

Rainbow of Blood

Your Plans and Our Reality

The back entrance to their outlying house faced an open, wild field—hidden from outside eyes. Beyond lay sparse woodland, and within it, the abandoned fort of Legata—though one had to know where to look.

But Arad realized he'd been noticed on the way here anyway, and he already regretted not waiting for darkness. He definitely should have made his way from the field side. And, to be honest, it would have been better not to come today at all.

He knocked on the door, and everything twisted in his chest, as usually happens when you knock on someone else's door and await entry in agony. Several moments passed, no one opened, and he cautiously tried to straighten the incredibly colorful, bright *nom*—the house sign, signifying it's belonging to an Ashai-Keetrah sister—for it stood crooked, not straight. Futile—it had been dug in that way, at an angle, permanently. Naturally, the *nom* wasn't of big interest; he was simply occupying his hands and mind with something extraneous, making himself appear busy. Stern. Secretly threatening from within and without, as befits males.

She's probably not here, thought Arad, pondering what answer he could invent for his father and mother: why had he suddenly approached an Ashai-Keetrah's house? And then suddenly he heard pawsteps; the bolt behind the door was opening with terrible resolve, and this definitely couldn't be Simsana, no, a lioness of fifteen years of age doesn't have such sharp strength and urgent handling of the world. Moreover, here's what: no one asked "who's there?"; no one inquired about the visitor.

"Beautiful day, Bright... Excellent one," he had first wanted to say "Bright-Radiant one," but instantly changed his mind, and for some reason said 'Excellent one,' and also performed either a deep nod or a very hesitant bow. Something like that. Bright-Excellent one. What a nightmare.

"Vaal keeps the day," the Ashai-Keetrah looked at him impassively, in the deep age of strength. "How may I serve?"

"I've come to see Vaalu-Simsana," said Arad as clearly and confidently as possible. He had prepared himself. He had to prepare—never once in his life had a lioness of the Ashai-Keetrah sisterhood been to his house. He knew that it must always be the *nomen*, not the name, the nomen; once more: not the name—the nomen... "We arranged to meet," now as carelessly and matter-of-factly as possible, and looking her straight in the eyes.

Damn it, but who is 'her'? Arad had forgotten the name of Simsana's mentor—and here she stood, right before him. Her name was simple and pleasant, nothing like her appearance: a coarse gray dress with a brutally heavy belt—heavy for a female—predatory eastern eyes (Yaamrian, perhaps?), sharp features, dark gold fur, an enormous iron ring in her ear. Nearly his height. No jokes with this one.

"She's not here. But she will be soon," she nodded her head, inviting. "Coming in?"

The offer sounded optional, casual; rather, even out of politeness, quite possibly (though not entirely clear). Easy to decline such a thing. Lionkind toss such offers around left and right every day. Perhaps he should decline now: after all, Simsana isn't here, there's only her mentor, and she's not needed here, not at all, she even spoils everything; well, if Simsana is not here, what can you do. A 'no' closes the court—as father loves to intone.

"Thank you," Arad entered.

He has to wait for her. No retreat!

He was met by a small antechamber. A basin for paws—enormous, wooden and crude, like a trough; he'd never seen anything like that. He removed his knemids, which he always called Legate knemids, though they weren't Legate ones at all, as older lions had once explained to him, laughing. He glanced aside: the mistress hadn't remained standing beside him, but had closed the door and gone inside the house. He washed his paws with deliberate thoroughness, then his hands, then by habit washed his muzzle, and then his nape, ran his claws through his already quite noticeable reddish mane, then again, and again. He looked at himself in the mirror—he looked serious and confused; same as always, really. There were an incredible number of towels by the basin, a dozen at least, and this definitely meant something or served some purpose (at their home it much more simple, like at everyone's—two towels: for paws and for hands); they hung in three tiers, not two. He took a lower one, dried his paws, took an upper one, ruffled himself all over with it, looked at himself in the mirror. Felt foolish. Why had he come in? This was all somehow wrong. He could have waited outside. She probably wasn't pleased to have him here—the mentor surely knew who he was, where he was from, from what house and lineage. Well, fine.

He opened the half-open interior door—light, wooden, with gaps—deliberately slowly. Then entered.

The room, this main room turned out to be larger, far larger than he'd expected. The abundance of things scattered everywhere assaulted him; it wasn't disorder, no, you could see how diligently they tried to keep everything in order, but it was precisely the abundance of things, so disparate that you got lost. Immediately to the left two glaives rested carelessly, the famous weapon of females, which lions have no business taking up. Beneath them—sacks, many sacks. Then, going around: a bed, a door, some entrance to

some attic, a long countertop, a stove, another table, another bed. Four cradles, the kind that hang from the ceiling, stood in the corner, stacked right on top of one another. But also, in the middle of the room, like a colossal altar—yet another, enormous bed on high legs; on it one could easily sleep lengthwise or crosswise; it was covered all in white, and...

"Let us be acquainted. I am Vaalu-Miresli, the mentor..."

"...mentor of Simsana, she told me about the Radiant one," he picked up very eagerly, and immediately regretted it, for he had just interrupted. "Vaalu-Simsana, I beg your pardon," he dug his claws into his palm, clenching his fist.

"Right. Sit down, be invited," the mentor commanded, pointing to the long bench at the long table, while she herself went to the stove by the opposite window; her look was focused, hard, lips pressed together, ears back.

He followed her briefly with his gaze. A dagger right behind her back, placed horizontally, simply and carelessly tied to that strong belt. A long, coarse gray dress below the knees—Arad didn't know what such clothes were called. He had a rough sense of what Ashai-Keetrah wore, noted from afar, and always had the impression they dressed ornately and curiously, and sometimes—as his father put it—whorishly (Arad had remembered this word and tossed it out a couple of times when occasion arose, and everyone laughed, and that was good). But this... It's some kind of austere, rough garment, and on the belt—three or four towels (rags?), clean and very white.

She was doing something over there by the stove and table. Alright.

He sat down, arms crossed on the table, legs beneath it. He looked around, taking in the smell of the house: herbs, some kind of either medicines or something else, food, females; the mixture was eclectic, indefinable, but pleasant.

And suddenly he noticed that they were not alone here. In another corner of the table, right by the wall, sat some hamanu; she was barely visible behind the window curtain and a tall, enormous vase. Oh, no. Not just some hamanu.

"Hamanu Ulra, good day! Excuse me, I hadn't noticed you."

She nodded. Oh, yes. He averted his eyes and fixed his gaze on a mug on the table. His mother and Ulra had studied together at the separate Gallen school for lionessies, and knew each other well. Ulra was a female in the most direct, most immediate sense and purpose: she endlessly bore cubs to her husband, a well-known fiscal, his father's partner in flis games and debates; she herself, without any servants (but with her childless sister), kept the house; she knew everything and everything she knew, she told to her numerous female acquaintances, just like her.

Ulra rose heavily, holding her belly. She was neither large, nor tall, nor fat, but she was... so pregnant. Arad couldn't come up with another thought.

In cubhood he'd been told that pregnant lionesses had swallowed a watermelon, so this one had swallowed many.

"My Vaal. *Nai*, the heat," she made herself a fan from an empty, small plate, and fanned herself with it. "Save me, mother-Ahlia. *Nai*... So, the day after tomorrow?"

"Yes," Vaalu-Miresli said without turning around, continuing to clatter the dishes. "Tomorrow."

"Arad, when you take a wife, don't give her three sons at once. Be strong. Ahlia the great mother! Oh..."

She adjusted her hem. Due to her condition, hamanu Ulra wore a completely loose long tunic, somewhat comical, without a belt and without the cords obligatory for every Naysagrian lioness—the *katena*. Just like at home, but for pregnant females this is permissible, even proper.

"Grant release, *masterina*," Ulra said unusually, very pleadingly—unusual both for her and in general; Arad involuntarily pricked up his ears.

Vaalu-Miresli approached, their hands meeting in an intricate, private embrace understood only by lionesses who had given life and received it—the palm of the Mistress of Life tenderly cradling the hamanu's elbow, then squeezing, strongly, quite strongly, as always happens when a lioness must bring life into the world and the Mistress of Life must help her, and in the world there are only the two of them, and no one else.

The lioness's palm relaxed limply on the Mistresse's forearm, submitting to the strong and tender grip.

"Vaal shall release," Vaalu-Miresli affirmed.

Arad turned away wildly. He probably shouldn't have looked at that, or perhaps wasn't even allowed to. A mug (empty), a plate (someone had eaten something), a book (large, clearly expensive, beautiful), covered with colored fabric bearing their native Naysagrian patterns (solar spirals everywhere). He shouldn't have come in after all. This was the house of a Mistress of Life, practically—a midwife's house (his father sometimes said 'those midwives,' meaning Ashai-Keetrah in general, all of them, indiscriminately, and into these words he put all of a male's contempt for the monstrously childish, limited and narrow affairs of the other sex); what business does a lion have in a house of females?

Meanwhile, Simsana's mentor was seeing the hamanu out; they stood somewhere outside, at the threshold, and the hamanu was laughing about something. That was it, now there was no chance that by some miracle they wouldn't find out about his visit. None whatsoever. Arad, son of judge Nergim-Sinay, of the Karizian-Roust lineage—at the house of a Mistress of Life, the Ashai-Keetrah Vaalu-Miresli! Excellent news, highest quality, exactly what's needed for rumors, gossip, speculations, all of it.

Finally, they said their farewells, and the entrance doors closed, the bolt slammed sharply again. Arad listened. A moment of silence. Then some rustling of garments.

Damn it. Arad remembered. She had introduced herself. He hadn't!

Right, he needed to think through what to say. Yes, something like this: 'I beg your pardon—I've probably disturbed the Great-Radiant one. I didn't know there was a guest. My name is Arad. Vaalu-Simsana and I became acquainted during the trip to Moor. We agreed I would stop by, and so—here I am. By the way, tomorrow there's a fair downtown. Perhaps Vaalu-Simsana would like to go with me?' Yes, such a speech would befit an educated lion from a good lineage.

This was almost all true. Firstly, they had made an arrangement, but differently; but this, really, didn't matter. Secondly, they hadn't first met on the trip to Moor (by then he already knew her, and had deliberately sat beside her on the way back—not without effort, not without cunning—for just a short while, because around her swirled flighty tails, noisy and rather annoying, evaluating everything with their glances and giggling at everything; in the end he and she managed to exchange a few words about all sorts of nonsense. Arad joked once, apparently not badly—she giggled, even laughed).

But in reality they had met when—not so long ago, two moons back—there was a fire at the hospital (a big affair), set by a madlion. Then they'd asked all of them, the whole gymnasium, all the gymnasium lions, to help clear out the hospital cellar, and Arad never would have thought a hospital could have so much wine and spirits. They were loading bottles into carts and laughing; they laughed so much they broke some, quite a few actually, and Arad cut his hand on a shard, along the forearm. It didn't hurt, but there turned out to be quite a bit of blood, and Arad went inside the hospital—to look for something for bandaging. And Simsana was just coming out of it, and—hesitating slightly—she herself stopped him with a gesture (Arad very well remembered her slowness, her doubt, as if she was deciding whether she needed to get involved with this bloody business). Everything was silent, completely. She bandaged his hand, and so skillfully, matter-of-factly and casually, as if she did this every day for many Arads; and she had a lot of white, cotton fabric with her, and before that poured stinging alcohol over everything, of which there was plenty around. Well, as for her being near the hospital, or in it—Arad had never asked what she was doing there—there was nothing strange about it: Ashai-Keetrah and hospitals are always somewhere near each other, and especially Mistresses of Life; and Simsana, she's exactly that—a disciple of a Mistress of Life: a midwife who is simultaneously an Ashai-Keetrah priestess (or the other way around—who can tell).

Arad, having first assumed Simsana was a hospital servant, swaggered and put on airs that nothing bothered him (it wasn't hard, it didn't hurt much):

"Shall we sample it?" he began to tease, holding a bottle of red wine in his good left hand.

"You can't, it's not ours. Theft," she answered without looking, examining and carefully touching her work.

"I'll buy it then."

She didn't answer. He found himself staring at the iron ring in her ear, large, only now noticing it: strange, large, crude. And then he noticed how she was dressed, this lioness about his age. That large belt. The hem of her dress was oddly cut, and the dress itself was adult, thick, somehow coarse. Around her neck a chain: seemed to be an amulet, but hidden by clothing.

A slight curtsy, not another word, a half-turn, her first step...

"May I be forgiven!" he grabbed her by the elbow, it came out rather sharp, but it was what it was. "What is the maassi called? The Fiery maassi. Fiery. Maassi of Ashai-Keetrah..." He smoothed his mane, releasing the lioness. "Excuse me for my clumsy manners."

"What does the young-sire need further?" she frowned slightly, laying back her ears.

"I've never had the honor of conversing with a lioness of the sisterhood muzzle to muzzle. May the—" a small pause, for he was remembering exactly how one should speak with them, "—Fiery one understand me."

She stared at him in obvious surprise, and Arad remembered one thing very well—her pressed, unusually dark lips; her cautious, slightly accusing gaze.

"How so?"

"My father is a judge," he said apologetically. "Therefore I grew up in an environment in which there was no... no..." he pressed his hand to his temple. "There was no sisterhood," was all he could come up with.

He spoke with her employing everything he knew from rhetoric and simply the experience of good manners, which his father and mother had instilled in him and his brothers. They had access to the local elite (and, no need to hide it, were themselves part of it—not the highest sort, but still), and Arad knew what a patrician house was like, had kissed the hand of a maassi of high bloodline. He had chosen the safest path: converse with her in the most courteous and elevated manner, because he simply didn't know how else to address her sisterhood's stratum. Had no experience. Only from books, only in words.

Fifteen years living as a Suung—and not conversing with priestesses of Vaal! Yes, such is possible, if you were born in a certain circle.

"Ah, so the young-sire is Arad, of the Karizian family?" she pricked up her ears.

"Correct," he was surprised: she knew who he was.

"Vaal-Simsana. *Stalla* of sister Vaalu-Miresli, Mistress of Life... I suggest you proceed without the *nomen*."

Later, in retrospect, Arad remembered that this last bit, this ‘...without the nomen,’ she spoke after a momentary delay, as if waiting, or considering, or even doubting. Later he clearly determined that these three words: opened the path; changed the world; made a ‘before’ and ‘after.’

"My attention?" Arad used the elevated form for the ordinary ‘What?’

She looked at him attentively.

"You may call me Simsana."

"I'm flattered," Arad caught the shift to informal address; by the rules, if a maassi offers it first, as it should be, then one must accept it with gratitude, never ignore it (monstrous tactlessness). Reasonably assuming the same worked with Ashai-Keetrah, he continued: "I..."

He forgot about the bottle in his hand; it fell and shattered.

"I'll steal another," Arad offered. It was an insanely stupid phrase; he didn't even know why he'd said it, lowering the register of their exchange once again.

Simsana huffed a laugh, helped him clean up the shards, remarking on his wounded hand (essentially she cleaned them up herself), and said her farewell.

...Pawsteps behind him, claws clicking on the floor. That was it, Vaalu-Miresli had finally, it seemed, entered. Right, Arad had thought through what he would say. He turned around. The Ashai passed by him; he followed her back with his gaze, then she turned, crossing her arms, and leaned sideways against the table. He stood—good thing he did so steadily—but accomplished nothing else of note, because he met her gaze. Good thing this happened after the standing, or he would have frozen mid-rise, or fallen, or something of the sort.

The thing was, Arad truly didn't know how Ashai conducted themselves; nowhere to learn, simply nowhere. They weren't spoken of at home (except to mock or criticize), weren't invited over, they took no part in anything, they had no place. He didn't know firsthand, up close, at length, their habits and manners, apart from—now—Simsana. He certainly sensed and noticed the difference between Simsana and her female peers, despite the fact that Simsana seemed to try to dampen her belonging to the sisterhood around him. Perhaps an illusion, but in any case—this was certain—Simsana didn't flaunt it or show off when convenient. But overall, her habits, her ways, fit within the boundaries of the familiar, the comprehensible; Arad knew that he knew nothing about her seriously, but what could he do—in the end, females are surrounded by mysteries anyway.

Here she spoke to him in another language. Not even another—a different kind. Until now Arad had lived never suspecting such things could exist in the world; it was as if someone had pulled cotton from his ears, and then the sounds didn't simply become more numerous, no, they changed in quality. Her eyes didn't simply know something about him—she entered into conver-

sation with his consciousness directly, bypassing the mediation of the mind. The gaze wasn't simply abundant, no, it was different, it was a method of communication, a language, a message compressed into the gleam and fires of her eyes in the afternoon light from the window. Everything around became unreal. In the world of eternal sun, in which he had lived these years carelessly, a moon appeared, with both sides—Luana and Sixtima. And because this discovery was too entrancing, surely much of what she conveyed to him—was lost.

But something Arad understood: 'Don't be afraid.'

She looked away toward the window. The grip released. Then looked again, but now nothing; either he'd grown accustomed, or that was it, or something.

Yes. He really should see this through to the end and introduce himself.

"I forgot..." he sincerely placed his hand on his chest. "My name is Arad."

"A pleasure, Arad. You see, we're already acquainted through others' ears," she sat at the table, busied herself with the plates. She moved the book in colored fabric closer, either for lack of space or for some other reason, nearer to him, to the edge of the table. "Simsana told me about you."

"Really?" he marveled, genuinely. A wave of blood. 'What exactly?'—his voice wavered (good thing it didn't crack into a squeak, as so often before)—these damned words escaping on their own, no one had asked for them. But this was too important, this was... what could she have told about him?"

"That your name is Arad, and that she likes you."

"I see..." he wanted to say something, but what could one say to that.

"Something to eat?" She stood, stretching unusually upward, clasping her palms above her head with arms extended—unusual for a lioness her age, who typically no longer perform such exercises. Then sharply lowered them and set her hands boldly on her hips, exhaling.

Arad firmly declined, shook his head, ears pressed back:

"No-no, thank you very much, I've just eaten. I thank the Radiant one."

"Fine. If you've eaten, then you'll drink," she went to the long counter by the stove, and quickly returned with a large, dented, crooked and generally old teapot, shiny and dull at the same time, and a simple wooden mug. Gripping the teapot's handle with a thick rag pulled right from her belt, she poured him something foaming, dark and red, and clearly hot; she poured from behind him; he felt a soft touch on his right shoulder.

The smell was strong, and distantly familiar.

"Hot wine?" he was slightly surprised.

"It's weak, to warm you in the cool," stuffing the rag into the other, left side of her belt, Vaalu-Miresli said, and sat down opposite him. "And good for the stomach."

"Ahhh..." Arad drew out, as if he understood everything. Though it wasn't particularly cool, and his stomach seemed fine. He sniffed; a sharp, spicy

aroma, sweet. He tried it: hot! Tart. Unclear if it was strong. Sweet, actually tasty. He took another small sip, set down the mug. Looked at her. She sat half-turned, looking out the window, sitting straight, right hand on the table, the other holding a finger. *I've become a guest of an Ashai-Keetrah*, thought Arad. *This is the end.*

"And when will Vaalu-Simsana arrive?"

"Should be soon," she gifted a fleeting glance, and back to the window. Serious, fierce, the kind that could devour you.

Wine in a teapot. Amusing, Arad hadn't seen such a thing before; he drank wine, just not like this, hot. His father, mother and guests drank such, but from a special thick pitcher.

He became curious. Everything became interesting to him.

"May I ask a question?"

"Go on."

"And this bed, in the middle? Is that... like where they give birth?"

"No, usually not," Simsana's mentor thought, licking her lips. "If a lioness gives birth at my house, then there," she pointed to the door behind her, without looking. "Here is not good."

"Why not?"

"What 'why not'?"

"Why is it not good to give birth here... to labor?" Arad gestured around, taking a sip.

"Kitchen—dirty," she looked at him, squinted. He felt the pressure. "Where one gives birth, there must be cleanliness. In those beds, if the birth goes well"—she released him—"a lioness can lie there the very next day. Then you take a cradle like that, see?" She pointed to the stack in the corner. "And hang it from the ceiling. Simple as that."

"I see there's no one here today," he took another sip, rubbed his nose—the wine's smell teased and played tricks.

"No one. Most prefer giving birth at home anyway." She looked at him, and now he actually felt good under her gaze. "You like it?"

"Yes. It's good."

She licked her lips again, and this did a very strange thing to Arad—he liked it even more. Something just happened.

"I must go," she said instantly. "Stay here, Simsana should be soon. Arad, tell her I'll be back by nightfall, alright?"

"Yes, Radiant Vaalu-Miresli, I'll tell her."

She stood, and after a moment of gathering herself, very quick, went into the antechamber. Something clattered there again, the rustle of knemids' buckles, then the decisive bolt, and while Arad was thinking whether he should say farewell first or what, she looked into the room:

"Until we meet, good Suung."

"Good day, Radiant one!" he eagerly replied, breaking into a smile, nodding. In an awkward gesture he also for some reason grabbed the mug, and nearly spilled from it; good thing she didn't notice.

Having surveyed the room one last time, Vaalu-Miresli resolutely departed, and Arad remained alone in the ringing silence of unfamiliar dwelling. He scratched, touched his nose, took another small sip of the wine, fished out an anise star with his claw; not daring to leave it on the table and make stains, he put it back. So it goes...

When will she come? How can he even explain to her why he is here? Maybe just tell the truth?

He has a plan. In the plan, she is at home. Then the invitation, and they go. Or a circumstantial refusal (possibly even indignation)—this too was accounted for: well, she's busy, something urgent, well, things happen, who knows—and he turns around, like a legion recalled from war at the last moment, a war that never began. Plan also accounted for the option, that she isn't at home (by the way, 'home' or 'at her mentor's,' Arad wondered? It seemed Simsana always said 'at ours,' but not 'home'). Then he turns around, like a legion who found no enemy on the battlefield. The plan even included an absolute refusal, without any excuses about anything: you told me something different, you were supposed to come tomorrow, I won't go with you, I don't want to, why should I go with you, where, what are you even talking about—and slam goes the door. This was, practically speaking, impossible, but Arad was a good strategist and accounted for even the impossible. Then he retreats, like a legion defeated by the enemy, a vanquished Suung, dragging his spear, covered in blood, and forever changed.

That her mentor would invite him into the house somehow still could fit into the plan. But not for long: he'd wait, Simsana would get ready, dress, do whatever else, well, whatever lionesses do when leaving the house (and if she were ready instantly, it would become clear that—even today!—she'd definitely been waiting for him), they'd leave. With the mentor he would be meaningful, silent, coolly polite and proper, two or even three years older than his age, and it would be noticeable; a real lion.

I didn't even tell her why I came to see Simsana! Arad suddenly remembered. And the mentor didn't ask. If she didn't ask, then... she knew. If she knew, then Simsana told her everything, including that I'd come for her. So we could go places. Unknown to her, Arad marvelled at the transcendental columns of logic in his conclusions. So she prepared and waited. That's good. Success is foretold.

Overall, the boundaries of today's and tonight's success were outlined vaguely, but Arad knew they included a kiss, a real one, so that his tongue would meet hers; but the fuller goal wasn't the kiss—that was only the first outpost—but a mixture of long kisses, many of them on the neck, on the ears and behind them (advice from a friend—according to his intelligence, li-

onesses go mad for such things), embraces (the tighter the better), and—important—her scent, and the more of the latter, the better; he was interested in the greatest possible territory he could conquer for kissing and smelling. He knew where and how he and Simsana would go for these purposes, because all of this was decidedly impossible in any public place—they were good Suungs, after all; they mustn't be seen. Away from prying eyes.

That he'd entered in Simsana's absence somehow no longer fit into the plan. New maps and new strategies were required. Although...

Arad swirled the mug, squinted at the window.

He just needs to wait here, Simsana will come, and they'll leave. This is even better: the mentor won't be here, Vaalu-Miresli won't be here, she won't interfere. This changes nothing.

Defining objectives is much easier, Arad thought, when you have experience from prior campaigns: it's not enough to desire—you must know what you desire; and Arad had such experience, and this experience had left scars on him. In short, Arad had a pretty good idea of what would count as victory today, but he needed to marshal all his previous experience to do everything as well and as maturely as possible.

Battle Scars and Possible Reality

First, long ago—three years back, at the Ai-Yulassai holiday that had just passed again—he had kissed his third cousin for the first time. She was also twelve (what a coincidence). Relatives from his father's family had come to visit in private coaches, many of them, all sorts, about ten in all (dad kept saying confidentially to mom about premature wealth and sudden nobility at the table; Arad overheard everything), and she got lost among them, this third cousin. They found themselves completely alone on a swing in the garden, in the middle of evening-night, and began talking about love: Arad dashingly, as if he already knew everything; Sarabande cautiously, ready at any moment to laugh it off or take offense. Arad won her over with politeness and wit. They grew frank with each other for the first time in their lives—at least he did, certainly. Arad honestly confessed he was in love with a lioness who'd studied with him at school, but now they didn't see each other, and he wanted... well... he wanted to 'do something with her,' as Arad either clumsily or precisely put it, but his crush gone off to weaving school. He'd gone to gymnasium; his cousin, it turned out, had too. She said she also had various romantic interests, but there was one unpleasant thing: she'd never kissed anyone. Not terrible in itself—someone would kiss her eventually, really—but this fact wasn't helpful. Lionesses talk among themselves about love and admirers—much and thoroughly—and it could happen they'd ask her what she'd had with lions, and if she said 'nothing,' everyone would laugh. Probably. Time flies forward inevitably, and still no one had dared express feelings for her because 'they're all cowards.' The cousin also doubted her beauty. Arad scattered several clumsy compliments, but also a good one. Said he also hadn't kissed anyone. It just hadn't worked out somehow.

They thought about it. Arad noted that those with sisters were lucky—jokingly, of course, jokingly. She—unexpectedly—noted that if she had a brother, she might have asked him to kiss her, just to know what to expect at all; or at least an older sister who would explain everything, but she only had two younger ones. Her mother had hinted a few times that there were some love games, but didn't go into details—asking her to grow up a bit more first. Nothing was written in books, and she wasn't much of a reader anyway. Friends had also told her a couple of times that all sorts of things happen between a lion and lioness, and there are all sorts of games, and much besides; but what use was that when everything begins with a kiss, and you should at least have some idea about it. Arad, not even excessively agitated (though

agitation—honestly—was there), went the route of jokes again and hinted that he was a third cousin, but still a brother, sort of; and since they'd already confessed their troubles to each other, then:

"Maybe we could try? Like an exercise, at school."

"Ew," she answered, "are you stupid?" Sarabande wrinkled her muzzle, ears half-laid back.

"Yes," he suddenly said. "Totally."

She thought for a moment, glanced down at her paws dangling from the swing.

"Do you really want to try that badly? Well, honestly..."

"Listen," he looked around, ears pricked, as if trying to steal something, "let's go behind that tree. No one will see us there, we won't tell anyone. And we'll know what to expect when it's for real."

Moments of tension. Arad had doubts. It became more frightening than eager. Then frightening altogether—he regretted it. He thought he'd gotten off easy, and wouldn't have to do anything, maybe it was right to leave everything as it was, but not so fast:

"You're so pushy. Fine. Once. But swear by blood you won't tell anyone."

"I swear by blood," he said that, of course.

He gave her his hand; she jumped down from the swing. There, behind the remarkable tree with two trunks and one base, it all happened. They stood facing each other (she was smaller, shorter); Arad didn't know how to even begin all this, how to approach a lioness with tenderness—or rather, he understood in his mind, had seen it a couple of times, had read about it, but in real life... He took her hands; she burst out laughing, and he let out a few chuckles himself, released her hands.

"Sorry, I just... Somehow..." she covered her mouth and nose with her palm. "This is so silly."

Do it! he suddenly tensed all over. Just do it. He took her by the shoulders. Then by the neck, then by the cheeks, very carefully; not tenderly—tenderness didn't come yet and he didn't know how—but carefully, the way you hold a very valuable figurine. He felt how frightened she was, how she went still. His heart beat wildly and incredibly loudly. He looked: she had closed her eyes, frozen, and become so serious. Everything became different: the sounds of the world changed, they became close and loud; smells became sharper. He kissed her on the chin, then higher; she didn't respond at all, he did it again, and she suddenly responded, quickly grasping, as all females do, that one must respond; and it was such a hot, burning sensation from her tongue that a powerful wave ran from his nape to his tail, the strongest in his life. This required a breather, or he could suffocate. Arad pulled back slightly, looked at her—she opened her eyes, full of terror.

"Again," he instructed.

They joined lips again; wiser from the first attempt, they did it a bit more boldly; one, second, third burning wave, he lowered his hands to her shoulders and squeezed them; she placed hers on his chest; the learning went quickly—they tilted their heads, understanding it was more comfortable that way. There wasn't enough air, not at all, he pulled back again; it turns out lionesses like to close their eyes in moments of tenderness, he concluded; it seemed she'd liked it, she apparently wanted more. But Arad decided today's achievement was incredible enough; these were such important and powerful discoveries that he dared not ask fate for more.

"I think I got it."

She opened her eyes as if awakening from a long sleep, removed her hands from his chest. Grabbed her belt, began adjusting it. Suddenly pushed him away, on top of everything, but Arad didn't feel offended. Without discussion, they began walking toward the house. All this time his cousin kept adjusting something on herself.

"Not bad, right?" he said in a laughing, cheerful tone, though everything was serious.

His cousin didn't answer.

They came out onto a small front walkway; there was no one at the entrance. They stopped on the façade staircase, by the sculptures of sharp-muzzled, lean hounds—she stopped him:

"Just don't tell anyone. My mother is Andarian. In our line, lionesses don't *play* with brothers, relatives—it's *hust* to us."

He thought, looking aside. Noted:

"But I'm a third cousin."

"Still a brother," she grew angry that he'd decided to argue.

"I promised, don't worry. But we weren't *playing*."

"A kiss is already *the Game*. That's what my friends and mother said. So we played, Arad," she concluded accusingly, as if he—and only he—was to blame for everything.

"Whatever. I promised," he repeated.

He'd heard something about *the Game* somewhere, from friends and peers, and so, by chance. But he knew almost nothing really. Only knew that his father was supposed to tell him about that, but he couldn't bring himself to approach him with this question, and didn't want to. And his brothers were younger—what could you get from them. *Well, well*, thought Arad, tossing from side to side, and for some reason thinking that somewhere upstairs, in the guest room, his third cousin probably wasn't sleeping either, *so I've already played with a lioness? Does that count too?*

He did lie to cousin Sarabande. A couple moons later he shared the experience with his trusted friend Krres; he embellished the affair and added several details.

"Nah-nah, taily, but that wasn't the Game," Krres denied, sticking his knife into a piece of wood; Krres, son of a retired Legata soldier (a boozier) and an innkeeper's servant (quite the one).

"Why not? She said that licking is already the Game," said Arad, and by his friend's smirk understood he'd displayed dismal naivety.

"The maneless ones will tell you all sorts of things, just keep your ears sharp. All they know is to tuck their tails in fear. Didn't your dad tell you?"

"Not yet."

"Ask him, let him do it. Otherwise they'll show you what's under their tail, and you'll think you've played," Krres laughed; Arad laughed too.

"That's not bad either, if they show."

"Yeah," Krres nodded and threw the knife harder. Had to pull it out with force.

"And your father told you?" Arad asked him.

He nodded silently.

"And?"

He paused meaningfully, threw the knife a couple of times. Then hid it; sitting, he clasped his hands on his knees and looked into the distance.

"You start the Game, you finish it. Got it?"

By Arad's eyes, Krres understood he didn't get it.

"Well, you started going after her yourself, right?"

"Yeah. Sort of suggested it."

"Well there, that's right. Dad said: if she goes after you herself, something's wrong. Either a whore. Or... well... anyway, a whore."

"Right."

"So you have to finish it."

"I did finish it myself. We left when I said."

"Arad," Krres tapped a claw on his forehead. "Finish. On her. Or on her clothes, that works too. But better on her. Right in the snout," he drew out the 'sss' with relish, and threw the knife again. Didn't hit the wood, but the sand.

"Yeah, yeah, sure," Arad hastily agreed.

"You can't stick it in her. Nowhere. And she won't let you anyway. She'll tuck her tail."

"That's obvious..." Arad nodded, knowing the Ancestral Law, even remembering much by heart. "So what do you do then?"

Krres scratched his nose, clicked his tongue.

"She'll show how she's ready to give," he answered after thinking.

"Meaning?"

"What do you mean 'meaning,' Arad? She'll show you how she's ready to surrender. That's her business."

Complicated! Complicated.

"And what? You played like that?"

"Yeah, with three," Krres said calmly.

"Wow," Arad said enviously. "For real?"

Suddenly he ran his fingers through his short light mane, scratched with his claws, ruffling himself up.

"Nah. Just kidding," and it became clear he really had been joking. "Almost worked with one. We got spooked."

So that's how it was. Everyone around, in the end, either joking or too serious. Such chaos, such disorder—try and figure it out.

◇

...Arad turned the mug, swirling the half-drunk wine; it had already cooled from hot to warm, a third remained. He looked out the window, looked at the cradles, sighed. He stood, paced, sat down. Sighed again, noticed the book in fabric, pulled it closer to himself. Thought again, crumpling, squeezing the Naysagrian patterns...

◇

...After that first, valuable experience, and the subsequent no less valuable discussion with Krres, he learned nothing particularly new (though he tried). Friends either stayed silent or shamelessly lied. He couldn't ask his parents. No use from brothers. And no sisters. A maternal cousin once shared something at a wedding after drinking, but his advice was barely comprehensible ("Don't listen to what she says, watch what she does," "Don't ask the game how to catch it"), concerned taming and subduing females in general, and was clearly meant for older lions. The opposite sex was elusive, deadly serious or endlessly giggly, lovely, left a trail of scent and gathered in flocks.

Lionesses wouldn't be caught and proved inaccessible.

But four moons ago something important happened to him, excellent and monstrous at once—this was his first real scar and true torment (was it even worth counting as scars a few broken sympathies and brief infatuations, and also his scandalous escapade with the lionessy Djulna, whom he'd 'jokingly' pressed against a wall?).

His father has a friend. Well, his father has many friends—he is a judge, after all. But this friend is important—the magister of their town of Gallen. Several times a year he invites various associates, which included Arad's father; so it happened again four moons ago. Usually mother took all three brothers, but this time only Arad went. The adults settled on the terrace, while the young ones arranged themselves in the magister's large garden. The guests this time were as motley as possible, and brought their heirs with them, and some were already two generations older—grandmothers and grandfathers to their adolescents; in the end a decent company gathered,

from thirteen years to almost eighteen. There were six lionesses, five young-lions. This was all clearly better than previous visits: they shot bows, then crossbows, then begged for a heavy crossbow, but Arad authoritatively determined it was broken, and the steward accused them of breaking it, and everyone was indignant; they observed a female *firran* in the magister's firrarium, very angry, because firrarium had no males (magister bred and sold them); they begged the magister's steward for horses, but he reasonably decided this horde of young-lions would work the horses to death, the weather was already hot, and refused. With nothing to do, they went to fight with poles on a beam 'until the poke,' as they say (fall—you lose), in the open—the usual fun, everyone loves it. And here Arad performed well, he completely demolished this degenerate mane (even two years older, ha), whose name he'd forgotten, who kept teasing him for no reason, trying to needle with mean jokes and mocking looks. The lionesses came to spectate. Arad won, though he wasn't the oldest or the strongest, and they clapped for him. Things moved toward evening, they sat on carpets.

When they'd calmed down, Arad couldn't help but notice—and no one either—that the company of females had gained an addition. But what an addition! What a arrival this was... This was a Suungkomnaasan lioness, without a trace of any mixture. Pure Suungkomnaasa. This maassi was either sixteen or already of age—seventeen, hardly more, but Arad saw-felt that she was slightly older than him; it was difficult to say precisely about her Coming of Age, because unlike the complex, established rules in the attire of lionesses of the Naysagri pride, his native pride, she was dressed truly like 'a northern lioness in the south' (though Naysagri isn't really the south)—in the simplest, short chiton, only to the knees, all white, like its mistress, with a purely symbolic belt, with sleeves that looked like someone had sliced them lengthwise with a knife, and—in addition—almost tail-free. A white spot. The inexperienced might mistake it for nightwear. This is forgivable for northern lionesses—they're warm, heat emanates from them. This long white fur, blue and emerald eyes, the long tail with no less magnificent tip; these ears with their dark border; these even, white, moist teeth, these flawless, even legs, my Vaal, excellent symmetries, even more beautiful asymmetries, I can't look at this anymore... Well, place any Suung before you, of any pride, any station, and torture him with questions about the beauty of lionesses, and each time he defines the ideal, press "and further?", and inevitably, in exhaustion, all will come to one thing, to it—to Suungkomnaasa, to the pure lionesses of the north; there will simply be nowhere further to go. Then jokes and sayings are expected, the very ones, of course: about their giggliness, choleric temper, some amazing mixture of pickiness and being easy, vengefulness, ability to fall into fury of any quality, softness of fur, amazing dialect and amazing words, and that it's hot under the blanket at night, and about ice between the thighs, but let's not speak of this, let's not...

Exactly such a one sat opposite Arad: utterly uncompromising North. Some guests from Suungkomnaasa had come to visit the magister, and now their daughter was playing the lute for everyone, and moreover telling them what she was playing:

"*Tsay*, listen all: sire Sols stern was, non-melanchol was, he haaated sentiment, but liiiked he feeeling. Bahtween sentiment and feeling—there thiiiis much is," she spread her arms wide, and Arad opened his mouth, then closed it, because he imagined her without such unnecessary clothing—the setting sun behind her helped with this. He sat more comfortably to hide his awakened interest, and assumed a thoughtful expression to conceal his thoughts while she played. He watched the stream of her excellent tail, settled at her paws; the tip twitched in rhythm with the music. She played very well; one of the connoisseurs among the lionesses praised her extravagantly, and you could tell she'd been practicing since earliest cubhood.

She'd been introduced earlier (a Komnaasan patrician), as soon as the young-lions had joined the maassi after their active games, but Arad remembered nothing except her first name (without the second-third, the bloodline names and other nonsense): Arshaya.

Then they sat down to play a card game—flis, simple one, so the games would be shorter. It had grown quite dark, and someone suggested a last game, then—go inside. They agreed, but then suddenly the degenerate and scoundrel hated by Arad proposed:

"The last round goes with hide-and-peek," and he smiled. Arad noticed two other young-lions smiled as well. "Whoever passes, please understand..." he shuffled the large flis cards, looking at everyone with a half-questioning air.

"And forgive!" a cheerful and sudden exclamation from maassi, the one sitting right beside the northern beauty, not bad herself either, daughter of the local arms dealer, Lenayna. Somehow this cheerful intonation surprised Arad; not even the cheerfulness itself, but something beneath it. Then she looked at Arad, but he didn't notice, for he devoted his attention to Arshaya, just like this: sometimes glancing, sometimes furtively.

He felt a certain agitation in the air. But couldn't understand where it came from. It turned out the game would split into rounds, and the females would play their round, and the males—theirs.

The competition was fierce. Arad didn't know what was happening in the lionesses' camp, but among them it was utter chaos and a battle to the death. He was seized by excitement, he seriously decided to win, not even knowing why. Not only he didn't know, but one other, the youngest among them, but he was knocked out first. In the end, the cards remained between him and the degenerate, and it became a matter of honor to first knock him off the beam today, and then—thrash him at cards. In flis you need to know how to count,

and Arad knew how: a rigorous mind, understanding of chance and pattern, an architect, a future architect. And he won.

"Lenayna, I heard you came second," Arad's opponent addressed the dealer's daughter. "You know, me too."

"No. Not second. And not third," she answered him with some good mockery.

"Well, good luck," meanwhile they clapped Arad on the shoulder, laughing, his game partners (except the boor, of course). "Who won over there?" and they all stared questioningly at the seated maassi.

It turned out the northern beauty had won among the lionesses. Another maassi was whispering something in her ear at that very moment, and Arad grasped she also didn't know the further rules of the game, which—it seemed—wasn't over yet.

"Find meee in the daaark," she pointed at herself, and everyone laughed. "Impossible thing," she looked at Arad. "No peekin'! Cheatin'! Swindlin'!"

Arad's eyes were covered by other maassi, laughing; they sat him down, began counting long, to a hundred it seemed. And so he sat in pleasant female embraces, in this tender company, in invisible hands and little claws, seeing nothing; meanwhile among the males someone drew out "Whoaaa...", someone whistled, someone laughed dashingly. He suddenly felt the gentle fingers on his eyes suddenly squeeze harder, and even what seemed like the sharpness of claws on his forehead. Finally, they released him, it had grown even darker than before, everyone stood up; the arms dealer's daughter passed by him, brushing his elbow—apparently by carelessness; he looked around, but Arshaya had vanished. Two young-lions from the company, good manes, were pointing fingers toward the garden, smiling.

"Just a moment, I'll be quick," Arad told everyone, meaning he'd find her without trouble, and everyone found this very funny.

He went. He began to suspect something. Actually, very much to suspect. He began to understand... His heart pounded, blood rushed. Breathing. The Game. My Vaal, the Game. Here it is. I'm ready. No, I'm not ready. I didn't know, I didn't prepare. But I sort of know everything... Damn it, I know nothing... What's there to know! Use her and finish on her, as you should! Nonsense, you don't do everything like this in a rush! How, what, how do I start, what do I do?.. I'm dreaming. It can't be. This northern lioness? No, I'm not that good. Who am I anyway? It can't be. She's not... But she came here! She said 'Yes' to the Game! She didn't confuse anything, did she? Didn't confuse anything? No, females don't confuse things. Especially in such matters.

He found her, deep in the far end of the garden, where she sat under rose bushes, one leg tucked up and embracing it with her arms, on an interesting southern carpet (the contrast), which she'd obviously grabbed from the last, card-playing spot.

"We know it all in the future of the past'. *Tsanna*, the rules of this hide-and-seek flis me knowing now, gift I should victory to the one who eyes your covered with palms."

"And who was that?" he crouched opposite her, feasting on her sight. That thigh from under the tunic. Tail along, grazing the carpet. Vaal, I want to rid myself of the burden right onto this.

"Don't me know," she looked, measured him with her gaze, sitting there. She giggled, then continued: "She ain't against you."

"And you?"

Arshaya smirked. Then smiled, and again those moist white teeth; this could mean anything, almost everything. Arad waited. He couldn't even swallow, because he was afraid to move, afraid to look eager, greedy; and saliva suddenly went involuntarily, on its own, without asking, from the corner of his mouth, and she noticed. He wiped it, slowly, because doing it fast no longer made sense.

"Aryaaad, this'll be mighty silly. You, and me."

He thought. She still sat the same way, swung her paw (he noted: the knee swaying right-left). He clenched his fingers before him, interlaced them, rested his chin on them. Female games, fine. What else to expect but female games when you go to a female? But a lioness shouldn't call a lion silly. Or what he was about to do—silly.

"Then why'd you go into the garden? You could've gone to the house, right?" he rubbed his nose with his folded fingers, laying things out in his mind. He didn't look at her.

"Whoa, angry right here. I am—helper to good, younger Suung," she nodded her head, looked up, waved her paw again, oh that restless tail. "You won—you earned. This help must you with others. Had me gone to the house, they'd start doubtin' if females be willing toward you. But like this: they'll grow jealous. There's your position," she pointed upward with her finger, beautifully, "and it's grown claws."

She didn't change position. Arad watched the language of her body. He understood little of it. But he felt this wasn't the pose lionesses use to reject a lion. But what was it? Consent?.. Doubt?.. Permission to admire?.. Invitation to ask?.. Demand to beg (ugh)? Teasing without exit or end? What? She was communicating with him—but he didn't understand the language. Contradictory messages were being sent to him. The enemy's disinformation created chaos in his consciousness.

What does it matter, thought Arad, and stood. *What truly matters is different*.

He stood directly over her, very confidently, even too much so, legs spread, like a master over a *dhaar*, arms crossed; so many different feelings were tearing him apart right now that they didn't even all fit, even the beastly desire hadn't passed yet. But this was unimportant, for everything was unim-

portant except one thing—principles, and Arad had principles; they buried all feelings, even lust, under their cement.

He was silent; she sat, cheerful, waiting to see what would entertain her next.

"Do you pity me?"

"*Tsanna*, younger, sweet one," she nodded affirmatively and cheerfully.

"And I don't pity you—not at all," he crouched beside her, to the right.

Arad had a straightforward plan: say this simple phrase; stand; leave without looking back. But suddenly something came over him, he became angry and offended at the entire female sex. They never say anything straight! Only twist things around! Everything's amusement to them! Everything only for them, and their fur's always smooth, and they don't have to do anything!

And he grabbed her the way he sometimes grabbed disobedient brothers—by the ears.

Arad—honestly—was completely taken aback by his own action.

It seemed she was taken aback too, not expecting it, but—just in case—laughed:

"Funny you, why tuggin' me ears?"

"So you won't hear what I think of you," he said angrily, but internally began to falter.

"Pffff..." she snorted, sensing weakness—females sense everything. "Bitten one. Let go," and she slapped his hand, as if to say: showed your mane there, enough now.

And this manner enraged him so. To strike a lion! Just like that, like something unimportant, harmless. He knew how to wrestle in the Circle, he was twice as strong as her, he could strangle her right here. And besides. Bitches.

He squeezed her ears, fingers on her nape, even pulled her slightly toward himself; lost his balance, fell to one knee—and now his nose was very close to hers, willingly or not.

"Ahshhh!" she hissed, even bared her teeth. And suddenly something very quickly, instantly, changed in her. The snarl turned into a smile, she looked down, her features melted, softened: "*Tsanna*?"

That's how they ask: a request to enter, for permission, for allowance. Permission to be freed? What was she asking of him, this northern lioness with patrician insignia on her neck? Oh yes, she was a patrician. No way, oh no, fuck, she was of such high lineage, this was impossible...

"No *tsanna*," he clenched his teeth, looked away.

He extended his hand to her—indication to rise. Arshaya looked at it as if not understanding where... why... what is this even, why a hand?.. and then accepted it, bit her lip with a fang, with manner and seriousness, like a patrician, and easily, gracefully rose before him.

What came over me? What have I done?

Arad wanted to say something, but no longer knew what. Something spun on his tongue about how she probably wouldn't wish to walk to the house in his company, but the words somehow ran out. He simply nodded, not even to her, but to the night air and cicadas, to something invisible around them; and then simply walked toward the house, trying to step evenly and walk straight. Upon arriving at the magister's house, he declared to his mother and father that he felt unwell because of his stomach (apparently ate something), and to avoid trouble, he'd better retire home. His mother grew worried, his father told him to go announce this to the master of the house, which Arad calmly did, and then, taking his cloak from a dhaar and his knemids, left for home.

He didn't see or hear how Arshaya returned, and learned what happened there much, much later. Almost nothing happened really: to the same dhaar Arshaya returned the carpet, which hadn't fulfilled one of today's purposes, washed her paws and went to the lionesses, who had already separated and were sitting-reclining apart from the lions on cushions, as usually happens after a brief shared meal at any decent evening gathering; the good Suung lionesses saw their entertainment return with her, and immediately someone began shoving the lute at her, and Arshaya reluctantly took it. She said she was thirsty, they gave her cold diluted wine, and so she sat with the lute and wine (with the second, so as not to play). Of course, the older lionesses didn't bat an ear, returned to gossip and embroidery (Naysagrian females don't embroider only when they're sleeping—everyone knows this), but two or three participants in today's card games settled around her and began approaching, pestering with indirect questions: you seem sad, tired, what's wrong with you, and where did Arad go off to (sharp-eyed, sharp-eyed!). Arshaya deflected, then took a sip, and suddenly:

"With this lion, play has no sense," she informed the young maassi. Lenayna's ears probably grew twice as large: "From such, there's sense in bearin' sons."

She didn't elaborate further on these matters—began to play.

He came home. Each of the brothers had a room. And he had his own. He undressed completely, threw everything in a corner and collapsed into bed muzzle down.

This was a catastrophe.

Principles. After all, there are three life outlooks befitting a lion, as his father said: stoics, pragmatists, rationalists (and this was one of the few things Arad agreed with him on entirely). How dearly they'd cost him tonight! There should be no pity for a male, and especially not such humiliating, patronizing pity from a female. But this was a completely special case, entirely, everything was different here, this was another world... He couldn't control himself and heavily, feverishly released right onto the bed, contrary to com-

mon sense and cleanliness. And even that didn't help much, because young blood returned very quickly.

The more he thought about it, and the more he thought about her, the more he understood what an exceptional opportunity he'd missed. Arguments in his own defense melted like snow in Khustru. He thought he'd followed principle and shown firmness. But it turned out he'd renounced an invitation to *Naheim*; he'd renounced initiation with a lioness, to a lioness, into a lioness, onto a lioness; their entire sex, the opposite sex, now looked at him with mockery and reproach through her eyes. Ghostly and white, she was invisibly present beside him—her ears, her thigh, her tail, and the scent. Yes, the scent, he remembered this half-hint, this very light aroma surrounding her, and especially when she rose, yes, and the wave covered him. Best not speak of scents—even after the incident with his third cousin he'd begun seriously paying attention to the scents of lionesses, and he'd have to conceal certain less-than-noble acts he'd resorted to in order to smell it; probably Arad discovered then, next to Sarabande, that scent exists, and it has one property—you want to saturate yourself with it infinitely, to bursting, until you die; he didn't understand this immediately, but somehow after a couple days, trying to recall everything; something was missing in his memories, and suddenly it struck him—right, the scent, Sarabande had a scent, light, but it was; everyone around has their own scent, truly, but there was something else, as if Arad's close presence changed something; or a lioness up close, within touch, smells qualitatively, completely-completely different than at a respectful distance; as if one scent is meant for everyone, and another—only for those who are permitted. How could he had refused all that for what he perceived as...

"You weren't given enough respect!" Arad said to himself and struck the wall.

To comprehend everything with reason? Arad is an architect. Arad is a craftsman. Alright, that can be done. Everything that day had been falling into place, he was winning. Then. First, Arshaya had taken the carpet with her. What sense was there in taking a carpet if she could simply stand in the garden and wait for this sweet and silly ("Mighty silly!") young-lion to explain what service had been done for him, and pity him. Second, when he'd determined who was who and what was what, expressing his principle and smothering it in dominance, she submitted and invited at the end with that infinitely warm northern 'tsanna.' She'd acknowledged him and surrendered. This couldn't be anything other than an invitation.

More. Further. She'd begun the conversation from afar out of propriety. "Had I known the rules..." "Helper to good, younger Suung," all of that. Her shyness, attacked by his questions (instead of a welcoming kiss!). Maybe she also had no experience—well, that's unlikely—then shyness under a mask of northern confidence. She just started badly. Just expressed herself vaguely.

Even her 'silly'—the strongest argument—could simply have been an unfortunate expression.

She's a northerner, he looked out the window facing south and conversed with himself. Their way of speaking is confusing. An unfortunate turn of phrase... This was all the Game," it dawned on him.

Every movement of hers—as he remembered everything well with his good, vivid, visual memory—he examined; and less and less believed he'd acted correctly. Principles can't be sold or observed every other day, but here he should have sold them, or understood that he was in a world of different principles, or performed any other mental trick: life and death were at stake; no, stupid ram, he'd behaved according to them, didn't accept the Game, and chose death.

Yes, he understood what stood behind his 'principles.' He didn't give a damn about the insult, truly. Fear. Fear of a lioness. Fear of this new experience. Fear of knowing a lioness far-far closer, far more carnally than before. In this case he'd displayed extraordinary indecisiveness, idiocy, blindness, stupidity—the worst qualities, unworthy of a lion. Obviously, he'd been offered a great gift, through fortunate circumstances and simple liking, which he, through ignorance and rigidity in all inter-sexual relations, hadn't even understood how to open; no, not only she helped him open it—he hadn't even understood that everything had been stuck right in his fangs, and he'd rejected it all.

Several joyless, terrible days passed, during which rains fell so conveniently.

A tragedy of lost opportunities.

"Dad, what do you do if you've missed a great opportunity? Should you forgive yourself?" he asked at the customary family dinner.

"What opportunity, son?" his father was in a good mood with resolved problems behind his tail. Leaning back in the wide chair of the master of the house, he adjusted his robe's belt.

"A big one."

The dhaar servant Sedesi, setting down tart cranberry sauce, glanced sideways.

"Somewhere there exists a perfect world where all our opportunities are realized in action. Alas, we're not in such a one. Yes, you should forgive yourself," his father thought. "Did something happen?"

"That's just it—nothing happened."

His mother froze, holding a pitcher in the air, then waved her hand, as if meaning 'pay no attention'. His younger brothers snorted, those two scamps, and Arad looked at them menacingly, twirling his fork; but what did they understand, the small fry.

He imagined this situation over and over. The beginning didn't change. He still heard her northern-dialect chatter about silliness and what a poor little

thing he was; still rose and said what he thought about her unheard-of female insolence, pulled her ears, stepped on her tail, sometimes adding the crudest insults; further, after all this principled stand of his, came variations. Sometimes he threw himself at the northerner, and she even resisted; sometimes she accepted his offered hand, rose (just as easily and gracefully as then), and then suddenly threw herself on his neck with silent plea not to reject her. Further the fantasies went far and already bypassed all and any prohibitions, going far beyond the bounds of the Game.

Life is an incredibly funny thing—and Arad didn't know how unspeakably *close* he was in his fantasies to the ideal world of possible reality.

(Un)Certain Reality

...That evening of the day when Arad had so bloodily met Simsana, by coincidence his father called him to the tablinium—‘to study.’ This meant Arad would sit at a small table (‘the draft table,’ as dad called it) next to his father's large one, and read suggested (and sometimes chosen by his father) books while he wrote his judicial edicts. Arad hardly needed such voluntary-compulsory exercise at all, because he read much, even too much, but such was the tradition in their family—this was how Nergim-Sinay introduced his son to literature unconditionally necessary for a Suung; and it happened about twice a moon, not often. As a rule, Sinay gave his son either immortal classics or something on Imperial law. Then sometimes they discussed what had been read.

First Sinay questioned his son about the bandaged wrist-forearm (Arad for some reason still hadn't removed the bandages). What happened, son? Well, I cut myself on glass at the hospital. Ah, pity, let me look. The cut isn't deep, but along the forearm, such bleeds strongly and much. Well, no big deal, it'll heal.

"Who bandaged you so thoroughly? They really did everything properly," his father examined it critically.

"Dad, I cut myself at the hospital, you know," Arad noted ironically, looking at his father, watching him touch the bandage as if it were a terrible, extraordinary wound.

"Indeed," his father laughed kindly and left off examining. "Thank the doctor," he waved and went to the table. "Hope you didn't tire yourselves out at that..."

"It wasn't a doctor," Arad sat at his table.

"Who then?" his father asked, yawning, opening a large notebook that he allowed no one to touch, not even his wife, and always hid.

"Who? Well, this... that... an Ashai-Keetrah."

His father paused, looked ahead, stylus between his fingers, then glanced at him.

"An Ashai-Keetrah?" his mouth twisted slightly.

"Yes," Arad began turning the book his father had pulled from the depths of the library. He hadn't seen it yet.

"Which one of them?"

"She was young, exactly my age," Arad noted, and made an elaborate gesture—described with his palms the imaginary curves of an imaginary figure of an imaginary lioness.

His father didn't notice the gesture.

"Son, you're not even young yet, you're adolescent."

"Adolescent then."

Dad chuckled, tapping the stylus tip against his fang.

"And what was her name?"

"Hers? I don't remember," Arad shrugged.

This was a lie. Arad remembered everything. He'd remembered it all well. Vaalu-Simsana. The waiting... I suggest without the nomen. Vaalu-Simsana. Without the nomen. Simsana. I suggest stripp...

"Arad!"

"What?"

"What's with you, sleepy?"

"No, dad, just thinking. You gave me some new book. I haven't seen this one before."

"Today we'll need to talk about... something," dad said, as if an extremely busy lion. "But first read this—'The Endless Rainbow of Blood.' Arius the Third, of the Helsiani, year eight hundred and fiftieth."

"Talk about what, dad?"

"First you read, skim through it, just have a look," his father waved him off, "I'll work here. And after we'll talk."

'The Endless Rainbow of Blood' turned out to be a heavy-styled ethical treatise on the nature of love and intersexual relations, mixed with what was called by the fashionable word 'metaphysics'; like all stoics, and Arad unconditionally counted himself among them, he didn't like metaphysics and its endless verbal spinning around Vaal-Tiamat-Naheim and suungmara. This was all philistinism of philosophasters who, on one hand, tried to kiss the Empire's ass, and on the other—the Ashai-Keetrah's. Neither the first nor the second particularly needed these tender attentions: the first already had no uncovered place left, everything kissed over; second ones always have a place for that, only they require slightly different kisses—more tangible and less chaste.

But if you cut away the excess, which wasn't easy, the book turned out to be good. This was a treatise on interaction between Suung male and Suung female in the broad sense; a text about relations between the sexes in general, and Arad had never read anything like it. All of this was precisely timely, so he delved into reading. At first there was much about how great the Suungs and the Vaal within them are (that very metaphysics), how good they are, and how the old grumbler who can no longer handle anything understands love, and about continuing the bloodline, and how important it is that

the Suungs don't suddenly decide to stop caring about this (just try to stop, Arad thought), and so forth. Then came just that:

...your blood changes when you are inflamed, your sense of smell changes, your scent changes, but especially—hers; things around you transform, consciousness changes. You cease to be yourself—you are now the Rainbow of Blood itself, which desires to continue once more, as it has thousands of times before. This feverish alteration of blood from the close presence of a female Suung, as has been known since ancient times, is beneficial in all respects for growing and young male Suungs after the beginning of mane-growth. Prolonged absence of natural release after such alteration, conversely, poisons the blood of males, therefore maturing Suungs should either participate in the known love-play experiences, or else abstain from excessive heating of the blood; and all females should not give vain causes for such heating...

About the scent Arad could confirm, even sign off on it. And about the blood too, everything was absolute truth. In this story with Arshaya he'd so overflowed himself with the poison of non-release that it still hurts (now—his character, but at first—not only that), and who knows how long it would still hurt.

Further:

...except in the most transcendent cases of leonine existence, which are rather speculative than real, belonging to the fire-solar (males) or water-lunar (females) sex must be perceived as fate, as the fundamental fact of existence: 'I, the lion—exist' instead of 'I—exist,' and the same—for lionesses. It is impossible to exist in any other quality; there is nothing but these poles and their gradations. Adjacent here is also the well-known fatalism among the Ashai-Keetrah, old as the sisterhood itself: one cannot become Ashai, only be born so. Sex is not something secondary in essence, accidental and curious, not merely the known natural signs and qualities of character and mind. It is a property, a substance of the Self itself. Therefore relations between male Suung and female Suung are the heart of suung-mara. Any other view of the nature of sex—especially a qualitatively different one—will be regressive and degenerative in its essence...

Fine, Arad scratched his nose, this is a clever way of saying that lions and lionesses are different. Big deal. This is obvious to anyone who's ever seen both. And especially—heard them. And especially—smelled them... Right, let's continue:

...Among the Helsians, who are universally recognized as the most developed and cultured of the barbarians, and who—I am convinced—have a chance one day to become Suungs, and their land—part of the Empire, there is nonetheless observed a discussion that is vicious and erroneous in its essence: namely about the subordinate position of the lioness, the female as such in general, in any society, and her possible 'equality' or at least 'equalization' in certain matters, be it ownership of property or possible ways of conducting oneself. Questions of such nature are devoid of any meaning from the perspective of any reasonably known Suung philosophy, and most certainly reveal their helplessness before the faith of Vaal. The maxim is exceedingly simple: it is impossible to compare the two sexes, just as it is impossible to compare fire and water in any practical, rather than amusing sense. Male and female are different sides of a magnet; on the metaphysical importance of the magnet and adamant see below. This is also why any priesthood, that can at least externally imitate the Ashai-Keetra sisterhood, is impossible in societies resembling the Helsian; and note, that we have already designated them as the most developed of barbarians...

Well, good that we at least can drink from same mugs as females, or we'd go crazy sorting that out, Arad smirked.

"Well then, son, how is it?" his father pointed at the book, twirling his stylus. "What can you say?"

Seems like he's been sitting and watching me for a while now, thought Arad and carefully closed the book. Outside crickets chirped in the warm night. Half-darkness of two lamps and several more candles.

"So, dad," Arad sighed meaningfully, "lions and lionesses are different. The Helsians, as always, run but can't catch up. Love is metaphysical, and also—transcendent. Everyone who disagrees is a regressive degenerate. We understand everything, and therefore can understand nothing."

Sinay laughed, sincerely. When he was truly amused, he held his chest, then wiped away nonexistent tears. He was pleased. And Arad felt good that his father was pleased.

"He's a Vaalist, dad, this Arius... What's his name. Arius the Third."

"It's nothing, you skip it as usual, what can you do. Everyone around is Vaalist, only you and I," he made a funny stern muzzle, "are in the faith-

fighting underground. Actually, it's a very good work," he pointed at the closed book. "What else?" he leaned back in his chair.

Arad's suspicions quickly turned into certainty; he roughly understood what exactly dad wanted to hear, and precisely grasped what his father wanted to discuss.

"Well, the Rainbow of Blood."

"The Rainbow of Blood!" his father picked up, joyfully striking the table, then tugging at his mane. "Yes-yes, that's it. Where it talks about hot blood, did you get there?"

"I got there," Arad nodded.

"Look, Arad," his father suddenly grew picturesquely serious and set aside his stylus, leaned on the table. Arad sat to the side, at his own, like a student in school. "Ahem... You're already mature enough to learn certain things. Ahem. You've probably already noticed your female peers, ahem, young linesses of your age..."

Uh-huh, that's happened, thought Arad, but stayed silent. Sarcasm forced his tail to flick.

"...and you've thought about the romantic side of the matter under consideration..."

Dad, sooner or later, turned everything into a court session.

"...and wondered about how... what exactly to do with your..." Sinay placed his hands before him, trying to find words, "...with your, well, these very sensations."

Arad noticed it was extraordinarily difficult for his father. This wasn't acting. It was insanely hard for him to talk about this. He knew he had to, and had surely prepared, and still. This puzzled Arad. He decided to help his dad:

"With my desires," Arad carefully added.

"Yes, and with them!" his father exhaled noisily and grabbed his stylus.

"You probably want to talk to me about the Game, right?"

"Exactly, about it. Precisely! Let me..." his father, noticing his son was trying to say something, stopped him with gestures. "Let me, questions later. If you develop a relationship with someone," dad set a hypothetical point on the table with his claw, "and it goes far enough," he moved the point, "then you can—if she agrees—as they say colloquially—play with her," he tapped the point. "In private," he exhaled, he didn't have enough air. This was torture for him. "You can finish, well, you understand, in the natural sense..."

"Yes," Arad helped.

"And while doing so not penetrate her, as adults do. Under no circumstances. Because the Ancestral Law, part one, section seven, article four, states..."

"Dad, yes, I remember. It's about how a minor Suung cannot be a father, and a Suunga—a mother."

"Correct! And be sure... be sure to remember that it's forbidden to play with dhaars, and you also shouldn't with Suungs of low station either, with various servants and, eh, lower classes."

"Dad, thanks. I'm glad we're talking about this. But don't worry, I already know about the Game, in practical terms."

Arad had wanted to say 'in general terms,' but decided to show off, to make it sound more sophisticated.

"In practical terms? You've already played?" his father suddenly livened up, completely surprised, interested.

And suddenly:

"Yes," Arad shamelessly lied.

He hadn't planned this lie. He hadn't thought about this lie. He didn't even know why he did it.

Though no. Why deceive himself. He knew.

"Even so. Oh... Interesting, who could it have been?" Sinay asked himself as if his son weren't even there; a strange question came to dad's head.

"Dad, the daughter of those Komnaasan patricians who were guests at the magister's. Arshaya."

"You played with the daughter of patrician Krasstan-Mas, of House Feyli, right hand of the Law and Order viceroy in Suungkomn...?" for some reason this seemed to horrify his father.

"Yes, dad. I spent right in her muzzle," Arad placed his palm on the table.

"Oh..." dad was completely bewildered.

"I won her at cards. There's such a game, flis with hide-and-seek. If you win, they cover your eyes, then you find her, catch her, well, and that's it."

Dad rubbed his mane.

"Youth nowadays... know how to make acquaintances," apparently this didn't fit in his father's head. "Alright, remember the prohibitions: no pregnancies until you're grown, clear?"

"Clear."

"And if she doesn't want something or forbids it, then comply. As they say, play where she's permitted it."

"Clear," Arad nodded fatalistically.

"Well, that settles the matter," his father closed the journal.

Yeah, thought Arad. *All settled*.

Right then and there mother entered the tablinium and demanded both go to sleep.

Chaos and disorder, thought Arad, standing by the window. *And I need clarity*. Heh. He'd started lying before even entering the war.

It was hard to distinguish what was true and what wasn't in these rules and customs of the Game.

Not even entirely clear how to play: who does what to whom? he thought, mindlessly unwrapping the bandage on his arm. *Technical difficulties expect-*

ed, wandering the terrain, catastrophic defeats. He unwound it, looked at the bloodied fabric, remembered Simsana. *Wonder if she's Naysagrian?*

Turned out—yes, sort of Naysagrian, or as they properly say, Naysagraya. His pride, close blood. Well, she didn't look like a Naysagrian; probably some other blood mixed in. This, and something else, was willingly told to him by the mathematics teacher his father had hired for homeschooling for Arad. Turned out he knew Vaalu-Simsana and her mentor, since he'd also taught her mathematics:

"They live by the river, she and her mentor. A house like that, white stone outside, story and a half. Large."

