times—an official sign of high approval from the deputy commander-in-chief. Energized, the soldiers cheered their departing general. Harpaq's guards struggled to keep pace with the chariot as it headed toward the center of the camp. The drummer brought up the rear.

In the middle of the plain, the number of red tents designated for Scythian warriors grew by the day. Setting them

up wasn't difficult: flexible branches were first driven into the ground and tied together at the top, then covered with red fabric.

As the Shahanshah's deadline drew near, Harpaq grew more relentless. He snapped at the dye master:

— Seems like you're in no hurry! Why aren't the red fabrics ready?

He ignored the man's excuses and, tired and frustrated, threatened:

— Finish the job before I throw you into the vat of boiling dye!

# HARPAQ INQUIRES ABOUT THE CAMP



**H**arpaq observed the spear-throwing drills until nightfall, then ordered the training to continue into twilight. He addressed the flustered commanders and officers:

— Even in darkness, your spears must hit the mark. That is the Shahanshah’s demand. — He added sternly: — If the Shahanshah is displeased during his inspection, consider your heads already in the executioner’s hands!

Without waiting for a response from the cowed officers, he mounted his two-wheeled chariot. A torchbearer led the way, and his guards followed behind.

Harpaq didn’t waste time commuting to the city—he stayed at the military camp, sleeping in his tent guarded by spearmen. By the time he reached his shelter, it was dark. In the bright torchlight, he noticed someone rushing toward him. The spearmen tried to push the man away, but Harpaq signaled for them to let him approach.

— Your Excellency, I'm Commander Kittan's uncle. I have urgent news for him.

Because Kittan was one of Harpaq's favorites, he couldn't ignore the man.

— Kittan is away but will return soon. You can tell him then, — Harpaq replied. — But why are you dressed like a foreigner?

— Your Excellency, I've come from Babylonia, — the man replied, explaining without waiting for further questioning. — May Great Ahura Mazda protect him, I was one of the artisans the Shahanshah sent to Babylon. I'm a stonemason. I worked on the Hanging Gardens built in honor of Median Princess Amitiasior. The Babylonians call our princess Semiramis. When the construction finished, I was granted permission to return home.

Princess Amitiasior of Media had been married to Babylonian crown prince Nebuchadnezzar, son of King Nabopolassar. Enchanted by her beauty and grace, Nebuchadnezzar fulfilled her every wish. Missing the lush gardens of Ecbatana, she longed for greenery. After becoming

king, Nebuchadnezzar built the Hanging Gardens to console her in the dusty city of Babylon.

Having heard of the gardens' fame, Harpaq asked curiously:

— Craftsman, are the stories about the Hanging Gardens true? Are they truly so magnificent?

The stonemason struggled to find words:

— They are incredible, Your Excellency. The Hanging Gardens can only be compared to the pyramids of Egypt! I could talk about them for hours, but what I saw on my journey troubles me. I must report it to someone in authority. That's why I was looking for my nephew Kittan...

— If it's such important news, you may tell me. But keep it brief—I'm very tired! — Harpaq urged.

The stonemason anxiously recounted what he had seen on the road. When he finished, Harpaq asked skeptically:

— How do you know the yurts belong to Scythians?

The stonemason replied with pride:

— Your Excellency, I wasn't always a stonemason. I'm a former soldier. I fought alongside Scythians in the Assyrian war. I've seen their yurts up close.

After a few more questions and answers, Harpaq leapt to his feet. He jumped into his chariot and ordered the spearmen:

— Feed and shelter Kittan's relative, but keep a close eye on him. Don't let him out of your sight! — Then he turned to his guards. — We're going to the city!

# HARPAQ APPEARS BEFORE TƏTÜR



**H**arpaq arrived at the court late at night. His chariot horses, driven at a gallop, were soaked in sweat and foam. His guards had fallen behind. Even the torchbearer's horse was lathered and gasping.

The young deputy commander-in-chief was still inexperienced in matters of state. Though an irreplaceable general on the battlefield, he was shaken by the idea of an unseen enemy lurking so close. The deputy regent, Bixur, who had been pulled from his sleep, whispered resolutely:

— Even if the enemy were an arrow's shot from Ecbatana, I will not wake the ailing Shahanshah. I value my head too much! — He offered advice. — Better you wake the heir or Tətür Atxa instead.

Though the choice was limited, Harpaq hesitated before heading to Tətür Atxa's residence for refuge. The chief spymaster received the news without the slightest change in

expression. His blank face confused the general, who muttered with uncertainty:

— I fear I've disturbed Your Excellency over nothing...

Tətür Atxa, without taking his eyes off him, set aside a clay tablet he had been marking under lamplight:

— Not at all. I simply see no reason for panic.

Strangely enough, Harpaq found reassurance in the calm tone of the man he disliked.

— So what should we do now? — he asked.

— We wait for morning to hear what the Shahanshah advises.

Everyone knew that the ailing Shahanshah had effectively left the realm in the hands of his milk-brother. Yet, despite being de facto ruler, the chief spymaster took no step without the sovereign's consent. Harpaq fidgeted uneasily in his seat:

— It's surprising, Your Excellency, how calmly you received such crucial news.

A slight twitch passed over Tətür Atxa's lips:

— We already have some information on the matter. But what you've brought doesn't lessen its importance.

Harpaq offered a proposal:

— Should I deploy five or six regiments into the forest? We could crush the Scythians' encampment.

