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Volodimir
Vladko



DESCENDANTS
OF THE
SCYTHIANS

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PUBLISHERS**





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Vladko



**DESCENDANTS
OF THE
SCYTHIANS**

A NOVEL

Kiev
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Володимир Владко
НАЩАДКИ СКИФІВ
Роман

Translated from the Ukrainian
by *Olexandr Panasyev*

*...Everything we know about the Scythians
we have learned either from archeological
artifacts or historical references
by ancient Greek
and Roman historians...*

*"...The representations of the Scythians
that the explorers had seen earlier
on the ancient jugs, vases, bas-reliefs, and jewelry,
had now come to life
before their very eyes..."*

*This is a gripping story
of the bellicose Scythians,
full of suspense
and flights of imagination.*

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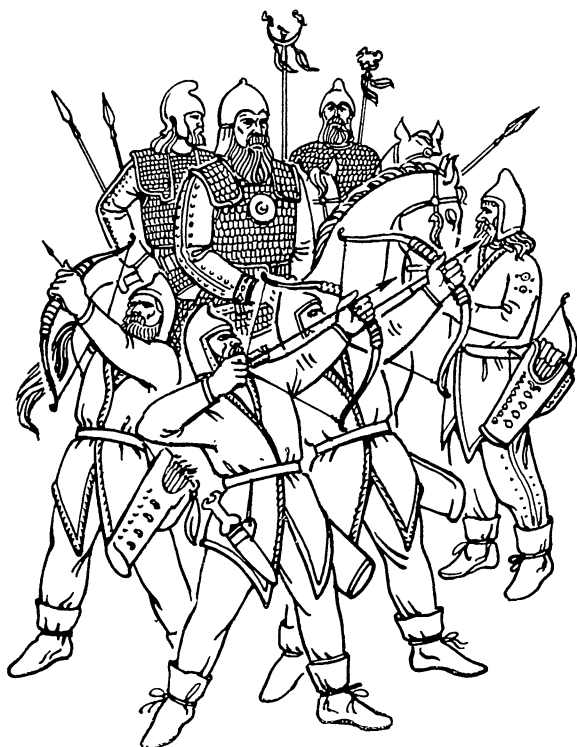
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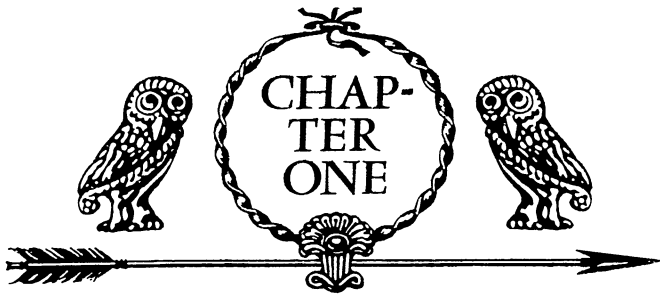
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PART THREE

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PART ONE





*a geologist, an archeologist and two
geology students decide to explore a cave,
Artem the student is envious, falls into an
archeological daydream, and faces the
music in the cave*

It was growing dark but as night fell, it did not become cooler. It was the middle of July. Ivan Semenovitch took off his embroidered Oriental skull-cap and wiped his shaven head with a handkerchief. The skull-cap was his favorite headgear.

"It's hot, isn't it?" he said matter-of-factly, and reaching up to the miner's lamp, he turned the flame down. Then he pulled a large piece of paper closer to him which bore a diagram of the newly-discovered deposits and prospecting shafts, and turned to the others. His small, piercing gray eyes seemed to be assessing the mood of the three people facing him, although this time he evidently had no intention of reproaching them. His fingers smoothed his short mustache and his voice sounded almost gentle when, after a short pause, he began to speak.

"It's not at all difficult, my friends, to analyse the results of our efforts. We have not found very much so far, the main impediment being... Do I need to tell you that what is hindering our progress is our working, as it were, along two lines? Yes, Dmitro Borisovich, working along two parallel lines, that's how I would describe it. Your rebellious outbursts are what distracts you all the time, aren't they? In fact, they distract not only you but also Lida and even Artem! I never imagined that archeologists could be so

enthusiastic... All right, all right, I'll stop, seeing that you're ready to explode. What I was going to say is that the time has come to unite our efforts..."

The exordium was quite promising.

"All the data we have from the geological prospecting points to one and the same thing," Ivan Semenovitch continued. "The veins of copper ore cannot yet be traced very far below the surface, but their general direction can be determined: they descend into the depths of the Sharp Mount."

"Isn't that what I've been telling you all along?" said the archeologist, his glasses flashing reflected light.

"Like the rest of us, you have been putting forward certain ideas. But all these theories have to be thoroughly checked," Ivan Semenovitch replied. "Lida, be so kind as to pass me your diagram."

Artem watched the girl rise slowly and gracefully to her feet, her movements deliberate and easy, pushing a straggling wisp of hair into place, take the paper from the windowsill and pass it to the geologist. The girl's every supple motion was pleasing to the eye. Even the navy-blue overalls she wore, which looked so scruffy on the others, fit her perfectly.

"I haven't finished it yet," she said handing over the diagram.

"That's all right, we'll be able to make out the main lines anyway. Move closer everybody, will you," the geologist said, unfolding the paper. "Here is the line of the prospecting shafts. All of them, except the sixth, indicate the general outline of..."

"The Sharp Mount!"

"Of course. The Sharp Mount and nothing else. You were right from the start, Dmitro Borisovich. Also anyone can see even without the keen sight you're endowed with, Dmitro Borisovich — the diagram shows it unequivocally — that the lines of the prospecting pits run straight for a while and then they break. The veins disappear at a depth of approximately ten meters, and there's no telling whether they reappear inside the mount. It'd be stupid to insist that they do without further borings, and deep ones at that. Surely you agree with that, Dmitro Borisovich! And we don't have any data as to how the veins run further down, do we? I don't as far as I am concerned, anyway."

"But *I* have some data!"

“Ah, you do, do you?”

“Yes.”

“Do you mean to say that you have the geological data concerning the veins inside the mount?”

“Yes, I do.”

The archeologist, sensing the intrigued gazes trained upon him, deliberately wiped his glasses with a piece of cloth, and said:

“You may be interested to know that I’ve observed outcrops of the veins on the walls of the cave, and though I’m not a geologist I can assure you...”

Ivan Semenovich shrugged his shoulders:

“Again you’re talking about that cave of yours, Dmitro Borisovich. I deeply respect your knowledge of archeology and I remember too, without your reminding me, that you are not a geologist. But I must tell you at this point that there is quite a difference between archeology and geology... In view of this, I grant that your observations may have been those of a scientist but nevertheless...”

“I’ve foreseen the objections you would raise, my dear Ivan Semenovich, but ignoring the somewhat boorish manner in which they’ve been couched...”

“I do apologize, really!”

“Ah well, never mind, never mind. I have long grown accustomed to the manner in which you express yourself... And to a greater extent than you have managed to accept the archeological enthusiasm you keep mentioning... But let’s get back to where we started. In view of the objections I was sure you would raise, I invited Lida to accompany me to the cave today, in the capacity of, let’s say, a reliable geological witness.”

Artem opened his eyes wide in bewildered indignation: Lida went to the cave in the company of Dmitro Borisovich without even a word to him about it! All right, just you wait!

Suppressing a smile, Ivan Semenovich said:

“Well, that, of course, is quite another matter since Lida, as a student at a geological college does know something about geology... And may I ask what you found in that cave? If my memory serves me right, the cave in question is only fifteen or so meters deep?”

“It used to be until recently.”

“Oh, I don’t quite get your meaning. Has it suddenly gotten deeper, or what?”

"We got as far as the obstruction caused by the rockfall. It blocked the way further down, but the cave in fact is much deeper..."

The geologist made himself more comfortable in his chair and looked at the archeologist with growing interest. Then he turned his gaze to Lida who forced an embarrassed smile.

"What a shame you didn't tell me about it right from the start," Ivan Semenovich said reproachfully. "You call that discipline?"

"Ivan Semenovich," Lida said, now really red with shame, "we only decided to keep it a secret to make it more exciting now. A little surprise, that's all."

"Did Artem take part in your secret sally into the cave?"

"No, he didn't. There were only the two of us. Artem was busy with something else and we didn't want to disturb him."

Artem, eyebrows knit, kept silent. Disturb him, indeed! It wasn't a matter of his being busy, not at all! Besides, sorting geological samples wasn't so important... The thing was that Lida and Dmitro Borisovich just didn't want him to know anything. It was a case of clear-cut treachery since they surely were aware that he was interested in the cave, too! All right, he wouldn't let them know what he thought about the whole thing! He had his pride, after all!

"I see, I see," the geologist said pensively. "Anyway, I'd appreciate being informed of the results of your secret expedition. How deep is the cave?"

"I wouldn't pretend to know," Dmitro Borisovich said irresolutely. "And I don't think it's possible to find out yet."

"Why not?"

"The cave is much too deep. We got down about to a hundred and fifty meters and turned back. And the end wasn't in sight."

"Ivan Semenovich," Lida cut into the conversation. "When we were digging through the rockfall we saw a passage that led into another cave, a very long one too! Then a lot of small passages, galleries, corridors and openings. A sort of maze. That's why we didn't go any further. We were not ready for a speleological venture. Here, have a look, I've made a quick pencil sketch of the cave section we went through."

Three heads leaned over the rough pencil sketch. Artem stayed put in his corner. He was determined not to budge.

The whole thing could be treated only as an offensive disregard of his person. Disgraceful!

Who was it who had first taken an interest in the cave when they had arrived just a month before and began prospecting — Artem of course! Who had kept assiduously collecting all kinds of information about it? Artem! Who had managed to find an old man who told them of some finds long ago in and around the cave? Again none other than Artem. Nobody would even have noticed the insignificant little cave had it not been for him. True enough, Artem wasn't an archeologist; he was a geology student, but then, Lida wasn't an archeologist either! She was also a student taking the same course as he. Anyway, one way or another, Dmitro Borisovich did not have the right — at least from an ethical point of view — to take Lida with him on this prowling that had turned to be so revealing. It was an affront! All right, now Artem knew what he had to do...

"And we did find four outcroppings of copper veins in the walls of the main gallery and two in one of the side corridors," Artem heard as he became aware of Lida's voice again. "They were real outcroppings. Ivan Semenovitch, they really were! Won't this cave be of great use to us?"

"So, they were real..." the geologist drawled. "Yes. Now the situation must be regarded from quite a different point of view. Dmitro Borisovich, don't look at me so triumphantly! I'm of the opinion that the person who really has the right to be pleased with himself is Artem, for he first took an interest in the cave. By the way, why do you look so morose, Artem? What's wrong? You are not unwell, are you?"

"Yes, quite a change has come over you," Dmitro Borisovich joined in, turning his head to look at Artem.

"Our dear Artem must be daydreaming," Lida said with a twinkle in her eye.

Artem slowly rose to his feet, his hands pushed deep into the pockets of his overalls. He approached the table without uttering a word, looked at the Lida's sketch and made a wry face.

"Really, Artem, what's come over you?"

"He's probably got some news to break. Is that it?"

But Artem turned away without replying, walked back to his chair, sat down, and only then did he speak. His voice was filled with a deliberate indifference.

"I've got nothing new to tell you. Neither am I daydreaming, nor am I sick. I'm fine. I'm just wondering since

when Lida got so excited about archeology? She's been quite lackadaisical about it up till very recently. And as far as her sketch is concerned, it's poppycock," he pointed to the paper on the table. "It's a... you can't call it anything but..."

"Ah, now I see what's wrong," Dmitro Borisovich said cheerfully. "You're not being reasonable, Artem. I took Lida along precisely to get her interested in my archeological affairs. And it seems I've succeeded, isn't that so, Lida?"

Lida nodded her head in ready affirmation, and then looked out of the corner of her eye at Ivan Semenovich: what did he think about the matter?

"Here we have another deserter from geology," laughed the geologist. "Now I realize, Dmitro Borisovich, that I should not have come here with you, no doubt about it. Honestly, you're a veritable enemy implanted in our midst. You will lure everyone here into your field, the way I see it. It looks as if we'll all turn into full-fledged archeologists! All right, let's get back to what we were discussing. Maybe Artem's mood will improve in the meanwhile. Is that likely, Artem?"

"I'm not in such a bad mood as it is," snapped Artem.

"Oh sure, sure, that's obvious... Now, my friends, in light of the new discoveries we'll have to introduce changes into our plans. You must admit now that I'm not as unyielding as some people think... incidentally, it's you I have in mind, Dmitro Borisovich. Though, to be quite frank, I still have my doubts and don't care to hide them."

"For example?"

"Well... the thing is that the veins could disappear inside the mount just as they do close to the surface... But that can be checked. Moreover since your desire to probe the cave for archeological finds is clear to everyone, Dmitro Borisovich, we'll unite our two lines into a common effort — geological and archeological. Do you have anything to add?"

The archeologist stroked his beard and spoke, seemingly lost in meditation:

"What attracts me most, Ivan Semenovich, is the fact that the cave is, so to say, an unexplored area. No one has set foot there for quite a long time. Remember what the old man said? 'I know that there cave inside out, I remember all its nooks and crannies. Been some time since they found anything in there.' Which means that at least two or three of the locals were impeded by the rockfall, thinking it was

the natural end of the cave. Now, since we've managed to get beyond it, I have quite different ideas about the cave."

"So you have, have you? I'm eager to hear about them."

"More than likely, the old man was referring to ancient artifacts. We've got a chance now of finding a lot more since I'm of the opinion that the cave once stretched deep into the heart of the Sharp Mount, and was spacious, too. It is quite plausible that some ancient people lived there or used it as a refuge to hide from enemies. That would explain the finds... There's even more to it, if you'll allow me to make some conjectures, which, of course, will be open to criticism. Considering the nature of the finds and how the villagers described them, I'm inclined to think that we may be talking about a tribe of ancient Scythians..."

"Scythians?" Lida and Artem exclaimed simultaneously.

"Yes, Scythians, one of their numerous tribes. It's quite conceivable. There's another idea that I have, though it's of a purely archeological kind, if you know what I mean. And as such it would be of no interest to you as representatives of the science of geology..."

"There you go again, Dmitro Borisovich," Lida said disgruntled. "As soon as you get to something interesting, you stop short and try to make us prompt you into continuing. Please go on, we're all ears."

"All right, I'll continue," the archeologist said with a smile. "There's a chance that we might find something in that cave that would tell us how the Scythians mined copper ore and how they extracted copper from it. It is known that they were excellent metal workers — copper, bronze, and especially iron. That's the archeological side of it. But since I know only too well that our dear Ivan Semenovich cannot be tempted to take an interest in any archeological questions no matter how hard I try, I've thought of yet another reason to study the cave. And it'll be a purely geological one."

"Namely?" the geologist said, with evident interest.

"Well, when we have established that the Scythians..."

"Wait, you said you were not sure it was the Scythians who inhabited these parts."

"Of course, you're right, Ivan Semenovich," the archeologist agreed. "Let's put it this way — when we establish beyond doubt that the ancient tribe that lived here extracted ore from the cave, it would necessarily mean that the tribe knew of the local deposits, am I right? And, consequently,

a geologist could draw his own conclusions from this fact, couldn't he?"

"I'll give you one conclusion straight away," Ivan Semenovitch said. "If your ancient tribe did use the local ore, this ore must have been of a very high quality because the ancient people could hardly have known any methods of working low-grade ore. Yes, you've scored a point, Dmitro Borisovich. What a shame you're not a geologist. You'd have made an excellent one if you hadn't spoiled it all by enrolling at an archeology school."

Dmitro Borisovich said with a smile:

"I'm most honored to hear such a refined compliment addressed to my humble person... I've laid down my reasons as to why I believe the cave should be explored quite thoroughly. Now I'll try to put forward another convincing argument as I've... er... saved the most interesting part for the end..."

"Of course! You're incorrigible. Pray continue."

"Here it is. You'll see."

Dmitro Borisovich slowly unbuttoned his overalls, pulled something out of his inside pocket, and froze. He turned his head toward the door and was apparently listening to sounds coming from outside: there was slight but persistent scratching at the door.

"Diana, is that you?" called Ivan Semenovitch.

The scratching was intensified. Lida got up and went to the door to open it. A big fawn-colored boxer dashed into the room yelping. She ran round the room, muzzled everyone's knees, then stretched out beside Ivan Semenovitch, and quieted down, eyes half-shut. Only the stump of a tail wagged persistently.

"I'm glad you've come home," Ivan Semenovitch said, stroking the dog's back. The tail wagged with renewed vigor. "Now, Dmitro Borisovich, please tell us what it is that you've saved for the end."

"These drawings."

The archeologist spread out a sheaf of papers torn from an ordinary school exercise book. A short sword, a horse's head, and a sort of covered wagon were drawn in rough, broken lines on the sheets. The last bore an awkwardly drawn human head. Everyone looked attentively at the drawings for some time. Artem was the first to speak:

"Were they done by a child?"

The archeologist burst into hearty laughter.

"What a compliment, Artem! Everything you see here was drawn by me."

"By you?"

"Absolutely. But it was not I who carved the originals of these images in the rock. In my drawings I've tried to be as faithful as could be to the carvings done by ancient people. So far I've been lucky enough to find four such carvings. These are just copies. I don't believe I'll be stretching the point too far if I say that these are of Scythian origin!"

The archeologist fell silent, carefully folding the papers. Then he said:

"Tomorrow I'll photograph them. They are extremely interesting, extremely! They bear a certain resemblance to pieces in the wonderful Scythian gold collection in the Hermitage Museum. That's my story," he concluded solemnly, raising his hand.

A profound silence fell in the room. Only the hissing of the miner's lamp and the geologist's drumming on the table was audible in the silence. One had to admit that the archeologist was very good at putting forward very convincing arguments and sound ideas. At last Ivan Semenovitch looked up and saw how Lida was eyeing him imploringly and how Artem, who had even forgotten his sulkiness, was waiting impatiently for his decision. Ivan Semenovitch's face broke into a wide grin:

"All right, you've convinced me!"

Excited applause greeted the pronouncement. The dog opened her eyes, wondering what all the fuss was about.

"Tomorrow's Sunday," the archeologist went on to say. "We'll have a good rest and make all the necessary preparations since we'll be facing a complicated and arduous task. And the day after tomorrow, we'll start on our underground expedition. We'll limit our explorations... mostly to the archeological line of our work — for a short period."

"But the archeological line is sure to give us some geological results," Dmitro Borisovich remarked.

"We'll see, we'll see."

"Does that mean we'll go exploring all together?" Artem asked, wishing to make things clear and definite.

"Yes, all together. And we'll even take Diana with us. Will you join us, Diana?"

The boxer languidly opened her eyes again, but closed them in a moment: apparently the matter did not interest Diana in the least.

Thus it was that major change came about in the work of a small group of researchers who had travelled to a remote backwater in the heart of the Ukraine. But what had brought them there in the first place?

In the late nineteenth century, deposits of copper ore were discovered on the slopes of the mountain ridge. Nobody could tell for sure how much ore there was or of what quality. A certain engineer by the name of Hlebov decided to make some money out of it. As he had the proper connections, he had managed to receive a government subsidy — quite a considerable amount of money — to build a factory. He even saw it through to the smelting of the first copper, after which he promptly disappeared. He had never really intended to turn the thing into a large-scale operation, for he was interested in only one thing — getting money from the state.

The factory quickly fell into disrepair, and it was soon reduced to a pile of bricks and odd pieces of equipment like trolleys and rails rusting here and there. The memory of engineer Hlebov, bent on having a good time drinking, and carousing with his friends well into the early hours, still lingered among the local villagers. Hearsay had it that there were deposits of copper ore inside the ridge, but whether it was true or whether there was enough to start extracting it on a commercial scale was unknown.

Some references to copper ore in the ridge could, in fact, be found in reports of various geological surveys preserved in the archives, but the evidence was vague and contradictory. This was hardly surprising since in czarist times, nobody seemed really to care about doing any further copper mining in the region.

Capitalists and businessmen, both domestic and foreign, were more interested in the coal fields located in this general area of the Donbas, for here, coal could be extracted practically from the surface. But this ridge did not have any coal so the entrepreneurs, eager to make quick and easy money, did not think it worth their while prospecting for copper along the ridge.

Neither was archeology much favored in this area. Local villagers occasionally found artifacts from ancient times, particularly at and around the Sharp Mount. But the finds, mostly objects of bronze or bone, did not attract much attention. No one suspected that the Sharp Mount might contain treasures.

In fact, there were no indications that anything valuable was hidden in the mount, as the villagers had never found anything made of gold or other precious metals or stones. Some bronze buckles and clasps, a few trinkets of very little worth — that was all. Dmitro Borisovich once said with a smile:

“As a matter of fact, we’re lucky. No one has done any excavations here; no one has explored the place as no treasures were thought to be likely to be found here. Consequently neither despoilers who grab one pretty trinket but ruin the rest nor grave robbers have ever found their way here. Everything that the cave may yield is ours to find and take.”

“Add copper ore to the list,” said the geologist.

The two men had been friends since their youth; they had travelled a great deal together and helped each other a lot, but each of them preserved an unshakable belief in the superiority of his own science. Such attitudes could be detected in their incessant light-hearted arguments.

They had been planning to explore the secrets of the Sharp Mount for quite some time, but for one reason or another the work had to be postponed several times. Thus it was only this summer that they had decided to combine work with pleasure and spend their summer holiday at the mount.

“But let’s not overburden ourselves with geological prospecting, right?” Dmitro Borisovich warned his friend in a decisive manner.

“Of course not. Neither shall we work too hard along archeological lines, right?” Ivan Semenovich replied in the same vein.

“The main thing is to get good rest,” Dmitro Borisovich added by way of explanation.

“Yes, prospecting and all that will be just to while away the time — purely for the fun of it,” Ivan Semenovich agreed.

“It’s a deal then!”

The reader may wonder at this point how Lida and Artem found themselves in the company of these two men of science. The explanation is very simple. Both the young people were students at the college where Ivan Semenovich taught: both were ardent lovers of geology. Lida, a distant relative of Ivan Semenovich, talked him into taking her along as a helper, to do some of the chores. How did Artem fit into the picture? That is also easy enough to explain. He

was rightfully regarded as one of the best students at the college. Ivan Semenovitch had high hopes for him and suggested that they spend their vacation together. Was there any need to say how overjoyed Artem was to accept such a proposal?.. To go on holiday in the company of his beloved and esteemed professor, and on top of it, to take part in real geological prospecting? It was nothing short of heaven!

Thus a close-knit group of two scientists and two college students had been formed; they had come to the foot of the ridge and settled in the vicinity of the Sharp Mount.

"Four people, not counting a dog," Artem would say jokingly. The dog, a wonderful fawn boxer that Ivan Semenovitch had brought along with him, could not be ignored, for Diana was large and intelligent, lacking, in the words of Lida, only the ability to speak.

It should be noted that Ivan Semenovitch and Dmitro Borisovich had both broken their mutual pledges the moment they had reached the Sharp Mount. The only sense in which the trip could be called a holiday was that neither of them had any lectures to give or any thinking or writing to do. Prospecting had overstepped the bounds of mere "fun." Very soon, there appeared prospecting shafts at the Sharp Mount that had been dug by Artem and Lida under the supervision of Ivan Semenovitch. As far as Dmitro Borisovich was concerned, how could he think of anything else when he had an unexplored cave full of secrets at his disposal?

Truth to tell, the results of their prospecting and exploring had been negligible thus far. Some copper ore had, in fact, been found, but not much more. As has already been mentioned, all the copper veins broke off only a short distance from the surface, and all the hopes of the geologist rested on the unexpected finds that had been made by Dmitro Borisovich and Lida.

The archeologist had not been very lucky either until the other day, when he had managed to penetrate the rockfall barring the passage.

It would be worthwhile to say a few words about the cave if only for the reason that it had awakened an interest in archeology in Lida and Artem.

An opening to a dark underground passage half overgrown with shrubbery could be seen on the slope of the Sharp Mount among tall, thick weeds.

The locals suggested that it had served as a bandits' hideout long ago; since then rockfalls had occurred in the

cave, drastically reducing it in size and making it a very dangerous place, so that even children who enjoyed playing hide-and-seek games, generally avoided venturing into it.

During the first days after their arrival, the archeologist examined the cave. Unfortunately, he found nothing to mention except traces of copper ore veins.

Artem lucked out and chanced upon a very old man who was slightly deaf but still had a sound enough memory. From him, Artem learned that it was in this very cave that the old man's father had once found several ancient artifacts, including broken pieces of old weapons. What had happened to the finds afterwards, the old man did not know. They had just disappeared, and that was all there was to it.

But Dmitro Borisovich, intrigued by the story, was not so easily put off. He knew from his own experience that such seemingly insignificant finds could lead to important archeological discoveries if you only looked in the right place. He willingly told the young man of such discoveries. Artem's conversion to archeology dated from these stories. Artem wondered why he had never thought before that archeology could be such an entrancing subject!

"That's because you've never had anything to do with the practical work of archeologists," Dmitro Borisovich would say, chuckling through his moustache as he looked into Artem's big black eyes that were burning with excitement.

When darkness fell, Artem and Lida would build a campfire. It was very agreeable to sit by the fire under the immense canopy of the starry sky. Everything around seemed full of suspense as the darkness pressed ever closer on all sides of the burning branches. Giving in to the insistent requests of Artem, Dmitro Borisovich would begin telling of things long past, and was so convincing it was as though he had personally witnessed the stirring events of ancient times. Even Ivan Semenovitch was also fascinated, though he took every opportunity to reproach the two young people for their enthusiasm for "the science studying the dead" as he put it. Indeed, Dmitro Borisovich, who was a great lover of archeology, could easily inspire his listeners.

Lida and Artem imagined quaint scenes from ancient times when the tribes of Scythians, Sarmatians, Greeks, and Persians had wandered through these areas, when the great and powerful nations had appeared on the historical scene to fight their neighbors, to win bloody battles or to be routed and disappear...

Red tongues of flame rose up and mingled with black smoke. Artem listened to the archeologist with his head resting on his hands, gazing into the fire. It seemed to him that he was not listening to the archeologist's stories but seeing the actual protagonists in flesh and blood.

He was especially fascinated by the stories of the ancient Scythians. Artem's imagination was utterly captivated by this mysterious people, a mixture of different tribes who had progressed from very primitive conditions to more advanced ones: they were at first nomads, hunters and then tillers of the land. Artem was enthralled with the unusual customs of the Scythians, who did not leave behind any written texts, and of whose existence one could learn only from indirect sources: mention made by ancient Greek and Roman historians, and from archeological excavations at their burial sites, now thickly overgrown with grass.

It was believed that in their migration from Southern Siberia and Kazakhstan, the Scythian tribes had mixed with other nomads, related to them in origin, in the Aral steppes, and then moved on to what is now the Ukraine and area around the Black Sea. Later on they were driven into the Crimea, Asia Minor and the Balkans by migrating Sarmatians. A part of the Scythians must have been absorbed by these new nomads, setting the scene for the earliest Slavic population on the territory of the present-day Ukraine. This story of the most ancient forefathers of Slavs sounded exciting and romantic!

That was the way the geology student had quite unexpectedly allowed himself to be captivated by archeology. And that was why it was such a blow for him when, as the reader already knows, Dmitro Borisovich and Lida had so treacherously left him out. No wonder he got angry. The reader remembers as well that he decided to do something to spite everyone. But what was it? It will soon be revealed.

Sunday is by rights the day a person can sleep late. That was what Artem believed and always did. But this particular Sunday, he got up earlier than usual. He dressed quietly, careful not to awaken Ivan Semenovitch with whom he roomed, and picked up his miner's gear.

Only the dog noticed that Artem was leaving. She looked at him expectantly, hoping he would play with her. But he stole away, and the boxer decided to be quiet, too. She rested her head on her outstretched front legs and closed her eyes.

The moment Artem was outside, he turned round to see whether anyone had noticed his leaving, and then made straight for the Sharp Mount. He walked through the high grass and weeds, heedless of the paths, hacking at the stalks with his pick as though the weeds were his personal enemies.

When he reached the cave, he stopped, lit the lamp, and entered. The familiar passage, the familiar damp walls. So far, so good. But where was the rockfall Dmitro Borisovich had been talking about? It did not take long to find it, and the hole in the rock suggested the way forward. Artem decided not to wait for anyone else. He was sure to make some extraordinary and extremely important discovery on his own.

Artem crawled through the hole and found that the tunnel got wider and higher. The rock reflected the light from the miner's lamp as though it were polished. The cave was quite big, unexplored, full of mystery, concealing its secrets. Artem cried out in a burst of good humor:

"Oho-ho!..."

The loud echo reverberated somewhere far away, then died down, only to echo back from an even greater distance. The reverberations seemed to be running along the passage, breaking into separate sounds, like falling pieces of rock, generating strange, new menacing voices, quite different from Artem's initial cry.

No, I won't do it again. It's a little unnerving, Artem thought to himself, directing the light along the ground to see the way ahead.

The passage grew wider as he moved forward, and it began to feel softer under his feet. Then at one moment, quite unexpectedly, Artem found that the passage forked and he had to choose which way to turn. He looked around hoping that something would suggest the direction. What was that on the wall? It looked like a drawing...

Oh yes, it was the profile, carved into the rock that Dmitro Borisovich had copied so carefully. No mistake about it. A human head, portrayed with rough lines cut deeply into the rock: short hair sticking from under a hood; a stern expression, a short straight nose and small beard. The face of a man from ancient times. Was he a Scythian? Most likely. Anyway, the visage corresponded to Artem's mental image of the nomads: stern, manly, and yet marked with comeliness and pride...

Artem gazed at the profile for a while. An odd feeling came over him. For the first time in his life, he had come face to face with something truly ancient. Just to think that two thousand years before, an ancient artist had stood on that very spot, carving that profile in the rock!

But which way should Artem turn: left or right? Which way should he choose?

All of a sudden it dawned upon Artem that he should go in the direction the head on the wall indicated! Of course! Besides, there was a rough arrow scratched on the rock that pointed in the same direction. Without further hesitation, Artem turned right.

The new passage was narrower, and turned sharply at different angles. The corridor seemed to be bypassing huge rocks. Another fifteen or twenty meters, and Artem had to stop in a sudden disappointment — the passage was completely blocked by a wall of soft earth.

Another rockslide, Artem thought in frustration.

He was about to turn back. What rotten luck! Was it a dead end? But how could he return without finding anything? No, he positively had to try and do something about it. He had probably gone the wrong way; perhaps he should have turned left instead of right. But no, that arrow under the profile unmistakably pointed right. Maybe there was a way of getting around the obstacle...

Artem began thoroughly examining the wall, holding the lamp close. No, there was not a single crack. Then he suddenly held his breath.

He had caught sight of some barely noticeable traces of stonework in the wall right in front of his eyes. He held the lamp closer and was able to make out individual stones in the masonry. The stones were placed one upon the other, with darker lines of mortar in between to hold them together. Part of the obstruction was in fact a stone wall rising from the floor to the ceiling. How strange he had failed to notice it straight away!

The stone wall definitely concealed something. Otherwise, why should it be there? And how could he get inside? Had it been sealed up without any openings? There must be some treasure hidden behind it, what else? It was he, Artem, who would discover this secret... Oh, just you wait, Lida...

But before Artem had had any time to make a movement, he heard muffled sounds. He strained his ears to hear whether he had just imagined them. No, he hadn't. Now he

could make out distant footfalls: somebody was making his way toward him.

He was annoyed. He had no desire to share his remarkable discovery with anyone yet. The best thing to do now would be to hide somewhere so the approaching person would not notice him. That would allow Artem to avoid any unwanted explanations. But where could he hide? Artem began frantically searching for any sort of recess in the walls. But there wasn't a single one! And the footfalls were drawing nearer and nearer. What a piece of bad luck! How would he explain his unauthorized visit to the cave?

Now Artem could also hear somebody whistling; the man who was approaching was evidently in a good mood: he was whistling quite a cheery tune. In a few seconds, a light blinked in the passage and...

"May I inquire what you are doing here, young man?" Artem heard the voice of Dmitro Borisovich.

Yes, it was the archeologist. He walked up, looked Artem over with suspicion (or so it seemed to the young man), and asked once again, this time somewhat sternly:

"Why have you come here, Artem? We decided to begin our exploration tomorrow, didn't we? What does this all mean?"

Artem felt the blood rush to his face and neck. He tried to turn the whole thing into a joke:

"But you're here, too, Dmitro Borsovich, in spite of..."

That didn't help in the least: it only aggravated the situation: the archeologist got quite hot under the collar:

"What? I'm here because archeology happens to be my occupation. But what right have you to be here? Who told you to come? Who has authorized your visit? It seems that you, my dear friend, have not even informed anyone of your intentions! Am I correct in my assumption?"

Dmitro Borisovich was glaring fiercely at Artem through his eyeglasses.

"You seem to have decided to become an independent treasure hunter," the archeologist went on implacably. "And this is after I've explained to you that it is benighted grave robbers that do most harm to archeology by defacing the most valuable evidence. Oh, I understand now — you wanted to make an important discovery on your own, so you kept your intentions secret? And then, probably, you would appropriate your finds without ever letting us know about them? Is that it, eh? Answer me!"

The accusations bordered on insult. He, Artem, a crass treasure hunter, a grave robber? Appropriate something for himself?

Artem tried in vain to think of some plausible excuse or explanation, but words failed him... Dmitro Borisovich was right to censure him: only now did Artem realize that his stunt looked rather suspicious: he had done something wrong and had nothing to say in his own defense.

Dmitro Borisovich kept his gaze fastened on Artem, and noticed the young man blink in desperation. He even seemed on the verge of tears. This placated the archeologist somewhat.

"All right, tell me what you were up to, Artem. You realize I thought you were up to no good, but still, I must know what brought you here? What would you think if you were in my place?"

At last Artem worked up the courage to give a hurried account of what had happened.

"You know, Dmitro Borisovich... I wanted, you know, so very much... I was so upset yesterday, when I learned that you and Lida,... that you went together to the... when you know I'm so interested in all these things... and so I decided..."

"You decided what?"

"I decided to come here and pay you back..."

"To pay who back? Me or Lida? And how you were going to do it?"

"To pay back both you and Lida... I wanted to find something really great... and then prove that I can..."

"Can what?"

"Can find something valuable and important... But I would never keep it to myself, Dmitro Borisovich! It'd be for everyone!" Then, quite unexpectedly, even for himself, he blurted out:

"And that would stop Lida from putting on airs, that's what!" Artem knew the moment he had finished that his confessions were not a reasonable explanation, but nevertheless his words were not lost on the archeologist.

Dmitro Borisovich burst out laughing as though he had heard something hilarious. He went on laughing for quite some time, stopping only to wipe his eyes and burst into further guffaws.

"Oh my, oh my! You've made me laugh, you really

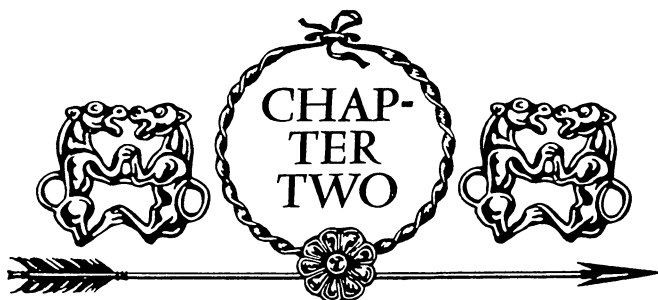
have! To hear such a thing coming from a college student!"

Artem's embarrassment reached a new stage as he heard these words. He had really said something stupid... Why on earth should he have mentioned Lida?... What did that girl's putting on airs have to do with the situation at hand?

Dmitro Borisovich removed his hat and began fanning himself with it as though he were hot. He was still laughing: it seemed only a glance at the young man's dismayed face was enough to send him off into another fit of laughter.

At last his mirth subsided, and his face immediately grew stern. Now he would probably say something that would cut Artem to the quick.

The younger man lowered his eyes, expecting a merciless verdict. What were his chances of being acquitted when he had been found guilty of committing a horrible crime against archeology and his friends? What would he say, this implacable archeologist?



confessions and lectures are exchanged, the overzealous nature of archeologists described, and a mysterious stone wall is discovered, behind which is hidden a still greater mystery in the shape of a small bronze chest, which, as Artem ardently wants to believe, contains no less a treasure than the gold crown of a Scythian chieftain

Dmitro Borisovich gave Artem another searching gaze:

"Is that all you wanted to say?"

"Of course, Dmitro Borisovich!" Artem uttered in a whimpering voice. "My word of honor! I've told you everything

there was to tell! I understand it was stupid of me, but, you know, something was sort of pushing me... and I, you know... Dmitro Borisovich, please believe me!"

The archeologist smiled. There was really nothing more to ask about. The young man's flushed and embarrassed face with its big black eyes blinking almost like a child's, expressed more than any words could.

"All right, young man," Dmitro Borisovich said at last with a dismissing wave of his hand, "let's make our peace. But you'll have to suffer a lecture from me all the same. And don't pull such a wry face. First, you've earned it as punishment and second, it'll be of some use to you. Which means that your gloomy expression's out of place. Oh, it's much better now. All right, tell me frankly: do you realize what incalculable harm your ill-advised prowling in the depths of this cave could have done to science? Yes, I do mean harm, and a very serious harm indeed!"

"I have moved around very carefully in the cave. I made sure I examined the walls and ceiling before I moved on. So, if you're worried about unexpected rockfalls, I was on my..."

"No, that's not what I mean," the archeologist snapped, dismissing Artem's words with an impatient gesture. "Of course that wasn't what I meant when I spoke of harm to science. Your being buried in a rockslide would constitute no great loss to science. One overzealous young man less, that's all. Oh, don't take offense, it's only a joke. Up to now, by the way, I've got my hope pinned on you, Artem, thinking that in the long run you'd make a decent scholar, provided, of course, you had the proper guidance. As a matter of fact, I have quite a different kind of harm in mind, a harm that could have been done not to you or me but to our common cause, to Science. Now, since you don't seem to comprehend what I'm talking about, you must listen to what I have to say. And I ask you kindly to be most attentive so that my words get firmly in your rash young head."

Dmitro Borisovich sat down on a piece of rock, produced a box of cigarettes and lit one from the little white flame of the lamp.

"Have a cigarette, young man. You don't feel like it? Let's then talk without the traditional peace pipe. Look at these things, will you?"

The archeologist drew the miner's lamp closer to his feet. Near it he put the box of cigarettes, to the right of it — a

pencil, and on the other side — his small-sized pickaxe. He was performing all these manipulations in such a concentrated, pensive and careful manner that Artem was indeed intrigued: it was so hard to guess what this complicated arrangement was designed for.

“So, young man, attention! Let’s imagine that all these things I’ve put down here are genuine archeological artifacts. And they are lying like this somewhere in a barrow or in a cave — somewhere where they have been spotted by an observant but hot-headed, grasping young man looking for archeological finds. Someone like you, for example. So, these archeological finds are resting just here. They are lying exactly the way they were put by our very remote forefathers in accordance with their traditions and rites. And we can learn about their traditions and rites only if we examine their arrangement carefully. All the more so in our case because we are probably dealing with traditions and rites of the ancient Scythians of whom we know next to nothing. We have neither descriptions nor authoritative statements about them. Now, here comes the enthusiastic young man. He sees, right in front of him, say, a vase of extraordinary beauty...”

Dmitro Borisovich swiftly snatched the box of cigarettes from the ground.

“The young man is, no doubt, excited. This is quite understandable as he has come across a genuine archeological treasure for the first time in his life. He examines the vase and the thought of how he will impress everyone with his unexpected find flashes through his rash mind. Yes, everyone, including one certain person who is of special interest to him... yes, yes, motives of this kind cannot be disregarded! But then, our young man sees other things lying around. He puts the vase down, grabs the sword, then a remarkable jug and so on...”

Dmitro Borisovich illustrated his story picking up the pencil, the lamp and the pickaxe from the ground with deft, swift movements. Artem watched him, not quite comprehending what the archeologist was driving at.

“So, he grabs one thing after the other, runs his fingers over it, makes many other hurried movements, quite in accordance with his effusiveness. He puts the sword back so that he can enjoy examining the jug, then he puts the jug aside when he thinks of the even greater beauty of the vase. At last, he chooses the most valuable thing of all... or

even decides to take all of them to impress his friends even more. He returns and then it occurs to him that besides the things themselves, the very order in which these things were lying could be of a significant scientific interest. It is a well-known principle that the original arrangements of things in a find can tell the archeologist much more than the things themselves. It can reveal details of the ancient people's everyday life, the meaning they attached to different things, plus much more. But in our case, unfortunately, the original arrangement of the things has been altered... It happened right at the moment when the young man began picking up the valuable vase... What's more, in his excitement, he has trampled into the ground all sorts of shards and other tiny but important details. If they had been studied, they might have revealed a few more details about the ancients' everyday life..."

Dmitro Borisovich gave Artem a sideways glance. The young man lowered his head abjectly, and was staring at his boots in dejection. Now he understood only too well what the archeologist was driving at!

"Dmitro Borisovich! I've found nothing! I've disarranged nothing! I've trampled nothing into the ground," the young man made a feeble attempt at putting forward an excuse.

"Oh, I'm amazed, Artem, I'm amazed at how perceptive you are! I haven't uttered a word that could suggest that it was you I had in mind describing a rash young man. And you've been so quick in making the right guess. Bang — and there you are. Oh, yes, you are right in saying that you've found nothing, that you've trampled nothing into the ground, that you've violated nothing... except discipline. Yes, I grant you that. But what if you had found something? Wouldn't you have acted in the way I've just described? Can you, my dear friend, be absolutely sure you wouldn't? Be honest now!"

"No, I'm not sure," Artem had to admit.

"That means?"

"That means that it could have happened just the way you described. Or rather, I'm almost sure it would have happened that way."

"I appreciate your honesty."

"But, Dmitro Borisovich, I haven't found anything, really, except, maybe for..."

Artem stopped mischievously. The archeologist looked up.

"Except for what?"

“Except for this stone wall.”

“What?”

The archeologist sprang to his feet.

“Where? Which kind of stones?”

Artem pointed silently to the rough masonry and shone the lamp on it. Jagged outline of roughly hewn stones with barely visible joints emerged from darkness.

“The wall? Yes, that’s a wall, no mistaking it. The masonry probably dates back to antiquity,” Dmitro Borisovich muttered to himself, his excitement mounting as he ran his fingers over the stones. A profound change had come over him: he was a different man. His lecturing stance disappeared, and the quiet composure of an accomplished scholar was gone now! He alternately stood on tiptoe, squatted, leaned this way and that, examining the joints, and then, as if remembering something, he would step back suddenly to get an overall look at the stones, shining his lamp on them.

Artem looked at the archeologist at first with respect, then with bewilderment, and finally, in amazement, even mixed with scorn. After a while, the young man chuckled slyly and screwed up his eyes: his turn had come at last! He began speaking, carefully weighing the rhythm of his words:

“And now this overzealous, but no longer... er... young man has found something... or maybe somebody else has pointed out this ‘something’ to him. It doesn’t really matter. The main thing is — he has seen something interesting,” Artem went on, mimicking the archeologist’s mocking voice of a short while ago. “He is excited, this not very young, or rather quite elderly man. He examines the find, a wall, for instance. He touches it here and there, almost dancing in his archeological rapture. And note, that in his mindless dancing this elderly but overactive man tramples the ground all around the find, quite oblivious of the fact that in the ground there can be some very important... Ouch! Dmitro Borisovich! Please! I won’t do it any more! Just a little joke! Please!”

Artem was writhing in an attempt to free the ear that had suddenly been caught in the vice-like grip of the archeologist’s strong fingers.

“Dmitro Borisovich, I’ve stopped, you hear? Let go!”

“All right, I’ll forgive you, but only because you’ve shown me this wall. All the same, Artem, you’re much too impudent! How dare you mimic your elders? It’s not at all

appropriate! Obviously, Ivan Semenovitch hasn't taught you anything about discipline. But in the present circumstances there are more important matters to discuss. This wall is quite extraordinary! Why don't you tell me about it straight away? Why not? Answer me!"

"Dmitro Borisovich, it was you who kept talking, all I could do was keep my mouth shut and listen," Artem said, carefully massaging his sore ear.

"Now you've got the cheek to blame me for not letting you talk?"

"No, it's not that... just didn't get the chance..."

"It's no good, I repeat, no good. But we'll talk about it later. Now, take the lamp and shine it over here."

For some time Dmitro Borisovich ran his agile fingers along the joints between the stones. One was reminded of the sure, deft movements of a surgeon during an operation. At last, the archeologist whistled triumphantly, stopped his search and gave the young man a meaningful glance.

"Artem, this wall promises a lot of discoveries. I'm quite sure of it. Now we'll try to get to the other side, just you and I. You've earned it. We'll start in a moment!"

Artem held his breath — was this really happening to him? But the archeologist added:

"Before we do anything else, we must photograph the wall the way it is now. You can't touch it before it's photographed."

Then, his composure restored, the archeologist prepared his small camera, equipped with a flash. After taking pictures from various angles, he approached the wall again.

"Now," he said with satisfaction, "we can try to dig through it."

Artem looked at the archeologist apprehensively:

"Dmitro Borisovich, you won't be charged with having committed archeological sacrilege, will you?"

"Why should I be?"

"Well, they'll say you've started digging through the wall without special permission. It was you yourself who told me that once."

"Yes-yes-yes, I did tell you!" Dmitro Borisovich interrupted the young man. "What kind of archeologist would I be if I didn't have a valid archeological license with me for the duration of the vacations?"

"What kind of license?"

"An authorization granted by the state to carry out any

archeological excavations I see fit. See? And I've got the permit right here in my pocket. So now, young man, get your pickaxe ready," ordered the archeologist curtly.

"Yes, sir. I'm not sure though I'll be able to remove any of these stones. This mortar or whatever it is must have hardened into stone..."

"All right, we'll see. Shove the pointed end under this stone..."

"And why this stone and not some other?"

"Do it first and we can talk later. Have you done it?"

"Yes."

"Now use the pick as a lever and push the stone upward. Careful! Good. And I'll get it from my end. Good. Careful! Push harder!"

The stone in fact yielded to their effort rather easily. Dmitro Borisovich must have examined the joints very thoroughly indeed...

"Now, don't push too hard. Let's lower it softly to the ground."

They did it. A black hole opened in the wall. Dmitro Borisovich brought the lamp closer and looked in.

"See, Artem, there's a hollow place behind it. There must be something just waiting for us to investigate it. Aha, I see you're impatient to crawl through. That's exactly what I was trying to warn you against. Not yet, wait. Let's get another stone out. This one here."

The second stone proved much harder to budge. The mortar had gotten so hard it made the stone impossible to move. The archeologist had to begin chipping the mortar with frequent well-aimed blows of his pick. At last, the second stone was placed beside the first one on the soft ground. Now the opening was wide enough to allow a man to crawl through.

"It's not a very convenient entrance. But we'll have to use it anyway. Here we go."

In a trice, Dmitro Borisovich disappeared through the opening, holding the lamp out in front of him. Artem who was watching the archeologist's movements with some apprehension, was very envious: the older man would be the first to see what was behind the mysterious wall. But the young man did not have to wait too long, for in a few seconds, from behind the wall came somewhat muffled voice of the archeologist:

"Artem, climb in, quick."

Artem found himself in a low, shallow cave. He could easily reach the ceiling with his hand. A wall of roughly hewn stones separated it from the blind alley leading from the main cave. In all likelihood, the wall had been built by ancient people hundreds of years ago! But why there?

The wall sealed off the little cave from which, by the looks of it, there was no way to get any further. No openings, obvious or potential, were discovered. Could it be a sort of a burial vault? But again, nothing to support this theory was found. Nothing, except for a layer of century-old fine dust on the floor and protruding parts of the wall...

Dmitro Borisovich and Artem then began thoroughly examining all the walls of the cave in hope of finding some clue. There were carvings on the walls in other passages, weren't there? So there was probably a chance of finding something similar here. But no, even a very thorough search failed to produce any carvings, pictures or other signs of human activity.

"No doubt we have here a natural recess walled off from the rest of the passage," said the archeologist in a low voice. "It is absolutely clear this has been done for some specific purpose. So far so good. But what was the purpose? A storage place? Most unlikely, with all that dust here and nothing else."

"Maybe someone was here before us and took everything there was to take away with him?" Artem put forward another theory.

"No, that's absolutely out of the question. I've examined the stone wall very carefully and found no traces of it's ever having been tampered with. Absolutely no signs or traces to suggest an earlier visit. Besides, would the robber take such great pains to put the stones back and mortar them? I don't think your theory holds in view of this implausibility. Anyway, it's inconceivable... Why should this empty hollow have been sealed off by a wall?..."

Dmitro Borisovich was lost in thought. Artem was looking at him, still entertaining some hopes that the archeologist would find a solution any minute now, would do something decisive about it. And they would return to inform the rest of a remarkable find. Lida would raise her eyebrows in envious surprise... She did it so charmingly... It was worth painting a picture of... But wait, what did Lida have to do with all this? It was much more important to evoke the

interest of Ivan Semenovitch! Then he would stop objecting to their archeological pursuits... Or, in the words of Dmitro Borisovich, to "the archeological line" of their work... Those eyebrows... they arched such perfectly straight lines above Lida's green eyes... And my, how they sparkled! Again Lida was on his mind! There were serious matters awaiting his attention... Maybe they were on the verge of some extraordinary discovery, so why he should be thinking about Lida all the time?... Soon Dmitro Borisovich would come up with a solution, and then... and then...

But Artem's hopes fell. Dmitro Borisovich put his lamp on the ground with an abrupt gesture of resignation.

"I don't know," he said with a sign. "I've never come across anything of the kind before and have never heard of anything like this being encountered by other archeologists. We need to think it over, discuss it, and avoid unnecessary haste. That's probably the most important thing in such situations, Artem — avoid haste! Yes, that's the thing. Now, young man, we'll start back," he said with determination. "Take this envelope. Collect samples of dust, first, at this wall, then at that one. I'll take samples in the center."

"And what purpose can that dust serve?"

Artem's voice was brimming with bitter disappointment. It had all begun so promisingly — only to end so miserably! Dust indeed! A very valuable find, a lot to be proud about on coming back...

"Ah, young man," said Dmitro Borisovich with a condescending smile, "you'll never make a true, committed archeologist, no, no way. You're after treasures, gold and valuables, aren't you? Your mood would be much improved if you chanced upon any, correct? My young friend, dust can also be of great help to an archeologist. Don't you understand how? Go ahead, collect it, and while you're doing it I'll prove the point, and you'll have more respect for this modest gray dust. Back in the lab, we'll examine this dust minutely, we'll subject it to analysis. Maybe this analysis will reveal that the dust is partly composed of, say, rotten pieces of clothing, grain, bread or something else. And then it'll be quite easy to answer the question which now seems so complicated: that will mean the mysterious walled-off recess was used by the ancients as a storing place for clothing or as a granary. Everything will fall nicely into place and explanations will be easily available. Do you

understand now of what significance this despicable gray dust can be?"

"Oh, yes, it's quite thrilling," Artem muttered, disconcerted. "If it is as you say, it wasn't worth the trouble of getting in here. We've just dirtied our clothes for nothing. And the lecture you've given me I could've listened to in comfort at home."

"What you've said is, my friend, first, discourteous and second, balderdash if you ask me. Science needs all possible kinds of evidence. Every little bit of new knowledge is important. Archeology, by the way, is based almost entirely on such tiny bits of evidence. All you have to do is look hard and see what you can see, examine whatever you find, and systematize. The abilities and qualities of a true archeologist are revealed through his attitude to such tiny bits of knowledge. Yes, my friend, in his attitude, and not in vociferous enthusiasm, not in clamorous interjections over an ancient artifact, even a very valuable one!"

Artem listened to this spontaneous lecture and methodically collected dust into envelopes. No matter what Dmitro Borisovich said about these bits of knowledge, it would be so much more exciting to find a pottery shard or even a bronze vessel, not to mention the crown of some Scythian tribal chief... Oh, that would be really terrific!

All of a sudden Artem stopped short, his eyes riveted to a spot at the foot of the wall just two steps away. It might be just another protruding stone, but it looked a bit different from the rest... like an artificial stone cube covered with dirt and dust... What kind of stone could it be? Artem glanced briskly back at the archeologist.

Dmitro Borisovich was pouring some dust into the envelope with great concentration and could not see what Artem was doing, so the younger man immediately set about removing dirt and dust from the rectangular protrusion. The surface was hard and rough... no, it wasn't a stone and... not just a protrusion either... Artem's heart began to race. He worked in a mounting frenzy.

"Once again I must remark that you're prone to lapses of discipline, my dear young man," Artem heard the archeologist's voice coming as though from afar. "Did I tell you to take samples at that spot? I must say, you're very inattentive, my friend, yes, you are, and very undisciplined too!"

Artem swiveled around. Dmitro Borisovich was holding

the envelope, packed with dust, and looking at him in disapproval.

"And why are you wearing such a perturbed look on your face?" the archeologist went on to say. "As though you're contemplating some neck-breaking stunt... or maybe you're not quite all right and can barely stand?"

Artem took a deep breath and was again able to control himself. But his voice broke when he began to speak:

"Dmitro Borisovich, the thing is... I've found one tiny bit of knowledge here. Only I'm afraid it's a little too big to fit into the envelope..."

Dmitro Borisovich did not suspect anything unusual hidden behind Artem's seemingly unaffected, even indifferent voice.

"What tiny bit? Which envelope? What kind of claptrap is that, young man?"

"You've been talking all the time about some tiny bit of knowledge, right? And here, one such tiny bit has presented itself. It's rather outsized, though. A sort of a box or something."

In a twinkling, Dmitro Borisovich was at Artem's side.

"What? Where? What box?"

"Right here, see for yourself."

Artem pointed to the mysterious object which he had just been cleaning up. What had emerged was a small square chest, crudely made, embossed with an ornamental design. It was half-hidden in a niche. The bright white light of the lamps revealed the dark, greenish bronze under the dust. Artem looked at Dmitro Borisovich in triumph: what would he say now?

But the archeologist was oblivious of Artem, of his precious envelopes, of all the world. Now only the chest existed for him. He squatted beside it and touched its top as though he were afraid it was hot enough to burn his fingers. His hands trembled; his lips were moving, shaping inaudible words. He was evidently very agitated and overexcited, and Artem sensed it was not the right time for taunting him. It would be sacrilegious.

"Dmitro Borisovich, it's a real big find, isn't it? Is it valuable?" he asked in an undertone, feeling the excitement spread through him, too.

It was hardly worth asking since just one look at the archeologist was enough to tell the whole story. He tried hard to control himself but was not very successful. His

efforts at constraint were easily visible. Dmitro Borisovich did everything that had to be done, that his long years of archeological experience had taught him to do, but he seemed merely to be going through the motions; his movements were mechanical, almost like that of an automaton. He took his camera out, photographed the chest from various angles, the same procedure as before the stone wall, but the mere fact that he almost dropped the flash twice, stumbled on the even floor, and did not comment his own unusual awkwardness allowed Artem to deduce that he was in a state of extreme agitation and tension. Artem, who kept his eyes glued to the archeologist, said eagerly:

“Can I help you?”

But Dmitro Borisovich did not even hear Artem. He lifted the chest off the ground and held it at the arms' length as one holds a basin filled to the brim with water. After holding it in this manner for a few moments, he carefully lowered it back to the ground. Then he approached the chest from the other side. His hair was dishevelled; his spectacles lop-sided. But he didn't see anything or hear anything; he was heedless of everything except for the chest...

Artem could make out a few words Dmitro Borisovich was muttering as though answering some questions he had silently put to himself:

“Yes... by the looks of it... dating to the Scythians... why only bronze?... strange, there's no iron... hidden away for no one to see... a relic... extraordinary!... a real hiding place!...”

“So you think it's Scythian?” Artem asked timidly.

But the archeologist was still quite inaccessible. He walked around the chest once again, bending his neck to one side like a hen that is aiming to peck at a seed it has just discovered. He looked at the chest first with one eye, then with the other, half-closing them at times. Then, suddenly rousing himself from his trance, he turned to Artem as though the young man had just appeared.

“Artem, my dear boy, this is quite extraordinary!” he cried out, grabbing the young man by his sleeve. “What stroke of luck brought you here? How did you guess the chest was hidden in precisely this corner?”

Artem shrugged his shoulders, embarrassed: what could he say really? He had just happened upon it; that was all...

But Dmitro Borisovich did not wait for him to answer. He went on speaking with ardor:

“My dear friend, you’ve surely got the luck of the devil on your side! It is doubtless of Scythian origin. And it is equally clear that the chest was placed here on purpose... As to who did it, I’d rather avoid making conjectures at this stage... It was hidden here, and then this recess was sealed off by a stone wall. I believe that solves the mystery of why the wall should be here! Do you follow me? It’s as clear as the fact that we’re standing here and now!”

Now Artem looked at the chest with more than mere curiosity. Other thoughts flooded the young man’s excitable mind.

Long centuries passed, days and nights inexorably following one another. Generations succeeded each other. And all this time, the small chest had rested peacefully in the tightly sealed recess of the cave. Many centuries of time had enshrouded the chest; utter stillness had guarded it, and along with that, had lain the secret it concealed. Now, this relic of remote past has been discovered. It would be taken to the surface, and in the bright sunlight, the mysterious chest would yield up its secrets...

“Dmitro Borisovich, what do you think is inside?”

“Inside this chest?” The archeologist glanced at the chest once again and spread his hands in the gesture of helplessness. “I reckon your question could be answered here and now only by a clairvoyant, but even he, in my opinion, wouldn’t be able to make a very definite statement. What’s inside, really? It could be anything. Jewels, or... No, it’s no good racking our brains over it. All the more so, that I, no matter how hard I try, cannot recollect any similar finds made or described in archeology. Some very interesting and important discoveries have been made in the barrows — the ancient burial mounds — finds made during the excavation of ancient settlements. But never anything like this chest...”

Dmitro Borisovich stroked the lid gently.

“To find such a bronze chest sitting all by itself in a cave, sealed by a stone wall — no, I’ve never heard of anything like that. Well, all right, soon we’ll know everything. Let’s get moving.”

The archeologist lifted the chest with great care and headed for the hole they had made in the wall.

“Light the way for me, Artem, give me some light!”

The yellowish envelopes, filled with the dust that had been collected in the cave, were abandoned. Dmitro Bori-

sovich, carrying the chest, stepped on one of them. The heavy trample tore the envelope and scattered the dust. But the archeologist paid no heed, for all his attention was concentrated on the bronze chest. Artem, who noticed all this, smiled to himself. In spite of the great solemnity of the moment, he couldn't help launching another taunt. As soon as they got through the hole, he looked at the archeologist who was moving majestically, holding the chest in his arms as though it were an object of the greatest value on earth. The elder man was coughing to indicate the significance of the event, and his younger colleague said in a solemn voice, making considerable effort not to burst into laughter:

"I am grieved to inform you, Dmitro Borisovich, that unfortunately you'll never make a true archeologist..."

"What's that?"

"I said you'd never make a true archeologist, Dmitro Borisovich. You're the kind of a person who is interested only in valuable finds. Chests, for example, or something else of that sort..."

"Oh, come off it! What is it you're driving at?"

"You see, Dmitro Borisovich, archeology is a comprehensive science. It deals with not only occasional finds of artifacts, no matter how valuable, but with what you might call 'trifles.' Rather it deals mostly with the tiniest details. It is they, these details, when systematized, that are of greatest value to archeology. Archeology looks for such details everywhere. It examines, studies and systematizes them. It can draw most helpful conclusions from the analysis of, say, dust. True archeologists never discard the collected samples, much less trample them mercilessly under foot, because they are never overwhelmed by individual finds, no matter how fascinating. That's something truly dedicated archeologists never do... By the way, Dmitro Borisovich, don't get too worked up. My ear is out of your reach now, so you'll have some problems trying to grab it. Besides your hands are nicely occupied with the chest, this individual artifact..."

"How dare you! What impertinence!"

"Maybe I'm being cheeky, yes. But I'll continue since I believe I'll be able to make some things clear to you. As I've said archeology studies even what seems to be the most insignificant things and it is unthinkable for a dedicated archeologist to cast them on the ground and trample them disdainfully... like some archeologists I happen to know

personally... Isn't it so, Dmitro Borisovich, or am I mistaken?"

The archeologist's reply was, to Artem's great surprise, unexpectedly mild and placatory:

"You're after your revenge, my friend? You want to get under my skin, you want to be witty at my expense, eh? My dear boy, you're free to do as you like. But I have to tell you frankly that at the moment, I really don't care. I'll tell you one thing. When you yourself will become an experienced geologist... or maybe an archeologist, who knows?... then you'll understand that there are moments when even a reserved scholar, burdened with age, knowledge and experience, turns into an over-enthusiastic boy all of a sudden. And when you have understood it, you'll remember your taunts — and feel ashamed of them. All right, let's forget about it. Light the way, Artem, I'm in mortal fear of stumbling and somehow damaging our find."

"Yes, sir."

Artem did not crack any more jokes. Even now, though he was still a long way from becoming a real scholar, he understood that the "moments" Dmitro Borisovich had been speaking about so earnestly, did in fact occur. If he, Artem, was so excited himself, then what a great effect this remarkable find must have had on the accomplished scholar who realized only too well the importance of this extraordinary discovery!

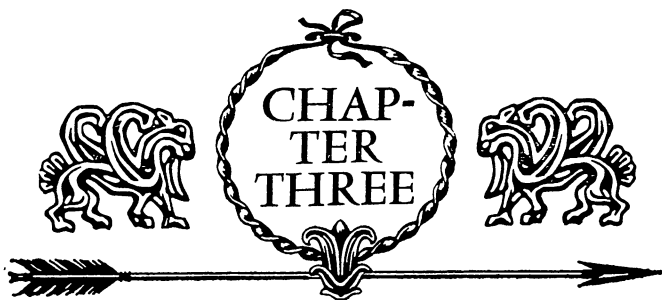
They were on their way out. The tall archeologist was walking in front of Artem, carefully watching his step, carrying in both hands the mysterious bronze chest that had been lying hidden for many centuries with its secret contents. Dmitro Borisovich said there could be jewels inside or anything else imaginable. Artem was itching to know what in fact it contained. What treasure, what unexpected things did this small chest with half-effaced embossing on the lid contain?

Artem was extremely anxious to get back to the others and show it to them and open it! The romantic youth was already seeing with his mind's eye the exotic things that they'd be sure to find in the chest. There surely must be something especially precious in it — otherwise why should it have been hidden so thoroughly by the ancient Scythians? ...What if it was the... the gold crown of a Scythian chieftain? This thought sent Artem's heart racing madly. A gold crown!

But did Scythian chieftains wear gold crowns? What a pity he knew so little about Scythians! Well, perhaps it wasn't a crown but some expensive headgear made of gold and studded with precious stones — it didn't make too much difference, did it? One way or the other, the chest was sure to contain something extremely rare and valuable, there was absolutely no doubt about it!

But how slowly Dmitro Borisovich was walking! The chieftain's crown! It would surely make a most worthy contribution to the famed collection of Scythian gold in the Hermitage Museum, the one Dmitro Borisovich had been talking so much about. And who had found it after all? Whose modest person would be for ever linked with the discovery of this extraordinary thing?

Artem couldn't stand the torture of expectation any longer. His heart was about to burst with impatience. What was inside the mysterious chest, what secret was locked in it?



Lida is nonplussed, the chest is opened and a piece of parchment with writing on it is discovered inside, but it turns to dust upon contact with the air; the testament of Pronis is read and Artem makes another discovery

“It's a wonderful morning, isn't it, Diana?”

The dog gave a short but expressive bark in reply and looked quizzically at her companion, so full of joie de vivre. The dog's short ears were pricked, the muscles of her strong legs taut, ready for jumps and capers. Diana was waiting

for the command to start frolicking as it always happened during outings with Lida. But this time the girl was slow to start the fun, standing on a hillock, filling her lungs with fresh, fragrant air.

“Oh, how wonderful!”

She was knee-deep in luxuriant green grass and thistles; the warm rays of the July morning sun were caressing her face, the light wind seemed to be cuddling her, embracing her lithe, supple figure; it was stroking her neck, touching her hair with its invisible fingers. Everything was wonderful indeed! The girl surveyed her surroundings.

Once impenetrable forest thickets had covered the area, or at least that's what Dmitro Borisovich said. Such a pity they were all gone! It would be so pleasant to wander through them! There must have been a plenty of wild animals living here, and the river must have been wider and deeper... And what now? No forests at all, only occasional small bushes. The river was narrow and the current slow, one could swim across in no time. It meandered like a snake, making a turn every ten meters or so, twisting this way and that, so if one swam for speed, one couldn't see how far behind the rest were lagging; that was what had happened the day before when Lida challenged Artem. It wasn't really any fun... Then she realized she had not seen Artem this morning yet.

“Do you know, by any chance, Diana, where our Artem is? He was sulky yesterday, all worked up. For no reason really. What made him boil was my visit to that cave with Dmitro Borisovich. Yes, we went there, so what? But he flew into a temper, he did, he was real mad... Very foolish of him! But where did he go today, so early in the morning? I should have talked to him... But I can't stand it when somebody's pouting... Maybe he's gone swimming. Hey, Diana, let's race to the river! Who's faster?”

The river was situated beyond the hillock. Lida raced downhill, waving her arms, jumping over high thistles, laughing irrepressibly. Diana, glad that the long-awaited fun had at last begun, seemed to have decided to demonstrate her sprinting ability. She leaped over the thistles, quick as lightning, in one jump getting ahead of the girl, hid for a moment in the grass only to spring out and try to catch the edge of Lida's skirt in her teeth. The girl waved her arms, wriggled, and tried to run away, but Diana easily caught up with her, barking happily, and gently nipped at

Lida's hand. She would release it only to nip it again a moment later, enjoying the game immensely. This continued for several minutes, then Diana stopped abruptly and froze to the spot.

"What is it, Diana?"

Diana gave a short bark, in quite a different way than before. It was, no doubt, a signal to draw the girl's attention to something.

"Oh, what's happened, Diana? What's there? Oh, yes, I see, those two men must be from our party. Where are they coming from?"

Two men, their dark silhouettes clearly outlined against the blue sky, came into view on a distant hillock. The one walking in front of the other made strange gestures as if he were moving the thistles apart to clear the way for the other. As they got closer, Lida saw it was Dmitro Borisovich. It even seemed to her that she could make out his pointed beard every time he turned to the other man. The archeologist turned round very frequently, practically every other step. And the man who was walking behind him was no doubt Artem...

"Aha, so, they must have made their peace!" she cried out, pleased.

But why is Artem walking with two left feet? Oh he's carrying something, a sort of a suitcase or a chest, right in front of him at arms' length. Is that the way to carry things, Artem? Oh, aren't you funny! And look at the way he's walking — very carefully, watching his step, selecting a place to secure a sure footing...

He stumbled, and Dmitro Borisovich rushed to him gesticulating violently. Then he took Artem's load from him. They exchanged roles. Now Artem was at the head, and Dmitro Borisovich was carrying a suitcase or whatever it was in the same strange manner as Artem had been just a little while ago.

"What is it they are carrying, I wonder?" Lida said pensively. "The path they are walking along runs from the Sharp Mount. They are definitely heading home... But what is that strange thing they are carrying with such a great caution?"

Then a thought flashed through her mind which made her jump high into the air, and shout at the top of her voice:

"Artem! Artem! Where're you going?"

At first Artem did not seem to hear her; then he looked

back, caught sight of Lida and pointed in an indifferent gesture to the Sharp Mount.

"What? You're coming from the mount?"

But they had already disappeared beyond the crest of the hillock. It would be futile to call after them now. But why didn't Artem stop, wait for her, or give a more articulate answer? Was he still out of humor? So very foolish of him!

Lida looked at Diana; the dog was looking at the girl in expectation, but she did not feel like frolicking any longer.

"Hey, let's run home, Diana! While they're walking so slowly downhill, we'll run and catch up with them!"

But Lida had miscalculated. Artem and Dmitro Borisovich reached the frame tent ahead of her. As she burst into the room, out of breath, she heard only the conclusion of the story Dmitro Borisovich, evidently much excited about something, had been telling:

"Now it's here in front of you, Ivan Semenovich. The chest we found in the walled-off recess. In fact, I must admit it was not 'we,' it was Artem who found it all by himself. Why to blush, young man? It's true, isn't it? You're the one who noticed it under the thick layers of dust! The credit for the discovery is all yours. Our Artem is very observant; he's got very sharp eyes!"

A small chest was sitting on the table. All the papers and diagrams had been shoved aside to make room for it. Ivan Semenovich was examining it with absorbed interest from all angles. Artem was standing beside the table, flushed, with an elated and jubilant smile on his face. So that's what they'd been carrying! And the chest had been found by Artem?... Lida approached the table cautiously. An ancient, greenish-black chest with some half-effaced ornaments on top, still liberally sprinkled with dust, crude... Lida surreptitiously gave Artem's hand a tug, and said under her breath:

"Well done, Artem! Congratulations!"

Artem gave her a glance, wanted to say something at first, but then changed his mind and squeezed her hand lightly, his eyes flashing.

"Yes, it seems to be a genuinely ancient thing," Ivan Semenovich uttered pensively. "It must have been made quite a few years ago."

"Oh, yes, quite a few, quite a few!" said Dmitro Borisovich as though rejoicing over the fact. Eyes half-closed, head raised dreamily, he ran his hand over his pointed beard.

"Yes, quite a few. I believe... at least two thousand... Oh, I must photograph this chest right away."

"Hey, when are we going to open it up?" cried out Artem impatiently. But the archeologist cooled him down with a single glance from under his spectacles:

"There'll be plenty of time for that!"

The picture-taking was given a much too solemn air and proceeded far too slowly. But at last Dmitro Borisovich put away his camera and heaved a sigh of relief:

"Well, now we can try to open it. But it must be done as carefully as possible. No, no, don't help me, Artem! And... you know what? Do me a favor and step back. I must concentrate properly on the task, and you're distracting me!"

Oh, how maddeningly slowly the archeologist did everything, as though teasing everyone with his sluggishness. One even got the impression he was opening it merely to satisfy the others' curiosity. But Artem could clearly see the excitement on his face and hear how it affected his voice. Aha, dear Dmitro Borisovich could barely control his own impatience!

This Artem did not say aloud; he only smiled to himself at the thought, with the conversation in the cave immediately coming back to mind.

Meanwhile, Dmitro Borisovich issued orders:

"Not a single unnecessary movement! Artem, why are you standing there as if you had nothing to do? Come over here, spread out some clean paper — not a single tiny bit from here must be lost. Not the tiniest of bits, understand?"

"Again this tiny bit of knowledge, Dmitro Borisovich?"

"Yes, my dear young man, of knowledge. As a matter of fact, you should bear it in mind that now none of your taunts can affect me in any way. They fall on deaf ears. All right, move to the right, Artem. You'll have a better view. Ivan Semenovitch, we'll begin now. We should probably make the first attempt from this side... from right here in fact!"

There were some marks on the chest, indicating that it had once been fitted with a lock. But apparently, it was not the lock that was now holding the lid shut: it must have stuck fast to the chest under the weight of centuries. Dmitro Borisovich, exercising great caution, tried to pry open the lid with gentle pressure on all sides. But it would not yield to his efforts. The archeologist heaved a sigh:

"I'm so afraid to use force, you know... It might be so fragile after two thousand years..."

"Let me try it," Ivan Semenovitch said. "I think my hands are stronger... Oh, don't look so alarmed! I'm not going to break it. You may rest assured, my dear friend, everything'll be all right."

"The problem is, Ivan Semenovitch, it might just fall apart! I beg you to be most careful, most careful!"

Ivan Semenovitch leaned over the chest. Then a light cracking sound was heard. It was enough to make the archeologist jump with horror and spring to the chest.

"Oh, my God! You've broken it!" he wailed as though it were he himself who was being mutilated.

"No, I haven't. I told you everything would be all right, didn't I?" Ivan Semenovitch said reassuringly and stepped aside. The chest opened. Dmitro Borisovich began muttering, overwhelmed with excitement:

"Let me come closer, make way!... Don't touch anything! I'll do the rest!"

No one made even a slightest move to infringe on the sacred right of Dmitro Borisovich to be the first to examine the contents of the mysterious chest. All of them just craned their necks, moved by curiosity and the desire to see something exceptional at last. But no one really knew what to expect, no one except Artem, of course. The gold crown of a Scythian chieftain — that was what was in the chest!

"Stay where you are, stay where you are," Dmitro Borisovich went on mumbling. "Don't come any closer. One mustn't... First of all the chest must be photographed the way it is now. The first one who has the right to look inside isn't me, it's my camera. Besides, the chest seems... it seems to be empty," he added after he duly succumbed to the temptation to peep in.

"What?"

"Empty?"

"But it can't be empty!"

The last of these exclamations belonged to Artem who had never thought, even remotely, of such a possibility.

But still it was empty, or very nearly empty. Dmitro Borisovich did indeed produce a roll of something that looked like paper, holding it with both hands, his elbows sticking high into the air, after he had finished photographing the opened chest. But there was really nothing else inside except for a thin layer of fine dust covering its bottom.

Artem did not even try to hide his disappointment. The crown of the Scythian chieftain, where was it? A stupid old piece of paper — and that was all? Luck positively seemed to have turned its back on the young man! All his dreams had come to naught. What was the use of photographing the chest again and the roll of parchment, as Dmitro Borisovich was now so thoroughly doing? Of what value were they now compared to what Artem had hoped they would find?

But finally the archeologist put away his camera. He leaned over the chest again, closely examining the inside. He put the roll that had been discovered in the chest on a clean sheet of paper, doing it very carefully as if it were the greatest of treasures. He even placed his hands edgewise on both sides of it as if trying to protect it against something. Dmitro Borisovich, quite unlike Artem, did not seem to show any disappointment. And what is more, his face radiated excitement, his small pointed beard moved in nervous jerks, his eyes flashed triumph. He looked round, at every one in succession.

“My good friends,” he said at last in a solemn voice. “Do you know what’s in front of you?”

Everybody kept silent. Then Artem, shrugging his shoulders, said indifferently:

“In any case, it doesn’t look to be any kind of treasure...”

The archeologist flared up:

“Ignoramus! Yes, young man, you’re an ignoramus! This — not a treasure? Not worth the greatest of attention, you think? A genuine document from the Scythian times — not treasure? The only find of its kind in the history of archeology... How dare you! Now, young man, you surely know that not a single written text, not a single word, put down by the Scythians has come down to us! Everything we know about the Scythians we have learned either from artifacts or historical references by ancient Greek and Roman historians! Surely, you must know all this since I’ve already told you about it. Lida, go ahead and tell us: didn’t I speak about all these things?”

“You did, Dmitro Borisovich,” affirmed the girl in a low voice. She was ashamed for Artem; he shouldn’t have come out with that ill-advised remark of his.

“See? So, in other words, you, young man, are of the opinion that a piece of something made of gold or studded with diamonds would be of greater importance for science than this unique document? Rubbish, and foolishness. A gold

gewgaw would be just another piece of high value. But this... this is..." the archeologist's voice faltered with indignation. Suddenly he waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "Ah, it's not worth talking about it anymore anyway. No, you'll never make an archeologist, Artem, never. But, let's cut this idle prattling short. I hate wasting time on it."

Ivan Semenovitch decided to help stop the altercation. He addressed the archeologist:

"Getting back to this roll, Dmitro Borisovich. What kind of paper is it?"

The archeologist immediately forgot about Artem, and turning to his friend, he said:

"Naturally at this point I cannot state anything positive about it except that it is a piece of specially cured leather. We can tentatively call it parchment. We'll have to unroll and see what's written there."

"But how do you know without unrolling it that something is in fact written on the parchment? Maybe it's blank?"

"That's out of the question," replied Dmitro Borisovich firmly. "I'm absolutely sure something's written on it. You don't believe me? You question my judgement? In just a moment, you're going to see it with your own eyes. Lida, get a piece of paper and pencil ready. And what's most important — one has to be extremely careful as this parchment is remarkably old. It can easily break, crumble, fall to pieces."

The archeologist grew even more agitated than before and now did not try to hide his excitement. His fingers trembled when he picked up the parchment again and began unrolling it as carefully as he could. The parchment was slow to yield: it rolled up again by itself as though it were spring-loaded the moment it straightened out. But it was enough to hold the unrolled part in the straightened position for several seconds for it to lose its elasticity and stay flat.

"Letters! Do you see them? Here they are, letters!" Dmitro Borisovich cried out in a transport.

Dark-brown letters could in fact be discerned on the inside of the parchment. They were ranged in straight lines, not even broken into separate words. What language was it?

"Those who want to find..." read Dmitro Borisovich in an undertone, at the same time unrolling the parchment a bit more.

"Oh, is that what's written there? How can you understand these strange characters?" asked Lida in bewilderment.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," muttered the archeologist. "Yes, that's what's written here... in ancient Greek though there are some words of a different language... possibly Iranian, mixed in. Unusual phraseology for ancient Greek... Now, let's see what it says further..."

The lines appeared one after another as Dmitro Borisovich kept unrolling the parchment, reading occasional phrases aloud:

"'The way is indicated by the map...' That's all very nice but where is the map? 'I have found gold there...' Gold? And who was it this 'I'?"

At last the parchment had been completely unrolled. Dmitro Borisovich grabbed his camera again and photographed the parchment stretched out on the white piece of paper several times; the parchment was tawny with dark uninterrupted lines of letters. Dmitro Borisovich began copying them down into his notebook. He kept muttering something to himself, plucking at his heart; evidently he had come across some difficult passages in the enigmatic text. Nobody dared to disturb or distract him with questions. Lida felt Artem touching her shoulder lightly:

"Did you hear that about the gold?" he said under his breath.

"Wasn't it you who were so displeased with the discovery of only the parchment and nothing else in the chest?" Lida said, also in a low voice.

Artem only shrugged his shoulders: there had been absolutely no way of guessing what was written on the parchment, had there? Lida added mockingly to drive the point home:

"Take care, by the way, not to let Dmitro Borisovich hear you. He's already given you the once-over for your 'dreams of gold,' hasn't he?"

The young man kept silent.

Dmitro Borisovich was almost finished copying the text, when Ivan Semenovitch cried out in alarm, pointing at the parchment:

"Look, look, Dmitro Borisovich, what's going on? The parchment's changing color!"

"It's gone darker! Yes, it has!" Lida cried out in her turn.

"It's getting brown at the edges!"

Dmitro Borisovich, startled, leaned over the parchment to examine it closer. Its original appearance was indeed

changing. The center was still light in color but on all sides, it had gone tawny, with the edges dark brown. Right before everyone's eyes, this dark brown color was slowly expanding toward the center as though some dark liquid were spreading over the surface. Closer to the edges, it was impossible already to make out the letters, as they had merged with the dark background.

Dmitro Borisovich banged the table with his fist in fury. What a disgrace! What a crime against science! How could he, an archeologist of no small experience, have failed to foresee such an eventuality? Why hadn't he thought about it? The ancient parchment, kept in an airtight metal box, had been well-preserved, out of contact with dampness and fresh air. Now the parchment had begun actively absorbing vapor from the air, and some rapid chemical reaction had started. The decay, delayed for hundreds of years, was doing its ruinous work rapidly and inexorably, and there was nothing that could stop it now.

Only he, Dmitro Borisovich, was to blame for it, and no one else! He should have taken some appropriate measures; he should have treated it with chemicals to give it the necessary resistance; or at least he should have put it between two sheets of glass, closing the edges with putty which would have stopped the air from getting to the parchment. It was a standard procedure; he had done it many times before... Besides, he knew so many other ways of preserving brittle and fragile ancient manuscripts!

"Condemn me, my friends, berate me, I'm guilty!" Dmitro Borisovich cried out in despair. "The ill-advised eagerness that made me hurry with the premature unrolling is to blame. I got carried away, that was the cause of the disaster... Oh, my God, what have I done! I'm burning with shame, I'm..."

His anguish cut him short; everybody saw that he'd never forgive himself for his own rashness.

"But, Dmitro Borisovich, you've photographed the parchment both before and after it was unrolled, from so many angles... the photographs'll show everything... besides, you've copied down the text," Lida tried to console him. But the heartbroken man only shook his head.

The parchment meanwhile had gone dark brown throughout; on the dark brown rectangle, boldly standing out against the background of the table, not a single word could be made out. It even seemed to have collapsed somehow, spreading closer to the surface of the table, almost sticking to the

white paper. The thought of what would happen to the mysterious piece of parchment next flashed through the minds of both Artem and Dmitro Borisovich simultaneously.

"Maybe it should be removed to a safer place," said Artem uncertainly.

"Yes, I think we should do so, at least for now... though I'm afraid it's a little too late!" the archeologist replied plaintively. "There's a piece of paper underneath the parchment. Let's try to put it the way it is into a suitcase or something. The thing is not to touch the parchment itself. Artem, fetch an empty suitcase, will you?"

In a minute, the suitcase was placed open on the table. Dmitro Borisovich and Lida took the paper with the parchment on it by the corners, and very carefully began lifting it...

"Watch it! Don't breathe on it!"

But lo and behold! The stunned onlookers saw a small piece tear away from the parchment and soar into the air like a black piece of ash, disintegrating as it went down. One of the bits lit on Lida's hand, and she did not even feel it touch her skin, so small and almost weightless it was. In a few moments, only two or three tiny brown pieces were left to be seen on the sheet of paper that Dmitro Borisovich and Lida were still holding. This was all that was left of the parchment that had been found in the bronze chest — a couple of small pieces of brownish gossamery substance.

Only one little piece the size of a postage stamp was still floating in the air. A draft was carrying it toward the door, and all the eyes followed it. The flake floated right to the door, turned over and disintegrated...

"Well, my friends, how long are you going to keep holding that empty sheet of paper?" the voice of Ivan Semenovitch rang out. He was wearing a broad smile. "Of course, it's too bad our parchment has ceased to exist, but nothing can be done about it. After all, we still have the photographs, and they'll be of some help, right? Don't grieve over the loss so heartbrokenly, Dmitro Borisovich! Besides, you've copied down the text, haven't you?"

"Yes, I have," the archeologist said gloomily. "I can't be sure I've not made mistakes, though. The photographs are our last hope."

"Can you read and translate what's written here? We're dying to know what it says in some detail," Ivan Semenovitch

said, feeling encouraging stares of Artem and Lida directed at him.

"I think I can."

"That's good, since, to the best of my knowledge, you're the only person among us who can read ancient Greek. Let's sit down and try to make out what it says. The text must be of extreme interest. It mentions gold, doesn't it? If so, it concerns geology as well as your archeology."

"How fast... how fast it disintegrated..." Dmitro Borisovich muttered as he sat down at the table. He pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his eyeglasses, misted over with perspiration. He put them back on and picked up the notebook with the text he had copied down. Lida was looking furtively over his shoulder. Artem chose to sit close to the chest, examining the tangled and intricate design on its top. They were reminiscent of some ornament, only not a single motif, not a single group of lines was repeated anywhere.

"I can't say everything is absolutely clear to me as yet," Dmitro Borisovich began, looking attentively at his notes. "As I've told you the text's written in ancient Greek, but liberally mixed with another language, in all probability one of the Iranian group. But it is rather clear in general. Someone who wrote this parchment in the remote past... My, how fast it has disintegrated! How terribly fast! Right in front of our eyes it turned to ashes... You all saw it happen..."

"Dmitro Borisovich, you've promised to translate what's written here, and not to keep on bemoaning the sad fate of the parchment," said the geologist, putting his hand on the grieving man's shoulder.

"Yes, yes... It's so painful to think about. Now, back to what I was saying: someone in ancient times wrote this parchment. Considering the fact that it has disintegrated so quickly, turned to ashes so to say before our very eyes..."

"Oh, Dmitro Borisovich, there you go again!"

"No, this time it's to the point. Considering this fact, I can tentatively date the parchment as being at least twenty five hundred years old. In other words, the writer was a contemporary of the ancient Scythians. No doubt about it. But I must admit that the text does not make any mention of Scythians. Which makes it a little more difficult to attribute the document to some particular people... But of course we'll make a joint effort to determine what's what in due time. Here it says in my somewhat free translation with... er..."

some guesswork due to the words not known to me, since they've been borrowed from a language other than ancient Greek. So here it goes!"

The archeologist adjusted his eyeglasses, looked round again and began:

"The one who wants... to find the treasure will do it... if he keeps going further and deeper into the cave... until he gets all the way to the spot shown on the map. He'll find four heads and three horses to guide him... Beyond the torches pointing upwards and... torches pointing downwards he will find the fifth head and a boar. May the gods help him. He will find the treasure there. He will find there a lot of gold and... will dig it up... as I, Pronis, did. I found that gold and left it in its place. The one who reads this is a lucky man. He'll take the map... and will find the gold in the walls as it was discovered by me, Pronis.' That's all, friends."

In the deep silence that fell, one could hear the loud breathing of the dog.

Dmitro Borisovich wiped his eyeglasses again, looking at the listeners inquiringly with his myopic eyes.

"What do you make out of it?" he asked at last.

"Well, whatever it is, it's not just a joke. It appears to be quite a serious document... a sort of testament," said Ivan Semenovitch.

"No, I don't mean that. I mean that it has some very important information. It speaks about 'a lot of gold in the walls,' for example," Dmitro Borisovich said as though thinking aloud.

"As long as it says something about gold in the walls, then we geologists must be all ears," replied Ivan Semenovitch. "Incidentally, the clues the parchment gives us shed light on some other things, too."

"Like what?"

"I told you once that in the past attempts had been made to dig for gold in the Sharp Mount, remember?"

"Yes, we do," affirmed Lida.

"It came to nothing then as negligible amount of gold had been found. The poor veins disappeared as close to the surface as the copper ones did... But if this parchment is accurate, and it is not just gold artifacts but real deposits, then..."

"Then what?"

"Then, apparently the gold veins must reappear exactly

like the copper ones somewhere inside our naughty mount. Anyway, it opens some new vistas we didn't expect..."

Ivan Semenovitch grew pensive, reflecting upon his own supposition.

"But, Dmitro Borisovich, is Pronis really a Scythian name? It seems to have... I don't pretend to know anything about it, but nevertheless... it seems to have a Greek ring to it..." Lida hazarded a guess.

"It does, beyond any doubt, sound Greek," the archeologist supported Lida's guess.

"And isn't the language of the text Greek as well, even though there are foreign words in it?"

"So what of it?"

"What about the Scythians then? Where do they come in here? You said it was a Scythian document, didn't you?"

"As a matter of fact, what I had in mind was that it has come down to us from the time the Scythians lived here in the vicinity of the Sharp Mount. In other words, I was referring to its age. That's one thing. Second, proceeding from this fact, I assumed that..."

