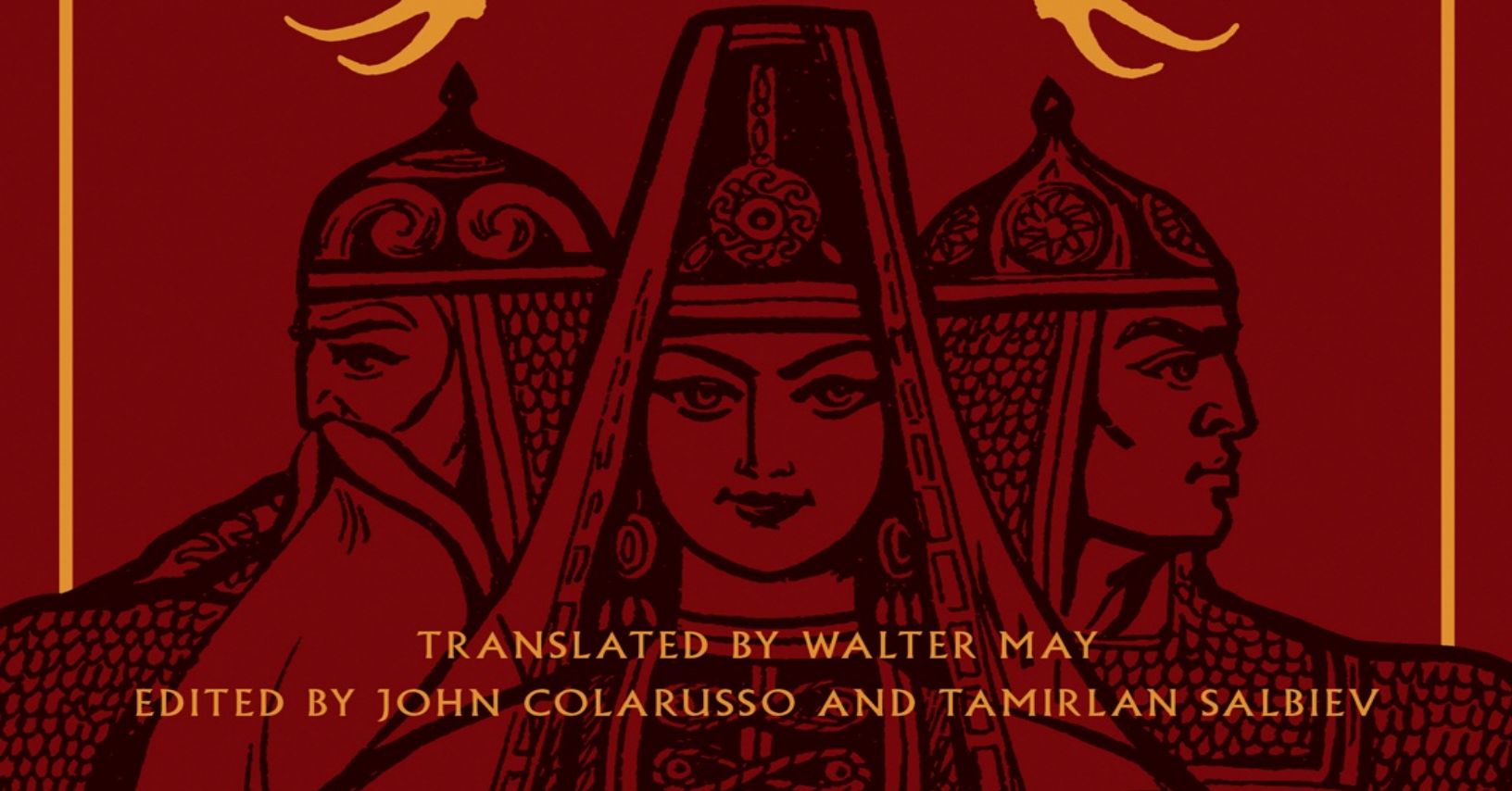
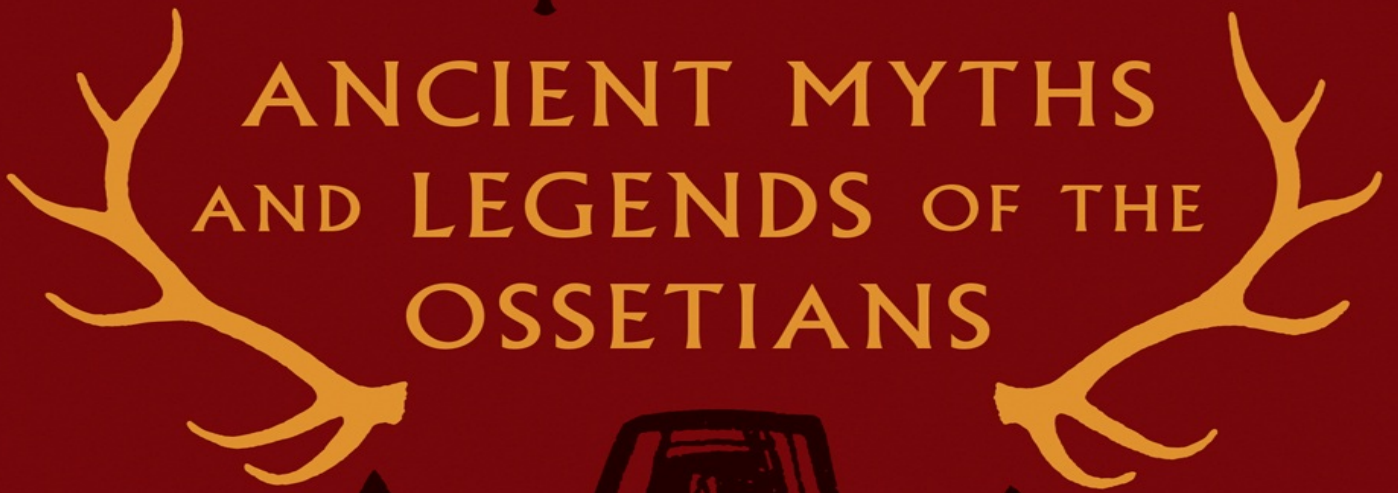


TALES OF THE NARTS



ANCIENT MYTHS
AND LEGENDS OF THE
OSSETIANS



TRANSLATED BY WALTER MAY

EDITED BY JOHN COLARUSSO AND TAMIRLAN SALBIEV

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PREFACE



JOHN COLARUSSO

THE TALES HEREIN have an unusual pedigree, one probably not apparent to the reader. Their roots lie in two distinct and yet related cultures, both of which fall outside the usual horizon of the familiar. One lies in a remote region, the other in a remote era.

The first of these is that of the Caucasus, of the Ossetians and their neighbors. This region has been one that has acted as a refuge for peoples driven from their earlier homes as well as a holdfast for indigenous peoples whose antiquity stretches back well before recorded history.

Those whose roots lie in the Caucasus speak languages unrelated to any outside the region. These groups, the Chechens and Daghestanis, the Circassians and Abkhazians, the Georgians and Svans, have resisted the great linguistic expansions that have swept over Eurasia in the past five thousand years, that of the Indo-Europeans, of the Semites, of the Turks and Huns, and of the Mongols. Such groups have not only retained their languages but also exhibit cultural features that are ancient and reflect beliefs and practices that antedate those that spread out along with the expansion of these language families. One example of this is the odd folkloric theme of a location for a figure's death. This does not mean where he (always a villain, and hence male) will die, but where his actual principle or method of death will be stored. In addition to such autochthonous

material these peoples have also been in prolonged contact with those undergoing expansions, so that numerous features can be found in the Caucasus that are otherwise confined to distant traditions, such as those of Ireland, India, the Slavic realm, or Greece.

The Ossetians have found refuge in the Caucasus within the last two thousand years. Their language (with two dialects) is a member of the Iranian group of languages, (proven by Vasily Abaev, whose introduction is retained in this edition), and hence a member of a branch of the Indo-European family, which includes English. The tales herein also show influences from the neighbors of the Ossetians, most notably the Amazons and Prometheus of Greek tradition, themes that are native to the Caucasus. The mountains that figure in some of the tales, as well as particular figures, such as Sozryko and Batraz, are of Circassian origin, a group to the west of the Ossetians.

Such mixing and borrowing are universal in folklore. Good tales know no boundaries. Nevertheless, within the Nart tradition, and particularly within that of the Ossetians, is a residue of a civilization that one may fairly characterize as a lost world. This is the culture of the “Steppe Iranians.” Few outside of academe will be familiar with them. Perhaps no other culture has had such a pervasive impact on that of Europe and much of Asia and yet remains so obscure.

The Steppe Iranians dwelt on the Eurasian steppe or prairie, stretching from present-day Hungary into Gansu and Manchuria in China, and spoke what we assume to have been Iranian languages. They are not to be confused with the Iranians of what is now Iran, known in Antiquity as Persians. The Persians were an early offshoot of the Steppe Iranians, early enough that by the time of the Persian Empire the Steppe Iranians to the north were seen as alien by the sedentary Persians. Those on the steppes led a nomadic way of life that probably continued the way of life of their remote ancestors, the Indo-Europeans. They called themselves “Aryans,” as did their close cousins the Indo-Aryans of India, whom these Iranians probably displaced from the steppes in the mid-second millennium BC. This name originally meant merely “people,” as in Old Irish *Bó Airem*, “cow people,” or “noble,” as in Greek *ari(stos)*, but became an ethnic self-designation on the steppes (Colarusso 2008). It is continued in that of “Iran”

and “Iron” the Ossetian self-designation. “Alan” is another form of this name, where the *-ry-* has developed into *-l-*. There were also the Roxalani, in Iranian the *Rukhsh*-alani White-Alans, meaning “Western Alans.” In addition there were other tribes, such as the Scythians, the Royal Scyths (said to have been extremely tall), the As, the Iazyges, the Massagetae, the Sparya, the Issedones, the Wusun, the Sakas, and the Sarmatians with their ancestors the Sauromatae, among others, whose names come down to us from Ancient Greek and Persian sources. One of the earliest tribes mentioned by the Greeks is the Scythians (hard or soft <c>, as the reader prefers).

The Scythians actually called themselves “Skolotae.” They were famous for their gold ornaments, often rendering animals in dramatic action poses. Most of the Steppe Iranians had some version of this art, constituting both ornament and wealth at the same time. Some used a system of signs, *tamghas*, as brands and perhaps even for writing. Some of these signs have entered the heraldry of Europe. All of the Steppe Iranians were famed as horse riders. They carried their recurved bow and arrows together in one case called a *gorytus*. All were exceptional archers, with a few tribes, such as the Alans and Sarmatians supplementing this weapon with axes, swords, and lances, along with chain-mail or scale armor. The Sarmatians even clad their horses in scale armor.

Gold and silver disks have been found with scenes of knight-like figures jousting that date to a thousand years before the knights of Medieval Europe and their tournaments. In one case a “golden man” has been uncovered wearing an entire suit trimmed with gold, topped with a conical crown also decorated with gold. On occasion even a frozen or mummified body has been recovered from the northern margins of their zone in southern Siberia or from the arid eastern fringes in what is now western China. Such corpses, of European aspect, also show extensive tattoos. Some show light hair. Chinese and Western sources describe these peoples as having light hair and eyes.

In fact the Medieval European clothing, weaponry, and armor all appear to have been adopted from those of such Steppe Iranians when they entered the Roman Empire as mercenaries or fled as refugees before the advancing armies of the Huns. The armor and weapons have become obsolete, but we still wear what

is in effect a version of Steppe Iranian clothing. When Rome fell, its people were wearing togas and still fighting in Roman style. Europe emerged from the Dark Ages with its people wearing Steppe Iranian apparel and fighting with Steppe Iranian weaponry. A shift also occurs in Celtic lore in a similar time frame. In its oldest form, probably of early Roman date, we find tales of heroes and cattle raids. When the Medieval period begins we find instead King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table, perhaps reflecting the influence of Iranian mercenaries stationed in Roman Britain and Gaul. Sir Kay, for example, has a clearly Iranian name that is also to be seen in the ancient Persian Shah, Kay Khosraw. The Medieval era is long past, but in a sense the Steppe Iranians are as close as the clothing we wear every day.

One may fairly ask, where have these people gone to? The answer is not entirely clear. The general assumption is that they formed a military elite and were eventually absorbed, relinquishing their languages and identity. One instance seems to have been among the Slavs to the north of the steppes who were destined to become the Russians, whose very name is possibly derived from the *Rukhsh-* prefix mentioned earlier, meaning “white” or “western,” as in *Belo-russia*, “White Russia,” based on the old Indo-European color compass of Central Asia (North = Black, East = Yellow, South = Green, West = White, Center = Red).

Several small groups survived with their ethnic identity intact, and one of these is the Ossetians. They are the descendants of the Medieval Kingdom of the Alans, which held sway over the center of the North Caucasus until driven into the hills by the Mongols. The Ossetians are mixed. They call themselves *Iron*, bear a name, *Osetæ*, which is the plural of the old tribal name *As*, and mention a tribe in their lore that continues the name of the Alans, the *Alæ-g-ket-tæ* Alan-adjective-clan-plural ‘the ones of the Alanic clan.’ Other names may be analyzed in Ossetian terms. *Sarma* means “freeman” in nineteenth-century Ossetian, so the *Sarmatae* were “the Freeman,” perhaps descendants of the earlier *Sauromatae*. *Massagetae* may be *massa-g-ket-tae* great-adjective-clan-plural, ‘the ones from the great clan.’ The *Wusun* may have been **(W)Oson* in older Chinese, which would make them the *Os-on* from older **As-an* *As-*

human.plural, with the same root and shift of **a* to *o* seen in *Osetae* itself. *Skolotae* (the Scythian self-designation), however, appears to be an Armenian-like name and to mean “puppies, young dogs,” a term for a youthful band of warriors. It would derive from the Proto-Indo-European root for “dog,” **kʷwo(n)-lo-* dog-little, yielding *skolo-* in Armenian, but **spara-* in Iranian, as in *Sparya*. Such a variance hints at a greater ethnic diversity across the steppes than is generally assumed.

The name “Nart” itself is a relic of this Iranian heritage, for it comes from Iranian **nr-tama* man-most, ‘most manly, hero.’ This construction itself has its roots in the original Indo-European language, **hner-temo-*, which is continued in Old Irish *nert* ‘heroic,’ pronounced [nerd], and the source, through moral inversion, of the English slang term “nerd.” The root for “man,” **hner-* standing alone can be found in the name of the Roman emperor *Nero* and in Greek *ane:r, andros*, from which terms such as “android” are derived. Hence “Nart sagas” or “Nart tales” to the eye of the linguist is revelatory of a special pedigree.

A fair amount, therefore, has been retrieved about this wealthy, dynamic, and far-flung civilization from historical sources and modern archaeology. What is missing is a substantial insight into their own sense of life, or daily routine, of struggle, triumph, and failure. In short, neither the ancients nor the archaeologists can give us more than a passing sense of what this civilization saw as the lineaments of life and its meaning. For this intimate insight we must turn to the tales that follow. Therein the reader will hear once more this lost world speaking, albeit with a complexity rendered by the centuries of life within the Caucasus. Still, reference to the wide plains and prolonged quests across them are an echo of that sea of grass that was once the seat of this civilization. Its expanse sustained them for more than two thousand years, and when their world drew to a close it afforded them access to safer lands. One of these havens was the North Caucasus, and we find the Ossetians there to this day.

I shall close with a note to the reader regarding quotation marks. There are two uses of single quotation marks. In the first, seen in the notes and the appendix of names, you will see names and words treated as linguistic objects.

These are set off by single quotation marks. The distinction may be seen in the following two sets of sentence pairs:

We are going to examine water. We will get wet.

We are going to examine ‘water.’ This is a cognate of Greek *hydor* and Armenian *get*.

In the second case no one gets wet.

The second function of single quotation marks is to gloss a foreign word—that is, to give it a constant equivalent in English, whereas double quotation marks are used to give a translation, an exact sense of the word in a given context. So, we can have the pair of sentences:

In Circassian *psi* is ‘water.’

In this Circassian construction *psi* ‘water’ means “any fluid.”

These conventions are all a bit fussy, but they prove to be useful. Italics are used to render a foreign word into Latin-based script. Slashes are used to render such a word into its phonemes, the psychological sounds of the language, as in

Circassian *psi* ‘water’ is /psə/, which can mean “any fluid.”

JOHN COLARUSSO
McMaster University
June 20, 2015

COMMENTARY



TAMIRLAN SALBIEV

THE OSSETIAN EPIC, Tales of the Narts, passed on through centuries by word of mouth, was first set down in writing toward the end of the nineteenth century, mainly in the form of prose transcriptions, and only occasionally in verse form. It is clear, however, from two Ossetian names of the epic, *Narti Kajita* (“Nart Poems”) and *Narti Taurakhta* (“Nart Legends”), that these two forms of the epic existed, one poetic and sung to music, the other a telling of the tales in prose. The traditional way of rendering these tales was to the accompaniment of the *fandir*, a twelve-stringed hand-harp, concerning which one of the episodes in the epic itself speaks. The names of these folk-singers were popular throughout the land among Ossetian people: Kudzi Jusoev, Iliko Margiev, Levan Begisov, Dzagko Gubaev, Zarakh Seulaev, Vano Guriev, Kertibi Kertibiev, Zaurbek Tuaev, Teb Andiev, Lazo Tuaev, Dris Tautiev, and many others.

The first documentary transcriptions of the Nart tales were made by teachers of the Tbilisi Spiritual Seminary: the Ossetian Vasily Tsoraev, and the Georgian writer, author of the famous novel *The Suram Fortress*, Daniel Chonkadze. They were translated into Russian with commentaries in *Ossetian Texts*, and published as “Papers of the Academy of Sciences” in 1868. The translation and notes were the work of the Russian academician Anton A. Schiefner.

From the Ossetian Nart tales first available at that time to Russian readers came two of the tales included in this book about Batraz and Urizhmag.

The appearance of these “Ossetian Texts” aroused considerable interest in wide circles of readers, and especially those concerned with the creative traditions of the Ossetian people, most of all with the epic itself. During the 1870s the well-known collectors of Ossetian folklore, the brothers Shanaev, published in their *Collection of Information about Caucasian Mountain Folk* a few of the Nart tales translated into Russian. In 1871, in one of the regular issues of “Information about Caucasian Mountain Folk,” a Russian literary scholar, B. B. Pfaf, printed some Nart tales that he had collected and translated into Russian.

Academician Vsevolod F. Miller, who started scientific investigation into the Nart epic, made a great contribution to the knowledge of Ossetian. In his book *Ossetian Studies*, Part I (1881–87) Miller published in Russian a cycle of the Nart tales, accompanying them with a scholarly commentary.

During the 1880s and 1890s representatives of the Ossetian progressive intelligentsia, A. Kaimazov, I. Sobiev, S. Tukkaev, M. Gardanov, G. Guriev, and M. Tuganov, published in Caucasian periodicals and in separate studies a great quantity of the Nart texts.

The Ossetian peoples’ poet, Kosta Khetagurov, was deeply interested in the Nart epic and literature concerning it, and a whole series of remarkable works by the poet were founded on motifs from the epic.

Planned work on the collection, publication, and scientific investigation of the Nart epic on a wide scale became possible only under Soviet rule. During a period of several years after the October Revolution, a great quantity of the Nart tales were collected and published in Ossetian and Russian with the aid of writers, scholars, and scientific workers of North and South Ossetia. The North and South Ossetian Scientific Investigation Institute published from 1925 to 1941 its summaries of work on the epic in *Literary Monument of Ossetian Folk-Lore*.

So-called Nart Committees were formed at the beginning of 1940 for the preparation and publication of the free text of the epic. The best scientific and literary cadres of the two republics were enlisted. A great and painstaking work

was undertaken in search for new materials, and for the systematic publication of existing manuscripts and scattered editions. This work proceeded even during the difficult years of the Great Patriotic War (World War II).

A summary text of the Nart tales was first published in the Ossetian language in 1946. In 1948 Yuri Lebedinsky translated that same text into Russian prose. It was published by the State Publishing House of North Ossetia in 1948, and in 1949 by the Soviet Writer publishers. In that same year, 1949, the State Literary Publishing House put out an edition of the Nart epic, translated into Russian blank verse, by Valentin Dinnik, *Sakazanija iz Nartov* (“Tales of the Narts”).

A great contribution to the study of the Nart epic was made by Vasily Ivanovich Abaev (in Ossetian, Abayte Washo). The appearance of his fundamental work *The Nart Epic* (1945) and a series of other works devoted to this historic monument was a great occasion for all Caucasian specialists. His work proved to other investigators the need for working out general problems by specialists in various areas.

In the realization of these efforts a great part was played by the All-Union Nart Conference (1956), which took place in Ordzhonikidze, and a later conference in Sukhumi (1964), at which along with folklorists, literary specialists, linguists, ethnographers, and historians took part. They advanced the study of the epic considerably, and called forth a number of articles and separate monographs on the most varied aspects of this most outstanding monument of the oral creations of many Caucasian folk.

One must not omit mention of the publication of the work of the famous French specialist, Georges Dumézil, *The Ossetian Epic and Mythology* in a Russian translation (1976) [probably Dumézil 1952], containing a series of fundamentally important principles, touching upon the origins of the Nart epic and its later development over a period of time.

The best work on the preparation of the present volume was done in the North Ossetian Investigation Institute. This work involved literary specialists and writers of several republics: V. I. Abaev, K. N. Ardasenov, N. K. Bagaev, S.

A. Britaev, A. S. Gulev, K. T. Kutiev, G. Z. Kaloev, N. K. Kulaev, S. T. Marzoev, and A. A. Khadartseva.

The basis of this edition is material found in the summary texts, issued in 1946 (literary editor Ivan Dzhanayev). In the present material, however, a few changes were made. The text has been slightly modernized and given a more artistically developed content, with variations and modifications in detail, plus a new series of separate tales. There have also been some changes in the position of various tales, placing them in their corresponding series. Such a widening and deepening of the text seems possible, considering a number of variants not used in the earlier publications, which showed the full richness of the material preserved in the folklore archives of the Scientific Investigation Institute of Ossetia.

A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF THE TRANSLATOR



WALTER MAY was born in Brighton, England, in 1912. He was an artist, an engineer, a draftsman, a teacher, an editor, and a poet. He had thirty years of experience in translating Russian verse and was a Soviet medalist, “Distinguished Man of Letters.” He also had many diplomas. He published over fifty books of verse—including anthologies of Belorussian, Ukrainian, and Kirghiz poetry and children’s verse. He lived in Moscow for over twenty-five years with his Russian wife, poetess Lyudmila Serostanova. He made broadcasts on radio and television, lectured at universities, English schools, and factory clubs. He was the editor of the English edition of *Moscow News*. He was an internationalist, and spoke several languages, including Esperanto. He also claimed to have discovered the place of origin of the Ancient Britains [“Britts”] in the Caucasus.

GUIDE TO THE NAMES AND TERMS

TRANSLATED FROM *SKAZANIJA IZ NARTOV*


WALTER MAY

Adil Masculine name. In the tales, lord of an unknown land.

Afshati The protector of the wild bison, deer, and other noble beasts.

Afshurgh Mythical horse of a special breed, which is usually attributed to Washtirji (see below). In one moment the horse flies from heaven to earth, and just as quickly returns there again, bearing its heavenly rider.

Agur A people with whom the Ossetian forebears, the Alans, fought, in the sixth to seventh centuries AD.

Akhshartaggata [Akhshartagketta] See under Alagata. One of the three main Nart families.

Akhshnarts A mountain plant.

Alagata One of the three main Nart families, living in the Middle village. The Akhshartaggata [Ashkhartagketta] family lived in the Upper village, and the Borata lived in the Lower village. These three families had their own characteristics, as depicted in the narrative: the Borata were rich and happy cattle-breeders, the Akhshartaggata were distinguished by manliness and military valor, and the Alagata were distinguished by mental boldness and adroitness. [Third, second, and first functions (Dumézil 1962).—JC]

Alasha According to Ossetian mythology, a smallish breed of exceptionally hardy horses. In tale 13, “The Nameless Son of Urizhmag,” this is his own

steed.

Aldar In the epoch of developing feudalism, a lord, khan, baron.

Alollei Hush-a-bye, lullaby sung to a baby.

Aluton Ale, mead. Beer, made with honey, strong and inebriating.

Aminon Mythical gatekeeper in the Land of the Dead. In the tales Aminon sits at the entrance to the world beyond the grave and asks the deceased what good or evil things he or she has done in life. On receiving a reply, he shows him the path to heaven, Zanat, or the path to hell, Zhindon.

Amseg Educator (or up-bringer) The Narts often gave their children to another family to be brought up. See the notes in tale 38, “Aishana.”

Ana (Nana) Mother (mama), a respectful name given by members of the family to mother or grandmother, and other elderly women.

Araq Unrefined vodka, home-brewed, made from barley, oats, or maize. Root meaning, “to pour out.”

Archi Mountain hunting footwear, plaited from strips of rawhide, similar to bast shoes.

Avdiw In Ossetian mythology, Avdiwag indicates the devil.

Barashtir Mythological lord of the land beyond the grave. In the Ossetian epic named the Land of the Dead.

Bidas’s helmet Fabulous Nart helmet that places itself on the warrior’s head before the oncoming battle.

Big House A Nart family’s feasting hall, holding many guests.

Bonvarnon The morning star. With the rising of this star at dawn began the mountain dweller’s working day.

Borata See under Alagata. One of the three main families of Narts.

Borzo So Ossetians are accustomed to name bearded goats, the leaders of flocks of sheep. The word comes from the Ossetian *botso*, a “beard.”

Buremadz A glue with marvelous properties. In some stories it is referred to as “dry glue.”

Burka A sleeveless felt cloak, part of the Ossetian national costume. Burkas were made of specially treated wool, either by Ossetians themselves or

purchased from Circassians (Kabardians) and Dagestani Andis, excellent craftsmen.

Chinta The name of an unknown tribe.

Dade Children's name for their grandfather or old father.

Dauag (duag) Good spirits, protectors of people and domestic beasts.

Donbettir Sovereign lord of the watery kingdom, especially seas, living below the ocean. From many tales it is evident that the Narts lived not far from watery expanses, great seas, lakes, and rivers. The epic closely links the Narts with the watery elements, and those who dwell therein. In Donbettir's home many Nart heroes were fostered, and from there came Khamis's wife, Batraz's mother, and there too lived Akhshartag and Zerashsha, Shatana's mother, and Shiridon's father, Gatag.

Dur-Dur The name of Khamis's famous horse.

Dzuar A spirit protector, heavenly dweller. Also a heathen shrine, a sanctuary.

Elijah Wasilla in the pagan era, Ilya in the Christian era, god of thunder and bread-grain. Wasilla was also named god of lightning. Those slain by lightning-stroke were not mourned, so as not to anger the god of thunder and lightning. They were buried where they had been struck down, with special ceremonies

Falvara The mythical protector of small horned cattle.

Fandir A twelve-stringed hand-harp. In the past Ossetians had many instruments called *fandir*. Some were played by bowing, others by plucking. It is to the latter that the hand-harp belongs. According to myth it was invented by Shiridon. More widespread was the six-stringed harp, known to the forebears of the Ossetians, the Alans, in the sixth century.

Fashal-grass Soft, silky grass, with which mountain people stuff boots.

Fatig According to legend, a special kind of metal that the heavenly smith Kurdalagon forged for Nart weapons.

Fyng Ancient Ossetian low, round, three-legged table, decorated with delicate carvings, and covered with all kinds of dishes for feasts, or individual guests.

Galagon Lord of the winds. During the winnowing of the grain, the Ossetians prayed to him for winds, and honored him with ceremonies and magic rites,

including a sacrificed cock.

Gatag Father of Shiridon. In several variants, lord of the rivers.

Goom Named in several tales as a mountain region. Most likely the River Koom and the Koom Ravine in North Caucasus.

Idil The River Volga. In the Tales of the Narts the ancient name of this great Russian river was preserved. Sometimes it is merely named *Narty stir don*, which means “great Nart river.”

Kaftishar-Khwandon-Aldar Lord, baron, master. *Kaf* in Ossetian means “an enormous fish,” a sturgeon. In the Scythian language, as Professor V. I. Abaev has shown, *Kana* meant “fish.” In his opinion the tale where this word occurs concerns the Kerch Strait, noted for its rich fisheries.

Kahazar Dwelling-house of the family, where they live, eat, and sleep. Under this name is also included the family hearth.

Karazh A very ancient form of funeral ritual, celebrated by the Nart forefathers. Even up until the eighteenth century it was observed in the Western Caucasus. The corpse was laid on a platform standing on four legs, somewhat like a tower. [A Zoroastrian influence.—JC]

Kavadashard The name of the children born illegally of feudal lords. The literal meaning of the word is “born in a manger.” They formed part of the lower social groups, and were ruthlessly exploited, enjoying no rights whatsoever.

Kazi Evil spirits, living beneath the ground or in deep forests.

Khatiag A tongue spoken by an unknown people. Some investigators consider that this word appertains to the Hittite tongue.

Khor-aldar In Ossetian mythology the lord of grain.

Khurtuan Grain, spread out in the sun to dry.

Khushadag A dry log, a beam.

Kulbadag-us Literally a woman sitting on the mountainside. A wise woman, prophetess, sorceress, who lived apart from people.

Kum Plain The Pyatigorsk Plain, in the vicinity of Pyatigorsk town.

Kurdalagon The heavenly smith, god of metal-workers. He assists the Narts in their struggles against their enemies, provides them with weapons, tempers famous Narts in his forge, and puts metal plates on skulls broken in battle.

Kuvaggag A portion of food, honoring someone sacred, which was usually given to the youngest man after prayers.

Kuvd A feast or banquet. Such were given in accordance with family custom for a wedding, the birth of a son, and so on.

Mikalgabirta A popular cult among Ossetian Christians, which includes the names of two angel-saints Michael and Gabriel. In the Nart epic the heavenly-dwellers Mikalgabirta, Rekom, and Taranjelos arose where God's three tears fell, shed over the death of Batraz. Mikalgabirta is counted in Ossetian mythology as the god of plenty, and is much respected by those living on the upper reaches of the River Ardon. There in the Kahsar Ravine he has his shrine.

Mizir Ancient Egypt.

Nykhash This word means "conversation," "word," "speech." It was the place where the men gathered at the end of the working day, usually the village square. There the Ossetians, led by their elders, discussed the social affairs of the village, arranged payment for a herdsman for their flocks, and arranged for the building of bridges, roads and so on. These discussions were general, taken part in by all, and the decisions thus reached had then to be carried out by all members of the society. At these meetings the young ones paid great attention to the Nart elders and their judgments, and listened to songs, stories, and legends of the Narts, usually to the accompaniment of the twelve-stringed harp.

Nikkola The heavenly dweller St. Nicholas.

Nogbon In Ossetian mythology the master of the New Year, one of the most popular festivals among the Ossetians, where they welcomed in the new year, or literally "new day."

Nuazhan Goblet or cup full of vodka, beer, or wine, which in the Ossetian manner is handed to guests of honor, and other respected persons at table. This custom, which is not found among other people in Caucasus, has its roots in old Scythian times, as witnessed by Herodotus in his records.

Pakunza See under Qanzargash.

Qabaq Shooting with bows and arrows at a target, an ancient funeral ritual among Ossetians, preserved until quite recently, when they began to shoot with rifles instead. In olden times they hammered a tall post into the earth, and on top of it they nailed a small circle of leather or even a coin, and shot at it. If they hit the target they received a prize from the deceased family. In the Nart epic this ritual is colorfully described. The Narts fixed the target on the top of their tall towers, and shot at that with their bows and arrows.

Qanzargash [Kanzargash in tale 67] A gigantic seven-headed monster, with a pair of wings that could sometimes be cast off, and with which, as one sees from “The Nart Round-Dance, the Shimd” (tale 67), they often flew over land and sea. [Also referred to as Pakunza.—JC]

Qugom The most fertile plot of soil for plowing in the mountains, situated mainly in the southern slopes. There they grew high-yielding kinds of grain, wheat, barley, and oats.

Rekom The patron and protector of the ancient Ossetian Tsarazhonta tribe in the Walaghir Ravine, in Northern Ossetia. Later many other Ossetians revered him as well. His shrine, which is of great historical and architectural interest, is found in the Tsei village in that same ravine.

Rong A popular inebriating beverage, frequently mentioned in the Nart tales, customary among the Alans, and to some extent surviving among the Svans (Georgia) today. It is fermented and mixed with honey.

Shafa The protector of the domestic hearth. The symbol of family prosperity and family happiness was the hearth-chain, held by all.

Shawfurd The Black Sea.

Shga Part of the leg of an ox or a deer. See tale 84, “The Elder and the Younger Share.” Given as a token of respect at a feast, meaning symbolically “May your legs remain firm.”

Shimd A mass dance, one of the most ancient customs among the Ossetians. It is performed jointly by men and women, at first one leading pair, then a second and a third, and so on, forming a long row that finally grows into a circle. This then breaks down into pairs, and again reforms into one grand circle. [In a similar dance performed by men only, the circle is formed of a lower

and an upper ring of the dancers. The men climb on the shoulders of the lower ring, and join hands behind their backs, and so the whole two-storied circle revolves.—WM]

Shoshlan Popular hero of the Tales of the Narts. From ancient days his name has been widespread among all Ossetians.

Shukh Strife The locality of Shukh, where a slaughter took place, is unknown. Nonetheless Ossetians in conversation until this day still use this expression.

Taranjelos One of the heavenly dwellers. In Ossetia he enjoys great popularity among those living in the Tyrshy Ravine, and on the upper reaches of the River Terek, where his shrine is.

Tatartup Name of a locality in Northern Ossetia. Personal name of a heavenly dweller, protector of people and animals.

Terk-Turk Terk is the old name of the Terek. Turk signifies either one of Turkish descent, or one speaking Turkish. Many geographical names in the Tales of the Narts are unclear.

Tserek Miraculous armor, impervious to arrows, belonging to the mythical warrior Tserek. This armor was active, and when a war-alarm sounded placed itself on the warrior's breast.

Tutir In Ossetian mythology this is the protector of wolves. He is a kind of wolf herdsman. He collects them and sends them after their prey. Without his word not one wolf will touch a living beast. If he wishes to punish humans, he sends wolves to attack their sheep. Ossetians pray to Tutir for help, coax and cajole him, and offer him feasts.

Udavs A magical musical instrument forged by Kurdalagon.

Ugash Seven sheaves together. Ten ugash formed one *stook*.

Vedukha The wife of the Nart hero Shoshlan, daughter of Chelakhshartag.

Wadmer The name of one of the fabulous huge giants in the tales.

Waig A giant, a one-eyed Cyclops. In the Nart tales the waigs live in caves, in seven-storied towers, in castles and fortresses, and are constantly at war with the Narts.

Washtirji The heavenly dweller St. George, the patron saint of all travelers and warriors.

Wasilla See under Elijah.

Zhed In Ossetian mythology a heavenly dweller, like angels. [A word about these heavenly dwellers, who play such a part in the Nart epic, and take on such a lively human image! There are four points that lead one to regard them more as men than gods: (1) They appear in human circumstances. (2) They live high up in the mountains, or maybe in the clouds. (3) They frequently descend to lower levels and mix with neighboring mountain folk, on best of terms, feasting and drinking with them. (4) They live isolated lives in inaccessible heights, and are of a noble and elevated character. Taking all these together it would seem to me that they were originally very hardy and heroic individuals who chose such a life deliberately, as in keeping with their bold temperament. Naturally they were regarded with deepest respect by those living more normally lower down the slopes, who as we see came to deify them.—WM]



A beehive tomb from the highlands of North Ossetia.

INTRODUCTION

THE OSSETIAN EPIC "TALES OF THE NARTS"



VASILY IVANOVICH ABAEV

1 ♦ CYCLES, SUBJECTS, HEROES

In literary studies it is established that the epic poem passes through several stages in its formation. To begin we have an incomplete collection of stories with no connections between them, arising in various centers, at various times, for various reasons. That is the first stage in the formation of the epic. We cannot as yet name it such. But material is in the process of preparation that, given favorable conditions, begins to take on the outlines of an epic poem. From the mass of heroes and subjects a few favorite names, events, and motifs stand out, and stories begin to crystallize around them, as centers of gravity. A few epic centers or cycles are formed. The epic enters the second stage of cycle formation.

In a few instances, not all by any means, it may then attain a third stage. Cycles up to now unconnected may be, more or less artificially, united in one thematic thread, and are brought together in one consistent story, forming one epic poem. A hyper-cyclic formation, if one can use such a term, takes place. It may appear as the result of not only uniting several cycles, but as the expansion of one favorite cycle, at the expense of others less popular. This is the concluding epic phase.

The transformation to this phase is frequently the result of individual creative efforts. For instance, the creation of the Iliad and the Odyssey from

previously scattered epic cycles of the Greek tradition are attributed to the blind poet Homer. Karelo-Finnish runes were taken up in the second, multi-cyclic phase, and Lönnrot alone gave them the finished aspect of the poem “Kalevala.”

In the last century, at the dawn of the collecting of the Tales of the Narts, it seemed that only unconnected tales were preserved in the memory of the people. But during the gathering together of materials, there began to emerge more clearly the outlines of a monumental, multi-thematic, but complete epic, with clear features of genealogical cyclic formation.

It appeared that the main heroes consisted of family relatives, covering four consecutive generations; that they were united in three families; that they bore the common name of the Narts; and what is especially important, that this term “Nartae” was in turn formed from Ossetian family names, and must therefore place the heroes in the relationship of members of one family, one heroic stock.

The dividing of the Tales of the Narts into cycles presented no difficulties. They simply asked themselves to be divided. The stories, with no constraint, easily grouped themselves around a few of the main heroes and events.

However, on the one hand in the Tales of the Narts we have a clear example of the cyclic stage with epic features. On the other hand they contain many survivals of the beginning stages of the epic: the development of the subject within each separate cycle is not entirely free from contradictions, and one clearly feels that the episodes threaded together and grouped around one hero or event had an earlier separate and independent existence, and that the storyteller found no compulsive need to remove these contradictions and maintain a strict story plot.

In the Tales of the Narts, four central cycles take shape:

- The origin of the Narts (Warkhag, his sons Akhshar and Akhshartag)
- Uruzhmag (Urizhmag) and Shatana
- Shoshlan (Sozruko)
- Batradz (Batraz)

Also of importance, if not in scale then in significance, are those cycles dealing with cunning Shiridon, and magical Asamazh.

But besides these fundamental cycles, we have fifteen independent plots and independent heroes: Totraz, Arakhzau, Shauai, Shibals, Aishana, and others. One cannot always ascertain whether the “little cycles” are fragments of previously existing larger ones, or whether, on the other hand, we find before us the scattered stories, on the way to the formation of another cycle.

Taken as a whole, the Tales of the Narts astound us with their richness and variety of subject material. If one does not count ancient mythology and epics, then one will scarcely find anywhere else such riches.

The plots of the tales are extremely varied, but certain of them one may count as typical: the struggle against giants; the campaigns for plundering cattle; the hunting adventures; the struggle between Nart family members and separate heroes, usually on the basis of blood feuds; the competition among the heroes for a woman’s favor, and the winning of a bride; the travels in the underworld beyond the grave (in the Shoshlan cycle); and the struggle against the gods dwelling in the heavens (in the Batraz cycle).

According to variants written down from the best storytellers, the founder of the Narts was Warkhag. He had two sons, Akhshar and Akhshartag. I have argued that fundamentally behind the story of the twins Akhshar and Akhshartag lies the totemistic myth of the origin of the tribe as a wolf, entirely analogous to the legend of Romulus and Remus (Abaev 1989, vol. 4, pp. 96–97; 1990).

The name of the progenitor of the Narts, Warkhag (in Ossetian, Wærxæg) is none other than the ancient Ossetian word meaning “wolf” (from the ancient Persian *varka* [from Proto-Indo-European **wolk^wos*, **wolpos*, English *wolf*, Latin *lupus*]). The legend of the descent of the Narts from a wolf leads to the cycle of widespread totemistic myths, characteristic of one of the earlier stages in the development of human society.

The Narts descended from the daughter of the water-god Zerashsha. This connection of the Narts with the water element, and its overlords, the Donbettirs, passes persistently through the whole epic. Batraz, through his mother, and Shiridon, through his father, are also children of the water. It is indubitable that in

the epoch of the creation of the epic, the Ossetian-Alans lived in the neighborhood of the sea, or some great rivers, since in the small mountain rivers of modern Ossetia it is decidedly impossible to find a place for the Donbettirs, with their wide kingdoms, and luxurious palaces. There are constant reminders of this in the tales about the sea.

The Narts were divided, according to most variants, into three families: Akhshartagketa, Borata [compare Sanskrit *Bhārata*, which is a direct match to Ossetian *Borætæ*, usually miss-cited as *Boratæ*] and Alagata [from Indo-Iranian **ārya-ka-ta* Aryan-adjective-collective, “the Aryan ones”]. In the attribution of separate heroes to this or that family, we observe a great muddle on the part of the storytellers, but by comparing and analyzing the variants we can establish that the famous heroes Urizhmag, Shatana, Khamis, Shoshlan, and Batraz were descendants of Akhshartag, and therefore must have belonged to the Akhshartagketa family. Representatives of the Borata family are found in Burafarnig and his seven sons. About the heroes of the Alagata family there is no firm tradition in the epic. The division of the Narts into separate and often mutually hostile families seems an obvious pointer to their tribal structure, and so strongly reminds one of the division of ancient Scandinavian epic heroes into three famous tribes, fated to great glory and suffering: Valzungi, Niflungi, and Budlungi.

The twins motif, repeated twice in the cycle (Akhshar-Akhshartag, and Urizhmag-Khamis) has the widest distribution in folklore. The Roman twins, Romulus and Remus, the Greek Castor and Pollux, and the Indian Ashvins, which served as a subject of special investigation by Vsevolod Miller (1881–87), appear as the best known of that special motif.

In certain variants of the Tales of the Narts, Zerashsha marries her husband’s father, Warkhag. From this episode wafts the archaic breeze. That simply is an undoubted echo of group marriage. where all the men of the group have access to all the women of another. Survivals of early forms of marital relationships are found in other cycles of the Tales of the Narts, headed by the Shatana-Urizhmag cycle to which we now turn our attention.

If anyone asked me to specify the most remarkable element in the Nart epic, I would answer without a moment's thought: the image of Shatana. Women figure in many epics, but we would search in vain in any other kind of epic for a woman's image of such power, of such significance, of such a sweeping scale, of such vitality as the Nart Shatana. In many epics women are also given a great role. But in spite of all that, they remain for the most part the bearers of purely feminine or family principles, which in the final account limit their sphere of activity. Therefore, in other epics one heroine could easily take the place of another, without damage to the psychological and artistic truth. The Nart Shatana, however, could not possibly be replaced at any time by anybody, and it would be equally impossible to remove her from the epic without feeling the yawning gap left behind.

The sphere of her activities is not the narrow circle of love and family relationships, but the life of the folk as a whole. One could imagine the Narts without any one of its heroes, even the greatest, but one couldn't imagine them without Shatana. Does this not explain the fact that nowhere in the epic do we find mention of the death of Shatana? She is immortal, or, more precisely, she is alive until this day, while the whole Nart people survive.

Shatana is the mother of her people, the center of attention of the Nart world. All threads lead to her—without her participation and advice not one significant event could take place. She it was who brought up the most famous heroes, Shoshlan and Batraz, not being their natural mother. She it was, wise and knowing the future, who rescued them at the most difficult moments. She it was who opened the hospitable doors of her home, when the Narts were overtaken by famine and hunger. Her generosity and the abundance of her table have passed into the proverb "Our hostess is a real Shatana!" That is the highest praise for a woman in the mouth of Ossetians.

Shatana is a powerful sorceress. She can summon up blizzards, storms, and sunshine; understand the language of the birds and beasts; if she so wishes, take on the form of an old hag, or a seductive young woman: and glancing in her "heavenly mirror" see all that is happening on the earth around.

To show that Shatana's image comes straight from a matriarchal epoch¹ is merely to batter at the open door. The obvious features of the matriarchal order are sown abundantly in all ancient epics, in the Kalevala, the Irish sagas, and the Edda. But the existence of such a monumental figure as Shatana in the Nart epic itself has special historical significance.

The fact is that one of the Ossetian forebears, the Alans (a name perhaps preserved in the Alagata, since both words derive from Indo-Iranian **ā*'-ryā-nā-m, "of the Aryans," with /ry/ giving /l/, whereas they yield /r/ in Ossetian, as in their self-designation *Iron*), were one of the Sarmatian tribes. The Sarmatii, according to the evidence of ancient authors, were distinguished among other tribes by the marked features of the matriarchy, and a high social situation of their womenfolk. Pseudo-Skilaks names them *gunai kokratumeno*i, that is to say "governing woman." We shall make no mistake if we say that, from the point of view of social typology, the Alan Shatana is the blood-sister (ritually adopted sister) of the Sarmatian queen Amagi (Polien), the Scythian Tomiris (Herodotus), or the Messagetian Zarina (Ktesii).

Rationality, endurance, resourcefulness in moments of danger—such are the distinguishing features of the oldest of the Narts, Urizhmag. In generosity and hospitality he is the fitting partner for his wife, Shatana. Their relationship is imbued with unchanging love and care.

As in the case with Urizhmag, so especially his wife Shatana appears episodically through whole cycles of stories. Every such episode brings out a new feature in their characteristics, and forms an image of high artistic power, integrity, and fullness. In one theme after another Shatana and Urizhmag appear as the central figures, and this gives us the right to speak of a special cycle dealing with this famous married pair.

The stories of Urizhmag and Shatana are deeply shaded, and overgrown with much later accretions about the first human or heavenly couples. The myth about Urizhmag and Shatana leads us into the circle of primitive myths about the origin of the gods, of mankind, and of human tribes. This is supported by the fact that the birth of Shatana is tied up with the birth of the first horse, and the first

dog. Indeed, the expressions “eldest horse” and “eldest dog” are not to be understood otherwise than as “progenitor of horses” and “progenitor of dogs.”

For mythological presentation it is usual and in the order of things that the first earthly horse sprang from the heavenly one, and likewise the first earthly dog from one in heaven. A people of horse- and sheep-breeders, shepherds, hunters, and warriors, as we know the ancient Alans and the mythical Narts to have been, must have valued and loved their horses and dogs above all other domestic creatures. It is no wonder that they introduced precisely these into their myth of the origin of mankind, for they belong together.

With the person of first and best of women—Shatana—is coupled the appearance of the first and best of drinks—beer, the favorite beverage of the Ossetians. Ethnographical and linguistic data point to the antiquity and exceptionally widespread nature of the culture of beer among Ossetians. The Ossetian word *æluton* for “fabulous food or drink,” originally meant “beer of a special brew,” and is related to the North German word for “beer,” *alut*, and can be compared with the English “ale,” and the Finnish *lut*.

Therefore we shall hardly be mistaken if we express the conviction that the Shatana and Urizhmag cycle, behind its everyday themes, conceals old mythological seeds of legends about the origins of human tribes, and of the gods. Going further, the image of Shatana and the part that she plays through the whole epic allow us to assert that this legend arises under the conditions of a surviving matriarchal world-outlook. This last circumstance may serve as a certain starting point for the dating of the given cycle. Many researchers note the existence of undoubted ties between totemism and the matriarchy. In any case the latter is not younger than the former. If we attribute the Warkhag cycle, with its totemistic nucleus to the first half of the first millennium before our era, then we can scarcely count the primitive mythological nucleus of the Urizhmag and Shatana cycle as later than that.

Did there exist some kind of ancient tie between the first and second cycle? That is not clearly apparent to us. The succession of the generations Warkhag-Akhshartag-Urizhmag seems to speak of such a connection, but that succession may have been attached later, in the form of a “genealogical cyclic formation.”

In the course of its long existence in the mouths and memories of the people, the Nart tales and their themes underwent, it stands to reason, not a few changes and variations, of which many are lost irretrievably. If the ancient Ossetian-Alans had had a written literature that would have fixed the Tales of the Narts in various stages of their history, we should have had extremely interesting material for assessment of the evolution of their epic motifs and subjects. Now, however, we unfortunately have no such material available.

Sometimes it happens, nonetheless, that versions not preserved by the given folk themselves are found among their neighboring tribes, where they in their time were known through the usual migration of folklore themes. Fortunately in the Shatana cycle, we have such an occasion. Just as Herodotus preserved for us many themes of the Nart epic in Scythian customs and traditions of the fifth century before our era, so the Armenian historian Moisei Khorenski in the legends that he recorded about the Alan queen Satenik fixed a few themes in which one may recognize the modification of Nart themes from the Shatana cycle.

In this same cycle there are also a few subjects and motifs that we can touch on only in passing. The theme of a hero who died in his youth, and returns from the world beyond the grave to his father, to perform with him wonderful exploits, and then go back to the kingdom of death, belongs to a number of the most popular in our epic. It is met with also in the Totraz cycle.

The adventure of Urizhmag in the Cyclops's cave relates to a now well-known migratory subject with the widest circulation. The antiquity of this theme is evidenced by Homer's story of Odysseus and Polyphemus. Similarly the myths about Prometheus, and the Argonauts, in their subject matter, closely connect ancient Greece with the Caucasus. [Colchis, Jason and the Golden Fleece, obviously.—WM]

The story of the Cyclops, apart from the Ossetians, is in evidence among the Mingrelians (of western Georgia), the Kabardians (and other Circassians; see Colarusso 2002), the Daghestanis, and the Chechens. Moreover, the Polyphemus motif is known among European peoples. The Caucasian variants stand incomparably closer to the Greek than the European ones do. Vsevolod Miller's

book *Caucasian Stories about the Cyclops* (see Miller 1885) is devoted to a comparative study of a selection of these tales.

The invention of beer served as the subject of an epic song not only among the Ossetians. The twentieth rune of the Kalevala is devoted almost entirely to that remarkable event. Kapo (or Osmotar), the daughter of Kaleva, the progenitor of Finnish heroes, appears as the first woman who brewed beer from barley, and added honey to it.

However little in common there may be, at first glance, between the profoundly human and real image of the Nart Shatana and the misty and mythical figure of the Finnish Kapo, they nonetheless come from the same source, from the most ancient myths about the origin of the natural elements, peoples, and gods. Such is the cycle of Shatana and Urizhmag, outstanding in the Tales of the Narts.

Shatana appears as mother and mistress of the home, not only in the narrow family circle but also among the whole tribe. When famine and hunger overtake the Narts, Shatana opens her hospitable doors, and feeds the folk, young and old, from her prepared reserves. The woman's managerial role shown here, as the keeper and distributor of the tribe's resources, is interesting in the highest degree, and important for the portrayal of early forms of society of the matriarchal type.

All this gives us the right to see in the image of Shatana and the motifs and subjects associated with her one of the most original phenomena, not only of Ossetian, but also of worldwide folklore traditions known to us.

The third cycle about Shoshlan is distinguished by the richness of the subject matter, and the popularity of its central hero. Shoshlan (Sozruko) is evidently a name of Turkish origin. We may compare it with the Nogai *suslan* ("put on a threatening look") from the root *susle*, "a frown, threatening, severe" (see note 15). The form Sozruko is an adaptation into the Adyghey (Circassian) language of the name Shoshlan. In the ancient Adyghey language there was no letter "l," and so it became "Sosran." To this form was added later the diminutive pet-name element *ko* (this is actually the Circassian word for son, /q^we/, forming patronymics). The form Sosranuko thus received (and preserved in the

Abkhazian tongue) was later simplified to Sosruko, and in that form was adopted from the Adyghey (Kabardinian) tongue back into Ossetian. Such “shuttle” words and names, passing from one language to another, and back again, are not an infrequent phenomenon.

On Ossetian soil, the name Shoshlan is in evidence from the thirteenth century on: the Ossetian chief David Shoshlan, was the husband of the famous Georgian queen Tamara. In the Digoron variants the name Sosruko is absent. They know only Shoshlan.

In the Nart epic Shoshlan (Sosruko) occupies a most prominent place, and appears as one of the favorite heroes, not only in the Ossetian but also in Kabardian (as well as other Circassians, Abaza, Ubykh), Balkar, Chechen, and other variants. In Shoshlan and Batraz cycles, more than in others, there appear truly heroic superhuman, warrior motifs. But in distinction from Batraz, a hero of unconquerable strength, and honest straightforward action, Shoshlan in battle against the most powerful enemies readily resorts to all kinds of trickery and cunning, while with the weakest and defeated enemy he is stern and pitiless. He is portrayed in an especially unseemly light in the episode of his fight with Totraz, son of Albeg.

In the Digoron variant his usual epithet was *næræmon*, which means “stormy, indomitable.” Evidence of his popularity and deep national character is found not only in the epic itself but also in many local tales connected with his name, especially in Digoria.⁽¹⁾ Many ancient tombs there are spoken of as his. They also have stones upon which he is supposed to have sat. One of their summer festivals is named after Shoshlan. The rainbow in Digoron is called “Shoshlan’s bow,” as in Persian it is called “Rustam’s bow.” In one story everyone is recommended to take steps to ensure that their deceased relatives receive a comfortable place to watch the fight between Shoshlan and Totraz, which occurs in the afterworld beyond the grave.

The figure of Shoshlan served as the subject of a special mythological study by Dumézil, titled *Myths of the Sun*.²

“Of course,” says Dumézil, “not every figure, not every deed performed by Shoshlan bears a sunny character. Like all kinds of gods, who in time become

heroes of a story, he united about his person many legends of various origin. But his cycle alone among the circle of Nart tales gives a whole row of themes, and fundamental ones at that, in which the sun-like nature of the hero appears in full glory.”

First of all, his birth: Being born from a stone is a feature readily attributed to sun-gods. From the rocks was born the sun-god Mithra, of Asia Minor. He also is called “born-of-stone.”

Shoshlan’s sun-like nature is further shown by his marriage to a daughter of the sun.

In a range of themes telling of the struggle of Shoshlan with his enemies, it is said that he achieved victory at mid-day: again a feature of a sun-god, since he attains the zenith of sunny power at midday.

The theme of his struggle against Mukara, son of Tar, especially in some variants, strikingly reminds one of the widespread myths about “the stealing of the sun.”

An evil being concealed beneath the ice is an obvious symbol of the cold winter. The hero wrestling with this evil being becomes a symbol of the sun. In the Nart epic these two are Mukara and Shoshlan.

Even more obviously and directly, the Wheel of Balshag (tale 37) leads us into the circle of sun myths. It comes to its end in water, in a few variants, the Black Sea, which means in the West. There are some variants where Balshag’s Wheel acts in accordance with the bidding of the daughter of the sun, offended by Shoshlan.

In the Digoron version of this story, the Wheel is named after Oionon. This name is a corruption of John (Johan), and St. John is associated successively with the sun cult. His festival falls in with the midsummer solstice of the sun [June 21—WM]. In Digoria, at the place of the supposed grave of Shoshlan near the village Nar, there was celebrated every summer, around the day of St. John the Baptist, “the festival of Shoshlan,” when rams were slaughtered in honor of the hero, and folk prayed to him to send down good weather. The connection of our hero with the sun cult is thus firmly supported.

The fact that the sun-hero is slain in the struggle against the Wheel, a symbol of the sun, does not surprise anyone who knows with what twists and turns and along what unexpected lines themes develop in folk-poetry, and how often is affirmed there the dialectic law of the unity of opposites.

Many similar examples could be brought, for folk myth creation fears contradiction least of all. In the complicated image of Shoshlan are united various different features, and perhaps most often contradictory ones. But if in that image there are features with a clear mythological meaning, then they are those of a sun-hero.

Shoshlan, the old "heathen" sun-god, battles with Oinon's Wheel, that is, St. John's Wheel, the new Christian god of the sun, and dies fighting.

Exactly likewise the heathen god of thunder Batraz struggles with the Christian god of thunder (Elias), by whom he also is slain. In both cases the victory rests with the new Christian god.³ Thus when Shoshlan compels the Wheel to name itself after him, and not after Oinon (or Balshag), we see through that transparent symbolism, that we are fighting to decide who shall remain master of the sun.

Among the most interesting episodes of the Shoshlan cycle we find the journey of our hero to the kingdom of the dead. This was, we know, one of the most ancient epic themes, as is witnessed by the monuments of world literature: Osiris in Egypt; Gilgamesh in Babylon; Odysseus, Hercules, and Orpheus in Greece; Väinämöinen in the Finnish Kalevala; Cúchulainn in the Irish sagas; Odin in Scandinavian mythology. These are the best-known names of heroes or gods, who, like the Nart Shoshlan, visited the land of the shade beyond the grave.

The Nart description is distinguished by the great concreteness and liveliness in the telling of the fates of people who in their earthly lives performed good or evil deeds. In this, as always, the scenes of torment and deprivation stand out much more variously and vividly than the scenes of blessedness. While in the Greek myths we find descriptions of the torments of two or three sinners (Tantalus, Sisyphus, the Danaides), here before us pass a whole procession of

pictures portraying rewards for good, and, more especially, punishments for evil deeds of every kind.

The moralizing tendency with which these descriptions are imbued is very touching in its naïveté. We see here which virtues are accounted especially praiseworthy, and which defects are most condemned. Generosity, hospitality, justice, and marital and maternal love—these bring blessedness in the other world. On the other hand a burdensome fate awaits the mean, the quarrelsome, the thievish, and the lustful and lascivious.

The description of the world beyond the grave, with all its wonders, is repeated in the same exact way in the ceremonial formula devoted to the deceased one's horse.

The bride-price paid by Shoshlan for the daughter of the sun represents a variation of a very widespread motif concerning marriages, which depended on the fulfillment of difficult assignments by the bridegroom.

Special mention must be made of Shoshlan's coat made of scalps. Vsevolod Miller had already shown that this theme comes from Scythian times (Miller 1881–87), and reflects the Scythian custom described by Herodotus:

Scythians cut off the heads of those they slay in battle, and bring them to their chieftain; only those warriors who bring an enemy's head have a right to share in the booty. Afterward they scalp the heads in the following fashion: they make a circular incision above the ears, and tear off the skin, by shaking the skull vigorously by the hair. With the aid of a bull's rib they scrape off surplus scraps of remaining fat and later soften the dried skin by crumpling it between their hands. When this is done, they use it as a wiping cloth for their hands, and hang it in their horse's bridle. In this way they win praise, for the greater number of such wipers a Scythian had, the greater was his honor and glory. Many of them made themselves cloaks of these human scalps, sewn together in the style of a shepherd's coat. ⁽²⁾

“The Alans carried on this tradition of the Scythians. These Alans boast of nothing so much as the slaughter of someone or other, and in the form of war-trophies, instead of decorations, hang the scalps cut from the heads of the slain on their war-horses” (Ammianus Marcellinus). We see in this example something that was once a living custom, an everyday occurrence, which in succession goes over into folklore, and is preserved as a folklore motif.

In the Shoshlan cycle we can show yet once more a clear example of such a transformation—thus that which with the Scythians was a living custom becomes with the Ossetians a theme for their Nart epic. We have in mind Shoshlan’s horse at his funeral, slain, and stuffed with straw. G. Dumézil points to the great similarity of the horse sacrifices among the Scythians and the Ossetians,⁴ and particularly when comparing them brings in a story by Herodotus, how they stood the stuffed corpses of horses around the grave of a Scythian chieftain, intended to accompany him in the world beyond. They slit them open, removed their internal organs, stuffed them with straw, and then sewed them up again. In this manner they stood them, with supports, around the grave. Can one then, Dumézil asks, separate these funeral horses of the Scythians, on which the chieftain would travel in the other world, and the funeral horse of Shoshlan, on which he returns to the world beyond the grave?

So these ancient customs, long since gone out of use, get woven into folklore themes and motifs, and live on through millennia.

Parallels between themes in the Shoshlan cycle and Scythian habits can serve in the absence of other data for the approximate dating of a few existing parts of that cycle; obviously the origin of those parts must relate to a time not later than fifth century BC.

The dawn of the Iron Age, with its metallurgy, put in man’s hands new instruments of labor and new weapons of war. The man of those times is imbued with belief in his own strength, in the might of his armaments, in the irrepressible aura of military glory. Then in exchange for the hero-wizard and sorcerer, we get the hero-warrior-knight.

But the ancient ideology of sorcery and magic does not die out all at once. It tries to maintain its position under the new conditions. As a result we get a type

of hero in whom warrior-like qualities are allied to cunning, that type of cunning that to ancient understanding meant sorcery. In the Ossetian language, the word *khin* means “cunning” and “sorcery”; hence we get the expression *khin æmæ kælæn*, which means “cunning and sorcery.”

Shoshlan personifies just this traditional stage. He is shown already clothed in the qualities of a hero-warrior, but along with them goes the image of a clearly defined hero-sorcerer. These features remain throughout his whole life. Shoshlan and Batraz both pass through a tempering procedure, but Batraz is tempered in the furnace of a smith, the normal “technology” of the Iron Age. Shoshlan, however, is tempered by quenching in wolf’s milk, a clear totemistic piece of magic. The important feats achieved by Shoshlan fall under one scheme: he begins as a hero-warrior, and ends as a warrior-magician.

The hero-warrior with the atavistic features of a hero-sorcerer is presented as if it were a transitional stage from the purely shamanistic form to the purely knightly. According to Engels,⁵ when war becomes the normal function of social life, and military leaders give tone to the formation of social ideology, and then a new type of epic hero is born—a hero of unconquerable strength, crushing his enemies with his knightly power, with no admixture of cunning or magical craft. Such a hero in the Tales of the Narts is Batraz, the son of Khamis.

Along with the heavy hyperbole, in the description of his person and his deeds, he is often led beyond earthly bounds, beyond what is humanly achievable, and is carried up beyond the world of the Narts, as a being of special order, a superman, a demi-god. Along with Shoshlan, and to a greater degree than him, Batraz bears within himself a mythological form where primitive cosmic powers still gather, for which the usual outer shell of the ordinary (albeit epic) hero is too frail and ephemeral. The hallmark of the miraculous, the superhuman is evident throughout his whole life, his birth, his feats, and his death. The final battle of Batraz with heavenly powers places him among the host of Titan warrior-gods, besides the Greek Prometheus and the Caucasian Amiran.

What was the origin of the Batraz cycle? We have found in our times that the names of Khamis and Batraz are of Mongolian origin, and that these two

Narts are evidently a splitting of the Mongolian name Khabichi-Batir.⁶ May we on that foundation assert that the whole of the Batraz cycle comes from the Mongolian? No, of course, that is not permissible. The process of cycle formation in epic tales leads us to this: that around one name may be united subjects and themes of most varied origin. In the Batraz cycle one may, if you please, find one or two subjects having parallels in the Mongolian epic. But, on the other hand, there are features to be seen belonging to the Scythian epoch, that is to say at least the fifth century before our era. In this manner, even if there existed an epic Khabichi-Batir on Mongolian soil, the Alan cycle Khamis and Batraz owes only their personal names to it, and maybe a couple of motifs. In all the rest it remains independent and original.

So, in the Batraz cycle, as in others, we must distinguish a few independent themes, which later in the process of cycle formation are united around one name. Among the most ancient elements of the Batraz cycle we must include mythological elements. The mythological nucleus of this series, as has been successfully shown by Georges Dumézil, presents the image of thunder-god.⁷ Superman, mythical features so strongly stand out in Batraz image that there is no reason to doubt its mythological foundation. Around the mythological nucleus have grown up a series of epic-hero themes and subjects of another origin, out of which the most popular has become the favorite one of tribal life, namely feuds and blood-revenge.

Fierceness is a characteristic feature of all gods of thunder, and this is a personal trait Batraz exhibits to a high degree. He has the features not only of lightning but also of storm. Let us note how he blew off the ashes from the burnt garments of the Nart women, or how from the breath of his dead body tens of heavenly powers perish.

It may appear to be a contradiction, that the thunder-god Batraz should struggle against the thunder-gods of the Christian era, among whom was counted St. Elijah (Watsilla). But that contradiction is of the same type as the struggle of Shoshlan, the sun-god, with the sun symbol, the Wheel of Balshag. It in no way refutes, but rather supports the mythical thunder-god nature of Batraz, because

the fight goes on, as we think, between gods of the two epochs, the heathen one represented by Batraz, and the Christian one by Watsilla (St. Elijah).

Elsewhere the struggle of Christianity with pre-Christian cults left its mark on many folk-epics of Christian peoples: on the Russian folk-tales (Dobrynya and the Snake, and so on); the German sagas (“Twilight of the Gods” and so on); and the Irish sagas.

The Nart epic in the main is pre-Christian, but in the dramatic episodes of the death of Batraz and Shoshlan is reflected, so we think, the struggle between old heathenism and new Christianity. The heathen demi-god Batraz perishes in the struggle with the Christian god, with Christian angels, and with St. Elijah (Wasilla). Especially interesting is the episode of the entombment of Batraz’s corpse in the crypt of St. Sophia, that is, the chief shrine of Byzantium, from which the Christian faith came to the Alans. We shall scarcely make anything out of this episode if we do not admit that it symbolizes the capitulation of the heathen world before the new religion, while the resistance that the already lifeless Batraz offers to this is merely an indication of the stubbornness of the previous struggle.

The connection between Batraz and the heathen cults of the Scythians and the ancient Aryans is supported by several direct parallels drawn by Dumézil.⁸ The ceremony of casting Batraz’s sword into the sea compares with the cult of the sword among the Scythians and Alans. The bonfire of “a hundred wagonloads of coal,” into which Batraz strides to become tempered before the trembling Narts, recalls the grandiose annual construction of a fire of “a hundred and fifty cartloads of logs,” which served the Scythians as a pedestal for their sword god, around which were slaughtered their trembling war captives.

In one tale recorded by Dzhantemir Shanaev, Batraz’s sword itself acts as a thunder-god. “The story,” says Shanaev, “asserts that Batraz’s sword was cast into the Black Sea.” He adds that “when the lightning flashes from the west Ossetians regard it as the gleam of Batraz’s sword, hurling itself out of the sea against the heavens to destroy evil powers and devils” (from Shanaev 1871).

Beside the array of traits characterizing Batraz as a mythical symbol of a thunder-god, there still remain in his cycle many motifs that in their turn have

wide parallels in world folklore. The clear parallel from Scythian customs, to which Miller (1881–87) has drawn our attention, has great importance for the explanation of the motif of the miraculous cup Watsamonga in the Nart epic. This cup raised itself to the lips of real heroes, telling of their campaigns, but remained motionless before braggarts and the boastful.

Here is what Herodotus tells us about the Scythians: “Once a year each regional chief at the festival ordered a glass of wine mixed with water, and all the Scythians who had killed an enemy drank from this goblet. Only those who had not performed this service had not the right to touch it. They sat aside in a state of shame that was for them a great dishonor. As for those who killed a large number of foes, they drank from two goblets united together.”

Aristotle also mentions this in his *Politics*: “The Scythians at one of their festivals do not allow those who had not killed one single enemy to partake of the cup going round.”

The closeness of the Tales of the Narts and the stories of Herodotus are striking. Both among the Narts and the Scythians the wine-cup served as an honorary reward for feats of battle, and to “distinguish real heroes.” In connection with this Dumézil notes the role that the goblet plays in Scythian mythology.⁹ Four things, all made of gold, which according to Scythian belief fell from heaven, were the plow, the yoke, the axe, and the goblet. It is also well-known what role holy wine and goblets played in Indo-Iranian cults.

One of the central episodes of the Batraz cycle is where Batraz takes blood-revenge for his father’s death. The classical motif of patriarchal-tribal custom, the blood-feud, occupied a leading place in the Nart epic not by chance alone. Speaking earlier about the specially lively aspects of this epic, we showed that one of the reasons for this fidelity to life must be seen in the way that the social conditions that gave birth to this epic continued to exist for a long time, and to further nourish it, thus saving it from ossification, degradation, and oblivion. The blood-feud motif entered the epic under the conditions of a patriarchal-tribal relationship and, judging by other elements of the Batraz cycle, at extremely distant times. But those patriarchal-tribal relations, including the blood-feud, continued to exist and flourish in Ossetian customs through many centuries. This

is the reason why the story of how Batraz took revenge for the death of his father was, and remained, one of the favorite and most popular episodes of the epic. Here is the reason why a whole series of Nart heroes besides Batraz also appear as avengers of their father's blood: Totraz, son of Albeg; Atsamazh,¹⁰ son of Atsa; Kaitar and Bitar, sons of Shoshlan. It is not by chance that the well-known folk epic, named "Avkhardt Khasanah" among Ossetians, also has blood-revenge as its theme.

The severe, persistent, and pitiless manner in which Batraz fulfills his filial duty as blood-avenger might appear repulsive to the modern reader, but one must take into account the fact that this epic was composed in very cruel times with very cruel and severe customs. Batraz's actions are dictated not by mere caprice, but by the idea of duty. His revenge is the victory of justice, as it was understood in tribal conditions. It contains fewer arbitrary elements and less unjustifiable cruelty than, say, the revenge of Krumhilda in "The Song of the Niebelungen." Moreover, in it are found individual features of knightly nobility and magnanimity. Thus, when Batraz brings the hewn-off arm of the slain Lord Shainag to Shatana as a war-trophy, she then suggests that he should return it to his relatives so that they may make an interment with due honors, which without the missing arm would be impossible according to their customs. Batraz does so without one word of protest.

Does not the cutting off of Lord Shainag's right arm contain the echo of an ancient custom? Herodotus (book 4) cites: "The Scythians bring to their war-god sacrifices not only of beasts, but of human beings. Human sacrifice is carried out in this way: from the number of prisoners they chose each hundredth one, and cut off his right shoulder including the arm. The hewn-off limb is then hurled in the air, and left to rest wherever it falls, the body being left in another place." This hacking off of the right arm appeared evidently among the Scythians, and among Ossetians, as a symbol of shameful dishonor for the enemy, depriving him of the right for honorable burial. The Ossetians' near-neighbors from Georgia, the Khevsur mountain-tribe, had a custom of cutting off the right hand of the defeated enemy as a war-trophy. The number of hands hanging on the wall served as a measure of the prowess of the Khevsur warriors.

Numerous parallels between the Batraz cycle and Scythian-Alan realities, as well as ancient customs, give us the right to assert that this cycle is quite original, and extremely old. On the other hand, however, there can be but little doubt that the names 'Khamis' and 'Batraz' are Mongolian in character, and taken with other facts show that the Alan epic came under the influence of the Mongols (but see English-language editor's note 5). There are doubts as to whether that influence was limited to personal names. Subjects and motifs may have also been borrowed. This question of Mongolian-Turkish elements in the Tales of the Narts deserves a good deal more work and attention.

The analysis of the themes and subjects of the Batraz cycle lead one to the conclusion that it was a long time in its formative period. Its most ancient elements derive from ancient history. It brings to us through the centuries the motifs of Scytho-Alan existence, and of Iranian mythology. The presence of Mongolian influence can only be dated to around the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries. Between these two extremes we see not only the development of the Batraz cycle but also of the Nart epic as a whole.

Let us now pass over from Batraz to Shirdon, a hero of an entirely different type. Shirdon is one of the favorite heroes of the epic. His popularity is no less than that of the most famous: Shatana, Urizhmag, Batraz, Shoshlan. His name is in common use, signifying a cunning and skillful old fox, capable of all kinds of tricks, but in moments of difficulty able to rescue himself and others by means of his inventiveness and resourcefulness.

The Tales of the Narts are remarkable, by the way, for the great place that humor occupies in them. We see for the most part the Nart Shirdon as the bearer of an essentially humorous character.

He figures in all the cycles of the epic, preserving everywhere his unique individuality. Shirdon has brothers in the epics of European peoples, the Irish Bricriu, and the Scandinavian Loki. In him there is nothing of the heroic power and spirit of Shoshlan and Batraz. His chief weapon is his tongue—sharp, poisonous, and pitiless, bearing discord and dissension in all places. This weapon appears at times more dangerous and destructive than the swords and arrows of the strongest Narts. He chances to do the Narts some important

services, but in most cases his evil turn of spirit prompts him to all kinds of crafty tricks, from which the Narts suffer sadly. Not without reason does the permanent epithet *Narti fidbilizh*, the “Nart’s evil genius,” stick to him.

Shirdon is a shape-changer. He can, by merely wishing, change himself into a werewolf, an old man, or a young girl. On one occasion he even changes into a hat. The red thread of hostility between him and Shoshlan runs through the epic, first to last.

Shirdon’s father was a water-spirit, Batag, or Gatag.¹¹ By using his power as master of the waters for evil purposes, he was able to close the springs and cut off the Nart women from their water supply. In this way he compelled one Nart beauty to live with him, and from these compulsory relationships Shirdon was born. According to several variants the Narts for a long time did not recognize him as a member of their tribe, and did not allow him into their villages. Only when he invented the twelve-string lap-harp, and presented it to the Narts, and captivated them with the sound of this wonderful instrument, did they take him into their midst.

Shirdon first hears of Shatana’s birth from Zerashsha, and uses this knowledge to put both Urizhmag and Khamis to shame. He began to shout in the presence of the Narts that Khamis had brought his wife with him to a feast of the Narts, hidden in his pocket in the shape of a frog. As a result of this the daughter of Bisenta left her husband, and Batraz was compelled to grow up with no mother.

At the tempering of Shoshlan in wolf’s milk, Shirdon persuaded them to shorten the trough where Shoshlan was to lie, as a result of which his knees stuck up out of the magical milk, and were not tempered, which later on was to serve as the reason for his death.

When the Narts sent their herd of horses into the kingdom of the powerful Mukara, Shirdon arranged things so that the fate of driving the herd there fell to Shoshlan, in the hope that in this way his old enemy would be killed. He also took the form of an old man, an old woman, and so on, to dissuade Shoshlan from saving the life of his old friend Zekh, wounded during the siege of the Khizh fortress.¹²

Having turned into a hat, Shiridon listened to the conversation between Shoshlan and his horse, and learned what it was that would lead them both to their deaths. This information he put to ill use in order to kill them. Balshag's Wheel, defeated in the first struggle with Shoshlan, refused further fight, and even consented to destroy its master. But Shiridon stepped in again. Adopting the form of an old man, then an old woman, then a young girl, he persistently advised the Wheel not to kill Balshag, but to battle against Shoshlan once more. Finally Shoshlan dies beneath an attack by the Wheel, and Shiridon cannot deny himself the pleasure of taunting his dying enemy.

According to a few variants, it was none other than Shiridon who poisoned Batraz, on the fatal day of his fight with the heavenly powers.

In the struggles between the Borata and Akhshartagketta families he also, in a few variants, played the role of instigator.

When the Narts, tormented by hunger, are completely exhausted, Shiridon, having eaten well, with especial satisfaction strolls among the starving, with bits of shashlik and fatty sheep entrails sticking to his whiskers.

Among the domestic animals, Shiridon's famous bitch stands out, in habit and in style well worthy of her master. Shiridon lives in a secret place, where it is difficult to find him. The entrance to his home is like a maze, a real labyrinth. Only by tying a thread to the bitch's leg and following it, like Ariadne's thread, could Khamis find his way to Shiridon's dwelling place.

Major sagas in which Shiridon plays the main role are few. Best known is the story about his stealing of Khamis's cow. In one hungry year, when the Narts were compelled to slay their last cattle, Shiridon stole Khamis's well-fed cow. While the meat of the slaughtered cow was boiling in the cauldron at home, Shiridon appeared at the Nart meeting place and chided Khamis over his loss. Khamis began to feel suspicious. He decided to make his way to Shiridon's home and see whether his cow was there. With great difficulty, following the thread tied to the leg of Shiridon's bitch, he found Shiridon's dwelling. In the cauldron meat was boiling. Sitting round waiting were Shiridon's seven sons. On the floor lay the head of Khamis's favorite cow. Infuriated, Khamis slew Shiridon's sons, chopped them up, and threw them into the cauldron. After Khamis had left,

Shirdon returned home, took the meat from the cauldron, and with horror saw that it consisted of the limbs of his sons. His grief was unbounded. Such great sorrow sublimates and ennobles the feelings of even an evil-doer, or at least, of a mischief-maker, and we see that in the moment of terror Shirdon grows before us into a tragic figure, compelling our unwilling respect.

From the bones of the bent arm of his eldest son he forms the frame of a small harp, and adds to it twelve strings from the heart fibers of his other sons, and to the sound of this plucked chords, he pours out his paternal sorrow. Thus, for the first time there appears among the Narts the twelve-stringed *fandir* or “hand-harp.”

Music is born of tragedy; such evidently is the thought behind this remarkable episode. The lament of Shirdon, played on his harp, shook the hearts of even the sternest of Narts. They forgave him his past actions against them, and took him among their number, to live with them openly, on an equal footing.

The remaining stories about Shirdon bear, in the main, the character of anecdotes, reminding us of popular tales among Caucasian and Turkish tribes, about Khoja Nasr-Eddin, frequently falling in with the theme, word for word.¹³

When we try to trace the origin of Shirdon’s image, there comes to mind first of all well-known mythological types from many folk-stories, those hero-rogues or tricksters. Such a trickster or deceiver is a kind of anti-hero. His behavior is often unsociable, even harmful to the community as a whole. This, as quite easily we see, is characteristic of many of Shirdon’s actions. Along with this deceptive side, the trickster may have certain traits of a cultural hero, which again were not lacking in Shirdon; thus he was the first to prepare the lap-harp for the Narts.

From the hero-trickster it is pleasant to pass on to such a radiant hero as Asamazh. Several themes and subjects in the epic are connected with his name.

The most interesting of these is the story of the wooing of Agunda, and her marriage to Asamazh. In this tale Asamazh appears as a wonderful singer and musician, charming the whole of nature with his flute-music.

This tale is found in several variants. Of these, one written down by Makharbeg Tuganov shows itself as a high creation of art. The song of Asamazh

occupies a special place in the epic. In it there are no scenes of cruelty or blood-letting that one meets in the other tales. The bitterest ideas of fate are foreign to it, the suffering that throws its shade upon the most important episodes in the history of the Narts. From start to finish it is imbued with sunshine and song, and is distinguished, disregarding its mythological character, by a brilliance and high relief of a psychological type, by the loveliness of its domestic scenes, by its abundant imagery, content, and perfection of form, this “Song of Asamazh” may rightly be regarded as one of the pearls of Ossetian folk-poetry.

Looking at this story, we may place Asamazh in the ranks of famous spell-binding singers: Orpheus in Greek mythology, Väinämöinen in the Finnish Kalevala, Giranta in the “Song of Gudrun” from Scandinavia, and Sadko in the Russian folk-tale. There exist, however, in this story certain features that lead one to think that this Ossetian Orpheus is typologically distinguished from his European brethren, and may be more ancient in origin than they. Reading the description of the effect which Asamazh’s music has on surrounding nature, we see that we are dealing not merely with a wonderful, magical spell-binding song but also with a melody that has the very nature of the sun. Truly, as a result of this song, the eternal glaciers begin to melt, the rivers overflow their bounds, the bared slopes are covered with a carpet of grass, blooms appear in the meadows, bees swarm among them and butterflies too, bears awaken from winter sleep in their lairs and welcome the sun. In short, before us lies a masterful portrayal of the coming of the spring. The song welcomes the sun and shares its power and activity.

Such a brilliant unity of micro- and macrocosmic elements in the motif of the marvelous singer is not found, as far as we are aware, in European Orpheus-type themes. Asamazh appears as a sun-hero, and his marriage to Agunda seems nothing less than a myth of the coming of spring.

Beside the heroes we have numbered in the Tales of the Narts there appear in some episodes a series of personages, remarkable in many ways, but not standing as the central figures in epic cycles. Such are Totraz, the son of Albeg; Arakhzau, the son of Bezenag; Shauwai, the son of Kanz; and Shibals, Marguz, and others.

There are a few tales that cannot be related to one definite cycle, since in these all the most notable Narts play an equal role. Such, for instance, is the story of the struggle between Akhshartagketta and the Borata family, and the tale of the black or gold fox.

The Nart epic concludes with an interesting account of the extinction of the Narts. They left this life in order to live eternally in songs. The rejection of eternal life in favor of eternal fame is the fundamental ethical idea of the Nart epic.

The motif of the struggle against the gods, with which the episode of the death of the Narts is full, appears in the epic more than once. It is expressed with greatest power in the Batraz cycle, in his final fight with the dwellers in heaven. The struggle of Shoshlan with Balshag's Wheel is also, in essence, a struggle against the heavenly powers. The root of such motifs is found in the ancient Prometheus-Amiran complex, wherein is reflected the first attempts by man to free himself from the power of the natural elements, and to subject nature to his will (as in the stealing of the heavenly fire, and so on). However, the persistence with which these motifs are repeated cannot be fully explained if one does not suppose that in the latest historical fates of the Ossetians-Alans there were factors that nourished and supported their existence. Such a factor was, in our opinion, the introduction of Christianity among the Alans. The struggle and death of Batraz, likewise of Shoshlan, and the final extinction of the Narts, was, perhaps, a poetical expression of the struggle of the old primitive heathen naturalism with the new Christian cult.

We remember that the titan Prometheus also was a representative of the older generation of gods defeated in the struggle against the new ones—Zeus in this case. In confirmation of this idea we direct attention to the fact that there is not a single instance of the struggle of the Narts against the purely heathen gods—Kurdalagon, the smith-god; Afshati, the god of the forest and its wildlife; and so on. For the Narts, these were on their side, “their people.” The Narts battled only against the Christianized god, Wasilla (St. Elijah), Washtirji (St. George), Oinon (St. John), and Zhedta (angels).

Vsevolod Miller (1881–87) and Georges Dumézil (1930, 1943, 1948, 1952, 1956, 1958a, 1960a, 1965, 1976, 1978a) showed that genetic ties of the Ossetian epic lead to north Iranian Scythian-Sarmatian tribes, occupying Southern Russia in the first millennium before our era. The brilliant comparative analysis carried out by these learned professors opened up such clear parallels between motifs and subjects in the sagas of the Narts and the legends and realities of the Scythian, Sarmatians, and Alans¹⁴ that they could not in any way be sheer coincidence. They are explained by the fact that the Scythian-Sarmatian-Alan world, disappearing into the past, continued to live in artistic transformations in this Nart epic. This view is supported by the fact that the names of the older generation of Narts bear a clearly Iranic character—Warkhag, Akhshar, Akhshartag, Urizhmag, Shiridon.

But this ancient nucleus, coming up to the times about which Herodotus tells, was never a closed world, never untouchable by outside impulses and influences. Just the opposite—it was wide open to the effects of other mythologies and folk-epics, with whose bearers these Scythians and Alans had combat in the course of their long history. To fully establish the scale of these surrounding ties is scarcely possible. The spread and transmigration of the northern Iranian peoples was too wide, and the number of peoples with whom the ancestors of the Ossetians had contacts was too great. Of their folklore and mythology we also know too little. But all the same, contacts with certain Indo-European, Turko-Mongolian, and Caucasian peoples left their traces sufficiently clearly in the epic poem of the Ossetian people.

The most ancient contacts were in the area of Eastern Europe, with the forebears of the Scandinavians, Slavs, Celts, and Italians (and Greeks).

A noticeable trace was left in the Ossetian epic (as also in Russian folk-tales) by contacts with the Turko-Mongolian tribes. In the Nart system of names the Turko-Mongolian stratum, both in its size and significance, comes immediately after Iranian. From the Turkish and Mongolian we get clarification of such names as Batraz, Khamis, Shoshlan, Eltagan, Shainag, Marguz, and others.¹⁵

There also exists a coincidence of subjects and themes. A few of them we have noted earlier.

The derivation of the term “Nart,” the common name of the heroes of the Ossetian epic, is of special importance in this relation. Many explanations of this term have been proposed. For the most part it is thought that the name is connected, one way or another, with the Iranian *nar-*, meaning “male,man.” Such is the opinion of Lopatinsky, Bleichsteiner, Trubetskoy, Rkhlitsky, Meyer, Dumézil, Bailey, Benveniste, and so on. Such an explanation, however, is not acceptable (see Abaev 1996 for at least some of these references).¹⁶ The Iranian word *nar* is reflected in the Ossetian word *næl*, “male,” and there is no reason to think that there existed a parallel (Ossetian) form *nar*.¹⁷ It is also most improbable that an epic (where the central figure is a woman, Shatana, a matriarchal figure) should bear the common name “men,” to say nothing of the colorless nature of such a term. The form and use of the term *Nartae* leaves no doubt that it is formed in the manner of Ossetian family names, with the usual Ossetian indication of the plural [collective] for *tae*, and therefore means “children of” or “descendants of” Nar. Then what can the term “Nar” mean here? Or to put it another way, whose descendants were they, those “Narts?” The answer to this question we find in the recordings of Caucasian specialist and ethnographer G. F. Chursin, taken down from an Ossetian storyteller. “Once upon a time the sun had children, the Nart warriors.” The word *nar(a)* really means “sun,” not in Ossetian, but in Mongolian. But there is nothing surprising in this. Alan-Mongolian relations were very close indeed. Among the Alans there could have been bilingual singers, in command of both languages. For them *nar(a)* was a special mythological name of the sun, in distinction from the common term in use *khur*,¹⁸ just as, say, in Greek there existed such a parallel, Apollo-Phoebos and Helios, that is, the sun. Is it necessary to point out that the name “children of the sun” [*Nar(a)-tæ*] fits these Nart heroes precisely? Would it be possible to find a better name?

We have stated earlier that the Tales of the Narts in their fundamental form, subject, and themes were considerably more ancient than the Alan-Mongol relations. How, then, to explain that this epic with its various songs went around

among the people a millennia or more, when the general term for its heroes “Nart” was not in existence? That is also quite in the order of things. The development of an epic is fulfilled in such a manner, that only at the end, in the concluding stages of the process, do the common factors appear. Before that there exist separate songs or story-cycles, which cannot be attached to any common whole or to a special hero. The appearance of the term “Nart” as a common name for all these epic heroes signifies the final stage of the process of development of the Alanic epic. It reflects and shows the need and efforts to bind the various tales together more closely in one whole and all-encompassing cycle. The Mongol influence has served as a spur to this end. In this there was something in common between the fates of both Alan and Russian epics. In Russian folk-stories, as you know, the heroes were called *bogatirs*, which is also a word borrowed from the Mongols, and appeared only in the Mongolian epoch. Nonetheless the old folk-songs were sung many centuries before the Mongol invasion.¹⁹

Why was it that Mongolian influence was fated to play such a role in the concluding stages of both the Alan and the Russian epics? Here, most likely, a whole range of reasons were active, but it will be sufficient to show the following three factors: (1) The Mongols were the people with extremely rich epic poems. (2) The relations between Alans and Mongols were of a lengthy and intensive character. (3) The clash with the Mongols, and also participation in Mongol campaigns, served as a spur to the livening of mutual tribal relations, and in part to the closing of the gap between the previously disunited groups of a military and of a family nature among the Alan people, which must undoubtedly have given a new sweep to epic creations, and have stimulated singers to attempts of uniting the separate and scattered military-family stories in a somewhat fuller and more complete form.

A special kind of international regional society formed the environment of the Nart epic in the Caucasus among the peoples dwelling there: Ossetians, Circassians (also known as Adygheys), Kabardians, Abadzekhs, and others (Colarusso 2002; Gadagatl’ 1994; Hadaghatl’a 1967, 1968–71); Abkhazians (Inal-Ipa 1962, 1988; Meremkulov and Salakaja 1975); Balkarians, Karachays

(Aliev 1994); Chechens, Ingush (Dalgat 1972); and Svans (Dzidziguri 1971). Here we refer not merely to a similarity between a few odd motifs or subjects, but to a general foundation of the epic's inventory, to the identity of chief heroes, and the general naming of them as Narts.

If we turn to the general content of the tales, then here we find a significant similarity, a unity of fundamental themes, and a likeness in composition between Ossetian, Circassian, Balkarian, and other variants. One can easily be convicted of this by Dumézil in his book *Legends of the Narts* (1930) where parallel French and various national variations are given.

One gets the impression that before us lie fragments of one single epic cycle. Among the Caucasian folklorists a dispute has sprung up as to which of the Caucasian people the Tales of the Narts really belong. The answer to this question is very simple: the epic belongs to the people among whom it circulates. That means that the Ossetian version belongs to the Ossetians, the Circassian one to the Circassians, the Abkhazian one to the Abkhazians, and so on.

Peoples derive their songs and legends not from the outside, but from the treasury of their souls, from their own historic experience, from their style of life. It is easy to become convinced that these nationalities of the Caucasus have the sagas of the Narts in variations that reflect their own everyday experience and circumstances, and that reflect the form, poetic style, and manner of recitation, as well as bearing traces of local national folklore traditions and national coloring.

The question of the origin of the internal inventory of tales, of personal names, and so on is another matter. It is impossible to say that the name "Nart" or the names of main heroes appeared independently among each of the nationalities. Here it is quite in place to raise the question about the overall epic's origin.

For the solution of this question the following facts are basic:

1. The term “Nart” includes the Ossetian plural indicator *t*, and is formed in the same way as other family names. Therefore it has passed to other nationalities of the Caucasus in Ossetian form (see note 17).
2. Certain Nart subjects, as has been shown by Miller and Dumézil, bear full analogy to the life and customs of the distant forebears of the Ossetians, the Scythian-Sarmatian tribes.
3. The names Warkhag, Akhshar, Akhshartag, Urizhmag, and female name Asirukhsh, and the name of the magical goblet Wasamonga, are quite undeniably of Iranian origin.²⁰
4. The main heroine of the sagas, Shatana, although not so fully clear as to origin, is nonetheless inseparable from the Alan princess Satenik, preserved in Armenian rhapsodies concerned with events of the second century AD (the campaign of the Alans beyond the Caucasus), thus pointing to an Ossetian basis.²¹
5. The name Shoshlan, being to all appearances of Turkish (Nogai) origin, is seen on Ossetian soil from the twelfth century onward (see note 16). (The husband of the Georgian queen Tamar, David Shoshlan, was its Ossetian bearer.) The name Sozruko presents itself as the Adyghey version of Shoshlan, with the local normal changing of the letter “l” to the letter “r.”
6. The name Batraz, formed from *Batir-as*, means As (Alas) warrior (see note 6).

All these leave no doubt that the material nucleus of the epic was the ancient Alan cycle, arising in certain of its elements already in the Scythian epoch, and unceasingly enriching itself thanks to contacts with other nationalities, and especially those of the Caucasus. The wide circulation that the name Sozruko received in Alan Ossetian variations speaks eloquently to the reverse influence of the Adygheys on the Ossetians. The necessary objective and unprejudiced analysis of the whole material leads on to such assessments. To such a

conclusion specifically comes Dumézil, a modern and outstanding mythologist and Caucasian specialist.

Summing up this short historical survey of the fate of the Nart epic, we may assert that a comparative analysis and study of the Tales of the Narts has led to these well-founded conclusions:

- The origin of the epic is found in the legends of northern Iranian tribes, Scythians, Sarmatians, and Alans.
- In the epic we come to recognize meetings with surrounding peoples, contacts leading to the mutual influence of the folk-epics of other nations: European (Scandinavian, Slavic, Celtic, and early Italian tribes), Turko-Mongolian, and Caucasian.

A folk-epic, as a special form of expression and as a poetic transformation of objective reality, needs interpretation. The Nart epic too requires such classification. What is hidden behind its images, subjects, and times? In the past century a dispute arose between two trends in the study of folk-epic creations, especially Russian folk-tales, both mythological and historical. Echoes of that dispute are heard today. The disputed point was this: whether on the one hand folk-epics contain mainly expressions of the myths, that is some poetic imagery or “explanation” of the phenomena of nature and the life of the people, or on the other hand, real historical facts, events, and personages. In another place, in an article concerning ancient Iranian religion and mythology,²² we have tried to show that it is not a matter of alternatives, either myth or history. Both one and the other exist side by side in religious systems, and also in folk epics.

This combination of the mythical and the historical in an epic is not mere chance or eventuality. It is normal and unavoidable. It appears as a result of the fact that the composers of the epic, folk-singers and tale-tellers, have at their disposal a rich inventory of traditional, mythological folklore images, subjects, and motifs, while at the same time they are children of their times, and of their natural and social environment, with its concrete historical experiences, events, customs, and psychological circumstances. This reality strongly invades the mythological area, and thus every folk-epic is not only a collection of myths and fairy-tales but also a valuable historical source. Of course, it is not always easy to separate myth from history. One may sometimes take the historical as myth, and the myth as historical. This is where disputes and differences of opinion are possible. But these will not be major and fundamental differences and disagreements on principle between schools of thought but minor deviations in the interpretation of separate elements of the memorial folk-epic.

The Tales of the Narts provide ample evidence for this complex twinned perspective. Therein one finds diverse and wonderful combinations of interwoven myths and history.

In examining separate cycles we already remarked that the origins of each of them consisted of this, that, or the other mythological factor: totemistic attributes, and the myth about twin-brothers in the Akhshar and Akhshartag cycle, the myth about the first human couple in the Urizhmag and Shatana cycle, the myth about the sun-hero and sun-worshipper in the Shoshlan cycle, the myth about the sun and the coming of spring in the Asamazh cycle, and the myth about the thunder in the Batraz cycle. Comparison with the mythology of other nations—especially Indo-Iranian, Scandinavian, Celtic, and Italian—enables us to reveal a mythological substratum in these places where it was veiled from sight by much later emendations and accretions.

A good example of this is the incestuous marriage of Urizhmag and Shatana. One might perceive here an echo of the endogamous customs that once existed among certain peoples, including the ancient Iranians. However, the influence of comparative mythological material convinces us that such a solution would be premature. In the most ancient religious and mythological epic of the Indo-Iranian peoples, the *Rig Veda*, brother and sister Lama and Lami become progenitors of a people. They themselves were born from the union of the god Gandarva and a “water-woman” or mermaid (*apya yosa*). We should remember that Urizhmag and Shatana were also born of such a “water-woman,” the daughter of the sovereign of the sea, Donbettir. In all the variants of the tale about Urizhmag and Shatana one motif is repeated: Shatana actively pursues her marriage, while Urizhmag resists her. The same thing occurs in the episode with Lama and Lami.

If the mythological foundation of the Nart epic does not raise any doubts among us, then just as unquestionable is its historical basis. We see at every step how, through the mythological schemes, their modes and motifs, appear traces of history, concrete historical events, a concrete people.

This historical basis of our epic consists, first of all, in the fact that in the majority of the tales a well-defined social setup is reflected. Nart society does not yet know a state system. Among them we see the signs of tribal organization, the family organization, with noticeable survivals of the matriarchy, in the figure of Shatana, for instance. The passion for campaigning cattle-raiding makes itself

felt at that stage of the development of the tribal system, which Engels named military democracy. We know that such a system was typical of the Sarmatian tribes.

From concrete events of Alanic history in the epic, most clearly and dramatically is reflected the struggle between heathen beliefs and Christianity. In essence and content our epic is heathen, pre-Christian. Although the names of Washtirji, St. George, and Wasilla, St. Elijah, and other Christian persons figure in it, the Christianity remains only in the names, while the images come from the heathen world.²³ As we have tried to show, along with these names goes the struggle between Christianity and heathenism. Shoshlan and Batraz are the heroes of the heathen world, dying in the struggle with a new god and his servants. The capitulation of Batraz before St. Sophia is the capitulation of the heathen Alans before Byzantine Christianity. Historically that all took place, as we know, between the fifth and tenth centuries. By the tenth century Christianity, at least nominally, had conquered the whole Alanic domain, and the Alanic episcopate had been established. In the episodes of the death of Batraz and Shoshlan the epic appears as one of the “passing away of paganism.”

Clear traces are found in the Tales of the Narts of Alan-Mongol relations. Do they contain any memories of any concrete historical personages? The name Batraz, *Batir-as*, meaning “warrior-Alan,” shows itself as the Mongolian variant of the Georgian *Os-Bagatar*, “warrior-Os” (Ossetian) (see notes 6 and 14). Thus is named in the Georgian chronicles the warrior-chief who in the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries fought with the Georgians against the Mongols, and in particular took the fortress of Gori, which in some Nart stories is attributed to Batraz in particular. As we may infer from other Ossetian stories, his real name was Alghuz. Then why has the epic preserved the hero’s name in its Mongolian form? Most probably for the same reason as the Serbs named their national hero Black George in the Turkish fashion, Karageorgi, and the Spanish named their hero Ruy Diaz, Count of Bivar, in the fight against the Moors, the Sid, in the Spanish manner, meaning “a prince of a commander.”

If we pass from the Nart heroes to their enemies, we shall recognize a few historical figures. About Shainag-aldar, under which name is revealed the

Mongolian Sain-Khan, that is Bati, we have already spoken. In the name of the Agur people, hostile to the Narts, we recognize the Turkish ethnological term Ogur.

Speaking of the historical character of the Tales of the Narts we cannot remain silent about one other specific feature, its great realism. Realism in the portrayal of social and everyday circumstances, and in the outlining of characters. It may seem strange to speak of realism where we do not leave the realm of inventive fantasy, but nevertheless, the Nart epic is deeply realistic. It is difficult to convince a simple mountain man that the Narts did not exist and perform great feats. He is ready to admit that many of these deeds and adventures of the Nart heroes are mere inventions, but that the people themselves, so life-like, in such high relief, as if carved out of a mountain cliff, could be a mere idea of somebody's head, that he could never allow.

The picture of the life and customs and society of the Narts is painted in such lively, realistic colors.

Originating in the totemistic plane from the wolf, and in the cosmic plane from the sun, the Narts remain faithful to their dual nature: as children of the wolf they love hunting and fighting, cattle-raids, and campaigns, and as children of the sun they love the rollicking radiance, gaiety, and happiness of feasts, games, and dances.

If we try on the basis of these stories to determine what main occupations the Narts had, and how they spent their time, we come to the conclusion that there were two: on the one hand hunting, cattle-raiding, and plundering expeditions, and on the other, noisy and abundant feasts, with dozens of slaughtered beasts, and with enormous cauldrons full of *rong* and mead, and inevitably at such celebrations the lively and noisy songs and dances. Such dances are brought to notice time and again, not as a chance feature, but as a leading motif, a real element of Nart life, as a serious and important occupation, to which the Narts gave themselves up whole-heartedly. It is quite possible that these dances had ritual significance. Otherwise it is difficult to explain why the Narts should perform their dances, for instance, when outside the enemy Agurs had besieged them and were ready to break into their village.

As far as their cattle raids and plundering expeditions are concerned, we need make no mistakes: they were purely “wolfish” exploits for the sole purpose of seizing sheep and cattle, and driving them off, and especially important, obtaining horses in this way.

We frequently see the leading Narts troubled by the thought that maybe somewhere there is a place they haven’t plundered. The fact that such a place existed was a sufficient motive to send them seeking more spoils.

This peculiar style of life, and its accompanying psychology, reflected in the most ancient strata of the Tales of the Narts, is not in itself a matter of chance. This is the life and psychology in which our epic was born. It is necessary to transfer oneself into that society with its warrior-band organization, with its constantly restless and rollicking style of life, with its perpetual clashes and conflicts between families and tribes, with its cult of boldness and daring, and with its plundering exploits in order to relate oneself to it with the necessary objectivity, and to determine its place in the history of the development of early forms of society. It stands to reason that neither the society depicted in Homer, nor the society of the Niebelungen, nor the society of the Russian folk-tale, where in all the state appears as a settled institution, can be placed in our historic range with Nart family and tribal society. Of all the European epics, only the ancient Irish sagas give us a picture typologically similar to the society of the Narts.

As enemies of the Narts, and the objectives of this valor of theirs, we see on the one hand the giants, *waiuguta*, and on the other the *aldarta* and *malikta*, that is the princes and feudal lords.²⁴ If the giants come from folklore, and symbolize, evidently, the crude untamable forces of nature, with which the cultural and creative man has to battle, then the others, and the struggle against them, are reflections of certain real historical events. The opposition of the Narts to the *aldarta* is the opposition of the warrior democracy to the already forming feudal system among their neighbors.

Devastating the domains of these feudal lords, and driving off their cattle, the Narts act, to use modern terminology, as expropriators of the exploiters.

Traces of divisions into class groups that one can recognize in Nart society in a few of the variants, one must relate to the very latest accretions of the epic, since they fit in vary badly with the whole structure of life in the most ancient part of the tales. In a few cases misunderstandings can obviously occur. For instance, two or three mentions of slaves are absolutely without foundation if presented as evidence of class division among the Narts. Slavery as a social institution we do not see in the epic, but what we do see are a few isolated slaves among the captives taken in warfare, and quite compatible with the tribal structure. There are many witnesses historically to the fact that in the purely tribal society of the Ossetians, Ingush, and Chechens, captives were often made slaves when there was no possibility of selling them.

If we take not separate instances here and there but the general impression left by the Nart's world in the most ancient parts of the epic, then before us, without a doubt, stands a family-tribal society, and furthermore with clear remnants of matriarchy.

The people in general form a warrior-group organization, of which it may be said that a certain kind of hierarchy is found there, but that is only the hierarchy of the elders and those with war glory. From this purely warrior-group organization comes yet another peculiarity of life among the Narts: the scorn for old and ailing Nart warriors, who can no longer take part in feuds and cattle-raids. This contempt for the aged arose from the conviction that the normal death for a fighting-man is death in battle or from wounds.

The material culture of the Nart warriors corresponds with that epoch depicted by their everyday social life. Here we have the Early Iron Age, in its romantic period. The profession of smith is surrounded by a shining aura, as it was in Homeric Greece, in Scandinavian mythology, and in the Finnish Kalevala. Like all that appeared beautiful and sacred, it is transferred from earth to the sky. The heavenly smith Kurdalagon is the blood-brother of Hephaestus and Vulcan and appears as one of the central figures in the epic. He not only forges weapons for the heroes, but even tempers them in his furnace as well. His relations with mortals, and here the great antiquity of the epic speaks, was incomparably more intimate, simple, and patriarchal than any smith-god in the

West. He was, for instance, a frequent participant in their feasts. The most outstanding Nart heroes, Batraz, Aishana, the son of Urizhmag, and others, remained with him for long periods on high as guests.

Iron and steel are met with in the epic at every step. Iron appears not only in weapons and armor. We meet iron-winged wolves, and hawks with iron beaks. Iron gates are quite usual, and there is even a whole castle made of iron, built by Shoshlan for his wife, the daughter of the sun. Finally a few heroes themselves are made of iron: Batraz in all variants, and Khamis and Shoshlan in some.

Alongside iron, gold is very popular. It figures both as a decorative epithet—golden hair, golden sun, and so on—and as a material attribute—golden apples, golden goblets, golden cones. Bronze went into cauldrons, and as some of the stories assure us was also used to patch up skulls broken in battle, when being repaired in Kurdalagon's heavenly smithy. Silver is not popular in the epic. A few times ivory is mentioned, and also mother-of-pearl and glass.

The weapons of the Narts consisted of swords (*kard*), battle-axe, pole-axe or halberd (*sirk*), spear (*arts*), bow (*ærdin*) and arrow (*fat*), shield (*wart*), chain-mail (*zhghær*) and helmet (*taka*). The mention in a few variants of guns and cannons rests entirely on the conscience of a few of the latest tale-telling modernizers! Weapons are sometimes thought of as animated. Thirsting for battle, they give forth flame or blue haze. The famous "Tserék armor," on hearing the word "battle," itself jumps up in place on the warrior hero.

All other materials, not connected with war feats, hunting, or feasting, are mentioned in the epic very vaguely, and only in passing. Sometimes Narts appear as shepherds, sometimes as farmers. But in the description of that side of the domestic life of the Narts, there is not that brilliance and reality as shown in military things. The Narts breed sheep, goats, and horned cattle, but they especially prize herds of horses.

Concerning agriculture among the Narts there is even less material. In one story (tale 20), the young Shoshlan, feasting with the gods, is presented with an iron plow, water to turn the mill, and wind for winnowing the grain. Here we have obviously a mythological interpretation of the source of agriculture.

Bread is scarcely mentioned in the tales—only the three scones made with honey that Shatana brings as an offering to the gods on the sacred hill, Waskupp, when she goes to pray to them. But since the Narts were great lovers of beer, then they must, one supposes if only for that purpose, have produced barley. Another favorite drink among the Narts was *rong*, prepared with honey, like mead. That does not mean that they occupied themselves with beekeeping. They could have obtained honey by bartering with neighbors, maybe Slavic tribes that went trading.

Many everyday features are scattered around in the description and explanation of the fates of deceased people in the world beyond the grave (see “Shoshlan in the Land of the Dead” [tale 36]), but to relate them all to the Narts’ early epoch is quite risky, since in this picture is included, pretty obviously, the experience of people of a much later age.

If we hear little about the working activities of the Narts, we hear all the more clearly and colorfully the rich description of their amusements. The leisure time of the sons of the sun,²⁵ judging by the stories recorded, was full of feasts, dancing, singing, and games. As is said in one of the tales: “God created the Narts for the merry and carefree life.” Contempt for death somehow is naturally and simply coupled with love for life and its joys. After the strain of battle, of distant cattle-raids and hunting, they gave themselves up heart and soul to carousing and merriment. Having seized rich spoils, the Narts never “put something away for a rainy day.” The plundered cattle were immediately put in the pot to entertain the whole tribe at the feast. To arrange such bountiful and generous carousals for all was obviously a matter of honor for the most distinguished Narts, and they did so on every possible occasion. The inability and unwillingness of the Narts to lay in supplies for an emergency resulted in their rapid swinging over from one extreme to another, after excessive feasting frequently followed a period of hunger, leading these children of the sun to exhaustion and even emaciation. Stories describing these sumptuous feasts and merriment stand in contrast to others, no less in number, portraying the times of common hunger and want. There are no signs, however, that these Narts in times of depression and need lost heart, or changed their habits. At the first possibility,

after the next successful cattle-raid, these irrepressible people gave themselves up to unrestrained enjoyment and merriment again.

Of the scale of the forthcoming feast one can judge by the formula of the village-crier. Not a single soul could refuse to attend after hearing the invitation: “All who can walk, bring yourselves,” cried the herald, “and those who cannot walk, then carry them!” Feeding mothers were recommended to bring their babies with them in their cradles. The tables were set out to a full extent of a bow-shot. The abundance of eatables was truly gargantuan; the festive boards bent and broke beneath the weight of the meat dishes. Beer and mead flowed over the brims of enormous cauldrons. The talented Ossetian artist Makharbeg Tuganov, in his remarkable work *A Nart Feast*, with its fine knowledge of the realities of those days, has given us a picture of how the Narts, those gourmands of the Iron Age, feasted and enjoyed themselves dancing.

The culmination of the feasting came when the famous Nart folk-dance, the Shimd, began (tale 67). This ancient, original and stylish round-dance in which all participate, even when performed today, produces an imposing impression. Multiplied in its effect by the superhuman powers and temperament of those Nart titans, this dance, the stories tell us, shook the very mountains, and was an outstanding spectacle. Even the gods above looked down on the Shimd dance of the Narts in amazement, mixed even with a goodly portion of fear!

Apart from the mass round-dance, solo dances are also described, demanding the greatest artistic skill and virtuosity from the performer. He had to dance on the very edge of a small, low round three-legged table (*fiŋg*), set out at feasts with food and dishes and goblets, without disturbing a single crumb. He also had to dance tip-toe on the brim of the great cauldrons filled with beer, without shaking or upsetting them, or finally with a goblet of mead on his head, without spilling a single drop. The irreproachable performance of such feats was possible only for the best dancers, and competitions between them were one of the Narts’ favorite spectacles. Such a competition between two famous dancers, Shoshlan and the son of Khizh, serves to tie up the famous story of the besieging of the Khizh fortress, and the subsequent marriage of Shoshlan.

Along with the dances, the Narts loved what we today would call sporting events. The character of these competitions was, of course, warrior-like, and their scale, simply Nart-like in scope. Archery and the testing of swords were the most usual of these contests. The stamina of steeds was tested in the glorious Nart horse races, in which even the heavenly god Wastirji took part. There is also mention of the game of knuckle-bones, usually among children.²⁶

In general, one of the characteristic features of the Nart heroes was a persistent and restless spirit of rivalry. To be the best always, and in everything, that was the fixed idea of the most eminent Narts. A few Nart tales have as their plot one and the same question that preoccupied all: “Who is the best among the Narts?” From this question arises, in a range of variants, the story of “Urizmag and the One-Eyed Giant” (tale 11). This same point stands at the center of attention when the beauty Akola, or Agunda, or Wazaftawa, or others are going to choose a husband for themselves, and scrupulously compare each of the suitors with the others, finding in everyone some small fault, until they make the final choice of Asamazh or Batraz. Then there is a passionate outburst about the same question, when the Narts are deciding who shall keep the sacred bowl of Wasamonga (tale 66). Finally this same question is set in the well-known tale about the elder Narts who bring out three most sacred treasures, to award them only to the most worthy.

In this last story, “Who Is Best among the Narts” (tale 69), the laurel wreath goes to Batraz. It is very interesting, in judging the ideal of human perfection among the people, to see what qualities gain for Batraz first place among the Narts. They were three: valor in battle, restraint in eating, and respect for women. Other stories and variants add a further range of qualities that, taken together, give a good idea of the Nart ideals. Through the whole epic run the threads of generosity, hospitality, and friendliness. Every successful raid results in a festive board for all. The aura that surrounds the married couple Urizhmag and Shatana is to a significant degree explained by their unbounded hospitality. Until today on Ossetian lips the names of Urizhmag and Shatana are synonyms for hospitality and generous kindness. There is no greater compliment than to name one’s host Urizhmag and one’s hostess Shatana.

Among the Narts the feeling of family solidarity and comradeship is highly developed. These features are connected in the closest way with the warrior-group organization of society, and flow naturally from it. In such conditions, when the tribe means also comradeship of the group, a natural feeling of blood-relationship between them grows many times over, thanks to common participation in battles and in hunting expeditions with their attendant dangers. Many stories have as their theme the saving of one Nart by the others in moments of mortal danger.

The thirst for adventurous feats and the scorning of death are the inseparable qualities of the real Nart. When a god presented the Narts with the choice of eternal life or eternal glory, they choose without hesitation death and eternal glory, rather than an existence without fame or honor (“The Downfall of the Narts,” tale 89).

Re-creating in the epic of the Narts a certain ideal epoch in their own past, the folk counted as one of its special features the intimacy, simplicity, and closeness of relationships between the people and the world of the gods. Truly, these relationships are distinguished in the epic by an exceptional kind of patriarchy and directness. The tales not only describe occasions of meetings between gods and the people but also underline the fact that such contacts were in the nature of things, and that they were of frequent occurrence. “The Narts were fellow diners with the gods,” is said in many stories. One of them about the end of the Narts begins so: “When the Narts were still full of strength, and when the pathway to the heavens was still open to them” The open road to the heavens, here is the dream of the golden age, incarnated in the Tales of the Narts. Their gods were people like themselves, with the same psychology, and the same weaknesses. They frequently and easily communicated with the Narts, and distinguished Narts dwelt with them for lengthy periods.

If, on the one hand, Narts were friends of the gods, then on the other hand they also appear as friends of nature, of birds and beasts and flowers. The world of the gods, the world of the people, and world of nature, these three worlds in Nart times breathe still as one life, and understand each other’s tongue. We remember what a wonderful effect the music of Asamazh had on all nature: the

beasts began to dance, the birds to sing, the grass and flowers to bloom in all their beauty, the glaciers to melt, and the rivers to overflow their banks. In following Balshag's Wheel, Shoshlan keeps up a conversation with all trees, and blesses the birch and hopes for their services to him. When he lies dying, the beasts run to him, the birds fly to him, and he speaks kindly to them, and offers his corpse to them as food. With touching nobility even such predators as wolves and ravens simply refuse his proposition. Swallows, the great favorites of the Narts, serve as a perpetual go-between for earthly mortals and the gods dwelling in the heavens. In some variants a swallow flies to Shoshlan as a messenger, bearing a warning of danger threatening his mother (tale 34), and in this same way also brings the Narts news of Shoshlan's death (tale 37). Many other sketches, showing the intimacy and mutual understanding between Narts and nature are scattered everywhere in the epic.

In general when we set on one side the later accretions in our many-layered epic, we see resurrected in its oldest parts Nart society, whose everyday life, world-outlook, ideals, and ideas produce an undiluted impression, whose completeness is overwhelming.

As if living, there stands before us the Narts' world, a world of severe warriors, and carefree dancers, offspring of the wolf, and sons of the sun, mighty as titans, and naïve as children, fierce and cruel to enemies, boundlessly kind and generous and extravagant at home, friends of the gods, and friends of nature. However original and far from us that world may be, on entering it we cannot avoid the impression of reality and liveliness that the folk's imagination has given to this fairy-tale mythical world.

The Tales of the Narts is an image of a wonderful legendary world created with such simplicity and power that it becomes near and dear to us, and we involuntarily feel that we must pay due tribute to the poetic genius of the folk who long ago composed and created it.

- (1). District of Ossetia, where their own local dialect is spoken.—WM
- (2). The three tufts of hair on the Scottish sporran, are a relic of [a Celtic form of] this custom.—WM

NOTES OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDITOR

1. The notion that the Caucasus, if not most of Eurasia, went through an era of matriarchal culture was popular during the early decades of the Soviet Union, in Abaev's youth. Such notions appear even among Western thinkers, such as Robert Graves and his thoughts on pre-Classical Greece, as in his *The White Goddess*.
2. Abaev is probably referring to a Russian version of Dumézil's 1943 article, "Légendes sur les Nartes: nouveaux documents relatifs au héros Sozryko," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 125: 97–128. Kevin Tuite informs me that such translations often appeared under special titles, as with Dumézil 1976. A more recent discussion of the same theme can be found in Dumézil 1978a, pp. 91–122.
3. The Iron and Tuallæg (Southern) Ossetians are Orthodox Christians. Only the Digoron are Muslim (Sunnis).
4. Dumézil 1978a, pp. 249–61.
5. This is one of a number of ideological allusions to Engels herein that Abaev made to be in compliance with the Communist system under which he lived most of his life. I have not bothered to track down the bibliographical data that underlies them.
6. The origin of the names of the Narts cannot be determined without consideration of their forms in the other Caucasian traditions. The Ossetian /xæmec/ corresponds to /xəməšʷ/ in West Circassian, while Batraz, earlier Ossetian /batradz/, is taken from East Circassian (Kabardian) /bet(e)rez/. West Circassian shows /p'eterez/ and the rarer /feterez/, the latter probably from Ubykh, where */p'/ → /f/, but the East Circassian form shows that this has been distorted from an earlier */pat'araz/, because in East Circassian */p/ → /b/. The forms of these names therefore suggest the originals */xaməčʷ/ and */pat'araz/ with /e/ ← */a/. If we turn to the East Caucasus to Ingush (close to Chechen), we find /xamč/ and /pataraz/, /patiraz/, or /patriž/, suggesting the Vainakh (Ingush-Chechen-Batsbi) originals */xamč'/ and */pat'raz/ or */pat'riž/. I would therefore posit originals */xemčʷ/ and */pat'(e)raz/. The first is not far from Abaev's Mongolian *Khabichi*, but one should have expected something like */xabəčʷ/ in the various Caucasian forms if this were the source name. The second proto-form, however, seems less close to *Batir*, which itself is a borrowing of Iranian *bahādur*, also found in Russian as *bogatyř*. The origin of these names is foreign to Ossetian and even to Iranian, as Benveniste also suggested (1959, p. 129), but it is probably local (Colarusso 2002, saga 33, n. 2). One might conceivably see for the first a Circassian */xə-m-čʷ/, "haste, frenzy-not-bend, tend" — "Don't be hasty, frenzied," as Khamis so often is, to his own detriment (note /xəže/, "to hurry; to be bold, decisive, frenzied" [Kuipers 1975, p. 66]; /tʰətʰə/, "to hurry" [ibid., p. 68]). For the second one might see Circassian */pat'a-ra-z/ "damage, destroy-locative-army" — "One who was an army's destruction," as Batraz is (note West Circassian /ye-p'et'e-, "cause-be.worn.out, damaged" (ibid, p. 10), reshaped from earlier */pat'a/ through the influence of the preverb /p'a-, used with a sense of severing or breaking.
7. It is not clear to me [JC] what work of Dumézil's Abaev is referring to here. Dumézil saw Batra(d)z as a trifunctional hero (Dumézil 1978a, pp. 50–66, and earlier references cited therein).
8. Dumézil 1978a, pp. 19–90.

9. Dumézil 1978a, pp. 169–224 ; 1960a.

10. The suffix */-mæž/* in Iron, until recently */-mæz/*, may be an Indo-Iranian reflex of Indo-European **megʷ-* ‘great, large’, or **makʷo* “son of” as in Irish *mac*, Welsh *map*, and old Germanic names *mag*, usually considered as restricted to northwestern Europe. The older forms of these names still found in Digoron are *Atsæ* and *Atsæmæz* (see appendix of names).

11. *Gætæg* is assimilated from *Bætæg*, which itself comes from Iranian **bartak-*, with a root *bart-* that occurs also in the name of a hero found in the Ubykh Nart sagas, *Bartinuquo* (Colarusso 2002, saga 86) and may also occur in that of a witch found in the Circassian Nart sagas, *B(y)aramupkh /b(y)are-m-ə-pχʷ/* *Byara-oblique.case-his-daughter* (ibid., sagas 10, 50, and 60). Such gender switching would suite *Shirdon* (as well as Norse *Loki*).

12. This is the widespread Indo-European theme of withholding a cure from a son or comrade. For example, Irish *Finn Mac Cumhail* brings about the death of *Diarmaid*, his valiant younger follower, while Iranian *Rustam* unwittingly slays his son *Sohrab* (Puhvel 1987, p. 118).

13. In Arabic */naṣr al-din/* means *Help(er) [of] the-faith*, suggesting that this later figure is a moral inversion of the trickster *Shirdon*. See guide to the names.

14. These were nomadic tribes that roamed from the plains of Hungary to those of western China from roughly 1000 BC until the coming of the Huns with the fall of Rome in the fifth century AD. They are assumed to have spoken Indo-European languages of the Iranian branch of which Ossetian, Persian, and Pashto are modern survivors. See *Rolle’s* archaeological discussion (1980), *Reeder* (1999), and *Rice* (1957) for discussions of their golden art, and my own general account (Colarusso 1994c). The Scythians called themselves *Skolotai* and what few words we have of their language from Herodotus, such as *oior pata* ‘man slayer,’ suggest that it was not Iranian and perhaps not even Indo-European. A link to a “Macro-Armenian,” that is, to a language cognate with Armenian, is possible, in which case the name would refer to “Little Dogs,” a youthful warband (← PIE **/kʷon-lo-to/*, “dog-diminutive-collective,” cf., Armenian *skund*, “puppy”; Colarusso 2004). The name of the *As*, from which *Asia* takes its name, is directly continued with an old collective suffix in *Ose-ti*. The Sarmatians seem to have been the ‘free ones,’ Ossetian */sarma-tə/* free-collective (Miller 1885). The Ossetians call themselves *Iron*, the same name as *Iran*, which shows a reflex (descendant form) of the original genitive plural **/āry-ānām/*, “of the Aryans.” This precludes direct linguistic links between the Ossetian self-designation and the group of dialects where original */-ry-/* yielded */-l-/*, as with the *Alans* or the *Roxalani* (*/ruxš-alani/*, ‘white, western-Alans’). Ossetian does, however, show the shift of **/-ry-/* → */-l-/* (Benveniste 1959, p. 29) for most of its vocabulary. A part of the name *Alan* is preserved in the name of one of the Nart families, the *Alægatæ*, which is from a collective built upon an old adjective: **/ārya-kā-ta/*. This name can only be from an l-dialect of Iranian.

Thus, the Nart sagas seem to contain an array of old Iranian nomads. Ossetian itself seems to have descended from the old Iranian l-dialect cluster, but to preserve a self-designation from the r-dialect group, and to be known to outsiders by one of the oldest Iranian names, that of the *As*.

15. *Shoshlan* (earlier *Soslan*) is probably from Indo-Iranian **/šwas-āryānām/* breath-of.the.Aryans, through Alanic **/sos-alan/*. For **/šwas-/*, compare English “wheeze”. *Eltagan* (*/eltayan/*) is from either a Turkic language or Mongol, and is based on the verb */yältä-/*, “to excite, rouse” (Abaev 1996, vol. 1, p. 411), and is found on an Old Turkic inscription from the Yennisey in the form *eltoyan* (Benveniste 1959, p. 146). *Shainag* is taken from Mongol *sain*, “glorious” (ibid., vol. 3, p. 22).

16. Abaev 1996, vol. 2, pp. 158–60.

17. There is little reason to muddy the waters here. The root is /nart-/, as in /nart-xor/, “Nart-food”, “maize” (Benveniste 1959, p. 116) and not /nar-/ and the derivation from Indo-Iranian */n̥tama/, “man-superlative,” for the former (ibid., p. 37; Bailey 1980), and from */nár-ya-/, “man-one.of”, “male” for the latter (Benveniste 1959, p. 29) is about as clear a set of etymologies as one could wish for. Mongol /nara/ would have yielded *Narata in Ossetian. Any links with Mongol /nara/, ‘sun’ (Abaev 1996, vol. 2, pp. 158–60), must be seen as later folk etymologies.

18. This is the Iranian reflex of Indo-European */sə₂-w-l-(n-)/, ‘sun’, as found in Gothic *sauil*, English *sun*, Latin *sōl-*, Greek *āélios*, *hēlios*, Old Church Slavonic *slunice*, Russian *solnce*, Lithuanian *saulė*, Sanskrit *súvar*, *súrya*, Avestan *hvarə* (Pisani 1947, p. 151, §335).

19. The Turkic and Mongol influences on the Nart sagas must be late if their origins are among the Iranian nomads of the steppes of Classical antiquity. There is little in either Russian or Caucasian traditions that reflects the Altaic era that does not overtly deal with Tatars, Turks, or Mongols. Russian *bogatyr* is in fact cognate with Persian *bahādur*, both terms referring to a knight. The Persian may itself be taken from Sanskrit or a related Indic language. The Russian and Indo-Iranian terms are likely built on one of the Indo-European roots for ‘god,’ */bhogh-/, so that the title originally would have meant a pious person.

20. These names likely have the following etymologies: Warkhag /wærxæg/ ← Proto-Iranian */warxa-ka-/ wolf-adjective ← Indo-European */wolk°-/ English *wolf*, Russian *volk*, and so on (Abaev 1996, vol. 4, p. 93); Akhshar, earlier /(æ)xsær/ ← Proto-Indo-Iranian */ksar-/, “brave”, and his dioscuric twin (Colarusso 2002, saga 3) Akhshartag, earlier /(æ)xsærtæg/ ← Proto-Indo-Iranian */ksatr(i)ya-ka-/ ‘kingly, warrior.caste-adjective’ (Abaev 1996, vol. 4, pp. 229–30), “kingly, knightly” ; Urizhmag, earlier /urizmæg/ ← Proto-Indo-Iranian */warza-māka-/, with */warza-/ from a substrate loan into Indo-Iranian meaning “wild boar,” and Proto-Indo-European */mak°o-/ ‘son,’ “son of the wild boar”; and Asirukhsh, earlier /aci-rūxs/ ← */wacə-ruxs/, “holy-light” (Abaev 1996, vol. 1, p. 27), from an Iranian language that lost the initial */w/.

21. This name is of mixed Iranian and Circassian origin: /sata-na-ya/, “hundred-mother-one.of,” “mother of a hundred,” with /sata-/ being Iranian and /-na-ya/ being Circassian. The Armenian name is clearly a borrowing from farther north in the Caucasus.

22. Abaev 1990c, pp. 302–25.

23. 23 These names are based on the Ossetian prefix for “saint” or “holy”, /wac-/ (German *weih-*, Sanskrit *Viṣ(nu)*, and the names “Elijah” /illa/, Digoron /ilea/, and “George” /žərž̥i/ with /c-ž̥/ → /s-t/ because of the original coronal (tongue blade) cluster behind /wastərž̥i/. Perhaps the most interesting shift due to Christianity is that of *Nartamongæ* to *Watsamongæ*, /nart-amon-gæ/ → /wæc-amon-gæ/, ‘Nart-to.signify, indicate-diminutive,’ shifted to ‘holy-to.signify, indicate-diminutive.’ This is a sort of Holy Grail found in the Nart sagas (Littleton and Malcor 1994).

24. This paragraph and the next were clearly written by Abaev so as to make the Nart sagas agree with Marxism-Leninism and to permit him to defend the Ossetians in the totalitarian environment of the late Stalin era.

What is remarkable about the Nart sagas across the entire North Caucasus, the Ossetian no more than the others, is the almost total absence of political information concerning Nart society. The society is clan based and not even tribal. Although other ethnic groups are occasionally mentioned, as Abaev states, they almost always serve merely as enemies or traditional rivals. Distant kingdoms with a lord or an emperor do sometimes play a role, but such sagas are usually outside the main stream of Nart life (64). The occasional rich man or lord is mentioned, but usually to serve merely as fools before the heroism of the truly valiant

warrior Nart. In short, one cannot envisage more clearly a society that stands outside of traditional Marxism than that of the Narts.

