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(1939 -)

THE LAST PEBBLE OF HARPAT

The glorious King Harpat, who had renounced his power long since, died at dawn.

The only man present was his friend and guardsman Aruc, a huge old warrior who was Harpat's senior.

The previous evening Harpat had asked Aruc to make him a bed under the wagon. Two white oxen ruminated over Harpat the whole night through. Shortly before dawn he began to moan, and the oxen, on sensing trouble, let out a bellow.

Aruc jumped to his feet, a sharp acinaces glistening in his hand. Harpat stretched out his right hand, and a whisper escaped his contorted lips:

“Ar-ruc... bring me a pebble... my end is near...”

Aruc raised the King's head with his left hand, and asked:

“What color the pebble — black or white?”

But Harpat gasped for a last breath with his toothless mouth — and went rigid.

The short-horned white oxen uttered a bellow. Its echo reverberated across the Valley of Stones along the steppe river. Old Aruc cried out in anguish. He pierced his left arm with an arrow, and made a cut on his forehead with the acinaces.

Then he set about building a campfire. Sparks shot forth from the kindling into the ashy mist of dawn, and a milky column of smoke billowed into the sky.

The rising sun tinged the smoke red, making it visible far away in the steppe as a crooked, bloody pillar.

Aruc stuck his acinaces into the ground near the feet of his lord, and sitting down with his legs folded beneath him, began to intone a prayer.

He sat like that the whole day through into the evening, throughout the night and during the next morning. He seemed oblivious of the arrival of the mounted chieftains from the neighboring tribes. The old man was confusedly whispering the words of the prayer, while the hierophants were sewing up the eyes of his sire, putting gold plaques on his sunken eyes, his lips and nose. A council of chieftains had gathered on a hill, their meeting rent with dissension — how should the glorious King be buried? Should his embalmed remains be taken around all the tribes and then buried under a tumulus as custom dictated? Or should he be buried right away and all the tribes come here to pay homage to the hero?

Among them was the supreme chief, Harpat's kin on his father's side — a confident and strong man. Turning to the other chieftains sitting around a pot steaming with pungent herbs, he said:

"Glorious and great was Harpat, our ruler and my uncle. Custom demands that everyone who passes over to the great beyond be taken from clan to clan. But does an eagle really go visiting his eaglets? It is the eaglets that go to see their father. So let all the clans come to the Valley of Stones and pay homage to their lord!" The supreme chief fell silent for a while, and everyone else kept his peace as well. Then he continued: "My dear brothers, how are we to give burial to Harpat — with or without concubines? And one more thing — when the deceased is put on the wagon, the black and white pebbles he collected in his gorytuses or quivers all his life are to be placed at his feet. But Harpat's gorytuses are nowhere to be found, either in his tent or on the wagon."

One of the chieftains rose to his feet, and bowing to the council, said:

"Commoners cannot divine the signs of the gods who inspire you to unusual deeds, because in the hearts of commoners there is uncertainty. It would be most unpleasant for the plebeians to learn that we had gathered, without inviting the lord's guardsman Aruc to the council — after all, he is the greatest and most glorious of the commoners. It is said that Harpat loved and respected his guardsman as if he were his kin."

This is a clever man, and he does not challenge my rule, the supreme chief thought. He reminded me quite well about Aruc and Harpat being distant relatives, while I had almost forgotten it... I will give my daughter in marriage to his son, and appoint him my successor.

"Well then, brothers, I think it would be disrespectful not to invite Aruc to our camp fire. He attended all the councils with Harpat..."

An old warrior was sent to Aruc.

On reaching him, the warrior went down on one knee, and taking off his felt hood, said:

"Aruc, the chieftains are calling you."

Aruc did not say anything in reply, and the warrior repeated the invitation three times. Aruc, however, did not respond. The warrior returned to the council alone;

After some thought, the supreme chief said:

"We must send the youngest chieftain to Aruc. In order to find out the truth, as our deceased Harpat taught us, it is worthwhile approaching a child and even a slave. You, however, are going not to a slave, but to a famous warrior. Aruc is a commoner, of course, but there has been more than one gilded cup made out of an enemy's skull attached to his belt, and the bridle and trappings of his horse have always been adorned with enemy scalps. You have all seen them for yourselves." The youngest chieftain went off and invited Aruc:

"Come to us, warrior! The chieftains seek your advice."