"All right, if it comes from the Scythians, why is it written in Greek and why is there a Greek name in it?" persisted the tenacious girl.

"As a matter of fact, some ancient Greeks could have found their way to this area too... say, some merchants. The ancient Greeks travelled very widely in general... But why should you pick on me, Lida, pestering me with all these questions? I've just hazarded a guess, quite plausible to my mind. Of course, I can't prove it now with hard fact. But you keep battering me like a tiresome opponent in a scholarly debate."

"Oh no, Dmitro Borisovich! The reason I'm asking all these questions is because I just don't understand."

"Besides," said the archeologist, "there are some incomprehensible passages in this text."

"Like where?" asked Ivan Semenovitch.

"Well, for example here. What can it mean: 'torches pointing upwards' and 'torches pointing downwards'? What are these 'four heads' and 'three horses'? And further on — 'the fifth head and a boar'? What did the writer mean by this?"

"Maybe it's some kind of a code..." the girl hazarded another guess.

"No, I don't think so."

Then suddenly Artem's voice rang out triumphantly:

"I know what kind of heads he means! The heads carved into the walls of the cave, some of which we've already found. And when we go deeper into it, we're sure to find the rest the text mentions."

"What about horses and a boar then?" Lida voiced her doubts.

"If we make a point of looking for them, we're sure to find them too," Artem replied with conviction. "Do you have anything else to suggest by way of explanation?"

"No, I don't," the girl admitted in all frankness.

Dmitro Borisovich began fingering his beard pensively, a sure indication of concentration when he was thinking over a problem.

"You may be right," he uttered. "In any case, in our exploration of the cave, we'll have to keep your interesting idea in mind. At this moment, Artem's hypothesis is the only workable suggestion as to how the mystery of those heads and boars could be solved... An ingenious thought, my young friend!"

Artem could not help smiling contentedly.

"Nevertheless it does not offer a comprehensive solution," the archeologist went on. "How should we interpret these torches for instance?"

"I don't know," honestly admitted Artem. "I can't figure it out."

"I don't think the main problem lies here," Ivan Semenovitch cut in. "The heads, horses and boars might really be a reference to the pictures on the walls. Such a solution can be easily accepted. But the main thing — the enigmatic map mentioned in the text — where is it? The text itself doesn't suffice to arrive at the final solution. The writer himself continually insists on the necessity of using some map. One gets the impression that those who will read the text will necessarily have the map as well. It is this map that is so conspicuously lacking. Could it have been put into the chest too?"

"Impossible. We examined it so thoroughly," said Lida.

"Let's have another look."

But the new meticulous search did not yield anything. The chest was, beyond any doubt, absolutely empty except for a thin layer of fine dust at the bottom. Unfortunately this very dust led them to disheartening conclusion. What

if the map had been drawn on another piece of parchment? What if that other piece of parchment had already decayed in the chest? This thin layer of dust could very well be its remnants... That could never be determined now...

"And what if we go reconnoitering without any map?" Artem asked hesitantly, for he was eager to find a way-out of this dead end.

"Nothing will come of it," Dmitro Borisovich replied gloomily. "There are innumerable passages and corridors there. How will we know which way to go? The exploration of the cave without a map will take too much time..."

They were sitting around the table now. Dmitro Borisovich would not let the notebook out of his hands: it was as though he were afraid of losing it the way he had lost the parchment. Lida was staring pensively out the window.

There, beyond the hillock where she had been playing with Diana earlier in the day, the slopes of the Sharp Mount with its remarkable unexplored cave rose high. There, in the cave, if one were to believe Pronis, gold deposits were to be found... How fascinating! All these developments were more like an adventure story than real life.

Ivan Semenovitch's train of thought was of a different kind. As a sober, experienced geologist, he realized that the unexpected find made by Artem and Dmitro Borisovich necessitated the introduction of certain changes into their prospecting activities. Since the ancient manuscript really did speak of gold deposits, it would be foolish or even criminal not to try to locate them. Of course, Ivan Semenovitch viewed things from a different point of view than the two young people or even Dmitro Borisovich, who was prone to be over-eager. The young people were seeking romance. Artem and Lida, after hearing stories about the Scythians, and learning of the enigmatic Pronis, all those heads, horses, boars and torches, were immediately thrilled by the suspense of the undertaking. As for Dmitro Borisovich, he was perfectly content with just the bronze chest and whatever other archeological finds they came across.

The strivings and thoughts of Ivan Semenovitch were of quite a different nature. For him, a dedicated geologist who had been prospecting for valuable resources all his life, the most important thing in all this unexpected affair with the chest lay in the unknown Pronis' mention of gold deposits. That was something Ivan Semenovitch simply could not ignore. But how should he set about looking for the gold?

If they had the map, mentioned by Pronis, it would make things so much easier. But even in the absence of the map, they had to start searching for the gold anyway. Things would go very slowly though, that much was clear. But then, what are the difficulties in this world for if not for man to overcome them!

Ivan Semenovitch was mistaken in one thing though. Artem was daydreaming at the moment neither of the gold crowns of Scythian chieftains nor of the mysteries of the cave inside the Sharp Mount. His thoughts were flowing in quite a different direction, totally unconnected with present events. What had brought this on, Artem himself could not say, but in fact, he was reminiscing about his childhood.

He remembered neither his father nor his mother as they had died when he was very young. His memories began only with the orphanage. They were really his first memories and he called them "memories in gray overalls" in jest, because he and all other children there had been dressed in gray overalls for all occasions. Now it seemed such a long time ago...

Then, in search of adventure, he and his two friends had run away from the orphanage with its tedious monotonous routine. So he was a vagrant for some time, but came across nothing worthy of his time.

Once Artem saw some boys his age launching a toy plane in the field. He made their acquaintance; the boys were also from a foster-home, but theirs was quite different from the one he had run away from — not at all "gray-overalls" and dull. He could see it right away from the boys' bright faces and animated talk. It was so exciting to watch the white model plane soar effortlessly into the air, so Artem stayed to talk to the boys. Then they all went back to the home for boys, and the principal allowed him to stay...

On the first night of Artem's stay at the new children's home, he was washed and dressed in clean clothes, then shown a new game he had never heard of called "Maze." There were innumerable intersecting, twisting lines, drawn on a piece of paper with lots of traps and dead ends. The object was to find the way out of the maze without crossing the lines. It took Artem quite a long time, but in the end he found the way out. He liked the game immeasurably. And the teacher said with a laugh: "Always try to find a way out of any situation with the same persistency. Today you've found a way out for the second time." Artem looked at her

in bewilderment: why for the “second time”? The teacher explained: “The first time was when you came here. It was a way to escape hunger and homelessness. And the second time is now when you’ve found the way out of the maze. Do you understand?”

Artem smiled to himself when he remembered all that: he had made good use of the advice ever since. It had lodged firmly in his memory. From childhood on, he had always found a way out. He had finished high school, and now he was close to graduation from college. At the present moment, he was once again looking for a way out of a difficult situation... That’s right, he was looking for a way out... Hadn’t the recollections of his childhood and the Maze game with its traps and dead ends come to him in connection with their present dire straits?

Only then did Artem become aware that all this time, he had been holding the lid of the chest in his hands tracing his finger along the deep grooves of its tangled ornament. Again he smiled to himself: that’s what had really brought on the memory of the Maze game... It was as though he were again looking for a way out of the maze... this time made of a strange ornament rather than drawn on paper... How could he get out without crossing the lines?... Hm, what if he took this spot as a starting point?

He located the entrance, but where should he go from there? In fact there wasn’t much choice, since there was only one way along the main line with all the passages disappearing as soon as they branched off from the main route. This ancient craftsman had carved an amazing ornament to keep anyone who happened to be tracing it from going off the main line... What was that? What an extraordinary idea?

Artem’s head began to reel. He knit his brows trying to regain control of himself. No, it couldn’t be... It seemed... He ran his finger over the lines. Oh, had he found the map?

Artem could not control himself any longer. It was incredible, and yet he knew beyond a doubt now that he had made another discovery. What a tremendous piece of luck! Oh, how lucky, how very lucky he was! This was just what they were looking for, right here, so unexpectedly simple and clear. He couldn’t keep the news to himself any longer, especially since everyone was so gloomy...

“Hey, I’ve found it!”

They turned and stared at the young man in startled surprise. What had come over him? Why was his face glowing with such happiness?

In the meantime, Artem walked to the center of the room, holding the bronze chest in his hands and shouting frantically:

"The map! The map! It's been found! It's right here! Here it is, the chart of our mysterious friend Pronis!"

Artem did indeed look like a man possessed.

"Where? What map? What kind of nonsense is this, young man?" Dmitro Borisovich said, rushing to the boy in concern.

Instead of replying, Artem handed the archeologist the chest without uttering a word; he just pointed to the ornament on the lid.

"All right, so what does this have to do with the map?"

"It's right here! You can see for yourself!"

"You mean this ornament?"

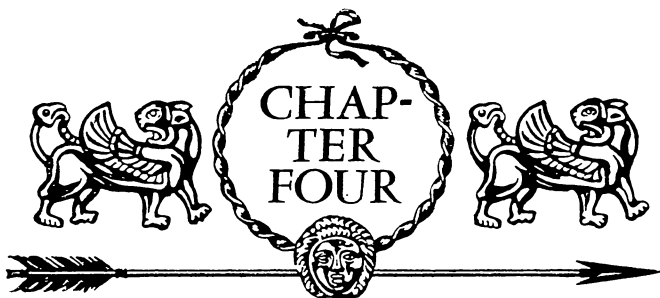
"Yes, this ornament, and none other! This ornament is the map Pronis mentions in his message. It's like a maze, you know. Just have a closer look; it's terribly simple!"

Three heads leaned over the lid of the chest. Six eyes began examining the intricate pattern of lines on it, exchanging occasional agitated remarks. Dmitro Borisovich was distrustfully tracing the groove of the main line with his finger. Lida went into raptures, uttering words of praise; Ivan Semenovitch nodded his head in contentment.

As for Artem, he had completely lost control. He rushed up to Diana, grabbed the head of the astounded dog, turned it this way and that, pushed her over, and rolled her over onto her back. Diana did not offer any resistance as she was quite accustomed to such expressions of feelings in the effusive young man. And in spite of the fact that today's expressions were especially violent, Diana only gently pressed her teeth into the man's hand.

Artem pushed and pulled, patting the dog's back and sides. His happy voice rang out triumphantly in the room:

"We've got the map! We've got the map! We've got it!"



the representations of horses and Scythian heads are discovered on the walls of the subterranean passages, and the enigma of the torches is solved; an unexpected obstacle blocks the way and Diana expresses the common attitude toward it; gray gas threatens to destroy the expedition and there seems to be no chance of rescue

Ivan Semenovitch stopped before the entrance to the cave and turned to his companions. He looked everyone over thoroughly and meticulously checked their gear. As was always the case before, this time, too, Ivan Semenovitch took upon himself the leadership in the expedition in spite of the fact that now it was of an archeological nature rather than a geological one. When Ivan Semenovitch had drawn Dmitro Borisovich's attention to this circumstance before leaving home, and suggested that the latter assume leadership of the group, the archeologist dismissed the offer with a wave of his hand:

"Of course I won't, my dear friend. Going through a cave is not an archeological venture; it belongs rather to a realm of which you, as a geologist, have much better knowledge. If we're lucky enough to come across some ancient artifacts which would concern archeology, then, yes, I'm at your service, and will gladly take up the leadership. But now... no, and once again no. Don't talk about it any more. You lead us! You give the commands!"

This time they did not overburden themselves, since they planned an expedition of only a short duration. What they had set out to do was to investigate some of the passages

and corridors in the cave. If the predictions and expectations came true, then they could always come back to the cave, bringing along diggers and all the necessary tools and equipment for carrying out steady, purposeful work.

"Is everybody in good shape? All right, all right, you don't have to prove it, I can see that you are. Do you have the dynamite charges, Artem? Good. What about the map? Do you have that with you, too, Artem? You haven't left it behind, have you?"

The young man grinned broadly: Ivan Semenovich must be joking!

"Good. Has everyone got something for lunch? Lamps? Pickaxes? Everything's in order? All right then, let's go. Dmitro Borisovich, please lead us since you already know some part of the way through the cave."

The day, bright, sunny and warm, was left behind. Eternal night, damp and portentous, reigned supreme inside the cave. Lida realized that she was even slightly nervous. She felt quite different now than the time she and Dmitro Borisovich had explored the cave. She wondered why she was so apprehensive — what was the cause of her nervous tension. It was just a reconnoitering trip like the previous ones in which she had taken part. Had she been so affected by the fact that they were now following the route indicated in the ancient parchment that existed no more?... But did it make much difference what kind of a map they used — the ancient one or copy they had made?

Artem was — or seemed to be — more relaxed. He was constantly checking the route they were following against the one on the map copied from lid of the chest. Every so often he would look up at Dmitro Borisovich, Lida, and Ivan Semenovich. The geologist was reserved as always; he did not seem at all affected by their present unusual circumstances. There was probably nothing special in it for him since he seemed unaffected by the romance of archeology; rather he regarded everything in terms of geological prospecting.

Dmitro Borisovich, on the contrary, was quite understandably excited. For the first time since their arrival at the Sharp Mount, the entire group had set out on an almost purely geological venture which, in his opinion, was promising. Promising, yes, but what results would it yield? Hadn't Dmitro Borisovich been bitterly disappointed many times before when seemingly promising beginnings had

fallen through without justifying the hopes of the archeologists?... Could it happen this time as well?.. It shouldn't, actually. The main thing was not to miss a single detail, not a single feature: everything here could be of importance, provided, of course, Pronis's map and text were genuine.

That's why Dmitro Borisovich was constantly on the alert, afraid of missing any other instructions Pronis could have left on the wall in addition to the ones indicated in the text. The archeologist was lighting the way with his miner's lamp very carefully, and the patch of light thrown by it moved in front of him in an erratic pattern, revealing jagged protruding rocks, unexpected turns or steep rises.

The light from the lamp of Artem who was walking in the rear of the party, produced even more phantasmagoric effects. It gave the figures in front of him giant shadows which moved along the walls, jumped one over the other, curved up to the ceiling, and broke into phantasmagoric shapes which assumed the weirdest of configurations.

For some time they walked in silence. The archeologist was the first to break it:

"The head of a Scythian!" he called out solemnly, pointing to the representation of the head carved into the rock, with sharp severe features of the face in profile. Despite its rough, crude lines, the carving's expressiveness revealed the dexterous hand of an ancient artist. The face, with its short nose and small beard, must have captured the distinct features of a warrior from the very remote past.

It was the very head Artem had seen yesterday, but now they had to turn in a different direction since the route Artem had taken the previous day was only a dead end. Artem looked at the map to see if it were accurate on that point, and in fact, the passage indicated that the way to the walled section was a dead end — the first proof that the map showed the actual layout of the passages.

Dmitro Borisovich walked on without hesitation and without consulting the map. He knew the way. They turned left, then began descending. The floor of the passage turned to soft ground quite different from the rocks they had been treading on just a short while ago. But the walls remained as rocky as before.

"That's the sediment from the water that once flowed through here," Ivan Semenovitch commented in a low voice, writing something down in his notebook. "It must have been a sort of subterranean river. Hm, a curious point: it

flowed not to the surface but the other way round, into the depths of the mount..."

"Hold it!" Dmitro Borisovich called out. He stopped at the new fork. "Artem, which way should we turn according to the map?"

"To the right," Artem said with conviction.

"And what's this?" Ivan Semenovitch said, lifting his lamp high into the air.

Immediately above them, the representation of a horse was carved into the rock. It was a surprisingly good image: the steed seemed poised to jump, its hind legs slightly bent.

"Aha, the horse!" Dmitro Borisovich said triumphantly. "The first horse of those mentioned in the text. There should be two more somewhere on our way. Forward, forward!"

They saw the second horse at the next fork; Artem, after consulting the map, announced that they should take the right fork. Then he continued with an irrefutable conclusion at which he had just arrived:

"The horses mean we should take the right fork, and the heads mean we should go left. Besides, the arrows under the carvings point in the proper direction."

At first, as was her habit, Lida expressed her doubts as to the validity of Artem's hasty conclusion, but soon enough, she saw for herself that again, Artem's hypothesis was correct; at the next fork, the carving of a human head appeared on the wall, and sure enough, they had to turn left. Artem beamed with satisfaction. They had been right in entrusting him with the map!

Dmitro Borisovich had not yet found much to rejoice in. They were already several hundred meters from the entrance, but he had not yet come across anything directly related to archeology, with the exception of the carvings, of course. But they, valuable enough in themselves, were not a phenomenon previously unknown to science; similar representations were rather well studied. Besides, these heads and horses had not yet taken them anywhere in particular.

The archeologist realized though, that it was much too early to jump to conclusions, but nevertheless, he couldn't help remarking grudgingly:

"Imagine: it looks like no one has walked here since ancient times. Surely we'll find something, won't we?"

Ivan Semenovitch was somewhat disappointed at the fact that no ore veins could be seen in the walls. In spite of

this, he tried to remain cheerful. "We'll see what lies further ahead," he kept telling himself. "So far, we've been going steadily downward. We must be at least a hundred and fifty meters below the surface." Ivan Semenovitch made another note in his book.

The third and fourth horses were a short distance away, and as before the horses indicated right turns, and the head, a left one. The expedition continued deeper and deeper into the bowels of the mount. Now they were two hundred meters underground.

"Which way had the water been flowing?" said Lida, who was evidently thinking something over. "If it was downward, maybe we'll find ourselves on the shore of an underground lake in the end. Right, Ivan Semenovitch?"

The geologist did not reply straight away. He scrutinized the walls, the ceiling, and the ground of the underground passage. Artem was eagerly awaiting his reply. It would be great to discover an underground lake!

"Nothing can be said with certainty at the moment," Ivan Semenovitch replied at last. "At first, to tell the truth, I also thought that the underground river flowed downward. But now I'm not so sure."

"Why?"

"Don't you understand? Shame on you — a future geologist who should have observed and analyzed all the evidence concerning the rock bedding and layers. If you're going to blush, Lida, don't, because it was what I thought myself at first. Let's look more closely into the matter. If the water was indeed flowing downward, where was its source? Remember, the entrance to the cave is rather high up on the slope of the mount. One could assume that the water first ran down the slope and then entered the mouth of the cave. But in that case, it couldn't possibly have cut such a deep track in the rocks."

"In other words you want to say that the water was flowing upward?" asked Lida in surprise.

"That's not impossible. Let's assume there was a large underground lake inside the mount into which water trickled down from the upper layers and got trapped there. At the point of overflowing, the water would begin finding a way out through the cracks. Don't forget about the atmospheric pressure: that's quite a significant factor. The water would begin eroding the cracks, making them wider and turning some of them into veritable river beds — similar to the one

we're walking on — in the course of thousands upon thousands of years. Oil or water geysers provide us with a similar phenomenon, after all."

"Now I understand," Lida said in a low voice.

"In the process I've described, at some point in time, the inflow of water could have been reduced for some reason, and the underground lake then would run dry, leaving a large empty space, polished inside with water — what we call a cave. Yes, I'm of the opinion that the water was in fact flowing upward."

But neither Artem nor Lida had time to comment the geologist's hypothesis. Dmitro Borisovich cried out something unintelligible, overwhelmed with surprise. The rest uttered inarticulate cries of amazement simultaneously.

The passage came to an abrupt end as though it dissolved into nothing. Like a river emptying into the sea, the underground passage emptied into a huge cave, pitch-black dark and menacing. The bright light from their miner's lamps was not powerful enough to win from the darkness even a small part of this immense cave. The light reached only the parts of the walls closest to them, and against the overwhelming blackness, the lamps seemed to have been reduced to feeble candlelights. The thick unbroken darkness hung before them like a coarse black carpet. Everyone stood in silence, overcome by the new discovery.

"Aha," Ivan Semenovitch uttered at last, and slowly continued: "That's really rather a big cave... I never thought there could be such things in this area... What do you say to that, Dmitro Borisovich?"

"What can I say? This is not exactly my cup of tea, Ivan Semenovitch. This cave comes as a great surprise, but remains a fact. And there's something over there that baffles me... Look over there at those shadows — they're columns but a bit too thick for columns as far as I'm concerned. Artem, let's go and have a better look."

Artem could make out the outline of the first column about ten meters away. It rose high into the air and disappeared into the impenetrable darkness above. The column seemed to get thinner the higher it went. But in the tricky light and enveloping darkness, it was impossible to tell for sure. There were dozens of columns around, so Dmitro Borisovich and Artem examined the bases of several ones in the light of their lamps, and Artem tried unsuccessfully to climb one of them.

As Ivan Semenovitch and Lida joined the two men, the combined glare of the lamps increased the illuminating power, but not enough. Dmitro Borisovich suddenly called out, pointing upwards:

“Look up there! There’s something over there, too!”

The columns were situated a short distance from one another. They shone in the light of the lamps, their surface uneven but glossy. And high above them, apparently on the ceiling of the cave, something glittered, too. But what was it?

“It’s not the continuation of this column that’s glittering up there,” Ivan Semenovitch said, peering into the darkness. “It’s something to the side... Aha, my good friends! The enigma is solved. As a matter of fact, it also solves the last riddle in Pronis’s text. Now everything’s clear!”

The rest were looking at him in bewilderment. What was Ivan Semenovitch driving at? The archeologist asked then: “What ‘last riddle’ do you have in mind?”

Without answering, Ivan Semenovitch pointed to the nearest column with a broad gesture of his hand:

“Do you see these layers of deposits? Aren’t they fairly typical? Lida, you surely can tell us what natural formations are made of layers of limestone.”

Lida replied immediately:

“Stalagmites! Of course! What a shame I didn’t guess earlier! It’s so obvious!”

“And in this case, what’s glittering up there?” the geologist went on, breaking into an open grin.

Now it was Artem who responded:

“It must be the stalactites, nothing else. It’s amazing we didn’t guess right off.”

“Nothing so surprising in it, my dear friend. No one expected to see stalactites and stalagmites inside the mount. It doesn’t look like a geological formation that might have them. And secondly, this darkness could mislead anyone. So, there’s no reason whatsoever to be ashamed. And now — who can tell me what ‘last riddle’ of Pronis I had in mind?”

Nobody ventured an answer.

“My good friends, it is so easy to guess. Don’t you remember what the text says? ‘Beyond the torches pointing upwards and torches pointing downwards he will find...’ Here you have torches pointing upwards,” and he pointed to the stalagmites, “and torches pointing downwards, stalactites.

Isn't this what Pronis wrote about? Ah, Dmitro Borisovich, you should have figured this one out!"

"Didn't you speak of the obscuring effect of this darkness just a short while ago, Ivan Semenovitch? Besides, these things are not at all my field of study. It is geology that deals with them, not archeology."

"All right, all right, don't start arguing; it won't help you anyway. Let's not waste time on idle talk. And this is *not* the proper place for debates. Artem, what does the map say now? Does it indicate a further route?"

Artem was crouching by the lamp reading the map at the moment. There were so many turns one could take indeed, wandering among the stalagmites that choosing the right one seemed quite impossible. The situation was further aggravated by the darkness! But Pronis's map once again proved very reliable: the way through the stalagmite cave was indicated as perpendicular to the wall where the passage that had led them to it opened. The map also showed clearly that after a turn to the right at some point ahead of them, they should arrive at the end of the cave.

"Let's get moving then," Ivan Semenovitch ordered after consulting the map. "It seems we're on the right track. Time's pressing!"

It was an exciting trip. The chimeric shapes rose high on all sides. They seemed to be growing from the ground, rising higher and higher, tapering and dissolving in the darkness. At some stretches, the ceiling of the cave seemed lower, or perhaps the ground rose; but which of the two things was extremely difficult to say. Anyway, at such places the light of the lamps reached the stalactites as well. These long glossy, uneven cones of fantastic variety were hanging from the ceiling with their tips almost meeting those of the stalagmites.

Artem was drinking in this phantasmagorical display put together by nature, so generous in its ingenious creations. Elongated snow-white cones gave way to glittering greenish formations like icicles that seemed liberally studded with shining precious stones; they in turn were replaced by large and thin sheets of limestone that seemed to be fluttering in a strong wind. These limestone sheets were so thin it made one wonder how they had come into being — one gentle touch seemed enough to shatter them into bits.

Then the rows of somber high stalagmites emerged from the darkness again. They stood like an immobile army of

limestone troops, whimsically reflecting the light from the lamps and casting pitch-black shadows. For thousands of years they had been standing there, and they would remain standing for thousands of years into the future, watching the millenia pass. The enigmatic Pronis, prior to writing his testament, drawing his map, and carving it into the lid of the chest to be hidden behind a stone wall, must have passed through these majestic chambers, descending deeper and deeper into the subterranean world. For whom had he hidden the chest? He must have been a courageous man to have wandered all alone through such somber and menacing places.

“How beautiful and how unusual!” uttered Lida under her breath in excitement. “To think that all this has been created by no more than dripping water and limestone! Tiny drops falling from the ceiling, leaving imperceptible deposits of dissolved limestone... How long it must have taken for those giants to grow to their present size and form all these fantastic shapes!”

Artem understood Lida’s feelings very well, because he himself was impressed: he had never seen anything like it before!

“Rockslide ahead!” Dmitro Borisovich called out. “The way is blocked.”

Another barrier? Would they have to turn back without reaching their destination?

The path, meandering among the stalagmites, had taken them to the opposite wall of the cave and ended there.

Everybody stood in gloomy silence, eyeing the new hindrance. How thick was it? Would it be possible to get through? No one could provide an answer. Huge pieces of rock and earth seemed to have been tossed just at that spot on purpose by a hostile monster.

“Diana, what’s the matter?” Ivan Semenovich asked the dog.

The boxer, who had so far been running quietly at her master’s side — it was not her first trip underground with him, after all — barked fiercely and sharply again and again. She was standing before the rockfall, her muscles taut, her body straining forward, and seemed to be trembling with rage. She was staring at the rocks and earth blocking their way as if they were something alive and hostile. Another bark — worried and aggressive at the same time! Then the dog began to move away slowly.

The people exchanged worried glances: the dog's reaction to the obstacle had puzzled them greatly as Diana had always been vivacious and friendly. What had come over her? Ivan Semenovich spoke in an attempt to dispell the gloom:

"Well, my friends," he said as though nothing unusual had taken place. "It seems to me that Diana has expressed the feeling we all share: the rockfall is our common enemy! She doesn't have any other means of expressing her reaction to a potential enemy except for barking..."

A well-presented and timely joke can work wonders. It can dispell a bad mood, cheer a body, make someone smile. And the transition from a smile to laughter, to more funny jokes, and even to genuine cheerfulness is an easy one. Ivan Semenovich knew all this very well. So he noted with satisfaction that even Lida who had been affected by the incident more than anyone else, smiled in response to his words.

"Let's discuss what we can do in the present situation," the geologist said. "Artem, what does your friend Pronis's map suggest?"

"Unfortunately, nothing, Ivan Semenovich. Apparently, Pronis could not have foreseen a rockfall at this spot. According to the map, a narrowing of the passage should occur, or perhaps the beginning of another corridor where we have this blockage now. Then, there should be two forks, one after the other, further along the way. And then the passage seems to come to an end. If it weren't for this obstacle, we would be very close to our destination... What a bad stroke of luck!"

"Well, it's here and we can't do anything about it!" Dmitro Borisovich muttered in annoyance. "It can ignore you, but you can't ignore it, my over-confident young man!"

"Restrain yourselves, my friends! Show some restraint. We have not yet decided what's to be done. Here are the facts: beyond the obstacle lies the route we should follow; the obstacle, to put it mildly, is a major one," Ivan Semenovich remarked, raising the lamp to light up the huge pieces of rock and earth in front of them as if to size them up. "It'd be rather difficult to move all this. Hence, the solution to the problem. A very simple and reasonable solution. The only acceptable solution for anyone who doesn't suffer from explorer's itch."

The silence that followed was pregnant with meaning.

"What solution do you have in mind?" Artem asked impatiently.

"To turn back and return with workers and all the necessary equipment to dig through the rockfall in accordance with the regulations for conducting subterranean work. That's the most reasonable thing to do — provided, I reiterate, the people involved do not suffer from explorer's itch."

"Oh no!" Lida and Artem cried out simultaneously. Dmitro Borisovich shook his head disapprovingly. It was clear no one wanted to postpone the attempt to get through.

Ivan Semenovitch laughed happily.

"I must admit I expected just such a response," he said, his tone filled with intrigue. "What a powerful thing this explorer's itch is! I have to confess I'm not entirely free of it myself. So, to cut short any further argument over the retreat, let's come up with a second solution to our problem."

Everybody looked at him in expectation. Even the dog raised her head, looking at the geologist as if in proof of Lida's conviction that she understood everything perfectly well but lacked only the ability to speak.

"The second solution is the following: to try to make our way through right now," Ivan Semenovitch said quietly.

"But how?" Dmitro Borisovich flashed a bespectacled glance at him. "What can we actually do with this rockfall now?"

"Dig through."

"Dig through without any help? There are thousands of tons of earth and limestone in front of us blocking our way. How can we get through without any heavy tools? Without many strong hands to help? With only our light pickaxes? I must say that your suggestion is, at best, groundless optimism," fumed Dmitro Borisovich, his indignation mostly for effect. "I would never have expected such flippancy from you, Ivan Semenovitch."

"As a matter of fact, Dmitro Borisovich, optimism, as far as I'm concerned, can never do any harm," the geologist retorted merrily. "Especially, when it is not so groundless as you assume, as you'll have a chance to learn in a short while. Your impulsiveness, on the contrary, can hardly do any good. That's the way it is, my dear archeologist! And I am not suggesting that we move all these thousands of tons of rocks with our rather weak hands. Now take a look,

and tell me what you think of my preliminary calculations, or rather my ideas."

He raised his lamp to light up the huge pile of rocks. The two giant stalagmites, standing like gateposts, were almost completely buried under the earth and rocks.

"I think we could attempt a breakthrough at this section. According to Pronis's map, here, between these two stalagmites, another subterranean corridor or narrowing of the cave should begin. Is that so, Artem?"

"Yes, that's correct, Ivan Semenovich."

"So I think that at this spot it's not thousands, or even hundreds tons of rock and earth that block our way but much less. Look: it's mostly earth, a lot of it, true, but if you train your eyes upward, you'll see that between the stalactites and tips of the stalagmites there sits a huge piece of rock, that looks like a pentagon. It was this rock which blocked the earth that was pouring down during the rock-fall. So, I would hazard a guess that in this section of the infall between these two stalagmites, only a thin wall of mostly soft earth has built up. It should be no more than a meter or so thick. So a mere meter of earth separates us from the passage we want to explore. You seem to be very sceptical, Dmitro Borisovich, so let's see if I'm right."

The geologist struck the wall of the rockfall to the right of the stalagmite, half buried in earth, which formed the right-hand post of their imaginary gate, watched as he did so by the distrustful archeologist. The sound of the impact was dull. Artem glanced at Lida surreptitiously: such a sound indicated that the wall was of considerable thickness. But Ivan Semenovich moved on, listening to the sound of the pickaxe striking the wall. When he hit the stalagmite itself, the sound was of a different, ringing quality.

"Isn't it natural for crystallized limestone to ring when struck?" asked the mistrustful archeologist. "That doesn't mean a thing yet, Ivan Semenovich, since the limestone..."

He stopped short as the geologist struck the wall between the two stalagmites. There was definite change in the sound, suggesting there was a hollow space beyond the wall of earth. The indistinct echo died out only several seconds later.

"What do you say now?"

Ivan Semenovich lowered his pickaxe.

"It seems... it seems..." Dmitro Borisovich was hesitant. It was difficult to say for sure whether the blockage was

too big or not — but now there was at least hope of getting through and moving forward. The archeologist grabbed his friend's hand in a gesture of appreciation and said enthusiastically:

"I believe you're right! No further proof is necessary!"

"Let's consider the argument closed," Ivan Semenovitch announced solemnly, "and get down to work, my friends."

The four pickaxes were raised in the air at almost the same time, but two struck a split second sooner, for Artem was eager to do something, and the archeologist was impatient to make up for time lost in futile argument. The strokes rained, sending stones and earth to the foot of the wall.

"One... two... one... two," Artem paced himself putting all his strength into the blows. The others worked in silence. The pickaxes flew in a measured tempo, striking the earth and sending echoes through the cave.

Lida stopped for a moment to wipe the perspiration from her forehead. It seemed to her that the reverberations from beyond the wall were louder. Were they really making progress? She had to get back to work; there would be time to rest later.

Artem did not slacken his efforts. His pickaxe rose and fell with swift, mechanical precision. The hole in front of him was growing perceptibly. Stroke after stroke after stroke, without a letup.

Then his pickaxe suddenly slipped into an empty space beyond the wall. Before Artem had time to realize what had happened, grayish smoke began billowing from the hole with a whistling, hissing sound, covering the handle in a moment.

"Hold it!" Ivan Semenovitch cried out, alarmed.

A jet of gray smoke shot from the small opening made by Artem's last stroke. It was coming out under great pressure like water from a fire hose, sizzling and spreading in the air, sinking slowly to the ground. It flowed down in waves, burying the feet of the four people.

The alarmed dog began barking furiously. She jumped onto a broken stalagmite with a flat top and standing there, went on barking resentfully at the spurting smoke.

"What kind of gas is it?" asked Lida in a half-puzzled half-frightened voice, stirring the thick gray waves at her feet with the pickaxe.

Nobody knew the answer. It was definitely not mine gas since it had not exploded or caught fire when it came in

touch with the flames of their miner's lamps. Besides, the limestone environment was not conducive to the natural production of the mine gas. The archeologist, greatly intrigued, together with the rest, watched the gas flow down the slope like some viscous liquid. Then he stopped over and scooped a handful of the strange gas. It swayed in an ellipsoid cloud in his palm without dissolving into the air or even dissipating. A very strange phenomenon indeed. Dmitro Borisovich sniffed the gas.

"It doesn't smell of anything. But..."

He buried his nose into the gas.

"But you can't breathe it. It lacks some vital ingredient, most probably oxygen."

Artem inhaled some of the gas too but failed to discover either a taste or a smell in it. Something viscous and deadly heavy had lodged in his chest after he had breathed it in. An extremely unpleasant thing, this gas.

"Oh, look!" Lida cried out.

The gas was slowly filling the cave, its level rising exactly the way as if it were water pouring in. The gray waves of the gas undulated very close to the clear white flames of the lamps. Then one of the flames sputtered and went out! The acetylene began spurting from the lamp with a characteristic sound, spreading its unpleasant sweetish smell around.

"The gas seems to be carbonic acid. It does not burn, neither does it allow anything else to burn. And you can't breathe it, since it has no oxygen," Ivan Semenovitch said, thinking aloud. "Artem, turn the gas regulator on the lamp down to cut off the flow of the acetylene."

Noise of something breaking loose came from the wall: a huge piece of earth had been dislodged under the pressure of the gas and fell down with a crash. Now the gas began spurting like a big fountain, describing a wide arc in the air and falling down to flow into the cave in seething waves.

"We must retreat, my friends! The level of the gas is rising, and we can't breathe it. It's dangerous to remain here any longer," Ivan Semenovitch said and then stopped short, going pale. Where could they retreat? To get out, they would have to go downward, retracing the route they had taken to reach the wall — a route which began on high ground but sank quite considerably to form a depression and rose again only a short distance from the rockfall. So down in the hollow, the gas would be the thickest as it was naturally

flowing downwards. There was no way they could return the way they had come. In other words, there was nowhere to retreat! And the level of the gas kept rising; it was already up to their knees. What was to be done?

As far as they could see in the dim light of the remaining lamps, the waves of the dreadful gas were surging all around them; the level was rising implacably. It was impossible to stop up the opening, for it had become wider under the pressure of the gas.

Ivan Semenovitch looked around: Dmitro Borisovich appeared calm, his anxiety betrayed only by his tightly pursed lips; Lida was leaning against a stalagmite in a half-swoon; Artem was standing at her side. The young man's big eyes moved back and forth from Lida to Ivan Semenovitch anxiously, as though seeking advice, waiting for an order from the geologist that he would carry out immediately. The dog kept on barking furiously at the dense gas that was flowing ever closer to her.

"Climb on top of the broken stalagmites! The flow of the gas will probably decrease!" Ivan Semenovitch called out. "The quantity of gas beyond that wall cannot be unlimited! Quick!"

It was the only thing left to do now — to move higher and higher, away from the dreaded waves of gas! Maybe it would all settle in the lowest part of the cave... But Ivan Semenovitch realized now that this was a futile hope. To see it, all one had to do was to look around. The gas was pouring in much faster than it was settling in the bottom of the cave; its level was continuously rising. The bases of the stalagmites were already covered with the dense gray fog. The fog was rising inexorably and soon it would reach the people who had climbed onto the tops of the broken stalagmites. Evidently there was no hope that its flow would decrease since the gas was spurting from the hole with greater intensity than before.

Artem was supporting Lida, who had fainted, with one arm and holding on to the tip of the stalagmite with his other hand. Disconnected, confused thoughts flashed one after the other through his mind:

How can we get ourselves out of this mess?.. We're lost, we can't do anything!... The gas is pouring in... How heavy Lida is. I can't support her for much longer... My arm has gone to sleep... I mustn't let her fall... All right, even if I don't drop her, the damned gas will get us sooner or later

anyway... And there's no way up from here!... We'll all suffocate... but Diana is evidently still alive though she's lower than we are... She's still barking...

The situation seemed hopeless indeed. The gas was rising slowly but steadily, and there was something terrifying in this implacable movement...

One of the lamps that had been put on top of the stalagmite threw an even, undisturbed light on the sad picture: the people clinging to the cold, shiny, hard surface of the stalagmites to the last, and the big tawny dog, already covered almost completely by the gray blanket of horrible gas. Diana still gave occasional frightened barks, but they grew less and less frequent. Gray surging waves of gas rose, filling the cave, cutting off all paths of retreat. The gas had already reached the feet of the people perched on top of the stalagmites.



a way out of the desperate situation is found which leads to an unexpected and incomprehensible source of subterranean light; the explorers escape through a hole to find woods, steep cliffs and a Scythian arrow; then they discover a crowd of exotically dressed people and witness a confrontation between the chieftain and the soothsayer; Artem interferes to stop the sacrifice but is captured along with his friends

It seemed to Artem that he had been unconscious for some time. A strange weakness and despair had overwhelmed him. His eyes had closed quite by themselves; his head drooped

lower and lower. But with his trembling hand that had gone numb, he was still holding tight to Lida whose limp body seemed heavier and heavier. The only one of his senses that remained fully alert was his hearing, and what is more it even seemed sharper. Artem heard every word the two older men said very distinctly; every little sound around him came in loud and clear; but he could neither respond nor move. It looked as though a thick covering had been thrown over everything. Under this covering were he and Lida whom he was holding... but no... she was moving away... And at some indefinite distance apart were the rest. Then Artem heard the voice of Ivan Semenovitch:

“The gas is pouring over Diana... She’ll probably be the first to go...”

To go where? Artem tried to understand what the geologist meant but in vain: Ivan Semenovitch’s words remained incomprehensible to him. Meanwhile, another voice reached Artem. This time it was Dmitro Borisovich speaking:

“Artem, hold on! There’s still a chance! Maybe...”

Maybe what? What did Dmitro Borisovich have in mind? Gathering all the strength left in him, Artem called back in a stifled voice:

“I’m hanging on... I’ll hold on as long as... as long as I can... and I’ll be holding...”

Meaning that he would be holding Lida. He was holding her and would go on doing so... But what would happen when all his strength had ebbed away? What then? The hoarse barking of the dog was reflected in the multiple echo from the stalagmites. Why was she barking in such a strange way? The sound seemed muffled by a blanket. She stopped only to give another bark, but even hoarser this time. No more sounds came from her afterwards. Then a voice:

“I think the dog has fallen from the stalagmite. Do you see her, Dmitro Borisovich?”

“No, I don’t,” the archeologist replied gravely. “Artem, keep your head up! The gas is getting closer to you. Keep your head up at all costs!”

Artem tried to raise his head — there was so much reproach in the archeologist’s voice... But, no, he couldn’t do it; his head was drooping down and he couldn’t do anything about it! Not just his head, but his entire body was being pulled down by some irresistible force. And how heavy Lida had become!...

The only thing Artem managed to do with great effort was open his eyes. Where were his friends? Oh, there they were. What was Ivan Semenovitch up to, holding the safety matches and two dynamite charges? Was it really dynamite? And a fuse... What was he going to do?

"Attention, my friends!" the firm voice of the geologist resounded through the cave. "We have only one last chance of survival left... Only because it is our final chance I am going to try it, Dmitro Borisovich... The opening through which the gas is coming in is not too big. I'm going to throw these two charges into the hole. I hope the explosion will seal the opening. Do you follow me? I'm hoping there will be enough earth to seal the opening..."

"And what if the explosion only makes the hole bigger? What then?"

"It won't make our situation worse... Now... Watch it, everybody! Hide behind the stalagmites! Here it goes!"

A small flash from a lighted match. The fuse began hissing. A ring of smoke ran along the thick cord, accompanied with tiny sparks scattering around, getting ever closer to the charges. Artem gathered enough strength to watch all Ivan Semenovitch's movements closely. The explosion was their last hope. If they were lucky, the opening would be sealed off by the falling earth, the flow of the gas would be cut off, and consequently, its level will not rise to drown them...

The geologist swung broadly, aiming the charges at the opening. With his other hand, he was holding on to the stalagmite. Another moment and...

But at the very last instant his foot in its heavy boot slipped on the slick surface of the stalagmite. Ivan Semenovitch tottered just as he was tossing the charges and the fuses were burning out.

"Oh blast it!"

The charges, a smoke tail trailing behind them, whizzed through the air and disappeared in the gray gas. They landed not at the opening but much further to the left, at the foot of big rock that jutted out from the wall. What a stroke of bad luck! Now there was no telling what would happen.

For another moment, the hissing of the burning fuse could be heard; the gas did not prevent it from burning, as it would burn even under water. Then a powerful explosion sent big pieces of rock flying high up into the air. Yellow

flames billowed. The rocks tumbled down with singularly lethal force. A thunderous, continuous noise enveloped everything, and it seemed that the blasts were coming from all sides and would never stop. The stones kept raining down with a deafening rattle, bombarding and hitting the stalagmites.

But the gazes of the people were fixed not on the falling stones but on the place in the wall where the explosion had taken place. Now the picture had changed radically.

A wide breach had opened there: the blast tore a gaping hole in the rocks, and jagged pieces were strewn all around. An even light flowed into the cave from this hole. But it was not the bright daylight of the July afternoon they had left behind on the surface. This grayish light, tinged with violet, reminded one of dusk or a rainy overcast day. But where could this light be coming from so deep underground? What was its source?

There was no time to think about it. The firm voice of Ivan Semenovich rang out.

“No gas is coming through the new opening!”

It was true. And what is more, the gray gas could be seen trickling into the new opening in small rivulets. Did that mean that there was normal air behind that wall? But Artem's ponderings were cut short.

“My friends! There is only way to save ourselves: we must try to reach the new breach opened by the blast. Dash through the gas, holding your breath,” Ivan Semenovich said. “There's not a minute to lose! The longer we stay here, the more difficult it'll be. Artem, can you carry Lida all by yourself? No, you can't, of course. Stay where you are! I'll help you and Lida.”

Then Ivan Semenovich, filling his lungs with air, plunged into the gray water-like waves. In a few seconds his head reemerged beside Artem. The geologist caught his breath and said:

“Let's try to carry Lida over to the breach together. It'll be safer that way. Dmitro Borisovich, I hope you'll manage without my help. All right, we plunge into the gas all together now. Now, one... two... three!”

Artem and Ivan Semenovich, carrying the unconscious Lida, made a dash for the opening. Artem, holding his breath, mechanically repeated all the movements of the geologist. Billows of the gray smoke kept moving in front of his wide-open eyes. In an instant, he could see nothing but the gray-

ness on all sides. There was only one thing he was fully aware of — the steady progress of Ivan Semenovitch. In fact, all Artem had to do was to carry Lida, mechanically keeping pace with the geologist. Artem stumbled; his feet slid on the slippery rocks; the opening was not yet in sight. There was no air left in his chest; it seemed ready to burst with strain... But he had to push on, no matter what.

Only a few final steps — had the distance been greater, Artem would surely have failed to make it! — and the gas seemed less dense. Wasn't it the light from the opening he had just gotten a glimpse of?... In a moment Artem's head was above the surface of the gas. He could start breathing at last!

Guzzling air, Artem forged ahead toward the opening. At the length of Lida's body away, he saw the head of Ivan Semenovitch, but the rest of the geologist's body — and Artem's as well — could not be seen yet through the dense gray gas. There it was, the breach... but where was the archeologist? Artem stumbled over a sharp stone. Another effort... how impossibly difficult were those last few steps!

"Higher, higher!" Ivan Semenovitch said encouragingly. "Dmitro Borisovich! Don't lag behind! In a few moments we'll be out in the fresh air! Just a few more steps!"

His last strength spent, Artem tripped and nearly fell down on the cold, damp piece of the limestone lying in the breach. He could not move another muscle or carry Lida any farther. Artem was at the end of his rope. Ivan Semenovitch got there just in time to grab him and keep him from falling.

Artem's legs and arms must have had some residual strength left in them, since he managed to push himself through the opening. He collapsed on the other side, his head dangling down from the edge. Then, unaware of how it came about, he tumbled headlong, rolling down the face of the rock. His closed eyes did not see anything; his hands were unable to grab hold of any thing to stop his fall. The young man rolled all the way down and landed on a heap of stones. But he was totally indifferent to his immediate fate. A strange torpor had overcome him: his entire body had gone completely out of control. Only his hearing, as earlier, remained unaffected.

Something heavy landed close to him with a thud. Was it Lida? Oh, if only he could open his eyes! But it was entirely beyond his power to do so. Artem could still hear

the sounds and voices from the outside world and nothing more. Now it was the voice of Ivan Semenovitch — what a man! he managed to remain vigorous and energetic, not forgetting about anyone, always ready to help...

“Dmitro Borisovich! Give me your hand! I’ll pull you up. Did the gas get in your lungs?”

“No, I’m O.K.... I’ll manage... You can choke on that gas... you’ve been down there far too long... what if you fall... what if you fall and Lida tumble down with you?”

“Lida’s already on the other side of the opening. Give me your hand, I tell you! Do you hear? I order you to give me your hand!”

A pause. Then — some rustling or swishing... incomprehensible sounds...

“Give me your hand, damn it, or I’ll come down to fetch you!”

“Just a second... I think Diana’s right by my feet here... I’ll lift her up.”

“You won’t have the strength!”

“I will... here, I’m holding her... now, take her from me! Oh! My camera! It’s gone! I’ve dropped it! I can’t find it in this gas... oh, where is it?”

“Come on, get out of there, quick! Climb up here, quick! Never mind your camera! Quick! See, the rocks up there seem to have moved again, they’re balanced precariously! They can come crashing down any moment!”

“I’ve lost my camera!... How careless I am! No, I absolutely must find it... maybe it’s...”

“Stop it and get up here, I tell you! On the double!”

“All right, all right!”

Another heavy thud... It must have been Diana landing on this side of the opening. But why couldn’t he hear the geologist’s voice any more? What about Dmitro Borisovich? Did they make it through? What was it that Ivan Semenovitch had said about “the precariously balanced” rocks?

As though in reply to Artem’s confused and disordered thoughts, a muffled and heavy rumbling could be heard. It increased in intensity by the moment. Something huge seemed to have detached itself from the rocks above the opening inside the cave. It tumbled down, striking the walls, the noise growing louder and louder. Now it seemed as though all the rocks in the world had been dislodged and gone clashing and rolling down into an abyss, breaking up into smaller pieces as they went.

Everything was shaking, quivering and rattling. The very ground quivered beneath the almost insensitive body of Artem. This pandemonium seemed to last for about a minute. Artem could not tell how long it actually lasted but it seemed a long time. He was continuously buffeted by the waves of air compressed by the huge falling rocks.

Abruptly all grew still, and this absolute, all-enveloping calm was more disturbing than the deafening noise of a moment ago, because it was completely incomprehensible to Artem. But was this stillness really so noiseless?

The weary young man could discern some sounds — occasional stones falling... or perhaps echoes coming from afar?

But what difference did it make, for Artem was lying half-dead and completely motionless... Unable to stir a limb, to move a single muscle. So the stillness continued as far as he was concerned. He couldn't move in any case... But maybe he had just been dreaming, for so many terrifying things all at once could happen only in dreams!

A sharp stone was prickling his shoulder, but Artem could not even twitch to relieve the pain. Chimerical images ran through his mind.

Surely it was all a dream, and yet not quite. In dreams, one is shut off from the surrounding world completely and is at the mercy of monsters, but Artem realized their unreality; now he felt the painful sharpness of a real stone; he was even aware of the closeness of the immobile hand of Lida... No, he was not mistaken; he knew for sure it was Lida's hand — motionless but warm, very close to him on the ground. No, he was not dreaming!

Though his eyes were still closed, Artem seemed to see the gray waves of the mysterious gas all around, surging and filling up the cave; no, they had already filled it. The waves were floating low above Artem like clouds in the mountains, the cold heavy cumulus of a gloomy, rainy day. That was probably why he had difficulty breathing.

Then he imagined he was again seeing the stalagmites, the huge conic shapes towering all around him like columns or mighty tree trunks... Why trees? In his delirium he thought he had begun hearing that dreadful hissing again, it was driving him mad. Continuous, harassing... Was the gas coming through the opening? But now the hissing seemed no more than the rustling of leaves. Leaves here? Trees? It was funny what incongruous fantasies beset him!

The young man even made an attempt to smile but failed. Not a single muscle moved. His condition was not unlike that of a person in the grips of a grave illness: he had lost control of his body while retaining the ability to use his senses. Beyond doubt, it was rustling leaves and not hissing gas that Artem heard!

The rustling intensified and then subsided like a light breeze blowing above the forest that makes the tops of the tall trees sway... It would be so nice to wander through such a forest, treading on the soft green grass, big tree trunks all around, singing... *Hey, in the forest, in the fooooorest, there are two oaks, two oaks, leaning towards each other, each other, like lovers, like lovers...*

Why he wanted to sing this particular song he could not say. It must have been the uneven rustling, growing in intensity that suggested the tune and the words... But wait, what kind of leaves could be found deep underground? Ivan Semenovich had said back there, in the subterranean passage, that they were at least two hundred meters below the surface. So what kind of trees could grow at such a depth? Impossible. And yet it was unmistakably leaves rustling in the wind; he could even hear some sort of song — very distant, unfamiliar, monotonous. He could not make out the words, but the tune was there all the same. What a strange phantasm! All right, he could accept that, since delirium can produce far more terrible things.

A song — savage and severe, solemn and slow, moody and monotonous — was coming from very far away. At times it was barely audible, then it could be heard much better, as though gusts of wind were carrying it to him, then dropped it along the way, only to pick it up playfully. What a strange and unfamiliar song! Artem had never in his life heard anything like it. How painfully the sharp stone was pressing into his shoulder! If only he could shift just a little, move his shoulder away just a bit...

Suddenly Artem realized that he had in fact managed to shift his body. The stone was not hurting him any longer. So...

Very slowly and carefully, as though not trusting himself fully, Artem sat up, hoisting himself from the ground with feeble hands; there was still some residual pain in his shoulder. He opened his eyes hesitantly, as one does after a prolonged fit of unconsciousness — and closed them again

immediately. Was he still dreaming? Why this strange, inexplicable light?

He opened his eyes once again, this time extremely cautiously, shading them with his hand, just in case. The light was not from any particular source, but came from all sides; it was the incomprehensible, even light of evening when the westering sun hides behind heavy and dark clouds.

Right in front of him he saw the thick reddish-brown trunk of a tall tree. The bole rose very high up in the air to branch off into boughs and eventually disappear in the wide crown of pinkish-yellow leaves whose color suggested late September and not mid-July. Lush, tall grass grew among the trees... but it was very odd grass, unreal, not at all green but also pinkish-yellow. Everything looked as though the fall had already changed the verdure miraculously into its favorite hues. All the same, even in fall neither leaves nor grass acquire such a pinkish tint! How odd! And where were the stalagmites? And the cave for that matter? Where were the rest?

Artem looked around and saw Lida lying beside him at the foot of a white cliff. She was lying motionless on her back, her eyes closed and seemingly lifeless. Further away on the same cliff, he saw Dmitro Borisovich — also motionless — and close to him, Ivan Semenovitch. They seemed to be unconscious. Or... no, he couldn't even think of the other possibility; that would be too horrible!

Only then did Artem realize that he could still hear the strange song. So he had not dreamt it? No doubt now — this monotonous, stark, moody song was still in the air. But who could be singing it here? And for that matter, where was "here"?

For the next few seconds, he listened thoughtfully to the distant song and then almost cried out in horror when something touched his shoulder.

"Who's that? Oh, it's you, Diana! You sure did give me a fright!"

The dog was standing beside him. She was making sounds of joy and tried to lick Artem's face.

"Where are we, Diana? What is this place? You don't know? Me neither."

The dog rushed to Lida, sniffed at her, then went over to Dmitro Borisovich and the geologist. After that, she returned to Artem and began tugging him at his sleeve as if inviting him to follow her.

"Yes, Diana, I would have gone over to them long before if I only could get up! You think I'm sitting here like this for nothing? That I don't want to know what's wrong with them or help them? Ah, you don't know me very well if it's what you think. However, maybe I'll try to get up."

In fact, Artem didn't feel as weak as he was just a few minutes before. His strength was returning quickly. He rose to his feet and walked unsteadily over to Lida. He stooped over her and touched her hand and forehead. Lida made an almost imperceptible movement; a quiver passed over her lips.

"Lida, my dear Lida, my love, wake up! Lida!"

He touched her face with his hand. An arch though weak smile brightened her face.

"My dear and my love?" she said in a low voice, without opening her eyes. "You're much too sentimental today, my little one!"

She sat up, her movements slow. Her eyes were fastened on the young man who felt greatly embarrassed — he had not thought she would hear him. But he hadn't said anything special, had he?

Meanwhile Lida took a quick look around and her smile disappeared from her face. She grabbed Artem's hand.

"Why so much light! Where are we, Artem?"

"I don't know, Lida. I'm as baffled as you are."

"Isn't it a wood?... leaves... and the grass is such an unusual color... It's all beyond me, Artem!"

"The same here, Lida."

"Everything's yellow and pink... Maybe I'm dreaming?"

Lida was looking around herself, greatly puzzled, not believing her own eyes.

"How did we get here?"

Artem only shrugged his shoulders — how could he explain anything to her if it was an absolute enigma to him?

"And where are Ivan Semenovitch and the archeologist?"

Artem pointed in the direction where both the men were lying.

"What's the matter with them? We must do something!"

Lida tried to get to her feet but failed.

"Oh damn!" she said under her breath.

"I was like that at first, too," Artem said. "Don't worry, in a few minutes you'll be quite all right."

"Artem, I just don't understand..."

"Neither do I."

He made a gesture of resignation.

"Where are we?" they suddenly heard the surprised voice of Dmitro Borisovich. "What kind of stage scenery is this? It was rather foolish to paint leaves and grass yellow and pink!"

Then Ivan Semenovitch replied:

"It's not scenery at all, my dear friend. It's quite a real forest, but of such preposterous colors..."

"Wait a minute!" the archeologist cried out. "Things like this don't exist, so I must be dreaming!"

"Then we must be dreaming collectively one and the same dream — Artem and Lida also wondered whether they were dreaming. Yes, my friend, that's how things are. Not only you, but even such an old hand at geology as myself cannot find any plausible explanations. By the way, have a look at this unusual cliff we're lying on."

Artem took another look around. Tall trees with pink leaves stood close to what looked like an almost vertical cliff, rising high, with jagged rocks sticking out of it. In fact he could not see where the cliff ended. It even seemed to Artem that it pierced the thick gray clouds overhead.

"I can't understand what's going on, Ivan Semenovitch," Artem said at last, noticing that the geologist's gaze was directed at him.

"Well, I must admit once again that I can make no more out of all this than you."

"And who is singing that song?" said Lida.

"A song? Oh, somebody's really singing!"

"And the song is getting nearer!"

"Quite a few people must be singing it..."

"The song is absolutely unfamiliar to me. I've never heard anything like it before." As the geologist said it, he raised his hand in warning. "Listen, just listen, and keep quiet."

In the ensuing silence, they heard a distant shout, then another one... Then the sounds of something like a tambourine could be heard; other tambourines still further away joined in; then more shouts — cheerful, triumphant, solemn. But how could it all be happening two hundred meters underground?

All four explorers were sitting now, in silence, glancing at each other from time to time. Something impossible and incomprehensible was going on! The strange sounds did

not abate; on the contrary they grew louder as though thousands of people had raised a shout, drowning the beat of the drums.

"Is it a sort of a parade or something?" Artem attempted a joke, but it sounded very inappropriate. Nobody smiled or paid any attention to his words for that matter. Discomfited, Artem did not pursue the matter. He felt a growing anxiety; the others also looked quite disturbed.

"Look over there!" Lida cried out.

A long arrow pierced the dense pinkish-yellow foliage, swished past them, then struck the ground, its feathers quivering in the air, its slim shaft sticking out from the grass, the harbinger of an unknown menace.

Ivan Semenovich was the first to regain control of himself. Overcoming his weakness, he rose to his feet, walked over to the arrow, and pulled it from the ground. His gray eyes studied the unexpected messenger thoroughly. At last he shook his head disapprovingly. His face had acquired an I-don't-like-the-look-of-it expression.

"Have a look at this thing, Dmitro Borisovich," he said, handing the arrow to the archeologist. "It's not a toy. And it is not the kind of arrow used in archery for sport these days either. It's a combat arrow if I've ever seen one. The arrowhead is made of bronze, you know."

"What? Made of bronze you say?"

The archeologist immediately stopped thinking about his weakness and fatigue, sprang to his feet, and ran to Ivan Semenovich.

"A combat arrow you say? Oh, give it to me!"

He took the proffered arrow and began examining it. He alternately brought it quite close to his short-sighted eyes and then held it at his arm's length, bending his neck in a funny manner, as though taking aim at it from under the spectacles.

"What do you say about it?" Ivan Semenovich asked impatiently, this arrow evidently becoming suddenly a very important thing for his musings.

"Just a moment, wait just a bit. I can't come to a conclusion so quickly. My eyeglasses are all smutty."

Dmitro Borisovich put the arrow on the bag nearest him, handling it as though it were the most precious of jewels. Then he took off his spectacles and wiped them very carefully with his handkerchief, all this without taking his eyes off the arrow one instant. Putting his glasses back on, he

peered at the arrow, his head bent apprehensively and mistrustfully, but some hope glinted in his eyes.

"So, what can you say about it?" Ivan Semenovich asked again.

"It's impossible. It's much too... much too... and yet there's no room left for doubt... You see, it's..."

The archeologist was apparently having difficulty finding the proper words to express himself. He picked up the arrow again and said, displaying it for his friends to admire it as though it were a thing of enormous value:

"My friends, it is an exact replica of an ancient arrow! Arrowheads of this type have been found in the excavations of the Scythian burial mounds. But they were always damaged, rusted and bent. You see my point? But this one is a new ancient arrow!"

"What do you mean — 'a new ancient arrow'? I'd say that's a very odd collocation, Dmitro Borisovich. Could you please make your meaning clear?"

"No, I can't! What do you want from me, Ivan Semenovich? I'm only describing what I see; I beg you to understand this. And I'm as puzzled as the rest of you! Truly I am!"

Artem glanced at Lida, and Lida returned the stare: it was nigh to impossible to make any sense of the archeologist's confused words.

The distant song changed in tone; now it was filled with joy and triumph. There was neither severity nor despondency in it any longer. Now it was truly a song of victory and jubilation.

"I have really never heard anything like it before," Ivan Semenovich said pensively, casting a glance at Artem and Lida. He probably meant both the song and the archeologist's garbled explanations. But the archeologist was not aware of the song at that point, for he was fully absorbed in examining the arrow.

"Look at Diana," Artem said to Lida in a low voice.

The dog was standing now, her legs wide apart. She turned her head in the direction from which the song was coming. The dog was obviously nervous. She was prepared to fight an unseen and unknown enemy. Ivan Semenovich also noticed this. For some time he stood looking at the dog as if thinking the situation over. Then he said, quietly and determinately, putting special stress on this quietness and determination:

“My friends, we must find out what’s going on there. Collect your belongings and get ready to move. Dmitro Borisovich, you’ll have plenty of time to examine your arrow later.”

The archeologist gave Ivan Semenovitch an annoyed look, but obeyed, putting the arrow under the flap of his rucksack so it was sticking out of either side, and scrambled to put it on.

Ivan Semenovitch was the first to start forward, picking his way among the trees, moving in the direction from which the song was coming.

They were walking through a big, dense forest. Something about it was different from the forests they were familiar with. Maybe it was the uniformly enormous trees or the unusual coloring of the leaves and grass — something they had never seen before. Everything was new and complicated, as though they had suddenly been transported to a far-away land. Things were further confounded by the arrow, the song, and the beat of drums.

Suddenly Ivan Semenovitch raised his hand in a gesture of warning that meant: “Be on your guard!”

They were approaching the edge of the forest. They could already glimpse the overcast sky through the giant trees; a few more steps and they would be out in the open... Abruptly Ivan Semenovitch doubled over and jumped behind the nearest tree, signalling for the rest to do the same. Diana, obedient to the strong hand of the geologist who had grabbed her collar, went to lie down by his side. Her body was trembling. They looked out from behind the trees, bewildered beyond measure. Artem’s breath was taken away; his hand clasped Lida’s; he was afraid to make even the slightest movement. He had to be dreaming it all! What else could it be? In real life, nothing of the kind could ever occur — such things happened only in dreams!

A wide field of the same strange pinkish-yellow color stretched into the distance from the edge of the forest. There were long rows of *kibitkas* * with covers of felt close to one another in one corner of the field; other big wagons, some of which had six wheels, could also be seen there.

Much further away, beyond the *kibitkas*, was a large herd

* *kibitka* — a wagon with a tent-like cover used by many of the Asian nomads in the past

of horses. And in the distance, encircling this most unusual of subterranean landscapes, steep, almost vertical mountains, similar to the cliff from which the explorers had started, were rising high into the air, seemingly without any ledges, to disappear in the low, dense, gray clouds. The place they had found themselves in was a sort of valley surrounded by high mountains; only it was much too wide.

But none of the four contemplated this picture for long, since their attention was riveted to something that was happening much closer to where they were hiding and which was of much greater importance to them at the moment.

Several hundred people were standing not far from the edge of the forest near a strange object made of branches and twigs. The several hundred men and women were wearing bizzare clothes, their uncommon appearance immediately catching the eye.

The men were wearing high conical felt hats; felted waistcoats of a sort, the backs of which were longer than the front; breeches, long or short, evidently of wool. The long, wide ones were tucked into the men's boots; leather straps were wound around the legs in the manner of puttees. The men were also brandishing long spears and holding bows and quivers; some of the men had battle axes, the handles stuck into their belts. The men formed an agitated crowd, some shouting, some singing; all of them brandishing their arms, as though threatening someone.

The women were standing in a separate group from the men; they were wearing long linen dresses and were draped in long cloaks with wide folds; their headgear was very tall. Some had what looked to be shawls on their heads. Men and women alike were garbed mainly in linen, but there was also a lot of wool and leather to be seen. The women were singing the same song, but in a more subdued manner. And all of them were looking in the direction of a large procession which was approaching in a cloud of dust. It was difficult to make out any details of the procession through the dust, but it was clear that a big mounted party was approaching with a group of people moving haltingly and tiredly on foot.

Artem felt Lida grasping his hand. He turned to look at her. She was about to ask something, but at that moment, the voice of Dmitro Borisovich, brimming with excitement, could be heard:

"Scythians! My friends, these people are Scythians, real

Scythians! What we see in front of us is a temporary camp of the ancient nomadic Scythians!"

"Not so loud!" Ivan Semenovitch cut him short.

For a moment Artem was distracted from the exotic sight. He turned his head to look at Dmitro Borisovich, trying to comprehend the words he had just heard. Scythians?... An ancient Scythian camp? Was Dmitro Borisovich making fun of them? Scythians living in this underground world in the 20th century?

One glance at the archeologist, though, was enough to convince anyone that the man meant what he had said: there was not a trace of frivolity in his demeanor; he had evidently been much taken by the things that were going on in the field. He was panting; his fingers kept nervously picking pieces of bark from the tree; his eyes were feasting on the singing people and the approaching procession. He kept adjusting the spectacles that slithered down his nose periodically.

Artem turned back to Lida. "Did you hear him?" he asked in a very low voice.

Lida nodded without saying anything.

"Scythians?... Can you make any sense of all this?"

Lida shrugged her shoulders: it was clear she understood as little as Artem.

Meanwhile, the procession was getting closer and closer. Apparently, the solemn song was in honor of the procession. It had already been welcomed by a rain of arrows, shot upward into the gloomy gray sky, accompanied by frenzied shouts. The arrows were landing in the forest; it was probably one of the arrows from a previous volley that had strayed far enough to be picked up by the four explorers.

Several men stepped out of the crowd to meet the procession. They were evidently people of some rank, for their dress was embellished with gold ornaments, and they carried no weapons except for short swords and ceremonial axes. One of them, an old man with gray hair and a long beard wearing a robe very much like a woman's dress, raised his hands and shouted something in a hoarse voice. The crowd and the procession responded immediately with similar shouts. Then the old man turned around, raised his hand in a salute before the peculiar object of twigs and branches the explorers had noticed earlier.

"It must be their sacrificial altar," Artem whispered excitedly.

“Yes, it looks like the Scythian altar was made of twigs!” Dmitro Borisovich replied no less excitedly.

The procession was now quite close, and the first rows of riders could be seen in detail. They were well armed, carrying rectangular shields of hide and studded with ornamental bronze figures of animals. The higher ranking riders — which fact could be determined by their more elaborate clothing — carried round shields with an oval cut into the top for a face.

But Artem’s attention had already focused on the strikingly looking horseman.

He was a burly, dignified man with a long gray beard, sitting majestically on his elaborately festooned steed, holding the reins in one hand, the other resting on the golden hilt of his short sword. On his head was a round golden helmet; shining gold ornaments adorned his dress: a heavy pendant of plaited gold wire on his chest; a bracelet on the wrist of the hand holding the reins — everything pointed to his being a man of highest rank. Several younger riders moving right behind him were holding the shiny figures above his head. There were panthers, deer, leaping lions and eagles with their wings spread perched on long spears. The distinguished rider was looking straight ahead, sitting in great dignity and stateliness on his brown mount, not paying attention to anything or anyone around him.

“He must be the chieftain of the tribe... the supreme leader...” Artem heard the voice of Dmitro Borisovich, muffled with excitement. “He’s returning from a raid with his fellow Scythians. It’s incredible to be seeing such a thing with my own eyes!”

“Shh... Shh...” Ivan Semenovitch again cut him short. “Be quiet!”

The old man who had earlier stepped out of the crowd, made a few more steps toward the riders, without lowering his raised arms. When there were only a few steps separating him and the chieftain, the latter stopped his horse with an almost imperceptible movement of his hand. All the other riders immediately stopped, too. Only those on foot continued moving, drawing nearer.

The old man with raised hands cried out something in a guttural voice, probably, words of welcome. The riders responded with shouts of greeting. Axes and swords flashed in the air; the figures of lions, eagles and panthers stirred above the head of the chieftain. The only person who

remained immobile and silent was the chieftain who, in the same detached and aloof manner sat astride horse, his hand on the hilt of the sword.

The old man, his arms still raised, cried out something once again, drawing discordant shouting in response from both the riders and the crowd. It was only then that the chieftain seemed to awaken; he made an imperious gesture with his hand as though beckoning someone to come up to him.

A young man, also richly attired, stepped out from the crowd around the altar. His face bore some resemblance to the chieftain's, but differed in that it was obnoxious, suspicious and insincere. The young man did not walk in a straightforward manner — there was something crablike in his gait. His right shoulder was hunched forward. The mounted chieftain lowered his head a little as though taking a better look at the young man, but his face remained impassive, with no expression of greeting or recognition.

The young man drew closer and made obeisance to the chieftain who stared motionlessly at him. The people around them grew quiet. The young man gave the chieftain a side-long glance as though he feared a sudden blow. But the chieftain only waved his hand in dismissal and turned away. The young man, as if he had expected this to happen, ran aside and stopped, still looking timidly at the rider in the gold helmet.

Then the chieftain looked back for the first time. A rider immediately rushed to his side — he must have been waiting for this sign all along. The chieftain made a lazy raking movement with his hand; the rider turned his horse around and galloped back, shouting something.

Artem, highly intrigued by these maneuvers, shifted a little to be closer to Dmitro Borisovich, and asked in a barely audible voice:

“What is it they're shouting? What language is it?”

Without turning his head, the archeologist answered, also under his breath:

“It must be Scythian.”

“Do you understand it?”

“Of course not.”

“Why? You don't know it?”

“No one knows Scythian... but wait, there's...”

“You two, shut up, will you?” Ivan Semenovitch stopped them sharply, giving them a stern look.

About a dozen riders were driving a group of people forward. The folks in this group were very different in appearance from the riders and crowd that had been waiting for the procession.

First, their dress differed; they were wearing various kinds of clothing; some had the same type of waistcoats but wore cloaks on top. Others were bareheaded, whereas all the riders and those in the crowd waiting by the altar had either helmets or hats on.

The group on foot looked exhausted. They were walking slowly, dragging their feet; some were limping, their heads bent. No one dared to raise his head; some glanced back in alarm each time one of the riders prodded them with a spear or simple charged them with their mounts.

"They're captives, aren't they?"

They were undoubtedly captives, several dozen of them, captured elsewhere by the cavalry and driven here on foot.

The old man who had been standing all this time before the altar with arms raised, viewed the captives with interest. For a short time, he lost his solemn, dignified air, even turning to the chieftain with some question. But the chieftain did not reply. He probably had not heard for he did not even turn his head in the other's direction. The old man by the altar made a wry face, and, probably to hide it, he bent over the altar right away.

Artem heard Dmitro Borisovich say in the voice of a man greatly nonplussed by what he was witnessing:

"He's a soothsayer! A Scythian soothsayer! He doesn't look androgyne though... I can't believe my own eyes!"

The captives were ordered to halt before the altar. The riders, spears and axes ready, pressed the captives, who made no attempt to resist, into a closer huddle. Once again the song of triumph soared to the sky along with another volley of sharp arrows. The captives shrank in fear as the arrows whizzed just above their heads.

The old soothsayer walked away from the altar. He again raised his hands into the air and mumbled something, probably a prayer. Abruptly breaking off in the middle of a word, he addressed the chieftain solemnly, pointing to the captives with his hand. Apparently the soothsayer was demanding something. The chieftain turned to look at him, his face acquiring a sterner expression, his hand gripping the hilt tighter. But the next instant he spoke quietly and imperiously. He said only a few words but that was enough:

he obviously agreed with the soothsayer; he did not contradict him. The soothsayer stood straighter, looking haughty and jubilant.

At the sign of the chieftain, two riders picked two men and one woman from the group of captives, huddled by the altar. They seemed to have deliberately picked the most exhausted captives who could barely stand. The three, prodded by the riders, went submissively and without resistance to the soothsayer; even the way they walked showed that they had stopped caring about anything. The soothsayer, displeased with something, stared at them, his hands curled into fists.

For the first time, an open and frank smile appeared on the face of the chieftain in the gold helmet. His warriors smiled, too. The soothsayer was standing motionless at the altar, staring at the captives in a rage, his dry, angular face twisted into a grimace, his lips moving in nervous jerks. Then he shifted his gaze to the chieftain who seemed to be watching the soothsayer's every movement. The soothsayer was about to say something, but then changed his mind, and turned back to the altar.

"What's going on here?" Artem asked in a low voice. "Are they at war with each other?"

But he fell silent the moment he felt the angry stare of the implacable Ivan Semenovitch.

The chieftain let fall a few short phrases, pointing at the old soothsayer, his remarks evoking loud laughter from the warriors. This guffawing was too much for the soothsayer — it drove him into a frenzy. He made a swift step toward the chieftain and began speaking furiously, alternately pointing to himself, at the altar, and at the three captives who had been led up to him. He waved his arms frenziedly. Abruptly he stopped and pointed skywards. There was a menacing edge to his hoarse voice.

"He's dissatisfied with the captives he's been given and threatens the wrath of the gods for such a pitiful offering," Artem heard Lida's voice. "Is that it, Dmitro Borisovich?"

"Looks like it. But — ssh! Let's see what happens next." The archeologist was completely absorbed in what was going on before their eyes.

The soothsayer fell silent, still pointing to the skies. Then the firm voice of the chieftain rang out, which sounded like an imperious command in the utter silence. The chieftain said only a few words, but they were sufficient. The sooth-

sayer seemed to shrink, his arrogance disappearing almost without a trace. He squeezed out a few indistinct words of reply, listlessly turned to the altar and beckoned to someone to come over to him.

Three burly women, wearing linen dresses embroidered with gold thread, came forward holding daggers in their hands. Bronze ornaments were dangling from their felt hats; the sharp-pointed daggers were drawn. The soothsayer pointed to the captives beside the altar, who could barely stand on their feet. The three armed women immediately approached them, daggers at the ready, and grabbed them by the hands. The next moment they were dragging them to the base of the altar. A desperate wailing rose to the sky. Exhausted as the captives were, they sensed the mortal danger, and began resisting. But what chance did they have against the burly armed women, these haggard, weary captives?

"It's disgusting!" The indignation broke from Lida. "These women helping the repulsive soothsayer!"

Dmitro Borisovich murmured to himself as though he had never heard Lida's indignant words.

"Yes, yes, that's how it should be! Scythian women were the priests! Women, not men, yes, that's how it was. It's strange though that the high priest, this soothsayer, is not a woman but an old man, albeit wearing a woman's dress... Priest he is, but why male?"

"Ssh!" Ivan Semenovich stopped the archeologist once again.

Meanwhile, the chieftain was silently watching the goings on at the altar, his face impassive, wearing no definite expression. His warriors were also silent. The only sounds were those of the captive woman wailing as she was dragged to the altar and the muffled murmur of the crowd.

"They want to kill her!" Lida said heatedly.

"To sacrifice her!" Artem cried out in no lesser state of indignation, quite forgetting the necessity of keeping his voice down.

"Ssh! Shush!" they heard the arresting voice of Ivan Semenovich from behind his tree.

But this time Artem was loath to obey the order as he had done before. He burst into an impassioned plea:

"Ivan Semenovich, we can't just watch this! We mustn't! We must interfere, we must help them, save them!"

"But there are only four of us, Artem!"

"It makes no difference! We cannot simply remain de-

tached, impassive observers!" Artem grabbed the handle of his pickaxe in a determined manner.

"It's insane, Artem! I command you..."

But it was already too late: Artem had sprung forward, his figure standing out boldly against the background of reddish tree trunks. He was noticed immediately. Several riders took off in a gallop toward him, spears held high. Piercing whistling and shouting resounded in the air.

The explorers were surrounded in no time — the archeologist barely had time to move from where he was standing; Lida and Ivan Semenovich had taken but a single step after Artem. One look at the riders sufficed to bring home the realization that any resistance would be futile. The spears were poised to strike, the battle axes held high in the air. But the Scythians did not use their weapons. They exchanged remarks, evidently puzzled by the unusual appearance of the strangers. At last one of the riders said something in a commanding tone. Some of the riders began pushing the explorers forward with the butts of their spears.

"Oh, you, stop it, damn you!" Artem bellowed furiously at them.

"I'm afraid we'll have to submit, my friends," Ivan Semenovich said in a low, resigned voice. "Now we're captives, too."

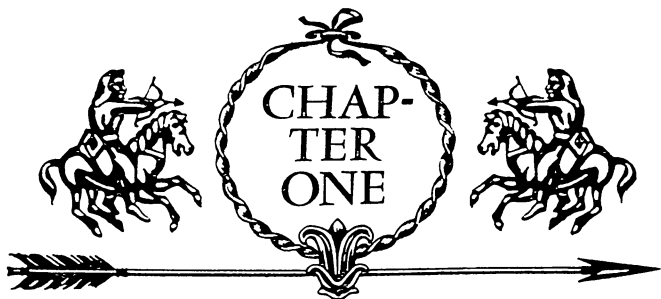
"Ivan Semenovich, it's me who's to blame! I'm so sorry," Artem said, turning to the geologist, as the awful realization of what he had done dawned upon him.

"It doesn't matter now, Artem. Besides, if you hadn't done it, I would have done it myself," Ivan Semenovich confessed. Artem saw that the older man was sincere.

The riders began prodding the explorers with the sharp points of their spears. The riders were on all sides, so there was nothing else to do but walk toward the crowd of Scythians, the chieftain, and the captives...

PART TWO





*the explorers puzzle over the word p o s k i n a,
and Artem duels with the old soothsayer;
Dmitro Borisovich discovers that he can
communicate with the Scythians and acts
as an interpreter in the chieftain's tent
where the guests are treated to o k s u g a l a*

Dmitro Borisovich shrugged his shoulders:

“Well, if we must submit and go where they take us, we must. I wouldn’t say it’s the best way to get to know the way of life of the ancient Scythians... But...” He pulled his trilby hat which had miraculously survived all their misadventures down low over his eyes. “But it appears we have no choice... Hey, what are you up to?”

One of the riders, obviously having taken an interest in the very unusual — from his point of view — piece of headgear that the archeologist was wearing, had plucked it from his head with the spear and raised it into the air, demonstrating it to the others. This caused a brief but lively exchange among the riders.

It was Diana that changed the mood: she, taking offense on behalf of her friend, leaped into the air, growling threateningly. Zooming through the air, the boxer clasped the spear with the archeologist’s hat perched on it between her massive jaws with strong teeth and snapped it in two as if it were a straw. A muffled crunching sound could be heard; the trilby fell to the ground. The rider had some difficulty regaining control of his frightened horse that reared and pranced. The rider himself was also somewhat unnerved by the sudden attack, and he neither tried to prevent it nor did he attempt to inflict any punishment.

Diana meanwhile jumped back to the explorers' sides, crouched, and bared her teeth, ready to fight for her friends. Dmitro Borisovich retrieved his trilby from the ground and clamped it on, muttering offensively:

"What bad manners!... Good girl, Diana! Without you I'd've lost my hat..."

"Good for her — yes, but let's hope it won't aggravate the situation," Ivan Semenovich said, glancing anxiously at the riders.

"I don't think it will. Just look at them; see how upset they are. They must be in mortal fear of the dog by the looks of them," Artem said.

The riders were in fact glancing at the dog in consternation. The boxer seemed to be the source of great fear. The rider whose spear had been broken by Diana threw the butt briskly into the bushes. He turned around to look back at the dog once again, then moved a little further away, repeating one and the same word over and over again:

"*Poskina!... Poskina!...*"

The rest of the riders also made it a point not to get near the dog, holding their spears and swords ready. The word *poskina* was on everybody's lips.

"What's the meaning of this *poskina*, I wonder," Lida said to herself in a low voice.

No one volunteered an answer. One thing was clear anyway: the riders were reluctant to do anything to the tawny dog and she no doubt felt it. She growled fiercely again, then turning disdainfully away from the riders, she trotted over to Ivan Semenovich. The riders began prodding the explorers once again, urging them on. But now they did it in a much more careful manner, as though suddenly inspired with some respect for the new captives. Even the pushing was more an invitation than a command.

Artem smiled contentedly:

"Ah, thank you, dear Diana, for your timely interference!"

He expected the others to pick up on his joke and develop it, but Ivan Semenovich said soberly:

"We really must go, my friends. Let's show reserve and caution. The situation is a serious one indeed. And don't forget that our every movement is closely observed."

The explorers captured the crowd's attention. The singing and shouting stopped, the welcoming ceremony abandoned, for the Scythians were now staring at the strangers. A murmur of amazement rippled through the crowd. Even the

captives — silent and resigned, concerned only with their own misfortune — turned to look at the new arrivals escorted by the riders. Even the chieftain, superior and indifferent up till then, was regarding the explorers with curiosity.

They walked under stares in which no benevolence could be discerned, feeling very much ill at ease but trying to look relaxed and dignified nonetheless. What else could they do?

Once again, the word first uttered by the riders was heard to rise above the crowd:

“Poskina! Poskina!”

The word passed from one Scythian to the other; they seemed to forget about the strangers, so much were they affected by the dog; they kept pointing at Diana, looking at her in consternation, and remarking in agitation:

“Poskina! Poskina!”

The only one who was indifferent to all this commotion was Diana herself. She walked quietly at the side of Ivan Semenovitch, glancing every now and then at him with her intelligent eyes as though trying to convince her master of her absolute loyalty.

“Poskina!... Poskina!” the word went around among the Scythians.

By now the explorers almost reached the place where the chieftain was sitting motionlessly on his horse, watching the strangers attentively. Artem could see his face in detail now. The tranquil, deep-set eyes under the beetling gray brows, half-covered by the lids; the long thin aquiline nose; the pallid lips, almost hidden by the gray mustache, the beard cascading onto his chest. The mustache moved slightly — the chieftain said a few incomprehensible words. He was obviously waiting for the strangers to answer.

Ivan Semenovitch and Dmitro Borisovich exchanged glances: how could they find out what this man wanted of them? What had he asked, what should they reply? And even if they said something by way of reply, would he, in turn, understand them?

Another wave of agitated murmuring passed through the crowd; the Scythians, highly intrigued, were moving closer and closer to the strangers. Soon they were surrounded on three sides by a dense wall of humanity. On three sides, because where the fourth should have been Diana was sitting, and the Scythians pointedly avoided getting close

to her, all the more so since the dog, disturbed by so many strange humans moving in, gave the surging crowd warning looks. She bared her teeth and growled with some reserve. Just in case, Ivan Semenovitch commanded:

“Quiet, Diana. Sit, sit still, and keep quiet!”

The dog looked at her master, wagged her docked tail submissively and stopped growling. But her lips kept lifting nervously; she bared her powerful fangs, showing that she was ready to come to the aid of her friends.

The chieftain, failing to get any reply from the strangers, said something else, this time in a more gentle, almost friendly tone. But once again, he got no reply. Noticing that the Scythians had crowded much too close to the strangers, he turned his head, annoyed, and gave some command to the riders, closest to him. They immediately rode forward and pushed the crowd back, making more room around the explorers.

The chieftain nodded his head in satisfaction.

“Good, this way it feels safer somehow,” Artem said.

The chieftain must have heard Artem’s voice because he turned his severe face toward the young man. But he did not say anything; he just looked Artem over from head to foot.

Suddenly the captives resumed their wailing. The burly priestesses evidently considered it necessary to go ahead with the sacrificial rite that had been interrupted by the arrival of the newcomers. They began singing a ritual song, their daggers pointed high, ready to strike.

“Ivan Semenovitch, they’re going to kill them after all!” Lida cried out in horror.

Artem was overcome with rage. He absolutely could not allow people to be slaughtered right before his eyes. Without giving heed to what Ivan Semenovitch was urgently saying to him, he rushed to the altar, brandishing his pickaxe and shouting frantically.

“Stop it! Leave them alone I tell you! Stop!”

The priestesses, greatly perplexed, froze. They had evidently not expected the strangers to risk interfering. The crowd heaved in agitation. Artem was now standing at the altar, brandishing the pickaxe.

“Leave these people alone I tell you! Leave them alone!” he shouted.

The armed priestesses began retreating little by little, for

Artem was indeed terrible to look at: his eyes flashed fire, his pickaxe held high, his mouth opened wide, yelling at the top of his lungs:

“What wrong have they done? What you want to kill them for? Clear out, or else I’ll...”

He fell silent as he saw the old soothsayer take a step toward him. He was approaching Artem in his solemn manner, his long, bony arms raised, muttering something maliciously. A murmur went through the crowd. There was enraged malignity emanating from the old soothsayer’s cruel, forbidding face. The beady, piercing eyes bored into the young man.

“Hey, I don’t give a damn for your hypnotic tricks!” Artem bellowed angrily at the soothsayer. “Don’t you try to scare me. I’m not so easily frightened, I’m not. Hey, you, move off!”

With these words, he rushed up to the captives chosen for the sacrifice. The priestesses had gotten hold of them again. The soothsayer tried to block Artem’s way, but the young man pushed him aside unceremoniously and leapt forward. The soothsayer reeled and almost fell. Infuriated and humiliated, he drew out sword and swung it high ready to strike.

“Aha, so that’s the way you want it,” Artem said, stopping in his tracks. “All right, you asked for it, you old geezer!”

He leapt to the side and struck the raised sword with his pickaxe. Metal struck against metal. The old soothsayer had evidently not expected such parrying. The short sword fell to the ground a few paces away. The soothsayer shifted his eyes from the sword to Artem and back in dismay.

“You didn’t expect that, did you, eh? That’s enough for you! And you, leave these people alone, I tell you!”

In a moment, Artem was near the priestesses, brandishing his pickaxe, shouting incoherent threats. This performance would probably have made little impression on the priestesses, but the way the young man had treated the soothsayer had frightened them, too. It was probably the first time they had ever seen someone resist and overcome him. The subdued priestesses hastily retreated behind the altar and peeped out looking alternately at Artem and the soothsayer who, regaining control of himself, retrieved his sword and rushed up at the young man.

"So you haven't had enough yet, you old fool?" Artem said, speaking through clenched teeth. "All right, just you wait!"

But the soothsayer did not raise his sword this time. A few paces away from the young man, he stopped, raised his arms into the air, and began muttering something. The Scythian crowd responded in a distressed manner. Even the captives, hearing the voice of the soothsayer, fell back from the young man. The soothsayer gesticulated wildly, as though drawing a picture in the air, then he doubled, straightened up again, only to bend up again and then stand over, his voice becoming more and more menacing. Artem understood, at last, what was going on.

"Ah, you're putting a curse on me, you old cheat? All right, you're welcome, go ahead, I don't give a damn about your mumbo-jumbo. Just keep your distance, and do as much cursing as you like. What a performance, eh?" he said to the captives, noticing how horrified they were as they listened to the incantations of the soothsayer. "Don't be afraid, it's nothing but trash, all this gibberish."

Now, cooling off a little, Artem realized that the situation could not continue like this for much longer, and that he did not have much of a chance against the priestesses and the soothsayer if he stood alone. Something had to be done about the situation on the double. But what?

Meanwhile, the soothsayer seemed to have gone into a tantrum. There was foam on his livid lips, and his curses grew louder by the minute, though he still kept his distance.