Abaev's third paragraph suggests this impossibility by noting that any traces of canonical class structure are late accretions. In this paragraph he more or less repudiates what he has written in the preceding two. As he says, Nart society is an archetypal mythic society that serves as a stage for the warrior raiding ethic and the almost chivalric heroism used to ennoble it. It may reflect an ancient clan-based social order that might have typified the Eurasian steppes at a remote era and to some extent typifies the Caucasus even today. To have seen it as a cog in the Marxist machine of history, as Soviet censors would have been intent on doing, was to have missed the point altogether, but Abaev's career and the welfare of the Ossetian and other Caucasians depended on the sort of Marxist apology he has written here.

25. Here Abaev is invoking his preceding etymology of *Nar(t)-tæ* as based upon Mongolian *nara* 'sun.' See note 17.

26. Knuckle-bones is the original form of the game of jacks, using five astragulus bones from the hock of a ruminant.

PART 1



WARKHAG

AND

HIS SONS



Warkhag was in those days among the eldest of the Narts. To him were born two sons, twins. One came at the first cockcrow, the other before the morning star, Bonvarnon, had appeared in the sky, at the second cockcrow. The rays of the risen sun shown into the heart of Warkhag, and he felt how dear to him were these two newborn babes. So that the day of their birth should bring the newcomers happiness, Warkhag prepared a feast, consisting of game caught in the hunt, to regale his guests.

Warkhag invited the heavenly smith, Kurdalagon, and the ruler of the deep seas, Donbettir, and highly esteemed Narts, Bora and others, were called to that rich feast. Kurdalagon took a fancy to Warkhag's sons and named them so, the elder he called Akhshar, and the younger Akhshartag.

Why did he give them these names? Speaking of a brave man one says "Akhshar." The first brother was such a young fellow, and so received that name. But the second brother was even bolder, and so he was called "Akhshartag," which means "bravest."

To celebrate the naming of the newborns, Kurdalagon presented Warkhag with a magic flute, which he had forged himself from tempered steel at his heavenly forge. The Narts placed this wonderful flute on the festive table, and it began to play on its own accord, merrily and resoundingly,

Take a cup of mead!
 Take a cup of mead!
 Drink it down indeed!
 To please God!

For seven days and seven nights Warkhag's guests feasted, and when the feast was over Kurdalagon leapt onto the crest of a fiery storm cloud, and like wide-winged Pakunza, flew off on it to the heavens. Donbettir changed into a

pearly, fiery fish and disappeared into the sea depths. The Narts, as befits those who spend their life on campaign, went off on a dangerous expedition.

Akhshar and Akhshartag grew with each passing hour. In one day they grew two inches; in a night a whole hand's breadth! They were a mischievous pair. They made for themselves bows and arrows, and there was not a bird who could fly over their heads. They shot them down immediately, and they fell like stones to the earth. The whole world soon knew that the Nart Warkhag had two gallant grown-up twin sons, Akhshar and Akhshartag.

2 ♦ AKHSHAR'S SWORD

Akhshar and Akhshartag soon grew up, and there came the day when they decided to go on a quest for a year. They made all their gear ready, and set off on the road. They came to a place where the road divided in three, and agreed thus, "We shall take one side-road each, and the middle road will be our place of meeting. Let us both put one of our own arrows we have beneath this stone by the wayside. Whoever returns, let him come to this stone and see whether his brother's arrow is still there."

Akhshar and Akhshartag then parted, traveling different roads. A year passed by, and Akhshartag returned to the agreed spot, lifted the stone and saw that Akhshar's arrow still lay there, covered with moss and mold. Akhshartag was at once disturbed. What had happened to his brother? He set out at once on the road that Akhshar had taken. He traveled a long time through forest and field, and over mountains, and toward evening he came to the Black Ravine. There he stayed for the night, and saw in his dream that his brother had been taken prisoner.

At once Akhshartag jumped up and went onward. Again he traveled all day, and toward evening he came to the White Ravine. He rested once more for the night in a forest grove, and had only just fallen asleep when he saw the same troubled dream as on the first night. Again he jumped up, and still full of alarm he went onward. From morning till evening he traveled, and now before him he saw the Red Ravine. But how could he not help feeling hungry after such long

travels? He could not sleep, but went in search throughout a grove, hoping to find some wild game to shoot. Suddenly he saw a lake, and on the shore stood a tent. In the tent from time to time some strange incomprehensible light appeared, and then disappeared.

“That tent is put there for some purpose,” he thought. “Maybe I can find here what has happened to my brother.”

He stepped a little nearer to this tent and began to peer in through the flap. He saw that inside the tent an iron door had been set in the floor, which opened and closed by itself. Each time it opened a light also glowed from somewhere in the tent. Akhshartag was amazed. What kind of wonder was this? The next time the light shown, he loosed an arrow in its direction. Straightaway he then heard a piercing cry—such a shriek that the trees bent down, and the lake seethed up and hurled waves ashore, and the beasts sleeping for the night in the grove grew frightened, and began to run away, bumping into one another in their haste. A little time passed, and all grew still again. The lake gathered its waves together, the trees straightened up, and the beasts quietly returned to their rest.

It began to grow light. As soon as dawn broke, Akhshartag saw an old woman come out of the tent. She had one crooked eye quite sightless, and in the other sighted eye stuck the arrow he had shot. She was moaning and groaning. Akhshartag came nearer and saw that she carried his brother’s scarf in her hand. He asked straightaway, “Who are you, old woman? How do you come to have my brother’s scarf in your hand?”

“Ah, young man, I don’t know who you are, but if you call yourself Akhshar’s brother, then you are my brother as well. I am one of the Narts. When he set out for the underwater dwellers, the Bisenags, he left me his scarf and said sternly, ‘Take care of it, my sister. If blood appears on it, that means that I am in difficulties, but if no blood appears, then you need not worry about me!’ I have just seen blood on the scarf. That means that he is in great trouble, your brother Akhshar, and he has probably fallen into the hands of the Bisenags. Now I have been blinded, and I don’t know what I can do.”

“Is there no remedy that would give you back the sight of one eye at least?” asked Akhshartag.

“If someone gathered some drops of morning dew and mixed them with doe’s milk, and sprinkled it on my wound, then I would see!”

Akhshartag ran off into the forest, caught a young deer and milked it, and mixed with it some fresh dew-drops. Then he gently removed the arrow from the woman’s eye, and poured into the wound the prepared mixture. She at once began to see again, and was happy to make out Akhshartag.

“How do you think my brother fell prisoner to the Bisenags?” Akhshartag then asked her.

“I shall tell you all, from the beginning, as far as I know it. The Bisenags went out hunting, and suddenly the gates of the sky opened, and out fell a piece of heavenly ore, right on the head of the eldest Bisenag, and passed right through him. The Bisenags carried off that piece of heavenly ore with them, below the water. Akhshar heard about this, and thought that he would take this piece of ore from them. When he came they must have surrounded him, tied him up, and carried him off as a prisoner with them. Just today I was making plans about what to do, when because of your arrow I was unable to carry on.”

“But to whom among the Narts do you belong, and why do you call yourself one of our women? To whom are you sister? Then afterward explain why when I looked at your tent at night there appeared and disappeared a strange light.”

“I am Warkhag’s sister, but I have lived here for a long time. My husband shared a table with the sun, and the sun presented him with a white stone. That stone I hung around my neck every night, and it lighted up my path. The light you saw was the light from it!”

“Where, then, has your husband gone?” inquired Akhshartag.

The old lady pointed to the iron door, lying in the ground, “That door leads to an underground cave, and at evening, on Saturdays, it opens. The Bisenags come to catch at least one person living on earth’s surface. If they don’t succeed, one of them dies. So it was that they once took my husband, but what happened to him I do not know, just as I do not really know what has happened to Akhshar.”

Akhshartag and the old woman waited till Saturday evening came. When the door to the underworld opened, Akhshartag put his shoulder under it to prevent it

from closing, then gave a great heave, and tore it out, together with its hinges, and flung it aside. After that he and the old lady went into the cavern and saw with horror that a man lay bound with arms and legs spread out, and from his beard and mustaches was woven a rope-like ladder that stretched up to the surface.

“There he is, my husband, the master of my head!” cried his wife.

Akhshartag drew his sword and cut the man’s bonds, and then cut short his beard and whiskers. The man stood up and thanked Akhshartag. Then they went together into the cavern, and suddenly saw Akhshar, standing as though he had been crucified, with his back to the cavern wall, while the Bisenags were shooting arrows at him, and then began attacking him with their swords. Seeing this, Akhshartag fell on them in a fury, and began to hew them down, while Warkhag’s sister and her husband chased those who fled, and killed them.

Thus Akhshartag freed his twin brother, Akhshar.

“You and your husband go along home together, and Akhshartag and I will come to you later!” said Akhshar.

The husband and wife went off together, while the brothers looked for the storeroom where the Bisenags kept the ore. They found this heavenly ore at last where the Bisenags had hidden it, and carried it off to the smith of the gods, Kurdalagon, and from it he made for Akhshar a two-edged sword. Such a sword it was that from a single blow any stone or any metal would fall apart, while the blade itself was never blunted.

When Akhshar and Akhshartag descended to earth again from Kurdalagon’s forge, they found the Bisenag’s chief, Karamag, waiting for them with more men. Akhshartag at once engaged them in a furious battle. But Karamag struck Akhshartag such a cunning blow that he fell senseless to the ground, and his sword dropped from his hand. Just then one of the servants of Donbettir appeared and whispered to Akhshar, “Smear your blade with this fish oil, and you will overcome your enemies!”

Akhshar at once smeared his sword with the fish oil, and then when Karamag raised his sword to strike him, Akhshar parried the blow, and Karamag’s blade shattered into tiny fragments, like little tin tacks.

Akhshar went on to slay all his Bisenag opponents, to the last one. The Donbettir servant, who advised Akhshar how to avoid defeat, then carried Akhshartag off to the Milky Lake, and bathed him in its healing waters, where he immediately recovered consciousness.

The word about Akhshar's wonderful sword flew round among all the Narts. They all gathered to see, and stood in amazement before that wondrous weapon. Since that time, whenever difficulties faced the Narts Akhshar went into battle against their enemies in the vanguard with his wonder-working sword. For its invincible durability it received the name "Akhshargard," which means "Akhshar's sword."

After Akhshar's death, his eldest son inherited his sword. Since then it has been a Nart custom that the eldest son receives his father's sword, and the youngest son inherits his horse.

3 ♦ THE APPLE OF THE NARTS

An apple tree grew in the Narts' orchard. Like heavenly azure its blossoms shone, but each day only one apple grew ripe on it. That was a golden apple, and it gleamed like fire. It had also life-giving powers, and cured people from all kinds of diseases, and healed all kinds of wounds. Only from death could it not save one. In the course of a day such an apple ripened, but during the night somebody always stole it. The Narts went on guard in turn, every night, but nobody ever saw anyone stealing the apple, though it continued to disappear each night.

It became Warkhag's turn to stand on guard in the orchard. He called his sons Akhshar and Akhshartag, and said to them, "Go, my sons, and protect the golden apple. All my hopes are set on you. If you do not preserve it, then you know what will happen. All three Nart tribes will gather here, a man from each of the three families. One of them will cut off your heads, the second will cut off your arms, and the third will stick on a stake the head of one of you and the arm of another and I shall remain alone in my old age with none to protect me nor feed me!"

“Have no fear, father, we shall guard the golden apple tree!” his sons replied.

“Get along then. I know that you are afraid of nothing. Only I myself am afraid that you should not guard the apple well,” said their father.

The fence around the orchard was of reindeer antlers, and it was so high that not even a bird could fly over it. The brothers sat under the magic tree and had their supper, and the younger one, Akhshartag, said to the elder one, Akhshar, “We shall stand guard by turns. You lie down now, and sleep till midnight. From midnight it will be your turn to watch.”

Akhshar agreed, lay down, and slept. He awoke at midnight and said to his brother, “May god forgive me, Akhshartag, but have I not overslept?!”

“No, it is not midnight yet, sleep on a little!” said Akhshartag.

Akhshar was glad to hear that and slept again. Then at about the hour when night begins to change to day, some kind of bird, it seemed, flew to the tree.

The apple was suddenly lit up, and Akhshartag saw a dove near the magic apple. She plucked the apple by its stem, and Akhshartag straightaway shot an arrow at her, so that half of her wing fell to the earth, and the dove, covered in blood, flew lower unevenly, and let the apple fall to the ground. Then Akhshartag woke up Akhshar.

“You see these drops of blood?” he said to his brother. “I shot a dove in our apple tree. She flew off, and see, here is half her wing! Very low, only just above the earth she flew, leaving a trail of blood. I must follow that track. I must catch her, or die in the attempt. There’s nothing else left for me to do!”

Akhshartag carefully bound up his victim’s half-wing in a silken handkerchief, and put it in the bosom of his coat, and when it grew quite light he said to Akhshar, “I am off to seek that wounded bird. What do you say to that?”

“I shall come with you, wherever you go!” replied Akhshar. So the brothers followed the bloody trail that led them to the seashore.

“It goes on into the water!” said Akhshar, and Akhshartag replied, “I shall go to the bottom of the sea. Wait for me here. If the waves throw up bloody foam on the shore, that means I am no longer in the Land of the Living, and you had better return home. If the waves throw up white foam, then wait for me here! Wait for just one year!”

“Very well,” answered Akhshar, and remained on the shore.

Then Akhshartag pulled up the ends of his overcoat and stepped into the water, and down to the bottom he went . . .

4 ♦ THE BEAUTY ZERASHSHA

After a long descent through the dim waters Akhshartag found himself in the house of Donbettir.

The walls of the house were made of mother-of-pearl, the floor was of blue crystal, and the morning star shone through the ceiling.

Akhshartag stepped across the threshold, and there he saw seven brothers sitting, along with two sisters, one more beautiful than the other. Like gold glittered and gleamed the maiden’s fair hair.

“Good day to you!” said Akhshartag, as he greeted them. “May happiness ever fill your home!”

“May you be blessed by a kindly fate!” one of the seven brothers and one of the pair of sisters replied. They rose and made a place for him to be seated. The three who were older than he sat on one side, the four who were younger on the other. They looked Akhshartag up and down, and said, “None like you has ever been in our home before, and never will be again. We should be joyful at your coming, and greet you with honor, but we cannot do so now since we are in mourning.”

“God save you from all sorrow. What woe is troubling you?”

The eldest brother answered him so, “We have three sisters, and one of them has been going into the Narts’ orchard, and it has ended badly for her. There each day a golden apple grows and ripens. At night our sister changed into a dove, and stole it away. More than once we told her that the Nart youths were bold, and no birds dare fly over their heads, so don’t go after any more apples. But she did not listen to us. The Narts Akhshar and Akhshartag were guarding the apple tree last night, and wounded our sister fatally, may they cut each other down with their swords!”

They had only just pronounced this name when a groan was heard from the adjoining chamber.

“Who is that groaning?” inquired Akhshartag.

“It is our Zerashsha, of whom we have told you,” they replied.

“Is there any remedy that will cure her?” asked Akhshartag.

“There is such a remedy!” answered one of the brothers. “If anyone can put back the missing half of her wing in its proper place she will be cured, and her life will be saved. If not, she will surely die!”

“How would you reward anyone who cured your sister?”

“We should give our beloved sister Zerashsha to him in marriage! The gods have decreed that only such a one should she marry.”

Then Akhshartag boldly told the brothers the truth, “I am Warkhag’s son. Akhshartag is my name. The half-wing of your sister is in my keeping. I was the one who wounded her, and I will be the one to cure her. Bring her in here, I beg you!”

The brothers’ faces all lit up with happiness, and they answered Akhshartag, “Our sister, Zerashsha, is seriously ill, and we cannot move her out here to you. You yourself must cross the threshold of her chamber.”

Then the young Nart stepped across the threshold.

A beautiful young woman was lying in bed, and her golden hair fell over her shoulders and down onto the floor. The sun was laughing on her face, and the moon was shining upon her breasts. She turned toward Akhshartag, and he could not help smiling with happiness. He took from his belt the silk handkerchief, and out of it he took the half-wing and laid it on Zerashsha’s wound. And straightaway she became seven times more lovely than before.

The seven brothers and her two sisters were all so glad, that they happily gave Zerashsha to Akhshartag as his bride. One day then another and so on for a week the wedding feast lasted for Akhshartag and for Zerashsha, the daughter of Donbettir. They fit one another like the sun and the moon among their guests at the festive board.

Day followed day; week followed week. Akhshartag and his beautiful bride, Zerashsha, lived in the underwater land of Donbettir.

Then came the time when Akhshartag remembered how his brother was still waiting for him, and he grew sad. He then said to Zerashsha, "I cannot live here any longer. I must go to meet my brother, and then return home!"³

"If you have a home of your own, then we must hasten there. It is not good for me to remain here any longer!"

She was already with child, and wished for it to be born in her husband's home, as custom demanded.

In the hour of farewell Zerashsha took a strand of golden hair from her plait and bound it round herself and Akhshartag, and at once they became two big fish, shining with scales of mother-of-pearl, and thus they swam up to the surface of the sea.



In the dark forest, on the seashore, Akhshar built himself a tent of animal skins, and awaited news of his brother. Once he saw that the waves cast up white foam on the shore, and he was very glad. "Alive and well, my brother will soon return happily to me! I shall go hunting for wild game, and maybe I shall be back in time for his return." So off he went to the hunt.



"Where are my two sons? Shall I never see them again?" so said old Warkhag, and grief bent his head, and his great power was broken.

But the Nart youths were glad that Akhshar and Akhshartag did not return, since they were always and everywhere so superior to them, and made them obey. They did not hesitate to mock Warkhag, and made him always take the cattle out to pasture as their shepherd, to insult him. Warkhag grew angry at this. More than once he deliberately drove some of the cattle into the sea, and drowned them, or prodded them over the edge of an abyss, and they broke their necks. He remained in the wilds, and did not go to the villages of the Narts, but all the same he suffered more, because of his absent sons.



Akhshartag and Zerashsha came from the bottom of the sea and saw on the shore a tent made of skins. They looked inside, but Akhshar was off hunting, and the tent was empty. When Zerashsha entered the tent, all inside was lit up by the radiance of her face. Such a fine tent it was, that she said to Akhshartag, “I cannot leave this place until I have sat and rested here awhile.”

“Very well,” replied Akhshartag. “You sit here meanwhile, and I’ll go and look for my brother.”

So Akhshartag went off to the forest to find his brother. In the meantime his brother returned home to his tent, and so the two brothers missed each other . . .

5 ♦ THE DEATH OF AKHSHAR AND AKHSHARTAG

Akhshartag had been gone a long time when Akhshar returned to his tent. When he entered he caught sight there of Zerashsha, and said to himself, “Oh, God of gods! Do not take away what happiness you have given us, neither on the road, nor at home! How could I expect that Akhshartag would not only return alive, but also bring his bride to my tent?”

Zerashsha glanced at Akhshar, and mistook him for her husband. Those fair-haired, tall, bright-eyed, wide-shouldered twin brothers were as like as two peas, so much that even Mother Earth and the God in heaven could not distinguish one from the other.

“Why have you been so long away?” asked Zerashsha.

Akhshar did not answer.

“What is wrong with you? Don’t you recognize your own wife? Did we not live a whole year together beneath the sea, with Donbettir?”

Thus Akhshar was convinced that before him sat his brother’s wife.

Zerashsha, mistaking Akhshar for her husband, gathered her things for the night, and began to cling to him, but saw at once that he turned away from her, distressed.

The time came to lie down and sleep. Silently Akhshar spread out his felt cloak, and they lay on that, covering themselves with Akhshartag’s cloak. But so that there should be no intimacy between him and his brother’s wife, Akhshar

drew his sword and placed it between himself and Zerashsha. This so infuriated her that she, being deeply offended, rose from the bed, and sat farther away, with a bitter, sad look on her face.

Some time afterward, toward morning, the tent-flap opened, and in stepped Akhshartag. He had shot a deer, and had brought a tree, branches and all, to make a fire.

When he caught sight of Zerashsha sitting with an offended look on her face, and his brother sleeping under his cloak, jealousy crept into his soul. What if Akhshar had taken advantage of his wife Zerashsha? Why did she look so distressed?

He took an arrow from his quiver, and shot it up into the sky, "Oh, God!" he prayed, "let my arrow soar like two, and return as one, and pierce that place where he touched my wife!"

The arrow soared away, then turned point downward and fell and struck Akhshar's little finger, and immediately he died.

Further distressed, Zerashsha told Akhshartag all exactly as it had happened, and he was seized by despair. Because of him and his suspicion, his innocent brother had died! He straightaway drew his sword, and placing the hilt on his brother's breast, and the pointed blade at his own heart, he leaned heavily forward upon his sword. The point pierced his breast, and thus Akhshartag died . . .

ZERASHSHA'S LAMENT

And then Zerashsha tore her hair,
Beat with her fists on brow and knees,
Scratched her cheeks, and cried in despair,
"Oh, woe is me! Black days are these!
Because of me brothers have died.
Because of me their blood was shed!"
She moaned and groaned, lamented, cried,
And mountains echoed her woe o'er head.

Wild beasts in sorrow silent fell,
On hearing her pitiful sad lament.
Her tears on blood-stained cheeks did swell,
Went streaming, gleaming, never spent.
Her sorrow floated like a cloud
Above twin corpses as they lay.
Her warm tears fell, like a funeral shroud,
But naught could wash her woe away.
She sat between them. Till midnight came,
Above the corpse of Akhshar the bold.
From midnight till morning, just the same,
Above Akhshartag, his flesh grown cold.
“What shall I do with these poor dead men?
Let ravens come, peck out their eyes?
Let foxes come, and gnaw at them,
And tear their pallid cheeks likewise?
I should make each of them a grave,
But how can I do so alone?
How bury them here, beside the wave,
Where all is stern, unyielding stone?”

Just then Washtirji, a great spirit on a three-legged horse and accompanied by a hunting hound, descended from the heavens to the earth. He then appeared before her, and said, “O Zerashsha! Sun of suns! Ornament of the universe. My lovely world, and the beauty of the earth! Long since I have followed in your tracks, and here I see you in great sorrow. What has happened to you?”

“How could I not be sorrowful?” replied Zerashsha. “I have been the cause of the death of these two brothers, and I do not know how I am going to bury them here!”

“O woman!” replied Washtirji. “I could of course bury them both, but if I do, then you must become my wife!”

Zerashsha straightaway answered, “Why should I not become your wife, after you have buried them?”

Hearing this, Washtirji lightly struck the earth with the handle of his whip, and the bodies of the two brothers sank into a cavity in the ground. Then there arose a tomb of stones united by mortar above their grave. Then above the risen tomb a beautiful palace arose. Washtirji then turned to Zerashsha and said, “Well, now all is accomplished, and we can go.”

“Wait here a moment while I go and wash my face and hands at the seashore. How can I go with you like this? The blood has dried on my cheeks and fingers,” so Zerashsha answered him.

Washtirji took her words as true, and off she ran to the seashore. She threw herself into the watery waves, and sank below into her father’s domain, the realm of Donbettir.

Washtirji waited and waited, and what kind of thoughts and wishes did not run through his head? “Where is that woman, then? The lovely Zerashsha has disappeared! She has deceived me, Washtirji, and I shall not forget such deception. Just wait awhile, and woe to your hearthstone!” swore Washtirji. “In this world I may not be able to catch you, but how will you escape me in the Land of the Dead?”

Washtirji flew into a fury, leapt on his three-legged horse, and called his hunting hound, and galloped off along the seashore to hunt.

6 ♦ THE BIRTH OF URIZHMAG AND KHAMIS

Zerashsha lived beneath the waters in the home of her parents—the Donbettirs. When her mother knew that Zerashsha was expecting a child, she said to her, “Go now, my daughter, into the land of the Narts. Whoever is not born in their country, they will never recognize as their own.”

So the poor woman did as her mother had advised. With bowed head she set out on her long journey.

“Even if I reach a Nart village, who will take me in?” she wondered.

Soon she came to such a village. Zerashsha went near the square, the meeting place of the respected Nart elders. As is incumbent upon a bride, she bowed her head, and did not turn her back upon the old men.

The Nart elders were surprised.

“Who is she, then? She showed us deep respect, as though she were one of our newlyweds. But all our young wives are here in the village. There are none who according to the custom or because of some offense or the other would go back to their parents’ home to stay with them!”

Then the elders said to the young Narts, “Go to our women, and tell them to find out who this young woman stranger is, who comes as our guest.”

So the young Narts went to the Nart women and said to them, “Listen, young wives of ours, well-mannered and silent before your elders, ask this newcomer why she too is silent before us. Is she one of our brides? You, our respected older wives and mothers, find out if she too is a respected mother, and learn her name, where she is from, and tell it to us!”

The young wives began to surround Zerashsha and to question her, “Who are you, and what are you?” they clamored.

But Zerashsha did not answer, and thought to herself, “If I tell them who I am, my answer will not be heard by the elders from my own lips, and may not be believed!”

Then the mothers, seeing that she did not answer the young wives, went up to her and asked her, “Tell us, what brings you to the land of the Narts?”

Zerashsha answered, “Don’t all ask me questions at once. If you wish to know who I am, and where I come from, let one of you speak, and I will answer.”

Then one of the most respected mothers took her to one side, “My sunshine, tell me, what brings you here? They all trust me here in this village, and you may trust me too!”

Then Zerashsha glanced at the elderly mother and answered, “It is awkward for me to even mention my name, and where I come from. It is shameful for me to stand on Nart land, before you young Nart wives and respected mothers. It is against custom to utter it before you,” replied Zerashsha, “but there is no other

way out for me, so despite that, I must tell it to you. My husband was Akhshartag, and I beg you lead me only to the ground floor of his tower,¹ where the cattle live in winter.”

Then the women told the young Narts whose bride she was, and they repeated it to the elders, sitting in the village square, “This woman comes to us from those relatives of ours for whom we have been waiting for so long.”

The elders were glad to hear this news, and replied, “Let it be so, then. If we have not heard from them so long, then nonetheless we shall learn from her what has happened to them. Only do not take her to old Warkhag’s tower, but to the topmost chamber in Akhshartag’s bastion!”

When Zerashsha standing nearby heard this she said to the women, “It is not fitting for me to be there. Soon will come the time when I shall show you a new shoot off your family tree. Meanwhile it were better and quieter for me to be not at the top of the tall tower, but in the shady cattle-stall below.”

So the women led her to the stall down below in the tower, and there she gave birth to twin sons. Urizhmag and Khamis they named them.

7 ♦ HOW URIZHMAG AND KHAMIS FOUND THEIR GRANDFATHER, WARKHAG

By day two fingers, by night a hand’s breadth grew her twin sons. But when they went out of doors for the first time from their home, and stood out on the street playing, and shooting their bows, all of the Nart youngsters hid wherever they could from the whistling of arrows.

At that time Kulbadag-ush, a seeress, sent her only daughter to the spring to fetch some water.

As soon as Khamis saw the girl, he shot an arrow at her, which smashed the jug to smithereens, and tore her dress to pieces.

Crying and sobbing bitterly she returned home.

“What happened to you, for goodness sake? Why did you return home so soon, and where is the water I sent you for?”

“That mischievous young devil Khamis shot an arrow at me, and broke the jug to bits, and tore my dress to rags.”

Her mother gave her another jug, and warned her, “Go again, my daughter, and don’t come back without water. May the milk I fed you on as a babe fill you with some of my sharp words. If you can’t answer back to such a young rascal, may you not have much luck in your life!”

The girl had only just stepped out of the house, when Khamis again shot an arrow at her.

“How easy it is to test your strength out on me!” shouted the girl. “Any little bird of the forest is stronger than I. But if you are a bold young fellow, better go and find your old grandfather, Warkhag, who has withered away, wandering after the Narts’ cattle!”

Having heard these offensive words, both boys broke their bows and arrows in a frenzy, and roaring and shouting like highway thieves, they burst into their house and told their mother, “We are going to the meeting place of the elders in the square. We have heard that our grandfather Warkhag is still alive. We want to go and find him. The elders may tell us where he is.”

They arrived on the square, where elders from all three Nart families gathered, and some of the younger Narts too.

Urizhmag and Khamis said, “May fortune smile on your council!”

“May it smile on you as well!” was the reply.

“We have heard that our father’s father, Warkhag, is still alive, and pastures Nart cattle. We beg you to show us where we may find him!”

“Let some of the younger boys go with you and show you the way.”

The lads led them to the pasture. As Urizhmag and Khamis strode toward their grandfather, the earth trembled beneath their feet, and stones fell from the cliff-sides.

From far away Warkhag heard the thunderous steps of Urizhmag and his brother, Khamis.

“What a wonder is this?” thought he, “Akhshar and Akhshartag are no longer in the Land of the Living, but it seems to me I hear them!”

Suddenly he saw the youngsters, and called, “Hey, who are you then?”

They answered him back, “We are the twin sons of Akhshartag.”

“Come nearer, come nearer to me. Only by feeling your limbs, and how you are made, can I tell who you are, and recognize you as my grandsons or not.”

Urizhmag and Khamis came up to the old man and embraced him, and then Warkhag fell silent, while with the tips of his fingers he felt their wrists and knee joints. Tears began to flow from his eyes, “My sons Akhshar and Akhshartag have perished, but I am happy that our breed has not passed away.” Thus he recognized his grandsons.

Warkhag then led the youngsters back to his old tower. First they climbed upstairs to the chambers at the top, but saw that they could not enter for all the rubbish accumulated there.

Then one brother took a wooden shovel, and the other took a broom, and they cleared away the rubbish and swept the rooms. All was shining bright when they finished, and everyone saw that the tower was seven times more beautiful than before.

Supporting their old grandfather by the armpits, they led him out into the courtyard, and there they trimmed his shaggy hair and beard and whiskers.

Then they stuck his staff into the rubbish outside and made him urinate on it. And they saw that his stream arced upward.

They gaped at each other in surprise and said, one to the other, “Yes, indeed, he’s still quite young, our granddad! He can still work, and manage to feed our mother.” They escorted him back to the hearth, sat him on a stool, and then said to him, “We are your sons, and from now on we shall live with you!”

While they were doing all this, Zerashsha stayed in the upper part of Akhshartag’s tower.

Now, having found their grandfather, and put all things in order, they set off to meet their mother again. They took her with them to the old tower of their grandfather Warkhag, and old Warkhag, when he saw Zerashsha, took her to be his wife.²

1. In olden times a tower was an essential possession for every well-to-do Ossetian family. The building of such towers began in times immemorial, and lasted up until the end of the eighteenth century. These four-sided conical towers were equipped for living in, for fighting, and for observation, having from four to seven stories. They were constructed of rough stone slabs held together by mortar. The ground floor of a domestic tower served to house cattle and domestic possessions. The other floors were used for living in, and the topmost one served for observation purposes. Such towers were built by rich families. In the Nart tales they are often owned by giants, by rich cattle-owners, and sometimes by famous Nart ladies.

2. Up until the nineteenth century Ossetians had a domestic tradition according to which the wife of a deceased husband wed an unmarried member of his family, most usually a brother. This custom was maintained because of an enormous *irad*, or “bride-price,” which was demanded right up until the October Revolution in Ossetia. By keeping the dead man’s wife in the family, they thus preserved a useful worker in the home, and avoided having to pay colossal sums for a bride from another family. [In remote mountain villages this custom, and the *irad*, still may be found until this day.—WM]

3. According to ancient Ossetian custom, the husband has to take his wife back to his home after the wedding. To remain living with his wife in her home was counted a disgrace for a man. To such a person they gave the name *midagmoj*, which means “a domesticated man.” Society looked on such men with scorn.

PART 2



URIZHMAG
AND
SHATANA



A year had passed since the marriage of Warkhag and Zerashsha. Then Warkhag died, and Zerashsha lived after that only a year or so more. Before her death she called her two sons to her and said to them, “When I die, you must stand guard over my corpse for the first three nights, because I am under the threat of a powerful being who has sworn to give me no peace in the Land of the Dead.”

Then she died, and they placed her body in a vault.

The first night came. Urizhmag put on his armor, took his bow and arrows, stood at the entrance to the vault, and kept guard till morning came. He did the same on the second night as well. On the third night Khamis said to his brother, Urizhmag, “Our mother brought us up together, so let me stand guard tonight over her corpse.”

Urizhmag answered his brother thus, “If I could have been sure of you, then not I but you, as the younger son, should have stood guard over our mother’s body all these three nights!”

Khamis was offended by Urizhmag’s sharp words, but he put on his armor, took his bow and arrows, and set off for the vault. There he stood on guard—and how could it be otherwise? But soon, from the Nart village, he caught sounds of merriment and feasting, the songs and dancing of wedding celebrations. Then with disappointment he thought, “Let the one who listens to a dead person die too! Who would want the corpse of my mother? Let me go and join in the dances, and have some fun at the wedding feast!”

But no sooner had he left the vault than its walls were lit up, and Washtirji entered. He tapped Zerashsha with his magic felt whip, and she became alive, and seven times more beautiful than she had been. But when he left, he touched her again with the magic whip, and all the life left her body again, and Zerashsha slept the deep sleep of the dead.

Nearly a year passed by. Sharp-eared Shirdon passed Zerashsha’s vault, and heard a baby crying there. He went straight off to the meeting place in the

square, where the three Nart families convened, “Peace upon this meeting, and a good morning to you all!”

“May you meet with a happy fate this day, Shirdon!”

Then Shirdon told the elders of what he had heard, “A miracle has happened in the Nart cemetery. A newborn babe is crying there!”

At the head of the elders, in the seat of honor, sat Urizhmag. Having heard Shirdon’s words he thought to himself, “My light-minded brother obviously did not guard my mother well on the third night.”

He jumped up, and quickly went to the burial ground. There he entered Zerashsha’s vault where her corpse lay, and at once saw nearby a newly born baby girl. He took her home with him, and they named her Shatana.

She was so wise and beautiful that in the light of her face the night became day, and the words she uttered were straighter than a sunbeam, and sharper than a sword.

9 ♦ HOW SHATANA BECAME URIZHMAG’S WIFE

Urizhmag became a grown man and took as his wife a beauty named Elda, from the Nart family Alagata.

Meanwhile Shatana had been growing up also. In one month she grew by a year, in one year she grew by three. She became such a beauty as had never been seen before among the Nart girls. Slender was she, bright eyed as an angel, and when she turned round, she was like an arrow in flight. Her voice was like nightingale’s song, and when she answered you her words were as caressing as a mother’s. Her hands were hospitable and generous. The bread she baked was such that one crumb would satisfy your hunger and make you as drunk as *aluton*, the ale that the Narts so much loved to drink.

The time came for her to get married, and she thought to herself, “I should take a husband, but how am I to know who is fated to be my mate?” She looked around on the earth; she looked on high in the sky, but among the earthly souls, and even among the heavenly spirits, she found none more valorous and wise than Urizhmag.

She simply could not disobey her heart's choice. "Either I shall become the wife of Urizhmag, or I shall not become anyone's wife!" So she said to herself. But it is easy to propose, and not so easy to dispose, as the saying goes.

She did not dare to confess her desire to Urizhmag, nor had she any intention to tell him through the lips of another.

What was to be done? She must put a bold face on and somehow approach the desired subject, so she spoke thus to Urizhmag, "Urizhmag, does anyone cast his wealth and possessions to the winds? Is it not a pity to give me in marriage to some other family? You must become my husband. There is no other way out!"

Urizhmag's ears rang with shame, the hair on his head stood on end.

"You can forget that at once!" he answered her. "Have you no conscience? If I did so, how could I show the Narts my face?"

Time passed by, not long, not short, and Urizhmag was preparing to go on a distant campaign. He would be away for a whole year.

Then he said to his young wife, Elda, "When I return, people will come to our house to meet me, and greet me, and congratulate me on a safe return from the campaign. See that you are in good time, and have everything ready to make our guests properly welcome, and prepare the necessary food and drink!"

So the year ran on toward its end. The time for Urizhmag to return drew near. Elda began to make honeyed mead for the guests. But when she poured the ferment in, it just would not brew properly. So, what could she do? Elda did not know that Shatana had, with her heavenly wisdom and earthly magic, prevented the mead from fermenting. In her distress she ran to Shatana and told her trouble to her.

"My dear girl from my husband's family! It is time for me to prepare a feast for my husband's guests, who will come on his return, but my mead will not ferment. If I do not prepare food and drink, my husband will see how helpless I am, and will beat me for it! He will be so angry—and that's worse than death for me!"

"But what business is that of mine?" replied Shatana indifferently.

Elda ran to and fro between the unfermented mead and Shatana.

“What can I do now? Ah, woe is me!” she cried, “my soul is hanging by a single hair. My death-hour is drawing near!”

Shatana had brought her to the brink of despair, and was convinced that she feared Urizhmag’s anger more than anything.

“Listen, my beautiful Elda,” she said. “I want to play a joke on your husband when he returns. Lend me your wedding dress and veil for one night, and I’ll make some new ferment for the mead, so that it will brew at once, and be ready.”

The young wife agreed to this, and Shatana made some ferment from malt and hops, and the mead brewed up straight away.

Urizhmag returned safely. His Nart guests came to welcome him. At the feast they praised the mead, and congratulated him on his return. The horns of mead went round; all drank their fill; and all was well. Urizhmag too drank his fill, and when the guests had all departed, went to his room.

Shatana at once slipped on Elda’s wedding gown and veil, and entered his chamber, and he mistook her for his wife.

“Young lady of the Alagata,” he said, “you have become more beautiful than you were on our first night!”

“That so happens with all young brides in our family,” answered Shatana quietly, and not in the least disturbed.

Dawn was approaching, but again with her heavenly wisdom and earthly magic, Shatana lighted up the moon and stars on the chamber ceiling, so that it still seemed night.

“Is it not time to rise?” asked Urizhmag.

“No, dawn is a long way off yet!” answered Shatana. “Look, the moon and stars are still shining!””

Meanwhile Elda, having cleared the guest room after the feasting, and put everything in order, went to enter her husband’s chamber. She tapped on door, but it was locked, and no one came to open it. After a while she came again and tapped on the door. Again no answer. She ran all round the house in despair; then a third time she came and knocked. No one answered. She was in such a fit of despair that her heart broke, and she fell dying on the floor.

Shatana, hearing the knocking, and after it the silence, felt that Elda's soul had departed from her body. She made a gesture and wiped the moon and stars from the ceiling, and the spell was broken.

Full daylight was here, and Urizhmag urged her, "Come get up, daylight is here already!"

When he saw Shatana standing before him, he was dumbfounded, "Is that really you, Shatana?" he queried incredulously.

"Well, who else then passed the night with you?" she replied.

What could he do now?

They buried Elda with all the usual honors.



"You have shamed me, Shatana," Urizhmag reproached her. "How shall I live with you before the Narts? What sort of face can I put upon things? They will cry shame on us both!"

"People's abuse lasts only two or three days!" answered Shatana. "It is no great shame. Do as I say, and it will soon be forgotten. Go and sit backward on your donkey, and trot three times around the meeting place in the square, and afterward tell me what the old counselors sitting there have said."

Urizhmag was amazed, but did as Shatana suggested.

When the elders first saw that he rode his donkey backward, both they and the younger men simply burst their sides laughing. Some rolled helplessly on the ground in their mirth. But when he passed still backward the second time, only the merriest ones mocked at him, and many others did not even glance at him again, and a few even said that Urizhmag, once their leader, had gone out of his wits it seemed. The third time he passed, not a single one smiled, and among the many respected elders sitting there, one said, "He is not doing this for nothing; most likely Urizhmag has a few very clever schemes up his sleeve!"

Urizhmag returned home and told Shatana all that occurred.

"There, you see!" she said. "It will be just the same with our personal affair. At first they will sneer at us, but they will soon get used to it all!"

So it turned out, and thus Shatana became the wife of Urizhmag.

Nart Urizhmag often went on cattle-raiding or hunting expeditions. This time he had been away a long time, but had found nothing, and met nobody, yet he could not allow himself to return home empty-handed.

He slept one night in a dark forest. It was already about midnight when he dreamed that suddenly an eagle from the Black Mountains had seized him, soared up on high, then dropped him into some brightly blazing bonfire. He awoke in a fright, and jumped up. “What kind of dream was that,” he wondered. “What does it mean and foretell?” Then suddenly he saw a light in the depths of a ravine. He went toward the light, and before him he found a hut. Inside, above some glowing embers, a spit with shashliks on it was roasting and turning itself over and over, while nearby on a low three-legged table stood three pies with cheese in them, and a jug of mead. By its side a drinking horn lay ready.

Urizhmag was very hungry, so he took the shashlik from the spit, poured himself a horn of mead, and gave a prayer, “O God, let me return home safe and sound!”

Just as he had prayed for his safety and health, in an instant the shashlik changed into a strong grown-up man, the pies into a sunny field sown with wheat, and instead of mead, a spring began to flow nearby. Urizhmag was struck dumb with wonder.

“What’s wrong with you, good fellow?” the man asked him. “By your looks you are a Nart, so why are you so surprised?”

“How can I not be surprised? Were I to tell them, no one would believe me, and the Narts would even laugh and mock me!” replied Urizhmag.

“This is no wonder, my good Nart fellow, but what Kharan-Khuag does with people is a wonder all right! It was he who turned me into shashliks, and said that until some Nart prayed over me, people would eat me in the shape of shashliks. It seems that you are my soul’s salvation. Therefore I thank you for saving me. Let us go to my home, and you shall be my guest.”

“No, my good man, I shall not go with you until I hear what further miracles Kharan-Khuag does.”

“You will hear everything if you come along with me!”

So Urizhmag followed the man he had saved. They came to his home. His wife came out to greet him, and embraced her lost husband with tears of happiness flowing from her eyes.

They entered the house—and what a wonder they saw there! The halls were of mother-of-pearl, and the ceiling was made of red glass. Urizhmag sat in the place of honor in a soft armchair, near the fireplace. In a moment they set a low three-legged table with all kinds of food and drink before him, but Urizhmag did not touch anything.

“What is wrong with you, my good Nart fellow? Why do you eat nothing?” his host anxiously inquired.

“Such is our custom,” answered Urizhmag. “We must first know with whom we share bread and salt. But we do not know one another as yet!”

“Hey, who are you then, my good Nart, if you don’t know Washtirji’s nephew Bigar. Washtirji, my mother’s brother, has been a benefactor of the Narts since ancient times, and takes their side in all things. Well now, and what are you called, may I ask?”

“I am Nart Urizhmag, one of the Nart elders. I know Washtirji well.”

Bigar had heard of Urizhmag earlier, but had never met him face to face. Having now heard what a high guest he had, Bigar did not know how to honor him sufficiently. His wife also showed him every care, “I thank you sincerely that you saved my husband!” she said.

Urizhmag was very satisfied with his reception, and after the meal inquired about the host’s father, and where he was, alive or dead?

“He died not long ago, he was slain by Kharan-Khuag,” said Bigar.

“What for?” questioned Urizhmag.

“That is a long story, but I will tell you everything,” replied Bigar.

“Kharan-Khuag drinks human blood. He has a felt whip that he does not show anybody. If he is angry with someone, and beats them with his whip, then he can turn them into anything he wants. My father had fine grapevines, but look out there—Kharan-Khuag turned them into thistle bushes, and all our cattle he turned into a heap of stones. That is why they call him Kharan-Khuag, because it

means 'Insatiable-Greed.' The more he eats, the hungrier he becomes. So without pausing to breathe he stuffs his belly like a mountain mill, grinding away without stop. He lives not far away, behind those hills. Nobody dares to go near him. Once he went hunting, and unfortunately met my father on the way, and said to him roughly, 'I want something to drink. Cut open your finger, and let me suck your blood to quench my thirst!'

" 'Why must you suck human blood?' asked my father. 'Here is my flock. Take a sheep. Who cares, take two, cut their throats, and drink their blood!'

"Straightaway Kharan-Khuag flew into a fury, and turned my poor father into that tombstone that we have just passed. That stone is the last remains of my father. I once asked Kharan-Khuag what my father had done to deserve such treatment, but instead of an answer he gave me curses. Then it was that he said, 'From now on, let people eat you! Let your water be their drink, and your bread be their food!' You yourself saw what he made of me!

"Let it be so until you are saved by the prayer of a Nart!" he added. "You yourself know how you saved me, dear Urizhmag. You turned into my saving angel."

Hearing this story Urizhmag was silent and astounded. Then he said, "Show me the house where Kharan-Khuag lives, and I will take revenge on him for your father, for you, for all whom he has slain!"

So they dined, rested, and afterward Bigar showed Urizhmag where Kharan-Khuag lived. Urizhmag went up to the house quietly, and found the host asleep. His felt whip lay by him, beneath his head. Urizhmag seized the whip from the pillow and cried, "Kharan-Khuag, get up!"

Kharan-Khuag jumped up quickly, but Urizhmag struck him with the whip and cried mockingly, "Change into a mangy old goat!"

At once Kharan-Khuag changed into a mangy old goat, and ran off into the forest, where wolves speedily set upon him and devoured him.

Urizhmag returned home with Bigar, and struck the white tombstone with the felt whip, and at once Bigar's father appeared in his living form. How happy was Bigar! He told everyone about Urizhmag's good deed, and the people living there brought presents for him to take home.

There he called the Narts together, and they feasted for three days in the home of Urizhmag and Shatana.

11 ♦ URIZHMAG AND THE ONE-EYED GIANT

Once, when Urizhmag was on his travels, the young Narts of the three families gathered together at the meeting place in the village square and began to discuss who was the best man among the Narts, and likewise, who was the best woman. They argued and argued about this, but could not come to an agreement on the matter. One would claim that the other was in no way fit for this honor, and that he himself was the best man among the Narts!

Shatana heard about these disputes, and said to them all, “If you went to the wise old woman Karmagon and asked her, she would tell you who is best among the Narts, and even who is worst!”

So the young Narts went to the wise old woman Karmagon, and invited her to come to the meeting place.

“For your God’s sake, leave me in peace, you young Nart boasters! What kind of judge am I about your quarrels?” answered Karmagon.

“We shall not give you any rest until you tell us who is best among the men, and who is the best among the women.”

She turned an attentive eye on them all, and then replied, “I see good people here. I see strong people here, so you may have success in your search. But no matter how I seek among you here, the best ones I do not see!”

“Who then are the best among the Narts? Just tell us, even if you do not see them here!” demanded the young Narts.

“The best among the men is Urizhmag, and the best among the women is Shatana!” answered Karmagon, when they had pestered her beyond endurance.

The young Narts grew angry when they heard this, and with offensive words they drove the old woman from the square. The next morning Urizhmag arrived home, and Shatana complained to him about them, “Yesterday our mischievous young men from all the three Nart families united in getting the old woman Karmagon to come to the square, and there they deeply offended her.”

Urizhmag became angry when he heard this and went to see Karmagon. “What happened to you in the village square, Karmagon?” he asked.

“May those boasters have no luck in their lives!” replied Karmagon. “They came to me yesterday, called me to the meeting place, and began to ask me who is best among the Narts, which man is best, and which woman is best? I told them at last that the best among the men is Urizhmag, and the best among the women is Shatana. After that they cursed me, and drove me from the square.”

Urizhmag said nothing further, but went home and lay down to sleep. Early in the morning he called the town-crier,¹ and said to him, “Go around the township, and cry so loud that all three families hear you, and tell them Urizhmag found a flock of wandering sheep on the Black Mountain during his travels, and let anyone who is a real man go with him and bring home the booty! Shout aloud, so that none afterward says that he did not hear or did not know about this.”

The town-crier went around the township, and cried aloud, so that all three Nart families could hear him, “Urizhmag has found a flock of wandering sheep on the Black Mountain. Let anyone who is a real man go with him and bring home the booty. But let anyone who is afraid not say afterward that he did not hear or know anything about this.”

So Urizhmag led the group of young men from all three families to the Black Mountain, to bring home the booty.

That night the old woman Karmagon baked three honey-cakes,² and began to pray over them thus, “O God of gods, my God! Pour down snow unheard of, and throw down the eternal ice from your mountains, so that these young Nart boasters and braggarts understand who is the best man among them!”

The snow poured down all night. Such a snowfall that you could not pass on horseback, nor on foot! Icy glaciers barred the way.

First Urizhmag led the young Narts along the shore of the White Sea, then he went on with them to the shore of the Black Sea. One after another they dropped behind Urizhmag. Oh-ing and ah-ing, they barely dragged themselves back to their homes and hearths.

Alone Urizhmag reached the Black Mountain, and saw that a huge flock of sheep was still pasturing there. He came nearer but could not see a shepherd anywhere, nor a shepherd's hut, but he noticed that the flock was led by a big horned billy-goat. It was a most unusual flock, for each sheep was little smaller than a young bullock, while the billy-goat leading them was nearer the size of a young camel.

"I shall slay one of those sheep for my supper," said Urizhmag to himself, and among the flock he seized one white sheep by its fleece. The white sheep began to tear away from his grasp, and pulled Urizhmag this way and that, and rolled him over on the ground. He even split his lips on a stone, but all the same she pulled herself away.

"You can't take these by force!" thought Urizhmag. "You must follow them, and try to think of something!"

Toward evening the sheep began to move down the path, led by the bold billy-goat. Urizhmag followed behind the flock. Soon he saw that the sheep were entering a large cave, and he followed them there. No sooner had the last sheep entered and laid down to rest, than Urizhmag saw a great one-eyed giant come whistling into the cave. On his shoulder he bore a huge tree with roots and all, just torn out of the earth. The giant struck the end of the tree on the stones of the cave, and it smashed into splinters. The big pieces were good for torches, and the small ones for kindling.

Urizhmag was scared when he saw the giant, but what could he do? He put a bold face on and said to him, "Good evening, master!"

"Good health, mountain chick!" answered the giant. "What kind of a god or holy spirit brought you here?"

"I am a wanderer, and found my way here myself," replied Urizhmag. Having barred the entrance to the cave with a colossal slab of stone, the one-eyed giant blew up the embers of the fire, then with his long crook with a hook at the end, he caught a sheep by one leg, pulled her out, slew her, cut her in two halves, hung them over the fire in a huge cauldron to boil, and lay down to sleep. Soon the cave reverberated with his snores.

Urizhmag sat waiting. When the supper was ready the giant woke up, took the cauldron from the fire, and then took out the meat. One half he kept for himself, the other he placed before Urizhmag. "Eat, my guest!"

So they ate supper together. How could it be otherwise? Urizhmag thanked the giant for his hospitality, and lay down to sleep. When morning came the giant arose, heaved the colossal slab of stone from the entrance, and stood there with legs athwart the opening. He called in kindly tones to the goat-leader, "Bodzo, my dear, take the sheep out to the pasture, see that they feed well, and at evening bring them all back, every one!"

First of all the goat passed between his legs, and behind him, one after another, followed the sheep. As they did so the giant then counted each one. Having done so, he left himself, and heaved the colossal stone slab back into place before the entrance.

Urizhmag remained alone, a captive inside the cave. During the day he tried many times to move the stone slab from the entrance, but could not even budge it.

Dusk came. The giant returned, slid away the stone, and let the flock into the cave. When they were all settled, he hauled the heavy stone slab back into place before the entrance.

"Only for one night do we count you our honored guest," said the giant to Urizhmag. "This evening it is your turn to prepare the supper. Let us see what you can make for us!"

"How can I prepare supper, when I have nothing with which to make it?" asked Urizhmag.

"Very well, then, I'll make supper myself," said the giant. He took his two-edged spit, which turned itself, stuck its two sharp ends into Urizhmag's knees, and hung him up thus on stakes over the fire.

"You will get roasted while I take a nap," said the giant, lying down on his bench, and soon he was snoring away again.

As soon as Urizhmag saw that he was fast asleep, he thrust his feet down upon the hearth-stone, caught hold of the cauldron-chain with his hand, and scorched by the fire, with teeth clenched against the pain, he exerted all his

strength and drew himself off the spit. Then he took the pointed spit and heated the end in the fire, and when it was red-hot he plunged it into the single eye of the giant.

With a roar the blinded giant leapt up, and began to feel around with outstretched hands to find Urizhmag. But why should he stay near the blinded giant? He hid himself in the middle of the flock of sheep.

Then the giant tried with promises and pleading words to tempt Urizhmag toward him. When this failed he began threatening him, but it made no difference. Urizhmag did not listen to him.

The giant tried again to catch him, but how can a blind man catch one who sees? At last he quieted down, and said, "I know you by your cunning tricks, Nart Urizhmag. All the same, my life is ending now, without my sight. Here in this ring is hidden all my strength, and all my happiness. Put on this ring, and all my strength and happiness will come to you!"

The giant threw the ring on the ground. Urizhmag gladly snatched it up. But as soon as he put it on his finger, it gripped his knuckle fast, and began to cry aloud, "He is here! He is here!"

Now it was easy for the giant to catch Urizhmag. Wherever he ran, the ring cried out, "He is here! He is here!" and the giant plunged after him in a fury. Just one hand's breadth from death was he, but God did him a favor. Urizhmag saw a cleaver in a corner of the cave, grabbed it quickly, placed his finger on the block, and—may the same happen only to your enemies—off flew his finger with the ring clinging to it. Away it rolled to one side, while Urizhmag stood on the other. "He is here! He is here!" the ring still cried.

The giant rushed forward, stumbled over the chopping-block, and smashed it to splinters, so great was his rage. He grabbed the ring still fixed fast to the finger, and in his frenzy, swallowed both.

Then he understood that he was defeated, and calming down again said to Urizhmag more quietly, "All the same you have sacrificed your head. You can't get out of this cave anyway, except between my legs, for the slab of stone you cannot possibly move!"

Urizhmag began to think of a way to escape from the cave. At night when it was full of snoring echoes again, Urizhmag slew the goat Bodzo, and skillfully skinned him, so that even his horns and hooves remained in place. Having been hungry all day, he made shashliks of the goat's meat by night, and thus satisfied his hunger.

When morning came, and it was time to let out the sheep, the giant awoke, heaved away the huge stone slab. Then he stood with legs athwart the cave mouth, and caressingly called his goat-leader, "Go out now, Bodzo, my good goat, my one hope. Lead my flock to the pasture, gather them together at dusk, and bring them back home!"

Straightaway Urizhmag got on all fours, and began to lead the sheep toward the giant. When he passed between his legs, he straightened up, so that the horns touched the giant's thighs, and he felt round them with his great fingers, then let the goat go through. So as Urizhmag came out of the cave, the sheep one by one followed after him, while the giant still stood counting them by feel. When the last sheep had left the cave, Urizhmag threw off the goat-skin from his shoulders, and cried to the blind giant, "Hey, you blind old ass! Now you may call your Bodzo as long as you like. He will not come. Just as you have lost him, so you have lost all the sheep you possessed!"

The giant in a fuming fury rushed out of the cave, but forgot in his anger and blindness that the cave mouth was close to a deep abyss. Too late he remembered, and went flying down into the empty space below, and was smashed to pulp on the rocks.

Then Urizhmag drove the flock of sheep home to the village of the Narts, and called the town-crier. He ordered him to cry aloud that all who had accompanied him on the first part of his journey should come and take their share of the booty. He also invited the old woman Karmagon to appear.

That took place in the evening, and by early morning all the Narts from the three families had gathered together, and stood waiting at the meeting place in the village square.

They saw how he divided the sheep between them, but noticed how he kept one portion of them apart. The Narts all glanced at each other in wonderment,

and asked themselves, “For whom is the extra share provided?” Each man took his portion that fell to him, but the one share remained. Then Urizhmag stepped forward and explained, “That share is for you, Karmagon, in recompense for the offense that you suffered at the hands of the young Narts!”

Karmagon was pleased, and took the sheep apportioned to her. But could she remain silent, as a woman should at the men’s meeting place? She turned to the young Nart boasters and said, “You see, it turned out as I said, Urizhmag is the best man among the Narts!” and the young hotheads had to agree.

“Yes, Urizhmag is best among the Narts!”

12 ♦ HOW URIZHMAG PARTED FROM SHATANA

Urizhmag once got very angry with Shatana, his wife, and said to her, “In the name of God, I ask you, go back to your parents’ home. Take with you all you wish—any treasure that appeals to your heart, that which you most desire—take it—only go! I simply cannot live with you any more!”

“Very well, then,” said Shatana. “How can I object against the wishes and commands of my husband given me by fate? I shall fulfill your will, but you too please fulfill my final wish. All my life I have lived with the Narts, and shared their hospitality. Let us arrange a farewell feast. I should like to give the cup of honor to our Nart guests for the last time.”

Urizhmag agreed, and they arranged a farewell feast. What a festive treat Shatana prepared for their guests! She brought the best dishes and the best beer out of their storage cupboard. Seven nights and seven days they sat at the table feasting, and as they started to depart, Shatana said to some of the younger Narts, “You have shown poor respect for your host. Why he is still quite sober! Bring him a horn of honor, the largest on the table, and say a few kindly words according to the custom, and then let him drain the drinking-horn dry!”

So the young Narts started to bring him horns of honor, one after the other. Until then Urizhmag had drunk but little, but now, having drained all the drinking-horns they flatteringly offered him, he became quite drunk, and fell into

a deep inebriated sleep. After that the other Narts went off in various directions to their homes.

Then Shatana found the best-fed oxen, and yoked them to a big cart. She took some soft dried hay, and laid that on the cart, covered it with a carpet, and on the carpet laid her sleeping husband. Up she got on the cart, and off they went from the courtyard. Nothing else did she take with her. All other treasures she left at home.

When they had got out on the plain, Urizhmag grew sober, and he woke up. He saw his wife sitting beside him, driving off the flies from his face with a burdock leaf, shouting at the oxen, and prodding them on with a birch branch. Urizhmag was amazed, what kind of a wonder was this?

“Are we going somewhere or the other?” he asked Shatana.

“I see that you are awake now. I am returning to my parents’ home!”

“That I remember,” said Urizhmag, “but why and where are you then taking me with you?”

“When you drove me out you said, ‘Take from our home any treasure that is nearest and dearest to your heart!’ Well, there is no treasure dearer to me than you, so let all the others stay behind!”

“I see that I have taken a proper devil as my wife,” laughed old Urizhmag, pleased with her reply.

So he made up with Shatana, and together they returned to their home, and there they continued to live in concord.

13 ♦ THE NAMELESS SON OF URIZHMAG

A year of famine came to the land of the Narts. The grain did not sprout, the grass did not grow, but withered away. The Narts were dying of hunger. They grew despondent, and lost faith in their own powers. The famous young Narts, so brave previously, grew so powerless that they lay day and night dazed in the meeting place in the square, and if they woke up, all they spoke about were the glorious feats they had performed, the dangers they had overcome when they

had driven off the fat cattle from their enemies' pastures. About their good swords and glorious bows and arrows, they said not a word.

Shirdon had an impudent dog, a bitch, and it so happened that all that time she ran about in the village square and jumped above the heads of the sleeping Narts, licked some of their mouths, gnawed some of their sandals, and bit through some of their belts. It was simply pitiful to see all that!

Once Urizhmag came to the square, and there he saw how it looked more like a battlefield than the village center. There lay the brave and famous youths, lean and hungry looking, while Shirdon's insolent bitch played all her dirty and loathsome tricks on them. A groan came up from his bosom. He threw his ivory walking-stick at the bitch, but it struck against a stone, and was broken in two. He gathered the broken fragments in a fury and returned home. There he threw down the broken parts onto the floor, and slumped down with all the weight of his body in his armchair, also made of ivory, and that fell to pieces as well.

"Why are your brows so black and stormy? Why did you slump down so angrily on your armchair and break it, my dear husband, master of my head?" asked Shatana. "What has happened to you? Who has offended you, and made you look so furious?"

"Nobody has offended me," replied Urizhmag sadly. "But how my heart aches when I see that for the lack of provision our young Narts have entirely lost all their honor! As soon as they so shamefully began to lie about the meeting place in the village square, Shirdon's impudent bitch came along, jumping over their heads of even the bravest of our famous youths, licking some of their mouths, gnawing at some of their sandals, biting through some of their belts. . . . All of them were dozing and sleeping, and none has the strength or the will to drive her away. My dear mistress, I would not grudge my life if only I could see our Narts well-fed and satisfied, so that the warm blood flowed swiftly through their veins again, and their courage returned back to them!"

"Don't be despondent!" replied Shatana. "Go and call them all! Our store-room is full of all sorts of food and drink. I shall feed them all, as though they were but one man!"

Then Shatana led Urizhmag to their pantry. One larder was full of cheese pies, in the other up to the ceiling were stored up heaps of beef and mutton shoulders and thighs, while in the third were stacked up bottles full of various beverages.

“You see, when the Narts had plenty, and were feasting, they sent home to me my honored share,³ and I stored it all up carefully, and now it will serve a good purpose!” said Shatana.

The clouds of worry dissolved from Urizhmag’s brow, and he said to Shatana in pleased tones, “Yes, there is even more than enough food here for all. They couldn’t eat half of it in a whole year. Make ready for a feast, my mistress!”

Then Urizhmag called the town herald, fed him up to the ears, and ordered him, “Go and cry with all your might, and tell the Narts, “Those who can walk should come to our feast themselves, and those who can’t, let them be carried by others. If anyone has a baby still in its cradle, let them bring baby, cradle, and all! Urizhmag of the Akhshartagketta calls all Narts to join in his feast!”

So the town-crier went around the village and cried aloud, “O Narts, those who can walk, should come themselves. Those who can’t, let them be carried by others. If anyone has a baby in a cradle, let them bring baby, cradle and all! Urizhmag of the Akhshartagketta is giving a feast and calls you to join in!”

Having heard the news, the Narts flooded into Urizhmag’s home. All, from the smallest to the greatest, from the youngest to the eldest, gathered together. Tables were set up and filled with food and drink, and day after day the company kept up the feast.

Meanwhile the fire began to get low on the hearth, and Urizhmag arose from his chair and went into the yard to chop some logs. Just as he was bending to pick the chopped pieces up, a huge shaggy-feathered eagle flew out from the Black Mountain, seized him in its talons, and flew off with him in its clutches to finally place him on a single pillar of rock amid the sea—no mountains, no trees, naught living to be seen around. Then Urizhmag began to name himself a most unhappy man, uncertain about his future.

All day he sat on the pillar, glancing around. Evening came, darkness began to gather, when suddenly he saw that from beneath the water, from beneath a submerged rock, somehow light was breaking through.

“Come what may, I must know what kind of a wonder that is,” said Urizhmag to himself. He slipped down from his pillar, slid into the water, moved the huge rock aside, and saw a door there before him. He opened this door, and there stood three maidens, each one more beautiful and slender than the other, who came running to greet him.

“May you come to us hale and hearty, Urizhmag! May you come to us sound, dear relative of ours! Come in, and be our guest!” said the maidens, smiling gaily and gladly.

Then he entered the house and saw a respectable old lady there.

“May there be good fortune in this house!” he greeted her.

“Be well, and happy, and be welcome!” said the old lady, and invited him to sit in an armchair.

Urizhmag sat down, looked around, and noticed that the floor beneath his feet was of blue glass, that the walls were studded with mother-of-pearl, and that the morning star was shining from the ceiling.

He was amazed at all this. What a wonder it was, right in the ocean depths. Of course, he soon realized that he had chanced upon some relations of his, the Donbettirs.

Then Urizhmag noticed a little boy who was running around, so light and swift he ran, that Urizhmag could not follow him. He loved to look at this little fellow, and happiness filled his old heart.

“Happy is the man who has you for a son!” he thought to himself.

“Was it sunshine or heavy rain that brought you to our land?” asked the old lady kindly. “We have been waiting to see you for so long!”

Urizhmag straightaway felt bolder and thought that he would not be lost after all if on the ocean bed he had found relatives eager to see him. And he began to tell them how he had come to their land. Meanwhile the maidens prepared the table for him. The host brought in a well-fed ram, and asked Urizhmag himself to slay it. The fire was stoked and Urizhmag barely had time

to look around once more before the table was set in front of him, full of good things to eat.

To begin the feast, Urizhmag, according to Nart custom, raised a piece of meat on the point of his dagger and said a prayer. When he had finished, he then, once more in accordance with custom, turned toward the little boy and said kindly, "Come to me, bright sunny boy, and taste the meat offering!"

Holding the meat on the dagger-blade, Urizhmag stretched it out toward the little fellow. He came running quickly to take it, then stumbled and fell right on the point of the dagger. The sharp blade penetrated his little heart, and like a beautiful cut mountain lily, he fell. He trembled a time or two, and then his young spirit flew away.

Deep sorrow seized Urizhmag, and all the Donbettir family. The maidens carried away his corpse into the next room.

"Why am I so unlucky? Why has such a woe fallen on my head?" thought Urizhmag.

Then, seeing that he did not touch the food, the old lady said, "Help yourself, Urizhmag. What has happened cannot be righted. All fulfills the will of God!"

But Urizhmag simply could not eat. He arose upset, bid them farewell, and returned by the way he had come. On leaving the house he heard how all the women were bewailing the loss of the little child.

No sooner had Urizhmag climbed back onto his lonely pillar than the enormous black eagle appeared in the sky, swooped down, once more took him in its talons, and carried him back all the long way to his home. There he collected the chopped firewood, and entering the dining hall, saw that the feast was still in full sway, and nobody had noticed either his absence or his return.

He sat down in his place, and turning to the company asked, "What kind of story would you like to hear from me? Old or new?"

"We have heard lots of old ones already," said his quests. "Now we would like to hear something new!"

"Does anybody remember how I went out?" he asked. "When the fire began to get low on the hearth, I arose from my chair and went into the yard to chop some logs. Just as I was bending to pick up the pieces, a huge shaggy-feathered

eagle from the Black Mountain seized me in its talons, and flew off with me in its clutches. For a long time he bore me over the sea, far from the shore, and finally placed me on a single pillar of rock. There were no other cliffs nearby, only sea all round—no mountains, no trees, nothing living to be seen, and the only moving thing was blue water below. Evening came, darkness began to gather, when suddenly I saw that from beneath the water, from beneath a submerged rock, somehow light was breaking through.

“ ‘Come what may, I must know what kind of a wonder that is,’ I said to myself and slipped down from the pillar, slid into the water, moved the huge rock aside, and saw a door there before me. I opened this door, and there stood three maidens, each one more beautiful and slender than the other, who came running to greet me. ‘Come in and be our guest!’ said the maidens to me. There were also a respectful old lady and a young boy there. I looked around and saw that the floor was of blue glass and the walls were studded with mother-of-pearl, and that the morning star was shining from the ceiling.

“They served a table for me and according to the Narts’ custom I raised a piece of meat on the point of my dagger, and said a prayer. When I had finished, I then, once more in accordance with custom, turned toward the little boy, and asked him to come to me and taste the meat offering. He came running quickly to take it, then stumbled and fell right on the point of the dagger.

“Deep sorrow seized the host family and me myself. I did not touch the food. I arose, bid them farewell, and returned by the way I had come. Then the enormous black eagle appeared in the sky, swooped down, once more took me in its talons, and carried me back all the long way to my home.”

In the next room among the women, Shatana was sitting. As she heard Urizhmag’s story, she began to tear her hair, and to scratch her cheeks, and began to bemoan her lot, “Lo, what, glorious men, best of the best, you deeply respected elders! Do not judge me, I beg of you, that I speak before you in tears. In my parental Donbettir home I left a secret treasure. My husband was away on a quest when the boy was born, and thus did not know about the babe. I gave him to be brought up by my relations in my father’s home. But there Urizhmag

found him, and with his own hand sent our immature son into the Land of the Dead. How will we live now? Who will take care of us in our old age?”

Everyone felt sad and silent on hearing her mournful complaint. Then quietly they arose and went home to their houses.

Then Urizhmag mourned. He went about with bowed head and hunched shoulders, and did not smile when someone smiled at him, and did not speak when someone addressed him.

There was a blue-gray stone at the meeting place in the village square, the stone of oblivion. Anyone who lay on that stone immediately forgot his sorrow. Urizhmag made a habit of lying himself face down on that stone, and not rising from it all day long. Then the elders would come to him and say, “Nart Urizhmag, glorious among the glorious! You must not be so sad and waste away with grief. Could such a grievous thing happen to anybody but you?”

Upon hearing these words, he would be comforted, and soon he became his former self.



The dolorous Donbettirs buried the body of the little boy in the earth, but his soul flew off to the Land of the Dead, and the ruler of that land, Barashtir, set the little fellow on his knee. But the lad was troubled, because nobody on earth remembered about him.

“What is worrying you?” asked Barashtir, and the lad replied, “Many years have passed since I came to the Land of the Dead, and my father Urizhmag, who finds time to bother about others, even about strangers, has no times to pay me tribute, and I am completely forgotten. He has not given a funeral feast, and not raised a memorial stone for me, and I am lonely and lost here among the dead. I beg you, Barashtir, release me for a little while from this Land of the Dead. I only want to prepare with my own hands all that is necessary for the annual funeral feast that should be held in memory of me each year on the date of my death, and I give my word that I shall return at once.”⁴

“I do not wish to offend you, but I cannot do what you ask,” replied Barashtir. “If any of the others knew that I let you go, then none of them would

stay here. It is hard enough to hold them here now, in the Land of the Dead, so how could I hold them then?”

“I can help you there,” said the youngster. “I shall turn the shoes on my horse Gee-gee around the opposite way, and when the dead ones miss me, and rush to the gates of the Land of the Dead, then you can tell them, ‘Just look at these horse tracks! If he has gone out of these gates, then I have no power to hold you, but if the tracks lead back into this land, there is no way out for you!’ ”

To this Barashtir agreed.

The lad shod his horse Gee-gee as he proposed, and galloped off out of the Land of the Dead. When the dead no longer saw him in their midst, they flocked to the gates, where they met the gatekeeper.

“Where are you all going?” asked Aminon, the guardian of the gates.

“If anyone can leave here, then nobody will stay!” shouted the crowd.

“First of all, make sure what has happened!” he replied. “Look at the horse’s tracks, and you will see that no one has left here!”

The dead ones looked and saw that the tracks led into the Land of the Dead. Then they all calmed down, and each one returned to his place without further trouble.

But the boy, the foster-child of the Donbettirs, the son of Urizhmag, who had never received a name, galloped afar, up to the Nart village, to the old home of the Akhshartagketta, and loudly called for the master of the house to appear.

“I am looking for Urizhmag,” said the young rider. “Will he not come with me on a quest? Tell him, please, that I shall wait for him at the Memorial Mound at the village pasture.”

Shatana turned back to the house and said, “O my dear husband, someone is making fun of you. At the front door there is a youngster hardly seen from behind the pommel and he invites you on a quest. He says he will be waiting for you at the Memorial Mound at the village pasture.”

“Hurry up, mistress!” he replied. “Put out my breast-plates for my journey. Of course, if anyone sees me going on a quest with a young lad, they will laugh at me. But I cannot break my word. While I have eyes to look out under my

brows, I shall always act honorably, and honestly. All my life I have never refused any comrade to go on a quest, and shall not do so now!”

But Shatana did not want Urizhmag to go with that bold young lad. When evening came, she baked three round honey cakes, and prayed, “O God of gods, my God! If you have created me for some reason, then I ask you to show me your favor! Send down this night on earth all the snow and rain that you have prepared for the next seven years, and whip up some whirlwinds and hurricanes. I hope that the bold youngster who is worthy of death will find it this night, but that my old man will remain at home.”

She had only just finished praying, when the heavens clouded over with heavy rain, and then snow fell so thick that no one had ever seen anything like it before. The ancient glaciers swept from the mountains, the whirlwinds wheeled and roared above the earth and blinded everybody who tried to go to the next-door neighbor.

But all the same before daylight Urizhmag saddled his old dapple-gray steed Arfana, and went off on the road, pushing his way through the thick snowflakes, the ice, and the drifts. Far away he saw that through the morning mist and snow rose the village pasture Memory Mound, like a black mountain.

Urizhmag rode up to the mound, and saw there a young lad lying asleep, with his saddle under his head, on a spread-out horse blanket, covered over with a felt cloak, and all around him the field was green. You could have found there space for seven threshing floors, and there his horse Gee-gee was browsing.

“Whether that is a heavenly spirit, or an angel, all the same, that’s something wonderful!” said he quietly to himself.

On his faithful Arfana he climbed the mound, and addressed him, “Hey, youngster, arise! The road is long, and the day is short. We must be on our way!”

The young lad jumped up quickly, armed himself with his weapons, straddled his steed, and off they rode. Urizhmag rode ahead on his dapple-gray Arfana, and behind him the youngster on his Gee-gee. They pushed ahead, and every passing hour the blizzard grew bolder. Urizhmag’s steed thrust aside the mounds of snow with his powerful chest, protected with a breast-plate, but it

became more and more difficult for him move forward, and he stumbled. Meanwhile the youth followed in his tracks, and where he passed, the snow melted, and black earth appeared. Urizhmag's dapple-gray started to choke for breath, and then the youngster said, "I will ride ahead. From this day let it be no shame, should a youngster ride in front of an elder."

As he became the leader, the breath of this horse melted the snow around him, making the road wide enough for seven threshing floors, and Arfana was treading over black earth.

So they rode on. Was it a long way or a short one? Urizhmag said, "Now my lad, we must take counsel. Where shall we go? What enemies shall we raid?"

"Take me to a land where you have never been before on a quest!"

"I have not found the way across the sea, therefore beyond the sea alone remains one land where I have not been. It is called Terk-Turk," answered Urizhmag. "There is not a richer land on earth. There are so many sheep and cattle, so many horses, that once they start out on the road, no shepherd or herdsman can turn them back. But it is not easy to get there. One must sail across a stormy sea, and then conquer those who keep watch over the cattle. First the shepherds and herdsmen of Terk-Turk, then an iron stallion, a wolf with iron teeth, and a hawk with an iron beak!"

"That is the land where we shall go!" declared the youngster. "Let us try out our luck there. Maybe something will fall into our hands!"

They reached the shores of the stormy sea, and began to swim across on their horses. Like fish their steeds swam, and bore them across to the farther shore. They came out of the water onto dry land. Then the youngster carefully bathed his horse, and smeared him with magic glue that sticks well without water, and made him roll in the nearby gravel. Then he smeared him again and made him roll in the sand on the shore. Gee-gee, his steed, became enormous, like a mountain. Then our two riders went on and found the herd of horses belonging to the Terk-Turks. Then the youngster made spades and dug two holes, one for himself and another for Urizhmag and his horse. Going up to Urizhmag, he said to him, "Look, Urizhmag, my horse will now fight with the iron stallion. At first they will kick each other with their hind legs, and their iron

hooves will strike each other, and send off sparks, and set the earth afire. Take care, whatever you do, not to look out of your hole then or terrible misfortune will overtake you!

“Next they will bite each other, and kick with their forelegs, and such a blast of fury will arise from their stormy breathing, that it will carry away the topmost hand’s breadth of the earth. Do not move from your hole then, or your dust and ashes will blow over the hills and dales. When the time comes to act, I myself will tell you.”

Then the two horses began to fight, neither sparing the other, the iron stallion and the youngster’s horse Gee-gee. From the clash of their iron hooves came such sparks that the earth caught fire. Urizhmag could not restrain his inquisitiveness, and glanced out of his hole, and his long beard caught fire at once. The youngster skillfully extinguished the flames, and said to him, “From now forth there will be a new custom, all will wear their beards as short as yours has now become!”

Then the iron stallion and the youngster’s steed began to bare their teeth and bite, and to kick with their forelegs. Such a blast arose, that it stripped the first hand’s breadth of soil from the earth. Again Urizhmag could not control his inquisitiveness and looked out of his hole, and the blast blew off the top of his skull and carried it quickly away.

“So now, my dear elder is left with no top on his head!” said the youngster, and sprang out of his hole, ran after the top of Urizhmag’s skull, which the blast had carried away. He overtook the wind, seized the skull, and brought it back. Placing it above Urizhmag’s brow, he said, “From this time forth the Narts will no longer remove the top half of their heads!”

Before that any Nart could take off the top of his head in order to shave it more easily, and could then put it back on again.

The horses had still not finished their fight, when a wolf with iron teeth in his jaws came to the aid of the iron stallion. Then the youth shot an arrow at him, and may it be so with all who curse you, the wolf died on the spot. The youngster cut off one of his ears and hid it in his tunic. Then a hawk with an iron beak came to aid the iron stallion. Again the youngster showed his skill, and shot

an arrow at the hawk. The hawk had flapped his wings just once when he fell down dead upon the ground. The youngster cut off his head, and hid that in his tunic too.

But still neither of the horses could defeat the other. More than once the iron stallion bit at the neck of Gee-gee with his iron teeth, but then gravel and sand filled his mouth, and he could not sink his teeth in. At last Gee-gee triumphed over the iron stallion, who sank on his knees to the earth. The youngster grabbed his saddle, flung it on the stallion, and mounted him, calling out, "Hey, Urizhmag! Quickly drive the herd of Terk-Turk horses off home, while I ride to inform their owners that their herd is gone."

"While nobody is pursuing us, we had better both go together on the same road home!" replied Urizhmag.

"My honor will not allow me to sneak off with such rich booty, without letting the owners know!" responded the lad.

At that time there was a feast among the people of Terk-Turk, and suddenly they saw a youngster gallop up on the iron stallion.

He came to the feasting place and cried, "Alarming news, people of Terk-Turk! All of your herd of horses, all of your riches, are being driven off."

The younger Terk-Turk heard this alarming news, and informed their elders. The eldest said, "That fellow probably seeks for something to eat and drink. Invite him in, and we shall welcome him as a guest."

The younger Terk-Turk ran to the lad and invited him into the house where the feast was, and where the elders were sitting. He looked around the festive board, and then took out the head of the hawk, and the ear of the wolf from his tunic pocket. The head he threw where the elders were feasting, and the ear he threw where the young Terk-Turks were eating. To the elders he said, "You didn't have enough cunning heads, dear elders! Here, take this one!" Then he turned to the younger ones, and said, "You didn't have enough sharp ears. Here, according to the tradition, take this one. As for your iron stallion, he is tied up in the stall!"

The feasters were all gripped by a great agitation. They understood that they had been robbed of their faithful guards. While they were recovering for a

moment from the shock, the young lad went to the stall, leapt upon the iron stallion, and off he went at full gallop, to overtake Urizhmag with the herd of horses.

He passed over the outskirts and saw there a gray-haired old lady, sitting between six burial mounds, weeping and moaning, and addressing herself to each of the burial mounds in turn.

“What kind of wonder is this?” thought the youngster.

At once the old lady, pointing at the burial mounds, said to him, “I had seven sons. Six of them have departed into the Land of the Dead. When enemies tried to seize the herds of the Terk-Turk, they died defending them, and their honor. Only one son remains to me. I know that he will gallop in pursuit of you, who have driven off our horses. But your skill and bearing are obvious. You are so brave! But my son, who will be in front of all the others, will attack you. Spare him, for my sake, for the sake of a widowed mother, and do not slay him! Give him a light wound, and throw him by the wayside, so that others galloping after to attack you do not trample him in the dust! May my only remaining son, my only support in old age, find in you a protector! So that all may be thus, be my milk-son, and let him be your milk-brother. Take my breast between your lips, then swear to me your oath!”

The young lad leapt down the iron stallion, took the old woman’s breast between his lips, and then gave her his solemn word (that means the firm promise of a Nart) that he would not cause her son any harm. The old woman thanked him and told him what her son looked like so that he might recognize him at once.

Again he mounted the iron stallion, and set off at a gallop to overtake Urizhmag and the herd. When they met they guided the horses across the stormy sea to the other side, then farther still, until they heard a rider galloping after them.

“You drive on ahead, Urizhmag, and preserve the booty, while I will try to restrain the followers.” So they agreed.

“Hey, you son-of-a-bitch, dirty dog that you are!” cried the rider from afar, as he galloped up nearer and nearer. “Do you know whose herd you have driven

off? If you are a man, don't try to run away from me!" Then the arrows began to buzz like flies around the ears of the youngster. He turned and shouted back his answer, "I may not touch you. I have named your mother as my milk-mother. I have taken her breast between my lips, and given her my sacred word to preserve you. Do not hinder me then, let me go my way!"

His pursuer did not obey him. Taking aim with one arrow after another, with passionate curses he drew nearer and nearer. Then the Nart youth shot one arrow at him. That arrow, not touching his body, but catching in his clothing, tore him from his saddle, and hurled him to the earth. In vain he tried to tear the arrow from the ground where it was stuck, but to no avail.

Meanwhile the other followers galloped up, and all together began to tug the arrow to release him, but they could not move it. In the end they had to slash his clothes from him with their swords, and only then could they set him on his feet again. Then they all set upon the young Nart, and the battle began. The men of Turk-Turk hit out and hewed at the young Nart, but he slew half of those in front, and so much blood was spilt, that it washed away those who were in the rear. Those who remained alive understood that they could not defeat such a warrior, and they returned home.

Urizhmag and the youngster successfully drove their booty home to the Nart's village, and stopped at the place where spoils were divided. Then the youngster said to Urizhmag, "You are the eldest, therefore it falls to you to divide the spoils between us!"

"But why should I divide the spoils that you have won?" replied Urizhmag. Then the youngster chose a white bull and set it aside, tied with a silken cord. All the remaining booty he divided into three lots, and addressed Urizhmag thus, "The first lot goes to Urizhmag, Urizhmag, as the eldest. The second, as my companion on the quest, to you also. The third is my lot, which I present to you with respect. The white bull remains. Take it and arrange for me a yearly memorial feast. To all the dead you pay your respects, but to me, your nameless son, whom you placed in the home of the Donbettirs, and with your own hands sent to the Land of the Dead, only to me have you never given a funeral feast, nor celebrated my memory!"

With that he jumped upon his own steed Gee-gee, waved a hand in farewell to Urizhmag, and galloped off to the Land of the Dead.

Tears streamed down Urizhmag's cheeks, and he cried to his departing son, "Glance back at me, if only once!" But his son did not look back, thinking to himself that his time was running out.

So Urizhmag sadly drove the booty home, and there said to Shatana, "O dear mistress of our house! I have been on a quest with that same youngster who was your joy and happiness in life, and whom you could not see enough of while he was alive!"

Hearing that, Shatana dashed to her horse and set off at a gallop after her son. For a long time she rode and rode, and gradually began to overtake him, and cried, "O you, who were my joy and delight on earth, you whom I could not see enough of when you were alive. Look back I beg you, just one glance, just once, son, look at me!"

Her son did not look back, but called to her, "The sun goes down, my time is running out, and I hasten to the Land of the Dead in order to keep my word!"

Shatana, unhappy mother as she was, understood that he could not stay, even for a moment, so she, poor creature, prayed, "O God of gods, my God! You can see into a mother's heart. Let it be that on this eve on the mountain snows the sun's rays should remain a little longer, the cold Sun of the Dead!"

The youngster reached the gates of the Land of the Dead, and cried to the gatekeeper Aminon, "Hey, open up the gates!"

"You are late, the sun has set already!" replied Aminon.

"No, it is still not dark! See, on the mountain snows the rays of the Sun of the Dead are still shining!" and turning, he pointed to the mountains. The gatekeeper opened the gates, and at that very moment Shatana saw her son. The edges of his garments gleamed, and for a second she saw his face, as the gates were closing behind him. But she hastened forward, and threw her gold ring after him, which itself bounced up and fell straight upon her son's finger. With that ring he returned to the Land of the Dead, this bold son of Urizhmag, and took his place on the knee of the god Barashtir.

When Shatana returned home, they slew the white bull and arranged a great funeral feast in honor of their son. All the remaining horses and cattle they distributed among the poorer Narts.

14 ♦ SHATANA'S SON

Urizhmag once went on a distant quest for a whole year. Who knows where he went? Was it soon or late after he left that Shatana felt she would soon have a child? When the time of birth drew near, she baked three round honey cakes, and prayed to God, "O God of gods, my God! Let there be today in the Nart village mists and clouds, as much as you predestined for our land in a whole year!" Soon a dark mist covered the Narts' dwelling places. Then Shatana yoked a pair of bulls, born on the same day and dedicated to Tutir, to a cart, and set off for the shores of the Terek, and there gave birth to a son. She had already prepared a trunk, and in it she laid the newborn child. Then she placed the trunk on a boat, and sent it floating down the river. After that she again sat in the cart and returned home.

The boat bobbed up and down on the wild waves, which tossed it up and down and to and fro like a ball. Some fishermen saw the empty boat floating by, caught hold of it, and brought it ashore. There they opened the trunk and saw a baby boy, and were extremely pleased. How could they not be? "Our chief has no children," they said to one another, "and if we bring this lad to him, he will reward us well, and entertain us with a feast!" So they brought the little boy to their chieftain. The chief thanked the fishermen and richly rewarded them. Then he began to bring up the lad as his own son. The boy grew up and distinguished himself by his manly and courageous character. Anyone who knew the Narts, who knew what brave blood ran in their veins, would have recognized him as theirs. This bold blood showed soon in the way he tired his rivals out in their contests, whether boys or girls. He twisted the necks of some, the arms of others, and the legs of others he pulled out of joint. Girls going for water began to complain about his tricks, and women coming from the mill too, because he

broke their jugs, and pierced their leather bags with well-aimed arrows from his bow. There was no mischievous trick that he was not up to.

The people started to complain to their lord. They gathered together in a crowd, and went to see him. “Many times we have complained to you about the boy you found and made your son. You evidently do nothing to check him, because he grows all the time more insolent and troublesome. He’s not a child any longer. He’s already beginning to grow a mustache, and it is time he was made to come to his senses. So we have come to ask you for the last time, master. Say, who is more precious to you, all your people, or that one lad?”

The chieftain had to think. For a long time he thought, and at last he said to himself, “Obviously he cannot live here among us in our village. Let him travel abroad!”

He gave his son the best of everything—clothes, weapons, all he needed for the journey. Then he said, “Go to the herd and choose for yourself the best horse you can find!”

In the chief’s herd there was a young foal that stood only halfway up his mother’s withers, but no one could master him. The young lad grasped hold of him by the tail, jumped on his back with no bridle, kicked his heels into his flanks, and rode off to the chieftain. When he saw this he thought even more strongly than before, “If he can tame such a spirited horse with no bridle, then what will he do when he is grown up into a man?” He thus became afraid for the boy he had brought up.

He formed a guard of twelve riders, to secretly keep an eye on him during his travels. He called these twelve riders before him and said, “My adopted son is going abroad. I have sent him on the pretext of seeking a wife for himself. Keep watch over him on the way, on every highway and byway. On the highway you will come to some iron gates, and they will be locked. The lad will no doubt try to open them with the handle of his whip, but will not succeed. Then he will whip up his horse, and they will fly over the iron gates. If everything happens as I say, then don’t spare your steeds, but gallop straight back to me. Do not forget, however, not to gallop all together in one direction, but each one on his own road, separate from the others.”

The chief's adopted son set off, and the twelve riders followed at a slight distance. They came on the highway to some huge iron gates, locked and bolted. The youth tried to open them with the handle of his whip, but did not succeed. Then he tugged the bridle, spun his spurs, and slashed with his whip, and the poor horse began to tremble and dance like a hare, and the next moment leapt forward and went flying with his rider over the great iron gates. Straightaway all the twelve riders following him drove their horses away off home in different directions. The lad glanced back after the chieftain's men, but himself rode on farther. Anyway, he became so sleepy astride his steed that he stopped using the reins, but all the same his faithful friend carried him on.

Thus was he seen by the eminent Narts, Urizhmag, Khamis, and Shoshlan, from the famous Akhshartagketta family.

“Not in vain have we spent our time on a quest,” said the Narts. If we take him prisoner, we can at least sell him as a slave, and buy our wives some new underwear!”⁵

Nart Shoshlan was the first to make an attack on the dozing rider, but though he gave his horse a thorough shaking, he did not waken the youngster. Then Khamis rode at full tilt against him. What horse was able to stand up to such an assault? But the young man's steed did not give way a step, and continued to bear his rider on. So then the Nart Urizhmag spurred his renowned Arfan to the attack. He struck the lad's horse head-on, but not even to Urizhmag's dappled gray did the proud horse of the youngster submit, but turned to the Narts and said, “You should leave us alone, and go on your ways. If you don't, and my master awakes, you will be sorry for your little amusements!”

But the Narts would not listen to his warning, and gave neither the young man nor his horse any rest. So the horse then gave his rider a mighty shake. The youth woke up, rubbed his eyes, saw at once the Narts and their teasing tricks. He turned his horse and charged, and see, here already the Narts Urizhmag and Khamis lie tied behind his saddle, and Shoshlan he has stuck with his spear under his belt, and lifted him high in the sky, and carried him off, driving the three Nart horses on before him.

“You probably did not think of what awaited you when you attacked me while I was asleep, but now you see what I shall do. I shall take you back to your land in this laughable position, and bring you to the feet of your wives!” said the young man.

How many campaigns had those Narts been on, to how many had they shown their prowess, but they had never met such a fellow as he! For a long time they remained silent, in great alarm, but later, seeing that there was nothing they could think up to improve matters, they loosened their tongues, and began to flatter their conqueror, “Do you really consider it possible, as our conqueror, to submit us to such shame? We beg you, pardon us for our mistakes. Better slay us on the spot than put us to such derision!”

“I see that you are elderly persons, and therefore I pardon you. But you must give me your word that you will never again offend any harmless traveler!” he replied.

What could the Narts do? They gave him their word. The youth then freed them, and they went off on their road, and he on his. Some time he rode, was it near or far, but suddenly he stopped his horse.

“Have I lost my memory? I do not know where I am going, in what land I am, nor whom it is I shall marry. Why did I let those three men go? I could have asked them everything! Most likely they had been in many places, seen many things, and knew many people where they had been received as guests. I shall turn and overtake them, and maybe they will show me a suitable bride!”

But the Narts, when they saw him coming after them, were scared, and went off at full gallop.

“Hey there, stop!” he cried. “I give you my word I will do you no harm. I need to speak with you about something!”

The Narts reined in their steeds, and the youth galloped up.

“I left my home,” he explained, “in order to find myself a bride, but in this country I know nobody. You, however, are experienced people, and have been here before most likely. Do me a kindness now, and show me, if you can, where I may find a suitable bride.”

“There, where two rivers meet, between them in his tower lives Adil. He has such a beautiful daughter, grown up there, that nowhere will you find an equal in looks nor manners. Whoever among the best in the world has tried to make a match with her, she has refused. If she agrees to meet with you, that means that she will be your wife.”

No sooner was he told this, than he turned his horse around, and made for the land between two rivers, and sought out the tower of Adil. Finally he found himself before Adil’s tower, and there in an upper chamber Adil’s lovely daughter and her companions were sitting at their sewing and embroidery. Suddenly one of them looked up and said, “Some kind of rider is making his way here! Never before has such a handsome youth found his way to our land!”

“Watch him!” said Adil’s daughter. “If he looks for a ford to cross the river, where the water is shallow, then we will simply amuse ourselves with him, but if he plunges in where the water is deep and swift, then he is fit to be my husband!”

“Look, he is crossing at the deepest place!” cried one of her companions. “Even a fish could not swim as well as he has done on his horse! Not even once did he hesitate nor stumble, and like an arrow has cut right across the river!”

The young man rode up to Adil’s tower, knocked with his whip on the door, and it fell open inward.

“I wish you a good day today, inhospitable hostess!” said he.

“Be happy and kind all your life, son of the Nart Shatana!” that maiden then replied, and thus they met.

Soon they had agreed to become man and wife, and that they would live in Adil’s castle, which stood on the land between two rivers, shaped like a boar’s snout. They had everything needed and they lived happily in harmony together.

One day the young wife said to her husband, “As soon as a young man gets a wife, he doesn’t set foot outside the house. I am surprised at you. How great is your rough physical strength, but you have done nothing to develop your mind. If your mind does not control crude strength, then the owner will come to grief. Travel, then, to the thorny spacious Tark steppe lands, and catch the black vixen there. Three white hairs grow on her brow. Pull them out of her head. One hair

will become your adviser, the second will change into a belt, and the third into a buckle of silver and gold. The belt and the buckle you shall give to me. But remember, it will not be easy to catch the black vixen. If you drive her through the thorny Tark steppe land, all your clothes will be torn to shreds, hanging on the thorn bushes, like sheep's wool there, and your body will be dripping with blood. You will not be able to drive her through the thorny Tark steppe land, but you may be able to drive her from the black thorn bushes out on to the sharp stones. They will tear the soles from your sandals, and a bloody trail you will leave on them, but do not give up the hunt until you force the vixen to stand, like a stone, among the stones. Then you must take her alive, pluck out the three hairs, and afterward let her go."

So he did, just as she had told him. He caught the vixen alive on the thorny steppes of Tark, drove her out on to the stones and grabbed her by the nape of the neck, pulled out the three hairs, and then let her go free.

The youth then returned home, gave the second and third precious hairs to his wife, and began to live a quiet life again. Some time after she said to him, "O master of my head, in these next two days you must accomplish a great feat. The Narts have attacked and taken the Gur fortress. They will begin to divide the spoils which they have captured there. You must also get a share of the loot. It will not be difficult if only you act skillfully. Before they attacked the fortress, the Narts set a fortune-teller on the road so that she should notice with her sharp eyes which of the Narts was first to enter and force his way into the fortress. The first one to battle his way in would receive the first and best part of the spoils. I shall sew a beautiful dress for that fortune-teller, so that it will cover her from head to foot. You pass her by casually, then stop and present her with the dress, and tell her that when they ask which of the Narts was first to get into the fortress, she should point to you." And so he did.

The Narts were gathered for the apportioning of the spoils taken in the Gur fortress. Among them was our youth, the son-in-law of Adil—and how could it be otherwise? He took counsel with the white hair, and it advised him to dig a hole twenty times the depth of his outstretched arms, and to put the cunning Shiridon into that hole, so that he could not cheat him in the share-out.

Then the Narts asked the fortune-teller, “Who was that lucky man who first broke through into the fortress?”

“Give the prize to the son-in-law of Adil, for he was the first to burst in!” answered the fortune-teller.

“Take the first share, son-in-law of Adil!” said the Nart elders. “The rest we shall share out evenly.”

Adil’s son-in-law looked all over the treasure they had taken and did as the white hair of the vixen advised him. He took a strip of leather, a small table on three legs, and a cap to make himself invisible, and off he went.

After he had chosen his share, they pulled Shirdon out of his hole. He swiftly inspected the treasures of the Gur fortress, and asked the Nart elders who had taken first share.

“The son-in-law of Adil!” answered the Nart elders.

“Long since you have been simple, good-for-nothing Narts,” said Shirdon to them, “and now you have let yourselves become a laughingstock again. The best pieces of the treasure have been taken by Shatana’s son, unbeknownst to you, and he did not even take part in the battle. Everything that remains now of the treasure is not worth a cup of water!”

The elders looked at each other in confusion, among them Urizhmag, Khamis, and Shoshlan. Having heard the mocking words of Shirdon, they guessed, of course, that it was the young rider whom they had met before.

Adil’s son-in-law returned safely home with his booty. Adil’s daughter was more than pleased to see him.

“Now we need not work so hard any more, and shall live happily by ourselves from now on. That strip of leather has this power: sit upon it, and you will be wherever you wish. The three-legged little table has this power: put your hand on one of its legs and give it a twist, and it will at once be covered with the tastiest food and drink; and the cap has this power: put it on your head, and you at once become invisible to everybody.”

Urizhmag, Khamis, and Shoshlan decided to visit Adil’s son-in-law, and invite him to come and live with the Narts. Not for nothing had these men of the Akhshartagketta tribe traveled about the world! They soon found Adil’s castle,

and dismounted near the guest room. Adil's son-in-law came out to meet them, and they greeted one another.

"Excuse me, my dear guests," said their host, "but I think if my memory serves me rightly, that I have already met you before!"

"You are not mistaken," answered Nart Khamis. "We have come to this castle to arrange your marriage ceremony. There is something further we would say as to why we came here. Only just recently we were given to know that our Shatana bore you, and here is your own father, Urizhmag of the Akhshartagketta family, Shatana's husband. We are his brothers, Khamis and Shoshlan. We count it shameful for a Nart to live in the house of his mother-in-law, and to rich Adil we shall pay the bride-price for you!"

"I have already paid the bride-price," said the youth.

Then straightaway the son of the Nart mistress Shatana and his young wife prepared to take to the road, and with them they took all their treasures.

15 ♦ WHO WON THE BLACK VIXEN?

Urizhmag, Khamis, and Shoshlan went out hunting. Asha was their nephew, his mother being also of the Akhshartagketta family, and they took him along as beater and chaser of the prey. The hunters hid in ambush by jutting cliffs, and Asha drove wild beasts toward them. From morning till night were they hunting when Asha drove out toward them a vixen. Urizhmag, Khamis, and Shoshlan all together sent their arrows flying. The vixen rolled up into a ball, fell on one side, and flopped down dead as a doornail.

"I killed her!" said one.

"No, it was I!" said another.

"You both claim that you killed her, but I didn't see you shoot!" said Shoshlan. Urizhmag and Khamis both objected, "What do you mean? Can we not tell by our own arrows whose they are?"

"Well then, you just tell me what kind of arrows you shot. Mine was of iron, cast in the form used by our forebears."

“I made my arrows with my own hands,” said Urizhmag, “and the imprint of my fingers is still on it!”

“And I once had the luck to come near the forge of the heavenly dweller Shafa, as he was cutting iron, and I asked him to make me arrows from the cuttings!” added Khamis.

They went up on to the hill where the vixen lay. They skinned her and drew out their arrows. Urizhmag’s arrow had pierced her neck, and Khamis’s arrow had broken a rib, while Shoshlan’s arrow had broken her spine. Then Khamis spoke up, “I am Khamis, the middle one, whose deeds are on all Nart tongues. Out of this skin, of course, I should make myself a jacket.”

“What else?” answered Shoshlan. “But for me, Shoshlan, the youngest, nothing is left, not even enough to make a cap for my little son!”

Then Urizhmag spoke up, “The vixen’s skin is mine by right, as the eldest here. I need just such a skin for the collar, lapels, and cuffs on my new fur coat!”

So a quarrel flared up among them, and the Akhshartagketta brothers got angry with each other. Straightaway Asha thought to himself, “May God slay me, but if my mother’s brothers go on like this, it will lead to grief!” Fearing for their lives, he made bold to say, “I am the youngest of you all, yet I dare to say this to you! Let us ask what Shatana says to this, and then act accordingly!”

They all became ashamed, bowed their heads, and went to Shatana. She came out to meet them, from her half of the home, and asked, “What has happened, dear kith and kin? Why do you come to me all looking so ashamed and dejected, with bowed heads, and not glancing at one another. What is the matter?”

“Something unpleasant has happened,” replied Asha. “They killed a black vixen, and cannot agree how to dispose of her skin. They all need your advice in this matter!”

“We had better take this affair before the Nart judges!” she said. Urizhmag, Khamis, and Shoshlan agreed to this, and took Asha, an honest fellow, with them as witness.

The judges considered the case, and answered them thus, “To give the skin to one of you means to offend the other two. If the skin is divided into three, it

will be good for nothing. Let us do so: each man shall tell us a story of some kind, and the one whose story seems to us best shall have the vixen's skin."

The three brothers consented to this, but asked, "With whom shall we start—with the youngest or the eldest?" The judges answered, "Let the middle one speak first, then the youngest, and then the eldest."

So Khamis began with this story, "Many strange things, and many wonders have I seen in my life, but I cannot speak of them all. I will tell of one thing that happened to me, when I along with my adopted son went to Arhara to buy fish. Well, my son and I stopped at a spring, and I said to my son, 'I want to sleep a little. Take one dried fish from the cart, soak it in spring water, and when it is soft, then wake me. We shall have our meal, and then travel farther.' I dozed off at once, but did not sleep long, for my son quickly awoke me, saying, 'Khamis, I took the fish and put it into the water by the spring, and suddenly it wagged its tail and swam away!' He was very obviously scared, and I was angry at being wakened so soon.

" 'You must have eaten it! Well, may it do you good. Say, where has anybody ever seen a dried fish that could swim?' I went on to question my young son. But he swore by heaven and earth that the dried fish did just that.

"I grew angrier still with his obstinacy. 'How dare you try to make matters worse by mocking your father?' I cried, and struck him with my sword, which cut him in two. He died straightaway. Then I set above his body and wept, and cursed my stupid self. 'You killed your son, thinking only of yourself and your belly! How will you go back and face the Narts now? How can you look your kinsfolk in the eye again?'

"For a long time I wept and mourned, then suddenly thought, 'What if I test the truth of what the youngster said?' I let his body down into the water, and suddenly it came to life, healthy and whole again it leapt out of the water, as fresh as if newly born. I exclaimed, 'From now on I will ask nothing more of God. That which has happened will be a blessing to me all my life!'

"So we returned home, and all the way we sang merry songs and laughed and joked. Anything more marvelous than that I have never seen, and never shall!" concluded Khamis.

“Well, Shoshlan, it is your turn now,” said the judges to him.

“What can one say,” began Shoshlan, “When one has seen so many marvelous things, such as have happened to me? I shall not speak of them all, only of this one. Once I was hunting on the Zhilakhar plain, and my young son was with me. We killed a kid, and made a resting place at the foot of a mound. We lit the fire, cut up the kid’s flesh into shashliks, stuck them on spits, and I said to the boy, ‘I shall sleep a little, but when the shashliks are roasted and ready, then waken me! We shall have our meal, and then travel farther!’ I had only just dozed off, when he awoke me exclaiming, ‘As soon as I put the shashliks above the fire to roast, the kid came to life, all sprang together, and ran away!’

“ ‘Eh, you youngster, what are you saying? You have eaten the roast shashliks, of course, and the other meat you have given to passers-by. There are plenty of them on this road. Very well, much good may they do you. But why do you try to make a mockery of me?’

“ ‘May heaven and earth be my witness! Not one piece did I touch, no passers-by did I see, and I gave nothing to nobody. The kid just ran off!’ So swore the boy.

“That made me extremely angry, such a defiant speech, and I drew my sword and quite forgetting myself, I cut him in two. ‘Let that teach you a lesson, not to ridicule your elders!’ I cried.

“When the lad died I was sorry for him, and even sorrier for myself. I started to weep, and that just on account of a bellyful of food I had slain my youngster. But then I thought, ‘What if I test the truth of what he said?’ I blew on the fire, put the lad on a spit, and thrust it above the flames, and suddenly he became alive, wriggled off the spit unharmed, and jumped up in front of me. He then asked me ‘Why did you bring me to life again? I was in the Land of the Dead, and there I was dancing the Shimd with your dead wife, but you, in bringing me back here have parted me from her, and stopped my merry dance!’

“Having heard this, I immediately plunged my sword into my own breast, above the heart, and fell lifeless. When I awoke I found myself in the Land of the Dead. I saw that they were dancing the Shimd, and my dead wife was among

them. I immediately took her hand, and joined her in the round-dance. Barashtir, the ruler of that land, watched our dancing. Those sitting near him asked, “ ‘Is that not the Nart Shoshlan? How did he get here?’

“ ‘He killed himself, in order to meet with his wife again—that’s how he got here!’ answered Barashtir.

“I held fast to my wife, and together we escaped and returned from the Land of the Dead. Soon afterward she bore me a son, and from the skin of the vixen that we killed I intended to make a fur cap for him. That, esteemed judges and dear nephew Asha, is my most wonderful story,” he concluded, and sat down.

“Now it is your turn,” said the judges, turning to Urizhmag.

This is what Urizhmag had to say, “I am also a Nart man, no worse than the rest. Many wonderful deeds I have done, many marvelous things I have seen, and cannot speak of them all. But listen to what happened to me in late autumn when I was hunting on the Zhilakhar plain. I did not pack any food for my hunting, neither did I kill any game on my way. Toward evening a mist fell, and it became so dark that I lost my way. I was dying of hunger and thirst, my life hung on a thread as fine as a spider’s silk. But God led me to a clump that was all weeds, which had once evidently been the resting place for shepherds. ‘Oh, if only there were left a wattle fencing round a fold, where I might in safety spend the night!’ I thought. I had only just said this to myself, when suddenly I saw such a wattle fence in front of me, and beyond it a gate.

“ ‘Go in,’ I thought, ‘and you will be safe there.’ So I opened the gate and went in, and found myself in a wonderfully kept dwelling, and my heart felt stronger. ‘Now, if only there were something to eat!’ I said to myself. No sooner had I said this than I saw before me a small three-legged table, and on it all sorts of tasty food and drink. I took my fill, and now my carefree heart was as merry as a magpie. ‘Now I need nothing more,’ I thought. ‘I’m well-fed, slightly tipsy, and merry at heart,’ and I lay down to sleep.

“Suddenly at midnight all around was lit up. ‘Has the house caught fire?’ I thought in alarm, but then I heard a woman’s voice, ‘Do not be alarmed, O man of the Narts, but the blanket had slipped off my feet!’ Again I wondered, ‘What miracle is this? What kind of being lives here whose flesh gives off such

radiance?’ The room grew even brighter, and I could no longer close my eyes. I got up from my bed, ‘All the same it seems that someone’s house is afire not far away!’ Again I heard a woman’s voice, quite near, ‘Don’t be afraid, man of the Narts, it is my hands which are shining so!’

“ ‘That is a human voice,’ I thought, ‘and what kind of a woman is it from whom such radiance pours forth?’

“The third time the light flared up, and became brighter still. I stood by my bed dumbstruck in wonder. Then from the next room I heard her voice again as she said, ‘Do not fear, friend Nart—that is my plait which gives such light!’

“ ‘Well, may I die first, but I must know what wonder lies behind this!’ I thought as I took a step forward toward the door.

“Then I hear the woman say ‘What do you want now, Urizhmag? What do you wish to do? You have everything you need, tasty food and wine. All has passed through your lips, so why not lie quiet and sleep? Why do you seek more?’

“ ‘Aha, she is beckoning me to come to her!’ I thought, and went farther in the direction of her voice. ‘I beg you, come no nearer, or no good will come of it, only misfortune!’ said the woman.

“May drunkards die! Much had I eaten. More had I drunk. All that had passed my lips only made me go farther toward her, nonetheless. But I only put one foot across the threshold, when she struck me with a felt whip, and I was changed into an ass.

“After that she gave me to a man, and for several years I worked for him. Gray hairs covered my spine, my sides grew hollow, emaciated. When he returned me to my unknown mistress, she struck me again with the felt whip, and I became a horse, and for a few years I set to work in harness. Finally I was returned, and this time changed into a dog by a blow from her felt whip. There wasn’t a better dog for miles around than I, and everywhere I was well spoken of and praised by all the people.

“At that time, some cunning wild beasts of prey were attacking the herd of a nearby lord. He came to my mistress and asked, “ ‘I beg you, give me your dog

awhile. I have heard he is an excellent hound. Perhaps he will save my sheep for me!’

“ ‘No, I will not give you my dog. He must be kept well fed. I fear that you will not feed him as necessary!’ she replied.

“ ‘But surely, he will not need more than the wolves kill from my herd in a single night?’ said the lord. So she then agreed.

“He took me to guard his herds. But he had recently been married, and did not wish to remain at night with the cattle, so he said to his herdsmen, ‘You feed the dog when necessary, and I shall return home,’ and with that he galloped off.

“The herdsmen were annoyed at this extra work. ‘Was it not enough work we had to do already serving the master, without becoming servants of his dog as well?’ they grumbled. ‘Even if wolves do attack his herds, it is not our cattle that they tear to pieces!’

“So they did not feed me, and lay down to sleep. Midnight came, and a dozen wolves crept up toward the herd, and howled, “ ‘O, Urizhmag, Urizhmag, see, we are coming to get you!’ In turn I howled back, “ ‘You are free to do as you wish, I shall not even lift my head!’

“The twelve wolves fell upon the flock, and till early morning they feasted, and destroyed as many sheep as they wished. I joined in with them, and destroyed twice as many sheep as all of them put together.

“In the morning the master galloped up on his well-groomed steed, ‘Well, how are you faring here?’ he asked the shepherds. ‘Did the dog defend the flocks well?’

“ ‘Take a look and see how well he protected them,’ replied the shepherds. ‘Half of the flock was killed by the wolves!’

“Then they caught me and began to beat me, each one trying to hurt me more than the others. Then the master took me and beat me. He rode off on his horse, and I ran behind him on a lead, and all the way home he beat and whipped me.

“ ‘Tell me, did my dog not keep your flocks well?’ asked my mistress when he returned me.

“ ‘May your dog die and go to the Devil!’ cried the rich lord. ‘A half of my herd was torn to pieces by the wolves!’

“ ‘God will not forgive those words,’ answered my mistress. ‘I know only too well how strong my dog is, and if it happened to your flock as you say, then it just means that you did not feed him well!’

“A little time passed by and another rich lord rode up, and asked, ‘Lend me your dog. Cunning beasts of prey are attacking my sheep!’

“ ‘I shall not lend you my dog,’ replied my mistress. ‘Not long ago another lord borrowed him from me, and brought him back hungry and cruelly beaten, and complained that he had not kept watch over his sheep, and half of them had been destroyed.’

“ ‘He is chief of one family, and I am chief of another. He is that kind of a lord, but I am not like him. Don’t mistake me!’

“My mistress did not answer him, so the lord took out of his pocket a silken lead, fastened it to my collar, and led me off to guard his flock. He gathered his shepherds together and told them, “ ‘Bring me the biggest and fattest sheep you can find!’ The shepherds did so, and dragged a huge fat sheep before their master.

“ ‘Kill it, and cut it up, and boil the meat!’ They did that also. Then the lord ordered them to feed me with the tender meat, and to go and milk a goat, and pour some into my soup, which they did also. Behind the master’s saddle was a rolled-up carpet. He himself spread it out near the sheepfold, and showed me that I was to lie down on it and keep watch. So I lay on the soft carpet, and placed my head on my outstretched, crossed paws, and began to keep watch. The master stayed with the flock through the night, and soon fell asleep.

Then I again heard the voices of the dozen cunning wolves. ‘O Urizhmag, Urizhmag, we have come to you again!’ they howled. ‘You won’t get anything here to live on!’ I howled back at them, ‘You are wasting your time!’ Then they came nearer, and howled yet louder, ‘O Urizhmag, Urizhmag, we have come to you again!’ and again I told them, ‘It is all in vain. You’ll get not a thing tonight!’ The third time they came nearer still, ‘Even if you don’t favor us with your help as before, remember that you are only one, and there are a dozen of

us!’ Angrily I replied, “ ‘Very well, just you try, that’s all! Come on then, just try!’

“So then they began to attack the flock on all sides, but not one of them did I let through, and not one sheep did they touch. I hurled them back, and their dead bodies fell on top of each other in a heap, and by morning all twelve were finished. Just then the shepherds and the master awoke, and the shepherds said to each other, seeing the sheep huddled together in a fright, “ ‘God has sent destruction down on us, but few of our sheep are left!’ But when they counted them, and recounted them to make sure, they were all there, safe and sound. Not a single one had been harmed. Not an ear was torn off. Not a lamb was touched. They all came near and began to look at me. Nearby they saw the heap of dead wolves, twelve of them, one on top of each other, and all as dead as a doornail!

“The master came up and hugged me, and patted my head. ‘Not one single wolf did my sheep any harm, not one of them robbed me of my riches! How can I show my gratitude to such a wonderful watchdog?’ Then he turned to the shepherds and said, ‘Go, take another bigger sheep, and bring it here!’ Then he took a silken cord from his pocket and tied one end to my collar, and the other round the sheep’s neck, and brought us both to my mistress, “ ‘My good woman,’ said he, ‘the kindness you did me I shall never forget, while day follows night. Take this ram as a present!’ after which he set off home, while I settled down again with my mistress.

“A long time passed, and then one day some hunters came to see my lady. ‘Lend us your dog, who is famed throughout the land. Indeed the whole world has heard of him. You see, we have a white bear in our forest. We just cannot drive him out, and have not been able to kill him. Would your dog not help us to drive him away?’ they inquired.

“ ‘You will have to take good care of my dog if you take him, for otherwise he will be of no use to you,’ replied my mistress.

“ ‘Can we really not take care of your dog? Indeed, while we are in the forest seeking the white bear, we shall not let other game pass by. We shall feed ourselves on that, and your dog will be fed too, or what kind of hunters should we be?’

“So my mistress handed me over to the hunters, and they led me off.

“Soon we came near the spot where the white bear had been seen, and they set me on his trail. Suddenly I caught sight of him, and he began to run off. I chased after him, hot on his heels. The white bear made for the mountains, but I did not tire, and followed him there. He reached a mountain crest, and sat down, like a human being. When I ran up to him he suddenly said, “ ‘I am Afshati. Having heard of your sad story I took on the form of a bear, so that I might help you. Sit down alongside me here. I know of the misfortunes that you have experienced, when you were turned into an ass, and then a horse. Only then I was occupied, and could not help you. Now we shall do so, let the hunters go on with their hunting, but you return to your mistress and pretend that you are ill. She will feed you with all kinds of food, that lady, but you must not take one bite of it, and must make out that you are dying. Then she will say, “Well, die then! If you are, after all, only a dog for me, then die as just a son-of-a-bitch!”

“ ‘She will step over your body lying there, and leave you to die. As soon as she gets past you, outside the door, you must take her felt whip from under her pillow. Hold it in your paw, and beat yourself with it. You were Urizhmag, and again you will become Urizhmag. Sit on her couch, holding her whip of felt in your hand, and wait till the mistress returns.’

“I did just as Afshati advised, and so became myself, Urizhmag, once more. I sat on her couch, waiting that woman’s return.

“ ‘Well, sorrow has fallen on your head,’ I said to her when she came back. ‘Before you go off to the Land of the Dead, you must reward me for all my suffering and torment.’

“I spent the whole night with her, and in the morning I struck her with her felt whip, and said, ‘Become a she-ass!’ She immediately turned into such a creature. I drove her back to our Nart village, and every one of you knows her—that gray she-ass that belongs to the Borata family. And that’s the end of my story.

“I have not known anything more wonderful than that in all my long life,” and with that he finished.

The judges began to discuss the stories, and to judge them all.

“Well, whatever you say, it was a wonderful thing that happened to Khamis. Even more wonderful was what happened to Shoshlan, but most wonderful of all was what happened to Urizhmag, who had for such a long time to live in an ass’s skin, and then to take the form of a horse, and finally even that of a dog. Therefore we have decided that the black vixen’s skin shall go to Urizhmag.”

Urizhmag took the skin and gave orders for it be made into a collar and cuffs for his fur coat. Talk about that fur coat of his still goes round among the Narts till this very day!

16 ♦ URIZHMAG AND THREE INQUISITIVE GUESTS

Around the Nart world there ran the saying that Nart Urizhmag had only to look at a man, and he could straightaway tell what kind of a character he was.

“But if he saw that man for the first time, could he really say what kind of a man stood before him?” inquired somebody.

Now three men met, and heard what was said of wise old Urizhmag. One of them was a fat-bellied, rich glutton. There was not a man whom he did not exploit and use for his own blood-sucking purposes.

The second was a rogue among rogues. He would give his soul, his very eyes, just to deceive somebody and lead them astray.

The third was quiet and reserved, scarcely saying a word. When something happened at table, and some blood-thirsty quarrel arose, and somebody had to step in and pacify the opponents, or when one had to reconcile neighbors who had quarreled and restore friendship between them, or when someone had to subdue a riot in a village, or if someone was needed to say a sincere word over the deceased at his funeral, or at the memorial feast—in any such case they would turn to this man. He was a great favorite among the folk, a wise and friendly fellow.

These three argued for a long time about Urizhmag, and at length they decided, “Let us go and see with our own eyes if he is really as wise as people say, and can indeed, not having lived with a man, tell his character at first glance.”

So they agreed and set off straightaway for the Nart settlement. All together these three inquisitive people arrived in the Nart village—how could it be otherwise?—and asked where the wise Urizhmag lived. People explained to them that when they passed such and such a street and came to a house with a high fence and a pointed roof that that would be Urizhmag’s home. The three inquisitive ones found this house, and asked where the owner was, and at once a tall old man with a gray beard came out to greet them, “Dear guests! The messengers of good luck! Come in, come in, and bring the sunshine with you!” he said, and they replied, “May you live a long life, be happy, and your sun not set!”

Nart Urizhmag led them into the house, seated them there, and then began to busy himself with many things, running to and fro, inside and outside the house.⁶

“Why are you so restless, Urizhmag?” they asked him. “We beg you, don’t be worried on our account!”

“Don’t say so, my dear guests. You know that guests are sent from heaven. The guests are ready—the host is not. That’s all there is to it!” answered Urizhmag. “But first tell me who you are, and what brings you to my home?”

“We have heard about your wisdom,” they replied, “Everyone says that Urizhmag can tell at a glance the character of any man he meets. We want to see with our own eyes, hear with our own ears, know in our own hearts—is that really true or not? That is why we are here.”

“Well, my dear fellows, just wait a little, while I see off my other guests,” said Urizhmag, and the guests made no objection.

Again Urizhmag ran to and fro, in and out of the house, and again returned. The guests were surprised, for it seemed to them that he was even more agitated than before. The next time he came back, they asked him who were the unusual guests about whom he was so troubled.

“How could I help being troubled? They came from a distant land, and arrived just a short while before you. But there was nobody at home except me. That is the reason for my agitation.”

“What kind of people, then, were they?” asked the fat-bellied one. “Most probably they were rich and prosperous folk?”

“Perhaps they made themselves out to be what they were not, and thus deceived you. There are plenty of such rogues on the road these days!” said the second one.

“You probably wanted to honor people—those who decide great issues, those whom the folk honor too, and are therefore near to your heart?” said the third.

“I don’t know,” replied Urizhmag. “I had not met them before, and could say nothing about them.”

“Then be good enough to express your opinion about us, and tell us what kind of guests we are, and what characteristics we have.”

“I have nothing to say to you, my guests,” he replied. “You see, I really had no other guests but you. Each one of you has already told me all about himself!”

The inquisitive ones were amazed, got up and said their farewells and straightaway set off home.

17 ♦ HOW BLACK BEER WAS BREWED

A little bird settled on a hop-vine, picked off a small green cone, and pecked out three small seeds from it. It then fluttered gaily off, and flew straight to the village of the famous Narts, and settled there, on the place where seeds of wet malt were set out in the sun to dry. It pecked only one seed, just one small seed of sweet malt, and flopped down to the ground in a stupor. It wanted to flap its wings and fly, but it seemed that they had been cut off. It wanted to hop away, but its little legs would not support it. Nart Urizhmag noticed it, picked it up, and carried it carefully home to his wife, the wise Shatana, the well-known Nart hostess.

Shatana gently took the bird in her hands, and laid it on a heap of wheat grain. Then a miracle occurred! No matter how much grain they took from the top of the heap, it did not become less.

The bird soon blinked, fluttered, twittered, and away it flew.

Then Shatana, that knowledgeable one, began to think. Urizhmag at Shatana's request, told her all that he had seen of the bird earlier. Of the rest, wise Shatana soon guessed. She ground up some dried malt, boiled it and put the liquid through a sieve, and added to it a good brew of hops. Soon it began to rise and fizz, and became covered in foam. When the Narts drank this brew, they were amazed. What was it made of? How was it brewed, this first beer? From barley corn malt, and from a ferment of hops, which can be found entwined around nut-trees,

Bring to us, Shatana dear,
Tasty horns of black-brown beer,
Raise the festive horn on high,
Urizhmag, a toast, aye-aye!

May the black beer to us bring
Happy days, and make us sing.
Merry songs of right good cheer
To Shatana's well-brewed beer!

18 ♦ URIZHMAG'S LAST CAMPAIGN

Nart Urizhmag grew decrepit. His powers were broken. He went no more on campaign. Nart youths ceased to ask his advice, and even began to ridicule him. At early morning, Urizhmag would go to the meeting place in the village square, and there he sat all day, listening to anything new that people had heard or seen. He watched how the young Narts competed with one another in the shooting contests, and regretted his past youth, when he shot his first arrows, which like the passing days, never return.

“Ah, if I could go just once more on campaign!” he once exclaimed, and went off to the meeting place where the Nart youths were gathered. Urizhmag said to them, “From my youth up until old age all the powers of my mind I have generously given to you, but now my old gray beard has become a burden to

you, and you no longer wish to hear me. Therefore I ask you to make me a big narrow box, place me inside it, and cast it into the sea. You must not bury someone you no longer respect in the Nart burial-ground.”⁷

Then several of the Nart youths said, “How shall we live, if we do not have wise Urizhmag among us, he who has led us to reason?”

But other voices too were heard, “He has grown too old, and is no longer good for anything!”

Nobody decided to do as Urizhmag had asked. The next day he came to the counsel place, and again asked that they should make a large trunk and place him in it, put the lid on, and cast him into the sea.

The young Narts saw that they could not persuade him otherwise. On the third day, as he repeated his request, they made him a big trunk, placed him inside with enough food and water for a week, fixed on the lid firmly, and cast the trunk and its contents into the sea.

But it was not swallowed up by the waves. Instead, they carefully bore it away. Sooner or later, who knows, eventually they bore him nigh to the shore where they drive the horses of the Black Sea King. In the morning the King’s servants drove the horses down to the shore to water them and wash them as usual. But the horses would not go down to the drinking place, where a stream ran into the sea; instead they snorted and bolted away. Then the King’s servants came to the place and saw there on the shore a huge wooden trunk. They tore off the lid, and therein lay an old man in a fur coat.

They were amazed, and asked the old man, “Who are you, and what god has brought you to our shores?”

“I am Nart Urizhmag. My old age came upon me, and life became a bore, so I asked my people to put me in this trunk and to cast me into the sea, and the waves have brought me here.”

Immediately one of the servants ran to the King and told him, “May I die from your displeasure, O King, but he whom all your life you wished to capture alive, Nart Urizhmag, is now in your hands!”

Then the King ordered him at once, “Bring the Nart Urizhmag here!”

When they brought Nart Urizhmag to him, the King was very pleased that at last he had fallen into his hands as a prisoner.

They chained him hand and foot with heavy irons, and locked him in a tower. They bolted and barred the tower, and left open one little crack, through which they could pass food to him, but only just enough, so that he did not die of hunger.

For days and nights, or weeks and months was it, they kept him a prisoner, and Urizhmag still sat locked in the tower. Then he became bored with such an existence, and began to think of a way out, and this is what he did. When the servant brought his food to him he said, "As I think and see things, it seems stupid of the King to keep me locked up in this tower till I die. What good will that do him? He could, if he wished, get a great ransom for me as his prisoner!"

The servant quickly ran to the King and said, "O King, may I die from your displeasure, my lord and master, but your prisoner just said some amazing words to me, 'Your master is stupid, as I see it, to keep me locked up. What good will it do him if I die in this tower. He could receive a great ransom for me as prisoner!'"

Then the King commanded, "Break off the prisoner's chains, and bring him to me!"

They broke off his chains and fetters of heavy iron, and brought him into the King's presence.

"Well, Nart Urizhmag, and what ransom do you propose to give me? You have nothing, so what can you offer?"

"I have nothing here, of course," answered Urizhmag, "but if my family and fellow tribesmen knew that I, their elder, have fallen prisoner, they would spare no riches to ransom me. I myself am rich but my fellow Narts are three times richer than I."

"But what shall I receive as your ransom?" asked the Black Sea King.

"I will tell you, and if my proposed ransom is to your liking, you will receive it. They will drive here a huge herd, a hundred hundred one-horned bulls, a hundred hundred two-horned bulls, a hundred hundred three-horned bulls, a hundred hundred four-horned bulls, and a hundred hundred five-horned bulls!"

How could my lord the King not rejoice to hear of such a ransom? He became very merry, and said to Urizhmag, “Make haste and send to your village, and tell them to prepare such a ransom for you!”

“Then give me some people whom I can send as messengers,” replied Urizhmag. “Two men will do, one with black hair, and one with red. They will give my message to the Narts, and show them the way to here.”

The King gave orders to send two men to Urizhmag, one black-haired and one red-haired, and they duly came to him. He told them how to find the way to the land of the Narts, and ordered them so, “When you arrive there, tell the Narts that Urizhmag has fallen prisoner to the Black Sea King, and ask them to send the following ransom—a hundred hundred one-horned bulls, a hundred hundred two-horned bulls, a hundred hundred three-horned bulls, a hundred hundred four-horned bulls, and a hundred hundred five-horned bulls. Let the Narts drive one black bull and one red bull in front of the herd. Those two bulls will show them the best way here. If these bulls are obstinate and will not do so, then cut off the head of the black bull and hang it round the neck of the red bull, and then it will lead them here!”

So the messengers set off for the land of the Narts. Was the way long, or did it seem short? Anyhow, finally one evening they arrived. The Narts were sitting at their meeting place in the square when the visitors rode in.

“We wish you a good evening,” they said, “and good counsel!”