"Where?" Arad asked.

"There's the very last street, called the Ring, and beyond that there's just a field."

"Ahhh. I know it."

"This V-Simsana turned out to be quite sharp," the tutor mused, putting his hand with the ruler to his sparse mane, "smart, for a lioness. But I haven't been there in a year."

"And what style is the house?" Arad suddenly inquired.

"I don't know about that, young-sire."

Well, at least Arad knew about it; or at least was beginning to know. Dad had placed him as an apprentice to the only real architect in Gallen, who'd graduated from a real Marna university—a level Arad dreamed of but couldn't be certain of achieving, despite quite good lineage and the monetary standing of his house. The master architect had seemingly graciously accepted him, but it was probably all only out of respect and possible favor for his father. The first Moon of Fire, when the gymnasium was sent on holidays, Arad spent sorting through his old papers and drawings; the master sometimes gave him truly stupid tasks and constant 'go-fetch-that.' Arad walked all over Gallen, and during that time encountered Simsana on the road five times (counted): twice with her mentor, three times with various lionessy friends, no fewer than three or four tails.

"Beautiful day, Simsana," he'd always walk past.

"Vaal into a strong day, Arad," she wouldn't stop, they were always in a hurry.

Her friends were curious, looking at him; one even seemed to shoot him a coy glance, but only seemed to.

Once he didn't turn to look after her, four times—he did. Not once—did she.

There was also that very trip to neighboring Moor: young ones went with adults—the adults to buy something, the young ones to see the world and laugh. There both Arad and Simsana ended up together. There was no chance to catch her alone, but he managed to sit with her a bit, to chat. The chat was frighteningly empty; he was even ashamed.

Insufferable Reality

After a moon or so of papers, calculations, and errands, Arad wanted to get where something was being built, and the master agreed this was a good idea. And assigned him to go, whenever possible every day, to a construction site on the outskirts of Gallen, and help there. Arad went. They were building a large pigsty, or rather, had only just begun. In the end he did all sorts of auxiliary work (not heavy: a teenager and judge's son), and also: first helped mark out the foundation with string, where he exasperated the forelion on the very first day with his remarks that the diagonals weren't equal, and this was wrong; then dared to rashly reject the sand for the foundation cushion, and this was amusing (they poured the sand anyway, because it was a 'fucking pigsty'). And then cement, and stones for it. Supposedly, Arad was to help the forelion maintain the mixture proportions, but...

In the end, he was covered in cement dust and dirt when he encountered Simsana this time.

Midday, he was lying in the shade of a tree, sipping disgustingly warm water from a pitcher, apart from the others (the forelion had paid him attention and very much insisted he rest separately, for it wasn't proper for a 'young-sire-apprentice' to be with workers—had already found out this was the judge's son, middle Imperial stratum, and by local standards—the local elite). Some kind hamanu (surely sent by that same forelion, who'd become caring as a nanny) had brought him food. He sat with his back to the path, and by pure chance noticed Simsana walking by, holding a clumsy bag under her arm.

"Simsana!" he jumped up, stepped onto the road.

She looked around, ears pricked.

"Beautiful day," he intercepted her.

"Arad? Is that you?" she was amazed at him and his... appearance. She set her bag on the road.

"Yes. Here, um, we're building. That's why I'm so dirty. I'm an architect. Want to be," he said everything at once.

"Ohhh... So you want to be an architect?" Simsana clasped her hands behind her back.

"Yes, yes. Gymnasium, then Marna University. If I can. And if I can't, then Moor University."

"A lion of action. Honestly," she placed her left hand on her chest, and with her right made waves in the air, "I thought architects sort of make a plan for a house, and then others build according to that plan..."

"That's true," he laughed condescendingly, "but it's useful to know how it all gets built. And what about you?"

"There's a lioness giving birth here, on Lower Third Street," she waved her hand. "May Vaal help that Suunga, she's having a hard time."

"Are you with your mentor?" he asked a rather stupid question.

He didn't want her to leave.

"Yes. We've been with her since midnight," she frowned slightly.

"I hope everything will be fine. She'll have healthy cubs. And she herself will be healthy."

Simsana nodded, and did so longer than one usually do. He noticed the change: she went inside herself, grew pensive, as if fell into something; making an intricate cross from splayed, spread fingers, she touched her nose with a claw, and then stopped even that. She fell deep, very deep; Arad hadn't seen this yet; Arad suddenly had moments to study her with his gaze, to examine her.

Sharp, non-Naysagrian ears, without border, without crest, without flourishes, without anything—pure. Such are unusual here. Large gray eyes. Short muzzle. Small nose, small mouth, black stripe. He'd seen such a combination in one book: 'sensual curve.' Sensual mouth, no, sensual lips. It would suit her. Height? Not tall, not short, ordinary. Body build? Hard to say, he'd only seen her in these rather coarse, long, inelegant dresses with the massive belt. Judging by her arms—thin. Or even outright skinny. She wore an amulet, he even knew what it was called—Vaal's amulet, almost completely hidden by the collar. Her coloring was grayish, a bit of sun; no, well maybe actually completely gray, really unusual. Such are called by the good word 'pretty,' from friends he'd also heard the word 'well-made.' A well-made young lioness. Beautiful. There is, for example, cheerful beauty. Everyone's seen that. There's boring beauty. There's provocative. What else... Khustrian. Northern. Yes, of course, northern, Komnaasan... Yunian! He'd seen that once, captivating. Andarian. He'd seen that too, that perfect smoothness and roundness of all lines. Certainly, also the native, delicious, Naysagrian, but here Simsana and that pinnacle didn't converge: too many inconsistencies. What then? Sad? No. Stern? Nooo. What? What?..

She looked at him, dark gray eyes.

"Simsana, I love you... to tell you... I want architecture," he said quickly. And grabbed his mane at this quickly-said nonsense with which he'd only filled the emptiness of the dialogue.

She seemed to wake up.

"Sorry, my attention?" she smiled, guiltily, very much so. "What about 'architecture'? Forgive me, I'm so worried about this lioness in labor."

"It's nothing, trifles," he waved his hand. "Listen. Look, I'm keeping you, you know. Do you go to the Felidsal inn? Felidsal."

"Rarely," she shrugged rather indifferently, "I've been a couple times, friends invited me."

"Come there today."

She's going to ask 'Why?' now, Arad suddenly feared, and quickly added:

"I'm inviting you, instead of your friends," he said and understood how worthless this sounded.

And extended his hand to her; Arad was already certain that everything he'd babbled could have been said a thousand times better.

She carefully and not immediately, but accepted his palm, taking a small, proper, curtseying step forward.

Raised in a good house, he roughly knew how lionesses of different estates and ages conducted themselves when greeting or parting, if you extended your hand to them. Suungas of low estates could get confused: sometimes they only curtsy, sometimes they extend a hand but late, catching themselves, and it's awkward. Once he'd extended his hand to a female dhaar—there were circumstances—and she was completely bewildered and kissed his hand, and it was brutally awkward. Simsana did everything well, simultaneously with him, curtsy simultaneous with her hand for his kiss; he could have kissed it, could have pretended, stopping a claw's width from her thin palm, and Arad chose the first; damn, she had manners, and this surprised Arad a bit; the only thing, for some reason she extended her left hand, not her right, as is still customary among patricians. After all, she was a disciple of an Ashai-Keetrah who delivered births, treated cubs, all that—and this wasn't exactly, hmm, not the business of the high circle; worthy, certainly, but. Just have a look at their town: one Ashai-Keetrah performs weddings, another certifies any deals—very respectable personages. Dad doesn't like them. They probably don't like dad.

So, Simsana could be from a good lineage. Perhaps! Perhaps. A topic for conversation.

Her second, right palm, she held at her neck; then suddenly turned around, somewhere back where she'd come from: where her mentor was, the female in labor, her craft.

Such good weather.

Arad waited.

"I am sorry, Arad," she suddenly said, looking down; Arad watched Simsana's ears pressing back more and more, "I don't know. So much to do. Arad, I can't," she quickly added at the end.

What?... his tail twitched.

"At all, no way?"

Simsana looked at him and nodded 'no,' small and slight, two or three times. No way. At all. Is everything clear to everyone? At all. No way.

"Maybe you don't like the place? I'll think of another," Arad asked hopelessly.

"It's not about that."

"Well, it's okay," he said slowly, then closed his eyes, rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Nothing, really. I understand."

But here's the thing: he was still holding her left palm, and she wasn't pulling away, wasn't making attempts to free herself, wasn't even making a hint at freeing herself; he was barely holding her, but she wasn't freeing herself, though she was already completely free to.

"My Vaal, and it's not about you, Arad," she hastily added.

"I understand," he interrupted, raising his hand, as if to say no explanations needed when everything's clear. "It doesn't work out, so—it doesn't work out."

Simsana looked at him. He completely released his grip, and only then did she take her hand back. Delicate. Accepted all courtesies and gently refused. *Trying her hardest not to offend. Won't torment her. There are plenty of maassi around. It's okay.*

"I'll be going then. Guess, I'm being waited for. Good luck with the birth... I mean, to her, that one."

"Thank you," she answered, picking up her bag from the ground.

Well, what are you waiting for. That's it. You're free. A refusal is a refusal. Yes is yes. No is no. Everything's simple.

Idiot, thought Arad. You stupid ram.

"Beautiful day, Simsan," he smiled at her. Probably didn't come out too well. But one shouldn't expect a wounded lion to do everything too well; probably shouldn't expect unexhausted smiles from him, quick paws.

He waved, turned around, his ears already heard from behind:

"Bye."

He didn't look after her, neither secretly nor openly—couldn't. Just sat under the tree, where he'd been before, slowly stroking the bridge of his nose with closed eyes.

There had been such certainty that everything would work out. He liked her, he had a premonition that something could ignite with her. It seemed the rest would follow, she'd meet with him, if only out of curiosity, common to lionesses. He knew he understood little about female signs and messages, but here his internal beacon so unambiguously proclaimed her interest; and this attraction had happened back then, near the hospital. Turned out—everything deceived him.

He'd actually been thinking about her. Not once, not twice. He liked many lionesses, and more specifically—four, but with this one—an Ashai acolyte, how about that—Arad had truly decided to take decisive steps. Difficulties: he knew little about lionesses; and almost nothing about Ashai. War without maps of enemy territory, only general sketches.

The arrow missed its target.

Probably Ashai-Keetrah are demanding; she needs someone stronger, older, better. Makes sense. Who in the Suung Empire doesn't want to be with them? Everyone does. Demanding. Makes sense.

Fiery Reality

The next day, in the morning, Arad dragged himself to the master architect and announced in an almost peremptory tone that he'd had enough of the pigsty. The master was surprised, thought about it, decided to do nothing about it (not wishing to quarrel with his father), and released Arad for that day. As a result, Arad found himself in the center of Gallen, left to his own devices. Didn't want to go home. Met a good friend, but he was in a hurry, though managed to show off a trophy—a wolf's pelt. Sat in a tavern, outside, at the very edge; looked at the Imperial Banner of the Suungs, fluttering on the Obelisk of the Empire in the middle of the square; in Gallen their Obelisk was tall, forty paces, not like in neighboring Moor, though that was a city two or three times larger; thought about whether he should become a military engineer instead of an architect. He'd build fortresses, forts, walls, pit-traps, moats filled with water, frogs, snakes, crocodiles (he'd seen a drawing of a crocodile in a book, and he'd scared lionesses in elementary school with frogs) in the Eastern Dominates. Bolt-throwers. Probably should become a true lion of science, be a loner, have nothing to do with females at all, not even touch them anywhere or anyhow; they say it helps with exercises of the mind, makes you angrier and smarter, and for a male it's important to be angrier, and smarter—goes without saying. Many prominent scholars consciously do not mess with them. Females get in the way.

While he was thinking, they brought something resembling both berry juice and lemonade at once. This something turned out to be dense, very cold and very tasty. He asked what it was called. They answered: "Kafnian sherish." Not bad.

A young hamanu passed by, probably about twenty years old. He followed her with his gaze, swirling his mug. You can probably tell more about Naysagrians by appearance and clothing than any other lionesses of any prides. Where to start? Of course. Look at behind, at the tail. Though you won't see much of it—Naysagrians don't acknowledge tail-free dresses, this isn't Khustru for you, not Helsia. Every respectable Naysagrian lioness is raised in pride tradition, and they're all like that here in Gallen; and after she becomes a maassi—that's, well, around twelve years old— she gets a belt. And from the belt cords are hanging from behind, six of them, sometimes eight, in some very special cases—twelve. All together it's called *katena*, but that's how lionesses say it; for lions it's simpler to say 'danglers,' a bit contemptuously (this is important), and that's all. This hamanu, for example, is

married, has two children, is going on everyday errands, isn't celebrating anything and... uh... oh, yes, she's from the simple estates. Herders, craft-slions.

Arad took another sip, left the hamanu in peace, and... Nai, wow, what's this?

Across the square, about twenty paces from him, walked an Ashai-Keetrah, and he hadn't seen such a one yet. She definitely wasn't local. Behind her walked a town watch guard—Arad even knew him, it was the brother of the wife of the son of his mother's second cousin; he carried a bucket of water. Behind them walked some elderly lioness with a large pitcher, he knew her by sight (visual memory), but no more. The Ashai-Keetrah was young, about twenty, with a circlet and smiled with bared teeth, extraordinarily sweetly; it was hard to say where she was from originally. But not local, nope. She was saying something cheerfully to the guard, who hastily nodded. All three of them approached the base of the Obelisk, and Arad roughly understood what he would see: they intended to light the Chalice of Vaal—a sort of large bronze basin, shallow and wide, filled with oil. Arad had only seen *ignimara* lit a few times in his life, literally countable on the fingers of two hands—both the Chalice ignition, and *ignimara* in general. Three times it was at weddings, from a distance, the rest—through various chance occurrences, including here, which happened rarely, only on holidays. The Chalice at the Obelisk in Gallen is open to all winds, without a canopy, always burns briefly, and they light it infrequently.

Father always likes to say that *ignimara* is a clever, not fully unraveled trick of the Ashai bunch. And to watch it is to fool yourself with a circus trick for an idle crowd.

But what else was there to do; Arad became curious, he stood and went to have a look with his half-full mug. Midday all around, almost no one about—interesting, what would happen?

The three of them approached the Chalice, onto a small platform; the Ashai together with the lioness wiped the Chalice clean; Arad idly stood watching at what seemed to him the minimum respectful distance. A small mishap occurred: the old hamanu nearly spilled the pitcher's contents onto the ground, everything almost fell, but together they caught the vessel and laughed with relief.

Suddenly someone ran up to the guard who stood off to the side, like Arad. Desperate gestures followed, explanations—a theft had happened, tail knows what; several lions emerged onto the square from the town Magistrate (there it is, across the way). A couple more heads appeared from the neighboring Market Street.

Couldn't pick a worse time for ceremonies. No one around. Lazy hour, thought Arad. What a fool, this Ashai.

The guard literally ran off, and this created an unexpected difficulty for the Ashai: she followed him with her gaze, then spread her hands picturesquely, as if to say—well, there you have it. Arad just stood and gawked, not knowing what any of this meant, amusing himself with the spectacle; one of the lions waved at the Ashai, but she turned away and began searching in another direction. In that other direction she found—him.

"Good Suung. Good Suung, may I trouble the young-sire?" she called him with a gesture, smiling.

He turned around, but no one behind him. Quickly approached, right up close, mug still in hand, but skeptically.

"Need help," she said cheerfully and quietly, stirring the oil with a large brush. "Save me, good Suung."

"How can I help?" Arad was surprised.

Looking at him, she said:

"What do you mean how—you'll witness."

"And what do I do?"

"Good Suung, we'll drink later when we're done," she took his mug and set it right by the chalice on the ground. "Nothing at all, same as always: stand and watch," she added even more quietly.

He pricked up his ears.

"Really nothing?" he bent slightly toward her, glancing furtively around. Someone had emerged from the Magistrate, and this someone, as Arad knew, was surely enjoying the spectacle: the son of a famous judge helping an Ashai do her tricks.

"What, you've never witnessed at home?" she whispered loudly, shaking the brush against the Chalice. "When they light the fire on Ai-Yulassai, Heroes' Day, birthday of Vaal's Hand, or just because? You look like oh-my," she glanced at him, teeth flashing, "a big lion, eighteen years."

"Sixteen," almost the truth from him. "We've never had Ashai at home, not once."

She looked at him, wrinkled her nose, squinted; and that cheerful, dashing, fearless expression never left her muzzle.

"Wuuhoo, this'll be fun," she was delighted.

"But why me?" he shrugged, flicked his tail restrainedly.

"And everyone asks that. Don't be a bore. That's it, quiet now, stand behind the Chalice, be silent and watch."

Fine. He stood and began observing her.

Great charm and enthusiasm radiated from everything about her; she was also beautiful in the muzzle. Really, truly. No jokes. No exaggeration. Exactly the kind artists paint. Yunian, Denenai, possibly... Andarian? She wore precisely that festive dress, dark-red, that he remembered as 'their dress,' 'Ashai-Keetrah vestments,' but didn't know what it was called. He'd heard, but forgotten. Meanwhile she was tossing the cords that hung along the full

length of her sleeves, crisscross over her head, then passed everything under her arms—it looked intricate and complex; ultimately her arms were completely bared, all the way to the shoulders. Pure gold coloring. Still, probably Denenai...

She grew more serious performing these things; or rather, not more serious, but as if resigned to something. Several times she tugged at her sleeves, checking. She was also humming to herself, a simple tune. She looked at him, smiled with the corner of her mouth, squinted—all for an instant.

A shiver ran down his spine. Enchanting.

Suddenly she pricked her ears, looked at the sky and around; grimaced as if tasting something sour—something displeased her. Even sniffed the air, then extended her hand, and the old hamanu invisible to Arad handed her a cloth thing resembling a sack. Turned out to be a large hooded cloak, stiff, gray and rather frightening in appearance, unsuited to her dress, her earrings, to all of her. This nightmare the Ashai deftly put on; the hood hid her eyes.

She stood like that briefly, then smoothly raised her hands before her, directly over the Chalice, without raising her head. For an instant it seemed to Arad this was how criminals looked, captured and condemned: large hood on the head, arms outstretched pleading for mercy. Then her palms clasped together. Then the left palm submitted to the right, began stroking it, and Arad heard what a painfully strong breath the Ashai took.

He clenched his fists involuntarily. He felt the tension; he began worrying for her. She was doing something infinitely difficult, fiercely fighting in a battle invisible to everyone—except him. He saw.

Red fire appeared on her right palm—and halfway up her forearm. Completely red. Arad saw her hand, from beginning to end, and the world around him changed. He felt its heat, its color. He went soft, his mouth fell slightly open, like one who had seen the rising of a scarlet sun. *This isn't a trick, not a trick, not a trick, this is, this is... Suungs, Suungs, oh suungmara, Vaal...*

Her palm traced across the surface of oil in the Chalice. It ignited.

They shouted in the crowd as usual—glory to Vaal, or something—Arad wasn't listening. He only watched her right hand: still burning. The Ashai shook it in the air, then hurriedly pressed it to her cloak, her hood...

...and here, he understood, something terrible happened. Unforeseen. Disaster. She caught fire—the cloak—and instantly!

A lion must always have a plan for bad things. Arad had one. He knew what to do if someone caught fire. He tore off his cloak's fibula and threw himself at her, knocked her off her paws, fell to the ground with her—throwing his cloak over her. Slapped her several times on the shoulders and head where fire might be. The fire had to be subdued—didn't matter if it was Vaal's fire or not. Hit the Chalice tripod with his tail. That hurt. He pressed her to the ground, sprawled on top of her. Everything went quiet.

Arad understood two things: he'd done something terrible, and done everything right. He did what he could. He acted quickly and decisively.

Gasps of horror around them. He was ready for curses, blows, swearing, criticism. That would come.

He found her muzzle in the folds of the cloak. She lay relaxed, not moving. Seeing him, she said:

"Gotcha."

She sniffled. Blood flowed from her nose, not much.

"The hood caught fire. I..."

"Lying on me feels good, for sure, but there'll be a crowd now."

He instantly stood, and she sat up. Everyone ran over, someone seriously shoved him aside, and Arad really wanted to remember who that was, but didn't see.

"She was on fire, fire on the hood," he began explaining to the old hamanu.

"But she can throw it off," she answered, almost crying.

"But it caught fire, didn't it? Did hamanu see?"

"Yes," she put her palm to her mouth. "Probably spilled oil on it when we were carrying it."

They crowded around the young Ashai. Arad scratched his mane, sighed, found the fibula on the ground, turned it in his hand.

"How does the Excellent one feel..." they were asking her.

She stood holding her head high with a handkerchief to her nose, repeating one phrase:

"Everything's fine. Everything's fine. Everything's fine."

And looking straight at him.

"This is punishable, completely impermissible," someone decided to protest.

"What nonsense, he saved me!"

She tossed the hood a couple times in one hand, continuing to hold the handkerchief to her nose with the other:

"It caught fire, there's oil on it. Oil stains. See. Everything's fine. What, is Vaal's fire burning in the Chalice? Well, glory to Vaal. Nothing terrible, nothing bad. Let hamanu hold it," she handed over the hood. "Actually no, let you give it back," she took it back. "Thank you. Everything's fine. No, he did great. I could've caught fire, all of me. Yes, all of me. Yes, yes... Everything's alright."

Everyone began gradually dispersing. They threw glances at Arad: curious, annoyed, interested. He stood by the Chalice of Vaal and looked at the fire—it was ordinary, yellow, thin.

"I really thought the Radiant one would burn."

"What's your name?" she rubbed her nose and looked at her blood on the cloth.

"Arad."

"Vaalu-Arassi," she seemed to want to continue, add something, but stopped. Instead of continuing, she stood beside him and the fire. Looked at the handkerchief again: more blood.

"Told you it'd be fun. Am I dirty?"

"Where exactly?" Arad loves precision.

She looked at him. Ancestors, what a green eyes.

"Where exactly?" she repeated, and then—the most melodious, most captivating laugh of all he'd heard from lionesses.

She chained attention to herself with a silk chain.

"There, at the tavern, you can wash up," Arad suggested, trying to speak as low and masculine as possible.

"Even need to. Let's go. Don't forget the mug."

He grabbed the mug from the ground and they went.

"That hood comes off, understand? Very quickly, look here," Vaalu-Arassi quickly put it on and swept it off, and it was comical and amusing, "See? It's special. We put it on when we're afraid to light ignimara in wind, outside, when we're afraid in general," she showed her claws as if intending to frighten him. "You put it on like this, hop," she put it on again, and Arad, having assumed an air of importance, watched her, "and you hide yourself, and all sorts don't interfere. It's called khinastr," she instantly took it off again. "There's a cloak like that, khinastra, maybe you've heard, lionesses wear it, both secular and us. And, uh, but this crude... this crude contraption... it's like that, you know, the one who executes, what's he called... the head-chopper one."

"Executioner," Arad corrected, condescendingly.

"What's the right word: head-chopper or executioner?" she waved her hand in the air, but with such a gesture a head would hardly fly—soft, gentle.

"Executioner," Arad said confidently, though he wasn't sure.

"I saw one light ignimara at a wedding. Celebration all around, and she—bam!—executioner's hood on her head," and she laughed.

Arad didn't laugh but reasoned, trying to reattach the torn fibula to his cloak, which he had to hold with his hand:

"Excellent Vaalu-Arassi, everything's fine and good, but it caught fire. I think oil was spilled on it. I deemed this dangerous," he noted weightily. "Radiant one, I beg your pardon."

"You were afraid for me, right?" they stopped by the table, she threw the hood on the bench and confidently planted her hands on her hips, looking around.

"Indeed. The circumstances were risky. Terrible things could have happened."

"Terrible things. I'll be right back," she said and went off somewhere.

He sat at the same table where he'd sat before. Even put the mug in the same place. Took the hood lying nearby, examined it: indeed they'd spilled oil on one side, quite a bit—stains remained. No, he'd done everything right. Good that she seemed to understand this. Frivolous! Joking around. One could burn... Good thing he knew what to do—he'd learned from his mother's cousin, who'd been in the East, told stories about fire arrows and arrows in the throat.

Put on the hood out of curiosity, discreetly looking around so no one would see. Quickly took it off.

Yes, it can be taken off quickly, but how was he to know? And the dress could have caught fire, that beautiful dress of hers. Sits well on her. Fits right. Emphasizes everything. And all of her everything is like of that one, of Arshaya, only better. Though it seemed impossible—how could it be better.

Playing with fire, thought Arad meaningfully.

"Young-sire, what happened?" an elderly tavern server approached him, tugging at his mane braid. "There, by the Chalice."

"The hood caught fire. Oil was spilled."

He took it, looked at it, touched the table with his claws, nodded his head.

"And I put it out," Arad suddenly added.

"Yes, I was told the young-sire threw himself to the ground with the Excellent one. Pity I didn't see it. Odd that they lit the Chalice now... Will you have anything else?"

"Kafnian sherish. Two mugs, please."

"Right away."

Pity Simsana wasn't here. Or all the lionesses of Gallen, all of them, he thought. *Then she would've seen me. Hero saves the day.*

Two mugs were brought.

Yeah, wish Simsana were here, he frowned, propping himself up with his fist and tracing his claw along the wood of the tabletop. *Probably she has someone. Or even a lot of them. Or she only has this studying, her craft. And I thought she liked me... She's just polite. Damn it. Everyone around has already played the Game, only I, like a complete idiot...*

"Hey, was I gone long?"

Before him appeared Vaalu-Arassi: without blood on her nose, and with two stripes of tentush under the corners of her eyes.

"Now Vaalu-Arassi is clean and beautiful," he pushed the mug toward her.

"Ohhh, Aradi, you're such a find, you've won me over. You save an Ashai from certain death, shower her with compliments and offer drinks—so timely after all that play with Vaal's fire," she said, then quickly, conspiratorially, confidentially added: "After ignimara you're really go thirsty. Mmmm... what is this?"

"It's called 'Kafnian sherish,' like lemonade and berry juice at once."

"Excellent stuff, my Vaal. Just what's needed."

He watched her drink.

Wonder if everyone in the world died, would she give herself to me right away, or would I have to force her?

"Let's get to know each other better, Aradi."

Come on, thought Arad. She's making fun of me, being condescending. Everyone just joking around.

"That's not necessary, Radiant Vaalu-Arassi," he looked away with a smirk.

"Mrrrow, ha-ha, lions haven't answered me like that before. So, we're on familiar terms, come on. Let's drop the pre-addresses."

"Is that like without the nomen too?" he looked at her, remembering Sim-sana.

"No, with the nomen. Look," she fidgeted in place, and Arad wanted her to do that but only sitting on him, that would be something, that would be the life, not this comedy, "when an Ashai-Keetrah says she wants to hear her name without the nomen, it moves your relationship into the close circle," she gestured, tapping her claws on the table. She traced a circle: "In this circle are your close relatives, friends, patrons of course, your lovers, all of that. She sort of disrobes before you," she showed a gesture of disrobing, Arad thought about asking for a repeat, "removes herself-as-sister from the light and hides her in shadow. And puts forward herself-as-lioness."

"Right, of course," he nodded, understanding everything. "I'm not a relative and not a lover, and not even a friend. But I'm a lion, who saved you."

"You know what?"

She stood and moved seats—right beside him, to the left. Her close, somehow tight, tense presence.

"I suggest without the nomen. You can call me Arassi. As much as you want. Saviors can too," she clinked mugs with him.

Here's an illusion: it seems like she's speaking right into your ear.

"Arassi, I'll brag: there's another Ashai who permitted me this."

"Care to share?" she scratched her neck.

"Gladly. But what?"

Arassi thought, swayed her head.

"She's your age?"

"Yes."

"Good sign, her favor."

"I thought so too," Arad sighed. "Well, good. You're not offended?"

The change of subject obviously caught Arassi off guard; but it seemed she liked being caught off guard.

"For making my nose bleed and rolling me in the dust? No, I've had worse."

"Sorry."

"Hey, Arad—it doesn't happen that a lion and lioness are together without blood-pain and all sorts of rolling around eventually."

"Sorry I didn't make it worse."

"Hey," she touched his shoulder. "This oil is serious stuff, and you saved me, don't doubt it. And saving an Ashai-Keetrah's life—the sisterhood never forgets that. And so: the sisterhood won't forget your help."

She sighed.

"And? How should the sisterhood thank you?" she leaned in, seeking his gaze.

"Thank you, it's not necessary," he looked straight ahead, turning his mug. "I don't need anything."

"The sisterhood doesn't thank with what's needed. The sisterhood thanks with what's desired."

"Really?" Arad said sarcastically. "In my opinion, you only mock."

He finished drinking, put down the mug and closed his eyes, leaning on the table.

"It's already so hard, try to figure it all out. There are traps everywhere and who knows what. Some nonsense is happening."

He stopped. Wait, get a grip, pull yourself together. He looked at her. She sat, ears pricked.

"Continue."

This sounded not even like a request, but like permission.

Arad gnawed his claw and continued:

"You said that 'without the nomen' is a good sign. A hint. Well, I had that. She's also Ashai-Keetrah, and she rejected me. First she said: 'we can drop the nomen.' Everything fit, I saw she wasn't against it, everything was good, I saw her a couple times, and... anyway, I invited her, and what? And nothing. She said she wouldn't go with me any-where. Not any day, not any year," Arad embellished, "not any place. And she can't, no time. At all."

"I don't know the whole story. Something might have prevented her. Or it could have been the swing."

"What? What swing?"

"That's when a lioness isn't sure if she wants to deal with you. Lionesses on swings need to be pushed off, the sooner the better."

"Pushed where?" he asked, confused.

"Either away, or into your arms, however you decide."

"The swing..." Arad said somewhat contemptuously. "Maybe something did prevent her. But what?"

"Let's think," she set her palm as a chin rest.

"I don't want to. If she can't, then... she can't. 'No' is also an answer."

"Are you out of your mind?" her ears moved, with their earrings. "Arad, don't give up, this is war and you're a warrior in it. There will be wounds,

can't avoid them. What, did you want to stroll through life? Won't work. You have to go forward," she wagged her finger, then touched it to his chin. His.

He noted her gestures, the whole manner of sitting, standing, moving, her mimics. There was something in it. He just wanted to watch.

"What, should I pester her? You hate that."

"We hate it, but not how you think. And who is she? Can you spill me details? We need to understand what's holding her."

"Well, she's an Ashai-Keetrah sister..."

"Arad, you said she's your age."

"So?"

"She can't be a sister. She's an acolyte. A stalla-acolyte."

"Ahhh... Okay, eh, I thought like all Ashai-Keetrah are sisters."

"Yes, sisters, but, well... Look, formally you can only become a sister after Acceptance, which is not before twenty years. Before that you study. Then Acceptance," Arassi looked up, "then they give you Vaal's amulet, and now you're a sister."

"She has an amulet. On her neck. By the way."

"That's not hers, it's her mentor's. That's a great liberty, it's very unusual. Only Mistresses of Life do that, it's permitted to them, it's their thing."

"Yes, they're both Mistresses of Life," Arad quickly agreed.

"Oh my. A stalla, a disciple of a Mistress of Life. Well, Arad, you've gotten yourself one. They, the Mistresses, they're... complicated."

"Why are they complicated?"

"They have difficult, bloody, terrifying craft. They constantly deal with life and death."

"Come on, cubs are born all the time everywhere. I haven't seen a birth, but it's like good that they're born, right?"

She looked at him helplessly. What could she tell him?

"We could use my friend here," that's what she said. "Even if I had mantics—there'd be little use of me as mantissa, very little. She would tell you everything, all your delicate affairs. But she's far from here, in the East..."

Arad didn't know what to say.

"I have this impression... You said Ashai don't visit your house, and haven't. Something like that. And you're... Forgive me for asking, but is your father a scholar, or..."

"I'm the son of an Imperial judge."

"Mmmm. He's one of the anvaalists folk, right?" she said in that very manner when someone wants to casually confirm something.

"Yes."

"And you?"

"Sort of... Yes."

Vaalu-Arassi was silent a bit longer than usual.

"You know the difference between anvaalism and the Doctrine of Enlightened Freedom?"

"Yes. Doctrine: Vaal is the Suungs, Suungs are Vaal, we don't have affairs with Ashai. Anvaalism: there's no Vaal, the Ashai... Ashai—we have. Affairs. No affairs. Oh, well, we don't deal with Ashai."

His father said it differently when they sat down to read in the tablinium: "Doctrine: Vaal exists, we don't need the priestess bunch. Anvaalism: we don't need Vaal, the sisters can go fu..."

"Arad, never tell anyone anywhere that your father is an anvaalist," Arassi said with extraordinary reproach. "He's in the Doctrine. Not an anvaalist. In the Doc-tri-ne. What's wrong with you?"

"You asked," he fidgeted with his mug, embarrassed.

"Arad," she looked at him very skeptically.

What a fantastic ability she has: to show so clearly that you're doing something wrong. You remember it for life, that skeptical muzzle of hers.

"Damn it! I just... We were just having such a sincere conversation... I..."

"It's okay. I'm just asking you. You don't need to deal with the Faith Oversight. Or, even worse, with certain sisters, okay? Not 'dad's an anvaalist, I'm an anvaalist,' but 'dad's in the Doctrine, I'm a good Suung.' That's what's prescribed for judges," they said in unison 'that's what's prescribed,' because Arad had heard this phrase many-many times in life. "Do you understand me?"

"I know all this."

"Do you understand me?" Arassi pressed.

"Yes."

"Now everything's clear. Your hot crush—she's afraid."

Why does she think Simsana's hot, thought Arad. *She's pretty shy, after all.*

"Why should she be afraid of me, I didn't tell her I'm an anvaal... that I... damn it," he felt the farcical nature of his entire position, "I don't even know, sometimes it seems to me that I... That I..."

"Arad, are you going to babble about yourself or about her?"

"About her," Arad answered, and suddenly got all riled up, became resolute: "You know what, Arassi? I'll prove it to her."

Arassi flicked her ears, rolled her eyes, brushed past his words.

"She's not afraid for herself, not for her mentor, not for the sisterhood. She's afraid for you, Arad, and especially—for your family."

"Then how am I supposed to deal with the sisterhood?" Arad asked disappointedly.

"You're an anvaalist!" she bared her teeth cheerfully. "You should whip us with a lash, not deal with us, chase us across the whole Empire. Come on, do it, be bad with me," she hissed with delight.

"I don't know anymore," he tried to produce a chuckle, and then spoke seriously, sincerely: "Your red flame, your ignimara, it shouldn't exist, there

was no trick, father always said there's a trick... But there's no trick at all, no deception, everything's pure, real, red, just fire on a hand from nowhere. Vaalu-Arassi, how can this be, what should I think, I look at you and start to believe, believe with all my heart, my honest word, I swear..." he justified himself.

She propped her chin on her palm, sighed.

"Oh, don't disappoint me, don't talk so much, fight for your convictions. Be a good Suung, the rest doesn't matter."

"Then... Can you not believe in Vaal, but love Ashai? Arassi, listen, my love can be strong," Arad swore to her.

"You can, everything's possible. We're ready for any love."

She leaned toward him, right to his ear.

"You're a smart lion, you'll invent a new *metanoian* thing and call it an elevated word, where you throw Vaal out like a dog, but where you love us: wayward, weak lionesses."

Arad felt his breath catch; the invisible tension, as if playful, game-like, unintentional, showy, optional, that had been slowly thickening before, became so obvious, hard, real; blood became hot like red fire, everything became tight; she was so close, only this stupid table in the way; right, he had to lay her down again, right here on the bench, since it had already been done once, and where there's once, there's twice, and three, and four, and five times; he wanted to do something, finally had to do something, it couldn't continue like this, he couldn't live like this anymore, otherwise something terrible would happen, he'd do something that would shake the earth or roar so loud that all the females in the *lyen* around would go deaf, blood would stream from their ears, from their noses, from everywhere, they would beg for mercy...

"No, Arad, it doesn't work that way," Arassi ran her palm right into Arad's mane. "'To tail with me,' 'I'll prove it to her,' 'I'll be good,' 'I'll love strongly,' 'I'll do everything'—nope. Wrong. That's not the way."

"What?" he was confused from the tension and such cruelly pleasant sensation from her palm; his thinking was as bad as it could be.

Suddenly Vaalu-Arassi squeezed her eyes shut, then grabbed the bridge of her nose with one hand and her head with the other. She inhaled and exhaled several times.

"Listen, Arad, what do you choose? The net or the fish?"

"Harpoon. One that tears everything to pieces," he scratched the table. And then grabbed her leg, somewhere at the knee. "Arassi, end this torment."

"Look me in the eyes."

Of course Arad did. He took a breath, and the breath seemed very long, loud, deep to him, everything fogged up in his head, and with the remainder of his thoughts he thought he was losing consciousness (it had happened be-

fore, when they choked him in the *Circle*). Exhale—and it released, he slowly rode back into the world. Turned out he was looking not at her, but at a wooden post.

“What the fuck?” Arad shook his head, looking around. Huh. Arassi was sitting across from him for some reason, though literally just a moment ago she'd been sitting next to him (seemed like). Neatly ran away. Obviously: grabbed her thigh, started some stupid advances—she ran.

She was rubbing her eyes, hard.

"It's nothing. Something got in my eye."

He watched her, rubbed his nose; the palm of his right hand smelled sharply, sweetly, intensely of something. Strange, that smell, it wasn't there before. And there's noise in his head. Don't sit like an idiot, don't sniff your hand. What about Arassi? She's still sitting like that, ears pressed back. Poor thing. Scared her. She ran. Eh.

"Listen, why is it... well... lighting the Chalice of Vaal at the Obelisk at midday?" he tried to distract and understand how she was. "They always do it in the evening, when there are more lionkind, don't they?"

She was distracted instantly, looked at him as if nothing had happened:

"They asked me, I couldn't refuse, as always. Dumb story."

Distracting himself from her consciously, to calm down completely and regain sobriety of mind, Arad carefully looked around: first the tavern (empty), then the square. They sat right by the cobblestones on a wooden platform—as if in two worlds at once: inside and outside. And suddenly he noticed someone. Oh yes. Damn it.

Simsana was walking. With a basket. Arad instantly tried to calculate her path, and if her will didn't decide to turn anywhere, she would pass right by them; she wasn't looking forward, rather somewhere down at her paws, at the stone patterns of the cobblestones. He made some incomprehensible sound, most like a quiet growl. Arassi heard, looked at him, then at the cause of his growling, and—if Arad had been watching—he would have been able to see how quickly she moved her gaze from him to her, eyes in unison with ears, like a huntress.

Arad scratched the table. Would there be sense in calling out to her? And why is this Vaalu-Arassi silent? Let her chatter about anything, then Simsana will notice it, see him, and they can meet eyes. And then further... No. No! Must be first. Must try. What if it's all true.

"Simsana! Hi!" he put all the carefreeness and casualness into these two words that he was capable of. And added, unexpectedly for himself: "Come here."

He saw her ears prick up, saw how she flared entirely with attention, seeking the owner of these words, and from the whole gesture of her body and manner Arad vaguely understood that everything, possibly, perhaps, probably, sort of, but...

Suddenly to the left—a sharp movement. There stood Vaalu-Arassi, and her transformation was so cold, sharp and altogether monstrous that Arad's jaw dropped. She stood in a proper, stately, ceremonial pose, diamond gaze—this was formality ice itself, inaccessibility, haughtiness. He stood, not even from manners, but from surprise.

"Young-sire Arad, utmost gratitude for the hospitality of a true Naysagrian. I regret that I must hasten away. The sisterhood," she glanced momentarily at Simsana who had approached at an uncertain distance, "shall forever be indebted for the young-sire's brilliant deed this day," she truly haughtily extended her left hand to him, and Arad accepted it for a mannered, utterly false designation of a kiss, looking at the silver ring of the sisterhood on her finger. "Glory to Vaal-Suungs. Let us glorify, the hearing one," this was intended for Simsana.

"Glory..." Arad mumbled.

"Let us glorify Vaal in this noonday, sister," Simsana answered at the same time, in surprise and slight fear, smoothing herself at the neck from the suddenness.

Having concluded thus, Vaalu-Arassi, *Seedna disciplara*, departed with proud and fluid gait, restrainedly pressing to herself the hood-khinastr—culprit of all today's misadventures.

Simsana watched after her, clutching her basket tightly to herself. Arad too, but then shifted his gaze to his Ashai nearby. He prepared to meet her gaze.

"Hi."

"Nai, hi," she turned to him, continuing to smooth her neck, calming herself from all the unexpectedness. "Oh, listen, who is this disciplara? Do you know her?"

"That's a disciplara?" Arad scratched his mane behind his ear. "That's one who studies at that, what's it called..."

"Disciplarium. Yes."

"I thought she was already kind of a sister," he said with surprise, offering her his hand and indicating she should sit. She obeyed and sat across from him, on the edge of the bench.

"No. She's definitely a disciplara," Simsana hugged her basket and looked after Arassi again, but she had already disappeared around the corner. "Don't know which disciplarium though. Her *Stamp* seems to be like Seedna's one..."

The tavern server looked out, approvingly surprised to himself at how Ashai-Keetrah are attracted to this young-sire, and generally what agitation of females there is around him. Then disappeared.

"Her name is Vaalu-Arassi," Arad licked his lips, rubbed the corners of his mouth. "She asked me to witness the Chalice of Vaal."

She smoothly, naturally placed her palm on the table.

"And what deed was she referring to?"

Arad looked her in the eyes, then at her attentive, curious, pricked ears. And completely casually:

"Nothing much."

The inopportune tavern server approached to ask what else the young-sire desired; Arad answered nothing, slapped two imperials on the table (terribly much, but he least of all wanted to count money right now, or any of this), and invited Simsana to stand, again offering his hand. And again she obeyed.

They stepped out onto the cobblestones of the square. Arad looked right, left, meaningfully, malefully. Attempt number two. Come on, break through her defense. Come on, forward on, for the glory of the Suungs...

"Arad, are you offended with me?" she preempted him with words.

And stood before him. So he could see all of her.

"What for, I get it," he answered, evenly and stoically, feeling triumph. "I'm not offended," he smiled at her as if he'd seen everything in the world. "Everything's fi..."

"I lied," Simsana said quickly and sincerely, grabbing her ear from shame and confession. "I wanted to go with you. It's just... your father, he's a judge. Everyone in Gallen knows he doesn't deal with Ashai-Keetrah," she looked down. "When I found out about this, when I learned about your father, when I was told, I thought that if you and I go somewhere, he'll get angry at you. And something bad will happen. And something will be, and something... will happen... You understand, Arad, it will happen..."

Arad diligently made an increasingly surprised, disconcerted and slightly indignant expression.

"...and there will be troubles and disputes in your family, and I didn't want to harm you. I was told it would be better this way. I know it's stupid, but I thought it was better for you this way, because Ashai aren't allowed to cause harm..."

"I'm not a judge," he placed his palm on her shoulder. "And I don't intend to be one."

"But your family, your father..."

"So what? Even if I were a judge, I wouldn't accept the Doctrine. I don't agree with it. Anyway, that's how it's supposed to be for dad, it's his service; you know, it's customary for judges not to have dealings with Ashai-Keetrah. But how can my dad, a Suung, be against his son, a Suung, associating with Ashai-Keetrah, with priestesses of suungmara, the finest of the Suung daughters, with lionesses of Vaal?"

Oh, how good that he remembered all these epithets, didn't forget a single one, his memory didn't fail him anywhere. Wonderful.

Impressed by the speech, clever and correct, confirming all her best expectations, affirming her feelings with reasonable arguments (oh, how lionesses like that!), Simsana sighed:

"Forgive me, I'm so... You're really not offended?"

"Come with me. Will you?" Arad released his last arrow of victory.

"I will. Invite me," she smiled and spun in place.

Well, excellent.

"Let's start by leaving here, I've been sitting too long. Let's go."

"Now? But where?" she was surprised.

"Over there," he waved west. Might as well have been east. Didn't matter.

"I need to walk through the market," she noted carefully, "my mentor said. Buy stuff."

"So let's go, give me the basket. The master released me," he preempted a possible question about time, so she wouldn't think to question his presence.

"I won't, it's not heavy, and it doesn't suit lions to walk with baskets," Simsana answered, smoothing her ears, right then left.

"You will surrender it when it gets heavy."

"I will surrender," she promised.

They walked to the market.

"So, she didn't say which disciplarium she's from?"

"No," Arad rubbed his nape, "just said her name was Vaalu-Arassi, that's all. It was like this: I was sitting in the tavern, saw they were going to light the Chalice, approached, she called me over and asked me to witness. I hadn't done that before, honestly."

"Hadn't witnessed? Oh, well, of course... And how was it?"

"Fine. Listen, why is it needed, witnessing? Why is someone needed?"

"There's no point in ceremonially lighting ignimara if you don't have witnesses. And it's better if it's a Suung, not a Suunga."

"Why so?"

"It's a symbol," Simsana looked around. "You'll be all the sons of Suungs, and she—all the daughters of Suungs."

"But there are always witnesses around, at the square. A whole bunch."

"They're not witnesses, they're just spectators. You have to appoint someone to witness. That's proper, that's ceremony."

They turned onto Market Street. Arad caught glances. He'd been noticed with her.

"Listen," he suddenly thought and became quite seriously puzzled, "can you light ignimara?"

"Wait a moment..." Simsana said and approached a vendor of roots, herbs, spices, cinnabar and rat poison. "Good day, hamanu Haumeni."

"Ahhh, young masterina, hello there."

Arad nodded, but the vendor didn't look at him, as one usually tries not to look at someone who represents great interest.

"My mentor's guidance," Simsana answered by rote, obviously following some rule.

"How's the mentor?" the vendor asked with undisguised cunning.

"She was asking: how is hamanu's daughter?"

"Glory to Vaal, she's well. Getting back on her paws..."

Arad turned away, feeling completely superfluous in female chatter, as it always is.

"You're not alone today," the vendor noted even more cunningly.

"No, not alone," and in Simsana's voice Arad heard defiance.

"Arad, of Karizian-Roust," Arad caught the right moment, though instantly understood the introduction wasn't particularly needed—the hamanu knew perfectly well who he was.

The vendor, either from plainness, or because of the age difference, or for some other reason, skipped the usual 'pleased to meet you' and reciprocal introduction.

"Young-sire Arad, the young-sire's father is a judge, correct?"

"Exactly so. Is hamanu acquainted?"

"How would I be, I'm a vendor at the market. Selling patamura and all sorts of this and that. I just know. Who doesn't know him in Gallen. Here."

Simsana took an unnaturally huge root, arm's length, turned it, smelled it.

"Old," she declared.

"Well, a bit. Almost young, really."

"Need a younger one."

"As they say, grab them young and you can't go wrong," hamanu Haumeni laughed and heavily climbed under the counter somewhere.

Arad and Simsana exchanged glances. She wrinkled her nose in a little laugh, then covered her mouth. He shrugged, as if to say, well, fancy that.

Simsana liked the second one better, she took it. Right there, without even managing to step away a couple paces, they ran into a little group of some of her fem-friends.

"Hi."

And again, once more, two more maassi, and again:

"Hi, V-Simsani," they shot glances at Arad.

They passed by.

"You have so many friends," Arad noted.

"You know, it's like young-manes hanging around the weaponsmith's son," she said, squinting and touching his shoulder so he'd bend closer to her ear.

"Got it. You'll be useful to them, that's why they're friends."

"And also everyone here sees us."

"That's for sure."

"And also you're hungry," she stopped him.

"Not really," Arad was surprised by her somehow uncanny perceptiveness.

"Come on, come on."

They walked through small streets, Simsana confidently leading him upward. Gallen in the center was divided into Upper and Lower; she turned left onto a path, and such a intricate one that he didn't know about it, though he'd lived here his whole life.

They came out to something Arad identified as a small garden: three or four apricot trees, enclosed by bushes on all sides in someone's backyard. He looked around a bit more and realized they were roughly behind the trade guild and guard barracks, but he hadn't known there was even a house here.

"Wait here," she set the basket by the tree, "I'll be right back."

Arad nodded, though he had no idea where they'd come or what would happen. He looked around, hands behind his back: there were gaps in the wall of bushes, and there, beyond them, was a barrier, and further—a sheer stone wall, about four paces high. Below ran a dead-end street where cubs were playing. To the right, right next to the barrier, dangerously close, stood a strange, old, semi-reclining chair. Arad walked past it, struck it with his paw—heavy. Further around was the blank wall of a neighboring house, then the house itself, and further—some utterly overgrown thickets that probably no one dared touch anymore, lest they awaken ancient evil.

His ears heard pawsteps, and he noted that he could probably already distinguish Simsana's steps by sound.

She approached: peaceful, practical, calm; didn't look at him; held a large blanket over her arm, and in one sweep it was on the grass. He watched. This was good.

"Sit," she invited, and he sat. But she didn't stay—left again.

This seemed somewhat strange and intriguing, and generally, perhaps, exciting. Garden, good weather, seclusion from the world. Simsana. Arad couldn't help but remember the garden and Arshaya; this was different, completely different, completely-completely different, but he couldn't help it.

He pulled the knife from his belt (it was in the way), casually tossed it aside.

He didn't know what would happen; there was no point thinking about the future, even the immediate. And he stopped thinking.

Soon Simsana came and brought in a towel some... vat? Pot? Something large, ceramic and pot-bellied. He didn't know what to call such a thing.

"What's that?"

"I don't know if you'll like it," Simsana said pensively, as one usually speaks during some task, "but you should try," she looked at him. She was pulling this pot out of the towel and wielded several smaller towels, which, like a magician, she pulled out seemingly from nowhere.

Arad got bold, took the lid off... off this gray ceramic pot—no, still Arad didn't know what to call such a thing. There was something delicious inside. Simsana, playfully, rapped his fingers with the same gray ceramic spoon.

It seemed to be a stew, but somehow very dark and with a very strong aroma.

"Move closer."

He moved closer, half-lying, toward the pot.

"To me, closer," she patiently corrected.

Alright, of course. Arad moved close, almost right up against her.

"You're going to eat. Come on," she very deftly brought a spoon to him, as if to say, try it. From surprise that he would now just like this be fed, like a small cub, Arad didn't even resist and obeyed.

"Listen, that's tasty."

Simsana was already holding the spoon ready a second time. The impression was she'd done this her whole life.

"And why are we..." Arad barely managed to say before he had to eat again.

"A hungry lion is an angry lion," Simsana answered, opening her mouth along with him, just like feeding a small cub.

"And why are you..."

"Don't worry, the lioness will eat too," Simsana demonstrated: took and ate a bit herself, from his spoon.

Arad actually understood that objecting to such conditions wasn't worth it. Quite the opposite. Everything was even good. Everything was even wonderful, and all by itself. Simsana was so charmingly serious; like he'd seen many times how his mother or their servant fed his younger brothers: focused, quick, confident and knowing what to do.

"And where is this from, what house is this?" he gestured there contentedly, toward the house. "Where are we?"

She turned around, as if she didn't know it was there.

"There's a cook here, she cooks for the guard barracks," he saw how she looked aside with pricked ears, her profile in a ray of kind sunlight.

Then she glanced at him.

"Oh..." Arad scratched his mane, as if this had some meaning. He noticed: Simsana licked the spoon, took more of this stewed meat with very strong flavor—spicy, and there were definitely nuts, and sour, and sweet—and gave him more. There was something in this gesture very direct, exciting, and (for some reason he thought so)—deliberate; possibly, one could even allow there was a challenge here. They were eating from one plate. From one spoon. Like that.

So, no expectations. I have to kiss her, as soon as we finish eating, Arad concluded. I have to, otherwise I won't be a lion, but a laughingstock. I have to do it very confidently. I have to do it as soon as possible, and today. She has to see me as strong. I'll have to do something, and won't accept any objections. I must he thought, examining her sitting on her haunches, legs tucked under herself and knees completely covered by her dress, as is usual-

ly proper for females of any bloodline and age to sit. *I'll have to grab her by the shoulders. Resistance is futile. I like her. She's beautiful. She's just right. And also she...*

Her gaze pulled him from the stream of important thoughts; Simsana smiled, but gently, and looked away.

"She'll need to be paid," Arad noted.

"No need," Simsana shook her head.

He thought. Hey. No.

"Don't you pay for us," he ordered.

"I won't," she shrugged, stirring in the pot. "She's a beneficiary, owes me and my mentor. If a Mistress of Life helps a lioness—she becomes a beneficiary."

"I see. Then I'll owe you. I'll be your beneficiary."

"I haven't had male beneficiaries yet."

"I'll be the first."

She chuckled, raising an eyebrow and flicking an ear.

Well then. Arad found a mug of water, drank it almost in one gulp. And the drops on the bottom he dashingly and brutally flicked onto the garden grass; they gleamed in the light.

"We'll eat, and go to the inn."

"Now? Looking like this?" she looked at herself. "Mmmm..."

"Then tonight."

She rubbed her chin.

"Today won't work. And tomorrow either," and she looked at him apologetically. "And I have to at least bring this patamura back by evening."

"All the better," he waved it off. Already all thought through: "Look, in four days there'll be a fair. There'll be all sorts of things. There'll be traveling performers, you know, dancers, magicians, there'll definitely be one like this, eh, she can put a plate on her belly, a deep one, and she'll hold it with her belly, upside down or right side up or however. The plate won't fall. And you'll be able to buy whatever you want. And you'll be able to easily buy wine there. And you'll be able to see, probably there will be Vaal's fire there, at night, it'll be beautiful. And they'll light a big fire, that's for sure. And there'll probably be Circle wrestling, and I'll also be wrestling..." he hinted at just how good and capable he was.

She didn't answer—still eating. Through his whole story she listened and ate, carefully choosing something for herself in the pot.

"Sounds good, I like it," understanding he'd finished and his ideas had run out, she answered readily.

"I'll come for you, and we'll go," Arad said importantly. "The two of us."

"We'll go," she echoed.

Simsana licked the spoon again, not particularly shy about the gesture, then set it back into the pot. For a moment, he caught himself thinking she

was probably of simple birth—what they called ‘of ordinary dignity’. So, he had decided Simsana is of high dignity. Now, he decided it’s ordinary. Hm. And what of it? The Ashai-Keetrah, as far as he knew, didn’t really carry the burden of bloodline dignity at all—they belonged to a separate stratum, no matter their origins.

He watched her drink, holding the small cup in both hands, and suddenly remembered how Arassi had folded her hands in a similar way during the lighting.

“By the way, you never mentioned—can you summon ignimara?” he asked, recalling his earlier question. It genuinely interested him, too.

She looked at him—was that confusion, or faint annoyance?

“Of course. I’m Ashai, aren’t I?”

“You’re serious?” he said, tugging absently at the mane just starting to thicken along his neck. “I thought Ashai only taught that after Coming of Age. That you had to be fully grown for it. I’ve never seen anyone our age do it.”

Simsana smiled, and he’d never seen such a smile from her before—it was almost sad. She turned the cup in her palms. Her gaze... first, he felt oddly ashamed, uncomfortable. Her gaze clashed with the lightness, the flowing sweetness of their afternoon. He hadn’t expected a peer to look at him like that; at the end of it waited a prize he absolutely anticipated, with no small probability: the serene softness of her mouth, her scent, her closed eyes (he’d seen such things before, even knew them). Suggestive gaze? Perhaps that was the best word he could find for now... Arad knew he’d never received such a look from any maassi. He wasn’t frightened by it, no. He just didn’t know what to do with it.

And there was this: she knew that he knew. It created an infinitely fading echo in the dialogue of their gazes. A strange sensation—knowing that she knew, imperfectly, roughly, blurrily, what he was thinking. And you know. And she does. And you again. And she again...

Something had to happen. Right now.

But then a completely alien voice, monstrous and inappropriate, disgustingly mundane and tactless:

"Veee-Simsana!"

Because he’d already started—his tail even twitched with nerves and desire—he’d already begun moving toward her, and she was preparing to receive him too, already tilting her head. He thought he’d caught the glint of her lower fangs, even felt her hot breath, her warmth, so much warmth, so very much warmth, and how she’d gone completely relaxed, and that exhale of disappointment—audible, perfectly audible.

"I’m here, hamanu Shiala," Simsana answered, looking away and down, ears swivelling.

"Glai’s coming. Will you take him?"

Simsana turned, looked around the tree, then stood and walked off. Arad couldn't see what was there. He rubbed his nose, looked away, sighed. *What Glai?* he thought. *Who is Glai, damn it? There shouldn't be a Glai. There shouldn't be anyone around. There shouldn't be anyone at all.*

Glai turned out to be a three-year-old cub in Simsana's arms.

"Sisana," he pulled out the amulet that had been hidden on her chest—a large one—and studied it with interest. "Rockies."

"You want rockies?" Simsana asked him gently, settling back onto the blanket with him. She sat differently now: leaning against the tree, legs off to the side.

Instead of answering, he lifted the amulet and began placing it on his chest, then on his head.

Arad said nothing. He didn't really know how to talk to small cubs, what to do with them, how to play with them—despite having two younger brothers.

"Is that the cook's son?" Arad asked carefully.

"No, her daughter's," Simsana answered without looking at him, ears pressed flat the way lionesses do when playing with cubs.

He settled onto her arm while she adjusted the length of fabric draped over her shoulder. These long pieces were always crisscrossed over her shoulders whenever he saw her in that somewhat odd, plain dress the Mistresses of Life wore (and he'd only ever seen her in such). Turned out Simsana had rigged the fabric around her neck, and now the cub lay on her chest and arm, the arm supported by the cloth.

Ha, clever, Arad thought.

Shoving his palm deep into her neckline, the cub instantly stopped fussing. Even his tail stopped twitching. Arad noticed Simsana had closed her eyes—her expression infinitely peaceful, calming, serene. He glanced away: a new character had appeared in their little world, quite quietly and unobtrusively—an old lion settling into that chair, lean and bare-chested, entirely dark gray. Arad nodded to him, and strangely enough, the old lion nodded back. He reclined in the chair with his back to them and went still.

Well. He'd been so close. But today fate had decided not to leave them alone.

No matter. He already knew something. He knew what would happen when his nose found its way to hers. That excited him even more than the kiss itself—he could look at her and imagine it, dream of it, knowing it would happen.

He looked at her. She'd already opened her eyes and was looking at him too.

"Is he falling asleep?" Arad whispered.

"Already asleep," Simsana answered quietly, but in a normal voice.

"What?" Arad asked, disbelieving. "That fast?"

"It's a Gift I have," she said, relaxing against the tree, watching Arad peacefully. "I can put cubs to sleep. Actually, anyone—just not as well."

"A Gift?"

"Different Ashai manifest different Gifts when they begin their training. One or many. The mentors say 'a Gift manifests.' This one appeared in me."

"Listen, that's probably incredibly useful," Arad said quite seriously, his interest piqued.

"Mm-hm," her answer held little enthusiasm. "Useful enough. Listen, tell me about that disciplara after all."

Instead of answering, Arad shifted over and leaned his back against the tree too, sitting right beside her, to her right. He had a formal excuse—to speak more quietly. Really, though, it was to sit pressed against her.

"Wait," she took the towel and deftly spread it with one hand. "Now sit."

"I don't know anything about her, Simsan," he said, extending his arm imperiously over his bent knee.

"And what were you doing at the tavern?"

"She said she was thirsty after the ignimara."

"Yes, it makes you terribly thirsty," she agreed. "You witnessed, and then you went to the tavern for drinks?"

"Well, yes, more or less. We chatted a bit. She was a little odd. And it seems like she did something..." Here Arad's thought seemed to stick, refusing to become words. "But quite a pleasant person. We were already saying goodbye, and I suddenly noticed you. That kind of day," he looked at her.

Now she was closer. Much closer. Her gray eyes studied him carefully, very carefully.

"She said the sisterhood was grateful to you. Will you tell me what that's about?"

"Nothing really. I'm not even sure I did the right thing."

"Arad, that's quite a high... I don't know the right word... it's rare for Ashai to say such things. 'Brilliant deed.' She said it in front of me on purpose, so I'd know: the sisterhood owes you."

"Sisterhood don't owe me anything," he said mockingly.

"Arad, please tell me, I'm burning up with curiosity," the lioness's composure broke. "I won't tell anyone."

"Although," Arad breathed, feeling a slight tremor, "if they're grateful," the air felt insufficient, "then you are too?"

"Yes," she agreed. "You can ask for something."

"What can I ask for?"

"Services. Rites. Rituals. Ceremonies. Various things. Whatever."

At the last moment Arad remembered the old lion and glanced over. He seemed to be sitting quietly, doing nothing, but...

"He's asleep," Simsana said quietly, hurriedly.

"Who knows..."

“Believe.”

“I need one service. A ritual. I need you to close your eyes.”

She didn't do it instantly. She seemed to be imagining first how to do it, or whether to do it at all. There was so much sunlight—they sat in shade, but the sun lived in the air itself. He moved closer to her, completely close, things around them began disappearing, sounds muffling. Arad truly hoped he'd keep watching her the whole time, but found his nose a breath away from hers; he felt her careful, waiting breathing. He knew there would be fire, had roughly imagined it, but not like this... When he kissed her, gently and slowly, he discovered several new things, each a completely stunning revelation: the first was her response—she kissed him back. He placed his palm on her shoulder, unconsciously, and suddenly discovered hers was on his chest, and it meant so much: reciprocation, it guarded its mistress, and also it invited him. The second thing was scent. It had been there before, certainly, but either Arad hadn't noticed it, or couldn't notice it, or perhaps it revealed itself only to one who'd earned such closeness. It resembled the scent of females; why hide it—Arad knew roughly how lionesses smelled: those momentary greeting-farewell-friendly-familial embraces, accidental proximities, by pure coincidence, the trail behind some maassi, Sarabanda once, after all. Djulna cornered. Arshaya, that missed bliss. But all those scents had been half-hints; perhaps with his sister it had been a very light, very gentle suggestion he hadn't paid much attention to—from the abundance of everything. Simsana's scent, from such impossible closeness, no longer hinted at anything—it simply was; this was a different female scent, in quantity and quality, that Arad had never known in his life until now. It became everything, Arad obeyed it completely, and he traced his nose along her cheek, then found her neck; he didn't even see or feel that Simsana had lifted her head, only for him; it seemed he'd turned his palm on her shoulder into a grip and even seemed to have dug in his claws (and it seemed she endured it). He understood he needed to take a breath, otherwise something terrible and great would happen now, otherwise he'd go forward somewhere, crushing everything in his path, and it was obvious this couldn't be done here, in this place, and now, in this time. He slowly, very slowly pulled back, and along the way received another gift he'd never seen before: Simsana, carefully, perhaps even uncertainly, licked his cheek. Arad froze. A miracle happened—she did it again: even lighter, even more carefully. Arad understood. He understood this new language. He knew what she'd told him. She'd forgotten herself so completely that her palm on his chest went entirely limp and seemed to fall. But it returned, pressing as lightly as possible for a lioness, and is impossible for a lion.

“Arad. Arad, we... Arad, we'll wake him.”

“What?” he exhaled. His head was spinning. “We didn't wake him?”

“No. We...”

"We'll do it later, right?"

Simsana didn't answer with words; perhaps one wasn't supposed to answer such things with 'yes'—that would be too simple. She looked down, her shoulders drawing in with uncertainty. A stupid question, unnecessary, altogether outside their world—the answer already lay before him.

It was an excellent beginning. He could calm down, catch his breath—think everything through, so much had been won here. Now he wouldn't wander alone through an unbearably heavy world; now he had a connection to the opposite, to the other side. From this moment the lionesses of the world, in Simsana's form, had agreed to be beside him, and it was so astonishing and incredible that...

"Listen, Simsan, need to tell you something."

"Yes?" she said, surprised.

"Listen, you smell."

Arad didn't know how best to say it; the echo of everything that had happened kept him from finding the words. This was the highest praise he could think of. He'd discovered the most astounding essence in the world, and she was its mistress, so somehow she needed to know.

But from the instant alarm and worry in her expression, he understood he'd blurted out something wrong somehow.

"Of what?" she asked fearfully.

"I don't know. Of Simsana," he rushed to say. "You can't smell that good, it's dangerous."

"And what, are you afraid?" she asked carefully, tilting her head.

"My mane's standing on end with terror," he said.

She laughed quietly, as if he'd said something hilarious, and couldn't stop for some time.

He was glad he'd made her laugh.

"You still haven't told me what you did for the sisterhood!" she suddenly accused him, almost petulant, poking his chest with a claw.

"And what do I get for telling?"

"I don't know," Simsana said, surprised and defensive at once.

"Perfect," Arad said cheerfully, because he knew—it was his business to know what he'd get. "That Vaalu-Arassi, she caught fire during the ignimara. She had this hood, big, the kind that covers your arms, shoulders, you know..."

"A khinastr."

"Yes. Someone spilled oil on it and didn't notice. It caught fire—the whole thing went up—and I put her out. Imagine that. I took off this cloak," Arad showed, "and smothered it."

"Wow. She couldn't take it off?"

"Yes, yes, I know, it comes off quickly, that's exactly what it's for. But I didn't know then."

Simsana nodded understandingly. Actually, Arad realized the whole story had keenly interested her, though he couldn't fully grasp why. He decided to press forward rather than circle the event.

"So she's a disciplara, right?" Arad glanced at the old lion, but he still hadn't stirred since lying down. "Wonder what she's doing here in Gallen?"

"I'm curious too. I'll ask around. But it's normal enough—disciplaras travel all over the Empire."

"Will you go to a disciplarium too?"

"Me? No," Simsana smiled, looked away, fidgeting with the amulet's chain. "Too late for me. I already tried to get in," she glanced at him sideways.

"And?" Arad turned to her fully.