Lida was looking at the young man with admiration. Dmitro Borisovich clenched the handle of the pickaxe in his hands; he seemed about to rush to Artem's aid. Ivan Semenovitch noticed the state the archeologist was in, and said, to calm him down:

"Wait, Dmitro Borisovich, wait. There's still time. So far, Artem has been holding on his own just fine; you see for yourself."

"But it might be too late if I wait!"

"No, it won't, trust me. I know what I'm doing. We've got something in reserve yet. Diana, quiet!" He was holding the dog by the collar as she tried to run over to Artem.

The chieftain, grasping the gilded pommel of the saddle, seemed all eyes and ears, totally unlike his previous self when his face bore a mask of contemptuous indifference. He

was now watching every move of the young stranger, and did not even hide his smile when Artem knocked the sword out of the soothsayer's hand. He was listening to the frenzied incantations of the old soothsayer and glancing at Artem in astonishment, for apparently, the young man was not affected in any way. Then the chieftain turned his gaze to the young Scythian who had come forward earlier to greet him. The young stoop-shouldered Scythian was trembling with fright. He covered his face with his hands, evidently greatly terrified by the soothsayer's shouting.

The old chieftain turned away disdainfully. One of the warriors asked him something, pointing at Artem with his spear. The chieftain shook his head and once again sat absolutely still.

At last the soothsayer realized that his curses were of no use against Artem. He shouted a command to the priestesses and gesticulated widely.

"Aha, he's ordering them to seize our Artem!" Dmitro Borisovich said anxiously. "Now is the time to come to his aid. I'll run over to him!"

"Wait," said the geologist curtly.

"But they'll seize him!"

"Stay where you are, I tell you," commanded the geologist. "There's still time!"

He was right. The priestesses did not dare to leave their place behind the altar despite the express commands of the soothsayer. They were engaged in a lively exchange but refused to submit to the order. Then the soothsayer, infuriated to the last measure, raised one hand threateningly, evidently intending to curse the priestesses. This was too much for them. Fearfully, holding their daggers out, they moved from behind the altar and stepped toward Artem.

"Oh, just you try it!" Artem stepped forward bravely.

But his voice betrayed a wavering resolve. The young man realized only too well that he had little chance with his small pickaxe against several adversaries armed with daggers and swords.

"Diana, help Artem!" Ivan Semenovitch said under his breath, releasing his grasp on the dog's collar. Diana leaped toward Artem, stopped at his side, and bared her teeth menacingly, facing the armed priestesses. The warning growl emphasized her serious intentions.

"Ah, now there are two of us!" Artem exclaimed in a much more cheerful voice. "Ivan Semenovitch, thank you!"

All right, now, you over there, come on, but be careful. Diana and I are going to tackle you in earnest!”

Without waiting for any response, he stepped forward, closer to the priestesses by the altar. The women immediately retreated, for the very appearance of the dog inspired mortal fear in them. Artem heard the now familiar:

“*Poskina... Poskina!*”

“Yeah, that sure is *poskina*,” Artem laughed out. He had regained his cheerful mood. “*Poskina!*”

He shouted the word as one would shout ‘Fire,’ in alarm. And in fact it had a profound effect on the Scythians. A tense silence fell over the field which even the old soothsayer was afraid to break.

“What does this word, so horrifying to them, really mean?” Ivan Semenovich asked the archeologist who just shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s difficult to say... In Greek *kyon* means ‘dog.’ From the sound of it, it may be related. But perhaps it’s a taboo word. Taboo in the sense of a prohibition, a sacred, religious prohibition to do or touch something... That’s all I can suggest for now.”

Meanwhile, the priestesses again hid behind the altar, and the old soothsayer was helpless to budge them.

Artem, having regained his composure, gave Diana a pat on the back:

“Well, my dear little *poskina*, what are we going to do next? The old guy seems to have lost this round. Could you suggest anything to consolidate our victory, my canine friend?”

As the tension slackened, calm returned to the young man. There was nothing to be on guard against at the moment. It was now absolutely clear that Diana inspired mortal fear in the Scythians, but Artem couldn’t understand why. He kept on stroking the dog’s back, noting with satisfaction that it caused renewed squeals from behind the altar. In the priestesses’ eyes that must have been an unimaginably horrible thing to do: to stroke the abominable monster! Artem pulled out a cigarette from his pocket, his movements relaxed, and said, rolling the cigarette between his fingers:

“No time to have a smoke with all these rites and fights. Right, Diana?”

Ivan Semenovich chuckled, evidently seeing something droll in the situation; he poked the archeologist with his

elbow to make him appreciate it; the archeologist even looked around, but failed to see anything potentially funny.

Artem put the cigarette into his mouth, lit it, inhaled with relish and exhaled a puff of smoke.

“Isn’t it great to have a smoke to relax a bit!”

An unprecedented hush fell over the pinkish-yellow field. The crowd froze into absolute immobility — not a word, not a movement. Even the chieftain gaped, looking at Artem inhaling and exhaling smoke. Artem released a thin jet of smoke and said:

“Why have they grown so quiet, Diana? Haven’t they ever seen anyone smoke before?”

Little by little, the talking resumed. The Scythians began to gesticulate excitedly, pointing at the young man by the altar with the smoke coming out of his mouth. It was the strangest thing they had seen that day. The priestesses had meanwhile stealthily crept away from the altar and disappeared into the crowd: they apparently considered it safer to keep as far as possible from the young man who was not afraid even of the terrible curses of the soothsayer, and who himself was conjuring up unseen tricks. The old soothsayer, who had probably never seen anything like it either, was also slinking away.

At last, Artem threw the cigarette butt to the ground and stamped on it, saying to the captives:-

“Why are you standing here? Go back to your crowd. The show’s over.”

He even pushed them gently toward the crowd of captives. They began retreating slowly and timidly, never turning their backs on the young man. Artem shook his head, saying compassionately:

“My, how scared they are, poor things!”

Then he turned and began walking back to his friends. Diana ran by his side. Wherever he passed, the Scythians fell silent, looking at him with respect and fear, waiting for the smoke to come from his mouth again.

“Well, that’s how things turned out,” Artem said as he came up to his friends, trying to hide his increasing embarrassment. He had failed to obey the explicit command of Ivan Semenovich, rushing as he did to the altar, endangering them all. “Ivan Semenovich, upon my word, I couldn’t help it...” There was some trepidation in his voice as though he were apologizing.

"All right, all right, Artem. We'll speak about it later. Let's see what happens next," the geologist said unexpectedly complacently.

But what was the matter with Lida? Her eyes were wet; she seemed to be on the verge of tears. Very strange!

"I was so worried about you, Artem, dear," she said softly.

Surprisingly enough, Artem did not know what to say in response. He grabbed Lida's small hand instead and squeezed it passionately. Dmitro Borisovich took his other hand and shook it, saying solemnly:

"My dear young friend, you are a real man! I... I congratulate you!" His pointed beard shook with excitement.

Now Artem was completely baffled. What had he done that merited congratulations and concern? Even Ivan Semenovich was not angry with him and did not rebuke him, which was good in itself.

"Attention, my friends!" the geologist said suddenly. "The old chieftain is talking about us."

The chieftain was indeed saying something, pointing to the explorers. Then he beckoned the old soothsayer to come nearer. The soothsayer did so, boiling with anger, though trying to conceal it. Their conversation did not last long. It was the chieftain who did most of the talking, while the soothsayer listened with growing annoyance. He even tried to contradict the mounted man once, but the chieftain raised his voice. The soothsayer bent his head submissively, rolling his beady eyes, clenching his fists in impotent fury.

"What a repulsive creature he is!" Lida said under her breath, noticing that Artem was looking at the soothsayer.

The young Scythian who had stepped forward to greet the old chieftain did not take his eyes off Lida, which made Artem angry. The misshapen Scythian seemed to feel he was being stared at; he gave a quick sidelong glance, saw the suspicious gaze of Artem and immediately turned away; their eyes crossed only for a moment, but it was enough to catch the hostility which filled his stare.

Who is that guy? Artem thought. He's no just anybody because he's dressed so richly... there's so many shiny little gold things all over his garb... And he's holding himself more confidently than the rest whenever the old chieftain is not looking at him, of course.

Meanwhile the conversation between the chieftain and the soothsayer ended. The soothsayer bowed low and walked

off. Artem observed him attentively, not liking his cunning, scowling face. Passing by the stoop-shouldered young Scythian, the old soothsayer made a slight movement with his head. The young Scythian responded with the quick, darting glance and immediately lowered his eyes submissively.

"Aha, there's something fishy here," Artem remarked. "He's got to be watched."

But truth to tell, he forgot about his observations a moment later when he saw a more modestly dressed Scythian with only one gold badge on his helmet, approach the chieftain. Another Scythian moved behind him, his appearance differing from the rest — his face was swarthy and beardless; he was quiet and unconstrained. The chieftain addressed himself to the young Scythian with the gold badge on the helmet. Surprisingly enough, his stern voice was much warmer now; he was speaking in a friendly tone, even gently. After the chieftain had finished, the young Scythian bowed, then turned and said a few words to the beardless man behind him; afterwards, the two of them walked over to the captives. The beardless man began speaking to the captives like their superior, not someone alien. He seemed to be reassuring them.

It was at this point that an unexpected and important event took place.

"My friends, I... err... I seem to understand some of what is being said by that man with the swarthy complexion..." Dmitro Borisovich said in excitement. The three explorers turned to look at him in surprise. "Yes, without any doubt, I can make out something! Not everything, of course, but... It's ancient Greek the way one would expect it to sound, but mixed heavily with some other language, exactly the way the parchment was!"

"Oh! You understand him? What's he saying?"

"Yes, yes, I do. Don't distract me! He says that they are forgiven for their escape..."

"What escape? Did they attempt an escape?"

"Oh, do keep quiet! They are pardoned for their attempted escape, and will be allowed to go on working as before... ah, what a pity I don't understand all of what's being said! Now he is comforting them... Isn't it extraordinary that we will be able to communicate with them! Now he says that..."

But Dmitro Borisovich did not have the chance to find out what was being said as the chieftain turned to the explorers.

He did not say anything this time but made such an eloquent gesture inviting them to follow that it was impossible not to understand. Then the chieftain jerked the reins and his horse stepped forward.

"He invites us to follow him," Artem interpreted the gesture. "What shall we do, Ivan Semenovich?"

"We'll follow him, but we must control ourselves, no matter what. Do you understand, Artem?" Ivan Semenovich said emphatically.

"I give you my word of honor, Ivan Semenovich. I'll do my best!"

* * *

Surrounded by the riders, the explorers were now following the old chieftain on foot. The circle of armed men around them made them feel annoyed and constrained. The riders did not show any signs of hostility toward the explorers, and yet the latter could not help feeling that they were captives.

"The stoop-shouldered guy is coming with us, too," Artem said. "And he's staring at you all the time, Lida. Do you see?"

"That one, you mean? What a horrid creature he is!"

"But he seems to like you very much. He's not taking eyes off you!"

"Oh, come off it! And don't tell me anything else about him, because every time I look at him, it gives me creeps. He's so repulsive and slimy!"

But a half-minute later Lida couldn't resist casting a glance at the misshapen Scythian to see if he was still staring at her. He was indeed, and was even smiling at her! But even his smile was lopsided, as though he was smiling with only half of his face.

"Artem, who do you think he is?"

"I couldn't care less and don't want to think about him," Artem replied gloomily.

"Oh, stop that, Artem dear. I'm serious."

"I'm also quite serious."

"Oh, come off it! It seems to me that he's related to the chieftain."

"What gave you that idea? You're always thinking things up!"

“Have a closer look, Artem! He resembles the chieftain, but the old man is likable... and the young one is disgusting.”

“Hm... all right, I’ll have a look later. It’s rather rude to do it now.”

On all sides of Artem and his friends rode silent warriors with stern faces. They were holding long spears with stylized metal representations of lions, panthers and spread eagles. The Scythians were holding them solemnly above their chieftain’s head. Most of the spears were topped with resting panthers but some were clawing or tearing their prey with their fangs. All were fierce and had short muzzles.

These panthers and eagles probably serve as battle standards for them, Artem thought. He was about to take his gaze elsewhere when an indistinct but insistent thought stirred in the depths of his mind. It sometimes happens that a person notices something and subconsciously registers the observation but cannot say what it is. However, when this memory comes back, it distracts and disturbs as though persistently demanding to be analyzed and transferred to the consciousness. Either one such memory of all of them together was making Artem irksome, reminding him of something familiar.

“Artem, look over there! Diana’s scared them again!” Lida burst into a loud laugh.

“Where?”

“Over there, in front of us!”

Two riders were indeed fighting for control of their horses which reared and pranced, frightened by the dog.

Suddenly Artem struck his forehead with his hand, the gesture of someone upon whom an idea has dawned.

“My friends! Ivan Semenovich! That’s what it is: I know now! I understand at last!”

“What do you know?”

“What have you understood, Artem dear?”

“I know what the word *poskina* means! And understand why all of them fear our Diana so much!”

“Why?”

“Because she looks exactly like their representations of panthers or whatever they are. And the word means ‘panther’ or whatever they call these ferocious creatures!”

“What panthers you’re talking about? And how do you know the word means ‘panther’?”

“Have a look at the images on the spears!”

"Oh, that really is so! Artem dear, you're so smart!"

There was indeed some truth behind Artem's reasoning. A boxer dog just like Diana might well have been the model for their panthers. The same short muzzle, the same fangs! No wonder the Scythians feared Diana! She was evidently a living incarnation of the sacred panther! That was why no one dared even to approach the dog, much less touch her or, God forbid, make her angry.

"I believe you're right, my young friend," Dmitro Borisovich said. "You've really got an observing eye! You keep proving it all the time! You made excellent suggestions when we were examining the parchment and the box, and then on our way through the cave... Panther... panther... most interesting! *Pos-kina*... If we accept that *kina* is a distorted Greek word for 'dog,' here it could mean 'any dog-like creature,' and in combination with *pos* it would give us the meaning of 'panther.' And yet it's not quite clear — we know the Scythians had domesticated dogs. So why should they be so frightened by our Diana? She does resemble a panther somewhat, it must be admitted... and yet... it's strange!"

The archeologist, absorbed in his own thoughts, continued muttering something under his breath long after Artem had stopped listening to him. Artem was beaming with satisfaction: he had managed to solve the mystery, his mind was free from a nagging riddle; everything had fallen into place. But was everything really clear now?...

* * *

Meanwhile they had reached a *kibitka*, which was much bigger than the other ones. It was standing a little apart, resting on a six-wheeled wagon. There was a huge representation of an eagle with wings spread wide on top of it. The fabric of the tent was dyed red; the flaps were turned back.

"This must be where the chieftain lives," the archeologist said, sounding very interested. "Aha, this really is the place!"

The chieftain dismounted with the bent young Scythian's assistance. Before he entered the *kibitka*, he once again invited the strangers to follow him with sweeping gesture of his hand. Then he disappeared into the *kibitka*, his companions filing in after him. Only the misshapen Scythian

remained behind. He bowed before the strangers, bending his head respectfully, and said something solemnly. As he was doing this, he looked at Lida from the corner of his eye. A smile, like a shadow, passed over his lips so fleetingly, that only Artem noticed it.

"I don't like him," the young man said in a low voice.

"Neither do I," replied Lida.

"Now, my friends, we must go in. To tell the truth, I'm dying to see with my own eyes what's inside this big *kibitka*," Dmitro Borisovich broke in. "Just think — we are going to get to know how the ancient Scythians lived! Only in a dream could one hope for such a thing!"

"But maybe we are dreaming, Dmitro Borisovich!" the geologist said, laughing. "How else could all this phantasmagoria we're going through be explained?"

"I wouldn't know," the archeologist replied drily. "All I can say is that I'd be very glad if I could go on dreaming like this for as long as possible to see as much as we can!"

Ivan Semenovitch glanced at Lida and Artem archly and shrugged in surrender: it was impossible to win an argument against Dmitro Borisovich when it concerned the ancient Scythians.

They entered the *kibitka* single file.

Inside, it was round and conical, with the light coming in through a big opening overhead. The floor was covered with thick, richly-decorated multi-colored carpets; small cushions were strewn along the walls. The same type of cushions were lying on top of the two large chests secured with large bronze studs and bound in wide bronze strips.

The chieftain was already seated on a soft rug. Without his gold helmet he appeared less stern than before. Or maybe his severity had gone because now he was smiling; his movements were light and devoid of the solemnity and marked dignity he had displayed when he was riding at the head of his warriors.

A younger Scythian with a small curly beard was standing by his side. It was the man with the single gold badge on his helmet to whom the chieftain had talked in a gentle voice. Artem felt at once that he shared the chieftain's liking for this man. The open, energetic face with a small dark mustache and beard, clear eyes and a tall forehead — all his features inspired affinity. Artem stole a glance at Lida: what was her reaction toward this man? But Lida was occupied with herself.

Seeing a small shiny bronze plate with ornaments all around it attached to a pole standing in the center of the *kibitka* and extending into the hole above, she was quick to realize what purpose it served. It was clear that this piece of polished bronze was used as a mirror. And Lida was taking advantage of the opportunity to fix her hair.

"Oh, you're beautiful enough without all that fuss," Artem said a little mockingly. "Don't you think so?"

Lida flushed. The chieftain also noticed that the girl was sprucing herself up before the bronze mirror. He laughed and said a few words to the young Scythian. This embarrassed Lida totally, and she stepped aside, closer to the explorers.

The chieftain, still keeping his genial smile, invited his guests to sit down on the carpet. They lowered themselves onto the carpet obediently and gladly as the fatigue caused by all the events of the extraordinary day had begun to tell.

"Good. At least we'll have some rest," Ivan Semenovitch said contentedly, making himself comfortable. "But how are we going to communicate? To use only signs would be very inconvenient. Dmitro Borisovich, what if you try your ancient Greek on them?"

"My ancient Greek has grown so rusty..."

"But give it a try nevertheless. It may turn out to be very helpful."

Dmitro Borisovich, painfully searching for words, slowly made up his first phrase. Despite its very awkward — in the archeologist's opinion — construction, the chieftain and the younger Scythian opened their eyes wide in surprise. They bent forward, listening with the greatest attention. Dmitro Borisovich repeated his phrase. The eyes of the younger Scythian shone with the joy of understanding.

"Oh, they do understand!" Artem cried out triumphantly.

The younger Scythian replied, then Dmitro Borisovich said something else and the conversation was under way. It was not an easy conversation, for it was interrupted whenever Dmitro Borisovich lacked the words to express himself and had to use gestures and signs, but it was a real exchange nevertheless. After a while, the archeologist, wiping the profuse perspiration from his brow, told his friends:

"The old chieftain's name is Skolot. This attractive man is Varkan. They both like us and are very interested to know more about us."

Hearing their names, the Scythians nodded their heads

one after the other. Then the chieftain clapped his hands. Shortly a big bronze bowl and several smaller ones were brought in. The chieftain solemnly pointed to the bowl, inviting the guests to try its contents.

"He's inviting us to drink some of what's inside," Dmitro Borisovich said. "I wonder what kind of beverage it is. Could it be..."

He stopped short as though reluctant to say something that would be out of place but without taking his eyes off the bowl.

"It must be some kind of alcoholic drink," Artem volunteered his opinion. "What else would one offer his guests?"

Once again the young man proved to be right. The bowl did contain some intoxicating drink, sweetish, thick, fragrant and milky in color; it was neither wine nor any other familiar liquor.

Dmitro Borisovich sipped at it, swallowing it in tiny gulps, trying to determine what it was made of. Ivan Semenovich, guessing what was on the archeologist's mind, said with conviction:

"There's one thing I can say for sure — it's not made of grapes."

"Of course not, but that was clear right from the start," Artem responded immediately. "Who ever saw wine made of such whitish grapes? Besides, would vines grow here?"

"Young man, keep quiet," the archeologist said stiffly. "I think... I think it's... nothing else but... Yes, it must be *oksugala*..."

"Oks what?"

"*Oksugala*... How depressing it is to talk with young people who are so ignorant of even the most basic facts of history and archeology! What a shame!"

"I'm sorry, Dmitro Borisovich," Artem said, resignedly bending his head, but at the same time glancing archly at Lida.

"As I said it must be the *oksugala* mentioned by the ancient historians who stated that in addition to meat, the usual nourishment of the ancient Scythians was milk and all kinds of dairy products. That's why the Scythians were often referred to as 'milk-drinkers' or 'mare's milk users'."

"Sounds very poetic, doesn't it?" Artem whispered to Lida who nearly burst out laughing. But Dmitro Borisovich, carried away by his historical observations, oblivious of anything around him, went on:

“So, as I was saying, I believe it’s the *oksugala* of the ancients, that is, fermented mare’s milk. The tribes of nomadic Scythians had great herds of horses. Incidentally, we’ve already seen such a herd... The nomadic Scythians ate horse flesh and drank mare’s milk. They made cheese of mare’s milk, too, and prepared various beverages and drinks from it — *oksugala*, for example.” Then he added: “Of course, horses were not the only domesticated animals the Scythians had. They also had oxen, hornless, by the way...”

“Pollards,” Artem broke in, eager to show that he knew the technical term.

“Yes, that’s the correct term. According to the ancients, the local breed of oxen did not grow horns as it was too cold for them. As I was saying, the Scythians had domesticated sheep, swine, and goats. We know — note this — that the Scythians did have dogs, so it’s not quite clear why our hosts should be so afraid of Diana. Maybe here, under these... er... specific conditions, all the dogs died out long ago. I would not risk expounding on this subject...” Dmitro Borisovich had another mouthful of *oksugala*.

Artem cleared his throat and said:

“Dmitro Borisovich, when speaking about the soothsayer garbed in that ridiculous woman’s dress, you used the strange word ‘androgyné’ or something like that. What does it mean?”

“Oh, it means ‘a human being that combines the features of both sexes.’ You see, according to the ancients, the Scythian priesthood was mostly made up of women, not men...”

“Like the ones we saw?” Lida asked. Artem even put down his cup.

“Yes. Herodotus says that if some men did happen to become priests, they were only ‘androgynés,’ effeminate persons wearing women clothes.”

“But you couldn’t call our soothsayer ‘effeminate’ — he’s so bony and has a long gray beard. Only his dress looked like a woman’s,” Ivan Semenovitch protested.

“It’s difficult to say now what he looked many years ago. Who knows, maybe when he was young, he was very effeminate. Besides, I want to remind you of the priestesses who, on his orders, seized the three captives. They were women, were they not?”

“Well, yes, they were,” Artem drawled in reluctant agreement. “But those women could give hell to any man...”

Incidentally, did these Scythians have a matriarchy or what?"

"That could very well have been the case, my friend," Dmitro Borisovich said pensively. "You see, in this general area, the neighboring tribe of the Scythians was that of the Sauromathae who were known to have a matriarchy in its classical form — the head of the tribe was a woman. No doubt, it had some impact on the attitude to women among the Scythians as well. Further east, and in Central Asia, some other tribes related to the Scythians — the Sacae and Massagetae — even had warrior queens..."

"Oh, really?" Lida said in amazement.

"Yes, of course," Dmitro Borisovich said emphatically. "For example, Queen Zarina inflicted a shattering defeat on the Persian King Cyrus, captured him and had him decapitated; his head was then put into a bag and filled with the blood of many Persians... The Scythian women were excellent riders, took part in military campaigns and showed themselves worthy warriors, not at all inferior to men, and in many cases superior. We found evidence supporting this in the Scythian and Sauromathian barrows where women were buried with their weapons. I think that the Scythian custom of having female priesthood dates back to those very early matriarchal times. And our soothsayer must have looked androgynous when young. His effeminacy has worn off with the passage of time, but he has kept his lady's dress. But we'll probably learn about all these things in more detail later on... Incidentally, the *oksugala* is excellent, upon my word it is! How do you find it, Ivan Semenovich?" the archeologist said at the end of his improvised lecture.

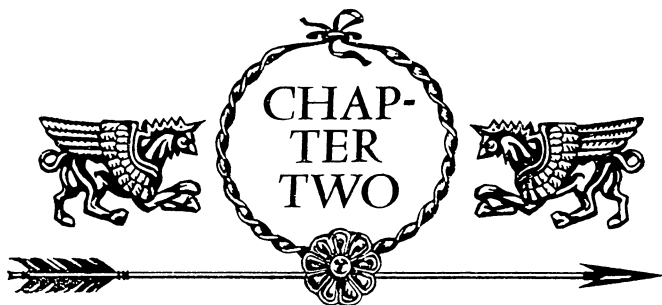
"Yes, I find your *oksugala* quite palatable," Ivan Semenovich said, wiping his lips with the inside of his hand. "Only be careful, my friends! Don't get carried away! It's very intoxicating!"

Agitated voices, filled with menace, came from outside. The chieftain raised his head, and Varkan rushed out. He returned almost immediately and reported something to the chieftain. Dmitro Borisovich turned to his friends, his face grave.

"Varkan says that the soothsayer is up to something else," the archeologist explained. "He's uttering imprecations on us. Varkan will go find out what he wants now. Skolot asks us not to worry."

The explorers exchanged glances. The situation boded ill. Varkan put on his helmet and went out. Artem looked after him and shook his head. *It'd be nice to find out what's going on*, he thought.

Choosing a moment when no one was looking in his direction, Artem stealthily crept out from the *kibitka*, hoping nobody would stop him. Nobody did.



the old soothsayer pronounces his imprecations and incantations to the accompaniment of a subterranean thunderstorm and in the end gets what he wants; the explorers are taken to a black kibitka where Lida is at first disgusted by the fresh schemings of the misshapen Scythian and then pleasantly surprised by the unexpected reappearance of Varkan

Varkan leapt onto a horse tethered by the *kibitka* and galloped away with a handful of other warriors. As Artem was following him with his eyes, he thought: *Looks that the old troublemaker has come up with something more serious this time. Otherwise Varkan would not be in such a hurry. And it probably concerns us... So what should I do?*

The decision had come to him at once — he must learn the intentions of the old soothsayer. Varkan had galloped away in the direction from which the explorers had been brought to the chieftain's. This much was clear to Artem who had a good very sense of direction.

So, I'll follow Varkan. It'd naturally be much faster to get there on horseback, but I don't have a mount, and there's nothing to be done about it so I'll have to go on foot... How quickly dusk has fallen! And the clouds have become much darker. Is the local night approaching at last?

A great black cloud was sailing across the sky, looming heavily over the forest, making the low sky seem even lower. Apparently, it was this cloud that was the cause of the premature dusk. Now the cloud had covered the sky almost entirely. The pinky-yellowish coloring of the plants had changed perceptibly, acquiring a purplish tint. Everything seemed fantastic, unreal, and artificial in this mysterious glow. Was it a thunderstorm approaching? Was it a clap of thunder he had just heard in the distance?... A subterranean thunderstorm? How could that be possible?

Artem quickened his pace. He decided it was no good wasting time trying to solve the puzzle he and his friends had had to face during the course of a single extraordinary day; there were so many inexplicable things they had encountered that it was really better to take them as they were, matter-of-factly, without trying to rationalize them. Anyway, neither Ivan Semenovitch nor Dmitro Borisovich could provide any plausible explanations. In such a situation, it was advisable to deal only with those developments that concerned the four of them at any given moment. The time would come to ponder the rest of the puzzles.

So, the first thing on Artem's mind was to find out what kind of scheme the old soothsayer had cooked up now, and to what extent it concerned him and his friends. As Artem thought about it, the fierce bony face, the piercing cold eyes of the soothsayer loomed large in his mind. It was, indeed, the face of a cruel man, a werewolf, who would not stop short of murder if somebody interfered with his plans.

At that moment, he saw a big crowd at the next bend in the road and stopped. He also heard shouts and general agitated murmur coming from the people. *They're headed for the chieftain's kибitka!* the thought crossed Artem's mind. There were several horsemen riding back and forth in front of the crowd. They gradually retreated as the mass of bodies pressed forward. The riders seemed to be trying to halt the progress of the crowd, urging their horses to push the people back with their chests, but the crowd was too much excited to be turned away, and pressed inexorably

forward, step by step. The horses reared and pranced; one of the riders was almost knocked out of the saddle.

The riders must be Varkan and his warriors! Artem thought.

The riders were now in full retreat. Artem caught sight of a rather short figure in a hectic movement between the retreating riders and the crowd, his hands raised threateningly high into the air. Artem recognized the old soothsayer who was advancing on the riders, shouting, losing his breath in the process, and uttering imprecations in his unpleasant voice. He pointed to the sky, to the big cloud that loomed so low as to touch the people's heads, and waved his arms wildly.

He must be scaring them with something, damn the old geezer! Artem thought.

Varkan rode toward the soothsayer, but other riders lagged behind, leaving Varkan alone to face the soothsayer. The old man took advantage of this chance and raised his arms even higher, shouting something in a frenzy. In response to this howling, the front rows surged forward and rushed at Varkan. Another moment, and he would be thrown from his horse, but Varkan had not lost his nerve: he jerked the reins, making the horse leap to the side and rear. Then the horse turned and bore the brave Scythian to the rest of the warriors. Without halting, Varkan shouted a few short words to the riders who galloped away all together, probably headed for the chieftain's *kibitka*.

The crowd rushed after the riders, shouting triumphantly. The old soothsayer ran in front of it, several Scythians close by his side. One could only wonder at the old man's agility and vigor. And it was probably this agility that impressed the Scythians, who followed him, running and shouting hostile words.

"Ah, I don't like the way the things are developing," Artem grumbled. "If they catch sight of me, I'll be in big trouble... and there's nowhere to hide..."

The situation was indeed growing desperate, all the more so since more Scythians began appearing from nearby *kibitkas* evidently attracted by the shouts of the crowd. There was nowhere for the young man to hide; he could be seized either by those Scythians who were running after the riders or by those who were pouring out of their *kibitkas*. At that moment, Artem saw that the riders were already quite near him.

"Varkan!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "Varkan, help!"

The Scythian, seeing Artem, uttered a cry of surprise. He reined in his horse abruptly. Varkan reached his hand to Artem and pulled the youth up behind him. The moment Artem was firmly installed, Varkan galloped away, catching up with the rest of the riders. Artem was sitting on the horse's croup, holding on to the Scythian's shoulders with his hands. A new wave of shouting came from the infuriated crowd. Artem turned his head to look back and saw the crowd, much swelled in size, rolling after them, the soothsayer at its head as before.

It looks as if it's us they're after, Artem thought, and this very disturbing idea made his flesh creep. But soon everything would become clear. In a few moments, the riders stopped at the red tent of the chieftain.

Artem leapt down from the horse and rushed in, impatient to break the news to his friends. If the old soothsayer was, in fact, stirring up animosity toward the strangers, Artem and his friends had to get ready to defend themselves, to do something about it... But what, Artem could not say. Seeing the disturbed, questioning expressions on the faces of his friends, who turned to him as he burst in, he cried out:

"A great crowd is on its way here! The soothsayer's leading them! They'll be here any moment now!"

Lida went pale, Ivan Semenovitch clenched his teeth, and Dmitro Borisovich began to rise. The old chieftain had, naturally, understood nothing of what Artem had said, and only looked at him questioningly.

"And what is it they want?" Ivan Semenovitch asked at last.

"I don't know. They attacked Varkan... They're pushing forward and are on their way here... They seem incensed at something."

That was all Artem could say, but just then, Varkan entered the *kibitka* and began telling his story, addressing himself to both the chieftain and Dmitro Borisovich. The chieftain frowned.

"What is he saying?" Ivan Semenovitch asked the archeologist.

"I do not understand. He must have forgotten I don't speak Scythian. But judging from the way he sounds, it must be pretty bad."

Abruptly, Skolot interrupted Varkan and picked up his helmet from the rug. His hand gripped the golden handle of his short sword. Without rising, he pointed at the guests.

Varkan understood. He turned to Dmitro Borisovich and spoke again — this time in Greek. The archeologist listened to him attentively, pulling anxiously at his beard.

“Well, what’s he telling you?” Ivan Semenovitch asked impatiently.

“He says that the soothsayer has instigated the Scythians to come here to Skolot and demand that we be given to the priests. The soothsayer warns of the gods’ wrath, scaring the people with an approaching thunderstorm, saying that lightning will strike them dead and rocks will begin to fall on their heads for their disobedience to the soothsayer. The soothsayer also says that the gods are already angry at the Scythians because Skolot would not allow us to be sacrificed...”

Artem saw the shrewd move of the soothsayer: he had used the approaching thunderstorm for his purpose, and thunderstorms were evidently rare in those parts.

“Ivan Semenovitch, there really is a thunderstorm coming. I’ve seen it,” he said. “The whole sky — or maybe not the real sky but whatever they have here for a sky — is covered with dark clouds, and the soothsayer apparently wants to use the occasion to scare the wits out of the Scythians.”

Ivan Semenovitch remained silent, pondering the problem. The archeologist began speaking again:

“Varkan says that the Scythians are indeed frightened. They fear that the rocks will start tumbling from the sky. That’s strange, since according to what we know about the Scythians from historical sources, they were not afraid of thunderstorms. But here they...” Dmitro Borisovich spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

Ivan Semenovitch shrugged his shoulders:

“Your historical sources might have had their reasons, but don’t forget that the conditions here are rather peculiar. The falling rocks mentioned by Varkan — isn’t that a good enough reason to be afraid of thunderstorms?”

Lida glanced at the geologist in surprise:

“Rocks? Do you believe rocks can really fall from the sky here during thunderstorms?”

“I don’t see why we should regard this idea as impossible. Don’t forget where we are. Powerful electric discharges can, of course, dislodge huge pieces of rock in the mountains,

sending them down into this valley... Have you forgotten that in all likelihood, we are in an enormous subterranean cavity, a sort of gigantic cave?"

Now, when this idea had been expressed at last, it sounded incredible, and yet it was the only plausible explanation. Ivan Semenovitch seemed to be the only person among the four explorers who had the presence of mind to think of the actual state of things. The presence of Scythians in this subterranean cavity of unthinkable size could be regarded as highly enigmatic and baffling, but still he never forgot they were somewhere underground in a gigantic cave where everything, from the chimerical yellow-pinkish plants to an underground thunderstorm with rocks raining from the sky, was highly unusual and unique. To arrive at an ultimate explanation that would take all these things into account was still impossible, the more so since there was no time to ponder it properly.

Diana, who up to the moment had been lying quietly on the rug in the *kibitka*, got to her feet and rushed to the exit, growling threateningly. Loud shouts poured in from outside.

Skolot rose slowly to his feet and walked out of the *kibitka*, his hand on the golden hilt of his sword, his countenance growing more concerned by the minute. Varkan followed him, giving the strangers a glance of consideration and encouragement to indicate that they were not to worry too much. Ivan Semenovitch replied with an expressive gesture: *we're doing fine*. Then he addressed himself to his friends:

"I think we should follow them. There's nothing much for us to do here."

They left the *kibitka* one by one. The geologists' knit brows and set jaws indicated his determination to fight if need be; Dmitro Borisovich clutched the handle of his pickaxe firmly. Lida's green eyes shone big on her pale face; she was biting her lip nervously.

"Are you scared? I can assure you..." Artem began grandly.

"Don't waste words, Artem," Lida cut him short. "I'm prepared to face anything. Let's go!" Lida spoke with a trembling voice, but all in all, she was in control of herself. Brave girl!

The agitated murmur of the big crowd subsided when Skolot appeared from the red *kibitka* accompanied by Varkan

and his warriors in battle leather and metal helmets. Even the old soothsayer standing in front of the crowd grew quiet. He scrutinized the stern face of Skolot, apparently trying to discover some signs of indecision which would indicate that he could press his case further. But the chieftain's dignified expression revealed only imperturbability and self-control. He clenched his hands into fists, waiting for the proper moment.

Then another round of shouts rang out from the crowd: the strangers appeared from the tent. There was resentment, animosity, even hatred in those shouts, for the crowd had been incited by the soothsayer and his henchmen. Without any encouragement from the old soothsayer, the Scythians began moving in on the red *kibitka*.

Abruptly the chieftain stepped forward and shouted something, his hand still on the hilt of his sword. The crowd immediately fell silent. Those in front even began pushing backwards, retreating before Skolot, whose eyes burned with anger under the gold helmet. Now, not a single sound came from the crowd.

"See, our Skolot does have some authority over the Scythians," Artem whispered to Lida.

But the girl did not listen: her attention was taken by the disgusting misshapen man, the one who resembled Skolot. He had appeared as though from nowhere at the side of explorers. Lida remembered that he had entered the chieftain's *kibitka* together with them, but disappeared shortly after as she could not remember his being anywhere near them during the talk with the chieftain.

Now the misshapen Scythian was peeping from behind Varkan's shoulder. He seemed to be waiting for something or looking for someone. His face was tense, the cunning eyes half-closed; he was leaning awkwardly forward, his left arm which was much longer than the right one, almost reaching the ground. Lida said, indicating the Scythian to Artem with her eyes:

"Where did he come from? Look, the stoop-shouldered one's here again. Why had he come?"

"Yes, I already noticed him standing there. He's a harbinger of evil to be sure," Artem said gloomily.

"I don't quite get you."

"Oh, every time he appears, he brings some trouble for us."

"Artem, I don't think you know what you're saying. You sound as though you were superstitious."

"Superstitious or not, I'd gladly beat him to a bloody pulp!"

"Oh, Artem!"

Once again the voice of Skolot could be heard: the chieftain seemed to be asking the crowd a question. The sudden distant clap of thunder cut him short and sent a wave of renewed agitation through the crowd which started somewhere in the back and rolled forward to subside only at the red *kibitka*. But it had given a new impetus to the old soothsayer. The situation was ripe for action.

With his arms raised high into the air, the soothsayer began slowly advancing toward Skolot, glancing emphatically upward at the black cloud. The chieftain held his ground, standing motionless, clenching his fingers ever tighter on the hilt of the sword, his eyes riveted on the old man.

Lida caught a glimpse of the misshapen Scythian's eyes flashing with joy and malice, but a moment later, all signs of emotion disappeared, as though this man had a special ability to sense someone's gaze on him. He gave the strangers a quick side glance and immediately turned away, feigning complete indifference to everything around him. *What a disgusting, revolting person*, Lida thought. There was something of a spider in him. It was strange that she should feel such revulsion toward him, for she did not have anything in particular against him; he had not done her any harm; on the contrary, she caught him looking at her benignly, even with some interest. So, why should she be so disgusted at the proximity of this person? And Artem experienced a similar revulsion toward him, perhaps even stronger. There must have been some reason for it! Both Artem and Lida felt subconsciously that the misshapen Scythian was an enemy, perfidious and wily.

Without lowering his arms, the soothsayer launched into another harangue. His voice sounded threateningly; he began demanding something, pointing to the huge black cloud overhead. Then he stopped, craftily making a pause, like a skilled orator or actor. And in the silence, another clap of thunder resounded — this time much closer. The soothsayer seemed to have been waiting for precisely this. He started screaming something at the top of his lungs. Then he turned to the crowd, addressing it rather than Skolot. Discordant

shouts of approval came from the mass of people milling about.

The old soothsayer made an expressive gesture, symbolically removing the strangers from Skolot's side and handing them over to the crowd. Then he pointed no less expressively to the ominous cloud straight overhead. His hands were in constant motion, as though he were tearing something that hindered and resisted him, apart; his every movement drew a clamorous response from the frantic, overwrought crowd.

Skolot shook his head, stretching out his arms as though in defense of the strangers. But the soothsayer made another step forward, yelling a long imprecation. Whether he had finished speaking or stopped at the right moment was impossible to say, but the blinding lightning lit up the scene, putting a frightening emphasis on his last words. The crowd was scared into immediate silence, and this unnatural, terrifying silence was filled with an ear-shredding clap of thunder, rolling from one end of the sky to the other.

Artem saw the dismayed, shocked faces of the Scythians. He saw the gray old men tremble with fear, scared out of their wits by the lightning, the thunder and soothsayer's malediction. There was only one thing missing to complete the picture — rocks raining from the sky as Varkan said they would... There was little doubt that such powerful bolts could, in fact, dislodge large rocks from their places higher up in the surrounding mountains and send them rolling down. This thought made Artem look up, but he saw only the seething cloud that seemed almost to be touching his head. The old soothsayer could not have chosen a better moment to get hold of the strangers.

Meanwhile the old man began speaking again, his voice even more menacing. He moved toward the strangers, flailing his arms. He walked straight ahead, ignoring both the chieftain and the warriors around. The frantic crowd followed him. Lida shuddered and grabbed Artem's hand — it was a terribly frightening picture indeed.

Skolot made a move to protect his guests. As he began pulling his sword out of the scabbard, Varkan and some other warriors leaned forward to him, begging him to stop, pointing to the mass of frenzied people. The misshapen Scythian was observing all this with a detached curiosity as though he were watching a play.

"There's nothing left for us to do but defend ourselves," Dmitro Borisovich cried out in desperation, swinging his

pickaxe at the approaching Scythians. But in a moment dozens of hands wrenched the pickaxes from them and took hold of the explorers themselves. Artem was heaved into the very thick of the crowd. Then he acted from desperation: there was only one recourse left him.

"Diana! Come here! Quick!" he cried out, wriggling like an eel in the hands of the strong Scythians who were holding him.

The big, tawny body of the dog zoomed through the air in the dusk. Growling fiercely, the dog leaped over the heads of the Scythians. Landing with all her weight on the two men standing closest to Artem, she knocked them to the ground. The next moment she had sunk her sharp teeth into the hand of the Scythian who was holding Artem. From all sides came the frightened cries:

"Poskina!... Poskina!... Poskina!..."

Diana was running in circles around Artem, baring her fangs, and darting at this or that Scythian. Some free space was cleared around Artem, who became the center of a magic circle into which the Scythians were loath to step for fear of the terrible creature, the *poskina*, that darted back and forth intrepidly within it. Diana struck such fear into the Scythians that none of them thought of using arms against her. The one who had been bitten ran away, and the rest began retreating little by little, close to panic. The soothsayer had apparently overlooked the fact that the Scythians feared *poskina* more than the thunder and lightning.

"Aha, that's good," Artem said contentedly, "that's good. Now, let's move over to the rest of our company. Diana, my dear *poskina*, let's go!"

The dog was all too eager to rush to the rescue of the others. A shrewd and intrepid fighter, the dog either bared her fangs to scare somebody away or leaped forward, scattering those who tried to block their passage, or dashed back to check for a possible attack from behind, or stayed at Artem's side to let him keep pace with her. None of the Scythians so much as tried to do anything to put the dog out of action, overwhelmed as they were with fear and awe. Some of the Scythians thought it wise to be as far as possible from the dread beast, and they retreated hurriedly.

"Diana!" Lida called in her ringing, cheerful voice.

"Here we are, Lida," Artem called back.

All four explorers were again reunited, four surrounded unarmed people, facing a continuous human wall of

infuriated Scythians armed with bows, spears and swords. The explorers had only a dog to defend them, and yet the Scythians did not attack. But if they were afraid to come close to the beast, why didn't they shoot the strangers and their dog with their arrows? It could be done so easily!

This thought was on the minds of the four explorers. Then Dmitro Borisovich spoke, as though in response to the general anxiety:

"The old soothsayer seems to have ordered them to capture us alive..."

Ivan Semenovitch nodded his head in agreement. And then he took a decision that had been unwittingly suggested by the archeologist.

"We must surrender, no more resistance," he said in a voice of authority that precluded any arguments. "The soothsayer could easily change his mind and command the Scythians to use their spears and arrows. In that case, Diana won't be of any help to us."

"You mean we should give ourselves up?"

"Cool down, Artem. I know what I'm talking about. I'm quite sure the old soothsayer does not intend to kill us now. He has some other plans for us at the moment. Otherwise we wouldn't be standing here quietly, discussing all this. Do you agree?"

Artem did not argue: Ivan Semenovitch was right.

"So, we must use this opportune moment while he is in his present frame of mind. We'll wait and see what happens next. No resistance now! That especially goes for you, Artem, though you, Dmitro Borisovich, must keep it in mind, too. Now, be quiet and stand still!"

Another clap of thunder was heard, but this time it was much less powerful than the previous one. The Scythians were standing around the explorers in a tight circle, neither retreating nor approaching. Diana kept turning her head, looking around, ready to spring at her enemies.

"All right, if we surrender now," Lida said in a low voice, "what'll happen to us afterwards?"

As though in reply to her question, the soothsayer's voice could be heard again, a voice that could be recognized among hundreds of other voices, hoarse and imperative. But the soothsayer was not to be seen behind the circle of the Scythian warriors.

"I remind you — stand still now," Ivan Semenovitch said emphatically.

The Scythians on one side of the circle stepped forward, holding their spears in front of them. Diana rushed at them, but the spears stopped her. The Scythians advanced, the sharp points of some spears were already touching the explorers. Diana made short jumps in all directions, but everywhere she was stopped by the spears. It was easy to see now that as the spears on one side were steadily advancing toward the explorers, while on the opposite side they were retreating, making way for the explorers to pass.

The intention of the Scythians — or rather that of the soothsayer who issued the commands — was all too apparent. They were maneuvering to make the explorers move in the desired direction.

“We must do what they want us to,” the geologist said. “Let’s go.”

As they began moving, the circle of the Scythians around them expanded, and the spears stopped prodding them, since the Scythians had realized that the strangers would not try to resist. Diana also obeyed the geologist’s commands, all the more so since the explorers were trotting quietly along, and their apparent calm meant there was no immediate danger. The dog was now walking peacefully by their side. If not for the circle of silent, hostile men all around holding spears and other weapons in combat readiness, the explorers might have been walking in a procession reminiscent of the one earlier in the day when they followed Skolot to his tent.

“How come Skolot gave in so easily to the soothsayer’s demands?” Artem suddenly spat out angrily. “Didn’t he say just a while ago that we were under his protection? This is downright treachery!”

“What else was there for him to do?” Lida replied. “You saw for yourself how the old bastard had incited the crowd. You saw what fear he had put into them, didn’t you?”

“All the same, Skolot should have defended us to the end,” Artem insisted stubbornly.

“Nothing would have come of it. It would only have resulted in bloodshed, and in the end the soothsayer would have us captured anyway,” the girl said. “Didn’t you see that even Varkan was begging Skolot not to interfere?”

“Ah, you and your Varkan!...” Artem said contemptuously. Now the young man regarded every Scythian as an enemy.

“You shouldn’t, really, speak like that,” Lida said heatedly. “Varkan seems to be very sympathetic to us.”

"Is he really?" Artem said, his lips twisted ironically.

"Stop grumbling, Artem. You're just peeved. And Lida is right on every point," Ivan Semenovich broke in. The young man fell silent discontentedly: what could he say more if everybody was against him? Lida was right as far as Varkan was concerned; Varkan did seem to be a very likeable person, but all the same, why should she be speaking so ardently in his favor?

"There's one thing that still remains unclear to me," Lida said, as if picking up the thread of the conversation.

"Ugh, just one thing?" Artem snapped. "Everything else she's understood, so it's all clear to her!"

"Hold your tongue, Artem!" Ivan Semenovich said angrily. Lida continued as though she had not heard Artem's acrimonious remark:

"What role does the misshapen Scythian play in all these goings on? That's what I'd like to know."

Naturally, no one could provide her with an answer, and the conversation ceased.

They were moving along the same road they had taken on their way to the chieftain's tent. It was a passage between two rows of wagons and *kibitkas*. The soothsayer, already on horseback, trotted past the explorers, leaving the crowd behind. He looked down at the explorers from his horse; it was not a comforting glance, for it was filled with cold fierceness. To think only that they were at the mercy of this cruel and unscrupulous person!

Further in the distance, beyond the crowd, on the knoll, the explorers saw a group of people. They were probably the captives whom the explorers had seen earlier in the day. It was difficult to say for sure, though, as they were far away.

Artem again turned his gaze to the precipitous cliffs that were rising high on the far side of the field beyond the forest and the hillocks. The whole place seemed surrounded on all sides by mountains which reached high up to the clouds and beyond. The surroundings resembled an enormous mountain valley, especially now in the dusk, when the unnatural yellowish-pink of the plants had changed to a uniform black. *Mountains, mountains everywhere. But are they really mountains, in the proper sense of the word? They're probably not mountains but the walls of a gigantic cave... a cave where ancient Scythians lived... But how had they found their way here?... And how and why had they*

managed to survive to modern times? Hm, if it is a cave, does that mean there is a ceiling somewhere up there, above the fields, the woods, the wagons... rocks straight ahead, hidden beyond the clouds? Very, very strange, incredible, impossible!

Meanwhile the procession reached the *kibitkas*, adorned with grotesque pictures crudely drawn on the felt of the tents, among which one could make out figures of panthers — *poskinas* — lions, and deer.

"These pictures must have some religious or ritual significance," remarked the archeologist who had almost completely regained his composure. No signs of his recent agitation were noticeable.

The procession stopped. The soothsayer was standing in front of a big *kibitka*. Now, on top of his long dress, he was wearing a long cloak also adorned with grotesque pictures of animals and birds. The soothsayer was now full of dignity, as if he were waiting for distinguished guests.

"The old trickster's putting on this show to let us see what a big wheel he is," Artem muttered. "If I could, I'd beat the hell out of..."

"Keep quiet!" Ivan Semenovitch said sharply. "Don't forget we're in his hands. I've already told you to keep quiet, haven't I?"

The soothsayer pronounced a short incantation, pointing alternately to the *kibitka* and the captive strangers. Those Scythians who were standing closer, immediately stepped back as though the strangers and their horrible *poskina* had become doubly dangerous to touch. Another wave of renewed fear passed over their faces. The soothsayer certainly did possess the power to intimidate these people.

After the old man was through with his incantations, he stepped aside, and the robust priestesses, daggers in hand, points forward, came up to the captives and indicated the entrance to the *kibitka* with their weapons.

"I think we must go in there," Dmitro Borisovich said. "You don't need any interpretation here. Right, Ivan Semenovitch?"

"We don't have much of an option," replied the geologist.

He was the first to enter the tent, drawing the piece of felt that served as the door, aside. Lida was the last to go in. She was very tired by now, and what she wanted most of all was a chance to rest.

As she was going in, she thought it would be a good idea to draw the piece of felt carefully across the entrance, completely closing it and indicating to the Scythians that the strangers were not to be disturbed. When she turned around, taking hold of the edge of the felt, she unwittingly looked through the opening, and what she saw made her stop, rooted to the spot. Forgetting all about her tiredness, she watched.

She saw the misshapen Scythian, who had evidently come with the crowd, talking to the old soothsayer, gesticulating excitedly, and glancing every so often at the *kibitka*. Without understanding a word, Lida realized that the younger man wanted the soothsayer to give him something that was in the *kibitka*. But the soothsayer kept doggedly shaking his head, apparently saying no. The younger man insisted.

Watching them talk made Lida's heart race wildly for some reason or other. She could not guess what it was that the ugly Scythian wanted, but she sensed it was something extremely significant, something that might concern them all. But what? Why was she so unnerved by it?

The soothsayer was now listening to the stoop-shouldered man with growing attention, and then Lida saw him nod his head curtly. The younger man's face twisted into a contented smile. She shifted her gaze to the soothsayer, checking whether he had in fact given his consent. The soothsayer nodded his head in an unmistakable gesture of assent.

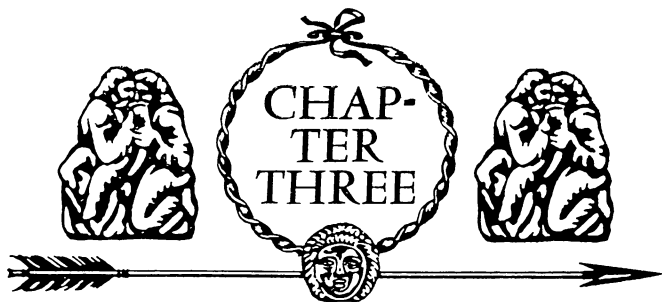
The misshapen Scythian cast a quick glance at the *kibitka*. His whole face shone with satisfaction. His eyes seemed to have located Lida in the *kibitka* and were resting on her... His gaze made her shudder and start back so violently that she almost lost her balance.

"Lida, what's keeping you?" she heard the voice of Ivan Semenovitch. "Come here. There's something new and interesting for all of us."

Lida turned around, and as she walked over to join the rest, she stopped dead, overcome with surprise. She saw something that she never expected to see.

Her friends, sitting on a rug, were talking to none other than Varkan who had somehow made his way into the *kibitka*. The Scythian was lying in the far corner of the *kibitka*, covered with a piece of cloth, only his helmeted head showing.

“Varkan!” Lida exclaimed in astonishment, opening her eyes wide. The next moment she flushed as she saw the young Scythian, hearing her utter his name, smile amicably at her.



the explorers are informed that they are “the property of the gods”; the Scythian food is eaten and complicated problems involving Skolot and Dorbatay are discussed; the archeologist goes into one of his impromptu discourses on history and Dorbatay puts forward his conditions; more is learned about Hartak, the misshapen Scythian, and Ivan Semenovich expands his ideas

“Don’t just stand there like that, Lida. Come over here. You’re not afraid of our friend Varkan, are you?” Ivan Semenovich said, laughing.

“Of course not! But how... how did he get in here?” Lida asked, still in the grip of the initial fright.

“That’s what Dmitro Borisovich is going to explain to us, as he remains the only person who can communicate with Varkan. Dmitro Borisovich! We’re waiting for you to start!”

In the semi-darkness of the *kibitka*, into which the twilight could penetrate only through the opening at its top, the conversation began, with Dmitro Borisovich acting as the interpreter. Artem was dispatched to stand guard at the entrance. He was to signal should anyone approach. That was the first thing Varkan wanted the explorers to

do. Varkan was lying on the floor, almost completely covered with a piece of felt; if the alarm were given, he could pull the felt over his head in his dark corner, and thus remain unnoticed by anyone who entered.

Varkan was telling his story in a low voice but speaking very fast. Dmitro Borisovich had to interrupt him once in a while, asking him to repeat or explain something that he had missed or failed to understand. Every two or three minutes, he stopped Varkan to translate what had been said. Impatient to render Varkan's words as quickly as possible, he made short cuts, dropping words and sounds, gesticulating with his agile hands to help himself and others get his meaning.

"Skolot, you see, could do nothing in that situation," Dmitro Borisovich translated. "The soothsayer — as we ourselves correctly guessed — managed to use the approaching thunderstorm to his own ends, threatening the Scythians with the wrath of the gods who would hurl rocks down from the sky if... well, in fact, rocks do happen to fall from the sky here..."

"That is quite an understandable phenomenon given the local conditions," remarked the geologist.

"Terrified, the Scythians followed the soothsayer and demanded that we be handed over to them. The soothsayer's case was immensely strengthened by the thunderbolts... Skolot was obliged to give in to the demand as he was afraid that any further resistance would lead to the fighting between his warriors and the soothsayer's henchmen. So, now we're in the hands of the soothsayer who has put a magic spell on us so that no one, except for him and his priestesses, can approach us... A sort of taboo. Now we're the property of the gods, so to speak... And since the soothsayer has developed a strong dislike for us, we, as Varkan tells me, are in danger of being... errr... sacrificed to appease these gods..."

"I protest!" Artem called indignantly from his post at the entrance. "That must not be allowed to happen!"

"I hold the same view, but it's a good thing we've been forewarned. Varkan says that the old soothsayer is an extremely wily and treacherous person. But this also makes it likely that he will want to use us for his own ends. The Scythians, you see, take us for some kind of wizards or sorcerers. Especially Artem..."

"Rrrright, I'm a very powerful magician!" the young man said in a voice affecting imperious dignity.

"Yes, Varkan says that you, Artem, have produced a very strong impression on the Scythians. Diana, our dear *poskina*, has also wrought havoc... To make it short and sweet, Varkan says that the confrontation has only just begun. The main thing is to let the Scythians calm down a little, then it'll be easier to deal with them. Now they're too excited... Ah, there's one thing we've got to ask Varkan about!"

Dmitro Borisovich began speaking to Varkan, choosing his words painstakingly. Nevertheless, it was obvious that he had gained somewhat in fluency. Varkan listened to him, his head bent attentively.

"Dmitro Borisovich, ask him who that stoop-shouldered Scythian is. He's been making eyes at Lida all the time," Artem requested from his post at the entrance.

"All righ, I will."

After the archeologist had worded his questions, Varkan started explaining, and, evidently, it was a rather complicated story, since Dmitro Borisovich had to interrupt him more often than before, asking him to repeat this or that phrase.

Suddenly, Artem coughed loudly, signaling a warning to his friends. Varkan immediately disappeared under the felt, and Ivan Semenovich even reclined on it, pretending to be resting.

Two Scythians, daggers hanging from their belts, entered the *kibitka*. They carried in two large wooden plates with big hunks of boiled meat on them. On top of the meat was some bread. A third Scythian came in carrying an earthen jug. They put the food on the floor silently, some distance away from the captives, and then left without uttering a word.

As soon as they had gone out, Varkan flipped the felt off his head. He said something that disturbed Dmitro Borisovich. The archeologist shook his head as though not quite believing what he had heard, adjusted his eyeglasses in an abrupt gesture, and said:

"The thing is, my friends... Artem! Varkan asks you not to neglect your duties at the entrance! So, as I was saying, the thing is that according to Varkan, the misshapen Scythian you wanted to know about is Skolot's son!"

"You don't say!" everybody exclaimed in disbelief.

“Yes, that’s right, Skolot’s son. And his name is Hartak. He was a sickly child, born a cripple. His disabilities prevented him from becoming a warrior like all the other Scythians of high rank; neither could he be an adequate hunter. It’s probably this disability that has turned him into such a wicked man, since he was envious of anyone who was physically fit and could distinguish himself in all those things from which Hartak was barred. Now he’s anxious lest, after Skolot’s death, he should fail to succeed his father as the chieftain, because of his physical deformity. The fact is that the Scythians are accustomed to having chieftains who exhibit great valor, intrepidity and physical strength. Besides, Skolot himself is not very fond of Hartak, mostly because his son associates with Dorbatay the soothsayer.”

“A very likable pair they are indeed!” Artem remarked ironically.

“The relations between Skolot and Dorbatay have also been going from bad to worse for quite some time now. In fact, they are half-brothers by their father. Skolot, as the elder son of the former chieftain, inherited the chieftaincy by right of primogeniture. Dorbatay has never been able to reconcile himself to this fact. Ivan Semenovitch, do you remember that when we were drinking the *oksugala*, I suggested that Dorbatay might have been effeminate in his youth? In point of fact, he was a handsome man.”

“That disgusting old creature?” Artem said indignantly.

“Well, senescence does not exactly improve one’s looks,” the archeologist said with a bitter smile. “Dorbatay was really a handsome man as Varkan tells me, and we can surmise that his beauty was somewhat effeminate. His androgynous looks could have been the reason he entered the priesthood. It is extremely likely that in this way, he hoped to put himself into a position of solid opposition to the hereditary chieftain Skolot... It seems he has managed to do that, though such an opposition is unnatural, judging from what we know about the ancient Scythians from the available sources.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s rather a complicated story and I don’t think it’s the right time to go into the details, but briefly, it’s like this. With the Scythians, whose social relations were not as advanced as, say, in Egypt, for a state to emerge, the power wielded by the chieftain was always stronger than that of the priests. The Scythian chieftains tried to use the

rather primitive religious beliefs that existed among their people for their own ends. But in our case, Dorbatay seems to have proved craftier than Skolot. He has managed to get all the priestesses under his thumb. At first, he was just an ordinary priest. The only two things that distinguished him from others were his being an androgynous male and the brother of Skolot. Then he maneuvered until he finally became the high priest, the soothsayer, thus achieving complete authority over the priestesses. Wily and unscrupulous as he is, he has gained considerable control over the gullible Scythians."

"We've already had a chance to see how easily they can be swayed!"

"Without Skolot's knowledge, he's surrounded himself with henchmen chosen from among the tall, strong androgynous-looking young men. Besides, he has some backing among the warriors, too. Now, a great enmity has developed between the two groupings — Skolot's and Dorbatay's. Most important — in the present situation — is the fact that the rich and the nobles have joined in the struggle — and now they are vying for power, too. That's what I've understood from Varkan's explanations. We have been seized by Dorbatay's faction with the support of the Scythian poor who are mortally afraid of thunderstorms. I think that thunderstorms and lightning in a cave like this — if it is a cave — can be disastrous. We're the victims of religious tenets manipulated by the crafty Dorbatay and his supporters to suit their ends..."

"Hm... it does sound very complicated," Ivan Semenovitch said pensively.

"Why did Skolot treat us better then, even trying to defend us against Dorbatay?" asked Lida, quite nonplussed by what she had heard; in her imagination, Skolot had already acquired the status of a friendly, likable person, who was in stiff opposition to the perfidious, malevolent soothsayer.

Dmitro Borisovich shrugged his shoulders:

"I suspect that Skolot would like to use us for his ends exactly the way Dorbatay wants to. But at the very start, when we first made our appearance here, we found ourselves in opposition to Dorbatay, thanks to Artem's fervent defense of the captives. It's understandable that our magnanimous gesture played into Skolot's hands and the chieftain thought it would be advantageous to have us on his side. Dorbatay

was also quick to realize that we could be an asset in his plans and moved to seize us... and he's succeeded as you can well see."

"So," Artem said, "we're tools to be used in the interests of this or that faction, right? But what if I categorically refuse to be reduced to the role of a tool and will never accept this role, what then?"

"Not only you, Artem, but none of us here would wish to accept it," Ivan Semenovitch replied instead of the archeologist. "Unfortunately, wishing is not enough in our present circumstances. We can't do much as long as we are held here like this. So, the first thing we must do, it's to free ourselves. Do you agree?"

"Yes, of course."

"And to achieve this, we must use every means at our disposal. Dmitro Borisovich, there's one thing which is not quite clear to me. What is the role of Varkan in all this? We must adopt a general line of behavior, be it as captives or free people. It does not become us to stand passively waiting to see which faction — Dorbatay's or Skolot's — gets the upper hand in their attempts to use us to strengthen their power."

"Yes, you're absolutely right, Ivan Semenovitch," Artem chimed in.

"As far as Varkan is concerned, he says he is here on orders from Skolot and on his own initiative, too," said the archeologist after talking again to the young Scythian.

"Oh, on his own initiative too? What does that mean? Does he represent another faction fighting for power?" Ivan Semenovitch asked.

"Again, it's a rather complicated story," Dmitro Borisovich replied, pulling his beard pensively. "You see, Skolot's power and support lie with his warriors; similarly, those of Dorbatay lie in his numerous priesthood. But there are all sorts of people among Skolot's supporters, including quite a few highborn young men. But there are also those who have only their personal valor to distinguish them. Skolot wants such stalwarts among his supporters, and that's why he willingly enlists fearless young men — mostly skilled hunters — into his force, even if they are not so wellborn. Varkan is one of them. The fact that Dorbatay keeps the Scythians down..."

"Do you want to imply that Skolot, on the contrary, is against oppressing the Scythians and wants to free them

from Dorbatay's yoke?" Ivan Semenovitch interrupted the archeologist, his voice full of irony. "That would be the first recorded instance in the history of mankind when a plutocrat goes out of his way to make those he oppresses happy, wiping, so to say, their tears, with his own hands."

The remark annoyed Dmitro Borisovich and when he replied, it was evident that he had taken offense:

"I wish you'd hear me out before you go jumping to unfounded conclusions. Besides, if we continue to indulge in arguments of this sort, I'll never be able to tell you what I've barely understood myself."

"I'm sorry, Dmitro Borisovich. Pray, go ahead!"

"Well, as I was saying, we've got quite a complicated situation here. Varkan told me that the two ruling factions have clashed more than once in the past. There are other factors that complicate the picture even further. For example: we saw a big group of captives driven back here from somewhere by the warriors. In fact, they were runaway slaves who revolted against their oppressors. The rebellion was put down, and some of the rebels ran away. Skolot's warriors found them and brought them back. We witnessed their return."

"Yes," said Ivan Semenovitch thoughtfully. "It is a complicated situation indeed... Incidentally, who is that black-haired beardless man who was reassuring the captives? Do you remember, Dmitro Borisovich, the one whose words you could make out?"

"Of course I remember him! I'll ask Varkan now."

The archeologist spoke to Varkan, and the young Scythian smiled when he heard the question. It took him quite some time to answer. Ivan Semenovitch, without being able to understand anything, caught one word that attracted his attention.

"Wait, wait a second," he said, interrupting Varkan. "Dmitro Borisovich, it seems I heard a familiar name. What was it that Varkan just said? It was something like 'Ronis.' It has familiar ring, as though I've heard it before."

"Yes, it's a person's name. As a matter of fact, the name of the man you asked about. And what Varkan is telling me is extremely interesting."

"Go ahead, tell us!"

"In point of fact, Varkan's story is known to me as an archeologist, in rough outline, without his having to tell me. Don't look so puzzled, I'll explain now. It concerns the

relations of the numerous Scythian tribes with the Greek colonists who settled along the shores of the Black Sea and founded their fortified towns, like Olvia and others. You've heard about Olvia, haven't you? I once told you about it. Well, getting back to the present story, the Greeks first acted as peaceable merchants, but as their settlements grew in number and size they began to put pressure on the local population. The wily, shrewd Greek merchants pushed further and further north, spreading their trade monopoly over some of the Scythian tribes, especially those who had already settled down and engaged in agriculture. The grain grown by the Scythians was exported in large quantities to Greece. Little by little, the Greek merchants made themselves virtual masters over the vast Scythian territories. They began introducing slavery, turning the free Scythians into slaves."

"Weren't they real aggressors and plunderers? Not only did they seize the Scythian lands, but they also made the Scythians into slaves!" the passionate Artem could not help crying out in indignation.

"To a certain extent they were, though the terms you have used are hardly applicable to them," Dmitro Borisovich said. "Those Scythians who resented being subjugated by the Greeks migrated further north, fighting rear guard actions. These were mostly nomadic Scythians. The outcome of the clashes was often undecided, but in most cases, the Greeks, who were better armed and more disciplined, defeated the Scythians, took many of them prisoner, and made them into slaves. On the other hand, the Scythians, for their part, regularly raided the Greek colonies. Varkan said that his tribe raided even Olvia, though that was a long time ago! In most cases, the raids met with little success, because the Greek towns were well-fortified with high walls and ramparts which the raiding Scythians could not breach or take by storm. Many Scythians died in the fighting, and quite a lot were taken captive to be sold as slaves in Olvia and other Greek colonies. But on rare occasions, the Scythians managed to capture some Greeks, and they became slaves of the Scythians."

"Right! Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!" said Artem, who was listening to the archeologist with unflagging attention.

"Maybe you're right," Dmitro Borisovich said. "But the Scythians never sold their slaves; they kept them for them-

selves. Besides, very few Greeks were captured by the Scythians since, as I've already mentioned, the Greeks were almost invariably on the winning side. Varkan says that this was what happened to his own tribe more than once. But once, a very long time ago, his tribe succeeded in capturing quite a few Greeks. They stayed with the tribe, their status hardly different from that of slaves. It happened such a long time ago that the memory of these events remained only in legends passed down from one generation to another. I must tell you that there's nothing in this story that would contradict history as we know it... But I've just recounted what Varkan's been telling me, and now comes something that no history books could contain..."

"Oh, go ahead, Dmitro Borisovich, go ahead! It's both important and interesting," Ivan Semenovitch urged the archeologist, noticing that he was sinking deep into his own reflections.

"So, Varkan tells me that his tribe has lost contacts with the Greek colonists for unknown reasons. His tribe has never come across them since those ancient times, and has never engaged in more fighting with them."

"That is quite understandable if we remember where this tribe lives now," the geologist said. "Does he know why there's no contacts? Have the Scythians tried to figure out the reasons?"

"Apparently they have not. Now, back to our story. The Scythians never saw any more of the Greeks, and the Greek slaves remained with the tribe. Many of them married into the Scythian families, picking up some of their customs and habits, and, naturally, passing some of their own on to the Scythians. Mutual historical influence, so to say, exchange of ideas," added Dmitro Borisovich with a smile. "But the descendants of those captured Greeks preserved their language to a large extent and some elements of their dress. The relations between the Scythians and the Greeks grew rather friendly. Or rather they were friendly, until Dorbatay came on the scene."

"Again that old scoundrel!" Artem cried out.

"Yes, Dorbatay caused the truce to be broken. As I've already told you, he went to great lengths in his attempts to establish his influence over the Scythians. Now, when the appropriate moment presented itself, he, using some religious motives, managed to sow hatred for the Greeks among the Scythians. Of course, Dorbatay was not alone in stirring up

trouble — he was supported by some Scythian elders and the rich who put pressure on the rest of the tribe. Skolot evidently did not oppose the soothsayer in this matter. The rest of the Scythians fell into the trap very easily, as it is very simple to set one group of people against another by playing on their religious prejudices. It goes without saying that the majority of the Scythians do not profit by the discord in any way, but they fear their gods and do whatever Dorbatay tells them to appease those deities. The soothsayer keeps reminding the Scythians that the Greeks have been forsaken by their gods and stirs them up against the Greeks. Very shrewd, isn't it?"

"There's likable Skolot for you!" Artem cried out in a fit of indignation. "He's likable only in appearance, but inside he's as rotten as Dorbatay!"

"Ah, did you expect him to be a friend of the slaves or what?" Ivan Semenovitch smiled sardonically. "Don't forget he is Dorbatay's brother... and it's not their parents that matters but their social status; that is by far the most important factor."

"But why do the slaves put up with the situation?" Artem said, still hotly. "If I were in their place..."

"They don't put up with it, my young friend," Dmitro Borisovich protested. "I told you already that they revolted recently, but you saw what came of it! You saw the captured slaves..."

"It's still not clear to me why the majority of the Scythians can be so easily manipulated by Dorbatay. Why wouldn't they side with the slaves? You said yourself that they did not profit from abusing the Greeks. Besides, they have their common enemies in Dorbatay, Skolot and the rich! I'd spell it all out to them nice and clear all right! Ask Varkan what he thinks about all that!" the young man continued pressing the subject.

The archeologist translated Artem's question to Varkan. The Scythian stared at the young man and knit his brows as though pondering the question intently. Then, after a short pause, he replied, looking Artem straight in the eye. Dmitro Borisovich translated:

"Varkan says that you, Artem, have much to learn here. Maybe sometime in the future Varkan will be able to answer your question, but not now. But he wants you to know that he has many friends among the Greeks, Ronis, for example, the man Ivan Semenovitch asked about. He's one of Varkan's

closest friends. From this fact, Varkan asks you to draw certain conclusions. How things will develop you'll see for yourself..."

Now it was Artem's turn to think the answer over, as it was brief and seemingly ambiguous, but evidently there was a lot of meaning hidden in it. The Scythian apparently did not think it wise to give a more explicit answer. But even what he had said was revealing. Here was Varkan, a warrior of Skolot's, enjoying the trust of the chieftain — Artem had noticed that much! At the same time, he was on friendly terms with the Greeks in spite of possible disgrace if it became known... Very, very interesting...

Nothing more was said for some time: there was quite a lot to ponder.

Artem walked over to the plates of food: it was high time to attend to it, not as an archeological necessity, as Dmitro Borisovich might regard it, but simply to get a decent meal at last. The meat smelled very appetizingly, and the bread also looked quite good; the earthen jug held aromatic fresh milk.

Artem sat down to have his meal close to the entrance, not forgetting of his duties as a guard. He fell to eating with such gusto that the rest couldn't help doing the same. In a minute everybody was heartily partaking of the food. Varkan watched the strangers with a benevolent smile. He refused to have anything to eat when Dmitro Borisovich asked him to join them.

Only after the explorers had finished the meat and bread and begun drinking the milk did Varkan begin to speak again, Dmitro Borisovich listening again with a concentrated attention.

"My friends," the archeologist said after a while, "Varkan says that we are not in immediate danger, at least until morning. Dorbatay's planning a major ceremony for tomorrow, but Skolot intends to buy you from him. He has a good chance of succeeding, since Dorbatay is greedy. Varkan thinks that Skolot is prepared to give him some jewels in exchange for your release."

"Oh, are we just goods to be bought and sold?" Lida flared up in anger. "And isn't Skolot — at least judging by what you said — just another version of Dorbatay? The soothsayer is very hostile to us, and the chieftain is not, but aren't they basically the same? In the words of Artem — don't they make a pair?"

"Lida, don't let your emotions get the best of you," Ivan Semenovitch said. "We must think hard and decide what to do without letting emotional outbursts interfere with our reasoning. There are some things that demand our close attention. For example, Varkan mentioned his relations with... what's his name... Ah, Ronis, isn't it? I think I'm on the right track in figuring out what's what..."

"So am I," Artem put in, looking triumphantly at Lida.

"That's good," the geologist said. "I'm happy we share the same opinion on the matter. So, I think we should put our stakes on Skolot, or rather not even him but on..."

The geologist did not pronounce the name but looked at Varkan quite significantly. But Varkan, who did not understand a word of what was being said, was patiently waiting for the interpretation. Suddenly he shuddered with fear, his gaze riveted on Diana. She got to her feet and walked over to Ivan Semenovitch, sniffing the air.

"Oh, it's too bad we forgot about the dog! We've had our dinner, but what about poor Diana?" said the geologist reproachfully. He took what was left of the meat and gave it to the dog. Varkan watched the dog eat silently but suspiciously. Then he addressed himself to Dmitro Borisovich, pointing to Diana. His question made the archeologist laugh.

"No, my friend, no!" he said to Varkan in Greek. "It's an ordinary dog, and a very good dog indeed, pure bred, devoted, even intelligent — but just a dog. There's nothing magical or extraordinary about her, I can assure you!" Then he turned to his friends. "What a great sway superstition can have over people! Even such a bright man as Varkan cannot suppress his fear of Diana. He asked whether we're afraid she might eat us one day. He regards our Diana as an incarnation of the sacred panther!"

It did sound preposterous, but the conversation was brought to a sudden halt, for Artem heard footfalls approaching the *kibitka*; he sprang to his feet and shushed them.

Varkan's head disappeared under the felt; Diana began growling menacingly.

"Diana, down! Down!" Ivan Semenovitch commanded sternly. The dog lowered herself to the ground reluctantly, still making a low growling sound.

A hand threw a flap at the entrance aside; a twinkling light was seen outside. A Scythian holding an oil lamp came in and stopped at the entrance. He was followed by the old

soothsayer wearing his ceremonial scarlet cloak and felt hat with sundry gold decorations glistening in the wavering light of the oil lamp. He looked around sharply, his face grim and forbidding. The gold decorations were of many sizes with various images carved into them. Similar decorations adorned the soothsayer's felt hat, long strands of gray hair stuck from under it.

"I wonder what it is he wants from us now?" Artem asked in a low voice, not really expecting an answer. None of them could provide it; they all waited guardedly for what would follow next.

The soothsayer assumed a dignified, self-assured posture. He made an almost imperceptible gesture, and a short swarthy man immediately rushed in. He bowed very low before the soothsayer and stood beside him, casting glances at the explorers, his curiosity evidently piqued by their strange appearance.

The soothsayer began speaking without turning his head to the swarthy man, ignoring his presence altogether. The words fell from his lips one by one, very distinctly, in measured intervals but completely lacking in emotional coloring. He seemed to be speaking about matters totally unrelated to the captives. When he paused, the swarthy man began translating. Evidently, he had been called in specifically for this purpose — to interpret the soothsayer's pronouncements into Greek. But how had the soothsayer learned that one of the captives could communicate in Greek?

The swarthy man translated and Dmitro Borisovich, in his turn, translated what had been said for his friends. Both the interpreters were careful in choosing their words so as to render the soothsayer's address as adequately as possible:

"The glorious Dorbatay, beloved-of-the-gods, does not harbor any ill feelings towards the strangers. Dorbatay understood they had been sent by the gods the moment they emerged from the forest accompanied by their yellow panther. It is known that no ordinary mortal can be accompanied by a panther — this beast of evil and terror incarnate."

"That is you, my dear Diana, he's speaking about," Artem whispered into the dog's ear, but in reply, the dog only moved her ear slightly.

"The glorious Dorbatay had another proof of the strangers' unearthly abilities," the translation continued, "when he saw smoke coming from the mouth and nose of the young

magician. This is a feat beyond the powers of ordinary mortals..."

"Aha, now, he's talking about me..."

"Artem, stop it," Ivan Semenovitch said sharply.

"Yes, sir," Artem replied submissively.

The soothsayer did not seem to hear any of this exchange or just ignored it. The moment the swarthy interpreter and Dmitro Borisovich had been done with their translations, he began speaking again:

"The glorious Dorbatay," he said in translation, "does not want any quarrels with the strangers; he's loath to do them any harm. He wants to give them worthy tasks to perform. He wants them to become his friends, in which case no one would dare to trouble them. Dorbatay himself will see to it that they have everything they please. They'll have the best cattle, the best horses, the best food, the best *kibitkas*, and as many slaves as they want. To have all this, they only must do as the glorious Dorbatay instructs them to do."

"But what is that he wants us to do? Let's hear it," Ivan Semenovitch said distrustfully.

"If the strangers promise Dorbatay to abide by his will, nobody will touch a hair of their heads. They'll be made rich and powerful, and Dorbatay will give them everything they would like to have because Dorbatay is omnipotent."

The swarthy translator was so impressed by such a fantastic proposition that his eyes shone with greed.

"All right, and what is it precisely that the glorious Dorbatay wants us to do?" Dmitro Borisovich asked.

Now the soothsayer showed that he deigned to hear: the moment the archeologist mentioned his name he shot a glance at him and a ghost of a smile appeared on his face. A moment later he resumed his quiet and haughty attitude and said:

"Dorbatay puts forward the following conditions: the strangers shall abstain from performing any miracles without his express approval. They shall assist him in performing miracles during the rituals. As far as the woman is concerned..."

"What does he have in mind?" Artem said, his suspicion immediately aroused.

"The woman, who has had the good fortune to be fancied by Hartak, son of the great chieftain, shall receive even a greater reward: she'll have the honor of becoming his fourth beloved wife..."

“What?”

“His wife?”

“The fourth wife?”

“Who — me?”

This outcry of indignation came from all the four explorers immediately and simultaneously. Did he really mean it? Lida to become the fourth wife of the deformed Hartak? To be given the honor of becoming his wife?

“Somebody has gone nuts! And it’s either us or them!” Artem cried out in a temper. “But I’m inclined to think it’s Dorbatay who’s out of his head. Tell him that it’s the custom with us to ask the girl first whether she wishes to marry someone, and only if she does not reject the proposal do any further discussions take place! Go ahead, tell him that!”

“He and his Hartak can go to hell!” Lida burst out in indignation.

“Right!” Artem supported Lida. “Let Hartak come here himself. Why is he hiding behind the backs of others? Then, when he makes his appearance, I’ll give it him hot! You old bastard, bring your Hartak in here, and I’ll teach him what’s what!”

Artem, burning with anger, was about to rush at Dorbatay with clenched fists when Ivan Semenovitch’s stern warning stopped him. But the young man could not help adding:

“I’m sure your Hartak is hanging around somewhere close. Tell him to watch his step. I’m short-tempered as they come! You hear that? Oh, and who’s that?”

The felt hanging at the entrance was pushed aside and a figure stepped into the semi-darkness of the *kibitka*. The soothsayer turned around quickly to look back. Lida guessed rather than actually saw the misshapen form of Hartak.

“It’s Hartak! He’s been eavesdropping!”

“So much the better,” Ivan Semenovitch remarked calmly. “He has probably realized by now without any further explanations that we reject both his and Dorbatay’s proposals. Now, Dmitro Borisovich, tell them this: we absolutely refuse to accept their proposals. We will not do what Dorbatay wants us to do. We do not want to assist him in duping people. That’s all we have to tell him. Am I right, my friends?”

“Of course!”

“That’s the only answer we could give him!”

Dorbatay listened attentively to what was being translated for him by the short swarthy man who accompanied his

interpretation with many deferential bows. His withered face remained impassive, as if there was nothing unexpected or displeasing to him in the answer given by the strangers. But when he began speaking again after the translator had finished, notes of dissatisfaction could be discerned in his voice.

"The old man seems to be greatly displeased," Artem voiced his observations. Lida irritably shrugged her shoulders, her meaning all too clear: *I could not care less.*

"The glorious Dorbatay has something else to say," the swarthy man went on. "The glorious Dorbatay wishes to inform the strangers that if they refuse to accept his proposals, they will be sacrificed tomorrow morning. So they must choose: either they receive honors and wealth from the hands of Dorbatay or death tomorrow morning."

"Dmitro Borisovich, tell them that we are not to be intimidated by his threats," said Ivan Semenovich firmly. "There's nothing more to discuss. We'll wait and see how he will go about fulfilling his threats tomorrow!"

Uncontrollable rage twisted Dorbatay's face. The swarthy interpreter bent over double, fearing the soothsayer would vent his anger on him. But Dorbatay controlled himself; he turned around and walked out. The interpreter followed him, shooting a glance full of bewilderment, at the strangers: these people had been offered such marvelous things — happiness and wealth — and yet they had inexplicably rejected them in favor of death! Shaking his head in wonderment, he walked out with the Scythian who was carrying the oil lamp.

With the only source of light gone, the *kibitka* was cast into utter darkness. There was a minute of silence, and then Dmitro Borisovich asked, his voice sounding a little dismayed:

"Now, my friends, what are we going to do?"

"Well, at least one thing is clear: we'll learn a lot about the religious rites of the Scythians," Artem replied testily. "Though we'll only find out what it feels like to be sacrificed, I dare say it will be extremely interesting and exciting — from an archeological point of view, of course."

"Artem, I'm not in the mood for your quips. I asked a serious question. We have a terrible problem on our hands," the archeologist said reproachfully.

"Now, listen to what I have to say," Ivan Semenovich broke in. "We'll have time to talk about everything, but

now we must ask Varkan whether he can bring the bags and other things we left at Skolot's place."

"Varkan promises to do it," the archeologist said after he had listened to the Scythian's reply to this question. "The bags will be here before dawn."

"That's good. Oh, there's one more thing — Dmitro Borisovich, ask Varkan to spread the word among those he trusts that we are prepared to defy the soothsayer. Can you do it?"

"Of course!"

"That's all for the moment."

The message passed and received, Varkan slipped out of the *kibitka* crawling out on the ground under the felt that was cautiously lifted a little. Artem said tentatively:

"What if we follow him? Then we could try to get to the forest and hide there until morning, and in the morning, we can start looking for the opening we got here by."

"That's out of the question," Ivan Semenovitch said calmly but firmly. "Varkan has lived here all his life. And we've been here barely twelve hours. He knows his way around, we don't. We can't speak the language. We're sure to be seized the moment we crawl out of here, and then, the soothsayer may want to begin his sacrificial ceremony right away, without waiting for morning."

Artem was silent for some time, and then, this time timidly, asked in the complete darkness of the *kibitka*:

"Ivan Semenovitch, may I ask one more thing? I'm trying to solve a puzzle, but I can't, and it's about to drive me crazy. We have some time to discuss things, don't we?"

"Go ahead, Artem, go ahead! Since when have you grown so bashful?"

"Well, you said once that in your opinion, we're in an incredibly large cave... it must be true, I know. But... but how come we've found people here? And, for that matter, the Scythians who supposedly died out more than two thousand years ago?"

Ivan Semenovitch chuckled. He could not see the faces of Artem and Lida in the darkness but he was sure they were turned to him, listening attentively:

"As a matter of fact, that question should be readdressed to Dmitro Borisovich. He is the one who is an expert in archeology," the geologist said.

"Archeology has nothing to do with it, Ivan Semenovitch," said Dmitro Borisovich. "It has never dealt with the living

Scythians. In our case, they're very much alive and kicking... In other words, I cannot give any plausible answer to Artem's questions."

"Maybe we're imagining it all," Lida said hesitantly.

"No, we're not," the geologist said with absolute certainty. "We have found the Scythians here, no doubt about that, though in a somewhat 'canned' state, so to say."

"What did you say? Canned? How do you mean?" Artem and Lida cried out at the same time. Dmitro Borisovich made only a disparaging sound in his throat. Canned Scythians indeed!

"I've got the impression, my friends, that you've unlearned to understand jokes," Ivan Semenovitch went on. "I thought it'd make you laugh, but instead it puzzled you. Well, all right, I'll explain. I did not mean it in the sense that somebody has put the Scythians into cans to preserve them until we arrive here. Nothing of the kind. You've had the chance to see for yourself that these Scythians are not quite the things from a preserve can. And yet — I insist upon my usage of the word: they are, to a great extent, canned products!"

"Ivan Semenovitch! Don't make us solve additional puzzles!" Dmitro Borisovich said. "We've got so many others yet!"

"All right, I'll speak in plain language, without metaphors. By my reckoning, we descended two or three hundred meters below the surface before we came across the big rockfall. Am I right in my estimation?"

"Yes, we must have gone at least that deep."

"Good. Then, we were attacked by that gas, and we crawled out through an opening to find ourselves in a strange forest, after which our adventures among the Scythians began. Correct?"

"Of course!"

"Hence, that opening was a window, so to say, into the world of the ancient Scythians. We have not used a time machine and yet we observe this ancient world, at least two thousand years old, all around us. We not only observe it, but are being treated rather harshly by it. We have no reason whatsoever to doubt the reality of this world. The question immediately arises: where is this world — or the observable part of it — situated? It would be quite sensible to suppose that it is situated under the ground, in an enormously large subterranean cavity of staggering pro-

portions, cut off from the surface since the ancient times.”

“And the Scythians?”

“To explain their presence here, we have to put forward another hypothesis. At one time in the remote past, there must have existed a passage connecting this subterranean cavity with the outer world. I see no other way of explaining the presence of the Scythians here. So, once a tribe of the Scythians, probably fleeing from danger, inadvertently made their way to this cave and had to remain here because a rockfall blocked the way back. The Scythians found themselves trapped here, with no connections to the rest of the world, and since there were no more outside influences, they retained all their habits and customs of two thousand years ago. We have accidentally walked into their life. That’s about all I can offer by way of conjecture!”

“There’s one thing, Ivan Semenovitch, that needs some further clarification. It is a well established fact that the Scythians, no matter at what stage of development they were — from the nomads to land tillers — were people whose lives were inseparably connected with the wide expanses of the steppes. It is very difficult to imagine them becoming accustomed to life underground. We do not know of even a single example when a Scythian tribe used a cave, much less lived underground!” the archeologist protested vehemently.

Ivan Semenovitch listened impassively to this and replied:

“You have probably misunderstood me, Dmitro Borisovich. I’m far from suggesting that any Scythian tribe ever preferred living in a cave to life in open areas or that one tribe chose to live underground of its own accord. Absolutely not. I have in mind quite a different thing: one of the tribes took refuge here, trying to escape some great peril, perhaps a strong enemy force. Is this idea acceptable from a historical point of view?”

“Yes, it is,” the archeologist conceded reluctantly.