Without hesitation, Tötür Atxa rejected it:

— No. It's to our advantage that the Scythians have concentrated in one place.

Harpaq, baffled, seemed like a lost child:

— Your Excellency, I don't understand.

Tötür cut him off and reassured:

— You will soon understand. Go, get some rest.

Harpaq stood up:

— And what about the stonemason? I mean Commander Kittan's uncle.

For the first time, Tötür paused in thought, then spoke:

— Bring him to me. He'll live under my protection for a while. He might be useful.

— Very well, Your Excellency. I'll send him to you in the morning.

But this time, Tətür ordered firmly, without hesitation:

— Don't wait until morning! Bring the stonemason to me tonight — under strong guard, and bring him yourself.

# DARASP'S JOURNEY TO MUGAN



Darasp traveled with a small entourage. One of the three horsemen accompanying him was an old camel driver — an irreplaceable guide, but a tireless chatterbox who had everyone at their wits' end. As they neared the Tarmakiz satrapy, they encountered anxious and restless locals everywhere, all speaking of rebellion and warning that the roads had become dangerous. The guide suggested joining a caravan headed north, but Darasp refused — he was in a hurry.

— The caravan would slow us down. We must reach Mugan as quickly as possible!

Along the way, they crossed paths with various mounted units. The sheer number of troops troubled Darasp. He spoke fluent Median, having learned it during his studies in the sacred city of Shiz. He asked one group's commander:

— Is the rebellion truly this serious?

When he learned that there was heavy fighting between insurgents and the army in the Zikertu province, and that the unrest was spreading, he and his group quickly left the city of Tarmakiz.

The road was rough — hilly and full of slopes — so their pace was slow. No soul was in sight. After traveling some distance, the overly talkative guide suddenly fell from his startled horse. His leg was stiffened — clearly injured. Just as they were about to move again, black specks began appearing on the horizon, rapidly growing in size and number. Alarmed, they watched as the horizon darkened completely.

Darasp asked in astonishment:

— What is that?

— A Turkmen migration, — the guide muttered with sudden clarity, momentarily forgetting his pain. — Best wait for them to pass. Otherwise we'll be trampled by horses, donkeys, oxen, and sheep.

They reined in their horses, released them into the grass, and lit a fire. They were just sharing a bite of bread when the migration came into full view — truly a sight to behold.

A herd of horses led the procession, their pounding hooves shaking the plains. Horsemen with whips gently guided the well-fed animals. Then flocks of sheep and goats, like grains of sand in the desert, moved in clusters. The shepherds were also mounted. After that, a massive cattle herd filled the plain so tightly that not even a needle could find room. The drovers tried to control them, but the animals moved at their own pace. Finally, carts pulled by yoked oxen brought up the rear.

Once the migration passed, Darasp's group moved on. There was still time before sunset, and they could have traveled farther, but the guide's swollen leg tormented him. Darasp tried to encourage him:

— Hold on. We'll stop at the next village and find a bone setter.

The guide snapped irritably:

— There's not a soul around here, let alone a bone setter! We're still far from the shores of the Andiya Sea. Let's stop after this next hill — I can't go any farther.

From the top of the hill, they spotted what looked like a small miracle. A camp was set around a small lake. Five or six men were pitching tents; women were cooking near fires;

children were shrieking and playing; dogs were barking. A few sheep, goats, and cows grazed on the slope. Horses were tethered, and the oxen hadn't yet been unyoked from their cart.

It looked like a small branch of the Turkmen migration they had seen earlier.

The small group descended into the camp. They helped the barely conscious guide down and laid him on a saddle blanket. A woman shouted at the barking dogs. Two men approached. Darasp showed them the guide's swollen leg. The younger man took a look and said:

— Looks like a dislocation.

The older man disagreed:

— No, it's a fracture. Go bring four or five eggs, a bowl of flour, a jug of water, and a strip of linen.

The younger man ran toward the cart. Darasp understood their language perfectly and asked curiously:

— Are you Medians?

— No, we're Turkmen. We were with the migration you saw earlier, — the old man replied.

— Do Turkmens speak Median?

— Maybe it's the Medians who speak our language! — the man said mockingly.

— Why did you split off from the migration?

— Long story, guest. The tribal chief didn't get along with our family.

— After you recover, will you rejoin them?

— No. We plan to settle here and make a home.

— Did you get permission?

That question offended the man:

— These steppes have been our ancestral pastures for generations. Who do we need permission from? We've been roaming from Maghrib to Mashriq and back for millennia, and no one's ever asked questions. We've never needed permission to settle, and we won't start now.

At that moment, the younger man returned from the tent. The older man quickly got to work. The guide cried out a few times during the treatment and then passed out. The man

applied a thick paste of his own making to the injured thigh and wrapped it tightly with the linen:

— Don't unwrap it for ten days, — he instructed, pulling out a small pouch. — Now I'll bring him back to his senses.

— It'd be better if he stayed unconscious! He talks our ears off on the road, — Darasp joked.

— That chatty, eh?

— No one talks more than him.

Sweating, the old Turkmen poured a few drops of liquid from his pouch down the guide's throat. He immediately woke up, shouting:

— Are you trying to kill me?

The Turkmen laughed heartily:

— The dead don't shout like that.