"Nothing—as you see, a free disciple. Vaalu-Miresli just mentors me, that's all," she said expansively, drawing out the words. "They didn't accept me," she added quickly, looking at the sleeping cub. She adjusted her arm, adjusted her dress, dissatisfied with something.

"Will you tell me how it was?"

"Well," she sighed, opening her mouth and licking her lips. "First you go through the Circle of Three—three Ashai-Keetrah evaluate you. I passed. I went with my mentor to Krimmau-Ammau, I was twelve then..."

"Do you have to go to a disciplarium at twelve if you want to enter?"

"It varies for different acolytes: some at eleven, some at fourteen. Me—at twelve."

"That's not fair," Arad said indignantly, trying to defend her and destroy those who'd dared not accept such an Ashai into the disciplarium. "How can lionesses at eleven compete with those who are fourteen?"

"It's not a competition, it's something a bit different. Everything's more complicated. It's fate: either you entered or you didn't. It's rather like the path of Ashai: you can only be born to it, not become it. It's similar here: you must be born a disciplara. You should prepare, you should try, and that's right, but..."

"But there are exams there, trials?"

"Yes, there are," Simsana thought carefully.

"Any trial is probably still better to pass at fourteen, no? Not ten, or eleven. Right?"

"Arad, you're so curious," she deflected from the conversation's path.

"Of course. You see, I met you, and you're the first Ashai-Keetrah I can talk to closely."

A little bird hopped before them, interested in the meal's remains, and Simsana gave it her attention. Then the cub again. But she continued when Arad endured the silence:

"Look, going to a disciplarium is voluntary. You decide with your mentor. You go when you're no longer a *naysi* but a *stalla*."

"What's the difference between naysi and stalla? Both are acolytes, right?" Arad quickly grasped concepts, connecting threads.

"Yes. But there is a difference," she said gently, fidgeting with the silver ring hanging at her neck. "When they first take you, accept you to the path, you're a naysi. Then you become a stalla."

"When?"

"When the time comes."

"The mentor decides, right?" Arad pressed.

"No, not the mentor," Simsana answered patiently. "It all depends on you. When the time comes. Arad, I'll tell you later sometime, if you want, what the difference is between naysi and stalla. Or maybe you'll find out yourself, or figure it out."

"Oh, all right. And you went to Krimmau-Ammau."

"Yes. But there," she narrowed her eyes and looked at him thoughtfully, "Mistresses of Life aren't particularly needed—there are very few of them in disciplariums at all. They all study freely, like me. Things are a bit different for us than for other Ashai."

"You have births—how would you learn that in a disciplarium, right?"

"Exactly, something like that," Simsana nodded, checking how cub Glai was sleeping.

"Maybe it would have been better not to go at all?"

"That's for certain," her tail twitched nervously, and he noticed. "Probably, but I wanted to so badly. My mentor decided to let me bite my tail," she exhaled.

And she looked at Arad expressively, and he even understood the meaning: *This topic is unpleasant for me*. This wordless communication was quite something—Arad found himself delighted by it.

"And what," he didn't let her go despite the message, "you came to the exam and they said: Mistress of Life, that's it, we're not taking you?"

"No, not like that. They take you in and begin evaluating: how you look; what your ignimara is like... Yes, disciplariums love ignimara, if you have the Gift for it they'll snatch you up just like that," she showed her claws. "Snap, and done. My ignimara is very ordinary. What Gifts you have—they look at that too. Funny thing: I didn't know yet what Gift I had. Only when I came back did I find out right away: putting anything to sleep. That Gift they definitely wouldn't want at Krimmau-Ammau. They check what you know from the Codex, from the Canon."

"The Canon? That's like the Great Doctrine of Faith or the Twelve Commandments of Vaal?" he decided to show off. He knew about them, had read them, heard of them. He and father had even sat once, reading them and laughing at it all. It was funny and stupid, and it was good time with dad.

Dad was a true anvaalist. And he was happy his son was too.

"No, you need to know those in any case. The Canon is all sorts of poems, texts, paintings, frescoes... statuettes. All art they've decided to include in the Canon."

No, that wasn't interesting.

"And what does 'how you look' mean? How you're dressed?"

"No, clothing doesn't matter. They look, well, you undress, and the mentors take a look," she said, and she was uncomfortable.

Arad was actually finding he quite liked it when lionesses were uncomfortable.

"Completely undressed, naked?"

"Vaal help me, yes Arad, completely."

"Sorry, I just wanted to clarify, it's odd after all," Arad said confusedly, imagining those undoubtedly, terribly odd scenes. "And what are they looking at?"

"How you're built and how you'll be built when you grow up. That's exactly why you're born a disciplara rather than becoming one. They won't take you at Krimmau-Ammau if your tail is the wrong length."

"What utter fools sit at this Krimmau-Ammau."

"Not utter fools, Arad, really," Simsana interrupted sternly, and he fell silent—right, he'd definitely gone somewhere wrong. "How can you say that?" she frowned, lifting her head slightly.

"Sorry."

"Dignified foolish sisters."

He laughed, the cub stirred unhappily in her arms, which she settled by rocking him maybe three or four times, no more. He fell back asleep.

"Shhhh, you'll wake him."

"You know, they were so stupid not to take you. How could they possibly say your tail was the wrong length? It's impossible. I would have taken you, at Krimmau-Ammau."

"Well, first of all, I actually passed on looks," Simsana noted casually. "Second, you haven't even seen my tail yet."

"Caught it," Arad actually caught the tip of her tail that had emerged from under her hem. "There it is."

"What are you doing."

"So, do you regret the disciplarium?" he left her tail alone, promising himself to return to it.

"No, not anymore. It's too late now."

"So you won't be a disciplara? Hmm... So you'll be, what is it, a stalla... until you become a sister?"

"No, after Coming of Age I'll just be a free disciple of a Mistress of Life. A young masterina, as it's proper to say."

"Young masterina..."

"That's what lionesses may say, not lions."

"And lions say what?"

"Just the usual—with nomen or without nomen. Same as for you."

"When you're seventeen, they'll give you a ring, dagger, and stamp? You'll walk around dangerous, with a dagger."

"When I'm seventeen," Simsana began chewing her claw, "I'll have to travel again—they won't just give them. Either to a disciplarium or one of the three Houses of Sisters in the Empire. Six places. Take your pick. And I have a ring already, look," she showed him a small ring attached to the amulet's chain. "Mistresses rarely wear it on their finger. And I have a sirna—the dagger. I'm already dangerous. Though it's not mine, it's my mentor's."

"I also heard you can't wear the amulet like that until you come of age," he remembered the conversation with Arassi.

"Not until I come of age, Arad—until I'm a sister. I'll be a sister after Acceptance. Look: first you're a naysi, then you're a stalla. Either in a disciplarium or not, doesn't matter—you're still a stalla. Then you're either a free acolyte or a disciplara. Then, after Acceptance, a sister. If you pass everything—that's how it goes."

"And what, they'll make you undress again? At Coming of Age."

"You and your undressing. Ugh, Arad, you're a good lion, not vulgar one. Coming of Age is complicated. Mostly they'll test your ignimara. Light it—good. Don't—goodbye."

"You'll light it though, right?" he asked hopefully.

"I hope so. Mine's decent enough. Not exactly fire, but it'll pass."

"Ha. And what happens to those who don't summon it?"

"They stop being Ashai-Keetrah."

"No way!" he said, surprised.

"Shhhh... What did you think? That's it, you didn't pass Coming of Age. They tell you 'farewell, thank you for trying,' you become an Approached One. You can do whatever you want—now you're just a Suunga."

"Well... And what do you do in such cases?" Arad spread his hands.

"I don't know," Simsana shrugged. "Get married, I guess."

"So this Coming of Age turns out to be a difficult thing?"

"Very much so. Many don't pass. Very many."

"You'll manage it," he waved a hand.

"Yes. I'll manage," Simsana answered sadly.

"So, the amulet is given at Coming of Age."

"No," Simsana corrected patiently, "at Acceptance. That's later. At twenty to twenty-five years. Still a long way off..."

"At Coming of Age you light ignimara. And there, at Acceptance, what do you do?"

"Can't talk about that. It's forbidden."

"All right. What I'm getting to is: you're wearing an amulet. How is that?"

"It's not mine," Simsana fingered the chain. "It's my mentor's. It's a symbol: I study with her, she trusts me with everything of hers. I often wear her sirna, her amulet. It's actually forbidden by the Codex. But that prohibition is sort of lifted for Mistresses of Life. We're allowed."

"Why?"

"Often a Mistress of Life hands all her stuff to her disciple—puts her amulet on her, and sirna, and her ring, so they don't get in the way when she's delivering a birth, and when... well, when she does lots of other things. The disciple is like a little holder."

"Ha. You know, my dad has the Codex of Ashai-Keetrah in his library."

"Really?"

"Yes, he's a judge after all. The Codex has the force of Imperial law. Such a big, thick tome. Dad keeps saying it's chaotic too."

He was certain Simsana would object. But she:

"Yes, it's a mess, everything's jumbled."

"And what else is forbidden by the Codex?"

"To whom?" Simsana squinted, adjusting her position. The adjustment worked out well—her shoulder began pressing against his.

She was close, her presence.

"Ashai-Keetrah, who else. It's for them after all. For you, I mean," he touched her neck (a formal pretext—pointing to the amulet's chain).

"Ashai come in different kinds, you know."

"Well, what can't any of you do?"

"We can't marry," she said immediately.

"That's stupid. I don't understand why. What else can't you do?"

"Arad," she rested her head on his shoulder, "I'm going to fall asleep now, just like him. Why are you tormenting me with this Codex?"

"The torture is over. Let's clink," he suggested, though there was nothing in the cups but water.

"Let's. So we're going to the fair in three days, right?"

"Yes," he said firmly.

"And we'll dance when they play?"

"Yes," he said firmly.

"What dances?" she latched on.

"Whatever you want. Fromal. Suungmtari. I can dance everything," Arad said proudly.

"I think I saw you—you were dancing a moon ago with some maassi."

Arad understood what she meant to say with her look: not 'I think' but 'I saw,' and not with 'some' maassi but one she knew exactly which. These hints through looks—quite the entertainment.

"Yes, that happened."

"Did you learn at the gymnasium?"

"No, dad arranged private lessons for me with one hamanu. I need to know how. I'm... from that kind of family. Hamanu Haniana, maybe you've heard of her."

"How could I not, of course."

"And you?"

"What?" Simsana looked surprised. "Whether I dance well?"

"Well... whether you like to."

"There are no lionesses who don't love dancing."

"And you dance everything too?"

"However you lead—that's how I'll dance," she shrugged, swivelled her ears, glanced aside.

"I'll do my best."

"I agree."

Strange how she answered. Not 'okay,' not 'all right,' but 'I agree.'

Arad thought about it, stretched fully, yawned.

"He's still asleep, right?" he asked Simsana about the cub.

"Mm-hm, mrrrow."

"Let me torture you with more questions."

"Questions?" Simsana seemed surprised that was what she'd be tortured with. "Okay, torture me with questions. What, the Codex again? That'll be hard, I'm not strong on it. Other things matter more to me."

"Like what?"

"*Aamsuna*."

"What?" Arad asked.

"*Aamsuna*—everything that isn't the Codex. The Codex isn't very important for Mistresses of Life."

"And what is *aamsuna*? There are many things that aren't the Codex."

She fell silent. For a moment Arad thought either she didn't want to answer, or something—she just stared at a point right in front of them.

"Have you ever opened the Codex of Ashai-Keetrah?"

"Yes, I think so."

"There on the second page, after the title page, one small word is written in the corner: '*aamsuna*.' Just that word and nothing else. And that's it, it's never mentioned in the Codex again. Because it doesn't belong to the Codex."

"What does it belong to?"

"It's everything that isn't the Codex. What I like most is how Vaalu-Daeema-Hinrana understood *aamsuna*: '*Ashai* is the Codex, *Keetrah* is *aamsuna*.' '*Ashai-Keetrah*' means 'sisters of understanding'. So the Codex governs sisterhood, but *aamsuna* governs understanding. You act by *aamsuna* when you understand things. Kinda, when you truly, really understand."

"I think I got it," Arad said, stroking his cheek. There was something to this—he found himself surprised.

"I don't know why I'm telling you, I don't even know if I'm allowed."

"You could get confused easily," he noted seriously.

"Ashai are constantly confused and don't know what to do," Simsana smirked. "My mentor says: 'The Codex is about what to do. Aamsuna is about what not to do.' I haven't really understood that yet myself, honestly."

"What's she like, your mentor?"

"She's..." Simsana looked up. "She's good," she said dreamily, but there was so much left unsaid that he stopped thinking about going in that direction. "And you?"

"Me? I'm good too."

She laughed.

"I know. I'm asking: so you want to be an architect?"

"Yes. I want to make big things that stand for a long time, defiantly. I'm studying with a master now. I don't like the master."

"Why?"

"He doesn't like me either, it's mutual. But I hope I'll please your mentor," he said, watching her, "because today I'm the one walking you home."

Discovering Reality

The curtain lifted and dropped for the tenth time.

"...shhhh, don't make noise."

"I'm not making noise. Why are you hissing? Is the cub asleep?"

"Over there, asleep. In Simsana's arms. And she's not alone—guess who she came with. You'll never guess. Arad, Nergim's son. Karizian."

"The judge, that one, the judge's?"

"Uh-huh."

"But he doesn't like Ashai. What a scandal," the younger lioness said admiringly.

"Everything's a scandal to you! Look there... See? Sitting together, oh my, affections," infinite accusation of monstrous crime from the older lioness.

"Affections?" rapturous sigh from the younger lioness.

"Yeah," the older lioness hissed. "I shoved the cub on her. And he's still pressing. See? See?"

"Will you tell the Mistress?"

"Well, what do you think? Of course I will. How old is he, sixteen, seventeen maybe? He'll wear her out, the boar. I've heard plenty about him already. Heard about him?"

"No, not really. What about him?"

"They say at the Magistrate's there was either a calling or dancing, you know, their whole thing. And he dragged some northerner's daughter into the garden there, and then..."

"What?" the younger lioness gasped.

"They say he almost raped her, pressed really hard. Poor thing probably barely got away, then complained to everyone—said he was so bold, don't show him your tail."

"And the fathers? What about the fathers?"

"Oh, they hushed it up somehow. Can't have a disgrace."

"So now he's come creeping after our little Simsani."

"Uh-huh. Now he'll be trampling her ears and chewing her tail."

"But she's Ashai, nothing will happen to her," the younger lioness suddenly decided.

"So what if she's Ashai?"

"She won't let herself come to harm. She'll manage somehow, they know how."

"But she's only fifteen!"

"Well, let her learn how not to let just anyone near. Or to let them..." the young lioness laughed.

"Oh, oh, you should have learned not to let them near back in your day. Every tom who tugged your tail, and you just laughed and spun around like a tavern slut. You should have laughed for the right ones, not all of them."

The young one fell sullenly silent.

"That's it, I'm going to chase him off. Vaal help me, I fed him, let them cuddle. Lioness of Vaal, kind soul, she'll be our masterina in a couple years, there you have it, and he's sitting pretty. Vaal above, what's going on. He doesn't understand a thing, they all only want one thing, this and that and the other, and feed here these lion-manes by the bucketful while you're at it, completely shameless, how are we supposed to live, what times..."

Arad and Simsana were already getting up to leave when the hamanu arrived, instantly bringing all of everyday reality with her. They handed the cub over to her, then Simsana followed after her, and Arad followed too because there was nowhere else to go. He'd even considered changing his plan and leaving, saying restrained farewells to everyone, not wanting to linger too long in the cook's quarters, but Simsana kept throwing glances at him—we'll be done soon, we'll leave now, and you'll walk me home like you promised—but the hamanu wouldn't let them go. Simsana even hinted:

"Well, we should be going, hamanu Shiala."

But no such luck. Some matters came up, obligations, the mentor was mentioned in passing, something very important needed doing somewhere. They had to go as a trio, so all three left the house together. Then they walked down the path toward the town, and it was narrow, so Arad walked behind, watching Simsana. He observed her, her gait, how the tip of her tail peeked out from the tail-slit in her dress, now hiding in the folds, now appearing. She turned around once to see how he was doing back there. A trail of her scent seemed to follow her (seemed it wasn't his imagination at all)—he already knew it. Her rough, strange, large iron earring gleamed; at first he'd found it rather absurd, but now he was starting to like it. She clasped her hands together in front of her in a gesture he couldn't see, chatting politely, articulately, animatedly with the hamanu, a basket at her side swaying in rhythm with her walk. Oh, she had a good, graceful gait, paws nearly in one line as if walking a beam—visible even beneath that rough, modest dress of hers, with a belt of decidedly unfemale thickness that mercilessly held her waist, her purse, her small knife, two fabric strips crossed over her shoulders, and even a gray cloth he'd only noticed now. Damn, blood of ancestors, who dresses a maassi her age like this? What fashion is it with these Mistresses of Life to dress like old hags from Norramark? He'd once seen a sister in a skirt with an asymmetrical hem—now that was something, those were legs, that was delicious, well, that is to say, tasteful, it's the word 'taste', of course, not anything else. And that Vaalu-Arassi—an entire erup-

tion of visual impressions. Fine, never mind. He wanted to embrace her from behind and squeeze. Squeeze very hard, so she'd start gasping, pleading, or even biting. She'd struggle, step on his paw with hers, growl. Definitely growl, yes. One of his hands would rest on her chest. Or her stomach. Somewhere there. His claws would grip firmly into the fabric of her dress—it was rough, could withstand anything. And the other would forcibly turn her chin toward him, and he'd take that one hand and pull up the hem of her dress, or whatever she had on, or no, better from behind, through the tail-slit, and...

"Arad?"

"Yes, yes, what?"

"Sorry, but we have here..." Simsana gestured helplessly at the wagon, at some old, cheerful, slightly balding lion, at hamanu Shiala, at the market where they'd somehow ended up again. There were some circumstances, some matters, they needed to stop somewhere, and then they'd give her a ride home along with the basket, all this would be uninteresting to him and she'd manage the rest herself, as she dared not impose his company for such nonsense. Arad stood with a slight smirk, then agreed. He was already thinking that perhaps it had all been a dream or something, but then she approached him (all those inappropriate tails were already waiting for her), close, to that very distance, and said:

"So I'm waiting, right?"

"Wait for me. I'll come in three days. I'll come for you."

"All right."

They needed to say goodbye somehow—perhaps they'd have waved to each other and that would have sufficed, or maybe he'd have kissed her hand, oh, such affectation in the middle of the market; but he somehow deciphered her body language and her readiness, and placed his hands on her shoulders (she responded instantly, hers on his), a perfectly good gesture for good friends. But she didn't offer him her cheek as usually happens, and they met exactly in the middle. He definitely, absolutely definitely felt her tongue slide across his lip and teeth—probably she'd wanted to lick him right on the nose and mouth, chin, basically everything, but restrained herself or got shy (there were so many good Suungs around, damn them); and what they managed was something like a quick kiss. And it could not, in no way could be a friendly farewell—that was impossible by all the laws of the world. He waved to her as she rode away, paws dangling from the back of the wagon, she waving back. Her long-suffering basket fell somewhere back there, and she didn't turn around again until disappearing around the corner.

That kiss remained the strongest impression of the entire day when he trudged home toward evening, and there had been many impressions. Dinner—he sat there, father, mother, his brothers, some friend of mom's, their dhaar serving. Marbled ham was brought out as an appetizer, but Arad was

absent from all of it. Someone asked how his day went. He answered something pitifully empty.

"What is it, son, are you unwell?" mom asked.

"Yes, my paws hurt—it was quite a day."

He settled in his room (first floor, corner, bed under the window), stared out the window, then climbed right onto the moonlit nighttime windowsill. He looked out—the world was kind, full of promise, all-forgiving. There was infinite confidence in everything, that very feeling when you know all is going well. Closing his eyes, he began imagining her (eidetic memory, you always come through): there she sits under the tree, paws off to the side, her tail flowing across the grass and ending limply at his hand. The garment needs changing—let it be a tunic with a free tail, like that time with the northern lioness Arshaya. Intelligent, attentive eyes. Ears slightly back, as if she's always faintly abashed. And her scent. He sniffed his palms—had any remained? He needed to steal something of hers, definitely needed to steal something, needed to do something, needed to do something with her. That scent—if they sold it, lionkind would pay in imperial gold. He needed to imagine her without anything at all. Arad could, but only vaguely. He knew what a lioness looked like only from the vulgar pictures that circulated among acquaintances, and once he'd seen naked lionesses bathing, but they'd been depressingly far away, plus there'd been a couple of other chance accidents. Much easier to imagine her heat, the fire of her kiss, closed eyes, her scent, how she lifts her head higher and higher as he kisses her neck lower and lower—yes, yes, there it is, there.

Vivid Reality

The next evening he sat with his mother at the table in their back courtyard, which they always brought out for the Season of Fire. Arad was resting, tired from uprooting stumps in their garden with a blackpaw who they sometimes hired for odd jobs. Mother was embroidering something (they say Naysagri-an females, once they reach Naheim, sew the night sky there, while Andarians weave steppe grasses in tapestry), occasionally clamping needles predatorily between her teeth. Father wandered about the garden, touching everything, dissatisfied with it all, particularly with Arad's shed where he kept heaps of his tools and clutter. Father looked very out of place there in his robe, typical of officials of every rank. Watching him, Arad tried to imagine hunting with his father and, once again, couldn't.

His brothers were somewhere either out or wandering through the house or making a mess again in the cellar, where they'd decided to make a robbers' den.

"So, how are things with you?" Mama suddenly asked without looking up.

"What things. The gymnasium's on break, the master architect gave me five days off," he shifted his paws, stretched out on another chair; then stretched entirely.

"And how are your personal affairs?" Mama asked in the same tone, again without looking up.

"Meaning?" Arad wanted clarification.

"Do you have any romantic interest yet, or interests? Has anyone caught your eye for the hunt?" Mother threaded the needle's eye on the first try.

Arad tugged at his tail, tapped it against the edge of the wicker chair.

"I don't want to interfere—after all, you're a lion and can sort everything out yourself," she continued, rapping her thimble loudly on the table, "but I can tell you something interesting I've heard."

"Someone caught my eye for the hunt, mom," he said with a meaningful chuckle. "And what have you heard?"

"That you're popular with many maassi, and even made a certain kind of... impression... back then, at the Magistrate's gathering, four moons ago. You might remember."

"What impression?" Arad thought, frowning, scratching his mane. What did she mean. Really.

"A good one, let's say. A good one. Especially on Malstruna-Lenayna."

"On who?"

"On Lenayna, daughter of hamanu Mirna, the weaponsmiths," Mama pressed.

"Ohhh. Mirna, that hamanu who likes to drop by. Got it," Arad stretched.

Mother was clearly waiting for continuation or comment, but none followed.

"I also heard today that you were seen with a certain, shall we say, particular individual..."

"Oh, that... the daughter... ugh, disciple of that midwife-Ashai, right? What's her name... Simsana," he circled his palm at his temple, pantomiming recollection.

"Yes, with her."

"Mama," he sighed heavily, meaningfully, "yesterday was full of all sorts of absurdity. At midday I had to witness Vaal's fire in the square—it happened by chance. Some visiting Ashai invited me, I couldn't refuse her, I'm a Suung after all, had to keep my mane. In the course of her ritual she caught fire, I had to put her out with my cloak."

Mother listened attentively, ears pricked forward, her sewing stopped.

"They explained I shouldn't have done that, but how was I to know? We don't light Vaal's fire, I'd never seen how it's done."

"You could have caught fire yourself!"

"No, no, everything's fine. And she's safe and sound. And then Simsana ran into us. Well, to cut to the chase, she asked for help with a basket, I agreed. Then we stopped at some hamanu's who cooks for the guard barracks, and we ate there."

"You ate at the cook's house?" Mama asked suspiciously. "You carried a basket?"

"I didn't carry the basket."

"You agreed to help with the basket," Mother looked upward, pointing her needle at the sky. "But you didn't carry the basket," now the needle pointed downward. "Fine, and what were you doing at the cook's house?"

"Not at the house, outside—it just happened that way. Simsana invited me, as a sort of thanks, I decided not to offend by refusing. I just walked with her," Arad related, somewhat irritably.

"Strange story. You could have easily refused," Mama waved it off.

"Yes, I know. I should have," Arad said and coughed. "And then we parted ways, and that's it. That's why we were seen together. You see, mom, I showed a certain kind of interest in her, of a very practical nature..." he traced cunning circles in the air.

"All right, Arad, you're quite grown now, I have nothing against you seeking romantic interests," she interrupted and continued sewing. "It's just that this particular... this Ashai acolyte, you understand, could create certain complications for dad. Even upset him. I think you can find yourself a much bet-

ter maassi—as we used to say back in *fansinall*, one with prospects for a relationship."

She suddenly bent down, pulled out a bottle of wine that had been—apparently—hiding under the table the whole time, opened it quite dashingly with her teeth, and poured herself a cup.

"Besides: I realized long ago that you're not timid and already know everything about the Game firsthand, which is when I advised your father to talk with you. Better late than never—every son needs to go through that formality with his father."

"Well, I didn't really know all that much, mom," Arad said honestly.

"Now, now, don't wag your tail at me. You know, that northerner—and she's the daughter of the deputy governor of the Fiscals and Treasury in Sungkomnaasa—the one you dragged into the garden, yes, yes, don't make those innocent eyes, she told everyone about your... voracious nature."

"She really said that?" He was genuinely surprised, even pricked his ears forward, which he rarely did (it's unbecoming for a male to prick them too much).

"And you thought I didn't know? Mama knows everything. Don't tell the father. He's a serious lion, he has no time for games."

She sighed.

"I don't know what you were up to there, but you impressed her. I hope you didn't do anything improper—everything by the rules?"

"Absolutely certain," Arad sighed heavily. "Everything was proper."

"Yes. Father doesn't need to know about this. You know, he doesn't much care for liberties, and talking about sensual matters doesn't interest him," Mama shook her head—no, it doesn't interest him, really.

"I figured that out when he talked to me about the Game. It seemed difficult for him."

"Difficult. Life treated him harshly, he grew up without a father, you know that yourself. He had no time to explore the gifts of youth," she sipped her wine. "I was actually his first. Oh..." she spilled some on the table, setting the cup back down. "Don't tell dad."

"Okay," Arad said, surprised.

But why—it all makes sense, he suddenly thought.

"And he never even played with anyone?"

Mama shook her head silently. Nope. Never played.

"He told me honestly when we started seeing each other seriously."

"Just admitted it honestly like that?"

"Yes. He's a very honest lion. Very. Even too much. I both love him for it and fear... for him, and... yeah. Too serious, too honest," she said expansively. Then waved a hand. "But for a judge, that's probably the best quality there is."

"Then I'll be honest too: I was thinking about arranging something with this Simsana, since she has an interest. But! If it's somehow inconvenient for father, then... then... that's that," he wanted to say 'to tail with her,' but suddenly couldn't.

"Good," mama agreed, examining her embroidery in the light.

"But really, she doesn't interest me," he said carelessly.

"Said as if you have someone else in mind."

"Yes," Arad inwardly rejoiced at this false trail his mother had set. "There are different ones in mind."

"Well, make a good choice, with good blood," mama agreed readily, even too readily. "By the way, I heard—through tenth ears—that maassi Lenayna is not indifferent to you. Though she's currently away visiting her grandmother in Marna."

"Do you approve of getting to know her, mama?" Arad asked for some reason.

"I'm just giving you a hint. Hints are useful, aren't they?"

Arad looked toward the sunset.

What Lenayna, when another, strange, enchanting target had appeared. He didn't even know Lenayna well, only fleetingly. She was one of those individuals whose existence you've known for years (name, age, sex), seen since cubhood, been in the same places with, but nothing more. His mother's friend's daughter.

"Just remember. I'm not really supposed to remind you about this—that's dad's prerogative—but remember the rules."

"Mom has no cause for concern. I remember everything, all's well."

Father arrived and noticed mother just sitting there drinking. He didn't like this, because for some reason it wasn't proper for a lioness to just sit and drink wine. Mother parried: there were no tasks left, everything was done, even today's sewing was finished—she had the right. Father was displeased: things weren't going well at work. He was offered wine but refused—needed a clear head for tomorrow. Mother made an unsuccessful joke about a clear head, father fell into his usual displeased nervousness, which simply had to be waited out. Mom asked about problems at work, father rolled his eyes, grimaced, hid his gaze in his fingers and rubbed his temples. Eventually mom calmed him, and he melted into his chair.

His brothers arrived, made noise, tried to drag Arad somewhere—he waved them off lazily.

Mother, with many precautions, alterations and edits, retold Arad's adventures from today, and he remained silent the whole time. While telling it, she lost her needles in the grass, and the search began—even Arad pretended to bend down and look. In reality he was just thinking about Simsana. If left alone for a couple moments, he couldn't think about anything else, or anyone else—especially not. It was monstrous and unbearable that she wasn't here.

On the other hand, there was nothing better than this anticipation of their next meeting.

He'd encountered lionesses in his life, but they'd all been different. Some were kind, some playful, some even showed favor, some simply allowed themselves to be looked at. They snorted, laughed amusingly, were foolishly cheerful or—more often—in haughty expectation. In short, it was always a one-sided game, throwing spears into an abyss, shooting arrows at the sky, trees, or cliffs. Sometimes the arrows broke entirely, weapons broke, nothing was right, and everything was very stupid, mundane and frightening. Well, and with Simsana: it was frightening again and not as confident as he'd like. Here he'd taken up a crossbow he'd only fired a couple times in his life, and always missed. He'd loosed a short, ugly, stocky bolt-arrow, loosed it almost at random rather than deliberately, loosed it from fleeting desire, enchanted sympathy, seeking opportunity and even male duty: after all, one must take interest in lionesses, one must do something with them if they exist, find use for them. If they exist, then one can put them to use, like, say, a hammer or pants, or a compass and stylus—drive the necessary nails into the places you need, and satisfy your needs. That's roughly how he imagined all these relationships, pleasures and romantic matters: the bolt flies, hits the prey, the prey falls. Done, meal served, no more events occur, and all the drama around it—just pretense, sentimental foolishness for lionesses.

But it turned out that from nowhere, in response, a little while later, an ornate, long arrow comes flying back, thin and colored, with a tip made of light. Then a second, then more, and more, and more, and more—red, blue, red, yellow, white, red, red. Unwinding long ribbons, they strike his nose, his brow, his eye, his heart, his palms. They're mercilessly tender, and you're dying beneath them. You forget that females aren't really worth ceremony, as father advised, and all those wise with experience, and that all this is simple stuff, you just need to find someone and snatch them up, whoever you can catch, after performing the uncomplicated mutual rituals. You forget everything entirely. All this is fine and quite possible—all this simplicity—if you're alive. But if you've died from her swift arrows, exhaling from happiness, then all of it is impossible. There sits mother, there sits father, and they don't even suspect that it's all over—Arad is gone, he's dead.

You

So. They'd agreed on three days.

Except: Arad had broken their agreement—he'd come a day early, and now, lurking like a predator, he waited in the mentor's house, slowly drinking still-warm wine, staring at the edge of a book peeking out from under fabric, and had already begun thinking how to explain his presence to Simsana (when she will arrive; if she will arrive; if the waiting will ever end at all; oh, no).

He'd been sitting a long time, no one had come, the wine in his cup was nearly gone. *This wine isn't doing much*, Arad thought. *Actually, nothing at all*. He was nervous, and the longer he sat, the more nervous he became.

He took the book, freed it from the fabric. Glancing around (just in case), he suddenly took the fabric and sniffed it—hers, she constantly touched it, her scent. He opened it—the book turned out to be 'Disciplaras and Disciplariums' by Gerod of Yaamri-Sai, 798 E.E. It was obviously expensive, extraordinarily so. He flipped through once, twice, three times, then quickly scanned a couple more pages, then further. Most pages had no text, and when there was any, he skipped it. This was *light-typery* transferred onto thick paper—images of disciplaras and disciplariums (as he understood from the captions), captured from both paintings and actual light-types. Here, for instance: against a simple white-reddish background (a curtain, drape, something like that) was a bust portrait of a young lioness, about seventeen. A very attractive lioness, southern, smiling. Caption: 'Vaalunayli-Lashaneh (Khustriani), Seedna disciplara, after passing Coming of Age, 793 E.E., Seedna.' Another, but not a painted portrait—a light-type, with a more interesting background: on the right, the sun of the Suung Empire's banner hiding in its folds; on the left, a dark banner or something, color unknown (light-types don't convey color, you can't see it). After some effort Arad understood it was dark blue, the checkered pattern of Menai Pride. 'Vaalunarayana (Menai), Ainansgard disciplara, obligatory light-typery after passing Coming of Age for personal file and Book of Sisters, 780 E.E., Ainansgard.' This lioness was simply beautiful. Here was a disciplara, left hand at her waist near the dagger, the other hanging freely along her body, serious, not soft, even haughty. 'Vaalumrouna (Andari), Seedna disciplara, free portrait, 778 E.E., Seednamay.' She caught Arad's fancy—he leaned in to examine everything, because the artist had executed it all in an extraordinarily realistic technique. The painting's complexity contrasted with the background's simplicity: some

symbolically simple flowering bushes. He noted that the freedom, the relaxation of the right leg, the palm resting on her thigh—far from accidental. There was both grace and practiced precision in it. She wasn't just standing there—she was showing how one should stand.

A few pages later he found this: a two-page spread, on the right were two repeating lines:

I will love you,
And you me—even more
I will love you,
And you me—more
I will love you,
And you me more
I will love you
And you me
I will love you
And you
I will love you
I will love you
I will love
Love you
Love you
Love you
You

Arad counted: there were twelve such stanzas. On the left was a light-type—she'd been captured in three-quarter profile, her entire muzzle turned part-way. She had large, dark eyes, a wide nose bridge, and small furry ears, the kind that are called 'snow ears.' Clearly northwestern blood had mixed strangely with southern, because her fur appeared darkish—hard to say, since you couldn't see the color. A small, flat nose; the light-type had honestly captured a scar under her left ear too. She was odd, even funny, Arad thought, and everything about her would be so-so if not for the eyes. Large, seemingly lined with something at the corners (or not, or yes, or no—Arad couldn't figure it out, and this doubt added even more), they shone impressively. They weren't sad, no, but not cheerful either—they were just... just... They were nocturnal eyes, completely. They didn't look directly at him but as if at someone behind his shoulder. The illusion was incredible—Arad even turned around. Then back to her. Then turned around again. The caption read: 'Vaalu-Anlille (Norramarsi), Ainansgard disciplara, mistress of *straya*, light-typery performed by Helsian fire-worshippers, 796 E.E., Outer Lands—Helsia.'

Below the poem was a signature:

'Vaalu-A.'—using elaborate calligraphy for 'Vaalu-' instead of the usual high script letter. Father had once explained: in one of the Supreme Chamber

of Justice's circulars, all judges, even those in the Doctrine, were strictly forbidden from writing 'Vaalu-' in lower script letters, because they'd taken it up as fashion, and such is considered an insult.

Arad couldn't resist and looked back again.

"Who's that there, behind my tail?" he scratched his nose with a nervous laugh.

The illusion was powerful, and the laugh came out anxious. There was something suggestive about all this—it resembled an incantation, like in myths or fairy tales, except that even here, in this book, it was beginning to work. Arad knew the Ashai-Keetrah even had incantations, something like that, but he'd forgotten what they were called. Maybe this was one of them, because he was beginning to love someone: either her, or someone behind him, or everyone in general, or the mysterious stranger, or the essence of loneliness.

Arad turned the page, and across the entire spread were red arrows flying straight at the reader. He closed his eyes. For the first time in his life he felt something like this, similar to being stunned: so it's possible—this way. How exactly? He hadn't even understood yet, honestly. But apparently, this way—it's possible.

The bolt struck so hard his ears and tail jumped. Someone had arrived, not yet visible who.

A deep breath, a thud, something fell. Her voice:

"Owww... Stand still!" something was being propped against the wall with a wooden knock.

It was Simsana.

"Phew..."

Knemids fell. Water—she was washing her paws. More water. And more. Now her hands, probably.

Arad quickly closed the book, spun sharply on the bench toward the room's entrance to see his target head-on. He wondered whether to stand. No, that would be very stupid—sit. He adjusted the knife at his belt so it would be visible. Hid it. No, back. Lean back with elbows on the table—yes, excellent idea. Add a pipe in his teeth and he'd have the perfect grown-up look of an infinitely self-confident lion. A real picture.

"And what's this?" Simsana asked herself, still invisible, and snorted quite amusingly.

She saw my knemids, definitely, he thought.

Moments passed during which this something was evidently being examined. Then a sigh, and a sound like scratching fur. And suddenly without warning, without preparation, just a few steps—she entered the room. Again in her usual modest-rough dress, in her hands an ordinary sort of sack.

She noticed him almost instantly.

"Hi, Simsana!" he said carelessly, sprawling, leaning against the table.

"Arad?" She was startled—again her usual female gesture: palm to chest. But not strongly. "Hey, nai, hello..."

He wanted to say something but didn't know what—everything was unplanned, everything stuck. He suddenly stood up, quickly and springily, in one movement.

This is serious, Arad thought. Damn, this is all more complicated than I thought.

"Is the fair today?" Simsana took several steps to the side, looking at him. "Isn't it tomorrow? Vaal, did I miss it?..." she thought fearfully.

"No, no, it's tomorrow, everything's fine," he stood immovably. "I was just passing nearby and dropped in."

Simsana carefully set down the sack near the bed in the center. She looked at him:

"I see."

She circled the bed on the opposite side from him, watching him like something dangerous and decidedly predatory, requiring attention and caution.

"Your mentor was here," Arad sat back down, now straddling the bench. "We talked, and she asked me to tell she'll be back by nightfall. Yeah, don't think I kicked the door or climbed through a window." He'd wanted to say it cheerfully, sparkingly, with humor, so they'd laugh together and she'd run to him easily, eagerly for a kiss. They'd melt, relax, and could go together anywhere. It didn't come out that way. It came out as if he were reporting, hammering in each word.

You fool, you sat around daydreaming and reading a book. How about planning the conversation? He felt genuine nervousness and fear. On one hand. But his other side said: *Everything's fine. Lead her.*

"Okay," Simsana answered carefully. She caught herself, her ears moving. "Um, are you hungry?"

"No, not at all, thank you," which was true.

Looking around, Simsana just as carefully approached him and sat beside him—not quite close, but rather, almost respectfully. She smoothed her dress hem as she sat, an infinitely careful gesture. Arad watched her attentively, missing nothing, keeping quiet. He'd pictured their meeting as a reunion of lovers after a brief separation: a kiss, gaiety, a couple of giggles from her, playfulness and sparkling eyes. They'd march out of the house briskly, forgetting everything. His condescension.

Instead: two wild beasts who'd noticed each other, not knowing what to expect.

Leaning on her elbow, she rested her palm against her chin-cheek and looked into his eyes. It seemed she even smiled, just a little.

"And look, I was reading the book—it's yours," his voice broke into a rasp. That's how it is when you catch cold: you don't speak, you growl.

"Yes, my favorite," she noticed and took the closed book. "The father of the twins gifted us this. Actually, not us, but to my mentor. That was long ago, four years ago, or three..."

"It's such a good book, Simsana. It's the best book I've ever read in my life."

"Oh, so you probably read right here, look," she smoothed her ear embarrassedly. "Here, there's..."

And she opened exactly to the page where he'd stopped—with the red arrows (the fabric had gotten right between the pages).

Simsana turned back to where the Ashai with the night gaze was.

"Yes, the best book," he took the cup with the now-cold wine, nearly empty.

"She died," Simsana suddenly said, pressing her claw against the page's edge. "After this light-type."

"This disciplara? Why?"

"An accident."

Awkward moments hung in the air.

"And also your mentor gave me wine, there, in the teapot. Shall we drink together? It's warm, hot."

"I..." she looked at him quickly, smoothed her ear again, left, right. "Oh, Arad, do you think..."

He was already pouring into the cup, pushing the book aside.

"...we should?"

"Let's try. This is yours. Will you get me another?"

Instead of answering, Simsana took his cup, squeezed her eyes tightly shut and began drinking. The wine had been weak to him, completely; but apparently it burned her—she suddenly coughed spectacularly—wine spilled from her, rivulets ran down her chin, her neck, drops going lower. Without finishing it all, but a good half, she pulled away from the cup, her whole muzzle covered in wine, looked at it as if bewildered, licked her lips and said:

"Oh my," looking straight at him.

A priestess of a blood cult, blood that looked like wine streaming from her.

Arad couldn't take it anymore. All this demanded action.

First he grabbed her hand with the cup and guided it to the table, and everything happened without surprises, as intended. With his second movement he directed her hands to his shoulders, and this also happened just as he wanted. Then a brief moment, fire, heat, then simply warmth—they kissed for a long time, he didn't want to leave this bliss. And she, surely, was the same—how else could it be. Another pleasure: to look at her during the kiss—she'd have her eyes closed. He squeezed her waist, perhaps too hard—a quiet, pleading moan escaped.

He had to go further, and Arad, with a careful palm behind her ears, simply took and laid her down along the entire bench, not considering anything. Simsana began protesting: her palms shifted from embrace to weak defense.

"Not like this," she pleaded.

He helped her sit up, catching the cup that nearly fell.

"Here it's no good," Simsana said again, swung her paws to the other side of the bench and stood.

"Shall we go? Otherwise mentor will come back soon," he stood too, which proved not so simple and required some maneuvering—his desire was far too obvious.

"She won't come, she'll be gone a long time," Simsana smoothed her ears with closed eyes and adjusted her collar.

Okay, Arad thought. Thinking was becoming difficult for him. So only this one solitary word kept spinning. *Okay*.

Simsana began speaking in a hoarse, hurried voice, still not opening her eyes:

"If we're going, we can go over there," she pointed toward the exit from the house. And then at a stubby wooden staircase leading up, which Arad had earlier assumed led to an attic. "Or we can go the other way. You say," she was already looking at him, holding her palms to her cheeks.

Arad extended his hand to her, she accepted, and he led her there, the other way, and up there was a small door, seemingly to an attic room—he'd seen such before. He wanted to go first (forgetting the mannered rule—lionesses go up first, down last), his paw slipped off the narrow step. Simsana understood that his unfamiliarity with the house would play cruel tricks, and went up first on careful paws. But it wasn't that he was unfamiliar or had missed his step—simply an incredible, nightmarish, nervous fear had begun choking him along with a terrible, unsatisfied, tearing desire—a horrifying combination. He understood he was going somewhere from which one simply doesn't return the same, something must happen there, and either the most important thing awaited him, or complete devastating defeat. And if nothing happened—that would be exactly it.

As if in a dream, he climbed after her, seeing before him the tuft of her tail from under her dress hem.

He gathered courage as he climbed this staircase of a thousand steps (in reality—ten). He wouldn't return from there without victory. He'd die, but he wouldn't return. He'd rape her if necessary. Why 'if'? Necessary. In any case necessary. It's always violence. But now... Now. Here's what. Here: let her give one more sign. He needed to be sure he'd understood everything correctly. That this was it, that this was the Game. Once more. Let me know, just once more. Show that this is 'yes,' not just stupid misunderstanding and naivety. I love you, you'll understand. I don't want to hurt you, you know. I want to, and don't want to simultaneously.

This proper upbringing, how to push it away when it's so needed?

She'll go in there, turn around, and you'll pounce on her, Arad decided. You're not waiting for signs. Immediately. You're the wildest lion of the wildest lions. A barbarian, ravishing an Ashai-Keetrah.

There. That was it. It became easier. More cheerful. It should be fun, tear everything in half!

Simsana, without looking at him, pushed the door—it opened inward with a terrible creak—and he entered, looking at her below the back, into an oblong little room, small, with a single window. Fear was retreating, still there, but it didn't matter. It was becoming predatory, easy. Arad understood what hot blood was, quick blood. He'd already stopped being embarrassed that he was breathing loudly, and he wouldn't have enough air for speaking, bleating, chattering—only, probably, for growling.

The entire room smelled of her. The entire room smelled of Simsana. This was the best room in all worlds.

She approached the low bed—contrary to Naysagrian custom—and stopped a step away from it. Come on. Turn around. Look at me. He was right there, two palms' distance between them.

Without turning, she tried to protect herself with her half-bent left hand, a powerless gesture of surrender:

"Arad, I'm scared..." and from the shade of her voice it was clear she truly was afraid.

"Me too," said someone else instead of him—growling, reckless, hoarse-predatory. He wasn't scared. He was burning up.

"Liar," Simsana suddenly said with a nervous laugh, beginning to untie her belt. It fell to the floor with a dull thud, along with her purse and something else. Without turning, she vigorously loosened the Mistress of Life dress, staring out the window, then began pulling it over her head, ears pressed flat.

Of course. Suddenly Arad realized he had far too much on. Everything was in the way. He'd never undressed so quickly in his life—though there wasn't much: pants, tunic, done. Finishing, he saw that Simsana had crouched to fold her dress on the floor by the bed, with her mentor's amulet on top, which she'd also removed. Either she didn't want to carelessly toss it, or she was waiting for him to approach from behind, not wanting to turn first, not wanting to be first.

For a moment or two he watched this sight: she in a white chemise to the knee, sitting on her haunches, her tail streaming across the floor toward him. He'd seen only this, just this, what could even be called an innocent sight—and was already mesmerized. There was no exposed, accidental thigh, everything modest, because Simsana in general was careful, never teased needlessly—he'd already understood that.

She stood, and was about to remove the chemise too, grasping crosswise at the sides to be left in nothing, as is proper, but no. Arad embraced her from behind and pressed her to him, hard, as he'd always dreamed of doing with so many. She lifted her head, settled against him, all, entirely, along his length—good, right, well done. Her neck free—here, take it, kiss, it's allowed, and here behind the ear too it's allowed. Only her scent, so much of it, and it was pure, nothing extraneous.

The scent was too powerful a thing—it eclipsed everything: mind, sense of space, sense of time, cause and effect, what was allowed and what wasn't. Arad simply buried his nose in Simsana's nape, simply inhaling her essence. So his captive wouldn't think to flee, his left palm pressed the lower part of her belly to himself, his right moved up toward her chest. Not knowing whether it was permitted to press a female's breast to himself, or how to handle this new, still unexplored form, his palm went slightly higher up and captured his captive at the throat. Simsana found herself surrounded. Arad forgot he needed to do something else, continue, and so on—her essence was too strong, he'd completely lost himself, and so he took and bit her, as if one could (must) taste Simsana.

"Can't hold back," she said, either embarrassed or admiring, and for the first time in his life he heard a lioness's voice up close, truly close, when you're embracing her.

He apologetically licked where he'd bitten, patronizingly. Good. Excellent. This was what had been so necessary—her scent. It gave what nothing else in the world could give. His left hand wanted to descend lower, explore what she had there, a lioness, below. This was an absolutely necessary thing, and Arad understood he needed to go around, from below through her thigh, lifting her chemise. He did so, and her thigh so astounded him with its softness and firmness simultaneously, with its fur, that he instantly wanted to continue, pursue the goal, bring the end closer—right now. For this, of course, he should turn her toward himself, then lead her to the bed (or floor—didn't matter), so that... Arad didn't yet know so that what. But something.

He felt how sensitively the lioness listened to his slightest call to turn (all he'd managed was to press on her thigh), how she answered, how she reacted to everything of his, how her entire being attended to him, awaiting the next command. How easily she spun, fulfilling his wish. How she generally understood wordlessly what he wanted to do with her, never once mistaken. You have to try this yourself to understand.

The long kiss was marred by Arad's pondering: how should everything continue? Even in such moments he couldn't stop thinking. He decided: forcefully, to be sure, he moved forward. He realized he'd done everything too roughly, but Simsana managed, even nimbly pushed off against him with her paw to be in the middle of the bed, not at the edge. This dexterity spurred him on even more. Here she probably wanted to perform the trick with the

chemise again and finally remove it, but didn't manage, because Arad pressed her down from above, painfully pressed her shoulders, then her arms, and left no choice but to respond to his kisses, which had transformed from tender to commanding, brooking no objection.

Lying turned out better than standing. Everything became unbearable, to the point of pain. Her neck became wet—entirely—from his kisses.

She tried several times to free her hand, and—finally—succeeded.

"Arad... Arad. Just a moment," she promised.

He watched her without taking his eyes away, leaning on his elbow, impossibly close to her muzzle. She was so flushed-disheveled-beautiful that he barely restrained the urge to interrupt her. She was searching for something by feel behind her on the dresser, serious. Unsuccessfully. Simsana frowned, sighed with dissatisfaction—she had to sit up, he rose too. She searched for something in the drawer of the long dresser, but it wasn't there. This something was evidently very important, because the search continued: flipping onto her stomach, she moved to the edge of the bed and began searching under it, and ultimately it turned out—surely unintentionally—that she presented herself to him tail-first, entirely, and even the modesty of the chemise's fabric couldn't dampen the beauty of this sight.

This couldn't end any other way: he placed his palms near her tail, on both sides, and even through the thin fabric it was such a delightful sensation that he unconsciously, quietly, filthily cursed.

All that remained was to bury his nose under her tail, between her thighs. He knew he wanted to do this.

"Arad, what are you doing?" she asked with frightened laughter, still unaccustomed to the fact that males—it turned out—could do this, that they were very interested in everything back there. No, of course she'd known this, but theoretically. But to know it like this, in practice—that was another matter. Well, now she had to.

"Everything's great."

"Here," she pulled something out and slipped from his grasp.

It turned out to be a small brown bottle with a cork like a wine bottle.

Simsana sat up, tucking the chemise between her legs, and her tail was between them too. She was still, of course, shy around him. And now, it seemed, she could properly examine him for the first time—had seen a lion this close and in such an exposed, primal state for the first time. He noticed how her gaze lingered on his lower abdomen and she quite involuntarily clenched her free palm, swallowing. Then she looked into his eyes, not frightened but serious:

"Remember the rules?" she suddenly asked quietly, looking straight at him, already pulling the cork out with her teeth.

"Yeah," he nodded. He was puzzled by what she was doing and what could be in the bottle, but apparently it was something truly necessary.

Simsana poured onto her left palm something dark yellow, like oil—and indeed, it smelled of olive oil, or something else, but Arad could swear he knew this scent. But—kill him—he couldn't remember from where or why. Carefully lifting her chemise to her lower belly, she slowly, thoroughly applied it to the inside of her thighs, smoothing only with the grain of her fur, top to bottom. Arad couldn't look away, his gaze riveted to what was promised between her legs, but he couldn't make it out—for now only a hint was accessible to him. Besides, her tail, cautiously clamped between her legs, guarded against his greedy gaze.

Then she instantly set the bottle on the dresser, smoothly and slowly stretched out across the bed, still keeping her legs bent and drawn up. Arad saw how serious she was, even focused—her eyes were closed. She extended her legs just as slowly upward, to their full length. Arad was mesmerized by this. Then she bent them slightly at the knee and crossed them.

Arad still wasn't doing anything, though he didn't consider himself worthy of inaction. He saw the lioness's body—it was beautiful, it was captivating. Her exercises, her strange ritual, her preparation—entranced him. Of course, she was preparing for him, all this was intended for him, for his advances. All. Was. For. Him. He'd supposedly prepared, he knew something about the Game, not in detail but in rough outline (though everyone should, damn it, go into those very necessary details!), but now only the simplest words spun around, once said by his friend Krres: "She'll show how she's ready to surrender."

In such complex situations, only the simplest, most effective things are remembered.

It seemed everything was ready. She was ready. She was lying there. Or... Or something else? And here, as Arad would understand later, she helped him a little, as she'd helped-nudged-confirmed-approved all this time before: without opening her eyes, still stretched out, she extended the tip of her tail to him, opening her palm. Here, take it. Play.

The lioness had surrendered; the lion's turn to conquer.

Arad understood everything. He even understood exactly what he should do and exactly how to take her, though before he'd doubted, to the point that from nervousness his desire had begun to drown. Now it burst forth like water breaking through a destroyed dam. The Game became completely clear. His victory in it became obvious, and the path to that victory, previously so unclear, agonizing, tense—became straight.

He grabbed her tail, still passing between her thighs and guarding its mistress and her most secret place. With his other hand pulled her by her legs, easily, without particular ceremony, like property. He entered between her thighs, and it proved far easier than expected. The novelty of the sensation of another's body—not his own, but another's—made him close his eyes. He almost released her tail, but suddenly Simsana wouldn't let him, grabbing his

palm and pulling it upward—pull, don't be afraid, go on, that's how it should be. Arad did it, but barely consciously, without particular force—now he was entirely there, below, now everything was there. Everything built quickly, very quickly, very intensely, very brightly. He already felt how incredibly terrifyingly it would all end, and couldn't even open his eyes, only gripping her crossed legs together tightly with his left hand, claws out, so she wouldn't suddenly think to uncross them.

Everything was very quickly approaching the end. The enormous, long-torturous tension, hunger, scent, the first naked lioness, the first lioness whose tail he'd grabbed (and hadn't released), all the impressions of this best day of his life—made themselves known. In the last few moments he thought to open his eyes so that, in addition to everything, he could examine her without any shame, devour her with his gaze however he wanted—now he had the right. Simsana lay on her back (belly exposed, but the chemise covered her chest, gathered in many folds), her head turned to the left side, toward the near wall where their bed stood. Not only were her eyes closed, she'd also half-covered herself with her palm, as one sometimes does in great shame. She didn't make moans, the kind Arad had, by chance, had the opportunity to accidentally overhear—nothing like that, not even loud breathing.

The end. Now it would be the end. Arad tensed entirely with all a male's strength, straightened, his left hand squeezed her legs-thighs together with all his force (and it clearly hurt her already, his ears heard a sigh of pain, but what did it matter!), his right pulled her tail taut, and he wanted to do something else to her at the last, and Arad simply took and bit her paw (not hard, he managed to restrain himself after all). But in everything else—nothing in the world, not Vaal, not Tiamat, not Naheim, not fear of death—absolutely nothing could restrain him anymore.

What followed he remembered only as one thing: a terrible, darkened release like a mudslide during an eclipse—long, agonizing and so sweet. As if dying for a moment, he fell back and to the side, dropping everything, losing his life, quietly and completely incoherently uttered one terrible curse, knocked his head against some huge dry wreath hanging for some reason on the wall by the bed. The wreath fell. For several moments he sat like that, leaning against the wall, understanding little and watching Simsana without interest, and only because she simply was before his gaze, and not anything else.

She, in genuine astonishment—probably the most open before him yet—half-sitting, examined all of herself, stained utterly and everywhere, from her lower body to her neck, holding her palm as if in a mute gesture of question. *Is this... how it is?*—her wordless questioning of the world. Surely she'd expected it would end with something neat, almost decent, not going beyond the boundaries of her thighs, the base of her tail, between her legs, well fine, maybe her belly too—not this complete defilement. She touched herself at

the neck, chin—his traces were there too. She looked at her fingers, didn't hesitate to try the scent, completely forgetting that he, the master and perpetrator, was also present.

Arad came to a bit, returned gradually to the world. Relaxed, already (still) uninterested in her, but loving, he crept toward her on the bed, sat on her left side, touching her side with his knee. Simsana, having finished examining herself and wiping her palms on the chemise, sat up partway, inhaled very deeply and very strongly, and suddenly struck him with claws across the muzzle.

It was so unexpected that Arad, accustomed to sharp movements and possible strikes like any male, didn't even think to defend himself.

"Bastard," Simsana said in a completely indescribable tone, not loudly—her teeth flashed in a bared smile, ears pressed flat. Closest to how it seemed was as if she, after long, stubborn reflection, had understood something extraordinarily important.

Stunned, Arad froze.

Suddenly Simsana pressed both palms to her mouth and nose, and only her frightened, regretful eyes shone. Then she quickly smoothed his cheek:

"Forgive, forgive me Arad... I'm sorry, I... I just wanted to so badly, I always wanted to... I didn't mean to, it wasn't hard, I retracted my claws, almost. There's nothing, nothing there," she stroked and rubbed the place of the strike. "I didn't mean to, I wanted to so badly... Okay? You're not offended? Not angry?"

"Not bad," he took her gentle, apologetic palm and kissed it. He felt his own distinct, strong scent on Simsana's palm. "What, is that how it's supposed to be, with Ashai?"

"No. That's just me," she finally decided to stop covering herself with her palm. "That's my... thing..."

"If you want, you can do it again."

"No, no. Now it's already... not right."

Looking around once more, Simsana gathered her tail and lowered her paws to the floor. Arad suddenly felt the Game should end with a tender wave, and stopped her, taking her by the shoulder. The kiss was completely different: not feverish, not hot, not greedy and nervous like before, but extraordinarily soft, tender. There wasn't the slightest tension or falseness in it. He ran his hand along her belly, side, shoulder, neck, embraced her behind the ear.

"But I'm all... Arad... You made such a mess of me. I need to... Wash..." she said, listening to how he licked her cheek and under her ear, barely touching.

"Don't go. Don't go anywhere. I love you."

She thought, listened, once closed her eyes, baring her fangs.

"Let me at least change my chemise," she asked.

"Go ahead," he stopped tormenting her and lay down.

Simsana stood, went somewhere behind the headboard. The sound of clothing dropped to the floor, rustling. He didn't look, though he was curious. Still, she'd decided to hide there to change—he should respect that, he thought, not pursue her everywhere with his gaze. Not hungry anymore.

"Are you thirsty?" she asked from somewhere behind.

"Very much so," he answered, gazing happily at the ceiling. *And hungry too*, he thought.

She appeared before him in another, exactly identical chemise, and already wearing her mentor's amulet. She was turning before the enormous mirror that stood directly opposite the bed. And here's what: it started at the floor and ended above a good lion's height.

Strange mirror, in a frame, just standing on the floor, Arad thought. *Kind of old. And a strange place for it.*

"How are you?" Simsana suddenly asked, not looking at him but brushing her fur with a small groombrush and examining the tip of her tail.

"Couldn't be better," Arad answered honestly.

He'd wanted to ask in return how she was herself. But Simsana, tossing the brush onto a shelf, had already left the room, still adjusting something near her ear with the large iron ring, and Arad was left alone.

"That's how it's done," he said quietly. He looked around. There was the door, where Simsana had gone. Great ancestors, what for—she was better than he'd dreamed of for his first lioness. As the young lions of his circle say, friends, acquaintances: it's good to have a lionessy, a fem-friend, a companion, a maassi. Well, if she's local, your own, from your blood-pride, then—a naysa, a naysagrian. Um, well fine, also: a maneless one, a toy, a plaything, a tail-lifter, or just a tail, or a five-tail, a tousle-tail, a tie-tail. And also: an under-tail. And also... okay, that's indecent enough already—you need to think about them well and decently: after all they're mothers, they're wives, they bring life into the world, life and beauty, and here you are, such a boor and a snob...

What else did she have here? Well, the mirror—there it was on the left, a dresser stood near it, on top of it for some reason were nothing but plates and a pitcher. On the right, on the wall by the bed—three wreaths of various sizes, just hanging there. Further, in the corner—dry branches, grasses. Behind him—another dresser with about four brushes, a box, some kind of black ribbon (thick), a basket—filled with cotton. And a couple more long ribbons and fabrics, various kinds. Something very much like a Chalice of Vaal stood by the windowsill, only upside down.

"That's how it's done," Arad said again, scratching behind his ear. His first fem-friend: Ashai-Keetrah, disciple of a Mistress of Life, a beauty, so graceful (very, seriously). She seemed to be from the south—he should ask,

he'd never even once asked what pride she was from. Pleased to meet you. How to understand all this? Damn, they might ask questions at home...

And yes, he'd heard from Atar that he'd sought Djulna's favor and surrender to the Game for three or four moons. Pffff. Look how it's done—didn't even manage a proper first date. Take that, losers. He adjusted his pillow, crossed one leg over the other and struck the wall. Bam. Got it, how it's done? This was all him: mind, strength, courage. And body—from the spear, from the Circle, from everything. True male. Handsome.

He remembered something, looked by the bed, then under it. Pulled out the small brown bottle. When had she managed to shove it so far under the bed, and cork it too? He opened the cork, sniffed—definitely a familiar scent.

And then Simsana entered through that terribly creaky door:

"Sorry, there's only water, not very cold," she closed the door nimbly and amusingly with her paw.

"Just what I need," he closed the bottle and set it on his belly, in plain sight. "Listen, I'll oil your door later, it creaks terribly."

"With this?" she sat beside him, paws on the floor. Handed him a large cup, kept a smaller one for herself.

"That's olive oil, right?" he pointed a claw at the bottle. "That won't work."

"Yes, oil. Oil and something else."

"Familiar scent," he took a sip of water.

"What, you don't know what it is?" Simsana smirked slyly.

"Well... olive oil with something else," he swished his tail indifferently.

Simsana looked at him with what seemed like mild surprise. She held something right under his nose—he recoiled, she smiled as if to say, don't be afraid. It turned out to be dried pork.

"It's oleamor. Light. Also called—love oil. Ugh, I hate when they call it that," Simsana sat entirely turned toward him, fist at her chin, legs crossed, swinging the free one in the air. Her tail ran along his side, ending near his hand. He stroked it very carefully. She didn't seem to notice. Seemed.

"Ah, so that's it. I was thinking..." he accepted more dried meat from her. "Thanks. I heard it's expensive."

"Not really. We have tons of it, Arad, a whole barrel."

"Wow, why so much?" he said with a laugh, chewing.

"What..." she said, surprised, gesturing with her cup. "My mentor and I make it. Lionesses come and buy it later, sometimes here, but more often we give it to a trader at the market, for a share."

"Oh, so you have a side business?"

"Vaal, Arad, making oleamor is an ancient Ashai-Keetrah craft," she made big eyes as if to say, come on. And she took his empty cup, already without water.

"Sorry, I didn't know. You have to understand, we've never had Ashai in our house," he put his hands behind his head and settled more comfortably. "See, you and your mentor are the first I've even talked to. By the way, your mentor has a lo—"

"I sometimes forget you're a judge's son," she shook her head, turning the cup in her hands. "Your dad is in that, what's it called, the Doctrine. That's how it's prescribed."

"That's how it's prescribed," Arad repeated. "Right..."

Moments of silence passed. Simsana gave him more pork—he saw it was the last piece and didn't open his mouth. You eat it. But no such luck: she simply stuffed it in like he was a cub. He had to chew.

Arad watched her thoughtful, in profile (she was looking straight ahead, thinking). She was strangely beautiful. And right now she looked quite grown-up. He gazed at the curve of her back, hidden by light white fabric, its round, good continuation below. Everything about her was so right, and even what was wrong—was still right. What an excellent build she had. Thin, yes, but it suited her so well. He couldn't even have imagined a couple moons ago that Gallen had such an extraordinary lioness. Surely he'd encountered her somewhere by chance, and even surely his eyes had met her gray ones, but he hadn't noticed or remembered. She always walked the street in that simple, modest dress in which it was impossible to even approximately understand the beauty of her figure. It seemed he'd never seen her in anything else. He began thinking a strange thought, though he'd always had enough audacity and self-satisfaction: I don't deserve this. Why me? I don't deserve it. No, I do! She's too... good for me. Come on. No, I'm serious. Stop it. You're not of the lowest blood either. Drop it!

"Probably if your father found out that you and I... are spending time together, he'd probably be angry..."

"No, why would he. I already told you."

Simsana looked at him, then took the oleamor bottle from his stomach and hid it back under the bed.

If she kept it under the bed, does that mean she expected we'd come here? he suddenly thought. But aloud he said:

"Sit closer, please. I'll show you something."

She looked out the window.

"It's getting dark already. My mentor will come soon after all, and I still need to wash..."

Then at him.

"I'll just show you quickly, that's all."

Paws tucked under her, she sat before him, guided by his hands embracing her shoulders, tail beside her. She found herself in his embrace—she in front, he behind, on the bed, and ahead—the full-length mirror. The two of them in it.

Arad, touching his nose to her shoulder and feeling desire seriously awakening in him to repeat everything, said:

"Look, see," he pointed at the mirror.

"Yes."

"We're both in it."

"Yes," she said strangely and sadly.

"Interesting mirror you have. Right here, by the bed. You know, you lie down and see yourself in it. Even sleep—and see yourself in it again."

She flinched noticeably.

Why I'm telling her those creepy things, Arad thought reproachfully.

He clasped his palms with hers, felt her claws. He guided her hands upward, to her shoulders, crosswise—embraced her so. He licked her neck, nape, behind her ear. Yes, there it is, all clear, all understood—sometimes rumors don't lie after all, right here.

"Arad... what are you doing..." he felt with his body how she was melting entirely against him, simply softening all over, simply flowing over him. "We can't... it won't stop... She's waiting," she pressed her wide-spread palm to her muzzle, eyes closed, nape resting on his shoulder. "I mean, she'll come soon..."

"You're the most beautiful lioness."

That scent. Could there ever be enough of it?

"You're sweet-talking me."

He turned her head, very lightly, very gently, by the chin.

"You're the most beautiful Ashai."

"Not true," she resisted with her last strength, but found herself kissed. "Tormentor. You're lying me..."

He released her, both looked in the mirror again, in accord. Him—well, what about him—an ordinary young lion, happy and self-satisfied, an impudent victor taking advantage of everything possible, just like everyone around, couldn't even look at himself anymore, made him sick. But her—what sparkling eyes she had, fiery, Vaal's fire, all awakened by him, stirred up, entirely gripped by him, wet from his kisses, and even once bitten on the paw, and...

"Much blood, more blood. Much blood. More blood," she suddenly said, separately, clearly.

Whatever it was, it was both curious and pleasant—Arad didn't object.