“Good. Then, quite by chance, pursued by its enemies, a tribe finds itself in front of a big opening in the ground... Now, tell me, is it too far-fetched to imagine it might enter in an attempt to hide from its enemies?”

“Well, yes, that is plausible...”

“So, our tribe moves further and further away from the opening, seeing wide vistas opening up before it... probably that was not as difficult for the tribe as it was for us to get here. There must have been a shorter and less hazardous

way, otherwise the steppe-loving Scythians would hardly have proceeded all the way into this cave. What happened next is evident: a sudden rockfall prevented the tribe from returning to the surface, and the Scythians stayed underground. And, cut off from the rest of the world as they were, they naturally preserved all their customs, life style, and so on — all those traits and features we now observe. That is the way I see it.”

Nobody said a word, pondering what had been said. It was, indeed, the only plausible explanation they could think of, albeit it was a somewhat fantastic one. The immense vastness of a subterranean cavity, cut off from the outside world? A Scythian tribe that had wandered into it thousands of years ago with its slaves and remained because it could not find the way out?...

“Of what size, then, must this underground cavity be if it contains forests, fields, and valleys?” Ivan Semenovitch asked aloud. “It must stretch for dozens, if not for hundreds of kilometers. That is not a phenomenon entirely unknown in geology. We do know of subterranean cavities of considerable size, though, of course, not as large as this one.”

“Yes, it has forests, a steppe and even mountains,” Artem said.

“I don’t think that the cliffs we have seen are real mountains; rather, they are the walls that run around all sides of the cavity. If it is a cave, consequently it must have walls which probably rise dozens or hundreds meters high. From a distance, they seem to be the cliffs of very steep mountains. We can’t see the ceiling of the cave because of the ever-present cloud cover, probably due to high humidity.”

“Ivan Semenovitch!” Dmitro Borisovich suddenly said in a voice much too loud. “Now I remember! Your hypothesis may indeed be supported by some statements in Herodotus. A passage from the work of this Greek historian has just come to mind. He says that the Scythians were mortally afraid of earthquakes which they regarded as the greatest possible calamity, probably because tremors were an extremely rare but devastating phenomenon in their lives. Then we must make a further step in our analysis of the situation and try to determine what could have caused such a considerable rockfall to cut a whole tribe off and bar their way back? It could have been caused by an earthquake, couldn’t it?”

"Yes, it could," Ivan Semenovitch agreed. "But where does that lead us?"

"Ah... the Scythians, who had seen one of their tribes disappear from the face of the earth, could easily have connected this disappearance with the earthquake which had swallowed so many of their people. What do you say to that?"

"It is not impossible," the geologist said, shrugging his shoulders.

"This event must have increased the Scythians' natural fear of earthquakes. So, Ivan Semenovitch, your supposition finds some parallel in Herodotus, and I accept it."

"I'm most obliged to you for that, Dmitro Borisovich," said Ivan Semenovitch, some irony creeping into his voice. "Do you have anything more to add?"

"Well, only one thing. Since we have discovered a Scythian tribe that has survived to our day thanks to a most unusual chain of coincidences which you have brilliantly delineated, we now face a task of paramount scientific importance."

"What task?"

"To study in a most thorough manner the life of this Scythian tribe. It is an absolutely unique case in the history of archeology! Not to make use of it would be a serious crime. I think that even you, Ivan Semenovitch, with your perennial scepticism toward archeology, must agree with me on this point. I don't ask the opinion of Lida and Artem on the matter because I'm sure they support me fully. Am I right, Artem?"

The young man nodded his head: the life of the Scythians was, of course, a most exciting thing to learn about, and in this respect, Dmitro Borisovich was surely right. But they had yet to see what the dawn would bring. What if Dorbatay really intended to carry out his threats? In that case, their field trip might be a short one. But Artem did not voice his apprehensions.

"Count me in, too," Lida said; she was so tired by now the only thing she craved at the moment was sleep. Were they going to talk much longer? But the indefatigable Artem had another question ready for the geologist:

"Ivan Semenovitch, there's something else I don't understand."

"Yes, what is it?"

"Well, if we accept your hypothesis as correct in explaining all that we find here, and if we're in fact in a

cave, what about the light? The sun can't be the source of it, nor the moon. And it's not electric light of course. So what is it then?"

"You expect too much of me, Artem," said the geologist. "Unfortunately, I don't understand it either. I could put forward some conjectures to explain it, but they would remain unsubstantiated guesses. We could assume, for example, that it is some radioactive elements in the ceiling that are the source of light here. Or perhaps constant fluorescence. Could either of the two be the source of the observed phenomenon? Yes, I believe they could. The light we see in this cave is diffused and reminiscent of early dusk because the source of it remains hidden by these heavy clouds."

"Yes, we could accept those as plausible explanations," Artem said. "But what about the night then?"

"Oh, will you let me be for a while, Artem? How can I possibly know the answers to all these questions? I've been here for exactly as long as you."

"Oh, Ivan Semenovich, I'm only asking you to give us another of your hypotheses," Artem insisted. "Even if it's just a supposition, you know, it'll still make it a little easier for me..."

"All right, I'll try to put forward another of my 'suppositions,'" the geologist chuckled. "There could be periodical fluctuations in the intensity of radiation from radioactive materials. For example, we could assume that our radioactive substance — if, of course, we're right in citing radioactivity as the source of light here! — radiates light only under the influence of the sun's rays. It gets charged up like some special paints, for example. But I must warn you I don't insist on my explanations, and if you chance upon something more convincing, I'd be happy to hear them. The way things are going it looks like we'll have plenty of time for everything... Lida, do you want to ask something?" Ivan Semenovich turned to the girl, hearing her restless movements. "I'm not a walking encyclopedia, mind you. So go ahead and fire away! But I warn you, it's going to be the last one for now!"

As a matter of fact, Lida was not going to ask anything as she was overwhelmed by fatigue. But now that Ivan Semenovich had mentioned her name, she might as well ask something. Was it only Artem who had the right to ask questions? After all, there was something that Lida

intended to ask about. It had been on her mind off and on, but then something always interfered.

"Ivan Semenovitch," she said sleepily, "I wonder why the plants here are such unusual colors. How can the leaves and grass be pink and yellow and not green? Why should they have developed this coloring?"

"Oh, well. All right, now we'll try to find some reason for that. It must be easier than the rest of the things that we discussed. What causes the plants on the surface to be green? Chlorophyl. What is chlorophyl? It's a green substance that absorbs the energy of sunlight and turns it into chemicals without which no plants could live, right?"

"Of course! That's from the textbook!"

"Good. But we are talking of conditions where sunlight is present, and there is no sunlight here. What were the plants to do? Die? No, living organisms always try to adopt to whatever conditions they find themselves in. Instead of sunlight, they use the local source of light, and they have probably developed a new substance to take the place of chlorophyl with similar properties, though of a different color. It is not green any longer but pinkish-yellow, adjusted not to the bright sunshine but to the mild light of the underground radiation. This adjustment to new conditions is the only thing that I can suggest now. Do you accept it, Lida?"

But Lida did not reply: the geologist heard the even, measured breathing of the girl which meant that she was sleeping peacefully. Ivan Semenovitch smiled to himself gently and said, lowering his voice:

"Artem, Lida's falling asleep shows that we should stop our scientific discussions. It's time to go to sleep; everybody's tired and we must be in shape for whatever awaits us on the morrow. There's only one more thing that we should settle now — our general line of behavior."

He cleared his throat, pulled his pipe from his pocket, filled it, and lit it. The unsteady light of his pipe that alternately flared up and grew feeble threw sharp fleeting shadows across his face. At last he said slowly and pensively:

"One thing is clear: we can't side with Dorbatay and the priests. Neither can we embrace the cause of Skolot who differs but little from his brother. Both of them want to manipulate us in their own interests. We must side with the ordinary Scythians who have been duped by the sooth-sayer and with the oppressed slaves.

"I think we should take the measure of Varkan. He has revealed but a fraction of what he could. I'm not saying it in reproach — it's quite natural to want to know the people you're dealing with better before you trust them, and he hasn't had much of a chance to get to know us. But, my friends, I believe that he and the likes of him — young Scythians, low-born hunters and warriors, could be of some help to us. But all of them seem to be adherents of Skolot, which means that at least for the time being, we'll have to gamble on this group, and consequently on Skolot..."

"A tactical move, Ivan Semenovich?" Artem chuckled.

"Well, in such a dangerous and complicated situation as ours, something can be gained, I believe, only through a crafty tactical move," the geologist said. "But I know for sure that we'll get the best of Dorbatay, tomorrow and in the days to come. The old rogue has committed a huge blunder: he showed his hand and now we know his cards, but he doesn't know ours! Excellent! Let's use it to our own advantage."

"Oh, but mustn't Dmitro Borisovich and I be let in on your secret plans?" remarked Artem.

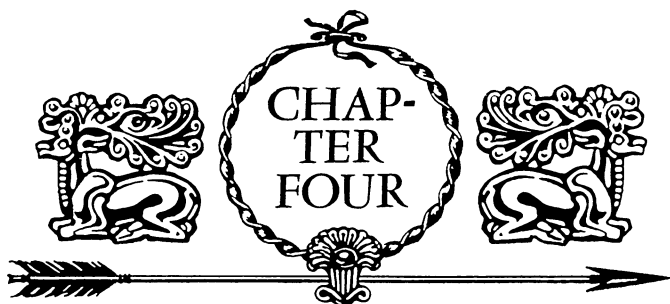
"That's what I'm going to do. All the more so that the main part in the show I'm planning will go to you, Artem. Now, move closer. I'll tell you what my stratagem is..."

The short pipe of Ivan Semenovich remained the only source of light flickering in the utter darkness. Dmitro Borisovich and Artem were listening very eagerly, trying not to miss a single word. Once in a while, Dmitro Borisovich pulled his beard out of habit, and sometimes he rubbed his hands nervously. Artem was enthralled with the geologist's plan and had no doubt it would work. What a pity Lida was sleeping and unable to hear it! But on the other hand, it'd be all the more thrilling for her to watch! Or maybe he should tell her when she woke up? All right, he decided to wait and see. But for now — he had to listen, listen attentively!

Artem had his eyes riveted on the geologist almost in rapture.

There was yet another pair of eyes that were fastened on Ivan Semenovich, and there was readiness in them to fulfil any command that the geologist deigned to issue. The eyes were half-closed, the gaze seemed languid, and the reflection of the light from the pipe could hardly be seen in them. But these eyes saw everything very clearly, and

even though Diana did not understand what it was that Ivan Semenovich was telling his friends, she must have felt only too well the tension throbbing in this strange night so fraught with danger, with even greater anxiety growing as the dawn drew nearer.



the explorers wake up to face the messenger from Dorbatay, refuse once again to accept Dorbatay's conditions, and are escorted to the site where the sacrifice is to take place; Artem comes out a winner in the confrontation with Dorbatay, and Skolot invites the explorers to be his guests of honor; Ivan Semenovich makes a bold and subtle move and gets what he wants

Artem had a dream which featured a Young Pioneers' Camp he had been to several times as a child. He dreamed about the time everybody was allowed to do what he pleased, and the boys and girls all wandered off in different directions, but then the drum began calling them back. The drumbeat permeated the camp, sounding very urgent. But the Young Pioneers were in no hurry to get back. The drumming continued, persistent and urging, driving Artem mad; the beat drew nearer, grew louder as though the drummer were looking specifically for him. The drummer was definitely bent on waking Artem up with his irritating drumming. Artem opened his eyes and looked around.

The strange, nagging, drumming sounds did not cease and Artem realized it was not in fact the drumbeat he had heard

in his sleep. It was something else which sounded like tambourines and flutes played simultaneously, and they did possess some annoyingly persistent quality. Now, some other high-pitched sound joined in, as though a simple melody were being played on fifes. He could also hear some movement outside the *kibitka*, as though many people were rushing hither and thither. Artem got up.

Dmitro Borisovich was lying on a piece of felt, his head supported on his hand, listening. Ivan Semenovich was pacing to and fro in the *kibitka*, his hands clasped behind his back, a deep frown on his brow. Lida was still sound asleep.

"Good morning, Artem," the geologist said, stopping at the young man's side. "Did you have a good sleep? How's your mood? It's time to get ready for the show."

Artem was jostled into action by these words: there was a lot to do and he had not yet begun! He turned to the bags that had been slipped in by Varkan before dawn. Lida woke up, staring in incomprehension at her friends, at Diana restlessly running around. The light of morning was pouring in through the opening in the top of the *kibitka*. The girl opened and closed her eyes in rapid succession, utterly bewildered.

"Oh, I've not been dreaming!" she said at last. "And I hoped so much I'd wake up to find myself at home..."

"No, unfortunately you've not been dreaming it all up," Artem said, rummaging through the bags. "Get up, very soon we'll leave to attend a big show."

"You've used the right word, Artem: it's going to be quite a show with a big audience watching," Ivan Semenovich said, smiling: Artem's cheerful mood had to be supported. "Don't worry, Lida. Artem is well prepared to play the leading role in the spectacle!"

"What show? What are you talking about?" the girl said, completely nonplussed, as she had not heard of Ivan Semenovich's plans.

"Lida, you're going to see everything for yourself. I can guarantee it's going to be a thriller," Artem said enigmatically, and added: "I'd explain everything to you, but there's no time for explanations now. I hear them coming to take us to the show!"

In fact, at almost the same moment, the piece of felt over the door to the *kibitka* was jerked aside by several Scythians armed with daggers, evidently the soothsayer's henchmen. Two more Scythians entered and stopped at the

entrance. The short swarthy man who had acted as an interpreter the previous night slipped into the *kibitka*, shooting fearful glances at Diana. He bowed and hastily launched his speech, which had apparently been prepared beforehand.

"The strangers must leave the *kibitka*. They must go without resistance to the place they will be led to. If they refuse to go they will be..."

The archeologist interrupted him angrily: "Unnecessary talk. We're ready to go."

The short man bowed again. He seemed to be a little uneasy in the presence of the strangers and stepped back. But there was something else he had to say. He looked the strangers over, and seeing no immediate danger to himself, he said:

"The glorious Dorbatay charged me to remind the strangers of his handsome proposals. The glorious Dorbatay says that..."

"We don't care to know what Dorbatay says," Dmitro Borisovich interrupted the short man sharply. "We gave our unequivocal answer yesterday. We've got nothing more to add. Let's go!"

The subdued murmur of a big crowd reached their ears when they emerged from the *kibitka*. Many armed horsemen were waiting for them to emerge. The crowd was standing at a considerable distance, reluctant to come any closer. About a dozen of the soothsayer's assistants, dagger points forward, encircled the strangers, and then the riders surrounded them on all sides. The procession began moving. But where to?

"Dorbatay is not anywhere around," Artem said.

"He's much too important to walk along with us," Lida said.

"We're going to see him, and soon enough at that," the archeologist said.

The tambourines and flutes resumed their music, and now Ivan Semenovitch could see who the musicians were. One of the riders was holding a big tambourine, and two others had smaller ones. Three more riders were blowing long pipes which looked as though they were made of bones.

Dmitro Borisovich was also watching the musicians. He touched the geologist's shoulder.

"Those pipes, aren't they something?" he said. "To think only that someone once ran and walked on them."

"I don't follow you."

"Oh, it's very simple. See what they're made of?"

"What is it?"

"Bone."

"All right. But what's so unusual about that?"

"Oh, it's a human tibia, a shinbone, Ivan Semenovich!"

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. Similar instruments, once used by the ancient Scythians, were found in excavations. In fact such human tibiae, sawed-off on both sides, polished and hollowed out, have been found in many barrows. Opinions differed as to what purpose they served. Some said they were musical instruments, others — that they were used in milking mares. But now everything has been clarified. They're pipes, musical instruments! That's what they are! Pipes made of human shinbones!"

The archeologist was right: it was easy to recognize the characteristic curve of the shinbone; the size was right too.

"The dirt road has ended," Artem said abruptly. "From now on we'll probably be walking right through the steppe. See how tall the grass is all around."

The circle of the riders around the explorers widened, probably because Diana dashed hither and thither inside it, causing the riders to move back a little to keep their distance from the dreaded dog.

The sound of tambourines came from somewhere in the distance. That must have been a signal for the riders in the front rows to gallop away into the steppe.

A wide view of the steppe, overgrown with tall grass of that extraordinary yellowish-pink color, opened before the explorers. It looked like a very wide, flat mountain valley, flanked on its right by the unnatural pinkish woods, with mountains looming high beyond it in the distance, and disappearing in the thick gray clouds. In fact, the mountains could be seen not only beyond the forest: they encircled the steppe on all sides. Artem recollected the conversation with the geologist last night — if his hypothesis was to be accepted, then these mountains must be the inner walls of the gigantic subterranean cavity. It would be interesting to find out whether any of the Scythians ever tried to climb them.

The procession was moving through the flat steppe. Only a mound of moderate size could be seen in the distance; it was in the direction of this mound that the riders had

galloped off. There was a strange structure topping the mound; it did resemble neither a temple, nor a house, nor even a tent.

It was just a big black pile in the shape of a crude pyramid. People were swarming all over the slopes of the mound. It seemed that the entire population of the Scythian camp had gathered here: some were on horseback, others came on foot; there were women and even children there. Artem's sharp eyes discerned a group of slaves standing to the side. Right by the black pyramid, Skolot, wearing the gleaming gold helmet, was to be seen on his horse, surrounded by his warriors.

Lida grabbed Artem by the hand. There was anxiety in her voice.

"Look, there's Dorbatay over there. And that disgusting Hartak is at his side. They seem to be sticking together!"

"Don't worry! I assure you everything'll be all right," the young man said cheerfully. But he was not so unperturbed as he pretended. He had not expected to see so many people gathered here. Would he be able to do what had been planned in front of this multitude? His disturbed glance sought Ivan Semenovitch. The geologist replied with an energetic nod of his head: everything'll be all right, and everything's going according to plan.

The procession was meanwhile drawing closer and closer to the black pyramid. It turned out to be a huge pile of dry branches and twigs, and served as the ceremonial sacred altar of the Scythians. Dmitro Borisovich had no doubts now that the pyramid was an altar. He could see a wooden ladder reaching to the top of the big pile. A huge old, blackened scimitar was sticking from the very top of it. Something was evidently holding it in an upright position, point upward. The whole arrangement was very close to what the archeologist thought ancient Scythian altars must have looked like judging from the available archeological and historical evidence.

Dorbatay was standing by the ladder wearing his ceremonial scarlet cloak decorated with plates of gold sewn to it. His cold, hostile eyes were searching the faces of the strangers for signs of fear or anxiety. But in vain! The explorers were quietly looking over the altar, the old soothsayer, his assistants, and the burly priestesses with their daggers and curved knives. It was they, the Scythians, who were nervously watching the strangers accompanied by the

dread *poskina*; it was they, the assistants, who would have to deal with the miracle-working strangers endowed with magical powers.

Skolot, his bodyguard, and his warriors formed a separate group. The old chieftain did not look as self-assured as he had the day before in spite of his obvious attempts to preserve his usual forbidding appearance of contemptuous and indifferent haughtiness. His hands played nervously with the reins; from time to time he exchanged short, clipped phrases with his warriors. The old chieftain was probably apprehensive that Dorbatay would use his position as "owner" of the strangers to his own advantage. The previous night, the soothsayer had categorically rejected all proposals that Skolot had made concerning the ransoming of the strangers. He had refused to turn them over to the chieftain, and now the foreign wizards, craftily manipulated by the soothsayer, could do a lot of harm to the chieftain's cause.

There was one more person who could hardly suppress his anxiety. It was Varkan. As soon as the procession approached close enough, Artem recognized him among the warriors who were standing a little aside from the group of extravagantly dressed bodyguards. The group Varkan was in looked much more somber, with no costly things decorating their dress. It was clear from the first glance that Varkan was a central figure among the low-born warriors. Artem wondered why. Weren't all of these warriors equal in social status? But of course, this question had to remain unanswered for the time being.

A group of the high-born Scythians, haughty and self-assured, sitting on richly embellished horses, was stationed not far from Dorbatay, between his numerous assistants and Skolot's warriors. The high-born Scythians deported themselves with great dignity, well aware of their power and strength. They stared at the strangers with open hostility.

Somewhat further downhill, the rest of the Scythians stood murmuring. They did not have any ornaments on their clothes, even the simplest bronze ones. They were a uniform mass of people with no one having anything to distinguish him or her from the rest. At the foot of the mound, the crowd was even bigger; it consisted of the Scythians and slaves who did not have the right to approach the altar any closer.

Lida could not help glancing stealthily at Hartak who was sitting on a horse with richly adorned harness. His

horse and his dress were definitely marks of his lofty status. He was also wearing a round bronze helmet, and a sword hung suspended from his belt. But all in all, everything about him had an artificial, even humorous aspect. The sword seemed to be pulling him to one side, making him appear even more bent; the bronze helmet weighed his head down. He cut a sorry figure sitting so awkwardly on his horse. But in spite of all this, he struck the girl as her arch-enemy. She could not help shuddering as she looked at his bony, twisted face.

Now the explorers were left almost to themselves with only a few of the soothsayer's assistants standing near. There were four robust priestesses close by, holding two slaves whose hands were bound. Dorbatay's threats of "sacrifices to be made at the ceremony" came to Artem's mind. These two hapless slaves, bereft of any chance of defending themselves, were to be sacrificed! He turned sharply to Ivan Semenovitch:

"What if they begin with these slaves? What do we do then?" the young man's face reflected his confusion. The geologist did not have time to reply.

At that moment the soothsayer raised his arms into the air in a gesture that had become so familiar to the explorers. It must have been the signal for the ceremony to begin, for almost immediately, all his acolytes also hoisted their hands up. An ominous silence fell over the place.

Dorbatay began chanting something in a high-pitched, hoarse voice. He bowed low before the pyramid of branches, straightened up, stretching his arms toward the big blackened scimitar sticking from the top of the pyramid. A gentle wind ruffled the folds of his scarlet cloak, making the old soothsayer look like a monstrously huge bird of prey ready to descend on its victim. The acolytes imitated all the movements of Dorbatay.

The tune of the song the old soothsayer was singing changed abruptly. The acolytes ceased their chanting as though directed to stop. Now Dorbatay was singing all alone, pitching the song too high, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. Then he flailed his arms and the chant was picked up again by all the acolytes. Dmitro Borisovich leaned forward to whisper into the geologist's ear:

"There was something in his song that concerned us. He mixed Greek words with Scythian, but I could get the general drift."

"That's interesting. What did he say?"

"Something along this line: 'Strangers! We'll sacrifice you to the gods if you do not give in. There's still time to stop the sacrifice. Say that you accept my conditions. Otherwise you will die. But first you will watch these slaves die.' It sounded like both a warning and a threat."

"That's all there was to it?" Ivan Semenovitch asked nonchalantly.

"Basically, yes."

"I'm afraid he won't get any positive answer from us to his proposals. Or maybe you are of a different opinion?"

"Of course not!" the archeologist cried out indignantly. "How could you think such a thing of me?"

"I'm glad you said so. Now we know at least that Dorbatay wants to start with the slaves and not with us. So much the better!"

The chant ended. Dorbatay barked fiercely several concluding words which were evidently meant to whip the listening Scythians into a frenzy. He was quite successful in it since in response he got wild shouts and clanging of weapons; the bows were drawn, and a rain of long-shafted arrows was released; the arrows described a long arch and landed at quite a distance from the mound.

Two acolytes handed Dorbatay a large gold bowl and a long stone knife with the golden haft.

"The bowl and the knife are the traditional sacred ritual objects of the Scythian soothsayers," Dmitro Borisovich whose archeological curiosity had again been roused, began whispering excitedly.

Dorbatay raised the bowl and the knife into the air ceremoniously and shouted something very loudly as though addressing some request to the clouds that were moving slowly across the sky. Dmitro Borisovich said:

"He's speaking half Greek, half Scythian again. He says that the strangers will see with their own eyes what will happen to them in just a short while, so they'd better hurry up with the acceptance of his proposals."

Ivan Semenovitch shook his head silently, without taking his eyes from the altar and what was going on beside it.

Dorbatay lowered the knife, its point downward. That was also a signal. The soothsayer's assistants who had been holding the bound slaves, now began dragging them toward the soothsayer. One of the slaves uttered a piercing cry, trying to free himself. The other slave, treading heavily,

moved on without resisting, evidently having relinquished all hope of deliverance. Loud shouts came from the crowd. Artem went pale. He cried out:

"They'll kill them! Ivan Semenovitch, they will! We can't let it happen!"

There was a deep frown on the geologist's brow. He grabbed the young man by the shoulder.

"Wait, Artem, wait. The time for us to act will come very soon."

Meanwhile the assistants were dragging the slaves toward Dorbatay. As the soothsayer was waiting his wandering gaze fell upon the strangers: there was a menace and triumph in his eyes. The first slave had already stopped his wailing; he seemed to have lost his voice. He was only making hoarse wheezing sounds, his head hanging back. The excited murmur in the crowd was growing, but above it rose the hysterical lamenting of a woman. Ivan Semenovitch gently pushed Artem forward.

"Now's the time, young man!"

In one leap Artem was at Dorbatay's side; the latter was startled by Artem's sudden movement, and stepped back. The soothsayer's assistants did not so much as budge to intercept Artem, so sudden and swift was his leap. Now he was standing right in front of the old soothsayer, with arms akimbo, his stance expressing contempt. Diana was at his side, baring her teeth and growling menacingly, ready to defend her master.

A dead silence fell over the steppe. Everyone froze. Everybody was waiting to see what the mighty, glorious Dorbatay would do to the impertinent stranger who, in Dorbatay's words, had been forsaken by the gods. Surely the great man had stepped back to have more room to set about incinerating the stranger.

Dorbatay, unlocking his clenched feeth with difficulty, shouted something wildly to his assistants, pointing at Artem with the stone knife. But they did not have the pluck to approach the young man. Once again, as it happened on the previous day, the old soothsayer had to face the challenger all by himself.

Artem was quick to use the situation to his full advantage.

"Listen, you, old roguel" he said very loudly right into the soothsayer's face. "Your rule's finished. I challenge you to a contest. Show all the tricks you're capable of. I'll show

mine. Then we'll see who's a more powerful magician. Where's your interpreter?"

Knowing that Dorbatay could not understand a single word of what he was saying, he added:

"All right, now I'll explain everything to you, nice and clear. Varkan, Varkan!"

Varkan urged his horse forward and in a moment was at Artem's side. Artem said:

"Dmitro Borisovich, tell Varkan everything that should be interpreted to this rogue, the soothsayer, that is, and to all the rest of the Scythians!"

Varkan listened to the archeologist and then began speaking, his voice strong and loud enough to be heard by all the Scythians. A loud clamor arose from the crowd. Dorbatay's face clouded. Now Artem had cut all paths of retreat. The crowd was waiting for Dorbatay's reply to the challenge of the audacious stranger; all eyes were fastened on him. The old soothsayer had at last made up his mind. He shouted his reply to the young man in a hoarse voice, that was brimming with menace.

"He says that the gods will reduce you, Artem, to ashes," the archeologist translated. "Aren't you scared?"

"All right, we'll see shortly who'll be more successful in using the heavenly fire! You start, old man! I invite your gods to incinerate me! But mind you, if you fail, then it'll be my turn!"

Artem was standing in front of Dorbatay, composed and unimpressed by the soothsayer's threats. Dorbatay realized then that in his rage, he said something he should never have said, and that the stranger was aware of this. The crowd meanwhile was waiting for the terrible punishment to be executed, and every minute that passed without anything happening was one more point in favor of the stranger! Still holding the sacred bowl and knife in his hands, Dorbatay began uttering his imprecations. He strained so much, shouting them that the muscles of his old withered neck stood out, once in a while he shifted from shouting to sinister hissing and then back to shouting; he waved his arms as though inviting all the fiendish elements of nature to unleash their fury upon the young malefactor. The latter remained as self-possessed as before, showing no fear. Artem was even smirking! A surging murmur passed through the crowd, and there was some new quality in that murmur. Artem felt that the mood of the crowd was shifting

in his favor. Dorbatay was losing his hold over the Scythians! Artem decided to use the moment to speed up the downfall of the soothsayer. He boldly stepped forward and stood very close to the old man who kept waving the knife and the bowl wildly.

"It doesn't seem to be working, eh?" Artem asked sarcastically. "I don't feel any flames burning me. So, make room, you've failed! Step aside, old man, now it's my turn!"

"Artem, watch out!" Lida cried out a warning.

In an abrupt and swift movement nobody would have expected him capable of, Dorbatay rushed at Artem, his knife poised high, ready to strike. Another moment, and he would have driven it home into Artem's chest. But at the very last instant he started back though Artem did not stir, never trying to parry the blow. Diana, watchful and always on guard, leaped forward, aiming at the soothsayer's throat. Her jaws closed with a snap, missing him by hardly an inch. Dorbatay was immensely lucky to have been able to recoil in time! Diana landed on her feet and stood ready for another attack. Her bristling hair, bared teeth, and low growl indicated her readiness to go into action.

"Ah, so that's how you want it!" Artem said slowly, as though perplexed. "You've realized that you can't call your heavenly fire down on me, so you've decided to stab me with your knife? That's where you're wrong. No good even trying. But now it's my turn. I warned you, didn't I? Open your eyes wider!"

In an unaffected gesture, Artem pulled out a cigarette and lit it. Dead silence fell over the crowd. Hundreds of eyes were following Artem's every movement. The young man knew it and, after inhaling the smoke, released it slowly and deliberately right into the face of Dorbatay who stood stunned by the performance.

"Aha, you don't like it? Wait, I have something else up my sleeve. Dmitro Borisovich! I want Varkan to translate that now I will knock the soothsayer down without even touching him, with the help of the heavenly fire. Yes, the heavenly fire will topple him over!"

Varkan translated what had been transmitted to him by Dmitro Borisovich. Dorbatay's face showed reluctance to believe the stranger would be able to do it. The soothsayer probably thought that his opponent was trying to scare him into submission, the thing he himself had just tried to do. After all, Dorbatay knew better than anyone else the true

worth of "the heavenly fire"! He put one foot forward, his stance and newly regained composure showing that he was not intimidated by the threats of the impertinent stranger.

"I see that you've prepared yourself for what's to come. All right, here it goes!"

Artem took a small object out of his pocket and put it close to the lit cigarette that was sticking out of his mouth. In a moment the object began hissing and smoking. Artem held it high and hurled it to the ground, right at the soothsayer's feet.

"Now, let's watch what happens. Now everyone will see whether you're strong enough to stay on your feet!"

Dorbatay panicked and was about to bolt when he saw the strange object hissing at his feet like a furious miniature monster. To make things look even more terrifying, it was smoking. But the soothsayer understood only too well that if he bolted, it would immediately spell the end of his influence over the Scythians. So, suppressing his great fear of the smoking magical object, he stayed put, only shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"Just one moment," Artem said, "and here it comes! Hold on, old man!"

The moment he said it, there was a deafening crack at Dorbatay's feet. Fire seemed to leap from the ground and hurl him into the air. It was impossible to say whether the old soothsayer was felled by the explosion or by the terrible fright he took from seeing the fire and hearing the ear-splitting crack, but whatever the cause of his fall, he flew into the air, turned over, flailed his arms, and dropped to the ground with a heavy thud, face upward. As he fell, he dropped the sacred bowl and the sacred knife and they rolled over to rest at Artem's feet. Then Dorbatay turned face down and remained in that position, wrapped in the loose folds of his ceremonial scarlet cloak as though afraid to look at the powerful young magician who had brought down fire and thunder from the heavens, much less to rise.

Once again, silence fell over the crowd. The Scythians appeared to have stopped breathing; they stared at Artem, seeing in him a terrifying creature endowed with great supernatural powers. He had not been destroyed by the gods in spite of all the soothsayer's efforts. Quite the reverse: it was Artem who had secured their aid and brought down fire and thunder, felling Dorbatay who was now lying helpless and motionless on the ground!

The young man picked up the gold bowl and stone knife from the ground and examined them. He moved with complete confidence as though not afraid of anything now. Who could attempt an attack on him after his remarkable victory over the seemingly omnipotent Dorbatay?

"Nice workmanship," Artem said looking the bowl and the knife over. "If I had found them back there in the cave, I would have been very glad. But now I've got to deal with more urgent matters than studying rare museum pieces. Hey, you, over there! Release those two fellows right away!"

He walked over to the priests who were holding the two bound slaves. The priests did not wait for Artem to come close, but letting go of the slaves, they ran to hide behind the pyramidal pile of branches. The slaves did not even dare to as much as stir. Their fear-filled eyes were fixed on Artem. They seemed to be mutely asking him to spare them. Artem realized then that the slaves took him for just another bloodthirsty soothsayer, no different from Dorbatay, and naturally assumed that he, Artem, was going to kill them. Wasn't he holding the sacrificial knife and the bowl in his hands?

"I'm a friend, don't be afraid of me," Artem said gently. "I'm going to use this knife for a purpose quite different from the one you have in mind. Now, here we go."

He sliced swiftly with the knife through the ropes, with which the slaves' hands were bound.

"How sharp it is!" Artem exclaimed in amazement. "It's made of stone, but it's razor sharp! Now, you can go back to your people. And if anybody tries to hurt you again, he'll have to deal with me. Spread the word."

He gently pushed them to show them they were free to go. They started running downhill, without looking back, waving their arms frenziedly. Artem watched them run, and then turned to Dorbatay who had propped himself up on his elbows. His eyes seemed to follow Artem's every movement.

"Get up, old man. Enough lying about. You're not hurt, are you? One little primer cap went off at his feet, and he thinks it was a shell. Get up, I tell you."

Dorbatay rose as though he had understood the command. His face was covered with dust, the gray hair tousled, the cloak awry. The sharp, fierce and hostile eyes bored into Artem, the arch-enemy. But for all that, the old man did

not seem to be in a hurry to launch another attack; he evidently realized there was nothing he could do at the moment. After a short silence, Dorbatay bent his head and murmured several words of submission in a constricted voice.

"Ah, well, that's all right," Artem said, laughing after hearing the translation. "It must be hard for you to admit that I'm more powerful than you are. We'll have to agree on this point, though it was clear all along. But now everybody has seen that. This is the end of your supremacy, Dorbatay!"

He looked around. The crowd was listening to him, trying to guess the meaning of his words. The Scythians now regarded him as a real magician. What else could a man who breathed smoke, who called forth fire and thunder from the ground, who knocked down the hitherto omnipotent Dorbatay without even touching him, who was accompanied by the dread *poskina* be but a true wizard? Hundreds of eyes were riveted on Artem, their expression ranging from awe to fear. But at least two persons were giving him sidelong glances filled with resentment and hate.

One of them was the old soothsayer: could he reconcile himself to defeat, to the loss of his previous undisputed influence over the Scythians? The other was Hartak who also had much to lose in the defeat of Dorbatay. The rich and high-born Scythian looked somewhat deflated.

Dmitro Borisovich grabbed the geologist's hand and shook it exuberantly.

"I must say you hit on an excellent idea!"

"You shouldn't give all credit to me," protested the geologist. "Part of credit, and probably the better part, should go to Artem. Besides, he played the leading role in our little spectacle, didn't he?"

"Oh, we'll express our admiration of his performance to him personally a bit later. What do you say to that, Lida?"

The girl had been much impressed by what had taken place, no doubt of that. It was, of course, only but natural: she was the only one of the four explorers who had not taken part in discussing the plan, so everything that Artem did had come as a complete surprise to her. Now Lida could hardly control the nervous laughter that was the psychological reaction to all the anxieties of the morning. Now, when the grave danger that had been hanging over them since

last night had lifted, Lida had an impulsive desire to kiss Ivan Semenovitch and Dmitro Borisovich, but Artem was topmost on her list. Nonetheless, she gave the archeologist a resounding kiss on the cheek.

"Oh, Dmitro Borisovich, everything is great!"

Artem was still out of earshot, but when he came up to his friends, the faithful Diana at his side, the first question he asked was:

"It looks like I did everything according to plan, didn't I, Ivan Semenovitch? Did I do anything wrong?"

"No. Everything was fine, except some of your expressions like 'old rogue.'"

"But he couldn't understand me anyway, could he?" Artem said ingenuously. "Besides, I had to vent my anger on somebody... By the way, Dmitro Borisovich, what should I do with these things?" Artem asked, indicating the bowl and the knife he was still holding in his hands. "They must be of great value, especially from an archeological point of view. And for me they're also a trophy."

Dmitro Borisovich, his eyes shining with fresh archeological enthusiasm, was about to take the sacred Scythian things from Artem's hands when he was mercilessly stopped by Ivan Semenovitch.

"These things must be immediately returned to the acolytes," he said in a commanding tone. "It would be a great offense if we appropriated them. You should have thought of that yourself, Dmitro Borisovich! I realize that you're dying to examine them thoroughly. But you can't have them, I'm sorry. You can look at them, but without taking them into your hands. It is Artem who has become a sort of substitute for Dorbatay in the eyes of the Scythians, and he will return their ritual objects to them."

"That's a pity," Dmitro Borisovich grumbled out in reply; he was loath to part with the two archeological treasures but he did see that the geologist was absolutely right. "Yes, that's what should be done. But my friends, just think how lucky I've been — to witness the sacrificial rite of the Scythians! Unfortunately, it was not carried out to the end as it should have been..."

"Unfortunately, you say? You're sorry no one was sacrificed?"

"Of course not, not in that sense anyway... But we do know how the rite would have proceeded... With this stone knife, Dorbatay would cut the victims' throats, the victims

being held by the assistants, of course. The blood would spurt into the gold bowl..."

Lida was overcome by nausea. But the archeologist had already warmed up to his subject and had stopped paying attention to anything around him. He continued:

"Then, Dorbatay or one of the priests would cut the victim's right hand off and throw it high into the air. Dorbatay himself would carry the gold bowl with the victim's blood in it to the top of the pyramid and pour it over the sacred scimitar. Incidentally, that is probably why the scimitar looks so black. Well, that's how, to the best of my knowledge, the sacrificial rite of the Scythians was usually conducted..."

"One thing is clear anyway, Dmitro Borisovich. You bear me a grudge for stealing the show and not letting you see how it would have gone with your own eyes," Artem said sarcastically.

"Or not even to see it but go through the whole experience yourself," Ivan Semenovitch added, drawing his hand across his throat.

"Oh, damn you!" said the archeologist in annoyance. "I was trying to tell you about a serious matter and you have nothing better to do than to poke fun at me... I wish I hadn't told you anything."

The conversation came abruptly to a halt when Skolot had ridden over to the explorers, his stern face wearing a smile. His voice sounded soft and friendly:

"Skolot congratulates the strangers on their victory over Dorbatay. Skolot wants them to know that he would not have allowed Dorbatay's threats to be carried out in any case. But it is better, of course, that everything happened the way it did, without violence. Skolot's warriors were ready to use force if necessary. Now no one will ever dare to do you any harm. Skolot invites the strangers to his home. You are welcome to be his guests of honor."

That was essentially what he said in the double interpretation of Varkan and Dmitro Borisovich. The archeologist was about to reply that they would be glad to accept the kind invitation of the chieftain, when Ivan Semenovitch stepped forward and said:

"I want to tell Skolot the following. My friends and I are very much surprised that the heartfelt invitation has come only from Skolot himself. Why has Hartak not invited

them in his turn? Is he not the son of Skolot? Does the glorious Hartak have some ill feeling toward us?"

It was a bold and at the same time subtle move. If Hartak extended an invitation to the strangers to be his guests, too, he would forfeit his right to do them any harm in the future. Age-old Scythian tradition forbade harming anyone who had been a guest in one's home, and any violation of the tradition would be regarded as the most perfidious act imaginable.

As Skolot listened to the interpretation of this speech through the archeologist and Varkan, his face was clouded by a deepening frown. Artem was closely watching Hartak who seemed to try to hide among Skolot's bodyguards. The misshapen Scythian at first made a move suggestive of his desire to flee the scene. But as that was impossible, he remained, his body hunched, his eyes shifting, afraid to meet the gaze of the strangers, especially that of Lida. Then Skolot began to speak, his voice sounding solemn and authoritative this time. As he finished he gave his son a meaningful look, and that proved sufficient.

Hartak began speaking in his turn, gesturing, bowing, an artificial smile fastened on. Even without the interpretation, it was clear that he was asking to forgive him for his belated invitation and that he invited the strangers to be his guests as well as the guests of his glorious and mighty father.

"We accept the invitation," Ivan Semenovitch said decorously. "We are glad to be the guests of Skolot and Hartak."

But an aside meant only for his friends followed:

"That'll give us an excellent opportunity to find out answers to many of our questions."



the explorers go on a guided tour of the Scythian camp and find that riding horses is not an unimaginably difficult exercise; Artem is shocked to discover that scalps could be worn as signs of distinction; the explorers witness a tooth-pulling and metal forging in a smithy; the archeologist goes through an unfortunate experience; Ronis tells the story of the gold deposits; and finally, the author of the testament from the chest is discovered to be Ronis's ancestor

"Hasn't Artem turned out to be quite a decent horseman?" Ivan Semenovitch said jokingly.

"It's not surprising in my case," the young man replied in the same jesting vein. "I have been riding horses since childhood. You'd better take a look at Lida. Isn't that some top class riding? She's managing her horse as though she's been doing it all her life!"

"Hey, you've forgotten to comment on my horsemanship!" said Dmitro Borisovich plaintively. "I've never ridden before, I can give you my word for it!"

"Ivan Semenovitch, as it should naturally have been expected, has proved again to be our leader in riding exercises as well as in all other things. He surely looks capable of beating any Scythian in a riding competition," Artem concluded the exchange of wisecracks. "Even our friend Varkan."

Varkan, who was riding with the strangers, was glad to seize the opportunity to show how favorably disposed he

was to them. He himself had volunteered to guide them around the Scythian camp. He had taken two of his friends, young warriors from Skolot's troops, to accompany him. Varkan readily told the strangers about anything they wanted to know; he had even learnt several words of the strangers' odd language from Artem.

The four explorers were riding the horses that had been presented to them by Skolot. Varkan had brought the horses to the strangers and advised who should take which horse. The black horse had been given with the spontaneous applause to Ivan Semenovitch. But Artem was also quite happy to have a bay, graceful and very spirited horse. Lida and Dmitro Borisovich had received small, placid mares; nevertheless the archeologist had asked Varkan repeatedly and worriedly:

"Are you sure, my friend, that this animal will not let me down so to say? Are you sure it's a quiet beast? You see, I would really hate to run into some complications with the horse, because until now my contact with these creatures was limited to observing them from a distance."

It was only when Varkan confirmed for the umpteenth time that the mare was the most placid of the numerous horses in the great herd belonging to Skolot, that the archeologist consented to be helped onto it.

The Scythian camp excited great curiosity in the explorers. Everything they came across on their way seemed worthy of attention. There were tall and richly adorned *kibitkas* mounted on six-wheeled wagons which belonged to rich and high-born Scythians many of whom were sitting outside them surrounded by servants and slaves. There were smaller *kibitkas* that belonged to numerous hunters who traded hides and furs for food with the rich Scythians who owned large herds of horses. There were also small *kibitkas* swarming with poorly dressed slaves. In fact, from what the explorers had learnt, it followed that the social status of the ordinary Scythians was hardly different from that of the slaves; they had very few possessions — just their small *kibitkas* and a handful of house utensils. They toiled from early morning till late at night, trying to earn their living by tending cattle, hunting, and doing all the other menial work.

Only a very limited number of low-born young Scythians could win for themselves a different kind of life through personal bravery: they were chosen to serve in the ranks

of Skolot's warriors alongside the high-born Scythians. But, according to Varkan, they never cut the family ties that linked them to the poorer sections of the Scythian population. They kept their distance, staying away from the sons of the rich and elders; Varkan and his friends were among these "lucky" few. They avoided the haughty rich whenever they could. The behavior of Varkan and his two companions was a good illustration of this: every time the explorers stopped at the *kibitkas* of the rich, Varkan and the other two Scythians stayed some distance away, but were always at hand to join in conversation with the ordinary Scythians. The fact that Varkan and the likes of him were members of the chieftain's troops allowed them to preserve a certain measure of independence, but it could be easily observed that the high-born and rich paid them back with feelings of ill will and contempt, frowning upon friendships of some of the young warriors with the Greek slaves.

The archeologist could not suppress his excitement which boiled over as the explorers progressed through the Scythian camp and the everyday life of the Scythians unfolded before him, a life of which he knew but little, whatever knowledge he had being based on the works of ancient Greek historians and evidence unearthed from the barrows. Varkan was showered with questions by Dmitro Borisovich who in his impatience left the Scythian very little time to answer his queries. Varkan was left alone only for short intervals when Dmitro Borisovich was overwhelmed by the desire to share his impressions with his friends.

"It's fantastic! It's unbelievably interesting!" he cried out, his eyes shining with excitement behind the lenses of his eyeglasses, his hand pushing his hat back. "You know, Artem, these Scythians seem to have preserved the social structure that was described by Herodotus so long ago! He said that the Scythians lived in many different tribes at various stages of social development, and hence they had different customs and life styles. Some of the tribes were only at the nomadic stage, while others had already attained the sophistication of grain growing. We have found ourselves, incidentally, with Scythians at the stage of nomads and hunters."

"So what?" Artem said nonchalantly; he did not care very much for these fine historical and social distinctions.

"What do you mean 'so what'?" the archeologist exclaimed. "This fact clarifies all the conflicting assumptions that

have been put forward by the archeologists! For your information, Varkan says that there is another Scythian tribe living not far away that raises grain and trades with Skolot's tribe. Isn't that extraordinary? Oh, how I hope we have enough time to see everything there is to see and study it!"

Artem thought: *'Enough time' he says! It looks as if we'll have all the time in the world to get to know and study the life of the Scythians! The way things are, there seems to be very little chance indeed of our being able to return home...*

But very soon his gloomy thoughts were swept away by the sight of the lively scenes in the Scythian camp. There was a wide road cutting through the camp and then turning to the forest, meandering among the huge trees with their pinkish leaves.

Most of the *kibitkas* and big six-wheel wagons were located on one side of the road; there were only narrow passages left between many of the *kibitkas* with pointed tops; at other places, bigger and more lavish *kibitkas* had more open space around them. Most such *kibitkas* belonged to the Scythian elders. They rested not on the ground but on cumbersome wagons with huge crude wheels. The *kibitkas* of ordinary Scythians, made of rough cloth, were rarely mounted on wagons; in most cases they were pitched directly on the ground. They outnumbered all others and were crowded close to one another.

There were bigger *kibitkas* of red felt situated some distance away from the rest. They belonged to the high-born Scythians; in fact, the red color was reserved for them only. A little way off, dozens of small *kibitkas* where the kinsmen of the high-born Scythians, their servants and slaves lived, clustered around the bigger ones.

Some of the bigger *kibitkas* were adorned with various charms and decorations. Colored strips of cloth were fastened to the tops and entrances. Their purpose was to chase away evil spirits. Bronze decorations were sewn onto the felt, mostly around the entrance. There were many ornamental dishes, plates and vases of different sizes and purposes inside the *kibitkas*. The richer the owner was, the more elaborate were his possessions.

Close to one of the *kibitkas*, Artem saw something that puzzled him: on a string leather attached to two poles were hanging what seemed to be very tiny pelts of different

hues — black, whitish and red. What kind of animals could have supplied such tiny pelts?

Artem even turned his horse to ride over to the poles to give the pelts a closer look. Varkan immediately joined him, ready as always to offer his help in whatever problem might arise. Quite forgetting that Varkan could not understand him, Artem asked, pointing to the strange pelts with his hand:

“What animal did those pelts come from?”

Varkan looked where Artem was pointing and smiled; then, nodding his head he drew Artem’s attention to the bridle of his horse. To his great surprise Artem saw similar pelts there too.

“Oh, yes, the same kind! What are they?”

The intelligent Scythian did not need any interpretation: he raised his hand to the top of his head, moved his hand swiftly and circularly around it, and then jerked the hand upward as though tearing something off the head. Artem stared silently, failing to comprehend the explanatory gestures. Varkan repeated them, this time around Artem’s head. He even tugged Artem’s hair slightly and then immediately pointed to the shrivelled pelts on his bridle. A wide genial grin extended his lips.

Only then did it begin to dawn upon Artem what in fact the strange pelts were. But no, it couldn’t be true... He glanced once again at Varkan and then at the pelts. Then he called Dmitro Borisovich.

“What is it, my friend?” the archeologist called back.

“I’m not sure I’ve understood Varkan correctly,” Artem said quickly. “I’m very curious about these pelts. Judging from Varkan gestures, they are scalps! But how could that be?”

“Not only could that be, but they are scalps,” the archeologist said quietly. “Of course, Varkan would use a different word, but whatever the word is in the Scythian they are scalps all right!”

“Oh, my, how awful!” Artem cried out involuntarily.

“From his point of view there’s nothing awful about it, but quite the contrary, an honorable distinction. American Indians are the best known case of this tradition. Of course, the Scythians should be given an absolute priority here, and there’s no need whatsoever to look for any connections. The thing is that the Scythians had a custom of scalping their slain enemies. The scalps, attached to the bridle, were the

evidence of the warrior's manliness, intrepidity and cunning in battle. We see that this custom has been preserved in our tribe, and Varkan is proudly displaying his scalps. He may even be surprised that you don't have any. He holds you in high esteem. I'll ask him now what he thinks of that."

The archeologist spoke to Varkan and the Scythian was quick to reply. Then he detached one of the scalps from the bridle and handed it to Artem.

"Oh, why is he doing that?" Artem asked in genuine surprise.

Dmitro Borisovich burst into laughter.

"Isn't it wonderful! Varkan wants to make you a gift of one... err... pelt."

"Why should he?"

"He says he's got many of them and his friend Artem has none. He says it would look nice on the bridle of your horse. Ha-ha! Isn't it extraordinary! Mind you: to give you this gift is a very noble thing for Varkan to do. Varkan is parting with an enemy scalp — a thing of great value to him! — in order to please his guest!"

"I can't say I'm too pleased!"

"From the point of view of Varkan you should be. Now, you must make up your mind whether you accept or refuse it."

"What am I going to do with it, Dmitro Borisovich?" Artem said. "I understand that for Varkan, it's a sign of distinction, but why should I have it? Besides, my stomach turns wherever I look at this... scalp. No, I won't take it."

"But, mind you, Artem, that Varkan might take offense," the archeologist said, this time quite seriously. "You are refusing a gift that has been offered you with the best intentions from the bottom of his heart."

But Artem had already found a way out of the awkward situation:

"Tell Varkan, Dmitro Borisovich, that in our country... or whatever you would call it in your interpretation — there's no such custom of wearing... err... pelts. So, I thank him very much but plead with him to attach it back where it belongs. Will that be a good enough excuse?"

"Let's hope it will. I'll translate what you've said to him."

The explorers continued on their way through the Scythian camp. The more they saw, the more Dmitro Borisovich's archeological enthusiasm grew. Could he, for example, even have dreamt, under any other circumstances of seeing a real Scythian tooth-puller at work?

They stopped at a *kibitka* where many people were gathered. The Scythians made way for the equestrians, abiding by Scythian custom: those on foot must always make way for riders, because anyone who was mounted was both literally and figuratively higher. The people at the *kibitka* did so in silence and rather glumly, but recognizing Varkan among the riders, greeted him cheerfully. This made Artem wonder once again why Varkan enjoyed such popularity among the ordinary Scythians.

A bearded old Scythian was kneeling before the *kibitka*. His hat was pushed far back on his head, and tears rolled from his eyes but he held his mouth open with resolve, clutching convulsively at the felt of the *kibitka*. Another Scythian, probably related somehow to the soothsayers as he was wearing a long woman's dress and a short cloak with small plates of bronze sewn to it, was stooping over the older Scythian yanking at something in the man's mouth with a huge pair of pliers. The sawbones' face was bathed in sweat, large drops of which accumulated on his forehead, wrinkled in concentration and effort. The operation must have been going on for quite some time already, judging from the condition of both patient and doctor.

The "patient," who continued to kneel with resignation, groaned and howled, supporting his chin with his hand from time to time. The "doctor" told him sharply, even savagely to hold still, pushing his head backward from time to time with his hand.

"Oh, what a terrible way to treat a man!" Lida cried out in indignation.

"But, my dear girl, progress in dentistry has left some of the principle things unchanged," Ivan Semenovitch protested. "In our dental clinics, with all their sophisticated equipment, you'd still have your tooth pulled out barbariously with pliers of improved design no doubt, but pliers all the same. As far as I'm concerned it doesn't make a great deal of difference whether the patient is sitting in some dentist's chair or kneeling, or whether the pliers are nickel-

plated or not. The operation of extracting a tooth seems to have remained basically unchanged for thousands of years."

But Dmitro Borisovich, evidently impressed, was watching every movement of the tooth-puller closely. At last he cried out excitedly:

"It's extraordinary! It's the scene from the electrum vase found in the barrow of Kul-Oba come to life! The vase is decorated with the scenes of Scythians practising dentistry! And now I'm witnessing it all for real!"

"An electrum vase?" Artem said. "Are you sure you've used the right word? What does 'electrum' mean, Dmitro Borisovich? If you wanted to say 'electric' I don't see how that could apply here either..."

"Of course I'm sure!" said the archeologist sharply. "Electrum — a natural alloy of silver and gold. Shame on you, a student of geology! You should know that, by the way!"

Artem only shrugged as if to say, he didn't think he was supposed to know about electrum.

"This yanking of teeth you call 'practising dentistry'?" Ivan Semenovitch said sarcastically. "You express it much too delicately, my dear friend, even if we take into consideration your emotions concerning 'electrum.' I wonder how loud you'd screech if you were subjected to such a crude procedure..."

At that moment, something snapped inside the old man's mouth, and the pliers produced a jagged piece of a tooth. Lida uttered a cry and turned away. The "doctor" examined the tooth fragment carefully and shook his head, evidently dissatisfied with the result, then pushed the patient who had already begun to rise, back to his knees, and once again thrust the pliers into the long-suffering "patient's" mouth. The operation continued!

"I think I've had enough of this spectacle, my friends," Ivan Semenovitch exclaimed. "I'm quite fed up with it in fact. Let's move on."

He turned his horse around, looked into the distance and said:

"There's something over there! Look at that party so blithely having their lunch!"

There were six Scythians sitting on the ground around a fire some distance away. They had taken off their leather and felt hats and put them on the ground and seemed quite oblivious to anything save their food. A large bronze

cauldron was suspended over the fire; steam was rising from it. Every Scythian held a chunk of steaming boiled meat in his hand, and once in a while, tore off a large piece with his teeth, chewed with gusto, washing the meat down with *oksugala* drawn from a big vessel standing on the ground by the fire.

The Scythians were eating in silence, as though performing a sacred ritual. Varkan greeted them in a loud voice. All six Scythians raised their heads simultaneously and, recognizing Varkan, greeted him cordially in turn and invited him and his companions to share their meal. Varkan asked whether the strangers would like to stop for a while and join these people at their meal.

"Thank you for the invitation," said Ivan Semenovitch. "Unfortunately we'll have to decline the invitation as we are pressed for time. Besides we've already had lunch. Thank you all the same."

Dmitro Borisovich said pensively:

"Hospitable people, these Scythians! By the looks of them, these six men must be quite poor. I don't think they eat meat very often, and yet they invited us to share their meal..."

Artem noticed that both the men and women they met on their way stared at Lida more than anybody else. No doubt, all the stranger men got their share of attention — the victory over Dorbatay that was still very fresh on people's minds made the strangers the focus of interest. But the strange girl was by far the one who excited the greatest curiosity. Once in a while, a Scythian would stop dead in his tracks, gaping and staring at Lida, ignoring the rest of the company. Evidently, the reason for this was not that Lida was mounted: horsemanship of Scythian women was not inferior to that of men. So what was it that made the Scythians stare?

Artem told Lida about his observations. The girl's reply was instantaneous:

"Oh, I believe it's quite simple. The Scythian women always wear their hats or whatever you call them with the edges turned up, and I'm bareheaded."

"So what?"

"In their eyes, my silly Artem, that's like a good Moslem seeing an unveiled woman in the street. It's unprecedented, don't you see?"

"In other words, you look indecent, and that makes them

mad. That's not a good idea, Lida. Why don't you put on a scarf or something? Or perhaps you don't want to hide your golden curls from view, but would rather display them to their full advantage, eh?"

"Aren't you silly! Why should I observe their stupid customs? I hate wearing anything on my head. Let them stare!"

Heavy, ringing sounds of metal striking against metal that grew louder as the cavalcade approached a small smithy stopped all the talk. A huge Scythian, naked to the waist and wearing a wide leather apron was hammering at a red-hot ingot.

It was a pleasure to watch his precise, measured and powerful movements. Reflections from the furnace played on his face, dripping with sweat. The tight rounded muscles bulged rhythmically under the shiny dark skin of his arms. There was a pile of small ingots by the furnace. The smith went on working, not paying the slightest bit of attention to the strangers.

Varkan was somewhat perplexed at the unusual interest the strangers exhibited toward the smith and his work which, in his eyes, could hold nothing that was worth paying attention to. His perplexity grew when Ivan Semenovich, evidently not satisfied with just watching, leapt down from his horse and went into the smithy. He walked over to the forge and picked up a cold ingot from the ground. He turned it in his hands, examining it in silence for some time. Then, nodding to the smith, who had stopped swinging his hammer and was staring in amazement at the strange visitor, Ivan Semenovich put the ingot down and walked back to his horse under the questioning gazes of his friends.

Ivan Semenovich leapt onto the horse with surprising agility, took the reins into his hand, looked at his companions, and said:

"I recalled our conversation about the insides of the Sharp Mount and the possibility of using the archeological evidence, related to the Scythians to determine whether the mount had any ore deposits. I have now discovered, Dmitro Borisovich, that those ingots are good bronze. It would be very useful to find out where the Scythians get their ore. If the deposits are anywhere nearby..."

"Yes, I'll ask him right away!" the archeologist said and turned to Varkan with his question. Then he said hastily:

"Yes, the Scythians get their ore from a place not far from here. Varkan even suggests that we go there. If we wish, he'll show us the mine."

"Gladly," the geologist said, gesturing for the Scythian to lead the way. Varkan turned his horse abruptly, leaned closer to its neck, and spurred it to a gallop. The explorers followed, having some problems keeping pace with him.

They galloped through the entire camp. Varkan was probably bored a little at having to wait all the time while his companions had stopped watching people at their everyday chores. Now he was glad to make up for it by riding fast.

Bending low over the horse's neck, he rode at full speed. Ivan Semenovitch gave his horse the rein with great pleasure; his mount not wanting to lag behind, also took off in a gallop. The other horses did the same without being urged by their riders. Truth to tell, Artem was a little apprehensive at first, but he was ashamed to show any signs of fear in front of his friends so he entrusted himself to his horse. Lida bit her lip, held fast to the reins, but did not try to slow down her sprightly mare.

It was only after some time that they realized Dmitro Borisovich had disappeared. They had already travelled far from the Scythian camp into the steppe with its pinkish-yellow grass high enough for a man to hide himself easily. Where indeed was Dmitro Borisovich? How had he managed to get lost?

"Varkan! Varkan!" Artem called out at the top of his voice. "Hold it!" He was short of breath after the swift gallop that made his flesh creep.

The Scythian reined in his horse, and as he turned his face presented a picture of vitality and joy. His eyes asked: what's the matter?

"We've lost Dmitro Borisovich!" Artem shouted.

"Where is he now?" Ivan Semenovitch said, looking around.

Varkan searched the steppe with his eyes, but the archeologist was nowhere to be seen.

"Dmitro Borisovich! Dmitro Borisovich!" they chorused. In a moment, a hardly audible reply came:

"I'm over here..."

"Where is here?" Artem shouted at the top of his voice.

"Here... in the bloody steppe!"

"Come join us!"

"I can't!"

“Why?” Artem shouted peering in the direction from which the voice came. But there was no sign of the archeologist: only the flat plain with the grass, growing high and thick, undulating in the breeze.

“You’d better come to me!” Dmitro Borisovich called out again.

Artem turned to the geologist as if asking permission; Ivan Semenovich nodded his head to give the go ahead. Artem immediately turned the horse around and galloped back in the direction they had come from. What was the matter with the archeologist?

The first thing that Artem discerned in the high grass was the head of the archeologist’s mare. It appeared for a moment above the grass, looked at the approaching rider, and was gone again. The grass was so high that even a horse could be hidden entirely from view! In a moment, the face of Dmitro Borisovich himself popped into view. It was an angry face. When he began speaking, he sounded very much annoyed, giving Artem a piece of his mind.

“So that’s how you respect your elders?! You galloped away with no regard for what happened to me!”

“Dmitro Borisovich, I wasn’t the only one...”

“Oh, keep quiet when I’m speaking! This damned beast is not at all as placid as you tried to convince me. I wanted to stop her because she was going at neck-breaking speed. But do you think she gave any heed to my appeals? Not at all! She kept going after you like mad. I tried to stop her. I pleaded with her to calm down. I pulled on the reins with all my might... or maybe it was she who was pulling the reins... I can’t tell for sure now...”

Artem felt he was about to burst out laughing, but he realized that if he did not control himself, Dmitro Borisovich would take it as a great personal offense. That is why Artem, with great effort, preserved a serious face. The archeologist continued hotly:

“I did everything imaginable to stop her! I tried to slow her down by pressing her flanks with my legs, shouted to her to stop! But nothing happened! The damned beast was going like a thing possessed, and besides, she wanted to throw me off, she did! The whole time!”

“She did not want to throw you off, she was just galloping!”

“Silence, young man! I know perfectly well what galloping is, I’ve seen lots of horses do it... in the movies.

Galloping is when a horse is moving at a measured pace and the rider moves rhythmically up and down in time with it in the saddle. Yes, I know these things well enough! But in this case, the brute was not galloping at all! How could I post rhythmically when the monster was trying the whole while to throw me over her neck? I tell you, she was!"

Artem had to turn away as he did not want the archeologist to see his face contort in his efforts to keep from laughing.

"At last I managed to get my hands around her neck, but to do it, I, naturally, had to let go of the reins! I didn't think I needed them anyway. Then I lost the blanket that is used instead of a saddle here... There's nothing funny about it, Artem! It's quite unmannerly and disrespectful, by the way, to laugh when somebody's telling you about such an unfortunate experience!"

"I... am... not... laughing, Dmitro Borisovich! I'm listening to you with the greatest respect... It's just that I'm short of breath after a fast ride, you know."

"So, as I was holding the beast that had gone amok, by the neck, I made another attempt to stop her," with these words the archeologist shot a furious glance at the mare who was peacefully grazing a few steps away, munching loudly on the lush grass. "I shouted right into her ear, 'Halt, damn you!' And what do you think she did?"

"She stopped?"

"Oh, how did you guess?" the archeologist asked suspiciously. "Yes, she did stop, but in what manner?"

Artem did not understand what Dmitro Borisovich meant.

"The damned beast did not stop all of her, so to say, at once. At first her front part stopped... Yes, yes, that's how it was! I remember it very well! And her hind part kept on galloping in the mean time!"

"But that's impossible!"

"But I'm telling you the hind part kept on galloping! I can't tell you for sure though for how long it continued in this manner because at some point, I was kicked up into the air by this bucking hind part, and sailed over the front part that was firmly standing on the ground. It's a wonder I didn't brake any bones when I landed! Only then did the mare stop completely, entirely, so to say... Oh, what has come over you?"

Artem was bent over almost double, leaning against the

horse's neck and shaking in uncontrollable fits of laughter. He was aware that it was so impolite to be laughing at someone else's misfortunes, that his mirth, enjoyed at the expense of such a respectable person as Dmitro Borisovich, was absolutely unpardonable, and yet he could not control himself.

"Cut out that laughing, young man! I personally do not see anything funny in the situation. Will you please stop!"

At last, Artem regained control of himself and stopped laughing. Wiping the tears from his eyes, he tried to put on a serious expression:

"Why didn't you join us afterward, when we began calling you?"

The archeologist glanced angrily at Artem above his glasses:

"Ha, do you imagine it is so easy to talk this beast into allowing me to remount? She flatly refuses! I've been pleading with her all this time! But she won't even allow me to get close to her! And all of you told me how placid and manageable she was!"

"You should have taken the reins, and she would have followed you wherever you wanted to go."

"Try for yourself. Incidentally, she's got teeth, and on the other end she can kick you with her hind legs. And if you approach her from the flank, there's nothing to grab on to..."

Artem was about to be overcome with a new wave of laughter, but to succumb to it would mean mortally offending the annoyed archeologist. So he silently jumped down from his horse, came over to the archeologist's mare, took her reins, and walked her over to Dmitro Borisovich.

"Now you can mount. I'll hold her."

The archeologist glanced at the young man suspiciously: wasn't he being a bit too careless in handling the horse? But as their friends were already impatiently calling, there was no more time to be lost. Throwing himself awkwardly astride the mare's back, Dmitro Borisovich wiggled his way to a sitting position. In a moment they were riding quietly side by side. The archeologist was silent, from time to time glancing mistrustfully at his mount trotting along smoothly and sedately, and at Artem who seemed completely absorbed in thoughts of his own. At last, Dmitro Borisovich heaved a sigh, as though he was about to confess something and said:

"It seems to me, Artem, that our discussion of the little... errr... incident, involving... my horse, was, so to say, of a strictly confidential nature, and it's probably not worthwhile... to tell our friends the details... Do you think it's unreasonable?"

"Oh no, it's not, it's not unreasonable at all, Dmitro Borisovich!"

"I'm very glad you think that way. I knew from the start that you would immediately recognize the impropriety of informing them of the details... Could we say that I was delayed because of... well, because of..."

Artem searched his mind for a convincing reason that could have accounted for the archeologist's falling behind:

"Say, you've had to stop because the horse's belly-band — the one that holds the blanket on the horse's back in place — was loose, and so it had to be tightened. That's something a person without a previous experience would hardly be able to do single-handedly, and so, I was only too glad to help."

"Yes, that's what it was, exactly. I was just about to mention that... errr... band," the archeologist said, pleased with the explanation. "There's one more thing... err... a personal request. Why should we go at such a break-neck speed? What's the hurry? What will we miss if we go a bit slower? All this galloping only makes you short of breath..."

"All right, Dmitro Borisovich," Artem said. He realized that the highly strung archeologist should be given a chance to compose himself.

They rode over to their friends who had been waiting rather impatiently for them. Artem gave them, in a few words, the invented reason that had supposedly held the archeologist back; Dmitro Borisovich shot anxious glances at Artem, evidently somewhat worried that the young man would not be able to check himself and would reveal the actual reason for the delay. But everything went off without a hitch, and the group started on its way. Now they were moving much slower, and soon enough Dmitro Borisovich regained some of his composure. He even began interpreting the explanations of Varkan who pointed to the slope of the hill situated close to the steep cliff the cavalcade was approaching.

"Here, on this slope, the Scythians mine their ore. It is taken from the open pit in baskets. The metal is smelted not far from here. All the work is supervised by Varkan's

friend, Ronis, the very man who attracted our attention on our first day here.”

As they drew nearer to the slope, they could discern pairs of people carrying big baskets of ore to a fair-sized furnace in a large hole in the ground. Black smoke was billowing from the chimney; the smoke was so heavy it sank low and spread over the ground.

“Only slaves and a few Scythians work here,” Dmitro Borisovich translated. “A sample of the ore will be brought to us in a moment. I’ve asked Varkan to bring some especially for you, Ivan Semenovich.”

“Oh, thank you.”

“Varkan also says that he has sent for Ronis. It may be of some interest to talk to him. Varkan says that Ronis is well versed in matters of mining.”

Ivan Semenovich, whose curiosity was thoroughly aroused, looked around, taking in all the details. An ordinary hill, by the looks of it. Jagged rocks on the cliffs beyond... Aha, the ore samples had arrived. High-grade ore of good quality... but with other metals in it; the experienced eye of the geologist immediately discerned all this. That’s why they smelted bronze from this copper ore which also has some tin or antimony, zinc or lead... The bronze was of quite a decent quality. But...

Ivan Semenovich turned to Dmitro Borisovich:

“Everything is clear as far as the bronze is concerned, Dmitro Borisovich. But another question arises...”

“What is that?”

“To the best of my knowledge — a geologist’s knowledge, not that of an archeologist, of course — the Scythians lived in the Iron Age, not the Bronze Age; is that correct?”

“Yes, you’re right, Ivan Semenovich. Iron was widely used by the Scythians, and in fact, Scythian culture as we know it was formed after the complete preeminence of iron over bronze.”

“That’s what I thought. But this tribe is using bronze, not iron. And here we see them digging for copper ore. So, the question is: why do the Scythians we’ve encountered here make and use bronze, not iron?”

Dmitro Borisovich pulled at his beard indecisively, evidently at a loss, not being able to provide an immediate answer.

“Why indeed?” the archeologist said pensively. “No doubt, bronze arrowheads, helmets, and ornaments and

copper cauldrons and so on were still used after bronze was superseded by iron, the metal favored by Ares, the god of war. But even though bronze was still used, it did not determine the overall picture of that age; the Age was decidedly that of Iron. You're absolutely correct in this respect, my dear Ivan Semenovitch. But in apparent contradiction to this fact, our Scythians are making bronze..."

"We have not seen anything made of iron at all, so far," the geologist said.

"No, we haven't, and that's very strange... But I have an idea, Ivan Semenovitch!" Dmitro Borisovich said, his eyes shining with the excitement of a possible solution that had dawned upon him. "What if our Scythians, who already knew how to use iron, found themselves cut off from the rest of the world in this... errr... cave, and had to go back to using bronze? What do you say to that?"

"Why should they? Just because they wanted to? I don't quite follow you, Dmitro Borisovich."

"In fact, it's quite simple. Our Scythians are living in a sort of a cave, aren't they?"

"Yes. Or anyway, that's what we think this place is. So, what follows from this fact?"

"What follows? They searched for deposits of iron ore in this spacious but nevertheless limited cavity and failed to find any. But they discovered copper ore. Do you see my point now? And cut off as they were from the rest of the world, they could do nothing else but start using bronze again!"

Whether it was really the case or not, the idea put forward by Dmitro Borisovich was not lacking in logical premise and gave the geologist something to ponder.

"All right," he said after some time. "We'll have to accept this as a starting hypothesis."

"I think it can be promoted from the status of a hypothesis to the one of a discovery. At least, that's what the facts tell us," Dmitro Borisovich said rather heatedly, already persuaded by his own idea.

Ivan Semenovitch said cautiously:

"In any case, we'll have plenty of time to find out the actual reason!"

"But will we ever be able to tell anyone of our great discoveries?" Artem said in a low voice. The mining area they were visiting with its steep cliffs close by reminded him of the fact that they had wandered into the oddest of

places, cut off from the rest of the world, deep under the ground... so very deep... and so far away from normal life!

"Why are you so pessimistic, Artem?" Lida said with gentle reproach in her voice. "You don't believe we'll get back to the surface?"

Artem did not reply; he did not know what to say — this pessimistic assessment of the situation had escaped his lips quite against his will. But Lida's attention at that moment switched to something else.

Hooves beating on the ground could be heard, and as they turned they saw a man riding toward them on a strange shaggy horse. It was Ronis, the first person they had heard speak Greek here.

The dark-haired, beardless Ronis, supervisor of the mining, cut a strange figure among the bearded Scythians. The explorers recalled that Ronis was a descendant of those Greeks who had been captured by the Scythians so long before. Consequently, he was a slave by his status. But neither his manners nor his speech revealed this. There was no subservience in either his behavior or his eyes that looked boldly straight into the eye of the person he was addressing. A polite smile played on his cleanly-shaven face; it seemed to emphasize that he, a descendant of the enslaved Greeks, practically a slave himself, knew his own worth and refused to toady to anyone.

Ronis bowed ceremoniously to the strangers and greeted Varkan in a very friendly manner. The two of them immediately fell into conversation. It could be easily deduced from the way they talked that they were long-time friends who did not have to use many words to reach an understanding; they obviously trusted each other completely. Ronis was listening to Varkan, his head slightly bent, glancing up at the strangers once in a while. His observant eyes moved from one figure to another. He gazed at Lida, but when he met Lida's eyes, he moved on to look at Dmitro Borisovich. Though the moment of eye-contact was short, Lida could see that the gaze was friendly and interested.

Varkan stopped talking, and Ronis replied in a few words; then Ronis addressed Dmitro Borisovich, but his eyes kept moving from one stranger to another, as though he wanted to demonstrate that his words were addressed to all of them. He was speaking with a flowing ease, not stopping to grope for words. All his manners showed that he considered himself equal to the people he was talking to.

The well-constructed Greek phrases made the archeologist forget for some time that he had to interpret what was being said for his friends. The Greek's speech was so smooth and clear that it seemed no interpretation was needed for them to comprehend it. But then Dmitro Borisovich remembered that his friends did not understand a word and began interpreting:

"It's a great pleasure for me to tell the wise and learned strangers about my work. I'll consider it an honor if I can be of service. In case our honored guests wish to see the mining of ore at a closer range, I'd bid them follow me and will gladly provide all the necessary explanations and details."

The tour of the mining pits did not take long. Surprising as it might seem, Dmitro Borisovich was more interested than Ivan Semenovitch. But could an experienced twentieth-century geologist really be that interested in primitive methods of mining ore two thousand years out of date! Ivan Semenovitch carefully noted only the directions and the thickness of the ore veins, but Dmitro Borisovich was fascinated by everything he saw: hammers, pickaxes, spades, the slaves' clothes — in fact no detail, no matter how insignificant, escaped the archeologist's attention. Artem heard the disappointed sighs that the archeologist heaved at regular intervals — all the sighs were of equal duration and expressed equal regret.

"Oh, if only I had my camera with me! How could I have lost it in that damned cave!"

But as there was no camera to take pictures with, and Dmitro Borisovich wished he could spend much longer time making drawings of all the exciting things he saw, in his notepad.

Artem watched the excited archeologist, but his thoughts were elsewhere: *Why did the name "Ronis" sound so familiar? It certainly did ring a bell... But where had I heard it?*

Meanwhile, they returned to the place where they had met Ronis earlier. The explorers asked him to tell them a little about himself; he began speaking — again in his reserved and quiet manner — but a melancholy note could now be discerned in his voice.

"I was born here," his story ran, "among the Scythians. But I know from the story passed down in our family from one generation to another that my ancestors were captured

by the Scythians in the town of Olvia after a battle in which the Greeks were defeated. The Scythians enslaved the captives. All the descendants of those captives have been kept in slavery ever since."

Varkan, who had been listening to Ronis all this time, looked up and said, chuckling:

"You mention it as though there was something extraordinary unjust or unusual in it. If it had been my ancestors who had been captured by the Greeks, they would have been enslaved, as was indeed the case with many Scythians."

Then they abruptly began speaking Scythian, evidently arguing about something. Dmitro Borisovich decided to use the break in his interpreting duties to express some of his opinions:

"Varkan, no doubt, has the point here. It's absolutely clear that the Scythians were captured by the Greeks in far greater numbers than the other way round, and they had to live in slavery under much harsher conditions. We have historical evidence of almost constant rioting among the Scythian slaves in the Greek colonies. The Greeks tried to squeeze everything they could from the slaves that had been captured in the coastal areas of the Black Sea... and most of these slaves were the Scythians."

"Of course the slaves were always revolting! In view of what they had to go through what else was there for them to do but revolt?" Artem said passionately; he could not remain silent when anyone was talking about oppression. Lida gave his sleeve a sharp tug as if to say: *don't interrupt!*

"About two thousand years ago," Dmitro Borisovich went on, bent on another of his impromptu lectures, "there was a massive revolt of the Scythian slaves led by a slave named Savmak. They even managed to seize power in one of the Greek Black Sea coastal towns. The Greeks had to call in additional troops to put down the uprising. There's quite a lot to be said in relation to our subject concerning the Bosphorian Kingdom, and the independent Greek city-states. And I can assure you that much of it will not be in favor of the Greeks! Some time later, remind me to tell you all about it: there are so many exciting stories from that period... Aha, our friends have begun speaking Greek again, evidently for our benefit."

But Varkan and Ronis continued their argument, now in Greek. At last the Scythian cried out in a temper:

“Ronis, I don’t understand one thing and now I want to find out the answer. Tell me, why do you have anything to do with Dorbatay? I know you very well; I know things about you no one else does. We share a lot, and if Dorbatay learnt about it we’d be in trouble, right?”

Ronis nodded his head: *make sure we would*. Varkan continued:

“But Dorbatay always looks daggers at me, because he’s my enemy and he knows it, and knows that I know it. Our enmity is mutual. I know you regard him as an enemy as well, so why do you seem to be in his good graces? Surely not because of your good looks? Can you explain his favorable attitudes toward you?”

Ronis smiled bitterly and said:

“Oh yes, Dorbatay pretends to be friendly with me. But of course it’s not, as you put, on account of my good looks. Neither does he harbor any good feelings for me as a person.”

“What is it then?” Varkan persisted.

Ronis’s eyes flashed with anger.

“All right then, I’ll tell you. It’s not the first time you’ve reproached me because Dorbatay is friendly towards me. But I’ll tell you frankly what’s behind it. You must know that I buy his friendship. I need it to go on with my work... you know which... without any hindrance. I’m prepared to sacrifice my very life to achieve what I’ve set out to do. You know that, too. But to reach this goal I must have as much freedom as I can possibly get. So I buy it from the old soothsayer.”

“I don’t quite get you, Ronis!”

“All right, I’ll explain. There’s a legend about one of my distant ancestors that has been passed down from father to son. I heard it from my father. I’ll tell it to you if you care to listen.

“Long ago, I’m not sure when, how many generations back, one of my forebears found gold deposits in the mountains. Gold nuggets you didn’t even have to dig for. You could just pick them up off the ground! Imagine — collecting nuggets of pure gold under your feet! There was so much of gold that one man or even several people could not collect all of it even if they worked all their lives. But my ancestor did not tell anybody about the gold. He kept his secret. Only his elder son knew of it, and my ancestor decreed that his secret should be passed from generation to

generation through elder sons only. That's how I learnt it. Some of the deposits are no good any longer though..."

"All the nuggets have been carried away?"

"No. Those deposits are no good for a different reason. You see, my ancestor found two separate locations of gold deposits: one is very rich and the other has considerably smaller amounts of gold. I'm working at the smaller one. But even there I get enough gold to keep the soothsayer happy when I give it to him for his treasury. In this way I buy my freedom. The old soothsayer has learnt somehow that I'm the only person who knows the location of the deposits, and as he wants to continue to receive his regular allotment of gold, he does not interfere with my activities. And there's enough gold there to last my whole lifetime, even should I live three hundred years! Old Dorbatay would, of course, want to find out exactly where I get my gold. But he is convinced that I won't tell him. He's already seen that even torture won't allow him to get anything out of me."

"How do you know he's convinced? And what do you mean by torture?" Varkan asked.

Without a word, Ronis pulled up the wide sleeve of his coat-like garment and rolled up his shirt sleeve, revealing long deep scars just above the elbow, as though the flesh had been cut from his arm in strips.

"That's how Dorbatay tried to find out and how he was convinced I wouldn't tell him anything. When he saw that I'd rather die than divulge anything, he let me go on condition that I'd bring him a certain amount of gold every week. Oh, he did try to have me followed, but nothing came of that either. I took the necessary precautions. So this gold is my only weapon now, and I won't let go of it. I must live because of the goal I have to attain. You know that goal, don't you, Varkan?"

He fell silent. Varkan grabbed his hand, squeezing it hard in an outburst of emotion.

"Don't be cross at me, my friend," he said impulsively. "I'm sorry if I've offended you in any way! I surely did not mean to! And I'm also sorry for reminding you of things you'd rather not bring up. But you must agree that sooner or later, it would have been discussed."

"I'm not angry with you, Varkan, and it's good we've talked about these things at last. Only it's unfortunate that we've taken so much of our guests' time!"

"Oh, that's perfectly all right! It was most informative to listen to you," Dmitro Borisovich protested vehemently. "There's even one more thing that we'd like very much to find out if you don't mind talking about it."

"Go ahead, ask your question," Ronis said. "You've already learnt almost too much anyway."

"Why are you using only the smaller of the deposits? What about the other one which is, as you say, much richer?"

"The richer one has been cut off by a rockfall. It's impossible to get through to it. No one even knows, in fact, where to look. The last person who knew the exact location was my ancestor who discovered it. He charted the way to it in his will which he left sealed in a cave. But the cave is inaccessible now as it's cut off by the same rockfall."

This piece of information gave Dmitro Borisovich a jolt: a will in a walled-off cave, access to which had been cut off by a rockfall!

Ronis continued his story:

"But, as I've said, there's enough gold for me in the smaller deposits. Should Dorbatay ever find the will — I don't know exactly where the richer deposits are! — he would never be able to find the gold anyway. I'll see to that! Besides, there's a good guarantee that none of us will ever find it."

"Why?" Ivan Semenovitch asked seriously and pensively.

"I know for sure that my ancestor had to go a very long way to get to them, and to do so, he had to go beyond these mountains," and Ronis pointed to the cliffs. "Now it is absolutely impossible to get to the other side of them through the underground passages, as they have been sealed off by rockfalls, and the mountains are too high for anyone to climb!"

Naturally, Artem thought. These are not mountains but the walls of this gigantic subterranean cavity, and at some point they must begin to curve inwards and continue to form the roof of the cave.

Ivan Semenovitch was listening to the translation of what Ronis was saying with great attention: the Greek's story quite unexpectedly turned out to be of great significance. Then he put his own question to the Greek:

"Is Ronis your real name? I've got the feeling something's missing from it. I dare say that Pronis would sound better to my ear!"

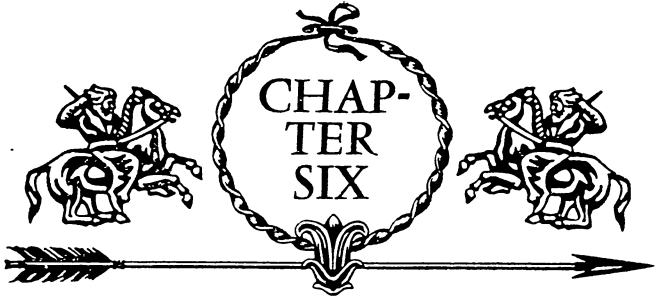
Dmitro Borisovich could not suppress some nervous ex-

citement translating this question, which was seemingly beside the point, but the intent of which was all too clear both to him and the rest of the explorers. Ronis — Pronis, the names were almost identical! Were the explorers on the threshold of the discovery that would enable them to solve the mystery put before them by the chest that had been discovered in the walled-off cave?

Ronis answered without any hesitation as if speaking about something of no importance whatsoever:

“Ronis and Pronis are the names that are traditionally given to the males of our family. The tradition runs many generations into the past. The names alternate from one generation to the other. In fact, Pronis was the name of my ancestor who discovered the gold deposits. His son was named Ronis. His grandson was Pronis, and so on down the line. My father’s name is Pronis, and my son, if I have one, would be called Pronis. That’s our family tradition and it must remain unchanged.”

Artem held his breath — everything fell into place: there was no reason to doubt that the man who had put down the cryptic words on the parchment they found in the chest was Ronis’s ancestor! Ronis’s story threw so much light on the text of the parchment and its directions as to how to get to the gold deposits! Oh Pronis, you could not ever have imagined what turbulent events would follow the discovery of your testament!



Varkan invites the explorers to take part in a hunt, then exhibits almost a supernatural skill in the spear throwing but puts himself in a situation that requires immediate action from Artem; Lida discerns certain changes in Artem and urges him to drink o k s u g a l a mixed with blood; the archeologist is annoyed to learn that he has missed an anthropologically important ceremony

They were already in sight of the nomadic Scythian camp, when Dmitro Borisovich who had been talking with Varkan, stopped his horse, raised his hand to attract attention and said:

"My friends, Varkan has an exciting proposal. It seems our young people will especially appreciate this, although Ivan Semenovitch and I would surely like to participate in it some way, too. Do you want to hear what it is?"

"Of course!" Artem responded immediately.

"Varkan said, give or take a word, the following: 'Wouldn't my young friend' — that is you, Artem — 'like to take part in a wild boar hunt? Yesterday some of my friends and I discovered the trail a large boar takes to get to his watering place. Skolot would be happy to treat his guests to an excellent meal of roast boar. He told me to hunt down that boar after the guests had seen everything else they wanted to see. So, if my young friend wants to take part in the hunt...'"

"Am I not young enough to be invited?" Lida said somewhat piqued.

"Oh, I'm sure the invitation extends to you as well,"

Dmitro Borisovich said and turned to Varkan to verify it. Varkan began nodding his head in glad affirmation the moment he heard the archeologist's question, and looked at the girl, his eyes radiating happy welcome, the unexpected ardor of which made Lida feel a little embarrassed.

"It seems to me that Varkan fancies Lida at least as much as our Artem does," the archeologist said, smiling archly. "Oh, don't blush, my dear girl, it is only natural. He's a very courteous and hospitable man... The only thing I'm a little worried about is that it might lead, inadvertently, you know, to some... err... discord. You remember, my friends, that Hartak also tried in his manner to woo Lida, and Varkan is not entirely indifferent either. But I've had ample opportunity to observe that there's another young man, a twentieth-century young man and our fellow countryman at that, who is not going to let himself to be pushed aside in this matter..."

"Dmitro Borisovich!" two voices cried out in a synchronized protest. "That's not funny!"

"All right, all right, so it's not. But what should I tell Varkan: do you accept his invitation?"

"Of course we do!"

"I'd be very happy to join him!"

"That leaves the two of us, Ivan Semenovich. What are we going to do? As a matter of fact, there's another invitation from Skolot — to have a look at some of his treasures. I must tell you frankly that I'd rather see the treasures than ride through God knows where in the forest searching for that boar. I'm not much of a hunter, you know. But Skolot's treasures must be a sight worth seeing. So, Ivan Semenovich, what's your decision?"

"I think I'm with you," the geologist said. "Viewing Skolot's treasures seems to me to be a more worthwhile pastime. What about you, Lida?"

Lida was of two minds: on the one hand it would be very interesting to see the treasures, but on the other, it would be so exciting to take part in the hunt, especially after such a cordial invitation. The treasures could be looked at some other day, whereas the hunting of the kind offered by Varkan could be a unique occasion! Having made up her mind on this point, she said:

"I'd rather join Artem if I could..."

"Artem... and Varkan? Oh, don't take my remarks seriously," Dmitro Borisovich said, laughing. "Good, everything is

settled then. Now we part company. Ivan Semenovitch and I will go back, and you'll go with Varkan to the hunt. There's one problem though: how will you communicate?"

"Oh, we'll find the way. Besides there'll be hardly any time for talking," Artem replied in a light tone. "At a hunt one is supposed to act, not talk."