“A happy life to you, dear guests!” answered the Narts. “By your looks it seems that you have traveled far. Do you bring us sunny or stormy news?”

“We have come from the land of the Black Sea King. Nart Urizhmag has fallen into his hands as a prisoner. The King demands a ransom for him, and Urizhmag has agreed, and sent us to collect it.”

Whatever one may say, the Narts were glad to hear that Urizhmag was still alive, and they asked the messengers, “We must swallow your bad news as best we can, dear guests, so please tell us what kind of a ransom does your master demand of us?”

The messengers then replied, “Nart Urizhmag asked that we should tell you this—‘Send as my ransom a hundred hundred one-horned bulls, a hundred

hundred two-horned bulls, a hundred hundred three-horned bulls, a hundred hundred four-horned bulls, and a hundred hundred five-horned bulls. Drive one black bull and one red bull before the herd. Those two will show you the best way here. If the bulls are obstinate, then cut off the head of the black bull and hang it round the neck of the red one, and then he will show you the way to the land of the Black Sea King.’ ”

The Narts arranged a resting place for the messengers overnight, and began to think where could they find such a ransom?

They argued and argued, but could not decide anything, and when they saw that they could think of nothing more, then dissatisfied and very disturbed they went to Shatana.

“Listen, Shatana! Your old man is prisoner to the Black Sea King. He has sent messengers to us demanding that as his ransom we must send him one-horned, two-horned, three-horned, four-horned, and five-horned cattle. One-horned bulls we can manage by cutting off one horn, two-horned we have plenty, but where shall we find three-, four-, and five-horned bulls? We have never heard tell of such things.”

On hearing their story Shatana began to laugh. “Well, I see that without my old man, all you Narts are lost! Again he has found for you an enemy stronghold full of rich booty. He calls you there, and shows you what kind of warriors are needed. One-horned bulls are foot-soldiers; two-horned bulls are cavalry; three-horned bulls are spear-men; four-horned bulls are armored warriors; and five-horned bulls are warriors bearing all kinds of arms.”

“But how are we to understand his words about cutting off the head of the black bull and hanging it round the neck of the red one?”

“Oh, that means just this, when you go on campaign you must compel those who were sent as messengers to show you the way to the Black Sea King’s land. If they refuse, or try to lead you astray, you must cut off the black-haired one’s head, and hang it round the neck of the red-haired one, and he must then show you the proper way.”

The Nart youths quickly prepared for campaign, and in three days had equipped a powerful army. Then they ordered the messengers to lead them to the

land of the Black Sea King. The messengers understood that they were traveling there with bad intentions, and so they led them a good distance from their land, and wanted to lose them in the mountains, and leave them there to die.

The black-haired messenger tried to escape and bear news of the coming attack to the Black Sea King. The Narts then cut off his head and hung it round the neck of the red-haired messenger. He was then so scared that he led the Narts on the right road.

Meanwhile Urizhmag was counting the days, and estimated the time when they should be approaching if all went well. Finally he went to the Black Sea King, and said to him, "Let us go up to the top of the tower, and take a look around, to see if they are not already driving the cattle here as my ransom!"

So they went to the tower, and saw far away, where the steppe joined the sky, that there was a dark cloud rising, just as if a thunderstorm was approaching. Urizhmag at once understood—the Narts were coming with their army. So he said to the King, "Well, you see, they are driving a huge herd of cattle here, and need your help. Send all your warriors as herdsman to drive home the bulls, but tell them not to take their weapons, but sticks and whips, which will be needed to head the herd this way. Otherwise, if our cattle see weapons, they will just go mad and break loose everywhere and get lost in the wilds. If that happens, then don't blame me, for I know their habits, and have warned you!"

The King sent all the men he had to meet the Narts, and on pain of death, ordered them to carry nothing but sticks and whips. As soon as the Narts saw these men approaching, they set upon them, and began to destroy them. Like a great cloud, the dust rose above the steppe. The King and Urizhmag watched this from the top of the tower, and the King asked Urizhmag, "What is that cloud, like smoke, that rises above the steppe?"

"Heavy cattle are being driven here as ransom for me. Thousands of bulls are on the move, and it is their breath and the dust raised by their hooves that you see!" answered Urizhmag.

"Do you not hear something like the noise of battle reaching us?"

“When so many heavy cattle are on the move they make such a sound with their beating hooves and the noise of their bellowing!”

Meanwhile the Narts had utterly destroyed the Black Sea King’s men. For a hundred years nobody had ever seen such a slaughter. Then Urizhmag, seeing that his cunning idea had worked successfully, turned and struck the Black Sea King with all his force in the face, “You thought that you would destroy Nart Urizhmag?” he mocked. “Now look and see there down below what has happened. The Narts have killed off all your men like dogs!” Then, suddenly seizing the astounded King by the hem of his robe, he heaved him up over the wall, and hurled him down from the tower into the courtyard below.

When the approaching Narts met Urizhmag at last, they were overjoyed that he had survived, and he duly addressed them thus, “I see that if I do not remain among you with my old gray head, then the crows will come and carry you off to their nests!”

Much cattle and booty the Narts found in the land of the Black Sea King. Much treasure they carried back home to the land of the Narts. They divided the spoils justly between the three Narts families and not one man had reason to complain. A whole year they feasted; a whole year they celebrated the memory of all Nart warriors who had died fighting.

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1. In olden times in almost every Ossetian village there was a herald (*fidiwag*) who in case of need stood on the highest place, usually the roof of a seven-story tower, and loudly cried invitations to villagers to meet in the square, or to go to feasts and memorial banquets. The herald was chosen in the village square by popular accord.
 2. In accordance with old Ossetian customs, people would bake three pancakes with a filling of honey, cheese, or potato in honor of some god or when seeking a divine favor. In the tales of the Narts the heroine Shatana, the wise woman Karmagon, and the others use this ceremony in order to help some great warrior or when they wish for good weather.
 3. In accordance with old Ossetian customs, if some honored elderly persons could not attend public feasts, the host sent to them portions of meat, pancakes, and various beverages. In the given instance Shatana's words show the great prestige and authority that she enjoyed among the Narts.
 4. According to ancient religious conceptions among Ossetians, the soul of a man after death crosses into another world, where it continues to live. There it has need of all that a human needs in life. Therefore relations of the deceased arranged memorial feasts for them several times a year. Ossetian Christians have to arrange twelve such feasts every year, and Muslims, ten. The expenses involved in a single feast were so great that they sometimes brought the deceased's relatives to complete penury. If they failed to hold such feasts in honor of the dead, they were subject to reproaches by neighbors, who would say that the dead were being starved in their world! This custom of memorial feasts finds sharp reflection in many of the tales of the Narts, and especially in such words as those uttered by Urizhmag's son, "My father, Urizhmag, has completely forgotten me. He does not give any memorial feasts in my honor, and I remain here, a refugee, without shelter among the dead."
 5. These words of the Narts to a certain extent reflect the feudal trading in slaves that existed in those far-off times in the Northern Caucasus. [Prisoners of war were also frequently used for this purpose, especially young ones.—WM]
 6. Hospitality was one of the traditional customs of all Ossetians. When a guest appeared in the host's home, the master would at once stop what he was doing and try to accept him as pleasantly as possible. He would take the guest into a special room, which almost every household had, distinguished by its comfort and cleanliness. In honor of the guest, wherever possible, they slew a ram and placed on the table the traditional dishes and beverages. At the table the guests were served by the youngest member of the family. If the host was caught unprepared to accept a guest, the eldest member of the family present would say, "The guest is ever ready, the host is never ready!" It was counted improper for the guest, without some special reason, to stay for more than three days. Denial of hospitality was severely judged by society, and had no place in usual Ossetian life.
 7. [In the past, according to Ossetian practice, the death of a man far away from home, battling against the enemy, was considered a glorious end. They made up songs about him in which they praised his achievements.—TS]

PART 3



SHOSHLAN



On the banks of a wide river Shatana was washing the linen. She looked at the clear water again and again, and suddenly wished to take a bath. She finished the laundry, undressed, and went into the water. On the other bank a young shepherd was pasturing his sheep.

Shatana was beautiful, and her white body gleamed in the sunlight. The shepherd saw Shatana, and such a passion seized him that he forded the river and came over to her side. But Shatana had secret powers and she made the waters rise around her and cover her. The shepherd could not control himself, then suddenly he felt a loss of power, and so sank exhausted onto a stone slab.

Shatana saw all this. She noticed the stone slab where he lost his power, and began to keep count of the days. When the time came round, Shatana led the heavenly blacksmith Kurdalagon to the riverbank, and there she said to him, “Swear that you will not reveal to anyone what I shall show you!”

The blacksmith swore an oath, and then Shatana asked him to break the stone apart with his heavy hammer. Just once Kurdalagon struck the stone a blow, and it split in two, and from within came out a newborn baby boy. Shatana gave him the name of Shoshlan, which means “born from the womb of a stone.”

She then took the babe home, and began to bring him up as her own.

Shoshlan grew up quickly, and one day said to Shatana, “The food that you feed me on would better be given to a dog. After all, he would keep watch on the threshold.”

Shatana, however did not understand what he meant. Sooner or later, who knows, Shoshlan again said to Shatana, “The food that you feed me on would better be given to a dog. After all, he would keep watch on the threshold.”

“What is that you are saying?” inquired Shatana, puzzled.

“If you wish that I should become a real man, then give me into Kurdalagon’s keeping, and let him temper me in wolf’s milk.”

In those far off times the Narts and the heavenly dwellers ate and drank together at one table. So Shatana called Kurdalagon to her home, and he came quickly at her bidding. She told him what Shoshlan was demanding. Kurdalagon then began to hollow out a trough from a tree trunk, big enough to hold Shoshlan.

Shirdon, the son of Gatag, whom not for nothing did they call the plague of the Narts, and who had thought things out already, said as he passed quickly by, “You are heading for trouble! Just look at what he is doing! He knows for whom he makes the trough, but he is making it four fingers too long, and what’s the good of that?”

Kurdalagon became confused, lost count of what he was doing, and made the trough four fingers too short.

“Now we can temper the young lad!” said Kurdalagon to Shatana.

“Prepare a hundred bags of oak charcoal, and gather a hundred wine-skins of she-wolf’s milk.”

With little difficulty Shatana burned oak logs and gathered a hundred bags of charcoal from them, but she could not think where to go to obtain so much she-wolf’s milk. She thought, and then she went to Urizhmag for help.

“I need a hundred wine-skins of she-wolf’s milk!” she told him.

“Well, tell me where I can get them! I’ll do so,” he replied.

“Listen, then! There, where seven roads meet, set up your tent. I will send you there some tasty dishes and drink, and you meanwhile ask every passer-by, on foot or in the saddle, how to obtain the milk.”

Urizhmag did as she said. At the meeting of seven roads he set up his tent, and Shatana began to send him the tastiest dishes and drink. Every passer-by, on foot or in the saddle, was lavishly entertained by Urizhmag. The people thanked him for his hospitality, but when he asked them where he could obtain she-wolf’s milk, they thought that he had gone quite crazy.

Time went by. Urizhmag sat in his tent at the crossing of the seven roads, but could find out nothing. One day, Shilam, the forefather of all dogs, ran by.¹ He was hungry, looking for something to eat. Urizhmag called him to his tent and fed him well.

“What are you doing here?” the dog asked him.

“I am trying to find out where to get she-wolf’s milk,” answered Urizhmag. “That is why I sit here, and ask all who pass by.”

“If you keep me well-fed for a week on all that I wish, I will get you some she-wolf’s milk,” Shilam said to him.

Urizhmag agreed, and began to do his best to feed him. Every time someone brought food from Shatana, he asked for special dishes that the dog had demanded. Shatana thought to herself, “Now I will find what I am looking for!” Whatever Urizhmag asked for, she sent. So for a whole week Urizhmag fed Shilam, and after that the dog said to him, “Now build a big cattle-fold, with a high strong fence all round.”

Urizhmag made some strong cattle fences, and from them built a big, high cattle-fold. Then Shilam ran into the forest and flock after flock of savage she-wolves he drove into the cattle-fold. From far away one could hear their yelping and howling, and clawing at the cattle-fold.

“Now you can milk them,” said Shilam to Urizhmag.

“Easier said than done!” replied Urizhmag. “If I go into the fold they will tear me to pieces!”

So Shilam went into the fold instead, seized one of the she-wolves by her shaggy neck, and led her to Urizhmag. He milked her, and then Shilam set her free. So, one after the other, Urizhmag milked all the she-wolves. A hundred wine-skins he filled with their milk, and with the servants’ help carried them home.

Then Kurdalagon placed Shoshlan at the bottom of a deep gully, and scattered hot oak-embers all over him. Having placed a hundred bellows at one end of the gully, they began to blow upon the embers until they became red-hot. Then Shatana asked Kurdalagon, “Take a look at the little fellow. Is he not smiling?”

Kurdalagon looked at Shoshlan, but there was no smile on his face. Shatana then ordered them to blow harder on the bellows. So it went on for a long time. Again Kurdalagon took a look at Shoshlan, and saw that the little fellow was turning red, and a smile had appeared.

Then they took the whole hundred wine-skins full of she-wolf's milk and filled the trough with them. Kurdalagon pulled Shoshlan out of the burning embers, and threw him into the trough of milk. Everything began to sizzle, and the milk turned into a white cloud of steam. Thus was young Shoshlan tempered by the heavenly blacksmith.

But Shiridon had done his dirty work too. The trough in the tree-trunk was just four fingers' breadth too short, and did not allow him to stretch out straight at full length, so he had to bend his knees a little, and the she-wolf's milk did not cover them. The rest of his body was as hard as steel, but his untempered knees stayed soft and he limped just a little when he began to walk.

20 ♦ WHAT GIFTS THE HEAVENLY GODS BESTOWED UPON
SHOSHLAN

The heavenly dweller Shafa, the protector of the domestic hearth, wanted to arrange a feast for the heavenly gods. He called together Washtirji, the protector of warriors and travelers; Wasilla, the lord of the thunder; one-eyed Afshati, the lord of noble beasts; Falvara, whom all sheep, goats, and other cattle obeyed; and Kurdalagon, the heavenly smith. Also invited to the feast were the master of all the four winds, the stern Galagon, and the lord of all the waters, Donbettir.

In bright lodges Shafa set the tables, and the heavenly dwellers sat around them drinking sweet black beer from wild bulls' horns, and the young Nart Shoshlan was serving them.

The heavenly dwellers said to their host, "Shafa, your pupil Shoshlan has the blood of the Akhshartagketta in him!"

"Oh, the Akhshartagketta are numerous and famous. They fear nobody in the whole wide world, and therefore in the battle they shine with a blue light!" heavenly Shafa answered them.

Then Washtirji, the protector of valiant warriors, raised a toast to Shoshlan. He uttered some words of praise, and finished thus, "I present to Nart Shoshlan my sword, that which was presented to me at just such a feast as this, by the heavenly blacksmith Kurdalagon."

With that Washtirji drained a huge wild bull's horn to the dregs.

After him Afshati, protector of noble beasts, raised a toast to Shoshlan.

Thanking him heart and soul for his kind words Shoshlan said, "All noble beasts of the mountains and plains are under your high protection, Afshati. Sternly you guard them, and do not let them come near us poor, earthly creatures!"

Then Afshati was addressed by heavenly Shafa, with a word on behalf of all earthly-dwellers, "You have many noble beasts, Afshati, and vainly they get lost in the ravines. Do not be mean, Afshati, and do not begrudge a part of your riches to the people on earth. They will never forget you for such kindness, and will praise your name forever!"

"I agree," replied Afshati. "A portion of my beasts that live in the forest and on the plains I shall share with the Narts, but in return I demand a gift from them. Let the hunter take with him three small flat loaves of bread, no larger than the palm of his hand, and on the mountain pass let him offer them up in homage to me. Later, when on the Black Mountain he has success and slays his prey, let him give the right forefoot to the first man he meets."

Then kindly Falvara, whom all sheep and goats and small horned cattle obey, raised a toast to Shoshlan, and said, "So that the gray wolves may not rob too much from your herds, I will teach you, Nart Shoshlan, the necessary spell. So when your herds go out to pasture, and wolves should attack them, repeat these words, and in that same moment I shall come to protect your flock, and not a single sheep will the gray wolves dare to attack."

After that the master of the thunder, Wasilla, raised a huge wild bull's horn to Shoshlan's good health, and Shoshlan, according to Nart custom thanked him and said, "Today I ask of you one thing alone for the people on earth. I have heard that you keep wheat grain in your bag. Do not begrudge this to earthly people, and they will be eternally grateful to you."

"Let it be so!" agreed Wasilla. "You will receive these seeds, and in the spring, as soon as the soil grows warm, you will sow them on the southern slopes of the mountains and hills. From those seeds that you will harvest in autumn, you will have bread for a whole year."

Kurdalagon then rose to propose a toast to Shoshlan's health, and drained his wild bull's horn in his honor. Shafa himself addressed Kurdalagon and asked him to make Shoshlan a present too.

"O Kurdalagon," he said, "from morn till eve, and all night long, you beat on your anvil, and don't give us a moment's peace to close our eyes. But only swords and daggers do you forge, and only for battle do you temper warriors as hard as steel."

"I understand you, wise Shafa," replied Kurdalagon. "I understand why you called us together at this feast. You wish that we should bestow gifts on your beloved earthly people. Very well, so be it. In my smithy I shall prepare metal plowshares for the Narts, and every spring they will go out and plow the fields with them."

Shoshlan thanked him heartily for this, and said, "O Kurdalagon, heavenly blacksmith, every spring we shall brew sweet beer, and drinking this on the fields, we shall praise your name."

Then Shoshlan turned to the master of the four winds, Galagon, "O stern Galagon! We do not expect gifts from you, but only ask that you should not send down on us your blizzards and hurricanes!"

"You ask much, offspring of the Narts! Even if I gave you my word, I might not be able to keep it. But I wish to make you a present today. When in autumn you winnow the chaff from the grain, then I will send a wind to carry away the chaff, and leave you only clean heavy grain."

"I thank you for that, Galagon, and I give you my word that the last shovel-full of grain from each harvest we shall dedicate to you!"

Lastly, the master of the waters, Donbettir, raised a toast to him.

According to Nart custom Shoshlan thanked him heartily, and then asked, "Donbettir, master of all waters! We know what a powerful lord you are and will you not make some kind of present to us bold Narts?"

"Nart offspring," replied Donbettir, "from now on let the Narts build water-mills beside my running waters, and I shall hand over to my playful daughters a request that they should turn your mill-wheels both day and night!"

Then Shafa thanked all his guests for those gifts to earthly folk, and then saw them safely off to their homes.

21 ♦ SHOSHLAN SEEKS SOMEONE STRONGER THAN HE

Once the Nart youths gathered together on the plain of Zhilakhar, and there they began the great round-dance, their favorite dance, the Shimd, which lasts a long time, and in which all take part. Shoshlan distinguished himself at this dance, and none could perform it better than he. He danced well standing on the ground, and even better he danced standing on the shoulders of the younger Narts forming a circle below. Thus the Shimd went in a two-tiered ring.

After the Shimd they began archery contests. They set up targets, and began to shoot at them. There were many excellent archers among the young Narts, but again ahead of them all stood Shoshlan. His arrows always struck the bull's-eye.

Not very far away, on the banks of a big wide river, a herd of cattle were resting.

“Well, let us test our strength now!” said the young Narts. Each one chose a young bull, and taking it by the horns, tried to hurl it over the river. None of them was able to perform this feat. But Shoshlan chose the biggest bull in the herd, grasped him by the horns, swung him round, and hurled him onto the other bank of the river. Then they competed in all kinds of games on the field, and in each of them Shoshlan triumphed over the whole of the Nart youths present.

People were amazed at him, praised his strength, and said that there was none other in the world stronger than he.

“In the land of the Narts, it is true, there is nobody who could measure up to me,” thought Shoshlan, returning home after the contests. “I shall have to go to other lands to find someone stronger than I.”

So Shoshlan set off on the road. How long he traveled no one knows, but sooner or later he came to the bank of a big river.

“I shall wander down the bank of this river,” he said to himself. “Maybe I shall meet some whose strength I can test.” He went on along the bank downstream. Suddenly he saw a fisherman coming toward him. For a fishing rod

he carried the whole trunk of a tree, and instead of a worm had a sheep set on the hook.

“I wish you good fishing!” he said to the fisherman.

“Welcome to us here! Be well, dear guest!” the fisherman replied.

“I am looking for someone with whom I might measure my strength,” said Shoshlan, “but I see I will not meet anyone stronger than you!”

“Oh, I am not all that strong,” said the fisherman. “Go farther down the river. There my elder brother catches fish. He is stronger!”

So Shoshlan went farther downstream. He walked along the bank, and saw another fisherman sitting there. His rod was a tree trunk larger than the other, and his bait was a whole cow hanging on the hook.

“I wish you good fishing!” said Shoshlan to the fisherman.

“Welcome to us here, dear guest!” the fisherman replied. “Be well! Where are you from, and where are you going, and what are you seeking?”

“I am looking for a man against whom I might measure my strength,” said Shoshlan, “but I see that I will not meet a stronger one than you!”

“I am not all that strong,” replied the fisherman. “Go farther downstream, and there you will meet my elder brother. He is stronger!”

Shoshlan went on farther, and met another fisherman on the bank. As a rod he was using a still larger tree trunk, and the dead body of a bull was hanging on his hook as bait.

“I wish you a happy day, and good fishing!” said Shoshlan.

“Welcome to us here, dear guest! And be always well!” the fisherman replied. “Where are you from, and what are you seeking?”

“I am seeking someone with powers greater than myself,” Shoshlan replied, “but I see that I will not meet anyone stronger than you!”

“Very well, then,” said fisherman, “you see that hollow there? Go down the bank until you come to it and wait there, and soon we shall come to you, and you can show us your strength.”

Shoshlan went on down the riverbank, and came to a house of sorts. He stepped over the threshold, and saw inside a woman sitting by the hearth, so enormous that in the gap between her teeth a swallow had built its nest.

“May you have a good day, mother mine!” said Shoshlan in greeting.

“You just saved your life by calling me your mother; otherwise I would take your blood to wash the rust off my teeth,” answered the woman. “But now you are my guest, so be well. Where are you from, and what are you seeking?” she asked.

“I come from the land of the Narts,” replied Shoshlan. “I am seeking someone with powers greater than my own. In our land I conquered all comers, and then set out in the world to find a man against whom I might measure my strength.”

“Oh, oh! Forget about that! My sons are catching fish. If when they return here at evening, they find you in our house, they will eat you, and leave no bones behind! Here is some food, take a bite, take a rest, and I will think up something to save you, to protect you!”

Quickly she placed a small three-legged table before him with various dishes on it. But did Shoshlan feel like eating—oh no! Then the woman lifted up an enormous sieve that was lying bottom-up on the floor, and hid Shoshlan beneath it. Several times he tried to lift the sieve, but he could not even budge it.

In the evening all three brothers returned home, and asked, “Today we sent a conceited mountain fellow here. Where is he? Give him to us, and we’ll clean our teeth with his blood. For a long time now we have not had the chance to taste human flesh.”

“You are hungry now, and need to eat something more nourishing than that,” answered their mother. “That fellow can’t get away—he’s under that sieve, so let him stay there, and you can have him for your breakfast tomorrow if you like!”

The mother fed her sons with the supper she had prepared, and after they had lain down to sleep, she tucked them up in their beds, and they were soon snoring. Then she let Shoshlan out from under the sieve, took him to the door, showed him the road and said, “Run as hard as you can! Only your legs can save you now, and there is nothing else to rely on. In the morning they will come after you. One of them has the smelling powers of a wolf; the second can jump across three ravines at once; the third can fly like a wild hawk.

When the three young giants awoke in the morning, their mother told them that their guest had run off, and they at once set off after him.

Like a hare Shoshlan flew away from them. What else could he do? Suddenly he saw a wide pasture, and a one-eyed giant with one arm was pushing a plow before him, and on his waist-belt hung a bag of grain, and to his leg a raven was tied. So he plowed and sowed, and dragged the raven after him. Shoshlan ran up to this giant plowman.

“Alas and alack!” cried he. “I give myself into your hands on this earth and in the next world. If those three brother fishermen overtake me, I am done for. There is no escape!”

“If you were to give yourself into the hands of God himself, he would not do more for you than I!” said the giant with one eye.

Then he opened his mouth, threw Shoshlan under his tongue and hid him.

Meanwhile the brother man-eaters came up to the plowman and said, “Has our mountain bird not flown past here by any chance?”

“I have seen no mountain bird,” answered the one-eyed giant. “I’ve no time to stand chattering with you, so leave me in peace. I’ve work to do, as you can see!”

“Give us back our little fellow at once, or it will be the worse for you!” the three brother giants began to demand.

“You had better go your own road, and let me go mine!” answered the one-eyed giant. “You can expect nothing good from me!”

Straightaway the three brothers set upon him together.

“Now you have only yourselves to blame!” cried the one-eyed giant, and with that he grabbed the three of them with one hand, and set them on the ground and sat himself down on them.

Then the giant spat out Shoshlan from beneath his tongue, and said, “On my thigh a long hair is growing. Pluck it out, and I will tie up these implacable ones.”

Shoshlan took hold of the hair and tugged and tugged, but could not pull it out. Like a cord, he wound it round his waist three times, and made a sudden dash with all his weight, but still could not pull it out.

“Cut it off with your sword then!” said the one-eyed giant.

Shoshlan drew his sword, and holding the hair with one hand, slashed at it with his sword in the other. The sword-blade became as blunt as an old knife, but the hair remained whole. Then the one-eyed giant knelt with one knee on the three brothers, pulled out the hair himself, and bound up the three brother fishermen.

When the three brothers understood that they were defeated, they began to protest and complain, and then humbly ask to be set free.

“We ask nothing from you. Only unbind us, and let us go home!”

The one-eyed giant did as they asked, and off they went.

“Where have you been wandering?” he asked Shoshlan. “What are you seeking, and why have you embarked on a quest all alone?”

“I am Nart Shoshlan. I tested the strength of our young Narts once. We tried to throw a young bull across a river. I was the only one who succeeded. After that I felt proud of my power, and set off for other lands, to find some other way of testing my strength. You saw what happened, and how that search ended. My thanks to you! Had it not been for your help, I should never have set foot again on Nart soil!”

“In our land, Shoshlan, any month-old child could throw a bull across a wide river, but nonetheless we do not pride ourselves on our powers as you do. Just listen what happened once to me.

“I am the youngest of seven brothers. Our father was healthy, and as alert as a reindeer. One day we all set out together on a quest. From morn till eve for several days we roamed around, riding here and there, but did not find any booty. One day, after dinner, the clouds began to gather darkly in the sky, and heavy rain started. We looked around for shelter from the storm, and suddenly caught sight of a cavern. There were eight of us, but we all found room for ourselves and our horses. After a while, we saw a shepherd driving his flock past our cavern. A mischievous goat ran up to our cave, and began rubbing itself up against it. That was such a huge goat, and he rubbed very hard, so that we felt our cavern rock to and fro like a cradle. Finally we understood that our cave was really the empty skull of one of their dead horses.

“ ‘Get away! Get away!’ shouted the shepherd at the frisky goat. But the billy-goat paid no attention, and did not rejoin the flock. Then the shepherd became furious, and swooped on him like a kite, but the goat had already capered off farther. The shepherd then stuck his stout staff in the eye-socket of the skull in which we were sitting, whirled it round his head, and hurled it after the goat. He aimed very well, and the skull struck the horns of the disobedient goat and was shattered. All who were inside, we and our horses, were scattered in various directions. What worse should happen to us? Well, the shepherd saw us, came running after us, and with his staff he slew my father and all six elder brothers. I had already been wounded when he had poked his staff in the horse’s eye-socket, and so had then poked my own eye out. Still, he seized me by one arm, and as I tried to escape he tore it off. So you see what things can happen on this earth of ours!

“Since then I have never in any way tried to measure my strength against anyone. To you who love me, and whom I love, I say, ‘Never seek strength greater than your own. Return home, my sunny young man, and never say that there is nobody in the world stronger than you!’ ”

So they said farewell, and the one-eyed, one-armed giant went off back to his village, and Nart Shoshlan set out on the long road home.

22 ♦ SHOSHLAN AND THE GOOMAG MAN

Once Shoshlan went hunting. One hare was all that he caught. Having skinned it and cut up the flesh, he made shashliks out of the kidneys, roasting them on a spit over the fire. What was left over he wrapped up in the skin and put it to one side. When the shashliks were done, Shoshlan, before starting to eat, said, as was his custom, a short prayer, “God lives!”

The moment he said these words, all the hare’s flesh inside the skin gathered together, and the hare came to life again! Shoshlan flung up his hands in amazement, and cried, “What a wonder! Who would believe me if I told them what has just happened—that I killed a hare, skinned it, cut up its flesh, made shashliks of its kidneys—and then it suddenly came to life again!”

“That is no wonder! If you want to see a wonder, go to the Goom Mountains across the pass!” said the hare as he skipped off.

“If it is a greater wonder than this one, I must see it, whatever the cost!” thought Shoshlan. He asked his wife to prepare him some food to carry, light and tasty to eat, then he straddled his steed and set off, heading for the land of Goom. Over seven mountain passes he rode, and there before him lay the eighth—the Goom Pass.

On the path he noticed the tracks of a deer. He followed the trail, and in a forest glade he caught sight of the prey. Such a beauty it was too, that Shoshlan felt sorry to kill it. The deer had only to stir a little, and the hairs on its back all rang out like musical strings in different tones. From mound to mound, from one tuft of grass to another, Shoshlan began to steal up on the deer. Having approached to within bow-shot, he had already fitted an arrow to his bow, and bent it, when suddenly through the air whistled an arrow of another hunter. The deer wavered, then fell from the height down a steep slope.

“What a mean dog! What a stupid ass! Who dared to shoot my deer?” shouted Shoshlan at the top of his voice.

Nobody answered him. Shoshlan followed the deer’s blood-stained trail down the ravine, and there he saw the dead deer, and a man who was standing nearby. But that man was as tall as a watchtower.

“Was it you who killed my deer?” Shoshlan asked him angrily.

“Yes, it was I who shot him!” answered the tall man steadily.

“But that deer belongs to me!” retorted Shoshlan arrogantly. “How dare you shoot another hunter’s deer?”

“If it was your deer, then why did you not shoot it before me?” replied the man. “I am a hunter, like you, and I am hunting on my own land, in the Goom ravines. Why then do you shout and curse at me?”

“And who are you then?” inquired Shoshlan, calming down a little.

“I am, as I said, from the land of Goom. The question is—who are you, and where do you come from?” the tall man made reply.

“I am Shoshlan, from the land of the Narts!”

“Well, then, man of the Narts,” said the man from the land of Goom, “God has given us both a share in this deer. Come here, and let us skin it together.” With that the quarrel ended, and they set about skinning the deer. When they had finished, the man from Goom handed Shoshlan his knife and said to him, “Man of the Narts, divide the deer in accordance with your customs.”

“You killed the deer,” answered Shoshlan. “So you must divide it.”

Then the man from Goom began to divide the deer into three parts.

“One portion for him, one for me, but who gets the third?” thought Shoshlan to himself in alarm. “Of course he’ll keep that for himself too. But if he does, he’ll get more than I, and such a humiliation would be worse than death for me.”

When the man from Goom finished dividing the deer into three parts he turned to Shoshlan and said, “It is your right, Nart Shoshlan, to choose any portion first!”

“Not so, my bright fellow,” said Shoshlan. “You killed the deer, and it is your right to choose your portion first.”

So the man from Goom chose one portion, and said to Shoshlan, “That will be your portion, Shoshlan.” Then pointing to the second portion, he added, “You have come from a faraway country, and therefore accept that from me, as my guest. The remaining portion will then be mine!”

After that they cooked some shashliks, and ate them with relish. Then each took his allotted portions, and prepared to go on his way. Before parting the man from Goom said to Shoshlan, “Man of the Narts, choose now whatever present you wish, be it my sword, my horse or my bow! Take what you like so that in the land of the Narts they should remember me, and think of me kindly!”

Shoshlan thanked the man from Goom sincerely, but he declined the present that he proposed. They bid one another farewell on parting, and mounted their horses.

The man from Goom went off to his own home, and Shoshlan toward the land of the Narts. But having traveled not very far, he thought to himself, “I didn’t take a lucky chance when it came. The man offered me a present, and I refused. Why did I not take something? I turned my back on a lucky chance! How shall I explain that to the Narts?”

So Shoshlan turned his horse around, and galloped after the man from Goom, and shouted out to him as he came within ear-shot, "Hey, man from Goom! I want a word with you. Wait a moment!"

The man from Goom also turned his horse around, and they met again where they had shared the deer.

"What do you wish, Nart Shoshlan?" asked the man from Goom. "Have you forgotten something perhaps?"

Shoshlan replied, "Well, we Narts are such a people, that if somebody honors us by proposing a present, and we at first decline to take it, then later we have regrets and ask ourselves why we did not accept it."

"Well, we are such a people," replied the man from Goom, "that if we offer somebody an honorable present, and he does not take it, we never offer him anything else."

Word followed word, and the two men began to quarrel. They took their bows and began to shoot. Then Shoshlan drew his sword, and the man from Goom his saber, and they began to rain blows on each other. Both received eighteen wounds, and they could not fight any more. One fell this way and the other that, both lying exhausted by the pathway. Toward the evening they recovered, and then said to each other, "We shall now go home and heal our wounds, and in precisely one year's time we shall meet here again!"

With difficulty they mounted their steeds, and Shoshlan rode slowly home to the land of the Narts, and the man from Goom to his own home.

They took medicine, and in a year healed their wounds, and then returned as they had agreed to the same spot.

From afar already Shoshlan caught sight of the man from Goom waiting and began letting fly his arrows. The man from Goom waved and shouted, "We shall both kill ourselves thus, man of the Narts. We have no blood feud between us, so should we wish to kill each other?" Then they both threw down their arms, this side and that, and gave each other their hands, and embraced, thus making up their quarrel.

"Now we are friends again, you must come to my home!" said the man from Goom. So they sat astride their horses and rode on to the Goom village. There

the man from Goom entertained Shoshlan excellently. For a whole week they never left the festive table. When that week ended and Shoshlan prepared to leave for home, the man from Goom presented Shoshlan with his bow, and in addition to that the skin of the deer over which they had first quarreled. That skin was such that every hair on it rang like a bell and every bristle laughed like a tambourine. One had only to touch it, and it began to sing in wonderful voices.

Later Shoshlan invited the man from Goom to visit him at home. He came to the land the Narts, and there in his own home Shoshlan welcomed him heartily and gladly, and entertained him for a whole week. When at the end of that time the man from Goom prepared to return home to his own land, how could Shoshlan let him go without a present? Generous Shoshlan made him a gift of his own steed.

So Shoshlan and the man from Goom agreed to call each other brothers.

23 ♦ SHOSHLAN IN THE LAND OF GOOM

Again Nart Shoshlan had a good opinion of himself, and thought that there was nobody in the world stronger than he. Again he decided to go hunting alone. A long while he wandered, a long time he roamed, but to his misfortune did not meet any bird or beast on that day. At last he entered a dark forest. In the middle of the forest there was a glade, and upon that glade a young golden deer was browsing.

Shoshlan tied up his horse, and began to creep up on the golden deer.

He was already taking aim, ready to loose his arrow, when a young lad came up to the golden deer, cast a silk cord about its budding horns, and led it away. Shoshlan was so surprised and upset he got on his steed and rode after the unknown lad. Meanwhile they came to an entrance of a village.

Shoshlan overtook him there, and said, “Good evening, my fine young fellow! Can you tell me with whom I might spend the night here?”

“You may stay with my father,” he replied in Khatiag tongue, “but where are you coming from, and where are you going?”

“I am a Nart from far away. I have been hunting day and night and wandered here.”

“My father loves the Narts with all his heart. He is ready day and night to meet such! We’ll be glad to host you.”

So Shoshlan set off with the young fellow, and when they came to a house the youth shouted out, “Daddy, just look? Here’s a Nart before your very eyes!”

An old man came out of the house, invited Shoshlan to dismount, then embraced him, and welcomed him inside, and asked him in the Khatiag tongue where he came from, who he was, and who his father was.

“I am from the Akhshartagketta family, and I am called Shoshlan.”

The old man had three sons, and he told them all, “The guest who is visiting us is a very dear one. The time has come to slaughter a beast in his honor. Bring one here from the herd!”

The youngest son, who had met Shoshlan on the road said, “I found a young fawn that had become lost in the forest today. Would that be enough for us or not?”

Shoshlan understood the Khatiag language well, and replied, “Enough for all, I’d say, and some left over!”

He did not let the old man’s sons go to the herd in the field.

So they brought in the golden deer. The old man performed the usual ritual, and said a prayer over it, lifted a rush light to its brow and marked it with soot, and then allowed Shoshlan to slaughter it. Shoshlan wished very much that they would give him the deer alive, but dared not ask for such a thing, and so he slew the young deer.

Supper was all ready, the low three-legged tables had been laid, but Shoshlan did not touch a thing. The host then asked him, “Why do you not eat? What is the matter with you, man of the Narts?”

“We Narts have a custom; even with blood-feud enemies we are prepared to share the meals, but we must know with whom we sit at table. You have done me a great honor, and served me well, but I still do not know your name, and who you are.”

The old man answered him, "I am a man from Goom. I have three sons, as you see. We have never offended anyone in our lives. We live with everybody in peace and friendship. Those who know our good intentions we help even more, but to those who do us harm we reply with the like, and even more."

Shoshlan did not make answer to these words, but began to eat. He became then a brother to his hosts. After supper they made up his bed, and he lay down to sleep. The skin that they had stripped from the golden deer they hung on the pole near him. As soon as the breeze began to blow the golden deer skin began to ring in various tones, and resounded like tambourines. Shoshlan was greatly surprised at this, and could not sleep, "If only they would give me that deer skin!" he thought during the night. "I would bring it as a new wonder back to the Narts!"

In the morning, as soon as it was light, the old Goom man came to Shoshlan's bed and told him, "I have sent my sons away, one to the herd of horses, the second to the herd of cattle, and the third to the flock of sheep. As our guest you now have the right to take with you any of the cattle, horses, or sheep, and the herdsmen too, if you wish. I must show my face and make a good impression on the Narts!"

Shoshlan arose, and together they went out onto the steppe to see the herds that had been placed at his disposal. Having seen what fine horses, cows, and sheep they were, Shoshlan took off his cap, and heartily thanked his host for his kindness, and said to him, "Let them stay with you, for your well-being. I shall take nothing of all these riches. You have already made me so welcome!"

The old man then said to his youngest son, in the Khatiag tongue, "You must accompany our honored guest on his way to the border of our land. Go and catch yourself a horse from the herd!"

The youth chased after a good horse in the herd, but he only managed to grab hold of a young foal with mangy skin, since all the other horses scampered away.

When the old man, his sons, and Shoshlan returned to the house, the breakfast was laid. They ate their meal, said their friendly farewells, and went out into the courtyard. Shoshlan saw beside his own horse a young foal with

mangy skin, and shook his head in uneasy alarm, thinking, “Will that foal keep up with my horse? How shall we reach the border?”

They bestraddled their steeds. Shoshlan said a further farewell to his host, and they set off. Shoshlan rode ahead, and the youth followed him. When they found themselves in a dense forest, Shoshlan’s horse began to fall out of step, while the foal kept pulling ahead despite a tight rein. Then the youth finally said to Shoshlan, “Of course, it is not befitting that I should ride ahead of my elder, but nevertheless, let me do so. Nobody will see us here, and I know the way better, so it will be easier for you to follow me.”

Shoshlan consented that he should go ahead. The mangy foal ridden by the youth always wanted to go through the thickest part of the forest, and rubbed shoulders on old trees, which it then pushed down. Riding behind him, Shoshlan felt pity for him, and after a while he said, “Why do you not guide your foal where the forest is not so thick?”

“Because he would then outpace your horse, and you would get left behind!” answered the youth.

At least they reached the borderline. The youth jumped down from his foal, and began to walk to and fro until Shoshlan caught up with them, and addressed the young fellow so, “Ouch, ouch! You have tired out my horse, but don’t think now that I am finished as well. Now, I shall ride ahead.”

“Happy journey, Shoshlan! This is the border, and beyond I may not go.”

“Let us change horses, then,” Shoshlan told the youth. But the youth was offended by these words, and replied rather sharply, “Shame on you! What are you saying, Shoshlan? Did not my father offer you a whole herd of excellent horses, along with the herdsman too? If you wanted a good horse, why didn’t you take one? This foal is one of the worst of the bunch, and I won’t change him with your horse. If I do as you ask, when I get back home Goom people will say “Eh, you there! Took a Nart’s horse for a mangy foal,” and so I should be put to shame!”

In reply to that Shoshlan laid his hand on his sword and threatened, “If you don’t quickly dismount from your foal and bestraddle my horse instead, then I shall slay you!”

In answer to that challenge the youth drew his sword, and they began to strike at each other, but neither could gain the upper hand.

Until midday they fought, then separated to take a rest.

“Now I know what you are worth,” said Shoshlan to the youth. “Go your way, and I’ll go mine, and we’ll test our strength another time.”

So they parted, both wounded, in opposite directions.

The youth arrived home all covered in blood. His father saw him and inquired.

“What’s the matter with you, my son?”

“Well, your guest treated me very nicely, I must say! He wished to change horses with me, but I considered that dishonorable. So we came to blows and wounded each other. Twelve times I wounded him, and twelve times he wounded me. We have agreed to meet again.”

“But why did you strike him? To strike a guest is shameful!”

“We quarreled just beyond our border!” explained his son.

“Well, that doesn’t matter, then. You must recover from your many wounds, and meanwhile we shall see. May friendship be born between you instead of enmity!”

Shoshlan did not show himself to the Narts, nor to the Chintas, until he had recovered completely. When he was well again he mounted his horse and rode off again to the Goom border. On that same day also the youth was waiting at the borderline. Shoshlan smiled and said, “Well, let’s make peace between us. We know each other’s strength, and instead of distressing each other doing great harm, let’s be great friends!”

“But I can’t believe you any longer, Shoshlan,” answered the Goom youth. “I can’t trust you. Don’t come near me now!”

Then Shoshlan drew his sword and lay it on the pommel of his saddle. His shield he threw on the ground, and his bow he hung on the cantle of his saddle. Then, unarmed, he went up to the youth and took his hand.

“We won’t test our strength against one another again,” he said. “We’ll test it together against whatever fate may send us!”

The youth regained his faith in Shoshlan, and said not a word against him. They swore by earth to be friends, and rode together to the home of the youth's father. They arrived there already fast friends again. The youth slipped from his saddle, but Shoshlan remained mounted. The youth's father came out to welcome him, "I beg you, Shoshlan, dismount, come in!" he said. "You are our guest. Why don't you enter our home. Come in, and stay with us!"

"Your son and I once tested our strength against one another, and neither proved to be the stronger. Now we must test our strength together on the open road. Tell us where there is a land that no man has set foot on to carry off booty, and let us go there together and prove our strength."

The old man pondered and then replied, "There is no such unknown land that Narts or Chintas have not set foot on in their campaigns. I know only one thing, that on the slopes of the Akhokha mountain there is a herd belonging to three brothers, favorites of the gods, but nobody till now has been able to overcome their powerful shepherd."

"That was just what I was looking for!" exclaimed Shoshlan. "We'll go and test our strength against him!"

The old man then responded, "But he can only be conquered by a cunning mind. No strong man would think of using force against him. . . . But come into the house, and I'll give you some further advice on the matter."

Shoshlan and the youth entered the house. There the old man continued to tell them what they should do.

"I have a very beautiful daughter. Let us dress her in the best silk gown, and let her take with her two twelve-stringed hand-harps.

One she will play by hand, and the other by foot. Take her with you to the Akhokha mountain. There you will find the home of that shepherd of whom I spoke, and while he is out on the pasture with the rams, you both will enter. In his house you will find an armchair of ivory. Sit the girl in that armchair, place the twelve-string harps before her, and let her play on them. Hide yourselves on either side of the door. In the evening that shepherd will return from the pasture with the rams. Not often does he see a woman, and therefore, when he enters the house and sees a beautiful maiden there, he will fall in a fainting fit. Then be

ready! Tie the shepherd securely to the central pillar of the house,² and then you can drive off his flock.”

Shoshlan and the youth did everything just as the old man had advised them, and went to the Akhokha mountain, found the house and entered, seated the maiden, and waited. In the evening the shepherd returned home, opened the door, and saw in his ivory armchair a lovely maiden playing hand and foot on two twelve-stringed hand-harps. When the maiden smiled at the shepherd such a powerful feeling of passion seized him that he fell in a faint.

Shoshlan and the youth were ready and waiting, and at once tied him up very securely to the central pillar of the house. When the shepherd at last came to himself, they brought to him some tasty food, but he did not accept anything from them. Finally Shoshlan brought him part of the ram’s leg. The shepherd tore out the knee-bone with his teeth, placed it on his forehead, then tossed his head with such force that the knee-bone sailed out of the house, and fell into the house of the three brothers whom the gods favored. They were sitting at supper just then, and the knee-bone fell near them, with the curved side uppermost—a bad sign.

When the shepherd did this with the knee-bone, the youth said, “May you do the right thing, just like that, Shoshlan! That knee-bone was sent as a messenger of alarm to the owners of the flock, the three brothers who live together. We must not waste a moment, but drive off the flock straight away, before they set upon our track.”

They drove off the flock of rams, and by morning had reached the wide-open steppe land. They took the old man’s daughter along with them, and went till night overtook them.

Meanwhile the three brothers favored by the gods were hot on their track. They had first gone to the shepherd’s house and released him from his bonds, and then the four of them set off in pursuit of Shoshlan, the Goom youth, and the old man’s daughter.

Out on the steppe, when they had already almost caught up with them, Shoshlan began to pray to the god of all warriors, Washtirji, “O protector of all nightly campaigners, Washtirji! Give us aid!”

Washtirji heard Shoshlan's prayer, jumped upon his three-legged horse, circled round above the steppe where Shoshlan and the Goom youth were driving off the stolen flock of rams, and behind them he threw his comb. Immediately their rear was protected by a dark impenetrable forest that sprang up. While their pursuers were breaking through the dense forest, Shoshlan and the young lad rode far ahead with the flock.

Then Washtirji circled round them again, and threw black stones behind Shoshlan and the youth from Goom. These stones grew to enormous size, and formed a range of rocky mountains. While their pursuers were finding a pass over the mountains, Shoshlan and the youth had already driven the flock of rams far ahead again.

Washtirji came down to the ground between the pursuers, and the ones who had stolen the flock of rams, and turned first to the three brothers favored by the gods, and their shepherd, and said, "Stop here awhile, and I will ask your adversaries why they have stolen your herd of rams."

The followers stopped, and Washtirji rode up to Shoshlan and the Goom youth and asked them, "Whose flock are you driving off?"

"We are driving off the rams belonging to the three brothers, favored by the gods," Shoshlan replied.

"Well then, your pursuers have already caught up with you. What are you going to do now? Shall I impose a truce between you, perhaps?"

"What could be better?" replied Shoshlan. "We are agreeable to that!"

"And whose maiden is that with you?" inquired Washtirji. "You've probably stolen her along with the rams?"

"No, she is my sister," answered the Goom youth.

Washtirji returned to the owners of the rams and smilingly said, "They are driving off the rams that were given to them as the bride-price for a maiden. They are not stealing them by force!"

Washtirji then led them all together. At once they gave the maiden to the three brothers, who were unmarried still, and then Shoshlan and the Goom youth rode off again, driving the rams back home.

In the morning when they shared out the flock in the presence of the Goom youth's father, Shoshlan divided the flock into three. The young man was thinking to himself, "Why does he divide them into three lots? Is he going to take two shares for himself? That would lead to trouble!"

But Shoshlan, sensing this said, "Young man, why do you suddenly look so gloomy? Have I not divided the rams fairly? One portion goes to your father as the bride-price, the second portion is yours, and the third is mine!"

The Goom youth and his father were then very pleased with Shoshlan, and even surrendered their lots to him. They also gave him the skin of the golden deer, and then accompanied him to their border.

Shoshlan brought the flock of rams safely home to the Nart village, and gave a great feast to which all the Narts were invited.

24 ♦ SHOSHLAN AND WARKHAG'S UNKNOWN SON

Nart Shoshlan decided to gather all the three Nart families at a grand feast. He called Shirdon and said to him, "Shirdon, I have chosen you as my herald. Call together in a week's time all the three Nart families living in our land, and I will arrange a rich feast for them!"

Shirdon agreed to be the herald, and made his way to the top of a tall Nart tower built of stones, and from there he cried aloud, "Hear me, O three Nart families! In a week's time Shoshlan will arrange a glorious feast, and you are all invited to come!"

On the appointed feast-day the Narts began to gather at Shoshlan's house. He seated them on benches in four long rows in his huge house, built of stone, and fortified with mortar. According to Shoshlan's command the best Nart youths served the food at the feast, while the youngest ones served as messengers and helped.

Urizhmag sat in the seat of honor for the eldest, and pronounced toast after toast. So they sat and ate and drank till halfway through the feast. Then Shoshlan went up to the elders, called one of the serving boys, felt in his pocket and brought forth his own gold cup, and gave orders to fill it with mead. This done,

he said, "O all you three Nart families! I am grateful to you that you have honored me with your presence in my home. This toast I raise to that house in which lives the most powerful of men. Let him take this goblet of mine, who is the strongest man in his house. May the mead in this cup do him good, and the goblet itself be a present for him!"

At once all heads were bowed, and all eyes turned to the floor among all three Nart families. Only the old Nart Warkhag who sat in his tattered coat among the feasting guests, looked around. Seeing that nobody among the Narts stood up to answer Shoshlan's toast, he jumped up like a youngster, took the gold cup from Shoshlan's hand, and said, "O three Nart families! All of you who come today to Shoshlan's home! May you be endowed and blessed by his kind wishes! But my eldest son is not here. He has gone to a distant and dangerous land, and among you all there is none as powerful as he!"

Forthwith Warkhag himself raised the golden goblet to his lips and drained it to the last drop, and the empty goblet he then pocketed in his bosom.

Time went on, and the Narts were still sitting at table. For the second time Shoshlan went to the elders, and another golden goblet he ordered to be filled with mead, after which he said to all present, "O three Nart families! Yes, Shoshlan offers himself, like a sacrifice, to all who have come to taste my hospitality today. I raise this cup to the health of that home where the best of women lives among you. If someone will name the worthiest of all women in his home, let him take this filled goblet from my hand, and may that with which it is filled do him good, and let him keep the cup as a present!"

Again the Narts of all three families lowered their eyes to the ground, and bowed their heads. Old Warkhag, in his tattered coat again looked round, and seeing that nobody rose and answered that toast of Shoshlan, jumped up again like a lad, took the second goblet from Shoshlan's hand, and said to all present, "O three Nart families! I wish you all who taste so gladly the hospitality of Shoshlan today a long life! My son, as I said, he's gone traveling to a far distant and dangerous land, and visited there the heavenly dweller Avdiwag, and has proposed his hand in a marriage with his only sister. If he succeeds in marrying that wonderful woman, then no better one will you see in any house than she!"

Old Warkhag drained the mead to the last drop, and having done so he placed the golden goblet in his bosom.

Again the toast went round in customary fashion, and there is little more one can say. Having himself drunk more mead than was good for him, Shoshlan again went to the elders, and called a serving boy to fill up the third golden goblet that he took from his pocket, and said, "O three Nart families! To all who answered my invitation I wish a successful and safe return back home. And this toast I propose to the health of that home that owns the best of all Nart horses. Let him who knows that he has such a horse take this gold goblet from my hand!"

Again the Nart families lowered their eyes, and looked round about, and seeing that none of the Narts moved a finger, Warkhag jumped up himself, took the third goblet from Shoshlan's hand, and said to all present, "O three Nart families! May you all have a safe homeward journey! Should my son marry the sister of Avdiwag, then he would receive as a present from his mother-in-law a horse who screams like a hawk, whistles like an eagle, and flies like the wind. Such a horse as that none among you here possesses!"

Again old Warkhag drained the mead, and placed the goblet in his bosom. Nobody knows how long the feast still went on, but at last the guests departed and made their way to their own homes.

A year or two passed by after that feast, then Shoshlan once thought, "Let the Narts eat my right hand, but all the same old Warkhag carried off those three goblets! How can one know if he has such a son, whose powers even I should fear? What god gave him such a daughter-in-law, who would have fed me with tidbits, and would have served me as I wished? Whence did he receive such a horse that would bear a rider like me, and prove better than my own? I shall go and call on Warkhag, and if all that he said proves to be true, I shall make him three presents, first my coat of mail, second my sword, and third my shield that no arrow can pierce."

In the evening twilight Shoshlan rode up to Warkhag's gate and called, "O Warkhag, take a look out here!"

At the loud call of Shoshlan, Warkhag's youngest son came running out onto the street, and Shoshlan asked him, "Where is your father Warkhag, then, my lad?"

"He has already undressed and gone to bed!" replied the youngster.

"Go and tell him that Shoshlan wishes to speak with him!"

The young lad returned to the house and told his father Warkhag, "Daddy, go outside. Shoshlan is calling and waiting to see you!"

"May things go ill with him! Had he not the time during the day to come and speak with me if he wished?"

He threw his old tattered coat round his shoulders, and went up on the flat roof of his home, and from there he called down, "I hope you are well, Shoshlan!"

"And I hope things are going well with you, Warkhag!"

"What news have you brought us, Shoshlan?"

"Nothing except good news could I bring you, Warkhag! You haven't forgotten, I hope, that grand feast I gave for all the Narts?"

"How could one forget such a feast! Till this very day we are not tired of expressing our thanks to you!"

"Truly, you had something to remember it by. You carried off from that feast my three golden goblets, Warkhag! I should like to see that powerful son of yours, your Narts' daughter-in-law, and that horse he was to receive, as swift as the wind!"

Warkhag then went down into the street, took hold of his horse's bridle, and led Shoshlan to the border of the Nart land. There he said, "Ride straight ahead until you meet another rider, and don't think of returning to our village until you do. The first one you meet will be my son. His strength you may test, his horse you will see, and his wife you will meet!"

Shoshlan rode straight out on the road shown him by Warkhag. Many a day he traveled, many a night he roamed, and came out on a deserted steppe land named Khiz, but not a soul did he meet. He decided to return, and in his mind was preparing the words he would say to Warkhag, "May you be left without your dead, without your sacred protectors, you old donkey, Warkhag! You

cheated me of the golden goblets, and sent me out on a deadly dangerous journey!” As soon as he made up his mind to return home, he took one last look across the distant steppe land, and suddenly saw there a rider, appearing in the distance as though he were the size of a blackbird.

He turned his horse back and rode ahead to meet him. They came near to one another, and the breath of the horse that the unknown man was riding lifted Shoshlan out of his saddle. The rider was Warkhag’s son. When he drew level with Shoshlan, he drew his sword ready to slay him, and addressed him with these words, “Who are you, then? What kind of a dog? What sort of a donkey? On the road I travel even birds are afraid to fly across, and mice steal away and hide. How did you dare decide to spur your horse on to meet me? He was just ready to strike Shoshlan with his sword, when he met his eyes, staring at him in amazement. Then Warkhag’s son said, “You have eyes like a Nart, otherwise I should have beheaded you!”

“May your mother and father be my guardians!” replied Shoshlan. “Do not slay me. I am Nart Shoshlan!”

At once Warkhag’s son jumped down from his horse, and made Shoshlan mount it, while he took the bridle of Shoshlan’s horse, and led them to the house where he lived. On arrival he said to Shoshlan, “Come in, come in! You must meet my bride.”

Shoshlan went forward and entered the courtyard. Quickly Avdiwag’s sister jumped up and came out to greet them. She took their horses and led them to the stable, and swiftly returned. She took Shoshlan into her husband’s house. There she undressed them, brought soap and water and washed them, laid out seven pairs of underwear for each, and dressed them from head to foot. She then brought her magic table on three legs, which served by itself whatever one wished. All kinds of food known on earth appeared there, and thus Avdiwag’s sister served her husband and her guest.

For seven days and seven nights they did not let Shoshlan leave the table, and on the eighth day Shoshlan thus addressed the bride, “Yes, may my head be brought to you as an offering, our new bride! Now only grant me the right to

leave your hospitable house. Most probably the three Nart families are out looking for me!”

Then Shoshlan brought his gifts to Warkhag’s son on parting, his sword, his coat of mail, and his shield.

“I promised these to your father, but now you keep them, in memory of the fact that all he told was true!”

Before he left they filled Shoshlan’s three golden goblets with mead. Shoshlan took the first. Warkhag’s son took the second, and the young bride took the third. Shoshlan wished them both good health, and then drained his goblet and handed it back to them. Warkhag’s son then said, “This goblet I give to you, as from the younger!” and stretched out to him his own goblet, and Shoshlan drained that one too.

Then Avdiwag’s sister also handed him her goblet and said, “This goblet I give you, as from the bride!”

Shoshlan took the golden goblet, uttered a prayer that they should both be happy in life, and then prayed for good health for the bride, and drained that goblet too.

Afterward Warkhag’s daughter-in-law brought Shoshlan seven pairs of underclothes for the journey, and so they saw him off on his way.

Shoshlan at last arrived back at the Nart village, just as one could expect. He went out on to the Nart meeting place in the square, and the young Narts welcomed him back, and asked him, “Well, how did your journey go, Shoshlan?”

“All was as it should be. But if old Warkhag comes to any one of you, then take off your hat, and give him a seat. He has such a powerful son, that if you placed all three Nart families on one side, and he alone on the other, then Warkhag’s son would equal them all in strength.

A severe year set in for the Narts. Grievously deep snow descended in early spring, covering all the pastures so that the cattle went hungry. Then the Narts

fed their cattle with the straw from the roofs of their houses. They were especially concerned with the future of their horses.

“What shall we do if our horses perish? A man without a horse is like a bird without wings!” said the Narts.

The best of them met in the village square, and began to think out ways to save their cattle and their horses.

“I know of a land rich in pastures,” said Urizhmag. “That is the steppe land of Balg, in the land of Tar. The steppes lie on the shores of the sea. The whole year round there is thick silky grass waving, and even in winter it is knee-high. It would be good if our herds could pasture there, but it would also be dangerous. Tar has two sons, Mukara and Bibyts. If we manage to save our herds, from the first, we would not be able to save them from the second.”

“What shall we do, then? There is no other way for us to save them!” said the eldest Narts. “We shall have to drive them to the Balg plain. But who among us is bold enough to face both sons of Tar?”

Many names were suggested by the Narts, but none of those named were prepared to drive the herds of horses and cattle into Tar’s land.

When Shoshlan saw that none were ready to go as shepherds and herdsmen with the sheep and horses, he said, “Hand me the twelve-stringed harp made by Shiridon, and presented to the Narts, then drive all your hungry herds and horses out to the road, and I will be their herdsman. If you trust me, I’ll try myself!”

How could the Narts not be happy to hear these words from Shoshlan?

“How could we refuse to give you Shiridon’s harp if you go as our herdsman? We know that you will not need a hundred shepherds with you, but can yourself alone protect our horses and cattle, and will not be bested!”

“Better that one man should die,” Shoshlan answered them, “than that all the Narts should perish!”

In those days, if one of the Narts should break his word, all things forged of steel would turn into brittle cast iron.

Shoshlan prepared for the road, put on a coat of rough wool, took his shepherd’s crook in his hand, and loudly cried, “Hey, you Narts! Drive your

herds out onto the games field. If anybody's cattle is left, we shall slaughter them for a feast!"

In all their courtyards the Narts were busy collecting and driving their horses, horned cattle, and sheep, and giving them into Shoshlan's keeping. He himself mounted his horse, gave a cry like a great falcon, then screamed like an eagle, and then drove the cattle off toward the land of Tar's sons. How far he drove them, how many days, who knows? But at last he reached the evergreen steppe lands of Balg. There, indeed, the grasses were waist-high. That was a land in which at the same time some trees were in flower, others had fruit already set, and on others the fruit was already ripe.

Shoshlan pitched his tent on a high hill. The cattle were already put at pasture, and Shoshlan went to do a little hunting. He soon came back with his quarry. He brought around some deer's carcasses and some dry logs to feed the fire. The Nart cattle fattened up so quickly in two days, that they got short of breath, and their legs scarce bore them.

Messengers brought news of all this to Mukara, "May I die from your anger, I must tell you that so many alien herds of horses and cattle are pasturing on your land, that the steppes of Balg are trampled flat beneath their hooves!"

Mukara, son of Tar, flew into a rage, and furiously cried, "What fool dares to shout near my home? Thunder does not roar when it hears my name! Who then dares drive cattle on my pastures?"

He straightaway seized the man who had brought him bad news, swung him by the arm round his head, and hurled him into the air, spinning like a windmill, and he fell into the middle of the sea.

On the following day another man came and called out to Mukara, "May I die from your anger, Mukara, but you must take a look and see how alien cattle have found their way to your Balg steppe!"

"I see I shall have no peace from these fools here!" roared Mukara. "Who would dare to drive their cattle onto my land? Is there a living creature on this earth who has not heard of Tar's sons?" Then, taking hold of the messenger who had brought bad tidings, he whirled him round his head, and hurled him,

springing like a top, through the air, and he struck a mountain crag, and was battered to bits.

Then on the third day another messenger came running into Mukara's courtyard with alarming news, "May I die from your anger, Mukara, son of Tar," he cried, "but out on the Balg steppes all the grass has been grazed by alien herds right down to the ground!"

He grabbed that messenger by the arm too, and was just getting ready to throw him out to the farthest bounds, when his wife said, "You will soon be done for! Three days running messengers come to you with alarming news, and you simply slay them! It would be better to check up on what is happening out there on the steppe lands. If it is not how he has said, you can kill him afterward!"

Mukara listened to his wife's voice, took her advice, and did not kill him as he had the others. He put on his armor instead, mounted his jet-black horse, with his weapons hanging from his belt, and off he went.



Shoshlan was sitting by his tent, playing on his twelve-stringed harp, and singing a song, while looking after the Nart cattle, which were freely grazing and lazing in the long lush grass.

Suddenly he noticed a dark cloud far away. It was moving toward him, and beneath it a deep furrow ran over the earth, while high above it, black ravens were flying.

"What might that be?" wondered Shoshlan.

The cloud came nearer, and then he saw that it was not a cloud, but a rider galloping toward him. His horse beneath him was as big as a hill, while the rider himself was as a haystack. From the mixed breath of the beast and its rider, a mist rose above the steppe. The deep furrow in the ground was left by the end of his saber, and it was not ravens flying above the misty cloud, but clods of turf that flew over the rider's head, thrown up by the hooves of his steed.

"So this must be Mukara, the son of Tar!" thought Shoshlan. "With strength alone you will get nothing from him, and if you manage to deal with him

successfully, it will only be by cunning!”

Mukara, son of Tar, galloped up and roared like thunder, “The sky dare not thunder in my presence. The hawk fears to fly across my land,. The ants do not dare to crawl on it. But you! What kind of a dog, what kind of a donkey are you? Do you really believe in your own strength so much, that you dare drive your cattle here?”

All the herds and horses gathered together tight, in fright at the cry of Mukara. Shoshlan was ready to crawl into an eggshell in fright. But what could he do? It was necessary to answer Mukara.

“Who’s polluting my land?” roared Mukara, and drove his horse straight on against Shoshlan.

Shoshlan knew seven languages, and he found tongue in one of them and answered, “May sorrow descend on Shoshlan’s head! It was he who sent me here, and I am only his servant, and do his bidding.”

“And who hired you?” growled Mukara, “and what for?”

“I am a Nart shepherd. Deep snow blocked the pastures, and ice froze the ground. Their cattle were helpless with hunger, and so they sent me here to these distant pastures.”

Mukara’s eyes gleamed with anger as soon as he heard Shoshlan’s name.

“They talk too much of this Nart Shoshlan! Tell me, what are his powers, how strong is he?”

“Whatever you say, Shoshlan is a mighty man,” answered he.

“Tell me then, what kind of games and contests of strength have you seen among these Narts. When I know that, and try whether I can perform those feats too, then I shall travel to meet this Shoshlan!”

“How should I know all the things he can do? I don’t have the time to spare in the village watching contests. Just once I saw one of them. The strongest among the Nart youths sharpened their swords on a black stone, and polished them on a whetstone to a fine edge, so that if you laid a hair across the blade, and blew on it, the hair was cut in two. Seeing this the Nart Shoshlan washed his neck, and went to the meeting place in the square, and there laid his head on a wooden block. The young Narts then came with their sharpened swords and

slashed at his neck with all their strength, but that meant nothing to Shoshlan, he only laughed, for not a trace of their blows was left on his steely-tempered neck, while the young Nart's swords were blunted and made jagged.

Then Mukara said to Shoshlan, "Show me your sword, then!" and Shoshlan showed him it. "Yes," he muttered, "not bad at all for a simple shepherd! Come on then, sharpen it up, and test it on my neck!"

"Well, if that's what you wish, so be it!" replied Shoshlan. He smiled and went to fetch his whetstone.

As he was sharpening, the blade of his sword gaily sang, You get sharp, my steel, my steel.

And today you will be glad.

With one swipe, if all goes well, We'll slash off Mukara's head!

He made the blade so sharp, that if you put a hair on its edge and blew on it a little, it would fall in two. Shoshlan was smiling with joy to the sun and danced merrily beneath the pale moon, and said to himself, "I'll cut off Mukara's head, and the Narts will rejoice!"

Mukara came then, and laid his head on a felled oak and said, "Don't spare me! Slash with all your strength!"

Straight from the shoulder, with full strength Shoshlan brought down his sword, but not one hair fell from Mukara's fat red neck. The sword flew from Shoshlan's hand, jagged and dull.

"No, that's no contest!" said Mukara. "Can you not tell me of some other kind of game that Shoshlan indulges in?"

"Shoshlan sticks the hilts of swords into the ground, and then he dances on the tips of the blades. Afterward he turns upside down, then twists round on his head on the sharp points!"

The son of Tar tried that game too. He took off his shoes, stuck his own sword and Shoshlan's into the ground by the hilt, and danced on their sharp tips,

but his feet were not even scratched. Then he jumped upside down, with his head on the pointed blades, and twisted round and round on his crown.

“No, that game is worth nothing at all!” he said. “Show me another!”

“Shoshlan has another game. He sends some of the strongest Narts up to the top of a mountain, and they then hurl down very large boulders while he stands below, with his brow raised to meet them, and the crags that they hurl onto his head just scatter in fragments.”

“Well, then, climb up this mountain crest,” said Mukara to Shoshlan, “and hurl down the largest boulders you can find. I will stand below and place my head beneath them as they fall. Let us try that!”

“I’ll do the best I can, I promise!” replied Shoshlan.

He climbed up to the mountain crest, and there he rejoiced. “Ah, All Highest, I thank thee! Now if I stand with my back against this towering crag, and place my feet against that other one, and stretch my steely-tempered legs, the whole crag will fall below on Mukara, and woe to the son of Tar then! If the whole crag and the cliff side too tumbles down, will it not surely crush him beneath its mighty mass?”

As Shoshlan scrambled up the mountain, and Mukara had watched him go, he suddenly noticed that the Nart shepherd had slightly bowed legs, and he remembered that there was a rumor that went around saying that Shoshlan was slightly bow-legged. At once he took up his bow, inserted an arrow, and was just taking aim, but then suddenly stopped.

“But what if this is not Shoshlan, but really a simple shepherd?” he thought. “If I kill him, the Narts will say that I dared not face Shoshlan, and slew his shepherd instead!”

Meanwhile Shoshlan reached the crags of the mountain top, leaned against one, and thrust the other away with his steely-tempered legs. Down it crashed where Mukara stood below, head raised to meet it. But it only crashed on his crown, and shattered into fragments of stone and sand.

Shoshlan became furious, and began to hurl down boulders from other crests, and sent mountain-sides rumbling down, each larger than the other, but

they only scattered into stones and dust on striking Mukara's broad brow. So the game went on from morn till evening.

"Hey, Shoshlan's shepherd!" cried Mukara at last. "Don't torment yourself in vain. These blows are nothing but flea bites to me!"

"It seems that he is predestined to be the destroyer of my family hearth!" thought Shoshlan to himself. "If he learns who I am, then I shall end up in his teeth for sure!"

"Can't you really tell some other contest of Shoshlan?" he questioned again, when Shoshlan came down from the mountain.

"May I swallow all your spleen, Mukara! Shoshlan has no end of such games and contacts, but what's the use in relating them?"

"Well, tell me about them, but only the more difficult ones!"

"Then listen! Shoshlan goes down to the bottom of the sea, and he sleeps there for seven days. During that time the sea around him becomes frozen to a depth of seven arm lengths. Solid ice it becomes, and the fish there as well. On the eighth day Shoshlan awakes, stretches himself, lifts up that whole block of ice, and pouring with sweat, he strides onto the center of the steppe. There he shakes himself hard, and all the frozen fish fall to the ground. Then Shoshlan calls out, "Hey, there, who would like some fish? If you have a horse and cart, drive up and take a load, but if you haven't, then take as much as you can carry yourself! Yes, that's what Shoshlan is like. He has many good qualities indeed, that worthy and powerful man!"

"Well, I too shall go down to the bottom of the sea, and then just watch what will happen!" boasted Mukara, son of Tar. When he reached the seabed he prayed to his god, "O God, turn the water all around me into ice seven arm lengths deep, and freeze it all, fish as well!"

So it happened that for seven arm lengths in depth the whole sea became frozen, and the fish too, and held Mukara fast in its grip for seven days. On the eighth day Shoshlan went to the shore and called, "Hey, there Mukara! Now it's time to rise!"

Exerting all his strength. Mukara tried to straighten up and lift the frozen sea, but he could not move the ice, nor break it.

“How is that?” said Shoshlan. “My master Shoshlan lifts the ice easily, but you cannot move it half an inch! Really, you my mighty Mukara must try again, and not give up so soon!”

Mukara made another desperate effort to straighten up, and he just managed to raise his head above the ice, but could not force his body with its wide shoulders through.

“Be kind to me, O Nart shepherd! Set me free from the ice, for I cannot move nor get out by myself!” begged then the frozen Mukara.

“Just a moment! Just a moment!” answered Shoshlan, and took his sword.

“Do you not know that I am Nart Shoshlan? I could not compete with you in strength, for there is none stronger than you in this world, surely! Nonetheless I have strength of mind too, and with it I have driven you under the ice, which is even stronger than you!”

“O, son of a witch, I did not recognize you!” growled Mukara in reply. “But when you climbed up the mountain, and I saw your bowed legs I was ready to believe that it was you. But my pride held me back and I did not let my arrow fly, for if it proved otherwise and I killed a shepherd, what would your people have said of me? What can I do now? I am in your hands. You have overcome me!”

Shoshlan began to hack at Mukara’s head with his sword. As before, sparks flew from his blades, but it did no harm to Mukara, still alive.

“Be kind to me,” he begged again. “Put an end to my suffering. Only when my own razor cuts off my head can I die. Go to my home and bring my razor and lay it on the ice, and it will cut off my head!”

Shoshlan jumped on his horse and galloped off to Mukara’s home. On the way he thought to himself, “It is no simple thing, that razor! Not for nothing did he send me to fetch it. There must be some trickery hidden here.”

Shoshlan took a large log of a tree in his hands, and holding it before him stepped on to the threshold of Mukara’s house. Straightaway the razor, which was lying on the lintel of the doorway flew down and split the log in two, and then fell to the ground. Shoshlan seized it quickly, and holding it tightly closed, galloped back to where Mukara was standing in his hole in the ice-covered sea.

Seeing Shoshlan was unharmed, Mukara muttered, “Well, lucky for you, son-of-a-witch, if you have saved yourself so!”

Shoshlan came up to him and said, “If you had as much sense as strength, nobody could have beaten you!”

“And you, Shoshlan, though you have enough sense, you still lack the strength to go with it. When I die, pull out the cord from my spinal column, and tie it round your waist, then all my power will come to you!”

Shoshlan put the razor down on the ice, and in a flash it slashed off the head of Mukara, son of Tar.

Shoshlan took a pair of powerful bulls, yoked them together, tied the end of the harness to the end of Mukara’s spinal cord, then gave the bulls a prod, and slowly, like a heavy chain, they drew out the whole cord. Shoshlan was just about to tie it around his waist when he suddenly remembered what had happened with the razor, “Most likely his spinal cord is not so simple either!” thought Shoshlan as he took it with him to the forest to test it. First he tied it around the trunk of a big beach tree, and just as though it had been sawn through, it fell. Then he tied it around a second tree, and that too immediately fell. Eight trees in a row did Mukara’s spinal cord choke and cut down. When Shoshlan began to wind it round the ninth tree, its strength faded, and it merely pressed it. Only when he saw this did Shoshlan bind it around his own waist.

Shoshlan sat by his tent again and watched the cattle grazing. Was it soon or long afterward, who knows, but suddenly he saw in the distance a huge black cloud approaching.

“That is not a good sign!” thought the Nart shepherd, Shoshlan.

Still larger and larger loomed the stormy cloud, and at last he made out a giant rider, who came galloping up to him.

“This is most likely Tar’s second son, Bibyts!” thought Shoshlan. “I was able to get rid of one son, but what shall I do with this one?”

The rider drew abreast of Shoshlan, and shouted in thunderous voice, “What kind of a dog, what kind of a donkey is this that has come to our land, where even an ant dare not crawl, where a falcon fears to fly across our path? Did you drive your herds here counting on your own strength to save them?”

“Now what are you saying, my dear fellow? I must swallow your displeasure, my good man, but I ask you, what kind of strong man am I? I am only a poor shepherd of the Nart Shoshlan. A severe year descended upon the Narts, a heavy winter, and nothing for their cattle to eat. So, they have sent me here to find other pasture. How could I refuse to do so? He would have killed me! Now you will kill me! What difference?”

“No, I must not kill him!” thought Tar’s son Bibyts. “Otherwise Shoshlan will say that I dared not face him in open fight, and attacked his shepherd instead!” So he asked Shoshlan then, “Have you seen my brother Mukara about?”

“Your brother Mukara? Of course I have seen him!”

“And where is he now, I should like to know?”

“He and I amused ourselves a long time together. I told him about some of the games and contests that Shoshlan arranges. We played some of them too and had a merry time. Now he has just lifted a huge block of frozen seawater on his head, and galloped off to the Narts’ land.”

“In the name of your god, I beg you,” asked Bibyts, “to tell me more about these games of Shoshlan. I have heard a good deal about the Narts!”

“I can tell you about them, and I can show you some!” said Shoshlan.

“Well, begin them at once! I’m waiting to try them!” said Bibyts.

“Among Shoshlan’s cattle there were two gray rams. Strong as bulls they were. Shoshlan stood them one on each side of him, showed them his lowered head, and then just for the fun of it, let them butt him, from both sides on his temples. When they got tired of butting his brow, Shoshlan would just stroke his face with his fingers and sometimes say, “I don’t know a more pleasant game than this one!”

“Where are these gray rams then?” inquired Bibyts.

“I can show them to you,” said Shoshlan, and he pointed out to him two huge rams in the herd. Really like bulls they were too.

Bibyts got down on his knees, and showed them both his head. Then Shoshlan whistled, and from both sides the rams came flying head-on and butted Bibyts with their horns. From morn till eve that game went on. At last the rams

grew weary, and Bibyts said to Shoshlan, “Really and truly, that’s a fine game!” He gave a grunt of pleasure and wiped the sweat from his brow with both hands, and then asked, “With what other games did Nart Shoshlan amuse himself?”

“At the foot of a mountain he sticks several spears into the earth with their points upward. Then he goes up the mountain to its crest and does a merry dance. In the heat of the dance he plunges head-first straight onto the spear-tips. There he stands on his head and claps both his heels together!”

“Well then, let us see how it goes with me!” said Bibyts. He took a few spears, stuck them in the ground, steel points upward, and then climbed up the nearby mountain. He danced there merrily awhile, then in the heat of the dance, with a joyous cry plunged head-first from the crest. Straight onto the spears he fell, stood upside-down on them, sang a gay song, and clapped his heels together in time with the melody.

“Well now, how did it go with me?” he asked Shoshlan. “Can’t that Nart think up better tricks than that?”

“O my bright fellow, he has endless powers, and countless tricks,” answered Shoshlan. “Sometimes at his order they bring huge boulders in a dozen carts pulled by a pair of bullocks, and large logs on a hundred carts pulled by a pair of oxen. They set the logs alight, and on the bonfire they heat the stones, blowing on the fire with a hundred pairs of bellows. When the stones are red-hot, Shoshlan opens his mouth, and they hurl the stones straight down his throat. He simply swallows them, and afterward spews them up again, none the worse!”

“Come on, then, let’s try that trick too!” exclaimed Bibyts. They harnessed up the Nart bullocks, and from the seashore they brought the largest boulders they could find on a dozen carts. Then they harnessed the oxen and went to the forest and brought home a hundred carts full of logs. They lit the bonfire under the stones, blew on the fire with a hundred pairs of bellows, and when the stones were red-hot, Bibyts tossed them into his open jaws, and swallowed them. Afterward he spewed them up again, gave a sigh, and said to Shoshlan, “That’s a good game, and useful too. It has warmed up my gizzard! Now show me Shoshlan’s most difficult trick, and I’ll try that one too!”

“Shoshlan has a special one. He walks into the sea until only his head shows above the water, and then they load heavy logs and stones upon his head. Shoshlan prays to his god, “God of gods, my God, send down such a frost, so that when a youngster runs into the yard to relieve himself, his water turns into an icicle!” When God fulfills this prayer of Shoshlan, and the sea freezes all round, he then lifts the frozen sea on his neck and shoulders, and carries it onto the land.”

“I simply must try to play this little game! Will my strength not suffice do you think?” said Bibyts boastfully, and straightaway began to walk into the sea, till only his head was showing.

Shoshlan loaded heavy stones and logs and anything to hand on to his head, and then began to pray, “God of gods, my God! Send down such a frost, so that when a youngster runs out into the yard to relieve himself, his water turns into an icicle straightaway!”

The Narts’ prayers to their God were always answered. Such a fierce frost descended on the earth that the sea froze solid in one icy stone. For a whole week Bibyts sat in that mass of ice, before Shoshlan said, “Well, now try to lift the ice, and come out on the land!”

Bibyts rose and stretched himself, and exerting all his strength, and sweating all over, he carried the frozen sea on his shoulders.

“O, woe is me!” thought Shoshlan. “It won’t be so easy to get rid of this Bibyts. The end has come for me and the cattle!”

“Now, say, who is the stronger?” mocked Bibyts.

“How should I know, a poor simple shepherd?” answered Shoshlan.

“Then I shall set off for the land of the Narts, and I shall take from them as tribute whatever is customary.”

“What do you need from the Narts?” asked Shoshlan.

“I shall go to the Narts to test my strength against them, and shall take from them as tribute one maiden and youth from each family!”

Shoshlan thought to himself, “Great shame will fall upon me. He will go to violate my native village, and I shall be spoken of as a cowardly helpless old woman among my own folk!”

Then Bibyts demanded of him, “Now you must show me the way to Shoshlan and the Nart people!”

“As you wish! The time has come for me to drive the cattle back to the land of the Narts. Follow me at a distance, and I will lead you!”

Bibyts agreed to follow, and Shoshlan, having gathered all the herds together, began to drive them home to the land of the Narts.

When the Narts saw him coming, and that all their cattle and horses were safe and sound, and well fed, they were all very glad, and began to praise and respect Shoshlan even more than before, as each one took his herd or flock, and drove them home. But they did not know what great alarm was pressing on Shoshlan’s heart. He returned to his home, angrily flopped down on his armchair, which creaked and cracked.

Shatana saw that Shoshlan had a weight on his mind, and that his soul was troubled, so she asked him, “Why are you angry? Surely, you should be glad. The cattle all returned well cared for and well fed, and the Narts are all praising you!”

“What have I got to do with cattle now?” answered Shoshlan. “My most powerful weapon in my fight with the son of Tar was my cunning. I was able to slay Mukara, and this cord which you see around my waist is made from his spinal marrow, and gives me great power. But however I tried. I could not overcome Bibyts successfully. That son of Tar is such a powerful giant that nobody can best him. I am troubled because he is following me back home and will soon arrive!”

“You fear him in vain,” said Shatana. “I shall help you to defeat him and get rid of him!”

They were still speaking when from the courtyard came the voice of Bibyts. Shatana ran out and welcomed him in as a guest.

Quickly returning to get the room ready, she said to Shoshlan, “You hide yourself for the moment, and leave me to deal with him!”

Behind the door of their home there was a cellar, and Shatana told him to hide there quietly, and listen carefully to all they said.

Then she ran to the door as Bibyts came from the stable, and sat him in the place of honor at their table, and then she set before him the most luxurious assortment of food.

“I am looking for Nart Shoshlan,” said Bibyts. “I very much need a word or two with him. Is he at home?”

“He should be home soon!” she replied. “He has only just returned from a distant land where he guarded the Nart herds at pasture, and our youths are celebrating his safe return. You have probably come after he arrived, and of course, you are tired. Eat meanwhile, and he will soon be here!”

Then Shatana brought him the goblet of honor, and asked him to say a prayer before eating. Bibyts took the goblet and had only just started to pray when Shatana interrupted him and said, “Oh, my good fellow, you don’t pray as we do! If the young Narts knew what you are saying, they would not let you out of here alive!”

“Well, take the goblet and say a prayer yourself, then!” said he.

“Tell me first, where do you keep your soul, your strength, and your courage,” inquired Shatana, still holding the goblet.³

“But what has that got to do with you?” asked Bibyts, surprised.

“How otherwise can I can pray for you?” answered Shatana. “So we Nart people pray for the soul of our guest!”

Then Bibyts thought a moment and replied, pointing to the column that supported the roof, “There in that column lies my strength, my courage, and my soul!”

Shatana ran to the column, embraced it, kissed it warmly. Bibyts began to smile, and said slightly mockingly, “Well, do you really think that my strength, my courage, and my very soul are to found in a wooden column then?”

“If they are not there, then where are they?” asked Shatana again.

“They lie in that hearthstone there!” answered Bibyts.

Shatana bent down beside the hearthstone and began to embrace it and kiss it, and stroke it with her hand.

“Now, tell me, cunning women, what would my soul, my courage, and my strength want in such a stone?” he again queried slightly mockingly.

“Ah, my dear guest, how ill you treat me! I ask you, from the bottom of my heart where they lie, in order to pray for you and them, but your only desire is to deceive me!” said Shatana in grieved tones.

Then Bibyts decided for the first time to trust Shatana.

“Listen,” said he, “and I will tell you the truth! On the Yellow Cliff there stands an impregnable fortress and in its center is a box of tempered steel. Three doves are hidden in that box. One of them is my strength. The second in that box is my courage, and the third my soul.”

“I see that they are safely hidden, and that nobody can find them!”

“Why not?” answered Bibyts. “I have only to take my sword to the door, and straightaway a beam of light will stretch from it to the fort.”

“What a wonder!” said Shatana in surprise. Then she took the goblet in her hand, said a prayer over it, and returned it to the guest, saying, “Now you may eat! Choose anything you please!”

Bibyts had been very hungry on the journey, and he simply gobbled up the food. Unnoticed, Shatana slipped into his goblet some herbs inducing sleep. As soon as he had drunk the drugged wine, the herbs did their work and sent him off to sleep. Shatana left him snoring.

Then she called Shoshlan, and he climbed out of the cellar, took Bibyts’s sword, and they went to the door. No sooner did the sunlight fall on the blade than a long beam of light, like a colored rainbow, stretched from it to the fortress on the Yellow Cliff. By that very beam Shoshlan sent his trained hawk to the fortress to fetch the steel box. In a moment the hawk flew there, and returning carried home the steel-tempered box in his beak.

Bibyts was still soundly asleep, and the echoes of his snoring ran through the whole house. Shoshlan opened the tempered-steel box, took the three doves in his hands, and then roared at the top of his voice, “What kind of a dog, what kind of donkey has laid himself down to sleep in my house, pray tell me!?”

Bibyts trembled, awoke, and jumped out of bed. But Shoshlan at once tore off the head of the dove in which his strength was hidden. Bibyts swayed, put a powerless hand to his head, and collapsed on the bed.

The second time Shoshlan roared at the top of his voice, “Unwelcome guest, away with you, out of my house I say!”

Bibyts tried to collect himself, but at once Shoshlan tore off the head of the dove in which his courage lay hidden. Then Bibyts recognized the Nart shepherd, and trembled all over.

“Now I know you! You are he, Nart Shoshlan! What can I do now? You have defeated me with your cunning mind. Now I am sure that you also sent my brother to the Land of the Dead!”

For the third time Shoshlan roared at the top of his voice, “Who is this dog, this stupid donkey, who after my two cries dares to remain in my house?”

Bibyts made as though to rise, but as soon as he saw him trying Shoshlan tore off the head of the dove in which Bibyts’s soul lay hidden. Then Bibyts, son of Tar, gave three sighs, and died.

Then Shoshlan gathered together the best of the young Narts, and led them to the land of Tar. From there they drove all the cattle, and seized all the spoils, and divided them equally among the three Nart families.

26 ♦ HOW SHOSHLAN WED KOSHER

One evening Shoshlan left his home, and went up along the street to the upper part of the Nart village. He came to one corner, and saw some young Narts standing there. They did not notice Shoshlan, and were speaking among themselves in this way, “Upon our word, without us Shoshlan would not be what he is!”

He went higher up the street to another corner, and there stood another group of young Narts, and Shoshlan heard the same kind of talk, “If we weren’t here, Shoshlan would not be what he is!”

He went on to the next corner, and there young Narts standing around were talking about the very same thing.

“Very well, then” said Shoshlan, “I will test your words in action!”

Was it long after, or soon after? Anyway, Shoshlan gathered the young Narts together, and said to them, “Hey there, my braves, the warriors of our enemy,

Warbi, have made their way to the mountain pass of Khizhin. We shall have to attack them and destroy them, and take possession of their goods and treasures. Tomorrow at dawn every one of you with your weapons and a store of food for the campaign must present yourselves before me on the village square.”

The young Narts agreed to this command. In the morning they set off on campaign with Shoshlan as their chief commander. They reached the pass of Khizhin, and saw there Warbi’s warriors, and heard the rumbling thunder of their armor as they came up from the ravine over the pass. The Nart youths were scared when they saw the hordes of Warbi’s troops and heard the rattle and rumble of the advancing host. Shoshlan looked around and saw that he remained at one place, all alone, and that the Nart youths had left him, every one, and had fled off home.

“Ah, you sons-of-bitches!” cried Shoshlan. “How you stuck your noses up at me that evening! Why don’t I see you so cocky now, I wonder?”

Alone Shoshlan went to battle against Warbi’s warriors, and finally destroyed and dispersed them. Then he took the best of all their possessions and treasures, and brought them home to the Nart village. There he went along the street, and not a soul did he meet.

“When I left all was well. Where have the others gone to now?”

Suddenly he saw a young woman, going to fetch water from the spring.

“Where have our people gone to, then?” he asked her.

The women made no reply. She was newly married, and had no right, according to Nart custom, to speak with elder men.

“For God’s sake!” shouted Shoshlan. “For this once, break the custom, and tell me why our village is deserted, and where the people are?”

“The beauty Kosher has gone up in her flying tower. She has flown up into the sky in it. When the Narts gathered to see this wonder, she said to them all, “I shall become the wife of him whose arrow reaches me in my tower in the sky!”

Shoshlan was agitated at this news. “What if someone’s arrow reaches her before I have a chance to shoot mine?” he thought, and hastened to the place where high above the earth Kosher’s tower hung in the sky.

He reached the spot where all the Nart men were gathered, gazing up into the heavens. He lay on his back on the ground, placed an arrow in his bow, and let it fly. His arrow stuck into the lintel of the door in the flying tower. Shoshlan shot another arrow, and that one stuck in the upper frame of the flying tower's window. This window then opened, and Kosher, with her white hand, took both arrows and looked at them, and thought, "Dear me! Both of these arrows come from one quiver." Then Kosher let down her flying tower to the earth, among the people again.

"He who shot these arrows, let him come and stand before me! He shall be my chosen one."

Shoshlan was pleased to hear these words, and he tore open the door of the tower, and rushed inside.

"Wait a moment, mad one, wait a moment!" cried Kosher. "You cannot take control of my tower!"

But Shoshlan did not listen to her, and went further. Kosher became angry. She ordered the tower to fly aloft. But she herself slipped out at the last moment onto the ground. Shoshlan, searching the tower everywhere for her, did not notice this, and was puzzled as to why he could not find her anywhere, high or low.

"That means she has deceived me, the treacherous wench!" he thought.

Meanwhile the tower flew higher and higher, bearing him with it.

Finally it reached heaven and stopped. What could Shoshlan do now? He became furious, and jumped off the top of the tower, toward the earth. He fell like a stone; the nearer to earth, the faster he flew. Finally he reached the surface of the earth, and with all the impetus of his downward plunge, broke through it, and went on down and down, and soon found himself among the devils of the seventh hell. They were very glad to see him, and welcomed him with the very best presents that they could find. But as the days passed by, Shoshlan grew sadder and sadder.

"Our dear guest," said the devils' chief, "all the best that we have, we bring to you, but we cannot now make you merry!"

“I am the kind of man,” declared Shoshlan, “that without hunting and campaigning, I simply cannot live!”

Just then as it happened, news came that enemies were driving off the devils’ cattle. The chief of the devils at once gave orders, “Fetch our famous horse Zinz-Alasha, and let our guest try him out! If he really is the kind of man that he says he is, then he can gallop on our steed and take back our herd from the thieves!”

Shoshlan jumped on the horse, tamed him in one moment, and galloped off after the robbers. Not only did he bring back the cattle, but he brought back the robbers too as prisoners.

“We can’t let him leave us now,” said the chief devil to his subordinates. “Such a devil, even among devils, you will not find!”

He then ordered that they should bring his three daughters to Shoshlan, and then addressed him so, “Our dear guest! All my three daughters I give to you as your wives. Such beauties as these, of course, you will not find anywhere! With them you will live among us very gaily and gladly your whole life through!”

Shoshlan had been in many lands, and had seen many women in his day, both very beautiful and very ugly, but such freaks as these, such devilish daughters, he had never seen before. But, so as not to offend his host, Shoshlan said to the chief devil, “Ah, how much I like your three daughters, my good devil-in-chief! But alas, in the land of the Narts I already have three wives. They cannot agree among themselves, and every day at home I hear screaming and scolding. They won’t be able to learn to live in accord with your dear daughters, and I don’t want to make three such sensitive girls unhappy.”

“Then ask what you wish, and we shall not begrudge you anything,” said the chief devil to Shoshlan.

“I only wish to return to my own Nart people. More than that there is nothing I need from you,” Shoshlan answered him.

The chief devil was very sorry, and gave a deep sigh.

“Well, then,” he said to his servants, “bring our guest two old slippers!” and they did so at once.

“Now put on these slippers, and pray to your God,” said the chief devil. “Pray so, “God of gods, make it so that I find myself at home!”

So Shoshlan put the old slippers on his feet, and prayed as he had been advised, and the next moment he was standing at the door of his own house! Shatana saw him and was delighted.

“I am prepared to swallow all your unpleasant anger, since you have returned my son to me, safe and sound!” she exclaimed.

Meanwhile Kosher had been living on earth. She soon learned that Shoshlan had returned and thought to herself, “Who knows, maybe he was offended by my tricks?” She then called her tower to descend to earth, entered it, and once again soared off into the sky between heaven and earth.

So it was that Shoshlan saw Kosher’s tower above, and asked Shatana, “What am I to do now? On account of that treacherous one I have already found myself in the seventh hell. Can I really leave her in peace and quiet, and stay calm myself?”

“I will help you in this matter,” said Shatana. “I shall change you into a whirlwind, and in that guise you can reach her without trouble.”

So Shatana changed him into a whirlwind, and he twisted and turned and rose high above, and in one moment attained the two-faced Kosher’s tower, and burst in through the window. Kosher was scared by the blast of the whirlwind, but straightaway it died down, and there stood Shoshlan.

“Now my cunning one, where will you fly from me?” asked Shoshlan.

“But why should I fly from you? Of what am I guilty? It is you who is the guilty one in everything. I rose here in my tower only to find out what your feelings were, and whether you were faithful to me!”

And there, up above, between heaven and earth, Nart Shoshlan and the beauty Kosher made up their differences, and were reconciled.

Then they ordered the tower to return below to the earth. How long they lived among the Narts, who knows? But Kosher was used to living alone in her tower, between heaven and earth, and could not get used to life among the Nart folk. She needed only Shoshlan, and nobody else. So one day she said these words to him, “My dear husband, I simply cannot live any longer among the Narts. If you wish that we should remain together, let us go and settle in my flying tower. There we shall have all we need.”

“But I cannot live that way either!” replied Shoshlan. “Without my Nart food and drink life is robbed of all taste for me, and without my Nart people life has no sense for me. If I do not partake in all their joys and sorrows, then life is no more!”

Thus it was that Shoshlan and the beauty Kosher parted. She went to live in her flying tower, and the beauty Kosher departed. She went to live in her flying tower, and rose up to heaven’s bosom, and Shoshlan remained on earth, living among the Narts.

27 ♦ HOW SHOSHLAN SLEW TELBERD’S THREE SONS

Nart Urizhmag prepared to go on a quest, to scout around and see what lay behind the mountains of Awhare-Khan. With him he took Khamis, Shoshlan, and Shibals. The reason for his taking them was that he himself was old, and well understood how useful these three might be on a far distant quest. Khamis was resourceful with words; Shoshlan was an accomplished rider and bowman; and Shibals, as the youngest, was taken for his ability to serve them at table.

So off they went with their twelve black bulls, born on Tutyr’s day. In their bullock cart were waiting many good things to eat and drink.

How long they traveled, who knows, but at last they came to an unknown place where they were surrounded by wreathes of black mist. Then someone shouted at them in such a fierce voice that they all froze.

“Hey, you Narts haven’t paid us your seven-year tribute. We shall come to collect contributions from you next Friday!”

“They have interrupted our journey,” said Urizhmag. “Let’s return home!”

“Hey, you elder Narts, are you frightened by shouting?” replied Shoshlan. He whipped up his steed and spurred on, and the others followed him.

After a while the same voice rang out again in the misty darkness, “Where are you going? We are the three sons of Telberd, and you have not yet paid us your seven-year tribute!”

The earth was frozen by that cry, and Urizhmag again asked them all, “Are you still not of a mind to turn back, comrades?”

“I swear by my father’s name I am not so inclined!” cried Shoshlan. “This is not the first time we have been beset by such foes.” Then he turned to Shibals, who was driving the bullock-cart, and shouted, “Come on Shibals, whip up your bullocks!” and once more they moved on.

Some time later they once more heard that terrifying voice crying, “How many times must we shout at you. We are coming soon to you for the seven-year tribute, and you had better turn around at once, and get off home and gather it!”

The youngest of Telberd’s three sons screamed this out in such a penetrating voice, that the earth froze, as if from frost.

Again Urizhmag asked the others, “Well, what do you say, shall we return home?”

“Very well, then, we shall return,” Shoshlan finally agreed.

So they made their way back to their village, each one returning to his own home. The news of what had happened to them soon spread around the village, and all the Narts were worried and disturbed.

Shatana, seeing this, went to Shoshlan and said, “The sons of Telberd ride winged horses, and they fly on them between heaven and earth. Those brothers never gave your forefathers any peace. In recent times they have feared you, and desisted, but now they are raising their voices against you again. But there is a way to overcome them, so listen. Behind the mountains there is such a spring that cattle cannot reach. Go to that spring, and carve for yourself a wooden coffin, like a trough, from a tree trunk. Lie down in it and wait. The sons of Telberd will bring their horses to that spring each morning to bathe. They will fly down to the spring. You must pretend to be dead, but hide your bow and arrows underneath you.”

Shoshlan did as Shatana suggested, and lay waiting. First of all the eldest son of Telberd flew down. He stood some way away, fearing to come nearer the coffin where Shoshlan lay, “You look like Shoshlan, and are pretending to be dead!” he thought.

Three times he approached the coffin, and went away again, but at last he plucked up courage to come nearer. Shoshlan at once arose, shot him with his bow, caught his horse, and hid the dead body in a nearby ditch.

Later the second brother flew down. He also feared to come near at first, thinking to himself, “You are Shoshlan, I’m sure, and you are only pretending to be dead!” But as soon as he came a little nearer, Shoshlan shot him too, and he hid his dead body and his horse in the ditch.

At last the youngest brother flew down, and keeping his distance said, “You are Shoshlan, I know, and are only pretending to be dead! I would have put an arrow through you, but having sworn not to shoot at the dead, I cannot take the risk.” For a long time he hesitated, then came a little nearer within bow-shot, and Shoshlan at once shot him. He took his horse, but did not stop to bury the dead body. What need for that? The three horses he gathered together in one place.

When Friday came the Narts all collected in the square to pay the tribute, but Shoshlan was not found among them.

“But where is Shoshlan, then?” the Narts wanted to know.

“Why do you ask?” Shirdon replied mockingly. “Most likely he has hidden away again somewhere!”

Meanwhile Shoshlan had gathered the weapons of the three brothers, tied their corpses to their horses tails, and ridden home. There he drove the horses to the meeting place in the square, but did not appear himself. When the Narts saw the horses dragging the dead bodies, they all began to wonder, “Who could have slain Telberd’s three sons?”

Soon they understood that as all were gathered in the square, and only Shoshlan was missing, then it must have been he who did so, and rid them once and for all of the three sons of Telberd.

So, thanks to Shoshlan, the Narts ceased to pay the seven-year tribute.

28 ♦ SHOSHLAN'S CAMPAIGN

Shoshlan thought that he would go on a quest for a year. He mounted his steed, and off he set. Was his road long, or not so long? Who can know save he himself? But anyway, at last he came to a great open plain. He looked around. There was nothing to be seen, not a sign of cattle, not a sign of riders. He traveled on farther, and there in the hollow in a forest he noticed the tracks of a

deer. He asked himself, “What kind of deer is that, that can leave tracks on the ground ankle-deep?”

He kept following the tracks, and crossed seven mountain passes, and on the eighth pass he caught up with his surprising deer. It was nibbling grass very quietly by the wayside. When the breeze blew on it all the hairs on its back rang like little bells. Shoshlan let fly his arrow at the deer, and the wounded creature bounded away. Shoshlan then climbed to the pass where the deer had been grazing, and found splashes of blood on the grass. These he carefully collected, and followed the blood-stained trail of the deer, which led him to a ravine. There he saw a house, went up to it, and called, “A guest is waiting on your doorstep, good host!”

At this call two young lads ran out, and invited Shoshlan to enter. They laid the table for supper, but Shoshlan did not eat anything, for he had noticed that the lads seemed to be very sad about something, “Tell me truly, what’s wrong? Why are you so sad?” he asked.

“Our mother is very ill, and therefore we are troubled!”

“And who is your mother, pray?”

“Our mother belongs to the tribe of Narts. She was noticed by the lord of Goom Ravine, and he took her away from us by force. But our mother was unyielding and stubborn, and the lord grew angry with her. He beat her with his felt whip, and said, “Change into a golden deer, and let there be none to heal you save the one who would wound you!” Our mother was thus changed into a golden deer. She ran away from the lord of Goom Ravine, and fed us youngsters on her milk. Since then she just dreams of returning to the Narts. “At least, I would like to see them once again!” she said. Therefore she often went on the distant mountain pass, where the Narts sometimes come hunting. Yesterday she went there, and one of the Narts saw her and shot her with his bow, wounding her badly. She left splashes of blood on the grass there, and she limped home wounded and exhausted, and now lies dying.”

“But can we not save her somehow?” inquired Shoshlan.

“If you take a drop of her blood and mix it with warm water, and give her that to drink, we think she should get better!”

Shoshlan took some of the blood-splashes that he had collected, and mixed them with warm water, and gave it to her to drink. The deer recovered quickly; obviously, she was very pleased with Shoshlan, but not one human word could she utter, and Shoshlan again asked the young lads, “But how can one change your mother back into a woman again?”

“If you beat her with the felt whip of the lord of Goom Ravine, then she will change back into human form again!”

“Then I shall go to the lord of Goom Ravine straightaway.”

“Today is Friday, and next Friday there will be a great feast in honor of his son. You go to him, and pretend that you know nothing of this. The lord of Goom Ravine will be seated among his guests, and his felt whip will be at hand. You take the opportunity to start serving his guests. If he does not suspect anything from your appearance, he will say to you, ‘You, my heaven-sent guest, come and take a seat beside me!’ You agree then. And be kind and gracious, but also be careful not to look at the felt whip for one instant, for if you do, he will become suspicious, and you will perish at his hand. If all goes well, you will be invited to stay. He will go to bed at night, and put the felt whip under his pillow. Don’t try to touch it, for the first time it will not fall into your hands. In the morning he will ask you, ‘Say, where are you traveling to, dear guest?’ And you must answer so, ‘I am looking for a place to work. Maybe someone will take me as a hired servant?’ Then he will say to you, ‘Stay with me, then!’ and you must agree to this.

“The second day, when all the guests are sitting feasting and drinking, the lord will get somewhat drunk, and when he goes to bed at night and takes the felt whip and puts it under his pillow, and falls asleep snoring, then you can creep in and take it quietly from his pillow.”

So Shoshlan set off to the land of Goom Ravine. As the two sons had said, the lord was giving a feast in honor of his son, and many guests were there. Shoshlan came to the Goom Ravine in the evening, when the guests had just departed for the night, and the lord of the Goom Ravine met him, holding his felt whip in his hand, and welcomed him in, “You come from far away it seems, and are most likely tired. Come in, and be my guest for the night!” Shoshlan thanked

him, and consented. When the lord went to bed he put his felt whip under his pillow. The next morning the guest returned to the feast, and sat at table. The lord of Goom Ravine then asked Shoshlan, "Where are you making for, on your travels?"

"I am looking for work, perhaps someone will take me as a servant?"

"I have no grown-up son to help me. Stay here, and be my helper."

"If you are not averse to my presence, I am willing," said Shoshlan.

"Then serve my guests here, as if you were my grown-up son. Let nobody go home unsatisfied. Entertain them as well as you can!"

So Shoshlan, as though he were the lord's young son, served all those at the feast. The lord of Goom Ravine, unnoticed by the guests, kept a sharp eye on Shoshlan, and was very grateful for his quick service and kind attention to his guests, but for a while he said nothing. Well, the guests ate and drank, and how could the lord not get tipsy too? Later in the evening the people departed to their homes for the night, and then the lord of Goom Ravine said to Shoshlan, "I am very grateful to you for your service today!"

That night the lord went to bed, and gave Shoshlan a bed near his. As soon as he was snoring, Shoshlan crept up to his bed, and quietly pulled the felt whip from under his pillow. Then he jumped up and began to roar like thunder, "Hey you, black ass! Do you really believe that I seek services with such as you? I am Nart Shoshlan. You torment the folk, but now it is your turn to be tormented!"

He struck the lord with the felt whip, and the master of Goom Ravine then changed into a black ass. Shoshlan loaded up all the lord's treasure on the black ass's back, and himself drove off his herds of horses and flocks of sheep, along with their shepherds, and returned to the house where the two young lads and the golden deer were waiting. Shoshlan at once struck the deer with the felt whip, and she then changed back into a woman once again.

Looking at Shoshlan the woman could not help feeling glad. Since he too, like she, was a Nart, she named herself his sister, and her sons his nephews. The felt whip she threw on the fire, and that fire still burns today, and does not die. Afterward Shoshlan's new sister and nephews made him many fine presents, and

he returned home to the Narts. There he gave an extraordinary rich feast, which lasted a whole week.

29 ♦ NART SHOSHLAN AND THE GIANT BIZHGWANA

The Narts prepared to go on a three-year adventure to find out what was going on around, and where the strongest men were to be found. How could they otherwise know where they stood?

They rode across the steppe lands, then came to the virgin forest, and above the forest there rose a steep cliff, upon whose crest a castle could be seen far away. Shoshlan decided to scout around, and to discover to whom the castle belonged. He went off alone away from the Narts, and quietly scaled the steep cliff. There he saw that the gates of the castle were open, but no guard was visible. He rode into the courtyard, tied up his horse, and looked in a window. There he saw the giant Bizhgwana asleep, and snoring so hard that every time his breath came out from his nostrils, the panels of the ceiling lifted and fell again.

“Of course he’s a tyrant, that giant Bizhgwana,” thought Shoshlan, “and therefore it is necessary to slay him!”

Shoshlan pretended to be a poor man, and called out so plaintively, “Giant Bizhgwana! May your father and mother be my protectors! Save me from the Nart Shoshlan! He wants to slay me with his sword!”

Giant Bizhgwana jumped out of bed, and went out into the courtyard, and there he saw Shoshlan, who stood no higher than his ankles. This enormous giant then roared at him, “Who are you? Where do you come from? How did you get here?”

“I am a poor man,” Shoshlan answered him. “I took care of the Nart Shoshlan’s cattle. Wolves came and killed one of his cows, and he threatened to murder me. All Shoshlan’s relations are hunting for me. I do not know where to go, or what to do, and so I came to you. I place my safety in your hands. Don’t give me away to Shoshlan, or he will roast me alive!”

“I have been looking for that son-of-a-bitch for a long time now,” roared the giant. “Now at last he will fall beneath my eye! Say, where are these Narts looking for you? Where can I find them?”

“I will tell you where they are, but I won’t go with you and show you, or they will kill me, or Shoshlan will swallow me alive.”

“Very well, you remain here, and wait for my return, I shall go and take a look at this Shoshlan, and see what kind of a man he is!”

“Wait a moment, giant Bizhgwana! Don’t go chasing after the Narts yourself! Better chase after their cattle, and drive off their herds, then they will very soon come after you themselves,” said Shoshlan.

So giant Bizhgwana set off to steal the Nart herds, while Shoshlan remained in the castle. Giant Bizhgwana had a servant working for him, and Shoshlan decided to take him into his confidence, and asked him, “Show me where this giant’s death lies, so that I may understand how I may finish him off successfully!”

“There is no ordinary way of dealing death to him. Only in the very highest tower of the castle arrows are stuck there. One of them is his soul, the second is his courage, and the third is his strength.⁴ But first of all go to the cellar under the castle, and lead out the black lasso-horse that is tied up there. If he allows you to sit on him, then all is well, but if not, then you must catch hold of him by his hind legs and whirl him around yourself as hard as you can, so that he will admit that you are the master, and his rider. Then jump on his back, and he will fly with you through the heavens. Returning from thence he will fly past the tallest tower. Then grab the three arrows at once, and then the giant’s fate will be in your hands.”

Shoshlan led the black lasso-horse out of the cellar, but it did not allow him to bestraddle it. Shoshlan caught hold of its hind legs, and twirled it around him with all his might. The lasso-horse became obedient, and Shoshlan jumped on his back, and he carried him to heaven and back. Returning from heaven, he flew past the tallest tower of the castle, and Shoshlan seized the three arrows that were sticking in it, then went flying down onto the courtyard, dismounted and entered the castle, awaiting the giant’s return.

Giant Bizhgwana found and carried off the Narts' possessions, and drove off their cattle. Shatana sent a messenger to find the Narts, and to sound the alarm. On hearing this they all hurried home. But when they reached their village, giant Bizhgwana was already far away. They went to Shirdon, and inquired of him, "Tell us where to look for the giant Bizhgwana. You, as usual, can probably guess where he may be found."

"I cannot guess about such things, but if anyone knows where to find him, then it is only Shatana."

They asked Shatana where to find the giant Bizhgwana, and she said, "If you ask Shoshlan, he will not only get your cattle back, and return them to you, but he will drive off giant Bizhgwana's cattle as well for you. However, if there is someone you think more powerful than Shoshlan, let him get your cattle back himself."

"If anyone of us could do such a thing, we should not have to ask your advice. More respected and powerful than Shoshlan at the moment is no one, not only among the Narts, but among the Chinta too."⁵

"Then set out by way of the Gomzikh forest, for Shoshlan should now be returning home by that route."

Straightaway the Narts dashed off on their way to the Gomzikh forest to meet Shoshlan. But meanwhile giant Bizhgwana had returned to his castle, and roared, while still afar off, "You just wait, Shoshlan! You have done everything to hide from me, but where will you go now?"

As he drew nearer to the castle Shoshlan shot the first arrow, and the giant began to sway. Then Shoshlan shot the second arrow, and he fell to the ground and begged for mercy, "Do not slay me, Shoshlan, but rather take all my possessions!"

"Such an evil-doer as you is better dead than alive," said Shoshlan.

"If you say so, then when you slay me, pluck out the gray hair that grows on the crown of my head, and wind it round your little finger, and your strength will be doubled!"

Shoshlan shot the last arrow, and the giant Bizhgwana fell dead. He then plucked the gray hair from the crown of the giant's head, but did not do as the

giant told him to before he died. First he wound the hair around a tree, and the tree broke in two. He did the same again with another tree, and that one too fell in halves. He tied the hair around seven trees in succession, and it caused them all to fall. Than he tied the hair around his little finger, and his powers were all doubled. Finally, he gathered the giant Bizhgwana's cattle along with the herds that he had stolen from the Narts, and drove them all off toward the Nart village, and the giant's castle he gave to the servant.

The Narts who had come seeking him met Shoshlan in Gomzikh forest, and gave him all the praise and honor due for his daring deeds.

Since then the name of Shoshlan became even more famous among all the Nart families.

30 ♦ WHY SHIRDON BECAME SHOSHLAN'S ENEMY

Shoshlan was away on a long campaign. Shiridon then said to the Narts, "My seven sons will I place as a target in a bull's skin, and let you shoot at them. If you should kill one of them, then I want nothing more from you. But if you do not succeed even in scratching one of them, then you must give me one bull from each house."

"Very well, we shall do so," said the Nart youths.

Shiridon wrapped his seven sons in one big bull's skin, and stood them up as a target on the roof of a seven-storied tower of the Borata family, and the Nart youths began shooting their arrows at them. Every day they shot at them, but could in no manner wound them, much less come near to killing one of them.

Shiridon had told his sons that it would be so, and thus they had agreed, but he had also warned them that only from Shoshlan was there any danger of them being slain. When the Nart youths in the many days following showed themselves unable to touch any of Shiridon's sons with their arrows, Shiridon began to mock them. He was already preparing to receive one bull from every home, as they had agreed.

Just then Shoshlan returned home. He saw that the Nart youths were shooting somewhere. Near the village he met a sorceress and asked her, "Today

is not a festival, so why are the Nart youths taking part in a shooting competition, and at what are they letting their arrows fly?"

The sorceress answered him, "Shirdon placed his seven sons in a bull's hide before them as a target, and the Nart youths are shooting at them, but cannot hit them. Tomorrow he will collect a bull from each house, and today already he is mocking them, and laughing at them."

"I'll show him something now!" decided Shoshlan, and carefully, so that Shirdon should not see him, joined those who were shooting with their bows. He shot one arrow at the youngsters, and it killed them all. They fell from the top of the tower into the courtyard of the house.

Shirdon straightaway recognized Shoshlan's arrow by the noise it made in flight, but what could he do now? It was too late to stop him. He only cried his everlasting curses on Shoshlan head, "May God never forgive you for what you have done! What you wished to do for so long you have now accomplished!"

He went into the courtyard, took his seven sons from the bull's hide, dug seven graves for them and buried them side by side.

Thus Shoshlan became Shirdon's enemy.

In the upper Nart village there lived a beautiful maiden named Wasirat. There was not another girl in the whole surrounding village who could compare with her for loveliness or shapeliness. She was also very skillful with her hands. Among the Nart youths there was not one whose heart she had not stung.

Once at the Nart meeting place on the village square, a discussion was going on among the young Narts about this beauty Wasirat.

One of them claimed “She favors me!” Another contradicted him “No, she prefers me!” So they continued to argue ardently.

Old Shirdon, Gatag’s son, listened in silence to their arguments and afterward went to speak to Wasirat. He glanced in at the door of her house, and saw her cutting out with one hand, and sewing with the other. Shirdon stepped over the threshold leaning on his stick.

“Good-day to you, beauty Wasirat!” he greeted her.

Wasirat did not even look up at him. So a second time he spoke.

“Do you really want the Nart youths to start killing one another? They have gathered at the meeting place, and furious arguments are going on there. One says ‘She favors me!’ and another objects ‘No, she prefers me!’ You must give your answer to these Nart youths, and decide this argument once and for all!”

The beauty Wasirat paid no attention whatsoever to Shirdon’s words but only glanced back at him over her shoulder with scornful disdain.

It was annoying to Shirdon that Wasirat took no account of his words whatsoever, and so he said to her, “My proud beauty Wasirat, look, we are here alone, and nobody can see us, so let me come a little closer to you, and so confide in me.”

Wasirat seized her scissors in anger and hissed at him “Get away from me before I prick your eyes out with my steel scissors!”

Shirdon was seething with anger at these insults, and as he turned to leave the house he replied “Well, if that is the way you treat me, I shall compel you to put on the robe of shame as you walk before them!”

With that he left—what else could one expect? But soon he began to teach the Nart youths to compose a mocking song about the beauty Wasirat. In this song it said that beauty Wasirat had become the mistress of a poor peasant, Teuvazh, of the Asata family.

That song came to the ears of Wasirat's father. He thought to himself, "However it may be, they must have some reason to compose such a song about my daughter!" So he then locked her up in the top story of the tower and he himself with his wife lived beneath.

The light of day became hateful for Wasirat, and she did not even want to see the sun in the sky. She sat in the top story of the tower, and could not understand what she was being punished for. The poor peasant Teuvazh too came to know about this song and about Wasirat's woes. He made himself a pair of wings, and one moonless night he flew up to the top story of the tower to Wasirat, sat on her windowsill and took off his wings. Wasirat recognized him, and opened the window and let him in, and so the young beauty and the poor peasant spent the night together. Before daybreak, Teuvazh affixed his wings again and flew away home.

How many nights passed by in this way? Who knows? But Wasirat began to sense that she was pregnant. Then she said to her father, "I cannot live any longer like this! The light of day is no longer pleasant for me, nor the sun in the blue sky! I do not need rich clothes any more. Let me make a loose-fitting sheepskin coat, and then live in the lower story with you. I shall not go out anywhere, and will not dress up any more, and then surely nobody will look at me!"

Her father listened to her request and did as Wasirat asked.

She began to count the days, and when her time drew near she bore a son with golden hair. Then she met Teuvazh and said to him "It will be a shocking shame if the Narts learn of this. In the lower Nart village they will compose more mocking songs, and sing them by their hand-harps. We had better make a stout wooden box."

Teuvazh made such a box, and decorated it with carvings. Wasirat then fed her golden-haired son at her breast, and laid him in the box, smeared the lid-

joints with wax, and launched it on the river. In due course, it was carried away by the stream down onto the plains.

There, on the steppe land lived the lord Bezenag. He was rich, with great herds of cattle, but he had no children. The lord Bezenag had serfs working for him as fishermen, who lived in villages nearby.

One day these fishermen saw that the river had brought down to them a decorated box, and they caught it at once and carried it ashore. "Look here!" they said, "What a beautiful box!"

They brought it straight away to the lord Bezenag, and showed it to him.

"Take off the lid then! It will be interesting to see what is inside!" said the lord to the fishermen.

They opened the box, and heard the cry of a baby boy inside.

Lord Bezenag looked the lad all over, and by the color of his hair he guessed that the babe was of the Nart family. This gladdened his heart.

"Oh, may all his sickness and misfortunes fall on me!" he cried. "I have been dreaming all my life about a son such as this one who has been sent!"

He hurried to tell his wife about it. She was overjoyed too on seeing the infant, and said, "What a happy present we have received with God's blessing!"

To make the baby appear to be her own, she first hid him, then wound several layers of woolen clothes around her waist, so as to seem fatter, and then went out into the street. She passed the village square where the elder Narts were gathered, and at that time Shoshlan happened also to be present. They looked at her in wonderment and exclaimed "Look, Bezenag's wife is pregnant, after all this time!" Then she returned and passed the meeting place again. She bowed to the elders, and said "A good evening to you!"

Shoshlan replied to her greetings with his congratulations, and said "May you bear your husband a son! If so, Nart Shoshlan will name him!"

The woman returned home and told her husband of Shoshlan's word. "You had better go to bed now quickly, as if you were having a baby. His wife lay down in bed, and put the baby in beside her. When this was done, he called the town herald, and said to him "Let the world know the news that the lord's wife

has born him a son! Those who love us, let them come to our birth feast, and let those who don't at least come to take a look at the lovely lad!"

The town herald proclaimed to all the people that their lord Bezenag now had a son. The people were astounded. Someone said "I was with them a short while ago, and did not notice any sign of such an event!" Someone else said "Surely the herald has made a mistake! We saw his wife a day or two ago, and she was slim and flat as a fish!"

Soon the whole population gathered at Bezenag's grand birth feast. The lord out of sheer joy slaughtered many white bulls as if they were merely white sheep. All the folk celebrated the birth of his baby son. Much was eaten and drunk to the newborn child's good health. Many words were spoken and many songs were sung. So the feast ended and the guests departed home.

But where could Bezenag's wife get breast-milk to feed her baby? She started to look around to find a wet nurse for him. Many were willing to take in Bezenag's child as wet nurses, but of whomever did so, not one was able to feed him at her breast. The young lad simply gnawed at their nipples, so that they nearly gave up their souls to God, and quickly brought him back to Lord Bezenag.

Eventually the problem was solved, however, and the lad began to grow, and went out and about among the people. Once he asked his father, "Dad! Why do you not give me a name. Is it not time?"

"I cannot do that, my lad, until my good friend Shoshlan chooses one!" said his father, and what could the lad answer to that?

Time passed by, and Bezenag's son grew up into a fine young man. Once he decided to go on a hunting expedition and said to his mother, "I am going hunting, mother, prepare me some food!"

His mother made some food ready for him, all he would need for the journey, and the youth set off to hunt game at the foot of the Black Mountains. As good God would have it, he fell in with Shoshlan on the way, and straightaway asked him "Perhaps we could go hunting together. What do you say?"

"We shall find a resting place for the night, and then we will see!"

The youth quickly set about the matter, pitched the tent, and then asked Shoshlan again “Well, how about it? Shall we go hunting together or not?”

“Let each one hunt separately, but we shall agree that all we catch shall be considered our common quarry,” replied Shoshlan.

They set off on their separate ways early in the morning, and they hunted until the evening. When it grew dark, the first to return to their resting place was the youth. He made a fire, put some shashliks on skewers above it, and prepared beds of dried grass for them both. Just then Shoshlan returned. They had supper together. The youth asked, “Excuse my immodest question to an elder, but I should like to know if you caught anything today on your way.”

“A worse day’s hunting than today’s I have never had in my life!” so answered Shoshlan. “I did not succeed in shooting a single hare! But tell me, how did you get on, young fellow?”

“In my short life I have done little hunting, but of those few days today was the most unsuccessful. Only forty deer, save one, I slew!”

Shoshlan lowered his brows in a frown, and felt offended.

They slept the night there, but in the morning, after breakfast, they again set off separately for the hunt.

In the evening the youth once more returned first, made a fire, ready for Shoshlan’s arrival, and arranged some shashliks above it.

Just as before Shoshlan returned later, and they sat down to supper.

“What success did you have with your hunting today?” the lad asked Shoshlan politely.

“No success at all! Nothing, nowhere!” answered Shoshlan glumly. “I have had no luck at all these last two days. But how did you fare?”

“I have also had a poor day. Only sixty deer, save one, did I manage to shoot today!” answered the youth.

Again Shoshlan laid down to sleep in an angry frame of mind.

In the morning, after breakfast, they went off in different ways to various ravines, and in the evening the youth arrived home first at their resting place. He managed to get a fire going, and to roast some shashliks above it, before

Shoshlan arrived back. They had their supper, and again the youth asked “My dear elder, did any prey fall into your hands today?”

“Nothing have I caught these last three days! How did you do?”

“I also had a bad day. Maybe it would be better to give up the hunting here. All day I wandered about hunting, and altogether I caught only eighty head of game, save one!”

They laid down to sleep, but from burning offense Shoshlan could not slumber, thinking to himself, “He will divide the quarry, and give me the smaller portion, of course. No. I could not stand that! I had better die than suffer such shame. I could not possibly show my face in front of the Narts again!”

Morning came, they breakfasted, and the youth said to Shoshlan “Now, elder, let us divide the dead game God has sent to us!”

Shoshlan saw him divide the game into three equal portions. He at once felt vexed, turned away from the spoil, knitted his brows, and looked glum. Straightaway the youth said to him “Look here, dear elder, this is your share by seniority. Take it!” Surprised, and raising his eyebrows in wonder, Shoshlan did so.

“And now take this second share, as my comrade in the hunting!”

Shoshlan, pleased as could be, took that share too.

“And now this last share remains for me!” said the young hunter.

Then, taking the heavy carcasses of the deer set aside for himself, he loaded them upon his shoulders, wished Shoshlan a good day, and so set off on his way home.

Standing dumbstruck, Shoshlan watched him as he departed. “O God, though I live among powerful Narts, I have never had the good fortune to meet such a strong young fellow! Who is he then? I don’t even know his name!” Thinking thus, Shoshlan quickly rose and set off after the young fellow. He, as it happened, looked back and saw Shoshlan about to overtake him. He stopped at once, and asked him “Have you forgotten something or the other, my dear elder?”

“You and I went hunting for three days, spent three nights together, and yet I don’t even know your name. That is why I come . . .”

“I haven’t a name yet, my dear elder. When I asked my father Bezenag about it he explained that he would not give me a name until he knew the one that Nart Shoshlan had chosen as promised.”

Shoshlan was overjoyed when he heard this, and said to the youth “But I am Nart Shoshlan, that friend of your father. From now on I name you, Bezenag’s son, as young Arakhzau.”

So named, Arakhzau returned home and told his father how on his hunting trip he had met another hunter, who turned out to be none other than Nart Shoshlan, and how he had given him the name of young Arakhzau. Seeing his father was pleased, he asked him “Father, I have only heard of the Narts, but I should like to go and meet them, and stay with them sometime.”

“May I swallow all your evil days!” said Bezenag. “But seeing that you have grown up enough to go hunting alone, why should I not send you as a guest to the Narts? If you so badly wish to be among them, then take this bridle, catch yourself a horse from our herd that pleases you, and happily off you go!”

Bold young Arakhzau caught a horse, saddled and bridled him, and set off to visit the Narts. On the outskirts of their village he met a sorceress and soothsayer, who greeted him, “May your road run straight, Bezenag’s son, bold Arakhzau!”

“May your heart be happy, my good woman!” he replied.

“Where are you riding to, my lad, bright as the sun?”

“I wish to visit the Narts, and to get to know them!”

“And what kind of a horse is that you are ridding on? Indeed, an old nag like that they send out to carry food to the shepherds in the ravines and plains, considering it as being good for nothing else. Then what kind of sword is that in your belt? Indeed, Nart women cut up cheeses with such blades! And what kind of horn is that in your hand? It isn’t as even as big as the flutes that the shepherds play on. No, you cannot be Bezenag’s son. He must have found you somewhere among the reeds and rushes. If you were his beloved son, he would give you such a horse that he has kept in good condition, one that has not been ridden for so long that he is just dying for a gallop and has been chafing at his steel bridle. Eight legs, such a horse would possess, and four ears. Your father

obviously begrudged you such a steed. As for a sword, your father's own sword has become a byword. There is not to match it. It gives off a blue light in its undying thirst for battle!"

Straightaway Arakhzau turned his horse's head around and rode home.

"Why have you returned home, my son Arakhzau?"

"I am no son to you!"

"Oh, so that is it!"

"If I were your son, you would have given me a horse that had not been ridden for a long time, one itching for a gallop, one that was already gnawing at its bridle. If I were your son, you also would have given me your sword, which emits blue flames in its thirst for battle. I should know then that I am your beloved son!"

"May I swallow all your misfortunes! But if you have grown into such a young man who could ride my steed, and bear my sword, what indeed could be more pleasant for me. You are still only a youngster, and could not cope with such a horse as mine!"

"Let me have a try!" answered the young Arakhzau.

"Then go down into the cellar, and you will see a slab that a pair of bullocks could not move. Behind that stone you will find my horse and my weapons as well."

Arakhzau went with his father into the cellar, and Bezenag showed him the stone slab. Arakhzau gave the slab a poke with his foot and it rolled over at once. Then he led the horse out of the cellar. He took some black soap with him, and led the horse down to the black river Terk, and washed him until he was as clean as an ivory button. He saddled and bridled the horse, stuck his father's sword into his belt, and once more set off to visit the Narts.

There, among the Narts, Shatana was talking to Urizhmag. "Either a whole troop of warriors will call upon you, Narts, or one young man who is worth a whole troop!"