As they parted, the man offered an apology:

— We would've hosted you, but we've only just set up camp and haven't even had time to sit down.

# DARASP IN KING IŞPAQ'S PRESENCE



The rest of the journey passed without incident. They arrived in Mugan. Darasp had drawn several conclusions from the orders he received in Parsargadae. Above all, he realized that King Kambiz was too fearful of Shahanshah Cyaxares to confront Media directly. Instead, he had joined a more devious and cunning scheme — stirring up Media’s enemies from behind the scenes.

King Işpaq listened to the Persian noble with suspicion. He took the small golden tablet presented by Darasp and ordered it to be read aloud in the Scythian language.

— Your Majesty, the inscription is in the Persian tongue. It translates as follows:

“We, Kambiz, King of Pars, from the lineage of the Achaemenids, send Darasp to King Işpaq of the Scythians as our envoy. He shall speak on our behalf.” That is all.

King Išpaq studied the nobleman. Though this was the man who called himself Dara's first visit to Mugan, he carried himself with great confidence.

— Your Majesty, I bring greetings from King Kambiz of Pars. Since we share a common enemy, we've come to your aid. If we unite our strengths, victory will be swift. In short, King Kambiz offers you an alliance.

Although young, Darasp had no trouble expressing his thoughts clearly. His words implied that he knew some details of the Scythians' plot against Media.

To buy time, King Išpaq signaled for his personal interpreter and asked Darasp to repeat himself. The Persian complied. Only then did Išpaq ask:

— What compels King Kambiz to turn against his own father-in-law?

Darasp retorted boldly:

— Then let me ask what drives King Išpaq to rebel against his brother-in-law?

And with passion, he continued:

— We do not want to live as slaves! We refuse to let our sons and daughters be taken to Media's depraved palaces. We will not let our wealth flow into Media's coffers. We want to live free!

King Išpaq replied with scorn:

— Didn't you rise up five years ago? What was the result? Parsargadae was razed, your father Kambiz was killed, and a boy ascended the throne in his place.

— Freedom demands sacrifice, Your Majesty. Victory is always born of struggle, — Darasp replied proudly.

King Išpaq, clearly tired, asked:

— And what support can we expect from you?

— We have people inside Cyaxares' court. We can pass on valuable intelligence. We also have gold — we can help meet your needs. I'm sure our partnership will bear fruit.

— We already gather intelligence without your help. What I need is manpower, — the king replied.

— That, I cannot promise.

— Then what sort of partnership is this? If we win, you share the victory; if we lose, you remain unscathed while we bear the burden. Is this your idea of alliance?

Darasp nodded, acknowledging the king's point. Still, he offered hope:

— Under the eyes of the Shahanshah, it's difficult to gather troops. But we have a small force — ten thousand men, perhaps a little less. We are prepared to join them with yours.

King Işpaq's face lit up:

— Now that sounds like a real alliance. Be ready. Our men will come to Parsargadae and show you the rallying point for our troops...

Darasp bowed to hide a smirk:

— Just tell us the time, Your Majesty. We already know your forces are assembling beyond Mount Bikini.

That remark struck King Işpaq like an arrow. The revelation of a military secret was an ominous sign — it could spell disaster for the entire plot.

# AQAR'S UNEASE



**T**he fifty-sixth day of the Great Id was approaching. Couriers came to Prince Aqar's residence in an unending stream. Though his responsibilities were mounting, he couldn't shake the rising doubts within him.

The forty-thousand-strong Scythian army was nearing Ecbatana. According to the latest courier, they were already within fifteen leagues of the city.

Aqar tried to rid himself of doubt and decided to personally inspect the arrangements made for the Scythians. His request was welcomed at court, which somewhat calmed him.

But the deputy regent expressed concern:

— Prince, we don't object to your visiting the camp. But things are different now. You should know military drills are underway. If anything happens to you, we'll be deeply embarrassed before King Išpaq.

Aqar laughed confidently:

— My dear sir, drills aren't battles. What could possibly go wrong?

— Who knows, Prince. Anything can happen, — Bixur warned. — Stay vigilant

## AQAR IN THE MEDIAN MILITARY CAMP



**E**nvoy Aqar and his scribe reached the camp built for the Scythians a few hours later without any hindrance. The young officer assigned to them by Deputy Commander Harpaq was the head of the camp's security unit. He rode ahead, occasionally stopping his horse to respectfully answer any questions they asked. Aqar's scribe couldn't hide his awe at the sheer scale of the encampment:

— What a massive army! — he exclaimed. — Prince, defeating the Medians will be no easy task.

Aqar, too, was impressed by what he saw along the way, but he brushed aside the doubts creeping into his heart:

— Nonsense! No matter how vast they are, they won't be able to withstand the Scythians.

They arrived at their destination. Dismounting, they walked a while on foot. The tents erected for the Scythian warriors were spaced apart, all covered in dark red fabric. Thick straw mats lined the ground inside. A fire pit was designated in the

center. A drinking water skin was placed in a corner. In front of each tent, a stake had been driven into the ground, and behind it, a shallow pit surrounded by reeds had been dug.

The tents, aligned toward the sunrise, were impeccably constructed. Aqar, pleased with the conditions prepared for the Scythian warriors, was informed by the security chief that the deputy commander awaited him at headquarters.

The headquarters was nearby. Harpaq welcomed the guests graciously and led them to his luxurious tent. He greeted Aqar warmly:

— The Great Sovereign, may the holy Hormuzd protect him, knows how to honor his friends! — he said.