"Are we going to have any weapons with us?" Lida asked, seeing that Varkan and his friends were armed with spears, bows and short swords, whereas neither Artem nor Lida had anything worthy of being called a weapon.

"The closest approximation to a weapon I have on me is this," Artem said, pulling a small penknife out of his pocket. "But it'll hardly be of any use in the boar hunt."

Seeing from their gestures what their problem was, Varkan made a sign to the two Scythians accompanying him. They rode closer, took off their swords and belts and handed them to Artem and Lida. Artem deftly girded himself with the belt from which a sword was dangling. Lida took a while, for the belt was too long and had to be wound twice around her slender waist. Meanwhile, Varkan was speaking to Dmitro Borisovich.

"Varkan says," the archeologist translated, "that the swords have been given to you not because there will be any real danger but just in case. He also wanted to provide you both with a bow and a quiverful of arrows, and spears too. But I told him you were not very proficient with bow and spear. Was I right? Incidentally, Lida, you look great with that sword at your side! A veritable Amazon on horseback, and of such a martial bearing that the boar will be mortally frightened from the very sight of you!"

"Oh, aren't you the flatterer today!" the girl said, pretending annoyance. But truth to tell, she did enjoy the feeling of resting her hand on the hilt of the sword. *What a pity Dmitro Borisovich had lost his camera!*

"Attention!" Artem cried out unexpectedly. "Mind my commands! Swords out!"

His sword flashed in the air.

"Swords into action!"

And Artem, in fulfilment of his own command, began brandishing his sword wildly. But Lida did not join him in this martial display.

"There's no one here to be attacked with a sword, so sheath your weapon, commander," Lida said, casting a side-long glance at Varkan: was the Scythian laughing derisively

at Artem's prank? But the Scythian was only smiling condescendedly.

"You should conserve your energy, Artem," Ivan Semenovitch said, chuckling. "Look, it's time for you to start."

Varkan raised his hand in an inviting gesture. Artem rather reluctantly sheathed his sword.

"All right, I'll wait to use it against the big game."

The explorers parted company: Ivan Semenovitch, the archeologist, and one of the Scythians started for the camp. The rest, with Varkan at the head, galloped across the steppe toward the forest.

Artem rode beside Lida, enjoying the sight of her on horseback: she was in complete and graceful control of her mount. Her auburn hair streamed in the air; her grip on the reins was firm; she evidently enjoyed riding fast. The high, yellowish-pink grass lashed their knees as their steeds did their best to keep pace with the great stallion of Varkan. Varkan looked back to see where Lida and Artem were, and noting that they were so close, he nodded his head approvingly. Artem shouted to Lida above the noise of their swift movement:

"Where did you learn to ride so well? I didn't know you'd ever been on a horse before!"

"Oh, I learnt to ride long before you did in any case," the girl replied with a note of challenge in her voice. "I passed my exam at the riding academy two years ago!"

"Ah, you did, did you," was all Artem could say.

They were now close to the forest, and at one point the high grass shortened to normal size so abruptly that it gave the impression of having been trimmed. There was a depression in the ground that extended along the forest's edge and was covered with a thick carpet of fragrant, low yellowish-pink grasses. Varkan shouted something, raised his spear high into the air and made a 90° turn.

"What's he up to?"

The horses of Lida and Artem, trained as they were to follow the leader, also turned after Varkan. Artem began looking around: had the hunt already started? But where was the boar in that case?

"There's a hare over there! A hare!" Lida shouted.

Varkan, leaning low over his horse's neck, was pursuing a hare; the small gray animal, long ears laid back, was trying to escape into the forest, running a frantic course, making long and unexpected leaps.

Varkan won't be able to catch up with the hare, Artem thought. Besides, it's just quite impossible to spear a running hare at full gallop with such a flimsy weapon as a spear!

But Varkan, apparently, was of a different opinion. Still holding the spear high, he was waiting only for the hare to align himself for an instant with his horse's path. When that happened, the Scythian hurled his spear with great force. The thin shaft trembled as though wiggling through the air in search of the target as it plummeted down in a smooth curve. The hare continued running, his ears laid back. As he was about to leap, the spear struck him, piercing him through and pinning him into the ground. The shaft quivered, sticking up at a sharp angle above the low grass.

Lida turned to Artem:

"It's just unbelievable! Have you ever seen anything like that?!"

"Never," Artem said.

The precision of this spear throwing was quite bewildering, verging on magic. Artem remembered reading about Australian aborigines who could hit a moving target with a cleverly thrown boomerang at considerable distances; about lassoing horses — lasso uncoiling and getting its noose around the horse's neck as though all by itself; about Spaniards — or were they Mexicans? — who could throw a knife and hit a man at a distance of several paces. But all of these stunts were nothing in comparison to the extraordinary precision in spear throwing he had just witnessed. To hit a wildly zigzagging hare from a galloping horse at a distance of twenty meters! If somebody had told Artem it was possible, he wouldn't have believed it. But he had just witnessed the feat with his own eyes!

Varkan, meanwhile, had ridden up to the hare, pulled the spear from the ground, removed the hare and fixed it to his belt. Artem and Lida watched the Scythian's every movement, entranced by his dexterity. Had Varkan hurled his spear into the clouds in the heavens above, and it had brought down a big bird, even then it wouldn't have surprised them more. This exploit had showed them what a fine hunter Varkan was!

The Scythian could not help seeing the great impression he had made on his companions. He smiled and waved his arm in the direction of the forest as if to say: *that's where the real hunt will take place.*

The forest welcomed the riders with pleasant, cool air.

Varkan was confidently leading the way deeper and deeper into the woods past trees and big bushes. At first, the trees around them were similar to pines, with straight trunks, emitting an agreeable smell, but with needles much too long and soft to be ordinary pines. After some time, they gradually gave way to some kind of deciduous trees with thick, tall trunks resembling oaks. The ground level began to fall perceptibly, and the air became more and more humid. Several spots were rather boggy. Observing the water squishing under the horses' hooves, Lida said:

"A river or some kind of marsh must be nearby. That's probably where the watering place is."

At last Varkan stopped his horse and turned, making a universally understood gesture for silence and caution. From then on, the riders had to move in total silence, watching every step. Varkan was constantly on the alert; once in a while, he bent over, probably looking for tracks. Some more minutes of high tension — and Varkan leaped down from his horse with his usual ease, making very little noise. Then, with a gesture, he invited Lida and Artem to dismount. His face showed great concentration: he was listening to the barely audible sounds which only he knew how to interpret. The other Scythian, meanwhile, tethered the horses to the trees. Varkan told him something in a low voice and then cast a glance at Artem. Artem guessed that from now on they should redouble their caution; he put his hand over the mouth as if sealing it. Varkan nodded his head approvingly, and started forward carefully picking his way among the bushes. His companions followed him, doing their best to move as noiselessly and carefully as he did.

An expanse of water sparkled some way ahead. It turned out to be a small pond, its banks overgrown with tall grass. Several oak-like trees extended their boughs and branches over the water pond's dreamy, mirror-flat surface.

Varkan signalled them to stop. He himself walked down to the waterfront, and stooped over, looking for something on the ground. Even Artem could see that some heavy animal had left tracks and trampled down grass and bushes all around. Had all these traces been left by their boar?

Varkan turned and walked back from the waterfront, moving along the tracks, but never stepping on them. He took the dead hare from his belt and put it across the tracks.

Then he looked Lida and Artem squarely in the face as though assessing their ability to understand him without words. Deciding, evidently, that they were bright enough to get his message he began explaining with gestures what was to take place soon. The young Scythian would have made a good actor — his gestures, combined with the appropriate expressions on his face, gave a very graphic and vivid description of what would happen during the hunt:

The boar would appear from the bushes, going along his old tracks. He would see the hare, stop, and begin to tear it to pieces. Varkan would throw his spear and kill the boar...

It was all quite understandable. But what were Lida and Artem supposed to do all this time? Varkan explained that too: he pointed to a tall tree and motioned that they were to climb it and stay there. Artem immediately responded with an indignant grimace: wasn't he going to take direct part in the hunt? Was he just to climb that tree and watch, nothing more?! What had they been given the swords then for? But Varkan kept pointing unremittingly at the tree, his face going stern. He gave a final gesture and then turned his attention to the sounds of the forest.

Artem also began to discern some peculiar noises: a large animal was moving heavily through the bushes, breathing sonorously, trampling the underbush and leaves.

There was no time to lose; Artem helped Lida up a tree, getting the girl onto a bough almost completely obscured from the ground by the pinkish-yellow leaves. In a few seconds, Artem climbed another tree, perching himself on a branch almost directly above the boar's tracks with the hare lying across them. Varkan and the other Scythian hid themselves too; it took Artem some time to locate Varkan behind a thick tree trunk, ready to put his spear into action.

The heavy breathing and noise of snapping twigs drew closer, but the beast was not in a hurry; neither was he careful to conceal his movements; evidently, he did not expect any enemies on his way. Artem then recalled reading that boars were the masters of the forests as they were very powerful animals, no less dangerous than larger predators. So the hunt would surely be all the more exciting for the danger!

Artem's grip on the sword's hilt grew tighter and tighter; his eyes turned in the direction the ominous sounds were coming from. If only he had a gun with him now! He'd have demonstrated his marksmanship! But he did not have

one, so, there was nothing for him to do but observe what would take place on the ground.

Finally, the boar appeared, pushing his elongated reddish snout through the undergrowth; the head had beady red eyes, and long, curving yellowish tusks sticking out of the lower jaw. The boar began sniffing loudly at something, and looking around worriedly. Did he sense some danger or did he smell something that made him look around?

Artem's eyes were glued to the boar: what a magnificent specimen he was! The powerful body with bulging muscles was about five feet long; it was covered rather sparsely with long coarse hairs, but the head had short thick bristle all over. The boar continued making growling, discontented sounds.

"Ah, if only I had a gun!" Artem whose dormant hunter's instinct had been suddenly roused, murmured to himself.

The boar saw the hare, stopped and began making even more menacing sounds as he sniffed at it. The decisive moment came.

Without turning his head, from the corner of his eye, Artem saw Varkan slip from behind the tree like a ghost, the spear poised high in the air. Varkan was taking a good aim to make sure the throw would be lethal. But when his hand had already begun its forward movement, Varkan lost his footing on the slippery ground. The spear flew from Varkan's hand, turned in the air, and grazed the boar on the head.

Varkan tried to keep his balance, flailing his arms, but the enraged beast had already seen his enemy and rushed at Varkan, immediately knocking him down.

"Oh, Varkan!" Lida screamed. "Help him, somebody! The boar'll kill him!"

Artem saw the huge reddish body of the boar almost directly below, and Varkan making unsuccessful attempts to get to his feet. Another moment and the boar would be at Varkan's chest with his deadly tusks. A strange, gurgling sound came from Artem's throat, and without any further deliberation, casting all other considerations aside, he drew his sword and jumped down from the tree.

Later, Artem would not have been able to give a detailed account of what followed. He did not know how he managed to stay on his feet after he landed, but anyway, he found himself standing on the damp, swampy ground, his sword raised high, and the wide powerful bristly back of the boar

in front of him. Without choosing where to hit, Artem brought down the sword with all his strength on its back. Blood spurted in all directions and the boar leaped into the air, letting out a terrible roar. In another moment, the boar turned to his new adversary, and Artem saw the red beady eyes, blazing with fury and pain, staring at him, and the tusks protruding from the open mouth, ready to be brought into action against him. The boar lowered himself a little on his hind legs, about to dash at his new enemy.

Artem still had time to think: *Now he'll get at me all right. If only I could hit him again on the head.*

The sword flashed in the air, but Artem had no chance to use it again as the boar, in one massive leap knocked Artem to the ground. A sharp pain shot through his leg. After a giddy moment, he found himself lying on his back staring at the yellow-pink leaves moving peacefully in the breeze above him. And he heard sounds of the extreme fury coming from the boar. Then these sounds suddenly stopped, and a gurgling sound like water pouring from a narrow bottleneck could be heard instead. Then everything became very still and quiet...

The stillness was broken by Lida's voice, filled with anxiety:

"Oh, my dear Artem, are you all right? Can you get up? Artem!"

Another voice joined Lida's, saying something. It was definitely Varkan's voice. He was still alive then! The boar hadn't ripped him open then!

Somebody's careful hands helped him to a sitting position.

"Artem, my dear, are you badly hurt? Tell me!"

"No, not much harm's been done, as far as I can tell... only my leg hurts a little," Artem at last gained sufficient control of his speech to utter a few words. His field of vision had widened to include Lida, who was holding his head, her face full of concern; Varkan, his clothes torn, helmetless, also looking at him with great concern; and another Scythian holding a leather helmet with water dripping from it.

"Hey, what's wrong? It's not my funeral yet!" Artem said. "I'm safe and sound. The boar's just sort of fallen on me that's all... There's only a little pa... ouch!"

Artem groaned as a sharp pain shot through his leg. Varkan came up to him, knelt before him, took Artem's hand into both his hands and put it to his forehead.

"What are you doing, Varkan! Quit it!" Artem exclaimed.

Still holding Artem's hand against his forehead, the Scythian looked straight into Artem's eye, his gaze full of sincere gratitude. So, the Scythian must be thanking Artem, in his own way, for saving his life. But the way he was doing it was somewhat embarrassing as far as Artem was concerned.

"It's a great shame we can't communicate properly," Artem said with a sigh. "Then I'd explain to you, my friend, that there's nothing in particular to thank me for. Could I have done otherwise? Wouldn't you have done the same had you been in my place? Only it's too bad I didn't have a gun. A gun, you know, is a thing that gives you a much better chance than a spear, even if you can throw it as well as you do."

Meanwhile, Varkan, scooping out water from the leather helmet with deft movements, began washing the wound on Artem's leg. Fortunately, it wasn't very deep: the boar's tusk had torn through the skin and upper layers of the muscles. Then Varkan dressed the wound with the same expertise, putting some fragrant leaves on it. Afterwards, he slapped Artem encouragingly on the back, and smiling broadly, helped the young man to his feet. The pain in the leg had miraculously subsided. Perhaps the leaves had helped?

"Do you hurt, Artem?" Lida asked, peering anxiously into the young man's face. She was eager to be useful in some way.

"When I think about it, it hurts, but when I take my mind off it, I can easily forget about it. It's probably the leaves that help soothe the pain."

Artem walked over to the dead boar, limping. The boar's body was stretched to its impressive full length on the ground; thick red blood was still oozing from the open mouth.

There was a bloody cut on the boar's back inflicted by the sword, evidently Artem's blow. There was also a gash which could not have been caused by Artem — a very powerful blow indeed that had laid bare the back clear to the spine. The third blow on the boar's head bashed it in, breaking it almost in two. Who had inflicted these two devastating blows?

"Lida, did you see how it all happened?"

"How you jumped down from that tree?"

“That far I can recollect well enough. What I want to hear about is these last two blows. My blow could not have killed the boar, it just wasn’t powerful enough.”

“The other Scythian did the rest. When we began climbing up the trees, Varkan said something to him and he ran back to where our horses were. Then I saw him run back here, just as you were jumping down. When you fell, Varkan was still on the ground, and this other man struck the boar with his sword first on the head, then on the back. The boar collapsed, kicking and wheezing. But you were lying motionless, and I was so frightened for you. I thought you’d been... that you’ve been...”

“Oh, there, there, I’m all right,” Artem said, somewhat ill at ease at this expression of concern. “Now, everything’s clear, and we can close the subject. I can’t stand it when girls show too much anxiety over trifling matters. Now, look, Varkan is going to dress the boar so we can take it with us!”

Varkan and the other Scythian dragged the carcass closer to a tree. From time to time, Varkan glanced up at Lida and Artem as if he knew what mood they were in. His face was cheerful, and every time he met the gaze of Lida or Artem, a broad, genial grin appeared on his face, as it so often had before.

Lida and Artem watched in fascination how dexterously Varkan made a long cut across the boar’s belly, removed and threw away the intestines. Meanwhile, the other Scythian brought the horses; the boar was put on one of them and firmly secured. Varkan mounted his horse, his friend jumped up behind him. Then Varkan gave the signal: *let’s go*.

The horses trotted off. Artem followed the horse with the boar’s carcass. Even disembowled and slung across the horse’s back the boar had a very threatening appearance with his wide open mouth and tusks. Willy-nilly, Artem recalled the moment those tusks had been aimed at him. With what infernal fury those beady red eyes had blazed then! If Varkan’s friend hadn’t delivered those timely blows, Artem wouldn’t have had a chance to examine the head of the dead beast and recall the details of the hunt.

“Varkan seems to be very grateful to you, Artem,” Lida said unexpectedly, catching up with the young man. “Remember how movingly he put your hand to his forehead? That must have been the Scythian way of saying ‘thank you,’ what do you think?”

"Yes, must have been. But in this case I should thank Varkan's friend for what he did..."

"But to pluck up courage to jump down from that tree onto the boar! Weren't you frightened?"

"I didn't have to pluck up my courage. I don't think there was even time to get properly frightened. I did the first thing that came to mind, and there's nothing more to discuss, really."

Lida realized Artem had definitely changed and was no longer the boy she had known at college or while they were exploring the Sharp Mount. Then, he had been an ordinary young man, a good friend, sometimes a little droll, but in most respects, very much like so many others.

Now, under these exceptional conditions verging on the unreal, Artem had begun to develop some new qualities; bravery, quick reflexes, keen powers of observation, and sharpness of reasoning. But to look at him, he remained his old self: the same shock of hair, the same wide-eyed expression, sometimes filled with inexplicable sadness. It was his behavior that had changed. And all the drollery seemed to have disappeared. His every movement, his every phrase seemed so dear to her, so close...

* * *

They had left the forest and were riding across the remarkable pink steppe. Grasshoppers chirped loudly, and above their heads, just beneath the low clouds, larks were singing. The smell of honey, emanating from the high grass, hung in the air. The pyramid of branches with the scimitar sticking from the top came into view in the distance. From this distance, the pyramid looked quite small; the scimitar looked hardly thicker than a piece of hair; in the evening dusk, the cliffs seemed to have moved closer and to lean inward, encompassing in a tightening grip the forest, the steppe, and the Scythian camp...

The neighing of many horses reached their ears. Varkan gave a warning gesture with his hand and turned his horse aside; Artem and Lida followed suit. This proved a very timely maneuver; the first horses of a big herd emerged from the high grass. Hundreds of horses were galloping straight ahead in what appeared to be a solid mass, making

the earth tremble. About a dozen Scythians were driving the herd along, cracking their long whips.

The riders stopped to watch the herd pass. Varkan surely knew what he was doing when he gave the sign to make way! Even at a considerable distance away from the herd, their horses grew restless and began neighing, and evidently wanting to join the herd. It was frightening to think what might have happened to them if they had not moved out of the way of the herd!

Artem recalled the stories about the Scythians Dmitro Borisovich had told in the evening by the fire after the day's work at the Sharp Mount. Now, before his very eyes, illustrations of those stirring stories had come to life.

Herds of horses were the main asset of the Scythians. Artem knew already that horses' meat and milk were the main staples of the Scythian diet; how had it happened that these herds were owned by just a handful of wealthy Scythians? Artem kept thinking about these things long after the herd had disappeared. Meanwhile, Lida, overcome with fatigue, had begun dozing in the saddle. Artem also felt weariness spreading through him.

Suddenly Varkan whistled sharply; there was a rider galloping toward them from the Scythian camp brandishing his spear. He reined in his horse sharply just in front of Varkan. They discussed something briefly. Varkan turned to look at Lida, who was half-asleep on her horse, then shifted his gaze to Artem, his eyes asking: is she all right? Artem made a gesture as if to say, *she's all right, just tired.*

Varkan said something to the rider, who immediately turned his horse around and galloped away. In a short while Varkan stopped at a small, felt-covered *kibitka*. He dismounted, and helped Artem take the exhausted Lida from the horse. The girl was barely able to stand upright. Once inside, she collapsed onto a thick soft rug. Varkan said a few quick words to an old Scythian who was in the *kibitka*. In no time, tall pitchers of cold milk, plates laden with roast meat, and loaves of bread were brought in and placed before Artem and Lida. Varkan sat down by their side and invited them to have some food.

Every swallow of the cool, fragrant milk that was thirstily gulped down, seemed to give Lida new strength. At last, she felt so refreshed she even smiled. She was somewhat embarrassed for having shown weakness. But no one,

of course, would mention it. Artem was eating the meat with gusto, washing it down with milk.

"Of course, it'd be more convenient to use a fork," Artem said, making it sound like a revelation, and tearing off a piece of meat with his fingers at the same time. "But it's all right this way too, especially when you're hungry. As a matter of fact, it suits the local life style better. Oh, and what's that?"

A woman in a tall headdress brought in a gold bowl; Varkan took it from her and put it on the floor, between himself and Artem. Artem watched Varkan with mounting curiosity, continuing to fill his mouth with morsels of food at the same time. Immediately after placing the bowl on the floor, Varkan left the *kibitka* with the host, the old Scythian. Artem said turning to Lida and shrugging his shoulders:

"Our friend seems to be putting himself to unnecessary trouble. Is he going to treat us to something else? What do you think?"

"Why shouldn't he?" the girl said quietly. "He's extremely grateful to you; take my word for it."

Artem made a gesture as if to say *skip it*.

Varkan came back with the host who was carrying a wine-skin like those in which Artem knew the Scythians kept their intoxicating beverage, *oksugala*.

"Oh, it looks like he really is going to treat us to that Scythian drink," Artem said.

Varkan stopped in the center of the *kibitka*, assuming a solemn posture, and began telling the old Scythian and the woman about the boar hunt. Though neither Artem nor Lida understood a single word, Varkan's gestures were so expressive, so vividly presenting the events of the hunt that they had no difficulty in following the story.

Varkan finished his story, came up to Artem, and put Artem's hand to his forehead the way he had already done before, throwing Artem into utter confusion.

"All right, enough of that," he blurted out, snatching his hand away from Varkan's grip. "I do wish he'd stop bringing it up!"

Varkan picked up the bowl and put it right in front of Artem; then he bowed before Artem ceremoniously and began speaking again, making himself understood with the help of gestures: Varkan evidently wanted to thank Artem for rescuing him from certain death. Then he pointed to the bowl, rolled up his shirt sleeve, and with a quick movement,

made a small cut in one of his fingers. Several drops of blood fell into the bowl.

“What’s going on?” Artem asked, feeling quite at a loss; the whole procedure baffled him completely.

“Now you’ll have to do the same,” Lida said without a moment of hesitation.

“How do you know?” Artem said giving her a distrustful glance.

“Oh, I remember reading about such a custom being practiced among primitive peoples,” Lida said, smiling. “It’s called ‘swearing eternal brotherhood’ or ‘becoming blood brothers.’”

“What’s that?”

“You’re supposed to cut your finger and let some of your blood drip into the bowl to mix with Varkan’s. Then you’ll drink the blood.”

Artem made a wry face:

“I don’t imagine it tastes very good...”

“Oh, there’s one more thing — some wine should be added to the bowl... But the Scythians don’t have wine... Oh, of course! They’ll use *oksugala!* You’ll drink that and it’ll taste better, even with the blood mixed in it.”

“Still I’m not very eager to try it. Why should we go through with this in the first place?”

“After you’ve done it, you and Varkan will become sworn brothers for the rest of your life. Which, incidentally, will put certain obligations on you.”

“Obligations? Will we behave like real brothers?”

“There’s more to it than just being real brothers. I can’t say for sure what it entails; I don’t remember all the details. You’ll have to ask Dmitro Borisovich. He’ll gladly explain everything.”

Meanwhile, Varkan was standing there holding the bowl and listening to the exchange of incomprehensible words. Artem still had his doubts:

“What if I refuse to participate in this... err... blood drinking ceremony? What happens then?”

“I don’t know, but I think it’d be a great offense for Varkan. Just think the situation over carefully: Varkan is so filled with gratitude to you that offers to become your blood brother — how can you reject his offer? I think it’s impossible. Go ahead, Artem and do what’s expected of you.”

“Oh, well, all right. But do we really have to have all

this blood?..." Artem protested feebly, but he had already realized that Varkan would take his refusal as a grave offense, so he simply had to accept the offer. He gave his hand to Varkan, but not without reservations.

The Scythian made a quick cut in Artem's forefinger. Artem made a wry face — a rather disgusting custom to his mind.

Several drops of Artem's blood fell into the bowl and were mixed with the blood of the Scythian. Varkan raised the bowl solemnly. The old Scythian poured some of the *oksugala* into the bowl. Varkan pulled out his sword, sat down beside Artem, and offered him the bowl. Lida, who had been watching the scene intently, urged Artem on, a smile on her lips:

"Take your sword out of the sheath, too, Artem. That must be how they do it. Then drink from the bowl. I hope you'll tell me how it tasted!"

"Stop teasing," Artem said with annoyance. But he pulled out his sword, took the bowl from Varkan with his free hand, and then without any further hesitation, pressed his lips to the edge of the bowl. Varkan, still holding the sword in one hand, put the other hand across Artem's shoulders, leaned forward and carefully put his lips to the edge of bowl.

"Go ahead, drink! You should do it together, at the same time!" Lida exclaimed.

The *oksugala* was thick and fragrant, and Artem failed to detect any unpleasant flavor. But it would hardly have been possible to taste the few drops of blood in the whole bowlful of *oksugala*. Then Varkan put the empty bowl aside, embraced Artem, and kissed him on the mouth, his brown curly beard tickling Artem's chin.

"How does it feel, blood-sucker?" Lida said archly, giving Artem a piquant look.

"Not too bad. Quite tasty, this *oksugala*. It's even better than what we had with Skolot. And I didn't taste the blood at all. Ha-ha."

Artem felt that the *oksugala* had gone into his head. How much of it had he drunk? No less than a quart... And all at once... Had some new faces appeared in the *kibitka*? Many warriors... or hunters? It made no difference... some women... all of them must have entered while he was drinking the *oksugala*... A great thing, incidentally, *oksugala*, just grrreat! So, now, they were blood brothers, he and Varkan,

right? Verrry interesting... a fine custom too, verrry fine custom!

To Artem, everything looked slightly out of focus; he liked all the faces around him. Everyone was looking at him in such a brotherly fashion, smiling at him so amiably... See, now, they're nice, but that morning by the altar, they had shouted threats and imprecations... But was it really worth remembering all that? They'd just been hoodwinked by Dorbatay... In fact, all the Scythians were very nice people, really. What a shame he couldn't speak Scythian; he'd tell them all how nice they were... But why were they making so much incomprehensible noise?

Varkan was once again telling the story of the hunt, this time to the Scythians who had gathered in the *kibitka*. As he talked, he repeatedly pointed to Lida, then to Artem. Once, he even jumped, evidently illustrating how Artem had leaped down from the tree and struck the boar with his sword. The Scythians expressed their approval of the young stranger's courageous behavior with cheers. They regarded Artem with new respect, giving him friendly smiles.

Artem was already past the stage of the initial embarrassment, probably, due to the *oksugala* he had drunk, and felt quite at ease now, taking all the respect offered him in stride, and, in his turn, watching the Scythians.

Among them was a tall, bearded Scythian wearing a leather helmet, a sword at his side. Artem was sure he had seen this man before at close quarters, especially when he noticed two sword cuts on the helmet that were crudely stitched together. But where had he seen this Scythian before? He couldn't remember for the life of him. There had been so many faces, so many things he had seen, so many adventures he had lived through in the last two days. Was the old Scythian who had brought the meat and milk, and then the *oksugala*, and was now listening so attentively to Varkan by any chance Varkan's father? Their faces definitely bore some resemblance — the high forehead and aquiline nose. And if one looked behind the wrinkles of old age... There were several young Scythian women present who were listening to Varkan with absorbed interest, their chins resting on their hands, exactly as so many women of so many other cultures and epochs would have done!

New voices could be heard outside. A moment later, the felt flap was thrust aside and Artem saw Dmitro Borisovich

walk in briskly. The moment he was inside, he began reproaching Artem and Lida:

"Look at them, sprawled on the carpets! And we're waiting for them at Skolot's, worrying sick about what might have happened to them, the young rascals! But they don't seem to care at all! Now, get up quick and let's go! Oh, you're quite drunk, Artem! How do you account for this state of intoxication? What have you been celebrating?"

Artem felt greatly discomfitted, and Lida said teasingly: "He's been celebrating his blood brotherhood with Varkan. They drank *oksugala* mixed with blood together. And there was a lot of *oksugala* too!"

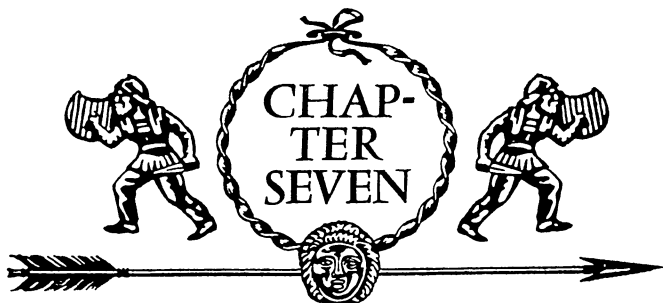
"Not that much!" Artem said sulkily.

"Blood brothers indeed! Really? Without my being present? Artem, that was very inconsiderate of you! You shouldn't have performed this ceremony in my absence! It's such an interesting custom, and isn't it a shame I've missed it! That was selfish of you to leave me out of this! Egoistical even, I would say! Ignoring the necessity of scientific observation!"

"I couldn't help it, Dmitro Borisovich! Varkan insisted on expressing his gratitude. And Lida also said that I should..."

"What gratitude? For what? Don't tell me now! Let's go! You can tell me everything on our way to Skolot's, but you must give me a very full account, without omitting even the tiniest of details. By the looks of things, this custom corresponds well to the stage of development of these Scythians. You may begin now, my friend, I'm all ears."

The archeologist said a few words to Varkan, and they left the *kibitka*, accompanied by the Scythian.



Skolot holds a feast and drinks from a gold bowl; the blind Ormad recites the story of Darius, the Persian king, and his invading army which received special gifts from the Scythians; Ivan Semenovitch is beset by worries and Dorbatay arrives to ruin the mood of everyone at the feast

There was an open space in front of the huge *kibitka* of Skolot, trampled smooth by innumerable feet and covered with carpets and hemp mats. Big wagons and *kibitkas*, smaller than Skolot's, circled this open space in an almost continuous wall, with only a few narrow passages left between them; the area thus enclosed looked like an amphitheater.

In the center of it, on a dais, with multi-colored carpets all over it, sat Skolot. Next to him reclined the most honored guest, Ivan Semenovitch. The geologist maintained a very lively intercourse with Skolot consisting entirely of gestures. What the two of them could make out of such a conversation remained a secret to everyone except the participants, and they seemed quite satisfied with the results.

Hartak, sitting close to Skolot, too, had put on sumptuous clothes for the occasion. But there seemed to be nothing that could adorn this man, and not because he was a cripple! His deformities were the least of the reasons; it was his wicked face with its constant expression of disgusted displeasure, twisted in a disdainful grimace of mistrust that made him so repulsive that no garments, regardless of how fine they were, could alter the impression. He never looked anyone straight in the eye, but avoided meeting even a

chance gaze. His lips were dry, and tightly pursed; his small, uneven teeth could be occasionally glimpsed when he talked; the forced smiles would at times appear on his greenish-gray face only to slide into the usual grimace.

The elders who had distinguished themselves in battle and hunt sat around the dais. They wore tall leather helmets, adorned with gold decorations, their white stringy hair hanging in long strands. These old warriors and hunters with long mustaches and gray beards had won the right to be sitting close to the chieftain by their bold deeds.

A little further away sat influential members of the tribe and wealthy Scythians of high rank. They kept their distance from the distinguished old warriors and hunters and, naturally, from those of lower rank. These people looked dignified and haughty, hardly noticing anything around them, and talking only among themselves in low voices.

Still further away were the ordinary Scythians, sitting by the wagons and *kibitkas*, in compact groups. Those who had shown special valor in recent hunts had places closer to the center. On the very fringes of the gathering far from everyone else sat the Scythian youths who had not distinguished themselves in anything yet but dreamed of feats of valor and fame; they were sitting on horses' hides or on the bare ground.

The Scythian women were sitting on separate rugs; and not all the women of the tribe were present — only those who wanted to take part in the feast. They watched the strangers with great interest, concentrating mostly on Lida; they were amazed to see Lida wearing no headgear, especially since the rest of her attire was so perplexingly unusual. But the Scythian women were quite at ease in this predominantly male company, talking in loud and cheerful voices, sometimes bursting into laughter, probably at jokes that the explorers could not understand. It was evident that participation in such feasts was quite a habitual thing for them.

"I'm surprised at the behavior of these women," Artem said to Lida under his breath. "I thought the Scythian women would behave in quite a different manner..."

"You expected them to be cowed down or something?" Lida asked with a challenge.

"No, not cowed down. That's too strong a word... but, in any case, not so independent as they look. Didn't the Scythians come from somewhere in the East? And to the

best of my knowledge, the Oriental women, since time immemorial have held a submissive position..."

"But these women, as you can well see, behave in a different manner: they're cracking jokes and laughing. Evidently they're very relaxed," Lida said. "They..."

"First of all, they're not 'Oriental women,'" Dmitro Borisovich suddenly broke in. "The Scythians are not purely of Asian descent, but are rather Eurasian. To the best of our knowledge, they formed as an ethnic group in the steppes between the Danube and Yenisey rivers. And how could you speak of the Scythians as Orientals after I've told you so much about them — about the matriarchy in the tribes related to the Scythians, about the amazons and warrior-queens. And I don't think it is justified in any historical or economic sense to link the Scythians to Oriental life styles, because the Orient developed along quite separate, distinct lines, with quite different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Consequently..."

"I'm sorry, Dmitro Borisovich, but so many people are waiting for us," Lida interrupted the archeologist rather abruptly just as he was getting up steam, giving Artem a sidelong glance; she knew very well that once Dmitro Borisovich got on his high horse, he could go on indefinitely.

"Yes, of course," he said, slightly embarrassed as he saw that Lida was right. "We're standing here talking while people are waiting for us! The big feast is about to begin."

A murmur rippled through the gathering when the Scythians saw Dmitro Borisovich, Lida and Artem, the remarkable young stranger who had emerged a winner in the contest with Dorbatay. The Scythians hurriedly made way for them, and a wide passage opened in the mass of humanity leading straight to the dais. The old chieftain acknowledged the arrival of the three strangers by raising himself a little from his place. He said something in a welcoming tone and gestured to the carpets at his side.

"Skolot invites us to take our seats beside him," said the archeologist. "It's a great honor, you know."

"Oh, it looks as if we're going to have a real feast," said Artem, looking around.

"Yes, we are," Ivan Semenovich said. "And we have to behave appropriately. This concerns you Artem first of all. Don't forget that hundreds of eyes are watching your every movement and certain conclusions will be drawn. So be careful. Some of the Scythians are watching us especially

closely," and the geologist surreptitiously pointed to the wealthy Scythians sitting in a separate group.

As a matter of fact, while the distinguished old warriors and hunters eyed the strangers with curiosity, the wealthy Scythians were much more reserved in their attitude, which bordered on hostility. Their hostility was hardly surprising, since the strangers had acted against Dorbatay, causing resentment among those who supported the crafty and perfidious soothsayer. All the explorers understood this, and consequently took the geologist's remark very seriously.

"Artem, you'd better not drink any more," Lida said in a low anxious voice. "It might have a bad effect on you, since you're unaccustomed to strong drinks."

"I wasn't going to, anyway," Artem replied, also in a low voice. "I feel a little sick in my stomach after all the *oksugala* I had with Varkan. Whichever way you turn it, this *oksugala* isn't very good for you... if you have too much of it, that is."

"I'm of the same opinion," Lida said.

It was very pleasant and comfortable to be sitting on the thick-piled carpet. Artem stretched out his legs, enjoying himself — it did feel very good to be resting like this! He was almost sober again, his mind practically free from the effect of the drink. If only he could avoid drinking any more *oksugala!*

Skolot clapped his hands twice. At this signal, servants immediately appeared carrying platters — raised high above their heads — of steaming boiled and roasted meat. The meat was followed by large cauldrons of soup, also steaming. The food was placed on mats in front of the Scythians who had gathered for the feast.

It seemed that all the available space had been already taken by the dishes and cauldrons, but the servants continued bringing them out. The younger Scythians, without waiting for any signal that the feast had officially begun, fell to eating, tearing the meat into manageable pieces with their fingers. But none of the older Scythians, all those distinguished warriors and hunters, the group of wealthy men — all those bearded and mustached scions — began eating. They were obviously waiting for something. The wealthy Scythians did not even seem to notice the food placed before them. They continued talking among themselves in low voices, casting sullen glances at the strangers from time to time.

"Oh, Artem, you have a bandaged leg! What happened? Have you been wounded?" the geologist asked solicitously, not having been informed of what had happened during the hunt.

"Oh, Ivan Semenovich, it's a very interesting story with a fascinating ending!" Lida put in quickly. "You keep quiet now, Artem. You'll get confused again and won't be able to tell anything straight," she said stopping the young man before he could break into the conversation. "I know what I'm saying. Artem proved himself a hero at the hunt..."

"Lida, cut it out!"

"Artem, keep quiet I tell you! He saved Varkan's life, that's what he did, really and truly, putting himself into mortal danger. And then, as a result of everything that happened during the hunt, he became Varkan's blood brother!"

"Blood brother?"

"Yes, his blood brother, which is more than just being a real brother," Lida said warming to her subject. "Isn't that correct, Dmitro Borisovich?"

"Absolutely," the archeologist said. "Brothers of one family sometimes become bitter enemies, like Skolot and Dorbatay, for example. But a blood brother for a Scythian means more than a brother of the same mother. That's quite true."

Artem rubbed his brow pensively:

"That's what Lida told me too... and yet I can't quite figure out how that could be."

"There's nothing really extraordinary about it. It fits well into the traditions of a tribe that is still at the family group stage of development. Family or clan relations are very important, and when a Scythian becomes your blood brother, he shows by this act that he is your closest, 'blood' relative. You see my point?"

"Yes, I do," Artem said with a sigh.

"There's one more thing to it," Dmitro Borisovich said in passing. "You no longer have the right to risk your life."

"As a matter of fact I wasn't exactly planning to. But why should you warn me against it in the first place, that's what I'd like to know?"

"Because, according to the rules of blood brotherhood, when one of the blood brothers dies, the other must die, too. This aspect emphasizes the significance of the ritual."

"Oh, what a thing I've gotten myself into!" Artem said,

making a gesture of utter confusion. "So, I don't even have the right to die when I see fit! I'm in a fine fix!"

"You, Artem, and Varkan are like Siamese twins," Lida burst out laughing. Artem gave her an angry glare and was about to open his mouth to give her a piece of his mind too — why was she always putting in her unsolicited opinions! — but he was prevented from doing so by Ivan Semenovich.

"Do be quiet! You'll have plenty of time to exchange opinions later on. You're attracting attention with your bickering. The servants are bringing in the main course of the feast!"

Four servants brought in the big roast boar, the very boar that had been killed in the forest earlier in that day — but not before it had nearly killed Varkan and Artem. Artem thought he could still recognize the dread shape of the head with its protruding tusks. But all the fearsomeness was gone from the boar; it was now lying with its feet tucked under its body, the head thrust forward — just the way a carcass roasted whole is supposed to look.

The boar was placed in front of Skolot. Apparently the Scythians considered it a special treat, because now the gray-haired warriors and hunters moved closer to the boar, appraising it carefully with the eyes of connoisseurs.

Skolot gave a signal to Varkan. The young Scythian pulled a short, wide knife from its sheath and began carving the meat, deftly as usual, separating the big pieces. The servants took the carved meat to the guests. But they still waited for some signal to begin eating. It was only when Skolot himself picked up a piece of meat and bit into it that the rest began eating; evidently, it was the host, the chieftain who was to open the feast. The Scythians gobbled up the meat, tearing it with their fingers or cutting pieces off with knives. The hot juice ran down their hands, arms and faces, staining their clothes and the carpets. But nobody seemed to notice or care; everyone was too occupied with the food. Even the rich Scythians who up till then had preserved a haughty and dignified demeanor, discarded it and gobbled up the meat exactly like the others.

The servants continued scurrying back and forth now, bringing wineskins with *oksugala* and placing them before the guests. *Oksugala* was poured into the bronze bowls and much clinking was heard as the toasting began. The voices of the Scythians grew louder.

Suddenly Skolot raised his hand and a servant handed him two gold cups bound together.

"This must have some special significance," Dmitro Borisovich whispered. "A ceremony of some sort should follow shortly!"

Another servant began filling the gold cups with *oksugala*; the chieftain stopped him with a nod, as if to say "enough," and raised the cups in a gesture of greeting, turning to the strangers.

"He's going to drink our health, isn't he," Lida said to Artem in a low voice.

"Let him drink," he answered, also under his breath. "I only hope they won't go pushing that *oksugala* on me, because I can't stand the sight of it just now..."

The chieftain put the cups slowly and ceremoniously to his lips and emptied them in one long draft, stopping only once to move his lips from one cup to the other. Then he flung them to the ground. Then followed cheers from the Scythians, who hurriedly raised their cups and bowls and drained them. The women began singing a solemn, moody song.

Meanwhile, Varkan had handed Skolot another big golden bowl, and a servant, holding a wineskin full of *oksugala*, with two hands, filled the bowl. The oldest and most distinguished of the hunters approached the chieftain and received the bowl from Skolot's hands. Moving carefully, he bowed, stood up straight, and drank the *oksugala*. The Scythians evidently considered it a great honor to receive a bowl of *oksugala* straight from the chieftain's hands. This honor was extended only to those guests who had proven themselves worthy of the chieftain's respect. The oldest hunter was followed by the other old Scythians, all of whom received the golden bowl, constantly refilled, from Skolot's hands.

Neither did the rest of the Scythians lag behind in consumption of *oksugala*. Their bronze bowls began ringing louder as they were filled and refilled. The confused murmur gained in strength and rose to a hubbub as the guests exploded in laughter every so often.

"It's frightening... what'll happen when they all get drunk?" Lida said, moving closer to the archeologist. But he assured her:

"You don't have to worry, my dear girl. As I recall, ancient

people knew when to stop, unlike so many of our 'civilized' contemporaries. Everything'll be all right!"

"Look, the next act in the show is beginning," Artem said in a low voice.

"Yes, look over there! There's a very old man walking to the dais!" Lida exclaimed, forgetting her fears.

And indeed, a man, very advanced in years, was approaching the dais, supported on either side by two youngsters. The chieftain raised his hand in greeting. It grew a lot quieter as the Scythians evidently held the old man in great respect.

Wearing a long white robe and a white fur hat, he walked slowly and silently, his eyes staring unmovingly upwards, his withered hands resting on the shoulders of the two young men. Wherever he passed loud laughter and talking died away, and heads were bowed as people hurriedly made way for the old man. His progress was slow; he seemed hardly able to move his feet; it was surprising that he had any strength left in him to move at all!

"But he's blind!" Lida said in a mild shock.

The old man's blank eyes were still turned upward when he at last arrived at the dais; Skolot greeted him deferentially. The old man replied, and his voice sounded surprisingly strong and deep, as though it belonged to a robust middle-aged man rather than to one so old.

He was helped to lower himself onto one of the carpets covering the dais. His eyes kept staring blindly upwards and his lips were moving, but no sounds came out. There was a sudden splash of tambourine music that died a few moments after it began only to be followed by the sounds of bone fifes which also lasted a few moments and reminded the explorers of a military call. An absolute silence descended over the place — all talking and laughter ceased. All the Scythians were now looking at the old man sitting on the dais. The old man continued moving his lips silently as though he were saying a prayer known only to himself.

Dmitro Borisovich leaned toward Varkan:

"Who's that old man?"

"He's the oldest and most respected of the Scythians," Varkan replied, never taking his reverential gaze off the old man. "His name is Ormad. He was born so long ago that nobody remembers when. But he remembers our fathers and grandfathers as children. Ormad is said to have been

so great a warrior and hunter that no one had ever risked a contest with him. Now he lives in his *kibitka* and is held in great esteem. He appears in public only on the most important occasions to tell people the stories of the glorious events of the past."

"Is he going to tell one of his stories now?" the archeologist asked, his eyes shining with anticipation.

Varkan nodded his head:

"The tambourines and fifes gave the signal that old Ormad would come out soon to recite a story. Now everybody's ready to listen," and Varkan embraced the audience in an all-encompassing gesture.

"Varkan, good man, I beseech you to begin translating everything the old man says as soon as he starts. Will you do it, please?" the archeologist said, his voice full of supplication. "You just can't imagine how important it is for me!"

Varkan was quick to agree; so far he had done everything the strangers had asked him to do.

In a few words, Dmitro Borisovich related to his friends the essence of what Varkan had told him; they appeared no less interested than the archeologist himself.

"So, Varkan is going to interpret what the old man says... That's good... But Dmitro Borisovich, will you do us a favor and translate everything for us immediately after Varkan's interpretation?" Ivan Semenovitch said in a voice that left no room for arguing. "You'll do it, won't you?"

But Dmitro Borisovich protested:

"It's still rather difficult for me, you know. Besides if I do the interpreting I won't be able to concentrate on the story itself, I just won't be able to remember everything that's been said... I won't be able to write it down..."

"Don't let that worry you, Dmitro Borisovich; we'll all help you reconstruct the details. There's even a marked advantage to having the story of Ormad lodged in four heads instead of only one," the geologist said, clinching the argument convincingly, so Dmitro Borisovich had to give in.

The old man stopped moving his lips silently, passed his frail hand slowly over his tarnished mustache that was no longer white but had yellowed with age. Now the silence was absolute, and he began speaking solemnly at a well-measured pace. At the same time, the double translation began.

"Hearken ye to the story of Ormad. Give ear to what I

shall tell you! Oh Skolots! Oh far-famed chieftain, Skolot, listen to my tale, and you, Hartak, the chieftain's young son, don't miss a word! All of you, old and young, warriors and hunters, rich and poor, listen to my tale! Everyone, listen! And you, strangers who have come to us from some mysterious land, listen as well! All of you must know that no one save old Ormad can tell you of the glorious deeds of the Skolot people in times long past! So listen! No one, except for old Ormad has the knowledge of what he has heard from his great grandfathers, tales passed from one generation to another! No one knows these stories except for old Ormad who does not have long to live among you!"

He stopped as though searching his memory, and Artem whispered hurriedly to the archeologist:

"Why does he keep calling the Scythians 'Skolots?' Anything to do with the chieftain Skolot?"

"No, rather the other way round. The Scythians called themselves 'Skolots,' or so we can assume. In fact, it was the Greeks who called them 'Scythians,' and we borrowed the name from the Greeks, but, naturally, Ormad would use the native word — 'Skolots.' But hush now! The old man has begun speaking again!"

"I'll tell you today of the memorable war in which the Skolots fought the invading forces of the mighty Persian King Darius who had gathered thousands of troops to invade the Skolots' lands. Listen to me, all of you! Old Ormad will speak of the glory and bravery of the Skolot warriors, of the wisdom of the Skolots!

"The great and formidable King Darius of Persia had conquered almost all the world. He had subjugated many countries by sword and fire, and no one dared to oppose him. Then he learnt that there still was a land not subject to him — the land of the Skolots. The Skolot warriors were fearless and undaunted. No other nation could conquer them. Knowing this, King Darius fixed his mind on making war on the Skolots and subject them to his rule as he had done with other nations. But his counselors advised him against the expedition, given the uncertainty of the outcome in view of the intrepidity and bravery of the Skolot warriors. But King Darius, blinded as he was by his great successes elsewhere, ignored this advice, calling his counselors cowards. So, King Darius assembled a great army and marched against the Skolots. It was a terrible and formidable force: the sky was dark with the dust raised by thousands upon

thousands of feet of Persians and soldiers of other nations dependent on King Darius as the army advanced into the Skolots' lands. As this army advanced, rivers disappeared — the Persian soldiers drank them all up. As the army advanced, it left but naked earth behind — all the grass was eaten to the last stem by the horses.

“King Darius proudly reviewed his innumerable troops and said: ‘If every soldier of my army takes a rock and hurls it at the Skolots, and if four out of five miss, even then not a single Skolot will be left alive!’ And King Darius advanced his army further into the wilderness of the steppes in search of the Skolots and their forces to fight a single decisive battle against them and win it, thus subjugating the Skolots...

“But the Skolot chieftains saw that they did not have sufficient forces to fight a battle in the open field against the overwhelming Persian multitudes. So the wise Skolot chieftains resolved to retreat covertly, with all their women, possessions and herds, and divided their forces into two bodies. They resolved to make it very difficult for the Persians to move freely through their lands, to make them lose strength as they marched. The wise Skolot chieftains resolved to fill up the wells and the springs as they passed and to destroy the herbage as they went...

“The Skolots retired in two groups to the North and to the South. One of the groups drove their cattle and herds of horses before them, the women, children, and old people riding in the *kibitkas*. The Skolot warriors made up the rear, but did not engage in battles with the Persians. That was how the first group travelled...

“Meanwhile, the other group, made up of warriors alone, went South in fulfillment of what had been resolved by the wise chieftains, to meet the Persian army halfway, to harrass the Persians and delay their progress so the other group could retreat safely to the North with all the women, children, and cattle. The courageous Skolot warriors knew that they did not stand a chance in open battle against the innumerable army of King Darius but they had been told by the Skolot chieftains to meet the Persian army halfway, and they did. The Skolots attacked the Persian camp at night when the Persians, lulled by the absence of the enemy, were sleeping. Rudely awakened from sleep, they rushed to arms thinking that they had the Skolots' army that was to be routed in one decisive battle before them, thus bringing

under eternal subjugation the entire Skolot nation. After the initial attack had been repelled, King Darius ordered his men to prepare for battle in the morning, saying, blinded as he was by his power and successes: 'One day of fighting — and we'll rout the Skolots. Then my power and might will be boundless.'

"But the wise Skolot chieftains and the courageous Skolot warriors had something quite different in minds when they undertook the nocturnal attack on the Persian camp. Before the sun was up, they again retreated swiftly to the north, filling up the wells and setting fire to the dry grass as they retreated. And in the morning, the Persian army stood ready for battle but there were no Skolots to be seen anywhere around. Only the vultures, circling in the sky above, were crying over the absence of carrion.

"King Darius became exceedingly angry and marched his army further north in pursuit of the Skolots, wishing to catch up with them and force them into battle. But the Skolots continued retreating further and further north, not stopping to do battle with the Persians. And now, before the dread Persian army had passed, the springs and wells went dry, being filled with dirt and rocks by the Skolots. And now it was not after the Persians passed that the grass disappeared, having been eaten by the Persian horses, but before the advancing Persian army, for it was set afire by the Skolots as they retreated northward. The sky was again darkened with dust raised by the Persian multitudes as they passed over the scorched stretches of land seeking battle, but in vain.

"The Persian army continued its march northward, but nowhere did it encounter the enemy to be routed and subjugated. The formidable Persian army was seeking battle, but there was no one to do battle with, as the Skolots kept retreating, fulfilling the command of their wise chieftains... And the Persians' rage grew greater as they continued to march without encountering the elusive Skolots and without finding water in the springs and wells that had been filled with rocks and sand by the Skolots. The Persians were seething with such rage they would have destroyed and ground to dust anything they came across on their way, but there was nothing at all to destroy as they marched through the deserted, devastated land...

"The Skolots, meanwhile, having made a detour through their Northern territory, returned to their Southern lands

without once engaging the Persians in a pitched battle. The dread and all-powerful Persian king then resolved, albeit very reluctantly, to turn west as he had lost so many soldiers who had died of thirst and starvation. But when King Darius took his decision to turn west and leave the Skolots' lands, he did not know that about two days' march ahead of him the Skolot divisions had burned and razed everything wherever the Persian army was to pass. It took King Darius several days to realize the cause of the devastation the Persians encountered in the formerly fertile lands, and when he did, he ordered his troops to throw themselves in hot pursuit to engage the Skolots in battle at last...

"But the wise Skolot chieftains told their warriors to retreat rapidly, not allowing the Persian army to catch up with them. And the hearts of the Persians were filled with despair. The vultures fell behind, feeling there would be no battle to provide them with food galore. The dread and formidable King Darius was overcome with rage, and he sent several horsemen to the Skolot chieftains on horses carefully chosen from the thousands of mounts in his army so they would be able to catch up with the Skolots. He sent the following message: 'Most miserable of men, why do you continually take flight when you have two other choices? If you think you are able to resist my power, stand, and having ceased your wandering, fight us. But if you are conscious of your inferiority, cease your hurried march and acknowledge me as your master, bringing me gifts, or I shall subject both you and your land to ruin and destruction!'

"But the senior Skolot chieftain Idanthysus answered as follows: 'This is the case, O Persian! Neither I nor my people have ever fled from any man out of fear, nor do we now so flee from thee; nor have we done anything but what we are wont to do even in time of peace. Before thou hast come or after thou leavest, my people will continue to move from one place to another as they have always done. We do not fight thee forthwith because there are so many other matters we must attend to. Do not issue empty threats, for we have no cities nor cultivated lands nor orchards — nothing which we fear might be taken or ravaged; and therefore, there is no reason why we should offer you Persians battle to defend anything. The grass that has burned will soon grow up again even higher, as it will get nourishment from the earth fertilized by the ashes of the burned grass and

the corpses of thy fallen soldiers. So, why should we hasten to do battle with thee? Yet if it is by all means necessary for thee to do battle with us, we have the sepulchers of our ancestors. Come, find them and attempt to disturb them, then thou wilt learn whether or not we can fight. But until then, do not seek to do battle with us, for we will not fight you unless we choose to do so!

“The Skolot chieftain Idanthyrus concluded his message thus: ‘I will send thee only such gifts as are befitting, O miserable King! And in reply to thy boast that thou art my master, thou and thy soldiers will pay dearly for it!’

“Meanwhile, the number of deaths in the Persian army from starvation and thirst, from disease and fatigue increased manifold, and the vultures appeared above the Persians, circling in a black mass, waiting for their chance, never leaving again, as there was a growing amount of food for them: It was not the bodies of enemies killed in battle by the Persians, but the Persians themselves who died by the hundreds every day...

“The wise Skolot chieftains, having ascertained that King Darius was in dire straits, sent him a herald with the promised gifts. King Darius became mighty glad, as he was already prepared to make peace with the Skolots without any more attempts to subjugate them, and return home without further humiliation. King Darius desired to accord a solemn reception to the Skolots who were the bearers of the gifts, but they cast the gifts on the ground, turned around, and galloped away so fast none of the Persians on their exhausted mounts could catch up with them. When he saw the gifts, King Darius became exceedingly angry, because the wise Skolot chieftains had sent him a bird, a mouse, a frog, and five arrows making the king wonder what the meaning of these gifts was.

“King Darius and his counselors pondered over the meaning of the gifts for a long time, and his opinion was as follows: ‘The Skolots intended to give themselves up to me along with their lands, waters, and herds of horses. For a mouse is bred in the earth and subsists on the same food as a man; a frog lives in the water, without which neither man nor beast can live; a bird in flight is like a horse; and the arrows the Skolots have delivered mean that they give over all their military forces to me, all-powerful King Darius, and my army.’

“But this time the counselors risked disagreement with the dread King Darius and conjectured that the gifts intimated: *Unless, O Persians, you become birds and fly into the air, or become mice and hide yourselves beneath the earth, or become frogs and leap into the lakes, you shall never return home again, but will be smitten by these arrows.*

“King Darius grew even more wrathful at this interpretation, since he saw that the Persians were not disposed to continue pursuing the Skolots and were apprehensive of the future.

“In the meantime, it was reported to the king that his illusive enemies had ceased their flight at last and had stopped in the steppe some distance away. King Darius, forgetting his great wrath, went to the top of the hill to have a look himself and saw that the Skolots had indeed drawn themselves up opposite the Persian camp as if they intended to engage in battle. The Skolots brandished their weapons as though challenging the Persians to do battle. King Darius resolved to accept the challenge immediately, as his army was still rather strong and large. But as he was about to issue battle orders, he saw a commotion rising among the Skolots. King Darius, quite bewildered, asked the meaning of the uproar in the enemy’s ranks and was told that they were pursuing a hare. The Skolots seemed to have forgotten about the Persians and the battle that was about to start, engaged, as they were, in the boisterous pursuit of the hare.

“When he heard this, the dread and all-powerful King Darius felt a dark foreboding creep into his heart, and he convened all his counselors and commanders and, filled with trepidation, told them the following: ‘Now I am convinced that you spoke rightly concerning the Skolots’ gifts. We must return home in haste. The Skolots treat us with great contempt, since they are so sure of themselves that they have broken ranks and are ignoring us to pursue a single small animal in full view of our forces. If they are so sure of victory, should we really try to fight them? Let us return home as fast as we can to avoid any further disgrace!’

“Thus spoke the all-powerful and dread Persian King Darius. And when the night came, the Persian army, without engaging the Skolots in battle, broke camp and marched away, leaving behind the sick and wounded, the weak and maimed so as not to be hampered in their hasty retreat...

“O listen to me, listen to old Ormad, listen! Thus, in

inglorious flight ended the march into the Skolot lands of the great and dread King Darius who — master of most of the known world — was then in such great haste to return home so as to avoid utter ruin with the remnants of his army, an army which not long before had been considered invincible and made the earth tremble, which had struck terror into the quick and dead alike... And now this dread army was fleeing from the Skolots without once engaging them in a major battle, something they had sought so persistently for so long; they were fleeing, chased by the fear that had been struck into all their hearts, even the heart of the all-powerful King Darius! So, the Persians were fleeing like the frightened hare that was pursued by the Skolots in view of the entire Persian camp. King Darius had been forced to relinquish and abandon all his glory and much of what he had carried with him across the wide Skolot steppes. The Skolots took much booty and won great glory for chasing away the dread King Darius, master of most of the known world. Glory to the gallant Skolot warriors, glory! Glory to the wise Skolot chieftains, glory!”

* * *

After old Ormad finished his tale, he kept nodding his head tiredly and moving his lips silently as cheers and excited shouting rose from all sides, the din enhanced by the ringing of weapons that some of the Scythians began brandishing. The Scythians freely expressed their great enthusiasm for the heroic tale recited by old Ormad. The bowls were again filled with *oksugala* and tambourines and bone fifes were played again.

Skolot filled a gold cup with his own hands and handed it solemnly to Ormad. The old man ceremoniously accepted the cup, managing to preserve his dignified appearance in spite of his fumbling movements, and raised it to his lips. His hands trembled — as is often the case with people of extreme old age — spilling some of the *oksugala*, but he drank to the dregs without stopping. Then he lowered his head, burying his chin in his chest, as though in complete exhaustion, leaned sideways, and fell asleep, oblivious of the din around him.

Dmitro Borisovich, no less thrilled than the Scythians, said to his friends: “Now I know that old Herodotus was quite correct in what he said in his history about the invasion

of the Persians! His version differs only in some insignificant details. It's most extraordinary what we've just heard! Artem! Lida! Do you hear? Everything's clear now! Ah, you don't give a damn! You don't understand the importance of it!"

"We do, we honestly do, Dmitro Borisovich," Artem protested, trying to show by his voice that they really did care. But the archeologist's mind was already occupied with something else. He turned again to Varkan, eagerly asked something and then listened to what the Scythian said with the greatest attention.

Ivan Semenovitch was probably the only one who remained aloof from the festive mood of the gathering. Some vague foreboding was gnawing at his heart. He could not put his finger on it, but his rich life experience had taught him to feel impending danger with some sixth sense, and his sixth sense was sending signals that made him apprehensive. But what direction could this unidentified danger come from?

The explorers' position seemed to have been established firmly enough; they had won considerable respect after the victory over Dorbatay at the altar. The crafty and treacherous Dorbatay must have lost much of his influence over the credulous Scythians as a soothsayer; he had even failed to turn up at the feast. Skolot appeared to display cordial feelings toward the strangers, either because he genuinely liked them or because of their triumph over the old soothsayer, his enemy. So, that left as a potential source of danger Hartak and the group of elders and the wealthy Scythians who probably supported the old soothsayer.

Ivan Semenovitch took surreptitious glances at Skolot's son, and discovered very soon that even at the feast, Hartak behaved differently from the rest of the Scythians. He hardly ate anything, had only a small cup of *oksugala* — and the small amount of drink he had had brought some color to his gray face and made his eyes even shiftier. Hartak seemed to be looking for someone, but evidently, that someone was not to be seen anywhere around. Still, Hartak continued searching the crowd with his eyes.

Hartak was restless even during Ormad's recital. Once his darting eyes met the geologist's and were immediately lowered; Hartak bent his head, pretending to be listening very attentively to Ormad. In a few moments, though, he shot the strangers a furtive glance which Ivan Semenovitch intercepted: there was malevolence in his eyes, only slightly veiled by an attempt at a crooked smile.

He's an enemy, and a very dangerous one, Ivan Semenovitch thought. *But would he dare to attempt anything here at the feast? Aren't we his guests of honor?*

Ivan Semenovitch was now assailed with doubts and suspicions, but none of them was definite enough to call for immediate action. Besides he was somewhat distracted by the explosion of Scythian music — the tambourines and fifes again. But this time it was a cheerful, dancing tune played at a fast tempo and accompanied by the ringing of swords. The Scythians who had been sitting closest to the dais moved hastily aside to make room in front for three lithe girls who ran up to the dais and began dancing.

The dancers seemed to be competing among themselves for the best performance. They alternated between light, barely touching the rugs with the toes of their little shoes, then leaping into the air and leaning low to the ground. The air was filled with the sounds of the tambourines and music of the fifes and encouraging shouts from the audience who were beating time by striking bowl against bowl or sword against sword.

Lida, who was fond of dancing, enjoyed the performance of the slender Scythian girls immensely, as, evidently, did all other guests.

Dmitro Borisovich, completely absorbed by the rare sight, murmured to himself: "Right... there's a picture on one of the Kul-Obisk gold plates, dating back to the Scythian times... the same movements are depicted... easily recognized here... they must be typical movements of the Scythian dancing... like this one, for instance — with the hands and arms thrown back... and now..."

The music stopped abruptly. The dancers froze, rooted to the spot, achieving a remarkable effect: a sudden, almost stone-like immobility after a tempestuous dance with so many quick movements. Skolot made a sign and bowls, filled with *oksugala*, were brought for the dancers. The young Scythian girls, still short of breath, bowed to the chieftain, emptied the bowls unflinching, and ran away, accompanied by thunderous applause.

Ivan Semenovitch glanced at Hartak — he was holding a cup of *oksugala* but did not drink. The geologist could see that his hands were trembling. Hartak put the cup down; his eyes were fixed on something outside the ring of *kibitkas*. Ivan Semenovitch followed the line of Hartak's gaze and saw some movement in the distance; then he

discerned a group of people approaching. He wondered who they could be.

He scrutinized Hartak's face and was convinced that the approaching party were the people Hartak had been waiting for all this time. Hartak clenched his fingers and a nervous tic appeared on his face; his eyes were riveted to the approaching people.

Right then, Ivan Semenovitch heard Lida's disturbed voice: "Look over there; Dorbatay's headed this way!"

"And he has his priestesses with him," Artem added, peering through the semi-darkness at the approaching group in the uneven light of the flickering torches.

"I wonder what's brought him here," Dmitro Borisovich added pensively.

The old soothsayer was already walking among the seated Scythians, headed for the dais, his deportment as solemn and dignified as before; it was as if he had never suffered the humiliating defeat at the hands of Artem. He walked, ignoring the drunken shouts, like a terrifying and ominous ghost, his scarlet cloak dragging after him on the ground, the tall conical hat, decorated with gold figurines of animals, pushed low over his eyebrows. There was a long staff in his hand with a gold owl perched on top.

The laughter and loud talking died down in Dorbatay's wake, as though he was extinguishing them with his dark shadow. He was closely followed by priestesses and priests, all ceremoniously attired: the women in embroidered linen dresses and the men in short red cloaks with ornaments and daggers under their belts.

In the silence that had fallen over the gathering, some cheers of greeting were suddenly heard; they came from the group of wealthy Scythians. Varkan, who watched the soothsayer and his party with mounting apprehension, said to Dmitro Borisovich under his breath:

"It's very suspicious... Dorbatay almost never comes to feasts. And no one expected him to come tonight... except, perhaps, for those bloated..."

Skolot assumed a dignified posture, waiting for the old soothsayer to arrive at the dais. Dorbatay ignored the fact that his arrival had completely changed the mood of the feast. That was probably what he had intended to do. But in any case, remaining quite composed, he came up to the dais, bowed low to Skolot, and began speaking in a loud voice, looking straight into the probing eyes of the chieftain,

who was evidently somewhat nonplussed by the soothsayer's unexpected arrival.

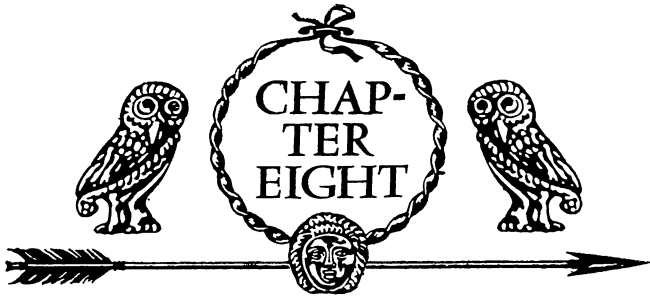
"Illustrious Skolot, and much beloved by the gods, accept my greetings! And famed and mighty strangers, sitting so close beside Skolot, I also extend greetings to you!"

"There seems to be some menace in his voice," Dmitro Borisovich said to Varkan who was translating the words of the old soothsayer for the archeologist.

"These strangers are mighty and powerful indeed," Dorbatay continued, "otherwise they would not have been granted the honor of occupying the sacred place by the chieftain, which is reserved, as is well-known, for only the most gallant and most famed warriors! These strangers are powerful indeed since they have managed to bend the chieftain to their will by forcing him to allow a strange woman to sit by his side, whereas by law, no woman has the right to sit beside the chieftain, because it is an offense to the gods! But as the gods are silent, that means that the strangers are omnipotent and free to do whatever they please. They are free to break our sacred age-old laws and customs. So I, a humble soothsayer, must perforce greet the powerful strangers!"

Ivan Semenovitch bent over and whispered to Artem:

"Be on guard, but keep quiet! Not a single movement that could be regarded as provocative! I'm afraid things are coming to a head. Watch out, Artem, watch out! The danger, whenever and wherever it comes from, must not catch us unawares!"



the old soothsayer shows himself an excellent actor in the one-man play telling stories of the past and then offering reconciliation to Skolot; the gold owl is dropped into the bowl of o k s u g a l a and Dorbatay puts forward new demands; Skolot rises to his feet to reject them only to drop dead; Hartak becomes chieftain and lets Dorbatay have his way; whereupon the soothsayer promptly orders the strangers seized

“Be on guard, Artem.”

Why was Ivan Semenovitch warning him? Why hadn't he explained anything? Could Dorbatay be scheming to do something right here at the feast? The question had to be left without answer, but the soothsayer's expression was quite ominous indeed.

He was not the frightened old man, trembling and looking around despondently after the defeat at the altar two days before. No, now standing before Skolot was an imperious, self-assured, grave soothsayer uttering words of overt threats. Artem could not fail to see that the general gaiety of the Scythians had given way to an uneasy silence. Now it was hard to believe that only a short while before the Scythians had been laughing and giving the outlanders friendly glances, so complete was the reversal of the general mood after the arrival of Dorbatay. It also encouraged the group of the wealthy Scythians to make menacing noises! And Varkan had grown abruptly sullen, his hand clasping the hilt of his sword.

“Artem! Dorbatay’s got something nasty up his sleeve!” the young man heard Lida’s voice filled with apprehension.

“How can you tell?” Artem said attempting to sound casual and carefree. But there was too much strain in his voice to pass unnoticed.

“Why should you pretend?” she said reproachfully. “Is there something you’re trying to hide from me? Why are you treating me like a child? I can see very well what’s going on.”

Artem shrugged, not knowing what to say. The atmosphere had indeed become charged with menace, but there was nothing for the explorers to do except wait for further developments.

Dorbatay was still standing in front of the dais, leaning on the staff with the gold owl. He made a well-timed pause in his address, as if checking the impression his sinister words had made; then he continued, gradually raising his voice in the manner of an experienced orator:

“I also greet you, noble Hartak, son of the chieftain and heir apparent! I see that you are the only one here who has not been foolishly rejoicing, having felt the portentous breath of the wrathful gods. Accept my greetings, future chieftain! You are beloved of the gods! You hold sacred the ancient traditions of the Skolots. You will bring, in your time, much happiness to the Skolot people!”

A murmur ran through the crowd; the Scythians were stretching their necks to get a better view of Hartak who did his best to assume a dignified posture worthy of Dorbatay’s praise. He did not achieve much, as his head was bent sideways and his eyes were blinking timorously; besides, he had trouble of keeping them open.

One of the hunters must have said something not very flattering about Hartak and the soothsayer must have heard it, because he wheeled round abruptly, raised his staff, and cried out wrathfully:

“Who dares to gainsay me? Let him remember then that he speaks against the gods! I, the humble soothsayer Dorbatay, call upon the gods to witness that I heard their awesome voice last night! The gods told me and bound me to tell you — and the earth quaked from their voice! —: ‘Go, and impress upon your people that our blessing is with the wise Skolot and his son, the noble Hartak! Make sure the people remember this!’ These words from the gods came

to me amidst terrible thunder and flames from which I, your humble soothsayer, had to shade my face!"

"Wasn't it with my help that the gods told him all this?" Artem said mockingly but in a very low voice after he had heard the translation.

"I came here," Dorbatay continued, "because I wanted to listen to the story of wise old Ormad along with everyone else. Unfortunately I have missed it. But now I want to tell you something that I have been reminded of by the gods. I want to tell a tale from the glorious past of the Skolot people. And if the wise chieftain Skolot will deign to allow me, I will do as I have been bidden by the gods!"

He raised his hands into the air and froze in his favorite posture, his eyes half-closed, as though listening to the voice of the gods.

"The old creap's playing his role excellently!" Dmitro Borisovich could not help exclaiming. "Isn't he, Ivan Semenovich? I wonder what it is he's going to tell them? It may be very interesting. What if it is something that is somehow connected with the histories of Herodotus and other ancient historians?"

The geologist did not say anything in reply. There was something else on his mind at the moment. Dorbatay lowered his long wrinkled hands at last and looked Skolot straight in the eye:

"I am waiting for your permission to speak, O chieftain! And I hope it will be granted!"

"Tell your story," Skolot said rather curtly without returning the stare. He must have felt that the soothsayer was playing his game with some definite and important purpose in mind. The chieftain shifted his eyes to Varkan to make sure Varkan had a firm grip on the hilt of his sword. Varkan was on guard. Now, in a more relaxed tone, Skolot repeated turning his gaze to Dorbatay:

"Tell us what the gods have bidden you."

The old soothsayer leaned on his staff and addressed both Skolot and all the Scythians at the same time, though it was evident that it was the gathering of hundreds of the Scythians that he intended his story for. The soothsayer's withered fingers were clasping the staff firmly, and his raucous voice sounded especially harsh and insistent; he made no attempt to conceal his ill feelings:

"The sage Ormad recited the tale of how the courageous Skolots gained a victory over the mighty Persian army and

how the haughty King Darius had to flee from our lands. I know this story well as it has been passed down to us through the ages for our edification. I wish to reiterate that the Skolots won only thanks to the aid and with the blessing of the gods. It was the gods who spoke to the wise chieftain Idanthysus and advised him as to how to achieve victory over King Darius. But what was the fate of Anacharsis, a kinsman of Idanthysus? Do you know his story, O Skolots? What happened to the man who forsook and rejected his gods? I remind you, descendants of the Darius-defeating Skolots, of the miserable plight of Anacharsis so that everyone of you will remember what awaits a man who forsakes the gods!"

"This sounds like flagrant religious propaganda to me," Artem remarked rather mockingly as he heard the translation.

"Anacharsis was a wise man," Dorbatay continued, "but he was not content to be the wisest of the Scythians. Anacharsis went to foreign countries where he thought he would acquire the wisdom of the foreign peoples, thus becoming the wisest of men. He travelled through many countries, staying in each of them for some time before he resolved to return home. But he was a different man by then: he had renounced the Skolot gods, having been converted to another faith. When he returned to the abode of the Skolots, he performed rites to a foreign goddess. Can there be a more grievous offense to our gods? Anacharsis converted many other Skolots to the worship of the foreign goddess. He would retire to the forest, taking other Skolots with him, and there they would perform the rites, playing timbrels, putting on Greek dress and doing obeisance to foreign images. So, what did the wise chieftain Saulius do when he had learnt about this outrage? He went to the forest with his warriors, saw the apostates thus employed, and shot them with his arrows, killing them all! Saulius did so because he had been inspired by the gods who gave him their blessing. Thus Saulius dealt with the offenders of our faith! Saulius was a courageous warrior and wise Skolot chieftain, beloved by the gods!"

Dorbatay's voice sounded triumphant now, and his last words he openly spat out at Skolot.

"Saulius was a sage and knew what was proper and good for the Skolots. He knew that the happiness and wealth of the Skolots were in the hands of the gods who must never be

insulted or forsaken and that their laws must be abided by. Do the Skolot people follow these precepts today? Does our wise chieftain Skolot remember them? He must because there is no other way..."

"But what was it that our gods reminded you of, O Dorbatay?" Skolot asked in annoyance; he felt that the treacherous soothsayer's attack was aimed at him personally.

"Presently, the wise Skolot will hear about it, too," Dorbatay replied quietly. "Once, the Skolot people lived through a period of hardships. The rivers ran dry and there was no more fish to be caught in them. An exceedingly hot summer killed the leaves on the trees and the grass in the fields, and the animals disappeared, so there was no game to hunt... Yes, the Skolots were once afflicted with such harsh times! Entire herds of horses perished from disease. And no prayers relieved the Skolots from this calamity because the gods had abandoned them, turning a deaf ear to all their supplications. Yes, the Skolots fell upon such hard times... Hot dry winds were blowing night and day, scorching the earth and bringing great misery to the Skolot people. Only the chieftain Scylas and his henchmen lived a carefree life, ignoring the great misfortune that had befallen the Skolot people who were dying in great numbers. Scylas was born of an Istrian woman who was not of our land. She taught him the Greek language and Greek customs, and on account of his education, Scylas did not respect the sacred customs of the Skolots and was much inclined to the Greek mode of life, their gods, and their profligacy. But the Skolot warriors and Skolot hunters and Skolot soothsayers were ignorant of all this, and thus were punished by the gods for their ignorance!"

Dorbatay's voice rang out deeper and more ominously:

"But Scylas schemed treacherously to abolish the Skolot customs altogether and impose Greek ways on our people. He associated with Greek merchants and secretly went with them to the Greek town of Borysthenes, where he assumed Greek dress, caroused, and performed rites to the Greek gods. All these things Scylas did, keeping them a secret from his people. Then, casting away his shame altogether, he resolved to seek initiation into the Bacchic mysteries. To secure the initiation, he had a mansion built for himself in Borysthenes, again keeping this secret from the Skolots. But the Skolot gods showed forbearance and warned Scylas, giving him a chance to repent and change his ways. They

hurled a bolt of lightning at his great mansion, setting it on fire. And the fire was so great that night turned into day, and Scylas himself barely escaped being burned alive in it. But the Skolots remained ignorant of these events, because they came to pass in a foreign, Greek town, and Scylas's henchmen never disclosed his escapades! But even the gods' admonitions did not make Scylas heed their commands. He was initiated into the Bacchic mysteries, may the very name of Bacchus be cursed! And the Skolots remained ignorant of what had caused the gods' wrath, enduring all the misery and afflictions sent down on them by the wrathful deities... And so it continued until the outrage came out in a conversation between the Skolot soothsayers and Greek merchants who had come on a trading mission to the Skolot lands. This is how it came to pass. The Skolots reproached the Greeks for their Bacchic ceremonies:

"How can you Greeks worship such a god, an embiber of wine, a carouser and profligate whose very name is offensive to mention? What kind of god is he? You believe that your Bacchus takes possession of you, is incarnate you when you are inebriated. We Skolots reject such gods! Our gods are stern but dignified!"

"The Greek merchants replied thus:

"How can you, Skolots,' they said mockingly, 'laugh at our marvelous god Bacchus and us? We don't want to argue with you over the merits of our Greek gods, but we're surprised to hear you say that the Skolots reject such gods when we know that your most important men perform rites to our Bacchus?'"

"But the Skolots did not believe the merchants, so the merchants said:

"If you don't believe us, we can prove it by telling you the name of one of them. He is called Scylas. He celebrates the rites to Bacchus and believes that Bacchus takes possession of him when he drinks intoxicating beverages at the rites."

"But the Skolots were incredulous, because they held their chieftain in high regard. So, the merchants said derisively:

"If you still persist in your disbelief, then follow us. We will show you your chieftain Scylas, wearing Greek dress, performing the rites to Bacchus, making libations, and drinking in his honor!"

“Then the Skolot elders followed the Greek merchants and saw with their own eyes their chieftain Scylas in Greek robes joining the Greeks in the Bacchanal and getting drunk in honor of Bacchus, may his very name be cursed!

“The Skolot elders were exceedingly wrathful. They immediately returned home and told the people everything they had seen. And as they spoke, their wrath grew:

“Our chieftain Scylas has betrayed the Skolot gods and the Skolot customs. He wants us to worship the wicked Greek gods. He wants the Greeks, those impious foreigners, to be our masters. The Greeks come to our lands, make fun of our customs and sacred laws, and Scylas obliges them and places them in the most honored seats beside himself! The foreign tricksters twist us around their little fingers, and Scylas does nothing to prevent it but smiles at their con-ning! We should depose of him as he is a traitor!”

“The entire Skolot people expressed their agreement with the elders’ suggestion, because one who is inclined to foreign customs and ways cannot be chieftain of the Skolots! The gods are sure to punish both such a chieftain and all the people along with him! It’s the primary duty of a chieftain to guard and maintain the sacred Skolot customs and not betray them! And if, when he goes astray and allows himself to be influenced by foreigners, then woe to all the Skolots! Thunderbolts and huge rocks will be hurled down upon the Skolot heads from the heavens as a horrible punishment! That’s what the gods have revealed to me!”

* * *

Dorbatay came abruptly to an ominous halt. Dead silence reigned over the gathering; all the Scythians seemed to hold their breath as there was hardly anyone who did not understand the thinly veiled meaning of the old soothsayer’s message!

“I’m somewhat surprised Dorbatay has made such an open threat against Skolot,” Dmitro Borisovich said, fixing his stare at the soothsayer. “He didn’t even take the trouble to dress it as a hint. What he said concerns us and Skolot directly...”

Ivan Semenovitch kept silent, though he was aware that his friends were eager to hear his assessment of the situation. But what could he really say when it was all too clear that the old soothsayer was once again trying to frighten if not

Skolot himself then those Scythians who were credulous enough to be intimidated at the very mention of the wrath of the gods!

The geologist caught the malicious glance that Dorbatay shot at them. But even without it, Dorbatay's intentions and schemes had become apparent. He had begun on a mild enough note but as he warmed to his own words, he grew more and more vituperative. Now they still had to wait for the end of the story and listen to what he would demand of the chieftain.

There was one more thing that worried Ivan Semenovich. He noticed that while Dorbatay was speaking, some characters kept coming up to the group of the Scythian nobles. They received orders given in very low voices and walked away as stealthily as they had come. It looked like a plot was being hatched, and this was especially menacing.

Dorbatay began speaking again; he was sure now he had the absolute attention of the audience:

"The Skolot people readily agreed with the soothsayers and elders because that was what the gods willed. The people chose the distinguished Oktamasades to be their chieftain! And the reprobate Scylas was beheaded! He was sacrificed to the uncompromising but just gods! And not a single warrior, not a single hunter spoke against such a punishment being meted out to the apostate though he had been their chieftain. All the people knew and realized that the patience of the gods had been exhausted and that the gods were ready to strike down the backslider and his henchmen with their thunderbolts!"

Dorbatay made a short pause, raising his staff with the gold owl high above his head to the full length of his arms, and then finished his story in a loud, solemn ominous voice:

"This is what the Skolots did to the treacherous Scylas who neglected our gods! And the gods were well pleased with the sacrifice. Happy times came to the Skolots. So the gods advised me, the humble soothsayer Dorbatay: 'Remember this story! Remember well the fate of the backslider Scylas!' I, Dorbatay, tell you on behalf of the gods: remember it well! This is what the Skolots must always do; they must always punish traitors who let themselves be pushed around by foreigners, who adopt foreign ways and worship foreign gods! Nothing will save them from retribution, no matter how exalted they may be! Take heed, warriors and hunters, hearken to the words of the humble soothsayer! I have

related to you everything the gods have bidden me to say. Remember and know that our gods will not allow any crime against or mockery of our sacred and ancient customs and laws!"

* * *

The soothsayer finished his story; it had obviously made a great impression on the audience, judging by the loud murmur that came from the Scythians. The archeologist bent over and said to Ivan Semenovich:

"You were absolutely right, my dear friend," there was anxiety in his voice. "The old trickster has twisted the story to suit his purpose..."

"In which way?" the geologist said, looking up.

"Remember the part that dealt with Scylas and his death? There is sufficient historical evidence on the matter to state positively that Scylas was killed for his tyrannical and oppressive rule, for doing his best to oblige the Greek colonizers rather than for backsliding and neglecting the local customs. Scylas, in all likelihood, was craftily manipulated by the Greeks who sought the establishment of the Greek rule over the Scythians. When it was discovered, Scylas paid with his life for the treachery."

"Then the story Dorbatay has told has some historical background? He has not invented all of it?" Lida asked in some surprise.

"No, he hasn't. The evidence we have from ancient historians basically coincides with Dorbatay's story," Dmitro Borisovich replied. "But he has twisted the facts to incite the Scythians against us and Skolot. It was a clever move, I must admit!"

"He has achieved what he set out to do," Ivan Semenovich said glumly. "The mood of the Scythians has changed drastically. Look at the wealthy and the elders: they're not sitting in a separate group any longer — they have joined the hunters. And they are definitely trying to work the hunters up!"

The wealthy Scythians had indeed begun to mingle with the distinguished hunters and warriors. Some of them must have gone to rouse the rest of the Scythians, because menacing shouts began coming from all sides and hostility could be glimpsed in many eyes. There was no doubt now that Dorbatay had been and was playing a well-prepared

and carefully-staged role. Everything must have been planned beforehand including the craftily built and embroidered story which had been directed implicitly against the strangers.

Dorbatay had meanwhile again turned to Skolot and bowed to him deferentially as though he had not just shown his hostile attitude toward the chieftain. According to the tradition, Skolot had to honor the story-teller by personally handing him the bowl of *oksugala*, and it seemed Dorbatay was waiting to be thus honored.

Skolot took a gold bowl of *oksugala* and extended it to the soothsayer, albeit reluctantly, but no matter what threats Dorbatay had made in his malevolent story-telling, the sacred tradition had to be upheld.

To the chieftain's great surprise, Dorbatay refused to accept the bowl. He shook his head, once again bowed ceremoniously to Skolot, and then said:

"My glorious and wise brother Skolot surely remembers that there's been some enmity between us. I did not want it, and the wise Skolot did not want it either. But this enmity has cast dark shadows upon our hearts. Now we no longer treat each other the way we used to or the way we should. I think it's time to change all this. I want us, O wise brother, to let bygones be bygones! Let us forgive and forget the past! I have come here to offer reconciliation. Let us forget the past once and forever! Fill your bowl too, O brother Skolot, and let us wash away our grievances with this *oksugala*! May we never bear each other any grudges!"

Now Dorbatay spoke in an extremely friendly and earnest manner which stood out in stark contrast to the tone in which he had recited his tale. The change was utterly confusing. Could it really be that the old soothsayer had come to the feast to make peace with Skolot, though his previous behavior contradicted such an intention? In any case it had to be admitted that Dorbatay was a remarkable actor. There was so much earnestness, so much sincere, profound sadness in his voice that it was impossible not to believe him!

"I say, what if he genuinely wants reconciliation?" said Lida, who had definitely been swayed by Dorbatay's performance.

"But not with us," Artem said sharply.

"Now, O Skolot, have your own bowl filled," Dorbatay went on. "Here, before all our courageous warriors and

hunters, I call upon the gods to witness that I sincerely wish to discard all the memory of the misunderstandings that have occurred between us in the past and to forget old scores so that nothing will cloud our future. In token of my best intentions I have brought you a gift — this sacred image of the owl, the wisest of birds. Have your bowl filled, brother, and we will drink to seal our new pledge!”

The Scythians cheered approvingly. Dorbatay surely knew how to sway an audience! His last words sounded so sincere and moving that it was impossible not to believe him, and if he did have some dark designs lurking in the gloomy depths of his wicked heart, they were completely concealed by his honeyed words. Now, whether or not Skolot was convinced of Dorbatay’s good will, he had to comply with the soothsayer’s wish to seal the proffered agreement with a drink of *oksugala*.

The servant filled Skolot’s golden bowl. Dorbatay had, meanwhile, taken the gold owl from the top of the staff and extended it to Skolot, saying:

“May this sacred image always remind you, my wise and courageous brother Skolot, of the love that all our hunters, all our warriors, all our herdsman, all our soothsayers have for you... and of my brotherly love, too!”

Skolot reached out to take the gold owl but as Dorbatay leaned forward to hand it to him, he tripped on the uneven carpet, lost his balance and nearly fell. He let go of the gold owl, and it plopped right into Skolot’s bowl. Dorbatay rightened himself and exclaimed, as though in distress:

“How careless of me! But even this can be interpreted as a sign from the gods! The gods indicate that they want you to drink this *oksugala* as a token of our return to friendly, brotherly ways. And you will recover the sacred image from the bottom of the bowl after you’ve drunk the *oksugala*. Now, let’s drink, my dear brother Skolot! And may nothing cloud our concord which is blessed by the gods!”

With these words he raised his bowl as if making a toast; Skolot did the same. Hundreds of eyes were fixed unwaveringly on them. In the dead silence reigning over the place, the two brothers put the bowls to their lips and emptied them in long gulps. The Scythians erupted in shouts of cheers in support of the unexpected reconciliation. Surprisingly enough, the cheers that came from the rich and the elders were by far the loudest. Why should they be gladder than anyone else?

"It's inconceivable that they can come to a lasting accord," Artem said, hardly believing his eyes.

Dorbatay lowered his bowl slowly, looking Skolot straight in the eye; the chieftain had meanwhile taken the gold owl from the bottom of his bowl and was looking it over. The soothsayer was staring intently at the chieftain as though expecting something, and a malevolent expression appeared on his stern, forbidding face for a fleeting moment. Then he shifted his gaze to Hartak and beneath the gray mustache, his lips broke into a wry smile.