The Narts were gathered in the big house of the Alagata family, sitting over their huge Nart cauldron, full of food, and Urizhmag then told them Shatana's prophetic words.

Not long after, Urizhmag looked out over the plain, shielding his eyes with his hand, and said, "There is some disturbance out there on the plain. The bright sun and the pale moon are shining in the sky, but there is a cloud of mist spreading out, also a flock of birds like a black cloud flying upward, and on the ground I see a deep furrow, of the sort that ploughs make."

All the Narts turned to where Urizhmag pointed, but nobody could make out what kind of attack this was against the Nart settlements.

Meanwhile Shatana was sitting up in the tower. Some Narts asked her, "Be so kind, Shatana, and tell us what kind of uninvited guests have appeared on our land."

Shatana looked into her heavenly mirror, and then replied "Well, dear Narts, he of whom I spoke is traveling to you. Though not a whole troop, this one man is as good as a whole troop of warriors. He always triumphs over tyrants. This newcomer is stronger than you are. That which appears like mist to you is the steam from his horse's nostrils, and that which appears to be a flock of birds is just the clumps of earth thrown up over his head by the hooves of his eight-legged horse. Like black ravens they look. That which you call the sun and moon shining in the sky is the glint from his sword-blade, blinding your eyes with its blue flashes. The deep furrow left in the ground is from the point of his sword, for though he is a mere youngster, his long sword-point ploughs the ground. Look now at the river. If that rider looks for a ford by which to cross, then he will be of no danger to you, but if he does not seek the shallows, and rides straight across the river, then take no account of his being just a youngster! He will be dangerous!"

So spoke Shatana, and then began to pray, "O God of gods, my God! If this rider seeks a ford, may he be our enemy, but if he swims straight across, then may he be our friend!"

The Narts looked again over the plain, and saw that the rider had now come to the river, and without choosing a shallow place, and without avoiding the deep, he spurred his steed straight into the water, cutting across the turbulent current with the speed and skill of a fish.

The Narts were alarmed, and again consulted Shatana.

“Be so kind as to tell us, Shatana, while he has still not climbed out onto the bank, what do you advise us to do?”

“First, go to the big house of the Alagata family, and sit down there in seven rows, and begin a welcoming festive banquet. Let Shoshlan be there, and serve the elders at table, as a younger man. Your guest will be ashamed to sit with the eldest, in the place of honor, but will take a seat at the end of the seventh row. Then let all seven rows hand their goblets to him to drink a toast to good health. He will have to drink all those toasts. If he does not die from that, I know no other way for you to overcome him. Only let nobody say an unwelcome word in his presence, otherwise he will hew and hack out streets and alleys through you, and slay you all! One other thing: he sets great store upon his steed. Go quickly to Urizhmag, and take his piebald steed. Sprinkle some magic dry glue over him, and let him roll in the damp sand seven times. When the guest arrives in a hurry, tie his horse up alongside Urizhmag’s piebald, at one bridle-rack. The horses will start to kick and bite each other. Then our guest’s horse will get a mouthful of glue and sand when he tries to bite pieces out of Urizhmag’s steed, and he in turn will bite bits of living flesh out of our guest’s horse, and cause him serious wounds. As soon as our guest reaches our village, I shall go out and invite him in. ‘Come into our house here. You are young and have traveled far and are tired. I will be a good hostess for you!’ If I succeed in enticing him into our house, I shall use all my tricks and all my cunning in preparing tidbits for him, so that he will feel weak and lose faith in his own strength. If however, I do not succeed in enticing him into our home, then as he passes through the streets I shall in a flash make an apple tree spring up, with branches full of ripe fruit. If he tastes only one apple from that tree, he will lose faith in himself.”

The Narts agreed with all this advice from Shatana. Seven times they sprinkled Urizhmag’s horse with dry glue. Seven times they made him roll on the moist sand, and then tied him to the bridle-rack outside the big house of the Alagata family. They then sat themselves in seven rows at the table inside, and Shoshlan served the elders, as a younger one at the feast.

Arakhzau had already arrived at the Nart village, and Shatana called to him from the tower of their home “You are welcome to stay with us in our home,

Bezenag's son Arakhzau! Be our guest, and I will be your good hostess!"

"It is not my father's habit, nor mine, to stay with cunning women such as you!" responded the youth.

"Then, if you turn away from our hospitality, just refresh yourself with apples from that tree over there on the street, and take a few in your pockets as well!" said Shatana.

"What has your apple tree got to do with me? Look what I think of it!" He gave it three slashes with his whip, and with a crack it went flying. "Not for refreshments did I come," he cried, "but to meet Nart Shoshlan. Tell me where he is, and how I can find him!"

Shatana answered him "He is at a feast in the long house of the Alagata family, serving elders at table. You will find him there."

"Then send someone to show me where that house is," replied the lad.

Shatana sent her young nephew Batraz, the son of Khamis, to show him the way, and to accompany him to the Alagata's banqueting hall.

They arrived at the big house where the Narts were gathered, and these came running out to greet him.

"Welcome to our home, Arakhzau, son of Bezenag, and stay with us, dear guest from a distant land!" Others took his horse's bridle, saying "We must tie up your tired steed. He is heated from the journey. Let him cool down a little. We'll tie him up beside Urizhmag's piebald." Others said "Take his sword, and hang it up in some convenient place." So they took his sword, but whichever hook they tried to hang it on, the hook gave way or broke completely.

"I shall be my own hanger!" insisted Arakhzau, and buckled on his big sword around his waist again. His chain-mail, wherever they laid it, just broke the lid of the chest.

The elder Narts invited him to sit at the top table, as honored guest, but he declined to sit there, and asked to be allowed to sit at the end of the seventh row.

"This place is more suitable for me!" he said as he seated himself.

All the seven rows of Narts raised toasts to the guest's health, and passed their goblets to him. He drained them all, but however much he drank, and

however much he ate, he still maintained table manners and customs better than anyone else.

Shoshlan was serving there, and not one unemptied goblet did he take from him. Chelakhshartag, the son of Khizh, sat in the place of honor, and Shainag himself, as chief, was the elder in charge of that feast.

When Shoshlan brought Arakhzau a full goblet, the lad held it in both hands, and began to dance on the very edge of the table, and went off whisking away from one end of the row to the other, but not a crumb did he brush from the table, and not a drop did he spill from the goblet.

Then Chelakhshartag, son of Khizh, said to Shoshlan, "Bring me a wild ram's horn full of the strongest drink you have!"

Shoshlan brought him a horn full of foaming mead. The son of Khizh held the horn in one hand, and in the other he took a join of meat set aside for honored guests, a whole leg of beef, and said to Shoshlan, "Our highly honored guest sits there at the lowest table. Go and call Arakhzau, son of Bezenag, to come to me and I will offer him this tidbit, and this wild ram's horn of mead."

At this invitation, passed on by Shoshlan, Arakhzau jumped up quickly, and despite his heavy sword, made his way dancing on tip-toe, to the elder's table. In a most artistic manner he whirled toward the son of Khizh. Everyone was amazed at this. Even Chelakhshartag envied him, but concealed his jealousy. When Arakhzau came up to him, sitting in the place of honor, he said respectfully to the lad, "You are our welcome guest, and here I present for you this horn of honor and this bull's leg. Take them! Eat and drink!"

Arakhzau drained the ram's horn to the last drop, and then, like a wolf, gnawed all the meat to the last shred off the bone. Then he thanked the son of Khizh, and returned to his place.

Chelakhshartag thought that after draining the horn full of mead, the lad would be knocked off his feet, but he walked back to his place as calm and steady as ever, without a stumble. This vexed the son of Khizh, and he stopped the lad, and beckoned him back, and said insultingly, "And what did you come here for, son-of-a-bitch? You stink like a bad fish, only worse!"

“I shall really be a son-of-a-bitch if I do not return here in a week and do not bury all this settlement in horse manure!”

Having said that, he left the banqueting hall, and set off home. But when he saw his horse, he grew angrier still. His steed had defeated Urizhmag’s piebald, but in turn had been bitten so badly that it was deeply wounded and blood-stained.

When Arakhzau left the house, Chelakhshartag felt suddenly alarmed and distracted, and said to Shoshlan, “God deprived me of my reason, and I have offended a good young fellow! I would give anything to anyone who could get him back!”

“I would try to get him to return,” said Shoshlan, “but you break your promises very easily, and cannot be trusted.”

“May heaven and earth be my witness!” cried Chelakhshartag, son of Khizh. “Ask whatever you wish, your heart’s desire! I shall fulfill it.”

Now Chelakhshartag had a daughter, a great beauty, Vedukha.

“Give me your beautiful daughter, Vedukha, and I will bring the bold young Arakhzau back to the feast!” answered Shoshlan.

“If only you can make peace between Arakhzau and me, then my daughter will be yours!” promised Chelakhshartag, Shoshlan straightaway led out his fleet-footed steed, jumped into the saddle, and galloped off after Arakhzau. He had almost caught up with him, when he suddenly thought uneasily, “What shall I do? If I overtake him from behind, he will think that I am pursuing him. But if I take here a shortcut and meet him head-on, he will think that I have been lying in ambush for him. Well, what will be, will be! I’ll ride up slowly beside him!” So as he came closer to Arakhzau he shouted out to him, “Hey there, Bezenag’s son, Arakhzau my friend, I beg you do not leave us so, feeling yourself offended! All the Narts are frightened because you have flown off in a temper!”

“May God punish you, and make you destroy one another!” he replied.

“He is still only a lad!” thought Shoshlan. “What if I tempt him with some present or other, and so win his heart? So he said to Arakhzau, “If you will only return to the feast, I will make to you a rich gift!”

“What kind of a gift, pray tell me?”

“I will give you my fleet-footed steed!”

“And what is he famous for? What feats can he perform?”

“May heaven and earth be my witness! In one day he can gallop from the sun’s rising place to its setting place!”

“Woe to you, Shoshlan, if you see in that a wonder! On such a nag we ride from house to house to drink black beer!”

“Then I’ll propose something else: my tempered-steel sword.”

“And what is your sword good for?”

“May heaven and earth be my witness! Whether you strike wood or stone with it, whatever your eyes may see, it will destroy everything, and will not grow duller, but even sharper!”

“Eh, eh, Shoshlan! Our women cut up cheeses with such a blade.”

“In that case, I’ll propose another present.”

“And what kind of present is that?”

“The tassel on the hilt of my sword.”

“And what is that tassel good for, pray, tell me?”

“May heaven and earth be my witness! If on a dark night I get lost on the plains, then that tassel flares up like a wick, and lights up my path, so that I return home safely.”

“Eh, Shoshlan, if that seems a wonder to you, then you are not a Nart! When our sheep return home late in the evening, then our women hang such tassels around their waists, and by their light they milk the sheep!”

“Then I must tell you one more thing, Arakhzau. If I can persuade you to return with me to the feast, Chelakhshartag, son of Khizh has promised to give you his beautiful daughter Vedukha as your bride!”

“Ah, you should have begun with that, Shoshlan!” replied Arakhzau, and turned his horse around. “Only don’t be offended if I said rude words about the treasures that you offered to me.”

On the way back home to the Nart village they met Zekh, the son of Wazh, and told him about their affairs.

“I swear by my father’s head, that if that is the way things stand, I will not leave you!” said Zekh, and went with them on their way.

But on seeing them returning, Chelakhshartag broke his vow, and taking Vedukha by the hand, went off to his Ainag fortress with her, and placed her there in the tower on the top of a high steep cliff.

32 ♦ THE DEATH OF ARAKHZAU

Once, during a hunt, Nart Shoshlan was coming down from a great ridge when he saw a golden deer. He crept quietly toward it, but the deer did not let him get within arrow-shot of it. He followed it for a long time and at last grew tired and angry, and decided to take a rest. He lay down beneath a tree and fell asleep. How long did he sleep? Who knows? But just at that time, not far away, the son of Bezenag rode by. He caught sight of the golden deer on a height, and let loose an arrow at it. The deer fell from the crest, and crashing down onto the very tree where Shoshlan was sleeping, broke a few branches, and landed on his head.

Shoshlan awoke at once, jumped up, and saw Arakhzau coming toward him laughing. They recognized each other at once, of course.

“What are you scared at, Shoshlan?” inquired Arakhzau.

“I am not scared, but merely wondering!” replied Shoshlan. “All day yesterday I was following that deer’s tracks, so how was it that you managed to shoot it before I could?”

“What are you wondering about? Are there not many fine deer, just like this one, around here?”

Both the hunters were glad to meet again. Arakhzau, as the younger, prepared roasted shashliks. They took a bite or two, and Arakhzau, seeing Shoshlan preparing to leave, said to him “Don’t go riding away, Shoshlan, but come with me and be my guest!”

They rode and rode. How far who knows? At last they reached the land of Chief Bezenag. Suddenly Shoshlan noticed ahead of them dust rolling up, as if it were a great cloud, and asked Arakhzau, “What is all that dust? Is it not some enemy attacking your lands?”

“No, it is nobody attacking us, Shoshlan,” answered Arakhzau. “Today is Bezenag’s birthday, and it is our youths who are kicking up all the dust with

their dancing!”

They came a little nearer, and Shoshlan heard how like rolling thunder arrows went whizzing by.

“What is that then?” asked Shoshlan alarmed. “Are you sure no enemy is invading your land and has burst through your borders?”

“Don’t be afraid, Shoshlan. That is an archery competition going on among the youths in honor of Bezenag’s birthday. Their bows are twanging, and their arrows are whistling in flight!” explained Arakhzau.

They traveled on, nearer still, and could already see the village ahead. Again Shoshlan heard as it were the rolling of thunder.

“Those are our young fellows jostling and wrestling in honor of Bezenag’s birthday,” explained Arakhzau. “They are just testing each other out, and trying their strength.”

So, still conversing, they rode into the village. Shoshlan went up to the chief Bezenag and greeted him, and Arakhzau laid the deer’s carcass before his father saying, “This is a birthday gift from Nart Shoshlan!”

Bezenag was only too pleased to welcome such a guest. They entertained him all night till early morning. Out in the village they continued to celebrate their chief Bezenag’s birthday. Young and old all joined in the merriment. Some butted each other like rams, nearly breaking their heads. Others let fly their arrows at distant targets, while yet others joined in the great ring dances.

For a long time Shoshlan watched all the contests and games, and finally asked, “Let me join the games as well, if you please!”

Bezenag gave his consent, and Shoshlan went to join the archery contest. He drew an arrow from his quiver and shot it at the target. There was no end to the amazement of the many dwellers in the Bezenag village when every arrow he let fly struck straight in the bull’s-eye! As soon as Bezenag heard of this, he made Shoshlan a present of a sword that itself jumped out of its sheath. Later Shoshlan joined in the butting contest, where the youths like young bucks, lowered their heads and rammed each other. Everyone whom Shoshlan butted went flying away, head-over-heels. The chief Bezenag got rather vexed that there were so

many of his people and none could knock Shoshlan off his feet however they tried.

On the third day Arakhzau joined in the games, and people suggested, “Shoshlan has beaten everybody here so far. Now let him test his skill and strength against our young Arakhzau!”

The chief Bezenag had nothing against the suggestion, and said “You Narts count it shameful to overcome a guest in a contest, but we count it a great glory! Come on, then, let us compete with each other!”

Shoshlan welcomed this opportunity, and the two started off with an archery contest. The villagers crowded around, each one watching every move made by the contestants. However, neither of them came out on top. When a bird flew overhead, they both took aim, and their arrows both stuck in the same eye of the bird at which they had aimed. After that they began shoving each other with their shoulders to see who could push the other from his place, but neither could nudge the other from where he stood. They tried many contests, but seeing that they were equal in all they gave each other a handshake and swore eternal brotherhood.

At last Shoshlan said, “You have entertained me wonderfully well, Bezenag! Since that is so, now allow my brother Arakhzau to visit my home as my guest.”

Bezenag was in agreement and allowed his son to travel with him.

The next day, having accepted presents from Bezenag, Shoshlan set off for his native village accompanied by Arakhzau. There he entertained his young guest generously, attending to all his needs. At last the time came for him to leave. They gave him rich presents, and Shoshlan even gave him his own horse. With respect and honor they saw him off.

Shirdon, who had always been a cunning one since birth, spied Arakhzau leaving, and decided to appear before him in the shape of an old woman. In this shape he said “Hey, young fellow! You are taking fine presents home with you to your father. But why did you choose those things that they offered to you? Why did you not ask for the wonder-horse Silan, who on a hot day cools you with ease, and on a cold one warms you up with action?”

Arakhzau returned to the Nart village, and called for Shoshlan.

He came out to him and asked “What have you forgotten Arakhzau? Have you left something behind?”

“If you wish to make me a real present, then give me your wonder-horse, Silan, so that he will warm me on a cold day, and cool me from the sultry heat on a hot one!”

“Whoever told you about Silan, may he be smitten by misfortune! That is such a swift horse, Arakhzau, that he completes a month-long journey in a day. You are not accustomed to such rapid travel, and I am afraid that such speed would bring you to disaster!”

“How is that, Shoshlan? Can you really refuse what I ask of you? If such a horse suits you, then that means he simply will suit me as well!”

Thereupon Shoshlan led Silan from the seventh cellar, led him to the river and washed him with such care as they wash tables before a feast. Then Arakhzau saddled him, mounted him, and said farewell to Shoshlan. Then he set off on his journey home.

He had ridden some distance from the village when he met Shiridon again, this time in the guise of an old man. “Hey, young man!” he said. “You have some fine presents, it is true, but why did you not ask Shoshlan, for the sake of the brotherly love he has sworn to you, to present to you the breast-plates of Serek to protect you from evil?”

Arakhzau returned again to the Nart village and called on Shoshlan.

“What more do you wish from me, my friend?” asked Shoshlan.

“If you could give me the Serek breast-plates, which no arrow can pierce, I should be extremely grateful!”

“May the tongue of him who urged you to ask for that split in two!” retorted Shoshlan, obviously displeased. However, he presented him with the Serek breast-plates since there was naught else he could do, but as he handed them to Arakhzau he said before parting in a tone of warning, “A happy journey, Arakhzau! But if anyone advises you to return again and ask for something else, beckon him toward you, catch hold of him, and look underneath his beard!”

On the road home he again met Shiridon, this time in the guise of a young woman, wearing a veil before her face. She looked at Arakhzau very modestly,

and he looked at her, and said, "Do not be embarrassed, young woman. Let me see your face!"

The young woman did as he asked, lifted up her veil, and said, "Although you are taking home many precious things, still there is something missing among all the rest."

"What, then, is missing? Tell me! Come a little nearer!"

But when Shirdon, in the disguise of a young woman, did so, Arakhzau swiftly caught hold of him, and pulled from Shirdon's bosom a knife, forged by the Donbettirs. Then he took him by the arm, whirled him around his head like a windmill, and hurled him flying to the end of the ravine. Nonetheless, he managed to shout back to Arakhzau, "If you are so strong, Arakhzau, then you should take to yourself as wife the beautiful daughter of Chief Kuan, who cuts and trims and sews in their seven-storied tower!"

So once more Arakhzau returned to Shoshlan and said, "Here is a knife for you, forged by the Donbettirs."

"Eh, Arakhzau, Arakhzau! This knife is a reliable sign that on your journey Shirdon stood before you every time. I recognize him by his knife. What else did he tell you to do?"

" 'If you are a real man,' he said, 'then take to yourself as wife the beautiful daughter of Chief Kuan, who sits and cuts and trims and sews in their seven-storied tower!' Now I feel I can not do without her!"

"Put such a thing out of your head! Shirdon has not forgiven you for your offense against him, and thus you will fall into his cunningly woven web. Better return home now and ask your father's advice."

So Arakhzau went off home with his presents, and told his father, "I am going to travel now to the land of the Donbettirs, to ask for the hand in marriage of the beautiful daughter of Chief Kuan."

"Oh, my son," replied Chief Bezenag, "you have thought up a most unsuitable thing. I am getting old now. I will die soon. Who will remain to throw a handful of earth on my coffin?"

"Do not worry father. I will return. I know what I am doing!"

"Then, at least take a Nart with you as your comrade."

“I do not wish to go back there again, father. Even if I get into trouble you can inform Shoshlan, and he will find me and help me,” said Arakhzau, and with that he left for the land of Chief Kuan.

This Chief Kuan was a relative of Shirdon’s, on his mother’s side. Having heard that Arakhzau was traveling to Chief Kuan, Shirdon arranged to have others delay him so that he could arrive first. There he told Chief Kuan “The young man who is coming to you will ask for your daughter’s hand in marriage. He once offended me and threw me down a ravine. I beg of you, take revenge on him for me and kill him! I am too old and weak.”

Toward evening Arakhzau arrived in the land of lord Kuan, and went to his castle and called “O good host, will you not invite a guest in to you?”

The son of Chief Kuan ran out to Arakhzau and welcomed him in. Arakhzau entered the castle. They set him down at a table, brought in supper, and all sat down to eat. Arakhzau then addressed the chief, Kuan, “Allow me to hope for your consent and it will be easier to ask!”

“Everything has its price, dear guest. Speak out! What is it that you wish of me?” and Arakhzau straightaway told his host what he wished.

“Here we have a custom,” said Chief Kuan. “Show your courage three times, and the maiden is yours. Otherwise we cannot give her to you!”

“Very well,” replied Arakhzau, “may it be as you wish!”

“Tomorrow morning, then, you must travel to the Fish Ravine, where you must catch enough fish for the wedding feast.”

The next morning Chief Kuan’s son and Arakhzau went to the Fish Ravine. Shirdon was already waiting there. He caught a big fish, cast a spell on it, and turned it onto a deer, which then appeared before Arakhzau. As soon as he saw it he went after it, following its tracks. The deer came to the Milky Lake, in the middle of which was an island with rich meadows. The deer swam to the island, went to the meadows, and began to graze. Then Arakhzau took an arrow and shot it at the deer, and it fell to the ground.

“Now, how am I going to carry it away from there?” thought Arakhzau. He entered the lake, and immediately his feet and ankles turned to stone. He went on

to the middle of the lake, and his knees turned to stone. He reached the island and saw Shiridon suddenly standing before him!

“Well, how do things stand now, Arakhzau?” Shiridon sneered. “You overcame me by sheer strength, but I have overcome you by cunning!”

Arakhzau saw at once how he had been deceived. He felt in his bosom and found his father’s button. He put it on the tip of an arrow and shot it. The arrow went quivering and whistling through the air, and struck Chief Bezenag’s threshold. Bezenag was just then lying down, warming himself in the sunshine. He saw the arrow, pulled it out, and understood at once that Arakhzau was in danger. He called one of his servants and straightaway said to him, “Hasten with all speed to the land of the Narts, and tell Shoshlan that his sworn brother Arakhzau is in danger, and needs his help!”

That same day Bezenag’s servant arrived at the Nart village, and gave Shoshlan his master’s message. Shoshlan mounted his gray horse at once and simply flew straight off to Bezenag. Upon arriving he asked, “Tell me quickly, which way did my sworn brother Arakhzau go?”

“He went to Chief Kuan, and from there shot his arrow as a sign.”

“Then give me the breast-plates of Serek, and the wonder-horse Silan, which I presented to Arakhzau, so that I can go to his aid!”

Chief Bezenag gave him the breast-plates, which he donned, and the wonder-horse Silan, which he then mounted. With one shake of the bridle he traveled a month’s journey in a day. But all the same he came too late. Arakhzau had already killed himself with one of his own arrows.

Shoshlan arrived at the chief’s tower and shouted, “Look out of your window, chief Kuan, and see who has arrived!”

From his very voice the walls of the fortress shook. Chief Kuan looked out and welcomed him to the hall, “Come in, come in! Evidently, you are a very special and unusual guest!”

“There is no reason for me to enter, only tell me at once where my sworn brother Arakhzau is.”

“He is with my son. They went to the Fish Ravine, and since then I have not heard where they are,” answered Chief Kuan.

Shoshlan turned his wonder-horse toward the Fish Ravine, and the next moment they were there. Nearby, at the Milky Lake he saw some people doing a merry round-dance, and asked them, "Why are you dancing? What fortune has blessed your day?"

"How can we stop dancing. We are so happy! Bezenag's son Arakhzau came to our chief to ask for his daughter's hand in marriage, and with Shiridon's aid, we managed to kill him!"

"And where then is his body?" inquired Shoshlan.

Lord Kuan's servants led him to the island in the Milky Lake, and the moment he saw Arakhzau's dead body, he shouted at them, "Eh, you asses! That was all I wanted to know and to see!"

Shiridon, hidden among the people, immediately recognized Shoshlan by his voice, and warned his friends, "Be on your guard! He was born from a stone, and can kill you all!" Then the cunning old man turned himself into a bird, and flew away.

But Shoshlan remained, and began to hew down Chief Kuan's servants. Those in front of him he slew, while those behind them were washed away in a stream of blood. All were slaughtered to the last man. Kuan's son he caught and dragged back to his father's fortress, and told the chief, "Bring here the dead body of my brother Arakhzau at once; otherwise I shall hew off your son's head!"

Lord Kuan could do nothing but obey. He sent servants to bring back the dead body of Arakhzau. When they returned, Shoshlan took the corpse and placed it on the shoulders of Chief Kuan and his son, and said to them, "Now go before me back to Arakhzau's father, and bring him the body of his dead son, and lay it before him."

There was nothing else they could do, so off they went on their long march. Shoshlan took Chief Kuan's daughter with him as a hostage.

They carried Arakhzau's corpse back to his home, and there Shoshlan called out to Chief Bezenag, "Here before you are those who slew your son, and this maiden is the one for whom he died!"

Then Chief Bezenag had a vault of silver made, and laid his son's body therein. Shoshlan then hewed off the heads of Chief Kuan and his son, and hung their heads above the vault at the entry to the tomb. Their dead bodies were thrown on the rubbish heap. Chief Bezenag thanked Shoshlan for avenging Arakhzau's death. Shoshlan then returned home, but left Chief Kuan's daughter there to take care of Bezenag in his old age.

33 ♦ HOW SHOSHLAN WED VEDUKHA

For seven years Shoshlan sought in marriage Vedukha, the beautiful daughter of Chelakhshartag, and for seven years, one after another, Chelakhshartag, the proud son of Khizh, refused him.

One day the Nart family Alagata arranged a feast to which the son of Khizh, proud Chelakhshartag, had been invited. All the guests gathered in the spacious hall of the Alagata family home for the festive occasion of the Alagata family day.

Urizhmag sat at the head of one row of tables, Khamis at the head of the second, and at the head of the third row sat Shiridon. Chelakhshartag was there as guest of honor.

The Narts ate and drank to celebrate the family day. The toasts then rolled around in waves, from the old to the young, and from the young to their elders, and the feast was in full swing.

Then Chelakhshartag, son of Khizh, began to argue with Shoshlan, as to which was the better man of the two. "I swear by my father's name, that I am ready to compete with you, and that in everything I shall surpass you. So, come on then, let us dance as the first part of our contest!"

"Let us dance, then!" said Shoshlan. "But what do you put up as a prize?"

"If you dance better than I," said Chelakhshartag, "then I will give you my daughter, the beauty Vedukha. Well, and what will you give?"

"I will put up the helmet of Bidas as prize," said Shoshlan. "On the news of war the helmet itself flies onto the warrior's head, and protects him, making him

invulnerable. In addition, I offer my sword, and my coat of mail. I leave it to you, as the elder and as our honored guest, to be the one to start the contest.”

Chelakhshartag jumped up from his place, and straightaway began to dance. At first he danced on the floor, then he jumped up onto the table and began to whirl round there. At once he knocked a goblet over and spilled some pickles, and brushed some pieces of bread down.

When Chelakhshartag, true to custom, retired, Shoshlan took his place, and he too started to dance on the floor. Truly, Chelakhshartag had danced very well, but Shoshlan did better. How skillfully he leapt onto a low three-legged table, and whirled round and round on it, then hopped onto the next, and the next, and so on along the whole row. Like a top he spun on the very edge of the table, and not one crust of bread did he touch, and not one goblet did he brush. Then all those feasting took out their daggers and knives, and placed them point-upward, with handles stuck in the ground, and Shoshlan began to dance on those blades in a way that you have never seen before. He turned and twisted like a mill wheel in a turbulent stream.

“What a clever devil!” exclaimed the guests, delighted at his dancing.

When he sat down in his place, members of the Alagata, the hosts of the feast, carried in a huge vessel, full to the brim with mead. Four hands were needed to lift it. Turning to the feasting guests, Shoshlan proclaimed, “He who dances with this bowl of Wasamonga upon his head and does not spill one single drop of mead, that one will be counted the best!”

Chelakhshartag jumped up, placed the Wasamonga bowl on his head, and began to dance. He danced well, whatever you may say, but nevertheless here and there drops of mead rolled up to the very edge of the bowl and spilled over. When he had finished, he sat down. They refilled the bowl to the brim, and gave it to Shoshlan. He placed Wasamonga’s bowl on the crown of his head, and began to dance. He danced even better than before, and not one drop of mead spilled over the edge of the bowl. Well, then Shoshlan finished dancing and sat down, and then Chelakhshartag, son of Khizh, said to the Narts, “May you all perish if you do not tell me the truth! Which of us danced the better?”

“You shall hear the truth,” replied the Narts. “You, Chelakhshartag, son of Khizh, danced very well indeed, but Shoshlan danced even better. Therefore he wins the contest!”

Chelakhshartag answered not a word, but jumped up from the table in anger, went out and saddled his steed, and galloped off home to his fortress of Khizh, above the ravine.

The next day Shoshlan gathered a few friends, and rode to the Khizh fortress, to receive Vedukha the beautiful, who had been promised to him by Chelakhshartag at the feast.

But the gates of the fortress were firmly closed and locked, and Shoshlan understood at once that Chelakhshartag had betrayed his word, and did not intend to give him the beauty Vedukha. Then he decided to take the fortress by attack, and to carry off the beauty Vedukha as a spoil. So he returned home, called the herald, and said to him, “Go to all Nart homes, and cry aloud the news, ‘Today is Friday, and next Friday we shall go to attack the fortress of Khizh! Any home that does not send us a warrior, will pay instead with a youngster, and he shall be my slave!’ ”

The herald cried aloud Shoshlan’s declaration to all Nart families, and everywhere they began to arm their warriors.

One of the Nart herdsman had no grown son to send on campaign. His only son was still lying in his cradle. The herdsman complained aloud, “I cannot go on campaign myself, for who then would take care of the herds? But if I do not take arms and go, then I shall have to give Shoshlan my only little son into lasting slavery!”

From day to day, the whole week through, the herdsman was troubled, and at night he spoke his thoughts aloud, bewailing his misfortune. Then suddenly he heard from down in the cradle the voice of his little son, “Do not despair, dear father. Send me to join Shoshlan’s soldiers!”

His father was amazed to hear him speak thus, and answered his son, “Would there be any reason for despair if I could send you to the fight. But you are too small!”

Then the little one stretched himself in his cradle, kicked out his legs, threw out his arms, and the cradle creaked and fell apart into many pieces. After that he said to his mother, "I'm rather hungry, mother dear!" So, his mother hastened to bake some bread. The loaf was as large and as long as the child himself, but when it was ready he ate it all and grew twice as big as before in front of their very eyes.

"Now you can send me on campaign!" he said. "If Shoshlan has to get off his horse for some reason, I can at least hold the bridle for him!"

Shoshlan gathered a great army of warriors, and led them off to the battle. On their way the herdsman's son overtook them. Shoshlan said to him, "Where do you think you are going, my little lad?"

"I am going on campaign with you!" said the boy. "I shall help you!"

"We can manage without milk-sops," said Shoshlan. "You had better go back home to mama!"

"Do not send me away, Shoshlan," said the little fellow. "I can at least hold your bridle for you if you have to get off your horse!"

"My horse is frightened of strangers," replied Shoshlan. "If he pulls the bridle from your hand, then what will you hold him by, eh?"

"I will hold him by his forelock!"

"And if he pulls away and leaves you his forelock in your grasp?"

"I will catch hold of his mane, then!"

"And if he pulls away, and leaves you holding part of his mane?"

"I will grab him, and hold him by one of his ears!"

"And if he leaves his ear in your hand?"

"Then I will grab hold of his tail!"

"And if he leaves his tail in your grasp?"

"I will take hold of one of his hind legs!"

"And if he leaves his hind leg with you?"

"Well, if you don't count it shameful to gallop on a horse with three legs, no forelock, half a mane, no tail, and only one ear, then I should not fear any kind of shame!"

“He’s no simpleton, this youngster!” said Shoshlan, and so he took him along.

The Narts encircled the Khizh fortress, and began to besiege it. But the gates were bolted and barred, firm and fast. Shoshlan could do not a thing. Not a single stone could he move from the fortress walls. So he dismounted from his steed, left it with the little lad, and went to help the men who were attacking the great walls of the fortress.

For a long time the little lad watched how the attack was going, and wanted to help those with Shoshlan. First he chose the highest tree in the forest, and bent its crest down to the ground. Then he tied the four legs of Shoshlan’s horse together onto one branch, and by the bridle lashed the horse’s head to another branch at the top of the tree.

Then he let it go, and the tall tree sprang up straight again, and carried the horse with it, high above the rest of the forest. Having done so, he ran off to Shoshlan. When he saw the lad alone, he said, “What have you done with my horse?”

“Just look how fast he is tied up!” answered the lad. “Do not be alarmed! He won’t be able to run away anywhere!”

When Shoshlan saw his steed hanging on the top of the tree, he thought “I’ve found a good friend!”

Meanwhile the lad kept on asking Shoshlan to let him join the fight. What could Shoshlan do now? In the end he agreed, and the lad said to him, “You see there above the Khizh fortress stands a black rocky cliff. I shall climb up there and with my heels I shall kick off great big boulders. They will fall down directly on the fortress and will destroy it. Chelakhshartag has a cherished arrow, made by the heavenly smith, Kurdalagon, and he will wound me in the heel. I will fall from the cliff, but you must not let me touch the earth. Then you must bear me through seven streams, and God will then grant your wish. I will survive, and will destroy the Khizh fortress, and bring to you the beauty Vedukha. But if you drop me on the earth, and cannot carry me through seven streams, then I will die and will not be able to help you in the fight.”

The young lad climbed to the top of the black cliff, and began to kick off huge boulders with his heels. They went flying down onto the fortress, and destroyed many buildings inside the walls. Chelakhshartag caught sight of the lad, and at once let fly the cherished arrow of Kurdalagon, which pierced his heel. He fell, like a sheaf in the field, and tumbled down the face of the cliff. But Shoshlan seized his sheepskin coat, opened it wide, and caught the lad as he fell, and did not let him touch the ground. He carried him in his arms and ran off to find seven streams. He had found and passed through three streams, and then he met an old man. On his back he bore an old leather bag, and under his arm some pitchforks with broken teeth. This was the cunning Shirdon who had taken on such a disguise.

“Where are you hastening to, father?” Shoshlan asked him.

“The Narts have broken into the Khizh fortress, and I am hurrying there to find some odds and ends of the spoils, maybe. But you seem to look like the Nart Shoshlan? What are you doing with this dead lad you are carrying? Meanwhile someone will steal your beautiful Vedukha!” said the old man, and quickly ran on.

But Shoshlan did not listen to him, and ran on further. When he passed through the fourth stream, the young lad began to move a little, and when he forded the fifth stream, his heart began to beat again. Two more streams to cross, and the very young boy would be well once more. He hastened on as quickly as he could over the sixth stream, and there he saw an old woman, with a sieve in her hands.

“Is it not Shoshlan I see before me? What are you doing carrying a dead boy about? The Narts have already taken Khizh fortress, and have captured your beautiful Vedukha. As you see, I am hurrying there with my sieve. Perhaps among the dust and ashes I shall find some spoils.”

Shoshlan’s heart trembled. As it was an old woman speaking it was not likely to be a lie. He did not know that this was another of old Shirdon’s cunning tricks.

He spread his sheepskin coat out on a hillock, laid the lad upon it, and then ran back to join his warriors. Quickly he sped to them, and saw them still

standing outside the walls, waiting for their leader. He then understood that he had been deceived, and rushed back to the boy, but found that the lad was dead. The crafty Shiridon had succeeded in sprinkling some earth on him, and he had died.

What could Shoshlan do now? He sent all his warriors back home, and he himself went to the spring where all the Khizh people came for water, and there he pretended to be dead. He lay so still that he was even covered by worms. After a while people began to come from the fortress for water, and saw the corpse beside the stream. They returned home and told Chelakhshartag that they had seen a dead man by the spring already covered by worms. By their description Chelakhshartag understood that it was Shoshlan, but he did not believe that he was dead.

“He is not dead, but just pretending!” said he to Veducha.

“I shall go there,” said Veducha. “I would like to see his corpse.”

“Don’t go near him,” said her father, “or he will capture you!”

“A dead man won’t touch me!” said Veducha defiantly.

Covering her face with her hand, she went down to the spring, where she filled her jug with water, took a quick look at the corpse, and returned home. It was hard for Shoshlan to remain absolutely still at the sight of her, but he never moved an eyelid.

“Be ashamed of yourself, father!” scolded Veducha angrily. “Nothing remains of the dead man except a heap of skin and bones covered by worms, and yet you fear to go near it. If the dead Shoshlan can arouse such terror in you, that means that he must have been a valiant man and was truly worthy to receive my hand in marriage! Ah, why did you not give me to him? I shall meet with none better now!”

“He is still not dead!” answered Chelakhshartag sullenly. He ordered his servants to go and heat a spit until it was red-hot, and then to thrust it into his heel. “If the spit goes right through his leg and comes out behind, and he doesn’t move or even twitch, then I’ll believe that he is dead!”

His servants did as he commanded. They heated a spit until it was red-hot, and then they thrust it into his heel. Into his leg and out the other side it went. All

this torment Shoshlan withstood without a sound and did not move. Nonetheless, Chelakhshartag still did not believe that he was dead.

“Bring me the spit!” he ordered.

They brought him the spit, and he sniffed at it cautiously.

“That accursed Shoshlan is still alive, by all the gods!” he cried.

“Whatever are you saying, father?” exclaimed Vedukha. “If a thorn pricks someone’s heel, they cannot help shouting about it, but this Nart whose heel was pierced by a red-hot spit did not even tremble. Yet you say he is still alive. If so, what better man should I find?”

Vedukha left the fortress, and began to beat her brow, and scratch her cheeks, and to lament, as it were, for her dead beloved. She came to the place where Shoshlan lay, and moaned, “Oh, you most unhappy of mortal men! If I had known sooner that death threatened you, I would have flung myself into a furious river to save you. How can I help but regret that you have died in vain!”

It was hard for Shoshlan not to move on hearing these loving words, but again he held out, and stirred not a finger.

When Chelakhshartag saw his daughter sadly return home unharmed, he could resist no longer, but left the fortress, and went to take a look at the corpse of his mortal enemy.

Nearer and nearer he came to Shoshlan, and now stood almost beside him. Then Shoshlan no longer held back, but jumped up and attacked him. Chelakhshartag immediately turned and ran swiftly back toward the fortress gates, but there Shoshlan overtook him, and struck such a blow with his sword, that he hacked off the top of his skull. Nonetheless he managed to slip through the gates, and to shout from the inside of the wall, “In a week’s time we shall renew the fight! Meanwhile I shall go up to the heavenly smith Kurdalagon, and he will forge me a new skull!”

So Chelakhshartag ascended into the heavens, and Kurdalagon did as he asked, and forged him a new bronze top to his skull. But when he placed it on Chelakhshartag’s head, he remarked, “From the outside I can fix it with rivets, but how can I turn them over from the inside?”

“Do not worry about that,” answered Chelakhshartag. “Every time you hammer in a rivet from the outside, I shall give a good hard cough, and the rivet will be fixed as needed!” So Kurdalagon cured Chelakhshartag.

When the day came to renew his duel with the son of Khiz, Shoshlan prayed to God for assistance: “O God of gods, my God! If I am in some way useful to you, and if I am to receive just a little happiness in reward, then order the sun to shine with such fiery strength that the cunning fox’s head should split, and that the bronze top of his skull should melt!”

The son of Khizh, Chelakhshartag, left the fortress, and began to wait for Shoshlan. Still he did not come. Chelakhshartag waited and waited, and the sun burned hotter and hotter, and at last it melted the bronze top of his skull, and burned out his brains. Thus, not moving from the spot, Chelakhshartag, son of Khizh, died.

Shoshlan, waiting nearby, saw that his end had come, and entered the fortress, and at last he spoke to Vedukha, “Your father lies dead at my hand, and now you are mine!”

“I am ready to be your wife,” answered Vedukha, “but first you must bury the body of my dead father!”

Shoshlan gave orders for a grand tomb to be built, and when it was ready he laid the corpse inside.

“I have now buried your father,” said Shoshlan to Vedukha, “what further objections have you to make?”

“First I want to see with my own eyes just how you have buried him,” answered Vedukha, “and then may God bless us! Whom will I have to fear?”

“Well then, let us go, and you will see for yourself!” said Shoshlan.

He did not notice that Vedukha was hiding her scissors up her sleeve. Vedukha entered the vault and looked at her dead father, then plunged the scissors into her heart, and fell onto her father’s corpse. All that Shoshlan could do then was to lay her beside her father.

“Many misfortunes and miseries I have lived through,” said Shoshlan, “but such a sorrow has never beset me before!”

Indeed, how could he refrain from mourning over the beauty Vedukha whom he had courted so many years. He decided to keep a watch of honor over his beloved. For three days and three nights he sat at the head of her coffin, then he suddenly saw a snake crawl onto her corpse. Shoshlan swiftly drew his sword and slashed the snake in two. The tail end remained where it was, but the head end quickly crawled back into its hole. He waited to see what would happen, and soon the head end of the snake crawled out again, carrying in its jaws the bead that fulfills all desires. It carried the bead to the spot where its other end was lying, and immediately the two halves joined together again, and the snake began to crawl away. This time Shoshlan struck it straight on the head and killed it outright. Then he pried open its jaws and took out the magic bead that fulfills all desires. This he lay on the wound at Vedukha's heart. The maiden sighed, opened her eyes, and exclaimed, "Oh, how long have I been sleeping?!"

"Oh, so long, so long, my dearest Vedukha!" replied Shoshlan.

Then he led her out of the vault, and took her with him back to his home. Happily and merrily they began to live together, and firmly and deeply they loved one another.

34 ♦ HOW SHOSHLAN SAVED SHATANA FROM THE LAKE
OF HELL

Shoshlan went on a distant hunting expedition in the direction where the sun rises. Above the earth and below the heavens his horse went galloping, as swift and powerful as a storm-wind. There were some younger Narts who were jealous of Shoshlan, even hostile toward him. When he was absent on a quest, or on hunting expeditions, they would ponder how they could wound him to the heart, or what evil deed would hurt him most. Once they agreed on a plan like this: "Let us throw his mother Shatana into the Lake of Hell! Hurl her alive into the Land of the Dead!"

One of the young Narts came to Shatana, and said to her: "Today is Friday, and you have a week left to live—until next Friday. Therefore make haste to say

your prayers, and confess your sins, for next Friday we shall throw you alive into the Lake of Hell.”

Shatana’s heart shrank in pain when she heard this threat, and she began to weep, and tears like great shiny beads rolled from her eyes. She started to think how she could send word to her son Shoshlan, born of a stone, about this threat to her life. Shatana was very resourceful! She baked three honey cakes, and ran to the river, and sat on the stone from which her son had been born, and there she prayed: “O God of gods, my God! Send me a bird that can carry my word to my son Shoshlan!” Then she sat and waited.

Soon she saw a kite flying overhead, and called to it: “Hey, there, you kite! I will make you a great gift if you will fly as my messenger of alarm in that direction where the sun rises, to my son Shoshlan. Tell him that his enemies want to fling me alive into the Land of the Dead, and that he must come home quickly!”

“An even worse misfortune than that I wish upon Shoshlan!” croaked the kite in answer to Shatana. “Whole ravines and gullies are full of the carcasses of slain beasts, and still he has not enough. When I fly over those dead creatures, to enjoy myself on their rotting flesh, Shoshlan shoots his arrows at me!”

The kite flew off, and in his tracks came a black raven with heavy wings, cawing and croaking. Shatana addressed her sad words to him:

Raven, o black Raven, I beg you, fat-necked one, Fly across the heavens

Toward the rising sun!

Not for the first occasion

Will you bear news of woe!

Croak the alarm, o Raven, That Shoshlan may know!

Caw to him, black brother:

Narts who wish not well, Want to hurl his mother, Alive, into the Lake of Hell!

Serve me in this matter—

Such a feast I’ll set, That of this you’ll chatter, And never will forget!

But the fat-necked black raven made reply: “No, I won’t fly, Shatana, as your messenger of alarm. Sometimes your son Shoshlan fills a whole ravine with slaughtered game, but does not even leave me a bone to pick!” so croaked the fat-necked Raven, and added, “I would like to see even greater misfortune fall upon his head!”

“May you ever be homeless among all nesting birds!” Shatana replied.

The fat-necked raven flew off, leaving Shatana weeping in despair. Then suddenly a thin-necked raven flew toward her, settled on a bough, and began to chaff and chirr. Shatana appealed to him so: “My son has galloped off to the land of the rising sun. If only you would bring him the alarming news that some of the Narts are going to hurl his mother alive into the Lake of Hell, oh, what a gift I’d give to you!”

“Let Shoshlan look upon such sorrow, at least with one eye!” chirred the raven. “Do you not remember how he bashed me with a broom, when I took just one egg from your chicken hutch. Only half-alive I escaped him, and I can’t forget it as long as I live!” With another caw he fled.

Shatana covered her face with her hands and wept bitterly. Suddenly she heard the twittering of a swallow: “Why are you weeping, so full of sorrow, Shatana?” the swallow said.

“How can I help weeping?” answered Shatana. “Our enemies among the Narts have threatened to come on Friday and hurl me alive into the Lake of Hell. My son and protector Shoshlan has gone on a hunting expedition and there is nobody to stand up for me!”

“Maybe I can help you?” twittered the swallow. “I shall never forget as long as I live how you saved my fledglings from the clutches of a wild cat, and put them in fresh warm milk, and put them back in the nest! What would you like me to do?”

“Fly, my dear swallow, to the land of the rising sun, and find my son Shoshlan there. Raise the alarm and tell him that foes among the Narts are going to hurl me alive into the Lake of Hell. Come home quickly!”

“How could I refuse to be your herald, glorious Shatana? How can I forget, sweet Shatana, your kindly deed? I shall fly at once to him. But maybe he will

not believe me?”

Shatana quickly slipped her ring off her finger, and placed it on the swallow's neck. It spread its wings, and flew toward the sunrise.

In one night, until Bonvarnon the bright star of morning arose, the swallow flew to the spot where it took Shoshlan seven weeks and seven days to gallop on his wind-swift steed. Beneath a shady bush, on the soft green grass, sat Shoshlan. The swallow perched on a branch above his head and twittered and chattered in a thousand different ways: “Hey, you famous Nart Shoshlan, you stormy one, there you lie quite undisturbed, while hostile Narts are planning to hurl your beloved mother Shatana alive into the Lake of Hell! She waits and weeps for you to return, like the light of day!”

“Dear swallow, you were always the people's friend, and I understand what you are trying to tell me, but how do I know that this is true?”

Straightaway the swallow shook off Shatana's ring from its neck. How could Shoshlan fail to recognize it? With one stride and a leap he was in the saddle, and on his storm-swift steed, as quick as a flying cloud, he galloped back toward home. He had already ridden a long way, when he saw a poor helpless beggar lying on the road, unable to rise.

“Eh, Nart Shoshlan, my life is in your hands!” he called, but could not even lift his head from the ground.

At once Shoshlan dismounted, bent over the poor man and asked him: “What is wrong with you? What do you need? How can I help you?”

“I am simply dying of hunger, and hope you can save me!” he replied.

But Shoshlan, in hurrying home to help his mother had not stopped to take any food with him. Still, it never entered his head that he could cast off a fellow-man to die of hunger. He just galloped into the forest and soon returned with a deer he had shot. He made a fire, roasted some pieces of meat over its flames, and only then did he wish the hungry beggar good-day, whip up his horse, and gallop off on his way. Again he rode a long way, and suddenly saw an eagle carrying off in its talons a tiny child. He at once took his bow and shot an arrow at the eagle, which, still clutching the child in its talons, fell into the river nearby. Shoshlan galloped up to the riverbank, jumped off his horse, plunged

into the river and saved the baby. He sat him on the saddle in front of him, and rode on again. On the outskirts of the next village he met a woman with her face all scratched with woe. An eagle had snatched away her child in front of her very eyes. Shoshlan returned the baby to its mother, and she thanked him deeply: "I am a poor widow," she said, "and you have saved my only son!" Shoshlan galloped off again in haste, whipping and spurring his steed, but in spite of all his efforts, he arrived too late. They had already hurled his mother alive into the Lake of Hell. He sped there, but found no signs of Shatana.

First he returned to the Nart village, and fully punished his foes. Then he galloped off to the Land of the Dead, and knocked at the gates, thinking that Barashtir might give him back his dear mother. He began to beg and plead with Barashtir, the Lord of the Dead, when he appeared, to give him back his murdered mother, and let her return to the Land of the Living. Finally Barashtir answered him thus: "Not few are the sins that you have committed, Nart Shoshlan. But because you stopped when hastening home to save your mother, and did not refuse a hungry beggar help, and also because you rescued a little child from the eagle's clutches, and returned it to its weeping mother, I will give you back your own mother."

So Barashtir released Shatana, and she and her son returned to the Nart village, in the Land of the Living, to dwell again among friends.

35 ♦ SHOSHLAN AND TOTRAZ

Alimbeg had six sons, and a single daughter. Alimbeg himself, and all his six sons had been slain by Shoshlan's hand in a family blood-feud. Only his daughter remained with her widowed mother. She was pregnant, and soon after the death of her husband, gave birth to another son. Shiridon gave the boy the name of Totraz, son of Alimbeg. The little lad grew so quickly, that in one day he gained a hand's breadth in height, and in one night he grew a quarter of a cubit. In front he was made of tempered steel, but behind he was as vulnerable as any other man.

Of course, Shoshlan understood that if the boy grew to manhood, then he would take his part in the blood-feud, to avenge the death of his father and brothers. Shoshlan and Shatana decided to put an end to the feud, and tear out the last of the Alimbeg family by the roots.

Shatana then suggested a plan to Shoshlan: “Next Friday,” she said, “call a meeting of the Narts on the Field of Games, and make the herald announce: ‘Today is Friday, and next Friday there will be a sports contest of all kinds taking place here. Those who do not send a contestant to test his strength against the others will have to pay a fine of one of his younger members of the family.’ There will be nobody to come from Alimbeg’s house, so you can then take his only daughter, Totraz’s sister, as a hostage and slave. We can deal with the lad Totraz later somehow, holding his sister captive.”

Shoshlan did as Shatana suggested, and announced the contest.

Totraz’s mother heard the herald’s announcement while she was still wearing her widow’s garb and bemoaning her husband and sons. She sat by the cradle of her only son, and wept and prayed: “May God never forgive you, Shoshlan, for what you are doing! You know very well that the house of Alimbeg cannot send a man to take part in the contest, and that means that you intend to devour the life of my last son as well!”

The little boy was sleeping at the time, but he was wakened by his mother’s sobbing and moaning.

“What’s wrong, Mama, and why are you weeping?” he asked her.

“I am not weeping, my son. Sleep quietly now, and let your mother sacrifice herself for you!” she said to the fatherless lad. She only wanted to hide her sorrow from her son. But the lad did not leave her in peace, so she said to him: “Well, how can I help weeping, then, when all the sons I had, and their brave father with them, were slain by Shoshlan’s hand? Only you and your sister remain, but now he is thinking up a way to devour your lives as well. The herald announced that any house that does not send a man to partake in the contest on the Field of Games must pay Shoshlan with a young person from the family as his slave. We have nobody to send, and that means that Shoshlan will take your elder sister to be his slave!”

“Don’t be afraid, dear mother! I shall go to the Field of Games to test my strength against other Nart youths, and I will not shame our family name, nor will I let them take my sister as their slave!”

“If you were only big enough, my little boy! If you were only grown-up, and could go to join the contests, then my days would not be so full of sorrows!” replied his mother.

“I shall no more call myself the son of Alimbeg if I give my only sister to be a slave! Not for nothing did Shirdon name me Totraz!”

He turned over in his cot, cast off his swaddling clothes, kicked against the side of his cradle, which at once went flying in all directions. One side went soaring away and struck a snowy mountain crest, and since then those mountains stand divided from one another. The second side fell on the distant steppe land, and since then the steppe there is covered with hillocks and gullies. The third side fell on the forest, and since then glades and clearings appeared there. The fourth side fell into the sea, and so since then islands have appeared, raising themselves up from the depths.

The youngster jumped up with such force that he struck his head on the ceiling. He became as strong and courageous as a man, and said: “Dear mother, while I was still in your womb I heard that my father, Alimbeg, spent all his days on expeditions and campaigns. He was, so they say, a famous man. Surely his horse must have survived?”

“Of course, how could it be otherwise?” replied his mother, “But before his death he put him down in the cellar, and closed the entrance with a huge slab of stone from the cliffs. He has a stock of food there, and a small spring of water. But he can’t get out, and must be already up to his ears in manure. Take care that you do not approach him from the rear, or he will kick you!”

Totraz took down his father’s whip from the wall, and went down into the cellar to fetch the horse.

“Wait a moment, my bright lad!” said his mother. “The cellar is closed with a huge slab of stone. Twelve pairs of bulls pulled it there. You won’t be able to move it by yourself. I must call people to help you.”

The lad made no reply, went up to the door of the cellar, and just pushed the slab aside with the handle of the whip. Then he caught hold of the horse's ears, and pulled him up out of the manure, and led him off to the river. There he washed him and brushed him down, and he became so clean that he simply sparkled, as if cleaned with egg-white.

He brought the horse back home, and set his father's silver saddle on his back.

"Surely father must have left his weapons behind?" he asked his mother.

"Go to the inner room, and there on the wall you will see them. In its eagerness for battle his sword flashes with blue flame. There in an iron box, closed with springs, you will find his helmet and chain-mail."

Totraz went with hasty steps to the inner room of the house. He passed through seven doors, and when he opened the eighth he found the inner room, and saw his father's sword shining on the wall. He found the black iron trunk, closed with springs, and opening the lid, he took from it Alimbeg's coat of mail, and his helmet. Having put them on, he returned to his mother and told her, "So it will be. I shall go to the Field of Games to represent our family, and shall compete with the Nart youths!" Then he quickly took the reins of his father's horse.

His mother was agitated, and feared that Shoshlan would kill him. But the youngster, fully armored and equipped, lightly sprang upon the shining steed, and it began to dance and prance beneath him.

"Look, Mama, how well do I sit upon father's horse?" asked Totraz. "If I do not handle him well, I shall not go outside our courtyard!"

"You haven't shown yet whether you handle him well or not!" she replied, wishing to see whether he really sat firm in the saddle. "When your father was going on campaign, before leaving the courtyard, he whipped up his horse, gave him free rein, and leapt over the garden fence then back again into the yard, and only then said goodbye to me."

At once Totraz whipped up his steed, and with one sweep leapt over the fence. Then he turned his horse, gave it another cut with the whip, and leapt back again into the yard. He was just raising his whip, about to shake the reins to

leave, when his mother said him: “Wait one moment, my son! Don’t hasten away! I want to make sure that you recognize the one who devoured the lives of your six brothers, and your father. When you come to the Field of Games, looked around carefully among the Narts and take note of the one who walks slightly bow-legged, whose eyes are as large as a sieve, one of them with two pupils, and whose beard sticks out in all directions, like the spikes of hedgehogs.” Beware of that man! He is the one who works our whole family woe!”

The lad trotted out of the courtyard on his horse. It was Friday, the day appointed for the sporting contests between the young Narts. They had gathered in the Field of Games, and till that moment no one from the house of Alimbeg had arrived to compete.

Now the games began, with contests between the Nart youths. They performed wonder after wonder, but the swarthy rider Shoshlan excelled them all. Suddenly from the direction of the village there appeared a dark cloud, and black ravens were soaring above it. The Narts were astonished, and could not understand what this could be.

Shirdon glanced with his keen eye, and said: “That which looks like a dark cloud is no cloud at all. That is the gray horse of Alimbeg Alagata galloping toward us, and you see the steam from his nostrils, not a cloud. That which you thought were ravens are not black ravens at all. They are the clods of earth that go flying above his head from his four hooves.”

“Yes, that is a horse galloping, we see now, but we cannot see who is riding it, that is why we wonder!” answered a few youths.

“It has a rider all right, and what kind of rider you will soon see with your own eyes!” Shirdon replied to them.

This surprised the Narts even more: “What kind of rider dare bestride the famous horse of Alimbeg? He could scarcely be seen above the saddle-bow.”

However, they soon found out who the rider was when he galloped up and cried: “May good luck go with you in your games, proud Nart youths!”

“Totraz, son of Alimbeg Alagata, welcome to our games!” answered Shirdon, who had given this little lad that name.

Totraz rode around the Field of Games, looking at the Nart youths and young men, seeking the one whom he must fight. As soon as he saw Shoshlan he knew at once from all three signs that this was he of whom mother spoke.

“Well, Shoshlan, let us compete with one another, you and I!” he said.

“Get along with you, young puppy!” answered Shoshlan. “How can I do so with you, when your mother’s milk is not yet dry in the corners of your lips? What could I say to onlookers that would explain why I compete with a baby like you?”

“Nonetheless, you cannot in this way refuse me!” answered Totraz.

“And where do you think you are poking your nose into, son of Alimbeg? I shall feed your flesh to the crows, and I shall cast your bones to the dogs!” answered Shoshlan scornfully.

But Totraz did not leave him in peace, and urged him again: “Come on, then! Come on, and we’ll see what happens!” he cried.

“Very well, then, come on, and we’ll see!” said Shoshlan spurring on his horse.

Their horses met with a clash. Shoshlan’s was hurled to one side, and fell to the ground. Totraz managed to catch Shoshlan on the point of his lance, and raised him high before him. The Nart youths who saw this ran off in all directions. Totraz had scared them out of their wits, and they feared that having finished with Shoshlan, he would set about them likewise, and every one ran to save his own head.

Totraz, not dismounting the whole day, carried Shoshlan on the point of his lance and not once did he let him touch the ground.

“You slew my father and my brothers,” he hissed, “and you will not escape from my hands. I shall kill you first!”

The evening came, and Shoshlan entreated Totraz humbly: “You should kill me by rights, but this time spare me, at least let me say farewell to my family. Today is Friday, and next Friday we shall fix as the day of our duel. Let us meet then at Khushzagat, behind the Nart village, on the Hill of Justice, where they decide who is in the right, and who is in the wrong. There we shall flight, man to man.”

They gave one another their word of honor, and Totraz then lowering his lance, allowed Shoshlan to feel the ground beneath his feet again.

“Until the time agreed upon I allow you to live!” he said. “May the one who does not appear for combat be named ‘Gop-Chekh’!”⁶ and putting his horse to the gallop, he set off home.

With slumped shoulders and bowed head, Shoshlan too returned home, and sank into his armchair, which creaked and shook on all four legs.

“What is wrong with you, my son, whom I never bore?” asked Shatana. “Who has offended you? Are you ill?”

“What could be worse than that which happened today to me on the Field of Games? Of him who has done much wrong, much recompense is demanded! I have run into shame. The youngest son of Alimbeg made fun of me all day. He carried me on the point of his lance, not letting my feet touch the ground, and I dangled there all day, like a tuft of colored felt. When he let me down afterward, he said to me: ‘I would have shown you what more I could do, had you not been a Nart!’ What can I do with such a boy, since he is already stronger than I? When he becomes a full-grown man, will he leave me in the Land of the Living?”

“Will you fight with him again?” enquired Shatana anxiously.

“I gave him my word that we shall meet next Friday at Khushzagat, beyond the Nart village. There, on the Hill of Justice, our single combat is set. I cannot break my word, and he, of course, will kill me!”

“Well, since so much time remains, be calm, and I shall help you. Only don’t sit as though defeated already, with bowed head. We must make haste. Go out hunting, and get enough wolf-skins to make yourself a jacket, and carry them to me straightway. Then go up to the heavenly metalworker Kurdalagon, and ask him to make you a hundred little bells, and a hundred tiny tambourines. If you can manage to get all these, then you need have no fear!”

Shoshlan went off, and soon returned, bringing Shatana many skins, just stripped from the wolves he had shot, enough to make a jacket of them. Shatana prepared a strong oak solution, tanned them thoroughly, and then set to work to sew them into a jacket.

Meanwhile Shoshlan went up to the heavenly smith Kurdalagon, and at his request the metalworker forged for him a hundred little bells and a hundred tiny tambourines, all ringing in different tones. These he then brought down again to Shatana, who fastened them, when the day of the duel dawned, into the mane of Shoshlan's steed. Then she put the jacket on Shoshlan with the furry side out, and fastened to the fur pieces of colored cloth, like a rainbow, and variegated scraps in his horse's mane as well. When all was ready, she said to Shoshlan: "Ride boldly now to the assigned place. Try to be there earlier than Alimbeg's son, and stop your steed before reaching the hill. I shall send to your aid a cloud, which obeys only us women, and it will cover you with its dark shade, and conceal you from the eyes of Totraz.

When he climbs the hill he will see nothing, save a cloud. Then he will start to shout: 'Hey, where are you, Shoshlan, the oath-breaker? Today we agreed to fight. Come on out, and show yourself for combat!' But do not reveal yourself then, while he remains facing you there, or you will not vanquish him. A second and a third time he will shout for you to appear: 'Hey, where are you, Shoshlan, the oath-breaker? Come out and fight, as we agreed!' Wait awhile, then he will turn his horse around in the direction of the village. At that moment you must act as quickly as you can. Be utterly ruthless! His powerful horse was fed and brought up by devils, but even devils fear wolves, and his horse fears wolf-skins too! How can he remain calm when he suddenly sees flying on his track a terrifying rider, with colored ribbons and rags waving in the wind, wearing a wolf-skin jacket, and his horse with hundreds of little bells and tambourines in its mane clanging in various tones? Totraz will try to turn his horse back to face you, and fight you, but will not be able to manage his frightened steed, and when he gallops off with his back to you, strike with all your strength, for though his front is as tough as steel, his back is vulnerable, like any other!"

So Shoshlan set off for the Hill of Justice. On reaching the foot of the hill, he waited on one side, and Shatana sent a cloud to conceal him. Soon Totraz came galloping up, and when he reached the hill cried: "Where are you Shoshlan? Come on out, and let us fight our duel today!"

But he stood facing Shoshlan, who was hidden by the cloud, and Shoshlan did not go out to fight him.

Totraz waited awhile, turned his horse side on toward Shoshlan, who was still hidden by the cloud, and again he shouted: “Hey, where are you, Shoshlan? Come on out and fight! We so agreed!” But he couldn’t see Shoshlan anywhere, so he waited a little longer. Then he turned his horse’s head to face the village, and shouted, “May evil befall you for breaking your oath, Shoshlan! Today we agreed to meet in single combat, but you have not kept your word! Now you will live in dishonor among the Narts as an oath-breaker!” With that he rode off toward the village.

Then, like a vulture swooping out of a grave, Shoshlan galloped out of the cloud blanket, and shouted to Totraz: “Here I am, and I did not break my oath! Wait for me, I say!”

Shoshlan’s appearance was sudden, but nonetheless Alimbeg’s son succeeded in turning his horse’s head toward him. The horse saw the shaggy wolf-skins, with their many-knotted colored rags and scraps of ribbon, and heard the tinkling tones of hundreds of bells and tiny tambourines all clinking together, so how could he help being frightened out of his wits? He turned his head back, and raced with his rider toward the village.

“May they bring you as a sacrifice to the dead!” screamed Totraz at his horse. “Because of you I will lose the fight and will die!”

Out of the corner of his eye Totraz glanced over his shoulder, and saw the oath-breaker Shoshlan. No matter how he struggled with his steed, Totraz could not stop him, nor turn him. He tugged at the reins with all his might, and the bridle broke. He grabbed his horse’s mane, and tore it out in handfuls. He grasped his horse’s ears, and ripped them off, along with the skin of his neck right down to his saddle-bow. No, no matter how hard he tried he could not turn his steed to face the foe, and heard already how the triumphant Shoshlan followed ever closer on his heels.

“May you be left with none to feed you!” he cursed his horse. “If I am not afraid of the foe, and would face him, then why don’t you?”

Totraz then leaned forward and reached for the maddened horse's lower jawbone, but though he pulled this way and that, and finally wrenched the jawbone out of its sockets, he could not turn nor stay his steed. Already Shoshlan's arrows began to fly, one after another, and Totraz's back was covered with bloody wounds, and deep gashes. Shoshlan overtook Totraz, and plunged his lance into his back, between his two shoulder blades. He fell face-down on the ground, and immediately gave up the ghost.

So Shoshlan slew the little lad, and putting his horse to the trot, pranced off merrily to his home.

How could Totraz's mother be otherwise than worried over the fate of her small son? She called two youths and said to them: "Today at Khushzagat, beyond the Nart village, on the Hill of Justice, Totraz must meet Shoshlan in single combat. Go and fetch me word of him, so that I may know what has happened!"

The two youths rode toward Khushzagat, and Shoshlan, returning home, saw them some way off. He wound a woolen kerchief round his head, so that they should not recognize him, and neither of them did.

"Where are you hurrying off to, young fellows?" he asked them.

"Today Alimbeg's son, Totraz, rode to the Hill of Justice to fight Shoshlan in single combat. His mother has sent us to find out who won!"

"She need not worry!" Shoshlan answered them. "Alimbeg's son rode off merrily on his prancing horse across the steppe, leaving behind him the corpse of Shoshlan lying on the Hill of Justice, for the wolves to eat!"

"Long life to you!" they replied. "You have saved us a lot of trouble."

The youngsters returned to Totraz's mother, and merrily told her: "We deserve a present from you in return for our happy news. Your Totraz has slain Shoshlan, and is on his way home!"

The old woman set a low round table before them with dishes of fat meat and many heady drinks poured out like water, and entertained them gaily, but still her mother's heart could not quiet down.

"Did you see my Totraz yourselves, or did somebody else tell you about the result of the combat between him and Shoshlan?" she queried.

“It would be shameful to lie to you,” the youths replied, “but we did not see Totraz himself. We were told all about the combat by some stranger whom we met coming toward us on our way.”

“And who was this rider, then. Perhaps you know him?” she asked.

“I took a good look at him,” said one of the youths, “and I was very surprised, for although his face was partly covered by a woolen scarf, I noticed that he had two pupils in one eye!”

At once, on hearing his, Totraz’s mother began to weep and wail, and scratch her cheeks with her nails, then to beat her knees and her thighs with her hands, and bitterly cried: “That stranger was Shoshlan himself! Out of all God’s creations, not a single creature has two pupils in one eye except Shoshlan! Go back now to the Hill of Justice, and find my son’s corpse. If he has been killed by a blow in the breast, then bring his body home, so that I may make my lamentations over him, and bury him in our family graveyard. But if he has been struck down by a blow in the back, then throw the carcass on the dung-heap, for it is not worthy of a decent burial in the soil of our forefathers. That is no place for a coward cut down running away!”

Back went the youths, and found Totraz’s corpse, but seeing arrow and spear wounds in his back, they went to throw his carcass on the dung-heap.

On their way, they met Shiridon. He looked at the corpse and asked: “Where are you carrying the corpse of Totraz, son of Alimbeg?”

“We are taking him to the dung-heap,” they replied, “since he was slain while turning away from Shoshlan!”

“You had better take a good look at his horse!” said Shiridon. “Was it not his fault that Totraz met his death so? I do not believe that he himself would run away from an enemy. He was not of cowardly blood.”

They returned to the place of the conflict and carefully looked at the carcass of his horse. After that they returned to Totraz’s mother and told her what a condition the dead horse was in: the bridle broken, its mane torn out, its ears ripped off, and the skin off its neck down to the withers, its lower jaw dislocated, its mouth torn open too..

“That means the beast was terrified, but not my son, and he died bravely!” she exclaimed. “Go back and bring him home!”

They brought back Totraz’s corpse, and buried it with honor in the graveyard among his family predecessors. For a whole year, each month his distracted mother made funeral memorials with mourning ceremonies over her dead son’s body. Her abundant tears flowed like a stream down into his grave, and in time washed away the earth over his head, and then a ray of sunshine penetrated into the depths of the tomb, and lit up the youthful features of Totraz, son of Alimbeg.

Shoshlan had tricked Totraz. Only with the aid of deceit did he succeed in slaying him. Therefore their combat will continue in the next world. Again will Totraz, son of Alimbeg Alagata, and Shoshlan Akhshartagketta meet, and again they will fight. The dead will gather in great crowds to see that most unusual of all combats, never seen before. Thus, if the living hold their contests in archery in memory of the dead, and place the targets on tall poles forming a tower, then the dead man may look down on the contest. Thus, if the living erect a memorial in honor of a dead man, then he may mount the memorial, and from there may see the contest.

Thus, he in whose honor and memory horse-racing contests are arranged, may himself witness the contest from the back of a horse.

One evening Shoshlan was sitting at the meeting place in the village square. Suddenly he saw old Urizhmag returning from hunting, with shoulders slumped, and bowed head.

“What misfortune has overtaken you, Urizhmag?” inquired Shoshlan.

“I have seen many things in my long life,” replied he, “but such a wonder has never happened to me before until this day. I was hunting among the rushes. Suddenly I glanced among the reeds, and there, as if it were the sun shining, stood a young doe. Her coat was of pure gold. I drew to within a bow-shot of her, strung my bow, and was about to shoot an arrow, when suddenly they all slipped out of the quiver and disappeared in the undergrowth where I could not see them. Not a single one remained. I reached for my sword, but that too flew out of my hand and God alone knows where it went! The doe immediately sped away. I chased after her, but she too seemed to have disappeared into the earth completely.”

That night Shoshlan could not sleep however he tried. In the early morning, when day divided from night, he threw his felt cloak round his shoulders, took his bow and quiver, hung his sword in his belt, and set off for the reeds and rushes where Urizhmag had seen the doe with its coat of gold. The sun had only just risen, and its first rays had penetrated the reeds. In their light Shoshlan saw the golden doe that Urizhmag had met. It was coming slowly toward him, nibbling around at the grass. The sun’s rays reflecting from her golden pelt seemed finer than the sharpest small needles, and pricked Shoshlan’s eyes, which were already large with surprise.

“If that deer only fell into my hands, there would be none more famous than I among the Narts!” said Shoshlan beneath his breath.

Creeping up quietly, grass blade by grass blade, he approached the golden doe. Now he was within bow-shot. He placed an arrow in his bow, and was about to shoot, when it suddenly dropped and disappeared. Shoshlan seized his

quiver, but not another single arrow was left in it. The deer was still there, and had not moved from its place.

“Is it just there to shame me?” thought he to himself, and drawing his sword, he sped on toward the deer, and came quite near in one great leap. But the golden doe saw him, and bounded away, making off toward the Black Mountains.

“No, no! You won’t get away from me!” thought Shoshlan, and flew off after her.

The golden doe flew off to the Black Mountains, and hid herself in a deep cavern.

Shoshlan was quite unaware that he was pursuing the daughter of the sun, Asirukhsh, though disguised as a deer, who had seven giants to protect her. Still thinking that he was chasing a golden deer, he came to the cavern where she had hidden, and saw nearby a seven-storied tower of a fortress. The first story’s door was open. Shoshlan entered and saw that he had come into the guest room. Nearby was a bench, and he took a seat there. Looking up on the wall he saw a beautifully carved birch-wood hand-harp, with twelve strings, hanging on a hook. Shoshlan took it down, and began to play a wonderful song. So well did he play, that the birds flew down, and beasts gathered round at the sound of the music. The very walls of the tall fortress tower began to sway to the rhythm of the melody, and the hills began to echo Shoshlan’s music.

Suddenly two little boys ran into the guest room, and playing quietly on the harp, Shoshlan said to them, “I am Nart Shoshlan, the one who cannot live without feasting and singing and fighting.”

The little lads ran off. They climbed the stairs to the topmost story of the tower, where seven giants lived, and said to them: “A wonderful guest has visited us. He is in the guest room and is playing on the twelve-stringed hand-harp. When we went in, he told us that he was Nart Shoshlan, the one who could not live without feasting, singing, and fighting.”

The giants said to the little lads: “Go to Shoshlan and tell him this: ‘If you want a feast, we shall send our mother to see you, but if you want a fight, we’ll send our father.’ ”

“What do I need a feast for now?” said Shoshlan. “If there is a fight, then send me a fight! That’s better!”

When the lads ran back to the giants and gave him Shoshlan’s reply, they came down from their high tower, and began to sharpen their knives, those same knives that they held when they came from the womb.

In the courtyard stood an altar stone where they carried out the sacrifice of animals. The giants at once seized Shoshlan, dragged him to this altar stone and laid him on it, and began to slash at him with their knives, crying as they did so: “Here is that dog, that son-of-bitch, who would not let our golden doe feed peacefully in the field!”

Fiercely they lunged at him with their sharp knives, but not one scratch did they make on the steel-tempered body of Shoshlan.

The giants were all amazed when their knives all grew blunt, while Shoshlan remained unharmed, and so they freed him, and said to themselves: “Let our ward, the daughter of the sun, Asirukhsh, tell us what to do!”

So the giants went to the daughter of the sun, and said to her, “An unusual guest has visited us. He calls himself Nart Shoshlan. We wanted to make an offering of him, but our knives could not touch him!”

The daughter of the sun listened, and hearing the name Shoshlan, cried, “If that is really Shoshlan, then he is my predestined one!”

“And how shall we know whether it is really he or not?”

“On Shoshlan’s back the sun and moon are tattooed.”

The giants went to the guest room where they had left him, took off his shirt, and saw the sun and the moon tattooed on his back. When they told Asirukhsh of this, she at once said to her wardens, the giants, “Go to him, and be nice to him, and agree with him about a bride-price that will be worthy of me. Narts are generous people. Try to get as many cattle as possible from him.” And she took on her womanly form.

Again the giants went to Shoshlan. This time they kindly clapped him on the shoulder and told him that he was the chosen one of the daughter of the sun, and each giant had some good word to say to him. Afterward they brought him to his prospective bride, and so he met the beauty Asirukhsh. Only after he had seen

her did they invite him to their resting place, sit beside him on a bench, and begin discussing the bride-price.

“The bride-price will be such. First you must build us a tower of black iron on the seashore, and on each of its four corners must grow a leaf of the tree of Azh. Next you must collect for us three hundred beasts: one hundred deer, one hundred wild bulls, and one hundred other kinds of beasts, and drive them into our courtyard.”

Shoshlan did not wish to argue when he heard of such a bride-price, but how could he help feeling downcast? He rose from his place, said goodbye to the giants, and with bowed head and slumped shoulders he returned to his own hearth. Having arrived home, he said to his mother Shatana, “Under the guardianship of seven giants there lives the daughter of the sun, Asirukhsh. She has consented to marry me, but the giants have demanded a heavy bride-price, *irad*, for my future bride.⁷ They demanded that I should build them a tower of black iron on the seashore, and on each of its four corners must grow a leaf of the tree of Azh. I must also bring them three hundred beasts: one hundred deer, one hundred wild bulls, and one hundred other beasts. I cannot collect such a bride-price as that, but I cannot at any price renounce such a bride as the beautiful daughter of the sun, Asirukhsh!”

“Sit here beside me,” said Shatana, “and listen now to what I say! They are asking a great price from you, it’s true, but if you do as I say, you can collect it all. It is easy to build an iron tower on the shore. You will take my magic ring, and go with it down to the sea, and there you will describe a big circle with it on the shore. Inside that ring will rise a four-sided tower of black iron. Three hundred beasts are also not difficult to collect. I shall ask Afshati to give me a flute for you. You will then stand on the tower and play on the flute, and all the beasts will come into the courtyard by themselves. The most difficult thing will be to obtain leaves of the tree of Azh, because they do not grow in this world. That is a tree that grows in the Land of the Dead. Barashtir can give them to you, and only he, the lord of that land. Maybe, if your dead wife Vedukha begged them from him for you, then you might receive them. More than that I cannot say!”

“Well then, goodbye, my mother!” said Shoshlan at once. “I shall travel to the Land of the Dead.”

Shatana could not say one word to him, before he had jumped onto his firm-footed steed, and had galloped off.

“But that is madness,” thought Shatana. “What sense is there in going to the Land of the Dead with nothing good in one’s hands?”

She at once lit her fire on the hearth, and prepared plenty of food to set out a funereal feast for the departed ones.

Shoshlan rode on and on, how long who knows, but in the end he came to the iron gates that lead into the Land of the Dead.

“Aminon, open the gates for me!” cried Shoshlan to the gatekeeper.

“When you die the gates will open for you of their own accord,” he answered. “You cannot enter the Land of the Dead alive, and I have no power to open the gates for you.”

“I do not wish to hear such talk,” replied Shoshlan hastily. “Just open up the gates and be quick about it!”

But soon he saw that the gatekeeper would do nothing to open them, so with all his strength he tore them off their hinges and entered. But no sooner had he done so, than a host of armed people approached him.

“Your black day has come, Shoshlan!” they said to him threateningly. “We have long been keeping a lookout for you, and now you cannot hide from us any more!” Waving their weapons and uttering curses, they advanced on him. But now what a wonder! None of them could strike him, none could seize him, and none could touch him. Amazed at this, and pondering what it might mean, he continued on his way.

The Land of the Dead is large. For a long time he wandered up hill, down dale, crossing lakes and rivers, and at last he came out onto a wide plain. Everywhere pillars and tall tree stumps were standing, and on them were people hanging, some by the legs, some by the arms, some by the neck, and some by the tongue. Beneath each one was laid a bonfire of red-hot coals that burned undyingly.

“Oh, Shoshlan, set us free! Release us from our torment!” they would suddenly cry when they caught sight of him. But he passed them by, as if he had not heard them.

As soon as he witnessed one wonder, another followed. There he saw a large lake, seething with snakes, frogs, and serpents of all kinds, and among all this vermin swarmed people, here rising to the surface, and there disappearing beneath the dark water.

“Hey, Shoshlan, help us out of this! Be our protector! Save us!” they began to cry when they saw him.

Shoshlan, amazed, even sympathetic, still could not answer a word.

Here again before him spread a wide plain. Rich crops of corn were waving on it. But nowhere did Shoshlan see folk among them mowing these cereals. Here again fat herds of cattle were browsing on lush green grass, while beasts of prey ran among them, but did not touch the cattle, which in turn showed no concern at their presence whatsoever.

A great quiet river flowed through this plain, and on its far side many maidens were dancing the Shimd, the Nart’s round-dance, taking hands and embracing each other. Nearby, spread out cloths on the grass, and there upon lay many delicious meals to eat, but nobody touched them.

The maidens were very happy when they caught sight of Shoshlan: “Shoshlan, Shoshlan! Was it earthly or heavenly spirits who brought you here to us? Of course, it was no chance game of luck, but only your manly courage has led you to us; otherwise how could you have entered this Land of the Dead without your shroud in which the dead are clothed?” So said the maidens, making way for Shoshlan.

“I wish you would feed me, I’m so hungry!” Shoshlan told them.

“Dance with us first, and then we will feed you!” replied the maidens.

Well, then! Slipping from his steed, Shoshlan chose the most lovely maiden as his partner. Since he was bold in everything he did, his blood began to seethe, and he tightly squeezed the hand of the maiden, but received no reply. He squeezed her more tightly, and suddenly she pulled away with unexpected

strength, seized Shoshlan by the arm, and hurled him away, so that he found himself in the middle of the river.

It was difficult for him to swim in his coat of mail, which weighed him down in the water, and gasping for breath he called to the maidens, "Forgive me, maidens! I erred. I see I did wrong!"

"Then we must forgive him!" said the maiden whom he had offended. She waded into the water, gave him her hand, helped him out onto the bank, and then said to him, "That which is permitted on earth to men is not permitted here!"

"Well then, that I understand," said Shoshlan mildly. "Now feed me, as you promised, for I am really very hungry!"

"Remain here with us, and don't strive to get back to the Land of the Living, and then, like us who are satisfied by merely looking at food, so will you be, and will not wish to eat it," said the maiden.

"But I do not wish to live in a land where food is not necessary!" Shoshlan replied to the maiden, then mounted his steed again and rode on.

He went farther, and soon before him another wonder appeared. On a frozen crag old men were sitting motionless, covered in ice. Sharp razors, themselves made of ice, shaved their jaws very roughly, pulling the hair out by the roots, and leaving half a beard behind. Shoshlan looked at them amazed, then passed on.

He had not ridden far when there arose before him a beautiful tower entirely made of silver. Through the large open window one could see that worthy elderly people were sitting there on golden benches, while before them were spread generous refreshments, and foaming goblets. There was abundant food on the table, but the elders touched nothing.

Shoshlan trotted on farther and saw an old man wearily dragging himself up a high mountain. On his back there was a basket in which heavy stones were heaped up. But there was no bottom in the basket, and the stones that kept falling through were put on the top again by the old man, only to fall through again, giving him endless work and trouble.

Shoshlan was amazed, and trotted on, gazing at a green meadow before him. A bullock was feeding there. The grass was waist-high, but the bullock was not

eating that. Instead he was chewing away at the beard of some old fellow, causing him great torment as he lay there helpless.

“Well, there is a real wonder!” thought Shoshlan. “While there is so much green grass all round, why does the bullock chew away at a beard?”

He had barely succeeded in marveling further on this wonder, when a new one appeared before his eyes.

Here was a river, and in the middle of it stood an island. From the bank to the island a bridge had been thrown, no wider than the sharp edge of a knife. On the island, in an eggshell, sat a naked old man.

Shoshlan, surprised, rode on farther. There on the road lay the frozen carcass of a horse, and on each side of it sat a silent man and woman.

“What is that for, and what does it mean?” thought Shoshlan. He did not ask them, all the same, but passed by the dumb couple, silent too.

Next he saw a man and his wife lying side by side on a huge bullock skin, covered by a similar one, but they could not find a place there, nor covering, and pulled this way and that, uncovering each other.

No sooner had he passed them than he saw another wonder: a husband and wife lying together on a hare’s skin, covered by another hare’s skin, just as small, and he could see that they were both quiet, warm, and cozy.

Then again, nearby, another wonder: Shoshlan saw there a man and a woman. The woman held out the hollow of her hand, and the man belched into it flames and smoke from his mouth. Then he rode farther, and lo and behold, before him stood a mountain, slashed by deep fissures, and he gasped with surprise as he saw a woman crawling there, and with a thick needle she was sewing together the cracks in the mountain. She was absolutely exhausted, poor woman, swamped in sweat, and could find no rest whatsoever. Shoshlan pitied her misery, and wondering, rode on.

He saw another woman, making cheese in a huge wooden tub. The tub was full of milk. She ought to get a big round cheese out of it, but when she took it out it was barely visible in her hand, like a wheat-grain. Not far away another woman was also making cheese. She had a small tub and a mere tablespoon of

milk, but drew forth from it a huge cheese, almost as big and massive as a mountain.

Thinking over what he had seen, Shoshlan rode by. He saw yet another woman. She was lying stretched out on her back on the ground, and millstones were turning, churning away on her breasts, with furious power, but producing nothing.

“I have never seen anything more astonishing than this!” Shoshlan said to himself, and just then, not far away, saw another woman. A similar pair of millstones were grinding away on her breasts, but they were reducing pieces of black stone to powder.

Shoshlan rode farther, and saw yet more amazing sights. Here was another woman feeding lizards at her breasts.

“What is she guilty of, I wonder?” said Shoshlan to himself.

No sooner had he thought this, when he saw yet another woman before him. Pieces of red woolen cloth were falling from her nostrils, while her right hand was burning with undying flames.

“What marvel is this? What has this unfortunate woman done to deserve such a fate, I wonder?”

Still farther he rode, and then came to a vault. In that vault sat a naked child, where its mother had given it birth. Bloody foam was trickling from its nostrils, and blood spewed from its throat. Shoshlan felt deep pity for the child, but how could he do anything to help?

He rode on farther. Before him was spread a forest glade. There children of various ages were playing, and sporting, but it was sad for Shoshlan to look at them, so disorderly were they dressed. Some had no shoes, but they had slippers stuck in their belts round their waists. Other had no belts round their waists, but round their necks instead. Yet others wore no hats, but they were stuffed into their bosoms. They were happy when they saw Shoshlan, and made a dash for him, some calling him father, and some mother. Shoshlan was full of pity for them. He dismounted, went to the children and stroked and petted them, and put their dresses right, and when he set off on his way again some children cried,

“May you always have a straight road, Shoshlan. May you be successful in all you do, and find what you came here to seek!”

For a long time he heard their voices calling and thanking him.

He traveled on and saw open gates ahead. He passed through them and beyond them lay a bitch. It was obvious that she was deeply asleep, though going to have puppies soon, and indeed they now began to bark at him from their mother’s womb.

Still wondering at all these marvels, he suddenly saw a heap of millet standing on the edge of a precipice. Nearby a sack and a saddlebag were arguing with one another. The sack said “I hold more than you!” but the saddlebag replied, “No, I hold more than you!” Then the sack filled itself with millet, and poured it into the saddlebag, but the saddlebag was not half full. In turn the saddlebag scooped up enough millet to fill it, and poured it into the sack. But it was soon overflowing the edge of the sack and falling into the abyss.

Shoshlan did not understand the meaning of their argument, and went on. Three young trees were growing in the middle of a plain. They had smooth trunks, just as though they had been turned on a wheel. Two slippers, one of bull’s hide, and one of goat’s hide, were each climbing a tree, trying to race each other to the top. The goat-leather slipper slid down, and remained on the ground, but the bull-leather slipper climbed to the top of the tree, and stayed there.

“What kind of prodigy is that?” thought Shoshlan. “Can it really be so that a slipper of bull’s leather gets the better of one made of goat’s leather?”

He traveled on and saw a rope stretching right across the plain to the very edge of the mountains, but it was so thick and heavy that no one could lift it. Neither could they jump over it. Then, suddenly it coiled itself up and rolled far away. As soon as Shoshlan had ridden on, another rope suddenly appeared, uncoiled, and stretched to the mountains. Suddenly it too began to coil up upon itself and did not stop until it had retreated up into the mountains.

Surprised once more, Shoshlan rode on. Soon he noticed that at the foot of the mountains springs were flowing. They were teeming with fish, and they leapt from one spring to another, not hindering one another.

Shoshlan looked on that as a wonder too.

Now before him he saw a high burial mound, and its fires were burning, and three cauldrons were seething and boiling thereon, but instead of branches and twigs as fuel, reindeer antlers were blazing under them. The two outermost cauldrons threw one another pieces of meat. Fat joints and legs were boiling and bubbling away, but the middle cauldron did not have a drop of soup in it. It was dry, hissing, and smoking.

“What could this mean?” thought Shoshlan. “The outer cauldrons throw meat to each other. Why does nothing fall into the middle one?”

He had only just left the mound when he saw another wonder: on the side of the road a woman’s kerchief and a man’s lamb’s wool hat were engaged in a fierce struggle. Here the kerchief got the upper hand, and there the lamb’s wool hat came out on top. Shoshlan waited a long while to see which eventually overcame the other. Suddenly they lay before him on the road, stilled and at peace, side by side, both the kerchief and the hat.

“What could that be? For my happiness or for my sorrow?” wondered Shoshlan, as he rode farther on his way.

Now there before him rushed a spring. Shoshlan was tired, and in order to rest a little he lay on the grass and fell asleep. He did not doze for long, but on awakening he saw that the bank where he had been sleeping was still covered in green grass, but the other bank was covered in snow.

Again he was surprised, and rode on ahead. Suddenly he saw three straight willows, with withes very suitable for making the handle of a whip. But as soon as Shoshlan chose one, and jumped down to cut a withy from it, the two others bowed themselves down and each one begged, “Don’t cut that one! Cut me instead! Cut me!”

There was another surprise for Shoshlan, as he rode on his way. Soon he saw a saddlebag lying on the road. “That could be useful to me,” thought Shoshlan, and leaned over from his saddle, intending to lift it with his whip-handle, but his whip broke under the strain, and the bag remained unmoved. “What has happened to me?” asked Shoshlan. “Usually at jousting I can pick up a rider on my lance at full gallop!” He jumped down from his horse, and got hold of the handle of the saddlebag, but could not lift it. Then he grasped it with both hands

and strained with might and main, but merely sank into the ground up to his knees, and could not raise the bag. His eyes stopped working from wonderment. In silence he stood motionless, then dragged his legs out of the earth, left the saddlebag on the road, and traveled on.

Soon on the road he saw a gaily colored ball of thread. "That may be useful to me on my way!" he thought, and from the saddle, caught up the end of the thread, and began to wind it round his hand. But however much he wound, still the ball grew no smaller. He cast the thread aside, and rode on. He had not ridden far when he again saw a ball of thread. It rolled along and unwound itself, but then the fine thread wound itself back onto the ball again, and the ball would not unwind itself any more.

"What can this new wonder mean?" thought Shoshlan as he rode ahead. Suddenly a third ball of thread appeared, and began to unwind its severe and sober-colored thread under his horse's feet. Shoshlan spurred his horse on, then looked back, and saw that the ball of thread was now beating his horse about the hind-quarters. He spurred on his steed, and left the ball behind. Shoshlan grew alarmed. "Will some misfortune overtake me?" he wondered. No sooner had he feared such, than he saw some elderly Narts sitting in armchairs of honor, the forebears of his family. Tables on three low legs stood before each, with various things to eat and drink set out upon them. On the edge of each table, however, lay a rotting cat and a rotting dog. The Nart elders looked at the bountiful food, but did not touch a single thing. How could Shoshlan not feel offended at this? "Who then has entertained our Narts, our family forebears, with such good things to eat, but then put a moldy cat and a dead dog there as well?"

At last he came to the place where fate ordained his beloved wife Vedukha to be. Here was a most strange wonder. His dear Vedukha awaited him with no head upon her shoulders. Shoshlan leapt from his saddle, and began to weep bitterly. Other dead ones gathered round him.

"Where, then is my dear wife's head?" he implored, as tears rolled down his cheeks. "I traveled through all the Land of the Dead to see her, but now . . ."

"Don't be sad," answered the dead ones. "Soon her head will return!"

And sure enough, a little while passed, and Vedukha's head appeared, rose to her shoulders, and grew onto her neck again, and said to him: "What's wrong with you, my dearest? Why are your eyes so red?"

"They are red with weeping. How could I refrain from weeping, when I came and saw your beautiful body here without its head?" he answered.

What a happy meeting that was then between Shoshlan and Vedukha! She asked her husband how he came there, "There is no road for living people to the Land of the Dead, so what spirits, earthly or heavenly, brought you here in your mail-coat?"

Shoshlan answered her question thus, "When I was left alone, the daughter of the sun, Asirukhsh, the ward of seven giants, agreed to become my wife. But those giants demanded of me a difficult bride-price indeed! I had to build them a tower of black iron, and at each corner it should have a bunch of leaves from the tree of Azh. Then I have to drive three hundred head of cattle to their yard! All that is in my power, with Shatana's aid, but the leaves of the tree of Azh can only be found in the Land of the Dead. Therefore I come to you, to ask you to beg such leaves for me from Barashtir, Lord of the Dead!"

"I will do what you ask of me," replied Vedukha, "but first tell me the news from the Land of the Living, and what wonders have happened?"

"What wonders have we on earth to compare with the wonders that you have here in the Land of the Dead?" he replied with a sigh.

"What wonders have you seen here then?" inquired Vedukha.

Shoshlan began to tell her all, from the very beginning; how he had quarreled with Aminon and broken through the gates of Death by force, and how armored foes had set upon him, threatened him with death, and struck him bitter blows, but he had not felt them.

"That is no wonder!" replied Vedukha. "Those were your old enemies, who had suffered death at your hand. While you live they can do you no harm, but after your death they may cause you trouble again."

"I saw a wide plain," Shoshlan told Vedukha, "and many people were hanging there on pillars or tall tree trunks, some by the legs, some by the arms, some by the neck, some by the tongue, and beneath each one a bonfire was

burning made of enormous red-hot stones and coals. ‘Hey, Shoshlan, set us free! Release us from our torment!’ they had cried. But what could I do? What could I reply? Who punished them so harshly?”

“They punished themselves,” answered Veduccha. “Much evil they did in the Land of the Living, and now in the Land of the Dead they pay for their evil deeds with such torment. Those hung by the legs gadded about doing nothing; those hung by the arms could not constrain themselves, and stole other’s goods; those hung by the tongue were scandal-mongers, and liars; those hung by the neck were harsh hangmen in their day!”

“I rode farther and ahead I saw a large lake full of frogs, snakes, serpents, and all kinds of loathsome things, and people were swimming amid all those vermin, rising to the surface, and sinking below again. They begged me to save them, but I was powerless to do so in the Land of the Dead. What had they done to merit such punishment?”

Veduccha replied, “You saw the Lake of Hell. Those who in life stole and deceived others in order to gain their goods, now, according to the laws of the Land of the Dead, take their punishment in the Lake of Hell.”

Shoshlan continued, “I rode on and saw a wide plain. Rich crops of corn were waving on it, and many sheaves of grain were standing unknown to cultivators. Another wonder—wild beasts roamed the plain, along with domestic cattle, but did not touch them. Through the plain flowed a large river, and on its banks young maidens were dancing the round-dance. On the grass nearby were spread all kinds of food and drink. I told them I was very hungry, and they replied that if I did not return to the Land of the Living, then I would be satisfied with the sight of such food alone. I answered them that I was not interested in a land where one only looks at food, and does not taste it. Pray tell me, what kind of a wonder is there?”

“You visited the Plains of Heaven,” replied Veduccha, “and these maidens had all died before they were old enough to marry. The food that stood in the bowls was that which relatives dedicated to them, in memorial services. According to custom in the Land of the Dead, they are satisfied if they only see this food, and know they are not forgotten.”

“I rode on and saw another wondrous thing. Elderly men were sitting frozen stiff, covered in ice, and razors of ice were themselves shaving their beards, tearing the hair out at the roots, leaving tufts behind.”

“These are they whom the people elected as judges, believing them to be honest and just. But these judges did not judge fairly, always took bribes from them, and favored relatives. Now, according to the laws of the Land of the Dead, they pay for sinning.”

“Still farther I rode,” said Shoshlan, “and saw a tower of silver. Very respectable elderly folk were sitting on golden benches, and before them were spread generous refreshments, and foaming mead in goblets, but they touched not a thing.” Vedukha then answered Shoshlan: “These are they who during their earthly life never stole from anyone, loved the poor, and helped them. For that they are rewarded here by Barashtir. They do not touch the edibles, because according to custom here, they are satisfied at the mere sight of them, set in their honor.”

“I rode farther and saw an old man dragging himself up a mountain, carrying upon his hunched back a basket of sand and stones without any bottom. The sand and stones fell out, and he had to gather them all again, and once more in the basket, they all fell through again. Why was he condemned to such endless toil?”

“That man in his earthly life, wherever he could, cut from his own neighbors odd bits of land, and from every poor man he went creeping and crawling to steal a portion of his plot, seeking in this way to enrich himself. Now you see how he pays for his dishonesty!”

“Further on I saw another wonder: a bull was standing in waist-high grass, but he did not graze on it. Instead he avidly chewed the beard of some poor old man. Why was that so?”

“You don’t need to wonder at that,” said Vedukha. “In his life that old man, when he was working his field, and needed an extra bull to yoke with his, borrowed one from his neighbor. He fed his own bull with fresh grass, but gave the neighbor’s bull only odds and ends to chew. For that he now sits and suffers while that bull chews his beard off!”

“Farther on I saw a bridge, as thin as the blade of a knife, thrown across to an island in a river. On the sharp edge of the bridge sat an old man in an eggshell. What was the reason for that?”

“That old man lived unsociably all his life. Neither on weekdays nor on holidays did he ever invite any guests in, so now he sits alone in the Land of the Dead, and passes his days in solitude.”

“Farther on still,” said Shoshlan, “I saw the rotting carcass of a horse, with a man and a woman sitting beside it. What were they doing?”

“That pair, during their lives were as mean as could be. What they earned by their toil was wasted even so. They would not spend a penny of it, neither on themselves nor on others. Now, in the Land of the Dead they feed on the sight of rotting horse-flesh,” answered Vedukha.

“As I rode on I saw a man and his wife lying on a bull’s hide, with another similar one over them. Each one pulled the skin to this side, but it did not suffice for both of them. What did that mean?”

“That meant that in life the man and his wife did not really love each other, or they would willingly have shared the skin. So here also.”

“But not far away I saw another married pair lying on a rabbit skin, covered by another one likewise, and they were quite comfortable and warm!”

“Nothing there to wonder at!” exclaimed Vedukha. “That man and woman loved each other their whole life through, and here they are happy and contented as on earth, and their earthly love keeps them warm!”

“Farther on I saw another pair. The man was belching up flames from his mouth into his wife’s hollowed hands. What was that for?”

“They are suffering for their own greediness now! They were living in a large family, and secretly set aside extra portions of food for themselves, thus robbing the others. Now they are paying for their greed. Three days in a year the Lord of the Dead, Barashtir, punishes them so!”

“I saw another woman who was trying to sew together cracks in the side of a mountain with a thick needle. It was quite hopeless, and beyond her power, poor wretch, but she could not stop, even one moment.”

“That woman deceived her husband during her life on earth. She loved another man, and for him she secretly sewed many things, never tiring, with small quick stitches. But she worked lazily, and sewed slowly and unwillingly for her husband, chaffing and chattering, and with big, careless stitches, and later his clothes simply fell to pieces on him. Now she pays for this, according to the laws of the Land of the Dead.”

“Farther on I saw another woman with a huge wooden tub full of milk from which she was making cheese. When she drew the cheese out, it was no bigger than a grain of wheat. Nearby another woman was making cheese in a small bowl with a mere spoonful of milk, and from that she got a chunk of cheese as massive as a mountain! That was a wonder!”

“Nothing wonderful at all,” declared Vedukha. “The woman with the tub full of milk was rich when she lived on earth. She had a hundred cows in her shed, and more than enough milk for her needs. But even her poor neighbor did not dare ask her for a piece of cheese. She always said to beggars that she had none to spare. The other woman who here in the Land of the Dead gets a massive cheese from a spoonful of milk, never had more than one cow all her life. But whether it was a festive day, or a workday, if anyone asked her for a piece of cheese, they were never refused. Now you see how they fare here!”

“As I went on my way, nearby I saw a woman lying on the ground with millstones grinding away on her breasts, but producing nothing. Why?”

“In life that woman ground flour in a neighbor’s mill without even asking permission, and you see how she was punished.”

“But nearby was another woman. On her breasts millstones were grinding away, but they only ground black pebbles. Why was that?”

“That woman when she lived on earth stole flour that another had milled. You see with what torments debts are paid in the Land of the Dead!”

“I saw another terrible thing. A woman had huge lizards sucking at her breasts. What was that torment for?”

“In life she sometimes took a child in as foster nurse. She should have fed such a child at her breast. She agreed to do so, but after putting the child’s bib on, she did not give it her breast. Now she pays her debt.”

“I saw still another woman, and pieces of red woolen and cotton cloth were falling from her nostrils, and her right hand was burning with a blue flame. What kind of mystery was that?”

“In life that woman was a seamstress, and she always cut off for herself a portion of the material she was given to sew. Now she pays!”

“I passed by a vault. There sat a naked boy. Blood and foam was trickling from his nostrils, and blood spewed from his throat. How then could I help being amazed at that?”

“No need to be amazed!” said Vedukha. “In life that boy obeyed neither his father nor his mother, and tormented them, so that more than once parental curses fell upon his head. Now he is sorry for the pains he caused them, and cries so bitterly, that blood pours from his nostrils and his throat, and nobody cares for him.”

“Farther on I saw a wide glade where children of all ages were at play, but I was sorry to see how disorderly their footwear and dress was. Some went barefoot, while their slippers were stuck in belts around their waists. Others went bareheaded, while their hats were in their breasts, tucked away. They all made a dash for me. Some called me mother; some called me father. How could I help pitying them? Then I slipped down from the saddle, and stroked their heads and caressed them, and put their clothes in order. When I rode off they called after me, ‘May your road always be straight, Shoshlan, and may you be successful and find what you came here to seek!’ ”

“Those were children who had died as orphans,” said Vedukha. “Because you were kind to them, and caressed them, they wished to see you successful and happy, and their wishes will be fulfilled!”

“Something else I saw on my way,” said Shoshlan. “By some open gates I saw a bitch who was obviously soon going to whelp. She was fast asleep, but from her womb the pups began to bark at me. What did that mean?”

“That means that the time is coming when elders will take advice from youngsters who will teach them common sense.” said Vedukha.

“Then I unexpectedly saw a sack and a saddle bragging as to which could hold more millet. The sack scooped up the millet until it was full, then poured it

into the saddlebag, which was not even half-filled. But when the saddlebag filled itself with millet and poured it into the sack, then that was full and flowing over. Why was that?”

“You are a Nart, so why are you puzzled about that?” asked Vedukha. “The time is coming when to the great and the small, to the well-bred and the ill-bred, will be given no more than they need for a full life.”

“I rode farther,” said Shoshlan, “and saw three trees in the middle of a plain, and they were as smooth as if turned on a wheel. There I saw two slippers, one of bull’s hide and one of goat’s leather, trying to race each other to the top of these trees. But the goat’s leather one slipped down, and stayed at the bottom, while the bull’s hide one reached the top. I was surprised that a bull’s hide slipper proved better than one made of kid skin. How was that? What did it mean?”

“Slippers of bull’s hide are worn by the simple folk, and slippers of kid skin are worn by the gentry,” answered Vedukha. “But the time is coming when the simple people will get the upper hand over the rich lords and will leave them behind.”

“Again I rode on, and looking round I saw a rope stretched from the plain right up to the mountains. It was so thick and heavy that one could not creep under it, nor jump over it. Suddenly it rolled itself up and rolled off far away. I wondered what that meant?”

“I see that you traveled far, but understood nothing on your way. That means that the world will finally become an open door for all,” said Vedukha. “What more did you see and could not understand?”

“I saw another rope, which stretched out from the mountains down to the plain, then suddenly it coiled itself up and rolled back to the mountains again.”

“That simply means that the people who left the mountains and came down to the plains found a good life there, but in time returned to their beloved mountains again, where life was harder but more noble!”

Shoshlan continued to tell Vedukha about his travels, “Once I looked ahead and saw at the foot of the mountains somewhere that springs were running and teeming with fish. They leapt from one spring to the other, splashed in the water,

and sported about, but did not hinder any of the other fish at all. I wondered what that meant?”

“That meant that the time will come when people of different tribes will live peaceably together like brothers and sisters,” said Veducha.

“Further on I saw a high burial mound, and on it fires were burning. Hung over the flames three cauldrons I saw, and deers’ antlers were burning below them, not tree branches. The two outside cauldrons were both bubbling away, and threw to each other fat joints of meat, but the middle cauldron was bone dry with not a drop of soup in it, and it hissed and smoked away. What did that mean?”

“That meant that the time will come when rich brothers will help each other, and bring each other generous presents, but to their poor brother they will give nothing, and he will die in poverty.”

“I had just ridden on when I saw another wonder. On the side of the road a stern struggle was going on between a woman’s kerchief and a man’s woolen hat. Here the kerchief conquered the lamb’s wool hat, and there the man’s mountain hat got the better of the kerchief. So they wrestled with one another, then suddenly lay peacefully side by side before me. I wondered for a long time what that meant, but could find no answer?”

“That foretells that the time will come when men and woman will be equals in every respect, and man will no longer dominate women!”

Shoshlan told Veducha how tired he had become, and how he had lain down to rest beside a spring, and had soon fallen asleep. “When I awoke,” he said, “I looked around on my side of the spring and saw green grass, but on the other bank lay white snow. Why was that?”

“That means that the time will come when man will fare equally well in winter or summer—it will be all the same to him one way or the other.”

“Farther on I saw three straight canes. I thought I would take one of them and make a whip-handle from it. I chose one, and was just behind to cut it, when the two others bowed to me and whispered, “No take me! Take me! I wonder a long time what that could mean?”

“That simply means that in the future the younger sisters will not wait until the elder sister gets married, but all marry freely.”

“As I was riding, I saw on the wayside a saddlebag. It looked like a good one and I thought it would be useful to me. I did not dismount, but leaned down and slipped the handle of my whip through the loops on the saddlebag. I am known for my strength and agility, and at the Nart contests I could pick up a man on the end of my lance at full gallop. But this was different. I could not even move that saddlebag, and only broke the handle of my whip. I was annoyed, and jumped down from my horse and seized the bag in one hand, but could not lift it. I took hold of it with both hands and tugged with might and main, but merely sank into the ground up to my knees while the saddlebag never moved. I saw that there was some kind of marvel there, and left the bag on the road.”

“How could you hope to lift such a bag? Inside lay hidden all the worthiness with which people are endowed!” explained Vedula.

“Farther on I saw a ball of gaily colored thread on the road and I wanted to take it with me. I took hold of the end of it, and began to wind it around my hand. I wound and wound, but the ball got no smaller. I understood it was some marvel, and threw it away and rode on.”

“That ball of thread signifies the secrets of the universe,” said Vedula. “No matter how you yearn to know them all, and come to their end, nevertheless you can only know a part. The rest remains beyond you!”

“Farther on I saw another ball of thread. It rolled and rolled, and unwound itself and rewound itself and its gay color grew somber.”

“That means that the time is coming when people will multiply so that the world will change again and again!” Vedula explained.

“Finally I came to a place where elderly men were sitting in armchairs of honor. They were our Nart forefathers. Much food and drink was set before them, but here and there among the victuals were the dead bodies of cats and dogs. The Nart elders looked at all the abundant feast, but touched nothing.”

“Why should they touch it and break the custom of the Land of the Dead?” replied Vedula. “It was Shatana who, when you set off on your way here, dedicated the feast to your Nart forefathers, with good food and bad. She wanted

to test you, and see whether you would tell the truth about the Land of the Dead on your return, and not conceal things!”

“Thank you, my dear Vedukha!” replied Shoshlan. “Now I understand everything, except just one. Why, when I met you at last, was there no head upon your body, which made me weep so? What mystery was that?”

“No mystery at all, dear Nart Shoshlan! My mind and my thoughts are always with you!” Vedukha replied. “I help you all the while indeed. You had only to decide to ride here, and I already cleared the way for you. Who has ever heard of a living person who entered the Land of the Dead? Without my help you could not have done that. When you go on a long journey, and the sun burns down on you, I fly over you, like a cloud, and protect you from his rays. When in time of battle a violent rainstorm pours down on your opponents, that is the work of my hands. I help you everywhere to lead your warriors to final victory!”

Having said this, Vedukha went to Barashtir, master of the Land of the Dead, and asked him for some leaves of the Azh tree, and brought them back to Shoshlan, and begged him to be careful.

“You forced your way into the Land of the Dead, where by the law of God a living man may not go. Now, just as a living man may not enter the Land of the Dead, so there is no way for a dead man, or even a live one, to leave it. Since you find yourself here, you must stay here, but I have a plan to overcome that difficulty. I have only to blink, and the shoes on your horse’s feet will turn back to front. Then you must gallop full speed out of here. The dead ones, when they hear your hoofbeats, will chase after you, to follow in your tracks and so escape from the Land of the Dead. But then they will see the tracks of your horse leading into the domain of Barashtir. They will return to their places. You are a restless man, Shoshlan, and are not destined for a peaceful life. Sometimes you do not listen to my advice, but now I shall give you a stern warning, and urge you, whatever treasures you may find on the road from here to the Land of the Living, do not be lured by them from the way, do not even glance at them, ride ever onward, do not stop!”

With this, Vedukha blinked and reversed the shoes on his horses hooves, and he said a fond farewell to her, bestraddled his steed, and galloped off to the

borders of the Land of the Dead. Hearing his horse's hoofbeats, the dead ones rushed to see if someone were leaving, and to follow in his tracks. But when they saw the tracks leading into their land they said to themselves, "That is someone who passed into our land!" Every one of them then returned again to their own place as before.

Meanwhile Shoshlan galloped on to the gates of the Land of the Dead.

"Open the gates!" he cried to Aminon the keeper, but got no reply. Seeing that no words were of avail in opening the gates, Shoshlan whipped up his steed, and with all his weight and might he crashed through them, and again sent them flying, and by force left the Land of the Dead.

He galloped toward home, to the land of the Narts. On the road he saw a heap of gold, but at once recalled Vedukha's strict warning, and rode by without a further glance. How far on the road he traveled, who knows? In one place he saw the luxurious tail of a golden fox on the road, but he spurred his horse on and took no notice of it. Further on he saw an old hat, and thought with regret: "Ah, what is the word of a dead wife now worth? What treasures I let slip, and now I find an old hat!" angrily he picked up the old hat and stuffed it into his bosom. "I'll give it to our young women. It may be good for something or other if only to wipe the flour off the millstones after grinding the corn."

He rode on and was already nearing the Nart village, when he said to his steed: "Say, what kind of death is predestined for you?"

His horse made no reply, and Shoshlan grew angry. In a deep dell he climbed down from saddle, and tied his horse's head to a tree. Then he cut some branches of juniper and began to lash the horse, until the blood began to flow from under his fine skin. Then he cried: "I shall beat you until you answer me. What kind of death awaits you?"

His horse still made no reply, and Shoshlan grew furious. He tore a tree up by the roots, and so beat his poor horse that the tree broke into splinters. What could the suffering steed do? At last he answered: "My death lies in my hooves. If something from below, beneath the earth penetrates into my legs, than I shall die. Otherwise death cannot touch me. But what will you die from master?" he then asked Shoshlan.

“I am all tempered steel,” answered Shoshlan. “Only my knees are not hardened. Only Balshag’s wheel can kill me. There is no other death!”

“May God not forgive you your thoughtless actions!” retorted his steed. “You have brought about both my death and your own! That old hat you picked up on the road and stuffed in your tunic—take a look now. Where is it? That was nothing less than the cunning old Shiridon, the son of Gatag, in disguise!”

Shoshlan thrust his hand into the breast of his tunic, but the hat was gone. The sly Shiridon, who had overheard the whole conversation, and knew their death secrets, had jumped out of Shoshlan’s bosom. At once Shoshlan understood why Vedukha had forbidden him to pick up anything on the road home, but it was too late now to make amends.

Meanwhile Shiridon, having quit Shoshlan, straightaway dashed off to Hell, to the Lord of the Devils, to call together his warriors.

“Nart Shoshlan tormented all the other Narts,” said Shiridon, “and deserves to die! I know how to destroy him. He places all his faith in his steed, but the horse’s death lies in his hooves. Give me quickly your best archers, who can shoot accurately from underground. From Hell itself they must let fly their arrows into his horse’s hooves.”

The Lord of the Devils gave him his best arches, and they began to shoot from below upward, and they penetrated the hooves of Shoshlan’s steed, and he fell dying. Before his last breath he said to Shoshlan: “As soon as I die, quickly but carefully skin me, and stuff the hide with straw. Afterward sit on my stuffed image, and who knows, perhaps I may carry you as far as your home again!”

Quickly and carefully Shoshlan took the skin from his horse, and then stuffed it with straw. Then he put his saddle on the stuffed dummy and mounted it, riding off toward the Nart village. But Shiridon was listening to the dying words of Shoshlan’s steed, and again ran to the Lord of the Devils, and sternly demanded further assistance, “Hey, you young devils, be quick and heat the heads of your arrows red-hot, and shoot again at the hooves of Shoshlan’s horse!”

The young Devils heated their arrowheads till they glowed, and began to shoot upward at Shoshlan’s steed. The flaming arrows struck the straw-stuffed

belly of Shoshlan's horse, and the faithful creature was burned to dust and ashes. What could Shoshlan do now?

On foot, and carrying his saddle on his shoulder, Shoshlan arrived home at last. After resting awhile, he told Shatana all that he had seen and heard in the Land of the Dead, without concealing anything. She in turn, fully believed him. She gave Shoshlan her wonder-working ring, and he went to the seashore, where he drew with it a wide circle. At once a great black tower, all of iron, rose from the circle there. At the four corners Shoshlan planted the leafy twigs of the tree of Azh. Then Shatana asked Afshati for the loan of his magic flute, and gave it to Shoshlan. When he began to play on it the beasts all gathered round, and entered the courtyard. The first hundred were deer, the second hundred were wild bulls, and the third hundred were various kinds of cattle, including wild sheep, and wild goats.

The seven giants, seeing the black iron tower, and the herds of deer, bulls, and other cattle gathered in the courtyard, agreed that Shoshlan had paid the bride-price in full, and so they handed over to him their ward, the daughter of the sun Asirukhsh, to be his wife.

37 ♦ THE DEATH OF SHOSHLAN

Shoshlan and the daughter of the sun, beautiful Asirukhsh, lived contentedly together and were very happy. The days and years rolled by one after another unnoticed. Shoshlan often went hunting to the Field of Games near the Zhilakhar Ravine, which the Narts had long ago chosen as the place for sporting expeditions, contests, and hunting.

So his days passed by.

Once Shoshlan went hunting there with a dozen of his chosen comrades. They set up their tent by the Zhilakhar Ravine, hunted from early morn till midday, and then returned to their tents to rest awhile. Toward evening they went hunting again. One day they returned to dinner, then laid down to rest. It was very hot and all his comrades were feeling tired. Only Shoshlan was not

feeling fatigued. He quietly took up his bow and arrows, and went off to the nearby ravine, which led to a lake.

“In such heat as this,” thought Shoshlan, “surely some creatures will come to the lake to have a drink, and slake their thirst.”

He sat on the shore of the lake and began to wait. For a long time he watched, then suddenly he saw a young deer approach the water. She was a beautiful creature. Nothing could compare with her grace of movement. The morning star sparkled on her neck. Shoshlan placed an arrow in his bow, and was about to loose it, when the deer turned into a young maiden. She approached Shoshlan, and said to him, “Be well, Shoshlan, and long may you live!”

“May you find your happiness, kind young maiden!” replied Shoshlan.

“How many times I have come down here from the heavens, only in order to see you, Shoshlan. How many years I have waited for you, and now at last we meet! Take me with you to be your wife!”

“If I took every homeless maiden to be my wife, there would soon be no place for me and them in the Nart village,” responded Shoshlan.

“Now see, Shoshlan, you will regret those words soon,” said the maid.

“Much have I hunted here, and I know that sows like to wallow in the marshes. If I took to wife all such creatures, soon my bright steel would become rusty rubbish!” said Shoshlan roughly.

The maiden, having heard these crude words, suddenly dropped her outstretched arms, and they turned into wings. Shoshlan wished in an instant to capture her, but she fluttered away, saying as she went: “Nart Shoshlan, I am a daughter of Balshag. Now see what will befall you!” She flew off to her father’s home, and there told him how Shoshlan had offended her. Balshag grew furious on hearing this and ordered his wheel: “Go and kill Shoshlan! He has humiliated my daughter!”

With a rumble, out rolled the Wheel of Balshag.⁸ Balshag shouted to Shoshlan: “Now beware, you Nart upstart! I have set my Wheel upon you!”

“What kind of weapon have you that you hope to kill me with?”

“You will see when it attacks you, so expect a blow!” cried Balshag.

“And what shall I place to meet the blow?” asked Shoshlan.

“Place your brow beneath it!” replied Balshag, thinking to slay him.

“Shoshlan saw the Wheel come flying toward him, and placed his brow before it. The Wheel struck its blow, and recoiled, without leaving a scratch. Shoshlan tried to catch hold of it, but it slipped from him.

Again Balshag shouted to him: “Wait a moment! It will roll at you again!”

“What shall I place before it this time?”

“Put your breast before it!” replied Balshag, certain of success. With a rumble the Wheel crashed into Shoshlan’s breast, but did no harm. This time Shoshlan was more clever, and caught hold of the Wheel, took it in his steely grasp, bent it beneath him, and broke two of its spokes.

The Wheel at once begged for mercy, and piteously cried, “Don’t cut my life short, Shoshlan! I shall become your Wheel, and no longer shall I serve Balshag, I swear!”

Shoshlan took him at his oath, and why not? He set the Wheel free, and it went rolling shakily away. On the road it met Shiridon, the sly.

Oh, that mischievous Shiridon! What was he, then, doing there?

There’s one answer, only one: Making mischief to spare! Not for naught was he named “the Nart’s plague”! Not by any or by ought could he be shamed!

“May you travel a good road, Balshag’s Wheel!” he said in greeting.

“Oh, don’t address me as Balshag’s Wheel any longer, for I have just become Shoshlan’s Wheel, and he’ll kill me if I go back to Balshag!”

“Eh, you’re shaky, and riding for a fall, my dear Wheel! Where is your previous power? Who has clouded your great fame?” asked Shiridon.

“Be quiet, Shiridon! I gave my oath to Shoshlan!” answered the Wheel.

“Let some blood out of your little finger, and you will be freed from your oath. Do you not know that you are fated to kill Shoshlan?”

“He is a dangerous man!” replied the Wheel. “If I attack him again he will grind me between his teeth. How can I cope with him?”

“First hasten to Kurdalagon, and let him prepare some steel spokes for your broken ones. Then later, when Shoshlan is asleep, attack him at his knees. He is vulnerable there, and thus he will die!” replied Shiridon.

The Wheel succumbed to sly Shirdon's suggestion, but hesitated, "Say, where shall I find him asleep, though?" asked the Wheel.

"After dinner with his comrades, he will be resting in his tent on the Field of Zhilakhar, where he has been hunting. Roll along over them and crush them all, and among them you will cut down Shoshlan!"

The Wheel made his way to Kurdalagon, the heavenly smith, and he replaced the broken spokes with metal ones. Then the Wheel went off to attack Shoshlan's tent near the ravine.

But it so happened that on that day, as often before, Shoshlan did not want to rest after dinner, but went roaming around the ravine. His twelve comrades lay down to rest in the tent, six on one side, and six on the other, their feet toward the center.

They had only just fallen asleep, when with a rumble, Balshag's Wheel rolled over them, cutting off all their legs.

"Woe to you, Shoshlan!" it cried, as it slew all his twelve comrades.

A little while passed, and back came Shoshlan, bearing a dead deer.

"Hey!" he cried. "Come out and look!" But nobody answered his call.

He threw the deer's carcass on the ground, and entered the tent. There he saw all his twelve comrades lying dead, with their legs hacked off. All went dark before his eyes.

"My God! What shall I do? Only Balshag's Wheel could have performed such an evil deed!" he said to himself, and ran out of the tent. He glanced around and saw Balshag's Wheel rolling away over the plain. So he at once appealed to the plain, "Stop Balshag's Wheel! It has slain my comrades!"

But the plain did nothing to stop it, and so received his curse, "Seven years you will bear harvest, but then you will be fruitless."

The Wheel rolled on to the mountains, and Shoshlan cried to them, "Stop Balshag's Wheel! It has killed all my comrades!"

But the mountains also did not stop it, and Shoshlan cursed them too.

"May one avalanche after another, and one landslide after another reduce you to rubble and ruins!" he cried.

The Wheel ran on to the forest, and rolled into an alder grove.

“Hold back Balshag’s Wheel, you alders! He is my foe!” roared Shoshlan. But the alder trees did not stop Balshag’s Wheel.

“May you be the most trashy trees from now on!” cried Shoshlan. “May they strip your bark to make paint, and may you wither away yourselves!”

Then Balshag’s Wheel ran between the lime trees, and Shoshlan begged them, “Lime trees, lime trees, hold back my mortal enemy!”

“Although I grow fat,” replied the lime tree heading the grove, “I have not the power to hold back your foe. I am soft, too soft!”

“Then may you too be accursed!” cried Shoshlan. “People will seek for your bark, and you may flourish very fine, but no fruit will you bear!”

The Wheel rolled into a hornbeam thicket, and Shoshlan called, “Hold back Balshag’s Wheel, O hornbeam! Hold back my foe, if only for a while!” But the hornbeam let the Wheel pass, and Shoshlan cried, “May God make people seek you, only to burn you in their stoves!”

Then Balshag’s Wheel entered a beech wood, and Shoshlan beseeched the trees, “Hold back the Wheel! My foe escapes me! He has killed my comrades!”

“May you suffer yet greater distress!” replied the beech. “My fine branches can shelter a whole village, but you lopped them off to build your house, and even ripped out my roots!”

“May they take your trunk as well, and saw it into planks and logs and beams!” cried Shoshlan to the mighty beeches.

Balshag’s Wheel went rolling on into an oak grove, and Shoshlan cried, “Hey, you great oaks! You at least have power to hold back my foe!” But the oak reminded Shoshlan that he had shown no pity for its topmost branches nor boughs, but had cut them down to make arrows of them.

“Well then, may acorns growing on your branches be scorned by man!”

Balshag’s Wheel rolled on into a silver birch grove, and Shoshlan cried, “Oh, beautiful silver birch, hold back my foe, at least a little while!”

“He who has become your foe will be my foe also!” replied the silver birch and like a net she drooped her delicate hair over Balshag’s Wheel. But the Wheel broke through the net easily, and rolled on farther.

“You will be counted as the best of trees forever, O silver birch, and your fine dry branches will be gathered by people to make spits for roasting shashliks on them!” said Shoshlan in gratitude to the silver birch.

The Wheel rolled on into a thicket of hazelnut trees, whose trunks and branches were entwined about with clinging hops vines.

“Oh, curly haired hops,” begged Shoshlan, “twine round my enemy and hold him back awhile. He has spilled the blood of my twelve comrades!”

Stringing and resilient as cords, the hops entwined themselves round the rolling Wheel, and finally stooped it. Then Shoshlan drew within bow-shot and loosed an arrow at it, which shattered one spoke. He let fly another shaft, and a second spoke flew into splinters. So in the hazelnut grove he came up to his foe and seized him fast. In gratitude to the hazelnuts and hops he straightaway said, “From now on, hazelnut tree, people will come from afar to you for your tasty nuts, and to you, curly-headed hops, for your head-spinning beverage. People making merry will always remember you with warm hearts.”

Then he drew his sword and raised it, intending to hack the Wheel to pieces. Straightaway the captive Wheel began to plead for mercy, and cried, “My life is in your hands, Shoshlan. Spare me, and I will fulfill all your commands, whatever you order me to do without question!”

“I have no further faith in you!” replied Shoshlan. “You are an oath-breaker, and will again deceive me at the first opportunity.”

But Balshag’s Wheel begged so pitifully and swore so ardently to always serve him that Shoshlan again began to believe it and to trust it.

“Very well,” he said. “I will have mercy on you, but for my twelve comrades whom you slew, you must slay twelve members of your own tribe. Then I will spare your life and set you free.”

The Wheel agreed, and sadly and shakily set off home.

When Shiridon found out that Balshag’s Wheel had not been able to kill Shoshlan, he took the form of an old man, and the next moment he stood on the road along which the Wheel was traveling.

“May you have a straight road before you,” he greeted it. “What has happened, that you look so sad and shaky?”

“What is there for me to be happy about?” replied the Wheel. Shoshlan has gained victory over me, and made me take an oath to slay twelve of my own family members as payment for the blood of his twelve comrades.”

“But why must you kill them? Cut the nails off their hands and feet and take them to him, and thus you will fulfill your oath!” said Shiridon.

But Balshag’s Wheel did not listen to him, and rolled on farther.

This time Shiridon stood before him in the guise of an old woman, “May your road run straight, Balshag’s Wheel!” said the old woman. “What has happened that you look so sad and shaken?”

“How can I look otherwise? How can I swallow my misfortune? Twelve members of my family must be slain to keep my oath which I gave Shoshlan.”

“But why must you kill them? Cut the nails off their hands and feet and take them to him, and thus you will fulfill your oath,” she said.

But Balshag’s Wheel did not listen to her, and rolled on farther.

Again Shiridon sped on ahead, and changed into a youth, with the first signs of fluff on his face, and stood in the way of the oncoming Wheel.

“May your road run straight, O Balshag’s Wheel!” said he. “What has happened, that you look so sad and shaky?”

“I had to give my oath to Shoshlan to slay twelve members of my own family, and now I am wavering before the fulfillment of that oath!”

“But why must you kill them? Cut the nails off their hands and feet and bring them to him, and thus you will fulfill your oath,” said the lad.

The Wheel made no reply, but rolled on farther. Having run awhile, he thought to himself, “See, the old man, the old woman, and the youth all gave me the same advice, and did not expect any kind of reward. What if I listen to their good counsel then?”

Having rolled home, he cut nails from the hands and feet of twelve members of his family, then rested at home awhile.

Day after day passed, week after week, still the Wheel rested. But cunning Shiridon, son of Gatag did not rest. He kept reminding him, “You should attack Shoshlan once more. Be avenged for your defeat!”