Aqar, in good spirits, stretched and asked:

— Dear Deputy Commander, what are the stakes planted in front of each tent for?

— By the Shahanshah's order, on the day the Scythian army enters the camp, a sheep will be tied to each stake, a large wineskin will be hung at each tent entrance, and a tray of pastries will be placed inside.

Prince, this is festive provision — a gift from the Shahanshah to his allies.

Aqar was taken aback:

— Five thousand sheep? Five thousand skins of wine? — he exclaimed in astonishment, but then composed himself and asked another question. — Dear Harpaq, unlike your warriors' tents, ours are not lined inside with felt. May I ask why?

— Our tents were set up during winter. The Scythian army will arrive in Ecbatana at the end of spring, stay at the camp for a few days, and then depart for campaign. The weather will be warm by then. Felt lining won't be necessary.

Aqar accepted the explanation. He posed one more question:

— Dear Harpaq, the accommodations for our warriors are excellent, but what about their horses? They can't be kept far from the tents.

— Prince, do not worry, — Harpaq reassured him. — The horses will be kept in corrals by the riverside. The area is close to both food and water and not far from the tents.

Aqar skeptically replied:

— A Scythian needs to keep his horse in sight at all times!

— There'll be two days of celebration. The food and drink will be so abundant, the Scythians will forget about their horses entirely.

Aqar left the deputy commander satisfied. The Medians' ignorance of the impending conspiracy filled him with confidence. He leaned in and whispered to his scribe:

— No matter how great the Median army is, it won't escape the trap we've laid for them!

# MEETING IN THE “CHAMBER OF DEATH”



**T**he Shahanshah had developed a new “illness.” He had taken to frequently visiting the “Chamber of Death.” Dragging his feet, he would roam around his future resting place, sometimes pausing to observe the gold- and gem-encrusted walls and floors. Though he had installed a throne for himself and seats for his entourage on the chamber’s balcony, he rarely lingered there. Usually, once he sat on the portable throne waiting at the door and slaves gently lifted it to carry him back to the palace, everyone would breathe a sigh of relief.

But this time was different. The Shahanshah sat on the throne and ordered his entourage to sit as well. The warm glow of the spring sun caressed their faces.

— I’m thinking, why not hold the Small Council here? It wouldn’t be so bad, — the ruler said.

He then mocked the discomfort visible on the faces of the crown prince, Tötür Atxa, the High Mobed, the chief treasurer,

the deputy commander, and the deputy regent who had followed him with anxious, silent steps.

— You won't find a better place than this in all of Media! Not even Ahriman himself would think to look for us in the "Chamber of Death"! — he joked, and without any preamble, gave his order: — Deputy Commander, you'll leave for Tarmakiz without delay. You'll oversee the suppression of the rebellion. Place all the forces in the satrapy under Commander Kittan's control. Any objections?

Harpaq asked timidly:

— Great Khagan, what about the Scythians in Mount Bikin?

The Shahanshah seized on the question eagerly:

— The Scythians aren't going anywhere! You'll head to Tarmakiz now. You have one week to go and return. Before you depart, visit Tətür Atxa's basement — I want you familiar with some of my intentions.

Harpaq shot out of the "Chamber of Death" like a bullet. The Shahanshah was quiet for a while, then addressed his foster brother:

— It's time to enlighten the deputy commander.

Tətür Atxa raised a hand to his brow but said nothing. The Shahanshah asked:

— Tətür, have you confirmed the location where the prince is hiding?

— Great Khagan, he is most likely in the Scythian military camp near Mount Bikin. Our spies are tracking him. We should have solid information any day now.

The Shahanshah frowned:

— You've got a whole herd of spies at your disposal, and still you speak in probabilities? If they're no use, fire them — why keep them?

Tətür Atxa's expression didn't change under the rebuke. He merely shifted his weight from one leg to the other and, without excuse, replied humbly:

— I am at fault, Great Khagan.

The Shahanshah turned to the deputy regent:

— Summon the envoys from Babylon, Lydia, and Scythia to the court. Let's see what they've been up to and what news they bring.

Then he looked back at Tötür Atxa and asked:

— Where are İşpaq's troops?

— Great Khagan, today's couriers brought word that İşpaq's army left Mughan on the twentieth day of the Great Calendar. They entered Urartu on the twenty-fifth.

The Shahanshah asked thoughtfully:

— How are they conducting themselves along the way?

— The couriers report strict discipline. They pay for the provisions and fodder they take, and do not stray from their camps...

— When will they reach Ecbatana?

— In about twenty days. They should arrive on the fifty-fifth day of the Great Calendar.— Are your men monitoring their movement across the land?

— Of course, Great Khagan. We have couriers stationed every two agach.

# PASSENGERS OF AGIT



**A**t the break of dawn, Agit stopped his cart in front of the tavern. He peeked through the open door and spotted the drunk tavern keeper:

— Hey, sacred wineskin, the high shaman sent me! Are the travelers here?

He didn't really need the drunk's answer. There were only two people inside. One was in rags, looking like a beggar, sitting behind the door and sipping wine. The other was more decently dressed, sitting sideways by the central hearth but avoiding the wine in front of him. From his behavior, it was clear he was trying to conceal his identity. The beggar-like man rasped:

— You'll be taking us!