"I forgot to say it when everything finished. Sorry, it's my first time."

For a moment he puzzled over what she was talking about, then understood. Yes, of course, he knew everything: Suung lionesses say certain words to Suung lions afterward—that's the custom, that's proper, it's part of suung-mara. True, he'd thought it was only after actual intercourse, not in the Game. Turns out, that's how it is. They say it in the Game too. Well, she'd

know better. Lions stay silent—it's the lionesses who must speak afterward. She'd know better.

And he almost admitted: *It's my first time too.* But of course, he didn't admit it. Instead:

"Oh well, have to repeat everything all over again."

"You brazen thing!" she said, looking at him, recoiling slightly, eyes narrowed—oh so fierce. And struck him across the muzzle again, not to say it really hurt, but noticeably.

Arad understood she had something with this, something connected, something secret—just like him, how he'd always wanted to bury himself behind a lioness, between her thighs. She found something in this love rebellion, this female resistance. Provocation. Yes, she was provoking him.

Simsana no longer made excuses, didn't apologize, just looked eye to eye: what would he say, how would he react?

He simply scratched himself and said:

"Wanna see real brazenness?"

Ha, as if. Like she'd answer that. She just watched.

Something came to Arad's mind, one rather vulgar thing, but he still didn't dare. For later. As it was, today's conquests already exceeded all imaginable and unimaginable expectations. What a day! What a day...

He pulled back, smiling.

"Have it your way."

"Arad, and get dressed," she flared up. "You're embarrassing me."

"Better you undress, and we'll be together."

"See, nai, I told you. Brazen. You, you..." she protested very convincingly. "Besides, I tried today, but you didn't let me—you pounced on me. So it's not my fault. I'll stay like this."

"It's simple: next time I'll take everything off myself. And I'll look at all of you myself," he closed his eyes with pleasure.

She stood, narrowed her eyes again, poked him in the nose with her finger:

"Ha! We'll see about that," she walked to the door. Turned around: "Maybe you won't earn it."

She walked around again, put on her mentor's amulet—now she wasn't hiding it anymore. She looked at herself with it in the mirror, crossed her arms, turned slightly sideways, rose up on the tips of her paws, on the very claws practically. She stood like that, thought something to herself, took off the amulet and put it back.

"Let's go, it's dark already."

Sensible. Arad stood—there was a delay with dressing and all that, he couldn't find everything on the floor that he'd left there. Finally dressed, they left the room. It was quite dark already, so she warned:

"Careful, the stairs are steep here."

They went down to the main room. Simsana lit a lamp, five candles. She brought more water while he slowly walked around the notorious huge bed in the center of the room, examining it.

"Listen, why is the bed in the middle?"

"The room is big, we need more beds, so there it stands. And it's kind of a tradition. Here, drink."

"Thanks."

They looked at each other with one eye while drinking, and suddenly began snorting with laughter, like very young cubs.

"Don't make me laugh!"

"I'm not doing anything, Simsi," he wiped his eyes, and simultaneously winked at her.

"Yeah, right, he's not doing anything..." she took the cups and put her hands behind her back. She turned slightly in place, her tail hit the bed.

"I won't go to the door, okay? Can you see yourself out?" she began. "I need to clean up, wash, everything. It'll take a while... My mentor..."

"No problem. So I'll come by tomorrow?" he embraced her around the waist.

"Tomorrow?" she was even surprised, placing her palm on his shoulder, as in a dance.

"The fair is tomorrow. Let's go. Please. We'll just walk around together."

"I hope my mentor will let me go. She might not," she thought seriously. "Otherwise I'm doing nothing for two days straight—that doesn't happen."

"I'll convince her myself," he said confidently.

"Oh, you don't know her," Simsana licked her lips.

"You don't know me."

He pressed her to himself, she wrapped her arms around his neck. She shook him a couple times while holding him like that—or rather, tried to shake him. Try shaking him with a lioness's arms. A strange, pleasant gesture—as if Simsana was trying to verify Arad's presence.

They kissed, very carefully, as if fearing for each other that they'd burn.

"Next time... don't bite my paw so hard, okay?" she said, eyes still closed. "Or bite, just... not so hard."

How wonderfully good it was to hear the most important part: 'Next Time.' Touching her ear with the ring, playing with it slightly, he answered:

"All right. Bye, Simsana."

"Goodbye, Arad. See you. Go carefully."

He smirked: his journey should not take long. He went into the corridor, put on his knemids, looked back into her room—she was still standing there, waiting.

"You'll get out yourself, open it?"

"No worries. I'm the best door-opener in the world."

"May Vaal be with you, strong Suung," she suddenly said hurriedly.

Noticing clear confusion in his expression, she hastened to add:

"That's how it should be, if you're leaving an Ashai's house. Or if an Ashai leaves your house. According to the Codex."

"What am I supposed to answer?" Arad scratched his nose, looking from under his brow.

He did that sometimes. Still waiting for his mane to grow so it would cover his eyes, and then he'd look 'from under his mane,' as they say. He'd heard lionesses liked that.

It seemed the question caught her off guard.

"Um... 'Thank you,' or 'bye,' 'goodbye.' Whatever."

"Thank you, Simsi, best lioness in the world."

And, pressing his ears flat so as not to hear any possible answer, possible protest, possible question, possible thanks, and generally all possibilities—he resolutely opened the house door into the cold evening air and the world of evening sounds, and closed it firmly.

Ahead—a fence, ivy already climbing powerlessly on it, having nowhere else to go. To the right—a path, a gate, then right again and he could depart home. To the left—a path, a row of pines, then a field. He'd come through there, which had been foolish since they'd notice anyway. Now there was even less point. But from some sense of consistency he decided to leave by the field side. There was basically no difference, in the end.

And then he noticed someone, on the left—right on the wide-rough bench with huge wooden boards, by the house wall. Someone was sitting there. This was impossible to see if you left the house. Impossible if you went right from the house. Only if you went left, glancing at the northern side of the house.

Vaalu-Miresli. She was asleep. Arad approached, looked. For a moment he thought something was wrong with her. Legs crossed, arms crossed, covered with a large cloak as females usually do when it's chilly; she slept, leaning against the wooden corner of the house.

"Vaalu-Miresli?" he addressed her for some reason in a loud whisper, as if afraid to wake something very powerful and ancient.

"Ah, it's you, Arad," she woke instantly, as if she hadn't been sleeping at all. "Well, did you go where you wanted?" she rubbed her eyes.

"To be honest," Arad sat beside her, "we didn't really go anywhere. Vaalu-Miresli didn't get cold?"

"In masterina, dress like this," she slapped her thighs, "good luck freezing. No, I slept fine until you woke me. Who could have thought you'd decide to go through the field instead of like everyone else—to the road," she scratched her ear artlessly.

"Forgive me. I worried about the Excellent one."

"Come on, really? But you're an anvaalist," she looked at him.

"No, what anvaalist am I," he spread his hands, pressing his ears slightly. "My father is in the Doctrine, and I'm just a Suung. Why would the Excellent one think that about me? Is this a joke?" he laughed.

The laugh sounded extremely lonely in the evening.

"Of course I was joking," Miresli said, dead serious. "It's such a stupid Ashai-Keetrah joke."

"Ahhh..." he drew out.

"Well then," Miresli rubbed her nose, "did you successfully not go anywhere?"

He decided to be as honest, as honest as possible.

"Yes. Very."

"You won?" she pushed him with her palm.

"Yes," Arad agreed briefly. Then decided to brag: "Victory, all over her. From paws to ears," he gestured with his hand. "Simsana was surprised how much."

Vaalu-Miresli looked around, as if taken aback or making sure no one was around.

"Tail-groper. Braggart," she said without looking at him. "Of course she was surprised—before this, little boars like you didn't bother her," she crossed her arms and looked ahead.

"Is tail-groper good or bad?"

"It's odd that you're not asking me about being a braggart and a little boar."

"Bragging isn't so bad. And boars are tasty."

"I'd like to say it's bad, but you know what: either a tail-groper or a nothing. Understood, tousle-tail?"

"Understood, Grand-Excellent one," he nodded respectfully.

"Yes, don't give you a tail to bite. You're even ironic, though you should be frightened. You should have gone to the right anyway, not to the left—what's wrong with you?"

"And miss seeing the Excellent Vaalu-Miresli?"

"Peacefully sleeping under her own house."

"I was worried. I didn't want to disturb Vaalu-Miresli, mentor to the best Ashai-Keetrah in the world—Vaalu-Simsana."

"Should I pass that along to her?" she stood.

"No need, I already told her she's the best lioness in the world."

"Liar, flatterer," she brushed off her dress, looked around. Very simple manners.

"Yes, indeed. But about Vaalu-Simsana—it's all true. I'm very grateful to the Radiant one for her—she's the best thing that's happened in my life in fifteen years."

"Isn't that too early to make such enormous conclusions?" she beckoned him with a finger—let's go.

He stood up, followed her. They headed, surprisingly, into the field, though there was nothing there.

"Fifteen years to make conclusions? Is that too short?"

"No, you've known her only a couple moons, and today you came for your first date. On which you took everything you wanted," for some reason she was accusing him of this.

"Second date. Only let Vaalu-Miresli not blame her—it was easier for her to give everything than to resist."

"Ah, so you forced her?" she perked up, ears pricking forward.

"Sure thing. I'm a little boar. I pounced on her when she was drinking wine from the teapot."

"Maybe you even resorted to violence?" She pressed her palms to her cheeks.

"Bit her paw. To blood, I think."

Miserly frowned, grunted several times, then pushed him again with her palm on the shoulder:

"Arad, confess—who taught you to talk to lionesses? Not your father, I won't believe it."

"No, not him. Mama's cousin. Probably. While I have the chance, I'd like to know: what does the Radiant Vaalu-Miresli like?"

They came out onto a lonely path in the field. Around them—no one. Only houses in the distance.

"What do I love? Oh, many things. I love when my back doesn't hurt. I love when you wake up early in the morning and outside the window—rain, very heavy, and you know you can still sleep more. I love liver," she nodded, making elaborate circular gestures with her left hand while her right supported her elbow. "Many years ago a housemate at the disciplarium hated me for it—couldn't stand the smell. And I couldn't live without it. In the end I lost my friend and got another one. She hated me too, but we somehow got along."

"And what else?" Arad lightly kicked a pebble. "None of that really works. And I need to gift the Excellent one something so she'll let Vaalu-Simsana go to the fair tomorrow," and he looked at her sideways. "I don't like liver either."

She shook her head.

"Show you a sheep and you'll devour the whole flock. Tomorrow there are errands—no, can't. No Simsana for you."

"We'll really just walk around, we won't be long, I promise," he placed his hand on his chest. "Just to the fair. You see, Radiant one, today I came by like this..."

"Like 'this'? Got the moon-count wrong?"

"No," he clapped palm to palm, "couldn't hold out. I mean: wanted to see her."

"I mean: not just see her," she looked toward the house. "We'll see. You remember hamanu Ulra? If tomorrow they don't come from her saying contractions started, then... I'll think about it."

"Thank you, Excellent Vaalu-Miresli. So what gifts are appropriate for Ashai-Keetrah?" he asked craftily.

"Two thousand imperials in gold—not bad for a start. A new beautiful plasis, I love everything green, in green motif. Silver pendants, if you want—a circlet, just don't choose it yourself. A Chalice of Vaal with engraving. Tail rings. Oh yes, I've long wanted a bath instead of a barrel in the bathing room. Actually, next to it."

Arad pretended to think, to calculate. Crickets sang. She looked at him seriously, then smiled, shaking her head.

"Would the Excellent one tell me where ones like me get loans?"

"Scoundrels like you? Fine, listen here—this is what I'll ask you then, since you so want to win me over. First, give something not to me, but to Simsana."

"So," he perked up, all attention. "And what does she like?"

"Not what, but who: you know, she's like all of us—lionesses love lions. Just be the very best first romantic interest... wait, no, let's be sincere—first love. Be like, well, just wow. So everyone dies of envy, me included."

"That's... Can we go back to the option with the head circlet or tail rings?"

"I hope that was a joke?" Vaalu-Miresli displayed truly devastating indignation. How her ears moved, her gaze bore down, the line of her mouth curved in contempt, baring fangs.

Wow, Arad thought. That's an expression.

"Of course I was joking. It's such a stupid joke, among us... um... what is it, grope-tailers," he smiled guiltily and jumped back a step just in case.

"Tail-groppers, Vaal help me."

"My apologies. I'll note that the Fiery one has quite our accent, but sometimes these words..." he tried to steer the conversation away.

"Yaamri. I'm Yaamrian," she spun in place, hinting at the famous Yaamrian dance.

"Ah, courage of the Empire, passion of the Empire," he supported the topic change.

Vaalu-Miresli laughed. *Eh, you won't charm this one*, Arad thought.

"I'll be open with you, Arad, as an advance: I'll have a serious request for you, but later."

"Later—when? Why not now?"

"I need to see you better first."

Her gait grew smoother, her gestures more expressive, her body language richer. Arad was beginning to feel slightly lost. A true illusion—that in the middle of the night you're walking somewhere with some high-born lioness

who by misunderstanding or tragedy found herself clothed in this gloomy woolen dress.

"The Reverend should..."

"Arad, I beg you, not the pre-address 'Reverend'... I've hated it since I was a stalla."

"Oh. I didn't mean to," he pressed his ears flat, apologizing.

"All right, continue."

"Vaalu-Miresli needs to trust me before making this request?"

"Yes."

"I see. Then... So the Excellent one knows more about me and can decide, I must confess: two Ashai-Keetrah have already caught me in a very bad thing."

Miresli pricked her ears forward.

"What thing?"

He looked at her without answering.

"Arad, I can't read minds. I can see moods—that's different. Empathy doesn't work like that. Almost..."

He twisted his family ring.

"I'm an anvaalist," he stopped.

"So... continue... Or is that all?" she spread her hands.

"That's all for now."

"How terrible," she invited him to walk on. "And who caught you?"

"One disciplara, Vaalu-Arassi, the day before yesterday—she was passing through Gallen. And the Mistress of Life Vaalu-Miresli, today."

"What a streak you're having in life: nothing special, and then—flocks of Ashai all around," she said indignantly.

"True. Exactly," Arad agreed readily, and even thought about it.

"I think not just Vaalu-Arassi and I caught you—there were others. But as you see, you're alive and well. Who cares."

"And the Chamber? And the Defence of the Faith?" he asked carefully.

"That's the Empire's business. Ashai don't proselytize. It's inconsequential to me, Arad, don't worry about it. I thought Simsana had caught you," she laughed.

"And what happens if she finds out?"

"I don't know," she shrugged. "Try telling her."

"I don't want to cause her pain or offend her. She'll think I'm a bad Suung."

"You're like a cat chewing thorns. You know anvaalism is very bad, you said so yourself, and yet you keep chewing. She'll find out, sooner or later. Or pretend to be an ordinary, normal Suung—what's it to you."

"I somehow didn't even think about what would happen if she found out..."

"You fell in love with a young priestess of Vaal while not believing in Vaal. How romantic, Vaal help me," she even sighed happily.

Arad suddenly grew frightened. Carelessness. Such recklessness.

"Forgive me, Vaalu-Miresli. I talked too much. Dizzy head from success, overconfidence..." he pressed his ears very guiltily, hung his head. "And my father, he doesn't know about this at all—he's just in the Doctrine. But he respects the ancestral faith of the Suungs like no one else. No one knows about me. I just read too many books."

"Oh, absolutely, I'm completely certain of that. Of course your father is just in the Doctrine. Vaal sees that I know this."

"I'm honest here," he tried.

"Sure. I know that. Only you're an apple that rolled away from the tree. A runaway piglet."

"Why then did the Radiant one allow me to meet with Vaalu-Simsana?"

"She chose you," she shrugged, explaining something completely obvious. "She liked you. An Ashai must know how to choose—it's part of her training."

"And so, does she know how?" Arad was very interested.

"We'll see."

"Her relationships with lions, in general, personal relationships—are those also part of Ashai-Keetrah training?"

"Absolutely. Of course. Very much so."

"So that's what this is all about? The time came for her to learn... to meet with a lion... okay, not like that... to play the Game? And so she found someone suitable?"

"That's so vulgar, Arad, that I'll just chalk it up to your youth. Of course it doesn't work like that," she seemed serious in her reproach.

"I apologize. I still don't know how it all works."

"Don't apologize, stop. Don't make excuses," she said nervously, either in feigned irritation or genuine. "You're making it worse."

He noticed something. With Ashai-Keetrah it was impossible to determine which emotions were genuine and which weren't. With ordinary lionkind it was always possible to somehow measure it, determine it—his internal compass worked somehow. Here it was just spinning wildly.

"All right. I said it as best I could."

"That's better," she tousled his mane.

"Just here's the thing, Excellent one, and I'm really asking, sincerely. Especially since everything happened so quickly... And the oleamor under the bed."

"And the oleamor under the bed! Arad, what do they call the last warning in wrestling when you break the rules?"

"Cock," he said, disconcerted.

"Really?" she was surprised, but then licked her lips and continued. "Well, here's a big cock for you. Look at him! Surrender quickly—you're unhappy. Lead him around by the nose too long—you're unhappy."

"Understood."

"So look: lionesses don't seek anyone out. They're found. We always try to be found, but you do the finding. Then we look, and it's like: not that one, not that one, ugh no, not that one, hmm, this one... Oh, this one might work. There, and you simply pleased her. You approached her, you met somewhere, you interested her. She responded. Those are the rules. You proved interesting to her, and she decided to let you move things forward. Then, when you've already snatched her up and won't leave her in peace, she agrees to the Game to satisfy your mania."

I didn't snatch her, it wasn't like that at all, Arad thought. Everything was even calm. And I didn't press her against walls like Djulna. By the way, I should try that...

"Mania? Why mania. Sounds kind of odd."

"Of course it's an obsession," Vaalu-Miresli said confidently. "Mania, thirst, hot blood at your age. Haven't you heard about this?"

"I've read about this."

"Joker. Well, so you don't overheat from your blood and do stupid things, she agrees to play. Just look at yourself—how do you feel? Good, confident, spirited?"

"Excellent," Arad agreed completely.

"See. Is there a difference between 'before' and 'after'?"

"An absolute chasm," he agreed again.

"See. Everything is done for you," she said reproachfully, and Arad suddenly thought it wasn't reproach but perhaps something else. "Suung lionesses make this concession to you out of love, so you become better. And you must become better. You must."

"And what about female part? Don't lionesses enjoy playing? Is it like milking a cow: necessary, useful, boring?"

"You know, I thought I'd heard everything—until this moment. You're a truly interesting young lion. And your questions are, mmm, interesting. Milking a cow... Don't worry, it's good and interesting for us too. But not like for you—the interest isn't the same quality, not the same quantity, and in general—don't even compare, we're too different. We feel differently, our sensuality is different. Everything's different."

"And what's it like?" Arad asked with curiosity, not missing the opportunity. "So what should one do so it's good for you?"

"Love us. And don't be shy about showing your love. Mother-Ahlia whips shy lions when they finally die after their boring lives. Do everything with her you deem necessary—not forgetting the rules. She'll feel your love, and that's exactly what she likes—feeling your desire. Don't think too much

about her, don't be too mannered, lead—we're not the delicate flowers you think. You know, if a lioness likes a lion, she likes giving what he wants. But I'd be deceiving you if I didn't say more. Lionesses will deceive you many times in your life, and many times this deception will be for good, not evil, so know that we need your thirst too. You need us, but we need you too. That's the secret."

"Not a tricky secret, but thank you."

"What, you want trickier advice?" she was very surprised. "These are a bit boring for you?"

"I really want it, Radiant Vaalu-Miresli. Will there be more?"

"Advice for the Game or for relatio—"

"The Game," Arad shot back instantly.

"Oh, Vaal. Lick behind her ears. Just a lot and for a long time, understand? Not just a little to check the box, but work at it," she tugged his ear. "When purring moans start coming from her, then you can consider it successful."

"Clear."

"Excellent," Miresli looked around, then looked at the sky. "And then go there."

"Where 'there'?" he also looked up.

"Under her tail, Arad. Under her tail. From behind, from in front—however you like."

He thought about it.

"You can't go under the tail in the Game! That's comple—"

"Not with this thing of yours," and she touched it precisely, unerringly, and Arad was genuinely surprised by such dexterity, "but with this," she scratched his nose. "Go there to lick, understand?"

"Eh..." he probably looked stupid.

"No fingers, hands, claws, tails, anything else," she said very insistently, "and listen to what I'm saying, because I'm saying it once. Only stick your muzzle there," she tugged at his muzzle. "It's good for you and good for her."

"For me? It's good for me?"

"A lioness's scent is good for lions, especially at your age. You'll be stronger, you'll grow properly. You'll even get smarter."

"I already understood it's somehow special," Arad said seriously. "I'd eat it or buy it in a shop."

"Well then, right there—it's completely special. There you can buy and eat your fill."

"And she'll let me?" Arad asked suspiciously. Risky proposition.

"Go there, I said. Do it," Vaalu-Miresli ordered. "Are you a lion or what?"

"And if she says 'don't'? I tried with my hand..."

"What did I tell you: don't go with your hand!" Miresli despaired. "Forget about hands. Don't go there with hands, paws, tails, nothing except your clean muzzle."

"But she might still protest."

"And that'll be in two cases, if she's already lain down with you: either she's shy, or she needs to wash. In the first case, ignore it—only you can break the ice, she can't. If there's absolutely no way, then wait and try next time—some have such a, you know, thing in their head," she tapped between her ears. "In the second—go wash together, only for blood of ancestors' sake, don't tell her 'go wash yourself,' you'll just destroy her with that. If washing isn't possible, either postpone everything to better times, or go for it. You'll figure it out, but better go for it. We smack impudent ones on the muzzle, but we sit beside them."

"All right," Arad cautiously allowed, trying to determine the sequence of actions, make a plan. "I went there. What do I do?"

"Ever licked ice in the Season of Waters?"

"Yeah."

"There. That's all you do. Don't bite, don't gnaw, nothing at all—just ice between her legs, like in that saying about northern females. The lighter, the better. Repeat."

"The lighter, the better. And she'll like it?" he asked with eager hope.

"Well, try it and see. There, now you know more than almost all the lions in Gallen. There's your trickier advice."

"Thank you, Vaalu-Miresli. I think all this is very useful."

"You bet."

"And this is allowed by the Game's rules, right?"

She looked at him, smirked.

"Do you need it inscribed in Ancestral Law: 'And it shall be permitted unto a young Suung to bestow licks upon a young Suunga...?'"

"Got it. Thank you," Arad hurried.

"You're welcome."

She pointed with her finger—let's go back to the house. She touched his nose—checking if it was frozen, just as his mother had done many times.

"She acts like a lioness, you act like a lion—everyone gets pleasure. That's the game. And never discuss this with her. Ever."

"What exactly?"

"The rules of the game between sexes. Just be yourself, she'll be herself. You'll play your roles, it's a game, but sincerity, love, trust are born in it. Less chatter, more signs. She'll communicate with you on one level with chatter, and on another—with signs, and those are more important. Don't worry, they're attuned to you, you'll understand them. We love attention very much—pay attention to her."

I thought Ashai would be convincing me of the faith's truth. And here—lick ice under her tail. Well then. They're fun.

"Is the Radiant Vaalu-Miresli preparing me to be the best first love after all?"

"How perceptive you are."

"Thank you for the advice," he placed his palm on his chest, half-joking, half-serious.

"My service," most likely Miresli wasn't joking.

"Service? How is this connected to serving Vaal?"

"Ashai-Keetrah are responsible for helping Suungs continue the race, Arad. Among other things, we answer questions like: 'What should you do with a lioness during the Game to squeeze purring moans from her?'"

"Seriously?"

She only smirked and waved him off.

"I didn't know. I thought Ashai just serve Vaal—like, lighting fire, well, verifying contracts, caring in hospitals..."

"Serving Vaal is serving Suungs. That's it, you've worn me out. Go sleep already—though you won't fall asleep, your day today was like a year for some."

"That's true. Good night, Excellent Vaalu-Miresli."

"Good night, Arad. Listen, don't blather needlessly about what we talked about, okay? Or I'll be embarrassed, my ears will press flat, I'll have nowhere to hide, won't be able to show my muzzle on the street."

"It'll all burn with me on the tophet," he drew his hand across his neck.

Bloody Timing

Arad didn't even remember how he got home through what was basically night now.

Their dhaari servant Sedesi came out (her full name was so long it wouldn't fit in a single line even in small script)—an always-ailing lioness of waning vigor, large and very dark gray.

"Master Arad, late today."

"Promised to stop by a friend's, errands," he gave her his knemids and went to wash his paws. "Hard day."

"Oh, oh," Sedesi agreed, "oh. Will Master Arad eat?"

Arad thought, looking at the small Kafnian palm plant in the entrance hall that his mother had gotten from someone for some indecent sum of money, and his father had grumbled about it.

"I will, a lot."

"Oh, that's good. Everyone dined without master, but there's much of everything. Should I set for Arad in the dining room?"

"No, I'll go to the kitchen, everything in the kitchen, to be quick."

"Quick, that's good, quick."

As soon as they entered the kitchen, his mother came in too, in a house dress, with ledgers and a lamp.

"Sedesi, you go to sleep, I'll serve him myself."

"Yes, mistress, good night, Arad."

"Good night," he sat at the kitchen table, taking a basin off the chair.

Mother set down the ledgers and struggled with the lamp, having taken it down from the ceiling. Arad lit a lamp on the table for himself too.

"I can't manage all this money-counting", she grumbled. "Should hire an accountant, maybe... You said you'd slaughter the pig. That's why I didn't hire the blackpaw today."

"Did I? I forgot, mama. Darzai could slaughter it."

"He's still small. And he wasn't around until evening either, barely crawled in for dinner. Everyone scatters, then try feeding you all," she fumed.

"He's not small, he's twelve already," Arad said mockingly.

"When his mane starts growing, then he can slaughter. You're rather late too."

"I was busy," he said quickly.

"And what, busy with what, where were you?"

"Oh, you know... First I stopped by Atar's—he wasn't there, actually. Then the master advised me to go see a house under construction. Met an acquaintance from the gymnasium in the center. Then stopped by one more place. That kind of day."

"Why aren't you going to the master for lessons?" Aevsuga asked.

"He gave me about seven days off. And we have a plan to go to Moor, ride the firrans."

"Yes, right. Just not on Tsayka. She's sick," Mother sighed.

"What's wrong with her?"

"Don't know. A healer should come look. I've been telling papa for a long time we need two horses, not one. Nai, we won't go broke," Mama waved the spoon. "And that pig is still squealing there, not slaughtered by you, bothering her. Sedesi gave her food, but pig's still screaming."

"Mama, first thing in the morning—I'll do it all."

"You're so serious somehow," Mother squinted at him.

"Hard day. Tired."

"Will you read more?"

"Definitely not. I've had enough new knowledge for today."

Mama swiveled her ears, tapped the spoon against dishes. Then she came over, served him food, and sat across from him.

"Since you're so serious, there's news for you."

"What kind?" he began eating.

"In about twenty days—that'll be right when the Season of Waters begins—Malstruna-Lenayna should arrive," Mama said conspiratorially.

"Lenayna?" he chewed. "She's at her grandmother's in Marna. As far as I know."

"We talked with her mother today—well, anyway... I haven't told you this yet," Mama spoke quietly. "Papa doesn't know yet if everything will work out, but look: we sent a letter with her to Marna through one of papa's acquaintances who serves in the Regulate of Law and Order, he is an important official there. A serious rank," Mama spoke more quietly still. "This acquaintance of papa's has very good connections at Marna University, and also—imagine that—knows Lenayna's grandmother. He can make you a very solid, private recommendation."

"Wow. Sounds good."

"Very much so," Mother nodded. "He might even come here on some matter, and then he'll surely want to talk with you."

"Really? Good news."

"Very. You know, we'll probably invite the Insai family over when this Marna official arrives. Father, mother, Lenayna. If everything works out, you'll owe her."

"Lenayna? For carrying the letter?" he ate eagerly, looking at her, then at his plate.

"Nai, her."

Arad made a very thoughtful muzzle, shook his head, frowned meaningfully.

"I see."

"It seems you like it."

Mother loved terribly when anyone praised home cooking.

"Yes..." Arad had forgotten to give a compliment today. "This is very good news, mom," he leaned back in his chair.

"And to your liking?" Mama suddenly asked, folding her fingers together.

"What? The food?" he looked at his mother for some time, and she at him. "Lenayna?" he asked again with emphasis. "We should get to know each other better," he raised his pinky finger and took more braised rabbit.

"Well, you'll get to know each other," she rapped on the table as if settling the matter. "In the end, you've seen each other more than once—you know her a bit, right? What's she like to you, any impressions?"

"Yes. Right. A maassi like any other—they're all similar, mom. But completely ours, pure Naysa. I don't really know her personality. Seems cheerful," he waved his fork back and forth, cheerful-lively. "Though at the wedding she sat next to me—gloomy. Maybe something happened. Well, that was long ago."

"Exactly, pure Naysagraya, excellent blood," Mama smiled. "Like your mama. Like your mama Aevsuga, and your grandmother Aevsuga, and great-grandmother Aevsuga, and so on and so on, back six tails. And her family is quite worthy. Good monetary standing," she noted.

"Well," Arad chewed, "we'll figure it out, mom."

"Of course you'll figure it out. Okay, you eat and go to sleep, and I'm off."

"Good night, mom."

Mama hugged him from behind and kissed him between the ears, then patted his shoulder—always like this when mom was in a good mood. And then she really left, not forgetting to take the ledgers.

Arad sat, twirling the fork in his hand. Scratched his nose with a claw. More fork twirling.

Smirked ironically to himself.

He leaned on the table, wearily smoothed his nape, his neck, eyes closed. Tapped the fork on the table again, then on the lamp. It chimed plaintively in bronze.

University. Important official. Some maassi Lenayna and something about a letter. Probably all this was important and good news. Probably worth thinking about.

"Ah, whatever."

No, nothing would enter his head.

He was bathing in a warm cascade of today's impressions, in which he'd learned so many things he probably couldn't have learned in a whole year—

or possibly in his entire life, had it been different. This was—so far—the happiest day of his life, and all of it needed to be thought through and remembered for a long time, a very long time. Understanding wouldn't take one night of peaceful sleep, oh no. He gazed at the flame in the lamp, shaking his head as if denying something:

"Simsana... Simsana... Sim-sa-na... Simsana."

How did all this even happen, how... need to go to sleep.

It seemed there was reason to be proud of himself.

He probably hadn't done everything perfectly. But everything had been right.

"Yes," he grinned, running his tongue over his fangs. "Yes. Just like that."

He bent a tin spoon lying on the table, bending it with his thumb.

"I came. I saw. I played."

The spoon broke.

He closed his eyes, remembered moments. There she was spinning before the mirror. There she was with eyes closed while he kissed, observing. How she examined herself in surprise, stained to the neck. Her accidental, moist glance in the semi-darkness, just one instant. Her teeth (good). Her tail and everything where it began (very good). How she covered herself with her tail, and how that was somehow indecently attractive.

That whole impossible conversation with Vaalu-Miresli. He'd had no idea that Ashai-Keetrah, and that in general all this... that with them you could... that they, and I...

"Ashai-Keetrah," he said very quietly aloud, listening to each sound. "Sisters of understanding."

He extinguished the lamp, and another accidental, nearly burned-out dim candle by the stove. Looked out the window—into the dark, moonless night. Cursed several times, in the foulest way—no anger, either satisfaction or admiration. Touched his nose to the cold glass, rubbed it, breathed on it. Listened for anyone nearby.

He pulled back, closed his eyes, punched himself in the nose a couple times with his fist. Thought.

"Yes. Just like that."

◇

The next day Arad rose early and in excellent spirits. Everything was done quickly: he was washed, he was fed, the pig (actually a large piglet) was slaughtered. He stopped by their mare Tsayka, but she was lying down. Arad felt she was very unwell—she was indifferent to everything and didn't want to stand. Mother had spoken truth—she was sick. A healer should be here now. He stood by her, not knowing what to do, then went to the ballista.

Arad made projectile machines, any that were available to a fifteen-year-old young lion. In cubhood he'd made slingshots, the very best ones, could make a bow, could make a crossbow (made two whole ones), but his favorite and most useless project was a small wheeled ballista shooting long, massive bolts. Father didn't care, his brothers enjoyed it, the servant was extremely afraid of it, mother was terribly angry and said he'd kill himself with it someday, and that all this was stunning foolishness. The ballista was ready and absolutely functional, frighteningly functional, and Arad had even lost his former interest in it, because while it was being made—not without extraordinary difficulties—the process itself had been the point. Now the finished weapon pierced boards, doors, all armor, and anything at all, and it was hard to imagine what to do with such destructive force. It occurred to him that it would be fun to kill a pig this way sometime: shoot at it with the ballista, then finish it off with a knife to the heart or hammer to the head. But complications were expected—if you didn't hit well, by the time you caught it, it would turn everything upside down. Blood, squealing, then good luck explaining that.

The first disappointment came from mama, announcing that today would have bad weather. Mom was never wrong about weather, predicting by sky and birds (a family skill—all Aevsugas could do this). The second—from father, after Arad announced at late breakfast that he was going to the fair:

"Great, take your brothers with you."

"Dad, why? Only my friends will be there—what will I do with them?"

"Ahahaha," Darzai and Ayarr laughed.

"Just take them."

"Dad, maybe they can go themselves?" Arad grimaced.

"You're not going on a date, but to a fair," mother began reasoning. "You can take them. We all can go, actually."

"I can't," Father said quickly.

"Mama... I won't go on a date, but there might be lionesses, and I might suddenly take one for a walk. There'll be dancing, and..."

"Meaning? What about Lenayna?"

"What about Lenayna, what do I care about her—she's in Marna!" Arad protested. "And I'm here!"

"Ahahaha," the brothers wouldn't stop.

Mama hissed at them.

"It will be perceived as unserious, Arad, if you're seeking quick relationships, entertainment... and she'll arrive and find out—oh, she will find out. Especially if she comes here with her father and mother."

"Why are you nagging him—he's fifteen years old, he's still far from all this serious fuss!" Father began getting angry.

"Ahahaha!" The brothers were delighted by the fun.

Mother shot father a look promising delayed retribution.

"Mom, I have no idea about her, really," Arad snorted with a laugh.

"Or do you have someone else in mind?" Mom suddenly asked.

The moment was somehow perfectly timed for those words—they seemed to sound in complete silence.

Awkward moments passed.

"Of course. All lionesses from thirteen to eighteen within a radius of, say, twenty lyens."

Dad smiled, the brothers started pointing at Arad and making muzzles. Darzai beat his chest, Ayarr made a very indecent gesture: index finger of his right hand going into a circle made by fingers of his left hand (where did that mongrel even see it?). For which he paid—mother struck him on the ears so hard he nearly fell.

"You'll take your brothers, though I see they. Do. Not De-serve. It! Right?" Mama got furious, standing and handing the servant one of the empty dishes. No one wants to talk seriously about serious things in this house full of males. "And anyway, there won't be nice weather today. Probably won't be a fair either."

And so it happened. The weather got much worse, became heavy—a thunderstorm could be felt in the air, it was inevitable. Arad learned the fair would be postponed two or three days, and that was certain. Nevertheless, at the sixth hour, as promised, he left the house—though in everyday clothes, not festive ones. But he took a short sword, though he usually walked with just a knife like everyone, because the sword got in the way.

He arrived at Simsana and Miresli's house, covered by a cloak and with a wet tail, muddy paws, but in excellent spirits. Nothing could dampen him.

I'll just say there won't be a fair. But I came, as promised.

He knocked, first carefully, but the rain was pouring, so he knocked harder, then even on the window. Someone was definitely home—he saw lit light.

Suddenly a lioness's roar-scream, so intense that Arad thought someone was being killed.

"What the..."

Meanwhile the door opened decisively, and there on the threshold—Simsana, in only a chemise with a belt:

"Arad?" she was surprised, though not very much. She looked animated, busy.

"What's happening, who's roaring?"

"Hamanu Ulra, she's with us. She's started short contractions. Oh..."

She hid the bloody cloth behind her back, which she'd been holding the whole time.

"I'm not afraid of blood," Arad smirked.

"You're not allowed to see this one. Listen, Arad, nothing will work out today," she shook her head quickly.

"I see. The fair was postponed, but I promised to come, and here I am."

"Simsana! Who's there?!" Vaalu-Miresli's voice promised to tear to pieces whoever dared.

"It's..." Simsana hesitated a long time with her answer, surely trying to lie, then gave up. "Arad. He's leaving already!"

"Perfect bloody timing! Horny tomcat! Tell him to bugger off, come here!"

Simsana, looking at Arad, scrunched up her muzzle, showed her teeth, pressed her ears flat—she felt awkward.

"Horny tomcat?" Arad found it funny.

"Don't be angry, she gets temper."

"No problem," he rubbed his nose. "I bugger off then."

"Wait," she turned as if looking inside the house, then lightly hopped to him and kissed him. "Now go."

"And how is she?"

"Who?" Simsana almost closed the door, sticking just her nose and muzzle through.

"Well, hamanu Ulra."

"She's fine, working. Decided not to scare the children at home. She'll manage, she's an easy birther," Simsana looked upward as if trying to find the answer there: why is he asking about such things? Then she snorted, wrinkled her nose, squinted, and smiled. "That's it, kisses."

She slammed the door, and Arad froze with his hand raised.

Two things proved delightful, worth coming for: her light hop with the kiss, and that 'kisses' at the end with a strange but very attractive gesture he'd never seen from lionesses before—she exhales, but not just so, but rather at you, for you, and smiles at the same time.

Adjustable Eroticism

Three days later, on this beautiful pre-evening, warm and pleasant, he was going—no, riding up in a two-wheeled cart (quite the combination: he'd begged the horse from papa's friend, with conditions and promises, since their own horse had gotten truly worse; the cart he took from home) to her house. He'd dressed up in a *pasna*, just like visiting the Magistrate—such a formal toga (this too cost something: mother on his way out noted that somehow he looked suspiciously good). He took a suitable inner purse from father, from him too—an inlaid back-knife, since only such decorative weapons suit togas and pasnas. On his wrists—wide bracelets, his own, gifted by mom. Hardest was the mane: it sort of existed now, and had even grown substantially after that fateful day with Simsana (they don't lie, truly, there really is something in that lioness scent—it makes you as you should be), but still wasn't enough to oil it, make braids, hang trinkets, or style it. He decided to simply wash and comb everything, and done. All affair is the purest gamble, because that rainy day he and Simsana hadn't agreed when they'd meet next, because of hamanu Ulra and circumstances.

Arad worried. First, she might not be there, though today was the fair, and if she thought about it—and she was very clever, as Arad had realized—then Simsana should guess he'd come (arrive on a cart, on a cart, not just come), at exactly the same time as last time. That is, at six. Second, he worried, now secretly (even from himself) about this: they'd appear together in public in quite an unambiguous status—as a lion and lioness in a relationship. A judge's son and an Ashai-Keetrah acolyte. Not even prospects for a relationship anymore, as mama had said then with her fansinall vocabulary. But with an actual relationship. So what, what of it—they're fifteen-sixteen (he was born in Season of Waters, sixteen soon would be), young love, youthful infatuation, Vaal above. Big deal! But surely mama would find out about this news. Father would find out. Everything would be definitive. Everything would be obvious... No wiggling out of it. Or?

Mom will be displeased, he already knew that: she has dynastic plans for Arad. She has nothing against Ashai-Keetrah, it seems, but she harbors certain expectations that included neither Simsana nor any young maassi-lioness at all, but only the right one (in the right place, at the right time), or the right ones. Well, with mama it's like this—he's a lion after all, does what he wants. Tail-groper, no big deal, can blame it all on that. Father. Father, father, father...

He'll be displeased too, but his annoyance will be of a different nature, Arad thought coldly, almost arrived. He's an anvaalist. I'm an anvaalist. I'm like this because of him. And here I am—dealing with Ashai. Betrayal. Intellectual. No. Principled—betrayal of principles. He hates them. He's glad I hate them. Indeed.

He climbed down from the cart near the house, tied the black-as-night mare to the closed gates of Vaalu-Miresli's (and Simsana's) house. Unfamiliar with him, the horse wouldn't cooperate, and everything was difficult.

But I'm just a Suung. I'm not a judge, not even studying law, I'm just a young Suung. I'm allowed. I even need to seek connections with Ashai-Keetrah—everyone around wants this. Every bastard tries at least once in his life to bed one, and here I played the Game my first time—with an Ashai. Instead of everyone rejoicing for me, mom and dad both, they will... Nothing's right for anyone. Fine, let's put it this way: I'm generally against Vaalism, but I like two Ashai-Keetrah. No, three. Is that allowed?

He finished with the tether, entered through the gate.

Actually, I'll arrange it like that: I didn't just play the Game with an Ashai-Keetrah for the first time, but actually will fuck one. Sensational: anvaalism defeats its opponents right in their..

He didn't finish the thought because the doors opened and Vaalu-Miresli came out backwards, not looking, dragging a bucket in one hand and a sack along the ground in the other. Behind her came Simsana in her usual Mistress of Life dress. They saw him almost immediately; he stopped, arms crossed.

"Vaal help me, what a young lion," Vaalu-Miresli said first. "Grandmother-Ahlia, have you seen such a thing?" she looked at the sky. "Why does Vaal send such temptations, through which sisters and acolytes unsteady in their purpose fall into *saahri* and abandon the sisterhood with the apologetic Ceremony of Farewell, to become wives of good Suungs, not accepting the truth that they are already married to all, and only their service gives life to His fire!"

This was quite oratorical.

"Sounds like a quote," Arad noted and bowed very deeply. "Good afternoon, Excellent Vaalu-Miresli. Hello, Simsana."

"Oh..." she gasped, then began devouring her mentor with her eyes, holding the wall behind her with both hands.

Mentor and disciple exchanged glances. Obviously a great deal was happening there.

"Fine," Vaalu-Miresli surrendered. "Otherwise there'll be no peace. Just this once."

"That's it, Simsana, let's go," Arad understood everything would work out. "The fair's today. Six o'clock. I'm here."

"I can't like this, I need to change. I thought..."

"So I'll ask Falsa to cover for you—go tell Ula," Miresli was telling her, but Simsana looked between him and her, listening with half an ear.

"...thought you'd come first just to arrange..."

"...are you listening to me?" Miresli clapped her palms lightly.

"I'll wait, you get dressed," Arad reassured her.

Simsana instantly vanished into the house.

"But Arad, in the house—not a paw!" Miresli suddenly turned to him.

"What, never at all?"

"Shhhh, don't shout. No, today! There's a lioness after labor and three cubs! Lions don't go where there are females in labor—they can't, understand?"

"I know, Excellent one, I won't go."

"Why I'm allowing this, I can't fathom. She should be... Bring her back before midnight, understand?" she pointed her finger at him.

"All right, Excellent one, I'll return her before midnight," he gestured with his hand. No need to worry.

"By ten would be better," Miresli decided.

She took the bucket, closed the door that Simsana had carelessly left open.

"Aren't you afraid?" she suddenly asked.

"No, the Radiant Vaalu-Miresli is very pleasant, actually. And the quotes are interesting."

"Stop joking around. I'm not asking about myself."

"About what then?"

"You know about whom."

How was this possible? How did she transform from a talkative, somewhat amusing lioness in her prime into this dark will of gaze? Arad couldn't hold out, lowered his eyes, though he'd always been strong at staring contests.

"I'm not afraid. I'm a Suung-Naysagrian. Nothing forbids me from being in Ashai company—only encourages it. Mother agrees with this. And father. Too."

"You're lying to me, but that's all right—I see it's not from malice," she stood, and Arad could now swear (eidetic memory) that it was exactly, in the same posture, as that very sad-intense disciplara from Simsana's book.

"Vaalu-Miresli, do you have advice for me?" he suddenly asked.

Actually, why not, he thought.

"I have some, but I won't give it. Decide yourself. Otherwise I'll break your will, and you'll blame me instead of yourself. And it's important for you now to make decisions yourself."

"That's probably always important for everyone."

"No, Arad. Sometimes we need decisions made for us. Especially if you're a lioness, not a lion."

"Hm. Even Ashai?"

"What a sarcastic example," Vaalu-Miresli said acidly. "We don't even choose to enter the sisterhood."

"Hm..."

"Before midnight, and better by ten. She's already sleep-deprived. Have a good evening, strong Suung."

"Pleasant evening, Excellent one."

Vaalu-Miresli took the bucket and sack, walked a bit, then as if understanding the futility of it all, turned around and simply went back into the house. Arad stood, swished his tail, stamped his paw.

Suddenly Simsana came out—actually quite quickly. Arad had internally prepared for it to take longer. She turned briskly, closed the door and approached him.

"I probably look terrible."

Actually, this was the first time in his life he'd seen her in anything other than her usual rough dress. And this something was far better. She wore no decorations, bracelets or anything else—not even her mentor's amulet. Only the silver ring of sisterhood on her finger and the unchanging iron one in her ear. There were also light, unobtrusive, almost invisible chandrops in her ears.

"Nothing terrible—I'll be with someone terribly beautiful."

"You're lying me again. Oh, wait, we're riding?"

"Oh yes."

He helped her climb onto the cart, got on himself, and only then remembered he hadn't untied the horse. He looked at her, laughed, climbed back down, did everything properly, looked at her again (she'd already settled comfortably, leg over leg).

Her dress (grayish-green, with patterned Naysagrian tucks along all the edges) had a strange hem. It was diagonal, and Simsana's leg was visible up to the thigh, slightly above the knee, because it also had a slit. He'd seen such boldness before, but only at various evenings, feasts, dinner receptions, like at the Magistrate's back then.

And off they went.

She began speaking, unusually quickly:

"I had to take this *svira*. I was in such a hurry, didn't want you to wait. My *subplasis* turned out completely unprepared—I didn't think you'd come. Incredible days," she said joyfully, and quickly added, "I mean, crazy busy: do this, do that. Sorry, I'm scattered, didn't think ahead. Where are we going?"

"We'll just ride, go around the ring road until this nag gets tired. Then we'll walk."

"Nag? Arad, what's wrong with you—don't you like horses?"

"No, not really, honestly. It would be fun if firrans could pull carts—I like them better."

"That would be silly, not fun—they're so beautiful. Our kin! Besides: they get attached to their owners. I heard only their owners ride them."

"Yeah."

"Have you ridden one?" she asked playfully.

It seemed she really would like to ride a firran.

"Behind someone, a couple times."

"And how was it?"

"You bounce around if you're not used to it. Generally, riding behind on a firran isn't great—you're a third in a pair. There should be only you and him."

"Only you and him..." she repeated.

"Right."

A pause arose during which Arad went around some lion with a pitchfork on his shoulder. Arad cursed at him, wiped his nose, looked at Simsana, then from top to bottom—all of her. She followed his gaze—what?

"Take a svira'—you mean this dress?"

"Yes, svira, like this. Modest, but I love it."

"It's so... interesting."

She instantly understood what he meant.

"The asymmetric hem of sisterhood—we're allowed to walk in such things. Svira is generally for travel or everyday wear."

"I like it, it suits you very well."

"Thanks."

"Why don't you wear it all the time?" Arad asked reasonably—in this he saw injustice and unreasonableness. "Since it's for everyday."

"For Mistresses of Life it's not very practical. That's why my mentor and I look every day like old hags," she laughed very sincerely.

"And this svira is so good for your stunning legs."

"What makes them stunning?" Simsana examined them.

"I once saw a statuette of a pri-lioness in a rich house. She was all black, and she had very elegant legs that, you know, the sculptor carved with such love. Well, they're an imperfect copy of yours."

"Arad, I... Arad! Stop, stop!"

They were riding down a rather wealthy street when, appearing from nowhere, an enormous Legate wagon pulled by two draft horses emerged indifferently from a courtyard—they nearly crashed into it. What it was doing here, Vaal alone knew. Sitting on it was a lion of completely indeterminate age, as always happens with old Legate warriors.

"What's this, sir? Eyes wandering?"

"Yes, at her," Arad admitted honestly.

The lion nodded and yawned. Then added:

"Watch her well."

Frankly, Arad expected jokes and vulgarity and was already preparing to respond, but nothing followed.

Passing the wagon, they rode on, emerged onto Gallen's circular road.

"Phew... It seems I'm distracting you a bit with my chatter."

"It's fine, that's the whole point—continue," he touched her palm.

"Actually, this svira really has two skirts—upper and lower. It's for all seasons. If you rotate the lower one, nothing will show—it'll be very proper."

"Can you rotate it more?"

"You can. More—and the slit will go all the way here," she showed the very top of her thigh.

"All the way where?"

"All the way here," she showed again.

"All the way here?" he touched her thigh, lightly.

She struck his palm, also lightly.

"Don't get distracted—we'll crash again. Also, sviras are convenient for dancing, whereas in a plasis like mine, you can't dance much."

A dress with adjustable eroticism, Arad thought. They really thought that through.

"Plasis—what's that?"

"It's, you know, the main garment of Ashai. There are different kinds, but generally it's, you know, festive clothing, or for rituals, ceremonies. There, you saw a plasis on Vaalu-Arassi, that disciplara you saved. She had an amazing plasis—I'd bite off my tail for one like that."

"You remember her name?"

It seemed Simsana was actually offended by such a question, fell into bewilderment.

"Of course. I always remember names."

"Wow, sometimes I don't remember even after the tenth time."

"You also only saw her once and still remembered. Or have you met before?"

Oh, these lionesses. They catch everything, connect everything.

"Nooo. No. I also remembered your name from the first time."

"Why?" she asked playfully.

"It's beautiful. Besides, you told me 'without the nomen,' and I didn't even understand what that meant. I was standing there, thinking: 'What did she say, I don't want to look like a fool.'"

"Do you know why I said that?" Simsana asked after some pause. It was clear the question wasn't just important, and wasn't even really a question. It came very, very hard for her. She'd decided he should know the answer to this question.

"Yes," Arad answered confidently.

Truly, she clearly hadn't expected that short, commanding 'yes.' She smoothed her ears—even seemed to seriously ponder.

"So, names," he continued. "What's your family name?"

"Family name? Mine? Veerd. Simsana of Veerd."

"Tell me about your family, your mom and dad. They must be very proud of you. Having an Ashai in the family is an excellent sign, an honor. Any brothers, sisters?"

"I'll tell you little later," she said matter-of-factly. "Where are we going?"

"Here's what I thought: we'll ride along the circular road here, turn onto Tobrian Street, and stop at one of dad's acquaintances' place to leave the cart. Then we'll walk from there—it's just a couple steps to the center."

"This is... his cart and horse?" Simsana's voice suddenly broke into a tremor, either from indignation or something else.

"No," Arad answered calmly, frowning slightly, trying to understand. "The horse isn't ours—ours is sick. But the cart is ours."

"Ah..." she held her hand to her mouth.

What's this about—does she want to ride more? Or does she not like that the horse isn't mine? he scratched his mane.

"Want to ride more?"

"No, let's do as you planned. Will we dance?"

He noticed her voice sounded strange. He looked at her, but she turned away and sneezed.

"Yes, of course. No idea what they'll be playing."

"Let's dance everything they play, everything."

"Alright," Arad agreed easily.

"And buy sweets?"

"We'll buy them. What do you like?"

"Everything. Especially stuff with honey. I can eat honey by the spoon, can't stop."

"Wow, but it's so cloying."

They stopped. The gates of Marsan-Ashnari family house were closed. After deliberation, Arad went to the house—had to make some effort. The son of the house master, that haughty, twenty-something, scrawny accountant who loved mocking Arad just a couple years ago when he'd come with his father and his fat mom, expressed clear displeasure that he'd arrived so early, that he'd arrived at all, and just in general. Arad went with him eventually to the cart—to open the gates and lead in the horse with the cart. This caused him very obvious irritation. When they approached, Arad saw: Simsana had already climbed down from the cart and stood with her tail to them, looking down at the evening street.

"Rather early! What, young-sir Arad, already done with your fun?" he asked completely inappropriately, catching the horse by the bridle. "Good evening, maassi."

Simsana turned and simply nodded to him. Arad noticed: her crossed arms rested so the sisterhood ring was visible; one paw in front, the other behind.

"No, we've just started."

"What, first occasion?" he asked with mocking hope.

"No," Arad shrugged, already extending his hand to Simsana—let's go. He didn't consider him a threat—he was just an annoying idiot with stupid airs.

"Well, go rustle about and hope it sticks," he scratched his chin with a caustic look.

Asshole, Arad thought, but decided not to start an argument.

"But what about sire?" Simsana suddenly said.

"What 'about me,' maas... Asha... Ashai, um, Vaalu...?" apparently he only now noticed there was an Ashai-Keetrah before him, though still young.

"Sir hasn't rustled yet himself," she raised her head higher.

Arad understood that Simsana had said something absolutely terrible to him, hit an invisible target dead-on with a huge ballista bolt. The accountant stood looking as if he might strike Simsana, and Arad tensed completely. An ordinary matter had taken some stupid turn. He began thinking how to properly resolve all this, find words so everyone could part calmly (this family, Marsan-Ashnari, after all, were useful friends to their's—must be considered), and so on, but Simsana took Arad's left arm.

And extended her hand to the son of Marsan-Ashnari, her left, with the ring—for a kiss.

Arad was somehow certain the son of Marsan-Ashnari wouldn't kiss the palm. Discourteous, rude, denial of proper manners toward Ashai, yes, but this instantaneous, senseless tension probably no longer allowed it. Simsana's gesture radiated command, great caprice—she had too much right to it. Arad wouldn't have accepted such a thing directed at himself, such falling under the paw of a maneless one, especially if she's fifteen and you're a full twenty. Best would be to part with restraint, forcing out farewells.

But he took her hand—with both hands—and reverently, submissively kissed it.

And during this:

"May Vaal grant this Suung the possibility to rustle a little," she spoke each word slowly, separately, ceremoniously.

This was too much. That is, formally, at first it was correct, mannered, and normal for Suungs of their positions, ages, status—nothing special, as it should be, and the blessing could be taken as a youthful, foolish joke. But in content it was so mocking and so bitchy that Arad actually felt sorry for the accountant. After all, he'd never taken him seriously—his barbs were just inconvenient stupidity, easier to avoid than seriously kick back at.

Arad nodded to him restrainedly, though he didn't see it, somehow not even fully straightening, and led Simsana down the street. She followed instantly, as if knowing when to step with him.

They walked away.

"You lashed him good."

"He's a creep. Don't deal with him," Simsana warned angrily, knowingly, like a hunter pointing out a trap. "You should have struck him across the muzzle."

"Simsani, it's not such a simple matter: to strike across the muzzle, for a petty reason, in festive clothes, on an occasion with a lioness who sends waves through your fur, some random fool whose father knows my father well."

"Too much thinking," she said and exhaled loudly, wrinkling her nose.

"You know what?" he topped her.

She looked at him with big, suddenly frightened, shiny eyes, and was silent. Exactly that: Arad saw fear. He completely didn't understand why fear. Was she afraid of him?

Lions don't settle matters with simple chatter. And he's a blabbermouth who's teased since cubhood, carried the habit to this day, can only open his mouth—who cares? That's what he wanted to say.

But Simsana couldn't hold out:

"Forgive me... Forgive me, Arad. You probably think I'm some evil fool. I'm ruining everything..."

He covered her mouth with his palm, quickly.

"Don't you dare insult the best lioness in the Empire."

He slowly removed his palm and simply, lightly kissed her.

"Hey, I already forgot about him," he spread his arms. "Otherwise we'll only talk about him: he did this, he blurted that," Arad grimaced while she laughed with watery eyes, wiping them, all in emotion (exaggerated, in Arad's view, but oh these lionesses), "he's this, he's that. We'll spend the whole evening like that. I wanted to say: remember where we left off?" he touched her chest, at the neck.

"Where?" she perked up, all open, and it seemed she meant the kiss. Arad resisted the temptation—they were on the street, they weren't alone, and young Suungs aren't approved to show feelings in public.

"You, your family, your parents and everyone-everyone-everyone. About how proud they are of you. You know, I won't be surprised if your family turns out to be of high standing, in every sense."

"Ahaha, right, we stopped, yes, on that," she said with a timid laugh, as if slightly breathless. That emotion incomprehensible to Arad didn't leave her, some overflowing feeling. Though generally he had no problem with a lioness being a lioness, still he'd internally assumed that Ashai-Keetrah emotions were more disciplined, controlled, more precise.

There. She inhaled deeply, drew the edge of her palm down the center of her body. Changed, calmed. He liked that she was nervous—from that Arad filled with confidence. After all, a first real occasion—going out together—was no joke, and for her it was definitely the first. For him too, basically. But really—no one needed to know that.

They turned the corner and the fair became visible, about three hundred steps ahead. Tents, stalls, Suungs, dhaars, guards, the ever-present pushy lion with a horn, fire everywhere and the sound of an enormous drum—all of it there.

"Nai, look how much is there. Let's go, Aradi!"

"Let's go, oh lioness-mystery. Daughter of a Legate dominarr. Daughter of an impoverished patrician. Daughter of a regul."

She laughed. But didn't answer.

Arad suddenly understood something:

Idiot. She's most likely of simple and humble origins. Don't put her to shame, change the subject, quick.

"So, if there aren't the promised acrobats with the plate, I'll bite someone, honest."

"Go bitey then," Simsana agreed very animatedly and laughed.

"Bitey?"

"Yes. Just not someone."

"But something, right?"

She didn't answer but looked at him with a smirk.

They entered the square (Simsana held his arm, neither released the other, and the closer they got, the stronger each one's grip)—there, no going back now. Well hello, good Suungs, can't count the stares anymore. The Chalice of Vaal, that very one, long-suffering, was already lit, cubs crowded around it. Near it also stood an Ashai-Keetrah, not young, with an intimidating circlet, in a dress of dangerous red, and an amulet of Vaal with an equally dangerously-red stone. Arad knew her by sight, purely externally—she was local, Gallenian, that's certain. Simsana greeted her. The Ashai didn't look at Arad but responded to their joint greeting (Simsana said something long and properly appropriate, while he just said good evening, and Radiant one, and that was all). There were already many heads around. No dancing yet (someone was just beating an uneven rhythm on a military drum, and that it was military—Arad recognized by sight and sound). The acrobats still needed to be found—they weren't on the square (the acrobats' choice would be small: either the square or the alley near his gymnasium, which was here, nearby).

They approached a sweets vendor, bought large honeycombs from her (for Simsana). Ha, she really hadn't lied about loving honey.

"Alright, let's walk around, see what's what."

"Uh-huuuh. By the way: dancing will be right here," she pointed to the south side of the square where they were tormenting the drum.

She said it like this: languid 'Uh...' then weak, relaxed '...huuuh.'

"Tell me, how's hamanu Ulra?"

"Of, fe couldn'th cale lesh," Simsana started chewing the honeycomb, and it turned out funny. She laughed guiltily, as if to say sorry, and just started

licking them, looking at the crowd. "I envy her—she gives birth so easily, though she roars so loudly during contractions your ears ring."

"And what, really three sons?"

"Imagine. She'll rest with us another day, and tomorrow we'll probably send her home already."

Arad decided not to get sweets for himself because he's a real lion, not something or other, and instead bought from another vendor—a dark-furred one (southern) with a jaunty eye patch (Arad wanted one himself)—pork with the spiciest spices available (Arad wanted it that way) on a thin, long knife. Though the vendor wanted a deposit for the knife. That's dumb. Who needs such a knife.

"Brothers the same age, good for them. Otherwise with younger ones—nothing but trouble," Arad said.

"Why's that?" Simsana was very surprised, licking the honeycomb and looking at him.

"They're always annoying," he looked at her. "Example: wanted to come with me today."

"You could have taken them," she shrugged, waved her palm—the gesture pleased Arad: such casualness.

"We're on an date," Arad tried the meat from the knife and realized vendor hadn't deceived him—the meat turned out so spicy that at first he didn't even understand what was happening.

"We're behaving only properly, like proper Suungs," Simsana licked her honeycomb again. "Only as proper."

"We kissed on the street. Ahhh..." Arad squeezed his eyes shut—tears would flow now.

"What, it's burning?" she peered at him, ears pricked forward.

"Nooo, just a bit," he rubbed his muzzle with his palm—maybe it would help.

"We only kissed once," Simsana returned to her honey, examining the surroundings. "We won't do it again. And your brothers would have asked to go home, or scattered across the fair."

"No. They would have dug their claws into us, spun around and teased."

"How old are they?"

"Darzai is twelve, Ayarr is eight. Or however old he is," Arad could barely speak. "Nine."

"Or however old he is.' You're something else."

Arad shrugged and realized he'd soon be all wet from the spice.

"Listen, let me have a bite of your honey."

"What, meat with honey?" Simsana was surprised. "Alright, here."

Good thing she was looking away, searching for the dancing.

"Thanks."

It seemed a bit easier, but better to drink something. Simsana, having gotten back her honeycomb, licked it again and froze in place. Then she squeezed her eyes shut, pressed them, exhaled:

"Oh Vaal, Arad. I'm going to burn up now."

"What's wrong?" Arad already understood what was wrong.

"You only bit it, and now it's all spicy!" she opened her mouth.

"Come on, I know what to do."

He dragged her by the hand and she ran after him, unable to close her mouth. Though that tavern where he and Arassi once had a conversation was already packed with tails. No one particularly cared about two teenagers, Arad pushed through to the tavern keeper so decisively, knew right away what he wanted and paid immediately, that they had two large mugs of Kafnian sherish implausibly quickly for a fair day.

Both drank silently and eagerly, drank everything, only then went outside.

"You've tortured me," she leaned against the tavern's awning post, fanning herself with her palm. "Tasty drink, by the way."

"Good we didn't kiss, right?" he put his hand on the post as if on his own property.

"It's spicy, Arad! How do you eat that? Such red spiciness, oh Greatmother-Ahlia, have mercy!"

"Red spiciness. Reminds me of that Ashai's red dress we met. And her red stone in the amulet. All red."

"Ah, Vaalu-Sizae," Simsana pointed to the center of the square. "Such a red plasis is a sign of strong ignimara. Ow, burning... Only Ashai with strong ignimara wear such."

"Strong—how's that?"

"Two hands, or if forearms burn, tail. Even ears," Simsana tried to lick her lips but it came with difficulty. Someone greeted her but she only nodded.

"That can happen?!" Arad was amazed in turn.

"Even more than that," she spoke slowly. "Why not? She also has an amulet with ruby, and that's a sign she doesn't accept patronage relationships at all. You can't approach such a one with the Ceremony of Address. *Messengers* wear such too."

"And are there many such signs in Ashai appearance?"

"Oh, a lot of them," she settled more comfortably against the post and sighed loudly.

"And what about yours?"

"On me?" she looked at herself. "Hmm... Well, from the obvious ones: iron ring of life," she tapped the ring with a claw. "Means I'm a Mistress of Life. Or training to be one. Most important. My distinction," she said meaningfully, and Arad understood this was important. "The chaindrops are small, just right for a stallia. And it's more comfortable to dance with such."

"I see you're eagerly waiting for when we'll dance."

"Not exactly eagerly. But I'm waiting. Further... There's no katena on me—as you see, I just don't know how to wear it, not used to it. My mentor is Yaamrian, she didn't teach me this. And even if I wore one, it's better to dance without it."

"By the way, always wanted to ask: what are you by pride?" Arad asked as if casually. He had to lean over her, holding the post—otherwise people bumped all around.

"By mother's blood—Naysagrian, by father's blood—Tobrian. So, Naysagrian it is. So, further. I'm wearing a svira, clothing sort of for travel, everyday, but it's also better to dance in it—just don't tell me again about eagerness, I'm actually very patient, very-very. In a plasis you can only do *formal* properly, but in a svira—whatever you want. I don't have an amulet on... If I had one, that would be another sign I'm a disciple of a Mistress of Life, but I decided not to take it. So—again—to dance more comfortably. I didn't take knemids—to dance. I see you didn't either, and that's good."

"So you're an Ashai-Keetrah who with her whole appearance roars: 'I came to dance!'"

"Arad, you're unbearable," for some reason she was indignant. "You're just mocking me... Yes!"

"Now, we'll finish drinking and go," he said confidently. "I'll go find those who'll be playing there—we'll track them down, I'll just bribe them."

"Oh come on. We'll wait," she waved her hand.

"No, otherwise I won't survive. Otherwise you'll just tear me to pieces, my lioness of sisterhood."

Then he immediately realized he'd broken a rule they'd told him about. 'My' is said first by her, not you. Mistake.

She suddenly beckoned, invited him with her hand. He, heeding, leaned in, frowning. No, closer, her hand asked.

"My Arad, I'll scratch you up so you'll tear me apart like Vaal himself," she whispered in his ear.

Fuck me, Arad thought—it became frightening and eager at once. This was too hot; this was too adult; there was something forbidden in it; it was too much, too fast, too much.

She pulled back, and again, the same thing, just like then with the strike: big frightened eyes, mouth covered with palm, immediate as-if asking forgiveness. She didn't say that, no, someone said it instead of her—it can't be, what horror, what vulgarity.

Arad only managed to scratch behind his ear when they blew the enormous, heavy, shiver-inducing town horn, that very one at the Magistrate's entrance. Then everyone quieted. This meant either incredible hooliganism, announcement of something important, or... the holiday's beginning, and that meant... if this was a fair at the end of Season of Fire, then they beat several tambourins, meaning—the start of general dancing.

"Let's go."

He didn't have to ask her twice.