But the Wheel had overcome its hatred of Shoshlan, and answered, "Eh, you cunning old fox, leave me in peace! Because of you I have suffered so many misfortunes!"

Unfortunately for the Narts, however, Shirdon did not give up his deliberate plans to have Shoshlan killed. He let loose his lying tongue to again persuade Balshag's Wheel to attack Shoshlan and slay him.

Once more Kurdalagon put two new spokes in the Wheel, and prepared it for attack. Then once, when Shoshlan was bent double chasing his prey on the field of Zhilakhar, suddenly, from nowhere, Balshag's Wheel rolled swiftly up and cut off his legs at the knee. Scornfully he threw before the mortally wounded warrior the cutoff finger- and toenails of the twelve members of his family, after which he rolled off home.

Shoshlan lay on the field of Zhilakhar, bleeding profusely, and looking all round for help. Whom could he send to the Narts with the news?

An eagle flew overhead, and Shoshlan called to him, "Oh, eagle, be my messenger of sorrow. Fly to the home of the Nart family Akhshartagketta, and inform my brothers Urizhmag and Khamis that I am dying, and there is nobody to close the eyes of Nart Shoshlan."

"May you suffer even greater distress than now!" replied the eagle. "Did you pity me when I was tired, and settled down on a tree, or on a rock? No, you straightaway reached for your bow and arrow. Well, may they now bring you no further joy!"

A little while passed, and a kite flew above him, and Shoshlan cried, "I beg you, O kite, be my messenger of sorrow. Fly home to the Nart family of the Akhshartagketta, and say that Balshag's Wheel has cut off Shoshlan's legs, and ask some relation of mine to hasten here to me."

"Get on with you and your wishes!" answered the kite. "Shatana has countless hens, but did you ever let me carry off even one? You saw me hungry, and straightaway reached for your bow!" and off he flew.

Shoshlan lay helpless, waiting and waiting.

Suddenly a swallow swooped over him, twittering. Shoshlan gladly cried, "O, you swallow! Fly quickly to the home of the Akhshartagketta, and tell them

that Balshag's Wheel has cut off Shoshlan's legs. He is dying on the field of Zhilakhar, and there is nobody to close his eyes."

"Be it as you say!" replied the swallow. "You are too good to lie here alone with nobody to close your eyes. I will be your messenger of sorrow. When a rainstorm sprang up, and I found nowhere to shelter, you took me in your bosom, and saved my life. You always left your barn open for me, and I fed there to my free delight. I recall your kindness!"

"You will forever be beloved by the people," replied Shoshlan, and the swallow flew off as the messenger of sorrow.

Shoshlan lay on the field and waited for some Nart relations to come and close his eyelids, and carry him back home.

A black raven flew over him, and seeing him dying, croaked in tears, "I shall be an orphan now! How shall I live without you, Shoshlan? All the paths and ravines you scattered with wild game, and therefore I could always find something to fill my stomach. But who is going to satisfy my hunger now?"

"You grieve in vain," replied Shoshlan. "Your weeping will do no good. Fly down to me and take your fill of my blood."

"How can you speak so, Shoshlan? My whole soul sorrows for you!"

Then, seeing that his grief was sincere, Shoshlan said to him, "Even if far off, where the earth and heavens meet, some carrion should lie, you will always find it. Like a blood-stained column the place where the carcass lies will come into view, and your keen eyes will see it, and you will find it and be satisfied! May God so reward you!"

The raven flew off, and a crow circled overhead, and began to cry, "Oh, who will prepare an abundant feast for us each day? Who will fill the ravines with heaps of wild game? How shall we live without you?"

"Fly down nearer to me," replied Shoshlan. "Here lie my hewn off legs, and here are clots of blood. In any case they will decay without you. Eat, satisfy your hunger, and don't croak in vain!"

But the crow flew down and wanted to peck at his living flesh, and drink his warm blood, and seeing this, Shoshlan cursed him, and said, "You evil bird! From morn till eve you croak before people, making sworn promises, but your

promises are never fulfilled. From now on, from night till morn you shall perch without moving on the bough of a tree. No other shelter shall you have. Such shall be your fate!”

Then the beasts of the field began to come to Shoshlan. First came the bear. He tore fur from his breast with his claws, and cried sadly, “What shall I do without you, Shoshlan. Who will take your place with me? I was always hospitably fed by your food, and you gave me to drink.”

“Don’t be grieved, my dear bear! That won’t help you! Better feed on my flesh, which I now take to the Land of the Dead,” said Shoshlan.

“How can you say such a thing?!” asked the bear, more sorrowfully.

“May God grant you such joy that when people only see your tracks they are smitten with fear!” said Shoshlan. “In the bitterest winter may you slumber for five months without food in your den!”

The bear went off, and in his place came then a wolf, and began to howl.

“How shall I live without you, Shoshlan? How many gullies and ditches you filled with fresh meat for me! Who will take your place and feed me?”

“You need not howl and wail in vain,” said Shoshlan. “That will not help either you or me. Here is my flesh, which I shall now take with me to the Land of the Dead. Come, take and eat your fill!”

“How can you say such words to a friend?” howled the wolf miserably.

Shoshlan, seeing that he suffered in his soul, thanked him and said, “When you fall upon the flock, may your heart be as bold as mine, but may you have the heart of an easily frightened sensitive maiden when yet not given in marriage as you fly away from your pursuers. May the strength of my little finger find its way into that neck of yours!”

The wolf went off, and Shoshlan suddenly saw a vixen nearby. With her tail slowly and mournfully waving, the vixen began to wail, “I shall be like an orphan without you, Shoshlan!” she howled.

“Do not wail in vain, dear vixen,” said Shoshlan. “Better to come near and feed on the flesh that I shall take soon to the land of the Dead!”

The vixen began to eagerly gnaw up the blood clots round his feet, but when she started to lick at the blood-stained stumps of his knees, Shoshlan suddenly

stirred and screamed at her fiercely, “May you be accursed! May people murder you for that beautiful coat of yours, but throw away your flesh as good for nothing!”

The vixen speedily made off—and what else could she do?



Meanwhile, the swallow finally flew into the Nart village, and perched herself on a roof beam, where she began to twitter, “Oh, Narts! Balshag’s Wheel has cut off your Shoshlan’s legs at the knee. He lies in the field of Zhilakhar alone, waiting for someone to close his dying eyes. He has sent me as his messenger of sorrow.”

All the Narts, young and old, began to howl and wail at top of their voices, and whole bunches of them rushed off to the field of Zhilakhar, each one hastening to be the first.

But in front of them all galloped the cunning Shirdon on his steed. He headed the whole field, and came up to Shoshlan and spitefully said, “Hey, Shoshlan, you should have died earlier! All the Narts in bunches are making their way here, and in each group someone has struck up a merry melody, and all the others are joining gaily in the chorus!”

Shoshlan’s heart almost broke with sorrow when he heard these words. But when the Narts appeared and came up to him, and he saw how the men had scratched their cheeks in grief, and how the women had torn out their hair in handfuls, then he told them of Shirdon’s deceit.

“Shirdon brought me untrue and unworthy news of you. Where is that old villain? Bring him before me, and let me deal with him!”

But who could find Shirdon? He had galloped off and hidden himself. The Nart youths took up Shoshlan, and carefully carried him back to the village. Then Shirdon appeared again from who knows where. As he rode by Shoshlan he called out to him, “O unhappy Shoshlan, yet another shameful thing awaits you in your own home. They have prepared you a tomb lined with snakeskins, and your funeral shroud they have sewn from the skins of frogs!”

As soon as they carried him into his home, he said to his family: “While I am still alive, my dear relatives, show me my grave, how it has been prepared, and show me my funeral shroud, how it is sewn.”

“Why should you wish, while yet living, to see that which is suited only to the dead? Your tomb and your shroud are not such as to make anyone ashamed. You have made our family powerful and glorious, and for this you gave all your strength. Have we not, then, prepared for you worthy death-ropes, and shall we not all accompany you to your tomb, and see you off to the Land of the Dead?”

“What can I do?” said Shoshlan. “Shirdon said bitter words to me, and I shall not rest until I see my tomb and my grave-clothes.”

Then the Narts brought to him his death robes, all sewn out of precious silken cloth. Then they showed him his coffin, forged out of high-carat gold. Then Shoshlan suddenly expressed the wish that they should at once dress him in his death robes, and lay him in his coffin, and said, “I feel that I have no further power, but Balshag’s Wheel is still at liberty, and gives us no peace. He who puts an end to Balshag’s Wheel may keep my sword as his rightful reward.”

The Narts remained silent, for none of them could hope to cope with Balshag’s Wheel. Just then Batraz, the son of Khamis, arrived home. When they told him of Shoshlan’s last wishes, he silently stepped forward and took Shoshlan’s sword, attached it to his belt, and rode off to seek Balshag’s chariot Wheel. He searched for it everywhere, up in the heavens and on the earth beneath the heavens, but could not find it anywhere.

Once, while riding on his pasture, a Nart shepherd said to Batraz, “Your breeding bull every day goes to your cellar, and there he bellows fiercely. I don’t know what’s the matter with him?”

“There’s more to this than meets the eye,” thought Batraz at once. He slew the bull, put its hide around his shoulders, went to the cellar, and began to bellow like a bull. Suddenly he heard Balshag’s Wheel saying, “May you be eaten at funeral feasts! In heaven and on earth I fear only Batraz, and it is from him that I am hiding, but you keep on coming here and bellowing, and give me no peace!”

“That means you are here, then!” cried Batraz. “I’m the one you fear so much in your hiding. But now you won’t escape from me!”

However, while Batraz was throwing off the bull's hide, Balshag's Wheel rolled quickly out of the cellar, and ran off, with Batraz chasing after him, just on his heels.

Then Balshag's Wheel changed into a drake, and flew away, but Batraz changed into a kite, and swooped after it. In terror Balshag's Wheel came down to the plain, and settled on a tall dried-up poplar tree. Batraz too changed his course, and came back to earth as a man. There he just clapped his hands together, and so much heat came from them, that the plain around began to break out in flames, and the poplar tree too.

From it a pheasant went flying off over the hot plain. Of course that was Balshag's Wheel, which had changed form again in fright. But at once Batraz changed into an eagle, and soared after it. Balshag's Wheel was helpless now, and flew over the Nart village into the home of a witch.

Batraz followed, and taking his normal form again, entered the home of the sorceress, and questioned the old woman, "Where is that pheasant that took refuge in your home? Tell me now at once, or I shall burn down your house with you and your children in it!"

The old woman was scared, and pointed to the graveyard, saying, "Go, seek him there. He is hiding in the grave of the last one there."

Batraz found the latest grave, and dug it open, and from it he dragged the frightened Balshag's Wheel, slashed it in two halves with Shoshlan's sword, and brought it back to Shoshlan's tomb. There he struck the two hewn halves of the Wheel into the ground, to stand as a monument to Shoshlan. Then he stood by the tomb, and cried at the top of his voice, "Shoshlan! Here I have brought you the remains of Balshag's Wheel!"

Straightaway Shoshlan called to his brothers from his coffin, "Hey, Urizhmag and Khamis! Build me a vault, and let there be one window facing east, so that the morning sun may look down on me. Let there be another window facing south, so that sun may shine on me at midday. Let there be a third window facing west, so that the sun may bid me farewell in the evening, and lay my bow and quiver by my side."

Shoshlan's brothers fulfilled his last wishes, and built the vault, and there they laid his bow and quiver full of arrows beside him.

But Shoshlan was not fated to die completely. Though lacking legs and lying in the tomb, whenever an alarm sounded he rose up to know whence it came and what it signified.

One day a young lad, a Nart shepherd boy playing near the tomb cried, "Danger! Danger!"

Shoshlan arose from the tomb, and asked him, "From which side does the danger come, my lad?"

The boy answered with a grin, "That was a false alarm. I have heard much about you, but never saw you before. I just wanted to know what you looked like!"

Shoshlan was offended that even children now played tricks on him, and since that time he has never again appeared outside his tomb.

38 ♦ AISHANA

A son was born to Urizhmag, and like the rumble of thunder the news echoed around and reached the ears of the heavenly Shafa, the god of the domestic hearth.

Whoever arranges a feast in honor of a newborn son has the right to educate him.⁹ Without delay Shafa brought a white bull on a silken cord into the Nart village. He came to Urizhmag's house and cried, "Long years of life to the newborn son! The right to bring him up belongs to me!"

He slaughtered the bull straightaway and gave a great feast for the Narts. They named the youngster Aishana. After the feast Shafa took him home with him to his heavenly dwelling. There Aishana began to grow up. Shafa's friends came to see him, and all admired and liked the little lad very much. Washtirji came with Afshati, and Tutir with Wasilla. Nogbon was accompanied by Elia. The young lad ran out to greet them, and helped them to dismount from their horses, the eldest first. Then he took off their saddles; carried their clothes, their cloaks, and whips into the house; and carefully tidied up the guests' equipment.

Shafa called the guests to the hearth, sat them on double benches, and placed low, three-legged tables before them. Food and drinks were then brought in, and Aishana, having removed his cap, began to serve them. When they had eaten and drunk their fill, they got up from their seats and took a look down on the earth below. Was there anything new to see?

Suddenly they noticed hosts of Agur warriors invading the land of the Narts, and whole herds of horses leaving their dung-heaps there.

The best of the Narts were away at that time on a distant campaign, and all who had not gone with them gathered on the Field of Games. They were ordered to dance there by the Agurs, who then amused themselves by shooting arrows among them. Those who were struck between the shoulder blades began to dance more lively, and those who got an arrow in their calves began to jump rather higher.

The heavenly dwellers were surprised at this, and said to each other: “The arrows do not pierce far into the Narts, and they do not even reach for their swords! What are such men made of?”

Then suddenly the heavenly dwellers saw Shoshlan’s wife come out of the old Akhshartag house, smiling like the sun, radiant as the morning star. She drank water from the spring, and one could see it flowing into her transparent throat, shining and gleaming, and the reflection of this reached the heavenly dwellers, gathered in Shafa’s house. They wondered at all they saw, and began to tell their host Shafa what was happening on earth. On hearing this Aishana suddenly dropped a jug of ale he was carrying. Shafa was angry with him.

“You will come to a bad end, my lad. You are yet too young to begin dreaming about beautiful women. What else could it be?”

“It was not because I heard about a beautiful woman, but because my parents live in that Nart village, as well as other relatives and elders, and maybe those Agur horses have trampled them underfoot, while here am I, untouched by their troubles!” he replied. “That beauty of whom they spoke, shining like the sun, and sparkling like the morning star, is Nart Shoshlan’s young wife. Obviously, the famous Nart warriors had gone on campaign; otherwise who would dare to

attack us? Besides, one of our young wives would sit at home, and not go to join the Narts dancing to please the Agur invaders.”

Shafa broke in and said to him straightaway, “If you are prepared to go to battle on their behalf, then I and my guests will make you some suitable presents.” To this they all agreed.

Aishana hung across his shoulders Shafa’s gift, a bow and a quiver of arrows, while round his waist he hung Shafa’s sword. Then he jumped on his horse, armed with a whip of thunder, given by Wasilla, and off he galloped, and came to aid the Narts. Everyone in the village was surprised to see him, and very glad too. Shatana was at that time on a distant visit to her parents, so they sent someone to fetch her. Only Shoshlan’s young wife did not even rise to greet him. Aishana said to her, “So you have grown too heavy to rise, my good woman? But you know I am no stranger here, and still you can’t get up to greet me!”

“Why should I stand before you, my sunny lad? Do I see before me someone who has driven the Agurs off the Nart’s land?” she replied.

Hearing this mockery, Aishana, blazing with anger, jumped on his horse and without blinking an eyelid fell upon the Agur foes. He began to destroy them with his self-aiming bow, and to slash them with Shafa’s sword, always eager for battle. He spilt so much blood that the ones who escaped his blows were swept away from the Nart’s land by a seething stream. Aishana destroyed them all, and saved the Nart village from destruction, but when he came back to his own home, though all the Narts crowded around him so tightly that he could not even dismount, the young wife of Shoshlan still seemed indifferent, and did not greet him.

“So, you are still too heavy to rise I see, my good woman,” said he. “If you would only raise your head to welcome me after victory!”

But Shoshlan’s young wife answered unperturbed, “Why should I stand before you, my sunny lad? You have not brought to my gates and planted in my garden that tree that from sunset blossoms, and from midnight to sunrise is heavy with fruit. On guard over that tree stand two mountains that butt into each other like rams, then part.”

These words also offended Aishana, and he turned his horse about and galloped off to find such a tree. He had not traveled far when his steed said to him, “Where are you making for, you god-displeasing abortion, tell me?”

“I must find and fetch a tree that is protected by two mountains that butt into each other like rams, then part. From sunset till midnight it ripens, and from midnight till sunrise it bears fruit already ripe.”

Then his horse replied, shaking his head, “Don’t dream about such a thing! Many bold young fellows, no worse than you, set out to find such a tree, but none of them returned with his head upon his shoulders!”

“But I can’t give up my mission! I must find it!” said Aishana.

Then his steed said to him, nodding his head, “Well, if that is so, then tie my girth straps tight, and twist my tail into a tight knot, but leave just three hairs free there. Then later, when we come to the mountains butting each other, you must whip so hard that a piece of skin the size of a boot sole flies off my rump, and another, the size of a boot tongue, flies off your palm as well! Then we shall swiftly gallop between the two mountains!”

So on they went till they came to the mountains butting into each other. Aishana tightened his horse’s girth straps and tied his tail in a tight knot, leaving three hairs free. Then he whipped his steed until a piece of skin the size of a boot tongue flew off the palm of his hand, and another the size of a boot sole flew off his horse’s rump. His steed went flying full speed between the mountains, and Aishana quickly found the magic tree, and tore it out by the roots. He turned his horse’s head and sped swiftly between the mountains. They came rolling together with a ringing and a rumbling, but one instant before they crashed together, Aishana’s steed slipped speedily through, and only three fine hairs were left behind.

After that Aishana’s steed said to him with a sigh: “If only my mother had given me milk for three more days, then I would not have lost those three hairs now!”

Aishana went galloping back to the Nart village, and planted the tree near the gates of the Akhshartagketta home. A crowd of Nart people gathered about

the house, stood in wonder before the tree, and cried, "Look what a wonderful tree Aishana has brought us!"

But all the same Shoshlan's young wife did not rise from her place to greet him, and did not even turn her proud head toward him.

"Why now do you not welcome me?" he asked. "What more do you wish?"

The proud young woman then answered him thus, "Why should I stand before you in respect? You have not been able so far to take to yourself as wife the golden-haired and golden-fated Shaumaron-Burzabakh, from the black-soiled fertile plains."

Now Shaumaron-Burzabakh lived in a tower so high that you could not see the top of it. She had consented to be married only to the man whose voice should reach her at the top of the tower from below.

Many would-be bridegrooms had called to her, standing at the foot of the tall tower, but their voices did not even reach halfway. Shaumaron-Burzabakh did not hear their shouts and screams, and her suitors were turned into stone forever more.

When Aishana came to her tower he shouted at the top of his voice, but his cry did not reach halfway, and at that moment he turned into stone up to the knees. The second time, summoning all his strength, he shouted, but the young maiden heard nothing of his call, and he turned into stone up to the waist. Tears began to gather in his eyes, and then his faithful steed said to him, "Why are you so down-hearted, my bold rider?"

"I have summoned up all my strength and shouted," answered Aishana, but I achieved nothing, and am turning to stone. Perhaps you can help me?"

Then his horse began to neigh, and he neighed so loud that the corner of the roof fell off the top of the tower. Shaumaron-Burzabakh then heard something from below at last, and looked down from her lodge, and saw Aishana, and his body, half turned to stone, became alive again.

Shaumaron-Burzabakh then descended from her tower to her suitor.

"You have come for me already?" the maiden asked Aishana.

"Yes, I have come for you. Get ready quickly, and we shall ride off."

Shaumaron-Burzabakh came out of the tower, Aishana sat her behind him on the croup of his steed, and they were ready to go, when he asked, “Why are there so many white stones standing round your tower?”

“They are not stones,” answered Shaumaron-Burzabakh, “but suitors who wished to marry me. When their voices did not reach the top of my tower they turned to stone and stayed there.”

“If that is so, then you should take your spell off them,” said Aishana.

“Don’t ask me to bring them back to life again!” answered the maiden. “It was only your horse who saved you too from becoming a stone. But among those stones were young fellows no less bold than you. If they come alive again, they won’t let you marry me, but will kill you!”

“What must be, will be,” answered Aishana. “Bring them back to life!”

Shaumaron-Burzabakh waved her silken kerchief to the right, and the stones stirred, changed into armed warriors, and one and all fell upon Aishana. When one of them raised his sword to strike him, Shaumaron-Burzabakh waved her kerchief to the left, and they all changed back to stone.

Then Aishana galloped off and brought Shaumaron-Burzabakh to his Nart village. The Narts were all delighted that he had returned safely and successfully, bringing with him such a beautiful young bride. From every side they began to shower presents and invitations on him and his bride.

Just at that time Shatana returned from her parents’ home. Delighted and proud of her young son, she started to brew honey-mead for the forthcoming wedding ceremony and feast.

Shoshlan and Khamis returned from campaign too, and having heard that Aishana had inflicted a crushing defeat on the Agurs single-handed, they could not make enough of their young fellow Nart.

Urizhmag then embraced his son, and said to him, “May all the misfortunes and sorrows predestined for my bold young son, who raised up our Nart village from beneath the hooves of enemy horses, fall upon me! May my friend Shafa live long, he who has brought up for us Narts such a brave young fellow!”

As he finished speaking, Shoshlan’s young wife, rather reluctantly, at last stood up before Aishana, like all the others. Aishana asked her, “If you stand

unwilling, young woman, would it not be better to sit?”

“But why should I jump up quickly,” she replied. “You did not bring me that fur coat that belongs to the gods! Its collar sings; its cuffs clap to keep time, like the palms of hands; and its hem dances by itself!”

“Now if that coat had been sewn by your own hands, I would gladly fetch it for you, wherever you may have left it. But I have no power to bring it if you have not sewn it!”

To that Shoshlan’s wife made no reply. Indeed, what could she have said?

39 ♦ AISHANA AND SHAINAG-ALDAR

Shainag-aldar fell ill, and he spoke seriously about it to the Narts.

“I see my end has come. If anyone knows a medicine that can restore a man to life, let him not begrudge it to me. He shall be rewarded.”

The Narts then answered him sorrowfully, “When death overtakes a man, what is the use of talking about medicine? Nobody can show prince Shainag a cure against inevitable death!”

Then Shainag-aldar ordered them to fetch Aishana, and then said to him, “Beneath seven cellars, in the eighth is hidden my horse, in whom I place my last hopes. If you can find me a medicine that will restore my life, I will make a present of that horse to you!”

Aishana answered, “I do not know where to look for such a medicine, and have never even heard of such. But if you know where it may be found, I will fetch it.”

“I know only this, that I shall not live much longer,” said Prince Shainag, “Across seven mountain passes live my two sisters. Go to them and tell them of my sickness. They may know of something!”

Aishana crossed seven mountains, and found Prince Shainag’s sisters, and told them of the threat of death hanging over their brother.

“If only we might die instead of him!” they cried. They came at once to see the Prince. Weeping and moaning, they stood before him.

“On whom can we place our hopes, if you should die?” they cried.

“I see no use in weeping and wailing,” he answered them, “but if you know of some kind of medicine that brings a man back to life, then go and find it for me. That would be better!”

“We have never heard of such medicine, but if such a thing exists, then your dear friend and brother, the Black Giant, who lives among the Black Mountains, alone would know it.”

Prince Shainag at once sent a messenger to the Black Giant, and he came to the Prince’s courtyard and cried, “Hey, there, my friend and brother, are you still alive?”

“I am more dead than alive, I am afraid,” replied the Prince. “My last hour has come, but if you know of any medicine that can restore a man to life, then tell me, otherwise I shall be of no use to anyone any more in this world!”

“Oh, Shainag-aldar, where did you or any other man ever hear that a dying man could be restored to life by some kind of medicine?”

“That is why I am asking you to think about it, Black Giant, my dear brother! You have seen much, you have heard much, and maybe you can recall something about such a medicine if you try?”

“Well, let me see! I once heard tell of a place where lifesaving balsam could be found, but who could reach it? Out on the Arpan Plain there grows an apple tree. A snake is wound round that tree and guards it. He holds the tip of his tail in his mouth, and sucks it all the while to remain awake. King Arpan brings the snake each morning as much food as eighteen pair of oxen can draw. That plain is far, far away, but he who can get an apple from that tree and eat it will be cured and restored to life. How to get there I know not, nor how to overcome the serpent.”

Prince Shainag looked round, and then asked, “Who can I send to the Arpan plain? Who will bring me that apple? I would present him my dancing horse that I have kept in my deepest cellar now for seven years!”

Then Aishana replied to Prince Shainag, “I would ride to the Arpan to fetch that apple, but we Narts have not got such a horse who could last out on such a distant journey.”

“In that case, let them lead out my own horse, and bring him to me. I will do so, that he will accept you as his rider. If you succeed, then let him be my gift to you,” answered the Prince.

So they fetched Prince Shainag’s steed from the cellar, and then the Prince came out on crutches, and made his horse acknowledge Aishana as his rider. The steed was saddled, and Aishana mounted him. At once the horse sped off, and with all its strength kicked up its hindquarters and sent Aishana flying. He at once changed into a swallow and overtook the horse and regained his seat. For a second time the horse bucked his hindquarters, and up again flew Aishana, but he changed into a tack and stuck back down through the saddle into the cushion beneath, and regained his seat.

The third time the horse bucked the youngster, but he changed into a horse-cloth, and slipped between the horse and the saddle, and kept his seat.

Prince Shainag’s horse then said to him, “You are good enough to be my rider, Aishana!”

“And you are good enough to be my horse until I find a better!”

“Tell me, Aishana,” asked the horse. “Which road are we going to take?”

“Well, Shainag-aldar is mortally sick. To save him there remains one remedy only. That is an apple that grows on a tree in the Arpan Plain. Though it is far, far away, I must obtain that apple!”

“Eh, Aishana, many bold ones like you have tried to get that apple, but they no longer live. The serpent swallowed them all!”

“There is no other way out for me! I must get that apple!” said he.

“Then I will give you some good advice, so listen to me!” said his horse. “While we travel, you must sleep in the saddle, but when I give you a shake, then you must wake, and we shall then agree on what to do.”

Aishana was soon rocked asleep in the saddle. The horse sped on so quickly that in one day they traveled a hundred-day track, and so came to the Arpan Plain, and began to seek the apple tree. For greater safety the horse went among the dense reeds and rushes where the serpent would not see them, and then he gave his rider a shake. Aishana awoke, and the horse said to him, “We have arrived. Dismount now and tie my tail in a tight knot, but leave three hairs free.”

Aishana did as his horse asked, and when he finished the steed said, “Now we shall ride farther, and mind you look well for traces of the tree in the center of the plain. Beware of the wily serpent that winds round it nine times! King Arpan sends it food and drink drawn by eighteen pairs of oxen every day, and it does not sleep all night!”

Aishana looked carefully across the plain and saw eighteen pairs of oxen drawing carts with food and drink, which they put near the serpent, and then returned home. The serpent rushed at the food and water, and swallowed it all at one gulp. Then it stood all the dishes and tubs together, and with one swish of its tail sent them all flying, and they landed straight in King Arpan’s courtyard. Then the serpent took its tail between its teeth, and began sucking it, and then fell asleep.

Then Prince Shainag’s horse danced and pranced and said to Aishana: “Now has come the time to pluck the apple. Sit firm in the saddle as I fly over the tree, and if you succeed in skillfully bending down and plucking an apple, then you will be a happy man, or we came in vain!”

Then he whipped his horse on, and they flew over the tree. He leaned down from the saddle and tore off a branch with three apples on it. He plucked them off, and stuffed them in his pocket, then threw the branch on the ground. The serpent awoke and saw the horse and its rider, and immediately pursued them. In one place it came near enough to snatch three hairs from the horse’s knotted tail, and quickly wound them round its teeth, and the horse went on dragging the serpent behind him over the river there. But, sensing the danger, he turned in his tracks and let the serpent fall into the water, while he went sweeping on to the opposite bank.

So Aishana returned at last to Prince Shainag, and said to him, “I have brought you the life-restoring apples, Shainag-aldar!”

“But you can’t have been to Arpan Plain and back so quickly! Oh, no! You have plucked other apples and brought them. Well, then, let’s prove the matter. We’ll give one apple to another sick man, and if he revives then I’ll believe you.”

Aishana gave an apple to a sick man of the Narts, and a second to a dying man on his deathbed, and they both recovered immediately. When Prince Shainag saw this, and was convinced that Aishan had really brought the apples from the Arpan Plain, he then ate the remaining one. Just one apple he ate, and to his great joy the feeling of death departed from him, and his power returned.

Prince Shainag kept his word, and presented his dancing horse to the young Aishana, and expressed his gratitude to him. Many were the feasts that he gave in his palace for the young man's honor and glory.

1. As is seen in the tales of the Narts, the name of the progenitor of all dogs was Shilam. The legend about the origin of the dog Shilam, as also about the first of all Nart horses, Arfana, Urizhmag's steed, was tied up with the totemistic view of the Ossetian forebears.

2. Here we have before us the central supporting pillar of the house, "Kahazar" (see Guide to the Names). On this pillar were hung weapons, clothes, domestic instruments, and so on, and to it were tied the ram to be slaughtered, and in ancient days probably the slaves, usually prisoners of war.

3. First, third, and second function aspects (Littleton 1966)—[JC].

4. First, second, and third function aspects (Littleton 1966)—[JC].

5. This word "Chinta" signifying some folk or the other, who, as is evident from the text, were more powerful than the Narts, remains among those words and terms whose origins and meaning have not so far been successfully revealed.

6. Chekh is the name of one of the Donbettirs (see Appendix of Names). The form "Gop" does not lend itself to deciphering.

[I have had the good fortune to find out the meaning of this word, from an Indian book *Life Proceeds from Life*, by Svami Prabuknaga, where *Gop* is clearly defined as a "girl shepherd." True, a man who does not appear for single combat is more a girl than a man, a member of Donbettir's underwater world, a mermaid. —WM]

[May has in mind here the Sanskrit *gopi* ("milkmaid"), but the Ossetian form is /*gopp*/ with a geminate and seems to mean "tuft." *Gop-Chekh* is literally "pale blue tuft," and perhaps is an old mark for a coward. See Appendix of Names.—JC]

7. The custom of *irad*, the "bride-price," exists among all Caucasian people. Furthermore, it found itself most firmly established among the Ossetians, where, as nowhere else, it reaches colossal proportions. In the nineteenth century the purchase of a bride was usually made in the form of larger and lesser cattle, often counted by the hundreds, in precious objects among which expensive weapons were considered a necessity, and in huge copper cauldrons for the brewing of beer. Before the November Revolution, they began to pay bride-prices mainly in the form of money. Then the amount ranged from 300 to 1,000 rubles. Many Ossetians, in order to collect such a sum for the purchase of a bride, worked for years as servants to rich landowners and kulaks, and traveled around in various regions of Russia, and even to America, Canada, China, and so on. This excessive sum to be paid for the bride led to the barbarous custom of kidnapping, often accompanied by killing, which in turn led to blood-feuds, continuing often through many years. At the present time this bride-price racket, like many other survivals of the past in Ossetia, has now faded into the region of legends.

8. [Professor V. I. Abaev, in his introduction to this book, says this of Balshag's Wheel that it leads us into the circle of sun myths. "The fact that the Sun-hero (Shoshlan) is alien in a struggle against the Wheel, a symbol of the sun, does not surprise anyone who knows with what twists and turns, and along what unexpected lines, the themes develop in folk-poetry, and how often is affirmed there the dialectic law of the union of opposites." That may be true in general, but I do not think that it applies here.

It seems obvious to me that Balshag's Wheel was none other than the first war-chariot-wheel, provided with a long curved blade at its axle, as one can see on the Westminster Bridge monument to Boadicea in her war-chariot. It was drawn by two horses, and carried the warrior-knight and his charioteer, to whom he gave

orders when and where to attack. Only in this story of Shoshlan's death the Wheel and its charioteer driver are united in one personification. So the Wheel can speak, think, act, make mistakes. It has a home and relatives, human enough to have finger- and toenails! The most convincing evidence from the story is the slaying of Shoshlan's twelve hunting comrades, lying in their tent, six on each side, feet toward the center, who have all their legs cut off below the knee simultaneously by one sweep of the Wheel. Later Shoshlan dies in the same way, with his legs severed at his knees, his only vulnerable spot.

[Professor V. I. Abaev, to whom I am indebted for many lengthy discussions on the epic and its translation, allows me to say that he too is now convinced of the correctness of this explanation, and of other notes made in the process of translation. After presenting him with a copy of my *Who Were the Ancient Britts?* he thanked me for clearing up many points.—WM]

9. Here are the echoes of two ancient Ossetian customs. According to the first, they gave a feast in honor of a newborn boy child, and according to the second they gave him to another family to be reared. The second custom took place when the boy had grown a few years. Then until his maturity he remained with his wardens and tutors, and was finally returned to his family. The foster-parent received rich presents from his real parents, and from that time on wardens and parents were counted as relatives, and helped each other with difficulties.

PART 4



SHIRDON



This happened in times long ago, when the beauty Zerashsha, the daughter of Donbettir, lord of the wide waters, was alive. Her two sons, Urizhmag and Khamis, were also walking this world. Parched old Warkhag once wanted a drink, and said to the beauty Zerashsha: “Go, sunlight of my soul, down to the stream, and fetch me some cold fresh water, for this warm water does not quench my thirst.”

Zerashsha took two pails, and went down to the stream. There on the bank Gatag, master of rivers and streams, saw her and said, “Oh, my sunny-eyed one, beautiful Zerashsha, how white is your skin! Love me now, or I won’t give you any water!” and smiled and winked at her.

Zerashsha was scared at this, and went home with two empty pails. Later she went down to the stream again, thinking that Gatag would be tired of waiting and watching for her. But Gatag was still standing and waiting by the water’s edge, and this time he got his way with her.

In due course a son was born to Zerashsha. They named him Shiridon, son of Gatag. His childhood was spent in Donbettir’s large family. When he grew up, he left the underwater kingdom, crawled out underneath a bridge, and came to the Narts’ meeting place in the village square.

The Narts were surprised to see this stranger, and someone said: “He is like us to look at, but there is also something devilish about him! Where has he sprung from? Where does he live?” They asked Shiridon, “Who are you? Tell us whence you come, and what is your name?”

Shiridon went up to Zerashsha, and quietly said to her, “The Narts are asking who I am, and where I come from. What shall I say?”

“Tell them that you are a Nart, like them,” she replied. “Only don’t tell them that I bore you. Then I will give you in marriage to a niece of the Narts. She often visits me, so call in yourself more often.”

That was all Shiridon needed to hear! Every day he went to the meeting place in the village square, and teased the Narts. They got angry with him and began to

quarrel. If someone made a dash for him, to strike him a blow, he just disappeared beneath the earth, and the Narts could not reach him nor catch him in any way.

One day Shirdon was sitting on the square. Young Shoshlan returned from the hunt, and brought with him a dog. The Narts all praised this hound. Shoshlan tied him up at night in his yard. When all were asleep, Shirdon crept into his courtyard and stole this dog. He gave it some magic food, and took him to his own home. By day the dog was free and wandered about everywhere, but at night he unfailingly returned to Shirdon's home.

Shoshlan wanted to recover his dog, but now the hound kept well away from him. Of course Shoshlan knew that Shirdon had stolen him, but he did not know just where Shirdon lived. Sometimes he followed the dog to catch it, but it disappeared under a bridge somewhere. Perhaps that was where Shirdon lived, he thought to himself.

Well, once Zerashsha told Shirdon some news about the Nart's niece, "Today, at midday, the Nart's niece will return home. Some girls will accompany her as far as the source of the Zikhi-don; after that she'll be all on her own, so don't stand yawning!"

Shirdon waited for the Nart's niece at the spring of Zikhi-don, and when the girls accompanying her left, Shirdon enticed her to him. Later she bore him three sons at once—unusual triplets.

When she was giving birth to them, Shirdon sat her near the hearth, and the first one he named after it, Konaga, which means "the hearth." But the birth-pangs did not cease, so Shirdon then sat her on his knees, and the second son was born so, and received this name, Waraga, which means "the knee." The third son was born with his little mouth closed, and almost suffocated. Shirdon opened his tiny lips and began to blow breath into them, and so saved the infant's life. This son he named Fuaga, which means "breath."

Thus in one day three sons were born to Shirdon, triplets. Their mother could not recover after their birth, and died soon after. Shirdon had to feed them all somehow, but managed to save them all.

The Narts named Shirdon “the treachery of the heavens, and the cunning of the earth.” He was so eloquent with words that whensoever he spoke people said his words had power to shatter a great cliff. Shirdon did not only know what had happened already, but could foretell what was to come. He knew, for instance, whether a young mother would bear a son or a daughter. On his forehead he had a secret scar, a sign of good fortune, though in fact Shirdon was very poor.

Shirdon could not get on with the Narts. They did not like him, and often tried to deceive him, and arranged all kinds of intrigues to catch him unawares. He in his turn did not spare the Narts either.

“Whoever sets a trap for Shirdon, they fall into it themselves!” so said the Narts. However, though they were angry with him, that did not mean that they did not prize his cleverness. Without him, for instance, their hunting expeditions and their cattle-raiding campaign were never really successful. So, though he was hurtful to them, he was also useful.

41 ♦ A NART EXPEDITION

The famous Narts Urizhmag, Khamis, Shoshlan, and Batraz gathered together to go on an expedition. Many of the younger Narts accompanied them on campaign, and they had only just started out of the village when one of them suddenly remembered Shirdon, and said to the others, “Why shouldn’t we take Shirdon along with us. It would make our campaign all the merrier with him amongst us!”

One of the young Narts said straightaway, “Wait for me here awhile, and I’ll go and fetch him.”

“Very well!” said the others. “We’ll wait, but move lively, return soon!”

The young Nart galloped back to the village, rode up to Shirdon’s home and shouted out to him, “Hey, are you at home, Shirdon? Look out of your window!”

“I’m here,” replied Shirdon, and came out to speak with the youngster.

“I’m ready to listen if you have good news to tell me!” he said.

“The most famous Narts are off on a distant expedition, and they’d like you to accompany them on their journey!” said the youngster.

Shirdon was silent, his face overclouded with care. He answered sadly, “How can I travel with them? You all know that I am poor and have no horse, so how can I possibly travel with them?”

“Don’t talk about having no horse. Have we no horses then? We are riding—and see you walking? But we are much younger than you, so how can that be—you walk while we ride. You will go on foot and we shall ride. Then where we shall ride, you will go on foot. We’ll see you on your way!”

“Very well then, that’s agreed!” said Shirdon because he was anxious to go on campaign too.

He tucked the ends of his tunic in his belt, and set off on foot, and soon they came to the place where the other Narts were waiting. Away they all went, he on foot following those on horseback. One of the Narts more arrogant than the rest in his dislike of Shirdon said, “Let us together, then, ride through this stubble-field, and let Shirdon scratch his legs to bits on the stubble till they bleed!”

So they rode along by the river through a long stubble-field, and Shirdon’s feet were soon pricked through his poor sandals till they bled. After a while Shirdon called to the young Narts and said, “Hey, you Narts, you are not keeping your word! You promised to give me a lift on your horses, but so far not one has done so. I am tired now, and my feet are sore. I can’t walk any more. What will you do now?”

“If we elder Narts had seen that you needed a horse,” said Urizhmag, “we should have provided you with one before we left the village. But which of us promised you that you would be able to ride?”

“But your youngster promised, when you sent him to fetch me!” said Shirdon, trying to control his agitation.

None of the Narts however offered him his horse to ride, or even to take him behind. They pranced along meadows on their excellent steeds, and even teased Shirdon by riding near and snatching his stick, or grabbing at his hat, and when this failed, simply rode round him in circles and made him really angry.

Still Shirdon held his tongue, but all the same thought to himself, “You won’t have long to poke fun at me so. My turn will come, then look out, you Narts, for I shall have the laugh of you and make you sweat!”

The Narts rode on, and again Shirdon complained: “It’s all very well for you, but not for me. You have broken the word you gave me, and make me walk all the while!”

The youth who was sent to fetch Shirdon then answered, “You are not speaking the truth, Shirdon! Who promised to let you ride their horse? Who gave you their word that you would not have to walk?”

“You yourself promised,” answered Shirdon, “but broke that promise!”

“You lie, Shirdon. What I said to you was, ‘You will go on foot, and we shall ride. Where we shall ride, there you will go on foot. We shall see you on your way,’ And as I promised, so it is, you see!”

Shirdon then understood that the youth had tricked him, and fell silent.

They rode on farther still, until they came to a wide river. Shirdon was disturbed most of all. How should he get across, traveling on foot?

Then Urizhmag, seeing him hesitating, said to him, “Take hold of my horse’s tail, Shirdon, and we’ll help you across!” They had got well into midstream, when Urizhmag asked Shirdon, “Say, Shirdon, when should a fellow cut his fingernails and toenails?”

“Whenever he remembers it, let him do it then,” replied Shirdon.

Straightway Urizhmag stopped his horse in midstream, and began to cut his fingernails. Then he took off his socks and began to cut his toenails. While he took his time doing this, Shirdon was left clutching his horse’s tail in the water, and the waves were washing him first one side and then the other. How else could it be in such a large swift river? When Urizhmag had finished his business, he whipped his steed up again, and they reached the other bank, dragging Shirdon along, wet and frozen.

Still the Narts rode on, and went so far, that Shirdon, afoot, wore out his sandals completely. Then he stood on a mound and said to all, “Farewell, Narts warriors! I shall remain here. May God grant that you return home safely with rich booty from your campaign! Then maidens and young Nart wives standing on the hill will count each man as you ride in, and find one short, and will say, ‘They must have sold one of their comrades as a slave, and they are coming back to divide the head-price!’ ”

At once Urizhmag made reply, "That's probably right, what you say, Shiridon. We must obviously avoid such a thing, and so we shall in turn let you ride behind us now!"

"Well, Shoshlan's horse is very strong. He gallops and kicks up the earth behind him. I shall ride behind Shoshlan first!" said Shiridon, and with that he took up his place.

Once settled there, he cautiously sneaked Shoshlan's tinder-box, with its flint and steel, from his pocket, then after a while said to him, "I am beginning to feel sorry for your steed now, Shoshlan. He must bear a double burden. I shall change over to another horse now. There is Urizhmag's horse, Arfan. Look how he kicks up the turf! I'll change over to him now!" and with that he slid down from behind Shoshlan. Then Urizhmag took Shiridon behind him, and they all rode on. Urizhmag had three tinder-boxes. One with flint and steel was tied to his waistband, a second with flint and steel was kept under the saddle cushion, and the third to the girth strap. Shiridon sneaked all three tinder-boxes from Urizhmag, with their flints and steels, and then said to him after a while, "I think your horse is somewhat tired, Urizhmag. It is hard going for him to carry two riders at the same time. I shall change over now to someone else." He jumped down from Urizhmag's horse, and went over to Khamis. He took Shiridon up as passenger, and set him behind himself.

At once Shiridon found his tinder-box, and stole that one too.

So he set on each one's horse in turn, and from each rider he stole his tinder-box, with its flint and steel.

Soon the night descended, and all grew dark and cold. The Narts then stopped and pitched their tents for the night, and Urizhmag said, "You young Narts set about catching something to set before it gets quite dark. Perhaps Afshati will send you some game to shoot for supper!"

They ran off at once to fulfill his command, and returned soon with the carcass of a deer they had slain. They quickly gathered some firewood, and began to prepare a bonfire, but they could not find a tinder-box anywhere. Urizhmag heard them fussing about looking, and laughed, "Obviously you were so busy kissing your wives and comforting them on parting, that you quite forgot

your tinder-boxes! But who goes on campaign with only one tinder-box? Take a lesson from an old-timer. I always have one strapped to my belt,” and he felt for it there but did not find it in its usual place.

Old Urizhmag was much put out at first, but then he began to feel for another one taken from the girth strap when he tied up his horse. He felt in his tunic’s lower pockets, but found no tinder-box there.

“Well,” cried Urizhmag, “what the devil has happened? Ah, never mind! I have a third which I keep under my saddle cushion. Run to my horse, lads, and bring my saddle cushion here!”

The Nart youngsters ran to bring him the saddle cushion. It was all folded up tight, like a fat turkey ready for cooking. Urizhmag unrolled it and began to feel for the tinder-box, but found nothing there either.

Meanwhile Shirdon went down into a gully and collected a heap of dried reeds, making out that he too wanted to set a fire going.

Urizhmag then said to him hopefully, “Hey, Shirdon, did you bring any fire with you? If so, light ours!”

But Shirdon only replied scornfully, “Get on with you all, you stuck-up Narts! What have you thought up now? You went to ride your horses, while I go on foot behind you with head-cloth full of burning coals? I have nothing of the sort!”

Then the Narts began to be troubled, “What shall we do now?” they began to ask each other despairingly.

Suddenly Urizhmag, glancing round, saw a light a long way off, and again he addressed Shirdon, “Well then, Shirdon—you see that light there, between those three mountains? You could go there and bring us back some embers maybe?”

Shirdon did not answer a word, but just went off in the direction shown. But halfway there he stopped, then returned and told the Narts that he had seen a house, knocked, but nobody opened nor answered.

Then one of the Nart youths went in search of fire, in the same direction, where light could still be seen. He walked a long way, and finally came to a

house. When he knocked seven giants came out. They were all very pleased to see the Nart youth.

“We do not drive from our threshold one who asks for fire,” said one of the giants, and invited him into their house.

The lad went in, but as soon as he sat down on a bench made of some heavy logs, where they had poured some special glue, the Nart youngster was stuck tight, so that he could not move.

The other Narts waited for his return, but finally they could wait no longer, and sent a second youngster out in search of him.

But when he came to the house and knocked, the giants invited him inside and sat him next to the first, and so the youngster, one after another, who went in search of their brethren and the fire they needed did not return. Next, the elder Narts began to go to rescue their own lads. First among them went Shoshlan, and in due course was invited into the house and sat on the sticky bench. The same fate then overtook Khamis when he went to the house. At last Urizhmag grew alarmed that none of his comrades returned, and could wait no longer, so he too then went in search of the others. He came up to the giants’ house and cried, “Hey there, whoever owns this house—come outside.”

Straightway the giants went out to meet him, and asked, “Who are you looking for? Your youngsters most likely? Well, don’t be alarmed, they will soon be returning home. Better come in as our guest, and we’ll offer you some warmed-up home-made whisky. It has been standing by the fire already, waiting to be served to our guests. That is why your youngsters were delayed. Don’t be embarrassed, come in!”

Urizhmag thought it over to himself, “It wouldn’t be bad, seeing how tired I am, to take a horn of warm whisky!”

Urizhmag went into the giants’ house and saw all the Narts as it were at a feast, sitting side by side on a long bench. But they looked angrily at Urizhmag, and none rose to greet him, as custom demanded. Urizhmag did not like that, and he became angry and slumped down on the end of the long bench. The giants went behind him and put some more of their secret glue there, and Urizhmag was also immediately stuck fast.

So they sat stuck in a row, those famous Narts, lovers of fighting, hunting, and riding, and all active movement. Their faces were pale, and they sadly looked out of their eyes. Meanwhile the giants' enormous cauldron was bubbling and seething away like a spring. Into that colossal cauldron the Narts would be thrown. The seven giants, each one stronger than the next, were already sharpening up their knives well on mountain crystal. Seeing all this, and hearing the rasp and chatter of steel, the Narts felt their hearts sinking before chilling death. . . .

But Shiridon at the halting place lit a fire, freshened up the venison brought in by the Nart youths, and made some tasty shashliks on spits, and ate them himself. The kidneys and their fat he roasted separately, and hung them on his mustaches, one on each side, until they became cool. When he had finished eating, he set off again in the direction that the Narts had taken. On reaching the giants' home, he cried, "Where have you got to, you Narts? Evidently you are stuffing your stomachs again, and have left me all alone in the dark forest. What if a bear comes and claws me, or the wolves eat me? You don't even see me!"

The Narts heard Shiridon's voice, and it lit up their hearts like a ray of sunshine. The giants, hearing him shout, went out to welcome him, "Come in, come in, and be our guest. Sit at table along with our other Nart guests!" and they showed him to the long bench.

But Shiridon at once made reply, "Whatever are you saying? Would I dare to sit shoulder to shoulder at table with them? They are my lords and masters—do you think that they would allow that? Better let them come outside and speak with me!"

The giants would not agree to that, so willy-nilly Shiridon was obliged to join the others at table. However, seeing the Narts sitting motionless there, Shiridon at once suspected that something was amiss. Why were they all as still as stones? Why were they all so silent? Shiridon stood near the door, so that all the Narts could see him, and teasing and mocking his comrades, began to lick the shreds of fat and kidneys still sticking to his whiskers, smacking his lips.

Again the giants invited him to sit down with the other Narts.

“I have already told you that it is not befitting for me to sit with them. But if you have an old tub without a bottom, then bring it to the table here, and fill it with ashes, and that would be like home.”

The giants did as he asked, and brought a bottomless tub, filled it with ashes, then one stealthily poured some magic glue on it. As Shirdon sat down, unseen by the giants, he tilted the barrel on one side, and since there was no bottom to it, some ashes trickled out, and the magic glue with them. Then Shirdon settled down comfortably on the rest, and the giants began conversing with him, “Tell us, how do they choose the fattest cattle for sacrifice in the land of the Narts?”

Shirdon answered them so, “In our country, when they want to choose the fatter cattle for the sacrifice, they pass their hand along the nape of its neck. If their nape is soft, then it means the cattle is fat, and fit for slaughter.”

On hearing this, the giants began to feel the necks of all the Narts in order. The softest neck was found on Shoshlan, and the giants decided that he was the fattest of the Narts. Together they tore him from his place and laid him on the table, just like a beast prepared for slaughter. Then Shirdon thought to himself, “If these giants do slay him, and the others later, then shame will fall upon me. These giants are sharpening their knives to slice Shoshlan to pieces before they cook him in their huge cauldron.” He jumped up at once and cried, “Hey, you giants! You are known everywhere in the world for your gluttony! What are you doing? Are you getting ready to stuff fat into your bellies again? That is shameful!”

The giants were doubly surprised—first that Shirdon was not stuck to his barrel, and second, that he spoke so boldly. They glanced at each other, embarrassed, and one replied, “Well, of course we take care of our bellies! What else do you think?”

“There is something else! You didn’t even inquire why these Narts came to you, but immediately set about stuffing them into your stomachs!”

“Then be good enough to tell us why they came. We are listening!”

“Then listen well!” said Shirdon. “An argument flared up among the Narts: which of the blacksmiths tools is the oldest of them all? They couldn’t agree, so they came to you, as knowledgeable people, for advice.”

The eldest giant could not restrain himself, and said decisively, "I'll tell you the truth! In the smithy the most important, and the oldest piece of equipment is the anvil!"

"No, no! The bellows came first. They are the most important! What would you do without them—blow on the fire with your mouth, then?" arrogantly answered his younger brother.

"What about the pincers?" broke in the third. "They are most important! You can't hold red-hot iron in your hands. They came first!"

"How about the hammer?" fiercely cried the fourth. "Will you beat the hot iron with your fist? That's the most important and the oldest!" His voice rang out, trying to make itself heard above the others.

Straightway Shirdon supported him, "That's it, brother, you have spoken more truly than the others! If they don't believe you, then let them feel it on their own heads, which is most important of all!" he said, seeing the giant take up a hammer, clutching in his hand, and waving it about.

These words of Shirdon just suited the impatient giant, and he tapped one of his brothers with it on the head, and he at once fell, as if dead. The other giants were soon going hammer and tongs at each other—and may your foes do likewise! They fought and wounded each other severely, seizing and striking with anything that came to hand. If anyone dropped his weapon, then Shirdon picked it up and handed it back to him quickly, urging him on, and saying, "What a merciless blow brother struck you, the heartless monster! He deserves something back!" So at that the fight flared fiercer.

Seeing that one after another the giants were breathing their last, the Narts heaved a sigh of relief, and light began to burn in their eyes. Soon the giants slew each other down to the last one, and when Shirdon was sure that they were all dead and done for, he said, "Oh, my comrades, I must say farewell to you now! I am returning home. What shall I tell them in the Nart village?"

The Narts all began to plead with him, and entreated him, and entrusted him to stay, "For your mother's sake, and for your father's sake, Shirdon, save us! You are not only evil, you are our good as well, our salvation! Do your good deed, and release us from this accursed bench!"

“How am I to help you, and with what?” answered Shirdon. “Shall I take a big saw, and saw the bench in pieces, so that each one of you goes home with a portion of it stuck to his bottom?”

“How could you suggest such a thing?” retorted the Narts. “We are all respectable men, and if we appear before others so, it would be far worse than death for us. No, no! We beg you, do something else, so that other Narts know nothing of our shameful position. Think up something!”

“Well then,” said Shirdon, “I can only suggest one other way—I’ll go and find eighty-eight wild bulls somewhere, then I’ll make some kind of fasteners for the bench on which you are stuck, and thus I’ll drag you back home, bench and all!”

The Narts began to wail, and tears rolled down their cheeks then, “If you take us home like that to the meeting place in the village square, the Narts will first of all glance at us, and then say, ‘See how Shirdon has dragged them home, our esteemed husbands, just as if they were wooden blocks, part of the bench too!’ No, it would be better to let the wolves chew our bones!”

So Shirdon made mock of the Narts as much as he pleased, and said, “I could save you all once more, but you would soon forget my help!”

“Oh, no! Only save us, and we shall do whatsoever you ask!” they said.

“But you will not keep your word! If we live together, as I wish, you would again give me the dog’s share when spoil is divided between you, and so I should be cheated. Also when you share out the land on the southern slopes of the mountain, then you would deliberately give me the northernmost lot. When sharing out the bullocks you would give me the youngest, first time under the yoke, and if it’s cows, you even will see to it that I get those after their first calving. Then when I die, you will bury me near the meeting place, so that I shall always hear your everlasting mockery of me!”

The Narts then swore that they would do nothing to spite Shirdon.

“Well, so be it!” said he, and began to scoop out hot water from the cauldron, and to pour it over the benches where the Narts were sitting, so that the glue softened, then melted, and finally freed the Narts.

It was no easy matter. They left bits of skin and meat in places, as they tore themselves from the bench. Therefore, when they made ready their steeds to ride back to camp, none of them could sit straight in the saddle, but bent and twisted this way and that.

When they reached their overnight campsite they looked around and saw Shiridon's last shashliks, still on their spits, and could not fail to guess that Shiridon had flint and steel and tinder-boxes, and that he had purposely made them go seeking fire at the giants' house. Again the Narts felt spiteful toward him and said, "Let's make Shiridon go on foot again!" So they mounted their horses, and then said to Shiridon, "Hey, Shiridon! You just follow in our tracks again. We are off now!"

Shiridon answered nothing, but when the Narts had departed he took the opportunity for catching one of the giants' horses, and on such a steed quickly overtook his comrades. He sat straight in the saddle, but more like a young man than they, bent this side and that, like old men.

"Ooh-hooh! You proud Narts! From overweening arrogance you cannot sit straight on your steeds!" he teased them.

Hanging their heads the Narts rode home. In one place they rested overnight, and began to agree between themselves what they could do to take Shiridon down a peg or two, "When that brash Shiridon, our everlasting plague, returns home, he will start boasting that he saved us all from disaster. Let's do something to make him the laughingstock of all the Narts at home!"

During the night some Narts got up, and cut off the lips of Shiridon's horse, so that its teeth were exposed, as if snarling all the time. But Shiridon saw what they had been up to, and secretly, very cautiously cut through the tails of their horses, but left them hanging on one shred.

In the morning the Narts set off. Shiridon rode behind them.

Shoshlan turned round in his saddle and said to the others, "Here's a wonderful thing! Shiridon's horse is laughing all the time!"

"My horse is not a fool, and doesn't laugh for nothing!" said Shiridon.

Then Shoshlan said to his comrades, somewhat alarmed, "Shiridon has again played some kind of a trick on us, but what?"

The Narts halted their horses, dismounted, and began to inspect them. They gave them a brush-down, and smartened them up, but as soon as they touched their horse's tails, they fell to the ground, like brushes.

The Narts were all disturbed at this, and cried, "How can we appear in the village on such dock-tailed steeds? All this mischief has been worked on us by that rascal Shirdon!"

They took hold of him, bent a tall tree down to the ground, and then tied Shirdon by his mustaches to the topmost branches, and let them go. Shirdon swung helpless high in the air, and sadly said to himself as the Narts rode off, "It seems to me, Shirdon, that now you've had it!"

Then suddenly he saw a shepherd driving a flock of sheep belonging to the lord Balg, smiling and whistling as he went. But when he saw Shirdon high up in the tree, hanging by his whiskers, he stopped whistling and gasped aloud in amazement, "For God's sake, tell me what you're doing up there!" and he stood gazing up at Shirdon, with his head thrown back.

"Mind your own business, and look where you lead your sheep!" said Shirdon. "If I tell you what I am doing here, you would straightway wish to take my place!" The shepherd shook his head, and said, "I swear I would do no such thing! Only be good enough to tell me what you are doing, right on the top of the tree, and what do you see?"

"Well, I see that I shan't get rid of you until I tell you, and its just this: from here I see how God grinds his grain in the heavens. It is so curious that I cannot stop looking a moment to eat and drink!"

"Be good enough, my dear fellow, to let me take a look at him, just once!" said the shepherd, "I've never had the chance to see God before!"

"What did I tell you? Here you are asking to take my place now!"

The shepherd swore that he merely wanted to glance out of the corner of his eye, and see what God was like, and then he would again let Shirdon occupy his place, and make him fast again.

He swore so many oaths, that Shirdon finally said, "Very well, I will tie you up here in the top of the tree. I shall have to tie you tightly, for if you are loosely

fastened, when you see God you might fall. Bend down the tree, and help me to unfasten my mustache, and then I'll fasten you in my place."

The inquisitive shepherd bent down the tree, and helped Shirdon to unfasten his whiskers. Shirdon then tied him tightly in his place, and set the tree free. It straightened itself up, and there was the shepherd—hanging on the topmost branches. He looked up into the heavens, but of course, he did not see God anywhere, and shouted down to Shirdon, "I don't see God here at all, and my eyes see less clearly now!"

"O warmth of my native hearth! Don't be in such a hurry dear fellow! Hang on a little longer by your whiskers there, and you'll see nothing at all!"

With that he left the dangling shepherd and drove off all the fat sheep of lord Balg. On reaching home with the flock, all gazed in wonder.

"Look . . . our bold Shirdon has again driven home the enemy's sheep!"

"May God punish you for hanging me in the tree!" replied Shirdon. As a reward he helped me to seize this flock. Take it and share it, and don't call me good-for-nothing! You are good-for-nothings if you can't seize Balg's flocks too!" The Narts straightaway set out for the Balg plain, but at once bumped into Balg's guards, who were looking for the shepherd. Again they cursed Shirdon, and wanted to kill him. But who could do that? If you threw him in the sea, he would come out dry! He could even get the better of the Narts, so they had to respect Shirdon, son of Gatag.

42 ♦ HOW THE TWELVE-STRINGED HARP APPEARED

For a whole year the Narts were busy building a banquet hall for all social occasions and festivities. They wanted to make it so that it should please even Shirdon, and win his approval. When the hall was finished, Shoshlan went to Shirdon and told him, "The Narts are gathered in their new banqueting hall, and ask that you should come and take a look at it."

"Very well, then, I shall come and do so," replied Shirdon.

So they went together and entered the great hall. All the Narts were gathered there, and they asked Shirdon, "Say, is it to your liking, our new feast hall? Do

you find in it any defect?”

Shirdon inspected the whole hall, looked in every corner, and afterward said to them, “Very good, very good indeed! But if only . . .” and not having finished his remarks, went off home.

Shoshlan went after him, caught him up and asked, “Why all the hurry, Shirdon? You told us little, indeed!”

“What more should I have told you, then?”

“You should have told us what you meant by: ‘But if only . . .’”

“I said that the hall was very good . . . but if only, I thought, if only there were something in the empty space in the middle!” and with that, off he went.

Shoshlan returned and told the Narts, “Shirdon criticized our hall, and said it appeared somewhat empty in the middle.”

The Narts began to meditate, trying to find the meaning in Shirdon’s words. The first one to offer a guess at what he had meant was Shoshlan.

“You see, in the hall, above the hearth, we have no chain hung for the cauldron. The sacred hearth-chain is missing! The center is empty!”¹

Then the Narts forged a heavy chain, and when it was ready, they hung it as customary above the hearth in the center of the hall. Then they sent Shoshlan to invite Shirdon again.

When Shirdon arrived the Narts asked him once more, “Take a look now, and tell us if there is anything missing!”

Shirdon again looked carefully round the hall and replied, “Very good, very good indeed! But now if only . . .” and again he made off home.

This time Khamis went after him, and having caught up with him asked, “Shirdon, you said our hall looked very well indeed, but from your unfinished remarks we gathered that there was something that you did not like still.”

“Your hall is certainly very good,” said Shirdon, “but the eastern side is somewhat empty.”

When the Narts heard these remarks, they wondered what he could possibly have meant. Finally they guessed that it was because they had no hostess, and the eastern corner, of course, was empty without her. They then invited a good-

looking young woman to be their hostess, dressed her up like a young bride, and placed her there.

They then wanted to send someone to Shiridon for the last time, but none of the Narts wished to go and ask him to come again.

Then Khamis said to them, “All right, then, I’ll go again. If he refuses to come, then I shall bring him by force here!”

Khamis went to Shiridon’s courtyard and called, “Shiridon, come outside here for a while!”

For a long time Shiridon made no response to the summons, but at last he came out and asked, “Well, what do you want of me, Khamis?”

“The Narts have gathered in the banquet hall, and invite you to come and see their feasting place again.”

“When you sit down to eat and drink, then why do you not invite me?” asked Shiridon. “I shall not come to look at your new hall again!” With that, he turned around and started back toward his house.

Then Khamis grabbed his arm, gave him a poke, and threatened him, saying, “It will be the worse for you if you don’t come, Shiridon!”

Then, furious, Shiridon relented and followed Khamis to the hall. He was still angry as he stepped over the threshold. For a long time he looked around, and finally he said, “Before I could not call this building a real home, but now it is a proper feasting place.”

The Narts were all very glad to hear such praise from Shiridon. He however was still in a rage, remembering the offense given to him by Khamis in threatening him so, and in his heart he was already nurturing a desire for revenge.

Now, Khamis owned a cow. For seven years she had had no calf, and so had become so fat that not only the Narts came to see her but also people from far away. Everyone stared in wonder at her. Naturally Khamis was very proud of this cow.

Shiridon decided that he would steal her.

Once, at night, he crept up to the shed where she stood inside, tied to her stall. No matter how he tried, however, he just could not open the heavy door of

the shed. He returned home empty-handed, and pondered for a long time about how to get at the cow and lead her off. At last, somehow, he thought up a plan. As day was drawing to its close, and people began to drive their cattle in from the pastures, Shiridon slipped through the open door of the cattle shed, and hid inside. Khamis drove in his cattle, and the cow, and firmly fastened the door. Shiridon sat quietly inside and eventually, when all were asleep, began carefully to lift the door off its hinges. In this he easily succeeded, and without making a noise.

Then he led off Khamis's cow, not to his house, which everyone knew, but to another hidden one, of which no one was aware. This secret house was dug into the earth under a bridge, and all his sons lived there, while Shiridon himself lived in a house on the outskirts of the village. He brought Khamis's cow to his secret hideout, and there he slaughtered her, and day after day he and all the members of his family had a fine feast on her flesh.

Khamis saw the next morning that his cow was missing. He began to search in the Nart villages, and in neighboring ones, but found nothing. He was simply bursting with fury. Eventually it came to his ears that the plague of the Narts, Shiridon, had stolen her from his shed.

"There's nothing else for me to do. I must go and see a sorceress and fortune-teller," he thought. So he found a fortune-teller, and told her exactly what had happened.

"Before you came to me I knew about your lost cow. Shiridon has a secret house hidden somewhere underground. Just where it is nobody knows, and neither do I, but in that house his family lives."

"But how can I find out where it is?" inquired Khamis.

"Well, you know his bitch—who doesn't?" replied the sorceress. "That bitch spends the night in the hidden house, and in the morning they let her out. You must watch out for his bitch and when you see her, catch hold of her, and fasten a tightly woven woolen thread to her leg, and then let her go, and I think that she will lead you to Shiridon's hidden home!"

Thenceforth Khamis kept a watch out for Shiridon's bitch, and early one morning he saw her, caught her, tied a strong woolen thread to her leg, and then

let her go. But the dog did not run home to Shirdon's hideout. She ran here and there, and did nothing to give her master away. Khamis caught her again and in frustration began to beat her. What else could he do? He beat her till she was half-dead, and then the bitch began to run off home, dragging the thread after her. Thus she led Khamis to the hidden house.

Shirdon was not there, but his three sons were frightened when they saw Khamis. "How did he ever find us?" they wondered.

The huge cauldron was full of boiling meat. Khamis pulled out some pieces, and at once saw that they were cooking parts of his cow. Unable to restrain his fury, he grabbed hold of Shirdon's sons, by ones and twos, and threw them into the cauldron. Then he stoked up the fire, loaded up all that was left of his cow onto his shoulder, and carried it off home. Thence he went off to the Nart meeting place. Shirdon was there, but Khamis stayed silent, and not a word did he say. But when Shirdon saw Khamis, he mockingly said, "Poor old Khamis! Somewhere they are cooking and eating his cow's meat, while he sits here all hungry!"

"Maybe someone is boiling my cow's meat, but in that same cauldron his own children's flesh is also cooking!" replied Khamis.

Shirdon felt a stab at his heart, fearing that some terrible sorrow had overtaken him, and without answering Khamis, he hurried off home. He ran to his hidden house, glanced around, and saw nobody.

"It's time for dinner, but where have my children gone to?" he thought in alarm. He then seized a huge two-pronged fork that he used for taking meat from the cauldron, and poking it into the boiling meat, he suddenly saw that on its prongs were the bones of his children—here a skull, there an arm, there a leg.

Shirdon was horror-struck, and the fork fell from his hand as he burst out weeping.

"Nobody but Khamis could have done such a thing, such a devilish evil deed!" he muttered, sobbing and shaking.

Then he took from the cauldron the bones of all his children, and held in his hands the arm bones of his eldest son, so that they formed, as it were the frame of a harp. The fibers that led to the hearts of his other sons he stretched on this

frame, so that twelve strings were thus formed, and then with bowed head he sank down beside the remains of his sons, and began to pluck and strike the strings, at the same time singing and sobbing, "I am a poor man, my little ones, and cannot give a funeral feast for you. But whenever people place on the hearth an offering to the dead, in the bright heavenly kingdom they will remember your name, my eldest son, for you were called at birth Konaga, which means 'the hearth.' "

Then, a little louder, Shiridon began to sing and sob, "My second son, at birth we named you Uarag, which means 'the knee,' and he who at the mourning feast for the dead shall kneel on his knee, then let him also remember you!"

Again he wailed and sang for his third son, and sobbed, "My third son, Fuaga, you were so named at your birth, meaning 'breath,' so let those at the funeral feast who blow on the hot food remember you, and that will be your memorial!"

So, one after the other, he praised the names of his three sons.

There was a deep hole behind the door of his hidden house, and there he buried the remains of his children. Then he took the twelve-stringed harp in his hand, and went off to the Narts' meeting place.

There he said to the gathered Narts, "Those who have known neither bitterness nor sorrow, let them listen to the music of the harp!"

Shiridon then played so sadly on his harp, that the whole universe listened to him. The blue heavens groaned, and shed their tears. The wild beasts ceased their hunting in the forest, and lay their heads down on the earth. The birds flew in flocks to Shiridon, and sobbed and wailed together with him. Those who sat at the meeting place too became very sad, and hung their heads and groaned, and tears fell from their eyes like hail.

But Shiridon still played on his harp, and in cadence with the ringing strings, he said to the Narts, "Here is the present that I bring to you Narts. I only ask that I may be allowed to live among you."

Listening to the songs that he sang, the Narts replied, "How can we refuse a man who has brought us such a treasure as a gift to all Narts?"

Then the elder Urizhmag arose and said to Shirdon, “We are of one blood with you, Shirdon. From now on you are a brother to all of us. If you do not begrudge to grant us such a treasure, then come and live with us. As our brother, all the doors of our homes are open to you, and from you we shall keep no secrets!”

The Narts then took the twelve-stringed harp from Shirdon’s hands, and said to one another, “Even if all we Narts are destined to die, this harp will forever remain alive. It will speak of us, and whoever plays on it will remember us, and will become one of us for ever more!”

43 ♦ SHIRDON AGAIN DECEIVES THE NARTS

Once the Narts went on a cattle-raiding expedition and took Shirdon with them. The cattle raid proved fruitless, and returning home empty-handed, the Narts decided to vent their rage on Shirdon.

They knew that in the middle of the dark forest there was a small bottomless lake, about which Shirdon knew nothing. They covered the surface of the lake with brush wood, then tricked Shirdon and sent him straight into that shaky place, in search of game. Shirdon suspected nothing of the trap, and fell right into the hidden water. But in falling, he just managed to catch hold of the roots of tree at the edge of the bank, and with great difficulty managed to drag himself out onto the bank. He at once gathered some dry brush wood, made a fire, and dried his wet clothes, and then ran back to the Narts by the shortest way.

They thought that Shirdon had already drowned, when suddenly they heard him shouting, “Hey, you Narts who love hunting so much! Stop for a moment and listen to what a wonder I have found!”

The Narts reined in their horses, and Shirdon drew up with them, “In all my life I have never seen anything like it—a marvel!” he said. Very soon curiosity got the better of the Narts, and they asked, “Well, what did you see, son of Gatag? Don’t try to trick us!”

“In the forest,” he said, “not having gone as far as the little lake, I saw beasts the likes of which you’ve never seen! They fled into the depths of the forest

among the thorn-bushes and prickles. I was so scared that I could hardly collect my senses, and ran to you here!”

The Narts saw that Shirdon’s clothes were dry, and believed what they heard as he continued his story, “You will never have such a chance again to catch such beasts! We must hurry! I, of course, won’t go near them, but I can lead you to the thicket of thorn-trees where they went. Enormous boars they were!”

The Narts followed Shirdon, and he led them into a grove overgrown with tangled thorn-bushes. There he urged them on forward into its depths.

Night fell as the Narts blundered round and around among the thorn-brushes, but they found no marvelous boars nor any other beasts, nor could they find their way out of the prickly thicket. The thorns just scratched at them till blood ran from them and their horses. Only when daylight came did they at last pull clear, and again they met Shirdon, waiting at the outskirts of the thicket.

“What’s this?” they screamed at him, “Have you tricked us again?!”

“Oh, you Narts!” cried Shirdon, “Why don’t you tell the truth? You wouldn’t dare go near such enormous boars, and so you simply hid in the thicket till daybreak! Now I shall tell everyone about your vaunted courage, and you will certainly be put to shame!”

The Narts were seriously scared that he might indeed do as he had said, and so shame them in front of all the others, so they kept silent, and had to endure his mockery.

So the son of Gatag took revenge on the Narts when they offended him.

44 ♦ HOW SHIRDON TRICKED THE GIANTS

Once Shirdon went into the street and saw that there were no Narts about, and that only children were playing there. Shirdon asked them, “Where have all the Narts gone? I don’t see anybody about!”

One little boy came up to him, and said shyly, “Don’t give me away, but the Narts went off secretly on a cattle raid!”

Shirdon went home, gathered his things together for the journey, and set off on the track of the Narts. Three days he walked through the dense quiet forest,

and was just preparing to take a rest, when he saw three giants fighting in the glade. He made as if to go on farther, and in passing them said, "Good health to you, strong-armed giants! What are you fighting for, please tell me? Why do you try to kill one another? It is not a good thing to quarrel so. You should be ashamed of yourselves!"

"We would gladly give up fighting," said the giants, "but we cannot agree on how to share, that's the trouble!"

"What are you sharing, then?" asked Shirdon, "Maybe I could help to settle the matter, and make peace between you?"

"We own three valuable things," answered the giants, "a skin, a low three-legged table, and a cord. The skin is not an ordinary one. Set upon it a good wish, and it will fly away wherever you want! The three-legged low table is not as simple as it looks. Strike it with a felt whip, and it is covered with food and drink. The cord is unusual too. Whatever treasures you bind with it, they lose weight!"

Then Shirdon at once said to the giants, "Just listen to me, and I shall make peace between you! Each one of you give me an arrow, and I shall let them loose in various directions. Whichever one of you comes running back first with his arrow, he shall have the first choice. The last one to return with his arrow will get what is left by the other two."

The three giants at once agreed. Shirdon took their arrows and shot them in three different directions and cried, "Run and fetch them now!"

As fast as their feet would go, the three giants ran for their own arrows, each pushing the other away, though the arrows were shot in various directions. Soon the giants were lost to sight.

Meanwhile Shirdon took the cord in his hand, placed the low three-legged table on the skin, then sat on it himself and said, "I wish to go back to the roof of my own home!"

No sooner had he made the wish than he found himself standing on the flat roof of his own home. He took all three things with him into the house, and soon arranged a feast. He set down the low three-legged table, struck it with a felt

whip, and with the food and drink that at once appeared in an endless flow he gave all the Narts a fine feast, and entertained them all for a whole week.

They saw how successful he had been on his expedition, and after that always took him with them when they went on a campaign.

45 ♦ HOW SHIRDON HELD A MEMORIAL FEAST
FOR HIS ANCESTORS

On meeting Shirdon the Narts, first one, then other, said to him, “You should arrange memorial feasts in honor of your deceased relatives, so that in the Land of the Dead they do not envy others. You commit a serious offense in not keeping up the customary feasts to the deceased ones, as we all do!”

Others were not beyond teasing him with meanness, mockingly saying, “Among us Narts you will not find another like you, ignoring the dead.”

Shirdon understood very well why the Narts were so concerned with his forebears. He, poor fellow, had only one single cow, and the Narts were eager to eat it. Why else were they worried about his relations?

“Well, let his deceased relations remain without food, and sit hiding their hunger among the other deceased ones!” So they spoke amongst themselves.

For a long time Shirdon kept silent on the matter, but at last said, “Well, you know that I have nothing, so how can I give memorial feasts?”

“Ask among your living relatives and friends, and let them help you, but on no account leave your dead forebears without food, without honor!”

Shirdon collected from relations what they could spare, and gathered his own things together until he had enough for a memorial feast. He then brought in a stove with firewood and stood it on the hearth. Then with a huge two-eared cauldron, he began to brew some beer. But in preparing this he portrayed himself as a simple fellow, stupid even. Everyone knew that to brew good beer you need to put twenty measures of malt in a two-eared cauldron, but he poured into it only one. He boiled it and boiled it, and for several days kept the fire going, but the beer, of course, was not ready.

However Shirdon, as usual, knew what he was doing! People thought that he was preparing a good stock of beer for the memorial feast. Next he slew a sheep, and threw its carcass into another cauldron. “My forebears have long now had no need of food,” he said to himself, “but the Narts will get one poor sheep among them, and make do with that!”

The news that Shirdon was preparing a memorial feast spread quickly. On the day of the feast Shirdon gathered together a beer-server, a baker, and two stupid young fellows whom he invited to serve at table, and said, “You will be busy serving at the feast table, and won’t have time to eat then, so take some refreshment now, or you’ll miss it.” He told them to kill a couple of chickens and roast them, and gave them some whiskey to drink. When this was done they poured the beer into barrels.

Then he sent messengers to invite the Narts to the memorial feast, and while waiting started up a discussion with the servers about which came first—the chicken or the egg? Already tipsy from the whisky, they quickly began to quarrel. One said, “The chicken, of course!” Another retorted, “But the chicken must have come from an egg!” So the argument grew into a fight between them, and they began to strike one another. Then Shirdon interfered, pretending that he wanted to separate them, and seemingly, by chance, he knocked over the barrels of beer. At once he began to show his distress, and to roundly scold his helpers.

“You have done me in! I’m finished! I have only just sent messengers to invite the Narts to the feast, and you have made me upset all my beer! How can I face the Narts now, when they arrive?”

He was just swearing at his helpers, when the eldest Narts came into the courtyard. Shirdon ran out to them, and said in distressful tones, “My servers are stupid fellows! They have spoiled everything! They started arguing about which came first, the chicken or the egg, and it led to a quarrel. They began to fight, and I tried to stop them, and in doing so the barrels of beer that I had prepared got knocked over, and all was spilled. How can we have a memorial feast now?”

The elder Narts glanced at each other, shook their heads, and went off home. On their way they met other Narts also coming to the feast, and when they heard what had happened, they too dispersed to their homes, and did not attend the

memorial celebrations. As for the food that Shirdon had prepared—well, that remained for him to eat alone.

46 ♦ WHY SHIRDON WAS CALLED A LIAR

The Narts gathered in the *nikhash*, the meeting place in the village square, and began to tell amusing stories. Shirdon listened, and scornfully screwed up his face. Then Khamis asked him what was the matter, “What are you making such a face for, Shirdon. Out of all those fine tales, was there not one that took your fancy, not one that pleased you?”

“How can I help but make a face? Each one of you trying to outdo the other, and telling such false stories, and even laughing at them! I’d like to know when I will hear from you at least one word of the truth?”

Shoshlan could not restrain himself, and shouted at Shirdon, “You are an ass, son of Gatag! If you know a better story, then why don’t you tell it to us. We should listen to you with interest.”

“I always have stories worth the telling for your ears!” said Shirdon.

When they heard this reply, the young Narts asked him to tell them such a tale. They were so insistent that at last Shirdon began, “This happened last Friday, before the Saturday when I intended to give a memorial feast in honor of my forebears. I needed to catch some game, and went out hunting.”

“May you sink into seventh hell, Shirdon!” enjoined Shoshlan, “What kind of a hunter are you, then, I’d like to know?”

“Don’t interrupt him, Shoshlan,” said Urizhmag, “let him continue!”

“Well, then! I went through the forest, and met a man there. I wished him good-day. When he learned that I was from the Narts, and intended to hunt, he proposed that we should go together, ‘Let us go to the banks of the Shaufurd. There enormous wild swine go grazing, and we can kill one of their piglets or so!’ ”

“So we set off together for the Shaufurd’s banks, and what did we see? May all my family at home die if I should tell a single lie! There was an enormous fat old sow, giving milk to her dozen piglets. But among them only the first one was

nuzzling the fat sow's nipple, while the second sucked the first one's tail, and the third sucked the second one's tail, and so on through the whole dozen piglets, and from the very last one's tail there spurted a stream of milk."

Here all the young Narts started laughing, and Shiridon broke off.

"May all your family die then, since you've told us a lie now!" said one of the youths.

Shoshlan, however did not laugh. He lost his temper, and shouted, "Get out of our sight, Shiridon! You are not worthy to sit with us on the *nikhash*, because you make mockery of such a sacred place as this ancient meeting place of ours, here in the village square!"

The other Narts jeered at Shiridon freely, but Urizhmag asked him, "Then how did you catch your piglet for the memorial feast at last?"

Again Shoshlan broke in angrily, before Shiridon could reply, "What piglet was there? The mice ate it, I suppose? A pity they didn't eat your lying old tongue, and your head along with it!"

Shiridon waited till all was quiet, and then said significantly, "It is you, unworthy Narts, who ought to slaughter a beast in my honor, because with that story I wanted to show you the way to take on your next hunting expedition, where you could have had such rich spoil!"

"We might have believed you, Shiridon, had you not told us so many lies here, that from such falsehoods we could make a ladder reaching up to the heavens!" said Khamis, shaking his head.

"It is well known that you Narts seek the road to God," replied Shiridon, "so climb up that ladder to him there that I have made for you! Only be careful that nobody falls from that ladder, or else he will break his neck, or leg at least, and Shoshlan and Khamis may even lose their hard heads!" retorted Shiridon—and so his story ended.

From then on they started to call Shiridon a liar.

Nart Shirdon was poor. He took a piece of woolen cloth from one man on trust, but was in no way able to pay back his debt. The man kept calling on him, and asking him to pay up, or give back the cloth, but each time Shirdon made excuses, and the fellow went home empty-handed. What stories didn't Shirdon think up, in order to put off the payment day!

One day the creditor came at the appointed time to see Shirdon about the payment of his debt. He came to Shirdon's home and called to him, "Hey, are you at home there, Shirdon?"

"He's not at home!" his sons told him.

"Then where is he? I've come to collect my debt!" said the creditor.

"He is beyond the village boundary, digging a ditch for water!"

The debt-collector went in the direction shown him and met Shirdon.

"Good-day to you, Shirdon. I wish you joy!"

"May your day be successful, my good fellow!"

"Shirdon, it's time to pay for the cloth, or to return it! You have thought up many excuses for not settling the debt. It is shameful to act so. You should have more conscience in these matters!"

"Now, have I ever refused to admit my debt? Be good enough not to remind me of it any more. What do you think I am doing here? It was in order to pay for the cloth that I came here. My debt brought me here!"

"What are you saying now, Shirdon? I see no signs of concern for the debt here. My eyes do not deceive me. You are just digging a ditch!"

"How dull in understanding you are, brother! See, I dig this ditch and let the water fill it. Then on the banks on each side I shall plant thorn-bushes. Then every time the village sheep and goats go to pasture and return home, they will certainly come to this ditch for a drink. In passing by the thorn-bushes they will inevitably leave tufts of excellent wool and hair there, and I shall gather them all together and comb them and spin them, and weave them until I have some good cloth, and I shall return the cloth to you, and thus your debt will be paid!"

Although the man was angry with Shirdon, he just had to laugh!

"You laugh in vain!" objected Shirdon. "Your cloth is in your hands!"

The creditor waved his empty hands and then returned home. What else could he do, expect leave him to plant the thorn-bushes? He is probably doing so even now.

48 ♦ WHO DECEIVED WHOM?

Shirdon had a well-fed ram. The Narts began to admire it. Once the elder Narts gathered at the meeting place in the square. Shirdon was there, but as was fitting, he sat a little apart. Khamis said to him, “Come and sit a little nearer, Shirdon, son of Gatag!”

He quickly did as bidden, and asked what they wanted of him.

“You know, Shirdon,” said Khamis very seriously, “the great flood is coming, and that will be the end. All will be lost and washed away, and your fat ram as well. Better let us go down to the riverbank, and slay the ram, prepare some shashliks on spits, and eat our fill, and may God look down with favor on us all!”

Shirdon was silent, and stared at the ground, but having heard Khamis, replied, “Since there’s going to be a great flood, let my ram be sacrificed!”

So on a sunny day the Narts gathered on the riverbank, and Shirdon led in his fat ram on a cord. Beneath a tree they chose a pleasant spot, slaughtered the ram, and quartered its carcass, and lit the fire.

While the shashliks were roasting on their spits, the Narts told tales and old legends. Some began to doze, and one of them said, “I say, it’s time to take a refresher! Let’s go bathing!”

They all slipped off their vestments, and plunged into the water.

While they were bathing, Shirdon threw all their clothes on the fire.

The Narts, feeling cool and refreshed climbed out onto the bank.

“Now,” they thought, “the shashliks will be done to a turn, and we shall settle down to our supper!”

But when they wanted to dress and began to look for their clothes, they could not find them anywhere, though they hunted high and low.

“Who the devil has run off with all our clothes?” they cried.

“Nobody ran off with them,” said Shirdon, “I took them, you see!”

“But why so? Where are they? We need them!” they cried, shivering.

“I used them to stoke up the fire to cook the shashliks!”

“But why the devil didn’t you take some more brush-wood?” they cried

“Why go and collect brush-wood, when the clothes were lying at hand? You said that the great flood was coming, and that would be the end, so what do you need clothes for, anyway? You can surely face the end naked!”

The Narts looked at each other in despair, and finally declared, “He who sets a trap for others, also sets one for himself!”

1. In ancient times the central place in an Ossetian home (Khazar), was occupied by the hearth and the hearth-chain, on which were hung kettles and cauldrons when food or drink was being prepared. This chain was a sacred thing in Ossetian homes and any desecration of it was called a most severe offense against the whole family. The home where there was no hearth-chain is spoken of in the tales as uninhabitable. Many religious traditions and customs were bound up with this hearth-chain.

PART 5



KHAMIS
AND
BATRAZ



Everyone knew that Urizhmag and Khamis were twin brothers, and that Zerashsha was their mother. But which one was the elder, and which the younger even they themselves did not know. Because of this, although they had reached their blossoming years, neither of them had founded a family. Neither of the brothers wanted to marry before the other, if that one proved to be the elder.¹ Had either married, and turned out to be the younger of the two, then the elder one would always feel offended that his younger brother, in marrying before he did, had broken the ancient custom of the Narts. In the meantime they continued to deny the other the right to marry first, and both looked on themselves as the elder.

Urizhmag and Khamis asked other Narts which of them was the elder, but nobody among them knew for certain. They then decided to go to their father's sister in Fashnart, and ask her. She would know, if anybody did, which was elder or younger.

It was a long way to Fashnart. Urizhmag, as the more sensible one, said, "It is a far journey, Khamis, and we shall need to provide ourselves with some food, and something to drink on our way."

Khamis agreed, and prepared food and drink, and all the necessities for a long journey, and packed it into two bags that they fixed behind their saddles, and thus the twin brothers set off on the distant road to their aunt Kizmida in the village of Fashnart.

On the road Urizhmag by chance rode on the right of Khamis, and only occasionally on the left. When they were already getting near to Fashnart, Urizhmag rode up on the right of Khamis, and in that order they arrived at the home of their aunt Kizmida.

She came out to welcome them, and how could she otherwise feel than be delighted to see them! When they had tired themselves with greetings at last, Urizhmag asked the important question, "We have come to ask you to be so kind

as to tell us, our dear aunt, which of us is the elder? We have asked everyone, but nobody can tell us.”

“My children, what are you asking me for? You yourselves must know the custom that traveling on the road the elder rides on the right, and the younger on the left. It is clear, therefore, from the way you arrived, that Urizhmag is the elder, and Khamis the younger!”

Nart Khamis lost his temper when he heard this, and cursed his aunt.

“If that is so, and it is all you can say, may you turn into a gray ass!”

“Oh, my dear child, do not curse me, for my shame will then fall on you Narts as well! Take pity on me, and I will give you Arkizh’s tooth!”

“What kind of a tooth is that?” inquired Khamis of his aunt.

“That is such a tooth that if you fix it in your mouth, and any woman sees it, she will immediately fall everlastingly in love with you!”

On hearing these words Khamis cheered up at once, and said, “Let my ill-tempered curse be cancelled. I take back what I said!”

Kizmida knew that Nart curses were always fulfilled, unless revoked, so she was relieved to be delivered from such dreadful shame, and at once brought out Arkizh’s tooth, and said to him, “You may take this gift for saving me from shame, my dear child. I give you this wonder-working tooth. It is a relic from our ancient ancestors, all that remains to us of them. Earlier it was found in the mouth of a maid, and later in the mouth of a man, and it never disappointed the one who wore it, but fulfilled the desires of each. This tooth cannot be lost. Wherever you may drop it, wherever it may happen to fall, it will unfailingly be found again. So it passed from hand to hand, from one generation to another, from one century to another, from one family to another.”

His old aunt Kizmida found a place for the tooth in his mouth, and then she told him what to do, “Whatever beauty you may take a fancy to, only smile and show her this tooth, and she will come to you of her own accord.”

Once Khamis happened to meet a beauty there in Fashnart, and the mere sight of her had set his heart astir. That was Azhaukhan, daughter of the lord of Fashnart. Now he was anxious to try out the power of the tooth of Arkizh on her. On their way home from Fashnart, Urizhmag and he met this beauty,

Azhaukhan, and Khamis smiled at her, revealing the wonderful tooth. She looked at Khamis, and immediately started to follow the riders. Khamis slowed down his horse, and the delicate daughter of Lord Fashnart swiftly overtook Khamis, and turning to him asked, "Where are you from, and who are you, dear guest? My heart is hard to hold; it is gone from me now, and you are carrying it away with you! I only glanced at you, and my head started spinning, and I don't know myself just what I am doing!"

"I am Nart Khamis," he replied, and he and his twin brother rode on their way, still conversing. Behind them silently rode the daughter of Lord Fashnart, not even knowing where she was going.

But after some while the maiden begged Khamis: "Nart Khamis, take pity on me, and turn your face toward me!"

Khamis reined in his steed, while Urizhmag rode on. And then what happened! As soon as he dismounted, and stood on the green grass, that beautiful maid flew to him and embraced him, and they lay down together on that green grass. When she came to herself again she was puzzled, thinking, "Where am I? Why am I here?" After that she returned to Fashnart; meanwhile Khamis and Urizhmag rode home again.

From then on Khamis began to show less strength for a warrior, and more weakness for women. They began to call him a woman-hunter, and the men did not permit their daughters to look in where he lived, so that these should not by chance catch Khamis's inquisitive eye.

The Narts were all sick and tired of this. At the instigation of Nart Burafarnig, they poisoned the mind of the Shauainag prince against Khamis. This prince had a wonderfully beautiful daughter named Mishirkhan. The fame of her beauty and slenderness had spread to the most distant lands. Khamis also had heard of her, but although he tried many times to meet her, he did not succeed in spite of following her around by day and night.

The Shauainag prince feared for his daughter's honor, and so that she should not by chance see Khamis with Arkizh's tooth, he built for her a secluded castle, and kept her there locked in the tower. Egged on by Burafarnig and the other Narts, the Shauainag prince started to follow Khamis's tracks, but though he

sought an opportunity to slay him if he did not leave his daughter alone, he did not succeed in catching up with him.

Once the prince was preparing to go off again in search of Khamis, not knowing that he was lying in wait nearby, counting on his leaving. When the prince left, his daughter Mishirkhan glanced from the top of her tower in farewell. At that moment Khamis appeared with his Arkizh tooth.

In her father's absence, having glimpsed Khamis's tooth, Mishirkhan could not find any peace for herself in her castle tower. She walked to and fro restlessly in her chamber, and all the while the wonder-working tooth tugged and tugged her toward Khamis.

Everything happened as it was bound to happen—the beauty Mishirkhan found herself in Khamis's presence, as he stood there with his steely mustaches, and straightaway she flew to him, flung her arms round his neck, and embraced him. He behaved like a bull on slippery ice, pretending not to notice anything unusual, and remaining indifferent to her.

The maiden embraced him more closely and pleaded with him, “Oh, Nart Khamis, do not torment me! Take pity on my need, and turn your face.”

That was all that Khamis needed, and the way was open. So he took good revenge upon Prince Shauainag, by fully satisfying his daughter.

Among the Narts the memory of Khamis's wonder-working tooth remained fresh for a long, long time.

50 ♦ HOW KHAMIS WAS WED

A hard time began for the Narts when famine struck. No food remained in their larders. Their cupboards were empty. They went out roaming on the mountains, collecting whatever was edible and came to hand. They also went hunting, but game too was scarce.

In those difficult times, Khamis began to bring in from the Yellow Plain, as the Narts named it, carcasses of golden deer. Not content with that, he also slew young deer in Khushkadag Vale, and brought them in. Even that was not enough. He brought wild turkeys from the mountains.

But one day he hunted in vain. Not a single bird nor beast fell before his flying arrows. Through the whole day till evening, he did not glimpse from the corner of his eye any quarry. It was twilight already, when he suddenly glimpsed a herd of deer in the depths of the forest, and among them he noticed one prominent white doe.

“God has sent me that one,” thought Khamis. He took aim with his bow, but had not yet let loose the arrow when a clap of thunder rolled through the ravines, and the deer scattered in all directions, save for the white doe, which lay dead.

“No, that was not thunder,” thought Khamis, bewildered. “There is not a single scrap of cloud in the sky. Maybe it was someone else who slew the doe, instead of me, although I see no signs of another hunter.”

He was still pondering these strange events, when into the clearing from the nearby ravine came a small boy barely visible above the ground. He went up to the slain doe, took out a knife, and began skillfully to flay the skin from the dead doe. He had just finished on one side, when Khamis said to himself, “Will not sorrow overtake your heart, my little lad? Who is going to help you turn over that heavy dead deer! Maybe he will be forced to leave it, and by God’s will, I shall get it after all!”

But then he saw a miracle before his eyes. The little lad placed a good grip on the dead carcass, and with a light swing turned it on its other side as if it had not been a full-grown deer but a white moth that had fallen into his hands.

“That’s a strong young fellow, surely!” thought Khamis to himself. Then Khamis gathered some dry brush-wood for starting a bonfire, and approached the spot where the little hunter was skinning the white doe, working away like an expert with his knife. Khamis threw the brush-wood down by the deer’s carcass, as was the custom among hunters,² and said to the youngster, “May the Lord God send you larger ones!”

“That which he sent, let it be for both of us,” said the little lad in greeting, quickly throwing off his felt cloak, and spreading it out on the ground, “Come and sit with me here, my good guest!” Khamis however, replied to him, shaking his head, “No, it would be better for me to help you with the skinning, or you will be tired out!”

“Maybe God will help me to recover!” replied the little hunter, and finally pulling off the skin, divided it into two halves. Then he cut out the deer’s entrails, and hung them over a branch of a nearby tree.

“There are people here and there, who anyway expect their share. So let them have it. That is only fair!” sang the little fellow.

“Evidently he is not going to share the meat with me! What kind of a face can I put on before all the Narts when they hear of this?” he thought to himself, and feeling his spirits sink, he hung his head.

But the little lad got a fire going in a moment, knowingly chose the best portions of the venison, cut and divided them into four parts, sliced them into small pieces, and stuck them on four spits that were at hand.

“He must be expecting some friends of his, if he prepares so many shashliks to roast!” thought Khamis to himself.

But when the spits were turned, and the shashliks were roasted well on all sides, the little hunter placed two spits before Khamis, and two before himself. Khamis took one spit, and set all the tasty shashliks stuck on it in a row, but the youngster had already emptied both his spits, and licking his lips he said, “Why don’t you eat up. You don’t need much to satisfy your hunger.”

When Khamis made no move to take more, he took the remaining spit lying before Khamis, and ate his third spit-full of smoking shashliks.

“How much, and how quickly that youngster eats! It’s amazing!” thought Khamis. “He cannot be just an ordinary boy of simple birth!”

After supper the little hunter led Khamis into a dry cavern, made up a bed for him, bade him settle himself down for the night, and covered him with his felt cloak. Khamis immediately dozed off, and the little lad then took the skin of the slain deer, and just as quickly and cleverly as when cutting meat, he cut the skin into long strips, and from them began to plait bridle-straps, harness, whips, and hobbles for horses.

It was probably midnight when Khamis stirred in his sleep, and saw the youngster still at work on the skins.

“Why don’t you lie down and sleep?” he inquired of the little lad.

“I have no time to sleep,” he replied. “When you return to your village, and people ask you where you have been, and with whom did you hunt, you will have to show them something as proof of your story, or they will never believe you, so I prepare these things for you.”

When morning came, the youngster said to Khamis, “We must not part without showing our prowess before each other.”

“In what way shall we do that?” questioned Khamis.

“Let us prove it in the hunt!” suggested the little lad.

“Very well,” said Khamis. “We shall prove it in the hunt then!”

They found a ravine deep in silence, and obviously a refuge for many wild beasts and birds, and the lad asked Khamis, “Will you go as beater, and drive the beasts from their lairs, or do you prefer to lie in ambush, waiting while I drive them out for you?”

“I am too old to go as beater,” replied Khamis. “Better to let me lie hidden here, and shoot the beasts as you drive them from the ravine!”

The lad agreed to this. He ran to one peak on the ravine, and there he screeched like a falcon, then he ran to another height and screamed like an eagle. The beasts were scared, and flocked together, and rushed out of the ravine, straight to where Khamis lay waiting. He had not expected the beasts to run by so soon or so quickly, and so before he was able to put one arrow to his bow they had all fled past.

The youngster then returned to Khamis and asked, “But where are the beasts I drove from the ravine?”

“There was not a single one to be seen!” Khamis said, to save his face.

Who else would not be offended by such a false reply? But the young lad in no way expressed his hurt, or dissatisfaction.

“Well, if you saw nothing, then sit here and rest quietly, while I go hunting alone, and find something somehow!” he said as he left.

He did not screech like a falcon, nor scream like an eagle, but he silently tracked down his prey, drove them before him, and slew them. A hundred times a hundred, and still more he slaughtered that day. Then he dragged their

carcasses to the spot where Khamis sat, and quickly began to count them out into three heaps.

“What is he doing now,” thought Khamis in alarm. “There are only two of us, so why divide the catch into three parts? Is he going to take two of them for himself? How shall I stand such an offense? How many years have I lived, how many a land have I traveled, and nobody has ever done such a thing to me before!”

The young hunter finished dividing up the prey into three parts, “Come here, Khamis,” he said, “Take the portion usually allotted to an elder, and then take the portion allotted to a helper in the hunt.”

Khamis chose his elder’s portion, then took his helper’s portion. Only then did the youngster take up onto his shoulders, as if it had been a bundle of dried hops, the heap of carcasses still remaining as his share. Then he said farewell to Khamis, and went on his way.

Khamis was happy with the rich harvest of the hunt, and set off to bring it back to the Narts, but he had gone only a few steps, when he suddenly recalled that he had not asked the young lad’s name. What if the Narts asked who it was that shared such good hunting with him?

He turned around and set off after him at once. The lad, seeing Khamis returning, stopped, lowered his load from his shoulders, and asked, “What has happened? Have you forgotten something?”

“Forgive me, but I forgot to ask your name, and of what family you are from.”

“I come from the tribe of the Donbettirs,” answered the young hunter. “I belong to the Bisenta family, and we live permanently below ground.”

“Then I should like to say just one more word,” Khamis answered. “I wish to take a wife from your family. Though your tribe is small in stature, you have great courage and worthiness.”

“That’s fine!” exclaimed the young lad. “We should very much like to establish good relations with the Narts. But you must know one thing. We are rather hot-tempered, and take pitiless revenge for any offense. We may be only two spans tall, and less than that round the waist, but our strength, our courage,

our own worthiness need no testing. I have a sister, and we could give her to you in marriage, but you Narts love to laugh at people, and make fun of them, and we grow sick of being mocked all the time, and die from constant reproaches. I fear that you will not be able to protect my sister from all that!”

“You just give her to me as my bride. I shall take care of her, make her my pride!”

“Very well, then, be it as you wish,” agreed the little hunter, and he named the day when Khamis might come to claim his sister’s hand.

“You must tell me where your home is!” said Khamis to the lad.

“I shall lay out a road for you, and you must follow it to our home,” answered the little hunter. “I shall draw my sword, hold it before me, pointing straight to my home, and with it I shall hew a road right through the forest, and make a wide path like a street. It will cut through the woodland and come out on the plain. There I shall make a furrow with my feet right across the plain, and it will lead to an anthill, and nearby my home will be found. Thus you must come!”

They bid each other goodbye, and parted on their ways. The son of Bisen lifted his load on his shoulders again, half this side, half that, held it fast with one hand, and with the other he drew his sword and cleared a path to his home, as he had promised. Meanwhile Khamis on returning home told the Narts all about his meeting. When the time appointed came near, Khamis chose a group of the best Narts, and with them rode off to the Bisenta to fetch his wife. They got to the spot where he had bid farewell to the little hunter, and there they found a road cutting through the dense forest. Beyond the forest they found the furrow his feet had made. They kept to this clear pathway and came at last to an anthill. They slid out of their saddles, and straightaway the little hunter appeared from the anthill with his comrades, and though small in stature they were quick and skillful. They welcomed the Narts, took care of their weapons, and their felt cloaks, and carried them to an underground chamber. Then they took their horses to a stable, and led their guests through wide doors to the underground banqueting hall. They had made excellent preparations to welcome the Narts, and richly they entertained them with the best of everything.

Shoshlan, acting as the bridegroom's best man, when the time came to do so, asked the Bisenta family to present to him the Nart's new sister, Khamis's bride-to-be. From the feasting hall, they took him into another chamber nearby. There stood a row of girls, each one more lovely than the other. Shoshlan greeted them, and then asked, "Tell me please, which one of you is destined to be our sister, and the wife of my friend Khamis?"

"None among us will be your sister, nor your friend's bride," replied the maidens. "Your sister, your friend's bride, is in that bed!"

"You are joking with me, but I must know without joking which one of you beauties is going to be the bride!" Shoshlan again insisted. So they took him to the bedside, lifted the blanket and showed Shoshlan a frog that was sitting underneath it.

"There she lies!" they repeated. Shoshlan couldn't believe his eyes. He still thought that they were joking. But their host, Bisen's son, then came to him and told him that beneath the frog's skin a beautiful maiden lay concealed, destined to be Khamis's bride. At this Shoshlan became very angry. He ran out of the bride's bedroom, and called the Narts, "Now you see why, for all his respected age, Khamis has not been able to be wed! People just laughed at Khamis, and they still do. He has put us all in a shameful position by bringing us here to act as his wedding party. Don't ask me about his prospective bride, for I shall not reply. Better get on our horses and ride home again!"

On hearing Shoshlan's words, the Narts mounted their horses and left.

Khamis was the last to do so, and when he prepared to leave, they put his bride, in her frog's skin, beneath the horn of his saddle, and the Bisenta wished him goodbye. He returned home feeling very sorry for himself. He put his horse in the stable, took off the saddle and bridle, and with his head hanging so low that his shoulders rose above it, he entered his home. There he dropped his saddle and bridle in one corner, and sad and tired, he just flopped into bed.

When sleep descended on his unhappy head, the bride in her frog's skin hopped out from beneath the saddle-horn, and straightaway changed into a beautiful maiden. Khamis opened his eyes to see a wonderful beauty before him, with the light of the heavens and the loveliness of the earth joined and mingled

in her face. The room became radiant, full of happy sunshine. That light was her golden hair, which fell about her shoulders, and reached down to her heels, clothing her with a robe as bright as the sun itself. Khamis gazed at her in amazement, “Are you a heavenly spirit, or an earthly maiden?” he asked her.

“I am not a heavenly spirit, and not an earthly one. I am a maiden from the Bisenta family, the one chosen to be your bride, she whom you sought in marriage, and brought home with you. But my fate is such that by day I have to hide from people’s eyes, and only at night do I leave my frog-skin disguise!”

“If that is so,” replied Khamis, “then here is your wedding-bed!”

“It is not time, and I shall not lie there now,” answered the maiden, “but I think it would be more fitting for you to show me the silks and other rich textiles, and all the pretty shoes and clothes that you have been saving up against your wedding day!”

Khamis jumped out of bed, and opened up his huge wooden chest in which lay silks in abundance and other rich textiles that he had saved for his wedding since his youth. The Bisenta maiden straightaway found a pair of scissors and began to cut and sew. Skillfully and swiftly she worked, and all that was needed to dress a hundred men from head to foot, she cut and sewed easily in one night. The second night the young bride of Khamis was occupied again in the same way, and when she had enough for two hundred men, she said, “Now do thus: take all these clothes and things, and share them out among the Narts. Those who are poorer, give to them the best. Do not fear that we, in doing so, shall grow poorer. Nothing that I make is ever lost, and nothing that I give is ever wasted!”

Khamis did as she suggested, and for a long time the Narts were amazed that Khamis should have spare clothes and slippers to give away.

Although Khamis’s young wife, from dawn till dusk, from sunrise till sunset, changed into a frog, Khamis loved her very much, and he could not bear to be parted from her for a moment. Wherever he went, he always took her with him.

Once he had to go to the great meeting place in the village square, and he said to her then, “Oh, Bisenon, today I have to go to the great assembly of Narts on the public square, and I shall take you with me.”

“Don’t do that,” his wife replied, “Leave me at home. If you take me to the meeting of the council of the Nart men, you will only lose me!”

But all her pleading was in vain. Khamis would not listen, and so he put her in his pocket, and set off to the meeting place.

As soon as Shiridon saw him there, he guessed at once that he had his little wife with him in his pocket, and wanted to play a trick on him. He gathered some of the young Narts together and at his suggestion they began a quarrel with Khamis that soon came to blows, and then Shiridon began to shout aloud, “Oh, Nart elders, the best of us are going to die! Just look what is happening here! The young beat their elders, and the elders bring their wives to the men’s council meeting! What kind of meeting is this? We have lost all shame, and disorder reigns. Just look at Khamis, for instance! He has the effrontery to bring his wife to this council! What is this, then, a man’s affair, or a woman’s? What is Bisenon herself doing here? Why did he have to bring her with him?”

Khamis grew enraged at this, and jumped up, and gave Shiridon such a blow with his fist, that he went flying head over heels, and crashed to the ground. Shiridon began to cough and choke, and a drop of blood appeared on his lips, and he lost consciousness. Khamis in a rage went off home, and left him there.

When Bisenon considered this, she later spoke to him reproachfully, “I told you that there was no need to take me with you to the meeting of the Grand Council, where Nart men meet, but you wouldn’t listen to me, and now you have done us both a deadly injury. After striking Shiridon such a blow, you can’t outlive the shame, and neither can I now stay with you. I shall have to go back where I came from!”

What could Khamis do now? He sadly accompanied Bisenon back to the family where he found her. When they came to the Bisenta home, Bisenon sadly said to Khamis, “I dreamed of accomplishing three good things for you, but I have succeeded in only one. Now listen to what I tell you. I should have borne you a son, and if he could have been fed at my breast, then in the whole wide

world there would have been none to equal him! No sword nor arrow could have touched him, nor pierced his skin. What can we do now? That was not fated to happen. Turn your back toward me, and with my breath I will pass over to you our future offspring!”

Khamis would not agree for a long while, and sadly replied, “But what will that youngster mean to me, if I lose you, his mother?”

“I cannot take him with me into our family, it is not allowed by our traditions and customs,” replied his wife.

At last Khamis turned his back toward Bisenon. She gave a deep breath, and between Khamis’s shoulder blades appeared a small swelling.

“Now go home, and tell Shatana about all this,” said she. “Shatana will know when the time comes, and will cut open the swelling.”

Thus Khamis and Bisenon said farewell, and she went back to her underground home forever.

Khamis, with his head drooping, returned home, and recounted to wise Shatana all that had happened. She listened carefully to his words. She began to count the days and months. When the time came she carefully cut open the swelling on Khamis’s spine, and out leapt a red-hot youngster. Above the waist like steel, below the waist like tempered steel was that small boy, and he plunged straight into the nearby sea. The water of the blue ocean began to boil around him, and went up in steam, and from that steam formed a cloud, and from that cloud fell heavy rain on the earth and on the sea, which then began to overflow its shores.

52 ♦ HOW BATRAZ WAS LURED OUT OF THE SEA

Khamis’s son grew up on the bed of the ocean and was taught the laws of life by the Donbettir family. In one month he grew as much as another child might grow in three years. There they gave him the name Batraz, son of Khamis.

In winter the shallows froze, and the Nart children came there to play knuckle-bones on the smooth ice.³ On hearing the merry cries of their games, Batraz came up from below, and breaking through the ice he appeared among

them. At once he began to play with them, and always won in the games, down to the last knuckle-bone. The Nart children returned to the meeting place in the village square, and sat beside their elders with sad faces.

“What has happened to you?” the grown-ups asked the children. “Why are you looking so miserable?”

“What have we got to be merry about?” they replied, “A small boy came up out of the icy water, about our age and looking very much like us. He began to play with us, but he won every game, and left us with no knuckle-bones at all, taking the last one from each of us.”

Shatana heard about what the Nart children had said, and guessed at once that the little boy was none other than Khamis’s son. The Narts began to think up ways to lure the lad from the bottom of the ocean, but they could not find a solution. Furthermore, the lad ceased to appear above the ice. Then the Narts asked Shatana what she could suggest.

“How can we lure the lad from the bottom of the sea out onto the land?”

Shatana thought awhile, then advised them thus, “Here is what you must do,” she said. “Let one of our old men go to the seashore with you, and there wet his head with seawater, and then shave his head all over. The lad will never have seen such a thing before. You will soon see—he will come out on the shore and watch with amazement, and ask questions. Then you must say to him, ‘Would you like us to shave your skull too?’ Of course, he will want you to! So then shave him all over his head, and throw the hair into the sea, and the lad will never return there again.”

The Narts did just as Shatana had instructed them. They took Urizhmag down to the seashore, sat him down there, wet his head with seawater, and started to shave his skull. True enough, the lad came out on the shore. Instead of a ball to play with, he held a bull in each hand, and tossed them up and caught them as they fell. Evidently, he was curious to see what the Narts were doing, how they shaved the old man’s skull, and that ordinary event seemed to him almost like a miracle. He was even envious of the old man, and asked if they would shave him too. They did so at once, and remembering Shatana’s words, threw his hair into the sea. When they had finished and returned home to the

Nart village, the lad followed them in their footsteps. When he came to the village he settled in the house of Khamis, his father.

Khamis was very pleased by the return of his son. He gave such a feast to the other Narts that for a whole week they never left the table.

53 ♦ THE GAMES OF YOUNG BATRAZ

The wise Shatana observed the behavior of the young Batraz, and fearing that he might cause mischief to others, did not let him go alone out of the house. When she occasionally had to call on a neighbor somewhere, she shut him up in a shed without a window, and locked the door. There he sat, and what else could he do? Once when the sun shone through a crack between the boards, he thought to himself, "Why should I sit so long in the dark?" He got up, butted the door with his shoulder, and so burst out into the yard. Outside on the street the Nart children were playing their merry games. He watched awhile, then could hold back no longer, and forgetting the strict orders given to him by Shatana, began to join in their games.

As they played, forgetting his great strength, he grabbed another child's arm, and straightaway pulled it out of joint, and when he ran into others with a jolt, they limped away on injured legs, and cries of pain and screams of despair arose on the street. Soon Shatana heard to her great surprise the shrieks and cries in the street, and guessed what had happened. She took a thick stick, went out into the street, gave Batraz a good beating, and drove him indoors.

Nonetheless, he was able to get out again. Now he knew the way. It was not long before he broke out again, and made his way gaily from the upper village down to the lower one, where lived the Akhshartagketta family. Nart Burafarnig lived there with his seven sons. He loved them all very much, and dressed them better than any other Narts. They all wore similar hats of expensive fur, similar tunics of one piece of rare light gray linen, and similar leggings and sandals of expensive kidskin. There were no other Nart youths who were better with a bow than Burafarnig's seven sons. He was immensely proud of them, and counted on

them as a support for his aging years. They were considered first among all the Nart youths, and therefore looked down on all other lads of the same age.

On that day, when Batraz succeeded in breaking out and gaining his freedom, and set off for the lower village, Burafarnig's sons were competing in a bow-shooting contest. Batraz, all dirty and dusty from the shed, slowly drew up to them. He wanted to take part in the contest, so he made this suggestion to them, "I will go about until late evening finding the arrows you shoot and bringing them back to you, only let me have one shot from the bow myself."

"Do you think that you, so dusty and dirty, dare touch our arrows?" the young brats answered him scornfully.

"As you shoot each arrow I will run and catch it in flight, before it touches the earth. Though you may shoot them to the end of the world I shall find them, hearing their flight, and bring them back. Only allow me in the evening to shoot just one arrow!" begged Batraz.

At last Burafarnig's sons relented. They loosed their arrows on all sides, but Batraz flew after them afoot, caught them in flight, and then brought them back. So the time passed away until midday, and then the youngest of the seven brothers said, "It would be shameful to drive that dirty young lad any further. Let him satisfy himself, and shoot one arrow, for surely he has earned that! Afterward he can leave here while the going's good!"

The elder brother agreed with the younger one's suggestion, and let Batraz shoot one arrow. Batraz looked attentively at the bow and arrow they gave him, and then said to the seven brothers, "I do not wish to shoot this arrow in vain at nothing. I really need a target. Put your hats one on top of the other, and place them as far away as you wish. If I hit that target, then give me the right to shoot once more."

"The elder brothers and the younger ones looked down their noses at this dirty dusty Batraz, glanced at each other, laughed scornfully, then took off their hats, and placed them one on top of the other as Batraz had asked, and set them as far away from Batraz as they could.

Batraz took aim, loosed the arrow, and the next moment the pile of hats went flying in bits and pieces. The seven brothers were certainly not pleased with that

kind of game, but all the same kept their word and handed Batraz one more arrow.

“If you make a heap out of your tunics, all piled up, and if I miss it, then I promise that I will find your shot arrows for you all my life!”

“Well, what if we try it then?” thought Burafarnig’s sons, and so they took off their tunics and set them up in a pile a long way away.

Again Batraz took careful aim, and loosed the arrow, and may your foe suffer the same fate as those tunics, for they went flying away in rags.

The proud sons of Burafarnig were full of anger at this, but what could they do about it? They silently took back their bow, and with bowed heads went off to their home. Meanwhile bare-footed, bare-headed Batraz went off whistling happily as though nothing had happened. He entered his Akhshartagketta home stealthily, so that Shatana should not see him, and went quietly into his dark dirty shed again.



Some time after, was it many days or few, who can tell, but one day Nart Burafarnig returned home from a long campaign, and decided to give a feast for all the Narts of the lower village. They drove a herd of bulls from one pasture, and a flock of sheep from another, and slaughtered all of them to provide plentiful meat dishes with which to regale the lower villagers. Burafarnig invited them all to his table, and they enjoyed a magnificent Nart feast. When they had eaten and drunk to their full satisfaction, Shirton, who was also present, addressed the Nart youths thus, “Hey, there, you bold young Narts! Would it not be a good thing to arrange an archery contest and show your prowess?”

All the young men from the lower village agreed, and went off to get ready for the competition. Soon it was in full swing, and hearing the cheering, young Batraz, all dusty and dirty from the shed, came down to the lower village to see what was going on. When the others, dressed in their best clothes, and well-feasted, saw him, all dusty and dirty, they began to laugh at him and mock him, “Look here, youngster, perhaps you’d like to try a shot, eh?”

Batraz said nothing, but took the offered bow, and let fly an arrow. It did not even reach halfway to the target. The Narts started to jeer and tease him even more, till Batraz responded scornfully, “Do you call that a target? I have no wish to shoot at such! If you want to see me shoot, then gather all your arrows in a pile, and place them as far away as you can. That would be something to shoot at then!”

The Nart youths took up the challenge, piled up their arrows far off and waited. Batraz then took aim and loosed an arrow, and it struck the target with such force, that all the youths’ arrows went flying in chips and splinters—here, there, and everywhere, then fell like snowflakes.

Then the proud lower village youngsters hung their heads in shame. Meanwhile Batraz sat on the grass and whistled a merry song to himself, with his chin cupped in his hands, and turned his back on them in scorn.

One of the Nart youngsters who had taken part in the contest went off back to the village, and told the Narts there what had happened, “A lad from the Akhshartagketta family, all dusty and dirty, came and took part in our contest, and with one arrow sent a pile of ours flying in splinters.”

Those listening started to tremble. Shiridon again stepped forward and cried, “Bring that young fellow here. We shall find out who and what he is!”

Several youngsters went to fetch Batraz, and bid him come to the village, but he didn’t even look around, and went on sitting and whistling to himself. They came up to him, and tried to lift him, but they couldn’t budge him. However much they tried, they couldn’t move him an inch.

They went back to those feasting and told them all about it. Again Shiridon was the first to speak in reply, “You go and tell him that if he comes to the village feast, he will be given some mead to try, as much as he wants. That will bring him!”

Shiridon had worked it all out with great cunning. Batraz was offended when he heard his words. Nevertheless he said nothing of this, and silently followed them back to the feast. When he entered the hall, Shiridon asked, “What kind of folk are you Akhshartagkettas? When you are kindly invited, you do not come,

but if you are not invited, you just butt in and break doors down with your heads!”

When he had finished these offensive remarks, one of the rich people of the lower village added more scornful and sarcastic remarks.

Batraz could not stand any more of that, and with a wave of his hand knocked down all those standing near him. One had his arm dislocated, and another had his back broken. At once the lord Burafarnig stepped in, “If you are such a skillful archer as they say, then you should have gone down to the seashore where my sons, seven of the best, have set up an egg as a target on the opposite shore, and are trying their skill by shooting at it across the water. You should test your skill against them!”

Batraz said nothing in reply, but set off at once for the seashore.

There he met the seven brothers, and saw how they had set up an egg as a target, and were shooting across the water at it on the opposite shore.

“I have heard about your contest from your father,” he said in greeting, “and see that you are shooting at an egg from one shore of the sea to another. I have come to take part in the shooting if you will let me!”

One of the youths offered him his bow and arrows, and Batraz made a shot, but the arrow fell into the middle of the sea. Of course, all the seven youths started laughing at him.

“I don’t like shooting at easy targets,” explained Batraz. “Let’s do something to make it more interesting. Let us stick a needle into the egg, and then the one whose arrow pierces the eye of the needle can boast a bit!”

So they stuck a needle into the egg, and set that up as their target on the opposite shore. One by one the seven sons, the pride and glory of the lower village, loosed their arrows at the target, but one by one they all missed the mark. Then in disappointment they handed Batraz a bow and an arrow, and let him try. Batraz let fly an arrow, and straight away it flew and pierced the eye of the needle.

Then, without thinking much about it, Batraz took a rope from out of the sea there, and tied up all the seven sons of Burafarnig into one bundle, slung them over his shoulder, and carried them back to the meeting place in the village

square in the lower settlement. There he dumped them on the ground, turned himself around, and whistling his favorite song, went off home.

54 ♦ BATRAZ, SON OF KHAMIS, AND ARAKHZAU,
SON OF BEZENAG

In the Nart village home of the Akhshartagketta, where old Urizhmag lived, the mistress of the house, Shatana, was busy at the hearth. Nearby sat the young lad Batraz, playing with the ashes. Because he sat much of his time crawling round the fireplace, his knees began to get rough.

Suddenly, Shatana heard something outside. A stranger had stopped at their gate, and was calling for someone to come out of the house, “Welcome to our home, dear guest,” said Shatana by the opened gate.

“May you be happy in your heart!” replied the unknown man. “Are the men at home? I should like to speak with them.”

“None of them are at home at present, but this is their house. Kindly come in, I beg you, and we shall be pleased to entertain you. If you like hot food, we’ll bring it piping-hot. If you prefer it cold, then we’ll bring it in as cool as a cucumber!”

“Thank you very much, my good woman, and may God bless you! What I really want is to meet Nart Shoshlan.”

“All our men have gone to a festive banquet at the home of Asa, in the distant village of Khushsagat Fashnart.”

“Thank you for your kind words, but I’d be even more grateful if you could find me someone to accompany me there, and show me the way!”

“Whom could I send with you? Except for myself there is only my senseless little lad in the house, warming his feet by the fire. If you wish, I could send him to go with you?” she said leaving the guest at the gate.

“May you lose your way, you thoughtless lad!” she said to the boy, smiling. “There is a guest standing at our gate, and he needs someone to show him the way to Khushsagat, where our men are feasting in the house of Asa.”

Batraz got up unhurriedly. He would have liked to stay at home by the fire, but hearing about the guest waiting outside, he straightened up and went out to meet him. They set off together, the guest on his horse, and Batraz afoot, all covered with dust and soot.

Where the path began to climb steeply the guest said to the lad, "Come here, laddie, and let me lift you up on to my horse with me!"

The lad looked first at the guest, then at his horse, and answered, "Excuse me, but your horse is not strong enough to bear the two of us!"

"What's that you say, you young puppy? Get up on my horse at once, or I'll give you a taste of my whip, and teach you how to judge horses!"

The young lad said nothing, but sprang up onto the horse before him. They hadn't traveled very far when the youngster squeezed the horse's flanks with his knees, and the steed straightaway stumbled, coughed, and rolled his head on one side, then the other, as blood showed on his lips.

"There you are, I told you that your horse could not carry the two of us!"

"Ah, so you must be Batraz, the son of Khamis!" said the rider.

"Yes, and you must be Arakhzau, son of Bezenag, in front of whom I sit!"

With that, Batraz jumped down from the horse, and went ahead on foot.

The road was a long one, and they had to stop and rest. Arakhzau dismounted from his horse at a turn in the path, and said to Batraz, "Shall we not try out an arrow or two Batraz? Come, take first shot!"

"I never take an arrow from my quiver before a quest!" said Batraz.

So then Arakhzau pulled out an arrow, tested his bowstring with his finger to see if was taut, placed an arrow in the bow, and shot it. It flew a long way ahead, and fell right on the path on which they were bound.

After that Batraz took his turn. The arrow went flying over the forest and mountains, and stuck quivering in the doorpost of the Asata home. When it found its mark, the old house simply shook, and inside it the food fell from the festive tables.

"Don't be scared, good people!" said Shoshlan, with a grin on his face, guessing what had happened, "That arrow was shot by Khamis's mischievous little lad. I think that young milk-sop must be on his way here!"

Right enough, after a little while had passed, up to the house of Asa came Arakhzau, son of Bezenag, and Batraz, son of Khamis.

Hurriedly Shoshlan rose from the table, and went outside. He welcomed with open arms the guest who had come to see him, and gave Batraz a slap on the cheek with a swing of his hand.

“You young puppy!” he cried, “That was you trying your arrow, I guess?”

Batraz did not answer, but turned to him the other cheek, showing that in all things he was obedient to his elders.

When things had settled down a bit, he slipped unnoticed out of the house, and suddenly made a dash for home. One jump here, one spring there, over seven hills and far away he flew, and in no time reappeared at home.

There everything went on as usual. He sat down by the hearth in front of the fire, and began to warm his toes among the ashes.

55 ♦ BATRAZ AND THE GIANT WITH THE MOTTLED BEARD

A giant with a mottled beard appeared in the Nart mountains. He didn't allow the cows, sheep, goats, or horses of the Narts to drink mountain spring water, nor feed on mountain pastures that he considered his, and as a result many cattle began to die. Then the eldest of the Narts decided to arrange a feast, to bring all of the folk together, and to choose a herdsman who would be able to defend the cattle from this greedy mottled-bearded giant.

Urizhmag sent messengers to all the three main Nart tribes, to call them to the feast. From Khamis's house the master himself came. The folk met at Urizhmag's house. He first said a prayer, then raised the sacred offering in his hands: three pies stuffed with cheese and a bull's foreleg. “These were meant for him who dares to be our shepherd and to save our cattle from the mottled-bearded giant,” he intoned.

But no one there was bold enough to claim such a prize.

“You heralds must go again!” said Urizhmag. “You announced the prize badly, and did not invite everyone. Go around to all the houses this time, and let

everyone know that all are invited, that none should stay at home, but come to the feast and claim the prize offered for a good shepherd.”

More people came to the second feast, and again Urizhmag said a prayer and offered up the sacred cheese pies, and the bull’s foreleg as a prize. Again nobody came forward to offer his services as herdsman, nor to claim the prize waiting in Urizhmag’s hands.

Then Urizhmag called the messengers together and asked them sternly, “Are you sure that you did not leave anybody at home in the villages?”

The eldest messenger answered straight out, “Only in Khamis’s house one youngster remained, a bare-footed lad, who sat among the ashes on the hearth warming his toes.”

“Go quickly, quickly, and bring him here too!” ordered Urizhmag.

The eldest messenger went himself to Khamis’s house, and invited the youngster to come to the feast. When he arrived, and Urizhmag saw him, he once again took up the offering and said, “This prize is offered as a present to the one who will be brave enough to become our herdsman, and save our cattle from the mottled-bearded giant!”

But Batraz did not understand all at once what it was all about, and Urizhmag, in a louder voice still repeated his words. However, Batraz, having met some of the younger Narts, was enjoying himself playing with them, and took little notice of Urizhmag’s words.

Then Urizhmag, in his loudest voice, ordered all to turn toward him, “Listen!” he said. “Whoever does the Nart folk this service, and takes our herds to the mountain pastures, and defends them from the giant with the mottled beard, let him receive this precious prize!”

At last Batraz heard his words clearly, and understood them. He jumped up from his place, and went up to old Urizhmag. He took the three pies stuffed with cheese, and the bull’s foreleg, opened his mouth wide, and swallowed the lot. Thus he showed himself ready to become the herdsman.

The next day, early in the morning, the Narts drove their herds and flocks out into the courtyard, and each one brought the new herdsman a present. One

brought sandals, one a shepherd's bag, one a leather cap, and one a cloak, and so on.

Then he drove off the Nart cattle to the high mountain pasture with its luscious green grass. He did not see the giant with the mottled beard anywhere. After a while he saw a deer. He shot it, and from its skin he made himself a tent. From its flesh he prepared himself some shashliks.

At this time the giant with the mottled beard was on a hunting expedition, but he soon heard the news that Nart cattle were feeding on the pastures that he had claimed as his own. Then blazing with anger he returned to the pasture, saw Batraz, and stepping up to him shouted, "What kind of an ass are you? What kind of a son-of-a-bitch? Who are you to set cattle to graze on my ground, I'd like to know?"