"Look, Hartak's trembling all over as if he were having a seizure!" Artem cried out in surprise.

"He must be in a mortal fear of something," Lida said.

Hartak was indeed trembling perceptibly; his face seemed filled with great fear; he clasped and unclasped his hands nervously, jerking his head as if chasing away an annoying fly. Dorbatay kept his disdainful gaze on him. At last Hartak managed to pull himself together — probably after he intercepted the piercing glare of the old soothsayer. Then Dorbatay again turned to Skolot:

"I hope you're not greatly displeased with this small gift. It is surely much too modest for such a great and wise chieftain."

Skolot looked up, his eyes still distrustful.

"I'm well pleased with the gift... provided it has been given as token of good will..."

Dorbatay said with a short dry laugh:

"I have given this sacred image to you with the blessing of the gods and before all your guests. How can such a gift be a token of anything but the most sincere good will?"

"That is very good, I must accept your assurances. What is it that you want to ask of me in return, Dorbatay?" Skolot asked. "According to tradition I cannot refuse you anything now. But mind you, there are certain things... or rather people... that I'd advise you not to ask for, because..."

The chieftain let the end of the sentence hang in the air and there was an all-too evident threat in his voice. Dmitro Borisovich commented:

"Did you get that hint? Skolot wants the soothsayer to understand that he is not to ask that the strangers be given to him in exchange for his gift. The chieftain is keeping his word to protect us, as you see."

"But how long will he be able to do it?" Ivan Semenovitch asked pensively.

Hearing the chieftain's words made Dorbatay assume a pose of hurt pride:

"I'm not going to ask for anything valuable, my brother Skolot. And you know very well that I don't need anything. It would not be proper for a humble soothsayer to ask for anything for himself personally. I only want to fulfill the will of the gods. It was the gods who bade me tell you and all the Skolots today of the fate of the traitor Scylas. I have done so. The gods also bade me make peace with you today and make you a gift of the sacred image. I have done this, too. But the gods also advised me as to what I must ask of you, O Skolot! You cannot refuse me, because you will be refusing the gods! You must fulfill the will of the gods and the sacred tradition of the Skolots!"

The old chieftain shook his head:

"Let's not argue, Dorbatay. I have warned you. Now tell me what it is you ask!"

Dorbatay's crackling voice now sounded sharp and menacing:

"The gods demand that you give them the strangers!"

And he emphasized his words by pointing to them with his hand.

"I will not let you have them," Skolot said with determination. But as soon as he had uttered these words, a discontented murmur arose from the Scythians who had been worked up by Dorbatay and then by the elders and the rich, and were much displeased with their chieftain's reply.

Dorbatay, who stood still facing the dais, said, with a sweeping gesture of his hand:

"Look around, my brother Skolot, and take heed! Ask the elders, ask the people. What will they tell you? You'll hear their indignation — indignation against you. Take heed!"

Skolot looked around and saw the gazes of the crowd, directed at him, expectant and anticipative. The Scythians watched the confrontation with avidity, waiting for its outcome, weighing the chances of the powerful contenders. But one thing was clear: the man who had the miracle-working strangers in his power would eventually overcome his opponent. And Skolot, realizing that, was adamant in his refusal.

"No, you can't have them!"

"The gods command it!" the soothsayer suddenly shrieked. "The gods command that you make this sacrifice to them! The gods have already threatened to destroy the Skolots

with thunderbolts! That was a terrifying warning! The strangers profaned the sacred altar; they mocked our gods and me, their humble priest! Only with the blood of the strangers can the gods be placated and the offense expiated. Give us, O Skolot, the strangers, or the wrath of gods will smite you, the terrible wrath of the omnipotent gods!”

The soothsayer's voice broke into a furious, piercing scream. He seemed to have gone berserk; he flailed his arms wildly, shaking his head and foaming at the mouth. His lips went livid, he stamped his feet and screamed:

“Give us the strangers who have defiled our sacred places!”

“No,” said the chieftain, shaking his head.

“The gods will destroy you, Skolot! Remember Scylas! You are betraying our gods! Change your mind! Give us the strangers!”

“No!”

Abruptly, Dorbatay stopped shrieking and fell silent. And all the Scythians present fell silent, too. The pause that ensued was an ominous one, filled with great tension. The silence was broken by Dorbatay, his voice sounding quite different now — solemn and prayerlike:

“O gods, great and just gods! I beseech you to listen to me, your humble servant!”

The old soothsayer again raised his arms into the air. He lowered his voice and spoke in a very loud whisper, so loud in fact that it could be heard easily all through the crowd:

“Great and wrathful gods, I beseech you, I pray that you will hear the voice of your meek servant, Dorbatay! I have told Skolot all that you bade me. I have warned him, I have done all I could. It grieves me to think of the retribution that is forthcoming, of the terrible punishment that you will dispense, O gods! But may this punishment not touch either me or the courageous Skolot people! May this punishment fall only on the one who violates your sacred laws and disregards your commands!”

Ivan Semenovich noticed that Dorbatay shot a glance at Skolot when he stopped talking, as though checking to see what impression his words were making on the old chieftain. Skolot was silent, his brows knit. Dorbatay began speaking again, alternately lowering his voice almost to a whisper only to raise it to an unbearable high-pitched shrieking:

"I beg of you, O gods, not to punish the innocent people, not to destroy them with your scorching thunderbolts in your wrath! If in your ire, you must punish someone, then strike down the one who has done you wrong!"

He fell silent; his raised arms began trembling as if with fatigue. A tense silence settled in, and then this silence was shattered when someone, inspired either by enthusiasm or fear, shouted:

"Give the strangers to the gods, O Skolot! Give them to the gods!"

This shout served as signal for the rest, and the crowd burst into a wild clamor which strongly resembled an incantation:

"Give them to the gods! Give them to the gods! Skolot, give them to the gods! Don't provoke the wrath of the gods!"

In this undulating uproar, several voices could be easily distinguished for their unremitting fervor: they were the voices of the nobles who had discarded their unusual reserve and were shouting the loudest, inciting the rest of the Scythians to do the same:

"Do what Dorbatay tells you to, O Skolot! Give the strangers to the gods! Give the strangers to the gods to appease their wrath!"

Skolot sprang to his feet. Standing on the dais, tall and of forbidding appearance, he said to Dorbatay who stood opposite him:

"So this is how you understand reconciliation, Dorbatay! You're again instigating strife among my people! You have not given up your pernicious scheming, but you cannot scare me with your frenzied shouting and imprecations because I know their true worth very well. Now, listen to me, my courageous warriors and hunters, listen to me, all Skolot people! I will now disclose the secret of Dorbatay, this wicked and worthless man! Listen..."

His voice suddenly broke; he clasped his throat with his hand; he was breathing heavily, as though short of breath. He opened his mouth wide, gasping for air; then he tore open the collar of his ceremonial dress.

The eyes of the old soothsayer flashed with joy. He began shouting hysterically in a shrill voice:

"The gods are punishing Skolot! Look, warriors and hunters! Look, everyone! The gods have stopped Skolot from speaking! Punish the apostate, O gods, if you must, but do not harm the innocent people. O gods, punish the violator of

our sacred laws as once you punished Anacharsis and Scylas!"

Skolot's face had gone deathly white. He swayed; his hands groped for support. With a tremendous effort Skolot said: "Wait... now... I'll tell you..."

Dorbatay's triumphant roaring drowned out the chieftain's words:

"The gods are punishing the backslider! The gods have struck Skolot in their terrible wrath!"

The Scythians began pushing toward the dais but no one dared to come too close.

Skolot made another attempt to say something and again failed. He made visible efforts to regain control of himself; he raised his hand and opened his mouth to speak but not a word passed his lips. A moment later, the old chieftain collapsed, sprawling on the ground. Several warriors rushed to his aid, but they were stopped by a harsh bellow from Dorbatay:

"Halt, fools! Stay where you are unless you want to be stricken by the gods! Do not approach the apostate punished so terribly by the gods!"

They stood still, irresolute, shifting their gaze from Dorbatay, who had assumed the posture of a supreme master with the power to decide the matters of life and death, to Skolot who was lying motionless on the rug. The gold helmet had fallen from his head and rolled to the side; his face was ashen, and his eyes had rolled up so that only the whites showed; his arms, spread wide, jerked spasmodically.

"He's dying, he's dying!" Lida cried out in great alarm. "Can't we help him somehow? Something must be done!"

Varkan, who had rushed to the chieftain, had been stopped not by the curses and imprecations of the old soothsayer but by the armed priests who had surrounded the motionless body in immediate obedience to a signal from Dorbatay. Everything that had come to pass had evidently been carefully planned beforehand and agreed upon by the perfidious soothsayer and his supporters who now streamed to the dais, forming a tight circle around it. The strangers, who had been joined by Varkan, were surrounded by armed men which made any potential attempts at resistance quite futile.

Skolot's hands jerked convulsively for the last time and his body went rigid. This was the end. The old chieftain had died.

"What's going to happen to us now?" Lida asked in consternation. "Now we're at the mercy of Dorbatay."

"But what caused his death?" Dmitro Borisovich asked in an undertone. "It was so sudden... I can't understand it."

"Dorbatay poisoned him," Ivan Semenovitch replied, also in a subdued voice.

"Poisoned? But how?.."

"Remember when Dorbatay was about to hand the gold owl to Skolot, he dropped it, as if by chance, into Skolot's bowl?"

"Yes, he did. So what?"

"The gold owl must have been covered with some poison which dissolved in the *oksugala*. Hartak must have been in on the plot which was masterminded by the old soothsayer and backed up by his supporters. Every little thing had been foreseen... Ah, just take a look at them now. Their triumph bespeaks their complicity!"

Hartak was now standing on the dais, supported by priests on either side. Nervous tremors passed through him, and his face muscles twitched spasmodically. He avoided looking in the direction of the corpse, trying hard to assume a dignified appearance, but failing dismally. He shifted his gaze quickly from one Scythian to another, turning to look at Dorbatay every other minute as though seeking support.

The elders and nobles were now standing in a tight circle around the dais, not letting the other Scythians to come close.

Artem, seething with rage, glared at Hartak, repeating time after time:

"Scoundrel! Parricide! Rascal!"

Hartak must have heard Artem's frenzied shouts for he shot a glance at him, his glower being like a poisoned dart. The boundless fury in that scowl was impotent, but only for the moment.

Dorbatay triumphantly climbed onto the dais and stood close to Hartak. The old soothsayer was flawlessly acting out his extremely complicated main role in this terrible drama of his own concoction. He turned to the Scythians who were crowded in front of the dais, and began speaking in a loud, deep voice, filled with real or feigned emotion:

"Courageous Skolots, elders, hunters and warriors! Listen to the message of the gods that I have received! Listen carefully, because the breath of the gods has touched me, giving me the faculty to understand their language. Listen

to me, O Skolots, you, who are always obedient to the gods' commands, listen to the voice of the gods! Step closer, illustrious Hartak, the son of a chieftain, and future chieftain!"

Hartak, supported by the two priests, limped over to Dorbatay. Now they were standing very close to each other, and the corpse of Skolot, for whose death they were responsible, was lying before them. The elders and nobles stood like a solid wall between the excited but browbeaten Scythians and Dorbatay who looked majestic, and even awesome in his long scarlet cloak; the gold ornaments sewn on it threw off dull reflections from the fitful flames of the torches.

"Listen to me, O Skolots! The implacable gods have punished Skolot with a terrible death. As they punished Anacharsis and Scylas in the past, so now they have stricken down Skolot, who caused their great wrath by violating our sacred customs. Skolot took the strange magicians under his protection and refused to give them to the gods! And because of this he died! But he died a chieftain and we must bury him with full honors, befitting a chieftain. That is what the gods have instructed me to tell you and I pass their message onto you!"

The Scythians began shouting their approval: Skolot had been a distinguished warrior and hunter and had earned the right to be buried with full honors! The old soothsayer had flawlessly worked out his role and was playing it excellently! He knew perfectly well when to strike, what to say, and how to say it!

Dorbatay raised his hand in a gesture calling for silence.

"I have not yet said everything, O courageous warriors and hunters. After the gods advised me of all the things that I have related to you, I asked them: who then is to become the chieftain of the Skolot people? Who has the right to wear this helmet, the symbol of power and respect?"

With these words he pointed to Skolot's helmet lying at his feet. One of the priests promptly picked it up and handed it to Dorbatay.

"Who will wear this gold helmet that is passed from one chieftain to another in strict accordance with tradition? Who is worthy of this sacred insignia of power? Who can claim the right to take Skolot's place because of his birth and because of the gods' love for him? I asked the gods all this, and the gods deigned to reply. Now I will tell you

whom they have chosen. Learn, O Skolots, of the gods' will!"

He raised the gold helmet high.

"There is only one man who has the right to wear the gold helmet of a chieftain. There is only one man who has been blessed by the gods with their love. With this noble and wise man as chieftain, the lives of the Skolots will be made happy by the gods. He may be young, but he is devoted to the gods and respects our sacred customs and laws. This man is..."

Dorbatay made a well-calculated pause and then pronounced solemnly:

"This man is the noble Hartak, beloved of the gods!"

A disapproving murmur ran through the crowd. Hartak for the chieftain? Wasn't he entirely unfitted for such a task?

Now came the most important moment in the revolting and terrible comedy staged and acted out by Dorbatay. To bring the final coup to a successful conclusion, Dorbatay shouted imperiously, making himself heard above the growing murmur of resentment:

"Tell me, O Skolots, do you want the noble Hartak for your chieftain? Mustn't we submit to the will of the gods? Make up your minds, Skolots, the gods are waiting!"

The elders and nobles who were standing in a circle around the dais cheered so loudly that they completely drowned the dissatisfied murmur of the warriors and hunters who found themselves pushed much further away from the dais. The elders and nobles bellowed out the name of Skolot's son, each trying to outdo the others in enthusiasm. This was what Dorbatay was waiting for.

"Noble Hartak," Dorbatay said very loudly. "The gods bless your elevation to the chieftainship. The Skolots greet you. Do you not hear their thunderous support? They unanimously call upon you to be their chieftain! Accept this gold helmet and offer obedience to the gods! Let all the Skolots offer up their prayers with you, new chieftain of our people!"

Without any delay, he put the gold helmet on Hartak's head. The helmet proved too big and heavy for Hartak; it tilted over one of Hartak's eyes. But Dorbatay did not bother to adjust it.

"Pray, O Skolots!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "Pray with the noble Hartak and me; pray to our stern but

just gods, and thank them for not punishing all of us, in their mercy, along with Skolot!"

In a rasping voice he began singing a long drawn-out prayer. It was immediately picked up by the other priests and the nobles. In a few moments, all the Scythians joined the prayer. The tune was the same the explorers had heard when they first regained consciousness and found themselves in the pink forest. There was something sinister in the slow, sad, harsh-sounding prayer.

Artem glanced anxiously at Lida to see how she had been affected by what had just transpired. Lida was still in control of herself, but it was evident that she was thoroughly frightened. Now Hartak, who had suddenly become chieftain, was master of the situation, the very Hartak who had so persistently tried to marry her... And obviously this hideous man had not given up his intention: even at the tensest moments, Lida intercepted quick glances from Hartak which made her wince.

Who was now going to come to their aid? The situation had become much more dangerous with the death of Skolot, even though before, both brothers had regarded the strangers only as a means to gaining their own ends in a feud which had been going on for ages. Dorbatay had won at last, and now he was standing, puffed up with pride, over the body of his brother whom he had poisoned. From now on he could discard all pretense. He had gained supreme power, because Hartak was a puppet in his hands; and it was not at all clear whether Dorbatay would consider it worthwhile having the strangers alive rather than dead; besides he surely remembered that the strangers had defied him on several occasions!

Lida probably felt, as all the explorers did, that Varkan was the only Scythian who could be considered a friend. Some other young Scythian warriors — Varkan's friends — seemed to have been friendly to the strangers, but this friendliness might well have been shown only in deference to Varkan. But in any case, now, when the situation had so drastically changed, Varkan and his friends could do very little to help the explorers. Varkan's relations with the soothsayer were bad at best, and Dorbatay was hardly a person to forgive his enemies.

Dmitro Borisovich, in spite of his forebodings concerning the future and his realization that after the murder of Skolot their own lives were in jeopardy, could not allow his

archeological enthusiasm to be dampened by his worries. The archeologist took in and catalogued in his brain everything he saw, every little detail: *The Scythians offering up their prayer! Fascinating!* No archeologist or historian had ever seen such an exciting scene before; no scholar had ever eyewitnessed the ceremony of the proclamation of a new Scythian chieftain! And there was Skolot's funeral to observe as yet! Ah, the archeologist wished he had more than one pair of eyes and more than one pair of ears!

"Keep your eyes open, young man, take a good look!" Dmitro Borisovich said in an agitated whisper. "You'll never see anything like it again in your life!"

"I probably won't... because I'm not sure how long I'm going to live... or you either, for that matter," Artem muttered in irritation; he was annoyed at the professional enthusiasm of the archeologist who seemed oblivious to the grave danger hanging over them.

Ivan Semenovich was intently watching everything happening around them to assess the situation and draw some conclusions. The explorers, with Varkan standing close by, were surrounded by the soothsayer's henchmen and chief Scythians, their daggers and swords unsheathed, evidently to forestall any attempt on the part of the explorers at escape. The warriors, who had obviously been swayed by the soothsayer to change allegiance to him, positioned themselves so that they separated the strangers from the rest of the crowd. If earlier an attempt at escape was not entirely unthinkable, now it was absolutely out of the question. There was no one to turn to for help either. Dorbatay had firmly re-established his influence over the Scythians; he seemed to have taken all the necessary steps to foil the strangers' attempts to escape. At the slightest suspicious movement, all the warriors and hunters would rush at the strangers with their swords and spears.

Ivan Semenovich was racking his brain for a solution: what could they do under the circumstances? Who would help them? Only one thing gave him some hope: weren't they supposed to be the guests of Hartak, too? But the chance that he would honor their status as guests was dismally small: Dorbatay would surely do something about that...

"Artem, do you happen to have any primers with you?"

"No, I don't, Ivan Semenovich."

"What a pity!"

"I used some of them at the altar..."

"Yes, I know, but not all of them."

"No, the rest are in the knapsack. I didn't think they would be of any use at this feast. How was I to know..."

The geologist did not say anything else; the young man was not, of course, to blame for negligence — if Ivan Semenovitch himself had not foreseen such a turn of events, how could he expect Artem to have done so?

* * *

The prayer ended. Now Dorbatay could rest assured that none of the warriors or hunters would dare express any disapproval over Hartak's elevation to the chieftaincy. The soothsayer had surely known what he was doing when he began the prayer. When it was over, Hartak was firmly established in the eyes of the god-fearing Scythians as chieftain with full rights.

There was only one thing for Dorbatay to settle now: what to do with the strangers? Dorbatay seemed ready to tackle this problem as well. The soothsayer was not likely to have them killed right then and there — especially the young magician who had publicly disgraced him. It would not be in keeping with the inspired and very effective performance he had just put on. They were surely to die, these conceited strangers who had halfwittedly rejected his most superb conditions! But they were to die in a manner that would consolidate his power. Lida should probably be spared, as she could be useful in manipulating Hartak.

Dorbatay now looked quite self-assured; in a very loud voice, so loud in fact that it carried to the outer fringes of the crowd, he said to Hartak, bowing to him and assuming a very deferential air:

"Now, illustrious Hartak, wise and mighty chieftain of the Skolots..."

He made a pause, a short but well-timed pause imbued with irony, which was only emphasized by the solemnity of the address. This miserable puppet who was eager to do anything to please him, Dorbatay called a "wise and mighty chieftain"! It did sound like thinly veiled mockery.

"Now, illustrious Hartak, wise and mighty chieftain of the Skolots," Dorbatay repeated, "we must fulfill the will of the gods. On behalf of the gods, O Hartak, demand that the cursed strangers be delivered into my hands. Do you agree to give them to the gods?"

Dorbatay had hardly had time to finish when Hartak obediently said:

“Yes, I agree!”

“But let us not forget that they are still your guests of honor,” Dorbatay continued, an implacable smile playing on his lips. “In accordance with our sacred customs we must be hospitable to our guests as long as they are our guests. We shall not deviate from this tradition. Not a single hair of their heads will be touched as long as they remain our guests. But on the other hand we cannot let them go free as they, magicians that they are, can envoke help of their gods and do us harm. So, they must be bound hand and foot and put in a safe place! And tomorrow, when they will not be considered your guests any longer, O Hartak — since they are your guests only for tonight — we shall decide their fate. Do you, warriors and hunters, give your approval of this?”

Loud and chaotic approval was instantaneously given; the voices of the nobles were the loudest.

“Yes, yes, that’s what should be done, Dorbatay!”

The soothsayer turned to his henchmen:

“Bind them!”

The henchmen, evidently still in great fear of the strangers, stepped forward reluctantly, watching for any suspicious movement: didn’t the strangers have the power to cause fire and thunder to leap from the ground and strike any offender down? And didn’t they have the dreaded *poskina* hidden somewhere to come to their aid at any moment?

But unfortunately Diana could not come to the explorers’ aid, as Artem had tied her to the *kibitka* even before they had gone on their tour of the Scythian camp in the morning, deciding that the dog would cause unnecessary complications, and then they had had no time to go back to the *kibitka* and fetch her along when they went to the feast.

The soothsayer’s henchmen were slowly but inexorably closing in on the strangers, encouraged by the cheering of the elders; they held the ropes ready, the points of their swords and daggers forward.

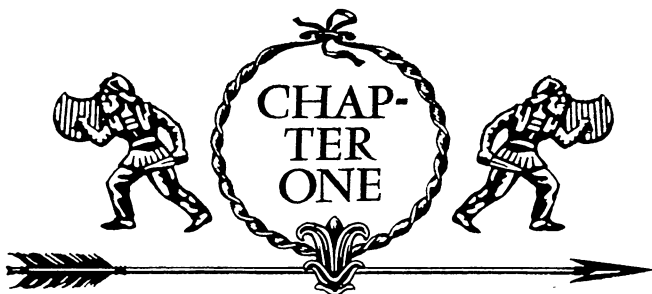
The strangers huddled closer together; they were quite defenseless.

Artem looked at Dorbatay to see a malicious smile playing on his wicked face.

The soothsayer could celebrate a victory!

PART THREE





Varkan disappears at a very crucial moment, the explorers walk through a corridor of spears, Artem leaps onto a horse and is ordered to make an escape; he and Dmitro Borisovich ride off at break-neck speed and are almost overtaken by their pursuers; Artem remembers an unusual weapon in the nick of time

The soothsayer's henchmen raised their weapons, apparently ready to use them against the explorers if need be. Lida, who found herself standing closest to their tightening circle, stepped back. But there was not much space left for retreating, as the wall of gleaming daggers and swords drew steadily forward on all sides.

"Oh, what's to be done? What's to be done?" Lida said, looking around desperately.

One of the younger priests tried to grab Lida's hand but she recoiled sharply, avoiding the grasp. Artem leaped forward placing himself between the priest and the girl. A moment later he felt someone join him. It was the archeologist, trembling with the eagerness to do battle that had suddenly flared up in him. Artem heard his strained voice:

"We'll defend ourselves to the end! I'm with you, Artem!"

But no resistance was really possible: what, in fact, could three unarmed men and a girl do in the face of dozens of well-armed enemies?

The priests stopped nevertheless, evidently taken aback by the strangers' obvious readiness to resist. Some of them

looked back at Dorbatay, waiting for further instructions, and Artem used the moment to put two fingers to his mouth and whistle as loud as he could. Artem realized that whistling for the dog that was tied up to the pole by the *kibitka* from such a distance was futile, but there was no harm in trying.

Dorbatay said something sharp and imperative. He must have given the order to seize the strangers no matter what. The swords were again raised in the air, this time poised to strike if any further resistance was encountered. There seemed to be only one thing left: give themselves up. Any further resistance might prove fatal.

Now two more Scythians appeared on the scene, carrying no arms but equipped with lassos. Any moment now the explorers would be ignominiously bound... It was then that Artem heard a familiar sound, distant but approaching quickly. It was she, it was she, Diana with her unmistakable barking!

"Ivan Semenovich, it's Diana! She's broken loose!"

The barking drew nearer; there could be no mistake — it was Diana! Artem shouted at the top of his voice:

"Diana! Come here! Diana! Come here! *Poskina, poskina!* Come here!"

The swords were lowered — *poskina* again? The dreaded yellow *poskina*?

"Come here! Diana! *Poskina!* Diana! *Poskina!*" Artem kept yelling. The barking stopped abruptly, but the crowd gave a collective groan of fear as the Scythians scattered in all directions, making way for Diana without even trying to use weapons against her. The big fawn dog dashed through the crowd like a ball of fire. She had stopped barking because she had seen her masters, and now she flashed past the dumbfounded priests in a giant leap, landing at the Artem's feet. It took the dog no time to assess the situation as dangerous for her masters, and she rushed at the priests, growling fiercely. The dog, ignoring the swords timidly displayed by the priests, kept charging at them, and they did not even dare to raise their weapons but retreated in terror, exclaiming in tremulous voices:

"*Poskina! Poskina!*"

Ivan Semenovich said to Artem:

"So, she must have broken loose when she heard your whistle. That was an excellent idea, Artem!"

A piece of rope was still hanging from the dog's neck.

“Our dear Diana!” Lida even clapped her hands in exultation. “She’ll save us!”

Ivan Semenovitch did not say anything but shrugged his shoulders as if to say: *I’m not so sure she can.*

There was, in fact, little to exult over. Dorbatay, who must have foreseen the possibility of the dreaded *poskina’s* appearing on the scene, issued a new command; it seemed nothing could catch him unawares. The situation changed abruptly, and again, a familiar maneuver was employed: spears were lowered and thrust forward. Now Diana could not charge the Scythians who were safe behind the forest of spears. There was no alternative but for the explorers to fall back.

Artem took a quick look around. Strange, but they were no longer surrounded on all sides: a passage had opened in the wall of swords and spears, and it led to the camp. Dorbatay’s plan was clear now: to force the strangers to go down this corridor of bristling swords and spears. But what trap did he expect them to fall into at the end of it?

The spearheads moved forward, almost touching the strangers’ breasts, and step by step they began retreating along the passage. The brave dog was bringing up the rear; every few paces she stopped and growled.

It had grown quite dark, and there was no way of telling what awaited the explorers at the end of the dark passage of swords and spears.

Dorbatay commanded something in a peremptory voice; but what had he said? It was important to know, even if it was the worst possible news. Why didn’t Varkan translate the soothsayer’s commands? Where was Varkan, anyway?

Artem looked around in alarm. Varkan was not to be seen anywhere!

“Dmitro Borisovich, Varkan’s gone.”

“He was at our side just a moment ago...”

“He didn’t tell you he was leaving, did he?”

“No, he didn’t.”

“So, he’s gone off somewhere without warning us!”

“I don’t know what to say, Artem. I don’t know why he’s done it.”

Varkan’s disappearance baffled the explorers greatly. If he had been seized by the priests they would surely have noticed the commotion. So, had Varkan just run away, abandoning them to their fate? That seemed highly unlikely!

Dmitro Borisovich looked around, feeling quite at a loss.

At last, failing to locate Varkan anywhere, he said hesitantly:

"He couldn't have just taken fright and run away..."

"No, he couldn't," Lida said with conviction. "Varkan would never do such a thing! Artem, do you think he could have bolted like that?"

"No, he couldn't," Artem said without any hesitation.

"But where in that case is he?" Ivan Semenovitch asked. No one could provide them with an answer. Varkan must have chosen a moment when nobody was paying attention to make his escape. With Varkan gone, the situation seemed entirely hopeless.

Meanwhile, the strangers were being driven further and further away from the dais. The stern, bearded faces beneath the bronze and leather helmets and felt hats now looked at the strangers with great hostility. The smiling faces and friendly, curious stares which had greeted the strangers several hours earlier were all clouded with malice now. The seditious rhetoric of Dorbatay and the insidious instigations of the nobles had done their job: *Aren't these strangers directly responsible for the death of our old chieftain Skolot? They have put Skolot under their spell, thus causing the gods' wrath to smite the chieftain. Hasn't the sage Dorbatay explained everything beautifully? Hasn't the sage Dorbatay spoken in behalf of the gods whose voice told him that the strangers must die? Dorbatay, who in his wisdom knew best, decided that the strangers should not be sacrificed now, and so it must be. But there is no chance for the strangers to avoid terrible retribution, because the gods are against them!*

All these thoughts and emotions could be read on every Scythian face. The wall of hostility, bristling with spears, was pushing the strangers along the passage. Any attempts at resistance would be suicidal. Even for the dog, there was nothing to do but to growl and retreat. Now the sinister silence was broken only by this growling and Dorbatay's urgings.

"Stay close together," Ivan Semenovitch said.

"They still want to tie us up!" Lida said in alarm.

"We can't allow it! We'll fight!" Artem exclaimed hotly.

"With what? We've got no weapons," Dmitro Borisovich said.

That was a very pertinent remark: they had no weapons of any sort with them. If earlier they had had their pickaxes

to defend themselves with, now their only weapon was Artem's pocket knife. Consequently there was not much sense in what Artem had said: he was seething with rage. It was the sudden disappearance of Varkan that had affected him the most. He did not want to believe that Varkan had just run away; such an act of faint-heartedness on his part was entirely out of character. But if he had not just run for it, he should have warned them somehow... *Varkan, have you already forgotten that today we became blood brothers?*

"Didn't you, Dmitro Borisovich, tell me that the ties between blood brothers are much stronger than those of real brothers?" Artem said reproachfully.

The archeologist, with a gesture of the one entirely baffled, admitted frankly:

"I'm absolutely nonplussed myself..."

"I just can't believe Varkan has run away, leaving us to the mercy of fate!" Lida exclaimed with a challenge in her voice. "He's not that kind of person! He couldn't have abandoned us like this!"

Meanwhile they had come to the end of the passage between the two walls of the armed Scythians. Once they were out of the perimeter of the *kibitkas* surrounding the place where the feast had been held, they ceased to be the guests of Hartak; that was probably why the priests, following Dorbatay's orders, had forced them out there. Ivan Semenovitch realized that now the moment had come when the priests would feel free to put Dorbatay's plans into action.

* * *

The fifes played an extremely high-pitched tune somewhere behind them, probably by the dais. Blazing new torches were brought. Their fitful flames fought off the darkness that pressed on all sides. Everything looked even more ominous in this flickering light which gave the scene a sinister, fairy-tale atmosphere: here and there from the darkness would appear a bearded face with jumping reflections in its hostile eyes, or a hand with a drawn bow and the arrow ready to fly from the taut bowstring, or a high felt hat of a priest... It was quite a hopeless situation — on all sides the explorers were threatened with swords and spears; the advancing priests could be glimpsed in the

unsteady light, which also revealed the two Scythians with the rope who were ready to bind the strangers.

Artem was thrown into utter despair; his voice trembled when he asked the geologist:

“What are we going to do, Ivan Semenovitch? What?”

He was well aware that the geologist was not in a position now to say anything, but still he wanted to hear some words of encouragement that would revive the dying hope that they would be saved.

Suddenly Diana raised her head as though listening to something and gave a short bark. Then she looked at the geologist as if expecting a command. The two priests with the rope had positioned themselves so they could go into action the moment a suitable chance presented itself.

Diana gave another short bark as though warning her master of something. Only then did the explorers hear horses approaching at a gallop and muffled shouts in the distance. A few moments later there remained no doubt that several riders were approaching at high speed; the clatter of hooves and shouts were clear, and the voices of the riders could be distinguished; one of the voices sounded very familiar...

“Varkan, Varkan!” Artem shouted at the top of his voice.

Pushing the priests aside with his snorting black horse covered in lather, Varkan broke through the circle of swords and spears; in one hand he was holding the reins of several riderless horses. More of Varkan’s young friends appeared on the scene, armed with swords, adding to the confusion by pushing the priests still further away. Discordant shouts rose from the crowd. No one had expected this momentous attack, not even Dorbatay!

Varkan shouted, his voice rising above the din:

“*Ratman! Ratman!*”

And all the other riders shouted with him:

“*Ratman! Ratman!*”

The word rang in the air; Varkan, meeting the anxious gazes of Dmitro Borisovich and Artem, pointed to the riderless horses with an expressive gesture as if to say: *hop on!* The other riders held the priests at bay to keep them from preventing the strangers’ escape. And above all the deafening clamor hung the battle-cry of Varkan’s party:

“*Ratman! Ratman!*”

But why did the warriors and hunters not budge and rush to the aid of the priests? Only a very short while before,

Dorbatay and his henchmen had enjoyed the support of the Scythians in their move to seize the strangers; it had seemed that all the Scythians were ill-disposed toward the strange magicians. And now Varkan and a handful of his friends were fighting in an audacious attempt to rescue the strangers in full view of the armed crowd, and not a single Scythian made the slightest move to assist the priests in repelling the attack. What could have influenced the mood of the crowd? Varkan, in spite of all his audacity and daring, could not have done anything against such odds if it were not for the unexpected tacit non-interference of the crowd; by their staying away and passively observing, the Scythian warriors inadvertently helped Varkan's cause. But why should they want to do it?

"Ratman! Ratman!"

Artem looked at Ivan Semenovitch questioningly; the geologist nodded, giving the go-ahead, and in a moment, Artem was straddling the horse nearest him. Grabbing reins, he shouted:

"Lida! Dmitro Borisovich! Get on the horses! Get on the horses!"

The archeologist was standing closest to him; without much ado, Artem grabbed him by the coat and helped him onto a horse with a single powerful jerk. Dmitro Borisovich found himself clinging to the horse's neck, holding on desperately. Now Lida and Ivan Semenovitch had to be helped onto the horses. But why were they taking so long? Besides they were not so helpless with horses as Dmitro Borisovich was and did not need too much assistance.

"Get on the horses!" Artem yelled once again.

His voice could hardly be heard in the deafening uproar that had engulfed the place. When the initial consternation had worn off, the priests rallied to attack Varkan's riders. In spite of very unfavorable odds, the riders defended themselves rather successfully by striking out at the priests with the flats of their swords; for some reason or other they did not want to use the cutting edge against the priests who, when they realized this, began pressing much harder. Then Dorbatay's imperious and piercing voice could be heard, evidently giving fresh orders. The old soothsayer had again proved his agility by getting so quickly from the dais to the scene of the clash!

In the wavering light of the torches, Artem saw a noose tighten over Ivan Semenovitch's upper arms; a moment later,

another lasso was thrown around Lida. The sight made Artem's blood run cold — the priests had used their advantage in numbers, cut off Lida and Ivan Semenovich from Varkan's riders and bound them!

"Ivan Semenovich! Lida!" Artem cried out to them, trying to get through the cordon of priests. But he could not: the priests had formed a veritable human wall around them. Some of the priests rushed at Artem and grabbed hold of the reins; a hot pain shot through his leg from a sudden blow. A lasso swished past his face, missing him by a couple of inches. A moment later he was almost dragged from his horse.

"Diana! Diana!" he yelled.

The dog immediately rushed to the rescue, her barking almost completely drowned by the din. Diana attacked one priest after another, biting them, knocking them down. And yet, none of them dared to strike her. They dashed out of her way, tripped and fell, or were knocked down by the dog, scrambled back to their feet and rushed to their positions around the strangers. Artem saw Varkan look around in alarm. Then he grabbed the reins of the archeologist's horse and called out to his followers. He made his horse rear and charged the priests. But he was heading in the direction opposite from where Lida and Ivan Semenovich were being held captive!

"Varkan! Wait!" Artem shrieked after him.

Varkan looked back and jerked his head which could only mean one thing: "We're getting out of here!"

"Hey, what about the rest?"

Varkan, ignoring Artem's pleas, made his way through the crowd, not letting go the reins of the archeologist's horse. Two of his men were locked in a pitched battle with the priests who were trying to drag Artem from his horse. He was completely at a loss as to what he should do next: Ivan Semenovich and Lida were in the enemy hands; Varkan and Dmitro Borisovich were fleeing. What was he to do? It was beyond his power to rescue his captured friends, and any attempt to do so would surely end in his being seized as well. Another lasso was thrown and would have caught Artem for sure if one of Varkan's men had not intercepted it in the air and thrown it to the ground. Through the uproar, Artem heard the muffled voice of Ivan Semenovich:

"Artem... run away at once... it's our only chance... come back to rescue us..."

Even then the young man could not quite make up his mind to escape: his friends were in mortal danger. How could he run away?!

“Run, Artem, escape! Escape! I order you: escape!”

Now it was an order, so he had to obey. Artem jerked the reins and the horse reared, sending one of his attackers sprawling. Artem’s horse came down on the priests in front of him.

“Ah, you deserved it! Forward, forward!”

But this was easier said than done. He felt a hand grab him firmly by the leg. The next moment, in the flickering light of the torches, he saw a spear rise into the air, and it was definitely aimed at him. Then the sound of metal striking metal was heard — one of Varkan’s men near Artem struck at the spear with his sword.

“Thank you! And now, I’m off!” Artem cried, spurring his horse to a gallop. A moment later the priests were far behind him. Some distance ahead, Artem made out the dark shape of a man on horseback moving away quickly — or perhaps there were two riders galloping close together — Varkan and Dmitro Borisovich no doubt. But would the archeologist be able to sustain such a gallop for long?

Looking back, Artem saw two more riders gaining on him. Hopefully, they were Varkan’s men, so everything should be all right. But what was happening to Lida and Ivan Semenovitch now? Artem still could discern the raving voice of Dorbatay through the clatter of the hooves: it was very easy to identify: rasping and yet somehow high-pitched. Artem also seemed to hear among the shouts and Diana’s barking, the voice of Ivan Semenovitch, calling out:

“Take Diana with you, Artem... Take Diana...!”

Without slowing down, Artem gave a piercing whistle, then again and again. But he realized it would be futile to look back to see whether the dog was following him, because the darkness around him was impenetrable.

The two of Varkan’s men had caught up with Artem and were riding alongside him. One of them suddenly stretched out his hand and pushed Artem closer to the horse’s neck.

At almost that very moment, a spear whizzed through the air just above his head, disappearing into the darkness ahead of him.

Thank you so much, my friend, Artem thought, realizing what had happened and appreciating what the man had done for him. It was as if the Scythians could see in the dark!

Artem looked back: what if there were further dangers lurking behind him in the dark? He saw the glow of the burning torches; in the distant glare, he thought he could make out a group of horsemen galloping after him. Had they been dispatched in pursuit? Or was his imagination running wild in the darkness? He also thought he heard Diana running to catch up with him.

No, these were not the tricks of his imagination: there she was, following him, and the clatter of the hooves and shouts of the Scythians in hot pursuit could be clearly heard now.

They were being chased!

* * *

Artem had no idea where he was headed with Varkan and his men. But he didn't care either. The most important thing now was to shake off their pursuers, who were surely priests dispatched by Dorbatay.

Artem bent closer to the horse's neck; the air whistled in his ears, hitting him hard in the face. His horse was galloping at top speed. They stayed in a close group, no one getting ahead or falling behind. He could also see Diana running alongside.

I wonder how Dmitro Borisovich is doing, Artem thought in trepidation. It'll be nothing short of a miracle if he hasn't fallen off his horse yet!

True, Varkan was riding by the archeologist's side and would always be ready to help. Artem was somewhat worried whether he and Varkan's men were moving in the right direction: it'd be terrible to lose Varkan now in this total darkness. But Artem's horse seemed to know where he was going, and Varkan's men knew the way.

Frenzied shouting came from behind. Varkan's men urged their horses to race even faster, and Artem did the same. Since their pursuers were numerous, much depended on the speed of their horses. The enraged priests would probably kill the lot of them immediately!

What if my horse stumbles and falls? Artem wondered, but soon chased away this futile thought. He had to concentrate on escaping. Judging by the clatter of hooves, their pursuers didn't seem to be gaining on them. But he wasn't sure how many of them there were altogether.

Artem looked back to see the same impenetrable darkness of the pitch-dark night. Once in a while, the clatter of hooves grew fainter and Artem rejoiced at the thought that his pursuers were falling behind. But then the clatter grew louder, and the men behind them seemed closer. Then Artem would press against his horse's neck, urging the beast onward, trying to become one with it.

"Faster... faster... faster!" he whispered, keeping time with the gallop.

The horse continued at the same neck-breaking speed. Once they galloped over a low hill, the hooves beating a resounding staccato against the stones. And then they flew across the steppe with its high grass that lashed at Artem's knees in the dark. He was disturbed by the fact that he did not know where they were going: the steppe was not a good place to hide. As far as he remembered, the cliffs at the end of the steppe could not hide them either. And they could not go on riding like this forever hoping that their pursuers would eventually fall behind and lose them...

There was little hope that would happen. The horses running after them must have been as fresh and strong as their own. Dorbatay was sure to have fetched the very best for his men...

Artem heard the clatter of hooves on stone from the same hill he and his companions had ridden over just a short while ago. So, the pursuers were not falling behind at all. Surely they were well-armed with the swords and spears the Scythians used so expertly. In this respect, the darkness was an asset for the fugitives.

When Artem remembered how Varkan had hit a small rabbit on horseback at full gallop, it made his flesh creep: Varkan was surely not the only Scythian capable of such feats! Artem looked back nervously: the steady clatter of hooves behind them never slackened. Artem peered into the darkness ahead and made out two dark silhouettes of men on horseback. He was definitely gaining on them. Were they slowing down? Had Varkan and Dmitro Borisovich — for who else could it be — reined in their horses? Something must have happened!

They have not stopped; they had slowed from a gallop to a trot. But at that pace, they would soon be overtaken by the pursuers! So, what was the idea?

When Artem found himself quite close to the riders, he called out to them:

“Dmitro Borisovich! What’s the matter? Why have you slowed down? The pursuers are on our heels!”

“My horse’s gone lame. He can’t gallop, and neither can I, for that matter. But that’s beside the point,” replied the archeologist.

“The pursuers...” Artem repeated but then cut himself short: it would disturb Dmitro Borisovich even more if he knew they were being chased. But it was too late: now the archeologist had been alerted to the new danger:

“What pursuers?” he asked quickly. “Do you mean we’re being chased?”

Artem had no alternative but to explain:

“An armed party has been dispatched to catch us, probably of priests. And they’re very close now.”

Now Artem’s horse was also trotting alongside the archeologist’s. Artem could not make out the expression on the archeologist’s face but he heard anxiety when the older man finally spoke:

“So, what’s to be done? My horse is limping... we can’t go much faster.”

At this point, Varkan cut in, saying just a few words. The clatter of the hooves was definitely drawing nearer and nearer with every passing moment. Something had to be done at once.

“What did Varkan tell you, Dmitro Borisovich?”

“He told me to go ahead to the forest which as it happens is very near, straight ahead. And to take you with me. Meanwhile, Varkan will engage the pursuers.”

“No, I don’t go with that,” Artem protested. “You should go there right away with your lame horse. I’m staying here and will catch up with you later.”

“But Artem...”

“Now’s not the time for arguing, Dmitro Borisovich! Go now!”

“You’re not even armed, Artem! What use you will be in a skirmish with the priests?”

“There you’re mistaken. I’ve got a weapon! Go, I beseech you!”

With no little satisfaction, Artem saw that the archeologist obeyed without further argument. His feeling of satisfaction was liberally mixed with wonder at how relations between people could change depending on the circumstances! Until just a short while ago, it was Dmitro Borisovich who issued orders which Artem invariably obeyed, albeit some-

times reluctantly, but now it was the archeologist who did what Artem told him.

Dmitro Borisovich set off toward the forest and was almost immediately engulfed by the darkness. In the meantime, the clatter of hooves was growing nearer.

Varkan put his hand on Artem's shoulder and gave him a gentle shove as if to say: *follow Dmitro Borisovich.*

"No, I'm staying here," Artem said resolutely. He was glad to hear Varkan say something to his men, in a tone suggesting that he approved of Artem's determination.

They stopped, and Artem's horse pranced nervously, probably sensing the tension of the rider. Swords clanked as they were drawn from the scabbards. Judging by the wild hue and cry that ensued, the pursuers must have caught sight of the fugitives.

It would be a fight against overwhelming odds: in spite of their dauntless courage, Varkan and his men would hardly be a match for the many pursuers, whose number could be estimated, judging by the clatter of hooves, as several score.

How could Artem help Varkan against such a formidable force? Diana would defend only Artem, for she could not distinguish friend from foe among the Scythians. Artem had neither sword nor spear, and Varkan had none to spare. Even if there had been an extra sword, Artem had no skill in handling one. But Artem knew how he would defend himself and the rest: he did have a weapon. It bore the least possible resemblance to anything conventionally described as weapons. In fact the thing he planned to use as a weapon was designed for purely peaceful purposes, but at the moment Artem placed more hope on it than on swords. In any case, he would not exchange it for a sword or spear under the present circumstances.

Artem's heart was pounding wildly; he was dying to use his unusual weapon. The voices of his pursuers grew even louder as they drew nearer. The time had come. Using gestures, Artem explained that Varkan and his men should stay where they were and that he, Artem, would deal with the pursuers all by himself. Varkan, nonplussed as he was, nevertheless realized that his blood brother had come up with some ingenious new plan.

"You stay here," Artem said, emphasizing his words with a gesture. "I'll meet the pursuers alone. Understand?"

Varkan did not, of course, understand the words but the

gestures were eloquent enough, and the Scythian was baffled; he was about to remonstrate, but Artem paid no heed. He dismounted, leaving Varkan and his men behind; they expressed their amazement and anxiety in terse phrases. Artem bent low to hide himself in the grass and dashed a dozen meters toward the oncoming pursuers. Then he stopped to catch his breath and command Diana, who was again at his side, to lie quietly.

"So, you want to hurl your spears?" Artem mumbled to himself. "You want to hack at us with your swords? Just try it! Just you wait, I'll make you sorry you've come!"

Crouching low in the grass, he saw — now that his eyes had grown accustomed to the dark — the silhouettes of the first pursuers riding straight at him. They must have seen Varkan and his men, whose immobility must have surprised them. But they also must have been glad to discover that they had halted, for they would be easier to capture.

Yelling in a frenzy, the attackers raised their spears; now they were sure of success.

Artem decided that the time to act had come. He raised his hand, holding a stubby object, above the grass.

"Here we go!"

The yelling stopped immediately, congealing into abrupt, stunned silence. The priests had reined in their horses, but even had they not done so, their frightened mounts would have stopped anyway. The concentrated ray of white light that seemed quite blinding in the total darkness hit the pursuers straight in the face, so they could not see anything but this mysterious light. Artem, Varkan and his men, on the contrary, could see the pursuers, overwhelmed by consternation, very well; and they were indeed priests. No wonder they were astounded: the blinding spot of light was shining above the high grass, without setting it on fire!

The priests were staring at the cold light that had sprung up so mysteriously in their way in baffled dismay. They could see each other almost as clearly as in the daylight; they could see the grass around them, but further away, the darkness on all sides of the source of light seemed to have solidified into a wall beyond which nothing could be seen.

"Aha, you've stopped, haven't you?" Artem whispered maliciously, trying to control his nervous excitement. "Now you've stopped, but what are you going to do next, I wonder?"

He trembled with nervous tension but he kept the button of his powerful flashlight pressed. Wasn't it a piece of good luck that he had it with him and that he had remembered it just in time!

Suddenly, as the initial shock wore off, a new upsurge of fury smote the priests. One of them — a middle-aged man wearing a red cloak with a hood, lashed his horse, urging it forward. But the horse, still thoroughly frightened by the light, only reared. The rider lashed it again, but the horse refused to move forward. Then the priest abruptly raised a spear into the air, aiming at the blinding light, uttering curses and imprecations all the while.

"Ah, I don't think you'll hit anything this time," Artem said under his breath dodging the spear. "Now it's me who's got the advantage!"

The spear had missed the target completely. When Artem had jumped to the side, he had released the button on the flashlight only to press it again a moment later, once again bathing the priests in cold white light. Under slightly different circumstances, Artem would have burst into laughter: the dismayed and confused faces of the priests, quite at a loss as what they should do, were a sight indeed! But at the moment Artem did not exactly feel like laughing.

"Go ahead, throw some more!" he said. "Don't forget to take a good aim though. I need time to dodge, after all. Diana, quiet! Lie still or else you might get hit by a spear."

Two spears were hurled at him almost at the same time. Artem dodged one and barely escaped being hit by the other.

"Aha, so that's what you want?" he said menacingly. "All right, you've asked for it."

He stepped back and groped for the spear sticking out of the ground. Without shutting off the light, he took the flashlight into his left hand, grabbed hold of the spear with the right one, raised it into the air and hurled it at the priests.

"Take that! Shortly you'll have another!"

The spear flew out of the darkness as though regurgitated by the earth. Artem had not taken an aim when he had hurled it, but the priests herded together into a tight group, their horses prancing but staying at one place, so it was very difficult to miss. Besides, they would have noticed the spear too late if at all. The spear hit one of the riders in the shoulder. The priests stared at the spear that had come from nowhere in great consternation, and exchanged alarmed

shouts. The wounded man, having pulled the spear from his wound, turned his horse sharply around and trotted away from the peculiar cold light which hurled spears back at those who threw them!

"Here's another one for you!" Artem cried out in a more cheerful voice now, throwing the second spear. He was not afraid of his enemies any longer.

This proved enough to turn dismay into panic; spears flying back from the darkness and hitting horses and men, the strange magician hiding behind the weird light — the priests broke down in the face of such abominations. What else did the terrible young magician have in store for them? — he who had defeated Dorbatay, who had escaped after the feast, and who was working these terrifying miracles in the night?

As though executing a command, the entire group wheeled round and galloped away. Artem could see that none of the riders even dared to look back. Leaning close to their horses' necks, they urged their mounts on, racing away as fast as possible.

Artem burst into nervous laughter:

"Didn't I tell Dmitro Borisovich I had a wonderful weapon!"

Artem remained where he was for some time, watching the priests make a hasty, disorderly retreat. In a moment, they disappeared over the hill. He switched off the flashlight and walked slowly back to Varkan and his men. He felt suddenly very tired, and stumbled in the high grass. The night seemed darker after the white glare of the flashlight. But soon, his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness again and he could see his horse grazing peacefully a short distance away and Varkan waiting with his men.

"Well, my friends, that's that," Artem said. "Did you see how they took to their heels! We're safe now, but I don't know for how long..."

He stopped short when he realized that the Scythians could not understand a word of what he was saying. They looked at him in awe: what he had just done was a miracle in their eyes. They had seen the eerie light and the panicky retreat of the priests, and assumed he had magical powers to make such a thing occur.

Artem leaped onto his horse.

"Let's go," he said with a gesture, urging them on. "If Dmitro Borisovich has not gotten lost in the forest, I'll

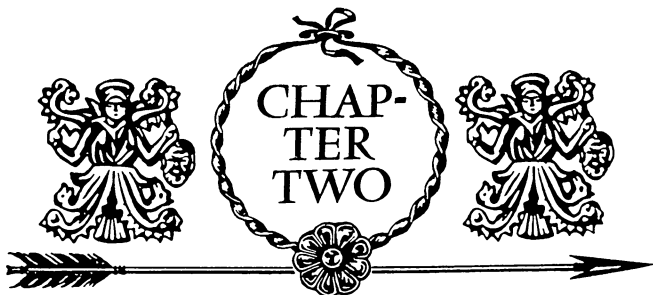
explain everything to you with his help. Diana, come here! Ah, my good dog, this time the enemy has been routed without your assistance, but that's all right. I'm sure there'll be plenty of chances for you to come to the rescue!"

Then he fell silent. The great nervous tension of the recent events must have affected him: he felt exhausted; the leg that had been wounded in the hunt was aching again.

Varkan said a few words to his men and they headed for the forest in silence. It seemed to have sprung out of darkness like something darker still. Varkan stopped his horse, put his hands to his mouth, and called the archeologist.

"Here I am, over here!" Dmitro Borisovich called back from a short distance away. He stepped from behind a tree and peered through the darkness counting the riders. Recognizing Artem, he rushed to him with open arms:

"My dear young friend! I'm so happy to see you safe and sound! I was so worried! I was so anxious lest you come to some harm!"



Ronis says the time is ripe for a rebellion, and Artem decides that he cannot possibly remain a passive observer: he must join Varkan and Ronis's cause; Artem finds a means of communicating with Lida

"When he saw that you had escaped, Dorbatay flew into a terrible rage. After the death of Skolot, he was convinced he had won the ultimate victory. So your escape has come to him as a tremendous blow. Besides, something else has come to pass to make Dorbatay and his rich supporters feel rather uncertain after all."

“Why should they?”

“The people are divided into those who support him and those who are against him. You see, Dorbatay has been preparing for the final confrontation with Skolot for a long time. But on the other hand he kept putting it off, because he was afraid of Skolot as he saw that the old chieftain had still a strong hold over the Scythians. That’s why he kept his machinations secret for so long, building up support for his case. He managed to get considerable backing, and then you appeared on the scene. After his defeat at the altar, Dorbatay realized that using your magical powers, Skolot would get all the Scythians under his sway. So, the old soothsayer resolved to act without further delay. With those elders, nobles and rich men who supported him, he worked out a detailed plan which he managed to pull off almost without a hitch. Hartak was proclaimed the new chieftain but it was clear to everyone that all the power was now in the hands of Dorbatay. Dorbatay had maneuvered the elders into agreeing to this in spite of the fact that originally, some of them had been on Skolot’s side. They probably figured it was more to their advantage to have Hartak for the chieftain with Dorbatay exercising the real power instead of Skolot and Dorbatay pitted one against the other in an endless conflict, for the nobles fear the revolt that is brewing among the poor and the slaves. Besides the situation is further aggravated by the fact that Varkan has escaped, too. And there’s great power behind Varkan as well.”

“What power?”

“Wait, I’ll get to that shortly,” Ronis said with a smile. “It won’t be easy to figure out the best course of action. I can tell you that Dorbatay fears you and your possible moves against him greatly, especially now, after the spectacular escape staged by Varkan! Incidentally, the Scythians are talking about nothing but the mysterious light that magically appeared before the priests, stopped the pursuit, and hurled back the spears thrown at it by the priests, hitting a man and a horse.”

“Ah, well...” said Artem modestly after he heard the translation.

“Then, there’s your yellow panther, your big dog, that is. In other words, I’m sure that Dorbatay wouldn’t mind making peace with you, provided, of course, you agree to a reconciliation...”

“Oh no, never!” Artem exclaimed.

Ronis looked at him and understood what he had just said without having to listen to the translation: the expression on Artem's face and the way he said it made his meaning all too clear.

"I'm not trying to convince you to do it," Ronis said with a bitter smile. "I know from experience how little Dorbatay's most solemn pledges are worth!"

"But we're worried about what will become of our two friends who are in the hands of the old soothsayer," Dmitro Borisovich said dismally and added, turning to Artem and looking him straight in the eye: "We should discuss the situation in every detail and decide upon something only after we have done so!"

Artem did not say anything in reply: the archeologist was right, of course. But on the other hand, they could not make any agreement with Dorbatay, their perfidious enemy, could they? And Ronis had also said that the old soothsayer could not be trusted! The Greek spoke again:

"At this point I don't think your friends are in any immediate danger. Dorbatay fears retribution from you should your friends come to any harm. Besides, Hartak fancies your girl... Dorbatay will surely use this to his own advantage. It gives him additional strings to pull his puppet whatever way he wants by promising to give the girl to Hartak in marriage after he's put the gold chieftain's helmet on his head."

Artem barely managed to suppress an indignant exclamation. But he lowered his head and stared at the ground.

"Your friends are being held in a *kibitka* with armed priests guarding them. They are not free to leave, but I can assure you that their lives are not in danger at the moment. After Dorbatay pronounced them the property of the gods, so to say, no Scythian would dare to touch a hair on their heads."

After Dmitro Borisovich translated this for Artem, he added from himself, seeing how downcast the young man looked: "That should really keep them safe for the time being."

"Hope they remain the property of the gods until we find the way to free them," Artem said.

When Ronis heard the translation of Artem's words, he said:

"Yes, it is safe enough... until... the moment Dorbatay

decides to use this 'property' for his own purposes. But it may turn out he'll have no time for that."

"Why?" Dmitro Borisovich asked.

"Because, something is going to happen in the near future that will come as a shock to Dorbatay," Ronis said, casting a meaningful glance at Varkan, who was also sitting by the fire making arrows. Without putting down the shaft and the knife he was holding in his hands, he said:

"All right, Ronis, tell them everything. Fate has brought us together in our struggle against our common enemy, Dorbatay and his henchmen. And Fate has also brought us close to the strangers who have become our friends. Go ahead, Ronis, tell our friends everything!"

"All right, Varkan, I will. They should know and should choose sides," Ronis agreed.

The archeologist's curiosity was piqued; as he translated, his eagerness to hear the secret grew. Varkan's distinctive position among the Scythians made him popular among the warriors and hunters and earned him quite pronounced animosity from the elders, nobles and priests, Dorbatay in particular. But what made Varkan different had remained a secret to the explorers.

"All right, listen to this story, my friends," Ronis said. "A revolt has been brewing among the slaves for a long time. But it must be well prepared to be a success. We've already seen the results of an ill-timed action. I gave ample warning that it would miscarry unless properly prepared. Varkan shared this view, too, but there were some hotheads who could not wait any longer and instigated the revolt. And, consequently, it all ended miserably, with many slaves losing their lives in battle and under torture..."

Ronis heaved a sigh, and then continued:

"It grieves me to think about this... especially knowing I warned them against making any rash moves... The most important Scythians, Dorbatay in particular, and the other nobles would never let the slaves go free without putting up a fight. A major uprising was necessary to bring about the release of the slaves, but we were not quite sure which side the hunters and herdsmen would take. It was a matter of extreme importance for us... The rich nobles and elders own big herds of horses and many slaves. But they aren't satisfied with what they have and try to get more by driving hard the hunters and herdsmen who have no possessions and have to work for the rich. The priests introduced a law that

the hunters must give a part of their game-bag to the gods, in other words to the priests. There's another law which requires the herdsmen to give the priests something, too. So, as you see, the rich elders and nobles make life very hard for the average Scythians. And no one can do anything about it. Dorbatay and his priests made sure no one could say a word against them, because anyone who did was denounced as an infidel and severely punished for breaking the sacred law."

"In fact, Dorbatay could strip anyone of all his possessions, declaring them 'the property of the gods,'" Varkan said bitterly.

"Yes, such things have happened," Ronis said. "The Scythians have learned to fear the priests and the rich. They cower and grumble in secret, but they're careful not to let the elders and priests hear about their grumbling to avoid trouble. That's how it was, but then discontent began to grow among the Scythians. It is more widespread among young warriors, hunters, and herdsmen. The discontented Scythians have resolved to unite against the elders, nobles and priests. The leader of the discontented warriors was and is..."

"Varkan!" Dmitro Borisovich exclaimed. "Of course it's Varkan! Who else could it be?"

"Who else indeed?" Artem said to himself with conviction.

"Yes, it's Varkan. It is he who has made all the preparations for a major uprising against the priests and nobles. I was responsible for getting everything ready for the revolt. We went our separate ways until Varkan and I began to see eye to eye. We realized that our ultimate goals were the same and that we should unite. We were about to give the signal to start the uprising, but the situation changed abruptly... As a matter of fact, it was your appearance that was responsible for the change. If not for you, Dorbatay would have behaved differently; he would not have been in such a hurry to get rid of Skolot. But after his defeat at the altar... I think I've told you about that... So, Dorbatay poisoned Skolot, having secured the support of the nobles beforehand. Incidentally, he planned to seize not only you but also Varkan and his friends whom he suspected of plotting against him. But things did not go the way he planned. Varkan managed to escape, and by the way, it was extremely dangerous for him to return as he did, to rescue

you. Now his friends have begun to join him here, one by one. Some have stayed behind to gain the support of other warriors and hunters. Dorbatay and his henchmen do not suspect that I incited the slaves to revolt. I'm sure that if he learnt about it, he'd rather lose the gold I bring to him and have me killed..."

Ronis fell silent, and the others were silent, too, their heads bent low in thought. They were sitting by the fire in the glade. Varkan went on working quietly at the arrow shafts with his knife as though the story did not concern him at all. But he glanced at them occasionally to see whether they were listening attentively enough then bent low over the arrow he was working at.

Dmitro Borisovich was all ears but didn't forget to translate Ronis's story for Artem, who was no less excited to hear it. This ancient world had been opening up before the archeologist in greater detail than could possibly be glimpsed in even the most meticulous accounts of the ancient historians or from any amount of artifacts unearthed in archeological excavations. Everything Dmitro Borisovich had observed threw additional light on the life of a Scythian tribe.

The representations of the Scythians that Dmitro Borisovich had seen earlier on the ancient jugs, vases, basreliefs, and jewelry, had now come to life before his very eyes. Could anything else give greater pleasure to an enthusiastic archeologist who had devoted his entire life to the history of the ancient tribes that had roamed the vast territories to the north of the Black Sea?

Artem was also excited to hear all this, but he was occupied with other problems.

The fate of his friends put everything else into the background. They were in the hands of Dorbatay and Hartak — or rather it was Dorbatay alone who was to be reckoned with, because Hartak could be easily dismissed as a nonentity. But on the other hand, Hartak wanted to marry Lida, and Dorbatay would be only too glad to oblige. This thought made Artem clench his fists. Though he loathed the very thought, he could not just ignore it. There was one thing that eased his mind somewhat: if Hartak intended to marry Lida, Dorbatay would not do her any harm, at least for the time being. As far as Ivan Semenovitch was concerned, his only hope was Dorbatay's fear of retribution from Artem and Dmitro Borisovich, should he come to any harm. That

is, of course, if Ronis's words were to be trusted. There was nothing else to hope for at the moment, and Artem knew it.

But there was something else that should be taken into consideration: according to Ronis, the Scythian community was about to explode in civil strife; Artem shared the views of Ronis and Varkan, and regarded the deep discontent of many Scythians as justified. It was only natural that the honest and courageous Varkan was the leader of the down-trodden hunters and herdsmen. Artem felt even more respect for his blood brother after learning of Varkan's role in the forthcoming revolt. It was also good to know that Ronis, a determined and resolute person, was the leader of the slaves who were preparing an uprising. That he was a man of exceptionally strong will could be easily seen from the story of the tortures he had been subjected to by Dorbatay. Ronis was definitely a man of mettle! He would be able to withstand any trials and carry into life all of his plans!

Thus the ways of the strangers and the leaders of the forthcoming uprising unexpectedly converged. Varkan was right in saying that all available forces should be united in the uprising. But could Artem and Dmitro Borisovich contribute anything? Weren't they just two men seeking to free their friends? Artem thought he and Dmitro Borisovich should do all they could to help the uprising. It was a just cause, and they could not ignore it. They would join them against the priests and the nobles in their attempt to bring about justice. And if it coincided with the attempt to rescue Lida and Ivan Semenovich, so much the better!

* * *

In the long silence that ensued the only distinct sounds were the rustling of leaves and the crackling of the fire. Diana was lying beside Artem, her head resting on her outstretched forelegs; from time to time she would prick up her ears, listening to some indistinct, muffled sounds coming from the depths of the forest. The tethered horses were standing nearby; several Scythians were resting beside the horses: they were obediently fulfilling the orders of Varkan.

Ronis looked up abruptly.

"What will you tell me, strangers?" he asked Dmitro Borisovich. "I've told you everything there was to tell, and now Varkan and I want to hear whose side you'll be on? Which way will you choose?"

The archeologist looked at him in surprise:

"What do you mean 'which way?'" he asked.

"Will you join us? Or do you prefer to remain neutral? We all understand you have that right, of course."

"My dear Ronis," Dmitro Borisovich said softly but firmly. "There's nothing to discuss here, really. There is only one thing we can do, and that is to side with you against the priests and the nobles. Are you of the same opinion, Artem?" he turned to the young man.

Artem did not say anything but warmly squeezed the hands of Varkan and Ronis in an eloquent gesture that showed without words Artem's preference. Varkan did not lower his eyes for the first time since the conversation had begun: he had been avoiding the eyes of the strangers, evidently not quite sure they would join his cause. Now Varkan looked Artem straight in the eye, and there was as much love and respect in his eyes as there was in the eyes of Artem who met his gaze. Artem realized that there had been some doubts in Varkan's mind as to what their decision would be even though Varkan believed in the bottom of his heart that they would support him. Now everything was decided, and it was a great thing to be looking each other in the eye.

Artem broke into a broad grin.

"Dmitro Borisovich, tell Varkan," he said, "that the problem of our participation must be considered settled. There's nothing else to discuss! My dear blood brother should not have had any doubts concerning us... Wait, Dmitro Borisovich, wait, don't translate all I said! Everything's clear anyway!"

The archeologist nodded his head as if to say: *yes, everything's clear.*

"But I've got a question of a different nature to ask," Artem said. "According to Ronis, Varkan has quite a lot of supporters. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that's correct," Varkan confirmed.

"If that is so, why couldn't these supporters help Lida and Ivan Semenovich escape as Varkan helped us? United, we could be of greater use. Besides, our friends would be safe."

Varkan looked at Ronis searchingly after he heard the translation, but the Greek shook his head.

"No, it can't be done now. It's out of the question at the moment," he said firmly. "Does our friend really think

that we would not like to do it? Of course we would, but the time for it has not yet come."

"Why?"

"You see, the priests are keeping such a close watch over the *kibitka* where your friends are kept that no one can even come in sight of it. Mind you, Dorbatay is sure we will make an attempt to free them, and he is prepared to repulse us. If we try it now, we will be walking into a trap."

Artem listened to the translation in gloomy silence. Ronis was surely right, and his assessment of the situation was flawless.

"We'll be able to free your friends later during the general uprising," Ronis said, "or maybe shortly before it breaks out, when the priests' attention is directed elsewhere."

"All right, I understand," Artem said impatiently, for his impetuosity could not be checked even with the most convincing arguments. "But when will the uprising begin? Varkan and Ronis said they'd been planning it for a long time. Why do they keep putting it off? Now, after the poisoning of Skolot, isn't it a suitable moment to come forward and open the Scythians' eyes to the pernicious role of Dorbatay and the treachery of the nobles?"

Artem, roused by his own fervid words, was burning with the desire to see the action started as soon as possible. Dmitro Borisovich translated only the essence of what he had said so that the young man would get the answer the sooner.

"There are, in fact, several reasons why we can't begin the uprising right away," Ronis said with utmost gravity.

"What reasons?" Artem persisted. "Didn't Ronis himself say a discontent was growing among the slaves, hunters, and herdsmen? What else are you waiting for?"

"That's exactly what the hotheads who started the previous revolt prematurely, said," Ronis replied gloomily. "They paid dearly for their rashness... and the whole thing ended in disaster... An uprising is a complicated matter — overlook one little detail, and everything is ruined."

Artem lowered his head again — the clever Greek had some very convincing arguments.

"We have to get more weapons. We don't have enough. That's first," Ronis continued. "The old warriors and their servants are better armed. Besides, the priests are also rather

well armed. Second, they are all united by the fear of the impending uprising and are on guard."

"So what?" Artem said hotly again. "They're united, so why can't you unite? Everything depends on you and those who share your views. You should give weapons to the people, incite them to action, make them follow you... then victory is yours! That's what you should understand!"

Ronis looked at Artem with added interest: he must have liked the young man's sincere impetuosity.

"Everything you say is quite correct in itself," Ronis said after a short silence. "But as it happens, now is not the right time to undertake anything decisive. Dorbatay played his role well — you saw that yourself — and he's managed to sway the majority of the Scythians to his side. The Scythians fear the gods and believe it was the gods who punished Skolot. But I can assure you that things will change radically in the nearest future..."

"How soon will that be?"

"That depends on when the Scythians start the funeral journey to bury Skolot. You see, Scythian chieftains of such prominence must be buried in a sacred place where many other chieftains have been buried. The place is called..."

"Gerrhus!" Dmitro Borisovich cried out quite forgetting for the moment of his duties as interpreter. His mind was momentarily invaded by other thoughts. He knew the name of the place where Scythian chieftains had been buried from reading Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian who had left the most comprehensive account about the Scythians to come down to us. Herodotus wrote that the Scythians buried the most prominent of their chieftains in Gerrhus, the location of which was known only to the Scythians. This was the place the Scythian chieftain Idanthyrus had in mind when he mockingly advised the Persian King Darius to come and find the graves of their ancestors. But wasn't Gerrhus reserved exclusively for the dead of the powerful Scythian tribe known as the Royal Scythians? At least that was how some later historians interpreted Herodotus on the subject. If that was so, how had it come about that a small Scythian tribe, the nomadic tribe of the chieftain Skolot had a similar custom? Was it because in its complete isolation it had adopted a mode of behavior learnt from stories about the Royal Scythians? At the moment the archeologist could not find a better explanation.

Ronis cast a puzzled glance at the stranger: how did he know about the sacred place of the Scythians? But, when he replied, he sounded quiet and deliberate, and not at all surprised:

"Yes, Gerrhus. Very few people know its exact location. It is generally believed to be somewhere in the vicinity of the Borysthenes..."

"The 'Dnieper' is what we call the river now," Dmitro Borisovich added in an aside to Artem.

"Oh, but... wait, how could the Dnieper flow through here? It's quite..." Artem said greatly perplexed.

"Hush, we'll try to find an explanation later!"

Ronis continued:

"They have begun the embalming of the chieftain's body. In a few days, the Scythians will break camp and begin the funeral procession to Gerrhus. Naturally, the slaves will follow them. The funeral rites at Gerrhus will involve many human sacrifices, and Dorbatay will need many slaves as victims..."

Ronis broke off his story at this point and fell into a short, gloomy silence, lowering his head. But very soon, he came out of his momentary melancholy and said:

"I am sorry, the very mention of the fact makes me sad. Dorbatay will sacrifice innocent people to his cruel gods... but ahead of everything else, he will use these sacrifices to establish even a firmer grip over the Scythians and make them fear not the gods but the soothsayer himself!"

"There is still a good chance that he won't be able to do it," Varkan said.

"I hope so," replied the Greek, frowning in concentration. "When the procession arrives in Gerrhus, our uprising will start. Anyway, that is how we've planned it."

Artem was excited to hear at last a more or less definite term for the start of the action.

"You see, my friends," Ronis went on, "while the Scythians are on the move to Gerrhus, Varkan will tell the hunters and herdsman — those who can be relied on, of course — what should be done. Dorbatay and the elders will not be able to rally support on such short notice, as during the journey, the Scythians will inevitably get mixed up and the nobles and their retainers will not be able to stay close together in one group. Also, the final coup will be easier as we plan to keep very quiet during the journey so as to

lull Dorbatay's vigilance and make him think that the unrest has fizzled out."

Listening to this, Artem could not help thinking of Ronis with growing admiration: this reserved man of short stature commanded tremendous respect! Ronis's plan seemed to take into consideration every detail and eventuality one could possibly think of. The plan was sure to work! It was so sound that naturally, Varkan supported his friend all the way. It was indeed a happy albeit rare combination: the courage and intrepidity of the young Scythian warrior and the careful planning and wise foresight of the Greek.

So there was only one thing over which they had no control: whether or not Lida and Ivan Semenovitch would come to any harm at Dorbatay's hands before the journey ended and the uprising began. Was there any hope that their friends would be safe until then?

As though in response to the worried thoughts of the young man, Ronis spoke again in the same deliberate, convincing manner:

"I think this funeral journey will keep Dorbatay, as the head priest, very busy. He won't have time to do any harm to your friends. As far as the girl is concerned, I think she is quite safe anyway, considering Hartak's intention to marry her. And your other friend is also relatively safe from any immediate danger."

"And why is that?"

"Well, there are some reasons to think so. Suppose Dorbatay intends to kill your friend..."

"A very nice thing to suppose, and very comforting too!" Dmitro Borisovich could not help exclaiming.

"But even if Dorbatay does have such an intention, he will not have time to deal with your friend until the actual burial of Skolot, because it would be more useful to sacrifice your friend during the funeral rites to lend the ceremony more solemnity."

Ronis presented his reasoning calmly, not overlooking a single detail. On the one hand, Artem and Dmitro Borisovich were somewhat put off by the callousness of his wording as though he were speaking about something inanimate rather than the fate of a human being, the way a chessplayer would speak of a pawn. On the other hand, they felt reassured by his determination and resoluteness. They saw in Ronis a person who wanted to plan everything carefully, taking into

consideration every detail to arrive at the proper conclusions and bring the affair to the desired end. Varkan put away the arrows he had been working on and rose to his feet, his questioning gaze resting on Ronis.

"Our conversation seems to be coming to an end," he said to his friend.

"Yes, so it seems," Ronis replied quietly.

"Then I have just one more question for you. Do you still think that I should not appear in the camp? Is it better for me to stay here in the forest?"

"Yes, you should stay here," Ronis said without the slightest hesitation. "Everything that need to be done at this stage can be done without you. Believe me, I have weighed everything carefully. There is no need for you to risk your life now, and if you go there you could easily walk into some trap. You know perfectly well what will happen if you are seized, do you not?"

Varkan nodded his head.

"Besides," Ronis continued, "all those who feel they are in danger will be coming here to join you. I, for my part, will be sending you weapons via my men. Our weapons must not be seized by Dorbatay. Also, when the Scythians break camp and start their funeral journey you and your men should follow them, making sure they do not see you. You should arrive in Gerrhus along with the main body of the Scythians. I will contrive some means of letting you know of any new developments and of the state of readiness for our final move. All right?"

"Yes, I think that is the best way," Varkan said without hesitation.

Barely audible sounds of tambourines and fifes drifted their way from far across the steppe; they all fell silent and listened. The Scythians dozing beside the horses, got up, alerted. Diana also pricked up her ears: she had already learnt to react to these sounds as to a potential menace.

"They have begun to perform the necessary rites to make sure the journey will be favored by the gods," Ronis said gloomily. "There will probably be some sacrifices, too... Dorbatay will try very hard to re-establish a firm grip on the Scythians... with the gods supposedly speaking through him, to make their will known to the Scythians... What rubbish!"

Without saying anything else, he leapt onto his horse and disappeared among the trees. Artem stared after Ronis,

listening to the distant tambourines and fifes. Rites with sacrifices, Ronis had said... And Lida and Ivan Semenovich were in the hands of the priests!.. He was powerless to do anything to rescue them... He did not even have any means of communicating with them to inform them of their new plan and find out what kind of conditions they were being kept in, of their moods and thoughts...

Wasn't it just awful?

Diana came up to the young man, put her head in his lap, and began whining. Had the dog sensed his mood or did she want to show she was sorely missing Ivan Semenovich and Lida?

"Yes, my Diana, you're not the only one who is in low spirits... I wish we could all see each other again, speak to each other..." said Artem, stroking the dog's head. At that very moment, an idea dawned upon him. Who said he couldn't communicate with his friends? Of course he could! He should have thought of it earlier!

Artem pulled a pencil out of his pocket, then his notebook, and began writing something hurriedly. Dmitro Borisovich stared at him in surprise; then, as he could not restrain his curiosity any longer, he walked up to the young man and peeped over his shoulder. Artem wrote:

Lida, we have successfully escaped and are safe now. We have not been injured or wounded and feel quite well. Dmitro Borisovich and I are in the forest planning your escape. We are worried lest some harm be done you, but we were told that Dorbatay has put you off limits by making you taboo for the other Scythians, and though he keeps you under lock and key, no one will dare to touch you. I think this taboo is a very helpful thing now. Ronis tells us that neither you nor Ivan Semenovich are in any immediate danger, at least for the time being. This is what sustains our hopes for the moment. Write back to me and tell me how you are. With Diana as the bearer of our messages you can feel free to write in detail. Ronis told us that the Scythians would soon start on the funeral journey to the sacred land of Gerrhus where Skolot is to be buried. It is there, in Gerrhus, that we are planning to set you free, for we cannot possibly do so at the moment. Ronis and Varkan told us there was a great discontent among many Scythians which will surely end in an uprising. We cannot remain passive observers, that much is clear. In my next message, I will give you more details. By the way, I want you to know that

the slaves are on our side. Write back immediately upon receiving this. Love, Artem.

When Artem had finished writing, he neatly folded the paper. Dmitro Borisovich, looking somewhat skeptically upon what Artem was doing, asked at last:

"And what is the means, if I may inquire, by which you think you can convey your message? And through what channel do you plan to receive an answer? Ronis is gone... besides, I doubt he would be able to pass the message on: he himself told us about the guard mounted outside the *kibitka* where Lida and Ivan Semenovitch are being kept. You remember that, don't you?"

Artem smiled cunningly and winked at Dmitro Borisovich:

"I did not plan to ask Ronis. I've got another postman, even more reliable. This one will be able to slip past any guards, and I don't think there's anything or anybody that will stop my messenger. And I'll get my reply in the same manner. I'm a little annoyed with myself for not having thought of it earlier. It's so simple!"

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, my young friend."

"Oh, now you'll understand everything. Diana, come here, my dear, wonderful dog, come here!"

Dmitro Borisovich and Varkan, very much intrigued, watched Artem adjust Diana's collar and put the folded paper between the overlapping leather straps.

"Aha," the archeologist exclaimed, "that's an interesting idea!"

Then Artem gently pushed the dog, saying:

"Go, Diana, go, quickly! Go to Lida! Understand? Go to Lida, find Lida, quick!"

The dog wriggled her stubby tail, evidently much pleased with her new task; then she gave a short and cheerful bark as if to say: *I understand*. No sooner said than done! But Artem told her several more times:

"Go to Lida, Diana, find Lida! Run quickly, very quickly! Yes, what a good dog!"

The dog gave another bark as though to indicate that she understood everything and took off at a great speed. In a few seconds, she disappeared among the trees, headed for the Scythian camp which was situated a considerable distance away across the steppe. Artem turned to the two men watching him, his face aglow with pleasure:

"It's all very simple," he said. "Diana carried our letters back and forth when we were working at the foot of the

Sharp Mount. In fact, Lida and I worked a considerable distance away from each other, as you may remember, Dmitro Borisovich. Well, sometimes, you get bored a little, you know, so once just for the fun of it, I put a piece of paper with a message to Lida into Diana's collar, and told the dog to run to Lida. Frankly, I didn't think anything would come out of it. I wasn't even sure Diana would understand the command correctly and go to Lida. And then, of course, I wasn't sure Lida would notice my message in the dog-collar. But she did! When Diana came back I saw a piece of paper in her collar, and could tell at once it wasn't mine, but Lida's. That's how we began corresponding via Diana. Diana learnt very quickly what she was expected to do. Now, some time has passed since our last exchange of letters, and she may have forgotten the game, but I hope not. And the Scythians will not harm our good dog, our dear *poskina*, as they fear her greatly. So, I believe a line of communication has been opened. What do you think, Dmitro Borisovich?"

The archeologist indicated that it was an excellent idea, very simple and effective.

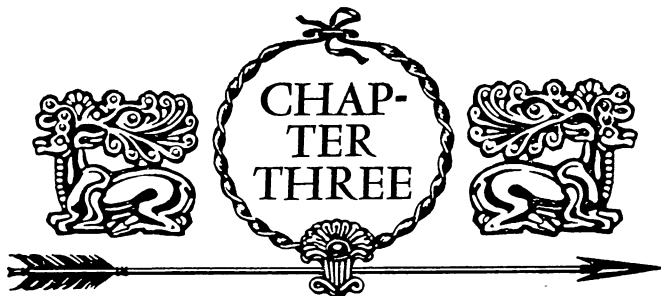
Meanwhile, Artem went on to other matters:

"Now we must get our luggage back, that's top on our list of priorities, Varkan. It's very important for us to get our bags back... I'm sorry, Varkan, I keep forgetting you can't understand me. When will we ever be able to communicate without an interpreter? But there's no other way out at the moment. Dmitro Borisovich, would you please translate that it is of vital importance for us to have our bags brought to us here?"

Varkan nodded his head after he heard the translation.

"Oh, good," Artem said when he saw Varkan nod. "We'll give it hot to Dorbatay and his priests yet!"

Artem's mood had evidently improved!



Lida and Ivan Semenovich find themselves captives of Dorbatay who once again asks them to accept his proposals which they do, not knowing exactly what the proposals are this time; they are brought to the altar to witness rites with human sacrifices; the gloom is somewhat dispelled by Artem's message, but Lida discovers she has unwittingly accepted a proposal to become Hartak's bride; Artem is greatly disappointed at his failure to find the dynamite charges in the bags, fights off a surprise attack with the means available and comes out victorious; Ronis informs Dmitro Borisovich of his new plans

What had come to pass in the Scythian camp after Dmitro Borisovich and Artem made their spectacular escape?

Dorbatay, seething with rage, ordered Lida and Ivan Semenovich be taken to his own *kibitka*. As they walked, surrounded by the armed priests, in the flickering torch-light, they expected to hear the pursuers who had been dispatched to catch the fugitives, returning from their mission. Occasional wild shouts of the priests filled the air with menace. Dorbatay kept silent, but the fierce expression on his face, with reflections from the red flames of the torches making it even more sinister, did not portend anything good for the strangers.

It was only in the *kibitka* that Dorbatay spoke again, and he addressed Hartak, who almost literally trod on Dorbatay's heels, following him wherever he went. Dorbatay never turned to look at the strangers who were sitting in the corner watching Dorbatay's every movement closely, trying

to guess what fate Dorbatay had in mind for them. And they could expect the worst...

Talking to Hartak now, Dorbatay did not bother to feign any respect for "the glorious and sagacious chieftain." There was no one to witness his behavior now, except for the strangers with bound hands. There was no reason whatsoever for old soothsayer to go on playing his role in front of them!

Now Dorbatay issued orders and Hartak listened with his head bent low. Only once did he try to remonstrate, but so timidly and in such a low voice, that Dorbatay made a contemptuous and impatient gesture with his hand and turned away. Hartak again lowered his head submissively and stopped without finishing what he had begun to say.

Priests kept coming and going: Dorbatay listened to what they had to say, gave orders and they rushed out again. Unfortunately, neither Lida nor Ivan Semenovitch could understand a word. Neither could they even venture a guess what Dorbatay and several dignified and haughty Scythian elders who entered the *kibitka* at one point, were speaking about. Their conversation was unexpectedly interrupted: a loud and agitated voice came from outside the *kibitka*, and a group of priests burst in. One of them had blood on his shoulder; he began to speak, out of breath, stopping, wavering, and gesticulating wildly. Dorbatay's face, which had been wearing a fierce enough expression, grew even gloomier as he listened to what the wounded man was telling him.

Ivan Semenovitch leaned closer to Lida and said under his breath:

"I'm sure this is the pursuit party come back. And they've failed to catch anybody! So, everything's all right! Artem and Dmitro Borisovich have managed to escape!"

"Oh, isn't that wonderful, Ivan Semenovitch! It..." Lida exclaimed, but cut herself short when she saw the warning in the geologist's eyes.

Suddenly Hartak began to speak. This time, in contrast to his earlier timidity, he sounded more self-assured, and Dorbatay listened to him quite attentively.

Hartak, while speaking, gestured toward Lida and Ivan Semenovitch, then to something outside the *kibitka*. Dorbatay was looking at him, his head bent to one side. It was a surprise to see Dorbatay apparently agree with what Hartak was suggesting; he gave a signal, and one of the attendant

priests dashed out and soon came back with the swarthy man who had come to the explorers once already with proposals from Dorbatay. The swarthy man bowed low before Dorbatay, listened to some imperious phrases uttered by the chief priest, then turned to the bound strangers and addressed them, speaking suavely and distinctly.

Lida looked at Ivan Semenovich in utter confusion:

"They think we can understand him! But without Dmitro Borisovich we can't!"

"Hm, Dorbatay reckons we know Greek!"

"But we don't, we don't! Oh, what shall we do? I wish we could understand at least some of it!"

Ivan Semenovich said with a sad smile:

"It would be very helpful, of course... But even without understanding a word of what they're telling us, we can make a good guess. I'm sure it's some new proposals. Naturally, I can't say exactly which, but as it happens, we absolutely cannot refuse anything they suggest. We must gain as much time as we possibly can. Do you follow me? Consequently, we must accept their proposals, no matter what."

"All of their proposals?" Lida asked tremulously.

"Yes, we have to!"

"You really mean we have to accept absolutely anything they might demand of us?" her voice broke as she remembered that Hartak fancied her. Had Ivan Semenovich forgotten about it?

The geologist said firmly:

"Yes, Lida, anything... but only up to a certain point, of course!"

"But how shall we know where to reject them? We can't speak either Greek or Scythian!"

"We'll watch all the developments very closely. I repeat, at the moment there's no other way out. The most important thing for us is to gain some time. Now look at me, and see whether it is noticeable that I don't understand anything this man is saying."

With those words, the geologist turned to the swarthy man who had stopped speaking, waiting politely for the strangers to finish their conversation. When the man began to speak again, Ivan Semenovich pretended he was all ears, taking in every word. When he finished speaking, Ivan Semenovich lowered his head pensively as though thinking something over, and then, after some time, gave a nod.

This made a great impression on the Scythians. Dorbatay ran his hand over his mustache in surprise: he had evidently not expected the strangers to accept the proposals so quickly. Hartak, apparently very pleased, addressed Dorbatay again, talking animatedly. Without saying anything, the soothsayer pointed to Lida, and shrugged his shoulders scornfully. Ivan Semenovitch leaned closer to the girl and whispered:

"Mind you, you'll have to agree too if they address you... nod, or something, you know..."

A moment later, the swarthy interpreter having received some additional instructions from Dorbatay, turned to Lida. With a deferential bow, he addressed the girl, pointed to Hartak, and then made a gesture as if to say: there is nothing one can do but accept. And what, indeed, was else could Lida do but submit? Her lips trembled, she nervously squeezed her hands behind her back. She listened to the swarthy man to the end, feigning understanding, and then nodded her head to indicate agreement. Hartak burst into laughter, and this glee made the girl realize that with her nod, she had given her consent to become the fourth wife of this hideous man! As if to give an additional proof, Hartak immediately turned to the soothsayer, bubbling with joy.

Lida lowered her head in helpless resignation. She felt she was about to faint, but the quiet voice of the geologist's reasoning jolted her into control of herself:

"Lida, don't take it so hard. It's a long way from your non-binding consent to the actual transaction."

"A long way, you say? But do you realize what I have given my consent to?" Lida cried out in almost total despair.

"Yes, I do. I realize and I understand. But don't worry so much. Nothing of the sort will happen, and, in fact, it can't happen at the moment. But your consent will give us more time and a chance for our friends to free us."

"And what if Hartak takes me to his *kibitka* this very moment? What then? What will become of me? What am I going to do then?"

