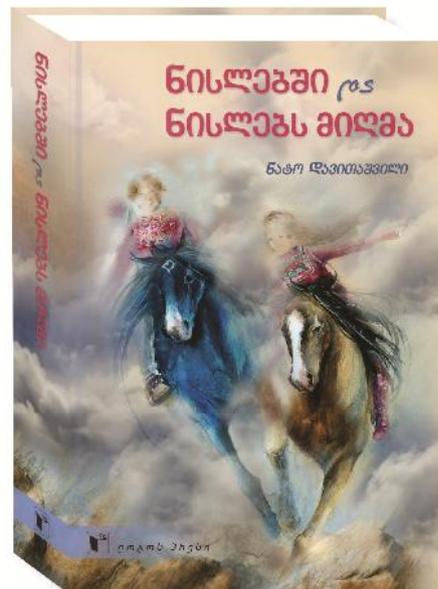


In and Beyond the Fog

NATALIE DAVITASHVILI

Synopsis

When the earth and the sky separated, the entire world was wrapped in eternal fog and people fell into misery. The last hope of mankind lies with a tiny village nestling in the mountains, an exceptionally strong-willed old musician and an orphan lad. Only the Chosen can take care of those living in and beyond the fog, only the most valiant and pure-hearted can rid the rest of the world from the treacherous fog.



The plot of the book is made of two parallel narratives. The first tells about Erekle, a 14-year old lad and his girl friend Gvantsa, who live in the village of Guro, which is well protected by Mount Tsroli. After a vicious attack from the White Wolves serving the Fog, a colt with a holly sign is on the verge of death, but Erekle saves it. He fetches the Vedzi water known for its curative powers, but more importantly he sacrifices his own legs to heal the dying colt. Travelling with his fellow villagers to Vedzi, he comes across many strange creatures, escapes many dangers and eventually learns about his own exceptional destiny – he is the Chosen one. In the meanwhile, the Fog becomes stronger by the day, looming over Guro and threatening its inhabitants. Despite his lost ability to walk, at around New Year Erekle heads for Mount Tsroli accompanied by his devoted friend Gvantsa. Thanks to unconditional loyalty of his friend, he manages to climb the mountain, his candle ignites without fire and its light reaches the sky.

The second narrative focuses on the travel of the old musician Anania and a little boy Makhare through the fog-wrapped region. The old musician's single wish is to free his native land from the encroaching Fog. It was Makhare who suggested that they should try to reach the sky with their voices so that the sun could shine down on earth as before. So out they set in search of the place from which they could make the sky hear their plea. After an arduous journey, exactly on the New Year's Day, they reach the Sky Tree hidden in the heart of the holly forest of the

White Mountain. The seemingly dry tree springs to life as Makhare plays his flute. Likewise, his flute sounds break the Fog and reach the sky.

Thanks to the efforts of Erekle and Makhare, the earth and the sky unite as they used to be before the Fog, while an army of Heavenly Warriors are sent to protect mankind from the evil creatures. Eventually, the sky clears and its azure shines down at the world.

Nato Davitashvili has been writing fantasy since 2007. She has already published three novels:

- The Story of Lile Iroeli, 2007, 2010 (2nd edition)
- When the Winged Lions Return, 2009 (winner of the 2008 literature competition The Golden Feather; nominated for the Gala literature competition in 2009)
- In and Beyond the Fog, 2011

By getting acquainted with the Georgian mythology skillfully presented in Nato Davitashvili's books, an international reader is exposed to the hitherto unfamiliar imagery and symbolism of the rich Georgian mythology.

Extract

Chapter 27

MOUNT SAMDZIVARA

Gvantsa went over to Erekle's place at the break of the dawn. She put the saddle on Keda and led it to him. They left Guro together with the cattle. Ubadlo followed them. Erekle reminded Gvantsa that her dog's name was Ubadlo, but she preferred the name she'd chosen for him.

It was a clear day and the hoar frost didn't linger. Such weather was considered misleading by the Guro people. The sun was shining brightly but its rays had lost their power. No comparison to the summer sun. Slight but chilly breeze could sneak up at an unsuspecting man enjoying the bright sun, easily driving him under the comfort of a warm blanket. Even worse, the wind could shift several times a day in this season, blowing from all directions.

Erekle and Gvantsa sent their horses at a gallop. Gvantsa wanted her Mtredo to overtake Erekle's Keda, but his horse did everything to keep its rival at a pace behind. It seemed her horse had a kind of respect for Keda. Gvantsa felt the mood of her Mtredo and let it choose its own speed.