At any dancing there are those who lead the others out, inviting (even re-proaching) by their example. Arad wasn't afraid of attention, generally speaking, but here with Simsana they were going out basically first. Simsana walked proudly and defiantly, ahead of him—in the suungmtari dance this is permitted, in suungmtari generally much is permitted, and you can dance it so differently, it suits anyone. Moreover, she raised her right hand—what a show! That's only done in serious dances, not at a fair where everyone does whatever. This certainly attracted attention, and it frightened Arad: if anyone had somehow missed them this evening, they'd certainly notice now.

Well, you're done for, Arad, he thought to himself.

How they'd pester with questions later. Especially at home. Would they? Of course they would...

When the drum started (beaten by a lion standing on it with his paw, a mane of completely savage-bandit appearance—Arad didn't know him) under the tambourins (and these lionesses were familiar—they play in Gallen whenever needed on whatever's available). They decided to start with the slow 'North-sun, South-moon.' Arad watched Simsana closely: slow *suungmtari* can be danced quite simply, can be more complex, can be intricate and done right by the art—at least from what he knew. Simsana seemed to have a variation between the second and third, one he hadn't seen before. Right from the first movements, when she began spinning around him, he understood that Simsana really knew how to dance—in the sense that she'd been taught, not that she'd learned chaotically at various celebrations like most. Arad got nervous: such a partner would notice your mistakes—here you could fall muzzle-first in the mud. Okay, good that any suungmtari is forgiving to the male's ability: if you memorize a couple simple movements, entrances-exits and that you still need to lead her, but she'll do the rest herself—there shouldn't be issues.

And there weren't. Very quickly he stopped paying attention to surroundings—everything merged into a simple blue-black-yellow blur under the evening sky. Only thing—space for dancing was free, not everyone had come out to dance yet, and that was good (soon it wouldn't be). After the slow suungmtari came another slow one, now only the lionesses played tambourins and sang 'Nothing Happened,' and Arad thought that starting with slow and sad things was somehow wrong. Then remembered that celebrations start this way if someone important died recently, or some other trouble happened—but he knew nothing of either. Everything worked, he hadn't relaxed yet (should drink something), but everything went as it should. They understood each other, sometimes—for a tiny moment—their eyes met, Simsana invariably smiled.

Right after the second dance she ran to adjust her collar, loosening it and her belt, and fixed something vigorously. Not satisfied, biting her lip, she reached right through the hem. Well, finally something worked out there.

"Mrrrow. I forgot," she demonstrated the result of her efforts, turning sideways to him and extending her leg. She'd rotated the lower skirt, and now the slit went almost to the whole thigh.

Arad approved, nodding. He smiled at her craftily. She didn't remain indebted—bared her fangs in return.

"Take off the pasna," she advised, looking at the musicians, as if afraid of missing the start of the next dance.

Yes, good advice, but where to leave clothing so it wouldn't get stolen or just accidentally torn? Having thought about it, he decided to toss it onto the partition between the pillars of the tavern awning.

"Who are you dancing with, Arad?" a hamanu asked him, boldly catching him by the hand. This was one of mother's friends who visited them occasionally. The question was, of course, not to find out with whom (that was clear, and whoever it wasn't clear to could ask a neighbour).

"Evening, hamanu. With Vaalu-Simsana. Disciple of Mistress of Life Vaalu-Miresli," he wiped his nose, looking for where Simsana was.

"Such dancing! Why, it seems you're both breathing unevenly," her daughter said in 'jest,' standing nearby—a lioness about twenty, married, known for her incredible addiction to gossip.

"Yes, we're entwined," Arad answered simply. "A beautiful lioness."

Yes, entwined, date, we have an occasion, in a relationship. To hell with denying it all. Female tricks and nets can't all be bypassed, anticipated or neutralized—sooner or later you'll fall into one. But there's an inevitable weapon against them: they can be torn to pieces with a knife.

The gossip was so delighted she couldn't find words to answer.

"Give me the pasna, don't throw it," mother's friend understood what Arad wanted to do and didn't let him, stopping him by force. "I'll keep it safe."

"Oh, thank you, hamanu Maashi."

"Go, go, don't worry."

Arad returned to Simsana, and she, like some other dancers, was watching the delay with the musicians positioned near Vaal's fire chalice. The music wasn't starting because the savage-lion with the drum was arguing with the lionesses with tambourins. They surrounded him, explaining something to him, hissing—one even struck him on the head with her tambourin, which he bore with indifference. Another mane came, and another, and one more. The first brought a simple horn, the second—a surna (that long, snake-like, thin instrument Arad had even tried playing once, and he remembered perfectly the end of its bell shaped like a naked lioness), the third—another tambourin, but a very large one.

"What are they doing?" Arad asked Simsana and took her hand.

"Well, this one with the drum," he felt her fingers interweave with his rather than simply allowing themselves to be held, and it was such an absorbing, good feeling, "said the tambourin players arranged mourning, not a celebration. And he called one of them names."

"So now there won't be music?"

No answer followed, because fast suungmtari began playing.

Again everything—except her—became a dark-orange blur. This was work, everything was serious. It would be nice to dance fromal, yes: you can talk during it, you don't tire much, and everything's so proper. But this was fast wildness, and Simsana was demanding, and the faster you spin (and fast suungmtari is all spinning), the more she likes it. After the first fast dance he understood he didn't need to be ceremonious with her. After that he led her harshly, but it seemed the stronger and rougher he did it, the better—she handled everything, could endure everything, even deliberately rough treatment.

Several times Arad bumped into someone. Once they tried to steal Simsana between dances—she didn't give in, clinging to him, and then in a clever maneuver she herself led them both slightly away from the scene of the attempt. No one tried to steal Arad. In small breaks Simsana only did two things: either hung on him, seriously so that he had to try to stay standing, and said some melodious, laughing nonsense; or endlessly wiped her wet nose and stamped her paw in impatience. She'd completely forgotten how to speak normally—only laughed or sighed. She didn't even think to ask for a break, but Arad knew he wouldn't give up first—let her.

No one gave up. The whole first round they didn't go anywhere. Strange, but no one played on the horn, or lute, or anything else even once, and the lionesses with tambourins obviously tired. Besides, a new entertainment appeared—near the gymnasium the promised acrobats appeared and everyone went there. Simsana walked back and forth, rising high on the claws of her paws (and thus becoming equal height for Arad), looked at what everyone was doing, and understood that for now dancing was done. She wilfully took an abandoned tambourin, shook it above, beat it, danced a little for herself, spinning in place.

Then embraced him, tapping the instrument on his back.

"Oh, Arad, let's step away, I'm tired."

Whew, Arad thought. *Finally*.

She stood with him like that, not wanting to leave. Just embraced, just purred at his neck—he felt it well, very much. Someone quietly approached from behind and took the tambourin from Simsana; she gave it up limply. It was one of the Naysagrians who'd been playing.

"What, young one—love?" she asked.

If anyone stood near that Naysagrian lioness, they would have seen how her big sparkling eyes peeked out from behind his shoulder, and how she

squeezed her eyes shut in answer: 'Yes.' But Arad, of course, didn't see this—for him Simsana let the question pass between her ears.

"Youth," the hamanu said contentedly and left them alone.

"What, Simsan, shall we go watch the trick with the plate?"

"As you want. I'd walk, cool down."

Mother's friend with his pasna had disappeared, and truly he should look for her, but he didn't want to—this didn't upset him. He'd walk like this, in a tunic—he wouldn't freeze. Having thought a bit, Arad led her up the street toward the guard barracks: first, there was a spring channeled through a trough; second, this way they'd go to the northern side of Gallen on a path where now basically they would be alone. Several times Simsana raised her paws and examined them, then shook dust off them. She also fanned herself with her hem.

"Where did you learn to dance?"

"In Krimmau-Ammau," she looked at him.

"But you didn't get in there."

"My mentor and I spent two moons there, after my failed entry. Oh," she waved her hand, "it wasn't easy for her: in Gallen there was a pile of work, females in labor, cubs, everyone asking, everyone complaining, but she did it for me. They took me to classes together with the disciplarium stallas. Let's drink, yeah?"

"We're going to the trough."

Arad drank by sticking his muzzle in the falling stream; Simsana drank more carefully, from her palms. She wet her nose, looked around with surprise. Her ears moved, listening to night sounds. A dim young moon shone.

"No one around. Even in the houses it's somehow dark."

"I told you: the plate trick, it's quite something. Everyone went to watch," he said, sticking his muzzle in the water stream again. Suddenly, having thought of something, he quickly turned to her. "Shall we go there?"

Here's what he saw: she stood sideways to him, fanning herself with the svira's hem, having raised it high, almost to the start of her tail. Hard to object to such a sight, and Arad instantly thought:

Such legs. And now—mine, for me, mine.

Noticing his gaze, she dropped the hem and slightly pressed her ears:

"Well, I'm hot," she justified herself, a drop of water falling from her chin. "I thought you'd be drinking, not turning around... Real *anasyrma* there. Oh, mother-Ahlia."

She covered herself with her palm—a gesture already familiar to Arad.

"What? What's that?" he straightened.

"You don't know what *anasyrma* is?"

"I know many words," he scratched his head and looked up, honestly trying to remember, "but I haven't heard that one. Is it something sisterhood-related?"

"Never mind," she adjusted her belt and smoothed her clothing.

"Why 'never mind,' tell me what it is," he offered to walk arm in arm, which she accepted, and they went in another direction from the center, toward Gallen mountain—the Height, past the barracks.

"Look it up in a dictionary, no need to embarrass me."

"I'd rather ask my father—he definitely knows, he loves old words, and ancient language, and all that."

"Oh no, not him—it's a bit vulgar."

"Oh, so my papa won't do?" embracing her waist, he started tickling her (all calculated, moment caught). "Then when I meet him, I'll ask yours."

"Mine?" Simsana was surprised, smoothing her ear, and didn't even get ticklish. She clarified with some great astonishment: "My father?"

"Yes. We'll see what he says," Arad spoke sternly, continuing to embrace from behind. "He'll be like: 'Where did you hear this?' And I'll be like: 'Well, Simsana says me that all the time.'"

"You won't ask him," she said weakly.

"Oh, you won't wriggle out of this," his palm passed, outer side, along her cheek.

"Arad, I... I don't have parents. I never knew them."

He didn't immediately, not instantly understand what she was talking about, and whether she was serious. He stopped, stopped her, looked at her. Simsana had a very strange expression, most of all as if she'd done something terrible and irreparable, and she wasn't looking in his eyes but rather at something (or someone) behind him.

He touched his nose to hers.

"I didn't know," he held her with both hands by the neck.

Arad observed carefully: she closed her eyes; she wasn't crying (but he could sense—she was holding it all in); she breathed quietly; she was listening to what would happen, doing nothing. He rubbed his nose against hers to cheer her up, but no, it didn't work well. Young voices sounded—these were Gallenians from the north crossing by this path to the fair. Normally everyone went around the mountain from the eastern or western side, it was much more convenient; only youth who didn't care went this way.

Arad pulled back, didn't want prying eyes, and led her further.

He was silent. What could you say? You speak without thinking, and here's what happens. Terrible awkwardness.

"There's a town called Almsan," she suddenly began quietly, when a group of three lions and six lionesses (all two or three years older than them) passed by. "And in it there's an orphanage. My mentor took me from that orphanage when I was one, but she couldn't fuss with me, so she gave me to a hamanu who became my nanny, also wet nurse, also stepmother, basically... became everything," she looked ahead.

Arad listened.

"And why was I in the orphanage? I know my parents were traveling with someone on the road in Tobrian, there were many of them, a trade caravan. Bandits killed everyone, left me, and then, then guards picked me up, or soldiers, I don't know, and I don't know anything more. And then my mentor came to the orphanage, by chance, and took me, and gave me to aunt Lanri, and aunt Lanri together with sir Tarna raised me until seven, then returned me to my mentor. My mentor sometimes visited me—they live here, nearby. I lived with them until seven. I was even at aunt Lanri's daughter's wedding—she played with me too, and she has a son, already adult. My mentor also has a son and daughter—the son is far away, he's apparently across the sea, in Kafna or somewhere. And the daughter lives in a village near Moor, we stayed with her a bit once... And she also came to visit us here."

"Vaalu-Miresli has children?" Arad was surprised, but just for conversation's sake. He was actually occupied with something else.

"Yes, of course, adults. She's already a grandmother. She hasn't seen her son in a long time, five years, but we see her daughter sometimes. Her name is Maysi. Maysi-Maysi. She played with me a lot..."

"Let's go up the Height, Simsani," he pointed to the path on the right. They should have gone straight.

"Let's go..." she didn't even ask why.

Because there's no one there, and nothing.

No one would be there, shouldn't be. There would be a path with a stone wall, wind, and the Empire's banner at the highest point in all of Gallen and the surroundings.

"Simsi, do you know who killed them and why?"

"No, no... Some bandits—there are many dangerous roads in Tobrian. And why—well, they robbed them and took everything. No one was left alive, apparently."

"How terrible."

"I survived by chance. At first my mentor told everyone I was lying in a cradle and even sleeping, but that's a lie, I know. Actually—she admitted later—I was tied in the wagon, like this, by the belt," Simsana showed how. "It's even unclear who did it, and that's how they found me, because I was howling through the whole forest."

"The Legate found you?"

"Either guards or warriors—I don't know who."

They came out almost to the very top, stopped on a trampled plateau. Only an uneven stone wall waist-high separated them from the quite steep slope ('Don't sit on such things! Never!'—Arad remembered from cubhood). There was almost no wind, the Empire's banner hung weakly, and Arad was still quite warm this night of the nearly dead Season of Fire.

"Do you know anything about them?"

"About mom, about dad? No..." she shook her head.

"And relatives?"

"There's no one, Arad," she shivered. "I'm sure somewhere there must be my kin, but my mentor and I never found anyone. She once said it seemed like one of my grandmothers was found, that she lives in Suungkomnaasa, but that's all. It didn't go beyond words."

Arad thought whether to ask further or if it was enough.

"Did anything remain from them? Things?"

"Yes. They found my bloodline papers on my mother, in a tube—she was hiding it under her clothes," Simsana showed on herself how things are hidden under clothing.

"So mother's and father's papers were there too?"

She looked at him with incomprehension. Then even the expression of sadness left her, replaced by concentration. She even waved her hand, as if asking someone invisible.

"No."

"Well, if a family travels far, all papers go in the tube. Usually."

"No, there was only mine. Probably dad's and mom's papers were separate."

"And the Bloodline Book?"

"No, there wasn't one. Only the birth papers. One single thing, all that's left, Arad, all that's left. That's all I had from mom, that's all, Arad."

Simsana clung to him, seeking soul-bond. Then hid under his neck, buried her muzzle near his shoulder. He felt she was crying, making the most cruel efforts not to do it loudly, obviously. Arad waited and simply stroked her. She exhaled. Calmed down...

He had to wait long.

"Sometimes it seems to me I remember something," she said without looking at him, somewhere down there, on his chest. "I remember it was scary and lonely, and dark, like now."

"Are you scared now?"

"No, now it's just dark. With you it's not scary. With you it's not lonely. Though now it's also... chilly," she rubbed her shoulders. "Aren't you cold?"

So. Apparently not everyone was warm. Well, of course, lionesses get colder, always. Also, she was so hot quite recently; now thrown into cold. He should take care, and the simplest thing—just go home. But Arad didn't want any 'home.' He didn't want to go down at all—they existed here alone. He didn't want to go to all the Suungs, to the world of warm blood—to tail with them all.

"Wait," he said.

Under the high banner pole (ten steps away), right in the rocky ground, there was a storeroom that Arad knew well because he'd been here several times to sort through remains of an ancient watchtower. There was something in it, and this something he now intended to use. He went without say-

ing anything (he liked thus, such was his nature: you go, you do—and that's it), Simsana behind him, arms crossed, suddenly all alienated and abandoned in appearance.

"What are you doing?" she asked uncertainly.

He tugged at the thick oak doors, all in iron. Of course—locked. But if everything remained as before... The key, half an arm in size, inconvenient as a poker, was kept right here, shoved into a crack between stones—you just had to not be afraid to stick your hand in. Which Arad did.

"What's there?" Simsana asked again.

"I'll get you something to warm up with."

"What do you mean?"

"Just a moment, wait a bit..."

Having opened the doors, he approached the chest by feel, painfully hitting some iron thing on the floor. From there he pulled out a long, heavy piece of fabric. So, spare banners—in place. Right now on the pole was the festive banner of the Suung Empire. He pulled out some other one, but in the darkness didn't see which exactly. Well, fine.

He came out with it, throwing it over his shoulder and leaving the key in the doors so it wouldn't get lost.

"Let's go, let's look at Gallen from above," he took her hand.

"What is this little room?" she looked at him, then back at the heavy doors, and endlessly smoothed her ear—her sign of worry, embarrassment, or generally any unclear situation. Arad already knew this thing of hers.

"They keep all sorts of junk."

There's one suitable place, by the old half-ruined wall of the watchtower. Not just suitable, even excellent—Arad had sat there a couple times with friends. From there you can see the Lish river, see the forests, see the southern part of Gallen below, all sorts of things visible—you can see the Yaamrian pawhills in the distance in very good weather.

Arad wrapped them both in the banner (long, it dragged on the ground), sat down on the sparse, trampled grass, leaned against the old wall. The banner's fabric absorbed everything: both cold and the sharpness of stone and earth. He pressed her to himself, covered them from above. There was much banner—they could cover themselves generously, very generously, as much as they wanted.

"There, now it's not cold. And we'll look at the night," he put his hand under his head, and the other at her waist.

"How did you know there was fabric there?" she embraced him—a female thing—threw her leg over him, her tail. He on his back, she on her side, toward him.

"I helped here once, yeah..." he rubbed his nose, squinting. "We'll warm up a bit and go."

"And return the fabric?" she nestled her nose somewhere by his chest, completely hidden there in the warmth of the banner.

"Of course."

"I need to be home by ten. Or by midnight," she said calmly and began purring: fully, loudly, with her whole being—you can't purr like that for long, Arad knew this, you have to try, you have to do it intentionally. The long, even purring of a mother is almost inaudible, you need to listen for it, putting your ear to her chest. But here, this was the purring of a lioness who... who probably loves, yes? For the first time in his life he regretted not having something female, that he couldn't answer in kind, because lions can't purr well or loudly—only torture their throat a bit, producing a couple menacing, unpeaceful sounds bordering on growling.

"Let's stay here longer, okay? Just look a bit—don't want to go home yet. Don't want to go down. Don't want to."

"Don't want to," she purred in repetition, her words merging in quick waves.

He seemed to see before him a very pale landscape bathed in young moonlight, but saw nothing because he was listening: to her left palm tenderly wandering across his chest, and sometimes he felt the hardness of silver from the sisterhood ring when she reached his neck; to her tail beating its tip against his leg; to her cheek pressed again to his chest; to the waves of her purring. He was so absorbed in this complete feeling that he didn't even really respond to her, though—it seemed—he should, must, by the rule of reciprocity in love. He was only pressing her to himself and slightly releasing, sliding his palm behind her belt.

He suddenly very clearly and very distinctly understood, looking at a lone night cloud, that it was all over. The former world would be no more—it was shattered to pieces. There would be 'before' and 'after' that day when he cut his hand bloody near that blessed hospital. Blessed blood—everyone should have such. It was no longer about seeking infatuation, not about lionesses, not about adolescent hot blood, not about the Game, not about the Rainbow of Blood, not even about Suungs, not even about first experience, not even about sating hunger, not about release, not about her now-so-necessary scent, not about her beauty, slender legs, generally the slender-fine build, proper, not about her eyes, her habit of smoothing her ears and her tendency—hidden from everyone but him—toward cruel-loving affect: to strike you across the muzzle and submissively await the consequences of this affect; not about the pleasantness of her ways, not about her pronounced female nature. It was simply about her. Yes, this is what they call 'love,' Arad thought—probably this is it, though even that word seemed imprecise to him, almost excessive. He'd entered her world—no, not that, he'd become the world in her heart. And most of all she sought warmth and someone to cling to, just like this,

completely. Arad understood that now he bore responsibility, moreover the greatest of all in his life. How carefully he must walk now!

He looked upward, pierced by the arrow of this understanding, and didn't even notice how twice she approached his neck with closed eyes and pressed ears, ready to answer any kiss of his, freezing with hot breath in the closest proximity to him, not daring to do it first, submitting to the rules of the eternal game. The third time she broke the prohibition and licked his neck, very lightly, just a little, herself, willfully, without his will, all on her own.

Arad didn't expect this. He didn't expect at all that it would be exactly like this, that a shuddering wave would run through him. He squeezed her from surprise, strongly, and his legs and tail jerked. She exhaled with a moan but didn't complain. Moreover, he growled a terrible, indecent word—end of everything. He took his hand from under his head and placed it on her shoulder covered by the banner, and pressed her slightly to himself—come on. He didn't even want to say anything, just do it again, just understand, you're a sister of understanding. This was completely different pleasure, of a new nature, a new world, because before he'd kissed lionesses, but they—not, and that so far proved to be not just sufficient—it was everything needed. But it turns out she can too. This is a whole discovery, though her kisses are of completely different nature and force—they're infinitely tender, there's no greed or thirst in them, and...

She understood and did it again, but differently and in a slightly different place: it was just as gentle, slow, but infinitely, infinitely long. Again a wave, again tension to the point of trembling, and Arad couldn't control anything, couldn't do anything—his hand slid to her head on its own, quickly and strongly. He didn't even know what he wanted to do: either embrace her, or turn her over, or anything—the hand simply acquired its own will, and...

...his family ring caught on her iron Mistress of Life ring in her ear. Strongly. Too much.

"Owrrr!" Simsana roared and flinched from real pain.

At the same moment Arad mindlessly caught something in his palm, not even understanding what.

Simsana half-rose and grabbed her ear, then looked at it—blood. For the first time in his life Arad was rendered speechless, completely so—he couldn't say anything though he wanted to.

She looked in his eyes with horror, even forgetting about the blood:

"Arad, the ring is gone," Simsana said hastily.

He clenched his palm and felt the ring in his hand. This was it. But instead of answering that the ring was here, he grabbed his mane. Catastrophe—this is him, this is what he... this is—look and learn—how to destroying everything.

"The ring is gone, that's a very bad sign, Arad," she turned toward the moonlit landscape, supposing it had flown somewhere into it. "Did you see where..."

Show her the ring, come on!

Which he did, without a single word—he only demanded her attention, touching her arm with his claws. She instantly turned, took it, examining it as if seeing it for the first time in her life, then squeezed it tightly in her fist. Then she put a palm to the ear and looked again—now more blood..

What have you done?! Arad hated himself.

Words were useless—he needed to do something. First he thought of the belt, but instantly understood it wouldn't work—of course. So with his back-knife he simply cut off a sizable piece of fabric from his tunic (soft, white, silk—just right). Then... Then he needed to take her in his hands again and seat her before him, but now a serious question arose—would she give herself into his hands now? This was a monstrous question. Arad knew he absolutely couldn't ask her—she would either come to him or not. It could be done gently. It could be done commandingly.

Here goes nothing. Commandingly. Come to me, sit here, I'll cover us with the banner.

She accepted. Sat before Arad on her haunches, tail toward him.

"Let me, let me, give it here," she stopped his hurried attempts to apply fabric to her ear.

"I'll lick it clean," he finally said hoarsely.

"Wait," she looked at the bloody whiteness of the fabric, then touched her ear, hissed from pain.

"I'll lick it clean, I'll be careful. Let me," he hurried.

"Look: is it badly torn?"

"Eh..." Arad said, truly not knowing what to say.

"Is it all torn or just... well, a straight line where the ring was?"

"A straight line. I'll lick it clean."

"Go ahead, but carefully."

He began. The taste of her blood. Simsana sat obediently. He grabbed her palm. Then the second one (felt the Mistress of Life ring in it). He pressed her to himself, and felt terribly sorry for her, incredibly so, like for no one ever, more than for himself. He felt something warm ticklishly roll from the corner of his left eye. Oh, no. Anything but this.

Don't cry, bastard. Don't cry. The very last thing you should do in front of a lioness. Are you an idiot? Don't cry—what's wrong with you, you know this must never be done, what are you doing? Pull yourself together! Melt. Yourself. Into steel.

There. Done. Will returned.

"How are you?" he tried to ask softly, but it didn't come out right.

"Good," strangely enough, she said exactly that word: 'good.'

"Simsana?" he wanted to say something to her (but didn't yet know what), examining her ear. The blood had basically stopped. But Arad continued, and he licked her ear as gently as he was capable of.

"It's good that you caught the ring. That's excellent, Arad. I have a great impression, a feeling that..." looking at the landscape, she began a detached monologue addressed not even to him, Arad, but rather to the world. "The main thing is—the ring is here. I'll pierce my ear anew later, that's not scary, trifles. Blood isn't scary—we Mistresses of Life are always in blood. You know, my nurse Lanri told me that once at the market some mantissa stopped her with me, little me. Not an Ashai-Keetrah but just some lioness, maybe even a lioness of wisdom, who knows. And she foretold that my hands would be up to the elbows in blood. Aunt Lanri, aunt Lanri, you know, called her crazy and got scared—she didn't understand the signs and image-meanings of mantics, she's just a good Suunga. You caught my Mistress of Life ring, Arad... You took it, you returned it. I don't yet understand the sign—I probably should read an engram or dream-see to be pierced by understanding, but I can't because I'm on an occasion with a lion, while on it you can't behave as you please, because everything we do we must do well—that's what aamsuna is, so I'm not worried. Because Vaal is great. He doesn't give us signs we can't embrace..." and she fell silent.

She turned to him, lightly pushed his shoulder. And then—bam!—poked him in the nose with her index finger, sharply but not painfully, and held him like that. Arad even stopped breathing.

"Now I know your weakness."

"Which one?" he asked, bewildered.

She pointed at his neck.

"Now don't even ask me to do that. Claw the walls all you want. Otherwise you won't leave a whole spot on me," and she pushed him slightly.

He leaned back against the wall, and she lay down on his chest again. Arad covered them both with the banner again.

"It's fine," he said. "Fine—soon I'll discover yours."

"Ha. Ha-ha. Ha-ha," she laughed theatrically—good luck, I have nothing like that, no weak spots.

"I have some guesses."

"And what would those be?" she asked defiantly, settling on his neck so she could look at the sky.

"Listen," he abruptly changed the subject, "let's wrap your ear with that piece of fabric. Where is it?"

"In my hand. No need."

"Why?" Arad was a bit surprised.

She stretched her hand out from under the banner, straight up, played with her fingers, even showed her claws.

"I'll look stupid. Besides, it's definitely dirty. Better leave it."

"Maybe we should go to your home then? You definitely have salve, that, what's it called..."

"Kiri salve, and not just that. Nonsense—I don't want to go home. Or is that it?" rising, she turned to him. "Or is the date declared finished by you?" she narrowed her gray, night-time eyes. He felt her tail beating against his leg.

He moved her higher toward himself, all of her, guided her cheek with his palm, her chin, remembering the wounded ear, placed his palm on her neck and kissed her. Yielding, submissive—he felt how she relaxed completely, melted, utterly dissolved. He performed his favorite trick—peeked at what she was doing, how she looked during the kiss, knowing for certain she wouldn't look (something very ancient forbade lionesses from doing so). Arad remembered for a moment an old, silly tale circulating among young lions his age, that the harder a lioness presses her ears during a kiss (and not only during it—they'd invented many other circumstances), the more she loves you.

Still, impossible to resist when a lioness has thrown her leg over you, and Arad slipped under her hem and set off on a journey along her knee, then thigh. Slowly, don't rush. Higher, more. Nothing changes in her—she's listening, oh yes, of course listening, but playing a little game called 'nothing is happening.' He madly wanted to change course, already almost at the very top, and travel along the thigh and below the tail—he already felt the dangerous closeness of that heat, he'd never been there. Glimpsed it, admitted—but never been. But he held firm, and not even because of the Game's rules and customs (he knew Simsana would endure a brief journey, forgive him his male curiosity)—no, but because of Vaalu-Miresli's advice. Not with the hand, no. You'll do it differently.

He carefully pulled back, leaving her kissed all over and under his neck. But left his hand at the top of her thigh.

"Is the ring there?" he asked casually.

"I hid the ring, don't worry," Simsana answered quietly.

"What will you do with it?"

"What do you mean," he felt her shrug. "I'll make a new hole in my left ear, continue with it. That's what Mistresses of Life are supposed to do—my mentor wears one, we all wear them."

"She's awesome lioness and Ashai-Keetrah, isn't she?"

"My mentor?" Simsana asked somewhat joyfully.

"Yes, I'm in awe of her," Arad didn't feel he was being insincere just to please.

"And I'm eternally indebted to her, since she took me from the Almsan orphanage. And every time I ask 'Why?' she has a new answer. I'm who I am precisely because of her. I..."

"I'm also eternally indebted to her for that."

Simsana smiled; he pressed her a bit more tightly to himself. She hid again somewhere there, on his chest.

"I was thinking. I have: my mentor, her daughter, my nurse and her husband. These are my close ones, as long as I remember. And..."

"You're a Mistress of Life. You like it, don't you?" Arad asked, interrupting.

"It's everything I am. It's everything to me, Arad. It's the best thing there can be."

"So hey, you also have a whole sisterhood."

"Yes, yes."

"If you'd been in a disciplarium, you'd probably feel it even more strongly."

"Exactly."

"Friends are always around you. And lionesses, it seems to me, really respect you and your mentor."

"That's nice."

"There's also one lion. You haven't known him as long as the others. But he..."

Simsana rose up. A long, long look at each other. Very long.

"What are you doing to me? You've undone me," she fell helplessly back onto his chest, and he wrapped her better in the banner's fabric. "I'm so... I'm completely..."

"And you don't need to do anything with yourself. I'll do everything."

She giggled.

"Everything? Oh no."

They were silent.

"I feel very good with you, Arad," Simsana said quietly, almost in a whisper.

And suddenly yawned very sweetly.

"I'll confess something to you," she said just as quietly.

"What?" Arad tried to hide the impatience of burning curiosity.

She inhaled several times, and Arad understood it was about to slip out, he said, but each time Simsana didn't dare, changed her mind, searched for new words.

"But let's not today," she finally said like that.

"Excellent, good that it's not today."

"And why's that?" she asked petulantly, slightly offended.

"It means we'll have tomorrow. Not just today."

"Mrrr..." she purred contentedly. "Cunning one."

"Does your ear hurt?" he stroked her.

"A bit. I'm thinking what to tell my mentor."

"The truth."

"That's for sure."

They lay there.

"So what did you like about my mentor?"

"Well... everything," Arad answered. "Yes, I had an experience with her: she looked at me like that, it was so strange. I never felt anything like it."

"The gaze, yes. *Straya*," Simsana agreed matter-of-factly.

"Can you do that?"

"No, not really—I don't have that gift."

"But you can put lionkind to sleep," Arad remembered.

"Mhm."

Suddenly—from curiosity—an excellent idea came to him:

"Listen, can you try putting me to sleep? Let me experience this thing."

She stirred.

"Arad, there's nothing to try—I'll put you to sleep. You'll fall asleep," she said even somewhat sadly.

"Let's try. I'll resist, just lie here and try my hardest not to sleep," he insisted.

"Oh, Arad... we have a connection, I feel you. No chance to stay awake. Silly. I'm not deceiving you, I can put lionkind to sleep. Lying about possessing Gifts of spirit, ahhhhmm..." she yawned. "Ah, is punished by the Codex."

"And how is it punished by the Codex?" his palm slid from her thigh to her tail; he went down its whole length, teasing and playing. From her side there was no protest that her tail had been made into a toy.

"Certainly not like that," in fairness, she made a very weak attempt to free her tail.

"Please. I'm very curious," Arad asked, burying his nose between her ears. Her scent. There can never be too much of it.

"Amazing what lion can want on an date, it turns out."

"And what else have lions wanted... on dates with you?"

"You're my first," she said simply. "With you I had my first kiss, first occasion," she settled more comfortably. "First Game. First in everything."

"Oh..." Arad didn't know what to say. This was unexpected. And for some reason very pleasant.

At the same time, another surprise came from his journey along her tail. It turned out that the tip of her tail split in two at the very end—this was unusual; Arad didn't think such things happened.

"Close your eyes," she said to him.

He did so.

She moved upward and now was right there—her nose near his. Arad wanted to move his hand (to adjust the banner's fabric, cover them better), but Simsana sensed it, anticipated, and forbade—gently. So he lay under her quiet purring for some moments, and then understood one interesting thing that rather captivated him: when she inhaled, he did too. Breathing had be-

come shared. A simple thing, it seemed, but such a rainbow of feeling—her warm breath on his nose.

Then something stranger happened: she—he sensed—pulled back, was now looking at him from above, yet the sensation of warm breath remained: on his nose, on his whiskers, on his mouth—warm wind with each exhale.

Then something else burst into consciousness: she was—it turned out—humming a very simple, harmonious melody. Melodic, beautiful—he liked it, nothing unusual, only it was surprising that he understood: she'd been humming for a while already, but he'd only noticed now. Suddenly, with another warm wave, she drew out along the melody:

"Ansian-saahiim..."

He'd never heard such words and couldn't understand the language—couldn't even guess where it was from or why. The vowels stretched infinitely; it sounded like "Ansiaaaaan-saaaahiiiiim..."

She let him rest. And then again:

"Ansian-saahiim..."

The second time unfolded surreally: as if the voice was either extremely loud, or everywhere, or right inside his head. A feeling of flight, up-up-up. And again. And again. Arad felt he was simply disappearing—such an immeasurably happy feeling, everyone should have this.

Useful Household Item

The sound of falling stones, unusually bright light in his eyes—Arad woke up.

Early dawn.

He got up, sat for a bit in sleepy disbelief. Looked right-left—to the left slept Simsana, mouth slightly open, both palms tucked under her head (left ear on top, traces of blood), completely serene, wrapped in—oh, it can't be! —the War Banner of Suungs.

I promised we'd be back before midnight...

"Simsi, Simsana," he shook her. "Wake up."

She shook her head a couple times, moaned, then opened her eyes. Slowly got up, smoothed her fur, looked at him.

"Good morning."

"Hey," she answered, and covered herself with her arms, tucking her legs. "Oh, great Vaal..."

"We really fell asleep. Need to go. Get up, I'll take the banner."

Simsana looked beneath herself, nimbly stood, then stepped off the bed she'd slept on:

"We slept on the War Banner?" she looked at the golden sun from which arrow-rays emanated.

"Apparently so," he took it from the ground, tried to shake it off.

"Great Vaal, spare us. This is forbidden, forbidden!"

She helped him—they took the ends, shook it out. Looked at each other and couldn't believe what was happening. Folded the banner together, silently. Arad carried it:

"I'll be right back, stay here."

And as soon as he approached the storeroom, he heard someone's paw-steps and conversation. Lionkind came to the Height often, about ten times a moon. Arad had done so more than once with Magistrate servants responsible for banners and signs. This was one of those days.

*Quick, open, throw in banner, close, get out... No! Too long! You'll be in a mousetrap. Drop it... Drag it with you... Too visible, noticeable—will they see you walking with it?! Drop it at the doors, folded. Yes!—*Arad thought all this in one heartbeat.

They had to run.

Arad dropped the banner at the doors and ran to Simsana.

"We're leaving, someone's here," he said in a loud whisper and grabbed her hand while she was trying to comb herself, or straighten her clothes, or put herself in order, or whatever else lionesses do.

"Who?" as always, inappropriate questions.

"We're leaving—lions from the Magistrate came to the Height."

"Ohhh..." she drew out fearfully. "What will happen?"

"Quiet. We run, and nothing will happen," he hurried down the steep, grassy slope, slippery from morning dew.

He knew the path, this steep trail on the other side of the Height. Simsana didn't know it at all. The escape was successful. Once they encountered a bog on the road from an overflowed stream—he would have jumped, but Simsana hesitated; so he carried her, throwing her over his shoulder like a useful household item, without thinking too much, and imagined he was carrying a captive somewhere to his lair or to sell, and it was very fun and thrilling—he even laughed, though he got his paws quite muddy. He carried her far longer than necessary—dry ground had long since appeared—and Simsana started asking to be let down, but instead he just bit her on the side, then gave her a good slap near the tail, and only then lowered her to the ground—abruptly. Dazed by such treatment, Simsana let out two or three nervous giggles.

Then they came out onto a street, and the look of both was quite something. Arad had torn his tunic with a knife, there were drops of her blood on it, his paws all muddy, and he had a wild-happy look. Simsana had a torn ear, blood on her clothes (almost invisible due to the color), and dishevelment from Arad. She had a frightened-happy look, in turn.

Arad was spouting some stupid nonsense about how getting up early in the morning is healthy because that's what stoics do, and traders, and mothers, and generally all lions and lionesses of substance. Simsana listened and agreed with absolutely everything.

Vaalu-Miresli's house was already visible.

"I promised we'd be back before midnight," Arad finally dared to broach the perilous matter.

"She'll kill me, and you too," she grabbed his shoulder. "Arad, you'd better go home."

"I'm going straight to your home, and straight to the end," he cut off.

"She'll be angry, I'm serious. I don't even know what will happen."

"Maybe she's not home?"

"She is... I can already see she is. Ahhh..." Simsana moaned, biting her claw. "There she is, sitting by the window. Vaal, she sees us. Arad, run while you can."

"Never," he answered cheerfully and swished his muddy tail.

They simply walked side by side, but suddenly Simsana took his hand. Then, when they entered the courtyard, she took his arm. They stood before the door; she squeezed his arm, even dug in with her claws.

"Maybe we should knock?" Arad suggested.

Simsana shook her head—no, wait—and then the door slowly, solemnly opened, and in the doorway appeared Vaalu-Miresli in a simple house dress with a huge green shawl on her shoulders.

She wasn't looking at him, only at Simsana. Oh yes, Arad thought. She won't escape conversations. Poor Simsi.

Meanwhile Simsana suddenly approached her mentor, knelt before her on one knee, and took her left hand in both palms. It looked like... *Probably this is how Ashai-Keetrah ask forgiveness when they've seriously erred*, Arad thought. Miresli looked at Arad, and the look promised absolutely nothing good, then placed her hand between her disciple's ears. Simsana stood, and then Miresli noticed the ear. And the absence of the ring.

"What is this?!" she asked Simsana in astonishment.

Instead of answering, the acolyte pulled the Mistress of Life ring from somewhere behind her belt, showed it hurriedly.

"Got caught onto something," she smiled with all her teeth. "The ear suffered a little, but the ring is here," she held it in her fingers like a found treasure.

"I'm the one who tore her ear," Arad spoke up.

Simsana turned to him. Oh, Vaal. Just wait, be quiet, at least now, maybe somehow everything will work out... Oh, no.

"Why?!" Miresli asked him, shaking both palms by her head.

"It happened by accident, I didn't mean to."

"Obviously you didn't mean to! If you had, I'd slaughter you right here. You... You... And you?" she looked at Simsana, whose ears instantly pressed back just after they'd recovered. "Look what he's done to you: you smell all of male, he's dragged you around," her mentor tugged at her clothes, "tore your ear, brought you home when it suited him—and you stand there content. Dream lion, sure. Look at him, what a sight. What were you two doing, I don't get it?!" Not waiting for an answer, Miresli tied her shawl at her chest. "Whatever, we'll talk later... You," she pointed at Arad, "unreliable—I asked you by twelve, you promised. You broke the agreement. Moreover—you tore off her Mistress of Life ring, and that's just too much. That's it, I won't forgive you, go away."

And she closed the door, taking Simsana inside.

Arad stood there, then sat on the step by the door, smoothed his mane. Yawned. Strangely, there were no loud arguments inside the house—only something like quiet conversation. Then he knocked on the door.

"You're still here?"

"Vaal-Miresli, Radiant one. May I also kneel?"

"No."

"May I explain myself?"

"No."

She closed the door.

Arad sighed. He didn't know why he was doing this, honestly. It was already impolite. Probably already serious rudeness. By the standards of his upbringing and his circle—incredible boorishness. But he knocked again.

Strangely, Vaalu-Miresli opened again.

"May I say goodbye to Simsana?"

"What do you mean?" the Mistress of Life put her fist on her hip, and her tone was—for the first time this morning—not irritated but rather concerned.

"I want to say 'goodbye'—I didn't have time. And she didn't either."

"She's in the balneum, washing you off," Vaalu-Miresli nodded toward the inside of the house. She looked at his dirty paws. "Come in, don't let cold into the house. But stand here," she warned, pointing at the door. "I keep cleanliness in the house—you can't track dirt here. Birthings happen here. Understand?"

"I understand."

"You don't understand anything, maned one," she tapped him on the head with her palm. "No-thing you understand. Nothing."

She placed a small stool, actually meant for resting your paws on when putting on knemids or washing. Arad stood straight, right by the exit in the anteroom, as she'd indicated. But Miresli sat on her legs, just like that, on the floor, and leaned her arm on the stool—and sat not just casually but with meaning, with posture. She even—it seemed—adjusted her tail, though it was completely hidden by her dress.

Arad was somewhat surprised by her manner—unusual.

"Look. You promised to bring her back, and I basically didn't sleep almost all night," she spoke, sitting right on the floor. "And today I need to go to two lionesses, and Simsana too. I didn't sleep, she didn't sleep—well, great Mistresses of Life we are, we'll fall asleep there," she gestured with her hand, and dissonance began arising in Arad. "So? How can I trust you? How can I count on you? And whose fault is it?" she raised her hand in a questioning gesture.

Arad grasped what exactly had caused the mismatch between reality and expectation: he was in the house of a simple Mistress of Life in a provincial town, who just a moment ago most resembled a grumpy midwife, but now it seemed to him that a patrician lioness had reclined on invisible cushions of an invisible couch and was discoursing on matters of life. Additionally, all this was happening here, in the anteroom, and this crude stool—the dissonance was strong. The manners were genuine. What was happening?

"She did sleep, by the way. I'm at fault. I ask forgiveness, Excellent one."

"You're at fault? Not her?" she tilted her head questioningly.

"Not her."

"Led her around as long as you wanted, yes?"

"Yes," Arad answered after thinking.

"My Vaal, did she at least ask to go home?"

"Well... yes, yes."

"What happened? Where were you?"

Arad leaned against the door frame, looked up.

"We first danced at the fair, then went to the Height, then... Mmm, it's hard to explain. But everything was good between us—let the Radiant one believe."

"I notice everything is good between you, even too good. I've never seen a lioness so tormented yet walking so content. She carries herself like a happy one, a full cup. Things beyond comprehension, right, Arad?" Vaalu-Miresli looked aside, and in the morning light from the window he saw her profile and the gray hairs on her ears.

"Right."

"And how was the ring torn off?"

"I embraced her, like this," Arad tried to show in the air, but it came out funny, "and... this... I went like this... and bam! And that's it."

"Sacred fire, Arad, I can't even imagine what you two were doing there. You're spoiling her, Arad," she began stroking her chin, looking sideways, from below. "You've already spoiled her, completely shaken her up."

"Excellent Vaalu-Miresli, may I have the Radiant one's left hand at my service?"

"First, sit down beside me."

He did so, on the other side of the stool.

"Second, why?"

"I want to kiss it as a sign of gratitude, for everything."

"Don't grovel. What a one you are. First: you don't keep promises, you deceive us. Second: you grovel. Result: a liar and a flatterer."

"I'll tell Vaalu-Miresli about her," Arad pointed toward the rooms. "Does the Excellent one know about Simsana? Probably knows everything, but I'll tell anyway. Honestly, I have no idea what kind of Ashai-Keetrah she is—I suspect awesome. She puts lionkind to sleep really well... I understand very little of this," his thoughts jumped chaotically; he wanted to say everything, here and now. "I used to imagine all of you somehow different, not like this. But it turns out, Vaalu-Miresli, Simsana is such a striking lioness, of such amazing... everything. There's nothing I don't like. Even if there is, it doesn't matter. She's even better than that lioness you paint yourself in dreams, that ideal. I'm even scared that I'm so candid, because I look foolish. But it's all true," he clenched his fist before her, as if threatening.

Miresli listened attentively. Whether she was impressed or not—impossible to say.

"She's your first love. That's why such feelings," she simply summarized.

"So it's only because she's my first love?" Arad, to admit, didn't believe this. Not at all.

"Something like that."

"No," Arad suddenly cut off, shook his head. "That's not true. It's not about that."

"Idealist," she smirked.

"I'm the worst pragmatist of all the most vile pragmatists. A stoic and pragmatist," he ran his hand along his neck several times—the symbol of stoicism.

"You're an idealist, like almost all of you," Vaalu-Miresli squinted and stroked his head, his mane. "You're far from the pragmatism of a female."

"So be it. What difference does it make. I'm grateful to Vaalu-Miresli and all the sisterhood for Simsana anyway," he suddenly crossed boundaries and took her hand in his himself. "She told me about her fate and how the Excellent one took her from the orphanage. I lived fifteen whole years and didn't know she was here, nearby. I'll confess how it was. At first I just wanted to find a lionessy for the Game. Fine. Decided to try with her. Well, tried. At first it was about all that, the simple things. But now... And therefore, Excellent one, I'm indebted to the Radiant one, to the sisterhood, and to..." he suddenly squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his fist to his nose. "Vaalu-Miresli, I'm probably also a blabbermouth, yes? I've spilled everything, yes? That's not how it's done, right? Am I ridiculous?"

"You'd better be careful. Do you hear?"

"Yes."

She waved her hand. Everyone can say 'yes.'

"You give her what no one else can give right now, except you. Not me, not the sisterhood, not her nurse's husband whom I tried so hard to involve in her upbringing but so futilely, and a couple others, and who knows who else—because you can't imagine how important it is for a young lioness to be in touch with lions. I could bring all the sisters of Krimmau-Ammau here, and they couldn't help the matter. But you can. You're now the lion in her life, and I'm afraid to tell you what responsibility you are bearing, and may Vaal help you, even though you're an anvaaalist. Be good—you mean much. Be a Suung of impeccable valor. She mustn't..." Miresli waved her hand—no, not that. "She needs to be convinced that... don't hurt her, Arad, she's vulnerable. She'll play she's strong, that everything's nothing to her, at pride—but still, she's very vulnerable."

She made a very solemn gesture, both hands raised before him:

"This is what 'spilling everything' means. This is how it's done."

Vaalu-Miresli casually tapped her claws on the wooden stool.

"Well then, Arad. I was about to decide to trust you, and now—I don't know. You deceived me with Simsana, you know."

"If the Radiant one is about us being late—that happened, one could say, by accident."

"And you had absolutely no control over the circumstances?"

Arad thought, looked around, touched the broom and pulled a straw from it.

"Don't ruin my brooms. You've ruined my disciple, at least don't touch them."

"I did, Vaalu-Miresli. Just gave myself to the flow of events. I felt too good."

"Alright, I'll forgive you this time," the Ashai-Keetrah suddenly agreed easily.

"And what did the Radiant one want to..."

Suddenly the door to the inner house opened, and Simsana's surprised muzzle appeared.

"Oh, mentor, Arad. You're still, um, haven't finished, um, your conversation?"

"Have you already washed?" Miresli asked in surprise.

"No, I'm just going," Simsana answered timidly.

"Oh, my disciple, you'd be lost as a stalla in a disciplarium condo," and she turned to Arad, pointing at her. "She can wash for an hour, and that's just washing. Ever seen such a thing?"

"Mentor!" Simsana protested meekly, all bewildered.

"He's sitting here," Miresli pointed at Arad, "because you didn't say good-bye to him, and I'm his hostage here. See what a threatening look. See?"

"Yes, I'm sitting on mentor's tail, Simsana. She can't get up."

Simsana appeared fully in the doorway, wrapped in a large bathing cloth from shoulders to paw claws, holding her palm at her chest.

"Arad, what are you doing, that must hurt..." Simsana said uncertainly, and Vaalu-Miresli suddenly shook with laughter.

"I was joking," he said with a laughing muzzle.

"My mentor isn't angry at Arad?" Simsana tried to hide her joy.

"I'm angry, of course," Vaalu-Miresli rose, and now not at all like an Ashai-Keetrah, not like a patrician lioness, and without calculated movement, but rather like a midwife. "How can you not be angry at such a one. Well, say your goodbyes, and run to the balneum."

And she left.

Simsana ran up to Arad.

"How did you win her over, how did you manage it?"

Instead of answering, he winked.

They kissed.

"When will you be free again?"

"I've already thought it through—let's do this: I'll send you a letter."

"A letter?" he was surprised.

"A note," she said reproachfully, looking him eye to eye. "That's how it's done in disciplinums—my mentor told me, it's the custom among Ashai-Keetrah. I'll hint at a time when you can come."

"Okay. Wouldn't it be simpler for you to come to my house?" he asked, and immediately understood he'd said something multilayered-foolish. But what's said can't be unsaid.

"Arad! I'm not... A letter is romantic, interesting," she was offended.

"My fault, I'm being foolish, tired, under the impression of time with you. It's like a dream. A golden dream. Thank you, Simsi."

"It was good."

"Well, until we meet."

"Until we meet, Arad."

Someone Invisible

Simsana looked at the door firmly closed by Arad, spun two or three times without involving legs in the movement, flicked tail, smiled to herself, and then transformed into the very picture of adult seriousness and entered the main room. Her mentor pointed toward the balneum—go, wash and make yourself pretty. No rejoicing, but—it seemed—no anger either. Simsana knew when Miresli was truly angry. Simsana went and did everything as required. Sometimes she washed with water and sighed, pressing the moisture to her cheeks. Sometimes she smiled at something (someone) invisible. Once she bit her lip with her fangs, spun around a couple times, and also looked at her legs. Many times she touched her torn ear, and because of it decided not to submerge her head in the bathing barrel.

She returned to the living quarters, climbed the ladder to her room, dried herself there, and came in just a nightgown straight to her mentor, who was rewinding a long cord that was given to females in labor—one end in their hands, the other suspended from the ceiling (it helps them, gives them something to hold). The mentor ordered even this washed, along with a host of other linens, unbraiding it first. She pointed: no-no, go to your room, I'll come soon.

And she came soon. Vaalu-Miresli sat Vaalu-Simsana by the huge mirror near the bed—the acolyte herself ended up on the edge, and the mentor behind her on the bed, legs tucked under. Vaalu-Miresli had also brought all sorts of things: kiri salve, alcohol, needles, a knife, a razor and frightening black powder, and various other things, and took a long time arranging it all on the nearby table.

And so they looked at themselves in this mirror: first seriously-glorious Vaalu-Simsana, then behind her—concentratedly-tired Vaalu-Miresli. The mentor examined the ear, touched it, looked at her disciple in the mirror and slightly raised her chin and adjusted the position of her hand. Then began looking at the ear again.

"Tell me."

"It was because of me," Simsana placed palm on her chest for a moment.

"Fire-clear. What happened?"

"I put him to sleep," Simsana stared at herself in the mirror, "with a sleep engram, and fell asleep myself."

"As if you didn't know that's possible, right? What a surprise. And why?" the mentor took salve on her fingers and examined the ear rather critically.

"To practice such gifts of spirit on a lion on occasion—that, I'll tell you," the mentor applied it to her ear carefully, "is extravagant."

"We started talking about it, he started it all. He asked."

"Ah, sure, if he asked," Miresli drawled with sarcastic seriousness, "then how could you refuse, indeed."

"Mentor..." Simsana looked down.

"Don't press your ears! I'm... Oh, Simsan," Miresli spread her hands and looked at her in the mirror, "I don't even know if there's any point stitching this. Could make it worse. So you'll be like this now, with a split ear. We'll see how it heals."

"Like the lionesses of Vaal-Suungs of antiquity," Simsana smiled. "It'll be a memory."

"Oh yes. He'll bite your head off, and you'll say that he—poor thing—was very hungry," Miresli smiled helplessly, ironically.

"How would I say anything without a head."

The mentor shook her head. *Lost! Completely spoiled!* Suddenly she proclaimed intimidatingly, coating the Mistress of Life ring with alcohol.

"You both watch yourselves!"

Simsana understood everything.

"Mentor, he's good."

"Good... They're all good. You mustn't indulge him so much. Know honor. Sometimes you need to show your claws to a male."

"He does appeal to mentor, doesn't he?" Simsana fidgeted impatiently, starting to smile.

Vaalu-Miresli didn't answer and kept rubbing the ring as if it were the most important thing in the world.

"I think that's a 'yes,'" Simsana said, and even more to herself than to her mentor, and even raised an eyebrow while the mentor wasn't looking.

"I already said: he's useful to you," the mentor stopped rubbing the ring with alcohol and began rubbing it with salve, "like that. Even to me, to some extent. You learn with him, I do my work."

"This is learning, as mentor said?"

"Yes, of course. Look what he does with you, how much of this... wildness he has. Excellent young lion to learn how to handle them, and you already need to. Hah, I thought: 'I'll let her go, she needs to learn, and the young lion is of good family, let her try it.' She comes back—like from war."

"Mentor did say that relations with lions are like war, and that I have weapons, and..." Simsana laughed.

"Right, right," Vaalu-Miresli agreed with something, though it wasn't even clear with what exactly.

Having prepared the ring, the mentor brought the candle closer and began heating a good awl on it.

"So will you tell me: what about the ring?"

"He did it. But I'm at fault."

It seemed after these words Miresli barely held back laughter.

"If I'm being frank," Simsana continued anyway, even crossing one leg over the other and leaning back with her palms on the bed, "if completely frank, I licked his neck, and from the feeling, mentor knows, his hand jerked and the ring caught the earring. He has such a family signet ring with a shield on it," Simsana tapped her fingers.

"Well, and where did you sleep? Not at his place, surely?"

"On the Height, on the mountain."

Vaalu-Miresli was silent.

"So many questions," she moved her ears and stopped heating the awl, "but I won't insist anymore... you should have all sorts of interesting secrets, right? At least you didn't freeze there?"

"No, Arad got a flag," Simsana sighed, "and we slept in it."

"So, even more questions now. And you were so eager to go to the disciplinary! You know, when I was a stalla, I only saw mentors, classes, and my sisters. And you two are doing everything you dare. I hope no one saw you."

"All for the glory of Suungs, mentor," Vaalu-Simsana joked.

"For the glory of Suungs," Vaalu-Miresli answered absolutely seriously.

The awl was ready, and Simsana kept her eyes open as her mentor simply and swiftly pierced her ear, then deftly threaded in the iron ring (not purely iron, of course). Simsana bared her teeth and gave one quiet growl, but that was all.

"What did you tell him about your past?" Her mentor twisted the ring mercilessly.

"About the orphanage, about dad... about mooom..." Simsana answered through a pained exhale, and now she did close her eyes, her tail striking the floor. "About my nurse."

"About the bloodline papers?" Her mentor released her ear and snuffed the candle.

"I said they found them next to me."

"That's not what I mean. You know what I'm asking."

"No, I didn't tell him. Why would he need to know that."

"You certain?" her mentor pressed.

"Certain."

Vaalu-Miresli raised a finger.

"I forgot to warn you: under no circumstances tell him. At least not until I say you can. Promise?"

"Yes, mentor. May I ask why?"

She answered evenly: "His father is a judge. Judges decide all such matters involving birth certificates and Ancestral Law. Unlikely, but if you bring it up, Arad might think you've decided to use him."

Simsana touched her ear cautiously, thinking. Then she understood.

"Of course! I completely understand, mentor."

Then she thought a bit more.

"But actually... does mentor truly intend to approach Arad's father?"

"I'm considering it," her mentor answered, and her ear twitched along with the corner of her mouth.

"He knows about me. His father, I mean. Perhaps he doesn't like it. That could complicate everything, if not ruin it entirely."

This pushed Miresli past her patience, despite the observation's perfect accuracy.

"Simsana, you're fifteen! Soon you'll be sixteen, and your Coming of Age shortly after that. We need to do something about your papers. I've searched everywhere, run myself off my paws. Our options are melting like snow in Khustru. I can't trust anyone..." Baring her teeth, Miresli shook her head in angry refusal. "No one!"

"Perhaps we should still go to Farmountains, where I was born?"

"No, that would accomplish nothing, just waste of time," her mentor answered bitterly. "No one knew your parents there. Your mother simply gave birth to you there and stayed a couple of days—that's all. I've told you this already. Perhaps Nergim is our chance; at least it's worth trying." She sat down beside her disciple, and now they both gazed into the mirror.

"So what, the dreamers' mirror?" Simsana asked the mirror, carefree, not sharing her mentor's anxieties. "Will you walk me through the tree tonight?"

"When did you last dreamwalked? Three days ago?" Vaalu-Miresli's ears pricked forward.

"Yes."

"Then not tonight. Has Vaal come in your dreams?"

"It's been ten days now... Or even twenty," Simsana reflected.

Vaalu-Miresli nodded. They sat in silence.

"Can Arad's father help me?"

"We'll see," Miresli sighed.

"What makes Arad's father different from the other judges?" Simsana asked.

"Nothing, as far as I know. They're all Doctrine here, none of them want anything to do with us. Nergim is an outright anvaalist."

"Arad too?" Simsana asked calmly. "Perhaps mentor sensed something?"

"I don't know," her mentor said, gazing into the mirror, smoothing her disciple's shoulder. "Ask him yourself."

"Why bother," Simsana shrugged. "It would be a foolish question. If he wants to tell me, he'll tell me. He's a true Suung, and that's all that matters. The truth of Vaal's faith is in him, whatever he might think."

She added:

"Actually, Arad told me his father doesn't care who he sees. Honestly, I couldn't tell if that was true or just... He said it so confidently," she sighed.

Her mentor looked at her disciple, rubbed her nose, then again, and again.

"Fine," she nodded. "You find out. Feel things out when you're with him next time. Ask around about what his family thinks."

"Mentor believes his mother and father attach importance to this?"

"I'm telling you: find out. Find out everything," Vaalu-Miresli pressed.

"But what... what if they're angry, or against it?" Simsana began stroking her ear.

"You don't want to know, Simsana, I understand. But you'll have to find out."

"So what then? Will mentor forbid me from seeing him?"

"Nooo... No. I can't, not anymore," Vaalu-Miresli answered. "You, here's what you do: find out from Arad what the mood is there, and tell me everything. Then I'll consider whether it's worth asking Nergim for a meeting. Like that, something like that. You, just... I'll warn you when we have time, you let him know, he'll come. And don't go anywhere with him—stay here," she tapped the wooden floor of the room.

"But what if he wants to take me somewhere?"

"He won't want to. We'll talk later, I'll help you prepare," Miresli said and gave a sweet, fanged yawn, then licked her chops. "You stay here, you surrender, then you circle around that question and attend with empathy. Only not before—after. Understood?" She touched her disciple.

"Yes."

Miresli nodded, smoothed her disciple's shoulder.

"I think I'll sit a while, drop into aumlan," Simsana said.

Her mentor kissed her near the ear ("Just don't touch it," she whispered) and left the room, taking everything she'd brought. Simsana listened for what her mentor was doing in the house. Seemed she'd gone out. She took up a claw file, filed her claws (essential practice for Mistresses of Life), watching herself in the mirror: straight on, now three-quarters, now from the other side, head higher, lower. Give me a seductive look—no, ugh—a hint of seduction, there, more, there's a hint of a hint of seduction, there. Fine, let's try not so direct then, let's try enchantment.

"Get away from me," she theatrically pushed at someone invisible. "Scoundrel. Scum. Villain," she accused the mirror terribly, as if conjuring whoever lurked behind it to be a villain. "Ravisher."

She swung a clawed hand at someone.

"Tormenter. I don't want to. I don't want to!"

She wrapped her arms around herself, covered herself with her tail.

"You want me? Un-want me then! Suffer. Suffffer."

And she bared her fangs, but it came out not frightening, no—something else entirely.

Wrong Scent

When Arad dragged himself home in his remarkable state, his father had already left for work, and that was good—he didn't want questioning from him right now. The house stood in quiet, morning sunlight pouring through the windows; a promise of a good day.

His mother and the servant were already worried, in great distress—he found them in the kitchen. But Arad calmed the lionesses as best he could (and he could), and told them what was what: he'd been at the fair, as it turned out, walked around, danced with whoever happened into the dance, watched the acrobats, everything was excellent; then he ended up near the Height because he needed to get to a certain place (he'd made plans with friends), and there some completely non-local types decided to test their teeth on him. And he had to fight! And actually everything was excellent, and then he wandered around until morning—yes, his fault, he hadn't warned them, he repented. The pasna wasn't lost, mama, the pasna is safe, it's with hamanu Maashi, she'll return it, probably. And if not—he'll go get it. That's just how it happened, oh those dances. And the cart, mama, isn't lost either, it's with the Marsan-Ashnari family, I'll retrieve it.

Well, he'd explained himself, more or less, and even ate.

And went off and slept with enormous pleasure through half the day.

He got up only for the midday meal, and in the dining room it turned out to be just the two of them, him and mama (his brothers had gone off with mother's brother on something he'd called 'hunting'). Mama said nothing at first. But her silence was so eloquent that...

"Arad, hamanu Maashi came by, brought your clothes," mama began—not right away, but a little later, when he'd already eaten through half of the enormous lion's portion.

...well then. What did you expect? Need to steer this into my channel, seize the initiative. Ah, and yes: boundless self-confidence.

"Yes, she helped me out."

Aevsuga poured herself diluted wine from the carafe.

"You're being rather quiet, not telling me how the fair went."

Mom is a lioness, and they always attack from the flanks. So you have to strike at the front.

"I imagine hamanu Maashi brought more than just clothes," Arad said with a smirk.

"I imagine so."

"And what did she tell mama?"

"Arad, you know what. Now all of Gallen knows about your infatuation with a midwife's apprentice."

"Mom, she's not a midwife's apprentice. She's a disciple of a Mistress of Life," he froze, staring at a point while chewing. "And you know that." He looked at his mother.

Colder, calmer, more deliberate!

"I am a judge's wife, Arad, I'm supposed to speak that way," Aevsuga yielded. "That's how father speaks, and I must too. I don't understand why you're baring your teeth like that"—and here she advanced.

Come at it more cleverly.

"If she were a midwife's apprentice, I wouldn't have anything to do with her—that would be outright disgrace for our line. But as it is, she's Ashai-Keetrah. Suungs of any strata are approved to have relations with Ashai-Keetrah."

Aevsuga sighed, turned her goblet.

"I don't mind you learning about life," a gesture of uncertainty in the air. "But Arad, all around will think you're an unserious lion." She pointed at him. "Wine-juice? I'll allow it."

"I'll have some, let mama pour."

"You're a serious lion," mama insisted, "and a lion like that always needs to think ahead, and always needs a worthy match. It's those Legate lions, drengirs who have no time to settle down, various rogues, lions of the free arts, scholars—they can afford not to think about it. But for serious lions, a good lineage-alliance is valued, and the earlier you build prospects and choose a lioness of the finest breeding, the better."

"I'm a serious lion, mama, I'm very serious, extraordinarily so, even too much!" Arad suddenly flared.

"I know, I know," mama said placatingly.

Feeling guilty at that conciliatory tone, Arad leaned back in his chair and said calmly:

"Mom, we're just having fun. Mama knows how it is: Ashai-Keetrah, they're here and there, they're free in their behavior, you can spend time with them without special obligations. It doesn't commit you to anything—mom understands. We'll mess around together a little, then go our separate ways. With them it's inevitable anyway."

"Ugh. 'Having fun, mess around together.' What are you, Khustrian?" His mother tried to shame him.

"Not Khustrian, mama, but a tail-groper," he decided that since he was being all male about it—there it is.

"Weh, vulgarity doesn't suit you," his mother waved him off and crossed her arms.

"I'll tell mom directly: I don't want to overthink this. I want to chase maassi, catch them and sink my claws in. Whoever I see, I snatch. I can't help myself," Arad felt the fur rising on his scruff and his blood warming—it was a flash of aggression, irritation—"and they won't escape me, just let them trrrry..."

He barely held himself back from slamming his fist on the table.

He closed his eyes. He felt so awkward he could have jumped out the window.

"I was told that growing up is no simple matter for young lions," his mother sighed. "And I've seen it myself. But let's think about how to do everything sensibly, not this 'whoever I see, I snatch' business, as you put it."

"Well fine, I'm listening: how then? No-no, not like that," he waved his hand. "Wrong question. Let me ask: what am I doing wrong right now? What am I doing that's bad?"

"It's very good that you're having relations with lionesses, I'm only glad for it, believe me. A lion without experience, he's, no-no... I won't say what we called ones like that at fansinall," she suddenly laughed.

"Let mama tell me," Arad grew interested, leaning all the way forward.

"No-no, that's not for you. Lioness chatter, what would you need it for."

"Oh please, mama. It's interesting, I'll know more."

"You don't need that. So look, here's what's bad: you've gotten involved with an Ashai-Keetrah knowing that father is a judge in Doctrine. Besides, you and papa," she tapped her head, "are lions of intellect, of learning—you don't accept faith like ordinary, uneducated Suungs. This could damage his reputation, raise unnecessary questions, hint at discord in the family. It... weakens him. Besides, you should agree with me that good opportunities shouldn't be missed, and you have a good opportunity to join in a good lineage-alliance." Mama emphasized the good words heavily.

"Mama, I feel like a lioness being married off. It's very funny—I'll even venture to say, humiliating."

"If you were a young lioness, we wouldn't be explaining ourselves here. We'd understand each other with a single glance." Mama tilted her head to the side. "I don't wish you ill, only the very best."

"Fine, let's say I'm being foolish about the lineage-alliance, though it should be forgivable—I'm fifteen..." Arad honestly considered the arguments.

"Almost sixteen."

"...but I'm not a judge. I'm allowed to have dealings with Ashai-Keetrah. I'm just a Suung like everyone else. Mama not only believes in Vaal, but we even had a great-aunt in our line who was Ashai-Keetrah. Is that really fair?"

Mama seemed to grow seriously thoughtful and crossed her arms tightly.

