

Story #434 (Tape #6, 1972)

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Arzu and Kamber<sup>1</sup>

Once upon a time there were a beauty named Arzu and a boy named Kamber. This Kamber went to a village and became an apprentice in the household there. This woman had a daughter. While Kamber and the daughter were herding flocks of lambs one day, they fell in love with each other. A neighbor noticed this and reported to the woman, "Your daughter and Kamber are going about in such-and-such a manner."

The mother thought it over and then said to herself, "Let me draw some milk from my breast and give this milk to both of them. After they have drunk this milk, I shall tell them that they are brother and sister. Knowing that they are so related, they will separate themselves from each other."<sup>2</sup>

The woman drew some milk from her breast and then cooked a meal. Her daughter, however, sensed what she was doing. The girl sang to Kamber,

They have placed one stone against another;

My beloved Kamber, they have mixed my mother's milk with the food.

Kamber replied,

<sup>1</sup> This is a version of a 17th-century folk romance known as Kerem and Aslı. It is sometimes referred to as the Romeo and Juliet of Turkish folk literature.

<sup>2</sup> When a woman nurses children other than her own, they become "milk siblings" of her own children. Often peasants trade nursings in order to bring their children and families closer together. The motif occurs frequently in folktales. Often a mother giant saves the mortal hero by nursing him briefly, thus making him immune to hostility from her fierce, man-eating giant sons.

Can there be such a food, one made with mother's milk?

Can Kamber, found in the mountains, be a brother to Arzu?<sup>3</sup>

Kamber felt that things were becoming difficult, and so he decided to go to his uncle and request his aid to help him in this situation. If with his help he could win his beloved, all would be well. If not, then he would have to give her up and leave this place. He went to his uncle's house and sat down.

They did not recognize him. They said to him, "Son, where do you come from and where are you going? Who are you?"

Kamber sang,

wish these beys were uncles and a nephew could go to them for help.

My beloved has been captured by my foes, and I have come to ask for help.

They started thinking about this, and finally they remembered that they had once lost a child by the name of Kamber. Could this boy be that child? They said among themselves, "We had two mares at the time he disappeared. If he can distinguish the color of these mares, we shall then know that he is our lost child, Kamber." So they set him a problem.

Kamber replied:

Red colts, brown colts, all

With their abundant manes.

My beloved was captured by my foes,

And I have come to ask for aid.

<sup>3</sup> This is a literal translation which loses, of course, much of the poetic effect of the Turkish.

*near* *girl* *him*  
 "It is clear now that he knew, for one of the horses was red and the other was brown. This is indeed our lost nephew," they said to each other,

They all set out together, and they came to the village where they found that Kamber's beloved had been given to the son of a neighbor. The wedding was now in progress. Kamber walked to the wedding room, entered, sat down, and looked around. He saw that they were playing, eating and dancing. In a passionate mood, he started speaking, but he became so *angry* that he sometimes used *bad* language. The people there wondered who he was and what he was talking about. Deciding to drive him away, they chased him not only out of the house but out of the village also.

The bride was dressed and placed in her *coach* carriage, and they started taking her to another town.<sup>4</sup> Kamber came and stopped before the carriage. Standing close to it, he started singing as follows:

O those who are going,

O those who carry Arzu away--

I have eaten the cream,

And you take but the skimmed milk away.<sup>5</sup>

When he sang this, Arzu was upset by it, and she said,

O Kamber, what have you done?

What words have you found here to say?

Why did you say such a thing?

They chased Kamber away again, and he ran away from that place. The girl told her people that she had to observe forty days of mourning during which time she would not allow her bridegroom to come near her.

<sup>4</sup> Apparently the bride is being conveyed to the home of her bridegroom. This may well refer to the exogamy of some Turkish groups.

<sup>5</sup> The term Kamber uses here is buttermilk, not skimmed milk.