Agit sneered:

— So now I'm reduced to chauffeuring beggars?

But the man's face seemed familiar. A closer look revealed it was Bittey the shaman, who had vanished the year before. Agit couldn't hide his surprise.

— I heard you fled to Mughan...

The shaman grumbled:

— As you see, I didn't! Get ready — we're heading to Mount Bikin! — he pulled out two silver coins and handed them to Agit. — Get provisions for three.

— Three? Who's the third? — Agit asked.

The shaman pointed to the young man by the fire:

— That noble you see over there is coming with us too.

The "nobleman" was Aspaz. The woman had easily seduced the coal burner of the Golden Temple and changed into an old princely outfit in his sooty cell. They'd left the city in the coal burner's cart. First, she'd taken care of her parents and siblings, moving them from the Persian district of Ecbatana to a remote village and giving them all her savings. Feeling at peace, she had then found the familiar beggar in the Scythian quarter's tavern.

...Agit glanced toward the direction indicated. The noble removed their hood, revealing a beautiful face. Realizing the “nobleman” was a woman in disguise, Agit barely managed to hide his surprise and said indifferently:

— If our road is this long, we better bring a couple of good wineskins to make the journey lively. Maybe I should pop over to the “White Temple”? They’ve got the best and cheapest wine there. Shaman brother, I’ll be right back — don’t worry.

# AGIT AT THE “WHITE TEMPLE”



There was intense activity in the courtyard of the White Temple. The platform being constructed by craftsmen and their helpers above the fortress walls now towered higher than the sacred fire altars themselves. Worshippers, believers, and temple workers had abandoned their duties to watch the spectacle.

The platform was already nearing completion. A double staircase on either side allowed people to ascend. Though it was a temporary structure, every piece of wood had been polished to elegance. Tomorrow, in celebration of Shahanshah Kiaksar's forty-year reign, festivities would be observed from this platform, and the winners of the contests would be summoned up to receive their rewards.

From the platform, the view of the military encampment was breathtaking. The vast plain spread out like the palm of a hand.

The structure was being erected under the supervision of Shaum the Elder. Though he had been elected to the High Council of Chief Priests, he hadn't left the temple and was still acting in his former role until a new chief priest was appointed.

Tätür Atxa was checking the platform's safety, climbing up and down. Despite his age, he tucked the hem of his robe into his belt and carefully inspected every joint and beam with his hands.

Shaum the Elder knew it was difficult to earn the head spymaster's approval. He silently watched his every move, not daring to speak. Unexpectedly, Tätür Atxa paused and said:

— Brother Shaum, it doesn't look bad at all! I think the Shahanshah will be pleased.

The priest's face lit up, and he breathed easier. Just as he was about to express his joy, a cart entered the temple courtyard and stopped beside them. The rider leapt down — it was Agit the Scythian. Placing his hand over his chest, he quietly addressed the priest:

— Holy Father, I have something urgent to tell you.

Seeing that many of those gathered in the courtyard were watching with curiosity, Shaum the Elder raised a finger to his lips:

— Come, there are too many people here! — He then turned to Tətür Atxa. — Excellency, this is our loyal brother. Let's hear what new tidings he brings.

The three of them headed to Shaum's cell. There, they listened attentively to Agit. Tətür Atxa asked a few follow-up questions. Satisfied with the answers, he said:

— When you return from Mount Bikin, come straight to the basement!

Agit had heard of the head spymaster by name, but now, standing before the all-powerful Tətür Atxa, he grew nervous — though he didn't let it show.

— Excellency, where is this place?

Tətür Atxa cast a crooked glance at him:

— Shaum the Elder will explain. Now go, before anyone becomes suspicious of you.

Agit saluted with a hand over his brow. As he reached the door, he turned back and asked:

— Holy Father, is the promise you gave me last time still valid?

The priest nodded:

— Of course, my brother! — Then, turning to the head spymaster's questioning gaze, he explained: — Excellency, I promised our brother I would free him from slavery.

Tətür Atxa's cold expression softened slightly:

— I trust the Holy Father will have no difficulty fulfilling that promise.

# THE SHAHANSHAH REVEALS HIS SECRET TO HARPAQ AND ASTIAQ



One week later, Harpaq arrived at the royal court in his campaign attire. To make it on time, he had driven several horses to collapse along the way. The seasoned general, who had witnessed the emperor's foresight firsthand in distant Tarmakiz, didn't go unnoticed by the Shahanshah.

— So, Naib-i-Lashkar, how was your journey? Has Kittan managed to quell the uprising in Tarmakiz? — the ruler asked.

Harpaq, unable to hide his admiration, bowed deeply, his helmeted head touching the floor again and again:

— Not yet, Great Khagan! It turns out the rebellion has engulfed the entire satrapy. When I left Tarmakiz, Kittan was advancing toward the Zikertu district.

For some reason, the Shahanshah turned with unease and summoned Harpaq closer:

— My hearing has dulled since the illness; I can't hear well. Come closer! — he ordered.

Though clad in heavy armor, Harpaq quickly crawled forward and knelt by the throne. On the other side sat Tötür Atxa, and behind him stood the crown prince.

The lines on the Shahanshah's forehead shifted:

— So, tell me again, how long will it take to crush the rebellion?