Aruc got to his feet. He pulled the arrow out of his left arm, sheathed his acinaces, put a kaftan around his shoulders, and pulled a felt hood over his head.

He knelt before the chieftains and put his hands on his knees in the position every warrior had to assume in anticipation of his chieftain's order.

The supreme chief turned to old Aruc:

"You were with the great Harpat all his life. Now he is no more. Harpat's soul has left his body, and here we are reflecting I on how to bury his earthly shell. Should he be buried with » a woman? If he were to be, it would be unnatural, because the | great man had not touched a woman long since. He loved truth, I though, and all of us know it. He never went against his word, • and this, too, we know..." All the gray and black-haired heads nodded in agreement. "So you, his loyal guardsman and I assistant, tell us how we should bury him? With a slave woman or without?"

"Would a dead slave raise to greater glory a ruler who slew more than one mighty warrior single-handedly in the lands of the herdsmen, in the lands of the plowmen, and in the distant lands to the south?"

"Clever words are always clever, even if they be spoken by I a commoner. So let us bury Harpat without any concubines. And so that our homage be suitably regal, let each of us sacrifice his best horse. The best horse is no match for the best of concubines, 'is that not so?"

Everyone bowed their heads in response to the chief's words. Then the supreme chief turned to Aruc:

"Warrior, we all know that you were a loyal guardsman of the I great Harpat ever since he mounted his war horse for the first time. So tell us then the whereabouts of his gorytuses, because I we could not find them in the wagon. You know that before he is j to be driven off by the oxen, we have to shake the black pebbles he collected on each bitter day and the white pebbles he threw into the gorytuses on happy days. We have to know whether the greatest warrior of our land was a happy man or not."

"I know where the gorytuses are, and I will bring them to you. But I have one request..."

"What is it?" the supreme chief asked, his black eyes gazing piercingly at Aruc from under a gray tuft of hair. Aruc looked calmly into his face.

"Oh great successor of Harpat, do not be angry with me, because only the wrath of the glorious Harpat made my knees tremble. My request is as follows: I will reveal the whereabouts of the gorytuses to you, but let me produce the pebbles so that they will not get mixed up."

The supreme chief thought for a long time, while everyone kept silent. Then, without raising his head, he raised his arm toward the old warrior.

"Bring us the gorytuses," he declared in a low voice. Shortly afterward Aruc brought the gorytuses wrapped in a snow leopard's skin.

Then the supreme chief ordered the youngest man on the council:

"Announce to all that we are holding counsel. Let no one come near this hill."

The foot warrior bowed, and walked down the hill. Aruc got down on his knees and put his burden onto the ground. He unrolled the leopard skin, in which three gorytuses were wrapped. One gorytus was old, mounted with gold plaques. The second was large, adorned with plaques of pure gold set with precious stones. The third gorytus was mounted with thin gold leaf embossed with figures of Scythians catching horses.

Aruc pulled his acinaces out of its sheath. Squeezing the old gorytus with one hand, his other hand moved the blade swiftly upward. The gilt plaques split apart at the cut, and everyone saw two layers with an equal number of black and white pebbles in the gorytus.

The chieftains began to count the pebbles, which in Aruc's mind seemed to turn into the bright and dark days of his lord.

Presently he saw the boy with the short black shock of hair jump down from his horse. Aruc, still a young warrior and famous daredevil at that time, galloped behind him, leading another two horses — one for the small Harpat and the other for himself — by the bridle. The boy had caught up with the bull at full tilt and sent an arrow right under the shoulder bone. The aurochs stopped in his tracks and let out a deathly roar, sputtering blood on all sides. The next moment his legs buckled and he fell on the ground with a thud. The boy turned the horse at full tilt, and they both rushed to the aurochs. The glassy eyes of the bull reflected the lofty blue of the sky in which eagles ^ were wheeling. That day Harpat threw the first white pebble into his gorytus.