"You are the ass, and you are the son-of-a-bitch!" replied Batraz. "What have you come here for, frothing and foaming at the mouth, and splashing your spittle about?"

Hearing these bold and haughty words from such a small lad, the giant was amazed, and guessed that he could be none other than Batraz, the son of Khamis. He immediately stopped shouting and cursing, and quietly said, "Do you happen to know the Nart youth Batraz, son of Khamis?"

"How could I not know him?" replied he.

"And do you know what games he likes to play?" asked the giant with the mottled beard.

"I shall show you his favorite game, if you like," replied Batraz, and with that he gave the giant with the mottled beard such a shove with his shoulder, that he lost his balance, fell back, and crashed to the ground. Batraz at once stepped forward, and with one blow of his sword, cut off his head. He stuck that on a pole, and holding it high in front of him, carried it back to the Nart village.

The Narts were coming out in the evening to receive him and their returning cattle. When they caught sight of the giant's head bobbing up and down, they thought that the giant himself had evil intentions and were terrified. But as Batraz drew near, they looked again and saw that he was carrying the giant's

head on a pole, and their fear turned to joy. All the Narts came out to welcome him, and had nothing but praise for Batraz, son of Khamis.

Since then Nart cattle roam freely on the spacious mountain pastures.

56 ♦ HOW BATRAZ HARDENED HIMSELF

Years passed by, and Batraz began to think to himself, “I cannot remain as I am. That is quite impossible. If I do not harden myself somehow, then some enemy or other will certainly overcome me. I had better go to the heavenly smith Kurdalagon and let him harden me.”

He climbed up from the earth into the heavens, and presented himself before Kurdalagon, and spoke with him thus, “You must harden me, Kurdalagon. I need tempering now.”

“Don’t ask me to do such a thing, my sunny lad. You are a fine youngster, and I would be sorry to burn you in my furnace!”

“Don’t try to frighten me with such words,” replied Batraz, and he straightaway crawled into the furnace himself. Then Kurdalagon, seeing that he was so determined, threw in some embers and began to blow upon them with his bellows. Even so he did not take the work seriously, but was half joking, half pretending. The fire did not touch Batraz, and he came out of the furnace, and asked Kurdalagon not to argue, nor play tricks, but to harden him properly, to make him invulnerable.

Kurdalagon at last agreed, but only on the following conditions, “For one month you will light my furnace fires, and for another month you will fetch me white stones from the river!”

Batraz agreed to these conditions willingly, and so he kept the fires going, and piled up the coals for the first month, and for the second carried white flint stones up from the riverbanks.

Then Kurdalagon threw Batraz into his huge fiery furnace, piled up around him an enormous heap of white flints, placed twelve bellows round about the furnace, and for a whole month kept blowing upon the fire. The old moon became new, and Kurdalagon thought to himself, “He must be burned to ashes

by now, poor son of Khamis! I must pull his bones out of my furnace.” He took a huge pair of tongs, and opened up the furnace door, then suddenly he heard Batraz’s voice from inside, “What sort of a joke are you playing on me? Your fire hasn’t reached under my skin yet. It’s boring here in your furnace. If you would only bring me a lap-harp, I could cheer myself up with a song or two!”

Kurdalagon brought him a lap-harp, and handed it to him. Then he again heaped up the black coals and white flints, and for a whole week blew upon the fire from twelve sides with his bellows. Again, when he opened the door he heard Batraz inside complaining that the fire had not gotten into his bones. Then Kurdalagon called him out, and said to him, “No, obviously we can’t harden you with ordinary coals. They don’t even make you sweat. Go now and find a dragon’s nest, and kill some dragons and serpents, and we’ll make charcoal of their bones, and from those embers we’ll fire up the forge, and that will warm you all right!”

Batraz went off and finally found a huge dragon’s nest where he slew dozens of dragon-serpents, and carried them back to Kurdalagon, and they together made charcoal out of their bones. Then Batraz climbed back into the furnace, and for a whole week Kurdalagon blew upon the fire from twelve sides with his bellows. Then he opened the door and heard Batraz calling, “I think I am hardened enough now. Don’t keep me here in the high draft of the furnace, but take me out and throw me into the sea!”

Then Kurdalagon took his long pair of pincers, and with them pulled out the Nart youngster, hardened and tempered all through, and cast him down into the sea with all his might. The sea bubbled and hissed around and its waters were changed into a cloud of steam that rose up into the heavens. All the fish, large and small, remained on the dry sandy bottom, among the naked stones. Batraz was entirely changed into blue steel. Only a part of his intestines was not hardened, because all the sea around had evaporated. Batraz came out on the dry land, and the cloud of vapor cooled and fell in heavy and prolonged rain, and soon the ocean-bed was covered again, and the waves began to play on the shore. The fish, large and small, looked around, recovered, and soon started swimming freely in the ocean once again.

Batraz once more climbed from the earth to the heavens, and there he went up to Kurdalagon and said to him, “If you haven’t hardened me properly, then woe to your hearth! I shall cut off your head from your shoulders!” With that he put up his leg onto the anvil, took up a hammer and beat his leg with it as hard as he could. From the strong steely note that rang out, Batraz knew that he was well hardened, and he said gratefully to Kurdalagon, “Now I am afraid of nothing!”

57 ♦ HOW BATRAZ SAVED URIZHMAG

All the men of the Akhshartagketta family had gone off on a distant cattle raid. Only old Urizhmag remained at home. The Akhshartagketta did not return for a long time. Then the people began to worry and said, “The Akhshartagketta are strong people, but they have obviously met others even stronger. Most likely they have already destroyed the Akhshartagketta.”

Since far-off times there had been disagreement between the Borata family and the Akhshartagketta, and there was still hostility between them.

The Akhshartagketta were not very numerous, but the men were distinguished by their strength and courage. The Borata were superior in numbers, but though richer in cattle, they had less strength and valor.⁴

When they heard that the Akhshartagketta had not returned from their campaign, some of them said “There are none of the Akhshartagketta left alive, and none to inherit their possessions. Only one old man remains at home. Let us kill him, and we can then take their goods and make them ours!”

The Borata got together to think this over, and they decided so, “We shall arrange a feast, and shall invite old Urizhmag. We shall make him drunk, and then kill him. So all the possessions of the Akhshartagketta will remain without a master, and we shall appropriate them as ours!”

So the Borata arranged a feast in their great house, and asked, “Whom shall we send to invent Urizhmag ?” At first nobody responded. But Shiridon, who happened to be there, then offered, “I’ll go for you!”

So it was agreed, and Shiridon went to Urizhmag, and sitting down in front of him said, “The Borata are giving a feast in their famous family hall, and they

invite you to join them. If you don't want to go, then don't come!"

"What kind of invitation are you giving me?" asked Urizhmag, surprised. "Is that the way to invite an honored guest?"

"That's the way the Borata family sometimes invites people!" said Shirdon.

"Then go back and tell them that old Urizhmag is sick, and cannot come to the feast, and remain there till the end, and give them my thanks!"

Shirdon then returned, and Urizhmag turned to Shatana and said, "Eh, I've grown too old, dear mistress, and the Narts no longer respect me! Can one really invite an honored guest so, 'Come if you wish, and if you don't wish to come, then don't?' "

"Yes, it's true, you've grown old, master of my head, if you can't understand the meaning you've been told! The Borata family are plotting some evil against you, and Shirdon spoke so, knowing of this, therefore he said, 'If you don't wish to come, don't come!' "

When Shirdon gave the Borata men Urizhmag's excuse for not coming, they began to discuss among themselves what to do next, and finally decided to send a young wife to invite him. According to their custom one could not but accept an invitation given by a young married woman, and so therefore they sent one to him and said that if he had a spark of life left in his soul, he must keep ancient customs, and come to the feast.

So a young married woman came to the Akhshartagketta's home and knocked at the door, and Shatana went out to see who it was. The young woman said, "The Borata family are giving a feast in the hall where they test the wrong and the right, and they have sent me to invite your old man Urizhmag."

Shatana went to him, and gave him the young woman's invitation.

Urizhmag was disturbed when he heard it. "May God never forgive those who sent her!" he thought to himself. Then he turned to Shatana and said, "Go out, my sunshine, and tell her, 'It is a bad thing, of course, to break old Nart customs, and one ought to respect the invitation of a married young woman to come to a feast, but I am old and unwell, and simply cannot come. I deeply and sincerely beg your pardon!' "

Shatana went out and gave the young married woman Urizhmag's reply. What more could the young bride do? She had to return with a refusal.

Then the Borata family sent a woman wearing mourning for her dead husband. She stepped up to the door of the house and called "Haiat-hiat. . . . Qusk-qush!"⁵ Old custom did not permit her to pronounce the name of a man's wife in his presence or hearing. Shatana went out to answer her call.

"O Shatana, those pretentious Borata did not even let me take off my widow's robes, but sent me with an invitation to Urizhmag to the feast. I beg you, tell him not to put me to shame by giving another refusal!"

Shatana returned to Urizhmag, and recounted what the widow had said. Urizhmag shook his head, and was more disturbed than ever. Now what could he do? It was impossible to say no to a widow in mourning. So he agreed.

Shatana then went back to the woman in morning with his final reply, "I shall come soon!"

When she had done so, she returned to Urizhmag to comfort and advise him.

"Don't be alarmed, my dear old fellow! Look here, I'll give you this silk kerchief, and if difficulty arises, then throw it on the floor, and help will come. Take this long tube too, and hide it under your tunic. Take a seat on a felt-covered cushion, and when they want to make you drink, pretend to do so, but secretly pour it down the tube, into the felt cushion."

Urizhmag took the kerchief and the tube, and concealed them in his tunic, threw his coat round his shoulders, stuck his sword in his belt, and hid it under his long coat. Thus prepared he went to the feast.

When the Borata family saw Urizhmag coming they all stood to meet him, "Peace to your home!" he said. "May your feast please God up above!"

"Welcome, welcome, Urizhmag!" The Borata all replied, and pretended to be very happy to see him among their guest.

They led him in and set him in the place of honor, at the head of the seven rows of tables, and the feast began. They placed seven goblets in front of Urizhmag, and every time a toast was raised to his health he took one, feeling sure of himself. After a while, when the others were a bit tipsy, and didn't see so

clearly, he began to tip the goblets of wine into the hidden tube, and the felt-covered cushion quickly sucked it up.

But not for nothing was Shirdon named the cunning of the earth, and the treachery of the heavens. He had remained relatively sober, and noticed Urizhmag's little tricks, and whispered to the Borata elders about them.

"Now we raise our goblets to the good luck of a rider setting off on his journey!" said the eldest of the Borata and rose to drink the toast. Urizhmag was obliged to rise too. He sadly shook his head, but could not refuse to join in the toast. Neither could he pass the inebriating wine into the tube, which could not be seen as he stood. He was therefore obliged to drink the seven goblets one after the other, and his head began to swim. Though bedazzled, he heard the words uttered by Burafarnig, the eldest of the Borata, "The time has come to slaughter the old bull!"

Urizhmag at once understood what he was speaking about. He saw that his life was threatened, and straightaway threw Shatana's silk kerchief on the floor. It rose at once and flew fluttering back to Shatana. She did not waste a moment, but quickly baked three honeyed pies, and ran to the holy hill, where the Narts prayed, and placed them on the ground, along with a jug of mead, then she pleaded, "O God of gods, my God! If I am still of the slightest use to you, then send to me at once the young lad Batraz who is now with the Donbettirs!"

No sooner had Shatana finished her prayer, then Batraz leapt up out of the sea, and came and stood before her.

"What has happened, dear mother who never bore me?" he asked.

"An inglorious death threatens your old uncle Urizhmag. The Borata have a festive gathering. He is there, and they are hoping to kill him!"

"Where have they gathered for the feast?" inquired Batraz.

"In their great house where they tell the right from the wrong," answered Shatana.

Batraz ran off at once like the wind, and reached the Borata's huge feasting hall, and cried aloud on the threshold. That cry shook the very beams of the ceiling, and the soot and dust of many years sprinkled down on those feasting below. Many of those seated there fell into a faint.

“Hey, old uncle of mine, Urizhmag, are you alive or dead?” he called.

Hearing Batraz’s voice, Urizhmag felt his heart filled with new hope and strength. He nearly lost his power of speech from sheer joy, and when he answered Batraz his words were scarcely audible, “I am not yet dead, but I barely hold on to the life in me now!”

“At this coming hunt, will you lie in ambush,” he called to Urizhmag, “or will you drive the flock of crows out of their forest?”

“I have no power to drive out the flock of crows altogether, but I can lie in wait for them, one by one!” answered old Urizhmag, and going to the door he stood at the threshold, drew his sword, and stretched it across the doorway from one post to the other.

Shirdon was the first to catch on to their intentions, and where this matter was leading. Terror gave him added strength, and he jumped up the chimney, and at once climbed to his freedom.

Batraz then knocked down one of the wooden pillars supporting the ceiling, and the whole house fell, and may your enemies who cause you suffering and curse you, themselves suffer a similar fate! For those Borata who were thus trapped he mercilessly struck down, and like the wooden pillar they sank to the floor, slashed to pieces. Those who tried to run out of the door fell straight on Urizhmag’s sword. Bodies fell outside, heads back inside.

Batraz lifted the central pillar, and those Borata left alive took refuge in the space under the roof. Seeing this Batraz at once let down the pillar again, and the roof fell and crushed them all like beetles.

So perished the Borata family, and since the battle of Shukh there never was such a slaughter as this.⁶

58 ♦ HOW NART BATRAZ FOUND BURAZAG

The Narts had an enemy, Black Dollau. They sought his dwelling place everywhere, but could find no trace of it. Then one day in the Borata village, a little boy was born, whom they named Burazag.

Once Burazag's mother left him in the courtyard for a moment, while she went into the house. She had no sooner gone inside than Black Dollau straightaway seized her son. When the mother returned, she couldn't find Burazag anywhere and began to cry aloud throughout the yard. The nearby Narts gathered, and began to look for the lad, but they too could not find him. So great was the sorrow of the mother and the father of Burazag that they both died that very same day.

Burazag remained with Black Dollau, and grew up quickly. Every month he grew as much as any other child in a whole year. He became a courageous youngster, and already went hunting alone. Black Dollau had no other sons and looked on Burazag as his own. He was a rich man, and did not refuse Burazag anything he asked. Once, when he was preparing to go hunting, Black Dollau admonished him thus, "You will find plenty of animals to shoot around here everywhere, so don't go straying away on the Warp Mountain!"

But Burazag didn't listen to Black Dollau's advice, and secretly went off to hunt on the Warp Mountain. Just at that time Nart Batraz was also hunting there, he on one side, and Burazag on the other. They both shot arrows here and there, but did not see each other.

However, Batraz was troubled and puzzled by the whistling of arrows.

"What kind of wonder is this?" he asked himself. "All the other Narts are at home, but this particular whistle is heard only from Nart arrows!"

Suddenly a white deer appeared on the mountain top. Both hunters shot at once, and the deer fell into a ravine. Batraz and Burazag both began to climb down the ravine to reach the prey, but when saw each other they said not a word, and hastened on to claim the deer. It lay dead on a rock, with Batraz's arrow sticking in one side, and Burazag's arrow sticking in the other. What should they do?

Batraz spoke first, and said to Burazag, "You are my unknown hunting comrade, so let the deer be yours, only do tell me please, who you are and where do you come from?"

"No, let the deer be yours!" answered Burazag. "You look like a Nart man to me, and I am very fond of the Narts. I am Burazag, son of Dollau."

“And I am the son of Khamis, Batraz,” was the reply.

They looked at each other straight in the eyes, and from the first moment they liked each other. Burazag then said to Batraz, “Come home with me, and be my guest!”

Batraz readily consented. They mounted their horses, and rode off to the home of Black Dollau. He lived in a large cave, the walls of which were made of fishbones. The cave was full of all kinds of treasures.

On meeting him Black Dollau straightaway asked Batraz, “Where do you come from, and who are you?”

“I am Batraz, son of Nart Khamis. I met your son hunting, and made friends with him at once. I liked him from the moment I saw him, and at once called him my brother. He invited me home, and here I am!”

When Black Dollau heard the Narts named, sparks of hatred blazed up in his eyes. He was very agitated, and thought to himself, “Our guest must surely know or guess that Burazag is a Nart, and yet has lived so long with one of their enemies. If that is so, then my affairs here will come to a bad end!” However he gave no sign of his disturbance, and welcomed Batraz for the night, so it seemed, with pleasure.

When dawn broke the next day, and Batraz prepared to leave for home, Black Dollau said to him in a friendly and generous fashion, “If you and my son named each other brothers, then accept my presents in his name. I will give you a herd of bears, and a keeper for them. Anything that takes your fancy among my treasures is yours!”

“I accept your gifts with thanks, but would ask you to let your son accompany me home, as my chosen brother. I also want to make him some presents, and to show him my native country.”

“Some time later I will let him come, but not now,” said Black Dollau.

“Well, in that case, I cannot accept your presents!” said Batraz, and having said farewell to Burazag, took his horse and set off home.

On arrival he went straight to Shatana and told her all he had seen.

“On the Warp heights I met a youngster who looked very much like a Nart. Burazag was his name. We called one another brothers. I wanted to bring him

back home with me, but his father, called Black Dollau, would not let him come. He said he would let him come later but not straightaway.”

“May you live long, and never die, Batraz! That lad is the one who disappeared from the Borata family!” Shatana told him. “Take Shiridon with you, and he will, of course, recognize him, and will bring him back home. That Black Dollau is an everlasting enemy of the Narts. They have been trying to discover his dwelling place for many years.”

Batraz went to Shiridon and told him all, and what Shatana had said.

“Shiridon, I need your help, if you will consent to come with me!”

Shiridon on hearing this agreed to accompany him, and he and Batraz rode off to the home of Black Dollau.

He received them as honored guests, and slaughtered a ram for them. But Batraz looked at him with a dissatisfied face, and said to him, “Will one ram be enough for all of us? I could easily lose its meat under my tongue, it seems to me!”

“Don’t be angry, dear guest,” replied Black Dollau. “If you wish, you may slaughter the whole flock!”

“I didn’t come here to slaughter rams!” retorted Batraz. “Guests do not usually do such things!”

These words seemed particularly offensive to Black Dollau, so he said, “Your mother’s milk is not dry on your lips yet, otherwise, were you older, I would slit your loose tongue and mouth ear to ear!”

Batraz was not going to tolerate this, and turned to Shiridon and said, “Let us bid farewell to Burazag, and saddle our horses and ride home!”

Shiridon agreed, then went to Burazag and said to him, “Farewell, and be happy, young Nart. You are the son of a Nart, so why do you remain here feeding on such scraps as your enemy leaves you. It would be better by far for you among the Narts in your father’s home!”

“You mean that Batraz and I are really both Narts and brothers?! Why did someone not tell me so before, and that Black Dollau was my foe?”

He joined Batraz, and together they seized Black Dollau by both arms and wrenched them out of his body. Swiftly they picked him up and hurled him into

the Black Sea. Finally they gathered all his herds and treasures, and set off with them back to the Nart country.

What else could the Borata do but give a grand feast—their long-lost youngster had at last returned to them and his native home.

59 ♦ BATRAZ AND TYKHYFYRT MUKARA

While growing up Batraz used to hide himself among the clouds in the sky.

The Narts could not live without going on campaigns, and long ones as well. They could be away from home for three years or even more. Once the best of the young Narts went on a campaign, and the most eminent Narts with them too. For a year nothing was heard of them and so the Kazita demon, Tykhyfyrt Mukara, sent his messenger to explain his master's will to those of the Narts who were still in the village, "Your forefathers as tribute offered girls to my forefathers. For many years now I have not claimed that tribute. The time has come, however, for you to pay it again; otherwise I am going to take what you owe me by force."

The Nart people grew upset and thought, "What shall we do now? None of us has ever heard about such a tribute. How shall we respond to this challenge? Shall we pay the tribute? If we do, then our warrior men are sure to reprimand us when they return. If we do not pay, Mukara will come. There is nobody to withstand him since our best warriors are away on campaign!"

Shirdon replied to them, "You will not find the answer to this question among yourselves. Go and ask Shatana instead."

While they continued to fret and argue Tykhyfyrt Mukara came among them. He approached and there was nobody to confront him. Unchallenged Mukara chose the best of the eligible maidens and the most beautiful from among the betrothed and drove them before himself, back to his abode.

When Shatana saw this she caught a hawk and said to him, "Do not lose time! Go to Batraz and tell him, 'If you are on foot, then do not sit down any more! If you are seated, then stand up and without delay come to your native

village! Your people are perishing.’ If you deliver my request to him, I will grant you the right to choose any chicken to your liking from my henhouse.”

Meanwhile Batraz was sitting among the clouds. The hawk flew up to him. When Batraz heard what had happened he immediately flung himself down from the heights and fell right into the fireplace of the Narts. He landed so hard that he found himself up to the middle of his thighs in the hearth. He pulled himself out, ran to Shatana, and asked her, “Mother mine, what has happened to you all?”

Shatana replied, “What has happened to us now is something that has never happened to your kin ever before. If you have any strength left, we are looking for your help.” And she proceeded to tell him the whole story.

Batraz asked her, “Which way did he go?”

Shatana replied, “Go to the shore of the sea, where the relatives of your mother dwell, and there cry out, ‘Little Chekh, come out to me! I need your help. I am of your kin. Show me the place where Tykhyfirt Mukara dwells!’ From Chekh nothing can be hidden, neither in the earth nor in the heavens. He will tell you where Tykhyfirt Mukara dwells. Batraz did not linger in Shatana’s house, but set off upon his journey straightaway. In time he came to the shore of the sea. There he cried out with all his might, “O little Chekh of the Donbettirta, I am of your kin. Show yourself to me!”

Chekh was a quick man, so he jumped up and stood before Batraz sooner than the echo of his cries had died in the forest. When he saw Batraz he said, “When you cried out you said that you were of my kin, but I have never seen anybody like you in my whole life. Please explain to me why you call yourself one of my kin?”

“Instead of discussing that, tell me where Tykhyfirt Mukara dwells,” replied Batraz.

“Now I recognize you by your bold answer. Truth it is that you are of my kin! I will tell you where Tykhyfirt Mukara dwells, but it is not easy to reach that place,” replied Chekh.

Batraz thought this over and said, “If it is really so difficult to get there, then go to him as my mediator and confidant and tell him this, ‘Save me the trouble of going to you myself. Let me tell you that I am Batraz. You have never heard

before of my existence among the Narts. Do not hope in vain to hide in the sea. I came to fight with you, so show yourself to me.’ ”

Cekh was so lively that in three blinks of an eye he had covered the distance of three days’ travel. He came to Mukara and told him everything, “A Nart youth came looking for you. He has not yet shaved. His eyes are the size of a threshing floor where twelve bulls can be put side by side to go round the circle. He ordered me to tell you this, ‘Save me the trouble of going into the sea myself and getting wet. I tell you that I am Batraz. You have never heard before of my existence among the Narts. Do not hope in vain to hide in the sea. I came to fight with you. Therefore come out to meet me face to face.’ ”

For a while Mukara thought over what he had heard and replied, “It would be shameful for me to hide from this man who came to fight me. If he is really a Nart, then let him wait till Friday, because that is the day when the Narts customarily hold combats. I will be ready to fight with him on that day.”

Cekh returned back and told Batraz everything Mukara had said. On hearing Mukara’s reply Batraz had nothing left to do but to return to his village. There he cried out loudly, “I wish you had perished Narts! A foul ass foully mistreated you! Instead of that humiliation I wish he had ruined you all! He and I have agreed to meet in combat next Friday. I know that none of you will fight by my side, but I want you at least to come and watch our combat, from a safe distance if you must.”

At that time the Narts did not know yet how important Batraz would be to them. They began to ask each other, “What shall we do now? Surely he looks like one of us, but why have we not seen him until now?”

Batraz understood their puzzlement and said, “I will tell you who I am. I am a Nart. Bisenon is my mother and Khamis is my father. Till now I was hiding from our people because I was not ready to show myself yet. But now I am going to fight with Tykhyfirt Mukara. He and I have agreed to meet on Friday. We shall fight in the field of Khizh, where you will be able to see everything safely from the summit of Wazh Mountain.”

Friday came, and Batraz made ready. He went inside and then led out his black horse, and said to him, “Upon my word, my foe is so daring because he is

truly strong. I will not prevail over him easily. I shall let you graze not far from me with your saddle on. When I grow red-hot, I shall cry to you, ‘Now come to me, my horse! Where are you?’ then come to me at full speed. When you reach me, push me with your chest with all your might so that I fly off into the midst of the sea.”

He set off along his way and finally reached the shore of the sea. He cried to Mukara, “Here I am. Do not hide from me!”

Immediately Mukara rose up from the depths of the sea. The two began to fight. They fought both in the mountains and in the plain, but all to no avail. Neither one prevailed over the other. Next they moved to the forest. They tore up huge trees from out the earth and struck each other with the trunks. Still, neither gave up. At last Batraz drove Mukara to the shore of the sea. Batraz grew red-hot and called to his horse, “Now come to me, my horse! Where are you?”

His horse galloped at full speed and drew up to Batraz. It pushed against him with its chest with all its might so that Batraz flew into the midst of the sea. There he was cooled. He climbed back out upon the shore again and gave a mighty full-throated cry, “Just wait, you black ass! I am coming for you now.”

Mukara grew frightened at his cry and hid himself in the depths of the sea. There dwelt his people, the Kazita, evil spirits, as was Mukara himself. His tower house was there in their domain. When he came to them he said, “I am pursued by a foe. We have no hope of vanquishing him by strength. We may overcome him only by cunning.”

With haste the Kazita dug a deep hole in the earth on the path that led to their domain. It was so deep that a human’s cry from the bottom would not be heard at its mouth. Over its opening they spread carpets.

As Batraz drew near to them the Kazita thought, “Let some of us go to meet him and greet him as our master. Meanwhile let the others gather enough stones and blocks that they can fill up the hole.”

Some of them gathered stones and blocks while the others went to meet Batraz. These said to him, “We have nothing against you. We have laid out carpets on the path for you. So, come and have no fear of anything.”

On hearing that Batraz continued along the path, afraid of nothing and unaware of any danger. When he reached the hole, he fell into it.

The Kazita rejoiced, “Just wait, Batraz! Now you are in our hands!”

Then they began to throw into the hole the stones and blocks that they had gathered. Batraz held the hilt of his sword up on his head, so that its blade was directed toward the mouth of the hole. Everything that the Kazita threw down upon him, both stones and blocks, met the blade of his sword and shattered into pieces. These fell at his feet. As the pile of debris grew, so did Batraz, rising up with them. At last when his head appeared over the edge of the hole the Kazita heard him cry, “You unworthy breed! I have come to bring doom upon you!”

The Kazita fled in fear when they heard his threats. Batraz jumped out of the hole and ran into Mukara’s tower. First Batraz killed the terrified Mukara. Then he went out, hunted down and destroyed the Kazita demons.

He led out from that domain beneath the sea all of the Nart maidens and brides, and returned them to their homes.

He himself again went to the heavens and there hid himself among the clouds as was his habit.

60 ♦ BATRAZ AND THE ARROGANT SON OF THE GIANT
AFSHARON

The Narts organized a grand dance on the field of Zhilakhar. They got such a grand dance going that the firm ground shook beneath their feet! Not a single prominent Nart was absent from that great round-dance—the Shimd—and Urizhmag, Shoshlan, and Batraz were there among the dancers.

Arrogant Alaf, the son of the one-eyed giant Afsharon, sat on a high mountain, and gazed down from there with envious eyes on the dancing Narts.

“I’ll go down to those Narts,” he said. “I’ll watch their dance more closely, and join in myself, perhaps, and show these young Narts a thing or two. I’ll make them get warmed up, and when they throw off their coats and jackets, I’ll gather them up quickly, and scoot off home with them!”

On hearing these words, his father at once objected, "You must not go near those Narts. If you should fall in with one of the famous warriors among them, they would seriously injure you. Surely you know that they don't even let birds fly above them when they are dancing. In my youth I was haughty, like you, and I fell in with some Nart youths, and challenged them to a fight. And see the result? I was left with one eye for the rest of my life."

But Alaf didn't want to listen to his father. He stuffed a dozen loaves of bread inside his coat, and strode off to the Zhilakhar Field.

"Very well," said his father, "you'll see for yourself what happens!"

Still arrogant, Alaf went by himself down through the mountain pastures. There he saw a large herd of cows, and began to milk them, one after another. Having milked a dozen, he sat down to breakfast. Feeling stronger, he strode on farther. By the wayside stood an old oak tree. He tore it out by the roots, and swung it over his shoulder, and in this fashion appeared at the great Nart round-dance. There he struck the field with the oak, as with a cudgel, and from such a blow the ground quivered. The young Narts were bounced up in the air, and fell down near him.

The dancing stopped, and satisfied with himself, the son of the one-eyed giant laughed aloud, and then said, "I have come to you, young Nart puppies, to dance with you. Let us test our powers, and see who comes off best!"

What could the young Narts do? With heavy hearts they took hands and began the Shimd round-dance again. The arrogant Alaf stood in the very center of the circle, and made mocking remarks about the dancers. If he saw a girl who pleased him, he seized her out of the ring, and made her dance with him. If he saw a lad who danced better than he did, he pulled him aside roughly, and took his place. In this way he injured many young Narts. One had his arm pulled out of joint, another had his shoulder dislocated, a third had his ribs crushed, and so on. They were moaning and groaning from this proud fellow, and his arrogant ways, but could do nothing, for he was so much stronger than they.

At last evening came. The Nart youths and maidens wanted to disperse, but the one-eyed giant's son, before letting them go, took many finest dresses from the girls, and the best jackets from the youths, then proudly strode off home. His

sister went out on the heights to meet him. From far off she saw him coming along the ravine with his bundle, and ran in to father and mother, and said excitedly, “My brother is coming up the ravine, and bringing me home some fine dresses that he has taken from the Nart girls!”

The old giant couldn’t believe his ears, and said to his daughter, “Run back and see if he is coming quickly and openly up the slopes, or if he is stealing back secretly, by way of the dips and hollows!”

Alaf’s sister ran out and saw him come striding up the slopes with a cheerful face. She went back to her father and told him, but he just did not believe her. However, the door was soon thrown open, and in came the cocky young Alaf, nose held high, and said to his father, “You did not want to let me go, but just see how things turned out. I danced at the Narts’ Shimd, and did as I liked with those youngsters. Look at all the clothes I have brought home!”

Then old Afsharon asked his stuck-up son, “That means, then, that you didn’t see among them a swarthy youngster with a bulging forehead, by any chance?”

“There were dark ones, and pale ones, with high brows and low brows, some bulging in, and some bulging out. All the Nart youths were there at that Shimd, but not one of them dared gainsay me in anything!” said his son.

“In any case, it would be better, my son, if you did not go there any more. That dark youth with the bulging forehead was obviously not there, so you should be satisfied with your luck!”

Alaf disdainfully waved his hand, conceitedly tossed up his head, and turned his back on his father.

The next day he got up early, again stuck a dozen loaves inside his coat, and again went striding off to the Zhilakhar Field. Like yesterday, he milked a dozen cows, drank their milk, ate his bread, tore out another oak by the roots, slung it over his shoulder, and once more appeared among the Nart youths, and to their dismay started up his old tricks again.

But it so happened just on that morning, that Batraz was sitting high up in the mountains by a glacier. He had been overheated in his last conflict, and was now cooling off his steely body. For the second time now he saw what was

happening down on the Zhilakhar Field, and how the stuck-up son of the one-eyed giant was taunting and insulting the Nart youth, with nobody to say him nay.

“There is nothing else to be done now. I must go down and measure my strength with his!” thought Batraz. He broke the ice field in two, and put one half of it on his head to cool himself down, and then like a mountain eagle he swooped down onto the Zhilakhar Field. The ice on his head melted, and torrents of water ran down his face, and fell on the soil.

When arrogant Alaf saw him coming, he thought to himself, “This is the swarthy youth with the bulging brow, of whom my father frightened me.”

He felt his heart go suddenly cold.

But the son of Khamis had been well brought up, and said politely, “Greetings, stranger!” and stretched out his hand to Alaf, who also held out his. Well, may the same befall your enemy as befell Alaf then. Batraz gave his hand such a squeeze that it turned into bloody porridge, and then he further asked him, “Well, dear guest, would you not like to join me in the Shimd? You already have danced with many others, so please do not refuse me!”

The young giant was all in a fever now, but what could he do? He just had to agree. Batraz took him by the arm, and they began to dance in the ring, like the others. They made a few rounds about, and then Batraz trod on Alaf’s foot, and knocked his elbow up. Alaf’s trodden foot became a bloody pancake, and his knocked arm was put out of joint. Quicker and quicker they danced in the Shimd, with its whirling circle, and Batraz joined Alaf at his side, and broke several ribs at once, all staved in together.

“Oh, oh, oh! I beg you, let me out of this alive!” he beseeched Batraz.

But Batraz, laughing, continued to torment and pester him, just as though he had been nothing but a helpless chick in his hands. Only when the Shimd finished did he let him go. Feeling himself free, Alaf gathered together his fading powers, and dragging his squashed foot behind him, and bending on the side to ease his broken ribs, with one arm hanging all limp, he hobbled painfully off home.

His sister was waiting for him on the mountain heights. From far off she saw him, and ran in to tell her father and mother, "My brother is coming back. He is dragging something with difficulty, no doubt a load of silk dresses from the Nart girls again!"

"Wait awhile before you smile!" answered her father. "He will arrive presently, and then you will see what beautiful clothes he brings!"

At first fear drove Alaf forward, like a wounded hare, as he struggled home. But when he saw that Batraz had no intention of following him, his strength suddenly expired, and he sank down in a heap on the ground. For a long while he lay there, while at home they were still awaiting him. At last Afsharon said to his daughter, "Go and see if your brother is coming, and tell us, is he striding up the slopes, or quietly creeping along by the hollows and gullies!"

His sister went out and saw that he was lying motionless in a hollow. When she returned and told the old giant this, he did not find it hard to guess what had happened to his son. He sent a pair of bullocks to cart him home, and they brought him back half-dead, half-alive.

"Well, I warned you, my son, that there was a strong young man among the Narts who had enough strength to overcome you, and that you would not be able to overpower him!" said his father to the now crestfallen son.

A few days passed by, and Alaf slowly came to himself, and asked, "Say, father, wherein lies Batraz's enormous strength?"

"It lies in the way he was hardened in the furnace by the heavenly smith Kurdalagon!" answered the one-eyed giant.

"Ah, you old one-eyed ass!" cried his son, railing against his father. "Why did you not think of asking Kurdalagon to do the same for me?" He got up from his bed, and set off to Kurdalagon's smithy. He went in and asked, "Harden me, Kurdalagon, just as you hardened the Nart Batraz. I will reward you richly for your work. He straightaway took out a handful of gold from his pocket and threw it before the heavenly smith and cried "Begin!"

"Wait a moment!" said the smith. "Batraz was already a man of iron, but you are soft and will burn away like a straw to nothing!" he warned.

"Nonetheless, harden me in your furnace, there's no other way out!"

Kurdalagon did not like wasting words for nothing, so he put Alaf in his furnace, set the fire going, blew upon the flames with his bellows, and then suddenly heard screams from inside. As soon as the flames touched Alaf he began yelling at the top of his voice, "Oh, woe is me! I am burning! Take me out of here quickly. Enough!"

Kurdalagon straightaway took, just as before, his pair of long tongs, and plunged them into the furnace in order to drag the arrogant Alaf out. But he was already consumed by the flames, and nothing remained of him save dust and ashes. Kurdalagon swept the ashes from the furnace, and without a single word, threw them onto the rubbish heap.

61 ♦ HOW THE ONE-EYED GIANT AFSHARON TOOK REVENGE
UPON THE NARTS

After the death of his son the one-eyed giant Afsharon grew very angry. So angry was he that blue flames flickered round his ribs. He was thinking all the while how he could be avenged for the loss of his son. He did not dare to think of touching Batraz himself, but decided to kill off his nearest and dearest relatives, the old Narts Urizhmag and Khamis.

So he invited them to him as guest, and gave his other sons orders, "Keep your weapons in readiness, and hide yourselves near our home. When the old Narts get tipsy, then I shall start to sing a song, and that will be the sign. You will know what to do then!"

Afsharon was not sparing with his entertainment. Under the weight of dishes prepared from the meat of game, the low three-legged tables had sunken into the earth. Afsharon served his guests himself, and raised toasts to them, here to the elders, there to the younger ones. The Nart elders, not suspecting anything evil, accepted his toasts with merry souls. Why should they not drink the goblets of strong mead in reply? In this way the elders became drunken, and Afsharon's sons, hearing the merriment, crept closer to the house. Just then the old giant raised a large golden goblet of mead, and with a smile turned to Urizhmag, and

asked him, “Be good enough to tell me, Urizhmag, what song shall I sing you— an old one, sung by our forefathers, or a new one?”

“I know, good host, that you sing well,” answered Urizhmag. “The ‘Qand’ if you wish to show the tender tones of your voice, then sing us a new one. We have probably heard all the other old ones before!”

Afsharon began to sing, and his voice grew louder and louder:

On a misty autumn day, Dogs drove two old boars at bay.
And wherever they tried to hide, The dogs just waited, gaping wide.
Sharp fangs in those fierce dogs’ heads
Tore those boars to shreds, to shreds . . .

Urizhmag and Khamis understood at once the threatening meaning of that song. Their heads cleared immediately. They were ready even to make an ignominious escape. But the way out was barred by the two fierce dogs, the sons of the one-eyed giant.

But that resounding triumphant song which Afsharon sang at full voice fell upon the ears of Batraz, who happened to be on a nearby height. He understood straightaway what it portended, and leapt down from the height, directly into the giant’s courtyard. When his steely body struck the yard, the ringing, echoing crash was heard everywhere around.

By that metallic clanging, Urizhmag knew that Batraz had come to their aid, and how they rejoiced at heart!

Urizhmag began to sing aloud, in answer to his host:

May you live long, generous host!
Well you fed us, raised your toast, Sparing not your golden voice, Singing to
make our hearts rejoice.
Not to the end, though, rang your song, Generous host! There you went
wrong!
I have heard that song and know

How the following verses go: Help came to those two old boars—
Fiery-eyed, a young lion roars, Leaps down from the mountain height, Gives
those fierce fanged dogs a fright!
Naught can save them from his jaws, Nor their skins from his sharp claws!

Urizhmag had just finished his song when Batraz burst into the giant's dwelling, tore down a doorpost, and may your enemies suffer the same fate as the old one-eyed giant and his two sons! Batraz, with sweeping blows, beat them all down into the dust, and then led the two old Narts with honor back to their own home.

62 ♦ HOW BATRAZ SAVED THE EMINENT NARTS

The eminent Narts Urizhmag, Khamis, and Shoshlan set off one day on a hunting expedition. Seven days and nights they roamed through ravines, and not a single beast did they see on their way. They had eaten all their stores of food, and torn their clothes to shreds, so they decided to return home. They had only just turned their horses about in a clearing of a dark forest, when a white deer ran out before them. The Narts snatched up their bows, and chased off after it. The deer just teased them. It waited until they were almost within bow-shot, then ran on. Again it stopped, and let them draw near, and again shot off ahead. The Narts, of course, went galloping in its tracks. Over seven mountains the deer led them on, then suddenly disappeared, just as though it had melted away. The daylight then lost its power, and the night spread its dark wings over the world, and hunger began to gnaw at the Narts. They stopped, undecided. . . . Go back home, or was it not too late already? Spend the night where darkness had overtaken them? Not with hungry stomachs could they lay down to sleep.

Suddenly, far away, they caught sight of a light, and at once pointed their steps toward it. Before them, out of the darkness, a tower rose, all made of great slabs of stone. The eminent Narts drew near, and began to shout and summon the host, "Hey, there, guests await you!"

But in that one tower seven giants lived. Having heard the cries of the Narts, they ran out to greet them, and were overjoyed at what they saw. “Mountain small fry!” was what they called them, and looked upon them as prey that had appeared before them on its own accord. They invited the Narts into their dwelling, and sat them in a row before the family hearth, and then glanced quickly at one another. Three of them began to sharpen the spits for roasting, and four of them began to lay the logs for the fire to roast their supper.

The Narts thought that the giants were busy preparing shashliks for them, as honored guests, and winked at each other merrily. Here, they thought, we shall get a glorious feast, and tomorrow we can go on our way!

But then they heard one or two words which the giants were exchanging, “We can’t make more than three spits of shashliks out of our guests,” said the oldest giant. “That means they will not suffice for all of us. We three elders will get one spit of shashliks each, and the young ones will have to wait, and count on other guests coming from the mountains.”

One of the younger giants objected, and answered, “No, you have not decided rightly! You elders have already enjoyed the sweet meat of mountain men, but we younger ones have not so far taken a taste of such a luxury!”

Then the fourth, the middle one of the seven brothers butted in, “You are both wrong! Whenever such tidbits fall into our hands, first the elders get them, and then the youngsters! What about me? This time I, as the middle one not included before, shall have them all to myself!”

The eminent Narts were scared when they heard all this, and saw that they would meet with a bad end. Khamis, quick-witted, said to the giants, “We see that our end has come. Before we die, we should like to sing a song. Such is our custom, that with our dying breath we sing together!”

The giants laughed aloud, and stuck out their lower lips like scoops.

“Sing, then, sing, you men of the mountains! You are only small fry! All the same we shall roast you and eat you!” they answered mockingly.

The three Narts raised their voices, and sang as loud as they could, and their song re-echoed in the heavens. There, the Nart Batraz, forged like steel, heard their chorus, and knew directly from it what they needed. He jumped down from

the heavenly height, and striking against the mountain stones, made such a clash and clang, that it resounded through the ravines and forests and plains. That clash of steel on stone told the three Narts that Batraz was hastening to their aid, and they all laughed.

“Laugh, then, laugh!” said the giant, with drooling lips. “Small fry!”

But just as they took their knives to hack the Narts to pieces, and place them on spits over the fire, their tower began to shake, and stones tumbled from the walls of their home. Through a gap they had left, Batraz, son of Khamis, leapt in. With his iron fist he started to strike at the seven giants. Whomever he struck could no longer move neither hand nor foot, and one after another they fell, and their souls swiftly left their bodies.

So Batraz slew all seven of the giants. He took the eminent Narts out of the tower, then went and killed some game for them to cook and eat. Afterward, when they had eaten their fill and recovered, he led them back to their Nart settlement.

Then he himself returned again to the heavenly heights.

63 ♦ NART URAZ AND THE GIANT AKHSHUALY

Nart Uraz went hunting in the Warp Mountains. He was tracking down a beast that they name the slyest of the sly. He stole after him in his tracks, but the beast did not let him get within bow-shot. “No matter how long I have to stalk him,” said Uraz to himself, “I shall track him down nonetheless and shoot him at last!”

Evening drew on, and they came to a wide plain—the beast ahead, and Uraz behind. A strip of forest showed up on the plain, and beyond that, some rocky hills with a cave. Into that very cave, swaying on its legs, the beast made its way, followed by Uraz. He was glad at heart, and said to himself, “This is your end. Now where can you go further?!”

He was already putting an arrow in his bow, and approaching the entrance to the cave, when suddenly, inside, some kind of a door opened, and he saw a light. Uraz then thought, “Well, it’s getting dark now. What if I spend the night here at the opening to this door? The beast will not escape past me there!”

He entered the door, and stopped immediately, gazing in amazement. The walls of the cavern were all made of fishbones and mother-of-pearl, while the floor was of pure crystal, and on it lay silken carpets. Through a hole in the roof there shone a star. Then, suddenly, from the depths of the cave, someone called him by name, “O Uraz, sit down, and have a rest! You must be tired!”

Uraz lowered himself into an armchair standing by the wall, and it was so soft that he sank right into it. He saw before him in the twilight a tender face, and the rosy tips of slender fingers. A few moments later beside him there stood a maiden—the beauty of the heavens, and the charm of the earth. Beyond, on the hearth, he saw roasting-spits that turned themselves, and on them shashliks were sizzling. Uraz was as hungry as a wolf, and when he smelt the roasting shashliks his mouth watered.

The maiden came nearer to him, and asked in tender tones, “Where are you bound for, and whence have you come?”

“I have come from our Nart village. I went out hunting, and following my prey, by chance I found myself here with you!”

The maiden was obviously glad of his presence, and after supper said, “Uraz, make us a bed for the night, so that we may lie together!”

Uraz readily made up a bed, and then, when they had both fallen asleep, at midnight the giant Akhshualy unexpectedly arrived. He seized the beautiful maiden and carried her off, still asleep, while Uraz he left beheaded, before he had even awakened. He then galloped off to the land of Shekh, where he had his castle.

There he locked the maiden in a tall tower, and demanded that she must forget Uraz, and love him instead. The maiden consented on one condition—that the giant should not come near her for one whole year. The giant agreed.

As Uraz did not return from the hunt to the Nart village, his friends and relations began a search for him. They sought him everywhere, but they did not find him. The daughter of the sun was very friendly with Batraz, and they named each other brother and sister. So Batraz went to his chosen sister and said to her, “O sister, dear daughter of the sun, our Uraz has disappeared while hunting, and you must help us find him!”

The daughter of the sun took her mirror from her father, and after gazing into it for a while, she said, "Uraz has been slain by the giant Akhshualy, and his body lies in the cave of Berd. There he met a maiden, the beauty of the heavens, and the charm of the earth, but at midnight the giant broke in on them as they slept, killed Uraz, before he even had a chance to awaken, and carried off the maiden to his castle in the land of Shekh!"

Batraz was seething with anger when he heard this, and gathering all his strength flew straight off to Berd's cave. There he broke down the door, and saw Uraz lying on the floor with his head cut off.

Batraz brought his body home to the Narts for burial, and interred his remains in the family vault. Then Batraz went to Shatana and told her of his decision to take revenge for Uraz's death. Then he said, "Prepare me provisions for the journey, and waste no time. I must go and teach that giant Akhshualy a lesson!"

Shatana prepared food and drink for the journey, and off he went to the Shekh steppe. How long the road took him, who knows, but at last he came to the giant Akhshualy's castle. He looked all round, but found no means of entry into the tower. So then he hid himself, and lay in waiting.

In the evening the giant returned from the hunt. On his shoulders he bore a pair of deer, and a huge tree with many branches. Hearing him as he approached, puffing and blowing, Batraz arose, went up to him and said, "Giant Akhshualy! This night I shall be your guest!"

"Who are you, and where do you come from?" inquired the giant.

"I am a man on the road, and travel about on my business. My country is far away from here, and I have nowhere to sleep, and so it is your duty to give me shelter for the night."

Giant Akhshualy said not a word to that, but took his guest inside.

He quickly skinned one of the slain deer, hacked the carcass in pieces, hung them in a cauldron over the hearth, broke some branches off the tree and got a fire going, all in a very short time.

When supper was ready, the guest and the host ate together, and then went to their beds. At midnight the giant awoke, went and roused his beloved bride-to-

be, and whispered to her, “Now, my dear maiden, come and take a look at this young man. I don’t know who he is, nor where he comes from. Maybe by chance, you know him?”

The beauty of the heavens and the charm of the earth came down from her tower, and the light from her face and her breast lit up the sleeping figure of Batraz, and she recognized him at once. However, she made as if she had never seen him before, and said to the giant Akhshualy, “No, I have never seen him before in my life!”

“Tomorrow early in the morning I shall be off hunting again. You see to it that my servants look after my guest until my return, and warn them not to let him out of the castle!”

Next morning the giant Akhshualy went off hunting, and the beauty descended from her tower, and went to the room where Batraz was still sleeping. Her face and breast lit up the walls so brightly, that when Batraz opened his eyes, he had straightaway to screw them up again.

“Have no fear!” said the maiden. “I have come to greet our Nart guest!”

“Well, what a wonder!” thought Batraz. “How does she know that I am a Nart.” So he then asked the maiden, “Who are you, young maiden, and what do you want of me?”

“I know that you have come to take revenge for the death of Uraz. But do not try to match your powers with the giant Akhshualy’s. There is but one way to bring about his death. Listen, and I shall tell you. But for the present you must lie in hiding. In the mornings the giant goes hunting, and at that time you must go to the Tiran Pass, and find his quiver. From it you must take three arrows, and bring them to the heavenly smith Kurdalagon, so that he can sharpen them, and temper them in the giant’s own night-water. In the evening, when he returns from hunting, you must lie in ambush somewhere on the lookout, and when you see him you must shoot the first arrow at the base of his spine, and that will deprive him of all his powers. The second you must lodge between his shoulder blades, and that will deprive him of speech. The third you must aim at his neck, and then he will suffocate.⁷

But see to it that you do not miss!”

Batraz thanked the beauty, and off he went into hiding. In the evening the giant Akhshualy returned from the hunt. Then the beauty of the heavens and the charm of the earth said to him, “Master of my head, listen to what I have to say to you!”

“Speak, then, my life, my joy, what is it that you wish?”

“I shall not leave you now, nor shall we wait till the end of the year. Prepare a tasty supper for us, we shall eat it together, and after supper we shall lie together in one bed!”

The giant jumped to his feet from sheer joy, and quite forgot about Batraz as together they supped and drank, then lay in one bed. The maiden made only one condition: that he should not take her as his wife just yet, until she gave the word. During the night the giant wanted to go outside, but the maiden would not let him. “You’ll catch cold!” she said, and brought him a pot instead.

When he had again fallen asleep, she quietly slipped out with the pot and gave it to Batraz. He then set off for the Tiran Pass. There he managed to find Akhshualy’s quiver, and took three arrows from it. Then he went up to the heavenly smith Kurdalagon, and asked him to sharpen the arrowheads well, and to temper them in the giant’s night-water. When that was all done, Batraz hastened back to the giant’s castle.

The giant had already left on his daily hunting expedition, so then Batraz waited inside the castle, behind the door, hidden from sight.

In the evening, as usual, the giant returned with a slain deer and a huge tree with many branches. As soon he stepped across the threshold, as he dropped his burden, then straightened up, Batraz let fly the first arrow, and it struck the giant at the base of his spine. Losing all his strength, he staggered and swayed. The second arrow went flying and it struck him between the shoulder-blades, and then Batraz came out of his hiding place, and standing before the giant with raised bow he said, “How did you dare to slay a sleeping Nart? Did you think, perhaps, that there would be none to take revenge for his death?”

The giant could not answer, and Batraz let fly the third arrow, and it flew straight at this neck, and Akhshualy crumpled up and crashed down on to the ground. Batraz gave the whole castle of Akhshualy to the flames, which finally

consumed it. The beautiful maiden he took with him back home, and the Nart elders decided to give her in marriage to the Nart elder Zeg.

64 ♦ BATRAZ AND THE ALDAR

Again a difficult time began for the Narts. Hunger threatened the lives of the folk, and Batraz then made a suggestion to the elders, “Let us travel somewhere beyond our borders, and maybe there you can sell my service in return for bread. That may perhaps save your lives.”

“What’s that you’re saying? Sell you like a slave to someone? Why, that is surely an unheard of thing!”

So said the elder Narts at first. But what can one do against the pangs of growing hunger and need? At last the elders agreed. They set off to a distant country, and there they found a nobleman who owned a land, a rich *aldar*, who bought Batraz as a servant in exchange for grain. He behaved like an ordinary simple workman. In the morning, usually, he drove a hundred pair of oxen to the forest. Batraz, with his hundred pair of oxen, was already dragging the tree trunks that he had torn out by the roots, and then hewn off their branches, back to the *aldar*’s courtyard, before the other woodsmen had even cut down a single tree! How could the *aldar* be otherwise than pleased? “I have a good workman here!” he said to himself. “I did well in buying him to serve me as a worker!”

So the days passed by, one after the other. Then the gods or the devils sent a rough old giant to the *aldar*’s village. This great old gruesome giant strode through the streets, and all in fear before him ran off in different directions.

“What kind of a giant is this?” Batraz asked his master.

“He is an evil tyrant, that old giant! We have to, in any case, pay him what he asks, or he would cause us all kinds of harm!” the *aldar* said.

Batraz at once jumped up and ran out in the street after the giant. The *aldar* called after him, warning him of the danger, but Batraz did not listen. The *aldar* thought to himself, “Ah, what a pity! The giant will kill him, and all for nothing, and I shall lose a powerful and excellent workman!” All the same, he feared to go out after him.

But Batraz caught up with the old giant, took hold of his arm, and leaped up and struck him such a blow with his iron fist, that he didn't even utter a sound, but fell lifeless to the ground at Batraz's feet. The people gathered around him in amazement, and with great joy. Then the *aldar* came running out, no longer afraid to leave home. He clapped Batraz on the shoulder, and said to him with pride, "You are a fine fellow that I have bought, my stalwart workman!"

"Could you not simply call me by my name? Why must you remind me that you have bought me, like a slave? Would someone in your family die if you gave me my own name?" said Batraz, frowning darkly, and left.

Next morning he yoked a hundred pairs of oxen to their carts, then went to the *aldar* and said to him, "The man you bought as a slave is leaving you. If you had not reminded me that I had been purchased by you, as your workman, I should have remained to serve you. But those words that you uttered have made me seek my freedom, and become a free man again, and now I am going home to my own people!"

Then the steel-blue son of the Narts, Batraz, lay on the carts all that pleased him of the *aldar*'s possessions, cried "Gee up!" to the oxen, and left the *aldar* standing there, gaping at him with open mouth.

65 ♦ HOW BATRAZ STORMED THE KHIZH FORTRESS

The prince of Khizh took a fancy to Shoshlan's wife—the beautiful daughter of the sun. He was thinking about how to kidnap her. He began to feed his horse on roasted barley grain, and for seven years readied it for the kidnapping.

Once, when Shoshlan was away on a distant campaign, his wife was drying grain in the sunshine. The Khizh prince traced her movements, then mounted his horse, and galloped straight up to Shoshlan's home. He seized hold of the daughter of the sun, and carried her off on his horse. There was nothing she could do about it. She was kidnapped!

Soon Shoshlan returned from his expedition, and not finding his wife at home, went to the house where his mother Shatana lived. He asked her if she knew where his wife had disappeared to. Shatana then told him the whole story.

He at once gathered together his Nart friends, and off they went to make war on the Khizh fortress.

For a long time they besieged the Khizh castle, but could not capture it, because the prince of Khizh had gathered together all the spirits of heaven and earth to defend it. At last the Narts had to return home empty-handed, which made them all very sad. Not a laugh, not one joke was heard on the streets of the Nart villages. Then wise Shatana cooked three honey-cakes, and with light steps climbed the mountain where sacrifices were made, and there she prayed, "O God of gods, my God! If I am still of some use to you, then send my son, whom I did not bear, who now sits in the councils of the dwellers on high, down to us again, because the Narts have suffered violence at enemy hands!"

Batraz, when he heard of this, grew so furious, that his steely body became red-hot. He peered around, then leapt down from the heavenly heights, straight onto the roof of the seven-story tower of Urizhmag and Shatana. He burned his way through ceilings, one after another, with his red-hot body. In the lowest story of the tower, there stood a huge water tub, and into that fell the glowing-hot Batraz. Having cooled off in the water, he climbed out of the tub, and went to Shatana, "What has happened to you here?" he asked her at once.

"We could not expect anything worse!" replied Shatana. "The prince of Khizh has kidnapped Shoshlan's wife, and carried her off to his castle. The Narts went to besiege the fortress, but could not capture it, and returned home without rescuing Shoshlan's wife."

Batraz immediately summoned the Narts together again, and off they rode to the Khizh fortress once more. As soon as the fortress came into sight, Batraz said to the Nart warriors, "Lash me firmly to this huge arrow that I have made!"

The Narts were all amazed, but nonetheless did as Batraz ordered. When they had bound him tightly to the arrow he told them, "Now take my bow, set the arrow to the string, and bend the ends of the bow with all your might, aiming it at the Khizh castle. Then let it fly!"

The Narts followed his instructions, Batraz stiffened his arms and legs, and off he went flying. The huge steel-headed arrow struck against the fortress wall, and knocked a large hole in one side of it. Still it went on, flying across the

castle courtyard to the opposite wall, and part of that came crumbling down too. Batraz quickly freed himself from the arrow, and went seeking the prince of Khizh, crying, "Where is that puppy, that son-of-a-bitch?" On finding him he asked, "Did you think that there were no Narts left alive? And that you could go stealing their wives with impunity!"

He caught hold of the prince by one arm, and tore it out. Then he did the same with the other. After that with one blow he smashed his skull in. Meanwhile the other Narts had entered the castle, overthrown the defenders, and gathered all the prince of Khizh's possessions and treasures together, and carried off his wife and three daughters along with these. As for Shoshlan's wife, the daughter of the sun, they restored her to her husband's home, and there was no happier man among the Narts.

66 ♦ BATRAZ AND THE NARTS' BOWL, WASAMONGA

The Narts had many treasures, but highest among them they valued their drinking bowl Wasamonga. That bowl had this precious property: if someone among those feasting spoke the truth about his feats, his valor, and his honor, the bowl lifted itself up to his lips, but if someone boasted falsely, then all was in vain. The bowl would sit unmoving.

Once the Narts were feasting, and their Wasamonga bowl, full to the brim with home brewed beer, stood before them. So they began to boast before each other about their deeds of daring. But no matter what they said, the Wasamonga bowl did not move in any way.

Only Batraz sat silent at that feast, and listened calmly to the tales of the other Narts. When all had finished speaking, Batraz arose lightly from his place, tapped the brim of the bowl with the handle of his whip, and then said, "I went hunting yesterday evening. I climbed the mountain slopes, and I killed seven evening spirits. I tell the truth, and therefore, answer truly Wasamonga bowl, and rise to the knees of my father here."

Smoothly the bowl arose, and settled itself on Khamis's knees.

Again Batraz tapped the brim with his whip-handle and continued, “At first flush of dawn I set off home down the mountain slopes, and there I killed seven dawn spirits. I have told the truth, so rise Wasamonga bowl, level with my father Khamis’s waist!”

The Wasamonga bowl accordingly rose level with Khamis’s waistline. Batraz was about to go with his story, when Khamis interrupted him, “Speak only of that which one may mention safely, and without offense, and say nothing of that which must not be mentioned!”

Khamis gave this warning because in the home-brewed beer, made with the aid of bread, swimming in the bowl he had seen a bead of fat, and in that bead of fat was hiding the spirit Khor-aldar, the lord of all grain. He had concealed himself there in order to listen to the drunken boasting of the Narts, and to find out who it was had killed his son. Khamis was afraid that Batraz would speak of this, and so would call down the anger of Khor-aldar, lord of all grain, upon them.

But Batraz went boldly on, and tapping the brim again, added, “Again I climbed the slopes of the mountain, and killed seven of the Elijah spirits of thunder, and seven of the Michael and Gabriel spirits of ripe grain, and among them, Burkhor-ali, the son of the sovereign spirit of all grain, Khor-aldar. All these spirits I slew, and seeing that I have spoken true, rise, Wasamonga bowl, to my father’s lips.”

The Wasamonga bowl steadily rose to Khamis’s lips, and at that moment Khor-aldar leapt out of the bowl, or otherwise Khamis would have swallowed him along with the beer. The sovereign spirit Khor-aldar flew in anger onto a stalk of barley. Six ears were sprouting on one stalk, growing in the field. Khor-aldar crushed them all in his hand. In revenge for the death of his son he wanted to destroy all six ears, and thus to punish the Narts. But just then Washtirji, patron saint of all warriors, the protector of all travelers, begged him, “Hey, leave at least one ear to feed my horse!”

So Khor-aldar left one ear alive on the stalk, and destroyed all else.

Meanwhile, when Khamis wanted to take a drink of beer from the bowl, there appeared in it lizards, snakes, frogs, and serpents. They rose up in a bunch,

and tried to swim into Khamis's mouth along with the beer. But Khamis's whiskers were as sharp as steel, and he made short work of the reptiles, piercing them through and through. They fell back, and were hidden in the bottom of the bowl. Then steely-whiskered Khamis simply turned the Wasamonga bowl upside down.

Among seven brothers there once grew up a lone sister. She was the light of heaven, and the loveliness of the earth, the beauty Akola.

She ordered her brothers to build her an iron tower at the crossing of seven ways, between the seas. She moved into that tower, and lived there, and did not show her beautiful face to anyone. Not a single man had seen her, and, except for the seven brothers, she had not looked on the face of a single man. The most valorous of the Narts tried more than once to find the way to her tower, but none succeeded.

Once Urizhmag has returned from the hunt, and suddenly saw that all the brave Narts had gathered on the top of Black Mountain, and were dancing the Shimd in a circle there. Such a dance it was, and so many were joining hands in it, that the age-old trees in the forest trembled, and cracks appeared in their mighty trunks. The very earth was shaking beneath the Narts' dancing feet.

“What is the reason for your dancing, eminent Narts?” Urizhmag inquired. “With your tramping tread you are frightening all the people!”

“Well, we shall tell you why!” someone answered. “In an iron tower that stands at the crossing of seven ways, between the two seas, there lives the beauty Akola, the light of the heavens, the loveliness of the earth. But she shows her face to nobody, and not a single man has been able to attract her attention. We know that every day she spreads the wings of Kanzargash, eagle's wings, and makes three circles in the sky. Here we dance the Shimd, hoping that on one of those flights she will see our dancing circle, and that someone among us may have the luck to attract her glance. But if nobody among us is destined to be so lucky, then all the same we shall have the chance to see her!”

“I am sorry to hear that you have to take so much trouble!” replied Urizhmag. “Say, what would you give me if I show you this beauty Akola?”

“I would give you my swift-footed steed, without regret!” said one.

“I would give you my double-edge sword at once!” said another.

“I would give my mountain-piercing bow and arrows!” cried a third. Thus, interrupting one another, the best of the best of the Narts shouted their offers, but all the same did not break off their rumbling, thundering circle of the Shimd.

After all the others fell silent, Batraz, son of Khamis spoke up, “O eldest Nart! Lure here to us the beauty Akola, and I will give you my bow that never misses the target!”

At once Urizhmag turned his piebald horse, Arfan, around, and giving him the spur, began to speak to him as he rode, “When you have galloped to Akola’s tower, pretend that you have a lame leg, and no matter how I lash you, drag on as though exhausted.”

So as soon as they reached Akola’s iron tower, his faithful horse did just as his master had commanded. Like rumbling peals of thunder the blows of Urizhmag’s lash re-echoed round the tower, but Arfan did not move a single step farther.

“What is that crack like lighting, and that rumble like thunder?” the beauty Akola asked her servant. “Is a heavenly storm breaking?”

“That is no heavenly storm,” answered the maid-servant. “An elderly man is riding by, but his lame horse will no longer move, so he is beating it. Those are the blows of his whip that you hear!”

“If it is an old man, and his horse can go no farther, then invite him in to be our guest. Either he has grown angry with his tired steed, or maybe he is tipsy, or just stupid perhaps. Or perhaps he is tired of the deceitful doings of his wife, who knows? Anyhow, ask him in!”

The servant went out of the tower, and invited Urizhmag to enter, “Come in and be our guest, respected elder,” she said to Urizhmag. “Let your horse have a rest, and you yourself take a rest too!”

“I see that you are a light-hearted young woman, and you must be more careful with strangers, or you will pour away your happiness like water!” replied Urizhmag. “If I had time to go visiting as a guest, then I should long ago have found a refuge for the night, no worse than your tower here. But I have no time to be a guest anywhere. The Agur warriors have come to the shores of our sea,

and there lives my only sister. It is to her I am hastening. If I am not in time to save her, at least I hope I may bury her decently!”

The serving-maid returned quickly to the tower and told Akola what she had learned from Urizhmag. The beauty lived alone in the tower, with none to defend her, so how could she help but feel frightened? She came down from her tower to Urizhmag, and said to him, “Spend this night with us, my dear old man, and let your horse rest and you rest too. Tomorrow all will be as God wills it!”

Urizhmag had already prayed to God that it might be as she suggested, and therefore he readily agreed to stay the night, and before going to bed, they entertained him well.

At dawn he arose, mounted his steed, and spurred him off, as if in one moment he must gallop with his rider to the very bounds of heaven. But as soon as he had gone so far that Akola, standing on the top of her tower, could no longer see him, Urizhmag halted his horse, dismounted, and sat awhile motionless. Then he remounted, turned his steed about, and rode it back until the tower once more came into sight. While still some way off, he began to shout, “Hey, there, ladies! Fly for your lives!”

The serving-maid appeared and begged Urizhmag to stop a moment, “Wait awhile! Just one word with you!”

Urizhmag halted his horse, and the serving-maid ran out and asked, “Be good enough to tell us what has happened! Good news or bad?”

“I was not in time to save my sister! The Agur warriors have seized the coastline, and now I must hurry home to save my family!” he said.

Akola, on hearing this, came out and begged Urizhmag to save her, “Take me with you, kind old man, and God will reward you, I’m sure!”

“I must go at once to save my family!” replied Urizhmag. “How can I take upon myself responsibility for you as well?”

“For God’s sake do not leave us!” begged the beauty Akola.

“Well, I can’t look on your unhappy fate unmoved. There’s nothing for it, I suppose. Come, get ready quickly!” Urizhmag said, giving in to her pleas. It had turned out just as he had prayed God it might.

The beauty Akola ordered her servant to get a half-dozen horses harnessed to her cart, mounted on springs, and hastily gathering together all her valuables, placed them in the cart. She took her seat, and they then left her tower, and placed themselves under Urizhmag's protection.

They traveled a little way, and the beauty Akola said to Urizhmag, "Kind old man, if your horse will go alongside mine, then harness him up, and come and sit comfortably with me in the cart."

Urizhmag harnessed his piebald steed along with the others, and went and sat on soft cushions, and showed the driver the way. At last they drew near the Black Mountain. A dark cloud lay over its summit. That was the dust rising high as the Narts danced energetically around in the circle of their Shimd. Akola asked Urizhmag, "What is that dark cloud there?"

"I will tell you what it is! That is the Narts who have heard that the Agurs are threatening their borders. They are preparing to meet them! Maybe you would like to go up to them on the mountain height?"

Akola thought a moment, and then replied, "We at least are escaping from the Agurs, and who could defend us better than those who have taken up arms against them? Let us drive up the mountain track and meet them, and there we shall find refuge!"

Urizhmag, of course, at once agreed, and their cart began to climb the mountain slopes, till they reached the top. The Narts were dancing faster and faster, and Akola looked from the cart with surprise, and the first man she saw was sparkling-eyed Shoshlan. He too was startled, then stepped out in front of her and said, "How many days have we been dancing for you our merry round-dance, the Shimd! Now you have arrived, I beg you, come and dance with me!"

"You are a very handsome man, and I would gladly dance with you, but you are of the mountain breed, and I should have to gather some very soft feather grass, and stuff it in your plaited leather hunting shoes, for however good you may be, you would still tread on my toes!"

"May you become the victim of others who wear plaited leather hunting shoes like mine," answered Shoshlan, and with bowed head left her.⁸

"Dance with me, beauty Akola!" said Shauwai, small of stature.

“I would dance with you,” replied Akola, “but if one of the powerful Narts took your hand, instead of mine, your arm would be broken!”

“Then dance with me, my beauty!” said Khamis, stepping forward.

“I would dance with you, but I see that among the spring grasses in your beard, the autumn grasses have found a place!” she replied.

Then Urizhmag asked her favor, “I was the one who found you, and I now ask you to dance with me!”

“I would gladly dance with you, Urizhmag, eldest of the Narts, but I know that your wife Shatana is very strict, and it would go ill with me if I should incur her disfavor!”

“May they bring you as a sacrifice to my wife, who distributes the honorary goblets of wine among our guests, and spreads a full table!” answered Urizhmag, and left the dance.

All the eminent Narts in turn asked the beauty Akola to dance with them, but she did not accept anyone’s invitation. Last of all came Khamis’s son, steely-bodied Batraz.

“Maiden, dance with me!” he asked.

“I would dance with you, Batraz, with pleasure,” answered Akola, “for only you among the Narts have no faults. Still there is one stain that remains on your honor. Many years ago the seven-headed giant named Kanzargash carried off one of your forebears, Uon, and made him his shepherd. Wearing an old jacket that had shed its fur, he pastured the giant’s flock. He still wears that old coat, full of nits, and if rain soaks it, it stretches and drags round his feet, but when the hot sun shines, it shrinks and squeezes him so that he barely breathes. Now, when you bring him back home, along with all the treasures of the giant Kanzargash, then you will be a worthy partner to dance with!”

Just as though someone had struck him a blow, he turned and said, “I am going away on a long journey, O Narts, and I ask you while I am gone to continue your Shimd, but do not let anyone offend the beauty Akola in any way, nor say one bad word to her!”

Having spoken thus, he jumped upon his horse, and galloped home, and dashed indoors to Shatana, and said to her, “Shatana, my Nanny, say, have we

not got somewhere among the old treasures of our forebears, which all Narts keep, an ancient sword, or a tested coat of mail? Who, if not you, can show me where such things are to be found?” he asked her.

“Your Nanny Shatana is always ready to sacrifice her heart for you! Over there, in our treasure-store, you will find an iron chest, full of armor and weapons of our forebears. You know the Khatiag tongue. Go up to the chest and ask for what you want, in that language, and it will open of itself, and you may take whatever you wish!”

Batraz went into the treasure-store of the Akhshartagketta, and addressed the chest in the Khatiag tongue. With a clang it opened its lid, and from many suits of mail and old swords, Batraz chose the sword and armor that suited him best, and having donned the coat of mail and stuck the sword in his belt, went back again to Shatana.

“Shatana, O Nanny, tell me, do this coat of mail and sword suit me?”

“May I stake my life to save your head! Yes, indeed, like sunlight suits the breast of our mountains, so the coat of mail suits you, and like spring dew glistening on the morning grass, so gleams the sword in your manly hand. You could not have chosen better!”

“If that is so, Nanny, then prepare me some food for the journey, that is tasty to eat and pack it so that it is easy to carry. There is one more thing that I must ask. We had a forebear named Uon. Say, is his old horse still alive, or at least can his old bridle be found? If so, please show me where they are!”

“In our old house his saddle and bridle are still hanging on the wall. Take them with you, and go deep into the forest. One white stallion remains from Uon’s herd. By day it is hidden in a mountain gorge, but at night it comes to graze in a clearing in the forest. Many years it has pastured there, and trodden out a path between the mountain and the clearing. If you have the courage, that horse will come into your hands. If not, that means it was not predestined so.”

Batraz took the saddle and bridle that belonged to Uon, and went to the forest. He found the path trodden out between the mountain and the clearing. A branching tree stood beside the path. Batraz climbed up among the branches hanging right over the path, and when late at night a white horse came out of the

mountain gorge along the path, Batraz leapt down from the branches onto its back. The horse made for the forest glade, but Batraz seized him by the throat and squeezed him, until the horse opened his mouth.

Quickly he thrust the bit between his teeth, and held the bridle, while he adroitly slipped the light saddle between himself and the horse's withers. The white stallion reared up on its hind legs and bucked and leapt as high as the trees, up, up into the skies. But Batraz lashed it three times with such force that bloody pieces of hide, big enough to make a pair of boots, went flying from the horse. He then reined it under control, and guided it where he wished. Well, he galloped away, so that a long way became short beneath his hooves. Some time later the horse suddenly spoke to Batraz, "I should like to know where we are traveling to now?"

Batraz answered him at once, "We are seeking the seven-headed giant, Kanzargash, who carried off one of my forebears beyond the mountains some years ago!"

"You will not succeed in reaching him," replied the white horse. "Your father took great pains to find that monster, but all to no avail. Indeed, how can one reach him? Two mountains block the way. They are as fierce as two wild rams, and all the time they butt each other, and then withdraw, only to butt again. Now listen! If in that short moment when they separate, you give me three good lashes, as you did when you tamed me, then either we shall gallop through between them before they close, or we shall be crushed. Your father tried, but did not strike hard enough, and the mountains pinched my tail, so we did not get through, and since then I have gone with a docked tail!"

Conversing thus, they reached those very mountains that butted one another like wild rams. Batraz at once reined the stallion in, and in that moment when the peaks parted, he gave his horse three blows such that chunks of hide big enough to make a pair of boots went flying from its haunches, while from Batraz's palms, enough skin went flying to make soles for them. The noise of those blows from his whip rumbled like thunder, and the echoes resounded from the two mountains. For a moment that uproar deafened them, and they were

rooted on the spot. In that moment the horse burst through the gap, with Batraz on his back, to the other side.

There the mountain slopes were not steep, and were overgrown with luxuriant green grass. These pastures extended farther than the eye could see. Look on one side, and you notice how slowly and steadily, all as one, a herd of horses were grazing. Look on the other, and the pasture seems to be black, not green. There an enormous flock of sheep were feeding. One shepherd alone, a tired old man, was in charge of them.

Batraz straightaway went up to him and greeted him so, "May this day bring you great happiness, my father!"

"May you be likewise lucky, my sunny lad!" replied the old man. "Say, where do you come from? I have long been a herdsman here in these hills, but have never seen a passer-by on foot, nor on horseback here. Our master, the seven-headed giant lets nobody through. What a wonder it is that you are here! Say, why have you come? What do you seek here?" Thus the old man questioned Batraz, and at the same time walked round and round his horse, while tears began to flow from his eyes onto the grass.

"Why are you crying, father?" asked Batraz. "Is it so sad and painful to see me then?"

"No, it is not sad to see you, my good man, but when I fell into the hands of this god-accursed monster, I left behind me a horse, very much like yours. But why should I grieve for him? The wolves most likely ate him long ago. It is for that old horse of mine, that I am crying!"

"Well, cry no more, father, for it is your own horse that you see before you. I am the son of Nart Khamis, Batraz, so have no fear!"

"Come down from that horse then," said the old man, "and let me feel your limbs. Only when my fingers feel bones can I be sure that you are really Khamis's son!"

Batraz dismounted, and went up to the old man. He ran his hands over the young man's limbs, and at last said to him, "You are one of us, of course. The whole makeup of your body is such as is only found in our family. But why did

you come here? Is it not enough that one of us is slowly dying here? Why must you die too?"

"Don't be sad, father! That will do you no good. It is better by far to tell me where the dwelling place of this monstrous giant is."

"I would willingly show you, but what can you do against him? There is no power on earth greater than his. The birds are afraid to fly over his land. The whole earth goes trembling before him!"

Nonetheless, Batraz insisted on asking him to reveal the giant's lair, and at last Uon fulfilled his request. "You see there, on the mountain peak, a black cavern," said Uon. "Its entry is blocked by a great slab of stone, and nobody on earth is strong enough to move it from its place. That is where the giant lives!"

In a moment Batraz had scaled the mountain, and with one heave of his shoulder shifted the slab from the entrance to the cave. He then went inside, and saw the seven-headed giant asleep. The noise of his snoring echoed beneath the vaulted roof of the cave. Heat was erupting from all his seven snouts, and rose in a cloud above him to the roof, then fell below in black ashes. Above the giant's seven snouts sat a sad maiden, daughter of the sun, Khorcheska, and the sun was shining through a hole in the roof onto her gleaming breast. Above the giant's feet sat another sad maiden, daughter of the moon, Mishirkhan, and the moon was shining on her bosom. Slowly they were waving enormous burdock leaves, so that the flies did not disturb the giant's sleep. In front of each maiden was a low three-legged table, so heavy with abundant food that they had sunk into the ground. The maidens did not even look at them. They were both weeping unceasingly. Like gleaming streams, the tears rolled down their cheeks and fell to the ground, whereupon they spread like diamonds around the cavern.

"Good-day to you, fair maidens!" said Khamis's son Batraz. "What are you weeping for all the time?"

"May you have success, steely-bodied Batraz! We shall die here soon! But why have you come here to perish too? We are weeping because the giant will wake up soon, and suck our blood to the last drop. For five months he feeds us on whole table-loads of food, as you see here. At the end of the fifth month, he pricks our heels with an awl, and sucks our blood. Then he sleeps, but when he

awakes, again he sucks our blood without a pause. We weep, because soon now he will awake!”

Batraz could hold himself back no longer. He drew forth his sword, and thought to himself “Now I will hack those seven heads in a row!”

But the maidens warned him against hasty action, “Wait a moment! Do not hasten! The giant is not destined to die from a stranger’s sword. You will merely awaken him, and he will swallow you at once!”

“From what, then, is he destined to die? Tell me that!” said Batraz.

“Go behind that door, and there you will see an enormous chest. A magic sword lies within. Only from that sword can he receive his deathblow, and not from any enemy sword nor arrows. But you will not be able to open that chest. Only a hundred pair of oxen could lift the lid!”

But Batraz at once ran to the chest, and uttered a word in the Khatiag tongue, and the lid raised itself. Batraz snatched up the sword, ran back to the sleeping giant, and with sweeping blows from the shoulder, one after another, six heads fell spouting blood over the cavern walls. The last head Batraz did not hack off, and waving to and fro in torment it cried accusingly, “Son of Khamis, Nart Batraz, it was unworthy of you to attack another while he was sleeping!”

“That is true,” replied Batraz, “but your offenses against the Narts and against these maidens simply roused my anger, like a great lump in my throat, and I could not restrain myself. Therefore be silent with your reproaches. I know that I should not slay sleeping foes!”

“Then I beg you not to prolong my death agony, but put me out of my misery, and cut off my last head!”

“It does not become me to cut you down a second time,” said Batraz. “The Akhshartagketa Narts, like Wasilla, the master of thunder and of lightning, strike only once!” Batraz answered him.

So once again the giant raised his remaining head, and tried to pull himself up, but in vain. He crashed down flat on his face, then quivered a few times, then became a motionless heap.

How could those two maidens do otherwise than rejoice? Their tears of sorrow dried at once, and now only tears of happiness were seen, as if they were

pearls, rolling down their cheeks.

“From now on, be our protector!” they begged Batraz, bowing low.

“Let your hearts be at peace, for I shall not desert you!” he said.

Then the maidens told Batraz some of the secrets of the cave, “Here in Kanzargash’s cavern, there lies a magic skin. Upon it you may lay all the riches of the world. He also has a magic cord. Whatever you wind it round will lose all its weight, and become as light as a feather, or a fluttering moth. Kanzargash also possesses a pair of wings with springs, and they will carry you over mountains and seas, wherever you wish. Beyond the cave, in a fold of the mountains, stands hidden a lake of milk. An old man has only to bathe in it, and he then becomes a youth again, only just beginning to sprout a moustache!”

Batraz first of all took the old man Uon to this lake of milk, and bathed him there, and at once he became a youth again. Then he filled a leather wineskin with that wonder-working milk, and took it back to the cave. There he gathered all the giant’s treasures, all his cattle, and all his grain, and lay that all on the magic skin. Then he bound it all fast with the magic weight-reducing cord, and placed the wings with springs on the edge of the skin. Finally he set Uon and the two maidens, not forgetting Uon’s white stallion, on the skin, and took a seat himself, and wished for all to be safe at home again. The spring wings began to fly high, high in the sky. From above he looked down and saw the two mountains butting each other like wild rams, knocking pieces off each other, then butting again.

Having returned to the land of the Narts, Batraz untied the magic cord, and the herds of cattle that were on the magic skin moved out onto the field and very nearly covered them all, as Batraz drove them. Then with Uon and both maidens he climbed the slopes of the mountain where the Narts were still dancing, circling round in the Shimd.

Meanwhile the beauty Akola sat in her cart, with the lookout flap closed, and did not leave it. Inside she was sewing some wonderful garments for Batraz.

With the milk of youth that he brought home in the leather wineskin, he doused his father Khamis, and he became a youth again.

Then Batraz went up to the daughter of the moon Mishirkhan, and said, "From this day onward, you will be the wife of Uon!" and she agreed. Then he went up to the daughter of the sun Khorcheska, and said to her, "From this day on you will be mistress in the home of Khamis, my father!" and she too agreed.

Finally he himself went up to the beauty Akola, and said to her, "From this day on you will be my wife!" And she happily agreed.

Throughout the whole Nart settlement was heard the merry noise of the wedding feasts, and everyone who could walk on two feet gathered at them. The celebrations, the feasting, the toasting, the drinking, and the merry songs and dancing went on for a whole week.

68 ♦ HOW BATRAZ BEAT THE SPIRIT OF FERTILITY

Zuar, the spirit granting fertility to Nart women, had always been invisible earlier, but suddenly one day he appeared before their eyes. The women, by twos or even alone, went to him and begged for his favors.

"Give me good fortune, a generous portion!"

Batraz's wife, Akola, heard about this and thought, "I too should go to Zuar, and ask his blessing." So she went to him and pleaded thus, "Glory to you, our spirit of fertility! Accept my offering with favor, and send me good fortune, a generous portion, and make me happy!"

"Away with you!" retorted Zuar. "I do not give my blessing to licentious strumpets, such as you! Away with you, I say!"

How could a good woman reply to such crude words? Offended and sad at heart, she returned home.

Batraz was at that time on a distant expedition. His wife sat at home and grieved. Suddenly she saw a swallow fly to their home, and settle on their chimney. Straightaway she begged the swallow, "Fly as quickly as you can to Batraz. If he is sitting, let him stand. If he is standing, don't let him sit, but tell him to come home at once!"

The swallow flew off to Batraz, and gave him her message. He jumped upon his steed, and in that same moment appeared back in his home.

“What has happened? Why are you troubled at heart?” he asked Akola.

“The spirit who grants fertility to the women of our village has appeared in the flesh before us. All the women went to him to ask his blessing, and I went too, but me alone he called bad names and drove me away with scornful curses!”

Batraz went straight into the forest, and there he hacked off some oak tree branches, and made some strong clubs out of them. When this was done, he went to the house near the village where Zuar dwelt.

“O Zuar, spirit of fertility, show me your face!” he cried.

Zuar thought that he had come to him with a prayer or with petitions, and went and looked out of the window. At once Batraz took a club from under his arm, and how he lashed and thrashed that Zuar! The spirit took to his heels, and ran as fast as his feet would take him. When one oak staff broke, Batraz took another, and continued to beat him. The spirit, frightened out of his wits, made for the door of the Wasilla’s family dwelling, and reached it on his last legs, and hid there, but still Batraz followed him, and shouted, “Hey, there, Wasillas! My stupid ass has strayed into your yard! Drive him out again to me, or I shall entertain you in such a way that you won’t forget this day in a hundred years!”

The Wasilla family were scared by this, and drove out Zuar. He ran farther, looking for a refuge, but Batraz did not give him one moment’s peace, and went on beating him as before. When one club broke, he took another. So they ran on till they came to Shafa’s dwelling. There Zuar was just about done for, but managed to dash through the door.

Shafa, the protector of the domestic hearth, came out to Batraz, “O Batraz! Pardon Zuar, for my sake! He hasn’t long to live!”

“What, pardon him for the sake of a long-eared ass like you? Drive him out at once, or I’ll splatter you with blood, like drops of rain!”

So Shafa had to drive Zuar out, and as he hurried away Batraz again began to beat him with the biggest club of all. Thus, with his tongue hanging out, puffing and blowing, he barely reached the dwelling of Tutir-Zuar, the protector of all wolves. Tutir came out to Batraz and pleaded with him to spare Zuar, “Ay, ay! Nart Batraz, show some respect for such a protector as I, and pardon the offender!”

“I would never have pardoned him for anyone, but since you ask it, I feel that human conscience is the strongest power. How can I refuse such an intercessor as you? Let him be pardoned for your sake, Tutir!” said Batraz, and with that he turned and went off home.

Zuar, the spirit of fertility, nursed his bumps and bruises for a whole year and more, and later, when he had quite recovered, felt so offended by the Narts, that he left his home among them for good.

69 ♦ WHO IS BEST AMONG THE NARTS?

The eminent Nart elders sat at their meeting place in their carved armchairs. They were holding council about the fate of the Nart people.

One of the eldest Narts was speaking: “Narts were real Narts only as long as the heavens did not dare to thunder above their heads, as long as they were ready to die in battle, defending their people, as long as each man was able to control his passions. Then they were real Narts, and from their mouths came nothing but the truth. Our folk could be called real Narts only when they could hold their heads up high, and not bow before anybody. They made the doors to their houses high, so that they did not have to bow their heads. We did not wish that God should think we were bowing our heads to him!”

A second among the Nart elders then took up the word, “Neighboring peoples envied the Narts, and Nart fame spread round the world, only as long as Narts were self-restrained in eating, and knew when to stop as they were drinking their mead. Then they did not give themselves to gluttony and carousing as they do now, and did not lose their courage and reason, and all sense of shame from inordinate drinking as they do now!”

A third speaker among the elders added his say to the others, “Only as long as we see the young respecting the old, and paying them honor can we be satisfied as Narts. Only as long as we do not interrupt others when speaking, but listen to their words soberly, and only as long as we do not lose our sense of dignity and conscience over a woman, can we consider ourselves real Narts!”

Then they brought three pieces of the finest woolen cloth to the elders. It was a glorious treasure, preserved from their ancestors in times of old.

Urizhmag took one of these pieces in his hands, and said, "With this treasure the elder Narts will reward the one among you younger Narts who is shown to possess the greatest wisdom, valor, and nobility. Is there anyone among you who would claim this valuable prize?"

Suddenly Khamis stepped forward and answered him thus, "I claim that piece of cloth."

Uproar broke out among the Narts. "So that's how it is! For a long time you have been scared even by your own shadow, and in your aging days very rarely do you look a man in the eye. As for wisdom, well!" cried one of them.

Khamis continued his speech. "I was going to say, when interrupted, that I have no special valor to boast about, but I do have, if the elder Narts will pardon my immodesty, a valiant son, Batraz. Who can compare with him for boldness? There is not one spot on his honor, and he will not permit anything dishonorable in his presence. It is for him that I claim the cloth!"

Nobody disputed these words of Khamis, and he took the prize.

Then Urizhmag took the second piece of woolen cloth in his hands, "This rich prize the Nart elders will award to the one who is most restrained in eating and drinking, and who from first to last, however unfortunate his fate, always bears the name of an honorable honest man."

"That award I also claim!" said Khamis. "I have . . ."

Uproar again! Cries and shouts among the Narts present rose above the village square. "No, no! Your words are not to our liking! Who among the Narts is it who does not know of your gluttony? Always feasting and drinking! When have you ever been the first to leave the table?"

Khamis then resumed his broken speech, "I have not come forward to claim the prize for myself, but for my son, Batraz, in his absence. Who, save he, is so moderate in all things?"

Again nobody disputed these words, and Khamis took the second prize.

Finally Urizhmag took the third roll of cloth in his hands and said, "This rich gift of the Nart elders will be given to the young man who has shown the

greatest nobility and respect in his relations to all our women, and has also been most considerate toward his own wife!”

“That gift I also claim, and I will . . .”

Greater uproar then ever!

“How dare you make so bold? Who has not heard of your magic wonder-working tooth of Arkizh? You have only to smile, and any woman becomes your easy prey. You would climb through a crack in a wall to get a woman! Your wife Bisenon, in the form of a frog, you used to carry around in your pocket. Where can one see such insolence toward women as you display?”

“Your reproaches are quite justified,” replied Khamis, “but who among you has shown greater nobility and respect toward women than Batraz?”



The Nart elders, before allotting the third prize, decided to test out Batraz’s valor, his moderation, and his attitude toward women.

Having heard from Khamis that he was hunting, they sent a group of a hundred riders to lay in wait for him, and suddenly fall upon him at once, but he immediately turned his horse round and made a pretense of flight. The riders chased after him, but because some of their horses were more powerful or swifter than others, they became stretched out in pursuit like a long thread. Then Batraz suddenly again turned his steed round, and may God protect you from such an onslaught! One after another, as they appeared, he mowed them down, and wounded, bloody, and hacked to bits, in sorry state they returned home.



After a while the Nart elders organized a feast, but they seated Batraz at the table in such a way that he could reach neither food nor drink. The others glutted themselves with delicacies, but Batraz just sat and did not touch a thing. Not a scrap of meat did he eat, not a drop of mead did he drink, but all the same he sang and danced better than them all. He made no complaints about this, and thus showed his moderation.



Just before he was due to return home after a hunting expedition, the elder Narts persuaded his wife Akola to pretend that she had been deceiving him in his absence, with their young shepherd lad. When he arrived home late in the evening, he found his wife asleep, with her head lying quietly on the shepherd's arm. Batraz very carefully removed the shepherd's arm from beneath her head, and placed her arm beneath his head. Then he himself went out into the courtyard, spread his felt cloak under him, placed his saddle beneath his head, and lay asleep till sunrise.

Thus the Nart elders were convinced of his bravery, his moderation, and his respect for his wife, and thus he finally received the third roll of precious woolen cloth.



The Nart elders did not disperse after awarding the prize to Batraz, but started discussing how it was that he showed such noble qualities. They called Batraz to their meeting later, to ask of him an explanation.

“O wisest Nart elders,” he said, “do not be surprised if I tell you that bravery and quick-wittedness in battle I learned from my hunting dog.”

“But how could that be?” inquired the elders, with great surprise.

“Once it happened as we were returning from the hunt, we passed through a strange village. My dog was with me, and the wild village-dogs came yelping out, and surrounded him. ‘They will tear him to bits!’ I thought. But before I could move, my dog, not losing one moment, ran off at full speed, with all the others, big and small, chasing after him. As they ran, some dropped behind, some forged ahead, and they became all stretched out in a long line. Then my dog suddenly turned on the nearest one, and bit him severely. Then so on, as they caught up with him, he bit them too. All my life I remembered that if you wish to defeat a foe, you must first of all divide him, destroy his unity, break him in small pieces, and then you will win the victory!”

“But where did you learn to be so moderate in eating and drinking?”

“Oh, that was long ago, when I was very young still!” he answered. “Once on a mountain pass the grown-ups sent us lads for water. On the way one of us

stumbled and swayed, nearly falling over something like an old leather bag, all wrinkled, and with a long narrow neck. We took this bag with us to fill it as an extra water supply, but when we held the bag out, the water went on pouring in but did not fill it. The bag just swelled and swelled, to our surprise. We filled the other jugs at the spring as it tumbled down from the cliffs, and took them and the bag back to the grown-ups. We poured the water out of the bag into their mugs, and then asked them what kind of bag it was that just swelled up but did not get full? The grown-ups looked carefully at the old bag, and finally decided that it was a human stomach! All my life I remembered that occurrence. “Yes, overeating is a bitter plague, and so is overdrinking!” I thought, and began to train myself at mealtimes. I took a flat round loaf and divided it into quarters, and at first ate only three. My strength did not fail, and I worked as usual. Then I laid aside another piece, and saw that half a loaf would satisfy me, as well as a whole one, so I never took more after that!”

“And how do you explain your behavior toward your wife?”

Batraz began to tell them another story. “Once a few Nart lads became stuck when hunting on a wide plain with no water, no trees, where there was such a sultry heat that we all felt limp. Evening came, and far off we saw a light. We stumbled toward it and found a small village. From one of the houses an elderly woman appeared, and a young girl with her, but we saw no men there.

“ ‘Come in, dear guests, and spend the night in our house,’ they said.

“We glanced at each other. How could we stay in a house where there were no menfolk? All the same, we dismounted, and gave the bridles to our young companions. Our hostess and her daughter prepared a fine supper for us, and began to make the beds in two rooms: one room for twenty of us, and another for nineteen of us. As they did so they spoke to each other in the Khatiag tongue, thinking that we would not understand. But I knew the language, and listening to their talk I understood then how unhappy women often are when left alone, and they needed men’s sympathy, understanding, and tender words and a caress now and then!

“ ‘I am already too old and nobody knows whether I will live till tomorrow. You are young and your whole life is still ahead of you. Let me stay with the

twenty guests and do what I should. And you go to the room where nineteen of them stay.’

“ ‘Oh, Mother! The young sometimes die even before the elderly. Death does not choose its prey by age. You have lived long and you have seen much. So let me go to the room where the twenty guests stay and so that I can greet them properly, because nobody knows what may happen to me tomorrow!’

“I then pledged myself on the spot that I would never deceive that young woman, who for my sake would leave her home, and enter my father’s house, and that if she herself should make a mistake, I would not under any circumstances reproach her for it.”

The elder Narts thanked Khamis for bringing up such a son, and also thanked Batraz himself for his explanations. Only then did they rise from their carved armchairs, and dispersed to their homes.

Some time passed, and again at a gathering in the meeting place the same question about who was best among the Narts arose once more. Much was spoken, and the arguments went on unendingly. Someone suggested that they should ask Shirdon of his opinion in this matter, but he was not present.

Soon after, Shirdon appeared. The elders put the question to him, “Who is the bravest and best among the Narts?”

“I would name the best Nart he who tightened his horse’s saddle-girth as they do before riding contests, then rode him into the Narts’ great hall, and having shown his riding skill there, spurred his steed and swept off like a swallow, and flew out of the top-most window! I would name the best Nart he whose horse left its tracks in the great Nart ravine Kugom, like a ploughed furrow, or he who is able to break through into the field of God, and steal God’s daughter to be his wife!”

None of the Narts would think of trying to accomplish even one of those feats, but when Batraz got to know of Shirdon’s words he could not remain still. Like a man of great courage, he decided to try to fulfill those deeds of which Shirdon had spoken. He tightened the saddle-girth of his steed, as they do before riding contests, spurred him on into the Narts’ great hall, whipped him hard, and flew like a swallow out of the top-most window, and on he went in search of

God's field. He rode on higher, through the Nart ravine Kugom, and his horse left its tracks like a furrow on the field. Who can tell how long he rode? At last, however, he came to a great cave, wherein there lived a giant.

"Good-day to you, Nart traveler!" said the giant, who had only one eye. "Say, what god was it who brought you here? What are you seeking?"

Khamis's son told him that he was searching for God's daughter.

"I am sorry for you, young man," said the giant. "Why did you start such a venture? We were nine brothers, each one stronger than the other and all save I alone died in the attempt to accomplish such a feat, and as you see, I escaped with only one eye. I beg you, return to your father's home. You are young, and it would be a pity if you should die too!"

"No!" replied Batraz. "I must try my luck. All I ask of you is to show me the road, and after that it will be as God wills!"

"Then listen to me closely, my bright boy!" said the giant. "Go on farther along this road, and far ahead you will find a waterless steppe. It will be hard going, but if you and your horse can withstand the way, and the throes of thirst, and come through the tormenting steppe still alive, then you will come to a country where the sun rolls like a wheel around the earth, where all is scorched and burnt, and cracked through and through in deep rifts by the heat. There you and your horse will be consumed by fire, or fall into a rift and meet your end. But if you can survive all and yet come through, then you will see a boundless ocean, where many people have met their death. Even an eagle could not fly over it. But if you manage to cross it somehow, then you will see a huge bare-necked bird, a violent vulture, whose wide wings blot out the light of day. You'll scarcely escape alive from that bird of prey, but if you do, who knows, then you will come to a place where two mountains are butting each other like wild rams, and your road will lie between them. Many a brave man has been crushed by those butting mountains, but if you succeed in passing like lightning between them, then you will find yourself in God's field. There, in a palace tower lives God's daughter."

Batraz thanked the one-eyed giant, and set off on the track that he had spoken of. First they came to the waterless desert, and he and his horse were

faint with thirst. However, they encouraged one another, and went on until they reached the land where the sun rolled around, and consumed the earth, splitting it into wide, deep rifts. It was so hot that neither Batraz nor his horse could breathe. Batraz, exhausted, and choking down dismay, asked his steed, "Say, what shall we do? How shall we get through?"

"Don't worry about me," said his steed, "but collect your own powers of resistance. A man and his horse are both tough and enduring, and the most enduring are those who have a firm will!"

Thus they passed through the land, and came to the boundless ocean. Seeing the waves there before him, Batraz's steed said to him, "Since we have got so far, having come through the desert, having passed the land cracked by the heat of the sun, and now have a boundless sea before us, we now have little to fear!"

With that, the horse plunged into the water, and began swimming the ocean, wagging from side to side, like the swiftest of fish, and in this way they crossed the sea. Then, suddenly, in the bright midday, all became as dark as night. The blue sky could not be seen, and not a single ray of light pierced the darkness. One could only hear the wings of an enormous bird beating overhead, and blotting out the sunlight. Glimpsing the shadowy shape, Batraz took a steel-headed arrow from his quiver, placed it in his bow, took aim, and sent the shaft straight into the bird of prey. The vulture beat its wings, then fell lifeless.

Batraz galloped firmly onward on his sturdy steed, until they came to the two mountains that first backed away, then came rushing together, butting like two wild rams with their brows.

"How shall we manage to gallop between them?" muttered Batraz.

"Whip me as hard as you can!" replied his horse. "Beat me so that the skin flies from your hands, and bits of my hide fly from my side, big enough to make a sole for a pair of boots!"

As soon as the mountains parted, Batraz beat his horse with all his might, and they went flying like an arrow between the mountains. Before them lay the open fields of God. In the center of the plain stood God's palace, with its high tower. Batraz rode round and round it, but could not find an entrance. He dismounted in the courtyard, took off his horse's saddle, and set his steed to

graze. Then he lay on his cloak with the saddle beneath his head, and went to sleep.

In the morning God's daughter, living in the tower, took her heavenly mirror, and looked into it to see what was happening in the world below. As she turned the mirror this way and that, she saw in it the far land of the Narts, and on the plain nearby the tracks of Batraz's steed like ploughed furrows. She followed these to see where they led. She saw that they finally reached the foot of her tower in the courtyard. There she saw Batraz, still asleep. She then came down into the courtyard to Batraz, embraced him, and woke him, and there was no end to her joy.

They lived together in the palace for a few days as husband and wife, and lacked nothing. Later, even though the daughter of almighty God did not want to leave her heavenly home, Batraz still decided to take her back home with him to the Narts. She then consented to travel with him. They prepared for the journey, set off, and finally arrived in the land of the Narts.

Thus it was, that for all these feats, Batraz, Khamis's son, was acclaimed the best man among the young Narts.

70 ♦ THE DEATH OF KHAMIS

The Narts respected old Khamis deeply. More than once he had been with them on their cattle-raiding expeditions, and to many Narts he had done good, and to many evil. Burafarnig of the Borata family had for a long time hated him. That all came about because Khamis had only to smile and reveal his wonder-working Arkizh tooth, and any woman who saw it simply could not refuse him. For this reason there were many men who felt offended by Khamis.

Soon after Bisenon had left him, he met Burafarnig's wife, and smiled at her. Seeing his Arkizh tooth, she could not resist his advances. Since that time Burafarnig had nurtured hatred in his heart toward Khamis, but was afraid to confront him, and could not think of any way of getting even with him for this insult.

Chief Shainag was related to the Borata family, and they complained to him about Khamis's offensive behavior, "He has done many of us Narts much wrong. If you could take revenge on him for us, we should never forget your kindness!"

"Well, so be it, then," he replied, "but you would have to get the support of the Akhshartagketta also, so that they take part in this matter!"

Of course, the Borata did not dare to approach the most eminent of the Akhshartagketta with such a treacherous proposition. But not for nothing was Shiridon named the treachery of the heavens, and the cunning of the earth, and not for nothing did they name him the misfortune of the Narts. He gathered the lowest of the Akhshartagketta, and began to shout at them, "Hey, you Akhshartagketta, listen to my words of warning. Your destruction will come from the hand of Khamis. Therefore you should kill him now!"

"We should all fall, like one great stone on him, and crush him!" said one rough fellow among the Akhshartagketta, "otherwise he will have more sons like Batraz, and they will drive us like cattle to a watering place but will not let us drink any water there!"

Many others raised their voices, and shouted their support. The lord Shainag heard this, and then asked, "At what time does Khamis go hunting, and what road does he take?"

"On Saturday morning he will ride over the Nart bridge, and if you then deal with him successfully, that would be your good fortune and ours as well!" Burafarnig replied.

After that Chief Shainag sat hidden in waiting for Khamis. Once early in the morning Khamis trotted on his horse to the hunt, not suspecting any misfortune lying in ambush for him. Just before he reached the bridge his horse began to whinny repeatedly. He beat him with his whip, and said sternly, "May they kill you, and stuff you, and lay you with your dead rider!"⁹ What the devil are you whinnying for, and what are you scared of now? Among the Borata are none whom I have not offended one way or another, but who would be bold enough to set a trap, hoping to catch me? Their nephew, Chief Shainag, is a coward, and you need not be afraid of him!"

Hearing these words, Chief Shainag sprang out of hiding, and cried, “Yes, it is I, Shainag, by my father and mother I swear it! I am now waiting for you, and you will not escape me!”

Khamis jumped down from his horse, and they began to fight. They beat and slashed at each other for a long time, and at last Khamis began to tire. Chief Shainag stepped forward and struck him a blow on the head with his curved sabre. The blow fell on his Arkizh tooth, and a metal fragment of the sabre went flying up into the sky, and gleamed there like the new moon. Chief Shainag struck a few more blows, and Khamis grew weaker and fell, mortally wounded. Thus his dead body was found later.

Soon the Akhshartagketta family knew that behind his death lay the plans made by the Borata, and fulfilled by the cruel hand of Chief Shainag.

The Narts brought Khamis’s dead body home for burial. Those who hated him were glad, but those to whom he had been good, and respected him, were sad and wept for their departed friend.

71 ♦ HOW BATRAZ AVENGED HIS FATHER’S DEATH

Batraz was away on a distant expedition, and knew nothing of his father’s death. Having buried Khamis, the Akhshartagketta decided to send a messenger to inform Batraz that his father had been killed by someone.

“Oh, you dirty dogs, you Borata! It was you who truly slew Khamis! But the sword of vengeance hangs over your heads!” cried old Urizhmag. He knew that Batraz would not leave his father’s death unavenged.

Then the Akhshartagketta family appealed to the evening breeze, and asked it to inform the morning breeze, floating over the earth, and through the heavens, to seek out Khamis’s son Batraz, and tell him that his father had been killed by some unknown hand. If Batraz were seated, let him immediately stand, if he were standing, let him not sit, but come straightaway, and hurry home!

The evening breeze passed on the sad news to the morning breeze. It floated over the earth, and through the heavens, and found Batraz, and in the Nart way expressed its condolences, “I was sent to you by the Nart elders, as a messenger

of sorrow, to tell you that your father has been slain by some evil hand, and he has already gone to the land of the departed.”

Having heard these sorrowful words, the steely-breasted Batraz then leaned upon his hunting spear and wept. “My family hearth is destroyed. Its fire is extinguished.” Leaden tears ran down his cheeks. When he had loosened the knot of sorrow, Batraz rode home. His thoughts rode on ahead, but finally he too arrived.

He entered his home mournfully, with bowed head, and meeting Shatana he at once asked her, “Tell me, mother who never bore me, who killed my father.”

Now Shatana knew that Batraz’s revenge would be terrible, and she feared that he might even die in fulfilling it, and so she tried to hide the truth from him. Therefore she said, “I was told that your father died a natural death. He came to the end of his days, and having paid God his debts, he departed. I am glad to see you alive after your hunting expedition!”

Batraz saw through her subterfuge at once, and asked her tenderly, “Mother, I should like some grain, roasted over the fire. That is so tasty!”

“No need to say another word my child!” replied Shatana delightedly.

She quickly stood the frying pan on the fire, and roasted the grain. When it was ready she poured it into a wooden cup and brought it to him.

“Did you not use to bring it to me from the wooden cup in your own hand, still warm, dear mother?” he reproached her gently, pointing to the cup. Then she took a handful of the hot grain in her palm, and held it out to him, as in childhood. But he suddenly seized her hand, closing it round the burning hot grain, and asked for the second time, “Tell me, quickly, who killed my father?”

The hot grain burned her palm and her fingers unbearably, and so Shatana, unable to stand the pain any longer then replied, “Let go! I’ll tell you! There was a plot against your father. He was killed by Chief Shainag, at the instigation of Burafarnig of the Borata. They divided his things between them. Chief Shainag took his sword, his fur coat was seized by Burafarnig, and his horse herd was filched away by Shoshlan!”

“Now I shall go to avenge my father’s death, and to gather his stolen belongings again!” said Batraz, full of anger.

He saddled Khamis's horse Dur-Dur, and mounted him, then Shatana called him as he tugged the reins, "Wait a moment! Where are you going now?"

"To Chief Shainag to begin with!" replied Batraz.

"Hey, my sunshine, my dear lad! It won't be so simple to settle the score with Chief Shainag. He can only be slain by his own sword! If you have decided to slay him, then listen to what I tell you: Every morning at dawn Chief Shainag drives his mettlesome horses to drink at the spring. That is the time to approach him. As soon as you see him, go to greet him and say, 'Good-day, old man!' He will exchange greetings with you, and ask, 'Why has God brought you here so early? Even wild beasts and birds don't dare come here! How did you arrive, and why?' You must answer him so: 'I cannot satisfy my ardent young heart. I want Kurdalagon the heavenly smith to forge me a sword. I have the metal and logs for the fire, and have asked our elders, "Who has best sword of all?" so that I may take my pattern from it. They told me that there is no sword in the world to match yours, Chief Shainag!' He will reply: 'In those elders' families, may as many young men survive as can forge a sword like mine!' Then he will unsheathe it, and show it to you. The sun and the moon are gleaming in its blade, which reflects the whole earth. He will stretch his sword toward you, but you must immediately draw back your horse, as if scared by its shiny blade. You must do so, for otherwise if you should attempt to touch it or take it, he will kill you with it at once. Then he will ask, 'Hey, young man, is your horse afraid of my sword?' Answer him back, 'He has seen more than one sword shine in battle, and was not scared!' Then you must ask him if he will allow you to hold the handle of the sword, and feel its balance. When he agrees, you must then look at the sword carefully. In the middle of the blade you will see the edge dented, and must say, 'What a great pity that such a wonderful sword should have its edge dented in the middle!' He will then tell you, 'That was caused by Nart Khamis, may he eat asses' entrails in the Land of the Dead! He dented my sword's edge with his magic tooth!' You will listen to him, and at the same time look around as if you had lost something. When he finishes speaking, you must ask, 'Say, where does the sun rise in this country, my wise old man? I have lost my direction here, and may forget my way and go astray.' Then he will turn to point

toward the east, where the sun rises, and at the same moment you must gather all your strength and strike. All will then depend upon your own hand. Strike at his neck, nowhere else will you succeed in slaying him!”

Thus advised, Batraz set off. Up hill, down dale he rode. Was it a day or a week, who knows? But at last he came to Chief Shainag’s land. At dawn Shainag was watering his horses at the spring, as was his usual way.

“Good morning to you, old man, my respects to you!” Batraz said.

“Good morning, young man! Whence have you come so early? Not a beast runs here, not a bird flies here, so how do you come to be here?”

“I cannot satisfy my ardent young heart. Kurdalagon, the heavenly smith, promised to forge me a sword. I prepared the metal and the fuel, and then I asked the elders who had the best sword in the world, so that I might take it as a pattern for mine. They told me that I should find it here. There is no weapon to equal Chief Shainag’s sword anywhere! So I was told!”

Shainag replied “In those elders’ families, may as many men survive as can forge a blade like mine!” Saying this he bared its blade.

The sun and moon were gleaming there, and the world was reflected. Chief Shainag extended his naked blade toward Batraz, but Batraz pulled in upon his bridle, and his horse backed away from the sword as though frightened.

“Hey, young man, it seems that your horse is scared of my sword!” said Shainag mockingly.

“He has seen more than one sword shine in battle, and was not scared!” replied Batraz. “Would you allow me to hold the fine handle of your sword, and test its balance?”

Chief Shainag reversed the sword, and Batraz took hold of the haft. Looking over the sword-blade, Batraz gasped, and shook his young head. Seeing the dented edge in the middle of the blade he cried, “Ah, me! Such a wonderful sword, spoiled by a dent in its edge!”

“The Nart Khamis is to blame for that—may he consume asses’ intestines in the Land of the Dead! He dented its edge with his wonder-working tooth of Arkizh!” cried Chief Shainag.

Hearing this blasphemy against his father's memory, Batraz was so enraged that he could scarce control himself, and quickly asked Shainag, "Say, where does the sun rise in your country? This land is strange to me, and I seem to have lost my direction."

Chief Shainag turned his head toward the east, and like a flash, Batraz struck such a mighty blow on his neck that his head flew from his shoulders and rolled onto the ground.

Batraz suddenly thought, "Maybe the Narts will not believe that I slew him?" He then hacked off Shainag's right hand, and took it with him.

He galloped back home, and straightway called to Shatana, "I have taken revenge for my dead father! You may take off your robe of mourning now!"

But Shatana seemed unconvinced, so he then threw the hewn-off hand of Shainag at her feet, to prove his words. Shatana replied, "It seems to me that you could not have slain Shainag so easily. This may only be the hand of his shepherd, or some poor herdsman. However, it will soon be possible to prove your words. If tomorrow morning the wind brings us tufts of golden hair, and a fine spattering of blood-red rain begins at dawn, that means you are speaking truly, and did slay Shainag."

Early next morning, before dawn, Shatana arose and ran across the furrows of the field and came by unnoticed paths to an open height. This she climbed and glanced around. At once she saw a fine spattering of red raindrops falling on the field, and the wind blew in with fine tufts of golden hair. Shatana knew that this was brought about by Shainag's wife, mourning for his loss, who had torn her hair and scratched her cheeks till they bled. The wind had blown her hair away, and the rain had washed her blood-stained cheeks. Shatana returned home at once and said to Batraz, "I see that my efforts to help you were not in vain! You have succeeded, my son, whom I did not bear, and have avenged your father's death. But it is wrong, and does not become you, that such a man as Chief Shainag go to the Land of the Dead with a hand hacked off. He sent your father to that last land, it is true, but he did not curse him by disfiguring his body. With that she handed back to Batraz Shainag's hewn-off hand wrapped in a silken cloth. Batraz knew at once what he must do.

He took the wrapped silken parcel, mounted his steed, and set off for Chief Shainag's land. At the outskirts of his village he dismounted, thrust his spear into the earth, tied his horse's bridle to it, and then went off to the chief's dwelling. It was full of standing mourners who had come to the funeral of their chief. Batraz, in accordance with Nart custom, beat himself on the head with the dead hand, and entered the house. He bowed to all, including the corpse, and laid the hewn-off hand on the dead man's breast beside the other, whose arm was already drawn over his chest, and then he said, "May the earth be glad to receive your mortal remains. You killed my father, and I avenged him. Retribution has been made. Receive back the hand that slew him!"

At first the relatives and friends of Chief Shainag were struck dumb as stone pillars by the unexpectedness of these words spoken aloud in front of them. But when his speech was finished, and no more re-echoed among them, they began to whisper among themselves, "The deer has itself come to the slaughter. Shainag's slayer is here. What can hinder us now?" They started to discuss how they would kill him. Batraz stood quietly listening. Suddenly, from among those who had come to pay their last respects to Chief Shainag, there stepped forth a very old man, and asked the others, "What about his horse? Where is his horse? Where has he left it?"

"On the outskirts of the village. He stuck his spear into the ground and tied him fast to that!" answered somebody.

"Then before talking about executing him," said the old man, "go now quickly, pull out the spear, and bring the horse here!"

Off they went, but no matter how they tried, singly or all together they could not pull out the spear, nor even loosen it, and had to quit their efforts.

On their return without the horse, the old man admonished them, "How, then do you expect to kill a man, whose spear you can't pull out of the ground? My dear boys, get that idea out of your heads if you don't want to be destroyed. It is obvious that Chief Shainag did not perish at the hands of an ordinary mortal!"

After hearing him, the relatives and friends of the dead man decided to let Batraz go without hindrance. What else indeed could they do?

In accordance with custom, Batraz bid farewell to the deceased and to those who had come to weep for him, then went to the end of the village, drew his spear from the ground, jumped onto his horse, and rode off.

From there he rode back to the home of Burafarnig Borata, entered the stately family courtyard, leapt down from his steed, and cried, "Burafarnig, come out here, your guest has arrived!"

Out came Burafarnig and recognized Batraz. Burafarnig reached for his sword, but was unable to draw it out before Batraz with a sweep of his blade hewed off his head, which went rolling down onto the ground. Then he got on his horse and made off, as though to save himself by escaping. Burafarnig's seven sons gave chase after him on their horses, but eventually stretched out behind one another on the way. Suddenly Batraz turned and struck down the nearest pursuer, then the next, and so on until all seven lay dead. When that was finished, he rode home and told Shatana all the story.

A few days passed, and in the meantime Batraz said to Shatana, "I must now find out from Shoshlan where he has driven my father's three best horses, and recover them!"

Shatana replied to this with a warning, "Very well, but don't strike him down, my bright boy; lest for the sake of three horses you destroy one of the best Narts left to us!"

"As you wish!" replied Batraz.

Shoshlan was at that time out on the Shukh steppe lands, pasturing the three fine horses taken from Khamis, and was not letting anyone draw near. Catching sight of Batraz far off, he shouted to him, "Hey, I don't let anyone here cross this steppe land. Not even birds dare fly over it, so how did you come here?"

Batraz did not answer a word, but placed an arrow in his bow and straightaway shot at him, and Shoshlan replied in kind. So they exchanged hostile arrows, but these slid off their steely breasts, or met each other in midair, and shattered to fragments. Then they bared their swords and came slashing and clashing together, but only sparks flew from the men as their swords clashed against their steel-tempered breasts. They set aside their swords then, and began to grapple with one another. Long did they wrestle, to and fro, and at last Batraz

hurled Shoshlan to the ground. Then he seized his sword, and was just about to hack off his head, when he remembered Shatana's words, and the promise he gave to her then not to kill him.

He turned to Shoshlan and said, "What can I do now? I have given Shatana my word not to kill you, since you are one of the best of the Narts that are left!"

Shoshlan lay exhausted on the grass, smiled at Batraz and replied, "I am happy to find that there is someone in our family stronger than I! Now, if you will, you may finish me off!"

But how could he do such a thing, after all? He helped him to stand on his feet again. When he had recovered, Shoshlan led Batraz to his tent and entertained him with all due respect, and finally said to him, "Now you may collect your father's three fine horses!"

Batraz found the three steeds, and led them away back to the Nart village, and Shoshlan bid him farewell.

Batraz still could not forget the murder of his father, and the deadly offense that they committed against his mother. He gathered the Narts together at their meeting place, and told them, "You are not without guilt in the murder of my father, Khamis, and you poisonously offended my mother, Bisenon. Therefore I demand payment from you for the insult to my mother, and for the death of my father!"

Having made this declaration, he left them. What could they do? What could they say? They were deep in desperation. Then Shirdon spoke to them, "Go to him and tell him that you are not guilty of the death of his father, but that you have not the power to fight against him. Therefore you have decided to give him what he, with his steely whiskers, demands. What he commands, that you will do." Thus he sent the Narts to Batraz.

Then Batraz, on hearing these words of theirs replied, "If my whiskers are steely, and stand in judgment over you, then listen! I do not demand much of you in redemption for your guilt. I am going to build myself a house. For that I need pillars of azalea. For the cross-beams I need trunks of tamarisk, and for the main ceiling-beam I need a spurge laurel trunk. If you obtain all these for me, then that will settle accounts between us!"

The Narts breathed a sigh of relief when they heard what light payment Batraz demanded of them. From each home they took a pair of oxen, and hastened light-hearted to the forest to find and hew down the trees needed to build Batraz's house. They went farther and farther into the forest, but though they found many altogether, the azaleas were not high enough to serve as pillars for a house. The tamarisks were beautiful, but as slender as a man's arm, and not suitable for making cross-beams. The spurge laurels, too, were lovely, but their slender and flexible stems were suitable only for making walking-sticks, not for a main beam.

With bowed heads they returned home from the forest, and told Batraz about their failure to find what he needed. "We went all over the forest, but found no azalea suitable for pillars, no tamarisks that would serve as cross-beams, and no spurge laurels sturdy enough for a main-beam. Perhaps God will soften your heart, and you will tell us what we can bring instead?"

Batraz replied to them, "Here is a leather basket that belonged to my father. Fill it to the brim with ashes from pure purple silk!"

Again the Narts dropped their heads on their breasts in despair. But what could they do? They gathered silken garments from their wives and daughters and burned them on the crest of Waskupp. Meanwhile Batraz began praying to God, "O God of gods, send down on earth a mighty whirlwind and a howling hurricane, and sweep the face of the earth!"

No sooner had the Narts burned all their wives and daughters' purple silks, than a mighty whirlwind arose, and a howling hurricane began and blew away all the fine ash, and not even a thimbleful was left.

The Narts got together again and came to Batraz. "You see, we took all the purple silk dresses from our wives and daughters, and made a huge bonfire on the crest of Waskupp, and burnt them to ashes, but then a sudden whirlwind came, and a howling hurricane blew away all the ashes, and not even a thimbleful remained!"

They asked Batraz how they could pay their debt, but he said to them, "I do not wish to live among you any longer. Therefore, so that I rid myself of you,

and you rid yourselves of me, go and gather as many thorn bushes as you can find, and make a bonfire of them, and let that be my funeral pyre!”

Not a single thorn bush remained on the whole of the Nart domains. A colossal heap was collected by all the Narts. Batraz clambered upon this mighty mound, and sat on the top. The Narts then set fire to the whole pile. They looked on this enormous fire, and all were hoping that it would burn Batraz to ashes, and free them of him for good. The fire blazed and blazed. After the red flames came the blue, and Batraz was heated through and through. Then he plunged down from the heap straight into the hollow where the spring that supplied the whole Nart village flowed. It immediately dried up, and changed into steam. The Narts, thirsty from the heat of the fire, could find nothing to drink. They sent little children and the oldest men so that they could find Batraz and beg him to leave the spring and return the water to their village.

Batraz took pity on the old and on the children, but his heart was still not appeased, and he still demanded retribution for his loss. The Narts were simply desperate, and thought that their end had come, but just then Shirdon appeared, and came and spoke with them, “I would have rid you of Batraz’s demands, but you do not respect my good deeds and when spoil is shared out I get the laziest oxen and the scruffiest sheep and calves!” They listened to Shirdon, and said, “If you are good enough to rid us of Batraz, whatever you ask of us we shall certainly not refuse!”

Shirdon then went to see Batraz. As he went he thought carefully, “If I go straight up to him, he will see me as arrogant. If I go up from behind, he will take me as deceitful!” Then he noticed that Batraz was just leaving his house, so he stood in the street, beating his head with the handle of his stick, groaning and wailing, “Khamis was my sworn brother! I know his murderer, but I have no power to avenge him in any way!” Batraz heard his lament, and asked, “And whom do you know still living who was my father’s murderer?”

“I will not conceal anything from you, Batraz. Your father was slain at the instigation of spirits both earthly and heavenly. Now they are all gathered together in the high Warp fortress, and there they are judging Khamis’s spirit!” After this Batraz called the Narts, saying, “Bind me fast to a huge long arrow,

then shoot it from my big bow against the Warp fortress!” The Narts did as he commanded. They lashed him to a huge long arrow, and shot it from Batraz’s biggest bow against the Warp fortress. Batraz went flying on the arrow, and pierced through the heads of many of the earthly and heavenly spirits. On all sides the hacked-off arms and wings went flying. Few there were who managed to escape.

72 ♦ THE DEATH OF BATRAZ

After the misfortune of the Narts, Shirdon had set Batraz against the earthly and heavenly spirits, and Batraz began to exterminate them wherever he found them, and showed them not the slightest mercy.

The spirits gathered together and began to complain of him to God on high, “We cannot live in peace because of him. Khamis’s son Batraz works us all evil, gives us no rest, and shows us no pity! Send down upon him death and destruction. Either let him remain alive, and we all die, or we all remain alive, and he must die!”

“I don’t know how to help you!” God replied. “He was born against my will, appeared on earth against my wishes, and his death is beyond me!”

When Batraz knew that the earthly and heavenly spirits had made complaint to God about him, he thought to himself inquisitively, “How powerful is that God to whom they pray, and make complaint of me? I shall go and see for myself!” So he set off, preparing himself for the long journey. When God knew that he was coming, he threw down on the road a bag that was just as heavy as the whole earth. Batraz saw it and went to pick it up with the end of his whip, without dismounting. He hooked the handle of the bag with the tip of his whip, and pulled toward him. He tugged and tugged, and his horse sank into the ground up to his belly.

“What kind of a wonder is this?” thought Batraz, amazed. He dismounted from his good steed, and with both hands grabbed hold of the bag, and tried to lift it. It moved a little, but he sank into the ground up to his knees. He then left the bag on the ground and rode farther on his way.

Then God threw in his path a ball of golden yarn. That ball was as long as all the roots of all the plants on earth and just as strong.

“Such yarn could be of use to me,” said Batraz to himself. “I shall give it to Shatana to mend our coats with.” Not dismounting, he swung down from his horse’s side to pick up the ball, but found that he could not lift it. He then dismounted from his steed, and tried to raise it with both hands, but no matter how he tugged, he couldn’t move it at all.

“There is some power on earth stronger than I!” decided Batraz, and turned his horse round to return home.

Just then the seven sons of Washtirji, patron of all warriors, and the seven sons of Elia, the god of thunder, came riding toward him. He charged at them straightaway and three sons of Washtirji and three sons of Elia were overcome. Those who escaped destruction flew to God and asked, “O God, who is dearer to you, we sons of Washtirji and Elia, or the son of Khamis, Batraz?”

God told them, “I have no power of death over him. He will die his own death, as he chooses. Go to the sun god and tell him to send in one day on earth all the warmth that he would give in one year. Meanwhile you must lure Batraz out onto the Khazhm steppe. There you must find some stones full of lead, and beat them with boulders, till they become as hard as flint. These you must then hurl down on Batraz. From the fighting, from the leaden stones, and from the terrible heat, hot as fire, he too will grow red-hot, and go to cool himself in the spring. But I shall dry the spring up. He will then go to seek the sea, but that will also dry up on that day.”

The earthly and the heavenly spirits went to the sun god and told him of God’s order. Then the sun sent down on earth such heat as would have sufficed for a whole year. The spirits then lured Batraz out onto the steppe, and there he was met by a hail of leaden stones. Batraz answered them with a hail of arrows, and succeeded in killing Washtirji’s remaining four sons, and three of the four remaining sons of Elia Wasilla. But the fight between steel-breasted Batraz and the earthly and heavenly spirits did not end there. The sun god sent from the heavens burning hot rays of fire, and Batraz became red-hot too.

“Just wait awhile. I shall cool down, and then I shall show you!”

He ran to the spring, but there was not a drop of cool water to be found. He rushed off to the sea, but only the dry bottom met his sight. Batraz grew hotter and hotter, and then that one intestine that had not been tempered by Kurdalagon burned away to ashes. As soon as that happened, Batraz fell in a heap and died.

The spirits flew to and fro above his motionless corpse. Then suddenly, there arose such a poisonous vapor from Batraz's body that many of the earthly and heavenly spirits also fell to the ground and expired. Those remaining went to God again and complained to him, "We suffered enough from him living, but we suffer more from him now that he is dead!"

"Go and bury him in the Shofya vault!" replied the Lord God.

The surviving spirits flew to Batraz's corpse, but no matter how they tried, they could not move it. Then they hitched twelve pairs of oxen to his body, and pulled with them, but all in vain. The steely corpse of Batraz lay where it had fallen.

Again the spirits flew to God and complained, and he told them, "Yoke together two oxen who were born on the second festive day of Tutir, master of all wolves. Such creatures possess secret powers!"

When the spirits found two such oxen, and yoked them together to Batraz's dead body, they began to move it. Slowly they dragged it toward the Shofya vault. But there the spirits met with further difficulties. No matter how they tried, they could not place Batraz's corpse in the vault. If they took him head first, his elbows stuck out and would not pass between the door-posts. If they took him feet-first, his knees stuck out and would not pass. Again the spirits flew off to God and made their familiar complaints.

At last God said, "Batraz demands a parting gift from me!" and let fall three tears onto Batraz's corpse. After that all went well, but as it entered the vault the three tears rolled away onto the ground. There arose three shrines: Taranjelos, Mikali-Gabrta, and Rekom.