Mount Samdzivara wasn't very far from Guro. Anyone could reach it and get back to the village at a leisurely walk. Riding a horse made the distance seem even shorter. It was called a mountain by the villagers, but in reality it was just a sizeable hillock with a strange copse. No one had ever encountered such trees with firmly entwined branches in the whole region. Stranger still, round the year the crowns and branches were covered in moss, which changed colour according to the season. In winter, when snow lay human height all around, it hardly reached one's ankle in the copse. The snowflakes also seemed to find it difficult to stay on the branches, that's why the yellowish moss showed out more than snow-covered patches. Well into late autumn, wild hyacinths used to bloom round the unusual copse. The flowers were tiny but much more stubborn and vivacious than others. They struggled with the onset of wintry frost until they lost the last petal. The frostier the nights, the darker the flowers became. Frost-bitten and downcast, they were still easily noticed among the hoar and the first snow. But the moment the flower caught even a single sun ray, it would straighten up and open its heart to the world. Some claimed they'd seen hyacinths on Mount Samdzivara even in winter.

There was a large moss-covered boulder in the centre of the copse. Those wishing to collect beads had to climb it and expose their chest to the sky. If the sky accepted them, white beads would be scattered among the wild hyacinths. If not, not a bead could be found.

There was hardly a man or woman of Guro who hadn't tried their luck at least once. They went as far as wear fake beads round their necks, gave them out as gifts claiming they came from Mount Samdzivara, but the sham beads never stayed with the deceitful owners – the thread would mysteriously come undone within minutes. Many had attempted to bring the beads down from the mountain, but no one had ever succeeded. Despite many years of futile attempts and continuous failure, their actual existence was never questioned. The elders and Maria insisted they had seen the Samdzivara beads with their own eyes, in their childhood though. And they were unable to recall who they had seen proudly wearing them around the neck. They had no idea who the Chosen one was that the Samdzivara beads considered worthy of first making themselves visible to the person and then turning into his or her protectors.

Mount Samdzivara was easily seen from a distance thanks to its distinct tint. Because of the wild hyacinths, its slopes had a bluish hue – even in late autumn, when their barren stems still supported the last flowers destined to perish in the approaching frost. The summery green-blue tint changed into fiery gold. Only the green of the copse didn't fade until the first snow, looking like a bright emerald set in pure gold.

Seeing the wild hyacinths made Gvantsa extremely happy. She dismounted and caressed the flowers. Her fingers brushed the dainty petals with utmost care, her cheeks feeling their delicate touch.

'Aren't they beautiful?' she looked up at Erekle. He smiled at her and glanced at the copse.

Gvantsa got into the saddle again and they headed for the trees. Keda and Mtredo found it difficult to walk among them – because of the intertwined roots, they couldn't confidently put their hoofs on the ground.

'Go ahead! I'll wait for you here,' Erekle called out to Gvantsa. She hadn't thought of going into the forest alone, so she froze. 'We can't stay here forever, you know. You've got to show yourself to the sky while the sun's still high. Have we travelled for nothing?' he added.

Gvantsa jumped down, gave her reins to Erekle and stepped into the forest. She was gone within seconds. Worried, Mtredo made to follow its owner into the trees, but Erekle held it tight. Ubadlo, on the other hand, stretched on the ground, not even attempting to follow her. Erekle thought he had heard wolves and looked for reassurance at Ubadlo.

'It's our hounds. They say everything's fine,' the dog answered his unuttered question without as much as opening its eyes.

'Go, have a look, will you?' Erekle told it after what seemed a long wait for Gvantsa to return.

The hound master got to its feet, sniffed around and headed for the copse. Hardy had it reached the outer trees when it turned back, followed by Gvantsa.

'Ubadlo! Were you coming to look for me?' she asked her fluffy giant of a dog, calling it its real name for the first time.

'Have you shown yourself to the sky?' Erekle asked her.

'I did, but the question is whether the sky saw me,' Gvantsa laughed. 'I came here hoping you'd help if needed. Now I think if I can't find the beads, I'll get a nice nosegay of hyacinths.' She mounted Mtredo and nudged it with her spurs.

'Let's see who circles the copse first!'

Mtredo seemed to soar into the air. Erekle spurred his Keda too, but the horse neighed as if telling him to allow the rival roll in a false sense of being too

fast for it as it would make Gvantsa and her horse happy. Ubadlo ran in long strides after its owner and Keda brought up the rear.

Keda galloped behind Mtredo, taking Erekle closer to Gvantsa. The lad was immensely joyous. What else could he dream of? Nothing worried him at the moment. Without a single flaw, tidy and cloudless, his entire world seemed to revolve round this little copse.