Having now understood the Shahanshah's true intent, Harpaq responded with satisfaction and enthusiasm:

— It will take time, Great Khagan. The rebellion in Zikertu has exceeded all bounds. Its suppression will take a while. We may even need reinforcements.

— Fool, I said my hearing is bad, not that I'm deaf! Speak quietly! — the Shahanshah rebuked. — How many more troops are needed?

— Another twenty thousand cavalry wouldn't hurt, — Harpaq muttered. — True, the Satrap of Tarmakiz has ten thousand cavalry and ten thousand infantry, but they've never seen battle. They're inexperienced. I placed them under Kittan's

command. Currently, twenty thousand cavalry and twenty thousand infantry are engaged in suppressing the rebellion. But that's not enough!

— Do you take into account the tribal forces in the Pəştəsər Mountains? — the Shahanshah reminded him. — According to Shaum the Elder, more than five thousand warriors await us there.

— Of course, Great Khagan. I met with the tribal leaders in Tarmakiz.

— What do you think, Tətür? — the Shahanshah asked without turning his head. — The Naib-i-Lashkar says we need more troops...

Tətür Atxa replied without looking at Harpaq:

— Great Khagan, if the Naib-i-Lashkar says so, then it must be true. But we mustn't touch the forces stationed in Ekbatana! That would immediately draw attention. Prince Aqar is perceptive in such matters.

The Shahanshah did not agree:

— True, it will be noticed quickly, — he said with a sly grin,  
— but by the time he understands what he’s seen, it will be too late.

Tötür Atxa pressed again in his monotone voice:

— Great Khagan, we mustn’t touch the forces in Ekbatana.  
However, things are calm in Pars and Urartu...

The Shahanshah pondered for a moment:

— Very well, Naib-i-Lashkar, I grant you command of the ten thousand cavalry stationed in Pars and the five thousand in Urartu. Take them with you. — Then he gave a final order in a hushed tone: — Let the troops travel not by caravan roads, but along winding trails!

The crown prince had never understood why, without assessing the scope of the uprising, the Shahanshah had ordered elite forces to be sent to Tarmakiz a week ago. Even newly conscripted troops could suppress a peasant revolt easily. At the time, the prince had not dared voice his protest. But now, he couldn’t hold back:

— My Fire Altar father, troops stationed at the borders of Babylon and Lydia, even in Urartu and Assyria, may be

summoned to Ekbatana, but those in Pars must not be moved. You know the Parsis are not a people to be trusted. If we launch a campaign against Egypt, they will stab us in the back.

The Shahanshah stood up, slowly paced around the throne room, then returned to his seat. He turned to Tötür Atxa:

— It's time to inform the crown prince.

— Yes, Great Khagan, — Tötür Atxa bowed.

Without waiting for his reply, the Shahanshah continued:

— While the Naib-i-Lashkar is busy suppressing the uprising, I entrust his powers to you. Gather all veteran warriors in Ekbatana. In their place, send newly conscripted infantry regiments. — Then turning to Harpaq, he gave a final command:

— On the 53rd day of the Great Id, you will launch a two-pronged assault on Muğan. Show mercy to women, children, and the elderly. But slay all who bear arms. Free Muğan from the Scythian yoke. Drive the enemy as far as the Pass — but no further. We desire only our own lands. We covet no other.

# ASTIAQ IN TƏTÜR'S BASEMENT



**T**ətür Atxa invited the crown prince to his semi-underground dominion. On the Shahanshah's orders, he began informing the future king without haste. But what he revealed drove Astiaq into a frenzy. He shouted in fury:

— If I were Shahanshah, I wouldn't keep a chief of spies like you for even a day! How could you let that snake slip away, uncle?

Tətür Atxa remained unfazed. He simply raised a finger to his lips:

— The crown prince must learn to control his emotions — and lower his voice. — As Astiaq paced the room in frustration, Tətür added calmly, — Don't worry, Your Majesty, we're back on the prince's trail.

The crown prince looked at the spy chief with suspicion and demanded:

— That snake should've been captured and handed over to the executioners long ago.

Tätür's voice did not change:

— Not yet. Let the conspirators continue believing we're unaware. — Then he revealed another secret.

What the chief of spies said completely confused Astiaq.

— You mean the Shahanshah intends to destroy the Scythian kingdom?

— Yes, the Shahanshah is resolute in his decision.

Astiaq breathed a sigh of relief:

— That is a wise decision. And what about Pars? When will he deal with them?

Tätür ended the conversation in his usual expressionless, detached tone:

— The Shahanshah still trusts Kambiz. But I suspect that burden may soon fall on Your Majesty.

# DARASP AND AQAR'S COLLABORATION



**D**arasp arrived at envoy Aqar's residence in the Scythian district — a flat, modest-looking building from the outside. This time, the host greeted him with greater reverence. Through correspondence with his counterpart in Pars, he had discovered that Darasp wasn't just any nobleman — he was of royal blood.

The guest's somber demeanor didn't escape the envoy's notice. Without waiting, he asked directly while still standing:

— Don't tell me you've come empty-handed, Your Majesty?

Darasp, who had returned from Muğan to Parsargada with great expectations, had not been allowed near the royal court. After a week of waiting, his direct superior finally placed ten thousand troops under his command — but warned him:

“If the king finds out, he'll have us all executed.”

Darasp spread his hands:

— Prince, I've come with only ten thousand troops. Our King Kambiz avoids maintaining an army. He fears the Shahanshah. — The Parsian noble grumbled. — I had to beg local nobles for even these.