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1. According to old Ossetian custom the younger brother did not marry before the elder. The same system, quite severely kept, applied among sisters. In this tale we are also reminded of another old custom of mountain etiquette, where the youngest, when traveling, always kept to the left of his elder.
 2. In accordance with an Ossetian custom kept up until today, one hunter, on meeting another who has killed a deer, would receive a certain portion. In his turn, the traveler, on seeing the slain deer, would throw down onto it dry branches, wishing the hunter further successes.
 3. The Ossetian epic was formed over the course of many centuries. It developed in that period when an ancient Iranian language was spoken by the forefathers of the Ossetians (Scythians, Sarmatians, and Alans) who still lived far away from the Central Caucasus, near the Black Sea, and the Sea of Azov, and along such rivers as the Don, Volga and Dnieper, all of which keep their ancient names in the Nart tales. It is not by chance, therefore, that in these tales the names of seas and great rivers frequently crop up. The tales also preserve for us certain characteristics of Scythian daily life. The game referred to as *alchiks*, widely spread in olden times among Ossetian youngsters, has much in common with the Russian game *babki*, that is, “knuckle-bones.”
 4. The Akhshartagketta are second function, the Borata are third, and the Alagutu (saga 9) or Alita (saga 80) are first (Dumézil 1966, 1968a, 1978a)—[JC].
 5. In the past the Ossetians had many patriarchal customs that placed the women in special position of unequal rights, and sometimes of humiliating servitude. A woman, for instance, her whole life through never spoke with elder male relatives of her husband, and for a certain period not with elder women relatives either. In the presence of men, if it was necessary to call some other woman or young girl, the woman must not ever use their names, but make gestures, mimic them, or turn to them with the words *qusk-qush*, which means “Do you hear.”
 6. Many of the events mentioned in the tales remain undeciphered, and among them the Shukh slaughter. In the opinion of some investigators of the Nart epic the word “Shukh” conceals a forgotten ethnic term, and in combination “Shukh slaughter” most probably we have the destruction of some kind of Shukh tribe. [This is probably a small Abkhazian clan that exists today. See Appendix of Names.—JC]
 7. A trifunctional death: second, first, third (Littleton 1966)—[JC].
 8. In this answer, Shoshlan expresses the offense felt by mountain-folk, scorned by Akola. The sense of the expression is “You are not worthy of the mountain folk whom you scorn.”
 9. So said the famous Nart hero Khamis to his horse. From ancient times in Ossetian funeral celebrations, an important place was occupied by the deceased man’s horse, a custom that goes back to the old Scythian era. Scythians, Sarmatians, and Alans buried the dead man’s horse with him, but later Ossetians modified this custom by cutting off the tip of horse’s ear, and burying that with him. The ceremony was solemnly observed. The horse was decorated, and on him was hung the rider’s war-gear. Then the old man conducting the ceremony led the horse three times round the rough wooden stretcher on which the dead man lay, pronouncing a lengthy parting speech. After that they cut off the tip of the horse’s ear and laid it with the deceased. They believed that it was unlucky to have such a horse, and after a year, they sold it to the first bidder. The meaning of Khamis’s words is therefore “May you perish!”

PART 6



ASAMAZH



Asa had three sons. When he died, the brothers began to divide the inheritance. They spent a long time sharing it out, but they could not come to an agreement, and so they quarreled. Seven times the elders gathered in the meeting place, and passed their judgment, but it could not satisfy the brothers nor settle their dispute.

The eldest of the Narts was a poor man, Magurag. Tears oozed from his blind eyes. He offered to act as intermediary in the division of the inheritance, and made his decision: the cattle he allotted to the elder brother, and to the younger brother he handed over old Asa's magical flute, while the middle brother received all the remaining possessions.

The elder brother was pleased with the sharing out, the middle one likewise, while Asamazh, the youngest, made no complaint either. The golden flute that he received as his portion was given to his father by Afshati, the protector of wild beasts. Along with the heavenly dwellers Nikkola and Washtirji, Afshati was often Asa's guest, and he and Asa had sworn eternal friendship. Afshati offered his friend many gifts, but he declined them all, save the golden flute alone, which he accepted.

Now this flute passed into Asamazh's hands. He took it with him to the Black Mountain. Asamazh was so handsome that when he passed the Nart meeting place, one of those seated there remarked, "Is it not Bonvarnon, the star of sunrise and sunset, peering from behind the hill?"

"No," said another. "It is not Bonvarnon, but bold young Asamazh, the youngest son of Asa, going with his golden flute to the Black Mountain."

Lord Shainag upon Black Mountain lives.

He has a daughter, a beauty, Agunda called.

She is his heir—to her his all he gives.

She holds her father's delighted heart enthralled.

A glance from her bright eyes is like the sun after a storm,

And when she sits to sew, her fingers shine.
And when she goes for water, in white jugs borne,
She floats and sways like a swan, a sight divine!
Her long fair hair cascades toward her heels,
Her slender form is full of tender grace.
The light of the moon from her white neck then steals,
The light of the morning sun shines from her face.
And clever is she, her mind unmatched by far.
Her wisdom gleams from her brow, like the morning star!
Young Narts went hunting reindeer then nearby,
Thus trying to exhibit their manly power.
They hoped to attract attention, and catch the eye
Of the beauty Agunda, weaving, on top of her tower.
Many leather shoes the match-makers had worn out,
Climbing Black Mountain slopes to her high home.
Many suitors were sent, but she left none in doubt.
She had not accepted proposals by any who'd come.
The youngest son of Asa, bold Asamazh,
Then took the treasure his father had left behind—
A musical wonder, decorated thus,
The perpetual golden flute, with enamel, black-lined.
Brave Asamazh the highest hill then found,
Nearby the Shainag-aldar's tall tower, so mute,
And the sweetest music began to echo around,
As gently to loving lips he raised his flute.
To its delicate melody reindeer began to snort,
And dance and prance upon their slender limbs.
In the forest deep, the chamois leapt for sport,
In ecstasy frolicking round to fantastic whims.
From steep dark cliffs came wild ram, curly-horned,
To began a round-dance, with the nanny-goats.
What an agile skipping and tripping troop they formed,

With bristling beards, long ears, and shaggy coats!
The foxes and hares could not resist the call,
And came dashing and chasing over the level plain.
Afshati's wards, the wildest creatures all,
Came skipping and tripping, heads dipping again and again.
Domestic cattle, neath Falvar's watchful eyes,
Came bleating and bahing and mooing over the mead.
And horses hurtled along, manes flying likewise,
And little lambs scampering, their ewes won't stop to feed.
Bold Asamazh, he played his very best.
The flute's notes flew to the hearts of all around.
In the Southern Mountains they woke up many a beast.
For there the big brown bears in their lairs were found.
The flowers on the gray earth raised their blooming heads,
And opened their petals to catch that magical sound.
The hungry bees buzzed o'er the flowerbeds,
The butterflies fluttered by, around and around.
The forest birds joined in then with their song.
Asamazh's music re-echoed again through the glade.
The bustards and long-legged storks then skipped along;
Oh, what a dance on the wide Goom plain they made!
The clouds, both light and dark, let fall warm tears,
Which freshened the thirsty soil on the bosom of earth.
Then thunder rolled, and on grateful green grass splashed
The dazzling drops that the springtime showers bear.
Asamazh's fingers flew fleeting over his flute,
Through the treetops breezes waved with wakening hopes.
Not a thing stayed silent, not one path was mute,
The fresh green grasses fluttered on mountain slopes.
The mountains with rumbling voices made reply,
The Black Mount with the White Mount began to dance.
The landslides and avalanches began to fly,

And rocks rolled round, wherever they had the chance.
More tenderly still did Asamazh then play:
The glaciers melted away, and fell in ravines.
The spring so shone on such a beautiful day,
Its bright eyes scanned the bold, breathtaking scenes.
Then people left their homes, and breathed spring air,
Which brought back life to their tired wintry hearts.
Now Asamazh's flute in eight keys did flare.
And, lo and behold! Another miracle starts!
In Lord Shainag's tall tower on the topmost stair,
A narrow door, like a crack, then opened wide,
And soon the beauty Agunda was standing there,
And gazing round, on the magic world outside.
The song that Asamazh had played on his flute
Had touched her heart with its wonderful lilt of love.
And leaving her weaving, she went outside, stood mute,
And looked to see who it was, who cooed like a dove!
Asamazh too looked, "How does this happen?" he thought,
"She rarely has even seen the Sun before!
Why now does she come out, afraid of naught,
And look at me, and straight in my eyes, what's more!"
Asamazh, by her beauty, was pierced to the very heart,
And she, seeing this, was also trembling with love.
But she did not wish to reveal this, on her part,
And merely stood looking down on him from above.
Then she came down, and stood on the cliff nearby.
"Live long, bring joy to your mother, O glorious youth!
But one desire in this whole wide world have I—
Give me, I beg you, your magical golden flute!"
Young Asamazh was offended by these words.
In fury his golden flute on the rocks cast down.
The perpetual flute was broken into shards,

And Asamazh then went off home with a frown.
But the proud Agunda climbed down the cliff with care,
And gathered the flute's fine fragments, and took them home.
With her magic whip of felt, she touched them there,
And all together again did the fragments come.
She took a red silk ribbon, and wound it around,
The flute again looked just like newly made.
Then her maiden's trunk of mother-of-pearl she found,
And deep inside it the flute she gently laid.

Sadly Asamazh, son of Asa, returned on his road home. Suddenly he saw riding toward him the heavenly dwellers Nikkola and Washtirji. Such a bright light emanated from their steeds that young Asamazh was half-blinded. These horses of the Afshurg breed were part of the herd belonging to Washtirji, the patron saint of warriors and travelers. The heavenly smith Kurdalagon had shod them, and sparks from their shoes flew as if from flint-stones. The two riders were glancing at the world around. On their left hand rose the mighty mountain Beshtau, and on ahead there stretched the distant steppe. On meeting young Asamazh, they reined in their steeds, and Nikkola inquired of him, "Where are you wandering, and stumbling so?" and Washtirji added, "Your head is so drooping. You are not ill, are you? And where is your golden flute, and why do you not play on it?"

"Glory to you two heavenly dwellers!" answered Asamazh, looking up. "Now, if only you had gone as my matchmakers to the daughter of Shainag-aldar, and gained her hand for me in marriage, I should not need to go with drooping head back home!"

So Nikkola and Washtirji agreed to go as suitor for Asamazh, and off they went to Shainag-aldar, and said to him, "We come as matchmakers from Asamazh, son of Asa, and take that responsibility on our shoulders. What bad things can you say about the son of Asa? His father was always held high in esteem by all Narts, while young Asamazh is among the best of the Nart youths,

and with his playing on his golden flute opens all hearts. Whatever you say, he would be not a bad relative, and would become your son-in-law. He was born beneath a lucky star, and if you, Shainag-aldar would be good enough to give us your daughter Agunda's hand in marriage to Asamazh, you would make him a very happy man!"

Shainag-aldar went to discuss this with his only daughter and heiress Agunda, and after a while she said to him, "Let Asa's son, the bold young Asamazh, drive into our courtyard a hundred deer, all born the same year. If he can do that, he is worthy!" Shainag-aldar did not wish to give his daughter away in marriage, and when he heard her words his whole face lit up with joy. He went back to the heavenly matchmakers, and gave them his daughter's answer.

Then it was their turn to go back with lowered heads to Asamazh. Could anyone possibly perform such a feat as Agunda demanded? How could young Asamazh find a hundred deer born in one year, capture them all, and take them to the Black Mountain home of Shainag-aldar?

Having heard Agunda's reply, Asamazh did not go any farther on his way home, but went into the deep forest instead. He was again very sad to receive such an answer. "Either I will find a hundred deer such as Agunda demands, or I will find my death!" he decided. He wandered through the deep forest, thinking to himself, "A hundred deer—they would not be impossible to catch. I should go at full gallop and seize them by the legs. But how can I find them all of the same year of birth?" He bit his fingernails in despair when he remembered his broken flute. Just now it would have been so useful to him.

For a long while he wandered in the forest depths, but could not think of any way of catching such creatures all of the same age.

Asamazh had been away from the Nart village for so long now that the Narts began to feel alarmed about him. So the boldest young Narts, famous for hunting deer, went to look for Asamazh, their young comrade. In a forest clearing they set their camp and lit a bonfire. Soon they were roasting shashliks on spits over the fire, and the smell of these wafted away to Asamazh, who thus found his way to his comrades. How glad they were to see him again! They began to ask him where he had been so long, and he told them of his woe.

The young Narts felt offended that he had been so treated, and they shortly decided to attack the castle of Shainag-aldar.

They gathered their things together and set off, and as they went along a ravine, they met Afshati. Asamazh was overjoyed to see Afshati, for he was the true friend of his father. Asamazh told him of his sorrow.

“Do not worry over that matter, son of my friend. We shall get that beauty for you!” said Afshati. “Let ten of you go to the Adai ravine, and each one catch ten deer, and all of them will have been born within the same year, without a doubt.” So said Afshati, the lord of all wild beasts, and the young Narts went straight off to the Adai ravine, and there they found so many deer, that each soon caught ten of them by the hind legs and brought them to Asamazh, all of them born in one year.

Early in the morning young Asamazh bathed his horse, washed it with black soap, and rinsed it with clear spring water. When the sun rose the young Narts and a few respected elders accompanied young Asamazh to the Black Mountain. On his right hand, as elder friend, rode steel-breasted Shoshlan on his indomitable steed Afshurg. As they rode they were joined by the two heavenly matchmakers, Washtirji and Nikkola, and friends. They went to Arjinarag, to call for Tatartup, and to Kurp Mountain, where the home of serene Elia stood, and to the summit of Adai, to the mighty Afshati, and to the summit of the Kariu Mountain, where the shrine of the protector of all cattle, Falvara, stood. So they gathered the heavenly dwellers together.

Gray-haired Tatartup was the eldest among them, and he headed the procession, and beside him on his left, the gallant Elia, and on his right, the old Nart Urizhmag. The youngest matchmaker was Washtirji. He rode a gray horse, and behind them all came a crowd of Asamazh’s friends. The mountains were shaken by the snorting of their steeds, and thunderheads of hot breath and hoof-dust rose on high. The midday sun glistened on their bridles. The way was long, and the eminent Narts began to converse with the earthly- and heavenly dwellers and to seek counsel among them.

“Several times already old Shainag-aldar has tricked our young suitors. What shall we do if this time too he will not give his daughter away?”

Then the great Washtirji said to all those who hoped to make a proposal that same day, despite having been refused before, “To me has fallen the honor to lead the bride from her father’s home, to the home of her suitor Asamazh, son of Asa. It would be a good thing if Shainag-aldar gave his daughter away willingly, but if he proves to be stubborn, then he will have only himself to blame. You are all equal in this with me, and I can only ask you one thing: let us seize the beauty Agunda by force, if he refuses to fulfill his promise.”

“Oh, Black Mountain is high, and the cliffs are steep and unassailable. Agunda, the beauty is her father’s only heir, and it will be very difficult to steal her away from him!” said old Tatartup.

Bold and radiant Elia, the pursuer of all oath-breakers answered, “O, Tatartup, favorite of God, you are the eldest in our matchmaking procession. Ask God to fling us a cloud, and then I will prove which is the firmer, the stony breast of the Black Mountain, or my courage!”

Then noble Nikkola added his word, “My bright Elia, we entrust you with the task of smashing the fortress of Black Mountain, while Washtirji and I will undertake to steal away the beauty Agunda from her father’s home!”

Listening to their conversation, the celebrated Afshati grew angry, and cried irascibly, “And what am I to do? Am I not a man? Seven powerful reindeer with branching horns, harnessed to a silver chariot, will wait for us at the foot of the Black Mountain!”

“I shall go ahead and see that the road is all clear!” said Falvara.

“And I’ll riddle Shainag-aldar with arrows if he thinks of chasing after us when we steal his daughter!” said steely-breasted Shoshlan.

So discussing, and conversing, they reached a spot near the Black Mountain. At the side of the road, beneath a wild pear tree, they dismounted from their Afshurg steeds. On the green grass they spread out their white felt cloaks in the shade. A fresh breeze was blowing from the mountain, and parted their long beards, strand from strand.

Washtirji and Nikkola, as befitted the real matchmakers, entered Shainag-aldar’s courtyard. Other heavenly dwellers had brought in the hundred deer, all born in one year, and had driven them into the courtyard.

Shainag's young servants ran out to meet the guests, carefully held their bridles while they dismounted, and showed them into the hall. Seeing the hundred head of deer in his courtyard, Shainag was grieved. He went to meet his guest with a frown on his brow. His beard was like white silk, but his body was slender, like a youth's while his shoulders were wide. His Circassian coat, made of camels' hair, fitted him well. He held a silver staff in his left hand. "Good health to you both! Come in and stay awhile, dear guests!"

"May you live long and be famous!" they answered him respectfully.

Shainag-aldar invited them into the guest room, and sat them in a place of honor, on carved ivory armchairs. Washtirji and Nikkola then told him that they had come, with a hundred deer, for his daughter.

"O holy spirits, dear guests of mine! The day of your arrival is a happy one for me! Do as you will. I have not a word to say against it. But just look, and see for yourselves, bright spirits! Here I am, an unhappy old man, a father, and yet as it were an orphan! My strength is fading, in the winter-time of life, and my bones are brittle. My mind is shaky, I am standing on the edge of the grave, and in these dismal days my daughter's glances take the place of the sun for me! I know her thoughts. She does not wish to leave her father alone in solitude at the end of his life. I must also add that she is still very young to be wed!"

The matchmakers answered him not a word. They rose and returned to their waiting comrades.

Meanwhile the beauty Agunda came into her father's room. How slender was her form! She asked him what he had answered to the matchmakers. When she heard his reply, she grew suddenly angry, her brows settled into a frown, and she turned and opened the door with a hand as white as ivory. Then she left her father in his room, and slammed the door behind her, a thing she never did.

Shainag-aldar understood his daughter's heart very well, and soon he went after her, and said with a slow smile, "Oh, my one and only heir, my self-willed daughter! You have fallen in love with a golden flute, and its resounding songs. You have fallen in love with the reindeer born in one year, with their branching horns, but I see very clearly that most of all you have fallen in love with the bold young Asamazh, the son of Asa!"

Then he gave orders at once to recall his guests, and they soon appeared before him. Turning toward them he declared, "For your sakes, and for my daughter's sake, I am ready to give her in marriage to people whom I feel to be my equals. I give her to Asamazh!"

Then Shainag-aldar invited all his guests to come in and share the family hearth. He sent out messengers straightaway, and many people soon came to attend the wedding feast. For a whole week, from one day to the next, Shainag-aldar entertained his guests. His low tables, on their silver legs, he placed before his heavenly guests and Nart visitors. Three enormous pies, and spits with hot roasted shashliks, made of pieces of liver and kidney, wrapped in the fat from the entrails, were brought in by Shainag-aldar's young servants, and they waited on the company attentively. After the meat dishes, they brought in horns full of honeyed mead, and huge two-handled jugs, full of foaming ale, were placed on the tables.

Gray-haired Tatartup removed his skull-cap and uttered a prayer. Bold young Asamazh, son of Asa, was first to try the offerings, the pies and those very tasty shashliks, as custom required. Mead and ale flowed more freely than water. Twice as much as the guests could eat stood on the tables before them. One gay song followed another, but some of the tipsy ones demanded something even gayer.

"Hey, my young son-in-law, why don't you play on that golden flute of yours, the one that softened the proud heart of my daughter? Where is that treasure, that melody that re-echoed over Black Mountain?"

But Asamazh answered Shainag-aldar with consternation, "I robbed my own young heart of the happiness of playing on that lively flute. In a fit of temper, I smashed it on the rocks below here!"

Then the beauty Agunda went out, and returned with the golden flute, all wrapped up in red silk, and handed it to Asamazh. When he unrolled the silk, his face lit up like the sun, as he saw his beloved flute whole and undamaged. He straightaway put it to his lips and began to play.

It was impossible to hear such music and not get up and dance. The guests left the tables and began to sway to and fro to the music, and outside, in the

courtyard the hundred antlered deer began to stamp and dance, and with powerful voices to repeat the music of the flute.

When the guests had eaten and drunk their fill, again they started to dance to Asamazh's merry melodies. Nart men, the best among them, danced on the edges of the tables, without touching a single dish, and even on the edge of the great cauldrons of beer, without spilling one drop. The others clapped hands in time, to urge them on faster still. So for a whole week they held a glorious wedding feast. At the end of the week, full of food and drink, they finally made their farewells, and descended from the castle on the summit of Black Mountain, taking with them the beauty Agunda back to young Asamazh's home.

Afshati's wedding gift, a coach all of silver, drawn by seven tall antlered reindeer, stood harnessed and ready. When Agunda the beauty was seated with bold Asamazh beside her, they set off, followed by a long procession of friends. Behind them came seven wagons bearing the young bride's possessions.

It was Washtirji's privilege to take the hand of the beauty Agunda and lead her into the bridegroom's home. On the other side went Urizhmag, eldest of the Narts. On ahead of them pranced the heavenly Nikkola, and the family banner was borne by a spirit, protector of the plain. Dashing and dancing on his lively steed in honor of the happy pair went the renowned Elia, and when he whipped his steed the thunder rolled and heavenly lightning hurled down javelins. Where his horse stamped, ravines opened up, and the breath of his steed was like a winter blizzard. So, happy and gay, they brought the beauty Agunda to the Nart village, and took her to the Nart banqueting hall. When they met, the beauty Agunda bowed low before the famous Nart hostess, the wise Shatana. Asamazh's friends struck up a song about her, on the threshold to the hall:

O, our beloved hostess, our fine Shatana!
O, fountain of life where all our richness starts!
O, it is to you we sing our song, Shatana.
O, it is to you, the mistress of our hearts!
O, full is your store of ale, both strong and mellow!

O, generous are your hands, and wise your head!
O, bring to us a tankard for each fellow,
Of blackest, foaming beer, and shashliks red!
O, tasty are your roasted mutton shashliks,
O, crackling on the spit, straight from the fire!
O, your black foaming beer is truly matchless!
O, kind hostess, what more could we desire?
O, bring us pies, with roasted cheese and butter,
O, stuff them well, and serve them piping hot!
O, bring us mead with honey, what could be better?
O, bring us out a jug full, the best you've got!
O, bring us one of your oldest, tastiest cheeses!
O, even your worst is treasure indeed for us!
O, marvelous mistress, you know well what pleases!
O, dear Shatana, you share your riches thus!

The Narts arranged a great wedding feast in their banquet hall. Gray-bearded Urizhmag, the eldest of the Narts, sat at the head of the table, and started off the proceedings with a prayer, "Glory be to thee, O God! Washtirji is a righteous and goodly spirit, so let him manage all our affairs in the correct way, and in accordance with ancient custom. O God, help our young bridal pair, who are just beginning a new life together, to arrange their path happily and wisely. Let anyone who wants to test his strength against us be deprived of all his power. Now, our young couple, begin to build a happy life together, and love and respect one another!"

When Urizhmag had finished his prayer, Tatartup began to sing a song dedicated to the young newlyweds:

Glorious is this hall, the home of the Narts.
Eight are its sides, four corners standing here.
How is it built so firmly in all its parts?

Because its pillars were brought by Donbettir!
Here stands their home, refuge from all distress.
Cross-beams were brought in from Rich Ravine.
The main beam came from the gorge of Happiness.
Chain o'er the hearth, suspended from heaven is seen!
Here lives Urizhmag, the old family head.
Wise Shatana is mistress, kind and discreet.
Famous Shoshlan hunts game, brings the deer home dead,
Lays his prey at the gray-haired master's feet!
These young Narts are boldest and best of all.
May they live long upon these mountains here!
May they have the bear's long claws, and a powerful paw!
May they be all as agile as forest deer!
May the maidens be fertile as our white hens,
Merry as chicks, their babies may they bear,
May they be gay, and as faithful loving friends,
May they live well and happy together, our pair!

74 ♦ NART SHIDAMON AND THE GIANT SHKHUALI

The Narts gathered together in Lakandon, and decided to go on a campaign. The two Nart villages, large and small, gathered there, but only from the Borata family there was not a single soul to be seen.

Urizhmag then called his young lads and told them, "I don't see a single member of the Borata family here! What has happened to them? Go and find what is wrong with them!"

Asamazh, as the youngest, was sent to the Borata. First he went to the elders, and asked them why they had not appeared.

"The two other Nart villages have gathered at Lakandon, and wait for you. Why do you delay? What has gone wrong?"

"What else can we do, my bright young lad? A spoke in our wheel is broken! On the Warp Mountain the giant Shkhuali killed our Bseg, cut off both his ears,

and took them away with him. What can we do now? We can't bury the deceased so disfigured! We are all grieving about it! His son Shidamon has gone hunting in the mountains of Sog, and he knows nothing of this. We must first find him and tell him!"

When Asamazh returned and told the Narts that Bseg had been slain, they were all struck still as stone. Seeing this Asamazh said to them, "You go on your expedition, and I will go and find Shidamon, and tell him what has happened. Then we shall follow you and catch up to you!"

The Narts set off on their campaign. On the way they competed one against the other, showing their skill by shooting birds in flight with their bows and arrows.

Meanwhile Asamazh rode through the Black Ravine, climbed the pass, looked all round, and in a nearby ravine he saw something wonderful. Shidamon had captured a deer, and was now sucking her udder, full of her milk. When he finished sucking, the deer fell as if dying on the grass.

"How shall I approach him?" thought Asamazh. "I shall have to go carefully, or he may take me for an enemy, and hurl me against the rocks!"

Then he suddenly saw another deer on a jutting height, and shot it. It fell down the cliff-side into the ravine, where he had seen Shidamon. Now, at least, he had some excuse for descending into the ravine, and down he went. It was not long before he met Shidamon, and said, "Good-day to you, son of Bseg!"

"Live long and be happy, kind traveler! Say, who are you, and where are you riding to, pray?"

"I am the Nart Asamazh, son of Asa, and I am looking for you!"

"Asamazh! Are you he whom the Narts in the three villages call Singing Flute, and why do you seek me here?"

"Yes, so they call me! But what are you doing alone here? People have gathered in alarm, but you have gone lost in the larder, feeding?!"

"Of what alarm do you speak, son of Asa?"

"First of all follow me, and I will tell you on the way!"

As Shidamon followed him they came to the village where the Borata lived. All was silent in the settlement. Not a voice was heard, as if the inhabitants had

been carried off somewhere. Shidamon suddenly guessed that something really serious had happened, and he began to weep aloud.

From the wailing and lamentation of Shidamon, the soot dropped from the ceilings, and walls began to crumble. Blind children's eyes saw the light, and old men's eyes began to scatter sparks. Babies at the breasts of their mothers cut their teeth; the winged birds fell from the skies; and wild beasts hid in their holes.

While Asamazh had been looking for Shidamon, the Borata had made two bronze ears for Bseg, and had buried him in his own vault. When Shidamon returned home with Asamazh, and he saw what had happened, he called other young Borata lads together, to follow the other Narts on campaign.

When they finally met, Urizhmag was overjoyed that the Borata would be taking part in their campaign, and Shidamon said to them all, "The giant Shkhuali has slain my father, and the first thing I must do is to avenge his death and disfiguration. We shall seize all the giant's cattle and possessions and share them among us. I beg you, let us start the campaign with this!"

"But the giant lives very far away!" objected Shiridon. "On the road to his dwelling place we may add to our numbers, but on the road back many of us will remain unnumbered!"

Shidamon grew angry with Shiridon for these remarks, and was already drawing his sword, when Asamazh stopped him, and called the other Narts.

They then discussed in which direction they should ride, and finally decided to do as Shidamon had asked them.

For seven days and nights they rode, and on the eighth day came to the Kirmiz steppe. There they met a shepherd, and looking around asked him, "Tell us, shepherd, why are there so many pits and bumps in these plains? Why are so many trees broken, and so much dust hanging about?"

The shepherd answered them forthwith, "Oh, if you had only seen what happened here! Shkhuali fought here with the Nart Bseg. They tore up trees by the roots, and beat one another with them. The rocks and cliffs they tore and hurled at each other. They strained their strength to the limit, and left holes in the ground where they trod. They raised such a cloud of dust above them as they struggled that it hasn't settled yet!"

So the Narts found at last the traces of their blood-brother again.

“But what kind of cavern is that up there in the mountains?”

“Oh there the giant Shkhuali overpowered Bseg at last. The Nart became caught in a cleft in the rocks, and the giant cut off both his ears, and put them in his pocket. Then from the Warp heights he hurled Bseg’s body over the mountains, down to the Nart square!”

At once the Narts understood how powerful the giant Shkhuali must be.

“And whose cattle are you herding here?” they asked the herdsman.

“These are Shkhuali’s cattle. He himself goes hunting, and returns only at evening from the chase,” replied the shepherd.

“And how can one slay such a giant? Do you know or not?”

“As far as I know, he does not fear any ordinary death. Nobody except his wife might know from what he might possibly die!”

Then Shidamon said to Asamazh, “Today you will be needed! Take your golden flute and come with me, and you Narts wait for us here!”

The Narts waited, while Shidamon and Asamazh found their way to the giant’s dwelling. When they drew near, Asamazh began to play on his magic flute. At once the grass shot up twice as high as before, and its dry stalks became green. The leaves on the trees sprouted thicker; the birds flew to Asamazh and began to sing; and the beasts came from the forest and began a round-dance.

The giant Shkhuali’s wife heard the sound of the golden flute, and wanted to dance, and sent a servant to Asamazh with an invitation, “Come in with your friend, and be my guests!”

“If I receive the right to talk to you, then I shall come!” he replied.

The servant took his message to her and then returned with her answer straightaway.

“Come in, and speak with me, as much as you wish!”

Then the Narts went into the giant’s home, and the hostess entertained them very well. As it grew dark, she said to her guests, “My husband is hunting, but will soon return. He may take you for his foes, and then don’t expect any mercy. Therefore I shall hide you in a secret room. There you may sleep and fear nothing!”

She hid the young Narts in the secret room, and just then the giant returned, and at once he asked her, sniffing, "Does it not smell of someone or the other in here?"

"Oh, husband dear," replied his wife, "two youngsters visited our village. One played on the flute, and the other danced on tiptoes. Our villagers were amazed. They had never seen anything like it before. It must be their smell that remains in the house!"

The giant asked no further questions, but stood up from his place, pushed his hand between the main girder and the cross-beam of the ceiling, and drew from there a small dagger. He polished it till it shone, and in so doing increased his strength seven times. Then he put it back.

In the morning, he went off hunting again. Then the young Narts came out of their secret room, and Asamazh played even better than before on his flute, while Shidamon danced on the tips of his toes, as if on knives.

In the giant's village, all were delighted with the young fellows, and wondered where they came from. Listening to the golden flute, the giant's cattle went waltzing off to their pasture. On their way the giant Shkhuali happened to see them, and grew scared, just at the spot where the other Narts had agreed to wait for Shidamon and Asamazh.

The breathing of his mighty horse blew the Narts up in the air, and only one or two managed to cling to the branches of a nearby tree. In this way Shiridon found himself face to face suddenly with the giant.

"What sort of a dog or an ass are you? Was it you who alarmed my cattle, and made them dance like that?" the giant asked angrily.

"It is you who are a dog and an ass!" retorted Shiridon, "and your cattle are dancing to the music of one who is now entertaining your wife!"

These words made the giant insane with rage. He spurred his horse and rode off home. While he was still on his way, Shidamon had managed to ask his wife, "What is the secret of your husband's life and death? If you tell me, I shall make you a present of my flute, and its music will ever be yours!"

"My husband will meet his death only from his little dagger!" she replied. "One scratch from it will be enough to kill him!" Then she showed the young

Narts where it was hidden, and Shidamon drew it out of its secret place. Then he turned to Asamazh and said hastily, “Asamazh! You ride off as quickly as you can back to our Narts, and drive off all the giant’s cattle. Meanwhile I shall seal this giant’s fate!”

Asamazh galloped off to the meeting place as agreed. Shidamon had no time to turn around. The giant rode up, and without dismounting seized him and his horse, and hurled them together from the Warp heights. Shidamon’s horse had its legs broken, but Shidamon escaped. The giant galloped down to the foot of the mountain and seized him and began to wrestle with him on foot. Shidamon managed to throw the giant into a bog, and there, because of his great weight, he became stuck. But Shidamon went after him, and grappled with him again.

The Narts watched this struggle from a distance. Three days and three nights they wrestled, but neither could overpower the other. Then Asamazh came galloping up and cried, “Giant Shkhuali! They are driving off all your cattle!”

When the giant heard this his strength failed him. He tried desperately once again to break free from Shidamon’s grasp, and would have done so had not Shidamon then struck him with the giant’s own small dagger. The giant staggered, and fell dead upon the ground.

How the Narts rejoiced! They took all of the giant’s possessions, and all of his herds, and what else might one expect? Asamazh never thought for one moment of really parting with his precious golden flute, and with laughter and joking the Narts returned home.

At the funeral feast for his father, Shidamon dedicated the usual portion of the spoils to his father’s honor. All the rest he divided equally among the Narts, much to their satisfaction. After the funeral feast Shidamon settled down quietly, and enjoyed the respect and esteem of all the Narts until the very day he died.

PART 7



SHAUWAI



For seven years before the feast in memory of their forefathers, the Nart Borata family began to collect together the fruits of their toil, so that they could arrange this feast to the departed ones in a worthy manner. Three years were left before the feast was planned to take place, and the Borata family then sent messengers to all the other Narts to inform them about the forthcoming celebrations.

“The memorial feast and games in honor of the forefathers of the Borata family will take place in three years’ time. He who wishes to pay tribute to the memory of our predecessors should start to train his horses in good time for the races if he wishes to take part in them. Between the Black Sea and the White Sea there stretches a mountainous land, and from there the race will start,¹ and on the Nart Field of Games a banner will be flying. He who first rides up to that banner will gain for himself the first prize, a slave-boy. He who comes in second will win a slave-girl, and all others will receive prizes too—cattle and precious goods of all kinds.”

So the messengers went the rounds of the Nart villages, and all began to train their horses, so that they might take part in the races.

Old Kanz, sitting in meeting place in the village square early one morning, also heard the announcement made by the herald. Discontented and vexed, he returned home and angrily threw himself in his armchair made of ivory, and it gave way under the strain. His old wife asked him, “What are you so vexed about, old man? What has made you so angry?”

“I heard the herald proclaim news about the forthcoming memorial feast in honor of the Borata family’s forebears,” old Kanz made reply. “It will take place in three years’ time. He advised those who wish to take part to start training their horses for the racing straight away. The winner will receive a slave-boy as a prize; the second man home will win a slave-girl; and all others will be given prizes of some kind too. I know that I shouldn’t expect to win first place, or any place at that, but who can I set astride my horse, to ride him for me? That’s what is vexing me, and that’s why I flopped down in my armchair so, and broke it!”

His wife on hearing this quickly set about baking three pies with honey, and poured out a full jug of mead, then climbed to the seventh story of their tower, and prayed to God, “O God, do not let my husband and I remain without offspring!”

She did not touch the pies after her prayer, but took them with the whole jug of mead and placed them before her husband, and encouraged him to eat and drink. When he had taken his fill, she lay down beside him and rested her head on his breast.

God heard her prayer, and lo and behold, once, when daylight was just taking the place of night, she gave birth to a little boy, and they named him Shauwai. She held him to her breast to suckle him, but he had teeth already, and bit her nipple. They invited a wet nurse to come and suckle him, but he bit her breast too. When Kanz knew of this, he ordered her to take his young son to the river, and throw him into a crack in an ice floe, to cool him down a bit.

She took him to the river, and threw him into a crack in an ice floe, and he became caught there and was carried away. A he-wolf found him and took him off to his den, and there the she-wolf suckled him. Not by the hour nor by the day he grew, but shot up all at once, became a young man, and began hunting.

When only three days were left before the horse race started, Kanz came home from the village meeting place, and angrily sat down in his ivory armchair, and again broke it to pieces.

“Obviously God sent me that youngster just to tease me, and alas, I have lost him, and cannot find him anywhere!” moaned Kanz.

Just then a shepherd came to see him and told him, “There is a lad wandering around up in the hills, hunting wild game!”

Old Kanz pricked up his ears at this, and said to his young friends, “Go and find that young lad up in the hills, and bring him here!”

Off they went, finally found the lad and brought him to old Kanz.

“What are you so sad about, my father?” asked the young Shauwai.

“I was sad because I thought I had lost you, and now I am sad that I have nobody to ride my horse in the memorial race to be held in three days’ time!”

“But where is your horse, father? Is he ready for the contest?”

“He stands in our underground cellar,” replied his father. “There’s nobody to water, nor to feed him, and all the time he gnaws at his iron bit. Go to him, and if he allows you to stroke him, that means you really are my son, and may dash off in the saddle wherever you wish. If not on you, then on whom should I place my hopes?”

Shauwai went to the underground stall, and had only just entered, when the horse lashed out at him with his hind hooves. But Shauwai took hold of his hind legs, and swung him onto the ground with a bang, two or three times, and then said to him severely, “May you be slain and stuffed, and lie with the dead one! Are you not tired of putrefying among all these droppings?”

Then the horse caught him between his teeth, and threw him to the ground. But he, in return, grabbed the horse’s ears and again swung him round and beat him upon the ground several times and said to him, “Don’t you want to get out of here? Do you not recognize in me the son of Kanz, Shauwai?”

“How should I not recognize you as his son?” answered the horse. “Before you came nobody dared even to touch one hair in my tail, but you throw me on the ground and beat me! I see that from today on you will be my master and my rider!”

“And from this day on you will be my faithful steed!” replied Shauwai. Then he returned from the stable to his father and asked him, “Have you any weapons stored away that I might use?”

“The steel blade of my sword is curling up from its thirst for battle!” said his father. “Its tip, stuck in the sheath, gives off a blue flame. My bow is chained to an iron post, and is eager for the fight. It gives off a red flame. Take them, my son! See, here are seven keys, six doors you will unlock, and when you open the seventh door, you will find the weapons there. If you can master them, they are yours. If you can not, then they may kill you, and it will not be my fault!”

Shauwai unlocked six doors, but as soon as he opened the seventh, the sword flew out with its blade toward him. It hurtled into the iron post on its way and slashed it in two, as a scythe would a stem of sorrel. But Shauwai immediately took hold of its hilt, and said, “Don’t let out any more blue flame, thirsting for battle! You will now hang at my waist, and that will be your proper place!”

Then Shauwai saw the bow. He just touched it, and of itself it let fly three arrows into the sky, and almost tore itself away from the post. Shauwai cunningly caught hold of it, and slung it over his shoulder, and thus he armed himself with the necessary weapons.

His horse was one of those that could go for a year without water, but now had come the hour when night and day part from each other, and Shauwai led him down to the Nart river Zikh.

At that early hour Shatana went to pray on the seventh story of the tower, and she glanced at all that was happy and all that was unhappy, and on what was happening on earth, and in the heavens. From her tower she saw someone taking a horse to the Nart river Zikh. She saw the star on his forehead, the white star of Bonvarnon, and recognized Kanz's famous steed. She went straight down below and told Urizhmag, "We have rejoiced too soon, believing in our victory in the race! We will not win it now, nor receive a slave-boy as our prize. I saw Kanz's horse at the Zikh watering place, but who was watering him I do not know!"

Then Urizhmag began to scold Shatana crossly, and said, "Everyone knows that old Kanz has no children now. Who then could take his horse down to the watering place on the Zikh?"

Shatana did not reply, but the next day, at the same hour, she again went up to the top of her tower, and straightaway looked toward the river and saw someone bringing his horse to the water. She recognized the star of Bonvarnon on its forehead, but it shone so brightly that she could not see its rider clearly. Again she went down to her husband Urizhmag, "I told you we had started rejoicing too soon in our presumed victory. We will not win a slave-boy! Today for the second time, I saw Kanz's horse at the Zikh River, but still could not recognize who was riding him!"

Once more Urizhmag grew cross with Shatana, and scolded her even more, "Don't talk nonsense, and don't tell stories, Shatana!"

On the third day Shatana once more climbed to the top of her tower, and with her keen eyes she saw again that the horse could belong to nobody but Kanz, but who brought him to the watering place she again could not tell, though she could even see the bridle rein.

Once more she told her husband that the horse was undoubtedly Kanz's, but that she could not make out who was watering him.

Even more sternly Urizhmag reproached Shatana for deliberately lying, "Why are you making up these lies, and such nonsensical ones too!?"

Then Shatana told Urizhmag of a dream that she had had, "I saw as if the race were finished, and you were all dispersed around the Field of Games, arguing. Nobody wanted to cede the main prize to anyone else. But on the crest of the Wazh Mountain, it seemed, a black crow was sitting. Suddenly he swooped down onto the field, and fell with all his weight on you, and broke nine of your ribs, so then I bound you with my silken scarf, took your arm over my shoulder, and lugged you home. I placed you on the carved ivory bed, and there you lay, seriously ill, and I was constantly busy about you, trying to nurse you. It seemed that you would not be able to go to the memorial feast of the Borata after all! Moreover you did not even win a slave-girl as second prize. So now remember what I have told you, and don't forget my prophetic dream!"

The time for the race came round. For a whole year horses had been training and resting between the Black Sea and the White Sea. Shauwai saddled his steed, put on his father's weapons, and said to his father Kanz, "When you were leaving on an expedition, how did you set off?"

"I set off by flying out of our top window!" said his father, pointing to the one nearest to the ceiling.

Shauwai whipped up his horse and flew, like a fly, out of the topmost window. He guided his horse toward the land between the Black and White Seas, where the race was to begin. He traveled through forests and plains and shot some deer and wild goats, and cut their skins into narrow strips. At last he came to the starting place, and found all the competitors sleeping. He did not wake them, but repaired their bridles and saddles with strips of hide, then went a little farther away, and unsaddled his horse, spread his horse's blanket on the ground, covered himself with his Andi felt cloak, lay his head on the saddle, and fell asleep, leaving his horse free to graze. While Shauwai was sleeping, his horse went and bathed itself in the sea.

The race had already begun, but Shauwai was still sleeping. The Field of Games lay far, far away, waiting for the riders with its fluttering banner stuck in the ground on its staff, which the rider had to seize.

But Shauwai was still slumbering. Then his horse went up to him, poked him with its muzzle, woke him up and said to him, "Get up, my master, quickly! Today the race will finish!"

Clean and shining was his horse's coat after bathing, as though someone had rubbed it with egg white. Shauwai slung the saddle on his back, jumped into it, whipped his horse along its course in the direction of the Field of Games, and away they went, hell-for-leather.

The young Nart spectators were watching from the seventh stories of their towers, following the progress of the racers. Everyone was anxious to see whose horse was leading. Look now! On ahead were two horses. One was Urizhmag's, and the other Khamis's. Like a pair of oxen in the yoke they were racing side by side. Close behind them galloped Shoshlan's horse. After all the others came Shirdon's nag, and the Nart youths began to yell, "Hey, Shirdon, your horse is carrying some extra weight somewhere!" Suddenly they caught sight of Kanz's horse. One after the other, it was overtaking all the horses, but the Narts could not make out who was riding it, for he was rather small.

Shirdon suddenly yelled back and said to them, "Of course, my horse is trailing along last, badly weighted down, but that's not the most remarkable thing! I can see a horse with a white star on its forehead. Now he has overtaken my horse, and pulled off his right ear, and now he is doing the same to all the other Nart racers, one after another. He pulls off their right ears, and throws them to the left! Now, my proud Nart youngsters, like me, you will not see that first prize, nor the right ears of your horses any more!"

Shoshlan could not bear to hear such sneering remarks. He dashed up to his tower, and took a good look beneath his outstretched palm, and saw the ear of his horse go flying off, then the ear of Khamis's, and then the ear of Urizhmag's, and they all remained one ear short. At last the racers galloped onto the Field of Games. Shauwai was first, and like a kite, he swooped down and seized the flag,

carried it off to Burafarnig, the eldest of the Borata Narts, and said to him, “Now bring me my first prize!”

Urizhmag felt full of spite, and said to Burafarnig fiercely, “Don’t give the first prize to that little ass! See, he still has traces of his mother’s milk at the corners of his mouth!”

Shauwai forthwith answered Urizhmag, “Because of your gray hair, I pardon you! But don’t argue with me about my first prize, for that is mine by right!”

In reply Urizhmag shook his stick threateningly at Shauwai. Shauwai could not put up with that, but lashed his horse and flew like a crow up to the top of the Wazh Mountain. Then, like a kite, he dived down below and landed right on top of Urizhmag, breaking nine of his ribs.

At once Shatana ran to him, and bound up his body with her silken scarf, took his arm over her shoulder, and lugged him off home. There she lay him on his ivory bed, and set to bustling about him all the time, trying to nurse him, and ease the pain of his cracked ribs.

So without Urizhmag present, the memorial feast to the Borata ancestors began. When the guests were seated, young Shauwai went up to Burafarnig, and said to him, “Bring the slave-boy, my first prize, and the slave-girl, Urizhmag’s second prize, here to me!”

Burafarnig did not dare to refuse his request and brought them both.

Shauwai sat them on the rump of his steed and rode home with them.

“Here you are, father!” he said, “my first prize, a slave-boy. And here is a slave-girl, the second prize, which I took by force from Urizhmag, after he had insulted me!”

“I see that you suit me well as a son,” answered Kanz, “and from this day on, people will name you Shauwai, son of Kanz.”



A long time passed, and then one day Shauwai went to his father, “I am going on a quest,” he said. “I have already readied myself.”

“Well then, go my young Shauwai,” said he, “but it were better for you to do something else, for if Urizhmag and his relatives learn that you are going off

alone, they will lie in wait for you and slay you, as they slew my ten brothers, and I would be left childless!”

“Do not worry about me, old father of mine. The slave-boy and slave-girl I received will remain instead of me, and will cheer you up. I will make sure that Urizhmag and his relatives do not get the better of me, neither by deceit, nor by cunningly thought-out plans, nor by force!”

He mounted his horse, his father wished him a happy journey, and off he rode from the courtyard.

He came to the Field of Games, and called out at the top of his voice, “Hey there, Urizhmag, come out and join me on a quest!”

From the force of that shout, the soot fell from the ceiling in Urizhmag’s house.

The second time Shauwai shouted, and from that blast planks fell from the ceiling. Still Urizhmag did not come out to him.

The third time he shouted, and the roof of Urizhmag’s house collapsed.

“Sit here awhile, and I’ll go out and talk to him!” said Shatana. She went out of the house and turned in the direction of the Field of Games, in the middle of which Shauwai was sitting astride his big horse. She went up to him and said, “Wait till morning for my old man, and I’ll get things ready for him.”

Shauwai dismounted from his horse, put his saddle beneath his head, spread his horse’s blanket underneath him, covered himself with his Andi felt cloak and was soon fast asleep. Meanwhile Shatana returned to Urizhmag.

“That youngster who causes us so much trouble is very much taken with you!” she said to him. “He so wants you to go on a quest with him that you won’t be able to refuse. But be careful when you go. Take your youths with you as well!”

Urizhmag took Shatana’s advice and got ready for the journey, but he left his whip at home as though he had completely forgotten it. He took both Shoshlan and Khamis with him. They came to the Field of Games, and saw that Shauwai was fast asleep, and snoring loudly.

“Wake up, youngster!” cried Urizhmag. “We are ready to set off now!”

Shauwai jumped up, quickly saddled his great horse, and they set off.

They had gone a good distance, when suddenly Urizhmag said, "I have forgotten my whip! I shall have to return home and get it."

Well, how could Shauwai let an old man be put to such trouble?

"I shall ride back and get your whip," said he, as he gave Urizhmag his own in the meantime. "I shall soon catch up with you again!" and off he galloped.

Soon he arrived, tied his horse to Urizhmag's tethering post, went into the guest room, and sat down. Shatana saw that they had a guest, and sent her daughter to him with a basin of water and a jug. The girl poured some water over his hands, and he washed and dried them. Then he said, "You are a sweet girl, but what a pity that you are lame!"

The girl went back to Shatana with tears in her eyes and said to her, "Nobody has ever been so rude to me before. Why did he call me lame?" Shatana comforted her daughter, took off her slipper, looked inside them, and in one she found a grain of millet. She straightaway started to scold her, and make her feel ashamed of herself, "How was it that you did not feel that you had a grain of millet in your slipper? The guest must have noticed that from the way you walked. That's why he called you lame! Take out the little round three-legged table, with some refreshments for him, and you will see that he won't call you lame any more!" The girl took the low round table, and set it before Shauwai, and he looked at her a while and then said, "You are a good-looking girl, but just a little lop-sided. You have a slight swelling upon your right side!"

The girl again felt offended, and went back to her mother and said, "That guest now says that I'm lop-sided, and have a swelling on one side!"

Shatana unbuttoned her daughter's dress and found inside it a thread that had not been cut off after sewing. She cut it off, and said to her, "You don't look after yourself properly. Go and fetch back the little table, if he's finished eating, and if he criticizes you again tell me!"

When the girl went back for the little table, Shauwai then said to her, "You are a lovely girl, but what a pity that you have a slight squint!"

The girl took the table back, and told her mother that their guest had remarked that she had a slight squint in her right eye. Shatana then looked in her daughter's right eye and put straight an eyelash which was poking under the lid.

Then she told her daughter, “He was quite right! How could he avoid noticing it, and calling you squint-eyed?” She scolded her daughter for her carelessness again. “You attend too little to these things! You are at the moment preparing to get married, but you are quite incapable of looking after yourself!”

Then she gave her daughter Urizhmag’s whip, and told her to hand it to the young man. When she did so Shauwai thanked her politely and said, “Whoever’s daughter you are, may you live long and be happy! Whoever’s wife you become, may you live long with him and make him happy! You are beautiful to look at now. Nobody could look better!”

After that he got on his horse and quickly caught up with Urizhmag. He gave him his whip, took his own back, and said to his fellow-riders, “I’ll gallop on ahead a bit, and prepare our campsite for this night, but you and the others need not hurry!”

Urizhmag, Khamis, and Shoshlan continued their journey, and thought to themselves, “We must rid ourselves of this troublesome youngster somehow!”

Shoshlan’s horse, the gift of the devil, was the steel-hooved Zinzalasha. It knew all the roads to the end of the earth and to heaven and to hell. So, Urizhmag, Khamis, and Shoshlan thought that this horse could be the means of Shauwai’s end, that it might lead him to his death.

Shauwai, on the road meanwhile, had killed many roe-deer and reindeer. He chose a camp site for the night. He made a tent out of the reindeer skins, but the roe-deer skins he spread for sleeping. He set a good fire to going, and by the time his fellow-travelers arrived, had readied roasted shashliks on spits. They made a good feast of them, and said that they would like to remain there for two or three days. Shauwai, as the youngest, stood guard over the horses at night.

When the time came for sleep, Shoshlan went out to his horse and commanded it that during the night it should gallop off to the end of the earth and hide itself somewhere there, so that Shauwai could not find it.

The fellow-travelers lay down on their roe-skins, and fell asleep. Shauwai took up watch by the horses, as the youngest, but after a while decided that there was no danger, and also went to sleep. In the middle of the night Shoshlan’s horse, the steel-shod Zinzalasha, according to his master’s orders, went off to the

ends of the earth. Shauwai was awakened by his own horse who said to him, "Arise quickly! We must gallop off after Shoshlan's horse. It wants to gallop to the ends of the earth, and if it does, you will never find it again. If people come to learn that you could not guard horses overnight, what shame will fall upon your head!"

Shauwai jumped on his horse and set off in pursuit of Zinzalasha. Just as the forelegs of Shoshlan's horse were leaving the earth, Shauwai grabbed hold of his tail, pulled him back, and began to beat him on the ground, then led him back to their campsite.

In the morning Shoshlan reproached his steed. "Why," he said, "did you not hide as I commanded you to do?" The horse told his master what had happened in the night, and Shoshlan again ordered him that night to go underground and hide.

"If Shauwai caught me on the edge of the earth, he will not let me go underground!" said his horse. But how can a good steed disobey his master?

On the second night Shoshlan himself wanted to keep watch over the horses, but Shauwai, as the youngest, would not allow that. So he was on guard again. All the others went to sleep. Later Shauwai, seeing that no danger was threatening the horses, also went to sleep. At midnight Shoshlan's Zinzalasha, obeying his master's command, made its way to a narrow split in the earth, in order to escape underground. But Shauwai's horse again roused his master and told him that Shoshlan's steed was about to descend into a crack in the earth in order to hide underground. Shauwai jumped on his horse and dashed off after it. Just as it was disappearing below ground, he caught hold of its ears, and hauled it back up again. Then he slammed it onto the ground sharply, and even broke two of its ribs. Then he drove it back again.

In the morning Shoshlan once more demanded of his horse, "Why did you not hide yourself underground as I commanded you to do?"

His steed replied, "I was just descending into a narrow crevice, when Shauwai caught me by the ears and hauled me back up. Then he slammed me onto the ground, and broke two of my ribs. Now I know that whatever I do, I cannot escape Shauwai!"

“Try just once more!” commanded Shoshlan, with reproach. “Maybe you will be able to gallop off to the heavenly land tonight!” Well, can a horse refuse his master? Night came, and when all were asleep, Shoshlan’s steed galloped off toward the heavenly land.

But Shauwai’s steed again awoke his master, and they galloped off in pursuit, just in time to catch Zinzalasha as it was leaping up to the heavenly land. Shauwai grabbed it by the hind legs, and threw it back on the ground, and beat it so severely that he broke two of its vertebrae.

“Well, you will be quiet now, and play no more tricks!” scolded Shauwai.

When the Narts arose the next morning Shauwai turned to Urizhmag and said, “Now take us to that land where you have never been before!”

“In my youth,” replied Urizhmag, “I traveled between two seas, and from there I brought back my piebald mare, when she was still just a foal. That land alone I could not conquer, it was so vast.”

“Then you stay here, feast on the wild game, and I will go scouting to see what I can find there!”

“It will be hard for you to reach there!” warned Urizhmag. “There are no roads over the sea. If you try to cross you will drown!”

Shauwai did not listen to him, but saddled his steed and set off. As swiftly as he galloped on dry land, so swiftly did he fly over the sea. He came to that distant land and saw that there were many piebald horses grazing on a plain. He galloped up to this herd, and lassoed a three-year-old foal, and led it away from the herd, and tethered it. Then he returned and began to drive off the whole herd.

The owners of the horses raised the alarm. All those who came in answer to the summons Shauwai slew one after another, and drove off the herd in the direction of the Narts campsite, where they waited for him.

After resting awhile, the Narts decided to dole out the herd. They chose Urizhmag, as the eldest, to allot the various portions of the spoil. However, Urizhmag declined this suggestion. The other two argued for a long time, and in the end agreed that Shauwai should do the sharing, since he was the one who had driven off the whole herd by himself.

Shauwai agreed to do so. The one piebald foal he separated from the herd, and the rest he divided into five portions.

Urizhmag could not make out what his intentions were and said to his sons that they had made a mistake, and that Shauwai was going to allot them a bastard's share, and keep the best for himself.

Shoshlan replied, "Don't be too quick in your judgment."

Khamis too said, "Better wait and see how he divides the herd between us, then judge!"

Then Shauwai began the allotment. First of all he turned to Urizhmag, "This lot is for you, as a sign of our respect to our eldest!" Then he presented him with a second lot, saying, "This lot is also for you as a fellow-traveler on our quest!"

Then he let Shoshlan and Khamis choose their own lots from those remaining, and the last lot he took for himself. That portion he divided into two, and gave a half each to Shoshlan and Khamis. Only the piebald foal he kept for himself, then quietly explained that he must give that foal to Shatana. Indeed, custom required that as mother of the bride-to-be, she must receive such a gift from her future son-in-law. Such was the custom.

At once Shoshlan understood, therefore, that Shauwai was preparing to become Urizhmag's son-in-law!

After the horse-raiding expedition they all went to Urizhmag's house, and all the local Narts gathered there to hear about it. Shoshlan and Khamis told of the bold achievements of Shauwai, and of his worthy and manly characteristics. Indeed, the Narts heard something to make them wonder. Afterward Shoshlan whispered in Shatana's ear, "Though Washtirji and many other heavenly dwellers came to court our sister, she refused them all. Now she is being courted by this youngster, but we must not give her away to him!"

"If he is such a valorous rider, hunter, and fighter," said Shatana, "we must at least receive his matchmakers. Then we shall see!"

After that Urizhmag gave a feast in honor of his guest Shauwai. Many people gathered on that occasion, and they immediately understood why Urizhmag had done so. At that feast they brought out the Wasamonga bowl, and offered it to Shauwai. He took it in both hands, and drained it dry. For three days

they feasted, and when all was over, and the guests began to leave, Shauwai decided to return home too. He thanked his host and said to him, “Wait for me in one year’s time, counting from today. Inside that year I shall return to you!” With that, he left for home.

Urizhmag was glad that Shauwai was asking to marry his daughter, and how could it be otherwise? Only one thing bothered him: he had no precise date proposed for the wedding. During that year, several times, he made ready to receive Shauwai and his matchmakers, fattened a ram in anticipation, then had to slay it for other guests when Shauwai did not appear.

The year came toward its end, and how Shauwai grew in that year! The first fine hairs appeared on his cheeks and chin. When only three days were left to go, he asked his father permission to go on a quest. Neither his father nor his mother had known up to that day that he was courting.

So, at last, he came to Urizhmag’s house, tied up his horse at the tethering post, went into the guest room, and sat down there, waiting.

At that time nobody happened to be at home except Shatana, her daughter, and the servants. All the men of the Akhshartagketta family were at a feast given by Burafarnig of the Borata.

Shauwai sat there alone in the guest room. Then he took down from the wall a small twelve-stringed hand-harp belonging to Shoshlan, and began to play and sing, and this is what he sang:

Ah, may you Narts all go to hell,—
You surely show no shame,
That nobody’s left here, where you dwell,
To meet your guest when he came!

Shatana heard the sounds of the harp, and sent a servant to him, “Find out who it is, and why he has come to visit us!”

The servant returned and told her that a young man was playing the harp there, his face covered in fine hair. Then Shatana ordered her to carry in a low

golden three-legged table and set it before the guest, though the food remaining on the dishes was already cold.

When Shauwai saw the cold odds and ends of food offered he was offended, “What am I to them, a mere hungry woodcutter, then?” he thought. With that he kicked the golden three-legged table, and it went flying into pieces.

The servant collected the pieces and took them back to Shatana, telling her what the guest had done. Shatana was grieved at this and called their slave-giant, and said to him, “Go into the guest room, and give that guest a good beating. He has dared to behave toward us more rudely than anybody has ever done before!”

The slave-giant went in to Shauwai, and they met, and began to fight. Shauwai slammed the giant’s head against the wall so hard that he died.

Shatana heard the crash as he fell, and sent a maid servant to the Borata home, where all the man were feasting, to raise the alarm there, “Come home quickly—bad things are happening here!”

When the other guests heard this, they wanted to hasten to Shatana’s aid, but Urizhmag stopped them, “First of all we must know who has visited us. Are we not waiting for an honored guest? It may even be he who has come at last!”

A few selected Nart youths, with Shoshlan at their head, went home and entered the guest room. They saw Shauwai there, playing on Shoshlan’s twelve-stringed hand-harp, and heard him singing a melancholy song:

Let Urizhmag’s family go to hell
If they can not respect their guest,
And set before him scraps as well,
Befitting a hungry woodcutter best!

When Shauwai saw Shoshlan come in, he hung his harp back on the wall, and according to custom, as befitting a suitor son-in-law, he humbly lowered his head and stood near the door. Shoshlan recognizing him at once, stretched out his hands in greeting, and said, “Welcome, Urizhmag’s future son-in-law!”

When Shatana and her daughter heard about this they were simply ashamed, and said that such a thing had never happened to them before.

Shoshlan comforted them both, and told them not to worry. Then the local people, hearing of Shauwai's arrival, began to gather at Urizhmag's home, anticipating a feast. There began a discussion among the elders about the bride-price, and arrangements for the wedding, "We shall take a hundred head of all kinds of wild beasts, and a hundred horses, each with full equipment for a campaign—harness, cloak, head-dress, and weapons. That will be the bride-price—the *irad!*"

They informed Shauwai of their decision and said to him, "Well, go off home now and collect the bride-price. When you have paid it in full, then do your part and take your bride!"

Shauwai agreed to these conditions, said farewell to the Narts, and set off home. In a short while he collected all that was necessary, and took the *irad* to Urizhmag, and said to him, "I shall come to you with a group of friends, but if you again entertain me as you did last time, I shall not forgive you!"

Shauwai then returned home, and sent a messenger to his father saying, "Without your knowledge I have wooed and won a bride among our blood-brothers. I have agreed on the *irad* and paid it. Now nothing remains but to send my friends as emissaries to collect the bride!"

His father found fitting emissaries for his son, the spirits of sunrise and sunset, the eldest of them, his old friend and guardian of the hunt, Afshati.

Shauwai informed all those named by his father, but did not reveal himself as the suitor, simply saying that on such and such a day Kanz Saumarota was marrying off his son, and invites you then as emissaries to collect the bride from her father's home. But though Shauwai did not mention his name, the heavenly dwellers recognized him as Kanz's son by the horse he rode. Nobody could master such a steed save Shauwai.

Late in the evening he arrived at Afshati's dwelling. When Afshati saw him coming astride Kanz's steed, he was very surprised, and thought, "Well, who is that then, who can ride my blood-brother's steed so well?" Recognizing that he was, indeed, the son of Kanz, Afshati was pleased.

Shauwai sent a messenger in to Afshati to tell him, “Kanz requests your presence at the wedding of his son. Your old friend hopes that you won’t delay in serving him for a while!” Well, how could Afshati refuse such an invitation, and not attend the wedding?

Taking his daughter with him, Afshati set off for Urizhmag’s home, and there the spirits of sunrise and sunset were already gathered. When old Urizhmag saw Afshati coming, he and all his family guessed that their son-in-law must really be Kanz’s single surviving son, because they all knew that Kanz and Afshati had been close friends for already many years.

Urizhmag and Kanz were blood-brothers too, and therefore Shauwai, as he sat at table, said to all around, “Let all blood-brothers at the table here make peace with one another, so that from today onward they live in peace and sincere friendship!”

Thus the old feuds were ended, and it could hardly be otherwise.

Afshati began to play on his flute, and many wild beasts came into the courtyard of Urizhmag’s home. Afshati made a present of them to Urizhmag, on behalf of his old friend Kanz.

It was a fine feast indeed. A few days it lasted, one after another. Then at last they had to say farewell. They took the bride, Shatana’s tender daughter, with them to Kanz’s home, to her husband’s hearth.

Having arrived there, she bathed the old father and mother of her husband Shauwai in water from the spring of youth, and they both became young again thanks to their daughter-in-law’s care.

Again the merry feasting began, and they celebrated a happy wedding. The folk around could not express their great joy on seeing the newly married couple, Shauwai and Shatana’s daughter. They loved each other well, and lived happily together to a ripe old age.

1. Long ago the Ossetians, like other Caucasian folks, had the custom of arranging horse races in honor of the dead. Contestants in such races usually received prizes of certain valuables belonging to the deceased, as well as other presents, prepared by his relations. In the given instance, which goes back to ancient times, they gave young slaves as prizes.

PART 8



VARIOUS
STORIES

ABOUT THE
NARTS



Eminent Narts, and there were about a dozen of them, went hunting. Among them were Urizhmag, Khamis, Shoshlan, Uon, Shirdon, and Batraz. They took with them their dogs, setters and hounds, and some mongrels among them too. How long they were wandering around, who knows? Nowhere, however, did they find traces of any game.

They passed through a wide steppe land, and made a camp site for the night in the clearing of a maple grove. There they were fortunate enough to kill a few deer. They fed themselves well on roasted venison shashliks, straight from the spit and rested awhile. Then Shoshlan said, "Let us take a look and see how things are in the Tar Ravine!"

"Very well then, let's go and keep our eyes and ears open!"

They mounted their horses, and traveled on farther toward the Tar Ravine. Then mists blew up, and it grew dark, but still the Narts went on their way. Suddenly, in the darkness, Shoshlan's hunting spear caught on something. They stopped, and began to feel around to see what it could be, and at last they found that they had, unwittingly, entered a cavern. They were all very much surprised at what had happened to them.

"No forest here, no cliffs nor rocks around, but how then can a cave appear in the middle of an open field?"

They stopped for the night in that cave, and early the next morning they mounted their steeds and again set off, and on their way they saw a small plain, overgrown with reeds and rushes. Then they turned back and saw an enormous skull looming up before them, and then understood that it was in this skull that they had slept the night. Nearby many bones lay scattered around, among them some human bones, some horse's bones, some wild boars' bones, some bones of mountain dogs.

"What is this?" Shoshlan exclaimed. "My dear elders, something wonderful has happened on this plain. Look here carefully now, and say what kind of bones are they?"

He jumped down from his horse, and took up human bones in his hands, then a horse's bones, and laid them down separately. Then he gathered dog's bones, and the bones of wild boars. Out of the human bones he laid out the skeleton of a huge giant, and then he slowly said, "Now I shall ask God to present before us this gigantic being as he was when still alive!"

"But why do so?" inquired his fellow-travelers. "Is that necessary?"

"I shall know no rest till I see what kind of being that was!" and he straightaway started praying. "O God of gods! Bring this giant back to life, just as once he was, only without his lower legs beneath the knees, and without his eyes, so that he can see nothing!"

Immediately the skull began to shake, the bones began to gather beneath it, and very soon became covered with meat and with flesh. A gigantic man came back to life, only he had no legs beneath the knees, so he could not walk, and he had no eyes, so he could not see anything around him.

The giant shook himself and stretched, and sat down. The Narts were amazed at this miracle. The giant, however, heard their remarks and asked, "Who are you? What kind of people? Where do you come from?"

"We are human beings!" someone among the Narts replied.

"What kind of human beings? What tribe do you belong to?"

"We are known as Narts, and come from a land far from here!"

"Oh, so you are those famous Nart people?! Is Urizhmag among you? And Khamis also? Is Shoshlan here? Batraz too?"

"How do you know about us, then? Our names and all?"

"From my forebears I heard that the Narts had appeared and settled in various places. They said that the Narts would be brave and valorous, and would show this as well, some in one way, some in another!"

As he was speaking he rose to his full height, and turned to them, "If it was you who brought me back to life, then why did you not give me my legs below the knees, that I might walk and my eyes, that I might see?"

"We are very careful people," answered Shoshlan, "and take decisions one at a time. What you are asking for, we cannot give!"

Then the giant turned to where Shoshlan was standing and said, "Give me your hand, and let me feel what kind of creature you are!" Shoshlan wanted to oblige, and drew nearer to the giant, but his breath smelt so poisonous that he quickly stepped back again.

"Where have you gone to?" asked the giant, sensing his withdrawal.

"Your breath has such a deathly smell that I did not come nearer!"

"Then turn around, and come with your back toward me!" replied he.

Shoshlan turned around and stepped back toward the giant, and gave him his hand to feel. The giant felt the bones of his wrist, and said to him, "What small bones you have! Say, what do you feed on?"

"We feed on bread, and the meat of wild beasts!" answered Shoshlan.

The giant waved his hand scornfully, and said, "I pity you if you live on such poor food. Your end will come soon, I see! Do you have fire for cooking?"

"We have!" answered Shoshlan, "but what do you feed on, then?"

"We live on hunting, and the juice of the earth!" replied the giant.

"And how do you obtain the juice of the earth?" queried Shoshlan.

The giant rolled up his sleeve to the armpit, and thrust his arm deep into the soil. He took a whole fistful of soil, and held it toward Shoshlan, and commanded him, "Hold out your hand!"

Shoshlan held out one hand, and the giant tightly squeezed the soil in his fist, and the greasy juice of the earth dripped out and fell on Shoshlan's open palm. The giant made signs for him to lick it up.

Shoshlan licked up the juice of the earth on his hand, and it tasted just like greasy meat, and went straight to his heart. He was so satisfied with the few drops he had licked that it seemed to him as if he had eaten a full meal.

"Now you won't want to eat for a full week!" said the giant. "You will only have to drink now and again."

Shoshlan then asked the giant, "What kind of human tribe are you from?"

"I am from the Wadmerns!" replied the giant.

Then Shoshlan asked further, "Then what are you doing here, and how did you come here?"

“In that marsh of reeds and rushes, there lived a wild boar. News of him spread far and wide. Hunters came seeking him as their prey, but he trampled them down, and ate them. I also heard about him, and came to try my strength against him. I galloped here on my horse, with my two dogs. The dogs drove him out of the reeds. He made straight for me! I had a bow ready in my hands, but the boar charged my horse, then threw him down, and drove off the dogs. I managed to give him just one blow with my club, and then he trampled me down too. Although I broke one of his ribs with my club, still he came on, and I fell beneath his hooves along with my horse. So that was how I came here!”

“And how did you kill animals?” inquired the Narts. “Show us how!”

“I will show you,” replied the giant. “We caught beasts in a noose, then beat them to death with a stone. If one of you will stand a little farther away, I will show you.”

Shoshlan went some way off. Then the giant took a huge stone and asked, “Where are you?” Then he stood listening for his answer.

“I am here,” said Shoshlan, quickly moving away from the spot at once.

The giant hurled the stone, and it fell right on the spot where he had been. He hurled another stone, even larger, then again he called to Shoshlan, “Where have you gone to? Did my stone not strike you?”

“No it did not, but only because I moved aside quickly as I spoke! Now tell me, what kind of sports and games did you play in your times?”

“Is there a hillock still standing near here?” inquired the giant.

“Yes, there is one standing nearby,” replied Shoshlan.

“Well, first go and stand on the top of that mound, and I will show you what kind of a game we used to play!”

Shoshlan climbed up to the top of the hillock and called to the giant, “I’m here, on the mound!” and immediately ran down again. Meanwhile the giant had torn up a big tree by the roots, whirled it round his head, and then hurled it straight at the mound. The soil slid away everywhere.

Again the giant called to Shoshlan, “Hey, where are you then. Did I strike you?”

“No, you did not,” replied Shoshlan, “but only because I fled down!”

“You fled, did you?” asked the giant. “But we don’t know what that word ‘fled’ means. Maybe the devil taught you such tricks?”

Then the Narts thought that they had gone far enough.

“O, God of gods,” they prayed, “turn this giant back into what he was, just a heap of bones!” Then instantly Wadmer the giant crumbled, and only his huge skull and his scattered bones remained on the plain.

Then the Narts returned to their homes, and again started living as merrily as before, and ate and drank with relish, and told tales about what they had seen, and what marvelous deeds they had done.

77 ♦ NART SHIBALS, THE SON OF WARKHTANAG

Nart Warkhtanag lived without a wife until he was old. The younger Narts decided that since Warkhtanag had no successor, they must him marry him off somehow. If he didn’t agree to marry, they would beat him to death by throwing stones at him.

Somebody told Warkhtanag of this decision. But he had taken an oath in youth not to marry as long as he lived. When he heard what the young Narts wanted to do, he began to pray: “O God, I decided long ago that I would never marry. What shall I do now? If I marry, I will break my vow! If don’t marry, I will lose the good name that I have earned among the Narts through many years. If they subject me to a shameful death, that shame will always remain with me!”

The younger Narts sent a selected group to him, and they said, “Warkhtanag, you have lived a respected life, but you have no heir, and so we should like to see you married!”

Warkhtanag did not raise any objections, and replied to the group, “Be ready next Friday, and I shall tell you where to send matchmakers.”

On Friday the young Narts gathered at Warkhtanag’s home to know to whom they must go as his matchmakers. Warkhtanag divided them into separate groups: hand-harp players, dancers, riders, singers—in that order, and thus he arranged the matchmaking processions, and they set off on their way, to the music of the twelve-stringed harps.

The daughter of steely-whiskered Khamis, hearing their music, looked down from her seven-story tower at the bride-seeking procession.

Warkhtanag had taken a look before at the daughter of steely-harried Khamis, and when he saw her this time he said to his friends, “Turn your horses around into the courtyard of steely-whiskered Khamis!” and so the procession rode into the courtyard there.

The host came out to meet them. He invited them inside, where they were entertained, offered food and drink, danced and sang, and finally made the match and carried off with them Khamis’s young daughter as the bride of Warkhtanag. How long they lived together as man and wife, who knows? One day, however, a son was born to them, and they named him Shibals.

Shibals was born at night. But when dawn came, the sun looked in at the window, and his light fell straight into Shibals eyes. His whole face was lit up so, and how could it be otherwise? Having seen all this Warkhtanag laughed aloud, and his wife was puzzled at this. “What are you laughing at so joyfully, my dear husband?” asked she.

Warkhtanag answered her right gladly, “I was always afraid that I should be left without a son, but now all has turned out so well and harmoniously. Late last night a daughter was born to the sun, our neighbor, and she only looked once into our Shibals’s eyes, and straightaway fell in love with him. Therefore I am gay!”

Shibals grew up, and began to go to the village of the sun to play with the boys there. Once the lads from the sun village took hold of him and said, “Look, here is our brother-in-law!” They took him into the home of the sun, and there Shibals and the daughter of the sun, Adaza, came to know each other. Finally, the sun gave his daughter to Shibals as his bride.

The maiden and young Shibals lived as man and wife in the sun’s home. How long were they there, who knows? But after a while, Shibals began to grow sad, and his wife, the beauty Adaza, asked him, “Why are you sad?”

“I do not complain of my life here. We live very well together. But all the same I remember my father and mother, and wish to go home to them.”

“And I wish to live as you live—better in a poor home with one’s own husband, than in a rich home without one. If you so wish, I will come to your father’s home with you!”

So Shibals and the daughter of the sun, the beauty Adaza, decided to leave the joyful home of the sun. Before they left, she asked her father: “What should I take as a gift to my father-in-law?”

“Take that magic suit of chain-mail,” the sun said to her.

That coat of mail was a wonder: its neck sang, its breast joined in the refrain, its sleeves clapped in time, and the hem of the mail-suit danced all by itself. The young couple took the chain-mail and set off for the home of old Warkhtanag. There Shibals and the daughter of the sun, Adaza, celebrated their wedding.

It so happened that Shibals went off on a cattle-raiding campaign for a year. Warkhtanag, in his son’s absence, more than once put on the suit of mail that his daughter-in-law had brought him and went out into the village square, the Nart elders’ meeting place. There people gathered around him, and admired the wonderful suit of mail.

Once three sons of Shoppar caught sight of the gathering from the summit of the Walipp Mountain, and saw old Warkhtanag sitting there in his shiny coat of mail. They were all envious and said, “Why has that good-for-nothing old cockscomb donned himself up in that wonderful suit of chain-mail? Let’s go down when he’s alone and take it, and while we are at it, let’s cut a couple of strips of skin off his spine!”—so said the three sons of Shoppar among themselves.

No sooner said than done! The three sons of Shoppar caught him alone, stripped off his chain-mail, despite his protests, “If my son were here, he would have given you something to think about, and you wouldn’t have got away with such robbery!”

“Oh, so you want to threaten us, do you?” said the three sons, and all of them attacked him together, and slashed a couple of strips of skin from his spine, and went off with their spoils.

Poor Warkhtanag, all bent up, crawled back home, went into his room and threw himself down into a corner.

The year passed, and Shibals's horse brought him back from battle, all slashed and scarred with wounds. Shibals came in and knocked on the door of his wife's chamber. She answered him without opening the door: "I will open the door, only if you give me your Nart's word of honor that you will do as I ask!"

Shibals at once answered her, with a groan, "I give my Nart's word. But open quickly! I have been fighting with the warriors of Aigan and Aguzn, and they have riddled me with arrows!"

The beauty Adaza opened the door, and Shibals fell across the step. When he undressed, arrow shafts fell from his clothing, and rattled onto the floor, and he said to his wife with a groan, "I am dying! Every bone in my body aches. Say, why did you not open the door at once when I knocked? Why did you make me take an oath first?"

"If you ask, then I must tell you," replied his wife. "It was because the three sons of Shoppar came to us. They made mock of your father's age, took from him the wonderful coat of chain-mail I brought, cut two strips of skin from his spine, and there he lies in his room, rolled up in a corner, and cannot move. You must take revenge on those who so badly mistreated him, robbed him, and injured him!"

The next day, rising with the first rays of dawn, Shibals took his plow, and rode with it to Shoppar's field, and began to plow the soil. The three sons of Shoppar looked down from the summit of Walipp, and saw a fellow on their field, plowing up everything in his way. They were amazed at such effrontery, and said to each other, "What kind of insolence is this?! Who dares to plow our field so, without our permission?" The three brothers went down from the summit to their field, and there they recognized Shibals, and said, "Yes, that is the son of that good-for-nothing cockscomb, Warkhtanag, and he has come to take revenge on us for his father's injuries!"

The two eldest brothers said to the youngest, "Go and give him what he deserves! Meanwhile, we'll go hunting!"

Those two rode off to the hunt, and the youngest son addressed Shibals, "Hey, you son-of-a-bitch! Do you dare to ask yourself whose land you are now

plowing? Have you come, perhaps, to take revenge for your father's injuries? If that is so, then look out, for something unpleasant awaits you!"

They began to wrestle with one another. They fought and grappled until they had no further power, and they both flopped down on the ground on different sides. Having rested awhile, they renewed their conflict, and then Shibals struck the youngest son such a blow that he straightaway died.

The two other brothers returned from the hunt after a while. The eldest said to the middle one, "Go and find out how our young brother has fared, and what he has done to Shibals!"

The middle brother went to see how his younger brother had succeeded with Shibals. On seeing Shibals, he straightaway began to grapple with him. For a long while they wrestled and grappled, then, exhausted, they rested awhile. As soon as Shibals regained his breath, he again grappled with the middle brother, and slew him as well.

When the eldest brother came to see what had happened, Shibals at once engaged him. How long they grappled with each other, who knows? They at last were exhausted, and sat aside to rest while they caught their breath, both of them feeling more dead than alive..

Just then, in the Land of the Dead, Khamis received the news that his grandson had killed two of the three sons of Shoppar, had fought with the third as well, and that they both were lying half-unconscious on the Shoppar's field. On hearing this, steely-whiskered Khamis took his felt whip, left the Land of the Dead, and in a moment appeared before Shibals. He struck him with his felt whip, and Shibals immediately rose, seven times stronger than before.

The eldest brother still lay on the ground powerless, half-dead. Shibals went to him, shook him, and asked, "Tell me, where is my father's coat of chain-mail, and where are the two strips of skin that you slashed from his spine?"

The eldest son of Shoppar replied, "All that you ask is hidden deep in the Tar Ravine, in the cavern of our father Shoppar."

Shibals, having found out the whereabouts of what he sought, then slew the eldest son, and set off at once for the Tar Ravine. He found Shoppar's cavern there, and from there he took the coat of mail and the two strips of skin.

Then Khamis said to him, “Now that that is settled, can we perhaps go hunting?”

Shibals agreed, and they parted in two separate ways. But instead of hunting, Khamis returned to the Land of the Dead. When Shibals returned to the place where they had agreed to meet, he threw down a dead deer from his shoulders and began to wait. For several hours he waited, but Khamis did not return, and Shibals then understood that he had gone for good, back to the Land of the Dead.

He then gathered all together, the dead deer, the suit of mail, and the strips of skin from his father’s spine, and he did not forget to take Khamis’s felt whip, which he had left. Then he returned home.

When he arrived home, he laid the strips of skin on his father’s spine, and tapped them with Khamis’s felt whip, and all became as it was before. He also returned to his father the wonderful coat of chain-mail.

His wife was overjoyed with Shibals’s success, and praised him for taking revenge for his father’s injuries, and slaying the three offenders.

So the son of the Nart Warkhtanag, and his wife, the daughter of the sun, Adaza, lived happily among the Narts until their dying day.

78 ♦ WASHTIRJI AND NART MARGUZ THE NOSELESS

Washtirji had two wives. Once when he was preparing to go on a far expedition, he said to them, “Prepare my things for the journey, the clothes that I shall wear, and the food I shall eat, and make it tasty, but light to carry!”

Both wives undertook the task of making preparations for their husband, and the senior wife said to the younger one, “Sew more quickly! Our husband is in a hurry to leave!”

“What are you frightened about?” replied the younger one. “We have nothing to fear from our husband. He is not, after all, like Nart Marguz!”

The senior wife then retorted, “Friends swear oaths to each other, calling on our husband’s name, and all honest people make vows to each other with him as their witness! But who is this Marguz you are chattering about? I have never

heard any one speak of him, or even mention his name?” The younger wife replied, “Nart Marguz killed his own wife and his own son!”

From morn till eve the elder wife never said another word to the younger one, and later, when Washtirji came home, neither wife said a word.

“What’s the matter with you?” asked Washtirji. “Why don’t you speak?”

“What have I to speak about, after what I heard from your second wife? ‘Sew more quickly’ I told her, ‘our husband is hastening off on a long campaign!’ She replied to that, ‘Why are you frightened of our husband? He is not like Nart Marguz, who killed his own wife and son!’ ” With that they all lay down to sleep.

In the morning Washtirji met his young wife and began to question her about the quarrel, “What have you been chattering about yesterday, you bold one?”

“Wait a moment, and I’ll tell you all,” she replied, and she told him what she had said to his first wife about him and about Marguz.

“If that Nart Marguz is not the brute you said he was, and did not do what you said he did, then woe befall you! I shall tie you to an untamed horse’s tail, and drive it round the field and the plain! But if it is true, what you said, then none will be more precious to me upon the earth than you!”

Washtirji mounted his thundering steed, and set off to find the Nart Marguz. He beat his steed with his silver whip, and galloped off.

Up hill and down dale he rode, and at last came out upon a boundless green-carpeted plain. Many horses, with the same gray-colored coats were pasturing on that steppe. Legs, rumps, heads, even ears, were all the same shape and color.

Washtirji wondered to himself, “Can all these horses belong to one master? No, one man could not own so many!” He went up to the herdsman, “Whose horses are these? They are so much alike, as though from one mare!”

“They belong to the Nart Marguz,” replied the herdsman.

Washtirji was even more surprised, and exclaimed, “May the best man in his family die! What kind of fellow is he then? I have never met such as he among the heavenly dwellers!”

At night, in order to prepare breakfast for his guest, the herdsman slew a foal that had never been saddled. Early in the morning Washtirji had breakfast,

thanked his host, bestrode his steed, and away he went. Soon he espied a huge herd of bulls, all gray, with white muzzles. He went up and greeted the herdsman, and said, “May your herd multiply, and never grow less! Whose bulls are these?”

“They belong to the Nart Marguz,” replied the herdsman.

“What kind of fellow is he? I’ve never met him on earth, nor among the heavenly dwellers either!” replied Washtirji, more surprised still.

The herdsman slew a fat bullock in honor of his guest, and entertained him well. In the morning he saddled his steed, thanked his host, and traveled on farther. For the whole day he rode, and then came upon a flock of fat sheep. They moved along, all tightly packed together, like stones on a seashore. Wherever he looked he saw the same black heads, the same dark legs, the same fat tails. He asked the herdsman, “Whose sheep are these?”

“They belong to the Nart Marguz,” replied the shepherd.

“What a marvel this is!” thought Washtirji. “I don’t know one of the heavenly dwellers who would have so many sheep!”

He rode on farther, another day’s journey, and came upon a herd of cows— all of the same color and breed. Washtirji was still more surprised, and asked one of the herdsman who were tending them, “Whose milk-cows are these?”

“They belong to the Nart Marguz,” the herdsman replied.

That night they slaughtered a fat calf for the morning’s breakfast. In the morning they all ate together, and then Washtirji thanked his hosts, and traveled on farther. All day he rode, and toward evening came upon a village, and on the outskirts two old men were sitting. One was looking after lambs, the other was taking care of young calves, while chatting.

“Good evening to you both!” Washtirji greeted them.

“May God be gracious to you, dear guest!” they replied. “Stay with us awhile and be welcome!”

“Excuse my question, but can you tell me where Nart Marguz lives?”

This question simply amazed the two old men. What kind of man could he be who did not know that? They gaped at him in silence.

“Don’t judge me harshly! I’m a traveler from far away.”

The old men looked at each other, and shook their heads. “That means there are still some places where Marguz has not been, and is not even known!” they thought. Then they turned to Washtirji and said to him, “You look well attired and you ride a horse with rich trappings, so go on along the main street of the village and you’ll come to three of his guest houses. The highest one is for the heavenly dwellers, and its tethering post is made of gold. The next is for lords and princes, and its tethering post is made of silver. And the lowest is for those freeborn, and its tethering post is made of bronze. The path from the highest house to the stables is paved with tiles glazed and shiny. The path to the stables from the middle house is also tiled. And the stable path from the third house is covered with planks.”

Washtirji went forward along the street and saw the three guest houses. He thought to himself, “No, I shall not raise my head above the others. I shall stay where the simple people do.”

He halted his horse near the house for freeborn guests, tied his steed to the bronze tethering post, and walked along the wooden-planked path to the guest house, and entered there. Marguz’s servants ran and saw the new guest’s horse. Its hooves were shod with gold, while its saddle and bridle were ornamented with precious stones. Having seen such a splendid steed, they decided not to welcome their guest into the house for freeborn people, and went to Marguz and told him, “Excuse us, Lord, but in our guest house for your freeborn visitors, a guest has arrived. We have just taken a look at his horse, and we have never seen such a steed, not even among our heavenly guests!”

“Go and find out who he is,” said Marguz, “and where he is from.”

The servants glanced in the window of their guest house where Washtirji was waiting, but his chain-mail shone so bright that they returned to Marguz’s chamber in fright and said to him, “We could not make up our minds to approach him, but one look at him was enough. There is something wonderful about him!”

Marguz began to grow interested. And then said to them, “But among my servants are those who escort and attend to such heavenly guests, as you must know, so why are you so disturbed and timid before this visitor? What kind of a

man, my lackeys, must he be? I have, for instance, heard much about Washtirji, but I have never met him. Let us raise some kind of alarm, for they say that Washtirji reacts at once to such a situation. If this guest acts so, then we shall know it is he!”

So Marguz set free a black fox, one of those whose hair shines like the sun, and gleams like the morning star Bonvarnon.

The young fellows chased off at once after the fox, out onto the open steppe, but the cunning fox made a half-circle back again to the outskirts of the village, then ran right down main street.

“Danger!” shrieked the women, who were not easily scared by such. “But why are our young men searching about on the steppe, when the fox is here in the village already?”

Where would such a woman’s cry not be heard? Washtirji, in the guest house for the freeborn, soon heard it, ran out of the house to the stable and mounted his horse, then galloped into the street.

“Why are you not ashamed of yourself, young man?” asked one woman. “The black fox has already run by, and people chased after it. Why are you so long after the rest? If you are scared of a fox, I’ll wind my woman’s scarf round your head!”

“Just a moment, light of my hearth! I’ll do all that I can, and I shall do no worse than they!” He galloped off along the street, overtook the fox, and pierced him with his spear. Then he came slowly back, carrying the black fox high on his lance-head, and the people followed him, wondering at his dexterity, his figure, and his handsome face.

Marguz was also amazed by his adroitness, and rode out to meet him.

“Hail, welcomed guest. Come, stay with us!” he greeted him. Then the guest and his host, conversing in a friendly fashion, rode into the yard of the guest house for heavenly dwellers. The house was wonderfully constructed. The walls were of copper, and from the ceiling, instead of a candelabra, hung the morning star. The coat hangers were made of deer antlers, and the chairs were of delicately carved ivory.

But Washtirji remembered, “I was not staying here, but in the lower house.” He wanted to go and take his horse, and tie him to the bronze tethering post again. But the servants did not permit him to go there, and he had to remain in the guest house for heavenly dwellers.

They brought in a low three-legged table, on which was food and drink, ready waiting. But he said to them straightway, “Excuse me, but although I am still young, I will nevertheless not touch the food until my host Marguz comes.”

The servants went and told Marguz about this, how the guest had declined to touch the food until the host arrived. Marguz pulled on his boots, threw his sable fur coat around his shoulders and entered.

“Good evening to you!” he said to his guest. They exchanged the usual greetings and respects, sat at table together, and began to eat.

Washtirji, glancing at Marguz, thought to himself, “My god! There is no man on earth to whom you have sent a blessing. But on whom here have you scattered your good fortune? He is not well-grown, he has no figure nor bearing, and has not even got a nose on his face! Can such a person be named happy, or fortunate?”

They ate well, and they drank well, and then Marguz proposed, “Maybe we should go on a quest together! What do you say?”

The guest was agreeable, and Marguz gave his servants orders, “Bring us two horses from the herd, before sunrise!”

Early next morning the young servants fulfilled their master’s wish and brought two young horses from the herd. Marguz said to Washtirji, “Your horse is tired out from the journey. Take either of these horses from the herd instead!” But Washtirji objected to this, “I cannot go on a quest on any steed save my own!”

“Listen to me, dear guest. Your horse is really tired, better take one of mine, and let your own have a rest meanwhile!”

Washtirji looked outside and saw a saddled horse tethered at the post—lean, with a scraggly haired mane and tail, and thought to himself, “What kind of horse will he offer me, if he himself rides such an old jade, and begrudges himself the best horse in his herd?”

“Will you ride on a quest on that horse tied outside?” he asked.

“Yes!” replied Marguz. “On that one there, already saddled.”

“But why is that?” asked Washtirji. “It was not your mother who bore all those beautiful horses I saw in your herd on my way here, so why do you begrudge yourself the very best of them? Why take such a hack?”

“You are not very reasonable, dear guest. Do you not know that one should not judge a horse’s strength by mere appearances?”

“And what kind of a man are you,” replied Washtirji, “if you can’t imagine what people will say when they see you astride such a nag, even more so alongside such a horse as mine!”

“But how can I call you reasonable, dear guest? Have I not told you that one does not judge a horse’s strength by his looks?”

“But have you not a horse in your herd of the same breed and strength who looks a little more lively and becoming?” said Washtirji.

Marguz did not like to hear such words from his guest, and replied, “The hot weather is coming and one must spare the best horses!”

So they set off, Washtirji riding his own horse, and for three days they traveled without a halt. On the fourth, early, Marguz said, “If we don’t reach our goal by evening, our trip will be in vain!”

So again they set off. Then Washtirji’s steed began to tire. He whipped it up, it galloped paces, then dropped into a trot, and finally into walking pace again. But Marguz’s lean horse with its sparse mane and tail went on forging ahead, so that Washtirji found it difficult to keep him in sight. Marguz turned round and called, “Drive him along a little harder! By evening we must be at our goal. Your mother did not bear your steed, so why do you spare him thus?”

Washtirji tightened his bridle, urged his horse on, spur and whip, and again he galloped awhile, then lost strength and trotted, then weak and exhausted, began to walk once more. Thus Washtirji was left behind.

“What kind of young men do we have today?” said Marguz. “May you outlive your parents, why do you, present youngsters, so pity your steeds? Of course, he has golden shoes, but his hooves are frog’s paws!”

Washtirji only nodded his head at these words, but thought to himself, “What kind of man have we here? What breed is he and his horse?” He had not seen anything like them, even among the heavenly dwellers.

So they rode on until they came to a burial mound, and Marguz halted his horse, dismounted, and hurried forward toward it. Washtirji also dismounted, and thought, “What has happened to my fellow-traveler, he has started wailing and weeping there?” Indeed, Marguz wept awhile, then rode toward the shores of a wide river, and stopped.

Washtirji was alarmed at seeing this and said to himself, “If we have to cross this river, then my steed won’t be able to cope with it at all!”

Marguz whipped up his horse, and he, in one bound, not even wetting his hooves, flew with his rider to the other bank. Washtirji galloped after him, but his horse, despite the lash, could not make the long leap, and fell with its rider into the river, which swept them both away.

The Marguz turned back, fished out Washtirji, and set him on the rump of his steed, while he took the bridle of Washtirji’s horse, and towed him, like a log, through the water.

“May you present youths all become your parents heirs!” cried he. “You snort at the water like a cat, when you fall in and wet your whiskers!”

Toward evening they came to the border of a foreign land, their goal.

“You wait for me here awhile, and I’ll take a look around!” said he.

He climbed up to the crest of a high hill. When he returned from there Washtirji noticed that there were tears in his eyes.

“Marguz, my hospitable host, why do I find you weeping again?”

“How is it possible to refrain from tears? Climb up the cliff, and take a look around, only be careful that nobody sees you!”

Washtirji scrambled up to the top of the cliff, took off his hat, and carefully looked around.

“O God, what a wonder is this?” he thought. “Till this day I have only seen the sun in the heavens, but here I see it upon the earth!”

He descended the cliff-face and said to old Marguz, “Until today I have only seen the sun on high in the heavens, but there I saw it before me on earth! What

wonder is this?”

“That is no sun you see, my dear guest, that is a huge copper cauldron, but such a one that the beer brewed in it on one occasion lasts for seven years, and after that, no matter how much you drink, each day the cauldron grows fuller and fuller. That brew has a wonderful quality about it—if you wet the brow of a newborn child with it, the babe will not need its mother’s breast for a whole year. That cauldron was the treasured possession of our forefathers, but it was seized by force, and carried off by the sons of Donbettir.”

“Let us do what we can to reclaim such a treasure!” cried Washtirji.

When it drew light, Washtirji changed himself into a black fox, such a fox that has a coat whose every hair merrily rings like a little bell. This fox then ran round the outskirts of the village below, and the best of the youths chased after it. The fox went round about the village for the second time, and even children and old granddads as well chased after it.

Washtirji had changed Marguz into an eagle, but such an eagle it was that each wing was scarcely smaller than a cloak, and each leg was like a young birch tree, while its head and beak were like an anvil.

When the whole village was chasing after the fox, old Marguz, making circles in the sky, steadily lowered himself down onto the village, then seized the cauldron by its two ears with his powerful talons and flew away with it up to the cliff-top.

Meanwhile the fox, breathing heavily with its tongue hanging out, also came back to the cliff-top and hid there. Marguz flew down to him, and Washtirji changed them both back into people again and off they rode on their journey once more.

When they came back to the banks of the river, Washtirji’s steed was exhausted. Then Marguz seated Washtirji behind him, took his horse’s bridle, whipped him on his flanks, and made him swim after them.

When they reached the farther shore, Marguz raised a prayer, thus, “O God, how my heart aches for my dear guest! May the heart of any good host ache so if people deem him worthy of the name of a human!”

At last Washtirji mounted his steed again and now he feared naught. They came to the high burial mound, dismounted, and let their horses go grazing. Washtirji watched them while Marguz again went up the mount. He wept so many tears there that he moistened the earth all round.

Then it was time to part. They thanked each other for their goodly comradeship, and Marguz said to Washtirji, "There is nothing dearer than a good guest!" and presented him with the copper cauldron. Thus they departed, Marguz to his home, and Washtirji back to his own village. But Washtirji had not gone a few paces when he thought to himself, "What a fine fellow I met with! Even among the heavenly dwellers I never met a better! But how can he go about like that without a nose? How did he lose it, I wonder? I must know somehow!"

He turned his horse around and soon caught up with Marguz, "Wait a minute, my hospitable host," he called, "there are three questions I should like to ask you!" Marguz then reined in his horse.

"You are a most agreeable good fellow in all ways, so how did it come about, if I might ask, that you lost your nose? Next, you are already old, but why have you no wife to comfort you? Last, why did you weep so sadly at the burial mound?"

"Oh, my dear guest! It would have been better if you had not asked such questions. But since you have turned back specially to do so, then I must tell you. In my youth I had such a keen nose that it did not matter what wild beast crossed my path, I knew it at once by its smell even without seeing it. That's how it was. Well, there were three sisters living beneath the heavens, all beauties they were too! One of them married me, the second married Wasilla, and the third became the wife of the heavenly dweller Washtirji. I went traveling around in those days—where didn't I wander? I was often away from home for more than a year or two. Once I returned from such an expedition, and before I entered the house even, from the bedroom window I caught the smell of an unknown man! At once I galloped across the courtyard, on this very horse that you see before you, and a devilish breed it is! I was blind with rage. I drew my sword and entered the bedroom, and dimly saw my wife in bed with a very young man. Straightaway I slew them both. Then I went into our guest room and laid down

to sleep. In the morning I awoke and heard weeping and wailing outside. I went out and saw the servants all crying their eyes out. I asked them, 'What are you weeping for?' and they replied, 'Last night you slew your wife and your eldest son!'

We buried them both and raised a mound of earth over them. After returning from the graveyard, I took a razor, and cut off my offending nose. Beneath the mound where I wept, my wife and eldest son lie sleeping!"

"Let us return to the mound where they lie buried. I wish to pay my respects to them!" said Washtirji softly.

Marguz agreed, and they once more returned to the burial mound. Washtirji took off his black felt cloak and laid it on the ground. "Now, my dear host," he said to Marguz, "help me to dig out their coffins, and lay the deceased on my cloak."

Together they opened the grave and lay the dead bodies of his wife and son on Washtirji's cloak. Then Washtirji took his small felt whip and lightly struck each one. Immediately they came back to life. He also tapped Marguz between the eyes, and at once his nose reappeared on his face.

"Do you not recognize me now, Marguz?" whispered Washtirji.

"No!" replied Marguz, lost in joy and wonder.

"I am the heavenly dweller Washtirji, who married your wife's own sister, and I came here to meet you, and make your acquaintance!"

"So we are relatives, you and I!" exclaimed Marguz. "Your wife and my mistress had the same father and mother!"

Washtirji's face shone just like the sun. How could he too help rejoicing over such a reunion? With the lovely wife and the handsome son they returned to Marguz's home, and there they arranged a great feast. All the local Narts were there on that festive occasion, and there was no end to the eating and drinking and to the singing and dancing.

At last Washtirji said farewell to his host and hostess, then once more mounted his horse, and flew off home. How glad the heavenly dwellers were to greet him back!

Then Washtirji said to his first wife, “Don’t be angry with the words of my younger wife. Although Nart Marguz is an earthly man, he is as brave and courageous as the best of us, and he slew his wife and son through a terrible mistake!”

To his younger wife he then said, “I took upon myself much suffering because of you and your words, but I made friends with a very valorous man!”

His younger wife, already smiling, replied to him, “My own sister, Marguz’s wife, and her eldest son lost their lives through no fault of their own at Marguz’s own hand. Now, as you use all your powers to help other people I thought I would say a word about Marguz, hoping that you would not leave him without aid!”

“Well, your troubled heart can be quiet again,” replied Washtirji. “I have just restored both his wife and his eldest son to life again!”

79 ♦ NART ZILI AND HIS SON

In those distant times, when the Narts were in their full glory, when the sea came only up to their ankles, and the wide road to heaven still lay open, there lived an esteemed Nart by the name of Zili. He was a rich man, and had more than enough grain and cattle, but he had, in spite of all his other possessions, only one son.

Then a hungry year befell the Narts. The harvest failed, and no food was left. The famine became so bad that they all were faced with the prospect of stretching out their legs and dying.

So a hungry year began for those Narts. Zili did not know to whom he could turn for help. Nobody remained alive from whom he might borrow grain, so one morning he called his son to him and said, “Well, my dear son, it’s the wolves legs that feed them, so if we sit here in one place, nobody will bring us anything! We must get moving! Here nothing remains that would provide us with bread. Let us ask heavenly Wasilla! He lived here once on earth, as young as I, and was my friend, and I still have hope in him. Therefore ride to him now and ask him to give us some grain. When he knows whose son you are, he will give you as

much as you will be able to carry and won't send you away with empty hands, I'm sure!"

Zili's son listened to his father with some doubt, and then decided to discuss the matter with a local wise old woman, Kulbadag. She told him, "Don't be sad, my young Nart lad! Climb up into my attic, and there you will find a dried horsehide. Bring it down, and give it a good shake two or three times. Then pray with your face to the east, and say, 'God of gods, who created me, turn this hide into what it once was!' If the god of the Narts is favorably inclined to you, he will change it into a horse seven times better than it was when alive before. Really, it was one of Washtirji's winged steeds. Jump on its back, and it will take you wherever you wish to go. When you stand before the heavenly Wasilla, he will know you by your likeness to your father. He will be glad to see you and will offer you many gifts, whatever you need. But do not accept any of them from him. After much discussion he will say, 'If you return home from me, not taking a single gift, then who will believe that you really came to Wasilla in heaven? Then what will you answer? How will you convince your father that you fulfilled his order?' Then you must say to Wasilla, 'Since I cannot return without a gift, then give me that old scoop of maple wood, which lies behind the barn door!' He will give you that old scoop, and then you must return quickly home. That old scoop has this magic quality: in whatever home it is found, bread will never be lacking there. Take it from heaven, on earth keep it."

Zili's son climbed up into the attic, found the dried horse's skin, shook it well three times, and as the wise old woman had advised him, he prayed to God, and the next moment the hide changed into a winged steed, already saddled and bridled. The youth jumped on its back and cried, "Bring me to heavenly Wasilla as quickly as you can!"

He soon appeared before Wasilla, who immediately knew whose son was standing there and asked him in. He was happy to see his friend's young lad and entertained him at once with ready dishes. Then he asked him, "What brings you here, young fellow, and what can I do to help you?"

Zili's son told him precisely the reason for his visit. Then Wasilla showed him barns, and they were all full of gold-red wheat. "This is all yours, if you

wish!” said he most generously.

“I cannot possibly take all that!” replied Zili’s son, “but behind the barn door there lies, half-hidden, an old scoop of maple-wood that I’d like.”

Wasilla straightway handed him the scoop and the lad flew off home.

When old Zili saw that his son’s hands were empty and only an old scoop was tucked under his armpit, he frowned and asked his son, “I sent you for grain, so why do you return with that old scoop?”

“Don’t worry, father! Tomorrow, not later, you will know what a real treasure that scoop is! Now you may rest easy, we shall have grain, and to spare, enough not just for us, but for all the other Narts as well!”

With his own hands he swept their biggest barn, and he threw down the old scoop across the threshold, closed the doors and locked them. In the morning he came to see whether the old woman had told him the truth. He opened the doors, and inside he saw that the barn was packed full of gold-red grain up to the roof. Out of sheer joy he forgot everything else and started singing at the top of his voice. That song woke his father.

On that day it was as if the sun rose right above the three Nart settlements. There was rejoicing without end! Everyone hastened to the Zili courtyard, and there collected all they needed—tubfuls of wheat! They ran to each other with congratulations on escaping the famine. Now there was bread for all, and they began to live without worry, and they blessed Zili and his son for saving them in time of greatest need.

Only Shirdon, the son of Gatag, and the evil genius of the Narts, could not sleep at nights and tossed restlessly in bed thinking up some way of undermining the popularity of Zili and how to ruin his reputation. He began to poison the minds of eminent Narts, pretending that he was pained in his soul by all this sudden fuss about these two upstarts and that he feared that the fame of really great Narts would suffer.

“Do you good-for-nothing Narts, once so famous, mean nothing today?” he mocked them. “Nobody says a good word about you now. Go to the upper village—you hear only about Zili’s son; go to the middle village—people are talking only about Zili and his son; go to the lower village—on the right or on

the left it's the same—Zili and his son! What are you worth, then? What good are you on earth if nobody speaks of you?"

So the days passed by, one after another. Then Zili called his son, "We have plenty of grain now, but no cattle. Ride to the heavenly Falvara, and ask him to send us cattle. Once long ago he was also my friend, he'll be glad to see you, and won't send you away empty-handed!"

Again Zili's son listened to his father, but with some doubts also. Once more he went to visit the wise old woman, and told her everything.

She listened to him patiently, and then told him, "Go up into the attic and take down that same dried horsehide, and give it three good shakes, and it will turn into your steed on which you may fly to Falvara. He will, of course, be pleased to see you, and will recognize you as Zili's son and will entertain you befittingly. He will offer you gifts, but do not accept them. In the garret of his shed, on the middle beam, lies hidden a birchwood switch for driving the cattle. Ask only for that. It has the wonderful property, that wherever it lies that shed will at all times be full of cattle; no matter how many beasts are taken from it, the cattle-shed will remain full!"

The young lad climbed up into her attic, took down the same horsehide, shook it three times, and it turned into a winged steed, saddled and bridled. He gave the word, and soon he was standing before Falvara.

Falvara was pleased to see his guest, slaughtered a ram in his honor, and entertained him well. Then he offered him much cattle, but Zili's son declined his gifts, and asked instead for the birchwood switch, hidden on the shed's main beam. Falvara gave it to him at once, and stuffing it into his belt he returned home. When Zili saw that he had brought no cattle with him, he frowned at him again and said, "Where are the cattle?"

"Don't worry father, tomorrow, not later, you will see what wonderful power lie in this birchwood switch!"

Taking a broom he swept the floor of their biggest cattle-shed, then placed the birchwood switch on a beam, closed the door, and locked it.

In the morning early the young lad jumped out of bed, and went to the door of the cattle shed. When he opened it and looked inside, he saw a huge flock of

white-woolen, fat-tailed sheep, and sang out aloud for joy.

Zili awoke, and when he and his son opened up the door of the shed the sheep spread themselves over the steppe in an unending flock. Then the Narts came and gazed on them in wonderment, and could speak of naught else except of the marvelous white-woolen sheep and of Zili and his son.

The elder Narts set Zili in the place of honor at their meeting in the village square, and at their feasts and celebrations they placed a white bearskin under his feet, while three young Narts stood by with fans so that not a single fly should bother him.

But Shirdon could not stand by and merely do nothing. He had to satisfy his scheming and cunning plans. He set his poisonous tongue wagging again, and began to incite the youngsters this time to somehow get rid of Zili and his son. Then one day, prompted by Shirdon, the few young Narts at the meeting place said to Zili, "Your son has become a real man now! He has made you famous, and us as well! We are very grateful to him, but we think that this is what he perhaps should do now: he should somehow get hold of the wonderful sable-fur coat of the lord of the Black Mountain. It would be fine if you sat dressed in that fur coat in the place of honor on the village square!"

Zili returned home in a black mood, and angrily sank in his chair. He turned things over in his mind, weighing up this and that, and at last he called his son to him and said, "Gatag's son Shirdon is trying to destroy us. He has poisoned the minds of the younger Narts now. Make ready for an expedition to the Black Mountain, where the lord lives in his castle, and take his sable-fur coat for me, sewn out of the most expensive skins. There is no other way out for us. That is what the young Narts demand, and you must either fulfill their demands, or hang your head in shame!"

"Be it so, father!" said the young man. "If I do not return in two weeks, counting from today, and do not bring you the lord's sable coat, that means that I am no longer living and can help you no more!"

He then sadly went to see the wise old woman Kulbadag and told her about everything. She listened, sat silent for a while, then said to him, "Your father has not set you an easy task. Nobody dares to approach the castle on the Black

Mountain, where the lord lives. It stands below an overhanging cliff, and only one road leads there. That path is always protected by seven wolves with iron jaws. On the peak of cliff sit seven eagles with iron beaks, and they let nobody, not even a bird, come near the castle. To enter it one has to pass through seven iron doors, which open and close by themselves. Any stranger is lost at once. He cannot open or close those doors. I can tell you the way to the Black Mountain, and how to make your way into the castle. You yourself must find a way to overcome the lord.” The youth made ready to leave.

“One thing, before you start,” continued the wise old woman, “you must slay seven rams and seven turkeys, and take all that food with you on your way, as well as seven fat sheeps’ tails. When you approach the high castle on the Black Mountain road, first of all seven hungry wolves will set upon you, gnashing their iron jaws. Don’t be afraid in your heart! Throw to each one of them the carcass of a ram, and while they are getting fat on that, gallop past nearer the castle. Next the seven eagles will swoop down on you with their iron beaks, and you must throw each one a turkey. The hungry eagles will take the turkeys to the top of the cliff, and will there set about pecking them to pieces. When they are satisfied they will sleep. Meanwhile you must reach the lord’s castle. The first door you must smear with fat from the first sheep’s tail, round the hinges, and it will then open by itself, and you can hurry on to the second. There you’ll smear the second door’s hinges with the fat from the second sheep’s tail, and that will also open of its own accord, and you can hurry on to the third. So you must act with all the remaining doors, and after passing the last one, you will stand face to face with the lord of the Black Mountain. Gather all your strength and courage, and wrestle with him. If he overcomes you, he will throw you to the wolves to eat. If you overcome him, then take the sable-fur coat, but do not touch anything else. Hurry back and gallop away from the castle while the wolves and eagles are still sleeping after their feast!”

Zili’s son took the dried horsehide from her attic, shook it thrice, and said his prayer. Again before him stood his winged steed, saddled and bridled. He galloped away to the Black Mountain, having taken with him the seven dead rams and turkeys, and the fat from seven sheeps’ tails.

As soon as he approached the road leading to the lord's castle, the seven hungry wolves set upon him, gnashing their iron jaws. He did not get scared, but threw each one the carcass of a ram. The hungry wolves seized their prey and ran off, while the youth whipped up his horse again.

He had not ridden far, when from the crest of the cliff seven eagles swooped down on him. He threw the dead turkeys to them, one at a time. The eagles seized their prey in their talons, and flew to the crest of the cliff, and began to tear the turkeys to pieces.

Meanwhile Zili's son galloped on, right up to the outer door of the castle, jumped off his horse, smeared the fat from one sheep's-tail on the door-hinges and at once it opened. On the second door he did the same, then at the third. So he sped on through all seven doors, but when he passed through the last the lord of the Black Mountain suddenly jumped up and attacked him. The fight began. The young lad quickly overcame the old lord, and threw him to the ground. There he took from him his sable-fur coat, touched nothing else, and left the castle as quickly as possible, and galloped away.

When the lord of the Black Mountain came to himself, he saw no signs of his opponent, and angrily he asked the doors, "Where has that young fellow gone? Why did you knowingly let that thief past? Now look what has happened—I am robbed of my sable-fur coat!"

"As long as we served you," the doors answered, "you have never once greased our hinges, and didn't notice that they were going rusty. But that young lad gave each one a good smearing with from a whole sheep's tail! Therefore we could do nothing else but let him pass by!"

The lord ran out of the castle, and cried to the seven eagles, "Hey! Quickly you eagles! Zili's son has robbed me of my sable coat. Fly after him, seize him in your talons and tear him to pieces!"

"Generation after generation we have guarded your castle," said his eagles, "but never once in all that time have you thrown us even a sick chicken. But he straightaway fed each one of us with a fat turkey. Why, therefore, should we fly after him and tear him to pieces?"

The lord of the Black Mountain then turned to the wolves and cried, “Hey, you iron-jawed wolves! Zili’s son has robbed me of my rich sable coat. Race after him and tear him limb from limb!”

But the iron-jawed wolves only looked at him and howled, “We have served you all our lives, but not once have you ever thrown us a gnawed bone, but he fed each one of us with a whole fat ram! Why, therefore, should we tear him limb from limb? Go after him yourself and catch him if you can!” So he returned cursing to his castle.

Zili’s son brought the lord of the Black Mountain’s sable coat home and presented it to his father. Zili put it on and sat on his ivory-carved chair in the place of honor at the next Nart meeting in the square. What big eyes Shirdon, the son of Gatag, made when he saw him!

He at once began to lay new cunning plans, and to think up new tricks. The next time the Narts were gathered on the square, with Zili still sitting in the place of honor, Shirdon started up a flattering speech, addressed to Zili in these terms, “You look fine in your ivory-carved chair, and your sable-fur coat, but if you sat astride one of Washtirji’s steeds, then there would be no one like you, no one to equal you on the whole earth!”

Shirdon had spoken so, feeling quite sure that Zili’s son would not be able to obtain a steed from the heavenly dweller Washtirji in any case.

Zili went home in a black mood and called his son and said to him, “Again that old devil Shirdon is up to his tricks! He now insists that I should send you to obtain a steed from Washtirji. He is hoping in that way to destroy us. However we cannot refuse his suggestion, that is clear, so you must go to Washtirji, the protector of all travelers, and ask him to give a horse to you for me!”

His son went to the old woman again, found the dried horsehide and shook it there times, said his prayer, and flew off the heaven to meet Washtirji. He was made very welcome and Washtirji did not begrudge him a horse from his herd. On that same day he returned home and gave it to his father, who lost no time in preparing it for riding to the meeting on the following day.

When Zili’s ill-wishers next morning saw him astride Washtirji’s steed, they were dumbfounded, and all the spirit went out of them.

But old Shirdon did not give up his evil schemes, and at the meeting place of the Narts he said to Zili, “Now one cannot find anybody to compare with you, O Zili! You now have everything, except God’s whiskers! Now, if you had God’s whiskers, you would become a real god on earth!”

Zili was not unduly worried by this last trick of Shirdon’s, for he now trusted his son absolutely and on reaching home said to him, “My son, there is nothing else for it now, but to go God himself in heaven and ask him to give me his whiskers!”

“Come what may, father, I’ll go!” replied his son, and without consulting the wise old woman, he bestrode Washtirji’s steed, flew up to the heavenly gates, and soon stood before God, and told him of his father’s request. For a while God sat smiling when he heard the story, then he took a silk kerchief, gave it to the young lad, and said, “Return home, and when you wipe your father’s whiskers with this silken kerchief, they will become exactly the same as mine!”

Zili’s son left the heavens and soon returned to earth, and did as God had told him. He smoothed his father’s whiskers over with the silk kerchief, and straightaway they became exactly like God’s whiskers. Zili felt them with his hands, stroked them smooth, twisted the tips, rode on Washtirji’s horse to the meeting place in the square, sat on his carved ivory chair of honor in his sable coat, and waited.

When his evil-hearted enemies saw him thus, they grew quite confused and quitted the meeting place cursing. Those who loved Zili, on the other hand, rejoiced in his victory, and praised him yet more highly. But Shirdon continued to indulge in his contentious antics, and to construe his deadly devices. He came curling about Zili’s legs like an affectionate cat, and settled down purring near him. When the Narts all gathered on the square in the evening, he loudly declared to all the young Narts, “Look here, all you young Narts, what kind of elder sits here before you! Is there anyone, in any other land to match him? Does he not look like a very God indeed? You must support your elder, elevate him, raise him and praise him take him to all the lands on earth, so that others may see him and magnify his name!”

The young Narts were delighted with this idea, and with one voice they begged Zili to spare no efforts, but to let the whole world see him and the young Narts accompanying him as well!

So they prepared for a great expedition, as if they were going to show the whole world their elder Zili. Off they rode, how long or how short the road was, who knows? In the end they came to a desert. They made a halt for a rest, and then the young Narts said to Zili, "We are on the border of a foreign land. Let us shave you a little, and trim your hair and your whiskers, so that you will look more handsome in that sable coat of yours!" Zili agreed to this. Then the young Nart, acting on Shirdon's instigation, took a razor and instead of cutting his whiskers they cut his throat in the desert.

As soon as Washtirji's horse saw that Zili was dead, he neighed and flew off to his heavenly owner. Then Wasilla appeared among the Narts in their village, and carried off his magic maplewood scoop, and finally Falvara came and reclaimed his birchwood switch.

Thus, as a result of their foul attack on old Zili, instead of red-gold wheat, grown from his seeds in their fields, the land was covered in sand, their flocks of sheep were turned to stone, their horses lost their agility and went lame, their sharp swords grew blunt, and their bold and mischievous tongues ceased to wag.

80 ♦ ALIMBEG'S DAUGHTER AND THE ALITA FAMILY

Alimbeg, of the Alita family, was all his life one of the most respected elders among the Narts, a leader of the Council, a chief among the warriors on campaign. He helped poor people, and did not let them pass by without a kindly word.

If someone was robbed of his cattle in the evening, at night he himself was unable to sleep, and went around seeking out the thief, and by morning the stolen flock would be returned again to its owner. Nobody gave their daughter in marriage without a word of advice from Alimbeg, and not a single wedding was celebrated without his presence.

The Narts did not even name their newborn babes without having asked his opinion. But in one thing Alimbeg was unhappy. Although he had seven wives, six had borne him no children, and only the last one had given him a daughter. Soon after her birth, Alimbeg was taken sick and died. The Narts were unable to find a worthy man to place at the head of the Council. Thus the time came when the Narts, without a wise counselor, went to rack and ruin.

Then three of the younger Nart friends of the Asata family decided among themselves to go to old Asamazh, the head of that family, who all his life had been known as one of the wisest elders, to ask him how they could manage in the future. So off they went and found him at home. "Good-day to you, Asamazh!" they greeted him cheerfully.

"May God bless you for remembering me, and being kind enough to call!"

"But why should we not remember you? You see, dear Asamazh, we have come to ask your wise advice!"

"And how can I, an old man, advise you?"

"We want to ask you what we should do, so that the Narts become good men again!" they answered him. "Once they were really good at everything, but why are they so different today, so helpless and hopeless?"

"If you want to know how to make the Narts real men again," said Asamazh, "then I advise you to do thus: go out and call together all the Nart folk. When they have come to the meeting, choose a new leader, but select the best from those families who for the past three generations have given the best people to our service, and helped us most!"

The young men thanked Asamazh for his good counsel, and did as he had advised them. They sent round messengers and spread the word that each Nart family must send one man as representative to the meeting place. Any family that did not send a man must instead give a girl from their number to serve as a slave, in retribution.

The Narts sat in the square, discussing their affairs, and who to choose as members of the new Council.

But from Alimbeg's home they could not send anyone to the meeting. Seven widows sat round the cradle of the little girl, and wept. "Never before did the

Narts meet without our husband, but now they have met, and we have no man to send, and what's more, they will take our little ray of sunshine away from us!" So Alimbeg's wives wept and wailed.

At that moment the little girl lying in her cradle, seeing how troubled the family group was, suddenly spoke and asked, "If your husband, my father, was such a well-respected and famous Nart, then has he not left behind his horse, his weapons, and his war-gear?"

"His horse remains, his sword and shield remain, and his war-gear remains!" answered the youngest of the seven wives.

"But where are they kept, then?" inquired the little girl.

They told her where everything was, and then she said to the seven, "Bake some loaves of bread about as big as I am myself. When I have eaten them I shall suddenly grow big enough to appear at the Nart meeting place." The seven wives did as she asked, and the little girl straightway ate them all, and then she said, "If there had been more, I should have grown yet bigger and stronger!"

After that she broke up her cradle, went out and led Alimbeg's horse from its underground stable, and washed him down with black soap, and he became as smooth and shiny as an egg. She jumped on his back and rode him to the sea at a gallop, and again bathed him there in the sunny water like a wild duck, then flew on him over the water and galloped back home. She nailed on him some iron shoes, placed a saddle on his back, and tugged at the girth-strap so hard that his eyes nearly popped out.

"Now let me dress up in man's clothes!" said the maiden to herself. "Maybe none will notice that I am a girl if I don my father's clothes!"

She carried out her father's clothes, shook them and cleaned them, and put them on. Then, as if it had been a bit of fluff, she lifted from the wall her father's heavy coat of mail, flung it over her shoulder, and galloped her horse into the courtyard, and said to the seven women, "What do I look like now, and how do you like my horse?"

The seven women praised her for the way she sat on her steed, but Alimbeg's horse thought sadly to himself, "Woe is me! Up till now my riders have been the best of Nart horsemen, but now my master is a girl!"

But Alimbeg's daughter sensed the clever horse's thoughts, and got angry with him. She beat him a few times with her whip, then suddenly made him jump over a high stone wall surrounding their courtyard.

"Now, what do you say?" she asked the horse, tugging the bridle.

"I like that very much!" replied the horse. "Your father never once decided to make me jump over such a stone wall as that!"

Then Alimbeg's daughter rode off to the Narts' Field of Games, where competitions were going on to select the best men at various sports.

Meanwhile some of the Nart youths had noted that no man had come from the Alimbeg family, and therefore they would, according to the law, have to take Alimbeg's daughter as a slave-girl. But then, when Alimbeg's horse suddenly showed up on the square, and the Narts recognized it, they were dumbfounded and mumbled, "What a wonder is this? When was a young fellow like this born to Alimbeg? He did not leave a male heir behind to attend our meetings! Still, we know already that his family of Alitas never bore bad ones!"

Then one of the elder Narts said to the younger ones, "Find out from him just who he is, and how he comes here!"

The young Narts went up to the rider, and asked him, "Where are you from? The horse and sword, we see, belonged to Alimbeg, the father of our previous Council. But how did they fall into your hands, and why are you here at our meeting?"

"May it be a successful one!" replied Alimbeg's daughter. "Yes, indeed my horse and weapons belonged to Alimbeg, of the Alita family. I am his son. My brave Narts! May you be always happy! You know that my father had seven wives—may his memory remain bright! The seventh one, the youngest, bore him a son before his death, and gave him to the Kambada family to be brought up by them. Well, I am he!"

The Narts were happy to hear this unexpected news. They remembered that Asamazh had advised them to select their counselors from families that for three generations had produced better and wiser people. They looked at the rider's courageous figure, and the wise expression on his features, and after conversing with him for some time understood that here also was a strong mind. They even

decided to test this new rider out in the Nart contests, and sure enough, the first competitor to win all the events was this unknown son of Alimbeg. A few elder Narts said, "If this brave young man were among the members of our Council, most probably he would then be selected as the Chairman among our counselors. He is strong, bold, and skillful, and blessed with a clear mind!"

But those who did not care for the Alimbeg's family replied, "Very well, let him serve in the Council as a messenger!"

"No!" replied the others. "It would not be fitting to treat a son of Alimbeg in such a humiliating fashion!"

"Well, then," said the ill-wishers, "let him serve as our envoy, and if he is successful, we can later make him a Council member!"

They argued thus for a long time, but on a point of honor, they simply could not make Alimbeg's son, from such a glorious father, a mere messenger-boy. They chose him instead to be an adviser-in-chief to the Council. They called the one who had previously held this post, and took from him his chain of office, and calling Alimbeg's son forward, they hung the chain of honor round his neck.

Having returned home, Alimbeg's daughter said to his seven wives, "I have come to a bad end I believe! It is all up with me, dear ones! Why did I go and put on man's clothes? Why did they go and elect me as adviser-in-chief to their Council? Not every man can cope with such a complicated position, and I, a maiden, how shall I manage there? If they should find out who I really am, then shame would fall on us all!"

However, not long after having chosen Alimbeg's son as their adviser-in-chief, the Narts noticed that their affairs began to run more smoothly.

"We must all work hard," Alimbeg's son taught them. "We must lay in provisions." Soon the great storehouses and barns of the Narts were full, as in earlier times, of reserves of food and other materials. This "son" of Alimbeg, with her active and powerful mind, began to unite the Narts more closely against their enemies, as never before. The black horses of the Narts charged into battle, neighing with impatience. The newly honed swords gleamed in the sunlight like diamonds, and the villages of the victorious Narts shone like sapphires.

Like her kind father, Alimbeg's daughter did not allow any injustice. If someone in the village stole a sheep, like good old Alimbeg, she set out to find the thief at once, and before daylight came the next day she found the missing sheep and returned it to its rightful owner. If she met a poor beggar, she fed him, and spoke to him kindly.

But once the cunning Shiridon—may he fall into misfortune!—went out onto the village square, put his hat under his head, and lay prone there.

The young Narts gathered round him, and finally said, "Well, get up, Shiridon! What are you cooking up now? Tell us, what have you discovered that troubles you so?"

Two or three questioned him, but Shiridon made no answer. He just lay still.

"Well, come on then, let's throw him into the river!" said they.

Then Shiridon turned over and showed them his face, clutched his bowels, as though in pain, and asked angrily, "What do you want of me, then, you arrogant Narts? Of course you are ashamed, but why do you vent your spite and shame on me?"

"What shame, what spite?" queried the Narts in bewilderment. "What have we to be ashamed of, pray? What are you talking about, Shiridon?"

"If you really want to know what I'm talking about," said Shiridon sarcastically, "then I mean that you must feel ashamed to have fallen so low as to choose a woman, a young one at that, to be head of your Council!"

"Get along with you, Shiridon! What have you conjured up now?" replied the young Narts, perplexed. "Can you really say that our affairs are going badly, and that therefore you are vexed?"

"Though you may have washed her in bird's milk, nevertheless it is shameful to have chosen a girl as the leader of the Council. Yes, simply shameful I say!" Then, turning to the Nart Shoshlan who had been away to rest and heal a wound, he added, "While you were away recovering, the Narts have chosen Alimbeg's son, from the Alita family, as chairman of the Council, which means that he is also finally in command of the army. But it turns out that his 'son' is a woman, so you and your soldiers have now fallen into a woman's hands, and await a woman's orders!"

Shoshlan did not believe a word Shirdon said. All the same, as an experienced war-leader he thought to himself, as any Nart must think if he suspected this were true, “Really, if the leader of the Council is a woman, then that is truly shameful!”

When Shirdon’s word got around, all the Narts tried in every way to find out what the real situation was. Were they governed by a man or a woman? Finally they thought up a plan, and called the leader of their Council to come to the Nart meeting place, and there they said to him, “We beg you, our respected leader, to find yourself a wife! You see, we are looking ahead! You will have a wise and capable heir, and he will become a source of strength in future days, and thus everyone will in the end benefit from your marriage!”

Alimbeg’s son answered the tricky question thus, “Our affairs are not quite in as good order as they should be. Give me a little time. Furthermore, my father, may his memory remain bright, also ordered me not to be in a hurry to get married!”

“Our affairs are going well. Give your work over temporarily to another competent person, and set about finding yourself a befitting bride and arrange your wedding!” said the Narts.

Alimbeg’s daughter could make no further reply to this, and promised the young Narts that she would seek a bride. Then she said to her horse, “O my good horse! We can no longer live among the Narts. We must travel to some distant strand, and die there! Why die here of shame? Better finish our days in some distant spot in peace. If I die here, and they find out that I was a woman, I shall only bring shame on myself and on our whole people!”

So the courageous daughter of Alimbeg set off to find herself a bride. While the road ran straight, she followed it, but after a while, when it turned aside, she got lost in bogs, marshes, mire, and brush wood, and at last came out upon another road, and there she overtook an old man who was riding on a white horse.

“May your road run straight!” she greeted the old man.

“Live long, and be blessed, my young fellow!” replied the old man.