Then there were black pebbles... The young Harpat made advances to the daughter of the chieftain. She made fun of him because he was still too young, and she was older than he. She

came from a clan of original herders, while he was a plower on his mother's side. When he had grown up, Harpat killed her brother, a glorious warrior, in a tourney. Right after the combat he left the tourney grounds. Aruc hurried after him and they reached the shores of a small river. Harpat walked along the river bank for a long time. In the end he picked up a pebble. Aruc did not know then what color the pebble was — white or black, but now he recognized it at first sight, because he knew well the pebbles in that river: the white pebbles were slightly yellowish, while the black ones had golden veins. And now when he saw the black pebble with the golden veins, Aruc realized that he had been wrong all his life, believing that revenge had been a great joy for the young Harpat. As the supreme chief turned to Aruc, the latter started coming to his senses:

"This gorytus was given him as a present by the Hellenes, wasn't it?"

"Oh yes," Aruc replied. "The Hellenes presented it to him for his glorious victories. It's made of pure gold all the way from Egypt."

"Cut this gorytus, too."

Aruc pushed the blade into the gold mounting, its cut edges briefly glistening in the sun. The gorytus was empty.

Silence fell.

On a sudden Aruc covered his face with his hands and burst out crying.

"What makes you cry, old Aruc?" he was asked.

"For ten years we fought in foreign lands, and victory never evaded our troops. If you only knew how many knights Harpat slew with his own hands! They advanced on him clad in armor, but he would kill them with an arrow aimed at their eyes. They hurled spears at him, while he would aim his thin darts at their throats. They fell upon him with axes and swords, while he would chop off their hands and plunge his acinaces into their chests and skulls with one thrust. If you only knew how women loved him! What Greek, Nubian, Jewish and Egyptian beauties surrendered to him! You do not even know the names of the tribes whose women used to love him. So everything was in vain, all the best ten years, the ten years of the greatest exploits and the most glorious victories. They brought him neither happiness nor grief..."

Aruc burst into tears again, saying:

"And I thought they were the best years of our life. I thought that..."

"Warrior, do cut the third gorytus!" Aruc was asked.

Aruc rent the embossed gold mounting of the gorytus with one blow, and everyone saw that almost all the pebbles in it were white.

Aruc realized that during the years when the white pebbles grew in number, Harpat had gone to war less often. Aruc decided that there were more white pebbles because Harpat had renounced his rule as supreme chief. He used to ride through his lands, preach unity among all the tribes, and he even visited the tribe where he had once fallen in love with the chieftain's daughter and killed her brother. Harpat arrived there only in the company of Aruc, bringing along a cup of peace. The young warriors, the grandchildren of the beauty, drew their acinaces and advanced on him, but at the sight of his bared head they eventually backed off. The beauty's sons and their children pardoned Harpat the blood of their clan, and he made peace with all of them.

As Aruc sat there on the ground, he thought about what pebble the old Harpat had wanted to put into the third gorytus before his death. Aruc knew that this had been the last wish of his sire.

He got up from the ground, bowed to the chieftains, and said:

"Wait for me, I will be back right away."

"Where are you off to, old warrior?"

"I am going to the river to fetch a white pebble to add it to the last pile."

"But Harpat should have done that himself!" the supreme chief said indignantly.

"My lord, when my sire sensed his approaching death at dawn yesterday, he called me, and willed, 'Bring me a pebble...' I have been wondering all this time what color the pebble should be, because he failed to say it. But now I know — he wanted a white pebble, because in the river where his mother bathed him as an infant, there is white gravel."

Shortly thereafter the old warrior returned from the river.

He put a wet pebble on the pile. Soon it had dried, and now no one could tell it apart from the other pebbles that were placed in two little piles at the feet of the deceased. The bier was raised onto the wagon, to which white oxen were hitched; the supreme priestess lashed them with a golden whip, the wheels set into motion with a creak, and the oxen pulled their master to his grave.

The strongest warriors swung their acinaces and plunged them into the throats of the sacrificial horses, and the blood bedewed the dense grass on all sides of the grave.

The naked women mourners lamented and wailed when the door to the burial chamber was rammed in according to the ancient tradition of plowmen, and the wailing continued throughout the entire night while the warriors partook of the funeral feast, competed in combat with spears and acinaces, in horse racing, wrestling and fist fighting. In the meantime the commoners were walking back and forth, carrying earth up the rising tumulus over the grave, and fortifying themselves with roast meat and the brew of herbs boiling and simmering in the pots.

And the sacrificial fires on the tumuli and hills crackled and spurted smoke. And a mournful funeral dirge floated before the wind over the feathergrass, wormwood and meadowsweet, glorifying and bemoaning the great warrior and illustrious King.

Translated by Anatole Bilenko