Lida was on the verge of tears. Ivan Semenovitch tried to reassure her, making his words sound as cheerful and convincing as he could:

"But, it cannot happen so quickly, my dear Lida. Don't forget that Hartak is a chieftain, and his wedding must be a special solemn occasion. And preparations for such a wedding will take a long time. In the meanwhile, Artem and Dmitro Borisovich will not remain idle. I'm sure..."

Though Lida realized there was no other way out, she could not suppress her revulsion. Ivan Semenovitch sounded very reassuring, but there was no way of knowing what Dorbatay and Hartak would think of next! How she wished Hartak had never laid eyes on her! Were they going to talk to her again? Again demanding her consent to something else now? No, she couldn't take any more!

But the interpreter, receiving his instructions from Dorbatay, did not launch into another of his long speeches. He motioned for them to leave the *kibitka*. Lida was only too glad to do so, as the presence of Hartak, who kept throwing amorous glances at her, now that she had agreed to become his wife, made her quite ill.

They got out of the *kibitka*, and though they were immediately surrounded by armed priests, they felt great relief at not seeing the faces of the two murderers, who after they had poisoned Skolot, continued their vile scheming.

The swarthy interpreter led the way. Every so often, he turned to the strangers, and said something, still under the delusion that they could understand him. And unexpectedly enough, they could understand at least some of what he was trying to convey not from his words, but from his eloquent gestures which could be interpreted thusly:

"It is not worth trying to escape. You can see for yourself how many armed men are surrounding you. Do not even think of making an attempt, or you will be killed on the spot."

But the thought of attempting an escape at the moment was very far from the explorers' minds!

The *kibitka* to which they came was also well-guarded by priests; only two Scythians entered with Lida and Ivan Semenovitch; the Scythians pointed to the rug on the ground as if to say: *sit down here!* and untied their hands. It was a very welcome gesture!

Massaging his hands to restore the circulation, the geologist said:

"I regard their untying of our hands as the first result of our having accepted Dorbatay's proposals, the essence of which remains unknown to us."

"What do you mean 'unknown'? We know only too well what they wanted," the girl said with infinite sadness in her voice.

"Don't make too much of our guesswork, Lida. Concerning what you have in mind, we do not have any independent or

reliable proof that we've guessed correctly, do we? Later, we'll be able to see better what's what, and in the meantime, aren't we better off now than with our hands bound? With your hands free, you can even think clearer, right?"

The crestfallen girl lowered her head: she couldn't keep up the conversation any longer.

"And here comes another consequence," said the geologist cheerfully. "Now we can see that our hosts take care to be hospitable to their guests. Let's have our supper, Lida," Ivan Semenovich said, indicating the plates and jars that had been brought in and placed on the rug.

* * *

Lida and Ivan Semenovich slept without being disturbed well into the morning. Only the voices of the guards posted outside were occasional reminders that a close watch was being kept. Dorbatay decided to take no chances this time and made sure the dangerous outlanders were well guarded.

In the morning, Ivan Semenovich, in a very quiet voice as though nothing extraordinary had happened the night before, in a voice, in fact, reserved for the most trivial things, said to Lida:

"Now, my dear Lida, I want you to pay heed to what I am going to say. The main thing now is to relax and behave as though nothing unusual has happened. As a matter of fact, I don't see that there's much to complain about: we get very decent meals which I wouldn't rate lower than what you get in an ordinary restaurant. Also, some pains have been taken to make us comfortable. I should say we're almost being treated like Dorbatay's guests of honor."

Lida looked at the geologist reproachfully:

"Why should you try to make it a joking matter, Ivan Semenovich? To reassure me? I'm not a child and I do understand why I had to do what you asked me. You don't really have to go out of our way just to make me smile..."

Ivan Semenovich chuckled.

"Oh, all right, I won't. I'm sorry. Let's talk seriously then. Our motto now must be patience and prudence. We must not in any way be the cause of irritation or displeasure for Dorbatay and Hartak. One word from them, and... you understand. They must believe that our wills are so broken, that we're glad to accept anything they..."

"Anything? Even my becoming Hartak's wife?" Lida cried out in indignation.

"Yes, if not in actual deed, then in word," Ivan Semenovich said quietly. "Haven't we agreed to talk seriously? You must understand, my dear girl, that this line of behavior is the only way to save ourselves from certain death. We're powerless to do anything else at the moment. I'm sure we'll get a message from Artem and Dmitro Borisovich. They'll find the means of getting it to us. And as you well know, neither our friend Artem nor his blood brother Varkan are the kind to remain idle. So cheer up. Things aren't as bad as they seem. I dare say everything's fine the way it is. Things could be much worse..."

Later in the day, they were taken to watch some rites at the sacred pyramid of branches — the place of Artem's victory over Dorbatay. Now the old soothsayer could celebrate his own triumph! He had shown himself a man of nimble wit and great cunning, using the smallest chance to gain his ends. Nobody could deny him that.

Dorbatay got the upper hand in the struggle with Skolot by poisoning him; before doing so, he very craftily accused the chieftain of sacrilege. But now, with Skolot out of the way, Dorbatay thought it wise to adapt the occasion of mourning to his vile purposes by making a show of great deference to the deceased chieftain. Dorbatay had no intention of robbing Skolot of the ceremonious obsequies due him as chieftain; rather the opposite — all the pomp was designed to impress on the Scythians the idea that Dorbatay loved his late brother dearly, as a brother should. And this love, Dorbatay wanted to imply by all his actions, impelled him to bury Skolot in accordance with the sacred customs. Yes, the gods had punished Skolot, but he had been a great chieftain and had every right to be buried with the appropriate pomp; besides, the spectacle would make the Scythians forget the enmity that had existed between the two brothers: were the funeral rites not to be conducted by the high priest Dorbatay who would surely ask the gods to pardon his wayward brother! And this would, without doubt, give him a firmer grip on the Scythians.

That day, in preparation for the funeral, Dorbatay staged the first act of the burial rites: three slaves were sacrificed. According to the sacred tradition, human victims had to be sacrificed in honor of the deceased chieftain — so three slaves, chosen as victims, were ceremoniously killed by the

priests. The crowd watched the sacrifice in silence. The strangers stood within the group that made up Hart's entourage. Ivan Semenovitch put his arms around Lida who stood with her head buried on his chest, nervous tremors passing through her body from time to time.

The sacrifice made her sick: for at least an hour after they returned to their *kibitka*, she lay motionless, almost unconscious, without answering the geologist's questions, hardly seeing or hearing anything. Finally, Ivan Semenovitch decided it would be better to let her be for a while, and fell silent.

Time proved a better remedy: in an hour or so Lida regained control of herself. She heaved herself up to a sitting position on the rug, her face still deathly pale, her hands still trembling a little. Ivan Semenovitch noted with satisfaction that it was possible to communicate with her again; she began reacting to things around her. But what should he talk about to help her get back to normal?

At that moment, the guards stationed outside the *kibitka*, raised a loud, fearful cry. Lida raised her head to listen. Then in a moment, her eyes were aglitter with joy:

"It's Diana!" she exclaimed. "Ivan Semenovitch, Diana's coming!"

A moment later the dog's menacing barking could be heard approaching fast. Diana must have been quite near as the frantic and frightened shouting of the Scythians increased sharply. The next moment the dog burst into the *kibitka*, still growling. No one had dared to stop her, just as it had happened earlier!

Diana was at Ivan Semenovitch and Lida's side in a single leap, licking their hands in her joy, jumping and trying to lick them in the face, overflowing as she was with the joy of seeing them again. Laughing, with tears in her eyes, Lida hugged the dog, calling it all the pet names she could think of.

Ivan Semenovitch searched behind the dog's collar as though he knew he would find something there, pulled out the folded piece of paper, looked at it, and archly smiling, handed it to Lida.

"Now, my dear girl, I do believe that what I'm giving you will raise your spirits," he said. "You don't even ask what it is, because you have already guessed. Aha, aha, it's a letter from our Artem, isn't it? And I'm sure it's addressed to you personally."

"Why are you so sure?" the girl said, flushing with embarrassment.

"Why he should have done it is beyond my comprehension," the geologist said, chuckling. "But let's not waste time on idle talk. Take it and read it. And after you've read it, retell at least the general contents to me, because I want to know how our friends are, too. And if there's anything personal, you're free, of course, to skip it."

Lida went red in the face. Without replying to Ivan Semenovich's taunting, she began reading the letter bearing evidence of haste in its uneven, nervously jumping lines.

"Very good," Ivan Semenovich said when she had finished reading. "We must get a message to them as fast as we can. They must be reassured that we're quite all right for the moment."

"And there's nothing 'personal' as you've put it, in this letter," Lida said.

"Oh, don't you worry about that, my dear girl," Ivan Semenovich said matter-of-factly. "If there's nothing in this message, there will be in the next one... But let's get down to business. Take my notebook — here it is, and write, describing everything that's happened to us since we got separated. There's enough paper to give all the details, so don't be stingy."

Lida did not have to be encouraged in her task. A moment later, she was bent over the pad, filling the pages with her miniscule handwriting, describing everything in great detail. She had managed to squeeze quite a lot indeed into her long message, a little erratic, true, but filled implicitly with tender feelings. The letter ended thus:

I had to pause in writing this letter because, quite unexpectedly, we were visited — who do you think? — by Hartak himself; there were several slave girls with him. Hartak tries his best to look dignified in Skolot's gold helmet, but he looks as hideous as before. The slaves brought in gold jewelry, beautiful rugs, bowls and richly adorned Scythian garments and put them in front of me. The slaves left, and Hartak pointed to all these things as if to say: this is all for you. Just imagine — that rascal giving me presents!

I was about to give him a piece of my mind, when Ivan Semenovich stopped me, saying peremptorily: 'Make a show of acceptance, Lida! Make believe that the things spread before you give you joy, that they're a marvelous sight, that you're excited to receive such magnificent gifts!'

I did what Ivan Semenovitch told me to the best I could. Hartak as he was leaving seemed to be well pleased. Was that abominable! He regards me now as his future wife! The loathsome murderer, parricide, believes I have given my consent to become his wife!

But Ivan Semenovitch says that everything is going — the way he sees it — according to plan. He said after Hartak was gone: 'The firmer is Hartak's belief that you've agreed to be his wife, the less dangerous the situation will be for us. The most important thing for us now is to wait it out, and delay by all available means any decisive actions on their part. In the meantime, Artem and Varkan are sure to come up with something.'

And he is right, isn't he? You'll think of some way to set us free, won't you?

Now, as far as Gerrhus is concerned, I think I heard this word several times when the priests were talking among themselves, but, naturally, before I read your letter I didn't have the slightest idea what it meant. From what we can tell, the Scythians are going to start on this trip you mentioned soon.

Now that we've learnt of the forthcoming uprising you can't imagine how eager Ivan Semenovitch and I are to take part in it, to be free. So, Ivan Semenovitch asks you to describe everything that concerns the uprising in great detail, without omitting anything. He says he must analyze the situation and even the smallest details could be of importance. As far as I am concerned, the most important thing for me is to be free! Artem, please help us!

That seems to be all for the moment. Artem, my dearest, do something quick to free us! Don't procrastinate! I'm in a terrible depression, and there's no one except you who can help us get us out of here! Lida.

Artem fell silent after he finished reading the letter. Dmitro Borisovich did not say anything either. Lida's message clarified a number of things. Hartak definitely regarded Lida as his future wife, giving her expensive presents. Dorbatay, on the other hand, seemed to have forgotten about the captives' existence for the time being, as he had plenty to keep him busy. Ronis was correct in his estimation of the situation. Dorbatay was not likely to harm the captives for the time being. And Ivan Semenovitch had adopted the correct policy: to agree to everything the Scythians wanted

them to do. That was all well and good, but what if Hartak wanted to have his wedding before anything could be done to stop it?

This thought made the blood rush to Artem's head. Hartak! That revolting creature regarded Lida as his rightful property! And the girl was quite defenseless in the hands of those rogues... Ivan Semenovitch would not be able to help either — an unarmed prisoner, he needed help himself... Only a decisive battle could resolve this situation, but when would it come, this decisive battle?

There were many Scythians — their number had grown considerably in the last few hours — sitting under the thick trees at the edge of the glade a short distance away from Artem and Dmitro Borisovich. Varkan's friends kept joining him here in the forest, all of them united by their strong opposition to Dorbatay; all of them had reason to fear his vengefulness. The Scythians were fondling their horses' harness, singing a gentle song. They were waiting for Varkan who had gone somewhere. Diana was lying at Artem's feet, occasionally raising her sad eyes as though trying to be sympathetic with his gloomy thoughts and mood. It was very quiet in the forest; only the fire crackled, and carefree birds chirped in the trees.

Artem stared silently into the flames, his fingers breaking a twig he had absentmindedly picked up from the ground. *I wish, he thought, that I had here as many reliable friends as the number of little pieces this twig could be broken into!*

He raised his head suddenly, listening: the muffled clatter of hooves came from the distance. The Scythians who had been peacefully resting under the trees sprang to their feet. The clatter of hooves, muffled by the soft, spongy ground of the forest floor, was approaching fast. In a few seconds, Varkan, riding a big black stallion that was breathing hard, appeared in the glade. Several young Scythian warriors, armed with bows, swords and spears followed him. In tow were a dozen horses, laden with weapons.

Even before Varkan had time to dismount, Artem shouted from joy:

"Our bags! He's brought our bags, Dmitro Borisovich!"

In fact, there were two knapsacks on his shoulders. The Scythian had done what he had been asked to do: he had managed to retrieve the bags and brought them to his friends.

"Wasn't Varkan fast in finding the bags?" Artem said, collecting the precious knapsacks from Varkan. "Isn't it great! Well done, Varkan! Dmitro Borisovich, ask him, please, how he managed to do it so quickly?"

"Oh, it was very simple," he said in reply to the archeologist's question. "As they had been left in the *kibitka* of the deceased Skolot, I thought nobody would touch them and, in fact, nobody did. I asked some of my boys to look. They did, found the bags and stealthily brought them back to me. But they did not feel like staying in the camp as their relations with Dorbatay were not very good. He knew they were my friends and was not likely to forget it. So, I invited them to join us here. They did. They are skilled warriors and will be of great use to us. And on our way here, we picked out several horses from Dorbatay's herd, just in case, you know. They are fine horses and we will surely put them to good use. And we also brought a few weapons. They will surely be of good use as well."

"Great, it's just great," Artem murmured to himself, going through the contents of the knapsacks. "Now, there's the lamp, oh — cans of food... we don't need these, that's for sure, there's food galore. Good, and what's this? Aha, that's the primers and safety fuse. Excellent! But where are the dynamite charges? They were in the bags... I remember putting them there very well... at least into mine, for sure... So why aren't they here in the bag where they're supposed to be?"

Then he stopped rummaging through the knapsacks, hitting himself with the flat of his hand on the forehead. "Of course! Damn it! Damn it! What the hell did I do that for? Damn it all!"

"What's the matter, Artem? Have you discovered something terrible?" the archeologist said.

"Ah, no," Artem said, very much annoyed. "You might say I haven't 'discovered' what I very much hoped I would — the dynamite charges. One of the bags is Lida's, and there were no charges in it. The other is mine, and the charges were in it, but..."

"But they're not there now, are they?"

"No, they aren't. The fact of the matter is that I took them out myself! Just before we went to confront Dorbatay at that pile of faggots, the altar, remember? I took a couple of primers, removed the charges from my bag, and put them into Ivan Semenovich's, as he told me to do, for reasons

of safety, I believe... So, all the charges are now in his knapsack."

"That's too bad."

Artem shook his head.

"Oh yes, too bad. It was our bad luck when Varkan picked these two bags instead of the other two... Incidentally, could you ask him, please, what happened to the other two bags?"

Varkan shrugged his shoulders: Varkan's friends had discovered only two bags in Skolot's *kibitka*, so it was not a matter of choosing; they picked up the two bags and brought them to Varkan; he did not have the slightest idea where the other two could be.

"Isn't that unfortunate?" Artem said gloomily. "I was pinning so much hope on these charges... they were our only weapons, since we're not too handy with all those battle axes, swords, and spears, are we? We've never been trained to use them, have we? And I don't know where we can start looking for the other two bags."

He then put all the things he had taken out of the bags back into place, pocketing only the primers and fuse.

"Things turned out differently from what I wanted. Nothing's to be done now but to try and teach ourselves to handle Scythian weapons, Dmitro Borisovich. It's the only thing we can do at the moment. For example, do you like this thing here?"

Artem pulled out a sword from the pile of weapons which had been brought by Varkan and his men and dumped in the center of the glade. Tossing it from hand to hand, he said:

"It's a little too heavy and will take a long time to get used to. And what about this one here?..."

Now he picked up a battle axe with a curved edge.

"Aha, this thing seems to be easier to handle, Dmitro Borisovich. Go ahead and choose something for yourself. We've found ourselves in a situation when we need to be able to use these weapons."

Varkan and his friends, who watched Artem choose a weapon with some interest, could not help laughing when Dmitro Borisovich began doing the same. The younger outlander was not too dexterous in handling the weapons, but his movements were sure enough and his grip on the handles was firm. But the older man was a sight to behold!...

He dealt with the new task like serious work that required determined effort. He tried a sword, a spear and a battle

axe, leaving bows and arrows alone. The latter, he judged, quite rightly, were beyond the scope of his martial abilities. At last, Dmitro Borisovich settled on a battle axe. His eyeglasses flashed menacingly as he brandished the axe, taking aim at an imaginary enemy, hacking at the air right and left, making terrible grunting sounds, putting the weapon down, spitting on his palms to get a firmer grip, picking up the axe again, hitting something in front of him, then quickly turning and parrying a sudden treacherous thrust from an imaginary enemy coming from behind... It was a spectacle worth seeing!

"That's good, that's right," Artem said approvingly, stifling his laughter and wiping away the smile that appeared on his face against his will. "Yes, that's the way to do it! I wouldn't say that you had a very bellicose look up till now, Dmitro Borisovich, but with this axe in your hands you look a veritable warrior! You could frighten the most stalwart enemy!"

"Oh, the enemy will take fright all right! I'll teach myself to handle this axe and become a soldier, I will," the archeologist replied in earnest, never stopping his martial exercise. "You were right, Artem, it's high time for me... to take part... in military operations... we'll have to fight... to free Lida and... Ivan Semenovich, right?"

At last, he put the axe down and lowered himself beside it, wiping profuse perspiration from his brow. It was an arduous work, practicing with this axe, it was!

"So, Dmitro Borisovich, we're going to fight with swords and axes, like real Scythians..." Artem stopped short when he glanced at Varkan: the Scythian was standing taut, his sword at the ready. The other Scythians also sprang to their feet, swords in hand, listening. Varkan raised his hand in a gesture of warning. What was going on?

Artem could not hear anything menacing except for rustling leaves and chirping birds: everything was peaceful, with no signs of danger at all. A branch snapped loudly under the foot of one of the Scythians and again everything was quiet.

"What..." Dmitro Borisovich began saying, but Artem stopped him by putting a finger to his lips. Varkan and the Scythians hid behind the trees, gesturing to Artem and Dmitro Borisovich to do the same.

It was growing dusky; it seemed to Artem that Varkan was gesturing to them to lie down on the ground. That could

mean only one thing — danger. The glade was empty except for the horses at its fringe and a Scythian hiding near the horses.

Artem grabbed Dmitro Borisovich by the shoulder and pulled him down, whispering into his ear:

“Get down, quick!”

The archeologist complied; after he was stretched on the ground, Artem began crawling toward Varkan.

“Artem!” he heard Dmitro Borisovich whisper. He evidently wanted to stop Artem, but the young man just looked back and again put the finger to his lips. Artem saw that the Scythians were now also crawling forward, keeping behind the trees and bushes. Judging from their behavior, the danger was real and grave, but Artem neither heard nor saw anything suspicious.

Varkan stopped crawling when he heard Artem laboring behind, vainly — in spite of all his agility — trying to catch up with the Scythians whose swiftness in crawling was not to be matched. Varkan, after a very short hesitation, crawled on, gesturing to Artem to stay behind. Artem replied also with an energetic gesture which meant: *never mind me, go ahead, move on, I'll manage!*

In a few seconds, Artem heard some voices. Now he could even make out that they were speaking in Scythian, and that those to whom the voices belonged, were moving. Hardly a minute passed before Artem saw a group of several dozen armed Scythians carefully making their way toward the glade where Dmitro Borisovich, the horses and weapons had been left. The armed Scythians moved slowly, holding their weapons at the ready, occasionally exchanging a word or two. Were they a reconnaissance party?

Varkan stopped dead behind the bushes: not a sound or the slightest movement any more. Artem hid behind a bush too, pressing close to the ground.

Are they headed for the glade? Artem thought with a shudder, his heart beating wildly. *Looks like Dorbatay has not given up his attempts to have us seized!*

The situation was desperate — once again they were against great odds: Artem, Varkan and a few of his friends facing a rather formidable group of armed Scythians. Then another group, also several dozen strong, appeared some distance away. It was a punitive force! Artem saw Varkan look back and shake his head; evidently he did not have much hope of success in a confrontation with such a force.

It was clear now that the fugitives' hiding place had somehow been discovered and a surprise attack was being prepared. The enemy's approach had been discovered in time, but any effective resistance seemed unthinkable: a mere handful against scores of armed men! Should Varkan's men be noticed by the enemy, a rain of arrows and spears would fall on them, and it would hardly be possible to avoid being hit, even hiding behind trees and bushes. There seemed no alternative but retreat. But retreat to where? Back to the glade? But again, such a retreat could hardly pass unnoticed, and the moment the enemy saw them, that would be the end of them.

And the enemy was moving forward meanwhile. They looked very sure of where they were going; it was reminiscent of a hunt when hunters are surrounding the lair of a beast that has been tracked down.

Artem saw Varkan and his men begin crawling away, trying to stay behind the bushes all the time. But they were moving away from the glade where Dmitro Borisovich was waiting, not even aware of the impending disaster! Varkan and his warriors were trying to get out of the enemy way, because they realized that it would be suicidal to fight.

All right, come what may, Artem thought in desperation. Something must be done at once!

Artem could do only one thing in an attempt to stop the enemy, and he knew he ran a great risk of failure. If the enemy noticed him just as he was about to pull his trick, they would surely perforate him with hundreds of arrows and spears before he made his final move. Artem still remembered the hare impaled on the spear... But there was no other way, so he had to go ahead and do it.

"Yes, come what may!" he whispered. And, as it always happens when a person reaches a decision to do something he is in two minds about, Artem felt a sort of relief, and he could act, concentrating on what he had to do, disregarding the danger.

Without getting to his feet, he prepared everything for his stunt, clumsily pulling the things he needed out of his pockets. Next, staying behind his bush he found good purchase for his hands and feet on the ground to hoist himself up and leap when the time was right. He saw that Varkan had noticed his strange activity and signalled to him to stop it.

Ah, my good friend, you may signal, but there is no other way out, so I will go ahead with what I am planning to do. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, Artem thought, turning away from Varkan to avoid being distracted any more. But if it works, then... Now, if the match does not fail me...

Every second counted. A detached observer would have thought that Artem had gone out of his mind: he sprang to his feet and began lighting a cigarette — an insane act at this moment of mortal danger, when death at the hand of implacable enemies seemed imminent, when the instinct of self-preservation should have kept him in hiding! The little flame of the burning match, that seemed so bright in the gathering dusk, lit up the face of the young man and the cigarette sticking out of his mouth for one brief moment then died. Now only a tiny spot of red light remained at the tip of the cigarette which grew brighter when Artem puffed at it. His eyes were riveted on the enemies who had stopped dead when they had seen the silhouette of the young magician with a spot of fire in his head. The outlander who had so miraculously materialized in their way, did not try to run away, nor did he do anything to prevent himself from being hit. He just stood there, a dot of fire at his mouth. Now all of the advancing Scythians froze, overcome by consternation, staring at him in dismay. But their initial fright would soon wear off and then they would fall on him with all their weapons and hack him to pieces...

As nothing terrible happened — only the little dot of light grew brighter — the Scythians began to shake off their consternation. A huge Scythian, evidently the leader, wearing a leather coat with metal plates sewn on to it, shouted something encouraging, pointing to Artem. In reply, the Scythians filled the forest with their battle-cry. But Artem had used the pause he had been granted: he had put the burning end of the cigarette to a short piece of the safety fuse that immediately caught fire, hissing and dropping sparks. The next moment Artem hurled the primer with the burning fuse attached to it into the midst of the Scythians and stepped back behind a thick tree trunk. He did it not a moment too soon as three of four spears hit the ground where he had been just standing.

“Aha, just you wait!” he cried out triumphantly.

The explosion of the primer made the Scythians freeze once again. The spears that had been raised in the air, the

bows that had been bent, were held in those positions. The bearded, dignified-looking warrior at whose feet the primer exploded sank to the ground in shock. Without getting to his feet again, he began crawling backwards on all fours, dropping arrows from his quiver but never stopping to pick them up, his sword dragging on the ground, catching on the branches. His was the only moving figure among the immobile Scythians, gripped by fear.

Under somewhat different circumstances, Artem would have burst laughing at this sight, but now he just did not have time to. Puffing vigorously at his cigarette, he put the fuses attached to the primers to the burning end one by one, and then hurled them at the Scythians.

One explosion followed another, throwing flashes of light at the Scythians who ceased to be a group united by a single purpose as they had lost their fighting spirit and were thoroughly discouraged. The Scythians at whose feet primers exploded, collapsed at first and then, oblivious of everything, forgetting Dorbatay's strict orders, casting away their resoluteness and audacity, not thinking any more of their superiority in numbers, took to their heels, having been routed by the terrible magician who now stood beside a tree without trying to hide behind it.

Artem was still holding the cigarette between his lips, but he had no use for it any longer. He stopped lighting the fuses — the punitive force had fled. His lips were twisted in a wry, nervous smile, his limbs trembling. But he had achieved a victory, a complete victory!

Spears, bows, arrows were scattered all around on the grass, dropped by the fleeing Scythians.

Artem stared silently at the scene. Strange conflicting emotions surged up in him, and he did not know to which he should give preference. On the one hand he had just managed to avert the mortal danger threatening him and his friends. That was good. But on the other hand, he was ashamed to have achieved his victory by rather cheap tricks which these Scythians took as nothing short of the terrible doings of a black magician. But what else could he have done in this situation? In any case, he had not killed or injured anyone. And if he had not played his tricks, things would have ended very badly for him, Varkan and his men... No, there had been no other way out, no doubt of it.

Artem was approached by Varkan who stopped a few paces away, staring at him silently, and in this stare were mixed

love, fascination and awe. Artem, greatly embarrassed, said:

“Oh, cut it out, Varkan!”

The Scythian, still without saying anything, in a very solemn gesture, put his hand first to his helmet, then to his heart, and then bowed to Artem, touching the ground with one hand. Artem was thrown into utter confusion: why should Varkan be paying homage to him?

“Oh, really, cut it out, I tell you,” Artem murmured, almost angrily now. “I’m not your king, you know. You’re happy everything ended the way it did, but so am I, no less than you, believe me. Ah, now that’s better, we don’t need all these ceremonies, really!” And Artem reached his hands toward the Scythian. “You’re my blood brother!”

Varkan, who listened to the sounds of the language unknown to him with great attention, must have discerned the earnest and friendly notes. He broke into a smile, grabbed Artem’s hands, squeezed them hard, and then hugged him, saying something warm and friendly.

His men were already collecting the weapons that had been left behind by Dorbatay’s soldiers. They cast furtive glances at Artem, talking in low voices. Once again Artem felt somewhat discomfited.

When they returned to the glade, Dmitro Borisovich rushed to Artem; he was greatly disturbed. He had heard the battle cry of the Scythians, and then the explosions of the primers, but he could not deduce from these sounds what was going on.

“Artem, my dear boy, what was it? Were you attacked? Was it a real fight? I heard the battle cries!” the archeologist poured out his questions, adjusting his eyeglasses which kept sliding down his nose — a sure sign that Dmitro Borisovich was in a state of great agitation.

“Luckily, everything was settled without a fight,” Artem said modestly.

“But what about those wild cries and explosions I heard?”

“Well, yes, there was, in fact, a group of soldiers that tried to attack us... And I’m still wondering how Dorbatay learnt where we were hiding?.. They, the soldiers that is, wanted to catch us unawares.”

“Oh, did they?”

“So it was necessary to do something about it. There was no other way out, you know. While they were deciding what to do next, I sort of attacked them myself.”

“You attacked them? You alone?”

“Errr... well, I threw a couple of primers at them. The primers detonated and gave a terrible fright to the Scythians who took to their heels. That’s all.”

“They just turned around and fled?”

“Yes, turned and fled. Otherwise we would not be talking with you now,” Artem said judiciously.

“Ah, my dear young man, is that any way to tell a story? I nearly went out of my mind lying here and listening to all those terrible sounds, and now I have to drag the words out of you!”

“Dmitro Borisovich, there’s nothing much to tell, honest! It was, really and truly just a skirmish, nothing more. Besides, we have to move out of here right away and find ourselves a different place to camp, because it is very dangerous to stay here any longer. Then, after we have settled down again, I promise, I will tell everything in great detail, if you’re interested, of course... And who’s that, over there?”

Some shadows were moving into the glade in the dusk. A moment later, the shadows became riders who had several heavily laden horses in tow. They could not be the enemy or Varkan would not be talking to them in such a friendly manner.

“Ronis!” exclaimed Dmitro Borisovich, glad to see the man again.

One of the riders dismounted and came up to the archeologist and Artem. It was, indeed, Ronis, who, as was his custom, bowed to Dmitro Borisovich politely and with dignity.

“I was happy to learn,” he said, “that Dorbatay’s soldiers failed to catch you by surprise. Unfortunately, I could not warn Varkan earlier because I learnt of Dorbatay’s intention only after the soldiers had already started on their way. They had been given an express order...”

“An express order?”

“Yes, a strict order to track you down and...”

“Kill us?”

“No, not necessarily. They were told to try and capture you alive, but Dorbatay told the leader of the group to kill you if capturing you proved impossible. Dorbatay would, of course, have preferred to have you brought to him alive rather than dead, because then he would have the opportunity to kill you when it suited him. But, naturally, if he could not

have you alive, he would feel much safer having you dead."

"Yes, he certainly would!" Artem said mockingly, after he heard the archeologist's translation of what Ronis was saying. "But his men tried to get us twice already and failed both times!"

"But they might have more luck some other time, especially if you stay here," Ronis said gravely. "He knows the exact location of your camp."

"Yes, we have to move away from here," Dmitro Borisovich said. "Artem suggested that already. It would be extremely unwise to give Dorbatay another chance."

"And the consequences of a new confrontation could be much graver for us," Artem added.

"All the more so that these 'grave consequences' would considerably hamper our plans," Ronis said with a slight smile. "So, let's get moving without losing any more time. I think Varkan has already chosen the site of our new camp. He knows the forest like nobody else."

Artem got on his horse. Dmitro Borisovich, after several abortive attempts, managed, at last, to wriggle his way onto the horse's back; he had reluctantly agreed to entrust himself to the mare. It was almost completely dark when Varkan started on his way. He was followed by the Scythians who had brought horses loaded with weapons. Next were Ronis and Artem with Dmitro Borisovich. Varkan's men brought up the rear.

Ronis was relating the news.

"The Scythians will start on their funeral journey very soon, maybe even tomorrow. The corpse of the chieftain has already been embalmed."

"Has already been embalmed?" Dmitro Borisovich whose archeological interest was immediately roused, repeated. "What a pity!.. That is... I mean... I wish I had seen it! It would have been of great interest for me to see how it was done! And the embalming took such a short time?"

"I understand it is not very complicated," Ronis said.

"So you know something about it? Do tell me about it, Ronis! And in as much detail as possible, please! It is of great interest to me!" the archeologist said with such passion that the Greek smiled, knowing that his smile could not be seen in the dark.

"All right, I will tell you what I know, but I don't know

much," Ronis said. "I am not a priest, you know... The priests rub the body with wax, make an incision in the abdomen and take out all the entrails. Then they put in chopped herbs, frankincense, anise... and something else. They sew the abdomen up again, and put the corpse on a bier. That's about all I know."

"That's all? Oh, I wish you knew more," Dmitro Borisovich exclaimed, sounding very disappointed.

"Yes, that is all. I do not know anything else as far as this matter is concerned... Now, that the body is embalmed, the Scythians can start on their journey."

"Nothing else to detain them?"

"No, I din't think there is anything to delay them. Most of the *kibitkas* and wagons have already been prepared for the journey. In fact, Dorbatay is rather in a hurry."

"Why should he be?" Artem asked.

"Because, according to law, Hartak can become a full-fledged chieftain only after the burial of his predecessor. There is a belief that while Skolot's soul is in the camp, no one else can be considered chieftain. Dorbatay, no doubt, wants to secure his victory by getting Hartak to assume full rights as chieftain. Besides, Hartak too would like to dispose of the body as soon as possible, for its continuing presence is a constant reminder of his participation in the murder of his father."

"Are there any other reasons for them to be in a hurry?" Artem asked, secretly entertaining a hope that there were not.

Ronis shot a quick glance at him.

"Well, yes, there is another reason for them to be in a hurry. Hartak, as you already know, wants very much to marry your girl..."

"Oh, damn him!" Artem could not help exclaiming.

"One way or another, he would not mind committing another crime if it would help to speed things up. At the moment, he cannot marry the girl — the same law forbids marriage before the deceased chieftain is buried... But there is one thing that cannot be overlooked. Here, it is Dorbatay who is free to establish and abolish laws. He is the one who interprets the commandments of the gods, and who knows what they will tell him next. What if they allow Hartak to marry without waiting until after the burial? It is not impossible."

"In that case, we must do something immediately to set Lida free... and Ivan Semenovitch too, of course. That's what I've urged the whole time!"

Ronis, sensing the urgency in Artem's voice, glanced at him, waiting for the translation from Dmitro Borisovich.

"Yes, we must give it some very serious consideration," Ronis said after a pause. "If Dorbatay gives his consent, the marriage can take place even during the funeral journey. The slaves who serve Hartak told me there was nothing on his mind but this marriage. And — I am sorry to say it but I must — it seems to me that Hartak... will manage to receive via Dorbatay the permission of the gods to go ahead with his marriage. Both Dorbatay and Hartak are vitally interested in keeping their relations friendly. So this marriage is a possibility... I felt I should warn you!"

Dmitro Borisovich must have been loath to translate this to Artem: he made frequent stops and pauses — which was quite unusual for him — as though choosing the right words with difficulty. As he finished he burst out in indignation:

"It's preposterous! What if Dorbatay really does give his consent for Hartak to take Lida in marriage before the burial? What then? We can't allow..."

He cut himself short. "Can't allow it to happen..." But did they have any means of stopping the marriage?

Artem was silent. Wild thoughts raced through his head. Lida was in the hands of Dorbatay and Hartak, two scoundrels who would not stop at anything in trying to achieve their ends, no matter how foul and sinful. What could Artem and Dmitro Borisovich really do to thwart the malefactors' evil schemes? Could Artem and the archeologist do anything at all? They themselves had to hide in the woods to avoid being seized and murdered by Dorbatay's men! They had to attempt to get Lida away from there, but was this kidnapping possible? Ronis had said that the captives were kept under a very heavy guard. Lida, in her message, also wrote of vigilant watch being kept at their *kibitka* round the clock.

They could launch a desperate attack at night. But would Varkan and his friends wish to take part in such a doomed venture? What chance would they have against the multitude of the armed priests and Dorbatay's soldiers, no matter how dauntlessly courageous the attackers were? Plus, there was another thing, the most important of all.

Ronis said it was safer for Dorbatay to have the strangers

dead rather than have them alive and loose. That meant the old buzzard had surely given an order that the captives be killed if they attempted to escape! He could not have failed to foresee the possibility of Artem and Dmitro Borisovich making such an attempt. The thought made Artem shudder. No, they could not risk Lida's life by an action that had so little chance of succeeding! If it were a question of his own life, he would not have hesitated. But Lida and Ivan Semenovich were helpless — completely at the mercy of the enemy.

This train of thought led Artem to melancholy and depressing conclusions. There seemed to be no solution...

Ronis, riding close, could not help noticing the gloom into which the strangers had been cast. He said to Dmitro Borisovich:

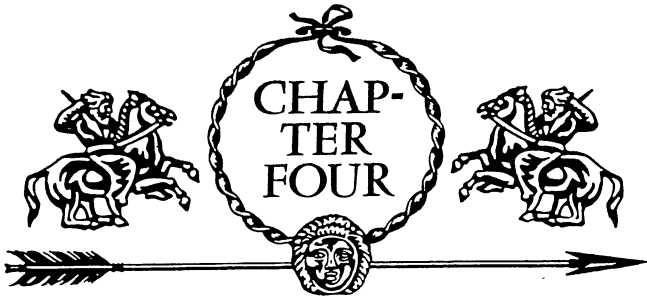
"I understand Hartak's intentions to marry this girl is a cause of concern for you. And you are afraid Dorbatay will give his consent for Hartak to marry?"

"You have put your finger on it, Ronis," the archeologist replied sullenly. "What makes it especially hard is that we are powerless to do anything to stop it. What can we really do? Nothing that could be of any help... And this thought makes us..."

Ronis cut him short, his voice sounding confidential and convincing:

"I understand. Now listen to what I am going to say. I've got an idea. It seems to me there is a way to help your friends, the girl in particular. Even if Dorbatay gives his consent, there is still a chance of thwarting Hartak's intentions, or, at least delaying the marriage for some time which will allow us to get ready for our final move. By that time we should have enough forces to..."

Leaning over, still closer to Dmitro Borisovich, the Greek continued to expound his new ideas in a barely audible whisper.



Artem discovers some peculiarities in the path the Scythians have taken, and Lida receives messages from Artem; she finds herself being proposed to and uses the ruse suggested in one of Artem's messages to delay the marriage; she eventually breaks down and Ivan Semenovitch has a hard time trying to get her out of her slump; the geologist plunges into reverie and then talks of beautiful clouds, and another letter arrives in which Artem mentions some "personal affairs"

The heavily loaded wagons swayed and creaked as they lumbered along, their wheels rolling in the ruts left in the soft earth by the wagons that had already passed. The line seemed endless, stretching as far as the eye could see. It took six or even eight horses to pull each wagon. But the load was so heavy that even the sturdy Scythian horses had to stop on the inclines to rest. The Scythians mercilessly whipped the snorting horses, covered with lather. Sometimes the horses managed to pull the wagons up the hills, and sometimes they had to be helped. Groups of exhausted, sweating slaves ran from wagon to wagon, pushing at the wheels, breathing heavily. The whips flashed through the air falling on the horses' backs and occasionally scourging the naked flesh of those slaves who were not too zealous at their toil.

The Scythians had been on the move for three days now. No one, except Dorbatay and a handful of priests, knew the way, the secret of which they carefully kept to themselves, giving directions only for the next leg of the journey. What the Scythians were allowed to know was that their destina-

tion was the sacred land of Gerrhus and that it was the gods themselves who gave instructions as to how to get there, and then only to the high priest, Dorbatay, who rode in his big wagon, wrapped in his ceremonial scarlet cloak. He was silent and grim as he listened to the gods and told the men the directions to Gerrhus where the lavish funeral of Skolot was to take place. Woe to anyone who bothered Dorbatay or disobeyed his orders which came directly from the gods! No one could save the miscreant from being immediately destroyed by the wrath of the gods, which would strike them down via the weapons of the priests who unswervingly fulfilled the will of the gods voiced by the lips of the merciless Dorbatay.

The Scythians were on the move.

They stopped only for lunch and for the night, cooking their modest meals over camp fires. Horse flesh was boiled with spices in huge bronze cauldrons. The sweetish smell of cooking food hung in the still air, making the mouths of the Scythians water. After the evening meal was over, the Scythians quickly fell into a deep sleep; only those who kept watch moved about the camp, every so often checking on the vigilance — as they were ordered to do by Dorbatay — of the special guard mounted around several wagons and *kibitkas* in the center of the camp. There, in the center was the profusely decorated bier with the body of Skolot, the wagons with all Dorbatay's treasures, and the *kibitka* with the captive outlanders, next to the bier.

The camp came to life with first light, and a modest breakfast was cooked. Fresh horses were chosen from the huge herds that were driven together while the Scythians were on the march; they were then harnessed to the enormous wagons. The horses that had pulled the wagons the day before were put back in the herds; horses that were too exhausted to go on or that were injured were slaughtered. The meat was salted down and stored for the future. This routine was repeated every day, in strict accordance with age-old tradition.

The Scythians had been moving along the edge of the seemingly endless forest beyond which the high cliffs loomed monotonously in the distance. Sometimes the column swerved away from the forest, only to come back to it, continuing along its edge.

Artem sometimes wondered whether Dorbatay and the Scythian chieftains had abandoned the idea of catching the

fugitives or had forgotten about them altogether. There had been no more attempts to capture the small group of the fugitives in the forest or even to see whether they were following the funeral procession. It was extremely unlikely that Dorbatay had forgotten about his enemies: the sooth-sayer was much too prudent and judicious to allow something like that to slip his mind! So, there were two possible explanations for the absence of harrassment: either Dorbatay thought they had stayed behind or that there were too few of them to worry about even if they were somewhere in the vicinity of the column. Dorbatay was probably quite sure that the captive outlanders were guarded heavily enough so as to be quite inaccessible.

It was no problem for Artem, Varkan and his men to watch every move the Scythians made without being seen. Artem made sure to remember all the landmarks they passed, for if they had to return to the old place all by themselves after rescuing Lida and Ivan Semenovitch, their only chance to get back to the surface of the earth was to locate the hole they had come through.

There was one thing that attracted the attention of the young man whose curiosity never left him. The Scythians were moving past the cliffs along the edge of the forest. According to the geologist's theory, the cliffs were in fact monolithic walls that rose above the clouds and encompassed the enormous subterranean cavity, inhabited by the Scythians. It was through a crack in this wall that the explorers had gotten into this Scythian world, leaving behind the big cave with its stalactites, stalagmites, and terrible gas.

At first, Artem, consulting his compass, thought the Scythians were heading due west, and this discovery did not improve his mood — which was blue enough — in the least. Every kilometer took them further away from the crack in the wall. But after some time, Artem saw that the direction in which the Scythians were moving changed slightly to the northwest.

Artem told Dmitro Borisovich of his observations.

"So, you're correlating the direction they are taking by compass. That's good. But frankly, I don't think it makes much difference which way they're heading — west or southwest."

It was clear that the archeologist thought it made very little difference as far as the two of them were concerned,

and Artem would probably have taken the same attitude if not for the fact that the Scythians continued to swerve to the right, heading almost due south. This meant that the cliffs curved extending from north to south, and the Scythians were moving along the concave curve of the cliffs.

This was in itself a very important observation, no matter what Dmitro Borisovich thought of it! If this were really so, that meant they could not travel too far from the opening through which the explorers had entered this Scythian world. If they were moving in the circle, they would come back to where they had started!

It would be very good if it were so. But would they be lucky enough, after rescuing Lida and Ivan Semenovitch, (Artem was convinced that they would soon be rescued) to find a place in the wall that could be broken through, say, with the help of Varkan and his men? Artem shook his head as he thought of it: it was quite unreasonable to hope that there were several thin places in the wall like the one they had come through where it took only a single dynamite charge to break through.

Should he talk to Dmitro Borisovich about all this? No, it did not seem worth the effort. Excellent expert in archeology — especially in matters concerning the archeology of the Black Sea coast — though he was, Dmitro Borisovich was little interested in geology which, he said, dealt with "dead matter." Artem had had more than one opportunity to be convinced that he and Lida knew more about geology than Dmitro Borisovich.

So, discussing the problem with the archeologist would hardly be useful. That's why Artem stopped thinking about it, all the more so since another thing was foremost in his mind — how to rescue Lida and Ivan Semenovitch. But that would only be possible during the uprising.

Every day, a number of people joined Varkan at the camp. They were young warriors and hunters who had had a very low opinion of the priests even before Skolot's death and had shown their hostile attitude in some manner. Now they felt that Dorbatay and the elders would retaliate, so they preferred to join Varkan in the forest, knowing that the priests and nobles had been settling scores these days with those who had dared to oppose them.

Ronis and Varkan were taking their time to make thorough preparations for the uprising. Artem considered it to be the best way of doing things, but still, he was burning

with desire to throw himself immediately into the fray which would bring freedom to Lida and Ivan Semenovich.

Meanwhile, all he could do was to watch the Scythians from some distance away. Only when they stopped for the night, did Artem and Varkan risk coming any closer. Artem still entertained a dim hope that some happy chance would present itself for saving Lida and Ivan Semenovich. But, alas, nothing of the sort occurred, as Artem never managed to get even anywhere close to the center of the camp where the big wagon that was the focus of his attention, stood.

Artem could easily tell this wagon from the rest by its red covering which he had glimpsed occasionally in the daytime. Once he even thought he could see Lida peering out, but he was too far away to know for sure. Anyway it was quite out of the question to attempt to set Lida free. There was nothing for him to do but clench his fists and wait.

The tension of forced inactivity was somewhat alleviated by Lida's letters. It was not Diana that carried the messages now. Ronis had set up a delivery service: every night, slaves brought Artem little sheets of paper torn from the geologist's notepad covered with Lida's fine handwriting, bearing signs of haste. Artem read and reread the messages several times, trying to grasp Lida's thoughts and feelings. Then, in his mind's eye, he would conjure up the image of his dear Lida:

...The wagon, heaving and creaking, its wheels going over bumps and small hollows, the tracks left on the ground being the only road across the wide steppe with the pink-yellowish forest stretching endlessly on one side, and the cliffs looming behind. Then a flat stretch of ground without bumps or hollows, the only sound now — the loud unceasing rasping of the wheels on the axles coming from all sides...

...Lida sitting in the wagon, looking out, staring at the distant woods, knowing that there Artem, Dmitro Borisovich, Varkan and his men, were following and waiting for the proper moment to get them free! Lida staring and sighing, the poor girl! Seeing nothing but the motionless trees, Lida would turn away, bending low over a piece of paper, writing the letter Artem was holding in his hand...

My Dearest Artem,

In your letter you tell me not to worry, to be cool and composed. I know it without your having to remind me, but waiting is so depressing! Waiting all day long and

waiting all night long, waiting for something that doesn't happen! The only thing that makes the waiting easier is writing letters to you. So I write as much as I can and will write as long as there are sheets left in Ivan Semenovitch's pad. You want me to describe everything that has happened to us since the departure. All right, I'll do it.

From the very start, the wagon we're riding in has been in the center close to Hartak's and right next to Skolot's huge funeral bier with its red cover; ten white horses are pulling it. There are red stripes along the horses' sides and backs. The priests escorting the body, are riding white horses too...

Artem again concentrated on the images evoked in his mind; he had in fact seen some of what Lida described from the hiding place — it was an impressive sight...

...The large bier with the body of Skolot, priests with sacred images of eagles, panthers and deer, the highest nobles and elders heading the procession. Around the bier those Scythians who had inflicted ritual wounds on themselves to express their grief at the death of the great chieftain Skolot: parts of ears missing, streaks of blood drying on their cheeks, necks and clothes; cuts on their hands and arms still oozing blood; foreheads and noses with deep scratches; left palms pierced with arrows, and hair cut short. The Scythians singing a disturbing, heart-rending song, with the priests leading — or perhaps not a song but chanting a prayer to the implacable gods? None of the Scythians was aware of the real cause of Skolot's death. Dorbatay, the poisoner, was riding in his wagon, looking very dignified, feigning concentration as he was mumbling prayers to the gods. The white horses slowly pulled the bier; another big wagon, carrying Skolot's bereaved wife, moved right behind the bier; she kept her face buried in her wrinkled hands, covered with age-spots. Two old priests were sitting beside the widow who was destined to follow the chieftain into the grave. The body of Skolot lay under a felt canopy in the red bier garbed in sumptuous clothes, the gold helmet on his head and massive gold bracelets on his wrists, arms folded on his chest; the old chieftain's short sword resting by his side; Skolot's expression peaceful, his closed eyes suggesting sleep rather than death, his face showing no signs of the death throes that had filled his last moments, only the thin, transparent layer of wax over the face and hands reminding one that he was rather dead than quietly resting or slumbering...

The procession pushed on and on, always in near-perfect order, the self-assured Dorbatay in his scarlet cloak and helmet-like headgear preserving his solemn and dignified appearance.

The innumerable gold decorations sewn onto his cloak and headdress jungled every time the wagon he was riding in, heaved over bumps and holes. Dorbatay's eyes were fixed on some invisible spot beyond the gray horizon; he seemed completely submerged in prayers for his beloved brother, the dead chieftain, not hearing or seeing anyone around. The simple-hearted Scythians, taken in by this performance, glanced at him with great respect.

Hartak also tried to preserve a solemn and dignified appearance, sitting straight on his horse, putting his hand on his hip in a carefree fashion, looking around, his eyes shifting, searching for a mocking glance, as he knew well that he did not command much respect with the warriors. In a short time, his head would bend under the weight of the big golden helmet. His hands nervously picked at the reins. Hartak looked very unsure of his equestrian abilities, and it was an effort for him to keep from tumbling off his horse.

"What a freak!" Lida could not help exclaiming as she caught sight of him.

Hartak must have heard her voice in spite of the considerable distance separating them. He looked back quickly, fixing his eyes on her. Lida froze in fear for a moment, but then she realized the freak could not have understood her anyway. In fact, Hartak smiled, evidently trying to make his smile a sweet one. It even seemed to Lida that Hartak had the impudence to wink at her! That was too much to bear, and she turned away quickly.

She dared to raise her eyes only after the bier had passed, followed by the rasping wagon in which the chieftain's widow was riding. Only after Hartak's wagons passed did the one carrying the captive strangers move on. Their wagon was followed by those with the slaves, servants and wives of the new chieftain.

Ivan Semenovich, taking a look around him, said:

"Do you see that big wagon over there, my dear girl? The one with the women in tall headdresses shooting glances at

you. I'm sure, they're Hartak's wives, and they seem eager to have a look at the new bride who's captured their husband's heart..."

"Oh, you shouldn't say that, Ivan Semenovich!" Lida said, much annoyed. "You know perfectly well how hateful the very thought of that is to me..."

But the geologist continued, unabashed:

"Believe me, Lida, I wish I didn't have to mention it, but... I think it's better to keep it in mind all the time so you'll stay on the alert and not be taken unawares. I admit I drew your attention to that wagon on purpose to remind you... to behave properly. I want to caution you against irresponsible conduct."

"Have I done something wrong?.."

"Well, yes, you have. You forget that it is in our vital interests to keep Hartak and Dorbatay assured that you have given your consent to marry the young chieftain. And don't make such a wry face! We have no option here! It would be even better if you could make them believe that you desire it! Remember what happened just a few minutes ago! Hartak smiled at you, and what did you do in return? Anyone observing your disgusted reaction would understand something was wrong! You're lucky that Hartak, overwhelmed as he seems to be with... errr... feelings toward you, did not notice your grimace. Don't do anything else like that, Lida! You're endangering our chances of being rescued!"

What could Lida reply to all that? She could only promise she would watch her step very carefully in the future.

...It was already the fourth day of the journey. For the fourth consecutive day the wagons had been moving toward the mysterious country of Gerrhus. Her letters to Artem, and his replies were the only things that alleviated the tedium. The messages from Artem were also evidence that their fate was the main concern of their friends. Lida had done what Artem had asked — a rather unexpected and mystifying thing — in one of his letters: to learn by heart a text of considerable length in Greek Artem had transcribed, listening to what Ronis slowly and distinctly told him. Lida knew the general content of the text but not the meaning of the words she had had to memorize. This text was later to play a significant, it not decisive role in her life.

The procession stopped for lunch; cauldrons were set up over the campfires. The air was again permeated with the

sweetish smell of horse meat being boiled; not only Lida but even Ivan Semenovich, a man of great tolerance, had developed an aversion toward the meat. But there was nothing else to eat. Truth to tell, Lida ate it only when Ivan Semenovich insisted. This morning the girl had felt she couldn't force herself to swallow even the tiniest piece.

"It makes me sick just to look at it, Ivan Semenovich! I'd better just have some milk!"

"No, that won't do, Lida. If the sight of it makes you sick, don't look at it. Just close your eyes and swallow."

"I can't! I can't put it in my mouth even with my eyes closed. It smells of horse sweat."

"Then hold your nose and eat it."

"It has such a pungent taste that..."

"Then put your tongue out of the way, and swallow it whole. I'm not joking, Lida. I'm quite serious. I insist that you eat. We must eat this meat to keep strong. You must realize clearly that a day will come when we'll need all our strength and deftness. We must prepare ourselves for it. And I'm not taking any of your remonstrations, my dear girl. You'd better think of what Artem would say if he saw you refusing food and condemning yourself to feebleness?"

Lida stopped resisting and began eating, color mounting in her cheeks. Well, if she must, she must...

Presently, some animated voices could be heard approaching their wagon. Was it a message from Artem being brought by the slaves? This thought even reconciled Lida somewhat to the loathsome boiled horse meat she was trying to swallow and keep down. She peeped out, and what she saw gave her the shock of her life: Hartak and the three nobles who always accompanied him as part of the young chieftain's entourage, were standing right by the wagon. Two slaves were putting a pair of steps covered with a red rug up to the wagon for the chieftain to ascend with all appropriate dignity and solemnity. And Hartak looked more dignified than he ever had before.

"Ivan Semenovich, Hartak's on his way here!" Lida said in a frightened whisper. "By the looks of him, something important is on his mind!"

"Please remember, Lida," the geologist replied with a frown, "control yourself! The main thing is to control yourself!"

"What about the text Artem's passed on to me?"

"Oh, yes, I think the time to use it has come!"

Saying this, Ivan Semenovitch moved into the corner and watched the felt cover rise and the stoop-shouldered Hartak, accompanied by the nobles, make his entrance, smile to the girl and even bow to her awkwardly — all to show how favorably he was disposed to her.

Lida leaned back to support herself against the side of the wagon and waited to see what would happen next.

Hartak began speaking, his rasping voice sounding especially irritating now. But he must have been saying something he thought should be welcomed as the most exciting news because he smiled a couple of times, baring his sharp, carnivorous teeth. He tried to make his voice sound gentle, evidently — judging from his gestures — inviting the girl to go with him.

When he finished speaking, making an expansive gesture, as if showing Lida the way, and as the translation of his address into the Greek language began, Lida suddenly realized that Hartak had come because Dorbatay had given his consent for the wedding to be held before the end of the journey and before the burial of Skolot! There could be no other reason for him to come to her with his entourage but to take her away and make her his wife! Lida was numbed with the unspeakable horror of the situation.

Hartak kept his hand extended to the exit while his words were being translated; his smile was still glued to his face. Lida could neither say anything nor make a slightest move; she was petrified. Her legs and arms felt like dead weights; blood drained from her face. Then Hartak made a step toward her, took hold of her shoulder — seemingly oblivious to the state she was in — and gently pushed her toward the exit opening in the felt cover. Lida, quite forgetting of the geologist's stern warnings, jerked her shoulder away from the Scythian's grasp, and cried out:

“Never, never!”

Panting hard, she looked around, her eyes wild with fear. She had to do something, but what? Then she caught the expressive gaze of Ivan Semenovitch, staring at her from the corner. Hartak was taken aback by her violent reaction. Ivan Semenovitch began speaking, very distinctly, spacing his words carefully, and sounding very persuasive:

“Lida, my dear girl, try to control yourself. Calm down, think! You're ruining our chances! Lida!”

Little by little, Lida began regaining control of herself. Yes, there was something she could do, and Ivan Seme-

novich knew what, and he would tell her, he would save her.

"Tell me what to do, Ivan Semenovich, please," she said feeling very faint.

"He wants you to go with him, doesn't he?"

"Yes, what else?"

"It means he's gotten Dorbatay's consent for the marriage... Oh, stop it, Lida," the geologist added hastily seeing the girl go rigid again at the mention of 'marriage.' "You remember the text Artem's sent you? Go ahead, and recite it, look serious, thoughtful, and convincing while you're doing it! Control yourself! Good. Now begin, but remember you must neither look nor sound hostile. Begin!"

Hartak stood looking quite at a loss, shifting his gaze from Lida to Ivan Semenovich and then back to Lida. He did not know what to do, whether to use force or wait a bit. In the meantime Lida had regained control of herself and was ready to recite the text, their last hope. She should have thought of it on her own! Artem had written that the text was to be used for exactly such an occasion! Now it was her turn!

Pulling herself together, and taking a deep breath, the young woman stepped forward and looked Hartak straight in the face. Hartak immediately lowered his eyes: he seemed unable to sustain anybody's direct gaze. Lida heaved a sigh and began. It is extremely difficult to recite something when you don't understand the individual words but know only the general content! Yet she tried to put as much dignity into what she was saying as she could — both Artem and Ivan Semenovich had advised it.

In fact, it was not only Lida who was ignorant of the meaning of the words in the text — Artem was just as hazy as to what the individual words meant, having transcribed the Greek sounds from Ronis's dictation. The contents were as follows:

Hartak! I come from a tribe different from your people. We have laws and customs different from yours. According to our laws, the chieftain cannot marry a girl before he has performed a feat of valor in combat, but he must not engage in combat before the deceased chieftain had been buried. I have agreed to become your wife. But our wedding can take place only after you have done what the laws of my people require. Otherwise the gods, my gods, will severely punish both you and me! Now I beg of you to leave and

return only after you have done everything to comply with the law!

That was what Lida told Hartak. She was not even sure whether what she pronounced was not garbled beyond comprehension — first in Artem's transcription and then in her utterance — but she pushed on, mouthing the Greek words with so much stateliness that she surprised herself. It gave her a new impetus and she finished her piece in a loud and solemn voice. As the translation proceeded she saw, first, that what she had said made sense, and, second, that Hartak was taken aback. He had never expected anything of the kind!

Ronis's plan seemed to be working! Suspecting that Hartak could get Dorbatay to consent to the marriage before the journey was over, Ronis had suggested this little ruse to delay the wedding; the trick was also to give the impression that it was really something that had to be done in accordance with the laws of the people the girl belonged to, not a refusal.

Lida had managed to regain almost complete self-control seeing the effect her words were having. Hartak was definitely discomfitted — and that was a gain already!

Had it been a resolute and bold person in place of Hartak, Ronis's plan would have fallen through, but Hartak was a milksop, so Ronis's plan worked. Hartak had evidently been scared by the girl's mentioning the wrath of some foreign gods. What if they really did punish him if he violated the laws of the people to which these outlanders belonged? Hartak looked around, seeking support, but his companions lowered their eyes; they had not approved of the young chieftain's marriage taking place before the end of the journey in the first place; in spite of Dorbatay's consent, they felt the sacred laws were being violated.

A murmur rose among those who stayed outside after they heard the translation of what Lida said. If it was a murmur of approval, it was not at all bad!

Hartak realized that the nobles were not on his side. He turned abruptly and left briskly, saying something which sounded like an order: there was ill-disguised fury in his voice. He was helped onto his horse and in a moment, he was gone. The other Scythians who had come with Hartak also left without saying a single word or casting a glance at the girl or the other stranger who was sitting motionlessly in the corner, staring.

It grew quiet. Lida glanced at Ivan Semenovitch: what did he think of her performance? But she did not have to ask as his reaction was manifested all too clearly. The geologist sprang to his feet, rushed to the girl, embraced and kissed her.

"It was just great, my dear girl, excellent!" he cried out, overflowing with emotion. "See the results? Terrific! Lida, you've proved your mettle! I'm proud of you!"

This time, Lida, emotionally drained, did not refuse to eat the horse meat, forgetting her disgust toward it. But instead of relaxation, the afternoon brought new tensions.

Every day, Dorbatay staged pompous rites with human sacrifices, and every day he increased the number of victims to increase the Scythians' fear of the gods and of him, the high priest of the vengeful gods and the mouthpiece of their will. Dorbatay, in all probability, also wanted to awe the captives: they had already been taken to watch the rites twice. This afternoon, there was no need to take them out of their wagon as the rites were to be performed in the center of the semicircle formed by all the wagons.

Though Ivan Semenovitch kept the felt cover tightly closed and Lida clasped her hands over her ears, it was impossible to get away from the horrible sounds that filled the air.

The girl had been enervated enough by her encounter with Hartak even before the rites began, and now she was heading toward nervous collapse. At first, she just trembled when the priests opened the ceremony with the doleful-sounding prayers. But then, after the terrible sacrifices began, Lida broke down in a flood of tears. No matter how hard she pressed her palms over her ears she still could hear the heart-rending sounds coming from outside.

Ivan Semenovitch was nervous, too. At first, he hoped Lida would manage to get control of her emotions, as it was not the first time that Lida had burst into tears, and on all the previous occasions, she had been able to regain self-control. He sat silently in his corner not even daring to look in her direction so she wouldn't think he was watching her. But gradually Lida's uncontrollable sobbing began to turn into full-fledged hysteria. Ivan Semenovitch was at a loss as to what he should do to calm the girl.

Lida went on crying bitterly, her head buried in the cushion. Her shoulders heaved; her face and the cushion

were wet with tears. Then she began trembling all over and almost shouted through her flood of tears:

"I can't stand it any more! I can't! I can't! It's horrible! Nowhere to hide! Hateful murderers! Oh, I can't stand it! I can't!"

"Just don't think about it, Lida," the geologist said dejectedly. "You're much too wrought-up. Wrap yourself up in a rug, and try to sleep. That's the only thing we can do now."

"You're making fun of me! Sleep? There are people being tortured... and you are... so merciless... so indifferent... I can't stand it!"

Her shouting grew louder, mingling with the shouts from outside, with the wailing and death cries of the victims, with the beating of tambourines, and the piercing whistling of the bone fifes — such a terrifying, unnerving din that it could quite literally drive anyone mad.

"Stop it, Lida! You must control yourself, really! We're powerless to do anything!"

The geologist tried to make his words sound reasonable and convincing, but it did not help: Lida went on hysterically weeping.

All of a sudden the beat of the tambourines grew louder — it seemed that their number had increased twofold; at the same time the high-pitched wailing of the fifes also grew in intensity.

"Oh, how horrible! I can't stand it! I can't!"

"Stop it, Lida, stop!"

"No, I can't, I can't! I'll do it! I'll do it!"

She raised her head, her glassy eyes staring into nothingness.

"My heart's breaking. I'll go out there and stop it. You hear? We have no right to stand aside... No, don't you touch me! Don't you stop me!"

As she said it, she sprang to her feet, ready to rush out. The geologist only just managed to intercept her, and had to use force to make her sit down on the rug again. Things were beginning to look really grim.

After a short silence, the geologist began speaking in a very loud, imperative, steeled voice, a voice Lida had never heard the tolerant, genial and reserved geologist use before!

"Cut it out! You hear, stop this immediately! You can't help these people, and neither can I! We'll just ruin our

chances of rescue. Shut up! Enough of your hysterics! You hear? Stop it or I'll..."

He firmly grabbed Lida by the shoulder, making her grimace with pain! His other hand flew into the air — clenched in a fist! She winced in his grasp — she had never seen him in such a fury! His jaw set tight, his eyes under the frowning brows flashing! Deep wrinkles furrowing the cheek with moving knots of muscle! The hand poised in the air, ready to strike!

"Oh, Ivan Semenovich, don't! You scare me... I..."

"Shut up!"

Biting her lips to draw blood, Lida cowered, silenced. She was so badly frightened she could not have uttered a single sound, even if she wanted to: she just swallowed sobs and shuddered from time to time; tears kept pouring from her eyes — she could not keep them back, hard as she tried.

She could still hear the frenzied shouts of the priests and heart-rending wails mingled with the beat of the tambourines and shrieking of the fifes. It seemed she was seeing the face of Ivan Semenovich, twisted with fury, looming above her. She could not get rid of the image of this face and the clenched fist raised high. She had never felt such dejection, loneliness, and hurt.

Ivan Semenovich let go of Lida's shoulder and stood looking at her cowering on the floor, suddenly turned into a little girl, piteous, her stooping back shaking with sobs. He slowly lowered his hand and was about to touch her golden hair. He wanted so much to pat her on the back, to say something soothing but he restrained himself: it was not the time to start comforting her, no matter how much he wanted. His heart was heavy: he had had to threaten a woman, and so mercilessly at that — something he thought he would never have to do. But he felt that if he relented now, Lida would have another fit of hysterics, moved by self-pity. And then she might rush out and do something that would destroy them both.

Ivan Semenovich heaved a sigh: the scene had cost him much: his hands twitched nervously, and his throat was constricted as though he was about to burst into tears himself.

He stared down at the gentle girl with much too soft a heart, smitten with pity for her. How could he have brought himself to threaten her? Now he himself had the problem of keeping self-control and not breaking down... But what

else could he have done? He had had to stop Lida's hysterics, to prevent her from dashing out...

Ivan Semenovich was standing by Lida's side. *She seems to be quieted down*, he thought. Noiselessly he moved away and slowly walked into his corner, sat down, filled and lit his pipe.

The shouting outside seemed to lose its intensity; the tambourine beat went on but slackened. Ivan Semenovich inhaled the smoke deeply, and it was very pleasant to feel tobacco smoke spread its tranquilizing effect through his veins. He glanced at Lida: the girl was lying down now, motionless; her shoulders had stopped shuddering; only muffled sobs could be heard once in a while. Very soon, though, she began breathing evenly: she must have slipped from her overexcited state into sleep.

Ivan Semenovich sat in his corner looking out the opening in the felt cover long after his pipe had stopped smoking and the wagon had begun rolling again. He could hear the voices of the Scythians urging the horses on and the tall grass swishing under the wagon wheels; through the opening, he could see the unending strip of the woods in the distance beyond which cliffs rose steeply. The heavy gray clouds hid the tops of the cliffs as they always did here. It was very difficult to believe there was a stone ceiling above the clouds — hundreds of meters of rock that separated this underground world from the world he could call his own, real and bathing in sunlight...

Artem and Dmitro Borisovich were hiding somewhere in the forest. He wondered what they were doing at the moment. How was Dmitro Borisovich, this hot-tempered, straightforward adult with the soul of a child, who was so helpless in these wild conditions, adjusting to the brutality of the Scythians? Ivan Semenovich did not think it would be too much of a problem for Artem to adjust, as he had proven that he could stand up for himself and for others; just think how radically he had been transformed from a sloppy, awkward youth into an intrepid, determined and resourceful young man! It was a good example of what a sudden change in circumstances could do: something that had been hidden deep in his soul had surfaced and turned into resoluteness, stalwartness, fearlessness, sound reasoning... A very nice boy, Artem!

Suddenly somebody embraced his neck making him start violently; he turned around to discover Lida.

Her green eyes were gazing at the geologist, an embarrassed smile on her lips. She was eager to speak but something held her back.

"I did not see you wake up," Ivan Semenovitch said in the most gentle voice he could master. What if he had overdone it and had been too harsh on her in his attempts stop her hysterics?

"Ivan Semenovitch, I feel so bad about my behavior... I'm sorry I didn't keep control of myself... I just couldn't... I'm ashamed... I can't look you straight in the eye..."

"All right, let's not speak about it. It's over and done with. Look up at the sky instead. Have you ever seen anything so beautiful? Have you? See those wonderful clouds? Aren't they just magnificent?"

The girl waved all this aside.

"I'm sorry but I think I can see only the usual gray sky and no magnificent clouds... just the usual overcast gray. Where did you see those clouds you spoke of?"

Ivan Semenovitch looked right, then left, and said:

"Strange, nothing unusual to be seen indeed... Very strange... I'm sure I saw them just a minute ago... they were so beautiful..."

"Oh, Ivan Semenovitch, except for these low-hanging clouds, what else could you expect to see here?"

"Yes, maybe you're right, maybe..."

"You were talking about the clouds just to change the subject! I know you were!"

"You think so? I don't think I did it on purpose..."

"Let's not ever bring it up again, please... I feel so ashamed, really..."

"Bring up what? The clouds?"

"No, of course not! You know what I mean."

"Ah, but if you keep coming back to it every other minute, I'll talk about it every day, ten times a day rather. And I'll tell Artem too!"

"Oh no, don't! I'll never do it again. I'll... Oh, who's that?"

A woman's head appeared in the opening — the slave woman brought sour milk for the captives. She put the earthen jar on floor and glanced quickly around.

"She's up to something."

After she ascertained that there was no one in the wagon except the outlanders, the slave pulled a tiny piece of paper from the folds of her dress. She gave it to Lida and made

several gestures as if to say: *give me your letter in return for this one for the men in the forest*, to which she pointed with her finger. Then the slave crouched with her back to the opening in a posture typical of a slave waiting for orders.

"It's a message from Artem!" Lida exclaimed, bubbling over with joy.

"And what does he say in his message?"

"Yes, I'll read it now!" Lida said hurriedly in her excitement. "It says: 'Why don't you write? We're worried. Has Hartak made any moves yet? Ronis told us that Hartak had already secured Dorbatay's consent for his marriage to you to take place before the end of the journey. Write back at once and tell us what's going on. Have you learnt the Greek text by heart? Mind you, very much may depend on it. We're doing fine here. Many more people have joined Varkan and Ronis here in the forest, so we're a large force now. The time of your rescue is drawing near. I expect you to write me a detailed account of everything. I'm particularly eager to learn what you think of my personal...'"

Lida abruptly halted and burst into a fit of coughing.

"Is there anything else there?" the geologist asked archly.

"...of the personal... errr... affairs I mentioned to you in my previous letter.' That's all, Ivan Semenovich," the girl said, trying to make her voice sound natural and sincere — in fact it sounded much too natural and much too sincere. Color mounted treacherously in her cheeks.

"That's all, is it?"

"Well, there's something else... just a meaningless trifle..."

Lida, now very red in the face, lowered her head.

"Oh, if it's just a meaningless trifle, I'll leave it to you to find some meaning in it," Ivan Semenovich said with a chuckle. "You must write back at once. Let's not make Artem worry unnecessarily — we have settled things more or less with Hartak, haven't we? Are there any sheets left in my notepad?"

"Quite a few, Ivan Semenovich, there's quite enough to last us several more days. I'll begin right now and will describe everything that happened to Artem. Where's the pencil?"

Ivan Semenovich turned away to conceal from Lida the arch but benevolent smile that spread across his face.



Varkan takes a decision as to the size of his group; Dorbatay stages another sacrifice with diviners taking part and a man dying in the flames; Artem draws some historical and literary parallels; Varkan swears vengeance and Artem drifts into a reverie thinking about Lida

Days passed, one like the next. The great funeral procession of the Scythians stretched for about a kilometer, but the legendary place of Gerrhus was still somewhere ahead. The horses moved slowly, at a measured pace; the huge, cumbersome wagons creaked: they could easily be passed on foot.

This slowness grated on Artem's nerves as he was impatient for the action to begin, and that would happen only after the Scythians arrived at Gerrhus! Varkan and Ronis reasoned with him, trying to cool him down.

"This slowness is working in our favor. Lida and Ivan Semenovitch are absolutely safe. Hartak fears the vengeance of the foreign gods and will not attempt to speed up the wedding..."

"He'd better not!"

"He won't. In the meantime, the forces Dorbatay and his henchmen could rely upon, are slowly but surely diminishing. It is not a very noticeable process, but consequently, our forces are growing, and increasing in strength. Varkan and Ronis tell me everything's proceeding according to plan," said Dmitro Borisovich.

The Greek added:

"It's a good sign that the Scythians are moving so slowly. There's nothing surprising in it, really. The longer the

journey lasts, the better it is for us. It will help our cause a lot, for the fight will be shorter."

Artem looked at him in surprise:

"Why? I don't follow."

"I will explain," Ronis said. "Remember, I once told you that this journey would weaken the forces of Dorbatay and the chiefs? What I have in mind is this: before the journey began, the most important Scythians and their soldiers kept close together, and now, with the fatigue of the journey and the procession stretched out the way it is now, everything is confused — the established order of wagons of the chiefs and their soldiers has broken down. Their wagons are scattered now, which greatly diminishes the effectiveness of their forces. On the other hand, our forces are growing. We aren't losing time; we're becoming more unified as more and more men join us. Yes, since the time when our first uprising was put down, we have learnt a lot!"

Ronis, showing an agitation quite out of character, struck the nearby tree with his clenched fist:

"I assure you, the chiefs are in for a much tougher fight this time! The blood of my ill-fated brothers, murdered and tortured to death by Dorbatay, will be avenged! We remember the crimes of the priests and chiefs only too well and we will avenge them!"

Varkan said judiciously:

"Ronis, you're not being reasonable. You have allowed your vengeful feelings speak for you..."

"I am a man of flesh and blood and I am subject to all human emotions. You seem to forget that, Varkan," Ronis said tartly.

"Oh yes, I remember it. And I also remember that the desire for vengeance leads to no good. Is it only vengeance that we are seeking, Ronis? No, not only that, and you know it as well as I do. So why do you put vengeance foremost?"

For the first time since they had met, Artem saw Ronis lower his head and admit that he had been wrong. Then he said:

"You are right, my friend. The blood of my slain brothers clouded my eyes..."

Everybody was silent, impressed with the way this firm and intelligent man admitted to having been wrong. After a short silence Varkan spoke again, tactfully changing the subject:

“As a matter of fact there’s one important thing I wanted to draw your attention to. I am not sure you have thought about it.”

“What?” Ronis said, raising his head, his eyes calm again.

“If Dorbatay and the chiefs suspected anything, they wouldn’t be treating the hunters and herdsman the way they are. For the last few days, Dorbatay has been playing into our hands, turning the hunters and herdsman against him. I think he has been blinded by his power. He and the chiefs are treating the hunters and herdsman the way they usually treat the slaves. This is what those who join us, tell us. And there are quite a few newcomers... unfortunately.”

“And what’s so bad about that?” Artem could not help exclaiming.

“It’s bad because Dorbatay may be alerted by the disappearance of men,” Varkan explained. “We’d rather have the old soothsayer remain convinced that he possesses the ultimate power. That’s why I’ve decided not to allow any more men to join our group. It’s already big enough, and I think it would serve our cause better if all those who have grown indignant at the injustices done them by Dorbatay and the chiefs stay where they are. They will be able to influence others and help us from within, so to say, when the right time comes. And that time is drawing near, and very quickly at that.”

Artem was excited to hear Varkan say that the time of the decisive battle was near! A few more days, and the uprising would break out! And then... then all their problems would be solved!

* * *

Varkan’s group kept following the funeral procession. Almost all the young warriors who had once formed the most reliable and strongest part of the troops of the dead chieftain had joined Varkan’s group. Soon after Skolot’s death, these young soldiers had found that Dorbatay and his henchmen would not forgive the retainers of the late Skolot whom they considered — with good reason — to be their enemies.

With Skolot dead, his retinue had lost the support it had enjoyed, and all those who had been in favor with Skolot were regarded with suspicion by Dorbatay. Those who had dropped some disapproving remarks about the priests or

haughty chiefs found themselves in a much worse situation — they faced almost certain death.

The merciless and vengeful Dorbatay would remember all their snubs, and his keen, boring eyes seemed to be gazing at the long line of people to be punished or simply put out of the way on the slightest suspicion of disloyalty.

Every day, the old soothsayer solemnly pronounced imprecations against those whom he suspected of disloyalty, and that was the end of them. These people were stripped of all their possessions, no matter how worthless, and at best, they were turned into slaves. No one dared to help those who bore the curse of the gods, since it would immediately bring a curse on the helper.

Seizure of property was only one of the intimidation procedures Dorbatay was employing to keep the people fearful and obedient. He managed to achieve his purpose quite well.

Three young hunters, all of them Varkan's friends, had already been put to death. These three hunters had, on several occasions, poked fun at the priests; neither had they held the chiefs in high regard. Dorbatay had meted out punishment to them with his characteristic cruelty.

One of them was accused of disrespect for the sacred traditions and ridicule of the priests. He, disarmed and bound, was brought before Hartak. The new chieftain was sitting on a dais richly decorated with red cloth. Dorbatay stood beside him, grim and relentless, wearing the ceremonial vestments of the high priest. The chiefs sat in a circle around the dais. A little further away the Scythians stood in a crowd. They spoke in undertone, casting sympathetic glances at the young hunter who, everybody realized, was doomed. The hunter probably realized this, too, but he stood firm.

Hartak raised his hand, giving the signal for the trial to begin. Then, in his croaking, rasping, dead voice, he asked the young man in the silence that had fallen:

“Do you plead guilty? Do you admit to having violated the sacred laws? Do you admit to having offended the holy priests?”

The hunter raised his head proudly and said boldly:

“No, I do not admit to having done anything wrong. I deny the charges. I have never violated the sacred laws. I have never offended the holy priests. I only stood up for an orphan girl who was wronged by a priest. He took away

all her cattle, depriving her of all means of livelihood. She would have died of hunger. The priest said he was doing it in obedience to the will of the gods. But could just gods really have ordered this? The priest slaughtered the horse he took from the girl, for food. After doing that, can he be called a 'holy' priest? So, I gave him a piece of my mind, that's all. How can that be considered an offense and violation of the sacred laws?"

He said this, looking Dorbatay straight in the eye. The crowd burst into a loud murmur, as quite a few people knew that everything he had said was true. Hartak was somewhat at a loss as to what to do next. Not so Dorbatay — the soothsayer knew perfectly well what to do! Raising his hand threateningly, he said in a loud, brazen voice:

"The priest did what the gods willed, otherwise the gods would have punished him! And they have not! And you, recreant, are being tried! You have offended a priest — a holy priest! — and thus provoked the ire of the just but severe gods whose will the priest obeyed. Be quiet! I will not have your arguments now! We will ask the great gods and they will tell us the whole truth. And we will do with you as the gods will advise us. Call the diviners! Let them consult the gods!"

Three priests, who in fact, looked very feminine, approached the dais with thick bundles of rods in their hands. They put the bundles on the ground, sank to their knees, raised their hands in the air, and began to sing a hymn in rasping voices. The priests asked the gods to hear their prayers and reply. The hunter stood waiting quietly. Everyone else waited eagerly for the sign from the gods.

When they finished praying, the priests spread the rods in front of them, bent low over them, and looked for patterns, murmuring sacred words. The crowd stood in glum silence. The artless hunter shrugged his shoulders as if to say: *what could these rods reveal when all the people know that the priests robbed the girl?*

The diviners straightened up at last. The elder diviner got to his feet, took a step forward and said:

"O great and wise chieftain, Hartak! O wise and holy servant of the gods, Dorbatay! The gods have made their reply. They have told us what it is to be done, and everyone of us has received the same answer. We have heard their thunderous voices. This man is guilty! He has insulted a priest and offended the gods. The gods are wrathful! This

man has violated our sacred laws, and not for the first time!"

The hunter paled at the new accusation: he knew he would be sentenced to death. But when Dorbatay asked him again whether he pleaded guilty, the hunter said firmly, with great courage:

"No! I have done nothing wrong! These priests are lying! The gods could not have said anything of the kind, because they know I am innocent!"

"Bring other diviners here!" Dorbatay said calmly. "We shall do everything in compliance with our sacred laws!"

The number of diviners was now six — double what it was the first time. This was what the sacred traditions required if the accused refused to accept the verdict of the first three diviners.

The six, after casting their rods on the ground, confirmed the findings of the first three:

"He is guilty! He is guilty on all counts! The gods have said it again! And the gods demand that he be punished!"

Once again, the hunter rejected the charges. Then Dorbatay called in twelve diviners — twice as many as before. These twelve gave the same reply:

"The man is guilty! This is what our gods tell us! And they demand a harsh punishment for him!"

No more evidence was required; everything had been done in accordance with the sacred traditions. Dorbatay turned to Hartak:

"You must give a verdict, O great and wise chieftain Hartak!"

Without looking at the accused hunter who searched in vain for some final hope in Hartak's expression, the chieftain said as though repeating words he had just been made to learn:

"May the gods' will be fulfilled! The guilty man must be punished!"

Dorbatay imperiously waved his hand and the priests brought a wagon filled with dry branches up to the dais. Fierce bulls were harnessed to the wagon. The hunter was bound hand and foot and gagged. Then he was put in the wagon and more branches were put on top of him. The wood was set on fire, and the bulls were lashed mercilessly. The frightened beasts ran into the steppe, pulling the blazing wagon in which an innocent man who could neither move nor even cry out in his terrible anguish, was being incinerated.

Dorbatay followed the burning wagon with his cold eyes for some time, then raised his hands in a solemn gesture and told everyone to pray to the great gods and thank them for having meted out just punishment to the criminal who had gone against the sacred traditions of the Skolots.

Two other hunters who also were Varkan's friends were put to death with much less pomp. One of them was hacked to pieces by priests with axes in the middle of the night. Afterwards, the priests claimed he was a recreant who had secretly worshipped the Greek gods. The Scythian gods had punished him by hurling the heavy, sharp axes from the skies. The simple-minded Scythians believed it...

The other hunter died during a hunt, struck down by a spear the priests claimed had also come from the skies. The other badly frightened participants in the hunt confirmed this, saying that they had seen for themselves a spear coming from somewhere above their heads, deep in the woods. The spear had not returned to the heavens, true enough, but who else except the gods could have hurled it in that forest when there was no one around but the hunters? However, Dorbatay and his closest associates knew very well where the weapon had come from: Dorbatay himself had ordered one of the priests to track down the hunters, climb up a tall tree and hurl the spear at the doomed man.

Varkan and his friends knew of all Dorbatay's evil deeds. Unfortunately, they were helpless to do anything to prevent the murders. No wonder there were so many defections to Varkan in the forest from the very first days of the funeral journey. Those who felt their fates would be similar to those who had already died preferred to run away. Dorbatay and the priests could easily deal with them one by one, secretly or in the open, but when they joined together, they were a considerable force, having the tacit support of the many hunters and herdsman who stayed with the main body of the Scythians but disapproved of the blood-thirsty priests' cruelty.

It was only later that Varkan decided to stop allowing new defectors to join him. All the younger warriors were already with Varkan, as were those hunters who were in danger of being murdered by Dorbatay and the priests. The rest of Varkan's supporters could remain with the main body of the Scythians for the time being. There, they could be more useful, as they could help with various matters before the uprising, and they also constituted a surprise force

within the Scythian ranks which could strike at Dorbatay from within — from where he least expected an attack.

The strength of Varkan's group grew on other counts, too, and not just numerically. Varkan made sure there would be no clashes with Dorbatay's forces before everything was ready for the final confrontation. Varkan reasoned that he had to solidify his forces and lull the vigilance of the old soothsayer. That is why the only action allowed was leading away horses from Dorbatay's large herds. It was done in the dead of night, very stealthily, to avoid any clashes with the herdsmen. Everything was done very quickly; Varkan's men were not even armed for such nocturnal raids. They were sure they would not be attacked anyway, as in accordance with the sacred Scythian traditions, it was forbidden to engage in any armed aggressive action until the deceased chieftain had been buried. Until then, the Scythians were permitted to use weapons only in self-defense.

Artem once said, commenting on the situation:

"It's like the legend old Ormad, or whatever his name was, told at Skolot's feast..."

"It was not a legend, my dear Artem, but a piece — somewhat embroidered of course — of actual history," Dmitro Borisovich remarked.

"All right, so it really happened. But anyway, this funeral procession on the way to Gerrhus could be compared to the march of Darius's hordes. And we, here in the forest — to the Scythians who avoided battle and used hit-and-run tactics... See, Dmitro Borisovich, how some knowledge of history, or legend, helps one assess the present situation? Ormad should be thanked. Now, what about a little workout?"

Artem and Dmitro Borisovich had already scored some successes in mastering the Scythian weapons. Artem took to archery. For some reason or other, he liked the excitement of shooting arrows, and every time he had a chance — mostly when their group stopped to rest — he practiced. After some time, he could claim considerable improvement in his archery skills — he was able to hit a tree with an arrow from twenty yards away. In spite of what he considered to be a great achievement, he was still way behind Varkan and the other Scythians who could hit the same target two or three times the distance!

Besides, Artem could hit only stationary targets. Any moving target — a hare or a fox — was beyond his capabilities.

Dmitro Borisovich had taken to the axe, the very same long-handled axe he had picked from the pile of weapons shortly before the surprise attack of Dorbatay's soldiers. In the time that had passed since that day, Dmitro Borisovich had learnt to handle it with considerable dexterity. His height and long sinewy arms increased his reach significantly. When the archeologist, his spectacles flashing menacingly, challenged Varkan to a mock battle, the Scythian had a very hard time defending himself. The sharp axe had become a very dangerous weapon in the hands of the persevering but hot-tempered archeologist.

"There's only one thing that spoils the effect somewhat, Dmitro Borisovich," Artem said jokingly. "With this axe in your hands, you remind me of Don Quixote who proclaimed the beauty of his lady Dulcinea to the world..."

"What impertinence!" the archeologist cried out, sounding rather offended.

"Oh, don't get cross! It's true! Upon my word! You're lanky as Don Quixote's supposed to be, gawky... err, no, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that — honest — I used the wrong word," Artem began mumbling, dropping his teasing tone, as soon as he saw the long, steady arm of Dmitro Borisovich reach out toward his ear. It would have been an impossible disgrace to have his ear pulled in front of the Scythians! And whose ear would it be? The ear of the young but powerful magician who, among other things, could summon thunder and fire from the ground!

Artem quickly stepped back, shut his mouth, and pulled his helmet still lower over his head. Both he and Dmitro Borisovich were obliged to wear round bronze helmets which left their faces open, most of the time now. It was Varkan who insisted, and Ronis supported him, saying:

"Why take unnecessary risks? When attacking, the Scythians aim for the head. If you wear helmets, you lessen your chances of being badly hurt. You never know what might happen any moment now."

Varkan's group followed the funeral procession on its way to Gerrhus day in, day out. Sometimes they kept close behind it, camping at its tail, and sometimes they moved parallel to it. The procession could hardly be seen in the extremely tall pink grass a horse's head high. Among other things, this mode of travel allowed Varkan and Ronis to communicate easily with their supporters who had stayed in the main Scythian camp. Artem was happy to be able to

maintain a steady correspondence with Lida and Ivan Semenovich.

Messages were exchanged without the help of Diana. There was no need to send the dread *poskina* back and forth, thus reminding Dorbatay and the priests of their existence. The slaves helped them get the messages in and out. Hartak had sent Lida two slave women to cater to all the whims of the chieftain's fiancée. He could never imagine that the slaves did in fact serve the girl very well but in a manner he would hardly have approved of. For with the two slaves, as well as most of the rest, the word of Ronis weighed much more than the orders of Hartak. So, the two slave girls took Lida's messages and passed them on to other slaves who carried them to the forest at night. Lines of communication were thus opened permanently in all weather.

Varkan was almost constantly in conference now. Two newly-arrived hunters had just told him of what had been going on at the camp. After hearing them out, he talked to Ronis and gave some orders. The hunters headed back to the camp.