Envoy Aqar was relieved, though he masked it with guile:

— Why so few? Even IV Rusa, that sorry king of Urartu, is sending five thousand cavalry. Frankly, we were expecting a larger force from Parsargada. — Then, pretending indifference, he asked, — Where's your army now? Still in Parsargada?

Darasp averted his gaze from the cunning Scythian:

— No, they're already in the forests around Bikini. They're ready for battle. It was a grueling journey, Prince! We had to circle Mount Zagros four times to evade Median patrols.

Envoy Aqar beamed and praised him:

— Well done, Your Majesty!

A brief silence followed. Then the shrewd Scythian, who had been gnawing at the Median Empire from within like a worm, couldn't resist jabbing at Darasp's ignorance:

— Seems Your Majesty forgot that Median troops have been withdrawn from the Parsian frontier. Their latest reports

come from Tarmakiz. Lucky for us, the uprising there is huge — and they still haven't been able to suppress it.

# FESTIVAL IN THE MILITARY CAMP



**T**he Scythian army was set to enter the city by midday. Prince Aqar had to forgo his sleep. He went to the camp early in the morning. Though it was still dawn, the plain churned like a great sea. Upon this visit, Envoy Aqar could hardly recognize the camp — it was a magnificent sight. With a touch of bitterness, he muttered to his long-serving but faded scribe:

— This is the Medians' last celebration!

There was no room to move. It felt as though the entire city of Ecbatana had poured into the camp. These were the final days of the celebration. After tomorrow's competitions, life in the country would return to normal. But for now, the revelry remained at its peak.

The scribe echoed his prince's sentiment:

— May the thunderbolts of the god Ares aid the Scythians!  
— He couldn't hold back. — Prince, let's enjoy the spectacle a little, we still have time!

The camp pulsed with excitement. Music and song echoed from all directions. Youths danced in circles. Priests moved through the rows of tents, placing heaping trays of oily pastries from carts and handing them out for free. Under their watchful eyes, servants with massive wineskins strapped to their backs poured wine into the cups of any who asked — also for free.

Envoy Aqar and his scribe tasted the free wine and sampled the pastries. The scribe whispered enviously:

— What a waste of such bounty! To give this luxury to commoners! Such a shame!

The number of mounted security patrols had been increased fivefold. They strictly enforced order, swiftly quelling any disputes, scuffles, or disorder among the revelers. No one's whims were indulged.

Several squares had been set up for entertainment. Tightrope walkers, cockfighters, monkey handlers, snake charmers — each group showed off their talents in different corners. Thousands of citizens wandered from show to show, finding entertainment to suit their tastes. Street vendors weaved through the crowds, hawking their wares.

Tightrope walkers leaped like birds across ropes stretched high between poles, putting on dazzling performances for both hearts and coin purses. But the biggest crowds gathered around the monkey performers, whose foolish antics had spectators doubled over with laughter. Most of the bear tamers were Scythians. Their hairy beasts performed somersaults, walked on hind legs, and leapt, drawing much-deserved applause.

Crowds watched the snake charmers in utter silence. The moment the flute stopped, the snakes halted their dance and poised to strike.

There was no end to the performances. Cock and ram fights, wrestling matches — each had their own audiences.

The entire camp was soaked in festive spirit. Guards, however, didn't allow anyone into the camp's main square. Soldiers could only watch from afar. Performers had linked several wagons together to form makeshift stages. Dance troupes swirled and twirled to lively music at various points throughout the area.

Envoy Aqar knew that tomorrow would host a horse race, archery, spear-throwing, and mock sword duels. The

Shahanshah himself would reward the victors — and with that, the celebrations would end.

The head of the security detail recognized Envoy Aqar from afar. When he learned the envoy wanted to see the deputy commander, he led the way, cracking his whip left and right to clear a path.

Upon seeing Tətür Atxa in the command tent, Aqar couldn't hide his surprise. He hesitated, staring at the cold face of the chief of spies:

— Your Excellency, I had a message for Naib of the Army, Harpaq.

Tətür gestured for him to sit:

— Sit down, Prince. Harpaq has been dismissed and imprisoned. I'm acting Naib of the Army for now. — To avoid further discussion, he added, — This is the Shahanshah's decision. In short, whatever you meant to tell Harpaq, you can tell me.

Aqar sat and feigned disappointment:

— What a pity. Harpaq was a worthy commander. — Then added, — Your Excellency, our troops will arrive at the camp shortly.

Tətür already knew:

— I know, Prince. We're prepared to welcome our allies. Our security forces are stationed along the Babylon–Ecbatana road. All paths into the camp are open.

Aqar didn't linger long. As he was leaving, he asked:

— How is the situation in Tarmakiz? Has the uprising been quelled?

— Unfortunately, Commander Kittan has not yet suppressed the rebellion. It seems our Tarmakiz forces will not be able to participate in the Egypt campaign. — Tətür replied.

# KIAKSAR'S FINAL COMMAND



The mobile throne stood ready at the door of the royal sleeping quarters. The Shahanshah rose with great difficulty. He no longer had the strength to walk — each step was labored, and he could not move without assistance.