"Think about this. Remind me, what's her name?"

"Vaal-Simsana."

"Is that what you call her? Surely not with a nomen?"

"No. Simsana, Simsi."

"Look here: Vaalu-Simsana also knows it's better not to have relations with you. She knew your father is a judge and in Doctrine, didn't she?"

"She knew," Arad admitted. "At first she even refused me an occasion."

"There," his mother seized on it. "So she, and even more so her mentor, decided for some reason that it was worth having relations with you. Despite the complications."

"Because I am who I am. She liked me," Arad said confidently.

"Arad, don't flatter yourself so, don't be enchanted. If her mentor had said no, she wouldn't have allowed you to so much as look at her. But her mentor said 'yes' for some reason. And that puzzles me."

"Mama doesn't know her," Arad smirked. "Simsana simply decided—"

"You don't know them, Arad!" Aevsuga flared, sharply adjusting her sleeves. "You don't know that Ashai-Keetrah have prescriptions for how to conduct themselves, and they know how, believe me, to behave as their faith and will commands them. They don't do anything casually, just like that, because they feel like it. Vaalu-Simsana couldn't have had relations with you without her mentor's permission—remember that."

"Let's say so, well, and what of it? It means the mentor liked me too."

Mama's muzzle furrowed; she exhaled with effort, snorted.

"Did they want something from you? Ask for anything? Bring up the subject of... I don't know... something they need?" She leaned toward her son.

"No, mom!" Arad spread his arms in perfect sincerity. "Not once, mom! No! You don't know her. If you'd spoken with her just once, if you'd seen her beside me," he struck his chest, "you'd understand that she's—" He held up his palm before him, as if catching hold of something.

"Are you in love with her?"

He looked at his mother. Then smirked, clasped his palms behind his scruff, ruffled behind his ears.

"Outright in love? Not just going out, playing around, yes?" And it seemed to Arad that eager little sparks lit up in mama's eyes.

Don't give in, he thought. Don't surrender. Guard her. Mine. My possession. Mine.

"Nah. No. Taken with her, I admit. But I'm not capable of chasing after a female, no. Anyway, it doesn't matter. She gave me the Game quickly, just like that—" he snapped his fingers. "That's why I'm taken with her: because with her it's easy. That's all there is to it."

"So it won't be any trouble not to have dealings with her? If necessary?"

Arad smirked again, clasped his legs behind his scruff again, ruffled behind his ears again.

"It'll be hard to give up an easy Game."

Mama sighed—oh, these son-ish mannerisms. Nothing like Nergim-Sinay at all. Interesting why, yes, how strange.

"Then there's a better proposal: Malstruna-Lenayna. Try approaching her. Believe me, if all goes well, she'll be interested in you and will meet your desires. You'll calm down, lionesses will leave your thoughts. You'll have both time and place for developing your relationship. Believe me, long-term, stable relations have their advantages."

"I don't want to limit myself."

"Don't be petulant. Think, Arad," she placed her palm on his. "Look: she, Lenayna, carried your letter—"

"Which I didn't write, please note."

"Your father's letter," Aevsuga patiently corrected herself. "You'll be able to study at Marna University. And think: why waste it on architecture? Such opportunities! Papa would have been happy to have them. Think how good it would be: you'll finish gymnasium, go together with Lenayna to Marna—she has a great-grandmother there, so you'll settle in well—and you'll begin studying law, Arad. You'll return here, and continue your father's line of service. Think what a fine prospect."

"Law?" He was surprised, but not very.

"Father will talk with you about that, about your choice of profession. He's wanted to for a long time, I'll honestly confess. Consider: Marna University—perhaps you'll become a judge? Perhaps you'll change your mind about becoming an architect and continue father's work? Why lose such enormous opportunities at Marna University? How well it all fits together: Lenayna, her great-grandmother, father's friend in Marna. You're the first-born son."

"Grand plans," he spread his hands. "And they depend on such trifles—like, what if Lenayna doesn't want me?"

"She'll want you. She will. Don't worry." Aevsuga closed her eyes, smiling.

"And what if I don't want her?" Arad turned capricious, in mischief.

"And what's wrong with her?" Mama seemed genuinely surprised. "You've seen her."

"Seen her, yeah. I don't know. Wrong scent," he said, and laughed at himself.

"Well then, go and try," his mother hinted with a smirk, as if she'd seen right through him, and poured him some wine-juice. "Maybe it's the right one."

"She's not even here, in Gallen."

"She'll be here," mama pointed at the floor of their house, "in three days. I'll invite the Insai family to us."

She left her son alone with himself, and here Arad remembered something.

Actually, Vaalu-Miresli had mentioned she wanted to ask him for something, but needed to 'see him better' first. Well... so what? Lionesses always want something in return—they want benefits and preferences, protections, gifts and attention when there's a lion nearby, don't they? They do. Such is the nature of the female. Why not, what's the problem, let her ask! Mother talks as if it's some horror. Simsana, for her part, hadn't asked for anything. (*She'll ask yet*, thought Arad, remembering certain advice from Miresli. *She'll beg me not to stop, she'll claw at the wall*—he daydreamed shamelessly, with a predatory smirk.) And even if she did ask? So what? You scratch my back, I scratch yours—what confusion or offense could there be? Let Vaalu-Miresli ask, whatever.

The day rolled unnoticed into evening, and dad came home, rather late. He was very irritated, and Arad shrank—evidently the rumors had reached him, and in some very unflattering light. It turned out—not that. It turned out:

"Desecration of an Imperial symbol!" Father roared.

Father had no concern for anything else. He was consumed by one piece of news he'd been told at the Magistrate's today: some bastards had dragged out the Imperial Banner at the Height and thrown it right on the ground—looked like they'd trampled it too. It was utterly, monstrously unheard of. Arad listened.

"Who could do such a thing? How terrible," his mother shrugged.

Good, right, need to muddy the waters, throw dust in their eyes, trample over the tracks.

"Dad, listen, I was in a fight at the Height last night."

"What?" his father asked, bewildered, knocked off his angry thoughts.

And Arad told him how last night he'd fought with some non-locals at the Height, there were many of them, six heads or four, it was dark, and they didn't do anything to him really, just tore his clothes, but that's nothing, all adolescents like him. And it was probably them who decided to pull that stunt with the banner, to laugh at Gallen and the Gallenese, and his father questioned him, and Arad answered, and swift retribution was promised, and papa promised to pass all this to the Magistrate and the guard; and moreover, to please his parents, to lead them away from himself, to stop denying and defending, to muddy the waters, to dust the air, to trample the tracks—Arad himself reminded papa that supposedly Malstruna-Lenayna was coming from Marna soon and supposedly mom wanted to invite her family to visit, and he, Arad—having thought it over—considered this a quite interesting affair, and generally it all promised new opportunities, because that's what mama says; and papa said benevolently-skeptically to Arad that the Insai family very much wants to ennoble itself and weave an alliance with a higher strata, and will perform incredible contortions for this, and all this was mama's inventions and insinuations (accustomed as she was to fansinall in-

trigues and arranging personal lives, what can you do), and also Lenayna's mother was a great friend of mama's, hence all these machinations and fabrications, but—there's no escaping it—the Insai arms trade yields substantial monetary wealth, so who knows, perhaps it's all not so bad after all, not so bad at all, even advantageous, let Arad condescend to look at this Malstruna-Lenayna if he wants, and they still had a serious conversation ahead about his future, but not today, no, probably tomorrow, and about the midwife's apprentice and questions about the fair night there were none, absolutely, which was what Arad wanted, which was what Arad had been working toward...

Right Scent

Somewhere around two days later, maybe three, when Arad went to gymnasium for the first time after the break (and this was already his final year), his father called him into the tablinium and as if in passing (which he always did for important conversations, and neither Aevsuga nor Arad liked this) began speaking about Arad's life plans. No, not about matrimonial matters or lineage contracts (in father's opinion, those would follow on their own—what a wonder, you take any female who suits by status and strata, and move on to solve the tasks of days)—but about choice of profession; and father brought down upon Arad a host of considerations and several unpleasant facts. The most unpleasant fact turned out to be that Arad had not pleased the master architect: neither in his approach to the work, nor as an apprentice (and his stunt of going to watch something being built, well that was really something), nor—most importantly—graphically. Arad, at best, drafts like a construction engineer; he's utterly unsuited to architectural drawing. The master had given him compositions of cubes, spheres, cylinders, and Arad had executed them not like an artist but like a mediocre military engineer sketching barrier diagrams. All this the master architect had secretly, regretfully, but absolutely truthfully conveyed to father.

But there's no need to despair!—father hastened to note.

At gymnasium Arad studies law. In the tablinium they read what? Correct: philosophy and law. Father sees judgeship as the family profession—yes, everyone does it this way, there are judges in the tenth generation. Arad is an anvaalist, an excellent card for entering the strata of judges, closed off to random tails—a unique quality for a unique profession; for only judges does the Empire encourage separation from the Suungs' faith (read: from the Ashai-Keetrah). And then there were those notorious capital opportunities that had so conveniently presented themselves.

There was something to think about, and Arad asked for time to reflect and catch his breath. This was definitely news, big news at that, and Arad decided simply to go to sleep—fortunately his brothers weren't home and there was no one to disturb the peace.

The next day, after gymnasium and the frenzied running races that had grown from some trivial argument, Arad, in the garden behind the house, was shooting a crossbow, made by himself, and comparing it to a real one, which his friend Atar had loaned him with great reluctance. Shooting was a pretext for reflection, a process to distract from reality (one can't just walk in

circles, really, like certain simpletons), and Arad thought about his father's words. The swings proved no trifle. In one moment he considered that father was completely right, and a new, beautiful page was opening in his life—everything new: plans, possibilities, priorities, even his image of himself. In another—that father was simply smashing everything of his, his entire nature, his entire meaning. And a multitude of thoughts in the space between these extremes...

What did a judge need, or a lion of justice generally? His mind was in order, Arad had no doubts. His sense of fairness? Tail knows, this fairness, hard to understand. Honesty? Well, sort of... Anvaalism? With anvaalism there had been problems lately, serious, no joke.

Arad grimaced, bared his teeth, but knew he'd find a solution. That's what being Arad meant.

He wasn't allowed to finish thinking: he noticed the servant carrying a small bronze table under the cherry tree, not far from him. Then she brought three semicircular chairs for lionesses. She approached him after positioning the last chair:

"Master Arad, visitors have come to mother."

"Who?"

"Insai lionesses," she whispered for some reason.

"Okay," Arad moved his ears and raised the crossbow once more.

"Mistress told me to bring a chair for Arad too."

Lion chairs are bigger and heavier, so he understood what she was getting at.

"I'll bring my own, don't trouble yourself, Sedesi," he lowered the crossbow.

She nodded—a sort of half-bow without effort, as usual—and left.

Very soon he noticed that his mom, hamanu Mirna, and a young lioness—her daughter Lenayna—were settling in at the table; about fifty paces from him. Mother looked at him, and he waved, gestured that he'd be right there. He exhaled, scratched his nose, dropped the crossbow (the homemade one) right into the grass. He should go, probably, otherwise mom would make his life miserable, and then there was the letter, and all of this, and all these matters.

Having dragged over a chair for himself, Arad dropped it without much care but greeted the lionesses of the Insai family quite politely indeed, and kissed the offered palms. Then he settled in, in the most confident and male pose circumstances would allow.

"Look, Arad, just as I told you: maassi Malstruna-Lenayna has returned to Gallen!" Mama performed extraordinary joy.

"Hamanu Aevsuga, I'd be honored with simply Lenayna," the daughter of the Insai line smiled with restraint.

Actually, hamanu Mirna had appeared in his mother's life recently, two years at most, and then suddenly—bam!—nearly every two or three days either mother or she would pay each other visits. Before this Arad had known neither her nor Lenayna; after their acquaintance he'd seen her several times, but she'd always been a sort of blank spot to him, like a friend-of-mother's daughter, something like... a relative, perhaps. They greeted each other coldly when they happened to meet, and a few times hadn't even done that, though they'd noticed each other perfectly well. Their longest interaction had been a year ago at a wedding held during Ai-Yulassai holidays for one of the sons of an acquaintance of father's (long story), where by fate's will they'd sat together briefly. He remembered her as an icy, sensible, slightly prickly lioness, but capable of conversation (if empty). He hadn't taken her to dance, and generally they'd all left that wedding early, for many reasons. After that, Arad, when necessary, occasionally recalled her in his fantasies; she'd entered the circle of lionesses one could, if need be, imagine; but with her it was difficult, as he remembered her only in very general terms, and for hot fantasies details matter.

And then—that evening at the magister's, the northern lioness, the Game fiasco—Lenayna had generally passed by his ears and eyes, except for one small detail.

"How is Marna?" mama asked with enormous interest, while meanwhile the servant brought black tea.

Since things had come to this, Arad thought, since mother had been making all manner of hints and recommendations, it was worth examining her as well as possible: who was this and what was she about. Lenayna sat to his right (round table, he opposite hamanu Mirna, Lenayna opposite his mama). First thing to note immediately: she wore a simple, fitted dress of dark blue. This simplicity was deceptive, Arad figured—it was probably not cheap, or even from Marna itself: those light, subtle patterns on it, that expensive look of the fabric. On her left palm, a gold ring, and on the same, a bracelet; the ring seemed to be a family ring, for it was a bit much for a young person of her position. On her neck, a necklace or something else, but by Naysagrian custom, her shoulders and the dress's neckline were covered by a shoulder wrap; by etiquette, she could remove it in these conditions, but Lenayna had apparently decided not to. On her classically Naysagrian ears (round, large, furless, solid-colored, golden, boring), three small rings each. (*Interesting, thought Arad, can you lick ears like that just so, with the rings?*) She definitely had a katena, visible from the belt, but from here Arad couldn't see what cords she had back there or what they signified.

Such was this maassi.

Lenayna wasn't looking at him, paid him no attention; she conducted herself entirely as if Arad didn't exist. He made use of this, gazing practically only at her, observing. He wanted to interject a remark just to see what

would happen, but couldn't choose which one (he wanted to say something at least slightly meaningful, but the discourse of the conversation allowed only the most shameless nonsense). At times it seemed she was impossibly, extraordinarily angry at him, and if he, for example, decided to touch her even on a claw, he'd instantly receive a slap or a snarl and a flash of fangs. She spoke with restraint, recalling her notorious coldness, almost without emotion, choosing her words, but expressed herself clearly, and Arad noted one detail—he liked her voice. It had an unusual texture: with an elusive flaw, sort of low, and sort of not. She gestured little, kept her legs together, crossed low and tucked beneath her.

"Oh, my ancestors, I forgot... Aevsi, my amber, there's a gift for you from Marna," Mirna suddenly interrupted her daughter's account of the Imperial gardens.

"Really?" Mama pricked her ears. "Mirni, honestly..."

"It's there, in the vestibule," Mirna tapped her head, as if everything slipped her mind.

"Then let's go look. Arad, you two chat here for now, we'll be right back."

Both mamas rose hurriedly and left together into the house, arm in arm.

Naysagrians, what are they like? Just like Lenayna: a broader muzzle, and cheekbones too, a wide nose (but a thin little chin); they're not slender, no, never; coloring—always gold, just dull gold, the sun of Suungs. And kind eyes. All Naysagrian females have, for some reason, kind, long eyes. They show anger with their muzzles, their mouths, their bodies, claws, tails—but the eyes stay kind.

At last, after his endless external study, she answered with a brief glance. Cold! Cold, she doused him with ice water. Pressed lips, formidable seriousness. Hey, he'd been promised favor—by rumors, by mama's words—everything had been presented in such a bright light. And here you are, good Suungs. She drank her tea holding the cup with both hands, as if warming herself, gazing to the side. Then suddenly she thought of something, and looked at what was in his cup, just casually, taking it by the handle and peering in; seeing emptiness, she poured him tea, a lot, threw him a lightning glance and went back to clasping her own cup, went back to looking away. This could be taken as presumptuousness even, such taking-charge while a guest, or else care (unlikely), or else following the rule that only lionesses pour for lions and serve (Andaria and Naysagri; the rest of the Empire, middle strata and above, looks on this as old-fashioned).

Probably, in response to this severe kindness, Arad should have either thanked her or started a conversation, but he didn't even know where to begin; he managed something like a nod. He simply didn't know what to do with her. He walked through the world pierced through by the arrows of another lioness; in fairness, Arad couldn't help noting that Lenayna had changed, grown up and grown prettier. She was, actually, not a bad maassi at

all. But she was clearly, clearly not well-disposed toward him—he was positively repulsive to her, her whole manner said so. It seemed she was burdened by being here, these visits, these mom's efforts (his mom Aevsuga would say 'arrangements').

Eh, what difference did it make. So he was repulsive, so fine. A pity... No, not a pity—one less problem! No, a pity in the sense that he'd thought: she'd gaze adoringly into his eyes, want his company, invisibly rub against him, such an irresistible lion he was. To be besieged by females—what could be better? Well, you can't make it worse, he thought, continuing to shamelessly study with his gaze the one they'd so eagerly encouraged upon him.

What to talk about? Not the weather. Talk at all—why bother her? One shouldn't bother anyone, it's ignoble, though profitable; one should be sincere, though that's unprofitable (probably; still unclear, we'll live and see). Ah, here's something—there's one interesting thing he could clarify, to satisfy curiosity. Can't make it worse, as noted, so why not.

"I want to ask you something."

"Yes?" She looked at him warily.

"Was it you who covered my eyes, back then, at the magister's evening?"

"What?" Into this question Lenayna poured much, much bewildered, defensive contempt.

Arad actually calmed down, having received her response; there was definitely no point in worrying or fussing. After all, if Lenayna had ever been disposed toward him, that was certainly no longer the case. Simsana! Come here. I want you on my lap right here, right now, all mine, all of you mine. We'd show her, just imagine, we'd show her what passion is, what love's arrows are—Lenayna would simply weep that they have this, and she has nothing.

"You remember when we finished the game of flis? I sat down and started counting, and someone covered my eyes with their palms... with claws, like so. I thought it was you."

"No," Lenayna answered with defiance, looking at him again. "That wasn't me."

"And who was it—did you see?"

"No, I don't remember. Why are you asking about this?" She was bringing the cup to her lips for the third time now, and still couldn't manage to drink.

Time to show off a little, what of it. Let her hate him to white-hot fury.

"The palms turned out to be very tender. And the little claws—sharp."

It seemed Lenayna lost her composure; something was happening inside her. She set the long-suffering cup on the table. Then picked it up again. Turned away from him; an invisible tail twitched beneath her dress.

"Is that so? You should have turned around—you'd have known who," she said, gazing at the horizon of sky.

"But I couldn't, that's the game."

"Those who dare—can. You could have turned around and looked, instead of going to the garden to find that... nooorthern... patriiician."

Oh, how much venom was in that. Lioness-Lenayna, surely, if it were possible, would have sunk her fangs into someone's neck (and whose?), blood would have sprayed, oof.

"I don't break Game rules, any of them. If I'd won anyone else—you, for example—I'd went with you."

Perhaps that was too much, and Arad felt it. He'd deliberately chosen that awful word order ("...if I'd won...") because he wanted to tease her, and he didn't even know why he wanted to.

"You, for example! What made you think I'd have gone to the garden? Naysagrians, real ones, don't do that, understand, nai!" Her ears pressed flat. "You'd have seen one thing: me leaving for the house."

"You don't like me?"

"No!"

Arad spread his hands.

"Pity."

She breathed deeply and waited to see if he'd say another nasty thing, or if that was all. For some time she sat completely motionless. Cherry leaves stirred, cool evening breeze, lovely. Arad touched the edge of the tablecloth.

He thought he should say something conciliatory.

"Thank you for the letter to Marna." Yes, that was worth Arad saying. It didn't really matter what came of that letter.

"You're welcome," she answered, and suddenly looked puzzled, frowned: "Hey, what are you doing?"

"Pouring you tea." Arad was indeed doing this: he'd taken the teapot and was filling her cup to the brim, though he spilled a bit on the tablecloth.

He wanted to do something else conciliatory like that.

"Lions don't serve anything for lionesses, especially not tea!" She tried to take the teapot from him.

It didn't work. Arad filled her cup to the top, even overflowing, and leaned back with it into his chair.

"See? Dared to break the rules, and look: you won't even let me pour tea," he said mockingly.

Something serious happened to her then. Lenayna smiled, but somehow very carelessly, and picked up her cup with great caution; spilled a little on the ground, deliberately, to drain the excess; and then—here Arad was truly caught off guard—just as slowly, calmly, even solemnly, she raised the cup to the top of his head, between his ears, and calmly, slowly, methodically poured the tea onto him.

Warm streams ran down his muzzle, the bridge of his nose, behind his ears. If one approached the things of this world without prejudice, Arad even derived unusual pleasure from this—it's not every day that a maassi pours

warm, pleasant liquid on your head, out of nowhere, with such a serious, concentrated muzzle expression. For a moment he closed his eyes. Of course he didn't move. No, this was bliss. Funny to say, but true.

He opened his eyes and looked at her, feeling drops trickling from his chin. Lenayna had already sat back in her chair, but it seemed to be dawning on her; her eyes slowly, inexorably dimmed with the horror of disgrace. Of scandal. What's the worst thing in a life of Naysagrian female? To cause a scandal.

"A nice cup of tea," Arad said.

Here he noticed something out of the corner of his eye.

He had to decide on an action or do nothing. Arad decided instantly.

After all, lionesses need saving, and especially ones who pour tea on your head.

They'll come in handy.

"Just don't turn around."

Lenayna didn't, but she let out a gasp of fear.

"Father is coming this way. Seems he saw everything. And my mama, and yours."

"Are you serious?"

"Sit on my lap," he commanded quietly.

Lenayna jumped—actually jumped—onto his lap, and so deftly and successfully, as if her whole life she'd done nothing but jump onto males' laps.

"Hold me."

He was embraced that very instant.

"We pretend we're taken with each other," he looked at her, and she at him. "Look only at me. When they approach," his voice grew quieter, "you'll hear them and become embarrassed and sit back down. My father has no sense of humor. There could have been a scandal, but this way he won't dare." He was almost whispering now. "He's coming. He's dense. He's very dense, Lenayna. Be ashamed!" he hissed.

"What?" The exhale of a frightened lioness.

"Turn around."

It was a somewhat amusing sight, but only if Arad hadn't known what charge it carried. Papa was hurrying toward the table, mother behind him in some half-attempt to stop him, behind her hurried Lenayna's mother—neither alive nor dead.

The maassi obediently hopped off his lap and darted back to her chair.

"Malstruna!" She was first to pounce on her daughter, but only verbally—she didn't even step out from behind Arad's father.

Lenayna looked in Arad's direction, but down.

"We seem to have come at rather the wrong moment," mama said awkwardly.

"And why are you wet, Arad?" Nergim demanded, in a very judicial voice.

"Oh, I was drinking tea, dad, and spilled it."

"Is that so?" Nergim stood three paces from him, looking only at him. "It seemed to me it was poured on you."

"Papa," he exhaled, with an artificial sigh of irritation and disappointment, "it's a game. You don't guess the word—they pour tea on you, sherish, or wine, whatever. That's what youth play now. It would take long to explain." He made an awkward muzzle: *you're all really quite untimely here.*

"Dear, might I have your attention for a small moment?" Aevsuga said sweetly to Nergim, and from this Arad understood that mother was in perfect, white fury.

"Guh," he grunted, strangled, as always happened when he feared mama's disfavor, and they left for that small moment.

Lenayna's mother instantly took her seat, watching them go.

"Malstruna!" she called her daughter by her first, 'mother's' name once more, this time in outright despair, as if she'd committed the most irreparable crime of all irreparable crimes.

"Really, we were playing an amusing game, hamanu Mirna," Arad raised his palms. "My papa simply didn't understand."

"Oh, how awkward." Hamanu Mirna hid her muzzle in her palms.

"We thought you'd gone for a long time, and..." Lenayna herself suddenly added, and didn't finish.

"We did go, but sir Nergim came back, and..." her mother explained, and also didn't finish.

"Don't worry, I'll explain everything to papa myself. Later. He's somewhat old-fashioned." Arad spoke with deliberate calm. "Don't fret, the tea continues."

And poured himself more tea.

"You're wet," Lenayna turned her attention to him, as if coming alive, stirring.

"I'll be right back, I'll bring something to dry off with, right back," Lenayna's mother vanished in an instant, also coming alive and stirring.

From somewhere a strong, already cool wind blew (breathing of the Season of Waters), and quite enough of one to toss Lenayna's dress, the cups, the spoons. The teapot nearly fell; Arad caught it and took it in his hands. Lenayna meanwhile was searching for something: on the table, under the table, on the chairs—everywhere in the vicinity; but couldn't find it. The gust subsided.

Then she turned, ears pricked. Having made sure no one was there, she stood and approached the relaxedly sitting Arad and took the teapot from him; he surrendered it without resistance this time. Then she stood at his left side, arms crossed, and performed an intricate thing: touched his leg with her

knee,. To confess, Arad didn't understand this gesture the first time; but understood she was demanding something. She did it again, and the second time she was looking toward the house, and her fingers were drumming lightly on her own shoulder.

He was supposed to figure out what all this meant, for lions must figure things out, but Arad somehow couldn't, and had doubts, so:

"That's sweet, but what are you doing?"

She sighed, looking at him (into his eyes), then lower (at his stomach), then back to his eyes. No, she wouldn't say what she wanted.

Arad finally understood: the Naysagrian wanted to sit on his lap. But she didn't dare do it herself (shameless)—he had to seat her himself (what could I do?). Yes well, save a lioness—be prepared for the consequences.

Damn it all. In the end, lions have a duty, written nowhere and spoken by no one, and Arad felt it. Really, you extend them a helping hand—and they're already on your neck.

Rubbing his nose, he drew her by the waist with his arm, not roughly, but gently, even carefully. She slowly sat on his leg, higher up, along the full length of his thigh. First sensation: pleasant weight, the softness of her body, warmth. She unhurriedly, proprietarily untied her shoulder wrap and covered all of him, his whole head. Her hands passed over his ears, mane, the back of his head, cheekbones, temples, scruff, neck; her hands not very tender, not too gentle—they were precisely kind. The most suspicious thing was exactly that Lenayna was a good lioness, and Arad understood this through her hands, and this understanding could not have been given him by endless conversations, by others' words, by nothing. The wrap introduced him to her scent, but Arad, though already experienced, couldn't directly compare, for her scent was mixed with some oils and fragrances. And again a fact: even the oils couldn't prevent him from understanding that the scent was right. He couldn't wriggle out of it now, couldn't say the scent was wrong. No. Everything about it was in order.

Malstruna-Lenayna dried him off completely, but that wasn't all—she, half-rising, took more of her dress's hem, and without hesitation wiped his nose, chin, his whole muzzle with that very hem.

All eastern Suungs know that a lioness's hem has power—but only if she has borne children. It can remove fear, insomnia, headache, anxieties, stammering, fatigue, ringing in the ears, various fits, panics, trembling hands, nausea, even hangovers (and something else). So mama had done for Arad when he was sick, and when he'd been frightened by a dog as a small cub, and for his brothers, and for father, and for some cub on the street. But what would happen if a maassi did this—Arad didn't know.

Arad had been wet, became dry, and Lenayna tossed the wrap over her shoulder. She held onto his neck, her legs tucked up, and her weight came to rest almost entirely on him.

Oh, what a one. Heavier than Simsana, he thought.

"That's your dress, though."

"It's clean, like the *khinastra*," she answered.

"But it'll get dirty, wet. Don't you mind?"

"No," she paused, "it'll wash out."

She straightened his clothes; Arad always had the habit of wearing his lacerna-cloak's fibula right on his tunic, simply and carelessly hooking it to the collar, especially like this, near the house. She went and without hesitation unclasped it from him and set it on the table.

"Seems we've met properly now," Arad spoke the truth. Now they couldn't receive any reproaches from their mothers: this was their doing. Neither could say the evening had been for nothing.

"Seems so, Arad."

He looked to see if there was anything to gnaw on there, on the table, but there was nothing.

"And so, won't you ask about the tea stunt?" Her voice rang with challenge.

"Why? It was taily. I'd even do it again." Arad, looking at her (not into her eyes, just at all of her, still studying), noticed a strange, small scar on her chin, to the left.

"We could do it again," she smoothed her hand down his back, with that silent, mutually understood apology of needing to check—wet or not.

"Father will scold us for wasting Kafnian tea," he shrugged.

"He'd begrudge you being taily?" For perhaps the first time, Lenayna laughed.

Arad thought about what to answer. Smirked. He wanted to tell Lenayna that because of this stunt father would definitely dislike her, at least for a time, though dad was rather grudge-bearing—or more precisely, just bearing-in-mind generally; he remembered things well, even too well.

"The main thing is you don't mind. Well, shall we do it again?"

He thought she'd demur and laugh it off, but:

"Let's, but sometime later," Lenayna said with dignity.

"Agreed. What else shall we do?"

"And what do you want?" Lenayna became very occupied, tying her *khinastra* back over her shoulders.

Arad decided not to be petty. It was completely pointless to stop what had started, or generally to pretend nothing was happening. He thought: ought to put his hands to work, after all she'd already done whatever she pleased today. Then thought: there's time. He could still do nothing with her, though two lionesses seemed better than one (and three better than two, presumably).

In the end everything went more or less sensibly: he simply held her slightly above the waist (but proprietarily: having slipped his palm under the

maassi's belt—this was far from a cautious holding-at-the-waist), while with the other, his left hand, he scratched the chair with his claws.

"We could douse each other with tea, or whatever you like. You could finally lose to me at flis. I want everything."

"But not all at once," she answered him, and looked toward the house.

But no one was coming from there, and generally it was as if everyone had died.

"Of course, Lenayna. Even I can't do everything simultaneously."

"Leni. You can call me Leni," she looked back at him.

Arad looked closely. She had different eyes. Yellow-brown, Naysagrian—they were kind, and not in the simple sense of yielding and mild character, but kind in the large sense: in the sense of her worth as a lioness. She was suited to everything a good Suung female should be suited for. Probably, Arad thought, one like this really would be very easy to marry—hard to go wrong. Then you'd only need to watch what you yourself were capable of and what you yourself amounted to, and she'd manage to be there beside you somehow.

He knew he could do this, and even should, taking into account everything today. But he hesitated. Do it, don't do it? Ah, damn it all—better to do and regret than not do and regret again (either way it's bad, good won't come of it—never and nowhere).

"Leni, now we'll start with something."

"But we're just getting acquainted. It's not an occasion," she said, in the old Naysagrian speech: not 'date' but 'occasion.'

Teasing! That's the worst thing you can do with Arad.

"You're right," he gripped her by the belt, by the waist harder, much harder; felt the katena cord digging into his hand. No, she was sitting wrong. He took her under the knees and quickly swung her legs onto his other knee; now she sat fully on him, not halfway. She made something like an 'oh,' as if she hadn't expected such force. Now he had to compel her to this; interesting—how? Probably just put a hand on her neck, behind her neck, something like that, or to her cheek, behind her ear, and demand the meeting of breaths that way. Nah, no, he needed to slip his hand under something, needed to get beneath something of hers, so she'd have no doubts who she was dealing with. He didn't glide over—Arad didn't like that—he went under.

He passed his palm under the khinastra to her neck and drew her to him, to learn her breath, to taste it.

It was a small kiss of acquaintance: they met, the warmth of the kiss, he licked her on the lips, she did the same, and even harder. It turned out there was so much alike: Leni melted the same way Simsi did; she closed her eyes and pressed her ears the same way Simsi did. But there was difference too: he sensed she was calmer; he caught a different scent. To understand it, he demanded she give him her neck, nudging her chin up with his nose, and

she, strangely enough, let him do it. Yes, it was right, undoubtedly, but different from Simsana's. Simsana was honey, the Season of Rising; she was lighter, more delicate. In Lenayna's scent there were no hints—it was a simple, clear, familiar call. Simsana's scent you could breathe in for eternity; this one—probably—you could, finally, be sated by.

Time to look at each other, in aftermath. Arad discovered he'd opened his eyes first; hard to tell, perhaps Leni had been waiting for more. At last she looked, and smiled, very lightly; he noticed an incongruity, an asymmetry, and only now understood that she'd always smiled, and frowned, and been serious unevenly. His palm moved on its own to touch the scar on her chin; Lenayna understood that Arad had inevitably noticed it, looked at his hand, then at him. Arad didn't stop his investigation, and it turned out that right here, right here, she had a strange hollow, as if she were missing a whole row of lower teeth, or...

"Don't. Don't touch," she turned away.

"Sorry," he stopped.

"Don't."

"Simsana, I didn't mean to cause you—" Arad began, and suddenly clenched his teeth tight.

"Sim-sa-na?" Lenayna looked at him, squinting slightly, ears pricked.

Yes, Arad, thought Arad. Yes. Yes. Nothing to say. Well done.

For several moments she looked at him. Arad said nothing—he understood that asking forgiveness was useless. This was truly unforgivable; you could do anything, but not this. And yet it was exactly this that had happened. Eh...

"Let go," she demanded, and made an attempt to rise.

"No, stay," he gripped her.

"Let go, I'm serious."

"So am I."

Lenayna looked toward the house—their mothers were already coming, both of them.

"They're coming, you'll have. To. Let. Me. Go," Lenayna tried to break free again.

Which Arad did: after all, she couldn't sit on his lap openly—improper.

Having seated herself in her chair, to his right, she crossed her hands, then gave him a palpable kick to the shin.

"Make sure you don't call her Lenayna, got it?" He saw her Naysagrian eyes; she was trying, probably, to be formidable, but actually came out so attractive.

Arad wanted to look guiltily down, at the legs of her chair, at the grass, and explain what a fool he was and beg for mercy. But some sixth sense told him he mustn't do that—he needed to devour her with his eyes, needed to make her avert her gaze, needed to be right even in this wrong situation. He

got what he wanted, devoured her—she looked away, jerking her head higher.

Their mothers were laughing, in good spirits.

"Nai, well, did you find something in common?" Arad's mother asked them.

Lenayna was looking off to the side and down, somewhere where his paws ended invisibly under the table, where the claws of his paws were; she fiddled with her khinastra and pricked her ears.

"Yes, of course," Arad grew stupidly cheerful, "and we even found a disagreement on one matter. But I think it's fixable." He looked now at his mother, now at hamanu Mirna.

And suddenly it turned out it was already dark, and already time to go, and perhaps enough for today, otherwise it was improper to abuse hospitality so long. They went to see the guests off, and mama gestured to him inconspicuously: come along, you'll say goodnight to everyone and stand there. Through the house they passed to the vestibule, where mom tediously and at length showed off various potted plants, and this greatly interested Lenayna's mother. Arad waited a bit until hamanu Mirna stepped away from her daughter, and approached her.

She stood there, forlorn, three or four paces from the entrance to the house, arms crossed, all defense. Arad made no attempts, didn't take her hands, simply stood beside her. She surveyed the surroundings, somehow bored, occasionally swaying. This was all bad, wrong—he didn't want it to be like this with her. Arad regretted for a moment that he'd started everything; probably it was foolish to taste the second dish before even properly beginning the first. You can't eat two at once... Or can you? Some do eat mustard with meat, or cream with chocolate.

Okay. Probably it was meant to be this way. He'd only just begun exploring the world of sensuality with Simsana; she didn't need helpers. She, his Ashai, his magnificent one—she didn't need them, that was absolutely certain. She, priestess of Vaal, wouldn't tolerate other blood, the blood of rivals—only his and hers. Let it be so, let it be, no pity, no pity, pity, no pity, eh, still...

He heard that mother and hamanu Mirna were already finishing their conversations, and here Lenayna abruptly untied her khinastra, then threw it around his neck, over his shoulders, and just as abruptly, yanking him toward her like a thing, tied it.

"Is this supposed to be a keepsake for me?" he tried to joke, weakly.

"Think what you want, I don't care," she spoke curtly. "It's wet from you, and no longer fit. It smells of you."

"It seems to me, on the contrary—it smells of you."

"Think what you want."

"But I have no gift in return."

"I don't care."

Then mother quickly called father, for the master of the house must see guests off, and they all said goodbye, and Arad simply and ordinarily kissed Lenayna's hand in parting, as was proper, because everyone around were good Suungs of middle standing—her kind Naysagrian eyes, her katena (six cords: red, red, white, white, red, red).

"Mama, what does a katena like that mean? It's 'celebration,' isn't it?" Arad asked, when the Insai family had left the place of the Karizian-Roust family.

"Yes, celebration, a small one," mama nodded.

Moondays, War Tactics and Cardinal Directions

For about three days Arad did nothing but sorting out various troubles at gymnasium, and generally neither books nor studies—nothing much would get into his head. Lenayna's khinastra he'd folded on the nightstand beside his bed, and—strange thing—it didn't disappear, though both mother and Sedesi had this terrible, tyrannical lioness habit of hiding and re-hiding things around the house in the most unexpected places.

One morning mother remarked:

"Hamanu Mirna confided that for two days now Lenayna cries in the evenings, doesn't want to do anything, and is very upset."

"Really?" Arad felt sorry for her.

"What do you think? Things seemed to go well enough between you, as I understood it. Did something happen?" Mother asked with great suspicion, pointing at him.

"Well, sort of..."

"You know, you should go to her and show up."

"What, just come by?"

"Invite her for a walk," mother outright demanded. "You wanted to go see the firrans—go with her."

"She probably won't go."

"You try, and then you'll see whether probably or probably not."

"Mama, I'll figure it out."

"Figure it out then."

Arad thought about what he should do, and unusually long at that. And decided not to go anywhere. He knew that if he left the house and went toward a female, it might happen that he'd end up not at Lenayna's house at all, no; his paws, most likely, would lead him to Simsana.

Another couple of days passed. From Simsana, as she'd promised, there was nothing. Lioness games? He was supposed to come himself? No, Arad decided, no, it couldn't be. He fantasized about Simsana. Fantasized about Lenayna. Sometimes together, with one and the other. He wanted to go to the females, wanted to do something—this nonsense disgusted him, this waiting. Then he grew concerned: how, actually, would Simsana send a letter? By Imperial Post, really? Next you'll say: Imperial Courier Service?

With each day he grew angrier and more restless, his patience was failing (though generally he was patient), so around the fifth or sixth day he decided thus: he'd go to Simsana, and if right there, right then he didn't get her gaze,

her touch, and her scent (he needed it!), then he'd go to Lenayna, and there he'd see what would happen.

And he really did come after gymnasium straight to Vaalu-Miresli's house, but there near the house lionesses had gathered—by the look of them, wash-erfemales, about four heads, with buckets, basins, all manner of such rubbish. Arad had already noticed the *nom* was turned crosswise, meaning the Ashai wasn't home (this much he already knew).

"Could the hamanu tell me where Vaalu-Miresli and Vaalu-Simsana are?"

"They're attending a firstborn, they're not here," one of them answered.

He walked in circles near the window, the door. Damn it.

"And what do you need, young-sir, from a Mistress of Life?" the Suung females grew curious, having dropped all their nonsense and conversations.

"I need Vaalu-Simsana," he said as if he'd lost something very much missing.

"Ah, so you're Arad," they smiled, but with narrowed eyes and cunning.

They made threatening gestures, and someone even clapped their palms:

"You watch yourself with her, carry our future masterina in your arms, or we'll tear your ears off, or something else."

"I already carried her," Arad answered, thinking of the irony with ears. "Here, I've come again. But she's not here."

"They're busy, young-sir, they're attending to mystery—that's a lot, they get very tired. Their noses are wet."

"And their hands are in blood," someone added, and all agreed.

"Tell me," Arad suddenly said, almost having set off, but turning back, "what do you think of them?"

"Of whom?" The lionesses seemed genuinely not to understand.

"Of Vaalu-Simsana and Vaalu-Miresli," he pointed at the house.

All their ears rose somehow, their eyes surprised:

"What are you asking? She's a masterina!" said the oldest. "Vaalu-Miresli—you still have to get in to see her!"

"It's a blessing..."

"It's a blessing when you do get in, she won't let you or the cubs go, Vaal himself guides her."

"When you see her, V-Simsana, you sit down and kiss her hands, and a lot. You don't know her, and you don't know what she does," they urged him.

"You're not allowed to know."

"No-no, you can't..."

"But you should kiss her hands for what they do."

"And she does everything she should, not like some others."

"Yes, yes..." all agreed again.

"Thanks. Good day to you," Arad said goodbye.

This was all magnificent, it was good to hear, it spread as pleasant warmth—he was proud of her. Arad already knew what he'd do when he saw her,

and when they were alone (at her home; if only they'd go nowhere, not that, in her room, he needed everything again, again)—he would kiss her hands. She'd laugh at first, then ask what he was doing, and he'd keep doing it anyway, and then go higher, and wouldn't tell her where he'd learned about the hands...

But all this didn't solve one thing that made him act, run, scheme, plan, search, and generally look under all their tails. He couldn't simply go home, enter the tablinium, and start reading some nonsense. He couldn't take Atar and shoot everything that shoots. He couldn't go wrestle at the Circle. Rather, he could, but Arad didn't want to—he didn't want distraction, replacement, substitution, or self-persuasion that he just needed to tire himself out and he'd stop thinking about them. No. To each his own, but he wanted a female—he needed it, it was simply necessity.

Arad went west, across the square and through Market Street, to the noisy street of the Insai line's house, to their eclectic townhouse with the small courtyard (directly across the street—the armory and its warehouses). Without hesitation he knocked; Lenayna's mother opened fairly quickly:

"Oh, young-sire Arad," she brightened. "Please come in."

"Hamanu Mirna, beautiful day, glad to see you. I need Lenayna," he said simply, without guile, the way one says 'I want to drink.'

"Yeeees..." hamanu Mirna drew out somehow. "Yes. Let young-sire Arad come in. Yes." And she went immediately to the second floor; the staircase went just like that, straight ahead, opposite the entrance.

He stood in the small vestibule, wondering whether to wash his paws and enter, or what. The smell of a stranger's house, sharp, strange somehow, but homey—someone kept house here. He decided not to enter without the hostess; and besides—what if something good happened, and Lenayna could go with him right away. Go where? Arad didn't know. He had no plan. He didn't even remember how much money he had on him. He wanted to lead her somewhere, slip his hand under her belt, anywhere...

Someone is coming.

Lenayna in a gray housedress, floor-length, belted with a symbolic cord. In her hands for some reason a stylus. Meanwhile hamanu Mirna, having presented her daughter, disappeared to the right, into the depths of the house.

Lenayna followed her mother with her gaze, as if asking why she was being left to be torn apart alone. Then she entered the vestibule where he remained, not daring to step off the mat (paws from the street, after all).

"Hi, Leni," he said, as softly as he could.

"Hi," she answered, as if agreeing to something. She wasn't looking at him.

"Come, let's go out," Arad said affirmatively.

This was the only reasonable reason, external, verbal, he'd invented for the visit. He couldn't say to her: 'Leni, let's chase everyone from the house, lock ourselves in your room, and play until we pass out.'

"I can't," she apologized.

"And yet?"

"Arad, I can't. Not today," she pressed the 'can't' and 'today,' holding her hands freely in front of her, turning the stylus. "And not tomorrow."

"And probably not the day after either?" he said mockingly.

"I don't know yet."

"Alright. Then forgive the disturbance," he nodded. "Sorry if something's wrong."

No, she's completely idnignated after all, Arad thought.

"Arad, what are you doing?" Though he hadn't yet managed to turn or leave, she grabbed his arm, and instantly jerked back, as if it hadn't been her who'd done it, but someone else. "You're just going to go like that... won't even come in for a bite?"

"I came for you. I'm not going to sit in the room for tea."

"And what's wrong with the idea?"

"I came for you," he repeated.

After a pause, Lenayna did this: closed her eyes, raised her eyebrows, clenched her teeth, raised her hand with the stylus clutched in her fist, then relaxed her arm, let it fall, striking herself on the side.

"If you want, we could go not to the parlor, but to my room. And drink tea there," she pointed upward with the stylus.

So. Interesting.

"Excellent idea."

"Let's go," she didn't drag it out; she kept looking around for where her mother was, but she'd vanished, completely.

"Just a moment, I'll wash up," and he washed his paws.

She stood beside him and watched as he dried himself with an incongruously large towel, then led him after her straight upstairs, and for some reason it seemed to Arad that she was smuggling him through the house, just like contraband or prey into a lair. They had a odd house, even more eclectic than outside: not so small really, but the abundance of all manner of things attacked from all sides and made it cramped: some tapestries on the walls, embroideries, a sword on the wall, a second sword, a third sword, spears, knives, daggers, a war axe (very rusty), a bronze tripod with a bowl of Vaal right at the top of the stairs (why? one was already visible below in the parlor), beside each burned a symbolic long candle, as they call it (one can't burn the bowl all the time, really), on candlesticks, very ornate. Then, in the narrowish corridor, where he nearly tripped over a paw-stool, she pushed open the door to her room—and this was her room, because the entire door was covered with an enormous knitted panel in the shape of flowers, nothing

like it he'd ever seen in his life, and pinned right to this panel was an embroidery with slightly unevenly stitched scarlet and black threads: 'Malstruna-Lenayna.' On the left was another door, without the panel, but with a similar embroidery reading 'Malstruna-Meysala'—and that door stood half-open.

In this small room (about five paces by five, maybe six) sat another lionessy, at a fine secretary desk that stole a quarter of the room. On the secretary lay open a large ledger book, and around it crowded so many papers and slips, styluses, quills, and everything—save us. The lionessy sat on a stool, holding its edges, in just a nightgown (not embarrassed in the slightest) and even without a belt, not even a symbolic one like Lenayna's, and she had a bratty look about her. She was a copy of Lenayna, only younger, about twelve, and more mischievous, and without the scar on her chin that Arad could no longer unsee on Lenayna, and without rings in her ears.

"Right, weh outta here," Lenayna hissed at her.

She swiveled on the chair:

"Oh, Lenayn, is this your match that mom talks about?"

"Go get dressed."

"What do I care, you're the one who brought him here," she smiled smugly.

"Shoo!"

"Pleased to meet you, maassi, my name is Arad," he took the sister's hand and kissed it, and she giggled and covered her mouth with her palm. Then, already being dragged by the ear away from the stool by Lenayna:

"Whoa, are you going to take her for yourself?" And she snorted again. "Lenayn, he's funny."

"Little tail, what manners—you're supposed to introduce yourself in return!"

"Dream-on, fat chance, niice try," she made a muzzle at Lenayna—perfectly even teeth, magnificent fangs. Oh wow, what a sight.

"I promise not to marry maassi Fat Chance," Arad touched her with a claw.

This somehow offended her enormously. She looked at Lenayna, snorted, and walked out; Lenayna closed the door behind her, since she hadn't bothered to.

"Serves her right. Just so," Lenayna approved. "Meysala is so spoiled, dad has spoiled her so much with gifts and everything, I don't even know anymore."

"I have two younger brothers, Leni. I understand."

She waved her hand, smiling, and pointed him to the chest by the secretary, for besides the stool with its soft cushion, there was nothing else to sit on in the room.

"Sit on it, it's good for sitting," and she tossed onto it a long soft thing taken from the bed nearby.

Arad did so: he climbed onto this enormous chest, put one leg on it and left the other on the floor, let his tail run along it toward the bed. On his bent knee he extended his arm. And so he sat, all like that, very much himself.

Meanwhile Lenayna sat at the secretary.

"Just a moment, I'll write something down so-I-don't for-get," she began tracing in very small, cramped script in the ledger. She sat straight, became serious. Arad peeked at what she was doing—on a page ruled into six columns she was filling in numbers in the last two. Then, with her left hand, she began to play with the abacus, and this was a sight: she followed the figures with a clawless finger, and didn't even once look at the abacus, over which her fingers flew with the deftness possible only after years of daily practice. For some reason Arad liked this very much; he was mesmerized. Then, finally, she looked at the abacus, then at the book, then again at the abacus.

She looked at him.

"It balanced," she blinked at him with both eyes.

"Good," he answered.

Need to start somehow, he thought, looking into her eyes. She squinted several times, trying to look stern, or something like that. The effect was opposite: Arad's blood warmed.

But here Lenayna suddenly slapped the stylus against the book.

"So. Arad. Tell me honestly," she crossed her arms, pressing her legs tightly together.

"Fine, no problem. I'll tell. Only give me your hand."

"Why?" she asked, but placed her hand on the secretary, and he took it without delay.

"Now the other."

"Why?" she asked with a little laugh, but placed the other on the secretary too; he took that one as well.

He folded them together, interlaced them, began to play with them as if they were something of his.

"What are you doing?"

Arad kissed them, and didn't let go.

"I like your hands. Now ask what you wanted."

She moved the stool closer so that—since he'd taken her hands captive—it would be more comfortable.

"What, Arad, tell me: should I give you a second chance?"

"I don't need a second chance," he shook his head. "Return the first one, as it was."

He began to pull her gently toward him by the hands, not hard yet.

"Sorry about the tea thing," Lenayna said reluctantly, simultaneously putting up resistance.

"I told you: that needs repeating, not apologizing for."

"And don't you want to say anything to me?" She played with her gaze, a manner already familiar to him.

"I do," he pulled her toward him, harder.

Lenayna still resisted. He pulled more. She—nope.

"No, come on, Arad. Let go."

Pointless. He's stronger.

"Arad, I can't sit on you," she told him, and sat on him, "or go anywhere with you. My stomach hurts. I need to stay home."

He adjusted her legs so they were together and toward the bed. With his paw he pulled the stool over and set his leg on it for support. Excellent.

"What's this, Leni. Are you sick, ate something bad?" He embraced her by the waist, gripping the belt-cord.

"No. I have those days, you know," Lenayna made weak attempts either to free herself or to settle more comfortably on him.

"What 'those days'?"

"Arad, you're smart. Moondays."

"Ah. Just imagine you're sitting on the chair. I'm soft too."

"You're hard, actually... It's not proper, a lion doesn't touch lionesses on such days, we avoid you during this time," she said, and immediately embraced him, and not in pretend-like manner either.

"I'm not touching you, you're just sitting," he meanwhile made his way up her back to her scruff.

She poked his nose with a claw:

"Listen, if anyone comes in now, it won't be good—I didn't even close the door. And if dad's home, even a bolt won't help."

"Why won't it help?" he was slightly surprised.

"He'll just break down the door," Lenayna shrugged, "you can't lock him out, that's how he is. But we love him. Listen, let me bring something, I'll go downstairs, otherwise it'll look bad."

"Alright, go ahead."

She, having looked at herself in a mirror hung with an uncountable number of ribbons—so many the reflection was barely visible—left.

Arad looked around. Glanced absently over the secretary, drew in the air. It smelled of this house, smelled slightly of ink and paper, smelled of Lenayna—the scent was very similar to the one in the wrap she'd left him. Things were everywhere in abundance, but all in order. It was clean, cozy, and good. Wooden floor. Only on the secretary—and this piece of furniture was extremely strange in a young maassi's room—did something like controlled chaos unfold. He took one of the slips of paper on it, though this was wrong, one doesn't do that, one shouldn't; glancing at the door, he read:

29 4MoonFire 807

110 | Cash House | 110.50 Dr

210-132 | Weikh & Sons --- Cr (owed 120.50; 10 paid for polishing)

29 4MoonFire 807

599 | *Black acc.* | 70.- *Dr (or whores?? clarify)*

111 | *Cash Dad* | 20.- *Cr*

110 | *Cash House* | 50.- *Cr (from sec-ry)*

30 4MoonFire 807

112 | *Cash Armory* | 12760.- *Dr*

420 | *Income Arm.* | 12760.- *Cr*

520 | *Sold goods* | 7500.- *Dr*

130-1 | *Goods Arm.* | 7500.- *Cr (old junk)*

This was her handwriting, Arad understood immediately, even unclear exactly how. He also understood these were bookkeeping entries, but their meaning was terrifyingly mysterious—a language (still) unknown to him. And he also understood that he'd come to feel great affection for her, and not in a cascade of dreams, and even without idealism, without pedestals and elevations, but very practically, very vitally. Attraction—right now, here, in this moment, on this day, in this place, at this time. Arad understood that it was precisely someone like this he should live with, not another, but precisely someone like this; he understood that he wanted someone like this, that he needed precisely this kind of lioness, and had always wanted exactly this kind at his side and for himself, this kind of Naysagrian, because she would do her part well, and that meant it would be easy for him to do his part well.

He had to quickly determine goals, tasks, behavior. He already hated himself for coming here without tactics or strategy, just like that, because he'd wanted to breathe in a lioness, and because down below it was getting hard. Incredibly stupid. He was trying with one legion to take two enemy cities, and if he didn't remember how different these two cities were, he'd very soon find himself defeated. And if he started lying, especially to himself—he would lose.

He'd have to be smart and cunning. The war had grown complicated.

Lenayna came in, set the tray right on the bed; she'd already managed to put on a big apron, right down to the floor. Arad looked at it, and suddenly a thing came to his mind:

"Do you have servants?" Arad asked the question; about servants in his strata it's not just acceptable to ask but customary (though there one asks "how are the servants?" and then listens to an endless stream of complaints).

It seemed Lenayna hadn't expected such a question at all. She froze with the cup halfway. Something pleasant was in the air, but Arad couldn't say exactly what.

"In the house? Yes, one is spinning now. There's another dhaar lionessy, her mother died, we took her in. She's still small, she's nine."

"Listen, that's sad," he scratched his scruff.

"Yes. My dad recently made a scene at the school, did you hear?"

"No, what happened?" He took from her a cup of something completely black. It wasn't tea.

"There's a school for dhaars at Southend, you know, there farther, on the road," she pointed, but not at all in the right direction. (*Really, thought Arad, lionesses can never remember cardinal directions.*)

"Uh-huh."

"It's very far from our home, and dad enrolled her in the school here, at the gymnasium. Rather, wanted to enroll her," Lenayna carefully seated herself beside him on the chest, to the left.

"Yes, I go there. They don't take dhaars."

"He offered a bribe to get her in," Lenayna said very simply.

In his house they'd already be fainting.

"And what, did they take her?" Arad was surprised, glancing at the cup.

She shook her head.

"Nope. They were very afraid of the Ancestral Law. So he called the school principal... called him things."

"Wow. And now what?"

"Nothing," she looked at him. "Dad hired her a tutor at home."

"That's not cheap."

"No, it's okay, fifteen imperials a session, three times a week. She already reads, writes in simple alphabet, counts. Dad thinks maybe she'll marry a Suung and become a Suung."

"Why does he care about her so much?" Arad wondered.

"Just because," Lenayna shrugged. She seemed surprised by the question.

"This is coffee, right?" Arad tried it, carefully, because it was hot.

"Yeah," she watched him closely. Then understood: "What, you don't drink coffee at home?"

"No. It's very expensive, and they say it causes bad sleep and your teeth fall out."

"One hundred ninety-six imperials per stone," Lenayna looked up, and he noticed how her left palm played, as if on invisible abacus beads, "not that expensive. Nothing falls out, and you just shouldn't drink it at night. Try it, you'll see, it livens you up."

"Listen, Leni," he began insinuatingly, "let's try something."

"Okay," Leni agreed somehow immediately. And then went defensive, realizing her rashness: "Aaaah, and what?"

"Look, I'm drinking the hot, see? And you don't drink, don't, put it down."

She put down the cup.

"Now like this..." he embraced her neck, fully, and took her chin from the other side; demanded her toward him.

She didn't resist, and her tongue turned out to be cool and also somehow sweet.

"Now you," he said, releasing her. To save time, he took his cup and forcibly gave her the hot to drink. It ended badly: she, groaning, hit him on the shoulder, and then suddenly sprayed everything on him.

"Ow! You..."

Which didn't stop him at all, wet on his muzzle and clothes, from shutting her up and kissing her again; she turned out to be hot and bitter, like coffee. It seemed she resisted, but what difference did it make.

"Sorry, I just..." she apologized, but then thought better of it: "You want to drown me?" She hit him again when he let go. "Arad, you're the most kind of... such a..." She wiped him with her apron. "Wild, willful, unrestrained lion. Ahlia, save me. Vaal. What did I do to deserve this."

Very pleased with himself, Arad nevertheless decided to get down to business:

"Listen, I want to talk to you, very frankly."

"I was just about to suggest that," she said unexpectedly, straightening her now thoroughly stained apron. "And you're ready?"

"Yes," Arad nodded.

"Then I'll go first," she took her cup. "I know you have a relationship. You do, don't you?"

"Yes."

"I know it's with an Ashai-Keetrah, a Mistress of Life. A young masterina, 'my mentor's guidance.'" Arad caught the shift in her voice, and also that she suddenly punched the pillow.

"Yes," he agreed easily.

"I even know her, Arad, we greet each other. She has a whole flock of maassi and hamanu acquaintances, practically half of Gallen," she spoke quickly and clearly, as if she'd thought through what to say beforehand.

"Yes."

"The last thing any lioness wants is to quarrel or have misunderstandings with Mistresses of Life. Do you understand me?" She pointed at him with the cup, and looked at him very questioningly.

"Yes."

"I am a faithful Suunga," she placed her palm on her heart, "and I understand that for Ashai-Keetrah everything is different, and that... for them it's... proper. Vaal gives them much, but takes one thing."

"I didn't quite understand that part."

"What I want to say is this. Arad, I shouldn't be asking this," Lenayna said somehow very sternly, "it's very foolish for a lioness to ask, and we've only just begun," a nervous tremor passed through her voice, "but still: are you serious about me, or just here to look at my tail?"

He looked at her, and she at him. Arad somehow ran out of words and thoughts. Outflanked from the rear. A strike from behind. Initiative with the enemy.

"My Vaal, what a fool I am..." she clutched her temple.

Cunning, so cunning, sharp-sighted, thought Arad. And somehow this was good. Somehow this was right. Somehow this added to her everything.

"Stop that, you're smart, Leni," he said seriously, even growing thoughtful. "I like you, and with every moment I spend with you, I like you more."

She purred, and loudly—Arad hadn't heard such a 'mrrrr' in a long time.

"Do that more often."

Lenayna did it again.

"More."

She did it again.

"Incredible. And you can do that always, can't you?"

She did it again.

"I'm not trying to distract you. I'm thinking how best to answer."

"Fine, just be honest and don't yank my tail," Lenayna shook her head, not looking at him but at the window, to their left. "What I love most is smart and truthful, and you seem like that."

"Good. So, our parents want us to join lines," Arad said, watching her, but Leni—still gazing at the window—didn't much react or show surprise.

"Mm-hm. Mine think it'll somehow help them with business, and mom has this fixation—she wants to elevate the family, and you're of higher birth, noble."

It was unclear whether she was joking or serious.

"Nah, we're all pretty middling," Arad said mockingly. "There are much finer ones."

"Also, dad probably thinks having a judge in the family would be very useful. Though it's mostly mom fussing, he treats it all as beside the point," she waved her hand.

"There he's miscalculated," Arad said mockingly again. "If he's betting on preferences in judgments, he'd better marry you off to another judge's son. My dad is very proper, too much so. That story you told about the bribe at school—he'd already be on the floor in a faint."

"What, really?" She was surprised, moved her ears, but didn't look at him.

"Yep. Same thing with the tea: he was seriously running at you to accuse you of irreparable insult to his son, house, and family. He could have thrown you out and forbidden the Insai from coming at all. I turned it all into a joke he doesn't understand. But he's remembered it against you."

She carefully scratched her cheek, said nothing. Licked her lips.

"As you see, not the most advantageous alliance—at least, we're unlikely to be what you want," Arad concluded.

"You don't know yet what we have to offer. And still, why did you save me from your dad's wrath?"

"I decided to be your Suung of impeccable valor," he took up a ready, fitting answer.

Now she'll laugh, thought Arad.

He was wrong. She sighed, rose from the chest, then sat back down. Suddenly decided to take off the apron, over her head, folded it and tossed it on the bed; then she extended her arm, in his direction, but not quite, as if in doubt or question. Arad understood the hint correctly and clasped palms with her.

"So then, Arad," immediately after, as if having received permission, Lenayna said, "what should I think, what should I do? Will you be such a Suung for me, or for someone else?" She looked at him, from the side, as in paintings, three-quarters—and with her ears pressed back.

"Only two can sail in this boat, right?" There was no point in hiding.

"Yes," she agreed readily, pleased that he understood her, "in our case—yes. Otherwise everything will be... I won't agree to that, Naysagrians don't accept that. You know. I'll want all your attention, if you wish to begin with me. I want to hear what you've decided."

Arad was surrounded.

Actually, he could deceive her. It wasn't hard. Actually, he could tell her the truth. That was far harder.

Promised to tell the truth, he thought.

Are you stupid? instinct prompted. *Deceive them all. They'll only be happy. Say any nonsense, it's war.*

There are principles.

Are you stupid?

"Building a relationship on deception is foolish. And I see that I can build one with you. I don't know, I have a very good feeling about you, we'll wear in together."

"I do too," she hastened to say.

"I don't even know your sister. I don't even know your mother. I've never seen your father. I don't know anything at all, except that you're a good Naysagrian and I like you very much," Arad surprised himself at how quickly and eagerly he'd gone in this direction.

"I like you too, but not very... I mean! Just like. A little less. Oh, I've tangled myself... Forget it. I like you..."

"I understood. So, the truth is this: I need to somehow end things with Simsana, and I can't do it in a single moment."

"Why?" she asked reasonably. "You're a lion, you can do anything."

"That's not right, you must agree," he said clearly, like a teacher at school. "You can't just disappear from someone's life—without explaining, without saying goodbye. Besides, she might not understand what happened. That's not how it's done. I don't want to be a pig."

Lenayna thought; it was visible that she was thinking, deciding.

"You'd be a lion. Lions do that. Not the best ones, probably... And as for understanding: she'll know what happened within a couple of days, once

we're seen together. Trust me on that. What do you want, to meet her and tell her everything?"

"Yes, something like that."

"What will you tell her?"

"That my father and mother are very angry about our meetings, and it's impossible for me to meet with her anymore without seriously quarreling with them."

"Um, why did you make that up?" Lenayna was a little surprised.

"I didn't make it up," Arad replied with a snort.

"How's that?" She shook her head, not understanding.

"My father is a judge. That means he's approved to be in the Doctrine of Enlightened Freedom. Judges are the only ones in the Empire for whom that's approved. Also scholars, but for them it's permitted, not approved. For everyone else it's forbidden."

She grimaced as if eating something bitter.

"What is this thing, the Doctrine?"

"It means he can't have dealings with Ashai-Keetrah. He respects the faith of Suungs, but Ashai-Keetrah have no private dealings with him, he doesn't use their services, nothing. Only official matters and only by law, observing their privileges. There are whole rules... And they don't come to our house."

"What nonsense. I didn't even know. Is this for real, like in the laws?" she said as if he'd told her a stupid joke, and took the empty cup from him.

"Yes."

"You've never had Ashai at home? On Ai-Yulassai? If someone's sick? If someone's giving birth? Just because?" She waved the cup.

"Never," Arad answered with a sigh.

"My Vaal. So, your parents got angry that you're in a relationship with an Ashai..."

"Mama—no, she... she mostly just wanted me to get together with you. She saw it as an obstacle, but she has nothing against Ashai. But father..."

"But father doesn't like Ashai-Keetrah."

"Yes, very much so," he said with a laugh.

"Did he yell at you?"

"No, not yet. Mama just tries to smooth it all over, not tell him anything. But he'll definitely be against her, and will drone on at me long and tediously..." he spoke harshly, and broke off.

Silence hung. Arad added:

"My dad will be against you too—you poured tea on me."

"Did you like the coffee?" Lenayna changed the subject somehow completely instantly.

"Yes, Leni, thank you."

And another sharp turn:

"So you want to tell her: problems in the family, sorry."

"Yes, problems in the family, lineage obligations, family plans between our lines. I hope she'll bear it."

"Why wouldn't she bear it?" Lenayna asked, looking ahead.

"She's an orphan. Besides her mentor, she has no one at all. No relatives, no one. Her mentor told me she's head over heels in love with me."

Arad said this and regretted it. Probably he shouldn't have said that. Some things just shouldn't be said.

"The Mistress, Vaalu-Miresli?" Lenayna pretended she hadn't heard a thing.

"Yes," he confirmed guiltily.

"You know what, Arad?" Lenayna looked ahead, unblinking. "I feel she won't let you go so easily."

Silence hung again. From the street came the sound of breaking glass and very strong cursing. Arad looked out but saw nothing; Lenayna just sat there, paying no attention at all.

"What would you advise?" he asked tactically, continuing to look out the window, and he didn't like his own tone: as if he were trying to ask about nonsense, as if he didn't care.

"You can't anger Ashai," Lenayna said very slowly, each word separate, "especially not Mistresses—it costs you more than it's worth, everyone knows that. And Vaal wouldn't be pleased," she bit her lip with a fang. "Here's what: do you already have something arranged?"

"She's supposed to send a letter," he rubbed his mane, sitting back on the chest, "when she's free. They're constantly busy."

"Sure thing. You go to her," she turned to him and began fiddling with his collar. "At the start, definitely say you've come to her for a farewell occasion. Give her something, attend to her, show respect," she unclasped his fibula and pinned it for some reason to her own dress. "Tell her all the circumstances, tell her you're forced to take on lineage obligations, ask for forgiveness."

"I'm not forced to take them on, I came to you myself," he placed his palm on her thigh.

"You lie—it's a good lie," she unclasped the fibula from herself and returned it to him. "Don't leave in a hurry, unless she throws you out, but that's very unlikely. I don't know how she'll behave, but she's obligated to accept it," her hands moved over his chest, his shoulders, caringly making some invisible adjustments. "Ashai are supposed to accept such things."

"That sounds very sensible," he agreed.

