

Prometheus

By Martin Marais

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“And that,” Isokrates concluded dramatically, his eyes scanning the awed faces of his audience, “is how I got the scar.”

As he stood up, the gloomy light of the tavern’s tallow lanterns seemed to realign and focus on him. He lifted his tattered tunic and turned. One of the shepherds, who was sat at the table, raised a lamp to allow a better view and the rest of them gathered around to examine the scar. Of course, they had seen it before, but as, undoubtedly, the most courageous shepherd amongst them, Isokrates received their utmost respect and they went through the well-established ritual. Some could not resist, but to hover their fingers down the lengths of the ragged claw marks that the bear had left etched on Isokrates’ back. None, however, dared touch them.

Old Kleitos, who alone had remained seated, smiled to himself as he watched the men go through the ritual. They had all heard the story before, many times, but it was a magnificent story, the best of them all, and Isokrates was a past master at telling tales, which was why his story was always the best told during the shepherds’ gatherings on the cold winter nights. Kleitos lifted his head and looked at the old man, the most respected shepherd in the valley, by the ceremony of examining the scar.

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The men settled down and, the story-telling over, they gathered into pairs and trios to discuss the more mundane matters that beset the life of a shepherd in the Caucasus.

Kleitos felt a small flutter in his chest and then that breathless feeling that he now got whenever he walked any distance. He grasped the edge of the table tightly with both hands and waited for the discomfort to pass. Meliton, sitting beside him, saw the look of fear in the old man’s eyes. He went to aid his aged mentor, but Kleitos raised spread fingers to stop him. Meliton stayed where he was, but kept a keen eye on his ancient friend. Kleitos closed his eyes and listened as the murmur of his life-long friends rolled over him like warm water. He slowed his breathing. He relaxed his body. His heart steadied. After a moment, he looked at Meliton and smiled.

“It has passed.”

Meliton breathed a sigh of relief. He smiled at the old man.