Ranks of spear-bearing guards sprang into motion. The servants lifted the throne's legs and slowly made their way toward the “chamber of death.” When the mobile platform arrived, the Shah's closest companions were already waiting on the balcony. Tötür Atxa and the crown prince stepped forward and helped the Shahanshah from the throne onto the seat prepared for him. Once he settled in, he turned to the High Priest of Priests:

— Our father, tomorrow at dawn, all the priests must be armed!

As if anticipating the question on everyone's minds, he added:

— Of course, the situation is under control. This is simply a precaution.

Father Amitaxah bowed with the support of his staff:

— Great Khagan, I will give the order immediately! Rest assured, by dawn tomorrow, weapons will be in the hands of all priests in every temple across the capital.

The Shahanshah frowned:

— Best if you do it without the trumpets. What need is there for all that noise?

Understanding the ruler's concern, Amitaxah quickly corrected himself:

— Of course, Great Khagan, as always, you are right! — Then asked permission — If I may, I'll give my instructions and return.

The Shahanshah gave a slight nod. Amitaxah descended from the balcony and made his way toward the nearby Golden Temple.

Tötür Atxa then exchanged glances with the crown prince:

— Great Khagan, I believe the crown prince cannot be kept out of such a major undertaking.

The Shah replied slowly:

— And what if something were to happen to the crown prince...? — he let the sentence trail off. — Then what?

Prince Astiaq knelt before the seat, speaking with a touch of offense:

— My holy father, I am thirty years old, not a child. I am fully capable of looking after myself — and the fate of the Median realm is my own. Even if demons of Ahriman block our path, I cannot stand aside!

His frustration was understandable. His father had always doubted his capabilities. Tətür Atxa, seeing the Shah's hesitation, didn't waste words:

— Great Khagan, you have always said the heir must learn how to hold the throne in his own hands.

Conceding to logic, the Shahanshah relented:

— Very well, brother, let it be as you say! — Then he addressed his son. — Rise now. You must crush the enemy hiding in the forests near Bikini. I give you command of twenty

thousand Median cavalry, ten thousand archers, and ten thousand slingers.

The crown prince's eyes widened:

— My holy father! Is such a force really necessary? From what I know, the Scythians have — at most — twenty thousand men around Bikini.

The Shahanshah straightened slightly, interrupting:

— My son, always count the enemy's strength as double what you expect, and you won't lose. I suspect there are more forces in that forest — perhaps even those Scythian cavalry who disappeared during the Lydian war. Who knows what tricks the enemy is planning? There's a reason people say, "*the Scythian's heart is as dark as the forest!*"

Then he gave his final order:

— Take several flasks of Median oil with you. To drive the enemy into the open, set fire to the forest. Median oil will help the fire spread.

A dust cloud rising in the direction of the military camp caught the attention of those on the balcony. Tətür Atxa remarked:

— The Scythian army is entering the camp.

The Shah broke the silence that followed:

— There's no more time to wait. The final knot must be tied in the net we've laid. Go now — to the camp!

Tətür Atxa and the crown prince hurried off the balcony.

Then the Shah turned to the regent:

— Bixur, I entrust the security of Ecbatana to you. Stay close to the city prefect.

As the regent's heavy form rolled down the steps, the chief treasurer Barri asked:

— Great Khagan, do you have any command for me?

Despite being in great pain, the Shahanshah couldn't resist joking with his amusing treasurer:

— Take your eyes off Egypt's golden pyramids and guard what little we have left!

Just then, seeing Amitaxah return to the balcony, the Shah was about to speak but suddenly his face went pale. He whispered:

— I'm freezing. Cover me!

A servant rushed up with a thick cloak and draped it over the Shah's seat. He whispered again:

— I'm freezing... move my chair into the sun.

They shifted his throne into a sunnier part of the balcony.

The breath of death hovered over the Shah's face. Not even the roaring temple fires could warm his body now. When a physician approached with medicine, the Shah lashed out:

— Stay away!

Then he gave a final command:

— Everyone leave — except Father Amitaxah.

# KIAKSAR'S FINAL BATTLE



Once everyone had left, the Shahanshah, his teeth chattering, turned to Father Amitaxah:— Father... what will become of Media's fate? The High Priest of Priests knelt beside the throne, took the Shah's hand in his, and gently comforted him:

— My brother, soon Harpaq's fifty-thousand-strong army will reach Mughan from two directions — both through the plain between the Andiya Sea and the mountains, and across the shallow part of the river that splits the country. The existence of the Scythian kingdom will be brought to an end...

The Shahanshah asked in a calm voice:

— And after that?

Without letting go of his hand, Father Amitaxah continued:

— My brother, soon Tətür Atxa's force — forty thousand heavy and twenty thousand light infantry — will drive their five-qaz-length spears through the red tents where the Scythians

sleep. Not a single soldier from the enemy's forty-thousand-strong army will survive.

The Shahanshah, now fully calm, asked again:

— And then?

Amitaxah went on:

— My brother, soon the crown prince's army will surround the Bikini forests. From one side, clay pots filled with Median oil will be lit and launched into the woods by slings, setting them ablaze. Meanwhile, archers will fire arrows into the trees. Anyone who escapes the flames will be struck down by Median cavalry.

He looked into the Shah's widening eyes and reassured him:

— Great Khagan, rest easy. I see a bright future for Media.

Only then did the mighty ruler of Media, Kiaksar, finally find peace. His eyes gently closed for the last time, and his soul rose to the endless heavens.

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