Keda closely followed Mtredo, which occasionally tried to lag behind. The former even had to nudge it a couple of times, as if hastening the rival. Mtredo took the hint and sped ahead.

‘We’re the first!’ Gvantsa shouted happily. ‘We’re faster!’

‘You’re always going to be first,’ Erekle chuckled and for some reason was reminded of a picture engraved on a rock which he saw while he visited the Master of the Vedzi water. There was someone stooping next to Gvantsa on that image. ‘The one and only,’ he added in half-tone.

‘What did you say? I can’t hear you,’ Gvantsa asked.

‘Nothing. I’m starved. What has your mum packed for us?’ Erekle lied. He was afraid that if she chose to really get it out of him, he’d have to spill everything. In truth, he didn’t wish to talk about the time spent with the Vedzi water Master.

‘Let’s have a look,’ she replied, got off the horse and busied herself with the picnic lunch.

She undid the knot of a kerchief-size cloth. Her mum had put some bread and pastry, which looked particularly appetizing lying gold-cheeked next to a large piece of sheep cheese. She hadn’t forgotten Ubadlo as a piece of meat was definitely supplied for it. But the dog turned its head away when it was offered to it.

‘He won’t eat it, have you forgotten?’ Erekle asked from his saddle.

‘Yes, I have, so stupid of me! Aren’t you going to get down?’

Keda didn’t wait for its master for orders – the horse kneeled to allow the lad to slide down. Erekle found sitting on the warm grass particularly pleasant. Gvantsa handed him some pastry.

‘Is it with a sweet or salty filling?’

‘That one’s sweet.’

‘I prefer to start with a salty one and finish with the sweet.’

The lad seemed famished. He was eating with relish, taking generous gulps of water from a leather flask. Mtredo and Keda were grazing nearby.

‘If we fail to find the beads, we’ve at least had a hearty meal,’ Gvantsa reassured herself.

‘Don’t worry, we will, especially if we finish munching and open our eyes wide.’

‘I have, but I can’t see a single one!’ she exclaimed in despair, gently touching the wild hyacinths. ‘Don’t laugh at me, but look what I’ve got. See how long my thread is?’ from her pocket she pulled a yard-long twisted, well-greased thread with a needle she had prepared for the beads.

‘Enough for both of us,’ Erekle agreed.

The girl cleared the picnic remains as quickly as she laid it out. Erekle lay on his back, with his hands under his head, his eyes closed.

‘I’m off looking for the beads,’ Gvantsa said heading for the slope.

Erekle was left alone with his thoughts and old worries: How long was he going to be like this? Had he by any chance enraged the Vedzi Water Master? Otherwise why hadn’t the mighty liquid worked for him? What lay in store for him? How could a cripple survive in the harsh mountain conditions? That question bothered him most of all. He was used to helping out others, ever obliging, ever sympathetic and he hated the idea of being looked after, turning into a burden to others. Despite it all, he wasn’t complaining. In fact, he was grateful to the fate for curing Keda, which now became his loyal friend and protector. At this point he recalled the warning given by the Vedzi Water Master: never utter a reproach towards a given gift. And Keda certainly was a gift in his understanding, for which he had sacrificed his legs. Was it his readiness to offer himself that really healed Keda? Erekle had no qualms, hadn’t regretted a single thing in the least. His thoughts drifted in a completely different direction.

‘I should try chopping wood sitting in the saddle.’

‘Instead of thinking about chopping wood, you should consider coming to me,’ he heard Mount Tsroli. ‘I’m expecting you at the New Year’s Day!’

He sat up at the voice. Since the moment he stopped feeling his legs, he had neither heard the voice of the mountain nor its breathing. For a second he thought Tsroli was talking to Gamakhela and resolved to ask him about it. But if his friend wanted to mention it, he would of his own accord.

‘Have you changed your mind?’ Erekle had no answer to this question. ‘You have to be here for the New Year if you wish to be the first-footer for your people!’

Still Erekle didn’t reply. He had never thought of being a first-footer. And what kind of luck could he bring others if he was a miserable cripple?

‘You can be accompanied by anyone to the mountain, anyone you trust, but remember, you’ve got to climb it on your own. Trust is fine, but that person should be aware of his or her own capacity when coming with you.’

'I've already asked Gamakhela to accompany me once and put his life at risk. How can I do the same in winter when wolves roam the area not to mention the White Servants of the Fog? How can I jeopardize his life?'

'But you had no doubts when sacrificing your own legs, did you?'

'They were mine.'