Yes. Honest, sensible, balanced, thought Arad.

"Be kind to her, but let her know right away that after this occasion a wall will appear," she looked at him, expressive yellow-brown eyes. "Don't give false hope," she tapped his shoulder. "And tell her mentor too, if you get the chance."

"Agreed. I'll do that."

"Something like that," she summed up, and touched his chin, very lightly.

The door swung open sharply:

"What the fuck, he's still here?" Lenayna's sister bared her teeth indignantly, leaning dangerously in the doorway.

"Already leaving," Arad raised his hands, surrendering.

"What took so long? I recall, you got tumbled by that blacksmith's stud a lot faster."

"You little wretch!" Lenayna nearly threw a cup at her, grabbing it from the tray, but her sister vanished, and she—pitied the cup.

"She's become unbearable. I'm actually ashamed," she rubbed her nose with an open palm, looking at the slammed door; her voice changed (because of the nose).

"And what stud is this?" Arad was very interested.

"She's joking," Lenayna said indifferently.

"Interesting jokes you have."

She understood that this wouldn't work with Arad. She feared him. She felt that he—very strange thing—knew the language of lionesses far better than young lions his age usually did: clueless, still incapable, unready.

"There was this one, a blacksmith's apprentice. So it was!" She looked in his direction and twirled the cup. "Only we had the Game, not what Meysalka said. Everything's very honest with me, I honor everything. A get-off-my-tail Game," she waved it off. "I thought: he'll get his change, get off my tail—otherwise he wouldn't leave me alone. And no one would even stand up for me!" she suddenly accused the world (not herself, of course).

"Right, sure, he got off," Arad clicked his tongue.

"I wasn't thinking much about that. I'm telling you—he wouldn't leave me alone," Lenayna justified herself, having thoroughly tormented the cup by now. "Had to tell dad, though I didn't really want to."

"Why not?"

"My dad's... something else, all so... lion-ish, completely. You'll see—you'll understand. I hope he didn't kill him," she sighed.

"Listen, so a get-off-my-tail Game—how does that work?" He stretched out his legs and yawned.

"Why are you asking such things? Ugh. I've heard you're quite the tail-groper," she punched him in the side, which Arad didn't expect, "you know everything. You know how it works yourself."

"Of course. Remember: that kind won't work with me."

Lenayna seemed taken aback, but just for show. She couldn't even find what to say. Then she found it:

"My Vaal, what nerve. What even made you think that...? Tail-chaser. Close your eyes."

Which he did, and felt himself licked on the cheek, with her holding the other. He continued sitting like that, listening to the sensation. Then she, purring just as loudly as before, settled on his shoulder, placing her palm underneath. He was still listening, didn't want to look.

"That's for you," she said very quietly, so he could barely hear.

"And that's all?"

"I don't know," she said even quieter.

"What, we won't even go on an occasion?"

"What do you mean we won't?" Leni asked in her normal voice. "You take me out—I'll be taken out. Only that little runt Meysala is hanging around, she might make trouble, don't pay attention, that's all she wants." She put her head on his shoulder again.

"Will she always be this troublesome with me, Meysala?"

"She's troublesome with everyone. I don't know. Dad says she'll be a whore, and laughs."

"What?" He was astonished and opened his eyes.

"Well, there it is. He says that's her nature. I took after mother, and she—after him."

"Unbelievable," he marveled.

"And you say your family doesn't suit us. We're quite a... gang ourselves," Lenayna snorted knowingly. "But we have money, and a trade."

"And a lot of money?"

"Oh, that's a complicated question."

"My Leni, don't tell me, I asked as a joke," he laughed.

"Well, it depends how you count. So, you just..." She patted his chest with her palm. "They're in demand, Arad, those two Mistresses. Try not to anger either of them. How would I be with a lion who angered a Mistress of Life?"

The topic troubles her, she worries, it gnaws at her, thought Arad.

"Why are they in demand?"

"They do everything," she sighed. "There's one other Mistress in Gallen, besides the midwives, but midwives are, well, they're weaker, you should only go to them for easy births. So this Mistress, Vaalu-Harana—not only does she not do everything, but cubs choke with her. She hates Vaalu-Miresli."

"Really? What for?"

"Jealous, probably. Many of the Ashai don't like her, Vaalu-Miresli. I don't know why. Something's not right for them." Lenayna wrinkled her muzzle.

"What does 'they do everything' mean?" Arad demanded of her. "I've heard this several times now, but I don't know what it means."

“It means they’re willing to dirty their hands,” Lenayna answered meaningfully. “There are those who are afraid, or, you know, lazy. Those two—no, they’re good ones.”

Arad shook his head, grimacing. Unclear.

“They deliver children, and they can also kill them,” Lenayna explained.

“How?” He was taken aback. Well then.

“I don’t know, they say they give you something hot to drink, speak words, and push in a needle. It hurts.”

“Listen, but why?”

“Well, all sorts of reasons. You were raped, or it’s dangerous for you to give birth, or... anything. Or say a cub was born with crook-sickness. He’ll be a freak his whole life—why live like that.”

“And what will they do with him?”

Lenayna pointed at her throat.

“What do you think. How exactly—I don’t know.”

“Unbelievable. Terrifying.”

“These are female matters, Arad,” Lenayna said seriously. “Oh, look, it’s already getting dark. My Vaal, how long have we sat here?”

Just then came a quiet knock at the door, but long, insistent.

“Come in, mom.”

Ceremoniously and smiling, Lenayna’s mother entered.

“I’m already leaving,” Arad promised.

Then he stood, then he exchanged pleasantries with hamanu Mirna, and hamanu Mirna pleased him, as he very much pleased hamanu Mirna; they descended, they saw him out, and Lenayna kissed him on the cheek. Everything was proper and quite nice; even Meysala said something like “byesies” to him (his mother would have fainted from such manners, and father would have gone all white like the distant mountain northerners), and he found himself beyond the door, amid the dark cloudy evening.

He stood by the entrance, adjusted his cloak.

Someone entered sharply through the gate, a heavy low figure, and slammed it just as sharply. This lion drew level with Arad: hewn, square, dressed in an unimaginable mix of Legate armor (vambraces, and knemids, and pauldrons) and some sort of wondrous expensive gear, and Arad recognized him—this was the one who constantly yelled at everyone in the armory, everyone in Gallen knew him, only it had somehow completely slipped his mind that this could be Lenayna’s father.

“Who are you?” He looked with small narrow eyes.

“Arad, of Karizian-Roust.”

“Who? Ah, so you’re that... the one. From those, the judge’s. I thought you’d be bigger!” He touched his mane; he smelled of beer and fish. “How old are you?”

“Sixteen,” Arad lied slightly. Though soon enough.

“Fuck me, what are you on about?” The lion was indignant. “I thought you were twenty.”

“No, sire, twenty will come later, have to wait.”

He laughed loudly.

“Why are you hanging around, come in.”

“I just came from there,” Arad pointed back with his thumb.

“Ahhh. What’d you come for?”

“To talk with sire’s daughter, Lenayna. Awkward, but I’d like to know sire’s name.” Arad didn’t remember what he was called, though he’d heard it more than once before.

“What’s awkward for you, she’s got a good bed, big one, I bought it myself.”

Arad laughed involuntarily; entertaining, this papa of Lenayna’s.

“We sat on the chest, but the bed seems excellent.”

“On the chest... So you squeezed her little ass? Here, check it out, what about this one?” He pulled out a real long sword and immediately tossed it (Arad barely caught it).

“Yes, good one,” Arad swung it.

“Break something with it.”

Arad shrugged. Sure, no problem. He could break anything. Taking several steps, with the simplest sharp thrust, without windup, he broke the outer glass of a window (noted—there was no light in the window). Then returned and extended the sword back, holding it by the guard. But the master, not at all surprised by Arad’s stunt, had already started hammering on the door.

“It’s open, I think,” Arad advised.

“Let the wife open it, there should be order.”

Hamanu Mirna, all biting her claws and in despair (together with Lenayna behind her, and he noticed her such wary-anxious look), opened, and he entered.

“Why did you break the window? Why the window? Were you drinking again?” The wife followed the husband.

“And the sword, sire?” Arad called after.

“Keep it for yourself!” came the roar from inside the house.

Arad shrugged, nodded his head, raised the sword once more. Even in the dark you could see it was good.

How do I carry it without a scabbard? he wondered.

Lenayna came up to him, having closed the doors behind her.

“Here, give it back to your father. You can’t carry it without a scabbard, they’ll take me for a fool,” Arad said.

“No, better take it. He’s drunk now and will fall to sleep. You see, breaking windows,” she led him away from the house, pushed him along.

“He’s not very drunk. And the sword is expensive. And the window, actually...”

“Take it, take it,” Lenayna insisted very much, “if anything, you’ll return it.”

Arad thought, and wrapped it in his cloak.

“Alright, Leni, I’m going.”

“Be safe, Arad,” she embraced him, strongly, very strongly for a female, and he felt on his cheek how cold the rings of her ears were.

Shadows Of Golden Lionesses

He slept excellently that night. Arad generally slept simply wonderfully these days: impossible dreams full of air, some ancient plots, dreams of lionesses with golden serpents on their heads, dreams of that Ashai with the night gaze who had died (according to Simsana). Rising, he wrote:

*I want to see
Shadows of golden lionesses
At sunset
Tomorrow
Or even today
But here they told me
That this already happened
Yesterday*

I'm also a poet, Arad thought to himself.

And the next day, after the visit to Lenayna, he discovered something else curious: a polemic had begun with himself, as if two Arads had actually appeared in his head (instead of more-or-less one), and started arguing. But this took shape during the day, whereas in the morning he couldn't shake the feeling that he'd done something completely stupid. Why had he gone to one lioness to ask advice about what to do with another? Was he—mad? Or, worse still—didn't know how to handle them? Of course he knew how.

Incidentally, why did he know how? Before, it seemed, he'd had no idea. And now—here you go, please. Everything had somehow started working out very well with females; before, something completely inaccessible had opened to him, really, as if his eyes or ears had been opened. Even suspicious.

Must have grown up, probably, thought Arad.

Early in the morning, on one of the following days, Arad was shooting a bow (the brothers had returned from their 'hunt,' and it was better to do this in the morning while they were still asleep), and thinking.

His split was like this: one Arad was direct, principled—he wanted to smash glass with a sword, arrange things on shelves, and act rightly. The second was cunning and mischievous, and suggested that silence is golden, that leaving things unsaid is good, that you should do your thing and not think about what the female thinks (you won't guess anyway). The first

wanted to choose one or the other. The second chose everyone at all. The first had impossible problems. The second had no problems at all.

The first problem for the first Arad turned out to be this: why had he gone to Lenayna at all? The answer seemed on the surface: he'd gone after Simsana, she wasn't there, he got angry (not at her, just generally, from hunger), went after Lenayna as the nearest familiar target. Well, he went, fine, but why did he go and blab everything, and generally go so far that it's borderline idiotic? What was the point? What sense, even in impatience, to exchange the lace-fine arrows of Simsi, her... her everything!.. for matrimonial sketches with Leni? There was not the slightest sense in taking and pulling from himself (along with blood, there'll be a lot of blood, more blood!) the arrows of the fire-priestess of Suungs, even considering lineage circumstances, all these half-prohibitions, all this father's judgeship and other nonsense; and even considering that Leni—hmm, Leni, she turned out not at all the one he'd expected. How much simpler it would have been for the direct, principled Arad if Leni had turned out to be some homely ninny. He would have simply laughed inwardly, sitting at that meeting, looked at the sky, and dreamed of Simsana. But Lenayna—she was probably a very sensible match, no better word for it. What a one, though. In a single visit of his, not only had she tried with the most cunning encirclement of his mind to remove her rival (with his own hands), she'd also tied herself a lion. Cunning. On the other hand, it's precisely such a far-sighted lioness that's useful to have in the household, isn't it?

But all this was such nonsense. It was still at least three years before he could seriously think about joining families. What vulgarity—to think about it now? In those years the world might end, he might die, Lenayna might, he might fall out of love with her, with himself, shoot off his parts with his own crossbow, or suddenly father might cease being a judge, or anything might happen. These were all impossibly stupid projects, thought Arad, drawing an arrow.

The trip to Lenayna had been a mistake—so he more or less decided. Not a mistake, let's say, but a miscalculation. Although...

I could visit both here and there, Arad thought. And that's it.

But he'd supposedly promised something. How did it go, Arad recalled, drawing the bowstring: go, drop Simsana, come back, report on the successful rout of the enemy. Well, Lenayna, well you're a... female.

No, no, that won't happen, Arad smirked—he wasn't going to drop his Ashai-Keetrah just because dad was an anvaalist judge, and mom had decided to marry him off nicely, and Lenayna didn't want rivals. Are you all serious? You've all gone mad.

Simsi isn't writing, he thought, pulling out another arrow. Everything's taking so long.

He already missed her very much, but was very afraid to admit it, as if fearing to fall or stumble into some trap.

The second question lurked unkindly, and looked far more complicated: was Lenayna herself a mistake? A few days ago, before that visit of the Insai family to their house, he would have laughed at such a question. She'd been nothing then, he hadn't known her, though he'd seen her a dozen times. But after... Hmm, thought Arad, well fine, he'd already more or less decided—by reason and by instinct, or rather, by this strange new sense for lionesses that hadn't existed before—that she was suitable as a wife (as a companion generally, if one wanted). Her house was easier to characterize: wealth and ruin. Fun and frightening. You join with that only if you love adventure and nonsense. He even felt awkward that his mother, having been friends with Lenayna's mother for a good two years, hadn't yet understood this, while he—understood it from one visit.

But Lenayna has something else. Arad didn't know what; or rather, what it was called. And it wasn't even that notorious clever cunning. In such a line, thought Arad, loosing an arrow, are born either prostitutes (here he agreed with Lenayna's father), or ones like Lenayna. Ones like her. What kind is that? Just like that.

And what of the second Arad: cunning, instinctive, mischievous? To the first question he answered simply: go wherever you want, do whatever you want, don't spread anything around, twist their tails—they love it—and just get what you need (bite all their scruffs). Go on, don't disappoint them, give them swings. To the second question: a find. A lioness-find, and she would have been impossible without Simsana. This was such a strange conclusion that Arad was even taken aback and thought that for this morning, he'd had enough shooting.

◇

After breakfast Nergim called Arad to ride with him, telling him not to go to gymnasium. Today he would go with him to the Chamber of Justice. This was something new. And on the way they had the conversation whose expectation had already gone to sleep in Arad (he'd thought—it would pass):

"I have multiple testimonies regarding your liaison with an Ashai-Keetrah acolyte. But I want to hear testimony from you."

"Yes, it's true," Arad confessed impeccably.

"May I know the nature of these relations?"

"They are natural, papa."

They were silent a while.

"Are you not concerned about possible consequences for your reputation?"

"I believe, papa, the consequences for me as a young Suung may be rather positive," Arad tried to be as haughty as possible.

"Not if a law career lies ahead of you, or a career in justice generally," father was unimpressed.

"And does it lie ahead?"

"I'm certain and hopeful that yes," dad said, somehow combining certainty and doubt in one sentence. "Besides, don't forget the reputation of the house. My reputation."

Arad shrugged.

"You can't be held responsible for the relations of a son who's sixteen."

"I see risks you don't see. I have more life experience than you, and every day I encounter... situations where something went wrong," Nergim spoke very firmly.

"Father, what is the risk? If you're worried about my convictions, they're quite in order," he lied without effort. "If you're worried about my reputation, I don't even understand what's objectionable about meetings between a young lion and a young lioness, especially since we honor customs and laws. Father, the Rainbow of Blood permits me this, even encourages it," Arad said, gazing at the surroundings with superiority.

"They need something from you," father shook his head, affirming.

"Dad, she doesn't need anything. Listen... Dad, let's talk like males, let's move to my plane."

"I guess," Nergim thought, "to the plane of your youth? Proceed."

"At my age: would you have refused to press down some ass, if she's rubbing up herself?"

To Arad this argument, expressed with the help of a phrase from Lenayna's father (he'd liked it, remembered it), seemed devastating, impossible to deny. The effect was somewhat different—father looked at him, stunned:

"How are you speaking to me?"

"Forgive the expression, but you understood the thought."

Father was silent.

"We spend time together," Arad continued. "She has fun, I have fun. She hasn't even said a word about Vaal, about faith, about all that nonsense—she simply doesn't care."

Father continued to be silent. Then pronounced, at an unexpected moment for Arad (he'd already thought—that's it, topic closed):

"I would like you to cease relations with these Ashai-Keetrah. It... distresses me," he spent a long time choosing the word.

Now it was Arad who fell silent.

"And this maassi of the Insai line—I'm displeased with her."

"Lenayna? She..." Arad hurried, but clenched his hand and went differently: "If you mean the joke with the tea, my explanation about the game was truthful. It's a display of playfulness, that's how youth have fun now."

Nergim shook his head in negation, silently indicating to the driver where to turn, touching him with his judicial rod.

"I mean an entire complex of manifestations of her external behavior, which I happened to witness. She struck me as an ill-bred and unrestrained person—I'll even render judgment: unbridled. Youth doesn't excuse it here. She dealt you an insult, and it's surprising you swallowed it so indifferently. And I, unlike mother, don't much like their family, although... to a degree this alliance is advantageous," father sighed. "Most likely you need a maassi from a fansinall, like mother," Nergim said with a spark of idea. "It's not an ideal place for raising lionesses, but they have learned manners."

"And where, papa, is the ideal place?" Arad inquired, knowing as always that father didn't sense traps and ambushes in words.

"Probably nowhere," father tucked the rod under his arm and looked aside. Someone waved to him from the street, but he didn't respond, with anything.

"Tomorrow I'm going to nowhere," Arad struck his chest, "and choosing myself a—"

"Don't be a philistine—it doesn't suit you at all, the eldest son of Karizian-Roust."

They were silent a while.

"You've begun having relations, that's positive, but here's the trouble: two young lionesses at once, and not the most fortunate ones. You need one like this: absolutely serious and impeccably proper, and one," father said this with absolute seriousness.

"The problem is this: two is better than one," Arad spread his fingers. "Three is better than two. Four is better than three. Five is better than four. And... six is better than five."

"I see the period of maturation is not coming easily to you. Hot blood is making you lose your reason."

"Dad, why, this is basic arithmetic."

Perhaps Nergim-Sinay might have answered this argument somehow, but they had already arrived. In the Chamber of Justice (the Chambers of Strict and Inexorable Judgment, CSIJ—jokingly, not around father, 'sissy') he spent half the day with father over papers, and father was very detailed about the proceedings, ate with him as well, and the other half of the day sat at a trial that dad also conducted, and it was rather engaging ("May the name of the Emperor be illuminated by the light of Vaal," "Let justice commence, for so the Suungs will it," and the most absurd—but required!—for a judge, whether in Doctrine or not: "By the will of Vaal, in the name of the Emperor").

Father was called 'the honor of Suungs.' Sometimes mama did this too, in a playful mood. Arad watched and tried to fit it all onto himself.

When they returned home, mom, at dinner, said quietly and with excitement:

"There's a letter for you. I put it in your room."

"What letter, from whom?" Arad asked indifferently, but just as quietly, and felt a wave go through his fur, up his back.

"I'm not sure, but it looks like a love letter," mama said so joyfully, as if it had come for her, not him.

Arad gave a surprised nod and deliberately stretched out his sitting at dinner until the very end, deliberately discussed impressions of the day with father (which Nergim liked very much), stretching, stretching the pleasure of this anticipation, and of course, trying to look indifferent and ordinary.

More than that: he washed, dried himself, and even went to his brothers' room—they had tormented him with pleas to show the sword they'd found on his bed in his room (he'd left it there on purpose, though why—he didn't know himself). Finally, he decided to go and had almost taken the sword with him, but they'd latched on to look more, and to get them off his back, Arad left the weapon. And went to his own room.

He turned the letter over, sniffed it. Hard to say... It should be Simsana—she'd said she would write. There was no one else. And good. Praise Vaal, thought Arad, that there's no one else, and that it's good.

"Vaal, if you exist. It's her, isn't it?" he asked the night window, and opened it.

My Arad,

Forgive me for not making myself known for so long a time. My days and nights are full of those labors which Vaal and the Suungs command lionesses of the sisterhood to perform. I dared not trouble you with word, knowing I would be consumed by service.

I was told you came to us the other day, demanding me, and how I recognize you in this impatient resolve. I am sorry we did not meet then, but that meeting would have been doomed to brevity and restraint of feelings. Therefore, you may find it interesting that on the 7th day of the 1st Moon of Waters—from the most solitary morning to the most solitary night—I am free of all duties and services.

May Vaal inspire you to vigorous deeds.

Your V.-S.

Arad flopped onto the bed as onto a cloud. Clasped his hands behind his scruff.

Yes.

If only there's no one there the day after tomorrow. No Miresli, no females giving birth, no sick ones, no washer-lionesses, no cubs, no hamanu Ulra. Vaal, make it so there's no one, so everyone around dies for a while and then comes back to life, or gets moved to another world—that's possible, isn't it? She's your priestess, let's blow a fire, I won't let you down, I'll do everything like Miresli said, I swear, I'll be a Suung of impeccable valor. Bring her to me as sacrifice, eh, give her to me in service—they do serve Suungs, don't they? Let me just capture her right there, so we don't go anywhere, so I don't walk in like that and she's all dressed up in plasis or whatever they have, and comes out from the threshold like: let's go, Arad, let's walk and see the world and have fun, and I'm like, yes-yes, of course, let's go, lovely weather, excellent idea. Give me strength not to let her leave, to drag her down by the scruff, just like then...

Suddenly came a piercing crash of glass; clear enough—the brothers in their room had put the sword to use after all.

Suffer

Early in the morning of the seventh day of the First Moon of Waters, having merely notified Sedesi that he'd be gone all day (so she could tell mother, and let them sort it out among themselves), he left the house. Dew still shone on the grass, and by all measures he was setting out early, but he feared some chance occurrence or dad's whim to take him along to work might delay him.

Besides, he hadn't wanted to sleep anyway, since before dawn.

With him he took the sword, placed in a too-narrow scabbard he'd found at home. Arad didn't know exactly why he'd taken it; some vague explanation went like this: he had to carry it like this, in his hand, and when he arrived he'd tell Simsana that—as it happened—he'd taken it to be sharpened, and therefore going out anywhere would be difficult (he couldn't wander around Gallen with both her and a sword); so why not stay and drink wine from cups at your place, what do you say, Simsani?

Funny, he thought.

But the real reason, it seemed, was slightly different: Arad wanted to look impossibly lion-ish and fearsome. And on the way he thought up something better; there should be a small performance or speech, and Arad, by the way, was quite good at oratory; at least, so he'd been assessed at gymnasium.

This should be a triumph, the dominance of the male. Requirement: their complete seclusion—this moment would need to be thought through. He would speak clearly, distinctly, confidently—take the best from both Arads: speak the truth (directness, principles), but only the truth useful for the matter (instinct, cunning).

Simsana! I must tell you something. Simsana! (must pace left-right before her, gazing at her unwaveringly) *I will be truthful with you: I was ordered to break off all relations with you. They are all—in fear!* (here he'd need to point accusingly in the direction of his home, so she'd understand). *Mother has lineage plans and fears their destruction by your fire. Father wishes to turn me into a judge who fears Ashai like fire* (not a word about Lenayna, nothing about her, at all). *But! Simsana! This shall not be, because...* (throw the sword somewhere, either on the table, or the bed, or the ground) *"...I love you"* (nah, mediocre) *"...I am your Suung of impeccable valor"* (there it is) *"...and you are my fire"* (not bad).

Then you advance on her, and see how it goes.

Arad stood at the threshold of their house, shaking off his paws. It was quiet; the nom was turned to 'no one home.' He felt doubt—what if something hadn't worked? What if again some emergency that Simsana absolutely had to attend? This vile everyday life knows how to ruin the best things. Life is sly, not kind, loves stupid jokes.

He knocked loudly on the door, so loudly in the morning air that he startled himself. It sounded as if the guard were demanding entry, not a young lion come to a lionessy for an occasion.

"Simsana!"

For several long moments it was quiet and unanswered, and then he heard from the depths of the house:

"Come," came her voice, soft and muffled; Arad barely heard it, in truth.

Arad, very thoroughly washing his paws, noted several things: the water completely fresh; and the towels fresh; and somehow very quiet; and much light in the vestibule, dust motes in the air. It seemed there was no one extra here—such silence. He locked the door, and even shook it, to be sure.

"Beautiful morning, Simsani," still in the vestibule, Arad tossed the sword in his hand (holding it by the middle of the scabbard), exhaled quietly, and entered.

In the room wandered patches of sun, radiant morning light from the windows, and an abundance of things everywhere, as before. First Arad looked at the table and near it, for where else would one usually be and sit here. But no one—and then he was pierced, it reached him that on the bed in the middle of the room there was someone or something—because of the bright, light patch on the whiteness of the sheets, the geometry and shadows had played a trick on him, hiding from him—her.

She, a stranger, was seated on the bed, evidently right on her paws, straight, with posture, in a light, white garment most resembling a nightgown or chiton; her tail flowed in a wave along the edge of the bed. She looked at him—or rather, looked in his direction, for Arad couldn't see her eyes—she was hidden by a large lioness mask, covering her whole muzzle. In her other hand something was held, but Arad didn't understand what.

He stopped. He wasn't even sure this was Simsana. It was so enchantingly strange.

The lioness didn't move.

Ritual hung in the air. Obviously: one of them had to do something first, and Arad didn't doubt—who else should do it but him. He took about six steps, just like that, with sword in scabbard, and stood right before her. Between them—two paces, respectfully. She watched through the mask, followed him, and Arad recognized what mask it was—this was Ahlia, the great-mother of all Suung lionesses. Large, symbolic ears (once this was prized among Suungs as great beauty; customs had long changed), gilding, trails of blood from the nose. Through the half-closed eyes of the mask, visi-

ble that he was being watched. A good mask. It seemed like... seemed like—Simsana. But this went so against everything he could ever have expected from interaction with a lioness, especially one his age, his generation, that the doubt was real: perhaps she had an unknown sister or an older friend (also Ashai-Keetrah, also slender), and all this was some cunning sisterhood thing?

If Simsana had sought to destroy the walls in which his mind sheltered, she had achieved it. He didn't want to say anything; he simply stood and contemplated the picture. In the lioness's posture could be read meekness, but the mask wouldn't let him relax, and even the frivolity of thought, the heat of blood—had quieted.

"Who are you?" asked the lioness.

Arad heard that it was her, and her voice drove him into bliss. He didn't even immediately understand what was asked; and when he understood, he uttered the only thing that came:

"A Suung of impeccable valor."

She evidently hadn't expected precisely that answer, for there sounded a quiet, unexpected, very pleased "Hmmm..." With a very sharp movement—Arad even flinched—the lioness opened the fan in her other hand; an excellent, practiced flourish.

"I've come for my Suunga. Where is she?"

"She is outside me. And I am inside her. Would you behold her?"

"I wish only that," answer simply, when you know the answer to the question exactly.

"Submit: the desire of the lion is the lionesses' life."

'... the lionesses' life' he involuntarily repeated after her, inaudibly. Who doesn't know this phrase from the most famous classic, the play 'I Dreamed of You.' It wasn't meant for him—she was saying it to *herself*.

Meanwhile the tail came alive, the paws ceased to rest on the bed and together performed a graceful flourish (also practiced), carefully alighting on the floor. The tip of the ribbon flicked—with which, it turned out, the lioness was girdled. She rose, approached him with small steps, and Arad absently calculated the distance—could he grab her? You could, answered instinct. The eyes in the mask blinked, the fan snapped shut, and the mask floated aside, revealing to him Simsana—but not simply Simsana, no, this turned out to be Simsana with a red stripe from nose to chin, like the mask; but instead of two modest streams of blood, hers was a careless red waterfall.

She was looking at him definitely like this: with serious, cruel joy; so, probably, looks the huntress seeing that great prey has fallen to her arrow. Also, it seemed, questioningly, as if she desired confirmation: had the sole spectator appreciated the small performance? Arad meanwhile remained in mute shock, and not even because all the changes to her appearance struck the eye, but that all this had been done for him.

Then lightning of action hurried, and he tried to grab her by the waist with one hand (in the other was the sword, after all), or something like that, into his arms; not very quickly, with excessive confidence, and therefore, probably, nothing worked—she deftly dodged to the side, having absolutely foreseen such a possibility.

"No-no, oh no," she forbade. "Suffer."

"You want me to suffer?" Arad asked with naive, hungry surprise.

"Of course," she opened the fan again, already looking at him from the left side, where she'd ended up after her successful escape. Just her eyes: "Vaal on a strong day, Arad."

The fan folded again, and an almost imperceptible nod of the head together with a shot of her gaze, then Simsana turned and walked toward the northern side of the house, where he hadn't yet been. He followed, watching her almost completely exposed tail in this tail-free chiton, or peplos, or nightgown (Arad—truly—didn't know what it was).

In the unusually large balneum it was dark; for such a house, not small but not the largest either, this was really not bad—Arad noted this. Simsana opened the door to the outside with her paw, dashing and somewhat out of character; Arad propped it with a stick so it wouldn't close. There was more light now, even morning sounds penetrated here, but still half-darkness lurked everywhere, and in the corners—outright gloom. Simsana stood beside the balneum—a barrel neck-high for a middling lioness—and looked at him expressively; expressively in precisely the sense that Miresli had once looked at him, conversing with him through her gaze, only much weaker, without the affect and effect. But Arad understood the message; he understood Simsana good. And he couldn't decide for himself, though he'd thought about it more than once—was she so expressive in messages carefully prepared for him and tailored to him, or had he so quickly and instantly become seasoned in the language of lionesses? Her message was simple: you're too dressed.

"Got it," he said.

A moment later this deficiency was corrected, and the sword ended up far from the water, in the corner.

Then she looked questioningly at the mask and fan: she had a problem—her hands were full. Arad, of course, was right there, but immediately reconsidered—she didn't need free hands at all. She needed the belt-ribbon untied, which he did, and this was only the first step; he'd gladly have continued undressing her further, but from this Simsana dodged—she deemed even this, the symbolic disrobing, sufficient. Having set the fan and mask on a stand beside the balneum, she took from him the belt-ribbon, which he'd already managed to wind around his fist (proprietary, fearlessly she unwound it, without shyness touching his hands, looking into his eyes, while he looked at her parted lips and very white teeth against the red paint), and said:

"Get in the water and turn away," on one exhale, matter-of-factly.

Arad climbed into the hot, even excessively hot water—one could go soft from such heat before long—and decided not to turn away, really now. But everything would be fair: he closed his eyes, dunked his head, and surfaced.

He wasn't alone for long at all: rustling of clothing, then the sound of falling fabric, a couple of careful claws on the stone floor—and now Arad was no longer alone in the balneum, where, by its maker's design, some four lions could fit, if they weren't shy. He felt, eyes still closed—a deal is a deal—that she touched his knee with her paw, with that tenderness only females are capable of.

Arad opened his eyes.

Simsana opposite, in the water. She's looking, she's waiting for you to, I don't know... show her how much you like all this? Like? What an insufficient word, what staleness wafts from it. Need to say something. Come up with something. I wasn't prepared for this. I don't know what; I can't think anymore. All of life was a delusion. Say something already, just not something monstrously stupid. Go on, a banality. Something simple.

"When I kiss you," an unconditional truth expressed, "I'll also become red," an inexorable logical conclusion.

Arad wasn't capable of more for now. And Simsana saw that he wasn't capable of anything for now. And she loved this. It was reflected in her half-smile: somewhat victorious, somewhat mischievous, somewhat sensual.

She said, swishing her palm through the water:

"It's sweet," she pointed a claw at her chin. "The blood of Ahlia is sweet. You can lick it."

She tried on the mask, grabbing it from the stand:

"This is Ahlia," she said gravely.

"This is, ummm, yes," Arad repeated after her, remembering that even the name of the great-mother of all Suungs isn't proper for lions to speak, otherwise troubles await.

"And this is one of her daughters," she removed the mask and smiled with teeth, with fangs.

"Simsana!" he recognized her joyfully.

She nodded, yes, yes.

"And is the blood really sweet?"

"Yes," Simsana nodded again, affirming everything, all true. And, it seemed, was waiting for something from him, but he only rubbed his muzzle with a wet palm, so she added: "It's a special paint."

"Simsi, truly, is this allowed?"

"What?" She pricked her ears, lowered her muzzle.

"Well, like this," he gestured at everything around, everything at all, at her.

"And why not?"

"I didn't even know. Without you I wouldn't know anything at all."

Still, he had to make sure that the red really did taste good, and he swam toward her. What was expected: she wouldn't move from the spot, observing his approach with tender horror, and then he'd press her against the wall, and he'd also need to glide along her curves under the water. What happened: she came to meet him, and they nearly bumped noses in the middle, but very quickly understood and determined how to resolve this meeting—he ended up higher, above the water, drops running off him of water that smelled of something, into which she'd thought to add something; she lower, muzzle upward, and her ears almost touching the water or even already in it (careful, water in the ears—oh how unpleasant), and to keep from drowning she grabbed him by the neck. At some moment a weird thought came into Arad's mind: that like this it would be very easy to drown her, no effort needed, just press down and be patient a little; and again a moment later he was utterly horrified by such an impulse, even shuddered all over (she immediately made something between "Hmmm..." and "Mrrrr...", taking this for a lightning bolt of arousal), and just in case embraced her at the neck, though she was holding onto him quite tenaciously. The blood of Ahlia-Simsana did turn out to be sweetish (more precisely, like a sour apple in sugar), he really did lick it all off her nose, lips, chin, part of her neck, and with a diligence she perhaps hadn't expected but patiently endured. *How did she think of this? he thought. My Simsana, how did you think of it? How?"*

At last Arad was satisfied with this first meeting of today, and she slipped right under his neck and turned onto her back. He again with his back to the wall of the balneum, and she lay spread on him. There were surprises: Simsana clearly hadn't expected (or had forgotten) that Arad's desire would be so obvious and firm, having run into it with the inside of her thigh; so she smoothly resettled onto his left leg and left shoulder. Arad was puzzled, since after all she could have lain on him, fit between his legs, and this would certainly have brought many sensations whose consequences he couldn't vouch for—why not. But evidently Simsana envisioned it all differently, certainly not in the water, so he decided not to insist. He'd get what he came for anyway. He appreciated the wisdom of her action: she was thinking about him, thinking about his desires, and wasn't teasing for nothing. The main thing was precisely this—she thought about him. Nothing was so convincing as precisely this: she thought about him.

"Am I asleep?"

"No, Arad, you're not asleep," she answered, stretching a leg out of the water on the opposite side and resting it on the edge of the balneum.

"Too good to be real," he nuzzled her ear with his nose, on which the Mistress of Life ring had reappeared, and he was curious.

She laughed, he felt her shake, his hand on her stomach, in dangerous, possessive closeness. *Don't go with your hands*, he recalled Miresli's advice.

Eh, Miresli, listen, let's make an exception. No, no. The mentor who raised such a disciple knows her craft. Obey.

"I'm good at telling dream from waking," she suddenly flipped over and licked his cheek, "I need to be. We do dreamwalk."

"So it's a dream after all? But what a real one."

Simsana smiled, closing her eyes and hanging on him. He wouldn't understand. He couldn't.

He returned with interest to her ear with the ring, and began to whisper to her, right into her ear, pressing her to him without sentiment (he knew this was right, this way it would enter as it should):

"You're my lioness of dream," he stroked her, along her whole length, as far as he could, "you're my golden dream, you're... you're... Vaalu-Simsana, priestess of Vaal, finest daughter of Suungs, my most wondrous dream, and... and Mistress of Life, and... my fire."

It couldn't be said he was unfamiliar with lionesses' bodies, no. But this pleasant yielding and softness, and in warm water besides; and the harder, the more hungrily his palm passed, the better it was for her.

"Arad... say me... more..." she asked when he stopped, and her speech was broken by exhales with purring.

It even occurred to him that he could say absolutely anything, even recite his father's edict—all the same. But he didn't have time to collect himself, because she turned and pushed her wet muzzle to his ear and breathed into it. He had to grab the edge, brace with another arm—the new sensation proved sharp, strong, too real (there are none like it in dreams). Yes, Simsana wanted to let him know what it was like. But the real thing began after her little ritual of several inhales and exhales:

"Yes. Arad, I'll tell you. Yes. I'll give myself to the power of 'yes.' I said 'yes' to you. Arad... Hm..."

This was too overwhelming—her wet, hot voice in his ear, so close; it's beyond lion nature to endure such a thing evenly; he probably nearly drowned or almost drowned. Simsana noticed this, so she didn't insist on his torment, and laughed into her palm, but so he wouldn't see.

He looked at her with passionate anger. He was starting to feel almost sick from desire, but Arad no longer even dared to tear the flowering nets that Simsana had woven around him and for him, honestly trying to follow the path of the Game.

"Simsana," he uttered her name like an engram, a spell.

"Yes, I'm getting hot too," she lied so softly. "The water's very warm. Very much so. I overdid it with the fire."

She washed his cheeks.

"Will you turn away?"

What if I say no? thought Arad. But still he decided to nod in agreement. It was inevitable anyway, like tomorrow's sunrise—let her finish playing, she needed to.

He didn't turn away, but closed his eyes. She got out, he waited (probably even longer than required); then with a sharp movement he climbed out and brought an incredible amount of water with him—it all spilled abundantly across the floor. Wrapped in balneum cloth, she gave him the same, dried his scruff, his ears, and then tried to wrap him too, but it didn't work:

"Don't, Simsani."

"But you'll be cold."

"I won't."

Well, she threw the cloth over his head and laughed.

"Sit a bit, and don't peek."

"Why?" he inquired, seating himself on a small barrel, near the sword in the corner.

"All things in their time," she answered simply.

That's certain, he thought, closed his eyes and crossed his arms. Took the cloth from his head, dried himself with it, bit it, felt with his tail the chill from the open door. The agreement was kept—he didn't look left, in her direction, didn't even turn his ears that way. He wondered what to do with her. What might he do with her? There were several things he would definitely do—thank you after all to Vaalu-Miresli; if only everything went as it should! Some things—he'd figure it out. Interesting, could she... no, that would be stupid and funny... but could he ask her, preferably somewhere near the window, ask her to stand-lie-sit (and whatever else) however he wanted? And have her put on what he said, or nothing at all. And he would memorize it—after all, his strong suit was visual memory. Ideally—sketch her, but that required skill, and he was no good. He'd turn her into a diagram of fortifications, a helpless set of straight lines, not a living lioness on paper. The master architect would be pleased with such self-criticism, oh yes. Bastard... Could have just said to his muzzle that he didn't like Arad.

It seemed like the rustling had long stopped, so Arad did look left—where was his Simsana? She, again dressed in that same interesting tail-free chiton, evoking thoughts of Khustru or Helsia (Arad had never been to either, and had seen very few living Khustrian females in his life, and Helsian ones—not a single one), was looking at herself in another barrel of water, as in a mirror—carefully searching for some flaws on her muzzle (blood of ancestors, what flaws?). She was smoothing near her nose, as if trying to find still-nonexistent whiskers, or at least a hint of them; the battle against them—a whole subject, and even dhaar females had adopted the Suung fashion of removing them completely and utterly.

She glanced at him, smiled, and left all that business.

"Aren't you cold?" She came over and showed concern.

He shook his head. No, not cold. Simsana meanwhile noticed the sword in the corner, half-crouched by it in female fashion, grew interested; her tail struck against his paw, the tail-slit parted, showed her legs above the knees, gave impulse to fantasy. He caught the moment and caught it by the tuft. Simsana did nothing about this, only silently and inactively acknowledged that he was allowed to do so.

"Is this yours?" She tried to take it with one hand, but had to use two.

"Don't know yet," Arad answered honestly.

"Ooooh, it looks good," standing, she amusingly tried to pull it from the too-narrow scabbard, but no chance.

Meanwhile Arad shamelessly examined her tail-tip. It was interesting; it seemed to him he hadn't seen ones like it, though he'd held no other in his hands besides his mama's—well, one could also count those episodes when he'd pulled lionesses by the tail a couple of times, but that was only fleeting acquaintance with that part of a lioness which among Naysagrians is considered thoroughly intimate. For pulling them by the tail—that's a risk comparable to lifting skirts and dresses, an assault, and he hadn't dared such things, being of good middle stratum and supposed to be well-raised. For those of lower origin—it's simpler; some of them managed to grab not just the tuft but the base of the tail (the higher you grab, the more glory). It's not easy—lionesses were very attentive to male attention and sensed when they were about to be troubled; and since they were about to be troubled practically always, they always remained attentive.

But back to Simsana. Not only was her tuft fuller than usual, but it also split in two, and you couldn't see this—only touch confirmed it. There, at the Height, Arad had first felt this. Here—he saw. *Probably that's why it's so big*, thought Arad.

"Curious tail-tip you have."

"I don't know," Simsana answered, carefully setting the sword back, and he had to lean to keep from losing the tail from his hand, "I was born with it. Mentor said it happens."

"Good," Arad decided, released her tail but took her by the shoulders. "Let's go."

Simsana turned to him and embraced him higher, around the neck.

"Where are we going? So eager?" Arad saw what female satisfaction, even mocking cunning, sounded in these words. Simsana tried to shake him in her embrace, as she'd done more than once, as if testing his steadiness, but in vain. "I haven't yet—"

Oh no, these tricks, these teasings wouldn't work on him, otherwise he'd soon be both miserable and in pain. Arad stood a bit wider (paw forward, paw back, simple) and grabbed her onto his shoulder.

"Arad, what are you doing?"

He ducked so as not to hit her on the doorframe, walked through the main room toward that same small steep staircase.

"Grabbed me, ruined everything. Let go," it seemed she was even scratching. "Let go. Let go. I won't run. We can't go up, we can't go upstairs like this, together. Let go," her tone shifted incredibly fast: now threat, now plea, now coaxing.

He didn't let go.

"Arad, I'm scared," she produced her last argument.

But he meanwhile was solving a problem: how to get upstairs together with her on this ladder (who made it?!) to her room. He felt her warmth on his neck, cheek, shoulder. Thinking, he bit her on the side, lightly, of course.

"With me you have nothing to fear," so he said and licked, the same side, but forgot she was in clothing (for now still), so instead of the sweetness of her fur he got the meaningless tastelessness of fabric.

Simsana let out an involuntary purr and hit him on the back.

"My Vaal, my light, why did I say anything about impatience..."

Finally, Arad decided how he'd do it all, including in case of mishaps or a broken step. And it turned out far easier than he'd thought—in a moment they were upstairs, Simsana was a light and convenient burden, very simple. *Someone like her would be very easy to rape*, thought Arad. He always thought this when he happened to carry lionesses in his arms or on his shoulder, always; and it had happened a couple of times already. Unhurriedly opening the door, he just as thoroughly locked it, even tested whether it held well.

This room, this scent, thought Arad. *Again this ritual. Now the prize is on my shoulder, not even in my arms, and she has nowhere to go, simply nowhere.*

He quickly took her off his shoulder and placed her in his arms (a deft maneuver, one can learn it—the main thing is to fearlessly and strongly toss her rear with your paw), which made her gasp, and then carefully, without roughness, laid her on the obviously prepared bed with a heap of pillows, large and small, and he only marveled at her ubiquitous foresight. Laid down in such a tender manner, Simsana peacefully, languidly, even sleepily lay for several moments: one leg along the bed, the other forming a beautiful triangle of her knee, revealing her loosened tail, her whole thigh, and already very transparent hints of that which eastern Suungs call 'the arch of the world,' Andarian females lyrically call 'the secret,' also called 'the sheath'; but suddenly, as if bitten, she crawled away to the far right corner, pushing off with her paws, to the wall. And covered her body with a small pillow, embracing it.

Hm. Arad cautiously climbed toward her, to reconnoiter the situation. Dangerous, dangerous! With each moment of his approach she squeezed the pillow harder, growled louder, and her ears pressed flatter.

"You're mauling me! Get off!" Arad heard, and this even slightly cracked his simple, fearless, hungry resolve—but it returned even stronger when Simsana decided to push him away, because this gesture... it was too good. She pushed so as to make him draw closer, to make him angrier. And also that scorching gaze-fire.

She struck him sharply, quickly across the muzzle, now with claws—no joke.

"Scoundrel," in this voice were both guilt and pleasure. "Hate you."

Ah, well if that's how it is, then he could strip away the veneer of properness. He pulled her by the paws, simply and strongly, right to him, pressed down on top. She tried to resist, but no quarter: in an instant he joined both her hands together, then pressed them to the pillows with one palm. She tried to break free or even throw him off, but it proved so powerless and useless that Simsana only sighed.

"And what will you do? What? Rape me? I'll bite," she tried not to let him kiss her, her nose wet from the unequal struggle. "In the name of Vaal, I'll bite, I swear... I'll be biting..."

But he wasn't intending to kiss her—such tenderness was beside the point now—he simply breathed in her scent at her neck, while with his hand he completely shamelessly explored her body. He visited almost everywhere he could reach, and without haste, but thoroughly, memorizing what was what—she'd asked for it herself, wanted it herself. He was drawn to her breasts—interesting, somewhat unfamiliar; he very much liked everything near the hips by the tail, this could be gripped commandingly with a full palm. He passed in dangerous proximity, both from above and by roundabout paths from below; he was stirred by the heat, but Simsana squeezed her legs together, not surrendering the last thing—but he didn't much insist, and indulged her illusion that she'd managed to defend herself. Arad already had a plan, and in this plan first came his release; only after that, with a calm, clear head, did he want to carefully but insistently approach the interesting things for Simsana. He was quite certain that the reverse order would lead to foolishness and something unforeseen.

Then he kissed her hungrily, pressing harder. Here she suddenly, strongly and very defiantly, shuddering almost convulsively with her whole body:

"What, you beast, haven't conquered everything?" and exhaled onto him, smiling with bared teeth.

Oh, what a challenge, and what naivety. *What, does she think I don't dare? Or—worse—I'm afraid?* His palm went on its inexorable, now merciless journey downward.

"Now I'll fuck you," he threatened, and bit her on the neck—not hard, no need to worry. He didn't say it fully and seriously (more like... a quarter...), it was the kind of threat of punishment for a lioness who's behaving badly

and defiantly—intimidation. But it seemed Simsana took it all directly, as stated—he heard her plea, and in her voice not fear, but concern—certainly:

"Arad, please. Aradi..." she began to stroke his back tenderly, trying to win him over with gentleness. "I'll turn over. Come, play me out," Simsana decided she'd over-teased the lion, herself beckoning him beyond the bounds of the Game. She had to call him back in the most decisive manner, unambiguously giving what he'd come for, but the promise remained only within permitted boundaries.

Arad stopped, practically at the goal already—one finger had already entered new, still unknown places between her legs. Nobly retreating, he rose, sat on his haunches and completely freed her from captivity. Simsana didn't deceive him now: again she climbed for the oleamor under the bed, and again he was gifted an excellent view; rising, she took off her nightgown-chiton over her head, and now Arad could look at all of her, which he diligently did, and looked where you'd expect. No longer taking this pleasure from him or hiding, Simsana, kneeling, opened the cork with her teeth; then, looking at the bed, then at Arad, she poured oleamor into her palm (rather a lot), applied it to the insides of her thighs and by her tail, and the remainder she simply and shamelessly smeared on his chest and shoulder (Arad thought she was too shy to go lower, and he should sometime direct her where needed). He assumed she would now lie on her back again with legs up, but no—she gathered pillows under her belly and lay on them like that, tail toward him and muzzle into the bed.

"I'll keep my tail up. But you go only between my thighs, not there. Promise?"

"It's all good, Simsi," Arad exhaled, devouring with his gaze the spectacle offered him, and the Game offered him. "Don't be afraid."

He grabbed her tail; she not only didn't hold it down, but even flicked it upward, inviting.

"Higher. You can go higher," she advised, and he saw her back so vividly, so flexible. "All the way to the top. Aham..."

Following the call, he entered between her thighs, at the very top, where the tail begins and life begins; a careless movement, a shift in position, a wrong angle, his forgetfulness or her willfulness—and he would enter her for real. He felt that above it was hot and wet, the wondrous, previously unknown fur giving a sharp, piercing, almost painful sensation. Even in the haste of desire, in the mounting urgency to end the torment as quickly as possible, Arad acknowledged how much better this was than their previous way of the Game; here there was none of that slight awkwardness and artificiality, here everything was almost real, very nearly. He could pull her tail, he could lick her scruff, he could hold her by the chin and kiss her, he could bite her ear—everything, not make do with a modest substitute like biting her paw. And he could breathe in the scent, which had transformed into a

sharp, strong, beckoning, shameless variation of her daytime scent. He could do everything, but the ascent was going too fast, and he could not, was not able to deny himself this; fantasy scattered, the desire to explore evaporated—he, pressing her with his whole body, buried his nose in her scruff, seeing nothing. Fine trembling, ragged breath (a little shameful, but nothing to be done); she had already—clever one—thought not to move, not to disturb him, and even not to make a sound, but she had arrived at this thing: she slightly moved to meet him there and only there, raising the middle of her body, and so each time, with each of his movements. Already all of this was too much, impossibly much, and this became the last stream for a huge hot lake, and it burst into countless tiny drops—the dam broke heavily and abundantly; he even thought with the remnants of consciousness amid the shining drops that he had accidentally penetrated her (and she had forgotten herself and hadn't noticed—but how could Arad know that for a female such a thing is impossible), and now they had unbelievably and irrevocably violated Ancestral Law, the Game, and Vaal knows what else, because he had no will left to pull back and finish on her back, her tail, her legs, anywhere; no, he pressed against her with all his strength and finished into the hot unknown below. This was even stronger, even more terrible than the first time, and through his bared teeth saliva spilled abundantly onto her scruff and neck.

"Much blood. More blood," she said, resting on the pillow and looking aside, straight into a large mirror.

Arad almost didn't understand her words; they reached him not immediately, but in parts. He found himself clinging with his cheek to her shoulder and neck; all of her sharply smelled of his saliva, her scent interrupted and mixed. He wanted to get up but couldn't. There, in the middle, it was wet, hot, and already soft. He looked at her dazedly: she was gnawing a claw with serious expression and looking at herself in the mirror. He wiped his nose on her shoulder, lazily flicked his tail.

"Sim... Simsan. Where did I finish?"

She stopped gnawing the claw and looked at what she'd gnawed.

"Between my legs. Somewhere under me," and she quickly inhaled with her wet nose, licked her lips.

"I just thought that..." he limply threw his arm onto the pillow.

"It's alright."

Several peaceful, somewhat apologetic kisses to her cheek. She met and returned the last one.

"Arad, I need to wash."

"Don't go."

"I'll be back soon, I can't be like this."

He slowly let her go, falling over onto his side; holding her by the hand, he demanded one more kiss—she gave it simply and quick, and also smiled so he'd forgive the mundane quickness. Wrapping herself in balneum cloth,

she wiped her legs their whole length, setting them on the bed one at a time, and Arad watched them with lazy interest—then she left, taking the chiton and groombrushes.

In his head—blissful emptiness. He didn't want to do anything, wanted to leave everything as it was, and it even occurred to him that he shouldn't today and now try what Vaalu-Miresli had advised him to learn—after all it was effort, after all he'd have to encroach on her and break her possible shame. *No, a plan is a plan*, thought Arad. *Now she'll come, and I'll slowly, stealthily...* Need to start with the ears, behind the ears, we'll see how it goes. Then talk her into lying down. Wait, lying how? On her back, legs up? Or let her get on all fours, muzzle in the bed, tail up? Arad began thinking through the problem. From all the explorations and observations of a lioness's body he'd managed to conduct, he vaguely understood that both options were possible. It seemed the first was more trusting, should suit better. The second—provocative, beastly; she probably wouldn't be able to relax, it would be hard for her, leave that for later. But what a view... Well fine, the first it seems. Arad thought about the difficulties of unexplored territory—he hadn't properly seen how everything was down there, only glancingly, only hints, Simsana guarded herself, didn't yield, was modest; about the difficulties of execution: licking ice—that was of course a good comparison, everything must be done carefully and lightly, but where exactly? Or did it matter? Arad had heard from those who knew, they swore by ancestors' blood, that lionesses sometimes also satisfy themselves in private. Did she do that? And if he asked her to show him? Oh no, she wouldn't go for that. Or? No. She wants leading and knowing from you, she won't show you anything. Hm. In theory, in theory, thought Arad, it should be clear from her behavior where was right. As always, she'd hint, she wouldn't say, she was female after all. *Need to soften her up, and then possess her like that. Possession by taste, yes. I'll say I need to taste her. Exactly. Everything on me. Put it all on me. I need the scent, need the taste, I want it, you give it to me. She'll have an excuse for herself. He wants it, what can you do, such is life, no escaping it, heavy lot, great trials, insufferable scoundrel. The main thing—say as little as possible. Do everything as if you do it every day...*

Good, he'd determined the action, but what was the end result? The Game itself presupposed a very definite result, a final line impossible to confuse with anything (and its absence—a great misfortune), nothing in the world could be more definite, and it all concerned only the lion. What would be the final goal in the case of a lioness? Arad didn't know, hadn't even caught rumors on the matter. Obviously everything would be different for her, because everything was different for them, that was the whole point. *Mystery*, thought Arad. *Maybe nothing will even work.*

But, thinking further, Arad came to the conclusion that he shouldn't worry too much about this. It would become clear. What became very interesting

and exciting to him was this—to break her resistance; she would flee, that was obvious, and he would pursue. If she didn't—it wouldn't even be interesting; but Arad knew that Simsana wouldn't yield to such a thing right away, this was, consider it, a venture into entirely adult things, at the very borders, and they'd only had their second Game. And he was already planning such things... Need to go slowly. But surely. Don't announce intentions immediately, don't demand anything. Don't demand anything at all, just slowly and surely. Start with the ears, and..

The nobility of reflection was interrupted by the creak of the door (and he'd promised to oil it, Arad remembered!). Simsana, same as always: drinks in cups, in her teeth—something to eat. Never forgets. And again in her chiton-nightgown; Arad hadn't yet seen her tease with nakedness for nothing, and he found pleasure in this.

She perched on the edge of the bed, while Arad leaned against the wall opposite the mirror.

"Simsan, come. Sit here," he showed in front of himself.

Simsana gave him the cup and silently moved over. She let him take from her mouth, and he received with his teeth—the same pork as last time. She sat before him, legs tucked and closed together; she didn't adjust her clothing, didn't straighten anything, didn't wrap anything closed, so he could contemplate—there, farther off, in the mirror!—her legs and thighs their whole length; mysteriously, narrowly dark between her legs, her tail in a beautiful arc streamed from there and ended somewhere under a pillow.

"Beautiful mirror," he remarked, and sipped the diluted juice. He meant both the mirror itself, and the view in it, and everything.

"Dreamwalkers' mirror," Simsana carefully reclined, leaned back against Arad. Her left ear ended up right by his nose, and Arad thought that a beginning was laid, and it was excellent.

"Dreamwalkers' mirror?" he asked again, thinking of something else entirely.

"Yes," she sipped and smoothed her leg (Arad feared that the view in the mirror would be destroyed right now, her hand would adjust her clothing, but no—she decided to give him a little more spectacle). "Ashai-Keetrah dreamwalk at night. And in the day too."

"See vivid dreams, you mean?" He slowly, calmly set the cup aside.

"No, not dreams. It's a Spirit Gift. You wake within the dream, and it's no longer a dream. The mirror helps you wake and become aware, and also helps you—teaches you not to fear."

"And how does it help?" He slowly embraced her, placing his palms crossed on her chest.

"In the dream you remember that you need to look in the mirror," she seemed not to notice what he was doing. "You look, you don't get frightened. And then... and then you do what's required."

"And what's required?" Having carefully examined her ear with the Mistress of Life ring, Arad gauged where he needed to begin.

"First of all, see Vaal," she sipped again and stretched her right leg along the bed (he looked—good, enough). "And then various... other things..."

"And have you seen him?" He licked behind her ear, as tenderly as he could.

"Yes."

"And what is he like?" He took the cup from her, not breaking from his work, and she surrendered it without protest.

"That's forbidden to speak of."

"But still? A hint?" He spoke muffledly, through his teeth, any nonsense; let her talk, let her defense fall asleep. The task after all, mission above all.

Something seemed to be happening. She shifted slightly toward him, placed her palm on his arm, uncertainly.

"For each one it's different... Arad, what are you doing?" She exhaled sufferingly.

This was the most growling 'just don't stop' he'd heard in his life.

Still looking in the mirror, still holding on.

"Nothing," the eternal answer to such a question.

"For me he's like light. Or a lion. Light and lion. Oh, Arad..." She closed her eyes. That's it, her mouth opened, her fangs. The first bastion had fallen, no doubt.

He moved to the right ear; probably such a change made sense, thought Arad. Okay, he thought again: how good and simple it was to soften her up while being clear and empty himself; in the greed of desire this wouldn't work, there would be only confusion, violence, demand.

News: her hand, which before had peacefully rested on his forearm, suddenly demanded something, pressing to his palm. Where were both his palms? Correct, Arad determined, on her chest. Following the logic of things, he needed to do something with it. Having determined the order and tactics of the maneuver, Arad slipped lower to penetrate by a roundabout path, from underneath, to her bare body—even through thin fabric you couldn't caress properly. There was some imperceptible, symbolic protest on her part against such willfulness, such nightmarish encroachment; Arad barely even noticed this protest (seemed like she tried not to let him lift the hem or some other foolishness). Behind the ear everything was being tenderly licked, nothing stopped, his palms began exploring her chest, trying to understand what was required. More news: her claws dug into his arm. More: she began to exhale loudly (one could be alarmed, not being used to it). It became clear what was required of his hands: he needed to go to the very tips of the breasts. Simsana involuntarily put her hand on his palm as if urging him on, then thought better and grabbed her muzzle, then covered her eyes with her palm, then again covered her mouth, unable to settle. She

seemed to be forbidding herself, feeling shy. He felt that she'd pulled her legs up high, having forgotten already about all that view in the mirror; a tense, fine trembling began to shake her, she tried to arch, it became difficult for him to lick behind her ears: she was pressing against him entirely, making things complicated. But Arad didn't give up and continued. Something greater than this interrupted breathing and trembling had to happen, and here a moan, here another, all on the exhale, and then more, through clenched teeth. Oh, this thing was working, definitely, she was approaching something. Continue? Or move further? *Need to throw her on her back while she's hot*, thought Arad. *This is the time.*

Suddenly, quickly, he stopped tormenting her. Directed her along the bed, strongly, like a large toy, then by the legs pulled her farther from the headboard, without any ceremonies. He caught her gaze in passing: completely wet, and also—as if she'd been impossibly, monstrously, terribly exhausted, only with the difference that then eyes go dim, but here there was outright fire.

"Arad..." she produced a languid mixture of sigh and laugh. "Arad. You again?.. Oleamor... There... Here... I'm sorry... Arad..." she seemed to have forgotten how to speak, words came with difficulty.

Arad devised: he'd kiss her, then go down, and so—to the goal. Logical, very logical.

He climbed to kiss her, it became hot and heavy—she responded passionately, even demandingly, the mood of the kisses was different. He went down; forgetting himself, he even kissed the fabric at her chest; pushed everything higher, quickly moved lower, to the belly; protest didn't follow yet, intentions not yet understood (or?). Her legs together, stretched taut—no-no, that wouldn't do, so hands under her knees, he demandingly wedged his body between her thighs and began raising them up.

"Arad? Arad?" she grew alarmed. "What are you doing?"

"Want to know your taste," he demanded.

"Arad? What do you want? Vaal, Arad... We're not..."

"I want this," he lay down, not giving freedom to her legs; a struggle—she couldn't decide and meekly tried to lower them, while he demanded the opposite—the most shameless and helpless exposure.

"But Arad, I, what have I done wrong?..." she asked such an astonishing question.

He felt her surrendering.

"I want you. Want your taste. I need it," he examined her there, trying to understand and memorize everything as well as possible.

"My Vaal, Arad... You're somad..."

Excellent. Broken, persuaded, given. This was the most dishonorable nakedness possible: she on her back, legs up, bent at the knees, nearly closed together, somewhere beneath him her tail flowed, he'd pinned it with his

body (as if all the rest weren't enough)—and he grasped her by the thighs, palms on her belly, having placed his cunning muzzle near her shame, near the most guarded. He'd taken everything, stolen everything, almost no secrets remained, perhaps except for the continuation of the blood, but that was forbidden to them, completely, that mustn't be violated (that would come later, only a little while left to wait).

So, thought Arad, licking the thighs near the space between her legs from the inside, approaching, let her get used to it. *She's listening. Of course she is. Carefully, and everything will work out. Softer. More. Fuck, how do I know this?*

He looked at her. Hard to see, but as always: she'd turned away, covered herself from the world with her palm. My Simsana, I already know you by your gestures. Her other palm—unexpectedly—she placed between his ears, and Arad couldn't yet understand: defending herself? communicating? inciting him on?

The scent was different: sharp, confident, sweet, young. As if from a lioness's scent they'd taken away everything superfluous and all the shame—the pure scent of mating. He moved to the goal, being careful, remembering that only the tongue could be in play; the taste was faint, unclear, salt could be sensed. Simsana produced the most female sigh he'd heard (so far) in his life; the palm at his scruff grabbed his ear, she began to knead and stroke it (astonishing). He was surprised how wet and hot everything was, a scorching chaos; he'd expected something would be there, but not like this. He went lower, more, right here—a gap, an emptiness, surely this was exactly where their prohibition by the Rainbow of Blood lay, and he—what a nightmare—had already penetrated here; true, not the way intended, but still... *What am I doing with this Ashai-Keetrah!* he thought gleefully. She held his ear but didn't tug it. He returned back, higher, she squeezed, smoothed his ear again. So that's it. That's it. Higher. In her moan could be heard an indistinct 'aham.' Good, excellent, well done Simsana, now we'll finish you. Arad gained confidence that everything would end with something. Her palm abandoned covering her muzzle (what was there to be ashamed of, too late now) and lay on his forearm. And Arad thought of this: he could reach her chest with his hands—come on, raise her legs higher, like that, now it was possible.

Here Simsana was certainly carried away. The moans became rhythmic, loud, natural. Trembling, the kind you can't fake (probably). A couple of times she said something, either "Vaal" or "Arad," he couldn't tell. She sometimes grabbed his ear with claws, painful, but he endured. He felt that there, below, she'd become even wetter, indecently so; the already familiar fine trembling ran through her body. Suddenly the trembling became convulsive, obvious, she began to breathe faster, the moans grew stronger, moreover—hitherto passive, she began to help him with her body; she abandoned his ear

and arched, tensed like a bowstring, claws scratching the bed, and Arad felt that this was it, he could rightfully be proud of himself, he'd brought her, the bitch, where she needed to come; and so it was for several moments—her trembling, tension, claws in the bed.

Then he heard a moan mixed with a growl. Her hand, hitherto tender, pressed hard, pushed away—meaning, get out. He made a mistake, didn't listen, her second hand came to help, her legs clenched. Arad, pulling back quickly, understood the deed was done. And then he got it good, with full swing—her paw to his muzzle from the side, somewhere left of the chin; his head rang and his teeth ached. Stunned, he rubbed his cheek, tasted blood on his tongue, wiped it.

Simsana meanwhile had rolled onto her side, legs clenched, holding her palm to her eyes, covering herself as always, her tail lashing in a dance. She apparently had no idea at all where she was, and was laughing. Just so, laughing. Then she rolled onto her other side, sighed deeply.

"Ooooh..." she moaned heavily and languidly.

Arad liked it very much. This was good—to possess a female this way. The blow to the muzzle and the blood even gave everything a beautiful completeness. His tongue was tired from the unaccustomed work; all in her scent, and now even slightly in his own blood, he wiped himself with his palm.

Finally, she looked at him and slowly rose:

"Arad, did I hit you?" She was pierced with concern, she touched him, grew worried.

"Yes, with your paw. Happens," he answered, and kissed her.

"Forgive me, I didn't mean to," she wiped him with something, Arad didn't even notice what.

He nodded vaguely. It only made things more fun. True, at the end he'd planned to tumble her some more, kiss her all over and smother her a bit from above, not let her escape; the blow had disrupted everything, but oh well.

"I got heated up from all this, need to play again."

"You're such an Arad, what a scoundrel you are," she hit him in the chest while also wiping him. "Oh, you. Oh, just you. You want more?"

"Yes, today. Only later, need to rest, otherwise it'll take long... I'll torment you."

"Already! Already. Let's go down then. Vaal," she began gathering things around the room. "He just took, he just did it, he just thought it up," she spoke as if he weren't in the room. "What am I guilty of? Vaal, what shame."

She was trying to smooth her fur, while he was occupied with nothing, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"You've so, so ruined me, you've completely ruined this lioness. I'm done. Oh..." She was paying him compliments, poked him a couple of times with a

groombrush, while he listened, trying to remember where his clothes were. "Why did you play me out like that, Arad? I nearly died. What did I do to you?" she complained plaintively and theatrically—well, an excellent compliment, he couldn't restrain a self-satisfied rubbing of his cheek.

He remembered where his clothes were—in the balneum. As was the sword. *And we didn't close the door there*, he suddenly thought. *Fuck, someone could've make paws for the sword.*

"Listen, my clothes are there. Give me something to wrap up in."

She silently gave him a large balneum cloth. He wrapped up, lay a while, waited for her.

"Let's go," she announced. Looked at him, ruffled his mane, kissed him. "Lion. Good one," she exhaled onto him, baring her teeth. "My Arad, let's go, you're all starved already."