“Where are you traveling to, my esteemed elder?” she asked.

“I am going to the land between the White Sea and the Black Sea!” he answered. “Now I look at you, and am lost in wonder. It seems to me that the horse you are riding belonged to Alimbeg, of the Alita family, and the weapons you carry, it seems to me, were also his. Whose son are you, young fellow, and whither are you riding?”

“Your words ring true, old man,” answered the girl. “This horse and these weapons belonged to Alimbeg Alita, and I am his son. Now I recognize in you the sworn brother of my father!”

The old man was overjoyed, his face lit up. It was, indeed, Washtirji, the old friend and sworn brother of Alimbeg. He then said to the lad, “And where, may I ask, are you bound for?”

“I am seeking a bride for myself!” was the unexpected reply.

“Ride with me to the shore of the sea. There, in a bronze tower, lives a swarthy-faced beauty, daughter of rich Adil, and we shall see her on the top story of her seven-storied tower!”

Alimbeg’s daughter agreed, and they traveled toward the bronze tower, standing on the seashore. When they had ridden some way they caught up with another rider, on a bay horse.

“May you have a successful journey!” said the new traveler.

“May you too be successful on your way!” replied Alimbeg’s youngster. The new traveler greeted Washtirji as an old friend, then turned to the younger one, and inquired, “Whose son are you, then?”

“I am the son of Alimbeg of the Alita family,” answered the young “lad.”

“Are you really my sworn brother’s son? We were both friends of your father, Washtirji, and I, Wasilla!”

How glad she was now, as Alimbeg’s daughter, to meet her father’s good friends! Washtirji told Wasilla what they were seeking, and where they were going, and the trio traveled on until they came to the bronze tower on the seashore. It was surrounded by a high wall that was all covered in sharpened disks, swiftly revolving, and gleaming like great diamonds, and they prevented anybody from coming near the tower. In the top story of the tower lived the swarthy-faced beauty, Adil’s daughter. One glance from her was like the sun of

suns. Her smile cured all sickness, and her black brows were arched like crescent moons.

The trio rode toward the tower, discussing what to do. “It will be difficult to steal Adil’s daughter from such a tower!” said Washtirji, “but if we don’t help this lad, what will Alimbeg think of us?” Then he waited for Wasilla to make some suggestion. “Yes, Washtirji, we certainly must help him!” replied Wasilla. “I shall knock heaven and earth together, so that the very foundations of the bronze tower are shaken. Adil’s daughter will be scared, and will look out of the window. Washtirji did not wait for him to finish, “and I meanwhile,” he interjected, “shall take on the form of an eagle. As soon as the maiden glances out of her open window, I shall seize her in my talons, and carry her out of the castle tower. What happens next, that will depend on Alimbeg’s son!”

When they reached the bronze tower Alimbeg’s daughter whipped up her steed and it flew over the wall, with its revolving sharp disks, gleaming like diamonds, and landed at the base of the bronze tower. At once then Wasilla began to beat heaven and earth together. Rain lashed down, and one saw through the torrents lightning flashing, and heard the thunder rumbling unceasingly. The bronze tower shook. It swayed one way, then the other, as if it wanted to break free from the earth. Then Adil’s daughter came to look out of the window to see if her family, her companions, and her servants were safe. Washtirji, in the shape of a mountain eagle, sat on the cornice of the tower, and as soon as she put her head out to look round, he swooped down and seized her in his talons. He then flew down to the base of the tower with her, where Alimbeg’s “son” was waiting, and took the maiden up onto the saddle before him. Then he whipped up his steed, and again flew over the wall with its revolving disks like diamonds, and having landed safely, met Washtirji and Wasilla in their own likenesses again.

“Well, so we have the girl, alright!” thought the all-knowing Washtirji, “but the abductor is a girl as well, though she tries to hide it! This affair is worthy of our sympathy and understanding, and we must do something to help this young couple!”

When at evening they came to a wide-spreading oak which stood alone upon the plain, Washtirji said to the young pair, “You remain here and rest awhile, and we shall travel on farther!” Then he took an apple from his pocket, gave it to Alimbeg’s daughter, and said to her smilingly, and nodding his head, “You eat the seeds and the core, and give the rest to Adil’s daughter to eat. Then you will see what happens! Be happy together!”

As soon as Alimbeg’s daughter swallowed the seeds of the apple along with the core, she became a young man, and when Adil’s daughter ate the rest, she fell in love with him straightaway. They passed the night together beneath the spreading oak tree. Early in the morning they rose, and set off home to the Nart village. The youth sat in the saddle with the maiden before him, and thus the happy couple arrived. When Alimbeg’s son and his bride entered the village street the Narts were overjoyed, “Just look! Here comes Alimbeg’s son and his bride!” they shouted.

The young Narts lifted them from their steed, and full of laughter, carried them into Alimbeg’s house. When they went back, past Shiridon’s house, they shouted out derisively, “Hey, there, this time we’ve caught you out, you old liar, Shiridon! Alimbeg’s son has returned with his bride now! What do you say to that?”

“What do I say? I say that I did my best to find some way of changing Alimbeg’s daughter into a son, and now that has been done successfully, you accuse me of evil intentions! What next?” What could they answer him?

The valiant son of Alimbeg thus remained as the leader of the Nart Council until the day of his death, and as for the swarthy beauty, the daughter of Adil, she bore him many children, and so the name of their family remained famous among all other Narts.

A poor man lived among the Narts with his grown-up daughter Wazaftau. He died early, and she remained fatherless, living with her widowed mother, Adakizh. Wazaftau was so beautiful that no other girl could compare with her.

Many good people came to seek her hand in marriage, but she did not consent to become the bride of any of them for they all had their defects.

When the Akhshartagketta family heard of this, they said among themselves, “What kind of defect can she find among us? We must try to marry her to someone in our family. Let us ask her hand for our Urizhmag!”

They dressed up Urizhmag as a suitor, set him on his huge horse Arfan. Among the best Narts they found a dozen young men to accompany him, and sent them off on their matchmaking mission to Wazaftau’s mother.

The matchmaking procession came to the village where Adakizh lived with her beautiful daughter, and they stopped at one of the richer houses. Early in the morning they told their host the reason for their visit, and sent their two best men with him, to ask for Wazaftau’s hand in marriage to Urizhmag, and they came to the home of Adakizh.

As there was no reason to refuse such guests, Adakizh entertained them well with food and drink, and they told her the reason for their coming, “Among the Narts the Akhshartagketta family are well-known and liked. Now the eldest of them, Urizhmag, wished to join his family with yours!”

“Who can say a word against the Akhshartagkettas?” asked Adakizh. “They are so famous that even the heavens don’t dare thunder above their heads! They are not only worthy to join our family, but even those better off than we. If Urizhmag wished to court my daughter, then a better fate than that I could not ask for her. Only she has no father, nor brother; therefore you must ask her yourself how she takes your attractive proposal!”

Then Adakizh turned to her daughter, Wazaftau, and said, “Say, my sunshine, what is your decision in this matter?”

“Forgive me, respected suitors,” answered Wazaftau. “My mother, you see, allows me free choice to decide my own fate, and so I will tell you what I think. She rightly said that there are no members of the Akhshartagketta family that one could accuse or shame in any way. Why then should I not marry Urizhmag? He is a very worthy man, and I consider him a befitting suitor. But he has one shortcoming that to my eyes is obvious. Just look, when a hunting hound grows old, he has no power to chase after the prey. He cannot close his jaws firmly, so

that it does not escape, and can't bring it home when the hunter's horn sounds. Such is Urizhmag now. He is old, and cannot close his jaws properly, and the spittle drips from the corner of his mouth. He can wrestle no more! That is why I cannot accept him as my husband, I am sorry to say!"

The suitors returned to Urizhmag, and told him what Wazaftau had said.

How could he help feeling offended? He hunched his shoulders, and lowered his head, and returned home. The news flew round all the Nart villages that Wazaftau had refused Urizhmag's proposal.

The other family members discussed the matter and finally decided, "Let us send suitors on behalf of Khamis. He is much younger!"

They dressed up Khamis as a suitor, even more richly than Urizhmag, and sent him with a dozen friends to court Wazaftau. They also stayed in one of the richer houses in her village. In the morning, they, with their host as guide, went to the home of Wazaftau. They were well received by her mother, Adakizh, and started up a conversation by praising all the goodly characteristics of the Akhshartagketta family.

"I know about all this already," said Adakizh. "It is considered one of the best among the Narts, so why should we not join our family with theirs? However, my daughter, who has no father nor elder brother, must herself decide this matter!"

Then Wazaftau stood before the suitors and answered, "Since you await my reply, I shall give it to you! I do not think that there is anything bad in the Akhshartagketta family, and my people swear by the name of Khamis. I thought to marry him, even for his famous gold tooth alone! But I am afraid that I must refuse his proposal. Round his magic gold tooth, pus has gathered, and his breath has such a smell that I can't even turn my face toward him!" With that the suitors left, disappointed.

When the Akhshartagketta family heard this, they straightaway suggested, "Well then, let's send Shoshlan as suitor! She won't be able to find anything to say against him!" So the matter was decided.

They dressed up Shoshlan as a suitor, and gathered a group of a dozen friends to accompany him. They came to the village where Adakizh lived, and

they also stayed in one of the richer homes. In the morning, taking their host with them to show them the way, they went to Adakizh's home. The hostess and guest exchanged welcomes, and the suitors began to tell of all the worthy points about young Shoshlan.

Fearing to offend Shoshlan, Adakizh could simply not think of refusing his proposal and said straightaway, "As far as I am concerned, the matter is agreed. But you must speak to my daughter, since she has no father nor elder brother."

The suitors then addressed Wazaftau, and said to her, "You, young lady, have refused proposals from Urizhmag and Khamis, mainly because they were both too old for you. Now the Akhshartagketta send as suitor the young and handsome Shoshlan, so you have every reason to agree!"

Straightaway Wazaftau answered them, "I know that my mother very much wishes me to marry Shoshlan. I have heard of his manly courage and valor on the field, and although I have not previously met him, nonetheless, talk about him and his exploits also reached my ears, so I know that there is none braver than he. But to every human being comes the wish to live long, and leave behind him worthy successors. Shoshlan is powerful, but he always hesitates, this way or that, like water poured into a saucer. He lightly breaks his word, even the most fearful oath, and that means that his offspring would be of a similar character, not straightforward and honest, and unable to keep a given word, and retribution would fall upon their heads. Can I marry a man from whom I cannot expect worthy successors?"

Having heard these words the suitors jumped up from their seats and left the house quickly. They told Shoshlan of Wazaftau's reply, and he, not raising his head before them, returned gloomily home.

The Akhshartagketta met again, and raised the question of a suitor, "What if we pair the beauty Wazaftau off with Urizhmag's son Aishana? What can she say against him? Handsome, a good figure, knows no equal! When the women going for water meet him, they spill the water from their pails, and almost faint. How can Wazaftau refuse to marry him?"

They dressed up Aishana with every care, and sent him off with twelve good friends to court Adakizh's daughter, and seek her hand in marriage. They arrived

at the village, and stayed at a good house. The next morning the suitors took with them their host, and came to Adakizh's home.

They were welcomed and entertained, and after a while one of them said, "Now among the Narts, Aishana, Urizhmag's son is held as an excellent example for their sons. He is handsome, has a good figure, and outshines the rest. This young man will make a name for himself in anything. We want to propose him as a suitable husband for your daughter Wazaftau!"

"Well then! I have nothing against the proposal!" said Adakizh. "I have heard the same things from other quarters, but of course, my daughter, having no father or elder brother, will decide just as she wishes!"

The Wazaftau stepped forward to give her answer, "I will tell you my opinion!" she said to the suitors. "What you say about Aishana, and his good looks and figure is true. People have many good words to say about him. But among the youths of his own age he has done nothing yet to distinguish himself. He is quiet and reserved, like a maiden, and up till now has not brought home any cattle or game from the raids. Therefore I shall not marry a man who can't feed me!"

Again the suitors returned empty-handed to Aishana, and told him of the beauty's reply. Aishana, huddled up with shame, went back home. Once more the news went around among the Narts, that young Aishana had been refused by Adakizh's daughter.

Then the Akhshartagketta family sent Khamis's son, Batraz, with his matchmakers, to sue for Wazaftau's hand in marriage. They went to Adakizh's home, and praised Batraz to the skies before her, and did all in their power to win the beauty for Batraz. Adakizh then said to the suitors, "I see no reason to refuse Khamis's son, Batraz. He would be an excellent son-in-law! But I cannot decide, you must ask Wazaftau!"

Then Wazaftau made her reply to the matchmakers thus, "Khamis's son Batraz is not the sort with whom one can find fault. His fame has spread far and wide among us all. But I'm afraid of him! Does one go willingly to one's death? They say that in winter, when the Idil is covered with ice, and the Nart youths play knuckle-bones there, then Batraz, in the shape of a black fox, takes them

one or two at a time, drags them beneath an ice floe. And there he used to suck the blood from their heels! I am afraid that he may get cross with me, and eat me! That's the reason why I cannot accept his proposal."

After that the bold Shauwai, son of Kanz, went to woo Wazaftau. He sent in his matchmakers to see her mother, and she was agreeable, but Wazaftau refused again. "Not long ago," she said, "I myself wanted to meet him. And hoped for such a proposal. There is not a braver man among the Narts. But I cannot marry him! I heard that his mother is chained to a wall with twelve chains, and spits from her mouth burning embers, and they fall to the ground as lumps of ice. What if one of them should fall on me? If he cannot cure his mother of that trouble and torment, what can I expect of him as husband then?"

So Shauwai also went home with empty hands. What more could one do?

Soon the word went round among the Narts that Wazaftau had been courted by five of the most famous man in the Akhshartagketta family, as well as by Kanz's bold son, Shauwai, and she had refused them all.

One night old Asa of the Asata family said to his wife, "I want to tell you, my dear old lady, of an idea which I have in my head, and to hear what you think of it!"

"What kind of an idea is that then, and would it be successful?"

"Listen! I've heard that Adakizh has one unmarried daughter, and here we have one unmarried son! Let us unite them! What do you say to that?"

"Of course, of course!" replied his wife, "But God knows if she would agree. She has already refused five of the Akhshartagketta family, and well as Kanz's son Shauwai!"

"That doesn't matter. It doesn't mean a thing!" retorted old Asa.

He got up at dawn, harnessed his horse to the cart, and asked his wife to give him something to eat on the way. His wife fed him, gave him food for his journey, and old Asa climbed on the cart, whipped up his nag, and set off at a trot, so as to arrive in time at Adakizh's home and make a match for his son with her daughter. He traveled out of his village past the Narts who knew him, and everyone he met asked him, "Where are you off to, Asa, so early in the morning?"

“I am traveling to Adakizh, to make a match between her daughter and my son!” he replied. Then they began to mock him, saying, “Oh, oh, oh,! We suppose that you think she’s yours already?”

Asa then passed the Narts’ meeting place in the square, and some of the elder Narts and members of the Akhshartagketta family asked him, “Asa, where are you going so early in the morning with your cart?”

“I am preparing to marry my son off to the beauty Wazaftau.”

The Akhshartagketta burst their sides laughing at him, and mockingly said, “Of course, the most difficult thing will be to get there, with that old nag of yours! All your hopes depend on him! Hey, give him a prod with your whip-handle, and the deed is as good as done!”

Asa drove his old horse along, while the Narts stood laughing, “We shall wait for you here, but you’ll come back empty-handed!”

Asa finally reached Adakizh’s home. He quickly unharnessed his horse, and fed him. He did not wait for anyone to introduce him, nor to act as matchmaker. He asked nobody’s aid, but went straight into the house and said that he wished to speak to the mistress.

When Adakizh came in they greeted each other, asked the usual questions as on first acquaintance. The hostess set a table before him with plentiful refreshments, and he ate and drank till satisfied. Then he turned to Adakizh and said quite simply, “Last night my wife and I discussed something together thus, ‘Adakizh has one unmarried daughter, and we have one unmarried son. Let us unite them!’ For that reason I have come to see you. Give us your daughter to be my son’s bride, and we shall all be happy!”

“I have had many good suitors for my daughter’s hand, but I myself did not decide the issue. She has no father, nor elder brother, and so will decide her own fate. All the Akhshartagketta family came one after another, as well as Shauwai, Kanz’s son, but Wazaftau turned down all of them. Her fate lies in her own hands, so you must ask her about the matter!”

Then Asa addressed the beauty Wazaftau, “I am from the Asata family. May I not swallow up all your troubles? Give us a favorable reply, and count us worthy to be your relatives!”

Wazaftau replied to this without hesitating, “May I be forgiven my harsh judgments, and my own straightforwardness! My mother knows that I shall marry the one whom I may set my heart upon. Therefore I say to you first, dear mother, that I wish to marry into the Asata family, and hope that you wish me well in this!” To Asa she said, “I am ready and willing to do as you propose, Asa!”

“Well, then, my dear son’s prospective bride, come and sit beside me in the cart, and I’ll take good care of you! Let us be on our way home!”

Wazaftau gathered together all her things, and put her various possessions on the cart. Asa sat in front holding the reins, and she behind him. He gave his old horse a prod, and they moved off on the road home.

The sun had already set when Asa drove his cart past the Nart meeting place in the square. The elderly Narts were still sitting there, the Akhshartagketta family members among them.

“Good evening to all you Nart elders!” Asa greeted them simply.

They all saw Wazaftau seated behind him, and her luggage in the cart.

The other Narts replied, “May she bring happiness to your home!” But the Akhshartagketta were silent.

So old Asa married his son Asamazh to the beauty Wazaftau, daughter of the widow Adakizh.

82 ♦ THE NART NAMED SOLITARY

In the Nart village there lived a widow of the Akhshartagketta family. She had one small son, and named him Solitary (*Iunag*).

One evening someone called at the widow’s house, and shouted, “Hey, Solitary, are you there?”

Solitary quietly went outside to see who it was.

“I’m here. They call me Solitary! Who are you, and where are you from?”

“I come from the Nart selection committee,” he replied, “and tomorrow it is your turn to take the cattle to their pasture, I must tell you!”

With lowered head Solitary returned to the house. He was thinking how he could alone cope with such a mass of restless, unruly cattle.

“What’s the matter with you, my son?” asked his mother. “Why do you return with such a sad face?”

“How can I help looking sad, mother? Tomorrow it is my turn to take the Nart cattle out to pasture. Can I really handle such a restless mass?”

“Don’t waste your time worrying, my lad. You were always hardier than the others, and you will find a way out, I do not doubt for a moment!”

While they were still speaking, someone else came and called out, “Hey, Solitary, are you there?”

Again he went outside to see who it was, and what they wanted.

“Here I am! Where else should I be? Who are you, and from where?”

“I have come as a messenger,” the fellow replied. “Your father’s blood-kin in the east will have a family share-out tomorrow, and if you are not there, you will bring trouble on your head!”¹

Solitary was disturbed by this, and returning indoors he said not a word, but sank down on a bench lost in thought about what to do.

“Now what’s wrong, my lad?” queried his mother. “I can see that you are cross again about something! What is it?”

“How can I help being cross, mother?” he said. “Tomorrow among my father’s blood-relatives in the east, there will be a family share-out. If I am not there I shall get into further trouble. I must go, but as you know, I have to take the cattle to pasture in the early morning!”

“Don’t be sad, my lad. You are tough and resourceful. Maybe you will find a way to cope with both tasks!” replied his mother.

While she was saying this, someone else called beneath the window, “Hey, Solitary, are you there?”

Once more he jumped up and went outside to see who it was.

“I am here! Who are you, and what do you want with me?”

“I have brought you bad news! Tomorrow morning early, your father’s murderer is preparing to carry off the girl with whom he had made a match for

you, his son. Hurry, or else this man who slew your father will escape you, and slip through your hands, and while you yawn, your bride will be gone!”

Slowly Solitary went back indoors, and sat on his bench disheartened, while tears began to fall, like hail, from his eyes.

“What is the cause of all this?” asked his mother. “Why are you crying so, my lad? That will do no good! What has grieved you so?”

“How could I hold back my tears, mother?” Solitary replied sadly. “Nobody stands up for me, and nobody is afraid of me! When I am grown-up people will all make a mockery of me, crying: ‘Single, unmarried, solitary!’ ”

“But never you mind!” answered his mother. “The morning’s weather doesn’t last all day. Tell me what’s gone wrong now? What troubles you?”

“I received bad news. Tomorrow morning early, my father’s murderer will try to carry off the girl with whom my father had made a match for me. I must hurry, or the man who slew my father will slip through my fingers, and I shall lose my bride!” replied her son. “Now matters are three times worse than they were: I must feed the cattle; I must go to father’s blood-relations; and I must stop my father’s murderer from running off with my bride, and avenge my father’s death. Though I have seen neither him, nor her, I cannot let this happen, nor let that scoundrel escape unpunished. What could be worse than that, mother dear?”

His mother answered her one and only beloved child, “Never mind! You are my light, the sunshine in my window! The bad weather will clear up somehow! The clouds can’t last all day, they will pass away. Think things over, and maybe you will find a way. Something I have not told you yet, but can tell you now. Your father had a sworn blood-brother, and comrade and he went off once on a hunting chase. At that time I was expecting your birth, and his comrade’s wife was also awaiting a child. They gave each other their oath, that if two sons were born to them, they would be blood-brothers from the day of their birth, and if two daughters were born, then they would be sworn sisters. If one boy and one girl were born, then they surely wished to unite them together in marriage. The wife of your father’s comrade bore him a daughter, and I gave birth to you. That is how it comes about that you already have a bride waiting for you! Your father’s murderer was that cruel-hearted Lord Shainag. May all his proud power

and haughtiness fade completely, and leave him helpless! Grow up, my lad, and face things now, and remember, morning storm clouds soon blow over!”

So the good widow consoled her only son, although she herself by now felt a lump in her throat from all their troubles. They sat silent a little while, when suddenly the youth asked his mother, “What do you think, mother? Is father’s horse still good for anything?”

His mother at once felt heartened when she heard this question.

“Father’s white horse is in fine fettle if only you can master him!”

“And does any of his war-gear remain intact, tell me?”

“Why of course, of course!” replied his mother. “In the attic you will find his sword and dagger, his bow and arrows, though they may be somewhat rusty now!”

Solitary did not close his eyes all night. He sought out his father’s sword and dagger, and bow and arrows, and sharpened them and polished them till they shone. Then early in the morning he went to the stable, and put the horse’s harness in order, saddled him, bridled him, rode him into the courtyard, and asked his mother, “Well, mother dear, how do I look on father’s horse?”

“May I sacrifice my life for you, I swear! You are like the merry dew, shining in the sunlight on the horse paddock as you sit there on father’s white horse!”

“Why should a man live without glory? Better not live at all!” he said solemnly, somewhat sadly. Then he waved his whip and prepared to go.

“Wait one moment!” cried his mother, and he reined in his horse.

“You are like the morning breeze, when it bends the feather-grass, up there on the mountain, white and green, and it looks as beautiful as you do now on your father’s white horse!”

“If I am so handsome, than that foretells a lovely life for me! I can enjoy myself, and go on raids as well!”² cried Solitary gaily, and whipping up his horse, galloped on to the Nart square, where he speedily rounded up the herds of cattle, and drove them to pasture. Leaving them there to feed, he spurred on his white steed to the east, where his father’s blood-kin lived, and was soon among them. They welcomed him into their company, and he advised them, “It would

be better if we all lived together as before. A solitary man is the poorest of the poor, and nobody knows that better than I!”

But the brothers answered him, “Though we may be more unhappy after the division, nonetheless, we ask you, as you father’s son, share out the things among us fairly!”

“I beg you, give up the idea of dividing into separate groups now!” pleaded Solitary. “You are making a big mistake. It is simple enough to divide the shares, but you will all be lonely without one another, like a single tree growing by the wayside. Each one that passes gives it a knock or a kick, and it gets covered in scales, or if not that, then all try to bend it down and sit on it awhile, and so it grows askew. I am alone, and today I have obligations, three of them, to perform. How can I manage all three single-handed? That’s what troubles me now, and that is the reason why I ask you to get this splitting up out of your heads and live together in peace!”

“We only ask you to do one thing! Divide the shares, please!” said the three brothers. “We have also thought about what you have said, and all the time we found it possible to live together, we did not call you, but now we cannot remain together any longer, and beg you—apportion the belongings!”

Solitary saw that it was useless to argue, and so he shared things out among the three brothers fairly. Then he straightaway led out his horse and prepared to depart.

“What’s wrong with you? Where are you hurrying off to?” asked the three brothers, on seeing him astride his horse.

“I have other business to attend to, my brothers!” said he.

“But you can’t leave us so soon! Sit down with us to table awhile!”

Solitary did not wish to stay, but their mother came out and said, “I know about your business, but I ask you, come down from your horse and take a goblet of mead, and taste some of the meat of the sacrificed ram that I prepared with my own hands. Then your journey will be more successful!”

What could Solitary do? He could certainly not refuse such a polite old woman! He got down from his steed, went into the house, sat down at table with them, stood up and said a few prayers, drank a goblet of nice sweet mead and

tasted the roast meat, but seemed not to notice anything, so occupied was he with his own cares.

He thanked his hostess, and mounted his steed once more and was off! He galloped and galloped until he came to the village where his father's sworn brother and comrade lived. As he neared the house he whipped his steed still more, and the maiden who was betrothed to him knew by his beating impatient whip, that he had come at last, and looked out of the window. Solitary then rode up and asked her, "Ah, there you are, you cunning one, why have you deceived me?"

"I am not guilty of that," replied the maiden. "I was forced to do what I did against my will!"

"If that is so, then come out to me, sit before me on the saddle, and off we'll go at once!"

The maiden, however, did not consent to this, and replied, "Is it really worthy of you, to carry me off captive like that?"

"Then what must I do to be worthy of you?" asked Solitary.

"You must ride away below, to a place where seven roads divide, and there you will learn what to do if you really want to win me!"

Solitary whipped up his steed, and went down to the place where the seven roads met, but saw nobody there. He hobbled his horse and let him graze, while he himself placed his saddle beneath his head and lay down to sleep. But could all those troubled thoughts let him slumber?

"She has deceived me, that cunning one," he thought. He jumped up, saddled his horse again, and was just going to ride off, when the wide earth began to tremble, a mist came down, and some kind of smoky cloud rolled above the mist, and higher still flew black crows. Solitary was amazed. Where did all this come from so suddenly, on a sunny day? But this was the group of Lord Shainag's guards, who were galloping to take the maiden as his bride. From their galloping steeds the earth shook so. The dust arose from the road. The mist and smoke were the hot breath from their nostrils, and those were no black crows flying, but clods of earth kicked up by their hooves as they sped on.

Solitary rode toward them, and each of the arrogant bodyguards of Lord Shainag deliberately knocked up against his steed, provoking him to a fight, and challenging him to combat, “Come on!” they said. “Let’s fight!”

“You had better leave me alone!” retorted Solitary. “I am going my own way, and I’m not interfering with you!”

Then four of these who had come to take their prize and carry her off turned their horses round to block Solitary’s path, and their leader, you should know, was Lord Shainag himself! He faced Solitary and said, “Let’s test our power on horseback!”

“If we must, we must!” replied Solitary.

“Then we shall do so,” said lord Shainag. “You stand with your horse across the path, and I shall ride my horse against you. If you move out of your place, that means you have lost the contest. If I have to stop, that means I have lost!”

“Very well, so be it!” answered Solitary, and placed his white mare across the path. Lord Shainag rode back a long way, then turned around, gave his horse both whip and spur, and galloped with all his might against Solitary. But neither he nor his steed budged one inch!

“You have lost the contest, Lord Shainag!” said Solitary, “but I forgive you. Now you stand still, and I shall give you a knock in return!”

Solitary did not go back far, but from only a few steps away he charged against his father’s murderer. He gave him such a blow, as though a mountain had struck him, and Lord Shainag went flying in two pieces one way, and his horse, also in halves, in the other.

At once the remaining bodyguards rushed against Solitary, and he immediately flashed out his sword from its sheath. One sweep of its sharp blade on this side, and he left a gap like a street through them, and making another sweep on that side, he left another gap like an alley in their number. So Solitary slashed them down and destroyed them.

Then he rode back to the home of his bride, beat his horse with his whip three times, and went flying higher than the maiden’s tower. She looked out of her window and saw him there, laughed joyfully, and then jumped out of the

window into his arms. Did she turn into a fly? Was he a mosquito, and his steed a hornet? Who knows? Anyway they flew off together, and nobody saw them.

The sun had not yet set when Solitary reached his home again. He quickly took his bride into his house, then galloped off on his horse again to herd up the cattle and bring them home. He quickly called them together, and drove the herds back home again.

On his arrival all the Narts came to greet him and his bride, and they arranged the wedding feast. For a whole week, day after day, they sat at table, feasted and drank, sang and danced, and praised Solitary for his prowess. They had something to praise him about, after all! In one day he had driven the restless Nart herds to pasture, and brought them all safely back, he had shared the family possessions among his blood-kin to their satisfaction, and he had avenged himself upon his father's murderer, and best of all, had brought home his own bride!

Two of the Nart families lived near each other as neighbors, the Akhshartagketta and the Borata. In the Akhshartagketta family there were many valorous men, but they lived more poorly than the Borata family. On the other hand, the men of the Borata family were not so strong. However, among the Akhshartagketta, there lived one good-for-nothing Nart, whom they named Zhivag, which simply means “lazy lout.”

Once all the eminent Narts went off on a cattle-raiding expedition, and in the homes of the Narts not even a log was left, because there was nobody to go and fetch them from the forest. Zhivag did not want to work, and lay on his side, snoozing, and didn’t even go outside the house. He even ate lying down. The Akhshartagketta women were sick and tried of keeping their homes warm by borrowing logs from others. Once these women had an idea, and agreed together to carry it out. “Let’s harness a pair of oxen to a wagon and lay Zhivag on it while he is still snoring. Then we’ll drive the oxen off in the direction of the forest. Either Zhivag will get lost there, and die of hunger, or else he’ll bring some logs, which he knows we need so badly!”

So they brought a pair of oxen, lashed two carts together, and on the back one they laid the sleeping Zhivag, who never blinked an eyelid. Then they drove the oxen off toward the forest. They knew the road well where they usually went for logs, and so they stopped at the same place. All the while the oxen went by themselves, Zhivag slept, but when they stopped, he woke up, and to his surprise saw that the sun was already getting low, and the best of the day was done.

“Well. I’ve met my end now!” thought the lazy Zhivag. “What shall I do?” After a while he decided to pray to God for deliverance.

“O God of gods,” he beseeched, “be gracious to me, and fill my two carts with fine logs, so that the oxen will turn themselves round and bring them back to the village themselves!”

The Narts were favored by God in this way, that whatever they sought of the God was granted to them. So it was now, and straightaway the two carts were full of excellent logs. The oxen, feeling the extra weight, turned around themselves, and dragged the two cars full of logs, with Zhivag lying asleep on top of them, and like one of them, back home.

The oxen drew near the tower of Burafarnig, and from the topmost story his daughter, the beauty Agunda, looked down and burst out laughing at such a sight. “Look! What a wonder!” she mocked. “Two carts full of logs, brought home by that good-for-nothing Zhivag, and he is lying asleep on top of them!”

But Zhivag was already awake, and heard the remark, and took offense. He looked up to the top of the tower, and cried, “Agunda, daughter of Burafarnig Borata! You have mocked me! In punishment for that offense you will have the misfortune to bear a child, not having known a man! Then all the Narts will mock you instead!”

The oxen went on, dragging the carts, with Zhivag lying on top of the logs, until they reached home. The Akhshartagketta women were amused, and said, “Look how many great logs Zhivag has brought home for us!”

“Well,” said Zhivag, “did you think that I would get lost and that you would be rid of me?” With that he went in and sat by the hearth, and was soon lost in slumber.

The curse that he uttered against Burafarnig’s daughter Agunda took effect, and soon she was seen to be pregnant. What a blow that was for Burafarnig! Many people had sent matchmakers to him, asking for his daughter’s hand in marriage, but she had not found a man worthy of her. Now look what had happened! For her seven brothers too, it was very awkward when the word went round among the Narts that she was pregnant, but by whom it was unknown. They asked her how it had happened and who had made her pregnant, maybe by violence?

Agunda told them straight out, “Nothing of that sort happened, and I have done nothing to make it so. But once I mocked Zhivag, that lazy Akhshartagketta fellow, and he put a curse on me, and said that as punishment

for mocking him, I should have a child though not having known a man, so then the Narts would mock me!”

When the brothers heard that they were all very angry, and said, “There’s none worse than that lazy lout Zhivag of Akhshartagketta! If he is the cause of this misfortune, then we shall have to kill him and our dishonored sister!”

Other Narts, however, said that the matter must be investigated, “Such a thing has never been heard of before. Therefore we Narts must discuss this affair and pass judgment as we see fit!”

The elders decided that stern judgment was necessary, and ordered, “Sew up Zhivag and Agunda in a big bull’s hide, and cast them in the river, and let fate deal with them as it sees fit!” But Agunda just then gave birth to a son, and they decided in the elders’ council that he should also share the same fate.

The Narts stripped the whole hide from a buffalo, as if for a wineskin, and prepared to sew Zhivag, Agunda, and her newborn son up in it.

“See, you are sending us to our death, although we are entirely without guilt! Well, they say that innocent people won’t be drowned in a river! But anything can happen! Give me my woman’s things with me at least—a pair of scissors, a needle and thread, and my thimble. I may have need of them, who knows?”

The Narts agreed to this, and then the three of them were sewn up into the buffalo’s hide, and hurled into the river. How far the river bore them, and where it cast them ashore none may know, but Agunda noticed that they were floating no more, and said to Zhivag, “Hey, Zhivag, son of the Akhshartagketta, it seems that we are no longer in the water! If you could manage to screw your head out of the hide somehow, you might find out where we are!”

“Oh Agunda, daughter of Burafarnig of Borata, don’t ask me to do such a difficult thing! Do it yourself! It is your idea.”

Then Agunda took her scissors, and with great difficulty managed to cut the hide open at the top, and so they all crawled out.

“Now we are on dry land again,” said Agunda. “We must protect ourselves from the rain and the sun. Let us make a tent of branches, and drape this buffalo hide over it too!” But Zhivag replied crossly, “No! Don’t ask me to do such things! It is your idea, so do it too!”

So poor Agunda herself somehow made a tent of branches, and pulled the buffalo hide round it.

“Now we have a shelter,” she said, “but what can we do to obtain some food? I already know that you have influence with the gods, Zhivag, so go down on your knees and beg them to save us from starving!”

Zhivag couldn't refuse that request, and began to beseech God for aid, “O God, you know that we are innocent, and yet the Narts want to kill us! Send us some food, and don't let us die!”

Immediately there appeared before them dishes of food. Their plea was favorably answered. Thus they lived. The child grew up quickly, and made himself a bow, and while still but a boy, went hunting and caught rabbits, hares, and other small beasts, since he had not the strength to go hunting deer. Once, on returning home, the youngster said, “Up there, on the heights, I came across a wonderful glade, with a beautiful view all round. Let us go and live there!”

They took up their tent, and moved into the mountain forest glade, and settled down there. After living there some time, one day Agunda said, “Well now, Zhivag, stir yourself! You have the gift of influencing the gods, but are you going to use it only to throw your offense on my guiltless shoulders? How long are we going to live in this old tent? Do go at once and pray to the gods to give you a decent house to live in!”

But Zhivag was such a lazy lout, that even to raise a prayer seemed to him a heavy task for which he should receive not only the gift of the gods, but an allowance of money to go along with it! However, since this woman Agunda gave him no peace with her demands, at last he prayed, “O God, I beseech you, let one tall tower arise here, and an iron castle!”

His prayer was answered at once, and before them rose a splendid four-sided tower, and an iron castle. Then they began to live there, and even to sow grain for bread, and the lad grew up into a young man, now, and went hunting deer.

“We have food. We have a fine high castle,” said Agunda to Zhivag, “but it would be better still if we had horses, sheep, and cows, and also herdsmen to take care of them!”

At first he did not listen, but when she insisted he again prayed to the gods, and that wish too was granted. On the plain around the castle appeared horses, sheep, and cows, and now they began to live like real people, thanks to Agunda's persistence. What else would you expect?

Once Agunda's father Burafarnig went to the top of his tower and looked around. Far away on the steppe he suddenly noticed another tower where nothing had been before. But now, although nobody lived there as far as he knew, how had a new castle appeared?

Burafarnig went to the Narts' meeting place, and said to the elders, "Just take a look over there in the direction of the steppe. Nobody ever lived there before, but now—just see! A new tower! What is that?"

The elders gathered in council, discussed the matter and decided they should send somebody there to find out whose tower it was. From the Akhshartagketta family they sent Shoshlan, and the Borata family Burafarnig.

These two scouts came to the shore of a big river, and saw on the farther side a tall tower and castle. Shoshlan and Burafarnig tried to cross the river, but the beasts could not swim the deep waters and the swift current swept them away. The riders decided to return home. But Agunda had seen how somebody was seeking to ford the river, and said, "Hey, Zhivag, we have all we need to live well now, except neighbors. I saw somebody trying to reach us across the river, but they had to give up, and went away. Go and beg your God to throw a bridge across the river, so that we may have visitors, and neighbors as friends!"

Zhivag did as she asked, and prayed for a bridge over the river, and no sooner had he done so than a fine firm bridge appeared from one bank to the other.

Soon afterward a party of Narts made up of four Akhshartagketta and four Borata was hunting nearby, and among them were Shoshlan and Burafarnig. When they came near the river they saw to their surprise that in the place where they had tried to ford the river a bridge had been thrown across. They were amazed that it had been built in such a short time. Who had done all this work? The Nart company crossed the bridge to find out to whom the tower, the castle,

and the bridge belonged. When they rode near the castle, a young fellow ran out to greet them.

Agunda recognized them at once, but did not go into the guest room.

“Tell the master that we should like to see him!” said Shoshlan.

He went into Agunda, and told her of their request, and she replied, “Go back, and tell them the master is absent on an expedition, and won’t be home for a week.”

Having heard this from the lad, the Narts then replied, “We shall wait for him as his guests meanwhile!”

A whole week they waited, one day after another, and Agunda prepared food and drink for them, and sent her son into the guest room with it, but she herself did not go to the guests. At the end of the week of waiting, Burafarnig said to Shoshlan, “A week already they have fed us, but the mistress of the home has not appeared once. It’s time we went!”

“Let’s go then!” said Burafarnig, “but go in and thank our hostess!”

Shoshlan went to the room where he saw the light of a fire burning. Agunda was sitting near the hearth, but did not look up to reveal her face, nor did she offer her guests any food for the journey home, as was the custom. Shoshlan frowned, and returned to his friends in their guest room.

“What’s wrong? Why are you frowning so?” asked Burafarnig.

“The hostess was very ungracious to me, so why should I be smiling?”

“In that case I shall not leave until I have seen her to know why!” answered Burafarnig. “If she entertained us so well at first and gave us such a good welcome, then why is she displeased with us now?”

Burafarnig then went to the room where the fire was burning, but as soon as he glanced through the door he recognized his own daughter, ran in, and embraced her warmly.

She gave him a leg of venison and a jug of mead to take back to his comrades, and there he began to tease Shoshlan, making fun of him so, “You count yourself as the most valorous among us, but now see what kind of man you are! The hostess, according to tradition, did not say a word to you, nor let you see her face, and made you no gift, but see what a reception she gave me!

Will you, after that, still count yourself the worthiest man among us? Are you then really better than I?”

Shoshlan could not keep quiet at such a personal insult, nor let it by. He grasped the handle of his sword, and evil would have ensued, had not Burafarnig laughed openly, and explained to him the position, “Hey, Shoshlan! How would you like to have the mistress of this home as your bride? She behaved according to custom, that as a maiden she was reserved toward you, did not look at you, and did not speak with you!”

When Shoshlan and the others Narts understood what had happened, they were very glad, more so when Agunda began to send them even tastier tidbits than before. Finally Shoshlan exclaimed, “What a pity it is! Here are our own people, Narts living alone, and we did not know it!” Turning to the lad he requested, “Go to your mistress and say that in this home, most probably, there is a host somewhere, and we should like to see him!”

The lad gave his mother Shoshlan’s message, and she made reply, “Well, let them come and see him then!” said Agunda, while she herself went to Zhivag, who as usual lay half-asleep on the divan.

“Our guests will come to see you,” she said “and when they do, neither stand up nor go to greet them, but tell them that though they wanted to kill us, innocent people do not drown in the river!”

When Shoshlan and the other came to see Zhivag, and speak with him, they of course recognized him at once. He spoke to them just as Agunda had told him to. They listened in silence, conscious of their guilt before him, and not knowing what to say. Then he asked them, “And how are you all living now?”

“We live pretty much as we did before,” the Narts replied.

“If that is so, then come and settle here near us, and we shall get on together somehow.”

Shoshlan and Burafarnig, realizing that Zhivag was justified, and that he and Agunda were really innocent, both then and now, and that it was for this reason that the Lord God had helped them, went sadly back to their Nart villages again.

People gathered round the hunting group, and asked them why they had been away so long. The hunters told them how well those three whom they had

wished to get rid of were living, and the elders and the others were ashamed of themselves.

“We stand guilty before them,” they said. “Our judgment was unjust! Truly, they have shown us that innocent people do not drown in the river!”

After that the Narts began to visit Agunda and Zhivag frequently. They liked the spot where their castle stood. A few Narts decided also to settle nearby. When they did so, Agunda went to Zhivag and said to him, “Ask your dear God for homes for those people who wish to become our neighbors and friends!” Though angry still, he let Agunda have her way.

“O God,” he prayed, “build some good houses down the river from us, but not better than ours!” Soon all turned out as he had prayed, and the Akhshartagketta and Borata moved in, and settled down, and they all lived peaceably together as good neighbors and friends.

84 ♦ THE ELDER AND THE YOUNGER SHARE

Having returned from expeditions, whether cattle raids, or hunting, all the Narts who took part in them divided the spoils equally. Once they went on an expedition to enrich themselves. They came on their way to the land belonging to crooked Ali. He had three sons—Shargoi, Gurgoi, and Anabar. The Narts stayed overnight at crooked Ali’s home. He treated his guests very well, and sat them behind low three-legged tables, and the Narts in those days sat together, old and young, wherever they could.

“Say, you Narts, who is eldest among you?” he asked.

“Urizhmag is the eldest of all!” replied the Narts.

“Then let him sit in accordance with his age, in the place of honor!”

So Urizhmag sat down in his appointed place.

“And after him, who is eldest?” asked crooked Ali.

“Khamis and Shoshlan,” answered the Narts.

“Then let them sit one on each side of Urizhmag!” said crooked Ali.

So they sat themselves down one on each side of Urizhmag, as they were told.

Crooked Ali sat them all so, in order of seniority, and then said, “Batraz, Asamazh, and Eltagan, you, as the youngest, will serve at table,” and they began to do so, as their host had asked. How should they do otherwise?

Then crooked Ali entertained them from day to day, and said to them, “My three sons live in three ravines, and tomorrow they will travel together to me. I beg you wait until they arrive!”

The Narts could not refuse, of course, and stayed over another day. In the morning the three sons arrived, as expected.

The Narts again sat at table in the order in which crooked Ali had placed them. They all ate and drank, and got a little tipsy. Then crooked Ali said to his three sons, “Now thank our guests for coming, and give them your blessing.”

The eldest son, Shargoi, took from the dish an ox-head, with its tongue, and placing it before Urizhmag, said to him, “You are the eldest among the Narts, and you are the head! From now on, make it a habit to give the eldest the ox-head. May he, as head, be endowed with reason, and may he also, having received a tongue, teach with his own tongue the younger ones as their tutor, and let them in turn pay full attention to the words he utters!”

Urizhmag thanked Shargoi for his kind attention, and said to him, “Here is an ox-leg for you! No matter how you cut it, or strike it, or what you do with it, that leg will never say ‘Oh!’ You too must remain healthy, and never feel pain in your legs, nor grow tired of walking.”

After that, crooked Ali’s second son, Gurgoi, took the neck of a ram, ready on the table, and brought it to Khamis, saying, “Sit with honor beside your elder. The head is the most important, but so that it may be held high, it needs a nice strong neck. However heavy the head, it still needs support, and you must provide that. May your neck be strong, so that none ever breaks it. Remain beside your elder, a second elder, and when he passes away, be prepared to take charge of the youths, to correct and admonish them!”

Khamis also thanked his server, and then cut off a sheep’s ear, and presented it to the second son, saying, “Be on your guard! Hear any threatening danger in time, and be prepared to meet it! Always be a worthy example for the best youths, and always answer their questions. Among those of your own age, be

famous for your good deeds, so that they speak openly in your absence of your kindness and your valor!”

Finally, the third son, Anabar, stepped forward. He laid the fat tail of a sheep before Shoshlan, and said to him, “You have the honor to sit close to your elders, so always follow behind them closely, and help them in everything. May your successors speak your name with respect. If the minds of elders cannot attain their aims, then may your mind be an aid to them. May the young ones respect you, and the old ones love you!”

Shoshlan also rose from table, took a sheep’s rib from the dish, and presented it to Anabar, with thanks, saying, “May your name be an example for all youths. Let no one be able to say, ‘Sit lower down the table,’ or ‘Sit higher up the table.’ Be in the middle, and be like the rib, satisfied as well. Patiently and devotedly serve your elders!”

Thus they exchanged grateful speeches, and since that time people have become accustomed to place an ox-head before the eldest, a neck and a fat sheep’s tail before the next to the eldest, to see the younger ones serving at table, and to give them an ox-leg, a sheep’s ear, and a rib.

The Narts set at table all night with crooked Ali, and at early morn he came to them and simply said, “Now, my dear Nart friends, split up into groups, and go hunting with my three sons in my three ravines. May you find there gifts from me to your liking, and plenty of them!”

Shargoi led a party of Narts into the Ruinous Ravine. They traveled all one day, then the next, then the third, then a week, then a month, and the third month they reached the shores of a great river. There stood a bridge, but right across their path, barring their way, lay a seven-headed giant, who did not move when he saw them coming.

“Get up, now, or else I shall kill you!” said Shargoi boldly to the giant.

“Ride over my spine. We shall try out our powers one against the other, when you return,” replied the giant.

The Narts rode over the giant’s spine, and he did not turn a hair.

So they came to the entrance to the Black Ravine, and glancing around saw that even the slopes of the mountains were covered with cattle, all black as

black. Shargoi turned to the Narts and said, "All these are a gift to you from my father, crooked Ali. You may now drive them off, but I shall not permit you to fight the seven-headed old giant on the way back. I shall do battle with him. If I have not returned home by evening, let the youngest one among you take my flute and play on it. If the flute begins to moan in complaining tones, that means I am no longer among the living. If it the tune it sings is a merry one, that means that I am still living, and shall soon return. I give my flute here to your youngest, so let him do as I have said."

So the Narts drove off the black herd back to crooked Ali's home.

Ali knew his son's flute well, and asked the Narts, when they told him of Shargoi's words, who was the youngest among them? When they named Asamazh, then crooked Ali replied, "Let him put my son's flute to his lips, and we shall know how he is!"

Asamazh took the flute, put it to his lips and began to play, and they all heard what a mournful tune it was. "My son Shargoi has perished!" moaned crooked Ali. "May he sit on high in the heavens! Let this flute be a gift to Asamazh in memory of Shargoi!"

The next day the Narts went hunting in the second ravine, with Gurgoi, crooked Ali's middle son. He rode ahead and showed them the way. Three months they traveled, till they came to the banks of a big river. On the riverbank, by the bridge, completely barring their way, lay a nine-headed giant. Gurgoi went boldly up to him and said, "Get up, now! Otherwise I shall kill you!"

"Ride over my spine!" said the giant with nine heads, and we shall test out our powers against each other when you return."

They rode over the giant's spine, and he did not even turn a hair. At last they came to the White Ravine, and looked around. There were so many white cattle, that the hillside could not be seen.

Then Gurgoi said to the Narts, "All this herd is a gift to you from my father, crooked Ali. Drive them off quickly, and I shall stand battle against the nine-headed giant. When you return to my father, wait for me until evening. If I do not come, pour water in my bowl Wasamonga, and let the middle one of you drop a tear in it for me. If I am destined to return, the tear will turn the water into

white foam. But if I am no longer in the Land of the Living, the water will become cloudy. Then let the one who wept the tear take my Wasamonga goblet in memory of me!”

The Narts drove the white herd back to the home of crooked Ali, and waited until evening for Gurgoi’s return, but still he never came. Then crooked Ali brought out the Wasamonga goblet, and filled it with water. Eltagan wept a tear into it in honor of Gurgoi, and the water at once grew cloudy. Thus crooked Ali knew of the death of his second son.

“Take this goblet, Eltagan,” he said quietly, “and keep it in memory of my middle son Gurgoi!”

Once more the Narts set out, and this time were led by Anabar, the youngest son of crooked Ali, to the third ravine. How long they traveled, who knows? But at last they came to the banks of a great wide river. They looked around, and there, by the bridge, completely barring their way, lay a twelve-headed giant, who showed no signs of moving.

Anabar stepped boldly up to the twelve-headed giant and said, “If you do not get up, and let us pass, I shall slay you!”

“Ride over my spine!” replied the giant, “and we shall test out our strength one against the other when you return.”

They rode over the spine of the twelve-headed giant, and he did not turn a hair. Thus they went on to the Red Ravine at last. The Narts took a look around, and everywhere it was so full of red cattle that they began to wonder how the earth bore them!

“All this is a gift from my father, crooked Ali,” said Anabar. “Go and drive the herd off quickly, and I shall follow. I must stay and try my strength against this twelve-headed giant. At home my father has my low three-legged table. If I do not return home before evening, let him stand it outside in the rays of the evening sun. If the sun’s rays gleam white and bright on the tabletop, that means that I am alive still, but if a rainbow is seen there, then I am no longer in the Land of the Living. Then let that three-legged table be a gift to the youngest in your group. It will show your way and light up your path!”

The Narts drove the red herd home to crooked Ali. They waited till the sun began to set, then crooked Ali brought out the three-legged table and stood it in the sunlight. At once a rainbow was seen to play above it.

Then crooked Ali said very quietly to the Narts, “Let this three-legged table be a present to Batraz, the most valorous of the younger Narts, in memory of my youngest son Anabar, who has evidently died a brave death battling with the giant. Take his herd with the others, and let them be your store for the future!” The Narts of course asked crooked Ali what he would do now alone, without his sons, and he said he would remain where he was, being too old to move.

Then Urizhmag said to him, “No, crooked Ali, it must not be so! You have taught us reason, you have shown our young men how to behave toward their elders, and did not begrudge us your herds and possessions. You have stood out with all your kindness and nobility toward us. Now listen to us a while! He who listens receives the portion of the listener, he who passes by receives the portion of a passer-by. Because you have been so good and so generous to us, we beg you to come back home with us! You will be esteemed and respected among all the Narts, and we shall be respected too, because we protect and keep a good man like you!”

Crooked Ali, on hearing this sincere invitation, made no objection. But although he set off on the journey back home with the Narts, he was not destined to reach their settlement. He died on the borderline, and the Narts built him a vaulted tomb, and buried him with all honors. After this they came back to their villages, with all the herds and presents that they had received, and shared out the cattle equally among their neighbors.

The best of the Narts, by the will of God, had passed away. Only the last of them survived, good-for-nothings and weaklings. On the outskirts of the Nart village in those days lived a widow, with a child still at the breast, a little boy named Bzhar. When he grew up, he built a seven-storied watch-tower, and said to the surviving Narts, “We shall let ourselves be ashamed in the eyes of those around

us, if we go on like this. We must hold fast to high traditions, to the will of our elders and our forefathers, and then no tyrant will be able to frighten us, and overcome us!”

The Narts then began to listen to his words and to do as he had said.

The Narts at that time had an enemy who hated them all. That was a nephew of God, Eloi Elinata. Once, when Bzhar was away on an expedition, Eloi Elinata, making his way into the Nart village, noticed three young trees by the roadside, all looking the same, and thought, “I shall hew down one of those trees, to make me a fine staff!” But these were special trees, connected with human fate. One of them was the tree of decision and bright success; another, just the opposite, brought gloomy failure; and the third created only confusion.

Eloi grabbed hold of one tree, to cut it down, when straightaway the voice of an angel cried in warning, “Do not touch that tree, Eloi! It is the tree of confusion!”

He reached for another tree, and again the angel cried from heaven, “Do not touch that tree, Eloi! It is the tree of gloomy failure!”

Then Eloi took hold of the third tree, and the angel’s voice said, “That is right, quite right! Cut down that one, you will have good success, and nobody will ever get the better of you!”

Eloi hewed down that tree for a staff, and since then nobody could overcome him. That staff had the quality that whoever held it in his hand was favored by success. What had Eloi not achieved with its aid? The fame of the staff spread far and wide. The Narts had tried to seize it several times, but all in vain.

When Bzhar returned from his expedition, they told him about this, “I shall send to Eloi Elinata, and tell him that he must either give us this staff freely, or we shall cut off his head and stick it on a spike above our tower!”

But there Bzhar’s mother stepped in and warned him, “You will not get that staff so simply as that! Take a better way! Eloi Elinata has a beautiful niece, Chenzena, who is staying with him now as his guest. Go and take some gifts there, and woo Chenzena. If you succeed in winning her, you will receive Eloi’s staff as a wedding present, but if you try to take it by force, you may be slain by him!”

Bzhar sat astride his frisky prancing horse and rode to Eloi Elinata. He came to his home, crossed the bridge, and called out from the yard, “Hey, Eloi, look out here!”

But Eloi did not go out himself, instead he sent his niece Chenzena. She was so lovely, that when Bzhar saw her he could not hold back, but seized her by the hand at once, and galloped off with her.

Meanwhile, when she did not return to Eloi to tell him who had paid him a visit, he himself went out into the courtyard. What did he see? An empty yard, and no sign of Chenzena! He sent servants everywhere to seek her, but without result. She had just disappeared.

Bzhar settled Chenzena with his mother’s brothers, and himself returned home. Scouts sent out by Eloi reached the Nart villages, but not finding the maiden there, they returned home and informed Eloi, “The Narts are all at home, but nobody knows anything about Chenzena nor about her kidnapper.”

“Go again and search for her!” commanded Eloi. “Look everywhere, but don’t tell anybody what you are doing! Let the lucky man who finds her take her as his bride!”

Eloi’s servants went again in various directions. They sought her in the north and in the south, in the east and in the west, but found nothing, and came back disappointed.

Meanwhile, at the end of the year, Chenzena bore Bzhar a son. He soon grew up, and was given into the care of his father’s grandmother. After a year had passed Bzhar sent a messenger to Eloi, and said, “Give me your staff, Eloi, or you won’t have long to live! I shall hew off your head, and it will look fine, stuck on a spike on the top of my tower, for all to see!”

But what reason had Eloi to give his staff to Bzhar under threat? He paid no attention to it, and made no answer. Then Bzhar gathered his warriors together from among the young Narts, and having armed themselves, they rode off to Eloi’s land to take his staff from him by force.

That night Eloi had a bad dream, and heard someone crying aloud, “Beware, Eloi, a violator comes to your land!”

Early in the morning, as soon as he could, Eloi prepared to meet the attackers, and prayed to his staff of success, “May that angel who first showed you to me help me now! Enemy warriors are riding against me, and I need your aid!”

Then he mounted his horse and called his warriors together, and they rode to the borders of his land. They sang their war-song on the way, and when they saw Nart attackers, they had already reached the edge of the steppe land.

They met in the middle of the steppe, and Bzhar sent a herald to say, “Surrender your staff to me, and all will be well!”

Eloi Elinata sent back the herald with this reply, “While I live, you shall never touch my staff! If you give me no peace with your demands, then let us meet in a truce and discuss this!”

Bzhar and Eloi Elinata came together under a flag of truce, and Eloi said to Bzhar at the outset, “Let us not destroy our peoples in this struggle, but decide the matter by single combat. If you overcome me, then hew off my head and the staff is yours. If I overcome you, then I shall hew off your head instead!”

Bzhar agreed to these conditions, and so the duel began. By the will of the gods, Eloi struck down Bzhar, and he fell flat on his back. Then he spoke his last words to his warriors friends, “Tell my mother to take charge of my son!” and with that he died.

Then Eloi hewed off his head, and hung it in a bag in his own vault.

Bzhar’s comrades, as had been agreed before the duel, took Bzhar’s corpse, and after wailing over it, carried it back sadly to their home.

Meanwhile Eloi’s warriors raised the white flag of victory, and in merry mood rode off home with songs on their lips.

The Narts brought Bzhar’s corpse to his mother. Again they wept over their dear dead leader and said sadly, “Since we have left Bzhar’s head in the hands of his enemies, we count ourselves no better than dead! Let us go back to Eloi, and ask for Bzhar’s head. We cannot bury his disfigured body so. What a shame it would be! Maybe Eloi will give us back Bzhar’s head, who knows?”

In no other way could they attain their end. They gathered food and drink for the memorial feast, and set off in their carts. As a gift to Eloi they took a horse in

full harness, a tempered sword, and bows and arrows, and hoped in return to receive Bzhar's head for burial.

Just at that time Eloi and his servants were carrying home logs from the forest on asses. Eloi did not recognize the Narts in their peaceful carts, and straightaway asked them, "Where are you going? Are you seeking somebody or something?"

"We are seeking Eloi Elinata," replied the Narts. "In his hands remains the head of our chieftain Bzhar, and we hoped that he would be kind enough to gladden our hearts by returning it to us. We cannot bury him without his head until then."

Eloi did not give himself away to these new Narts, and merely said, "Maybe he will return your chief's head to you. Go on your way in your carts, and ask him when you reach his dwelling."

Meanwhile Eloi left his men and donkeys to bring home the logs, and he quickly rode home another way ahead of them, and thus was ready to greet the Narts when they arrived, thinking to himself, "Just wait, you Narts! I shall make fine tribute-payers out of you, and later on I shall sell you in the slave market!"

The Narts duly arrived, and Eloi welcomed them into his home. Then he called his own people together to meet the Narts. They duly presented him with their gifts, which they had prepared, and he readily accepted them. The next day they held a memorial feast for the Nart Bzhar. Eloi went to vault, and took down the head of Bzhar, and handed it over to the Narts in a silken bag, with tears in his eyes. All those gathered bewailed the fallen. Eloi made them parting gifts, and saw them off on their way with full honors.

The Narts thus traveled home again. They placed the dead man's head on his body again, and buried him in their vault. The next day Bzhar's mother, all dressed in black, went to her husband's home, and took charge of Bzhar's son, whom she then cared for till he grew up into a man.

After Bzhar's death and burial, Eloi Elinata decided to straightaway enslave the Narts, and came to their land with his warriors, and laid a heavy burden of tribute upon them all. The old men plowed his fields; the old women harrowed them. The young Narts carted manure; the maidens washed his clothes and

bathed his feet. The Narts had been brought down to a sad state, but what could they do? They just had to be patient and endure it all.

But Bzhar's son soon grew up. He could already shoot with bow and arrows. He played with young lads who came from the family of his father's grandmother, and in their games he always came out on top. Every evening he returned to his mother Chenzena.

Once he had the idea of going hunting. His mother and grandmother did not wish to let him go, but they could not dissuade him in any way, and off he went with seven of his comrades. They came to a mound that served as a signpost for travelers, and there met a couple of Nart boys. Bzhar's son went up to them and asked, "Who are you, and where do you come from?"

"We are Narts," they replied, "and who are you then?"

"I have long dreamed of meeting Nart lads," said Bzhar's son. "I am of the same blood as you!"

The young lads glanced at each other, and Bzhar's son understood that they did not accept him as one of themselves, so he said, "What are you puzzled and surprised about? My father's name was Bzhar. He died peacefully, and I am his son!"

"If your father really was Bzhar, then he did not die peacefully, but was slain by Eloi Elinata! When you return home ask your mother and your grandmother, and they will tell you how it happened."

Bzhar's son stood silent awhile, then he returned home, went to his grandmother's brothers, with whom his mother lived, and asked her, "Is it true, as I by chance have heard, that my father did not die peacefully, but was slain by our enemy? If you do not tell me truly how he died, I shall cut off the breast that fed me, and call you a stranger!"

"Eloi Elinata was your father's slayer," she replied. "He is my own uncle, but he had no pity on me, and made me a widow!"

"Then I shall go, and I shall take revenge for my father's blood!"

"Oh, you will not be able to measure up to him," replied his mother. "He is a relative of the heavenly dwellers, and an angel gave him the staff of decision, which always brings success to him who holds it. So therefore, nobody can get

the better of him by force. If you had his magic staff you could overcome him, but without that you are a dead man!”

Bzhar’s son then went to his grandmother and asked her, “Eloi Elinata has the staff of decision and success. Tell me, how can I obtain it?”

“Oh, may I be sacrificed to save your life!” replied his grandmother. “Put that idea out of your head! Eloi Elinata is our deadly enemy, and he obtained that staff of success by the will of the gods. He enslaved the Narts, and made the old men plow, and old women harrow, the young men carry dung, and the young maidens wash his clothes and his feet. He is a relative of the gods, and cannot meet death in a simple way. But there is just one thing: his death might come from a deep hole in the middle of the Field of Games. There was hidden a store of carefully saved heavenly iron. If you asked Kurdalagon, the heavenly smith, to forge a sword from such iron, and to temper it, then with such a sword you might hew off Eloi’s head, just like cutting off a pumpkin, and in that way you would also save all the enslaved Narts!”

Bzhar’s son, on hearing this, took a few comrades with him, and went to the Nart Field of Games. There he found the hidden store of heavenly iron at the bottom of a deep hole. He carried off the iron and took it to Kurdalagon, and first of all asked him to forge an awl for him, and to temper it well. Then he returned to the young Narts, and began to prepare them for a great battle with a merciless enemy.

In the evening Bzhar’s son again went to the heavenly smith Kurdalagon, who handed him a sword that he had forged, as Bzhar’s son had asked him.

The youth tested the blade with the awl, made of heavenly iron and thoroughly tempered. The awl made a hole in the blade of the sword, which meant that it was made of ordinary iron. He was angry with the smith and shouted at him threateningly, “Hey there, Kurdalagon! Bring me a sword that is worthy of me, or I shall hurl you down among the mountaintops! I brought you enough of the heavenly iron, so now use it, and make me a heavenly sword!”

Kurdalagon brought Bzhar’s son another sword. He tested that one too with the tempered awl made from heavenly iron, and it pierced a hole in that.

“You had better bring me a sword worthy of me, do you hear, Kurdalagon?! If you don’t, you son-of-a-bitch, I’ll wring your naked neck for you!”

Thus threatened, what could even a heavenly smith do? He finally made a sword and sheath really worthy of Bzhar’s son, and when tested by the tempered awl, not even a scratch-mark ensued, but the blade whistled and shone like the stars in the heavens.

“Pray to the gods, Kurdalagon, that you grow better!” shouted Bzhar’s son. He struck the smith’s anvil with the naked sword, and the anvil fell in two halves, one this way, one that.

Meanwhile Chenzena, the mother of Bzhar’s son, hearing that he had gone on a visit to the heavenly smith, turned pale with fright and said, “Better that I should die, than that I should hear of my son’s death!”

She took a knife of tempered steel, and cut her own throat with it. As soon as he heard of this, her son came and found her dead already. He buried her in the Araz vault. Afterward he went to his grandmother, “You must now take the place of my mother,” he said. “I’ll take revenge on Eloi Elinata for my father’s death, and for his shameful treatment of all we Narts, so you must be witness to how I struggle with him. He took her back with him to the Nart village, and she saw that the Narts’ homes had been turned into horse stables and cattle sheds. He took her up to the top of the tower, constructed by his father, and there said, “I beg you, grandma, stay here on guard, and keep a good lookout! I am gathering the young Narts together, and meanwhile turn your face toward where our enemies will come. Taking a glance at you, I shall then know where they are to be found. But do not leave your post, and run below! Don’t even think of such a thing!”

So Bzhar’s son went around among the young Narts, got them together, and spoke seriously unto them and asked them, “What do you wish? This shameful life that we are leading now, or an honorable death facing our oppressor in battle?”

“Better death on the field, than a life of shame!” they cried.

Then Bzhar’s son put them in battle order, and sent an envoy to Eloi, “Today is your last day of life! Show yourself a man, Eloi, appear!”

Eloi made a prayer to the staff of success and pleaded, “Today I need your aid, and may the angel who led me to you change into solid gold if only he helps too!”

The angel heard Eloi’s prayer, and began to make things hard for the Narts. Then Washtirji, who had always been favorably inclined toward them, said to the master of the clouds, “Those clouds that you have prepared for the rest of the year, gather them together now instead, and spread them over the land of the Narts. Today there will be a battle there, a test of their powers, so let them fight the battle out themselves, without interference from elsewhere!”

The master of the clouds did as Washtirji requested, and sent down over the Narts such stormy dark thunder clouds that the angels could not see what was happening on earth there. No people could be seen, no homes, no banners flying, so how could they interfere in the struggle between Eloi and the Narts? They left earthly people to settle their own fates.

Bzhar’s son sent one further messenger to Eloi, “Come out to battle, and let us test our strength! We are waiting!”

There was no other way out for Eloi Elinata. He answered thus, “Let us meet face to face in single combat. If you overthrow me, hew off my head, but if I overcome you, I shall hew yours off instead! We shall not sacrifice a whole people to settle this struggle!”

Bzhar’s son agreed to these conditions. They met, and began to fight. They battled from morning till eve, and when they were both exhausted, they separated and rested apart awhile. On the second day they fought even more desperately, but neither could defeat the other. Again they fell apart exhausted, one on one side, one on the other, and lay there quiet. At midnight Eloi rose with difficulty, and quietly slipped away into his castle, and took refuge there.

On the third morning Bzhar’s son awoke, only to find that Eloi had disappeared, like a coward. Full of fury, he ordered his warriors to attack the enemy, and those in the front ranks were soon hacked to pieces. So many were slain that their blood washed away those who stood behind, and they were either drowned, or crushed, trying to escape. In this way the Narts destroyed their enemies down to the last man.

Meanwhile Eloi had left his tower, and was trying to make a personal attack on Bzhar's son from the rear. He crept forward toward him, but Bzhar's son took a quick glance at his tower, and saw which way his own grandmother was facing. At once he understood that someone was trying to make a surprise attack on him from behind. It could be none other than Eloi since all his men were slain, so Bzhar's son quickly turned and overtook him. Eloi, trapped, tried to gain refuge in his tower, but he had only just reached the threshold when Bzhar's son caught up with him and made a mighty sweep with his sword of heavenly steel. The blade struck Eloi on his spine, and split him right down to his navel, cutting him into two. He fell, half dead, on the ground, and Bzhar's son stood astride him crying, "You are a miserable son-of-a-bitch! You are my father's murderer, and the evil foe of all Narts!" He seized Eloi's hair by the left hand, and thrust the point of his sword at his throat.

The staff of decision and success fell from Eloi's hand, and Bzhar's son, with a further sweep of his sword, hewed off his head. Then he stuck it on a lengthy shaft and plunged the other end into a large dung heap. Thus Bzhar's son saved the Nart people from oppression and death.

86 ♦ HOW NART ELTAGAN WAS WED

Once at the Nart meeting place in the square they were speaking about Zhilakhur, the daughter of Taragan, the lord of the Black Sea. That maiden had the strength of a man, and whoever married her would be saved from poverty forever for she had such a rich father. Out of all the Narts, there was not one youth who had not sent matchmakers to her with proposals of marriage, but not one of them had she accepted.

In those days, into the Alagata family was born a little boy whom they named Eltagan. One day his mother put him outside to get warm in the sunshine. He saw how the young Narts passed by with lowered heads, looking gloomy. Eltagan suddenly asked his mother from his cradle, "Mama, what is it that makes all the young Narts look so sad today?"

“Oh, may I give my life for you, my dear son! I must tell you, then, that the lord of the Black Sea, Taragan, has one daughter, Zhilakhur, and none can match her for her beauty. From all ends of the earth come the suitors and their matchmakers, but she does not wish to marry any of them. Among our young Narts there is none whom she counted worthy of that honor. Therefore they feel offended and look so sad!”

“And would she really not marry me either?” asked Eltagan.

“May the lord save me, I’ll die first! You are not old enough to start talking about getting married, my little one! You must grow up to the right age, her age, first!”

Eltagan laid in his cradle another week, and then asked his mother to put him outside in the sun again. No sooner had she done so, than he began to stretch himself in the sunshine, and broke his cradle to pieces. He then got up, and started to walk. First of all he walked down to the village square, where the elder Narts were holding a meeting, and sat down a little way away and listened to their discussions.

One of the elder Narts was speaking, and said to the others, “It will be a deadly shame on us if somebody else takes Taragan’s daughter as his wife, before any of our young Narts does!”

Then Eltagan stepped forward and said to the elders, “O glorious Nart elders! If no one else among the Narts is bold enough to go with me, you may at least watch from afar how I bring home to you that young maiden as my chosen wife!”

The Nart elders were all amazed, and laughed at him, and said, “Very well, we shall watch for your coming from Warp Mountain.”

Then Eltagan returned home to his father and asked him, “My father, did you ever have a warhorse? You were, indeed, a famous warrior in your day. Have you no armor and no weapons to be found, with which I could arm myself?”

“No weapons indeed! Of course they could be found!” answered his father, “but in order to take my weapons in your hands, you must first grow up and become a man, for at present you are far too young, my son!”

“Well, if you have them, find them, and prepare your weapons and armor and your horse for me tomorrow, so that they are fit for use!”

His father was surprised and troubled by this request, but Eltagan was so insistent that at last on the morrow he prepared all his war equipment for his son, as he had asked.

In the morning Eltagan took charge of the armor and weapons, and then saddled and mounted his father’s warhorse. The old horse at once bucked and shied, then leapt up into the sky among the clouds. Down he came to earth, with a clatter of hooves, and asked Eltagan, “Well, youngster, are you still alive?”

“Well, I’m certainly not dead!” retorted Eltagan. “Did you ever see a dead man riding a lively horse, such as you, dancing and prancing?”

His father’s horse fell silent. There was nothing he could say in reply.

Then Eltagan galloped off to Taragan’s castle, while the Narts gathered on Warp Mountain, to watch what would happen.

Eltagan screamed like a hawk, howled like a wild beast, and his horse with one leap took him to Taragan’s castle. There Eltagan saw Taragan sitting on his lordly chair, supported by springs, and covered with mother-of-pearl. He was surrounded by servants, so that not even a fly should settle on him. Eltagan called from the courtyard, “Hey there, my host, will you not accept a guest?”

“It is God who sends us guests!” replied Taragan. “Come in, and be welcome!”

Eltagan entered, and they entertained him magnificently.

“Whence do you come, my guest?” asked Taragan. “What do you wish?”

“I am a Nart of the Alagata family. Eltagan is my name. I have come to make a match with your daughter Zhilakhur! What do you say to that?”

“I am flattered that you should think my daughter worthy of you, but until tomorrow I shall say nothing of that to you!”

So Eltagan remained until the next day in Taragan’s castle. They put him in the guest house for the night, and locked the door fast outside. Then Taragan straightaway said to his waiting slaves, “That young puppy is of the same breed as those who gnawed my father! It has turned out well that he has fallen into my

hands! Go and set fire to the guest house on all four sides, and turn him into ashes!”

At midnight, according to Taragan’s command, they set fire to the guest house. The walls and ceiling were soon ablaze, and a falling fragment awoke Eltagan. He thrust aside the blazing walls with his hands, and trampled them underfoot as he came out. Then he began to blow upon the flames with all his might, and they spread to the castle and thence over the land.

Then with his sword in his hand, Eltagan began to strike down the servants of Taragan, and his guardsmen one by one. When he fought against Taragan’s warriors and their swords met, more sparks began to fly, and set the forest afire. Mountains began to slide, and peals of thunderous rumbling rang out. Even the Narts watching the fight from the Warp crest far away were overcome by the heat of the conflagration.

At last Eltagan seized hold of Taragan, and hurled him across three mountain ranges into the Black Sea. Then he took the beauty Zhilakhur, and seated her before him, and galloped off home toward Warp Mountain.

When he arrived there he saw that the Narts were scattered around here and there, some half hidden, some concealed beneath bushes, and some were lying unconscious. Others were seated beneath trees, scarcely breathing. Eltagan rode up and asked them, “What has happened? What has scattered you Narts around so, half dead?”

“This is thanks to you, son of the Alagata! You have been fighting, and we could not breathe from the heat of that battle, though far away! Why did you disperse us so with the fury of your own fiery breathing?”

Eltagan began to smile. Then the other Narts began to revive, and they mounted their horses and followed Eltagan with his beautiful bride back to his home, where father and mother were waiting to greet them.

For seven days and nights they feasted, not leaving the banqueting tables. What a wedding feast that was! Its like had not been seen before!

Eltagan brought home gifts for the Narts, one after the other, each better than the last, and fun and laughter spread, till finally they left, and sought their homes again.

Then Eltagan, and his beautiful bride Zhilakhur, wedded and bedded, began to live happily together.

87 ♦ THE NARTS AND THE BLACK-HEADED GIANTS

The black-headed giants were powerful oppressors. They were pitiless and robust tyrants, who had conquered all the peoples living in nearby surrounding lands. The only ones who remained undefeated were the Narts, for they were a brave and valorous people.

The best of them once went on a hunting expedition. For many days nothing was heard of them. Then the remaining Narts grew worried, saying, “There is still no news of the best and boldest among us. We must go and search for them. If they are in trouble we must save them!”

Then Agunda, a Nart maiden, quickly gathered together all the other girls and maidens, and they said to Shatana, “There is still no news of all our very best and bravest. There are only old men left at home, whom we might send, so we shall go to find our own lost people ourselves!”

“Oh, you must not do so!” replied Shatana. “You will not find them, and on your way others may offend you, and put you to shame for ever!”

“Do not be worried about that!” answered the maidens. “We shall not let anyone take advantage of us, nor shame us. But if after we have left, the Nart villages are threatened by danger, then send a messenger after us.”

Shatana saw it was useless to argue with them, and said, “I see that you go in any case. If so, then dress in men’s attire, so that your long dresses do not hinder you if you have to fight to survive, and so bring you to distress and defeat!”

“That is good advice!” Agunda agreed. “We shall dress in men’s clothes, so that our long dresses do not get in our way while riding or fighting!”

So the maiden warriors set off in the search of the missing Narts, all dressed as men. They rode a long while, and one evening reached a wild wood. Before they entered it, they rested awhile. Then Agunda ordered, “Prepare your weapons for battle, we may be needing them soon!”

The Nart maidens made ready, and put their weapons in order, as men do, and in the morning began to ride through the wood.

Meanwhile, back in the Nart settlements, black-headed giants had burst in and surrounded the villages. The eldest giant, Zanga, sent his messengers to tell the people what they would be compelled to pay, "You bold Narts! Your forefathers paid tribute to ours. You have paid no dues now for many years. We shall forgive those debts if you pay us three years of tribute."

The Narts who remained were alarmed, and said to one another, "We have never heard of such a thing, that Narts paid tribute to black-headed giants! Well, let us ask Shatana, perhaps she can advise us!"

While the Narts were deciding, the black-headed giants set their horses loose on unmown meadows, and made the villages into stables.

Then the chief giant Zanga asked the remaining Narts, "Why do you not bring us the tribute you owe us?"

"We know nothing of such tribute. Our elders and our best warriors are away on expedition. Without their word we shall not pay!"

Then Zanga ordered his men to ravage the villages, seize all the goods they found, and to round up the Nart cattle. They went round to all the Nart towers, and stole all the goods and cattle, and even took the herdsmen away with them as captives.

Shatana took out the golden flute that she kept, a present from the Mountain Winds, and on it she began to sound the alarm note. This note echoed through the mountains, and was carried by the winds, till it reached Agunda and her companions, who by that time were in the depths of the Black Ravine. When she heard it she said to her maidens, "Some misfortune has overtaken the Narts back home. That is the note of Shatana's golden flute of the Mountain Winds! It is her alarm!"

The maiden warriors turned their horses around and began to ride back, when they met the black-headed giants at the exit of the ravine. They at once recognized their own cattle, which the giants had driven off, and at once attacked the despoilers. For a long while neither side could overcome the other. Three days and three nights blood flowed, and then the chief giant Zanga proposed a

truce and said, "Let your leader come and fight with me in single combat. The first one to fall will share his defeat with all his warriors, who will then become captives and slaves."

"May you be accursed all your life, if you do not keep your word!" answered Agunda, and she herself stepped forward to face the black-headed giant in single combat. At first they fought with spears, and Zanga's spear was broken in two. Then they fought with swords, and Agunda's sword went flying from her hand. Then they grappled with one another, hand to hand, and wrestled to and fro. Suddenly Agunda's helmet slipped off, and Zanga saw that the opponent was a maiden. He stopped at once and said scornfully, "Ha, these bold Narts! They dare not fight us themselves, but send maidens instead!"

Straightaway the other giants surrounded the maidens, twisted their arms behind their backs, and led them off as captives.

Meanwhile Shatana, seeing that nothing had come of her warning, took her golden flute of the Mountain Winds, and sounded the alarm once more. The note echoed among the mountains, was borne by the wind, and then reached the ears of the Nart men still hunting in the wilds. Urizhmag, on hearing it at once said to his companions, "Let us go home! Something is wrong in our villages! Shatana sounds the alarm! We must return at once, though we have had no success in the hunt yet. More is the pity!"

"Let us go, then!" replied Shoshlan. "It seems that some great misfortune has descended upon our land in our absence."

"While you are arguing here, the enemy there is dishonoring your wives and daughters, and mocking their misery!" cried Shiridon.

"May your tongue dry up in your mouth, Shiridon, if you say such awful things!" replied Urizhmag angrily.

The Nart braves turned their horses around, and began to ride home quickly. On their way they passed the mouth of the Black Ravine, and saw streams of congealed blood everywhere. They could not understand from where it came, but spurred their horses on more vigorously.

At last they reached their native land, and saw everything trampled down by horses' hooves. They entered the village and found the streets full of horse dung.

They went straight to Shatana, and asked in alarm, “What has happened? Who dared to attack us, and despoil our homes?”

“The black-headed giants came, not in their hundreds, but in their thousands!” replied Shatana. “They demanded that we should pay them tribute, three years at once, and the rest they would overlook. We refused and paid them nothing, and then they sacked the villages, drove off the herds of cattle, and even took the herdsmen captive!”

“Where are all our young maidens, then?” inquired Urizhmag, disturbed.

“Well, you didn’t return for such a long time that they went out to search for you, and we have heard nothing of them since. They too seem to have met misfortune while seeking for you!”

The Narts grew full of anger when they heard all of this, and gathered forces for a great campaign against the black-headed giants. They rode one day, then the next, then a week they rode, and another, and at last they came out on a wide steppe. They met a herdsman taking care of horses.

“Where are you from, and whose horses are these?” they asked.

“I shall not say where I am from, but these horses belong to the head of the black-headed giants, Zanga.”

They rode on farther, and met a shepherd keeping a flock of sheep: “Where do you come from, shepherd, and whose sheep are these?”

“I shall not say where I come from, but these sheep belong to Zanga, the chief of the black-headed giants,” the shepherd replied.

Then they came to a place where the road divided into three, and began to wonder which path to take. While they were arguing about this among themselves, Washtirji saw them from the crest of Wazh mountain, and taking the form of an old man, descended to them on the plain.

The Narts greeted him with the respect due to an elder and asked, “Be good enough to tell us, as you know this place better than we, which of these three paths will take us to the land of the black-headed giants?”

“Take the middle one!” replied the old man, and went off.

So the Narts rode along the middle path, and Washtirji hid himself. Along the way they rode, and once again came to a place where the road divided into

three. Once more they were puzzled as to which path to take. Just then Washtirji appeared again, but this time in the form of an old woman. The Narts greeted her kindly, and asked her, “Be kind enough, dear mother, since you have lived here longer than we, which path must we take to reach the land of the black headed giants?”

“Take the path to the left!” replied the old woman, and soon went off.

The Narts rode to the left, and yet again came to a spot where the path divided into three. Which way should they take now? Just then, as they were looking around, lost, Washtirji appeared to them in his usual form, and greeted them warmly, “Where are you bound for, brave Nart riders?” he asked them.

“We are bound for the land of the black-headed giants, but we do not know which of these three paths to take!” they replied.

“Keep to the right, “ said Washtirji, “and you will come straight there, where you wish to be!” Thus they rode on until they came to the land they were seeking, and there they sent a messenger to Chief Zanga, asking to see him. He ordered his servant to ask the messenger from where he came, and what he wanted in the land of the black-headed giants.

“We are bold Narts” replied the messenger. “May our curse rest on your heads all your days if you do not now come forth and measure your strength against ours in battle!”

Hearing that the Narts had appeared before him in his own land, the chief Zanga quickly gathered together all the black-headed giants from their enormous settlement, and having donned their armor and taken their weapons, they speedily went forth against the Narts. Thus the battle began in all its fury—no mercy was asked nor given by either side.

Seven days and seven nights they fought, but neither side could overcome the other, because those giants whom the Narts slew in the evening, overnight regained their powers, and in the morning were alive and joined the battlefield again.

Then Washtirji came down again to the Narts and told them, “You will not come to a good end fighting the black-headed giants so. They have a powerful god who supports them. Tomorrow morning, hide yourselves among the rushes

along the banks of the river nearby, before the giants bring their steeds down to drink their morning water, and to refresh themselves thus as well. When they appear on the riverbank, then attack them before they have a chance to drink, and thus overcome them!”

The Nart warriors concealed themselves among the rushes by the banks of the river flowing through the black-headed giants’ land. When the giants came down to drink, the Narts shot them down with their bows and arrows, and slew most of them in this way. Those who survived, with the chief Zanga at their head, again rose to battle. From early morn till late eve the struggle went on, and blood flowed in streams in front of the Narts’ swords, and drowned or washed away the giants in the rear. Toward sunset the Narts began to triumph, and forced the black-headed giants back toward their fortress. All were now slain, only Zanga remained alive, and him they could not kill, however they tried.

Then Washtirji appeared to the Narts again and told them, “Smite him on the bridge of his nose. Only thus can he be destroyed!”

Then the Narts loosed their arrows at Zanga, and struck him on the bridge of his nose, and soon he fell and died.

The Narts freed their captive maidens and young women, and burned the fortress down to the ground. Then they rounded up all the cattle of the black-headed giants, and their own stolen herds, and set off for home.

When they reached their own homes again there was great rejoicing. They slaughtered some of the cattle of the black-headed giants, and feasted many days to celebrate their victory over their deadly enemies.

88 ♦ THE SWORD IN THE LAKE
A VARIANT OF “THE DEATH OF BATRAZ” (TALE 72)³

Batraz took the Narts to an extreme: the sword Dzus-qara drained their blood without his help while [his horse] Dur-Dur devoured them. Batraz brought such misfortunes upon the Narts and because of his whims they grew greatly sick of him. Eventually a large group of Narts had vanished because of his wishes. No force could harm Batraz and no weapon had any effect on him. So that he might

continue to destroy Narts in an even more brutal manner Batraz one day summoned them and demanded that they were to prepare one hundred wagons of charcoal and fetch twenty-four sets of blacksmith bellows. By their own strength they were also to make a colossal-size forge out of a mountain.

The Narts brought one hundred wagons of charcoal, made a heap of it all, fetched twenty-four sets of bellows, and arranged them on both sides of the mountain. There they stood blowing them onto the heap. When a strong fire had taken hold of the mass Batraz threw himself into the mass and remained there until he was white-hot. Then he demanded that the Narts throw him into the sea, where he could temper himself like the best steel. As he stood there the sea boiled fiercely, stormed, and raged. Batraz so hardened himself that no weapon could harm him. When at last he came out of the sea he came out like a steel man.

In order to fulfill his revenge more greatly he began to strike the Narts. Woe to the Narts! Blood flowed like a river. He slaughtered thousands as they groaned like locusts. The Narts fell into despair. Where could they hide? There was no escape from Batraz's vengeance. Day and night he slaughtered them with his sword *Dzus-qara* while his horse *Dur-Dur* devoured them alive. When they tried to defend themselves the Narts could cause no harm to Batraz, because his nature was now as strong as that of hardened steel so that weapons did not affect him.

So that the Narts might finally preserve their souls Batraz took it into his head to show them his hard and deathless might. He ordered the Narts to bring a huge cannon along with a hundred *pood* (360 pounds, or 164 kilograms) charge of gunpowder. The Narts brought the cannon and said to Batraz, "The cannon has been brought."

He ordered them to charge it and then set Batraz with the charge inside the barrel like a cannon ball. Yet again here was grief. Misfortune fell to the lot of the Narts. The Narts fell into despair. As they started to charge the gigantic cannon they found they needed a commensurately huge ramrod without which they could not carry out their task. When Batraz saw the misery and despair of the Narts he pointed to a thick pine tree three *sazhens* (20 feet, or 6 meters) in

girth. He prepared this himself and then climbed back in. The Narts said that although the ramrod was now ready, how could they tell where he, Batraz, was inside the bore. He replied that when he was seated tightly and far enough from the barrel opening, he would cough, and that his first cough would mean that his flexed knee had reached the charge. And just so, as he coughed the first time, a huge and powerful blast of wind hurled the ramrod out of the cannon and scattered the Narts over all the region.

Once again came misery: a great portion of the Narts were maimed or died of severe injuries brought upon them by the blast of air from Batraz's cough. There was nothing to be done! The remaining Narts gathered once again to resume their task, to set Batraz and the powder charge inside the cannon. They set him inside the cannon with the same huge pine ramrod. Then a second time Batraz let them know that he was seated tightly inside the bore with his knees against the charge. He then ordered the Narts to take aim at an inaccessible fortress high atop Warp-aldar. This had been a source of many troubles and of insults of all kinds for the Narts and for Batraz.

The Narts aimed the cannon at the inaccessible fortress atop Warp-aldar, and fired. With this shot Batraz shattered the fortress of Warp-aldar, but he himself was left unharmed like an immortal man transformed into hardened steel. He defeated Warp-aldar and brought it forever under the control of the Narts and himself. The lord of the enemies in the fortress pledged eternal friendship with the Narts. It had been hard for the Narts to suffer under the domination of the fortress atop Warp-aldar. Despite constant war no power had been able to subdue the fortress, Providence had decreed it so, until it came to its decline under the blast of the gigantic cannon with the charge of the deathless man made of hardened steel, Batraz.

Batraz was dissatisfied with all his efforts at vengeance up until then, so that henceforth he started to pursue his quest with tenfold force. His wrath was such that it made the Narts forget what he had already brought down on their heads. At first he tried to distract them with wild and carefree living until they fell into a reverie. Then he planned to destroy them once and for all. At this point God

took notice of Batraz's anger, and He grew angry with him because he was an apostate and did not believe in His truth.

The Narts sank to such misery that they could find no place to hide from Batraz's merciless and greedy thirst for blood. One group escaped his sword, but perished from hunger brought on by Batraz. The bread of the Narts was made from maize, which they would store in the event of a poor harvest. It fell to them that their reserve was not big enough because he would harass them at night with arrows when they tried to gather it, just as by day he would turn the bread of the cornfield to coal.

Their misery was endless. It was impossible to escape the vengeance of Batraz. He, deathless, wrestled with holy angels and with God's saints, but then God in his anger decided to curtail the deathless life of Batraz. He sent upon him various diseases and decreed that he would suffer death like an earthly creature. But for the Narts this gave no relief. From Batraz various ulcers and wounds opened up and other incurable diseases spread with stink and death among the Narts. Thus even in his illness he tried to drive the Narts to utter ruin and death.

Finally a small portion of them was left alive, and they beseeched Batraz not to drive the Nart race to extinction and to offer some chance for them to escape from his attack. Then Batraz showed mercy toward them and answered that after having inflicted such misery on them it was enough and that he would die. But up until that time he had not been able to die because his sword Dzus-qara had not been thrown away into the sea. He said that he was fated to die only in that way. Otherwise he would live and bring death upon them until they were all exterminated.

Again, the Narts were in misery. How were they to throw the sword of Batraz into the sea? They decided to speak as though they had already done so, to persuade him that the sword was already thrown into the sea and that the time for him to die had come. The Narts went and said to sick Batraz, with varying assurances, that his sword had been thrown away and that the end of his life had come. Batraz asked them what they had seen when they had thrown the sword away. The Narts finally answered that nothing special had happened to the sea.

“Thus you must know,” said Batraz, “the sword Dzus-qara has not been thrown into the sea; otherwise you would have seen several miracles.”

Upon these words of Batraz, the Narts hastened with all their strength and might to carry out the wish of Batraz. With the help of the few thousand still living they dragged Batraz’s sword to the shore and threw it into the sea. When the sword was cast away a great storm rose up and the water erupted into waves. The sea itself began to boil and took on the color of blood. The Narts were astonished by these miracles and their gladness was boundless. They went and related to Batraz what they had seen. He, persuaded of their truth, at last give up his spirit, after which it was easy for the Narts to give his remains to the earth.

Even after consigning his body to the earth the Narts were unable to be sure that Batraz was truly dead and still feared that he might still wipe their race from the earth. For their credulity God turned his wrath upon the Narts and sent fire down from the clouds so that they were annihilated.

89 ♦ THE DOWNFALL OF THE NARTS

The valorous Narts spent their whole lives in battles. They smashed the power of many despoilers who sought to conquer them. They destroyed the giants to the last one, and even entered into battle with both the earthly and heavenly spirits. Seven times seven they annihilated the heavenly spirits, and twice as many times again exterminated the earthly ones.

There were none left against whom they might test their strength. They were thinking of this, when mischievous Shiridon, son of Gatag, said, “Pray to God then! You would do better to put yourselves against him, and test your strength against his!”

The Narts replied to this daring suggestion made by Shiridon, “We have prayed to God already, but we do not know where he can be found!”

“Well, then, you have only to do something to anger him, and he will appear and reveal himself to you!” answered Shiridon scornfully.

“How can we do something that will certainly make him angry them?” asked the Narts, unused to this idea of Shiridon’s.

“The devil take you Narts, for being so hard of understanding!” replied Shiridon. “Just stop praying to him, forget his name, as though it never existed. Make all your doors taller, so that you do not have to bow your heads when you enter, and God will never think that you are bowing to him. If you do all this, God will seek you out in his anger!”

The Narts did all that Shiridon advised them to do, and made their doors higher, and no longer bowed their heads. They no longer offered prayers. They never uttered God’s name, and they forgot his existence.

Then God called a swallow as messenger and said to it, “Fly down to earth, to the Narts, and ask how I have offended them. Then the swallow flew to the Nart meeting place, and settled on the tip of a young tree growing there, and began to chatter away in the Khatiag dialect. “I have been sent to you as an intermediary. The personage before whom you used to bow wants me to ask you, ‘What have I done against you Narts, and how have I offended you?’ He awaits your reply.”

Urizhmag understood this strange dialect, and addressed the others: “The one whom we are seeking has sent his intermediary and is waiting for an answer. Think it over and tell me your unanimous decision!”

“What is there to think over?” replied the Narts. “We have decided already. We served this God a long time, but he never once appeared before us so that we might see him, as we begged him to do in our prayers. Now let him appear, and come before us, and we shall test our strengths!”

Urizhmag translated this reply to the swallow, which at once flew off and told God what the Narts gave as their answer.

God sent the swallow back to the Narts with another question, “What should I do if we test our strength against each other, and I overcome you? Shall I root out the whole tribe completely, or should I leave some weaker ones behind to continue the Nart generation with inferior successors? Which fate would you choose?”

The swallow returned to the Narts and repeated God’s words. They then looked at each other and said quite firmly, “If he exterminates our tribe, then let him do so that none survives!”

But at once a few other Narts, not so sensible, said otherwise, “How can we be without successors even if not so strong as we are?”

Urizhmag spoke sternly to these objectors, “Why did you speak so? It simply is much better to perish completely than to leave weaklings and struggling stragglers behind!”

Finally, after much discussion, all the Narts agreed with Urizhmag.

The swallow then flew back and told God what they had decided. God, in reply, said to the swallow, “I give you no peace, I know, but I must ask of you your kind consent to fly back just once more and tell the Narts that all who are able to do battle should put on their armor next Friday, and go to the field of Khizh, where they practice battle, and I shall appear before them there!”

For the third time the swallow flew back to the Narts, and gave them God’s answer, and this time they were glad to hear it.

“See, we shall do battle this time with God himself!” they said. “We shall now learn at last what kind of a man he is!”

So on the following Friday all the Narts who could hold a sword went hurrying helter-skelter, overtaking each other, to the field of Khizh, where the battle was to begin. All the Nart women and children took up their places on the crest of Wazh heights, to watch the fight.

But God did not want to exterminate the Narts, and this time sent Washtirji as his messenger, and asked him to convey his message, “My dear Narts, I love you all, and do not want to destroy you! Just think once more before you give battle. I can grant you eternal life, or eternal glory, one or the other. Which will you choose?”

Washtirji appeared before the Narts and gave them God’s message.

“What do we need eternal life for?” asked the Narts. “Would it be wonderful to live without end? But if our glory and our good name lived forever on earth—that is what we should wish!”

Washtirji returned to God and told him the Narts’ answer.

Then God grew full of wrath, and cursed them all, saying, “May your daily toil give you no more than one measure of flour!”

That curse soon took effect among the Narts. No matter how many shocks of corn they threshed in a day, they never got more than one measure of grain from them. But they were clever people, and thought of a way out. They threshed only one shock of seven sheaves each day. From each of the seven sheaves they received a full measure of grain, so that each shock gave them ten!

So they continued to live with sufficient food to eat as previously.

When God saw this piece of cunning, he placed another curse on them. He made their fields remain green and unripe by day beneath the sun, and only at night were they ripe and ready to reap.

No matter when the Narts went to reap in the sunshine, their corn was still green. Therefore they tried to reap at night, beneath the moon. But then, when they entered their fields, the ripe ears became green again.

Again the Narts thought up a very cunning way out of the difficulty. They pitched their tents near the corn fields, and late in the evening went out with their bows and arrows, which they shot among the standing ears. These were twin-headed arrows, like tiny sickles, and they cut off the stalks of corn that stood ripe before them. Then, to increase the supplies of grain, they did not separate the grain from the ears, or the ears from the stalk, but threshed them and ground them all together.

So they managed to live for another year. After that they said to each other, remembering what they had said to God about eternal life, "Why are we doing so? Did we not tell God that we preferred a glorious death to an inglorious life? It is time to make an end to all this!" So they then began to dig their own graves. When all was ready, they simply threw themselves into them.

Thus came about the downfall of the Narts, but their fame lived on.

1. In ancient times there was a general custom of having two wives or more, especially among feudal lords and rich peasants. Sons of these two wives were counted blood-brothers, as were also those who swore an oath on brotherhood. The Ossetians termed this relationship sworn-brotherhood, or *artkhord*, which means “on oath.”

Ethnologically this custom goes back to ancient Iranian tribes, and it was widespread among Ossetians in the past. Judging by records of Herodotus, and by archaeological monuments, it was close to the old Scythian custom of sworn-brotherhood. In Ossetia the ritual went so: those becoming sworn-brothers filled a goblet with *araq* or beer, and dropped a coin into it. Then each one drank three times from it and swore an oath of brotherhood. A strict custom of family share-out was observed, in which close blood-relations took part, particularly in huge patriarchal families that grew up in the nineteenth century among Ossetians, often numbering 60 to 100 members over three generations. It was headed by the eldest (the father or his brother), where rights were strictly limited by the family council. Families usually split up after the death of their head. There a great role was played by the *afashin*, the eldest woman, the controller of the family storehouse. They often compared her for goodness and generosity with the famous Nart heroine Shatana. “She is our Shatana!” they would say of such an old woman.

2. As is seen from many of the tales, the most ancient Nart warriors were military leaders and their main occupation was the organization of military campaigns. The main aim of these expeditions was the seizure of herds of horse and cattle belonging to neighboring feudal lords. The meaning of these words spoken by the Nart Solitary is simply, “Can I really refuse to go on a cattle-raid?”

[This cattle-raiding was a common event, and is reflected not only in the tales of the Narts, but in the Irish sagas also, with the same dash and daring.—WM]

3. From Khamytsaeva and Bjazyrov, 1990, vol. 2, pp. 312–314.

[This is evidently a garbled myth offering the vision of Batraz as a sort of implacable monster or plague, pursuing vengeance to an extreme. Surely the tradition of vendetta in the Caucasus must at times have seemed this way even in the era of heroic warfare. The image is mixed however in that it also hails Batraz as the vanquisher of the hated foe of Warp-aldar fortress (“Lord Warp,” or “Lord of the Falcon’s Place”). The use of a cannon indicates the persistence of Batraz as hero and late date of this episode.

As Abaev has pointed out in his introduction to this collection the Christian God ultimately makes His appearance in order to resolve the impasse of vendetta and to save the Narts. He is opposed to Batraz as well as superior to him. Batraz, naturally, is depicted as a blasphemer for this purpose. The Christian God not only destroys Batraz but annihilates the Narts as well, thereby fulfilling Batraz’s own agenda. This is surely a curious turn, but the Nart sagas in all their forms are explicitly concerned with the fact that the Narts no longer exist, and this could be seen as this myth’s explanation for their extinction.—WM]

TRANSLATOR'S EPITAPH



Sleep, brave folk, and take your rest.
While you were living, you were the best!
Now you lie underneath the earth,
While the world recounts to us your worth!
Your fine feats are known to all
Into oblivion you shall not fall.
Your bold prowess and power were great!
. . . And you yourselves chose your fate!

APPENDIX OF NAMES



PHONEMICIZATION BY TAMIRLAN SALBIEV
ETYMOLOGIES BY JOHN COLARUSSO

THE NAMES of the Narts in the texts as well as in the introduction have been rendered so as to make them accessible to an English reader while retaining a semblance of their pronunciation in the Iron (literary) dialect of Ossetian. This has meant leveling the contrast between /æ/ (like the ‘a’ in ‘cat’) and /a/ (like the ‘a’ in ‘father’). The uvular /q/ is collapsed into /x/ and both are usually written ‘kh,’ while /ɣ/ is written as ‘g.’ Curiously, the Iron dialect has undergone a sound shift since its orthography was set in the early Soviet period. The phonemes (distinctive sounds) /s/ and /z/ have been backed so that they are now pronounced much like ‘sh’ and ‘zh’ (‘s’ in ‘pleasure’) (Abaev 1964, p. 7), while the affricates /c/ (‘ts’) and /ʒ/ (‘dz’) have been spirantized to ‘s’ and ‘z.’ The glottalic ejective /c’/ has been retained, but has been retracted as with /s/ and /z/. It is rendered as a simple ‘ch.’ Similarly, the glottalic ejectives, /p’/, /t’/, /č’/, and /k’/ have been written without their diacritic ejection mark (single right-hand quote). Thus, the name /ʒerassæ/ Dzerassæ is here written ‘Zerashsha,’ while /æxsærtæg/ Ækhsærtæg is written ‘Akhshartag.’

For the reader who is linguistically inclined these names are listed here in their “Anglicized” version with their original phonemic form, from Iron unless otherwise noted. Stress in Ossetic is intensive and usually alternates between the

first or second syllable of the same word (neighboring Georgian also shows variable stress for the same word), although /a/ and /o/ attract stress over other vowels (ibid., pp. 10–11). The phonemic system of Iron Ossetic is as follows (after ibid., pp. 3, 6, with modifications from Abaev 1996):

| OSSETIAN CONSONANTS | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------|------|
| Labial | p | b | p' | f | v | m |
| Dental | t | d | t' | | | n |
| Alveolar (prepalatal) | c | ʒ | c' | s | z | r, l |
| Palato-alveolar (palatal) | č | ǰ | č' | | | |
| Velar | k | g | k' | | | |
| Rounded | k ^o | g ^o | k' ^o | | | |
| Uvular | q | — | — | x | ɣ | |
| Rounded | q ^o | | | x ^o | ɣ ^o | |

Rounded velars and uvulars have emerged before earlier */u/, which has reduced to /ə/, while plain velars and uvulars remain before /u/ derived from earlier /o/. In other words */ku -/ → /k^oə-/, but */ko-/ → /ku-/. /p/, /t/, and so on, are voiceless aspirates, much as in English. /b/, /d/, and so on are fully voiced as in Russian. /p'/, /t'/, and so on are made with the vocal cords closed and with the larynx rising like a piston to create a slight pressure buildup and a corresponding popping effect when the sound is released. Stops and fricatives are frequently geminated (doubled) in various positions. Geminated aspirated stops lose their aspiration but remain tense, while geminated voiced stops lose most of their voicing but remain lax, so that the contrast between geminated stops is that between prolonged tense and lax stops. Geminated ejectives, /p'/, /t'/, and so on retain their ejection.

| OSSETIAN VOWELS | |
|-----------------|--|
| | |

| | Front | Back |
|------|-------|------|
| High | i | u |
| Mid | e | ə, o |
| Low | æ | a |

Abaev (1996) also posits long and short forms for /i/ and /u/. For most Iron speakers /æ/ is central (IPA [a]) and /a/ is very low, back, and tense (IPA [ɑ]). In Digoron /æ/ is [æ] and /a/ is [a]. Generally the vowels have their “continental” values, much as in Italian. The /ə/, much like the ‘a’ in ‘sofa,’ is not a reduced or weak value in Ossetian, but has a full sustained value.

Some of the names have been glossed [by JC] when their meaning is evident or some semantic link is possible. One should refer to Knobloch (1991) for further speculations on these names. References here to Abaev’s etymological dictionary (1996) are cited as (A volume number, page number), those to Bigulaev et al. (1962) are cited as (B, page number), and those to Kuipers (1975) as (K, page number). Other occasional abbreviations are ‘sfx’ for ‘suffix,’ ‘adj’ for ‘adjectival,’ ‘coll’ for ‘collective ending,’ cf. for Latin *confer* ‘compare,’ ‘proto-Ir’ for ‘proto-Iranian,’ and ‘proto-I-I’ for ‘proto-Indo-Iranian.’ Reconstructed historical forms are marked with an asterisk.

For a simple guide to the names found in the tales, with some suggestions as to their meanings or significance refer to the “Guide to the Names.” This list and the one here do not entirely coincide and often differ on matters of etymology.

NAMES

Adai /aday/

Adakizh /adæqəz/

Adaza /adaʒæ/

Adil /adəl/

Afsharon /æfsæron/ ← /fsær-on/ ? ‘jaw(.bone)-name.sfx,’ but note West Circassian /pš^yar/ ‘fat’ (noun or adjective) (K, 34)

Afshati /æfsati/ “god of the hunt,” cf. Svan /aspac’/, Thracian Sabazios (A 1, 109).

Afshurg /æfsury/ ← proto-I-I. */ap-sūra-ga/ ‘water-strong-sfx’

Agunda /agundæ/ cf. Parthian y’kwnd, Persian yākand, Georgian /iagundi/ ‘ruby, sapphire’ (A 1, 35), but note Circassian /ak^oande/ (Colarusso 2002, saga 11, n. 17) where the root /k^oə/ ‘wagon, cart’ seems to be involved

Agur /agur/ Turkic /oğuz/, /oğur/ ‘horde’ (A 1, 36–37)

Aguzn /aguznə/

Aigan /aygan/

Ainag /aynæg/

Aishana /aysana/

Akhar-kalak /axær-kalak/ ‘awful.judgment-citadel’ (A 1, 89) (Armenian /k’alak’/ ‘fortress’)

Akhokha (Mountain) /axoxayə (xox)/ cf. /xox/, Digoron /xonx/ ‘mountain’ (A 4, 222–23)

Akhshar /æxsar/ ← */xsart/ ‘brave’ (A 4, 224–25)

Akhshartag /æxsærtæg/ ← */xsart-æg/ ← proto-Ir. /xšatr-ak-/ ‘kingly-adj.sfx,’ cf. proto-I-I */ksatr(i)ya-/ ‘ruling caste’ (A 4, 229–30), see Abaev (1964, p. 119) for weakening of /a/ to /æ/

Akhshargard /æxsargard/ ← */xsar(t)-kard/ ‘bave-sword (A 4, 225–26; B, 127)

Akhshartaggatta, Akhshartagketta /æxsærtæggattæ/ ← /xsart-æg-ket-tæ/ ‘rulers-adj.sfx-clan-coll’ ← */æxsartæg-ket-tə/ ‘kingly-clan-genitive.plural’ (Salbiev, personal communication)

Akhshualy /æxsuali/ see Shkhuali

Akola /akolæ/

Alaf /alæf/

Alagata /alægatæ/, Alanic */āla-gā-ta/ ← proto-Ir. /*ārya-kā-ta/ “Aryans” (A 1, 44–45)

aldar /ældar/ ‘lord, prince,’ (A 1, 126–28)

Ali /alə/ ‘Alan’ (A 4, 273–74)

Alimbeg /aləmbeg/ ← */ālan-beg/, with Turkic /beg/ ‘sir, lord’

Alita /alətæ/ ← /alə-tæ/ “Alans”

aluton /æluton/ ‘beer’, cf. English *ale* (A 1, 129–31)

Aminon /aminon/ by dissimilation from */amon-on/ ‘(to.)reveal-name.sfx,’ perhaps itself by assimilation from */amon-ən/ ‘(to.)reveal-deverbal. Nominal. asbtract.sfx’ (Abaev 1964, p. 90, §172), “Revelation, Revealer, Teacher,” which would align this name with Wasamonga /wac-amon-gæ/ ‘holy-reveal, indicate-diminutive,’ “Holy Little Revelation,” this being the “Holy Grail” of the Narts

Anabar /ænæbar/

Andi (felt cloak) /andiyag/ ‘Andi-adj.sfx’ (after the Andi people of Daghestan)

Arakhzau /arəqcaw/

Araz (vault) /æraz/

Arfan /ærfæn/ ← proto-Ir. */abra-pana/ ‘heaven(ly)-guard’ (A 1, 175)

Arjinarag /æržinaræg/

Arkizh /arqəzə/

Arpan /arpan/

Asa /acæ/ ← proto-Ir. */vāča-/ ‘holy’ (of non-Ossetian origin)

Asamazh /acæməz/ ← proto-Ir. */vāča-maz/ ‘holy-great,’ “Great Holy (One)” (A 1, 26)

Asata /acætæ/ ← proto-Ir. */vāča-ta/ ‘holy-coll,’ “Holy Ones”

Asirukhsh /acəruks/ ← /wacə-ruks/ ← proto-Ir. */vāča-ruxš-/ ‘holy-white’ (A 1, 27), see introduction, note 20.

Avdiwag /ævdiwæg/ also /avdīwag/ ← proto-Ir. */hafta-dayva-ka-/ seven-demon-adj, from the name of a cult (A 1, 84, 199–200); see Abaev (1964, p. 119) for vowel weakening

Awar-Khan /awar-qan/ ‘Avar-khan,’ after the Avar nomads of Medieval times

Azaukhan /azauxan/

Azh (tree) /azæ/

Balg /balyæ/ perhaps from a Celtic language, such as that of the Bastarnae of the western Pontic steppe, cf. *Belgae*, or Irish (*Fir-*)*Bolg* “brave, mighty”

Balshag /balsæg/ ← Ingush /malx-sæg/ ‘sun-man’ (A 1, 234)

Barashtir /barastər/ ← /bar/ ‘ruler’ plus Chechen /eštr/ “god of the Other World” (cf. Babylonian Ishtar “goddess of dawn”) (A 1, 236)

Batag /bætæg/ ← */bart-ak-/ see introduction, note 11

Batraz /batraz/ see introduction, note 6, but also (A 1, 240–41)

Berd’s (cave) /berd/ a personal name of Turkic origin

Bezenag /bezenag/ ← */bergen-ag/ ‘Greek-adj.sfx,’ cf. Georgian /burzeni/ (A 1, 260)

Bibys /bibəc/

Bidas /bidac/

Bigar /biyar/

Biseg, Bseg /bæceg/ these and the next four words may be based on the same root seen /bæcæw/ ‘argument’ (B. 171), or /bæxs-/ ‘to suffer, endure’ (A1, 283)

Bisenag /bæcen-ag/ b. - adj.

Bisenon /bæcen-on/ b.- name, sfx.

Bisenta /bæcen-tæ/ b/ - cell

Bizhghwana /bizɣwanə/ ← */bæc-ɣ°anə/

Bodzo /bozo/ ‘dominant billy-goat’ (B, 167)

Bonvarnon /bonværnən/ ← /bon-færn-on/ ‘day-heavenly-name.sfx,’ “the morning star,” (A 1, 2; A 1, 67)

Bora /boræ/ ← Proto-I-I */bhāra-/ ‘great,’ Sanskrit /bhārata/, but see (A 1, 268)

Borata /borætæ/ ← Proto-I-I */bhāra-ta/ ‘great-coll,’ but see (A 1, 268)

Burafarnig /buræfærnæg/, Digoron /boræfærnug/ ← /boræ-færn-ug/ ‘great-heavenly-endowed.with,’ see (A 1, 271) for parallel with Norse Bora giant father of Odin

Burazag /būræzæg/ ← /boræ-zæg/ ‘great-denominative.sfx,’ “Mighty” (?)
(Abaev 1964, p. 90)

Bzhar /bzar/ ← Circassian /bʒa-rə/ ‘horn-being,’ “the Horned One,” referring to
the antlered horses depicted in Scythian art (Rice 1965, 1957; Gryaznov
1969)

Cekh /c'ex/ ← proto-Circassian */č'əx̣°/ ‘pale blue,’ (K, p. 36), or */c'əx̣°/
‘person,’ (K, p. 1)

Chelakhshartag /čelæxsærtæg/ ← Circassian /č'yaaλa/ ‘child, youth,’ plus /
æxsærtæg/, see earlier.

Chenzena /č'enzena/

Chinta /č'əntæ/, note West Circassian /č'yənt'a/

Dollau /dollaw/

Donbettir /donbettər/ ← */don-pettər/ ‘river-Peter’ (A 1, 367–68)

Donbettirta /donbettərtæ/ collective of the preceding

Dur-Dur /dūr-duræ/ ‘stone-weir’ (A 1, 376)

Dzus-qara ← */dyus-qara/, with /qara/ ‘black,’ of Turkic origin

Elda /eldæ/ ? ← Circassian /λədə/ ‘(to.) shine, glitter’ (K, 46)

Elia /elia/ Elijah

Eloi-Elinati /eloy elənatə/

Eltagan /eltayan/ ← Turkic /yältä-yan/ ‘excite-able’ (A 1, 411)

Falvara /fælværa/ ← */flor-lavr/ ‘blossom (of.the.)laurel’ (A 1, 442–43)

Fashnart /fæsnart/ ← /fæs-nart/ ‘behind-Nart,’ a region (A 1, 456)

Fuaga /fuagæ/ cf. /fūgæ/, Digoron /fogæ/ ‘rhododendron’ (A 1, 485)

Galagon /galægon/ ← /gal-æg-on/ ‘ox-adj.sfx-name.sfx,’ (A 1, 506)

Gatag /gætæg/ see /bætæg/ earlier

Gomzhikh /gomzəx/ ? ← */g°əm-zəx/ ← Proto-Circassian */g°əm-c'əx̣°/
‘Goom-people’

Goom /g°əm/ ← Abaza derivational complex /g°ə-m-/ ‘enter-not-,’ “lacking,
without; restless,” or ‘center-oblique.case,’ “Center” used as a toponym in
Abaza

Goomag /g^oəmag/ ← /g^oəm-ag/ ‘Goom-belonging.to’ (Abaev 1964, p. 85, §168.6)

Gop-Chekh /gopp-c'ex/ ‘tuft-pale.blue,’ (A 1, 524)

Gum ‘person,’ see Goom

Gur (fortress) /g^oər/, Digoron /guræ/ ‘torso,’ earlier ‘heart, breast,’ perhaps here ‘center,’ cf. Mingrelian /guri/ ‘heart’ (A 1, 531), also Circassian /g^oə/ ‘heart, center’; see Goom.

Gurgoi /g^oərgoy/ preceding, with Circassian /-g^oa-y/ ‘region-one.of,’ found in tribal names.

Kanz /qanz/ ‘brain’ (A 2, 263–4)

Kanzargash /qənzærgæs/ ← /qan-čängäs/ “Chingis Khan” (A 2, 291)

Kanz Saumarota /qanz sawmaro-tæ/ with /sawmaro-/ linked to the word for ‘black (earth)’ (A 3, 47), perhaps “Leader of Those of the Black Earth”; see Shaumaron-Burzabakh

Karamag /qæræməy/ cf. /qær-ən/ ‘shout-infinitive’ (A 2, 293), or Turkic /qara-/ ‘black’

Kariu (Mountain) /qæriw/ cf. /qæræw/ ‘blind’ (A 2, 294)

Karmagon /k'armægon/

Kazita /kazitæ/ ← /kazi-tæ/ ‘demon-coll,’ ← Georgian /kaži/ ‘demon’ (A 2, 566)

Khamis /xæmæc/ see note 6 of introduction, note 6, but also (A 4, 172–73).

Kharan-Khuag /xæran-xwag/ ‘forbidden.place-?’ (A 4, 174–75)

Khatiag (tongue) /xatiag/ ← /xati-ag/ ‘Hatti- belonging.to,’ “Hattic or Hittite language”; for /-ag/ see Abaev (1964, p. 85, §168.6)

Khazhm (Steppe) /xæzm/

Khizh (field) /xəz/ ‘net, trap’ (A 4, 273)

Khizhin (pass) /xəzən/ ‘bag, pouch’ (A 4, 275)

Khor-aldar Burkhor-ali /xor-ældar būr-xor-alə/ ‘grain-lord yellow-grain-Alan,’ “the Alan Grain or Millet Lord” (A 1, 273–74)

Khorcheska /xorč'eskæ/ ← /xor-českæ/ ‘grain’ plus proto-Circassian /k^yaašxa/ ‘scanty, meager’ (K, 32)

Khushkadag (Vale) /x^oəsk'adag/ ← /x^oəsk'-ad-ag/ 'dry-abstract.sfx-noun.sfx,'
 "Place of Dryness," (A 4, 269-7) and (Abaev 1964, pp. 85–86, 91)
 Khushzagat /x^oəzæ zægat/ ← /x^oezæ-zæg-at/ 'color-character.sfx-?,' "Colored
 Ones" ? (A 4, 273–74; Abaev 1964, p. 90)
 Kizmida /qəzmədæ/
 Konaga /k'onagæ/ ← /k'ona-gæ/ 'hearth-diminutive' (A 1, 636)
 Kosher /koser/ ? ← proto-Circassian */k^oəśa-rə/ 'cradle-be.participle,' "the one
 with/in the cradle" (K, 58)
 Kuan /kuwan/ ? ← proto-Circassian */k^oəwə/ 'deep' (K, 57)
 Kulbadag-ush /k'uləbadæg-us/ 'witch-woman' (A 1, 641; A 4, 20–21)
 Kurdalagon /k^oərdalæg-on/ ← /kūrd-alæg-on/ 'smith-Alanic-name.sfx,' "god of
 the forge" (A 1, 610)
 Kurp (Mountain) /kurp/
 Lakandon /laqon-don/ 'Lakan-river'
 Magurag /mæg^oər-æg/ 'poor-nominal,' "poor fellow," (Abaev 1964, p. 86; A 2,
 82)
Marguz /mæryuz/, cf. perhaps /mær(æ)/ 'soil' (A 2, 95)
Mikali-Gabrta /məkalə-gabər-tæ/ 'Michael-Gabriel-coll' (A 2, 138–39)
Mishirkhan /məsərxan/ ← /məsər-xan/ 'Egypt-khan,' Arabic /mişr/'Egypt,' (A
 2, 145)
Mukara /mukara/
Nart(a) /nart(æ)/ ← proto-Ossetian */nart-tæ/, with loss of /t-t/as in
 */(æ)xsartæg-ket-tə/, earlier, and ultimately from proto-I-I */nɪ-tama/ 'man-
 superlative,' "hero, most manly,' see of introduction, note 17 but see also (A
 2, 158–60)
Nikkola /nəkkola/, Digoron /nikkola/ "Saint Nicholas" (A2, 181–83)
 Pakunza /pakənzə/ ← Georgian /pask'unʒi/ 'gryphon' (A 2, 286)
 Rekom /rekom/
 Serek /cerek/
 Shafa /safa/ see (A 3, 9–10), "god of the hearth"

Shainag-aldar /saynæg ældar/ ← /sayn-æg ældar/ ‘glorious- adj.sfx lord,’ “Lord of Glory,” from Mongol /sain/ ‘glorious,’ (A 3, 21–22), see introduction, note 15

Shargoi /særgoy/ “preoccupied with self-preservation” (A 3, 83)

Shatana /satana/ ← /sata-na/ ‘one.hundred-mother,’ the second part from Circassian, see introduction, note 21, and Benveniste (1959, p. 129), but also (A 3, 39–40)

Shauwai /sæwway/ perhaps this and the next two words contain a reduced form of the root /saw/ ‘black’

Shauwainag /sawaynæg/

Shaumaron-Burzabakh /sawmaron-būr-zæbæx/ ‘black.earth,’ with the second part perhaps ← /būr-zæbæx/ ‘yellow-good’ (A 1, 390); perhaps a distorted version of ‘Sauromatae,’ which would then mean “Black Earth People,” (see preface)

Shawfyrd /sawfærd/ ← /saw-fært/ ‘black-son’ (A 1, 271, 500)

Shekh /sex/, cf. the Abkhaz clan /š^yəḥ^o/

Shibals /səbælc/, Digoron /subælcɪ/ ← Turkic /subal-či/ ‘clay-profession,’ “plasterer” (A 3, 181)

Shidamon /sidæmon/ ‘light, bright’ (A 3, 102–5)

Shilam /silæm/

Shimd /simd/ a round-dance

Shirdon /særdon/ ‘beast, wild.one,’ (A 3, 207–8)

Shkhuali /sxu-ale/ from either Circassian /šx^oe/ ‘big,’ or /šx^oe/ ‘sorcerer,’ plus ‘Alan,’ therefore “Great Alan,” or “Alan the Sorcerer,” note /æsxuali/ earlier

Shofya (Vault) Greek *Sophia* (A 3, 129–30)

Shoppar /soppær/

Shoshlan /soslan/ “Breath, Soul of the Alans,” see introduction, note 15, but also (A 3, 138–39)

Silan /cilæn/, perhaps related to /cil/, Digoron /celæ/ ‘fern’ (A 1, 312)

Sog (mountains) /cog/, perhaps related to /cong/ ‘arm’ (A 1, 313)

Tar /tar/ perhaps ‘dark’ or ‘chest, breast’ (A 3, 229–31)

Taragan /tarayan/

Taranjelos /taranželos/ ← Georgian /mtavar-angelozi/ arch-angel (A 3, 231–32)

Tark (Steppe) /tarq/

Tatartup /tætærtup/ ← /tætær-tup/ ‘Tatar-mob’ (A 3, 282)

Telberd /telberd/

Terk /terk/ the Terek River in the North East Caucasus

Terk-Turk /terk-turk/, /turk/ “brave, valiant” (A 3, 320)

Teuvazh /tewvæz/ ← /tewa-fæz/ ‘camel-even.tempered’ (A 3, 290; A 1, 466–67)

Tiran (Pass) /tiræn/

Totraz /totəraz/ “Two Stars” (Colarusso 1998b)

Tutir, Tutyr /tutər/, Digoron /totur/ Greek *Theódoros* (A 3, 322–23)

Tykhfyrt Mukara /təxə-fərt mukara/ ‘strong-son Mukara’ (A 3, 344–45)

Udavs A magical musical instrument forged by Kurdalagon

Ugash Seven sheaves together; ten *ugash* formed one *stook*

Uon /won/, Digoron /wæn, on, onæ, ionæ/ ‘shoulder blade’ (A 2, 227–28)

Uraz /uraz/

Urizhmag /wərəzmæg/, /uruzmæg/, /oræzmæg/ an old Iranian name (A 4, 127–28), ← */wārza-maka-/ ‘wild.boar-son,’ see introduction, note 20, and Colarusso (2002, saga 2, note 9)

Vedukha /veduxa/ ← Proto-Circassian */z°e-dəwxe/, cf. Kabardian /ve-daxe/ ‘foster.mother-beautiful

Wadakhshin /wad-(æ)xs næ/ ‘wind-lady’ (A 4, 333; A 4, 236)

Wadmer /wadmer/ ← */wad-mers/ ‘wind-greedy’ (A 4, 32–33; A 2, 112)

Waig /wayeg/, Digoron /wayug/ ← Iranian */wayuka-/, “a giant, a one-eyed Cyclops”; In the Nart tales the Waigs live in caves, in seven storey towers, in castles and fortresses, and are constantly at war with the Narts (A 4, 68–70)

Walipp (Mountain) /waləpp/ ← */wari-p’a/ ‘falcon-place’ (A 4, 49), with Circassian /p’a/

Waraga /wæragæ/ ← */wær-ag-gæ/ ‘(to.)bend-nominal.sfx-diminutive,’ “knee,”
(A 4, 88; Abaev1964, p. 85, §168.5)

Warbi /warbi/

Wargon /wærgon/ god of the smiths (A 4, 93-94), cf. Latin *Volcānus*

Warkhag /wærxæg/ ← proto-I-I */warka-ka-/ ‘wolf-adj.sfx’ (A 4, 96–97)

Warkhtanag /wærxtænæg/ ← /wærx-tæn-æg/ ‘width-thin-adj.sfx,’ “skinny” (A
4, 96; A 1, 262–63), but also ‘wolf-thin-adj.sfx,’ “skinny wolf”

Warp (Heights) /warəpp/ ← */wari-p’a/ ‘falcon-place’ (A 4, 49), with
Circassian /p’a/, see Walipp earlier

Wasamonga (bowl, cup) /wacamongæ/ ← /wac-amon-gæ/ ‘holy-indicator,
revealer-diminutive,’ the cauldron or cup that revealed true heroes (A 4, 29–
30)

Washtirji /wastərji/ ← */wac-žərži/ “St. George” (A 4, 55–56)

Wasilla /wacilla/ ← /wac-illa/ “St. Elijah” (A 4, 31–32)

Wasirat /waciræt/ ← */wac-iræ-t(ə)/ ‘holy-Iron-genitive.plural,’ “Saint of the
Ossetians”

Waskupp /wack’əpp/ ← /wac-k’əpp/ ‘holy-hill’ (A 4, 26–28; A 1, 651)

Wazaftau /wazæftaw/ ← */wac-æftawæ/ ‘holy-increase’ (A 4, 36), a saint of
abundance (?)

Wazh (Mountains) /wazə/ ← */wazi/ ← Georgian /vazi/ ‘grape vine’ (A 4, 62)

Zanga (giant) /zængæ/, cf. ? /zængæda/ ‘gossip’ (A 1, 394)

Zhed /zæd/ ‘angel’ ← Iranian /yazata/ ‘spirit’ /yaz-/ ‘to offer a sacrifice,’
cf. Yezidi, Yazd (A, 4, 290–91)

Zeg /zeg/ cf. the Georgian /žiget/ ‘Circassian, North Caucasian’

Zekh /zex/ cf. the name *Zikhi* referring to an old tribe in the Caucasus, preserved
in Ubykh /zəxə/ ‘Abkhazia, Circassia’ (Vogt 1963, p. 231).

Zerashsha /zerassæ/ This name may be related to Circassian /marəsa/ “Merissa,
goddess of bees,” which seems to come from Greek *Melissa*, “priestess at
Delphi”; this name may be for the same goddess, but based on a North West
Caucasian root */ž(a)/, preserved in Ubykh */žá(a)ž/ ‘bee’ (Vogt 1963, p. 231)

and perhaps in West Circassian /bʒʸa/ ‘bee’ (K, 39); the original proto-Ossetian may have been */zɛræssæ/ with a shape paralleling that of the Circassian name—it then would have been reshaped with a long second vowel to accord with Iranian sound patterns

Zhilakhar (Field) /zilaxar/ ‘circling, wandering,’ used in toponyms (A 4, 310)

Zhilakhur /zilaxur/ ? variant of the preceding

Zhivag /ziv-æg/ ‘lazy-adj.sfx,’ “Lazy One,” (A 4, 312)

Zikhi-don (river) /zɛxə-don/ ‘mouth-river,’ (A 1, 408, 366–67)

Zili /zələ/ ‘wren,’ (A 1, 405)

Zinz-Alasha /zinz-alasa/ proto-Circassian */gʸəgʸa-/ (K, 50), Bzhedukh West Circassian /ʒʸəʒʸe/ ‘to shine’, or perhaps /(be)ʒʸəʒʸe-/ ‘(to.)stumble, stagger,’ plus Ossetian /alasa/ ‘gelding,’ (A 1, 44), thus “shining gelding,” or “stumbling gelding”

Zuar /zwar/ ← Georgian /ʒvari/ cross, (A 1, 401–2)

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