'I've told you what I had to. After this coming New Year's Day I will close my heart forever. Have a look inside the priest's room at Guro this evening. They're bringing out the chalice. Farewell!'

'Wait!' Erekle shouted but heard nothing except a deep sign of Mount Tsroli.

'I've found them!' he heard Gvantsa's happy voice. 'Erekle, look! See how many!'

He wanted to spring to his feet at her voice but was unable to lift his body off the ground. Gvantsa came running in a moment. Her hands were full of the beads the size of raspberries. They were white but emitted a gentle glow of various hues depending which angle one looked at them. She sat next to him and dropped the beads into his lap. The girl was smiling but at the same time tears were streaking down her cheeks.

'What are you waiting for? Get your thread! Let's string them!' Erekle said excitedly.

'They showed themselves, can you believe it, showed themselves to me! They were among the hyacinths, scattered everywhere, glittering like morning dew. First I heard a kind of patter and then I saw them dropping like raindrops around me. I gathered all of them, didn't leave a single one behind. No, that's not true – I missed one and it clattered to attract my attention as if asking to be picked up.'

Gvantsa stringed the beads. Erekle took it from her and knotted the thread around her neck.

'It's so becoming! They glow beautifully against your face. You look very different, believe me.' Erekle could hardly hide his admiration.

'How different?' She accepted the compliment.

'Beautiful.'

'So I wasn't beautiful before?' she laughed.

'You were, but with the beads you look like a grown-up.'

'Then, if I'm a grown-up and the Samdzivara beads make me look beautiful, I should accompany you to Mount Tsroli. Don't even try to protest!' She shook her finger at him. 'We must go before the first snow.'

'Mount Tsroli told me to go alone.'

‘That’s fine. We’ll wait for you at the foot of the mountain – Mtredo, my Bombora, sorry, I mean Ubadlo and I.’

‘It’s waiting for me on the New Year’s Day.’

‘How can we do that in winter? You’re going to freeze if you don’t move!’ Gvantsa sounded horrified at the thought.

‘I don’t know,’ Erekle shrugged his shoulders.

‘Did it talk to you while I was gathering the beads?’

‘How do you know? Did you hear it?’

‘No, Tsroli never talks to me. I just thought its heart was open today. A patch of blue looked like a field of hyacinths among the dark clouds.’

‘Time to get back. Keda!’ Erekle called his horse.

‘Can we stay a little longer just to see if the string holds?’

‘It’s not going to snap, ever!’ Erekle reassured her.

‘I was told that only the one who knotted it is capable of undoing it,’ she said meekly.

‘More so! I’m never going to undo it!’

‘Mtredo!’ Gvantsa also called her grazing horse.

* * *

In the middle of the priest’s room, on a tree-legged carved table there stood the silver chalice adorned with bells and deer ornament. Inside, there was the red wine pressed a hundred years ago. Had the times been better, the chalice would have been filled to the brim, but now every drop of the precious wine was carefully watched. The supply dwindled with every year, that’s why the chalice was filled at about an inch.

The elders had been sitting around it since midday and would stay till the sunset. Hoping the wine would disappear from the chalice, they lifted it one after another. Several men from the village were also granted the honour of touching it. But the chalice was waiting for the Chosen one. Only he could drain the wine without actually putting his lips to the brim. No one had succeeded in many, many years. Zakaria was there too. He lifted the chalice above his head, but when he lowered it, the wine level was the same.

Erekle reached the priest’s room as the elders were about to leave. Everyone was taken aback at seeing the lad on horseback. Keda lingered for a moment at the threshold, then stepped inside. Since the miraculous healing and its sudden

growth, the elders often discussed the horse, but they were unable to decide whether it truly was the Marked one or just another horse with a white brow.

Keda stopped next to the chalice. Erekle was not sure of the reasons Mount Tsroli had summoned him. Neither did he know why the elders put up with him for so long.

‘Erekle!’ Zakaria called out to him. ‘Lift the chalice above your head!’ The elders frowned at the man in disapproval.

Erekle did as Zakaria told him – he bent down from his saddle, lifted the chalice with both hands and held it above his head. Keda circled the room with its rider holding the chalice high up.

‘Now put it down,’ Zakaria ordered him.

The lad put the chalice on the table. Keda didn’t wait for the outcome. It left the room immediately.

Zakaria approached the chalice and looked inside. The elders sprang to their feet.

‘Don’t you dare touch it!’ came the warning from all directions.

But Zakaria ignored them. He grabbed the chalice and turned it over. Not a single drop of wine escaped the ritual vessel.

‘That’s how our enemies are going to end up!’ Zakaria’s excited voice boomed in the room.