Varkan's face was clouded; even more sombre was Ronis's. He knew in general terms from his own sources what was going on in the Scythian camp, but the hunters' story had affected him deeply. The hunters informed him that Dorbatay was preparing a new rite with more human sacrifices. Such bloody rites were staged practically every day now, and the Greek slaves were being killed in increasing numbers by the priests as a sacrifice to propitiate the gods.

Ronis stared gloomily at the fire where the sparks were darting and dancing. Varkan came up to him and patted him on the shoulder:

"Don't feel too bad, my friend," he said softly. "There are only two or three more days of waiting before we strike. Then we'll put an end to everything that's depressing you and breaking your heart now. Do you believe me?"

Ronis raised his head, his big eyes glistening with reflections from the fire. When he began to speak, there was a great anguish in his voice:

"I do believe you and trust you completely, Varkan. Otherwise I would not be here with you. I'm firmly convinced that we'll win. But sometimes I feel I'm choking with too much hatred for Dorbatay and his priests..."

"What's so bad about that?" Varkan asked in surprise.

"There's nothing wrong with it," the Greek said with a

sigh. "But sometimes it can be a nuisance; it fuddles the brain as you saw quite recently, my friend. When this hatred grips me, I forget our aims and think only of revenge for all my brothers. How many of my kin has he had tortured to death and murdered! If Dorbatay manages to escape, I will be very discontented!"

"He will not escape, Ronis!"

"He does not have much chance... as long as I'm alive."

Ronis suddenly sprang to his feet. His voice rang.

"And what will happen if I die before him? No, Varkan, I am not afraid of death. But it might turn out that I will not be able to meet my arch enemy face to face. It can happen easily in battle, for no one is protected from sudden death. You're a soldier yourself, Varkan, and you understand what I'm talking about, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," the Scythian said in a low voice.

"All right then," Ronis said. "Death or a bad wound can come unheeded from a stray arrow... or the blow of an axe from behind... And I won't be able to do what I'm burning to do. Such thoughts make me restless; I lose the ability to do what must be done at the moment; I have an irrepressible urge to cut the old evil-doer's throat with my own hands! To kill him — and then come what may. Now listen to me, Varkan. Do you still consider yourself my friend and brother, now and for ever?"

"Why should you ask? You know very well that I do!" Varkan said reproachfully.

"All right then. I have never asked you for personal favors. But now I want you to promise me in all earnest to do what I ask of you. And if I die and you don't do it, may Fate punish you! Do you agree to promise me that, Varkan?"

"Go ahead, tell me your request, I'm listening."

"There's only one request I have, one demand rather, as you're my best friend, my blood brother. If I fall in battle, dead or badly wounded, if I am not fated to be the avenger for all my murdered Greek brothers... if fate does not allow me to kill this blood-thirsty, wild beast, this hideous creature and murderer Dorbatay with my own hands, you, Varkan, must kill him yourself. Kill him! Fulfill my greatest desire, punish the vile man, Varkan, my friend!"

Ronis's voice was vibrating with intense hatred; he shook his clenched fists in the air; he dropped his voice from a shout to a fervent, even feverish whisper, stopping to gasp for air as though he was short of breath.

“Kill him!... Kill him, Varkan! Swear you will!”

Varkan put his hand on the hilt of the sword. His face was grave and determined as he said firmly and solemnly:

“I swear to you, Ronis, that I will do what you ask of me. My hatred for Dorbatay is no less than yours. All my friends hate him. We’ll never know peace until this stinking rat dies. I swear to you, O Ronis!”

The paroxysm of great agitation passed and Ronis now seemed a little ashamed of this display of emotions, which was so out of character with him. He wiped his forehead with his palm and sighed with relief. Then he squeezed Varkan’s hand, looking him straight in the eye.

“I believe you, Varkan! I will put it out of my mind. You are a noble and honest man. I am going to repeat what I once said, but you refused to take heed then: I sincerely want you, Varkan, to become the chieftain of the Scythians!”

Varkan shrugged his shoulders, not saying anything in reply.

Several young warriors came up to the camp fire. They were to start shortly on their nightly raid to get more horses from Dorbatay’s herds. Varkan listened to their report and issued brief orders; the warriors walked away and disappeared into the darkness. The sounds of the tambourines came from the Scythian camp in the distance.

Artem felt neither fear nor apprehension. On the contrary, now, after he had heard the translation of Ronis’s passionate outburst and Varkan’s reply, a firm belief in the successful outcome of their enterprise grew in him. The vague doubts and anxieties that had been lurking in the back of his mind completely disappeared. For the first time in his life, he had witnessed the great power of hatred!

Artem had also had another opportunity to see that Varkan was a courageous, resolute, honest and straightforward man. He had also learnt that Ronis had a penetrating, sober and flexible mind and was a man of mettle and cold-blooded reason. He realized very clearly now that this reticent Greek had become the leader of the downtrodden slaves by right, just as Varkan was at the head of the maltreated hunters, herdsmen and young warriors from the deceased chieftain’s entourage by right.

But it was only now that Artem had seen them open their hearts, filled as they were with turbulent feelings, to show the magnitude of their hatred for their common enemy. Ronis and Varkan, drawn so close to each other by mutual love,

friendship and respect, amply demonstrated their great human worth. Artem grew to admire them enormously.

It made Artem feel proud to have both these men as his friends. He was not at all surprised when Dmitro Borisovich told him enthusiastically:

“We will win, Artem! Now I’m sure of it.”

The archeologist was staring at him with his myopic eyes, much too thoroughly wiping his eyeglasses which had suspiciously misted over. But his face was clear and he was wearing the resolute expression of a man who has arrived at some unshakable conclusions.

“Of course we’ll win, Dmitro Borisovich,” Artem said. “From what you just translated it seems...”

The archeologist took Artem’s hand and squeezed it hard:

“Yes, I know what you mean, Artem! Now I’m sure that nothing will stop them! Consequently, the most important thing for us at the moment — the release of dear friends — will also be accomplished! We’ll be together again! We’ll kiss our beloved girl, we’ll embrace Ivan Semenovich...”

Dmitro Borisovich was so deeply moved by his own words that he was struck speechless for some time by his frantic attempts to find adequate verbal expression for his emotions.

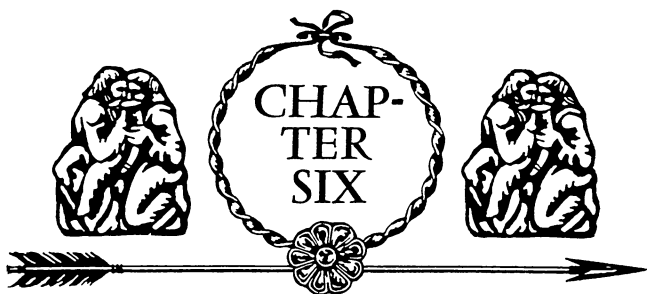
Ronis got to his feet.

“I’m going back to the Scythian camp,” he said. His voice had returned to normal — it was quiet, sober, imbued with characteristic ironic overtones. Nothing betrayed the emotional outburst he had gone through just a short while ago. “I’ll find out — maybe for the last time — how Dorbatay and Hartak are getting on. I’m interested to learn whether they think nothing threatens them in the near future, whether anything’s troubling them... It seems we have arranged and thought of everything, Varkan? Do you remember our signals?”

“Yes,” said Varkan curtly.

“Then I’m leaving. I probably won’t see you until the day of the uprising.” Ronis raised his hand in a gesture of good-bye and disappeared among the trees.

The men sitting around the dying fire fell silent; the deep night shadows, which seemed even darker against the unstable light of the last, flickering flames, were moving in from all sides. A slight breeze gently touched the tops of tall grass. The clearing where they were sitting was enveloped on all sides by the impenetrable dark. Only the clouds in the sky could still be discerned.



The Scythians arrive at Gerrhus and the explorers watch the funeral ceremony from a ledge on the face of the cliff; Ronis gives the signal and the battle begins; the four friends are reunited only to find themselves facing a new danger; Varkan displays his courage, and the time comes for the explorers to use their only weapon

The tops of the huge rocks at the ledge close to the foot of the cliffs served as an excellent observation point. Artem reckoned hardly a kilometer separated them from the site where the burial was to take place. From where they stood, they remained undetected by the Scythians below. Even if it were not for the jagged rocks which provided such a good hiding place, the Scythians below were much too busy to pay any attention to anything around them.

Not only could the observers see everything in detail due to the extreme purity of the air, but they could also hear the sounds of the remarkable spectacle unfolding below them. For several hours now, the priests had been chanting their woeful prayers. The solemn and impressive ceremony of Skolot's burial turned out to be a compelling sight.

Artem, Dmitro Borisovich and Varkan had been lying there, among the rocks, since early morning, watching, listening and waiting. A little beyond them was stationed their entire group whose strength was over one hundred and fifty well-armed young warriors and hunters. It had been decided that the signal for the attack would be given after Ronis had pulled his forces together to strike at Dorbatay's soldiers from the rear. Then they would be joined by the hunters and herdsman who would also be alerted. After Dorbatay's forces

were thus engaged, the decisive attack would come from the rocks — it would be carried out by Varkan's warriors. The general plan of the uprising that had been worked out by Varkan and Ronis seemed faultless: all that remained was to carry it out.

But there was one person hiding in the rocks whose mind was occupied with matters very different from the impending battle with the soldiers of Dorbatay and Hartak! This person was, of course, none other than Dmitro Borisovich! The enthusiastic archeologist had stopped thinking about his mastery of the battle axe. Neither was his participation in the forthcoming battle — “my personal and direct involvement,” as he put it — of much concern to him. His attention was riveted to the scene unfolding below. He wanted to weep with disappointment that he had lost his camera in that cursed cave! It was an outrage not to be able to capture on film everything he had been privileged to see! What a vexation to be left only with some rather blurred mental pictures imprinted on the memory!

The burial of the Scythian chieftain, the obsequies, carried out in full accordance with the sacred traditions of the tribe! An archeologist's dream, to be sure! Quite naturally, Dmitro Borisovich could not take his eyes off the scene. Even Artem, who, though he was not an archeologist, shared much of Dmitro Borisovich's enthusiasm, for he was impressed by the unusual, striking sight.

The burial was to take place on a flat stretch of the ground, flanked on one side by the cliffs and locked in on all the other sides by the curve of a quietly flowing, rather wide river. The Scythians called the river “Borysthenes,” but Dmitro Borisovich explained the name to Artem:

“The real Borysthenes, the one Herodotus wrote about, is, of course, the Dnieper of our days. The river we see here is just an underground stream that empties into some underground lake which must be of quite a size, too. And again, of course, this lake would have nothing whatsoever to do with the Pontus of Euxine, that is, what we now call the Black Sea. Incidentally, our hypothetical underground lake would be very much below sea level...”

This last observation was self-evident and did not call for any explanation. The archeologist went on:

“The tribe of the Scythian nomads that wandered into this underground cavity a very long time ago and was forced to stay...”

“So, you support the theory Ivan Semenovitch put forward to explain the Scythian presence here?” Artem interrupted him.

“We haven’t come up with any other plausible theories so far. So, as I was saying, this tribe, cut off from the surface, must have preserved the ancient geographical names and applied them to their new environment. The Scythians, Herodotus tells us, had many legends concerning the Borysthenes, and these stories must have been passed down from generation to generation. When these underground Scythians came upon this river, they, quite naturally, invested it with such a glorious name. That’s all. And, as this funeral is also part of the ancient tradition, the tribe picked this spot, associating it with the legendary Gerrhus, as a burial place for their chieftains.”

“Yes, all this is very interesting, and no doubt very important,” Artem said impatiently. “I am quite sure that everything you say is true, but there’s something else that’s worrying me at the moment...”

But glancing at the archeologist, Artem stopped, as he saw that Dmitro Borisovich was not listening, so absorbed he was in the ceremony below. Artem was more concerned with the following:

Suppose in the general uprising Lida and Ivan Semenovitch were set free. So far so good. What next? Varkan was no doubt an excellent person, and Ronis, too. So after the uprising, they would feel quite safe among the Scythians; that was obvious. But the most important question remained: what next? Wasn’t it high time to start looking for a way back to the surface? Hadn’t they had enough adventures? Hadn’t they had enough of this world with its pink and yellow plants, which as far as Artem was concerned, were rather disgusting?

But how would they look for the way back? The cliffs were the same wherever they went, rising in steep walls, and disappearing into clouds, with jagged rocks at the foot. Which place should they choose to climb? And what good would it do to scale those cliffs? How could they find the thin place in the wall that separated this strange world from the stalactite cave with its passage to the surface?

The damned rocks! Artem kicked one in a fit of bad temper. The kick hurt his foot, making him cry with pain — the stone was as hard here as anywhere else! The pain brought him back to the harsh reality of the moment. Wasn’t

it a bit too early to think about returning? First they had to free their friends, and then they would see what to do next. Ivan Semenovitch would, of course, know what to do! Things would take care of themselves!

Artem turned his attention to the obsequies proceeding down below. All the Scythians had already gathered by the large pit that was to serve as a grave. Dorbatay and the priests stood around it in a tight circle, a few steps away. Hartak, the son of the late chieftain, and the oldest and most important chiefs who were closest to Skolot, formed the inner circle.

The embalmed body had already been put in the grave and laid out on a rug, surrounded by wooden poles dug into the ground. The priests were putting planks across the poles and covering them with reeds, thus making a sort of simple, wooden but spacious tomb for the body of Skolot; there was room enough in it for all the things the Scythians believed the deceased would need in the world of spirits.

Dmitro Borisovich had told Artem that big mounds of earth, heaped on both sides of the grave during the digging, would be used to make a barrow. A short distance away from the grave stood the wagon in which the widow sat, sobbing uncontrollably, and the servants, all of whom would shortly follow their late master to the grave to cater to his needs in the nether world.

The wonderful black stallion that belonged to Skolot, was also brought to the grave. He pawed the ground, nervously turning his head and stretching his neck. The priests held him firmly by the reins as the stallion seemed to feel death approaching. He snorted, jerked his head and looked fiercely at the priests.

“Are they going to kill him, too?” Artem asked, without turning his head, feeling sorry for so handsome and noble a horse. Dmitro Borisovich said curtly, “Yes.” He was also grieved at the thought that this handsome horse, the only large one he had seen, was soon to be slaughtered. But there was nothing to be done about it: the Scythians believed that their chieftain would need the horse to go riding in the next world.

There were hunters and herdsman, old women and girls, boys and very old men in the big, seething crowd standing some distance away from the grave. There were only few people by the wagons.

A cart, loaded with gold vials and precious objects, was

brought to the grave; it was followed by a goodly number of choice pigs, goats and sheep.

"Will all of this also go into the grave?" Artem asked, incredulous; even after the explanations given by Dmitro Borisovich, Artem could not quite believe that so many precious things, so many animals were to be buried in the grave.

"Of course!" Dmitro Borisovich said, but with a look of surprise at Artem's incredulity. "Not only these animals and treasures. They'll put Skolot's widow into the grave, too, strangling her first. I don't know all the details, but they should bury a cup-bearer, a cook, a groom, and some servants along with the chieftain... Not alive, of course, but strangled beforehand. It's the tradition."

"You speak so matter-of-factly about it!" Artem said, bristling. "I'm boiling with indignation and you're dispassionately enumerating the victims! It's revolting, that's what!"

The archeologist said noncommittally:

"I don't think you should be so indignant about it, Artem. It's history, and I'm telling you what historians recorded. In our excavations, we have discovered similar victims. Do you want me to pass moral judgment on this ancient custom? Oh, never mind that now! Better look over there at the slaves!"

A group of slaves that had been working by the wagons, stopped what they were doing and began moving toward the big Scythian crowd. Artem had noticed earlier that slaves tended to gather in small groups of men only, without any women or children. Even from a considerable distance, he thought he could make out their agitation. Their movements were brisk and purposeful, not slow and languid as usual. But what Scythian would pay now any attention to the miserable slaves when his chieftain was being buried? But Artem gave his full attention to the slaves, as he knew that their agitation was not accidental, that they were uniting their forces in accordance with Ronis's plan. They had evidently been instructed to station themselves on one side of the crowd, away from the rocks at the foot of the cliffs. A short while later, most of them drifted to the place furthest from where Varkan's men would attack. Aha, now the maneuver became clear. Artem chuckled with satisfaction: Ronis's strategic thinking was surely that of an expert. The slaves not only placed themselves out of line of Varkan's

attack, but were positioned conveniently close to the grave around which all the priests and chiefs were gathered.

Varkan, to his great satisfaction, also observed the concentration of the slaves in one place. His keen eyes saw — as he had expected — that their short cloaks were not draped around them in the usual loose manner, and he knew they must be hiding weapons underneath. So Ronis and his aids had managed to distribute weapons among the slaves.

Varkan turned to Artem. Without saying anything he picked up a sharp stone and scratched a circle on the rock. On one side of it he scratched an arrow that pierced the circle. Then, he quickly scratched another arrow on the other side of the circle. He dropped the stone, put his hands on both sides of the circle, and brought them together as though squeezing the circle, looking at Artem.

“I understand. An excellent plan!” Artem said, nodding his head. “We’ll get them in a pincer movement and crush them! It’s all quite clear!”

Varkan’s face broke into a happy smile: he and the young stranger, his blood brother, could communicate quite well!

The melancholy song grew in volume: all the Scythians, gathered at the grave, must have joined the priests in the song. Dorbatay raised his hands into the air — a gesture to draw attention to himself and give a signal to the priests. Another party of priests went to Skolot’s wagon to get the things that were to be placed into the grave. The ritual chanting grew alternately louder and softer, but never stopped. Dorbatay stood motionless with his hand in the air, the wide sleeves of his garment hanging at his sides like the wings of an immense, sinister bird. The priests were busy carrying things that once belonged to Skolot, into the grave. Golden bowls and ornaments, various weapons, among them his short ceremonial sword with the gold hilt, were carefully put on the rich carpets around the body to make sure that should the dead chieftain reach out his hand, he would get what he wanted.

“What fabulous treasures are being put in there!” whispered the archeologist, fascinated.

“Oh yes, they’re laying it out especially for you,” Artem could not help quipping.

Dmitro Borisovich did not hear the remark as his attention was completely absorbed by a party of priests who were carrying victuals to the grave: big cauldrons of stew, entire carcasses of horses, pigs and sheep.

At last, the flow of objects being put into the grave ceased. There was no room left around the corpse; it was impossible to reach it across the vast quantity of treasures, weapons and food.

Varkan touched Artem on the shoulder and pointed to the crowd and beyond. All the male slaves must have been gathered there. Artem's heart was sent racing when he saw what he thought was the glint of a weapon.

The time of the attack must be very near now, he thought. When will Ronis give the signal? Everything seems ready. But where are Lida and Ivan Semenovitch? I don't see them anywhere!

Then another thought flashed through his mind: what if Ronis wasn't giving the signal because he knew the captive strangers were being kept some place where their lives would be threatened if there was an attempt to free them, and he was doing something about it now?

Suddenly Diana, lying on a flat rock to the right of Artem, gave a short, agitated bark. At almost the same time, Dmitro Borisovich grabbed him by the shoulder:

"Look, there they are!"

A score of priests were escorting Lida and Ivan Semenovitch to the grave. They walked unbound, and only the drawn weapons in the hands of the priests indicated that they were still captives. As he walked, Ivan Semenovitch glanced toward the cliffs above the heads of the priests. Did he know where his friends were waiting in an ambush? The geologist and Lida must have been informed of their friends' whereabouts because Lida also seemed to look in the same direction!

"They know, they surely know where we'll attack from!" Artem cried out cheerfully. "It must be Ronis's doing! He must have let them know somehow!"

Lida and Ivan Semenovitch stopped not far from the grave, but not too close, which was very fortunate. For some reason or other, the priests must have decided they were not to be allowed to enter the inner circle. Their position would make setting them free easier. At least that's what Artem thought.

Two hoary old warriors brought Skolot's black stallion up to the grave, leading him by the reins. The horse didn't want to be led into the hole and jerked from side to side. But the reins were held very fast. A priest with a distinguished and solemn appearance, approached the horse, dagger in hand, shouted something, probably an incantation, and plunged the dagger into the horse's graceful neck. A jet

of blood spurted out; the horse collapsed on its front knees, and a sound of choking came from his mouth.

The dagger was brought down several more times, and the black horse was stilled forever. Now Skolot could ride his favorite battle horse in the world of shadows.

Several priests came up to the wagon in which Skolot's aged widow was sitting. Shudders passed through her body; her withered hands were pressed to her face. She was carried to the grave more dead than alive.

"Villains! To kill a woman, an old woman!" Artem cried out.

"It's their custom," Dmitro Borisovich mumbled without conviction. His archeological enthusiasm of a few minutes ago had evaporated. He did not say he was sorry he had lost his camera. He would not have been able to photograph such a horrible scene anyway.

The priests brought the hapless woman to the place where the slaughtered horse was lying. As she had fainted from fear, the priests had to carry her. A priest with a rope in his hands followed them. He was the ritual executioner who was to strangle the widow of the chieftain so she would follow her husband to the other world and be a good wife to him there.

At that moment, Artem saw a thin column of smoke rising in the distance beyond the crowd, from among the *kibitkas*. The smoke rose higher and higher in the still air; to an uninitiated observer, it was just smoke from a small camp-fire.

"Ronis has given his signal! It's time to start, Varkan!"

But Artem was too late with his exclamation: Varkan had already given the signal to his men to go down the cliff. They descended the cliff nimbly and moved toward a cluster of trees that rose between the cliffs and the spot where the burial ceremony was taking place.

"Dmitro Borisovich! The signal's been given!" Artem cried out in great excitement. "I'm going down with Varkan's men!"

"What do you mean you're going down? Do you suppose I'm going to stay here?"

Saying this, the archeologist grabbed his battle axe and began his descent. The ungainly archeologist had a hard time keeping his balance on the way down; it was especially difficult as his eyes were still riveted on the burial scene.

But duty was above everything for him! His friends needed help, and he must do whatever he could to help them.

The desperate cry of a woman reached them from the distance, making them shiver and halt on their way: it was the last cry of Skolot's dying widow.

Artem and Dmitro Borisovich resumed their descent. Varkan's men had already reached the grove. Artem knew that in response to the signal, Varkan's men had to rush to the grove and wait there until the slaves engaged the enemy. This would give them a chance to get close to the enemy without being observed. Otherwise, they would be met by a hail of arrows and spears and the main attack would lose the advantage of surprise. To prevent this from happening, Ronis and his men had to engage the enemy and sustain battle for some time.

* * *

The grove, being much closer to the grave, allowed them to observe the Scythian crowd in much greater detail, but at the same time, being at ground level made it impossible for them to see what was going on by the grave. They could hear much better though. The monotonous, melancholy praying did not cease. Drowning all other sounds, it was occasionally pierced by the terrible heart-rending, high-pitched crying of a woman. It gave Artem the shivers to think that one of those cries could have come from Lida.

Varkan's men were lying on the ground, hiding behind the trees of the grove, waiting patiently. One careless move could reveal their presence, and the consequences would be serious.

The absolute silence in the grove contrasted sharply with the monotonous song and piercing cries of the women. Artem's heart was pounding wildly in his chest, threatening to burst. He kept telling himself that he must keep a cool head and relax, for the time of the decisive attack was near. But that was easier said than done!

The grove was still, filled with an extremely tense silence. No movement. Why wasn't Ronis signalling for the attack to begin?

Artem heard the heavy breathing of Dmitro Borisovich at his side. The archeologist's hands were tightly clasped

around the handle of the axe. Then Dmitro Borisovich said in a barely audible whisper right into Artem's ear:

"Where's your weapon, Artem? Are you ready?"

Without saying anything, Artem indicated his sword with his eyes. The archeologist nodded his head to show that he thought it was not enough. Then the young man patted one of his pockets as if to say: *don't worry, everything's all right; I have something else here, too.* His most important weapon was ready for use at any moment the situation called for it to be employed.

Loud shouts made Artem and Dmitro Borisovich hold their breath. Had the slaves launched their attack?

The shouting increased in volume and turned into a general din. The song stopped, drowned in a powerful wave of shouts, frantic and fierce. The slaves had started the uprising!

"Forward! Forward!" Artem shouted at the top of his voice.

"Forward!" Dmitro Borisovich joined him in the shout.

Getting to their feet at the same moment, they started running toward the grave. No matter how fast they tried to run, Varkan's men were faster, surging ahead of them. Artem could see only their backs appearing and disappearing among the trees. He kept racing after them, brandishing his sword and shouting:

"Forward! Forward!"

Dmitro Borisovich followed as fast as he could; he had completely forgotten that for the sake of archeology it would have been best to remain an impartial observer. In a moment, he turned with his usual impetuosity into an intrepid soldier. He also shouted something but Artem's mind did not register what it was.

In a few moments they were out of the grove, running full speed across the field. Then they slowed down somewhat as it took considerable effort to wade through the tall pink grass that seemed to be growing everywhere. Artem saw Varkan's men in front of him and heard the sounds of clashing weapons and shouts coming from somewhere very near. The gaping hole of the grave was just a short distance away. Would they be lucky enough to meet the enemy and get to the captives without having an arrow shot or spear hurled at them? Had Ronis and his men managed to engage the forces of the chiefs and priests so intensely they weren't paying any attention to anything else around?

Women and children, badly frightened by the sudden eruption of fighting, scattered in panic in all directions. As no one tried to attack them, they made way for Varkan's men who kept running at full speed. Every moment they were getting closer and closer to the grave. The closer the attackers got to it, the bigger their chances were of taking Dorbatay by surprise and preventing him from rallying his forces for resistance.

A moment later, Artem saw the attackers reach the enemy lines in front of the grave. The battle had begun. Amidst the clanging of swords, the enemy bellowed a terrible war-cry, trying to raise their own courage for a stiff resistance. The priests, armed with swords and daggers, began pouring out of the grave pit. Urged on by sharp commands from Dorbatay, they threw themselves into battle and checked the advance of the attackers. Swords were brought into play with added fierceness. Both sides were fighting on foot, with no horse soldiers to help. The greatest danger for the attackers had passed: the enemy had not had time to use their bows and meet the sudden thrust from the grove with a deadly hail of well-aimed arrows. It was from the very start hand-to-hand fighting in which the victory goes to the one who is stronger, quicker, more experienced; it was a battle fought with swords and axes, a battle at close quarters. Varkan's soldiers made their way to the grave without losing a single man!

Diana made her presence known to Artem by growling at his side. Diana! How could he have forgotten about her! Without even turning his head to her, he shouted:

"Forward, forrr-ward, Diana! To our friends! To Lida!"

The battle raged on. But where was Varkan? Aha, over there. He was fighting against three enemies who tried to overcome him by sheer number. He needed help!

But before Artem had time to rush to Varkan's aid, the foes, besetting him, were attacked by his bold warriors. Two of them were brought down, and the third was killed by Varkan's sword.

On all sides there was clanging of weapons, groaning of the wounded, and shouting of the combatants. Varkan's men kept pressing the enemy who were lacking in courage and intrepidity. Besides, the forest insurgents had a clear and noble goal; they knew perfectly well what they were fighting for and what they wanted to achieve. Hartak's soldiers and the priests felt very differently, taken by surprise, dumb-

founded by the sudden attack. And they began to retreat in spite of the frenzied incitements from the furious Dorbatay.

But where were Lida and Ivan Semenovich?

The main fighting now began moving sideways from the grave. The enemy, hard pressed and slowly falling back, opened the way to the grave on one of its flanks. It made Artem wonder: weren't the priests giving way much too easily? Did they have a reliable rearguard to fall back on? Had something gone wrong with the attack? Artem knew the slaves, burning with hatred, must be attacking the enemy from the other side, from the rear. Had something stopped or delayed them? But it was impossible to make out anything in the turmoil of battle, in the terrible din of voices and weapons. If only he knew where to look for Lida and Ivan Semenovich! Moments before the attack had begun, he had seen them standing close to the grave. Had they been dragged away by the retreating priests?

Artem rushed forward, arriving at the edge of the pit a few paces away from the spot where the ground sloped to provide easy access to it. Some distance away, he could see the wagons, among them the scarlet bier in which the body of Skolot had been carried... Lida and the geologist must be somewhere around... He must get there quickly!

Something buzzed past Artem's head... Then again... and again...

"Ouch!" Dmitro Borisovich cried out, as an arrow hit his helmeted head.

"Keep moving!" Artem shouted without stopping.

Behind one of the mounds of earth stood a group of priests with bows in their hands. Among them Artem glimpsed the red cloak of Dorbatay. Were Lida and the geologist somewhere there, too? The priests were slowly retreating into the pit. The next moment, Artem heard the ringing voice of Lida:

"Diana! Diana! Come here! Come here to me!"

Both Artem and Diana stopped dead in their tracks. The dog, trembling with impatience, her ears pricked, looked at Artem, as though asking for permission to run to the girl.

"Of course! Right away! Hurry! Run to Lida, Diana! To Lida! Quick!"

Diana would show the way! She would take Artem to Lida! Artem began shouting at the top of his voice after Diana. She spurted toward the priests, making giant leaps every few steps. "*Poskina! Poskina!*" he shouted.

He knew what he was doing. With these shouts he let the priests know that the dread *poskina* was on her way. It would strike fear into them even before the dog arrived! It would also, in all likelihood, scare them badly enough to make them think only of fleeing rather than of aiming their spears and arrows at the sacred animal.

Diana, meanwhile, had already reached the earth mound behind which the priests were hiding. So Lida and Ivan Semenovich must be there, too! Artem started running toward the mound.

"Forward!" Artem shouted again as he ran. Dmitro Borisovich followed. Now Artem was afraid of neither arrows nor spears; he knew that nothing could stop him! The Scythians would make a bolt for it at the sight of the dread *poskina*! Their fear of *poskina* would protect Artem!

As Artem ran, he saw Diana reach the priests who stood undecided, not daring to use their weapons against the dog. Diana, without stopping, leapt into the air and closed her jaws on the neck of one of the priests, knocking him to the ground. Then the dog turned and immediately attacked another priest. The priests, utterly terrified, turned and ran! Dorbatay was the first to go, getting far ahead of the routed priests. As he ran, stumbling on the hem of his long scarlet robe, he pulled it up every so often to allow for freer movement, but never stopped for a moment. A little behind him limped a man looking clownish in his sumptuous clothes: it was Hartak!

But Artem did not care to watch the scene: with immense joy he saw a graceful girl run out from behind the mound, her golden hair streaming in the air, her arms stretched toward Artem. Behind her ran Ivan Semenovich. The priests had left the captives behind as they scurried away in panic!

"Lida! Lida! My dear!"

A moment later Lida's arms were flung around Artem's neck and he was kissed hotly on the mouth.

"Artem, dear! My love!"

"Lida!"

"We must get back quickly to the rocks at the foot of cliffs! Quick!" Ivan Semenovich said in his cool and commanding voice. "We don't have a second to lose! Just turn around and have a look over there!"

From where they stood, they could see the battlefield in detail. The slaves were pressing the priests and Hartak's soldiers hard. With the slaves were many poor Scythian

hunters and herdsmen who had joined the uprising the way Varkan had predicted they would. But the enemy were retreating toward the grave — all other escape routes had been cut off — thus creating a dangerous situation for the explorers.

Artem assessed the situation in an instant: he and Dmitro Borisovich, in their haste to free their friends, had gotten too far from Varkan's men, and now the enemy, in their retreat, had cut them completely off from the friendly troops. Dorbatay and Hartak had stopped running away and were in the midst of their troops, moving slowly toward the outlanders. In a moment several arrows whizzed past the explorers. It was a lucky thing for them that the priests were not as good with their bows as the regular Scythian warriors were.

"Diana!" Ivan Semenovich shouted. "Come here!"

There was nothing else to do but retreat to the cliffs. If some of Varkan's men, or maybe even Varkan himself, saw the plight of the outlanders they would attack the enemy, forcing them to halt, and thus allowing them to escape before they were captured again. But the chance seemed rather slim: Varkan and his men were too much involved in bloody fighting to pay attention to anything around.

The explorers ran toward the cliffs. A group of priests and soldiers rushed after them in hot pursuit, probably with express orders to capture them again or simply kill them to get rid of them for good. The main body of the enemy forces was still engaged in bitter fighting with the slaves under the leadership of Ronis, but the group detached to capture the strangers was big enough to do the job without any difficulty. It was a grave situation in which the explorers stood no chances if they tried to resist.

Then something made Artem look back. Varkan and a dozen young soldiers appeared on the priests' right flank! The valorous Scythian had not forgotten about his blood brother and his friends, even in the heat of battle! When he saw them, he immediately realized that they were in danger. So he had fought his way through, and now he was running with some of his men, toward them to help.

"Varkan'll be here in a minute!" Artem cried out cheerfully. "We don't have to worry now!"

They stopped to wait for Varkan and his men. Holding his blood-stained sword in one hand, the Scythian gesticulated with the other, pointing to the cliffs; as he spoke he had

to stop a couple of times to gasp for air because he was still short of breath after the break-neck run:

“We must get there quickly! And wait until the enemy is broken from the rear! They are trying to resist. That’s why they’ve pulled together all their forces and are moving this way. But they still have no chance of winning.”

As soon as these words were translated, Ivan Semenovitch, Lida and Dmitro Borisovich started running toward the cliffs. Varkan, his men, and Artem covered their retreat. Artem was now in full control of himself: his dear friends had been saved; Varkan had joined them, everything was all right. Every few steps Artem stopped, as some of the Scythians in Varkan’s party did, and taking a good aim, shot an arrow at the enemy; he had picked up both the bow and the quiver full of arrows running through the battlefield some time earlier. His shots, no doubt, were not as effective as the archery of the Scythians, but the young man was eager to do something to help slow down the advance of the enemy.

Isn’t it a piece of bad luck! he thought as he released his arrows. *To find ourselves right in the path of retreat of these damned priests and Hartak’s soldiers... All right, they don’t have any other way to retreat... that’s why they are pursuing us... ah, good, here’s the grove at last! I’ll make my stand here, shoot a few more arrows and then dash into the trees!*

Artem again saw the scarlet cloak of Dorbatay among the priests; he also saw the pathetic figure of Hartak. He would have given a great deal to be able to hit any one of them with his arrow! But, alas, the distance was too great. Artem’s arms, despite his intensive training, were not as strong as those of the Scythian warriors; neither was his aim too sure.

“All right, just you wait, I’ll try all the same... maybe this time...” Artem whispered to himself as he stood behind a tree, taking aim. But no, it was too far! And the more experienced enemy soldiers had a much better chance of hitting Artem than Artem did of hitting his target!

“Don’t lag behind, Artem!” he heard Ivan Semenovitch calling to him in a loud and peremptory voice. There was nothing to be done but obey the order. He turned, and running among the trees in zigzags, soon joined the rest.

Varkan was speaking to his men in an evident fit of bad temper, gesticulating and pointing toward the grove from which the mass of enemy soldiers were moving toward the grove. They were retreating, that much was clear, but

retreating in the same general direction as the advance party dispatched by Dorbatay to capture the strangers. To oppose this formidable force was only a dozen of Varkan's soldiers and the outlanders, on whose combat strength Varkan could not rely very much. The fierce attack of the slaves caused the priests and Hartak's soldiers to flee from the grave toward the grove, thus creating an immediate and grave threat to the outlanders and Varkan's dozen, and forcing them to retreat. But the question was: where to?

Ivan Semenovich explained the situation to Artem:

"Varkan's men, the main body, that is, of his men, got too involved in fighting and allowed the priests to cut them off from their leader, Varkan. But then they should have attacked the retreating priests, which they apparently did not do, and now the situation is somewhat complicated."

That was evidently what Varkan was so annoyed about. He turned to the outlanders, making an eloquent gesture with his hand toward the cliffs, as if to say: *that's the place we must get to, and quick!* He did not have to insist as the situation was only too clear to everyone. Soon they were climbing the rocks to the flat ledge where they would be able to defend themselves, protected by the jagged rocks along its edge.

As they spread out among the boulders, Artem remembered the geologist's assessment of the situation, and said:

"All the same, the victory will be Ronis's and Varkan's! We'll have a chance yet to celebrate their victory with them! Take my word for it!"

"Don't be too rash with conclusions, Artem. It's not yet clear whether we'll be able to participate in any future celebrations..."

"And why is that?"

"Well, if the priests manage to capture us again... then, I don't think they are likely to spare us... And there's nowhere for us to escape from here, do you realize that?"

"But we can wait out here until Ronis comes to the rescue. Besides, there must be horses somewhere in the vicinity..."

"First, we must get to those horses, Artem."

A moment later, as though in support of the geologist's words, something began whizzing and buzzing and hissing menacingly in the air all around them. It was a wild cacophony of high-pitched sounds of various intensities, grating on the nerves and striking panic into everyone. Artem had never heard anything like it before. He saw Lida go pale

and Ivan Semenovitch grimace. The sudden eruption of these terrible sounds gave Dmitro Borisovich a bad start. But a moment later he managed to get a control of his fright; strange as it might seem, he was the first to do it, he of all people.

"Don't get up! Keep behind the rocks!" he shouted in a peremptory voice. "Hug the rocks! It's the famous whistling arrows of the Scythians!"

In a few seconds they crawled to the protection of the rocky crest that separated the flat ground from the slope at the foot of which the priests and Hartak's soldiers were now positioned. Artem and the rest had now understood what gave them such a bad fright: a hail of arrows descended on their hiding place; the enemy had used unusual arrows equipped with whistling devices that produced terrible sounds. The arrows flew over the crest, but due to the angle at which they had been shot, they could harm no one so far...

Dmitro Borisovich, snuggling in safety behind a huge rock, said:

"Yes, the famous whistling arrows of the Scythians! They were used to strike panic into the enemy. Dorbatay must have thought these arrows would frighten us, too... and I admit he was not wrong, the old rogue! It was really frightening!"

"It was frightening because it came so unexpectedly," Artem said trying to put on a bold face, and glancing at Lida whose face still retained the pallor of a bad fright. "You know, it was really sudden, this ghastly whizzing... It was like an attack on the nerves, really! But they are just arrows, nothing more. Besides, arrows shot from below will pass above us without doing any harm! And as they say, the devil is not so black as he is painted!"

"What you say is basically correct." Ivan Semenovitch said pensively. "But if they choose to shoot in a different manner..."

"How?" Artem asked.

"In artillery it's called 'plunging fire.' If you shoot at a certain angle, the missiles go rather steeply up but then they go down and can fall right behind a barrier... Do you follow me?"

"And they can use barbed arrows too," Dmitro Borisovich said as though thinking aloud. "I'm not sure whether the Scythians use them, but the possibility exists."

“Barbed arrows? And what’s that?” Artem asked rather tensely, feeling Lida squeeze his arm in fresh alarm. Artem wanted to say something else, to reassure the girl who had been considerably ruffled by what she had gone through, but he did not have time to.

Several arrows clanked and thudded, falling on the stones very close to where the explorers sat. Two arrows stuck vertically, trembling. A muffled groan reached their ears. Someone must have been wounded!

Turning around, Artem saw Varkan grab his left shoulder with the right hand. There was blood coming from under the hand and between the fingers.

“Varkan’s been hit!”

Varkan, pale in the face, pulled at the arrow but it did not come out. He gave it a stronger tug, but again with no effect. The arrow stayed in the flesh, and only the bulging muscles showed that he was applying great effort in trying to extricate it. Glancing at Dmitro Borisovich, Artem saw great anxiety in his face.

“It must be a barbed arrowhead,” the archeologist said in a whisper. “If it is what I think... it cannot be pulled out like this... only if you cut the flesh around it... The arrowhead must be taken out, otherwise it’ll oxidize... And what if it’s poisoned?”

Varkan, biting his lips, gave one last pull and then abandoned his attempts. One of his men crawled up to him. He cut off the shaft and bandaged the wound tightly, using a belt to secure the bandage. Then he said something to Varkan who silently nodded his head, his eyes closed.

Artem did not try to reassure Varkan; he did not think the Scythian needed it. The arrows had meanwhile stopped falling. Only occasional arrows still whizzed past.

“Dorbatay must be up to something else,” Ivan Semenovich said. “He must be planning another attack. With arrows, or sending his soldiers up? Artem, where’s the bag we found and smuggled out to you in the forest?”

The two bags that Varkan had brought Artem soon after their escape to the forest, did not contain the dynamite charges, so sometime later, after Artem had managed to repel the sudden attack in the forest with the primers, he had asked Varkan and Ronis to try to find the other two. The slaves found them among the things, stored away after the death of Skolot, and passed them on to Varkan’s men, who, in turn, delivered them to Artem. Much to his joy, he

discovered that nothing had been taken out, probably out of fear of meddling with things belonging to the foreign magicians. Artem took the trouble of carrying one bag, into which he put their most prized possessions, with him from the camp to the place in the rocks from which the final attack was launched. But when they saw Ronis's signal and started running down to the grove, Artem had left the bag behind. In the heat of battle and retreat he had forgotten about it, and now, when Ivan Semenovitch mentioned it, he looked around in panic, thinking he had lost it. As he looked around, feverishly trying to remember where he had left it he was very much relieved to find it sitting untouched where it had been put a few hours ago. He rushed to it and squatted beside it, opening it. He did not see a head in the leather helmet emerging noiselessly above the crest of the rocks. The entire Scythian soon emerged, and holding onto the rocks, took a quick look around. Artem, still oblivious of the enemy's presence, was the closest to him. The Scythian raised his spear and took aim. It all happened within a second.

"Artem!" Dmitro Borisovich suddenly cried out in alarm when he saw a Scythian with the raised spear at the crest. Artem looked up and was petrified with horror; just a few steps away, he saw an enemy soldier aiming at him with a spear.

That's it, a thought flashed through his mind.

But at the same time, he saw someone leaping right in front of him. It was Varkan! The young Scythian had also noticed the danger to his blood brother. In a lightning movement, he had leapt between Artem and the enemy soldier. Had his intention been to tackle the enemy with his bare hands? The explorers were never to learn the answer.

The soldier hurled his weapon. It described a curve in the air — Artem saw it coming. But Varkan stood in the way of the sharp spear that was intended to bring death to Artem. With a loud groan, Varkan sagged to the ground right in front of the young man. A moment later Dmitro Borisovich who had rushed up to the intruder, brought down his heavy axe on the head in the leather helmet; the soldier did not have time to get away. Flinging up his hands, he went tumbling down the slope.

No one cared to see what happened to the enemy soldier as everybody rushed to Varkan. Varkan, their courageous, loyal friend was lying on the ground with a spear sticking

out of his chest! The spear the enemy had intended for Artem! Blood was pouring from the wound.

“Varkan, Varkan, why did you do it?” muttered Artem, completely stunned. He bent low over the man who had just saved his life. Pink froth appeared on Varkan’s lips — a sure sign that the spear had pierced his lung. Varkan still found enough strength to smile; his hand groped for Artem’s trembling hand and gave it a squeeze, a very light one, his exceptional strength suddenly gone.

Tears welled in Artem’s eyes. He must help Varkan, he must... But how? Artem then heard the geologist’s doleful voice:

“By the looks of it, his lung has been pierced... We don’t have any means of helping him... Nothing can be done...”

The shouts of the priests and enemy soldiers who were trying to boost each others’ spirits for a decisive attack came from below. The attack was sure to come, as these rocks were the only place the enemy could retreat to. From their vantage point, the explorers and Varkan’s men could see that the slaves and the warriors of Varkan’s main force had reunited and pushed the enemy as far as the grove. There was almost no doubt that the enemy would be crushed soon. But what if they managed to capture this position in the rocks before it happened? There were too many of them, and a handful of Varkan’s men and the four strangers would not be able to hold them back for any significant time!

Then, Dorbatay’s rasping voice could be heard, giving some orders. But what did he say?

Varkan’s men were now positioned along the crest, hiding behind the rocks so they could not be hit by arrows. Due to the steep slope and the ruggedness of the rocks, it was possible to reach the ledge only one at a time, and those of the enemy who did get there would be easily dealt with by the defenders. Several of the enemy soldiers had already tried it, and were now sprawled on the ground, having been flung down, their heads bashed in. The rest had not yet worked up enough courage to ascend the slope.

Ivan Semenovich said to Artem in an undertone:

“You may safely assume that we will not use the horses.”

“And why is that?”

“Hartak’s soldiers have managed to get to them by some roundabout path. I didn’t see them do it, but I see them there now. Look, the enemy’s on that side, too.”

Now their encirclement was complete; they were in a trap. In front and on all the sides, they were besieged by the enemy. Behind them rose the vertical cliffs. The enemy, in turn, were also trapped, pressed to the foot of the rocks by the insurgents with no available routes of retreat except uphill. This made the situation especially grave for the explorers, as the enemy, even should they want to lift the siege, had nowhere to go. Besides, Dorbatay surely realized the advantages of the position on the rock ledge where his forces, after capturing it from the strangers, could hold out, with excellent chances of being able to defend themselves successfully for quite a long time against the insurgents.

Lida supported Varkan's head; the courageous Scythian's life was oozing away. His eyes were half-closed, he breathed heavily, in gasps. No words came from him.

"Varkan, Varkan, you shouldn't have done it..."

The Scythian heard the sympathetic voice of his blood brother. His hand again touched Artem's hand lightly. He did not have strength any longer for a smile, only the shade of it appeared on his deathly-pale face.

His eyes sought out Artem's.

"I'm here with you, Varkan, here!"

Artem took Varkan's hand in his. There were no words to express his grief; he helplessly and woefully blinked the tears from his eyes. Artem squeezed out a few words:

"Varkan, my dear, great, wonderful friend..."

Varkan groaned, his hand unsteadily going to his head. He opened his eyes. There was a flicker of recognition when he saw Lida bent low over him. She said, her voice full of grief:

"Varkan, are you better?"

Gathering what little strength there was left in him, he moved his eyes from one of his friends to another: Dmitro Borisovich still holding his battle-axe in his hands; Ivan Semenovich, intently surveying the steep slope; Artem who never took his anxious, compassionate eyes off him, trying, it seemed, to pass through this intense gaze of great sympathy some strength and vital force which his dying blood brother needed so badly. This time Varkan managed a real smile of relief. All his friends were at his side. Hardly moving his lips, he whispered in Greek, barely audibly:

"I'm glad... glad that you... that all of you..."

He could speak no more. His head rolled to the side. The last colors of life were gone from his face, and some pink

froth again appeared on his lips. His chest heaved spasmodically — it was the last breath the Scythian ever took. A moment later he was dead. His limp body was as motionless as the quiver lying by his side.

Lida buried her face in her hands; hot tears ran between her fingers. She wept, without feeling shame for her tears or trying to conceal them; she was weeping over their dead friend, their true, noble and devoted friend. This wonderful man had been a friend to all of them. He had sacrificed himself to save Artem's life, and he would have done so for anyone of them! Dmitro Borisovich turned away, wiping his tears. Artem could not make himself look at the body of the dead Scythian. He kept muttering to himself:

"Now... I can't... I mustn't... I must control myself... the enemy can attack any minute... I have to control myself..."

He felt as though a heavy hand had grabbed his heart; hot waves of anguish passed through him; he had to keep his eyes tightly shut to force back the tears. And he kept telling himself:

"I must control myself... Varkan, intrepid warrior, wonderful friend, had died... but there's nothing I can do about it..."

At last, Artem moved slowly away from the stiff body of his friend and blood brother. Then he turned and looked once again at Varkan's bloodless but now tranquil face.

"Farewell, Varkan," he said mournfully, but in a steady voice. "Farewell, my friend!"

A spear whizzed through the air and clanged against the rock, falling between Artem and Varkan's body. The enemy had definitely resolved upon a final attack. So, the insurgents must still be pressing them hard, so they had to try to capture the advantageous position on the ledge to defend themselves more successfully. But whatever the reason, the enemy were about to launch an attack that had to be dealt with! Two more spears struck the rock close to one another, but luckily without hurting anyone.

Varkan's men, who until now had kept their defensive positions along the crest, began to show signs of restlessness. They glanced at the motionless body of their leader, talking in low voices. Then, they picked up their weapons and began to run, stooping low, toward the place where the horses, before they had been besieged by the enemy, had been tethered. One of the Scythians stopped, turned to the outlanders, and beckoned for them to follow.

Artem looked after the retreating Scythians undecided:

wouldn't it be better to try to escape while there still was some chance of succeeding? But Ivan Semenovitch put his hand reassuringly on Artem's shoulder.

"I don't think there's any point in it," he said, having guessed what the younger man was thinking about. "Suppose even, that we manage to escape from here — which is extremely unlikely — and don't forget that the horses must have been seized by the priests. What then? The moment we leave, this place will be captured by the enemy. It will be almost an impregnable stronghold against the insurgents. Do we have a moral right to let that happen?"

"Of course not! It would be treachery on our part!" Artem said hotly. "Besides if we do somehow manage to escape, what really we would do next? Hide in the forest? Varkan is no longer with us..."

"So," Ivan Semenovitch continued, "we must hold this position for some time more, thus giving the insurgents time to crush the enemy. It's our moral duty before... our courageous dead friend."

"Yes, you are right, Ivan Semenovitch," Artem replied with conviction.

"The insurgents have already chased the enemy almost to the foot of the cliff. The time has come for us to help our friends who made it possible for us to escape from the hands of Dorbatay and Hartak. Besides, by helping them, we'll help ourselves regain complete freedom."

The geologist observed the situation on the battlefield with his keen eyes:

"I believe the final assault is going to begin any minute now. The enemy does not seem to have any options," Ivan Semenovitch said emphatically, picking up the bag. "There are only two points from which they can launch their attack, here and here," he added pointing down at the two places where ascent was possible. "I'll take care of this spot, and you take the other one. Good. Now, my dear friend, let's have a smoke in these last quiet moments. But make sure you have at least one cigarette left! The time has come to use our only weapon!"



the priests storm the ledge and the explorers use their only weapon; Dorbatay dies but the explorers's weapon is turned against them; a chance explosion opens up the mountain and the explorers find themselves in a cave; Ivan Semenovitch supplies explanations and a Scythian face is found carved on the wall; the treasure of Pronis is discovered

The ledge on which the explorers were hiding was about fifteen meters in length. The explorers moved to one end of the ledge which was isolated from the rest of it by huge rocks, forming a sort of pocket, separated from the outside by the crest with an unscalable crag at the back of it. At the foot of declivity behind the crest swarmed the enemy.

By now the only possible way of escape — the one Artem had been tempted to use — had been cut off by the enemy who had also captured the horses on which Varkan's group had arrived at their place of ambush. The priests must have seized those men from Varkan's party who had tried to escape by that route, too. But as they were nowhere to be seen, there was no way of knowing for sure.

The priests still held back their attack, probably screwing up courage or regrouping their forces. Whatever the reason for the delay, it played into the explorers' hands. They watched anxiously, hidden among the rocks, the changes of fortune in the battle, hoping that the enemy's resistance would at last be broken. But what they saw did not exactly comply with their wishes.

The battle was far from entering its final stage. Earlier, it had seemed that the main forces of the enemy had been on the verge of a crushing defeat. But the situation had

changed! The soldiers of Varkan's group, in the heat of battle, must have moved further than they had been expected to, letting a considerable enemy force slip out from the encirclement. When Varkan's soldiers realized what had happened and begun to rearrange their battle formation, the latter had taken heart, regrouped their own forces, and retreated, in an orderly manner, first to Skolot's grave, then to the grove, and then further towards the crags. The suddenness of the attack, in which Ronis had invested so much hope, had not brought the expected results!

It was easy to see from the ledge how fiercely the enemy were defending themselves. They were putting all their strength into the struggle as they had evidently realized they would not be spared if they lost. In spite of this, they were still giving ground before the great fury of the insurgents who stopped fighting only when they died or when their hands and arms were so covered with wounds they could move them no longer. It was a terrible, life or death encounter. It was only natural in such a situation for Dorbatay and Hartak and their entourage to keep away from the thick of the battle and stay at a relatively safe distance by the crags with about a hundred priests and soldiers, waiting and hoping for the successful outcome of the battle. But their hopes were diminishing by the minute as the insurgents never slackened their pressure, making the enemy fall back and retreat toward the crags.

"It looks as though, in spite of their indecisiveness, the priests will storm the ledge," Ivan Semenovitch said, his voice full of apprehension. "The old soothsayer and his henchmen must consider us a lesser menace at the moment than the insurgents who will cut their throats as soon as they lay their hands on them. All right, get ready, Artem! Diana, quiet! Lie down!"

The dog was lying still, her head resting on her front legs, even without being told to do so. She occasionally looked inquisitively at her master. Her eyes were in perpetual motion as she listened to the disquieting sounds of the battle coming from afar and to the nearer sounds of the priests' voices coming from the foot of the slope. Every so often, a shudder passed through her body: her muscles were tensed to launch her to the defense of her masters!

"When they get to the top of the crest, they won't see us here," Artem said. "We'll be safe for a couple of minutes behind these rocks. So, maybe we should let them get as

near as possible. What do you say, Ivan Semenovich? Then we can wreak real havoc upon them..."

"Hush," the geologist interrupted him. "Shhh!"

He was looking at the rocks toward which Artem had just pointed. There was the top of a Scythian helmet, slowly emerging from behind a rock. It looked as though someone wanted to peek in but couldn't make up his mind.

Dmitro Borisovich grabbed his battle-axe. But Ivan Semenovich stopped him.

"First of all, it's just a helmet. It seems there's no head in it. Too much trouble striking an empty helmet. Second, you'll be unnecessarily exposing yourself to arrows and reveal our position besides. Ah, yes, it is for sure a ruse, a trick that has been used throughout the ages — a helmet or hat, supported on a stick, raised for the enemy to see. They just want to find out whether we're on guard. All right, let them think we haven't seen anything, because Artem is right — we should let them come nearer. Artem, my friend, are you ready?"

Artem, pointing to the dynamite charges laid out in front of him with short pieces of safety fuse attached to them, said: "Everything's ready, Ivan Semenovich!"

"Good! But be carefull with that cigarette of yours now! Make sure it doesn't go out and let us down."

"Yes, sir!"

The helmet that had been swaying strangely, suddenly disappeared behind the rocks, never to appear again.

"Our guess was correct," Ivan Semenovich said with a chuckle. "Now Dorbatay is convinced that we are not attentive enough, and in all likelihood that place will be chosen for storming. Excellent!"

"I wish the insurgents would advance faster!" Artem said with a sigh.

"I don't think it would improve our situation any. I think it would make it even more hazardous, because then we would have to face the soldiers from the enemy's main force, hot from battle, angry at their defeat, and much more experienced in fighting than the priests."

"Well, you have a point," Artem admitted reluctantly.

The hubbub at the foot of the slope suddenly died down. Instead, came an ominous, menacing silence which made it possible to hear the sounds of the battle raging in the distance; the clanging of metal and shouts of the combatants. The geologist's eyes were riveted to the spot at which the

helmet had been pushed into view several minutes ago. His brows puckered with tension from waiting; he watched.

"They've fallen silent down there," he said pensively. "So, I believe, the attack is about to be launched. Attention, Artem! But don't light the fuse before I give the command!"

Artem was patiently waiting, keeping his eyes riveted to the crest. Any minute they could expect a new shower of whistling or barbed arrows, or spears to fall on them. Artem glanced back at the motionless body of his blood brother, the faithful Varkan. A barbed arrow, and then a spear... Artem heaved a sigh. But he had to keep his attention focused on the places where the enemy was likely to appear from. He realized that his timing had to be absolutely perfect: not a minute too soon or a minute too late... The priests would be well prepared for the assault... Neither Dorbatay nor Hartak relished the possibility of finding themselves in the thick of the battle that was inexorably approaching the crags... So the only way of escape for them was upward, to the ledge, which had yet to be captured from its defenders... Did the enemy know that there were only four of them, the four strangers with none of Varkan's men to help? In any case, Dorbatay and his priests were surely prepared to push themselves to the limit in their attempt to capture the ledge, killing whoever dared to resist.

Suddenly Ivan Semenovitch made a warning gesture:

"Attention! Here they are! But act on command, Artem!"

Several helmets appeared simultaneously from behind the rocks. A moment later, the fierce bearded faces of the priests came into view. The priests cautiously looked around, their strong hands firmly gripping the stones. The priests were ready either to jump in and attack the defenders, or, in case of grave danger, to hide behind the rocks.

Diana began growling, but the geologist's strong hand pressed her head to the ground, and she was silenced; only her intelligent eyes were moving, watching the enemy.

The priests carefully scanned the ledge and were in no hurry to jump in. There was no one in sight except for the body of Varkan. The explorers were well hidden from view behind the rocks in their corner of the ledge.

Then one of the priests, having probably decided there was no immediate danger, turned back and said something to the rest of his party. A dozen helmeted priests hoisted themselves up onto the rocks. In addition to their usual short swords and wide daggers, they were also equipped with

bows and quivers full of arrows. They stood at the very edge of the slope, not yet daring to go any further.

Suddenly, Dorbatay's creaking, imperative voice could be heard from below. From the tone of his voice it could be surmised that he was inquiring about something. The priest who had signalled his comrades to come up a minute earlier, replied. His voice sounded reassuring and brought quite unexpected results.

In a few seconds the head of Dorbatay himself emerged slowly from behind rocks. As he was helped onto a flat rock, Dorbatay carefully scanned the ledge the way the priests had done before him. His cold and cruel eyes seemed to touch every stone, rock or prominence.

Artem grew absolutely still, afraid even to breathe. It seemed to him that Dorbatay's searching gaze lingered over their hiding place for much too long before it moved further. But he could not see through the stone, he absolutely could not! And the crack in the rock Artem was peeking through was much too narrow to reveal their presence. And yet, Artem could not get rid of the impression that Dorbatay had somehow seen him and his friends... It felt like just the right time to throw a charge at him!

"I'm itching to do away with him right now," Artem moved his lips in an almost soundless whisper, turning to Ivan Semenovitch. "I haven't had time to tell you... that Varkan gave an oath of vengeance... to kill Dorbatay..."

"Shhh!" the geologist stopped him sharply.

Dorbatay was still examining the rocks, especially the ones behind which the explorers were hiding. Suddenly his face puckered in a grimace of wicked triumph. He seemed to have come to a decision. Artem, hardly believing his eyes, saw the old soothsayer point with his sinewy hand in their direction. It was an extremely unexpected gesture as it was quite impossible to see the strangers from the spot where the soothsayer was standing! And yet he was pointing to their hiding place as though he had in fact seen through the stone!

Whatever made the soothsayer point in that direction, the priests, obedient to his commands, began moving toward the explorers' corner of the ledge, their swords drawn and arrows taut on the bows. Artem had the odd feeling of being able to see his own body go stiff with tension, only his chest heaving as he breathed. Now, now! How was his cigarette? Good, still burning!

But why wasn't Ivan Semenovitch giving the signal? The priests were no more than five or six meters away!

"Go ahead, Artem!"

It took him only a moment to put the cigarette to the fuse. It immediately started burning, hissing and dropping sparks. Artem hurled the charge over the barrier of rocks.

When it was still in the air, he saw that he had thrown it with too much force. The charge sailed over the priests' heads and fell somewhere behind them over the ledge.

"Another one!"

One more dynamite charge flew into the air, trailing smoke. This time it came down right in front of the three nearest priests. They froze, staring in fear at this smoking object, vomiting forth sparks. Its hissing reminded them of a small angry animal.

"Hit the deck, Artem!" Ivan Semenovitch bellowed when he saw his friends hoisting themselves from the rocks to see better. "Down, can't you understand!"

Dorbatay cried out something in alarm: he must have recognized the hissing sound that brought to mind the memory of his comeuppance at the sacred altar. Artem saw him jump backward, tripping as he did so on his long robe. But it was too late. The terrible explosion shook the rocks, sending up a cloud of black smoke. One of the priests was flung high into the air by the blast, flailing his arms wildly. A huge boulder crushed into the ledge, exploding into small lethal pieces. A hail of stones knocked the priests down. A moment later another explosion shook the ground: it was the first charge thrown by Artem; it went off a little later than the second one, probably because its fuse was longer.

A second cloud of smoke began slowly rising above the ledge of rocks. Artem had a glimpse of a human figure who seemed to be riding spreadeagle on top of the black smoky mushroom. The figure in the scarlet cloak turned upside down. There was something painfully familiar in this figure. The sight made Artem shudder. Was it?.. Yes, it was Dorbatay. The old soothsayer did not have time to escape, and the second blast hurled his corpse back toward the ledge.

The broken body of the soothsayer began falling down, still turning. The long white gown and the chimerical red cloak fluttered around him, and at that moment he looked like an ominous bird with wings spread. Dorbatay was falling in an avalanche of stones... The punishment of his

dread gods had been meted out to him at last... Finally, his body crashed into the rocks and lay still with stone falling on and around him.

Ivan Semenovitch shouted a command:

"Another charge, Artem! Over there, to the left!"

"Artem, the priests! Further to the left!" Lida cried out, too.

In fact, several more helmeted heads appeared above the crest. Brandishing their swords and keeping their bows drawn, the enemy poured into the ledge, scrambling over the rocks like insects. In a few seconds they would reach the explorers...

But there was enough time for Artem to set fire to the fuses of two charges and throw them, one right after the other, at the enemy. Up went the charges over the wall of rocks, trailing smoke, and a moment later they landed among the attackers.

"Now, you're going to get it!" Artem whispered, his heart beating wildly.

The charges lay on the ground, spewing smoke. The priests recoiled, but then an unexpected thing happened, something the explorers would never think was possible: one of the priests bent forward quickly, snatched one of the charges from the ground, straightened up, and with a wide sweep of his arm, hurled it back behind the rock barrier separating the explorers' hiding place from the rest of the ledge!

"Look!" Lida screamed.

The explorers' weapon had been turned against them! Petrified with terror, they watched the same priest stoop over to pick up the other charge. But this time, he did not manage to throw it back at the strangers — the charge went off, flashing red flames, shaking the mountain and sending pieces of rocks and priests flying down the slope in a cloud of black smoke...

But what happened to the charge that had been thrown back at the strangers by the priest?

* * *

They saw the charge fly over their heads, as the priest had thrown it too hard. It fell somewhere behind them among the rocks. They could not see the place where it landed; only a thin wisp of smoke indicated its location. A moment

later it exploded thunderously in what seemed a more powerful explosion than all the previous ones.

And lo and behold: the crags wavered and...

Eyes wide with horror, the explorers gaped at the terrible change the explosion had wrought in the mountain: immense masses of rock, now unbalanced, were about to collapse and bury them under thousands of tons of stone.

Then the rocks began to fall! First they wavered, then moved slowly as though sliding apart, and then suddenly, they crashed down, falling onto the ledge a short distance from the explorers, and breaking into thousands of pieces, showering them with stones.

The explosion not only disturbed the balance of the rocks on the face of the mountain, it caused some shifting of the stone below the surface.

As the explorers watched in awe, a crack opened in the face of the cliff. The cliff seemed to have been cleft in two by a deep black gap that widened before their very eyes. The two huge rocks that flanked the gap on either side began moving inwards as though pushed by an invisible gigantic hand; as their tops met, the immense slabs stopped, keeping all other rocks from sliding down. The gap looked very much like the mouth of a cave.

Ivan Semenovitch looked around, and to his great consternation and dismay, he heard the battle cry of the priests. Apparently they had not been intimidated by the terrible explosions and falling rocks. It could only mean that the priests figured it was better to risk storming the ledge and to face all the hazards awaiting them there, both natural and supernatural, than to fall into the hands of the insurgents burning with vengeance. The explorers were virtually defenseless now — Artem had only one charge left; and there was no one to help them. By the time Ronis's men got here, everything would be over... So, there was no option left but...

"My friends!" Ivan Semenovitch shouted. "Follow me! Follow me!"

And he rushed to the gap — whatever awaited them there in the bowels of the mountain was better than the prospect of being seized by the bloodthirsty priests, seething with rage.

It seemed to Artem as he started to run that the great slabs flanking the gap were tottering. He stopped for a moment to get a better look. Yes, they were definitely sliding!

There was nothing else to do but hope they would not collapse for another minute, but, of course, they could give way under the immense weight of the other rocks pressing on them from above, any moment, either squashing the explorers or closing the gap.

"Quickly! Quickly! The rocks can fall in any moment!" Ivan Semenovitch shouted.

But his friends hardly needed any urging. Dmitro Borisovich and Lida ran right behind the geologist, with Artem who carried the bag and a spear, bringing up the rear, Diana at his side. They raced as fast as their legs would carry them, jumping over big pieces of rock. Quickly!

A moment later they were inside the gap; they had disappeared into the darkness as though they had been swallowed up by it. They were not a moment too soon, as another party of priests had scrambled onto the ledge. Howling wildly and brandishing their weapons in a frenzy, they rushed after the strangers. But the latter had already made it through the gap into what turned out to be a cave. But which way should they go in this pitch-black darkness? The only source of light was the gap through which they had come in. And the enemy would be there in a few seconds!

Ivan Semenovitch was the first to stop as he ran smack into a stone wall, hurting his leg. It was impossible, quite impossible to move quickly in this utter darkness which seemed especially impenetrable after the light outside, subdued though it was. And the enemy would surely find some way of locating the explorers in the limited space of the cave!

Still out of breath after running, Ivan Semenovitch said between gasps:

"Artem... give me... give me... the charges..."

"But I have only one left, Ivan Semenovitch!"

"All right... give it to me... And all of you... move on... further away from the gap... I'll stay behind for a while."

"But..." Artem began to object, but was silenced by the angry and peremptory voice of the geologist who snapped:

"Move on, I tell you! None of your lip! Move on!"

He snatched the charge from Artem's hands, turned, and ran back toward the gap through which the voices of their pursuers could be already heard. Ivan Semenovitch stopped, lit a match and put it to the fuse. As it began to smoke, the geologist looked back, but his friends were not to be seen in the blackness of the cave. Then, with a wide sweep

of his arm, he cast the charge into the gap. He followed it with his eyes as it flew — a little black thing with a tiny dot of fire at its end, then he turned and ran to catch up with his friends.

A few moments later the blast wave hit him in the back, almost knocking him down. He ran on under the impetus, stumbling against stones, and at last he tripped on a rock and fell.

The continuous thunder of crashing rocks filled the cave. The light that filtered through the gap, disappeared as the two gigantic stone slabs fell in the swirling billows of black smoke and dust; the gap was completely sealed with rocks falling from above, now that the slabs holding them back and supporting them were gone. A huge pile of stones grew at the place where only a short while ago, there had been a gaping crack.

The cave the explorers had found themselves in, was securely cut off the Scythian world. There was no more danger of being attacked by the priests. The deafening noise of the falling rocks subsided; only the reverberating echo could still be heard dying away, and an occasional stone clacking as it rolled down.

Soon everything grew absolutely still; not a sound could be heard from the outside either. An impenetrable darkness enveloped Ivan Semenovitch.

He scrambled to his feet, wiped the sweat from his brow, and heaved a sigh of relief. But which way was he to go to join his friends?

It was quite futile to try to see anything in the darkness — he could not see his hand in front of his face. Where were his friends? Hopefully they were not hurt in the explosion or in the subsequent avalanche of rocks and stones.

Suddenly a bright white flame sprung up somewhere in the distance. It must be a miner's lamp! Ivan Semenovitch remembered Artem boasting he had managed to preserve one lamp through all their tribulations. So, if he still had it in the bag Ivan Semenovitch had seen him running with, he must have lit it, good boy!

The light made it possible to see some of the surrounding rocks. Even the first look revealed they were not just the usual jagged pieces of stone — they were conical-shaped stalagmites rising from the floor of the cave. And yes, some

gigantic stalactites could be discerned hanging from above! Another stalactite cavern? Or was it, by any chance, the same one they had come through before their fantastic adventures had begun?

Ivan Semenovitch gazed about, but it was impossible to tell whether it was the same cave. In any case, it was a gigantic cavern, too, judging by what he could see in the feeble light. Great boulders and pieces of rock were piled at the place where the gap had been.

"Ivan Semenovitch!" he heard Artem calling him. "Ivan Semenovitch! Do you hear me? Are you all right? Where are you? Answer me!"

"I'm here! I can hear you, and I can see the light too," he called back. "You don't have to worry. I'll join you in a minute."

And the geologist smiled in the darkness, his first full smile of relief in a long time, and began walking towards the light of the lamp, climbing over rocks, going around the stalagmites; they were exactly like the ones they had seen in the other cave.

Diana almost swept him off his feet as she shot out from the darkness, jumping at him and licking his face.

"All right, all right, enough of that," he said disentangling himself from the dog.

As the geologist came closer he saw Artem holding the lamp high in the air: it was tied to the spear — that was why the light reached so far. Now Artem lowered it as there was no need to light the way for the geologist.

Dmitro Borisovich looked very picturesque indeed! With a Scythian helmet on, he was holding his battle-axe in the hands. Good, no one was hurt, everybody was here. But why did they look so despondent, except, of course, for the ever-cheerful Diana?

"What's wrong, my friends?" the geologist said. "Aren't you happy we have escaped? We've left all the dangers behind — now the priests won't be able to do us any harm, even with their arrows!"

His attempt at a joke did not make any impression on his friends. They looked as dejected as before.

"All right, what's the matter?" he said rather sharply. "What has come over you? We have escaped certain death; you should be mad with joy! But you look as though... Dmitro Borisovich, tell me, what's the matter?"

The archeologist shrugged his shoulders:

"Yes, we've escaped from the priests, that's true. But what are we going to do next, Ivan Semenovich?"

"What do you mean, what are we going to do next?"

"Well, aren't we sort of sealed off in some cave?" Artem cut in. "We don't know where to go... if there is anywhere to go."

"I don't follow you, Artem," Ivan Semenovich said with genuine surprise. "We've been extraordinarily lucky so far! We had just enough dynamite to delay the attack and then open and close a gap in the crags. We even have a lamp, a thing which none of us thought of carrying around, except you, Artem. If one considers what we've been through, it's almost a miracle! And you whine and say 'sealed off,' 'nowhere to go'! We have not even started looking for the way out!"

Dmitro Borisovich said hesitantly, glancing inquiringly at the geologist:

"Yes... to look for the way out... But which direction are we to choose? It's impossible to decide which way to go. We don't know anything about this cavern. So where do we go from here? We can go right or left, this way or that way with the same little chance of hitting on the egress... Or rather with no chance, if you want."

Quite unexpectedly Ivan Semenovich burst out laughing, his laughter reverberating among the stalagmites.

"My good friends, I don't recognize you! Is it really you? What's come over you?" he said after his laughter subsided. "Lida, are you also part of this dejected company? Now, try to remember what we talked about more than once during that tedious funeral journey?"

Lida looked at the man with uncertainty: there were so many subjects they had touched upon!

"Too bad, too bad!" he said with a mock reproach. "And I thought it had made a profound impression on you then. Ah, well, never mind. You'll soon see what I mean. Now, cheer up! It's a shame to sulk after we've had such a narrow escape! We're on our way home, and you look so dismayed! We're as good as back on the surface, in our world..."

"I think it'd be more correct to say that we're still very much under the surface, in an unexplored cavern," Dmitro Borisovich said gloomily.

"All right," the geologist said with a smile. "If you can't

figure out why I'm sure we'll soon be on our way home, I'll explain it. Sit down and listen."

He was the first to sit down on a boulder; then he pulled out his notebook that had only a few pages left.

"You see, my book worked so hard it lost a lot of weight," he said making another attempt at a joke. "Lida maintained such a lively correspondence with Artem... But there're still some pages left. It'll be enough."

He opened the notebook to a page with a technical drawing that looked like a diagram. His friends stood around him, craning their necks to see it.

"Look at this... Still, I'm surprised at the change in you, Artem! With such an excellent mind as yours — and to miss such an obvious thing! Didn't I teach to keep your sense of direction in any situation? All right, tell me, did you notice the direction the Scythians took at the start of their funeral journey?"

"They headed west," Artem readily replied.

"Did they keep going west?"

"No, they didn't. They ended up heading north."

"Good. So you did notice the change of direction, didn't you? I'm glad. But why didn't you draw the necessary conclusions from it? Try to do so now."

Artem's mind was set working feverishly while his eyes were riveted on the plan before him. What was the catch? But it was Lida who was the first with the answer:

"I remember! You talked about the procession moving in a curve along the cliffs!"

"That's correct, Lida. But which necessary conclusions do we have to draw from this?"

Now Lida fell to thinking. What conclusions, really?

"Yes, the procession kept moving along the cliffs," the geologist said. "Good. But it swerved to the right as it moved, changing direction from west to north and then slowly to east, and finally south. That's what I have here in my plan. Look."

The line, tracing schematically the progress of the procession, made almost a complete circle on the paper.

"You noticed the change of direction, Artem, but the most important thing you seem to have missed: the procession eventually turned south," Ivan Semenovitch said. "You haven't guessed what I'm driving at yet, Artem? Think harder!"

Then, in a flash, everything became clear to Artem, and

the strange drawing revealed its meaning. Of course! The procession had made almost a complete circle and arrived at...

"Ivan Semenovitch!" he cried out. "Ivan Semenovitch! I know! It's so simple I'm ashamed of myself for not guessing earlier!"

"And?"

"We made a circle, moving along the walls of this underground world and came back to where we had started! So it must be the same cave where we were nearly killed by that gas! Damn it, I should have guessed myself! I noticed the direction in which the procession was moving change soon after it had started! Dmitro Borisovich, don't you remember, we talked about it? We tried to figure out what it would mean for us? Do you remember that?"

Dmitro Borisovich after some hesitation said, nodding his head:

"Yes, I remember some talk about the change in direction; yes, we did talk about that. But I don't remember us arriving at any conclusions, Artem. No, I positively don't."

"But isn't what I said now correct? Isn't it, Ivan Semenovitch?" Artem said passionately.

"Absolutely," the geologist said. "We have come back to our stalactite cave, though, of course, not at the same place we entered the Scythian world, but a little further to the north. I would estimate that we would have about a mile to go before we get to the section of the cave with which we are familiar. Of course, my calculations are valid only if my compass is in order. I have relied on it all the time though, but just in case, let's check it. Artem, do you still have your compass?"

Artem quickly produced it — the hands of both were in identical positions.

"Aha, that means everything's all right," Ivan Semenovitch said with conviction. "Let's get started, my friends! We don't have much time — don't forget it's vital for us to have some light, and there can't be too much fuel left in the lamp. It must last until we get to the place where we left our other three lamps. We must try to find them."

They were about to start when Artem said:

"Wait, Ivan Semenovitch, what about that gas? It almost killed us then!"

Ivan Semenovitch dismissed the objection with a wave of his hand:

“Don’t worry, my friend. If it is still there, we’ll be able to detect it long before we plunge into it. But I’m sure it has either dissipated or decomposed. Anyway, we’ll see. Now, let’s go, my friends, and be quick about it!”

* * *

They moved among the stalagmites, constantly checking their direction with the compass. Ivan Semenovitch was at the head of the party, Artem following right behind, trying to keep up the pace set by the geologist.

Artem ran the explanations through his mind again and again.

The enormous underground cavity where the Scythians lived and upon which the explorers had inadvertently stumbled, had its limits, stupendously big though it was. It was circular at ground level, and the funeral procession had just gone around it, arriving not far from where it had started! Very luckily for the explorers, the sight of the burial turned out to be close to their stalactite cave! It looked so simple now, and yet was incredible.

Compared with the cave of the Scythian world, the stalactite cave was tiny, but in its turn, it was gigantic by any human standards. It was vitally important now for the explorers to move in the proper direction which would take them to the place from where all their incredible adventures had begun. The loss of direction was fraught with... But no — Artem had joined Ivan Semenovitch on many occasions for underground explorations and not once had the geologist’s keen, experienced eyes and sense of direction let them down. There was another thing, enigmatic as much as that they had encountered recently, which was on Artem’s mind now. Maybe Ivan Semenovitch had found the answer to it during the long days of captivity and just hadn’t had time to tell him about it...

“Ivan Semenovitch,” Artem said in a low voice, “I’ve got a question for you.”

“What kind of question?” the geologist asked, turning his head but not stopping.

“That gas. Where did it come from? It did not come from the Scythian world, did it?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Where did it come from then?”

“Without making a chemical analysis of the gas, it’s

impossible to say anything for sure, but I would venture a guess that what happened was this: in a rather small cavity, separated both from the stalactite cave and the immense Scythian underground world, some unknown gas was formed due to chemical or even organic processes."

"It was a poisonous gas, too," Artem remarked.

"No, I don't think it was, my friend. Had it been poisonous, we would have been... errr... effected in a very different manner. No, it was not poisonous, Artem. I would reckon it was a heavy, neutral gas with no oxygen in it, and possibly with an admixture of some substance with a narcotic effect which knocked us out for some time. So it had all the properties of an asphyxiating gas. This gas was trapped in the cavity where it had been forming for centuries until we came along and released it by blowing a hole in the massive rocks. As it escaped..."

"It escaped and nearly killed us," Dmitro Borisovich said emphatically, cutting into the geologist's explanations, which he had been following keenly for some time as he walked.

"Yes, it was a rather unpleasant encounter," Ivan Semenovich agreed. Before he continued, he checked the direction with his compass. "But most important is that our most trying adventures are over."

"If we don't walk into that gas again," Dmitro Borisovich said with the same emphasis, and even rather sullenly this time.

"Oh, how horrible that would be!" the geologist said mockingly. "You're in a very pessimistic mood today. But I can guarantee that we won't find any traces of that gas."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Because such gases are very unstable and easily decompose, mixing with the air!"

They walked for some time in silence. The going was easy — there were no major obstacles in their way. Skirting a stalagmite, Dmitro Borisovich thought that now all of their miraculous, fantastic adventures seemed to have been no more than a dream. But the Scythian helmet on his head was very real! And the long-handled battle-axe in his hands was very real, too!

And the life of the nomadic Scythian tribe? Wasn't that much too real? And it was good to know there was a chance of being able to return some time in the future to this strange underground world of the Scythians, ancient but still very much alive! To study their life thoroughly!

Fantastic! Incredible! The discovery that he and his friends had made — albeit involuntarily — would open a new era in archeology! He thought of the reaction of the scientific world to his sensational report: some would be enthusiastic, others skeptical, still others — derisive. He would challenge the skeptics to go down underground to the subterranean realm of the living Scythians and see for themselves! A reality that could be more fantastic than the wildest flights of imagination!

The archeologist's head began spinning: what tremendous vistas of research would be opened! He couldn't keep silent any longer, he was bursting with enthusiasm:

"Ivan Semenovitch, my dear friend, just think! We'll be able to return to the Scythians again with a well-equipped archeological expedition! We'll come to them as friends..."

He stopped abruptly as the pale face of the dead Varkan appeared before his mind's eye.

"Friends..." Artem repeated as though in an echo. "Yes, let's hope our friends will have won by that time... but we shall not find our poor Varkan among them..."

Artem heaved a sigh. Wonderful Varkan who had sacrificed his life for his blood brother! Artem would never see him again; never again would he shake the strong hand of this open and courageous man.

Suddenly, Ivan Semenovitch shouted loudly:

"Aha, there it is, the place where we encountered the gas!"

The geologist was not mistaken: it was the very place — the familiar crack in the wall; the familiar group of stalagmites. There was not a trace of the noxious gas; the crack was so inviting!

"Oh, there's one of our lamps sitting right where we left it, and two more over there! Everything's the same as it was. And no gas. We scrambled outside into the Scythian world through here! Now it's blocked and sealed by these huge rocks. Remember, they began falling soon after we got through. Difficult to believe that all our adventures started from this very spot."

Then a short silence fell as everyone looked around in the dying light of Artem's lamp. Artem checked the fuel and found that there was very little left. Before the light went out altogether Artem climbed onto the stalagmites to retrieve the lamps left there shortly before their egress into the Scythian world. Luckily, all three lamps still had fuel in

them as they had been turned out before the explorers had rushed through the opening... It seemed such a long time ago...

Ivan Semenovitch was the first to speak again:

"Well, my friends, isn't it high time to start our way home? What do you think? I reckon we can postpone a more thorough exploration until we come here better equipped. Haven't we had enough of adventures?"

Artem cast a glance at the geologist and it seemed to him there was some irony lurking in his squinting eyes. Why this smile? Had he remembered something that had yet to be done? But what?

He looked around again, taking in the stalagmites, the wall, the gaping crack...

"Wait!" Artem cried out suddenly. "Wait! There's one thing we haven't done yet! We can't go home yet!"

Dmitro Borisovich stared at him in amazement; Lida also looked at him in some annoyance: what was the restless Artem up to now? Ivan Semenovitch alone turned to the young man as though he had expected this outburst.

"We're not through with this cave yet, my friends!" Artem said impulsively. "You seem to have forgotten the aim of our underground expedition in the first place! Have you forgotten the parchment and what it said? Have you forgotten about Pronis and the story his descendant Ronis told us about him?"

Ivan Semenovitch burst into laughter which he had been trying to suppress for some time.

"I have not forgotten," he said. "But it seems to me that Dmitro Borisovich and Lida have indeed forgotten what it was we came down here to look for. And our Artem was ready to rush back home too!"

"No, I wasn't! Honest! I... was just thinking of something else at the moment," Artem said in his defense. "Besides it doesn't really matter now, Ivan Semenovitch! We absolutely must explore it to the end! And to do so, we only have to go through this crack! I'm sure it can't be far! Let's go, Ivan Semenovitch!"

"Now, if you remember what Pronis's testament said you would agree that here it does look like the last passage indicated in the plan. We even started digging to get through the rockfall, remember? Shall we go ahead and do some more exploring?" the geologist asked, addressing Lida and the archeologist.

As a matter of fact, the question did not need to be asked, as it was much too tempting to see where this new corridor would lead. Meanwhile, Artem had climbed into the wide crack as he was eager to be the first one in.

"All right, let's go," Ivan Semenovitch gave the command.

One could easily walk upright through the passage. As he cautiously made his way in, he examined the walls in the light of his lamp. Suddenly he shouted triumphantly:

"See? See? It's exactly what Pronis's testament said we would find here!"

He pointed to the picture of a head carved into the rock. It was the head of a Scythian, the fifth head mentioned by the parchment that had been found in the bronze chest! Deep grooves outlined a helmeted Scythian head, gazing at something in the distance.

This newly discovered face differed from the ones the explorers had seen earlier on the walls of the underground passages on their way to the cave. Their severity had a forbidding, even terrifying aspect. But the present visage had a much milder expression and bore a strong resemblance to someone they had seen in the flesh.

Lida was the first to speak, her voice trembling with emotion:

"Oh, doesn't the head resemble our poor friend Varkan!"

For some time everybody contemplated the picture that seemed to stand out from the wall in bold relief. The features of the face definitely resembled those of Varkan. Everyone was overcome by a fresh wave of memories. But Ivan Semenovitch took them out of their reverie:

"Sorry, but we don't have much time! Don't forget there's not much fuel left in our lamps, and without light we won't be able to get out of here. We'll come back soon, and we'll surely visit the place where... we parted for ever. Let's move on, my friends!"

A few steps further, the passage forked. Discovering a small representation of a wild boar on the wall, Artem knew where to turn. He remembered well the instructions of the parchment. The explorers moved on without examining the carving.

A few more steps through the passage, which had narrowed, and the light from Artem's lamp revealed a fantastic sight. Artem stopped dead in his tracks, jerked the lamp higher. The rest stopped behind him, dumbfounded.

The narrow passage widened abruptly to form a cavern

whose floor was covered with a layer of what looked like pebble-sized stones, shimmering a dull yellow in the light of the lamps. The same glitter shone from spots in the walls of the cavern which resembled an oddly-shaped room. The remains of an ancient bronze spade could be seen among the glittering stones.

Ivan Semenovich made a step forward, picked up one of the stones and examined it closely. Then he looked at his friends and said in an awed voice, pronouncing each word very clearly, distinctly, and slowly as though emphasizing by this the great importance of each word.

"These are gold nuggets, my friends. And this must be the gold deposit once discovered by Pronis! The deposit the Scythians could not get to!"

"The great treasure his descendant Ronis told us about!" Artem cried out impulsively.

The geologist ran his eyes around the cavern, its floor, walls and ceiling.

"It's so great a treasure I wouldn't dare to even estimate its value," he said at last, his voice revealing how stunned he was by the discovery. "There must have been an immensely, unimaginably rich vein of gold running through this place. Sometime in the distant past, part of it must have crumbled and fallen down here in a shower of gold nuggets! It's... it's unbelievable! Expedition upon expedition will soon be coming here! Not only for the gold of course! We have made some mind-boggling discoveries: this unheard-of subterranean cavity the presence of which no one could suspect, the Scythians living deep in the earth, and all the other enigmatic phenomena we have encountered... all of it is worth studying thoroughly. And it's not a matter of archeology only, Dmitro Borisovich! The mass of puzzles we have come across can be cracked only by joint effort. The whole thing is a great scientific problem in itself! Besides, economically... such a tremendous amount of gold in one little place... Our country will benefit greatly from this discovery, my friends!"

"So, this is the treasure Pronis wrote about..." Dmitro Borisovich said in a low voice, more to himself than to anybody else.

"The treasure that has been waiting for centuries to be discovered," Lida said.

Ivan Semenovich cast a last glance at the gold nuggets scattered on the floor of the cavern.

"Now, let's get started, my friends," he said with a sigh. "We are much too tired after all we've had to go through. We have to get back to the surface, and it's still a long way, mind you, and uphill too! We'll take a short rest and then come back here. Besides we have to inform the scientific world and the authorities of our discoveries. Artem, my friend, put a couple of these nuggets into your bag as samples and material evidence so we won't think it was all a dream when we get back to the surface... nothing but a fantastic dream..." the geologist said, overcome with emotion.

They turned and began to walk back to their great stalactite cave, past the pictures of the boar and the Scythian head. Artem lagged behind, letting his friends go ahead to have one more look at the face. It did indeed resemble his blood brother!

"Varkan, Varkan!" he whispered mournfully.

Artem, his eyes half-closed, summoned up memories of recent events: the camp fire in the forest... he and Dmitro Borisovich listening to the conversation of Ronis and Varkan, their heated arguments, their plans... the reflections from the fire playing on the energetic face of the Scythian... Ronis leaving... Varkan sitting with them by the fire... the silent forest... heavy, massive clouds moving across the low underground sky... the quiet, friendly voice of the bold Varkan.

"Artem! What's holding you up? Come on!" Ivan Semenovich called out to him from a distance.

"My dear Artem, where are you?" This time it was Lida's voice, so gentle and soothing that was a pleasure to hear.

Artem roused himself from his reveries.

"I'm here, I'm here! I'll be with you in a minute!" he shouted back.

Artem turned and began to walk briskly toward his friends; the light from his lamp danced on the rocks, stalactites and stalagmites, creating phantasmagoric pictures on their uneven surfaces.

THE END

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