Some time later Kamber said to himself, "Let me once again visit the village where that beauty Arzu lives. If Allah is to take my soul let me die after seeing her again." He reached her village after a while, and he stopped near her house. The girl was sitting at a window where she could see the young man. Looking out, she thought she saw the same Kamber she had known before. He had the same horse as before, and all his equipment<sup>6</sup> was exactly the same as it had been before. She was surprised. Not daring to ask him directly where he was from, she asked him in song:

Your horse and uniform are both so black!

What wonderful things my Allah can create!

If it is not improper for me to ask,

Where is it that you come from, O young man?

To this Kamber replied,

My horse and uniform are both so black--

What wonderful things my Allah can create!

No, it is not improper for you to ask.

It was from Ak Kavak that first I came.

(Back in the old days, when the girl asked Kamber where he came from, he used to tell her that he came from Ak Kavak.<sup>7</sup>)

When Arzu heard this, she realized that this was the man they were looking for. The two escaped together and traveled until they reached a

<sup>6</sup> The narrator uses the word organization here. This does not make sense if taken literally; the word equipment seemed the best substitute.

<sup>7</sup> This is an indication of the narrator's awareness of the great age of this tale. Apparently he does not know where this Ak Kavak (White Poplar) is, but since that was the way it had been told in the past, that is the way he will tell it in the present.

*Elopes with*

fountain, where they refreshed themselves the next morning. Arzu washed her face with water from the trough. While she was scrubbing her fingers, her <sup>2</sup>bracelet fell into the water, but she did not notice this. A little while later Kamber washed his face in the same trough, and there he noticed the bracelet down at the bottom of the trough. He picked up the golden bracelet and put it into his pocket. He then returned to Arzu,

the two of them sat together for a while. To cool herself, Arzu rolled up her sleeves, and as she did so, she realized that her bracelet was missing. Kamber asked her, "What are you searching for?"

"I must have lost my bracelet," she replied. "If you have it, please give it back to me."

Kamber said,

I did not go to the fountain;

I did not wash my hands and face;

My soul, my liver, Arzu,

I have not seen your bracelet.

At this point the narrator apologized for his bad singing voice.

Arzu<sup>8</sup> answered,

And I have washed my hands and face.

I have placed my bracelet over here.

She did not tell him that she had dropped her bracelet but that she had placed it over there. Kamber again said that he had not seen her

<sup>8</sup> Throughout much of the tale, especially in this part, the narrator calls the girl Arzu Güzel, as if the two words were parts of her name.

bracelet but he asked how her bracelet was marked so that he would know it was hers if he should see it anywhere.

She said, "Arzu and Kamber were written on it."

He sang,

Arzu, O Arzu,

Rams and sheep with lambs.

What was it written on the bracelet?

Oh, tell me, my Arzu.

Arzu answered,

With pleasure, O with pleasure.

On my bracelet was written

Arzu and Kamber.<sup>9</sup>

"Very well, then," said Kamber, "here is your bracelet. From now on, do not be so careless."

Then they started riding again, stopping briefly only here and there until they came to a plain where they decided to dismount and let their horses rest. There they made love. As Kamber was lying with his head on Arzu's knees, his soul was taken away by the order of Allah [that is, he died]. Arzu did not realize that he had died, and so when the morning came, she decided to awaken him with a song to him.

It is morning, and dawn is breaking.

Hear! The birds are singing legends.

The star which watched us making love is setting now.

Wake up, young man, wake up.

<sup>9</sup> Are there but three lines to this stanza, or did we miss something?



The star is setting now.

Then she realized that Kamber was dead, but while tending the fire, she caught fire, and died too<sup>10</sup>

This was their end. They could not possess each other in this world.

Their wedding will be held in the next world. May Allah make this possible for all of us.

<sup>10</sup> In some of the classic love stories of the Middle East, the lovers never possess each other physically. Kept apart by marriage to others forced upon them by parents or rulers, they yearn for each other in a Platonic way. Their love becomes first intellectual and then spiritual, and thus consumed by love's fires, they die. This is what happens, for example, in Fuzuli's Leyla and Mecnun.

In this peasant tale, however, there is a mixture of the physical and spiritual. The lovers do possess each other briefly, and there is a suggestion that after Kamber dies, Arzu literally burns to death when her hair sweeps the ashes of their fire.