Moments later Simsana, extremely animated and bustling, still in her tail-free chiton, went off to some storerooms there, beyond the 'birthing room,' as she called that room, and according to her sudden, extremely abundant wordiness it followed that she needed to get some spices there to put in what they'd be eating, and they'd be eating a 'surprise,' meaning he'd see, and also there farther on was an icehouse, because from that room you could go outside and slip into the cellar where the icehouse was, and she very much hoped no one would see her, and to all this he agreeably mm-hmmed and nodded. He immediately hurried to the balneum, but worried for nothing: Simsana had somehow closed the door, though he completely didn't remember this. The sword was in its place; he took it, drew it from the scabbard, stood there.

"Ashai-Keetrah," he said under his breath. "Ashai. Keetrah..."

He sheathed the sword. Sat on the barrel, grew thoughtful, pressing fist to chin. Something was all too good. Somehow all this was... working out for him. As if he'd been replaced—tell him a couple of moons ago that a lioness would be hitting him in the muzzle from love-spasms, he wouldn't have believed it.

He looked toward where Simsana was, somewhere there in the house, beyond the door, so close, so near.

I won't give her to anyone. If someone tries to take her—I'll challenge him, kill him. And I won't abandon her because someone wants me to. I'll be her Suung. She'll be my Suunga, he took the sword and went back into the main room. Sat at the table, sword against the wall; Simsana was licking her fingers by the stove, bustling about, and it was funny, unusual to watch her from behind with such a free tail. Arad couldn't understand how lionesses walked around like that in Helsia, Khustru, Kafna, heat or no heat. You'd constantly be looking at their rears, life would be a series of endless advances and desperate rapes. You'd just keep pulling the tail, pulling, pulling

at it... Need to play again. And definitely, and urgently. Maybe grab her again right now...

She seemed to sense with her tail what he was thinking. She didn't even look at him, she didn't turn to him once, didn't look. Only:

"I'll be right there."

And to her room. A moment later—out of it, but already in an eastern Sung chemise that covered the tail a good three-quarters and reached just below the knees.

"Why did you change?" he wondered, leaning on the table.

"You can't tease a lion without consequences. Especially one like you. With you it costs more than it's worth. Otherwise we won't even eat anything."

"How did you know what I was thinking?"

"Ashai-Keetrah," she pointed at herself from ears to paws with a smile, spoon in hand.

"Simsan, Ashai-Keetrah—'sisters of understanding'? Is that the translation from the ancient? Am I right?"

"Yes. Exactly. You understood everything, you're right," she deftly dug into the spice jar with the spoon.

Arad frowned, leaned broadly on the table.

"And what is there to understand?"

"Everything," she said matter-of-factly, not looking at him.

"And is that possible?"

"No. It's an ideal, unattainable. How does it go..." Simsana thought, and he saw her rubbing her nose. "Beauty condemns ugliness. Strength condemns weakness. Death condemns life. The ideal condemns everyone."

"That's good."

"That's the Canon."

Arad scratched his mane.

"Simsana."

"Mrrrow?"

"I'm very glad you exist. And very glad Vaalu-Miresli exists. If you didn't exist, someone would have had to imagine you."

"As you see, someone three thousand years ago thought the same thing, and so we got imagined. Sit, sit, there'll be biteys soon," she urged him, though he wasn't thinking of going anywhere. Where would he go from here? He'd just stay here like this.

"Is it true that the Ashai didn't appear on their own, but had a mother? A foundress?"

"Lionkind think all sorts of things about that," Simsana tapped the wooden spoon on the pan, again, harder. "I think you know the commonly accepted version, you're already knowing."

"Well... There was some lioness, forgot her name, to whom Vaal suddenly appeared. Those who truly believed her became sisters. It all happened three thousand years ago. Such is the story."

"Stupid, isn't it?" Simsana licked the spoon, looking at him. "Just a moment, be patient a bit more. A little more frying."

"Terribly stupid," he snorted. "Is there a better one?"

"There's a second one that many Ashai like: Vaalu-Veeris was mad, but you know, the talented kind," she leaned against the windowsill, setting her paw against the wall.

How stupid, thought Arad. *I'm sitting some five steps away. Or six. From her.* He quickly rose and began to advance.

"Aradi, I only ask: let's at least finish eating, and then... and then maybe, later, all right? All right?" She instantly grew alert and discerned his hidden (even from himself) intentions, perceptively determining his possible path and trying to get somewhere.

"Don't worry, I'll just sit near you," he ended up by the windowsill, but she was again at the stove.

"I don't believe you," she exhaled, baring teeth. "You're too tricky."

Arad already knew her love-gestures. *I wonder what mine are?*

"And how do you like this second story?" he asked, setting his paw against the wall, exactly as she had before.

"I don't know. Mentor says both stories are lies."

"Does she have her own version?"

"She says Vaalu-Veeris was a very smart, vicious, ruthless, devoted, and skilled shamani of one of the proto-Suung chieftains. She founded the sisterhood at the chieftain's request, because Vaal revealed himself not to her, but to him."

"Which chieftain?"

"Oh, I don't remember exactly," Simsana frowned charmingly. "Tan-Amun, or what?..."

"Tan-Amon, maybe?"

"Yes, him," she pointed the spoon at Arad.

"'Shamani'—is that a name?"

"No, the proto-Suungs had priestesses, they were called that."

"I've never read about them, never even heard. Though I love reading history."

"They avoid calling them that now. Maybe you've heard of northern shamanayas, heresies, the faith-mimicry?"

"I know that in the North there are prides, and in these prides there are various lionesses who do various things. Scaaaary ones. Wear wolf skins and eat Suung cubs."

Simsana snorted.

"So, your mentor likes this version?"

"Yes, something like that. All right, nommies time."

"I like her very much. It seems she has an interesting past. Your mentor."

"Quite. Sit," she pointed him to the table, and sat opposite herself, with some small plate (she'd thrust the pan at him). "I'll steal from you."

"No, that's not okay. Sit," he tapped the table beside him, "we'll be together. We'll eat from one."

"Nai, only the bonded do that," Simsana hinted at marriage.

"You're married to all Suungs. Please, to the table," he took her plate from her.

She laughed helplessly, sighed, then spun around, darted over the corner of the table and sat close, tight beside him.

"And I," she suddenly found her muzzle right by his, "haven't even passed my Coming of Age. What 'married' for me? You," she covered his mouth with her palm, "are violating Ancestral Law, staining the Rainbow of Blood. Right now, right here," she pulled his ear.

He suddenly caught her fingers with his teeth.

"Don't bite me. I won't do it again," she said.

He took her hands in his.

"I was asked to do something with you. I was asked," he began, "to kiss your hands. One. The other. Right here, and right here."

"Who asked?" she was surprised.

"Hamanu I met here, by the house; came for you—found them. They said you do something, something very good, tremendous. Then higher, and then right here. I'm diligent, you see."

"No, I don't see, nope," she purred to him, all invitation to a kiss.

Arad, of course, accepted the invitation. This time he tried to squeeze her hard, very hard, and also tried to bite—not hard—during the kiss. She moaned, but it seemed to him that the torment was borne by her far more easily than he'd thought; generally, here's what he'd discovered these days: lionesses are far more resilient to male torments than one could imagine.

He decided: she would eat together with him, on his lap. Done.

"Eat. Only don't get off. Not allowed."

Simsana sighed, embraced him. Nothing but demands. And began to feed him.

"Where did your mentor go, Simsi?"

She hesitated with the answer, then waved her hand.

"Here, in a house nearby, on the street to the east, through," she closed one eye, remembering, "yes, one house over. There's a hamanu there, weaves baskets."

"What's Vaalu-Miresli doing there?" Arad inquired intently. "Are they birthing there?"

"No. No one's birthing. You know, she simply gave us the house for the day."

"Listen, even I feel awkward," he stopped chewing, "and that's no small feat—to make me feel awkward."

"She's doing it not for you, but for me," she stirred with the spoon in the pan. "She says you're my training."

"I'm completely ready for regular, daily lessons."

"Insufferable," Simsana smiled. "It's only today. It won't be like this again."

"She and I will come to an arrangement," Arad said as if it were a done deal.

"And you don't need to arrange with me anymore? With me?" she grew a little fierce. "And the training: it's just a joke. Before you I had nothing with lions—mentor simply decided to allow me. I hadn't even told her about anything like that. When I told her about you, that was basically the first time I let slip about a lion," she smiled and made merry.

Arad understood that she was covering her tracks. That she—from love and female forgetfulness—had let slip. He really was her training; Simsana was trying to sweep away the possible consequences, trying to hide. This wasn't something you discuss with a lion; but she'd chosen an unfortunate method—to explain, to retreat into a joke.

They looked into each other's eyes. She understood that he understood. He understood that she understood that he understood.

"My mentor is an alumna of two disciplariums," she threw him bait, leading away from the topic. "Can you imagine?"

Arad let himself be led. Let it be.

"What does that mean?"

"It's the rarest thing, Arad," Simsana eagerly seized the conversation. "She first entered Krimmau-Ammau. At twenty the sisterhood of that disciplarium decided to reject her, but the sisterhood of Seedna—accepted her. Very rarely does that happen. If an acolyte is expelled from a disciplarium, it's almost always a departure from the sisterhood, forever."

"What was her offense?" Arad wasn't very impressed, though it was interesting.

"I don't know. She keeps saying she studied poorly, but somehow I don't believe it. And I only learned this because I noticed the engraving on her sirna says 'sisterhood of Krimmau-Ammau,' but on her amulet—'sisterhood of Seedna.' Once they even didn't want to recognize her as Ashai—one of the Chamber buffoons claimed she'd stolen the amulet," Simsana laughed.

"Try not recognizing her," Arad ate, with a frown. "If you don't recognize her, then no one. Listen," he grew animated, "I've heard that some Ashai-Keetrah don't like your mentor, here, in Gallen..."

"And who told you such a thing?" Simsana grew very interested, ears pricked, and began to caress his neck with her fingers: confess, confess, my dear.

"It's not important, I just heard," he tried to retreat.

"Just tell me."

No, retreat wouldn't work.

"Maassi Malstruna-Lenayna. It just came up in conversation once."

"And who is this, maassi Malstruna-Lenayna?" Her fingers moved to his cheek.

"Those, the Insai family, arms dealers—you should know them."

"Ah, yes-yes, Lenayna, yes," Simsana agreed-remembered easily, without concern, her fingers came to his ear. "When did you have this conversation?"

"She, the thing is," he said indifferently, "was at our house with her mother. Her mother came to visit, she's friends with my mama. And what, about the enmity—is it untrue?"

"And she, what, came with her mom?"

"Yes, yes. So what, about the enmity—is it untrue?"

Simsana licked her lips, bit them, then said:

"Untrue, very exaggerated rumors," she sighed. "This gossip... Lionesses just love to wag their tongues. Sisterhood is sisterhood. You understand? Of course you understand. And she, what, chatted with you at your home when she came with her mama?"

"Well yes, I said so. They came. Both. Drank tea."

She rubbed against him.

"What, shall we return to our nighttime confessions? Remember? The Height, the banner? Go on, you first."

"I love you very much, Simsana."

She smiled, dropped everything. Looked at him. Took his hand and rubbed against it. Stretched out all over him; he had to shift and lean against the wall. Arad thought about several things: that he was inwardly waiting for an answer; that he was eating, therefore—how could he kiss, but it seemed she didn't care at all. She was already rubbing her muzzle against his cheek. Then with her ears. Purring, quietly, but sometimes a loud wave would come, like this: she'd rub—and a wave.

Don't listen to what she says. Watch what she does," he understood.

How simple it all turns out to be, with them.

"Why are you looking so? Why are you looking?" she accused him for demanding mutual confession. "You know it all..."

"I know I won't give you to anyone," he held her by the chin, as his own, while with his other hand he wandered where he wanted. "Especially not because someone wants me to."

It turned out that kissing, when she's all stretched out on you with her head raised high, was difficult; everything came out upside down, and he bit her on the nose from unfamiliarity.

"Let me bring us something to drink."

Returning with that same, unsurpassed dented teapot, Simsana sat not on Arad—otherwise he'd never eat—but beside him, legs tightly crossed, straight to the table, with deliberately straight posture; sometimes she took the spoon from him, since they ate from one, and took a small piece for herself, or simply licked it.

"And so, Arad, how are things?" She returned the spoon to him, having made it clean.

"Never better, as always with you."

"I mean studies," she leaned on the table, crossing her legs even tighter. She swept her tail off the bench, looked at him, a gleaming fang biting her lip. "Or generally, at home, in your family."

"With studies it's all complicated," he beat the spoon against the pan, looking ahead. Before him were: a huge vase; farther, at the edge of the table—a cover-cloth with patterns, from the book with red arrows and dead disciplaras, but the book itself—unfortunately—wasn't there; farther—an impossibly tightly made bed, the kind you're even afraid to touch, in the most solitary corner of the house. He wondered where the book was and thought that after he played Simsana again, they'd need to read it together. He liked this prospect and forgot what he was supposed to be saying.

"What's complicated there?" Simsana didn't let him drift off.

"The master architect considers that I'll be the most abysmal architect in all the Empire. Maybe in the world. So my father became very insistent with a counterproposal that so conveniently came to his mind—that I go into law. And then become a judge."

"Nai, nai. Woah. You don't want to?"

"I don't know. I think I'll be an abysmal judge, but everyone thinks I'll be an terrible architect."

"But you're an excellent lion."

"Thanks to all ancestors. Both mine and yours."

"Hm..." she snorted with a satisfied little laugh. "So, they're directing you to judgeship?" She smoothed her ear.

"It seems my muzzle is being confidently and firmly turned toward it. Protests from me—so far—haven't been heard. So my parents think it's in the bag."

"And from what... or from whom... what are they turning you away from?"

He looked at her, for the first time in a couple of moments; maybe even a very long moment.

"I understand what you want to ask. I'll say this: it's not a problem."

"You think?" She smoothed her ears.

"You shouldn't worry about this. Everything's on me, I take it all on myself."

"What does your father think about our relationship?" She lightly touched him, moved slightly closer.

"He's displeased," Arad nervously tapped his paw on the floor. "But he's always displeased with everything. Everything worries him. Especially reputation. He's like a maassi who only looks around: what if something happens, what if someone says something."

"He... Forgive me..." She touched him again, on the forearm, trying to look into his eyes, but Arad sat straight and looked ahead, tapping his paw. "Have you had conversations with him? He doesn't like me and my mentor? Has he come to dislike us even more?.. Or maybe less..."

"Damn him!" He threw the spoon against the table. It clinked, bounced, fell to the floor.

—*What are you doing? Stop it! Calm down!*

—*I'm saying what I think.*

—*Apologize to her, quickly.*

—*Never apologize to a lioness you love.*

—*But...*

—*Never!*

—*This is senseless! Sometimes we do horrible things! Mistakes must be acknowledged! Have you gone mad?*

—*Shut up. Never.*

He shut his maw, and also covered his eyes with his fingers. What a fool...

It's quiet from her side. Probably stunned, or offended. He heard: she went somewhere.

He felt something nudging into his hand; he looked—and Simsana had given him a new spoon, then pressed against him, wrapping her arm under his.

"I'll tell you something, Arad. I need to confess."

"In that case: let's take the teapot and go to your room. We'll talk there."

"Alright."

"Is that wine again?" He shook the teapot.

"No, it's tea."

"We're taking it anyway. Let's go," he took her by the hand, and also grabbed the teapot.

"Oh, wait, wait," she barely managed to grab the cups.

In her room he arranged everything thoroughly: cups on the dresser by the bed, the teapot too, Simsana—facing the mirror, he tossed pillows under her back, laid her on himself, but Simsana decided that wouldn't do and turned to face him.

It became very quiet. No one said anything. Arad thought that—probably—it should all be left like this, in silence. Then, after being silent, they could play again and part without words. That would be splendid. She had already confessed everything; she might have a whole host of secrets, but it didn't

matter—she'd confessed the main thing, he didn't need anything more. His own secrets and omissions she didn't need; they would only harm, only be harmful, they would give her nothing except baring female feelings and senseless doubts.

"Maybe you don't need to confess?" he offered, looking at her. "Everyone has things left unsaid. Let us have them too."

"I must," she hid herself, covering with her arm, biting her forearm, only her eyes gleaming. "My mentor, soon, I don't know when, will ask you for a favor. What she'll want is this: you'll need to ask your father for a meeting. We need him to receive her, but privately, without extra ears and eyes. So today I was supposed to find out what your family thinks of us. She's interested in how your father will receive her. I already understand—there may be difficulties. Probably we should abandon this idea."

"What's required of me is to ask my father to meet with her? And that's all?" He frowned.

"Yes," she climbed a little closer toward him, "but I see it's not a very good idea. You'd have to convince him to receive my mentor at least without hostility, and that... will hardly be simple."

Arad waved his hand, meaning no-no, wait.

"I can convince him. We're often in disagreement, yes. But my father trusts me, and I trust him—too. I can ask him to hear her out. But what does she want?"

"We want," Simsana pointed at herself. "We need a favor from him, one document, one decision on Ancestral Law. Certainly, not without gratitude..."

"Oh, a bribe," Arad grimaced. "My dad's a poor candidate for that."

"I know," Simsana sighed. "That's why I tell my mentor the idea isn't great. But she thinks it can all work out."

"So what's the matter, or is it a secret?" He reached for a cup.

"Well... I think, Arad, you should refuse her," she stroked his chest. "Your father is angry at us, at me, he doesn't like Ashai. Why my mentor is confident of success—I don't know. Especially since you yourself said—he doesn't accept bribes."

"What a situation."

"I don't want to drag you into this."

"You say it's about Ancestral Law?" He sipped his tea. "My father happens to judge lineage matters, that's his area. What are you trying to pull off there? Some inheritance stuff, eh?" He raised the cup as if toasting such mischief.

But Simsana didn't share his mischief, not at all.

"No. I lost my birth papers," she pressed her ears back and bared her teeth as if from toothache. "I need a new ones. And we have only a year for everything, otherwise I won't be able to pass my Coming of Age."

"And here I thought. This is definitely fixable!" he said cheerfully. "How does it go... You need two, or maybe three witnesses. I don't know if a mentor can be a witness," he thought, then waved his hand. "Ah, doesn't matter. They'll record testimony and make a new one, I know, it's done."

"We have a copy. Once my mentor transcribed my birth certificate, start to finish. She's like that, you know, meticulous when needed."

"Wonderful," Arad rejoiced. "Father will help you."

"There's a problem with witnesses. I don't have any relatives, none at all. We'd have to travel, and far, and for a long time. We want to do it without witnesses," she looked at him fearfully.

Arad scratched his mane, tugged at it.

"I think even that can be arranged. I think you and your mentor are enough, you'll bring my dad this copy. After all, if it doesn't work that way, he'll at least tell you what to do next. Got it? You'll ask him, and I'll try to outline the situation for him."

"Don't! Don't tell him anything!" She took his cheeks in her palms, nose to nose. "And don't tell my mentor that I told you everything," she begged him in an incanting whisper. "I'm not supposed to tell you, you don't know anything. Okay?"

"Okay. No problem."

"If she starts this topic, better refuse," she continued to implore him, embracing him. "And never, never think, never, that I... that I..."

"I'll help you. My father, of course, doesn't like Ashai-Keetrah, but he's fair. Very fair. You can even be horrified at how fair he is. He's a judge, you see?"

Simsana wasn't listening, not at all, even her ears were completely flattened—such ears don't hear. Eyes closed, she rubbed her nose against his.

"...never think, never, that I..."

"...that you what?"

"...that I..." she smiled weakly. "Forget it, forget it. Refuse Vaalu-Miresli. Refuse my mentor, forget about this. Kiss me, Arad."

"You'll have your bloodline papers," Arad waved his hand as if it were a done deal, "the most beautiful in Gallen. You'll see."

"We'll go to the village where I was born, and somehow solve these troubles. Forget... Forget..."

"No need to go anywhere, and what about regular lessons? What? You've decided. To skip. Them?" Desire came over Arad, and he grabbed her from behind, at the tail. "I promise, you'll have your bloodpapers. Everything will be... Lie down for me."

"You think it'll work out with dad?" Uncertainly, unhurriedly, she lay down.

"Everything will work out, everything. No, not on your back, but like today. Like that. Give me the oleamor, I'll do everything myself."

"Careful, it's runny," Simsana anxiously looked at herself in the mirror, muzzle on the bare bed, touching her chin, lip, teeth with a claw.

"Yeah, sure," he threw her tail over his shoulder.

"Be careful," she asked, and closed her eyes.

"Don't worry."

And she felt his palm, all in oleamor, grab her muzzle. At first he simply held her in a trap-muzzle. Then his hand directed, demanding an almost impossible kiss, but she managed to turn her head and give it—for his sake. Then Simsana bit his fingers, to somehow take revenge for such violence, and then thought better of it and licked them, trying to appease him and make him not bite her scruff so hard (marks will stay, several days, oh my) and not deprive her of her ears, not again deprive her of her Mistress of Life ring. Oh Vaal, that's it, mustn't disturb him, he's already approaching, even faster than last time, though supposedly it should take longer (well, so her mentor told her, explaining all these things), and praise Vaal, he'd torture her to death otherwise, won't let her live, with him you'll be all bitten, all tormented, and between the thighs it'll already be itching (no doubt), just let him not forget himself and go there. He can! He's unrestrained, he's not normal. I'll move forward then, there, claws even ready, how he trembles, how he likes me, how he wants this, what power I have, how they all want this, that's it, he's going to suffocate me now, and beneath me it's already hot and wet, and more, and more, much blood...

"Much blood, more blood, much..." she said, as proper, and sneezed: he'd smeared her whole muzzle with oleamor, it even got in her nose. The path of faithful daughters of Suungs is not easy.

Arad collapsed onto his side and lay like that a while, lifeless. Then slowly demanded kisses.

"Wait, I'm all dirty," she dodged.

"Come on, it suits you."

"So you know," she wiped herself, already sitting, "there are two kinds of oleamor: for the Game and all that, and dark. Dark you can't taste, it's harmful, you can't put it in your mouth."

"And which is this?" Arad grew concerned.

"Light. But a lioness's muzzle shouldn't be smeared with dark. Agreed?"

"Sure. I'll remember. How are they different?"

"Lig—" she didn't finish, because he pounced and licked off what remained. Simsana fought back and even growled, but no chance.

"Hey, ugh, it's not tasty," Arad grimaced and reached for the cup.

"Serves you right," she hit him on the shoulder. "My Vaal, Vaal is great, doesn't forgive."

She looked at the chemise, looked at the bed. Hopeless. With him you can't keep up with the laundry; she'd have to sit like this.

"Listen, Simsi, I thought of something."

"I'm already scared."

"I've heard," Arad began, tormenting the teapot and trying to make it pour more tea, but it was all done, "that Ashai-Keetrah have certain poses. Like for standing, for sitting, even, probably, for lying..."

Simsana sat on the edge of the bed, at that respectful distance from him that can only appear between a male and female after intimacy—and the Game, after all, is a rehearsal for intimacy.

"Yes, there are poses for everything, for all occasions," she nodded, trying to examine the marks on her scruff and shoulder. "Forty-eight classical, many others."

"Can you get into one of them?"

She thought, shrugged.

"I can, but why... Aaaaah, no-no-no," she raised both index fingers with claws up, "I've figured you out. I already know what you want. We were told about such things, sisters warned sisters about treachery! Ha, ha, ha. No. This we'll postpone to the future. Indefinite. Maybe. Or even not postpone at all. Nai!"

"What?" Arad asked, bewildered, so innocent. "I just wanted to know, I haven't dealt with Ashai. I don't even know what you're..."

"Nuh-uh. Look at him. You've already dealt with Ashai-Keetrah more closely than all your peers," she sprawled on her stomach, swinging her legs, having lowered the chemise as far as possible. She leaned on the bed, by his paw. Looking up from below. "Poor thing, poor thing. Where have you dealt with them, with Vaal's priestesses? One became yours, with a bitten scruff—does that even count? Oh poor thing, no, you haven't dealt with them. You, Arad, are beastly cunning and terribly devious."

"Fine, just one pose then?" In an instant he changed disposition, understanding that the enemy had discovered his designs and built a solid defense. He ended up beside her, facing her, to charm her gray eyes, already so loving, already so familiar, cunning, gleaming; but he, not small, didn't account for his size, knocked with either his tail or his hand hanging off the edge against something at the end of the bed, on the wall, and this something fell with a loud, clanging crash; then some fabric fell, then something else crunched, and on top of that the wreath fell from the wall again, right across from them.

Simsana sighed.

"I'm in one of the poses right now. There, look, there's one for you."

Arad did so. Lying on her belly. Palm under cheek, the other embracing her elbow. One leg along the bed, the other—raised. Her head seems slightly tilted. Ears half-flattened. An arch in her back, at the waist—she seems to be holding it, deliberately. Tail also along the bed.

He tried to memorize this picture. Looked at the street—still day. Praise Vaal. He gives time.

"And now let me show what you knocked over."

Simsana climbed over the edge of the bed, grabbing the wreath on her way. Something was being hurriedly searched for there, between the bed, the chest, between a pile of things on the rack.

"Look," she showed him a tambourine with ribbons.

"Can you play it?"

Simsana very easily found herself on her paws, near the entrance.

"This one, by the way, is quite good. What a fabric of sound, hear?" She tapped it, then somehow deftly ran her fingers along its edge. Then banged it against her knee. "Well, an Ashai should play something. What are you looking at? I know—it's not a lute, not a harp. But at least something."

"And..."

"If I'd studied at a disciplarium, I'd know how to play all sorts. Not my fate, nai," and again banged it against her knee.

"And..."

"You know what my mentor told me? Hit it like this against your palm, hit it like this against your butt, and that's all the playing," which she did.

Frankly, Arad had never seen such a thing—she did it deftly and naturally, as if she'd been born with it in her hands. In his circles tambourines weren't played; it was a southern, fairground instrument, well, also good for weddings, on Heroes' Day they beat it (and on the Night too), on the Emperor's Birthday, may his name be illuminated by the light of Vaal (though they say Akash the Second can't stand noise). Mother knew how to play the harp, sometimes did it for guests, and also for his brothers when they were smaller—they loved to fall asleep right on the floor to it. And the way eastern Sunungs play: they stand in a semicircle or a row, and simply—tap-tap with fingers, palms. Also shake it.

With Simsana everything came out far more colorful: she danced in place, eyes closed and smiling—she enjoyed it. She really did—timely and precisely—strike the tambourine against her thigh, deftly positioning it, and Arad was surprised by this spectacle, as by the dance, as by the music she played. All provocative and seductive; knowing her character and manner, Arad found a contrast here, because Simsana provoked and seduced rarely, quickly, only with precise, single arrows—the rest of the time she either acted modest or patiently, obediently endured everything imposed by his will.

"More," he clapped, rising to his knees.

"Enough for you, that'll do," Simsana climbed back onto the bed, laughing. And then did the strangest thing: hit him on the head with the instrument, kissed him, turned and fell into his arms (in exactly that sequence).

"Is there maybe something else?"

"There's also a *maansuraa*, only we won't play that. No one's died, after all. And I don't know how anyway," she shrugged somewhere there, in his arms, rubbed against his chest. "And mentor... mentor forgot how," she

spread her hands, the tambourine ribbons flashed. "She's a Mistress of Life, not of mourning," she extended her palm, the left one, with the silver ring.

She, alive, said something more to him, now turning to him, now nestling further at his chest; he pensively looked at her rings: now the sisterhood ring on her finger, flashing, hard to catch, now the Mistress of Life ring on her ear—ever-present, sometimes right under his nose, and once she brushed his cheek with it.

"Arad, Aradi?.. What makes you sad?" She shook him. "What is it?"

"Now it's my turn to confess."

It seemed Simsana grew frightened. Something like that. He caught in her eyes, her expression, everything—something like fear. She said nothing, didn't demand he continue, nothing—only waited.

"I'm an anvaalist."

From her—thoughtful frowning, as if he'd communicated something complicated, incomprehensible, even in another language.

"Rather, I was," he quickly continued, propping his chin with his fist. "Now I don't know. Let me say, let me put it this way: I consider Vaal-worship degrading, the proofs—insufficient. It's all so unconvincing: just believe, and don't think. My father says: 'The free lion doesn't need Vaal.' Or: 'Vaal is an illusion, a dream.' He confided in me like this: 'Arad, I believe it's a great conspiracy, only I don't yet understand it.' Ah, here's another: 'Everyone around is fooling themselves, it's hard to be serious when there's a circus all around.' And now I'm with you. Probably this horrifies you. You're a lioness of Vaal after all. Possibly it doesn't even matter to you, you're a lioness of Vaal after all. There's no point in confessing," he smirked. "It's so stupid, I know. Now I doubt, I don't know anything anymore. You've changed everything... You've done something... You..."

"I love you."

Simsana pressed close to Arad, met him cheek to cheek, not troubling him with a kiss, her quiet purring. He pressed all of her to himself, and she exhaled in a peaceful moan somewhere near his ear. He tried to kiss her, but in vain—she evaded, she fled, purring and laughing, hid under his neck or somewhere near his ears, along the way gifting him an accidental, warm lick-kiss.

"I'm yours. You are my Vaal," she said into either his right or left ear—Arad had already lost track.

"Is it even allowed to say that?" He still managed to be surprised.

"It's necessary. You're part of him, after all," he noticed a change in her, she pulled back, she was a little strange—Arad thought this was probably what mild wine-drunkenness should look like in young lionesses. "We'll fix this, we'll dispel it all. Here I am, pet me," she smiled, holding onto his neck.

"Yes," he obeyed, and petted her.

"Come, I'll show you. You asked, asked about this, I remember everything. And you think I don't remember. I remember everything, I'll show you."

"What?" He completely didn't understand what she meant.

"Come, come, let's go. Come on, come on..."

Arad followed her to the main room; she easily hopped down the stairs; Arad noticed through the window the beginning of dusk. Simsana stood, surveying the whole room; Arad stopped beside her, doing the same—but having no idea what was to be searched for.

"Here, come this way," she led, and stood facing the entrance to the balneum and near the stove. She looked around, turned about, looked at him and smiled, but somehow uncertainly; then pulled her chemise off over her head, and Arad thought he'd talked her into the poses after all; and this would be excellent, all the better that everything had started without timid preambles, and all these transitions, leadings, beckonings—from remnants of shame or something like that, well, female things, try to understand what goes on in there, in their night souls; on the other hand, thought Arad, all this was somehow too strange for a simple showing of herself, which all lionesses love (and never admit to).

She sat on her haunches, right on the sturdy plank floor, and invited him opposite. Arad thought there was a draft from the door, and she might get cold (he was fine, though also without clothes).

"Remember, you asked me: can I summon ignimara?" Simsana looked at him very solemnly; he even felt awkward.

"Yes."

"You will witness. Now take and look at my hands."

Arad looked, kissed one of them, looked into her eyes. What did she want?

"Look, look. You can examine all of me, wherever you want. Search for evidence, find the trick. Maybe you'll find some kindling, or oil, something else. You can bite me," she laughed, "or lick me."

"I won't refuse either one again," he really did walk around her in a circle. "There's nothing on you, you're simply naked. So where does ignimara come from, how is it made?"

"It's a Gift of Spirit, it's the fire of Vaal. I don't know, Arad. And my mentor doesn't know. And no one does."

He scratched his nose and sat back down opposite her.

"Vaal grants it to me," she spoke with conviction, suggestively. "Only Sung lionesses can summon fire on their palms, and only those who by fate and Vaal are appointed from birth to be Ashai."

"Yes," Arad confirmed. And suddenly added, unexpectedly for himself, unexpectedly for her, even for the world: "Praise Vaal. He gifted me you."

Simsana sighed joyfully, and Arad for the first time in all this time distinctly, very distinctly sensed another language that her eyes spoke; they burned, he felt a strange emotion: as if to a feeling of danger someone added much desire, and then covered it all with reverence.

"Don't touch me, no touching, don't touch. There's water there," she spoke as if something extremely funny, vaguely pointing toward the balneum. She closed her eyes. "Look, here I am, there's nothing on me. Here I am, a daughter of Suungs, and you, a son of Suungs. Simply witness what Vaal gives. Preserve, Vaal, the faith of all faiths... Don't believe the sisterhood, don't believe the ancestors, don't believe the Suungs and the suungmara, believe nothing, just watch..."

Arad sensed with his whole body—didn't even see, but sensed—that the room had grown darker, almost completely dark. On her right palm appeared a red, very red, utterly bright-red sweep of flame, at first small, then larger, then more, then Arad, recoiling from the heat (it burned!), saw that it was already higher than her head. It burned slower, more majestically than ordinary fire; it made everything dark around, and when he saw her eyes through the veil of this flame, he thought this was truly a nightmare, for he saw nothing except her eyes. More. More. Blood of ancestors, she's still burning, how long. He began to feel pain for her. One can't burn like this without consequences. Simsana, lioness, don't burn up, don't do this for my sake, do anything but this. She clenched her right palm into a fist, bared her teeth as if growling, and he saw the redness of her fangs from the very red fire; the ignimara then soared in a final, highest column, nearly to the ceiling, or to the sky, and went out.

Arad found himself embracing a barrel. He completely didn't remember how he'd crawled to it or embraced it, and this frightened him. He quickly stood, so as not to appear before her in such a pitiful position.

But needlessly—she wasn't looking at him. Simsana sat on her haunches, eyes closed, shaking her right hand and rubbing it, weakly and slowly. Then she stood clumsily, holding onto the stove, and grabbed the first jug she found. She drank, greedily and carelessly, everything spilling, she snuffled. Then she set the jug down, it nearly shattered, and for some time swayed dangerously in a circle.

"Simsan, how are you?" He approached cautiously, from the side.

"Stupid," she turned, but not toward him, and walked with a stumbling, completely graceless gait to another corner of the house, with the dresser, and chest, and junk, and bed. On the way she tried to put the chemise back on, but after an unsuccessful attempt, threw the endeavor away with disgust, and it flew toward the western window. She began rummaging there, in the corner—various rubbish flew to the floor: some clothing, knitting needles, some papers tied with cord, even a smoking pipe. Finally, something seemed

to be found; she froze in place, searching in a small box. The box fell with a clatter down into the chest.

"Everything all right?" Following her tail, he waited behind her.

What do these things mean? Is this prescribed to the sisterhood? To acolytes? Indicated in the Codex? he frowned, clenching his teeth. *What kind of things are these?*

"Forgive me, I'm there," she said slowly, and made something like an attempt to turn to him, but instead began falling sideways, as if tripping and not resisting, and Arad caught her—hurriedly, convulsively, aggressively; her temple, jaw, ear—all stopped in utter tiny distance from the wall of the chest.

"Simsana? What's wrong with you?" He took her in his arms and felt how she'd grown heavier. Not good.

"Break it!" She looked somewhere in his direction, as if guessing his position in the world, smiling painfully, eyes half-closed.

"Break what?"

"Go on," she yawned, then coughed with a laugh.

He carried her to the middle bed, the largest; he felt something warm flow down his arms. In horror he looked down, afraid to see blood there, but it turned out not so bad—it wasn't blood. And that was good.

"Vaal!" she moaned when he laid her down.

"Tell me, what happened? What should I do? Where does it hurt?" He looked at her, everywhere, but had no idea what to search for.

Simsana weakly extended her hand to him, and he took something from it.

"Break it."

Arad examined in the uncertain twilight what she'd given him, supposing it was either an answer, or medicine, or... But it turned out to be a whole double *symbolon*, an ordinary thing for trade deals, various agreements; he recognized it well, since father's house was full of symbolons, and he even knew their types by heart—only this one was all painted with red, and something else, unclear, there was no time to examine.

"This is a symbo—"

"Vaal, break it," she moaned again.

And he broke it, along the break line.

She laughed and extended an unruly hand to him, grabbed him right by the nose and pinched.

"Give me..."

He set the broken symbolon to the side, by her head. No time for games. He quickly thought the matter was the jug and its contents; he rushed to it, sniffed. Seemed like water.

He ran back to her.

"Does it hurt? Want to vomit?" He felt her nose. Well, seemed normal, not hot, couldn't tell, couldn't tell anything here at all. He turned his head to the side.

"Did Lenayna pi... piss on you?"

"Fuck, Simsana, what's wrong with you?"

"It was her," she said slowly, confidently, and produced a sleepy rasp, like those when old lions fall asleep.

Need Miresli, at any cost, right now.

He ran upstairs, to Simsana's room. Right, at least there are trousers.

"Arad, it's you?"

"Yes, it's me," he dressed and rushed about, trying to find the tunic but forgetting where it was. "I'll be right back."

"You go to Lenayna?"

"I'm going for your mentor! Damn it, you're poisoned. Vomit on the floor if you need to, understood? Okay?"

She produced something like 'Uh-huh,' and then:

"Where are you going?"

Arad, bursting onto the street in just trousers, ran; without knemids, without tunic, without cloak—good thing not naked. He tried to remember, left or right. Where was she supposed to be? If only she's there! Miresli, be there! Seemed like left. Two houses over. There, that one, a lamp visible right by the window.

He began pounding on the door so hard everything shook. Some old lion opened.

"What?" he snarled with extreme hostility.

"Vaal-Miresli, is Vaalu-Miresli here?!"

"Who are you?"

"There, there, her disciple, she's unwell!"

"What?"

Stupid old fart, Arad thought hatefully, shoving him aside and slipping into the house. He heard that somewhere above, on the second floor, lionesses were singing. The house was bright, good, everything visible. A lioness squeaked in fright on the stairs. There's the room, right opposite, no door. The singing stopped—everyone heard the disturbance and turned to Arad, and Miresli was here, oh praise whatever, how glad he was to see her, like no one in his life.

"Arad?"

"Vaal-Miresli!"

They exclaimed almost simultaneously. She sat holding knitting needles in her hands, almost indistinguishable from the other hamanu—there were six tails here, maybe ten, what difference.

"Simsana is very unwell!"

"Fucking brat!" The lion from below was already coming up the stairs.

Miresli looked at Arad for a moment. Then threw down the needles, stood, pushed him in the shoulder—meaning, let's go.

"What exactly happened?" She held his shoulder, firmly.

"I don't know! Poisoned!"

"Let's go."

"How dare you enter the house?!" The lion appeared before them, with an axe.

"Tarko, everything's fine!" Miresli shielded Arad with herself.

"I'll chop him to pieces!"

"Tarko, sorry. Tarko, everything's fine," they went around him, Miresli pushing Arad's shoulder. "Let's go, let's go..."

The lion growled, but chopped no one down.

They hurried out onto the street. Miresli tucked her hands into the slits of her usual gray, heavy dress and ran, quite briskly, which Arad hadn't expected. Arad thought about what this could be. Maybe Simsana had died? Why? That jug, there was something in it. Or was it the ignimara? It shouldn't end like that, right? Seemed not. Arad knew nothing about this.

They burst into the house, already rather dark. Miresli grabbed a lamp, somewhere in the entryway, but needed something to light it with, and there was no fire anywhere; she needed kindling, a flint, and Arad was already preparing to search at her demand, when Miresli pulled out her sirna-dagger, clamped it in her teeth, placed her fingers right on the wick and exhaled viciously:

"Ias, ias!"

The lamp ignited. Arad had never seen anything like it. The lamp was thrust into his hands.

Entering the room, she ran to Simsana—who lay peacefully on her side. She put her ear to her, felt her neck, her arm. Listened more. Then stepped away more calmly, took a candleholder, lit more light from the lamp, and set it around.

"What were you doing? Tell me everything."

Arad noticed bloody traces at the corners of the mentor's mouth—from the dagger. She hadn't bothered to wipe them.

"Well, I came, we went to wash. Then played. Then ate, from one pan. Then played again. Then she said: let me show you something. She sat right here," Arad showed the spot and walked to it, "she had ignimara, very red, and a lot of fire. I told her I'm an anvaalist. She drank from this jug, here..."

"After the ignimara she drifted off?" Miresli wagged her hand by her head. "Became sleepy?"

"Yes, weird. Started rummaging there, in the chest, nearly fell, was talking some nonsense."

"Okay. Sit," she pointed him to the bed, at Simsana's paws. She herself sat at the head; stretching her arm along the pillow, half-reclining, she carefully stroked the edge of Simsana's ear.

"What's wrong with her? Does the Radiant one know?"

She nodded silently. Pulled a coverlet from under the pillow, covered Simsana with it. Wiped her own mouth with white cloth she'd pulled from her belt—bloody traces remained. Arad scratched behind his ear, thinking whether to say it. He should, actually, and:

"Vaal-Miresli, she needs to be wiped. Something happened while I was carrying her."

The mentor suddenly laughed, continuing to wipe her mouth.

"Arad, leave you two alone one more time and you'll turn the whole Empire upside down. And burn the house down. You're simply dangerous to leave alone," she looked around. "My Vaal. Well, you... Well, Arad. Wait."

She returned with three large towels, and with a sharp movement removed the coverlet from Simsana. She stirred; Arad pricked his ears.

"Turn away," she indicated to him. And began shooing him from the bed: "And, you know, go, go home, you've played enough. She's fine, don't worry."

"I'll wait until she wakes," Arad didn't move.

"That won't be soon—she needs to sleep until morning, at the very least. Or even until midday. Go."

Not going anywhere, thought Arad. *Can't do that. I must stay.* But how...

"Will the Fiery one let me? May I?" He demanded she give him the towel.

Vaal-Miresli thought, looked at him with suspicion (so it seemed to him). And then silently handed it over.

This is so strange, thought Arad, *I'm rubbing her leg with a wet cloth, and she sleeps on*—and as if hearing his thoughts, Simsana stirred and sighed peacefully. *All this is so strange. A moon ago if someone had told me: you'll be wiping the legs of a completely naked Ashai-Keetrah, who—shameful to think— did this on you, and you'll only feel how much you love her, and that you're no longer an anvaalist, and that you can no longer be one.* He did everything simply—wrapped her whole leg in the towel, from the very top, and went down. He figured: he wasn't embarrassed, Simsana was currently incapable, Miresli was thinking something, who knows what—you can't understand anything with these Ashai-Keetrah at all, there's no time to reason much with them, you won't get bored with them, with them you only experience extremely astonishing things. Then Miresli gave him a dry towel instead of the wet one. All the same. He wasn't afraid to wipe her there, only worried that Miresli would now protest—exactly so, she caught Arad's hand, but instead of indignation, well, all that vulgarity—she showed him how to properly wipe a female, silently guiding; and then easily and simply turned her onto her stomach, like a toy. Arad for some reason wiped her whole tail

too, its entire length, and after that Miresli laid Simsana on her side. Sometimes he gave careful, completely unnecessary from a practical standpoint attention to some places, like her knee; he also liked stroking her shin.

The mentor noticed something in Simsana's palm and removed it. Saw the broken symbolon, brought it to the candlelight to see better. Snorted, and hid it—both parts.

And it all ended with Arad, getting carried away, touching her claws on her paw, where no attention or wiping was required at all, and then suddenly it came over him, and he bit—well, not bit exactly, rather, touchingly nibbled—the toes of her paw. That's how she caught him red-handed: Arad looking at her, with Simsana's paw in his teeth, with the gaze of a thief; Miresli beheld how this one here was devouring her disciple.

"May Vaalu-Miresli not tell her," he left the paw in peace.

The mentor raised her hand at him, and he unconsciously covered his eye, shrank, but instead of a blow she ruffled his mane, his ear.

"Oh no," she shook him by the muzzle. "She'll learn everything from me, in full color. She'll learn everything about what happens when you burn ignimara and don't stop when you're supposed to," this she said sternly to the already sleeping Simsana, raising her voice, and she, stirring, frowned sweetly (Arad desperately wanted to kiss her).

"May her mentor not scold her. She did this for my sake. I told her I was an anvaalist, and she decided to... show me... everything."

"Yes, I can see—show everything."

Suddenly Miresli began laughing, restraining herself, but it came out poorly: she began to shake all over, ears pressed back, forcibly covering her mouth with her hand.

"So, anvaalist, having fun with the Ashai-Keetrah?" Having somewhat composed herself, the mentor asked quietly.

"More fun than I could have imagined," Arad answered seriously. "And I must admit: I'm no longer an anvaalist."

"Oh. And what happened, Arad?" Her voice trembled.

And Miresli continued to choke on laughter, worse than before. She snorted several times and buried her forehead in the headboard, covering herself with her arm. Pulling back, she wiped tears.

"I don't quite understand..." he scratched his mane.

"It's nothing, nothing," she waved him off. "Pay no attention."

Arad covered Simsana so she wouldn't get cold. Smoothed her leg.

"Go get dressed, or you'll catch cold. Here, take the candleholder," Miresli said to him.

The tunic was found quickly—in the balneum. The sword was found too; the cloak took longest to search for. Arad had the feeling he'd forgotten something, and he went around the house everywhere he'd been. Even went to check if the knemids were in place.

Then he returned, sat again at Simsana's paws. She still slept, very deeply and sweetly. Vaalu-Miresli still sat at her head, stroking her right ear, the one free of the Mistress of Life ring; she didn't look at Arad and was silent. He sat on the edge of the bed, set his sword's scabbard against the floor and rotated it around its axis, watching the glint of the guard. Miresli wants me to leave, thought Arad. She'll drive me out now. I'll sit a little longer, he thought.

"Where did she show you the ignimara?"

"Over there," he pointed at the spot by the stove, near the entrance to the balneum.

"Naked?"

"Yes."

Miresli suddenly found a trace of oleamor behind Simsana's ear. Raised an eyebrow, wiped it.

"It's good that she was naked. Did it burn long?"

"About ten seconds. Long, the fire was higher than her head. It was the coolest thing I've seen in my life. I felt that this thing, it's sacred. Does Vaalu-Miresli understand me?" Arad spoke very seriously, not even daring to look at her, only rotating his sword.

"Uh-huh," she answered simply, very simply, too simply.

"And what's wrong with her? And what will happen to her?"

"She's very tired. She wanted to show you a beautiful ignimara, but overreached. A little."

"She succeeded. It was a very red fire of Vaal. I'll be different now. Vaal, preserve the faith of all faiths. I'll tell my father that I'm now a faithful Sung."

"I beg you, Arad, just don't tell him that. I ask you very much, stay an anvaalist a little longer, at least another ten years or so, and then you'll see."

"But how?" He spread his hands.

"Well, like this," she slapped the bed, "think of something, you're a lion. Tell yourself it was a dream, or it seemed that way, make your mind work, let it turn over in there, think on it. Listen, Arad..." she looked at him, finally.

"Do Ashai always show their lions ignimara?" He didn't let her continue, afraid he'd forget to ask.

"Only those who've come of age, and only to chosen ones."

"So, wait, she wasn't allowed to show that?" He narrowed his eyes.

"Absolutely, in no way, never and nowhere, under no pretext. Listen, Arad, I'm going to ask you. There's a conversation to be had."

"My attention."

"Let's go to her room, so we won't disturb her. Let her sleep," Vaalu-Miresli rose. She repeated again, stretching upward, clasping her palms: "Let her sleep..."

Arad left the sword at Simsana's paws.

Suffer. Unabated

The candleholder was placed on the nightstand. Miresli first removed all the pillows from the bed, made a show of not noticing the wet spots, spread out a large woolen coverlet, and herself reclined on it on her side, gathering pillows for herself. But before reclining, she simply took off her Mistress of Life dress, remaining in just her chemise, having first tossed the sirna right onto the bed; he couldn't even imagine such a thing possible from any Suung female of her age. The amulet she hid under her chemise.

"Sit."

"How?" Arad asked an odd question. But he was puzzled by the atmosphere of their being here; he didn't quite understand what to do with himself.

"Like this," Miresli showed: she sat on the bed, knees together, clasping them with her hands. Then reclined back. "I undressed because it's hot. No point staying in a house dress."

He sat.

"I see."

"You're probably surprised we came here. But I don't want to wake her; she shouldn't hear this conversation, not even a small part. She might pretend to be sleeping, you know... become a little pretender. She's sleeping deeply, it'll take a long time for her, but let's do everything properly."

"I like this room," he rested his arms on the headboard, stretched out his legs. "Her scent is here."

"This is called 'a conversation in bed,'" Miresli paid no attention. "Don't feel awkward; it's not what you might imagine. Among Ashai—and you'll see more of them in your life—this means a confidential conversation. Ashai try to put meaning into everything they do, so if you're talking with her in bed—it's a sign. Useful to remember."

"Even if they're not lovers?"

"That has no significance whatsoever. Remember: you're talking with an Ashai in bed—she trusts you."

"Understood. This works with ordinary lionesses too."

"Not quite. Can you imagine a hamanu my age offering to talk to you in bed?"

"Curious," Arad smirked. "I'd need to grow a bit for that."

"It's all the same to him. Besides, I can't talk seriously with a lion at a table. I've tried; it's impossible," Miresli waved her hand.

"I assume the Excellent one has experienced difficulties because of this. And more than once."

"Not at all. I've never had difficulty suddenly finding the lion I needed in bed. Almost."

"So I'm the needed lion. What will Simsana's mentor ask of me?"

"I have important matter with your father. Convince him to meet with me, but outside of service, and the sooner the better."

"That won't be difficult. I'll even try to convince him to receive Vaalu-Miresli as well as possible."

"No need. The more you try to convince him, the worse for the matter. Just arrange a meeting, that's the main thing."

"May I inquire about the essence of the matter?"

"It's a matter of Ancestral Law," Miresli touched the corners of her mouth, looked at what was there with the blood: all gone, none at all. "There's nothing dark, illegal, nothing bad in it. There are just some formalities we cannot observe, due to external circumstances. So we need the help of a lion like your father."

"Very well."

"Naturally, your father will wish for gratitude for his troubles, and we will certainly be grateful in the most various form. Or forms. This I promise; you'll tell him this."

"We'?" Arad was surprised.

"Simsana and I. The matter concerns Simsana. It's important for her, Arad."

"Very well. No problem, Excellent one. I'll do this, he'll agree," Arad said confidently. "The only problem is: where exactly you should meet."

"I'm not yet certain of the place. Perhaps your father will have a suggestion; I'm open to any."

"All right."

"But there's another difficulty..."

"May Vaalu-Miresli not worry about difficulties. We'll strangle them like rabbits. A place will be chosen, a time too, everything will be done," he reached for something he'd noticed with a sober eye (earlier today there'd been no time for that). "Here, this book. I liked it so much," he opened 'Disciplaras and Disciplariums' in the candlelight, "if Vaalu-Miresli permits me to enter the house at least once more, then Simsana and I won't do foolish things anymore. We'll simply read it together," he stumbled upon that page with the arrows, next to the Ashai of the night gaze, and left it there. He showed this to Vaalu-Miresli, opening the book wide: "Here."

She closed her eyes, rubbed her hands as if washing them. Then froze. Then opened her eyes, looked at him, wanted to say something—froze.

"I like these arrows too," said Arad, and closed the book. "What's the right way to call it... Aesthetic strike."

"Arad, your father will have a foremost demand, which we will have to fulfill. Possibly it will be the only one altogether; he won't need money, or services, or the rest—nothing. He will demand that Simsana stop seeing you, meeting you, speaking to you."

"Come on. I'll talk to him," Arad said confidently, too quickly.

Miresli didn't stop him from interrupting. She continued:

"Don't harbor false hopes. The more you ask him, the more furious he'll be in this demand. Better not tell him anything; then there's a negligible chance. But... I don't think so."

"All the same," Arad shrugged. "I'll come to her."

"That's the wall, Arad. Yes, we'll promise your father that Simsana won't come within a bowshot of you. But the moment she sees you, and you come to her—it's all over, the ice shatters. She won't be able to resist; she likes you too much, Arad. Too much."

Expressive, persuasive gestures. Arad felt how she was inclining him, bending him, searching.

"So be it. All the same. Let father be angry, let all of Gallen be angry," he didn't yield.

"No. We'll break the agreement with your father. This could have bad consequences, first and foremost—for Simsana."

"How bad?"

"She could fail her Coming of Age; she won't be admitted. You see, she lost her bloodline papers saving a drowning cub on the way from Krimmau-Ammau. The papers were in a tube; the tube Simsana had like this, over her shoulder; she got into the water, the tube floated away, she didn't notice. Without a birth certificate she won't pass Coming of Age, which means she'll leave the sisterhood. If we get the certificate from your father but break the agreement, and in aftermath he learns that Simsana is—still your lioness," Miresli said it just like that: 'your lioness,' "then very bad things could happen."

"She was saving a drowning cub?" Arad was surprised, setting the book back on the dresser as it had been.

"Just so. He was more frightened than drowning; Simsana got all wet. This happened about three years ago. Three..."

"She didn't tell me this," Arad gathered his mane in his fist.

"I assume she told you everything else, more or less."

Arad said nothing. That's a secret, after all.

Miresli leaned over, took her amulet off her neck, turned it in her hands like a toy, played with it like a pendulum. And suddenly threw it to Arad—and he caught. And immediately said:

"Arad, be her true Suung. You need to leave her."

"What do you mean?" The fur on his back stood on end.

"Simply do it and leave her."

"When?" The fur stood on end, it seemed, everywhere.

"Today."

"But why?"

With his mind Arad understood why. But it wasn't the mind that asked the question.

"Because she won't be able to do it herself. And she'll be ordered to leave you, which she'll do, suffering. Or even—imagine—she won't, but if you listen to me, it won't matter much."

"This is dishonorable," he mindlessly turned the amulet in his hands. "I said I love her."

She sat straight on her haunches, on the bed, extraordinarily straight. It seemed to Arad that she'd become younger, by twenty years. Or thirty.

"Valor doesn't come easily, without sacrifice and effort," she looked him eye to eye, making it impossible to tear his gaze away. "Today you said you'd become a faithful Suung. You'll refuse to know her, you'll suffer, but this way you'll make her Ashai-Keetrah and honor Vaal in the most noble way. Everything will return: the Ashai won't forget this, believe me," she pointed right at him. "When the time comes, she'll learn what you did for her."

"And when will the time come?" he asked sadly and ironically.

"Not before her Coming of Age."

Arad threw up his hands, dropped them helplessly onto the bed.

"Alright, may I think this through? I want to examine the whole position," he sat on his haunches and began gesturing before her as if pleading, "perhaps there's someone else besides my dad?"

"I've tried. The other judges are all connected to your dad anyway. Your dad judges lineage matters. Everything rests on him."

"Maybe the sisterhood will help? The sisterhood is powerful!" He smiled uncomprehendingly—come now, here it is, the answer.

"No. Not in this case," she narrowed her eyes. "The sisterhood could play very cruel jokes here. The circumstances are malicious."

"Very well. Maybe dad won't demand a separation?"

"There's a small hope. But I don't think so. Just don't try to convince him; he'll only more furiously protect you from us. In his world you're simply a will-less victim, you understand nothing, and can't do anything about yourself. And Simsana is a predator who must release you."

"But why?" Arad was genuinely surprised.

"Because he understands relationship between a lion and a lioness not nearly as well as justice. Besides, you're his son."

"Fine, so. He'll demand Simsana stay away from me. She'll agree. And I... And I... We'll meet secretly," he offered a simple solution. Why make a big deal out of their relationship! Come on!

"A terrible idea. Simsana won't be able to. And you won't either," she spoke slowly. "She's a Mistress of Life. You're a judge's son. Forget it. Listen: your father will demand this, and Simsana will agree. It will hurt her, but she'll have no choice. She'll promise it, and so will I. You can do nothing; you can approach Simsana, and she'll break her promise—and she will break it; or you can take the whole blow upon yourself."

Arad got off the bed, stood on his paws. Looked at himself in the full-length mirror.

And here Vaalu-Miresli did something very precise; she knew exactly what to do; she knew what would work on him in the most impeccable way. She sat beside him and placed both palms on his shoulder, looking up from below:

"Help me make her into an Ashai-Keetrah, Arad. It's very important."

"Yes," he looked into the mirror.

"Will you be her Suung of impeccable valor?"

"Yes. I will. What should I do?"

"What do you mean," she sat back on her haunches, on the bed. "Suffer."

"No, that goes without saying, but I'll walk out now, and... what?"

"You'll go home, and the next day you'll attend to your own affairs. Do you have some attraction, any young lionesses in mind?"

"There is. Malstruna-Lenayna, the Insai family, mother wants to connect our lines."

"Do you like her?"

"She's alright. I went to her when I didn't find Simsana at home. I was hungry. I kissed her. I drank coffee with her. She doused me with tea. She has a scar under her mouth. She was having her moondays. She has a harsh father; he gave me a sword. I don't know why. I brought the sword with me today. I don't know why."

"Excellent," Miresli liked all of this very much. "The next day you go to her."

"What's best to tell father?"

"Say that I need a meeting, in his place, on his terms, that it's about Ancestral Law, but you don't know the details. Say that I'll be enormously grateful. Convey my apologies to him. Possibly he'll demand you break off relations with Simsana. You can tell him anything you like; it won't matter. If I were you, I'd show doubt, waver, avoid the topic."

"What will happen to Simsana?"

"That I take upon myself. It won't be easy for her; she'll be angry at you. Or, most likely, worse... But we'll manage."

"What does worse mean?" He turned sharply, demanding explanation.

"Even more in love. Therefore, Arad, I'll ask you. When you next see her... if she speaks to you... just say that you've acquired family obligations."

Repeat it like a wind-up toy, like a complete fool. And nothing more. Muzzle like a wall. All right?"

"Not all right, Excellent one."

"I know. But you'll manage. Simsana is very proud to be Ashai-Keetrah, a Mistress of Life. She never shows it, but it's all she has. Rather, it was, before you came. She's damaged, she's an orphan. All she secretly desires is someone she can cling to and completely, unreservedly trust. She'll have to choose between the first and the second. She'll choose the first; that's how it should be for her. Let's help her, Arad. You want to see her as a Mistress of Life, don't you?"

Confidently, as if reading a verdict, he said:

"That's all I want. I want nothing for myself. I'm not interested in 'me.' I'm interested in 'you,'" but suddenly the confidence terribly failed him: "Vaalumiresli, I must know: are we doing the right thing? All this is... necessary, isn't it?"

"Yes. Necessary. And I see that it's right. Forgive me that I couldn't think of anything better. Truly, I can't."

"Thank you for everything," he said cheerfully and very falsely. "I'll do everything. Off I go."

"Wait. Here. This is your part of the symbolon."

Arad looked at it in his palm.

"Why is it red?" he asked.

"Pink. She painted it. I think it's her cubhood craft. See, the white lines—arrows, I think—they've nearly worn away. I've never seen this thing; she hid everything from me, her whole life, she was terribly ashamed of everything... of hers. She hardly intended in the *metanoia* of the everyday to show it to you, much less give it. And after uncontrolled ignimara, you know, you become like... well, like if you drank too much wine. Give me your part. Look."

Vaalumiresli joined both parts. They fit perfectly.

"Such a deal. Such an exchange of memory. Such a story. Such are things," she separated the symbolon and rejoined it again. "Here."

She gave him his part and rose from the bed in one movement, unusual for her age.

Arad approached, stood beside Simsana. She still slept. His head was empty. He sat, thought he should say 'I love you, Simsana.' Changed his mind. Thought to kiss her on the cheek. Changed his mind. Then the ear with the Mistress of Life ring, but it was far, below; she was sleeping on it—couldn't reach.

"Will Vaalumiresli give Simsana her part of the symbolon?"

"Of course," and she did it right then: placed it in her disciple's palm.

Arad nodded. Good. A thought came: he should kiss her hands. That's what those lionesses had bequeathed. He took her palm, kissed it, pressed it to his cheek. And this—for the last time? I don't want to, don't. It can't be...

He grabbed the sword at her paws, he had to go, and Arad went, put on the knemids; Miresli followed him, and already at the door embraced him, smoothed his shoulder, tugged his ear, said nothing, nothing at all; Arad avoided her gaze and let his attention slide over things. But at some moment he couldn't avoid the trap of her gaze in the almost complete darkness, and now no one could ever dissuade him that fire didn't dwell inside the Ashai, because her eyes reflected more light than they saw. And he also felt himself naked, but not bodily—in spirit, and this was far more awkward than trivial daytime nakedness of body; this was a very nocturnal baring.

"You'll be a very strong lion, Arad."

She tugged his mane once more, an untender, deliberate gesture that ended with a gentle touch; there was meaning in this.

"You're good."

He had a feeling—already familiar—that he was being enchanted. Somewhere he'd experienced this before, quite certainly, but couldn't recall the instants or the moment.

"Thank you, Vaalu-Miresli."

She kissed him, and he couldn't even remember afterward where.

Chapter, In Which Everyone Is Right and Everyone Is Wrong

Waking the next morning proved difficult—Arad stared at the ceiling, trying to understand what he'd dreamed and what he hadn't.

He'd dreamed utterly fantastical, astonishing, real dreams. He'd never had such dreams, never seen such things. There was that Ashai-Keetrah (Andarian features, it seemed, that shameless smoothness of all lines), before whom some buffoon was shaking a fish, and from the fish riches poured: gold, imperials, rubies. Some of this wealth fell at Arad's paws, and he scooped up a bit for himself—no sense letting good things go to waste.

"Arad, get your ass up, mother's calling to eat," so inappropriately Darzai invaded the room of dream-vision, and threw something at him; it turned out to be Lenayna's wrap, which none of the household lionesses had dared move from the dresser. They could easily hide a sword worth a couple thousand imperials in the kitchen among the spoons and forks; but such a relic as a Naysagrian wrap given to a lion—never.

"Get outta here," Arad rose and threw a pillow at him, but he dodged. The wrap he hid immediately.

"You better not throwing javelins, but su—"

"I'll give you something to suck!" Arad threw a bracer at his brother. No use; he dodged again.

"Moron," Darzai was having fun. "Go on, throw your balls now."

Arad rubbed his nose.

"Go on, chop them off with your toothpick. By the way, where is it?"

"In the ass," his brother had impossibly irritated Arad. Such dreams, such dreams, and all down the tail, as always...

"That's why you're sitting so straight. Listen, be real," his brother crept toward him cautiously, ready for danger. "Let me swing it today, after school."

"No. You dumb? Your wrist's still too weak."

"Oh, come on. Listen, will you let me if I tell something?"

"What?" Arad asked without interest.

"Come on, first promise. Then my turn."

"Yeah," Arad put on his tunic, also checking the weather through the window, "you know the drill. Crawl away."

"Listen, so, yesterday mother and father were talking, saying you went to that lionessy-Ashai again. In the dining room, I heard it all."

Arad held his silence.

"And?"

"Look, so, they're angry and all that," his brother sat on the bed. "Listen, tell me, what do you do with her? And how?"

"We play games," Arad put on trousers. "Hide and seek."

"Arad, come on, let's be real."

"Not what we do with her, but what I do with her," Arad took off the trousers, realizing they were dirty. "That's the right way to say it."

"What's the difference."

"Your mane isn't even growing yet. When it starts, I'll tell you."

"It is growing, Arad, look, are you blind, right here, it's growing!"

Arad clicked his tongue, looked at his brother, who was trying to spread apart a dark hint of the first sprouts of mane, looking in the mirror.

"Tell me what else you overheard."

"Dad said this needs to stop," Darzai lay on the bed, kicking his paws against the headboard, but Arad gestured for him to get up, "and he'll have a serious talk with you. Sounds bad, yeah. Also they were arguing about something, about some wedding, I didn't understand. Listen, did you look under her tail?" his brother looked hopefully.

"Why would I. Lionesses should be respected."

"I'm for real!"

"I'll tell you in the evening."

"You're always like this—uhh, uhh, dragging it out. And you'll drag it in."

"I said—in the evening! If you behave. And also," Arad considered proprietarily, "if you haul the junk out of the shed."

"Screw you," his brother despaired.

"Suit yourself. You can't even get it up yet anyway."

"I can get hard, moron."

"Whatever," Arad was leaving the room.

"Arad," Darzai approached confidentially on the way, "is it true that you can do them right in the... mama, we're coming. Coming, here's Arad, he was getting dressed."

"Come on, I've been waiting forever," mother hurried them with a frantic gesture. "You're late, Arad. Wash up. Ancestors, what a morning."

His brother hadn't lied, strangely enough. The serious conversation took place that same day, in the evening of the 8th day of the 1st Moon of Water, 807 year of the Era of Empire. Location: the tablinium of Nergim-Sinai, the Karizian-Roust house. Participants: Arad, son; Nergim, father. Father, as always, in his place; Arad, as always, came in and sat in his place. Weather: good. Balcony doors: open. Therefore—cold.

"How was your day at gymnasium?"

"Fine, papa," Arad answered, looking out at the street. "Let me close the door. There's a draft, and the candles will go out."

"Cold is useful," father answered evenly. "Warmth softens, doesn't let you think. And there's something to think about."

Here we go, thought Arad. Only all the previous times when he'd thought 'here we go,' he hadn't been ready for the conversation, or was partially ready, or had doubts. Today, however—on the contrary—he was ready as never before.

"But first a couple of good news. I saved them, didn't want to scatter at dinner. One should always start with the good," father raised his finger, with the family ring, wearing it in his manner on the index finger. Mother had never approved of this, but father always answered that he was used to it. But here, for the complete picture: Arad had once found a mention in the book 'History of the True Eastern Suungs and Andaria, 1st-4th centuries E.E.' that heads of families of patrician origin often wore rings this way (hence the expressions 'seal with a finger' or 'point with the seal,' and so on). Presumption! They were of middle lineage.

"First good news: Sire Valrr of the Astal will be visiting Gallen. Do you know who that is? The very one, the notable of the Collegium of Judges at the Marnian Chamber of Justice. It was him who maassi Malstruna-Lenayna delivered the letter, for which she should be thanked," father sighed skeptically but nodded affirmatively, giving due credit. "He not only replied in a manner which I find," Nergim-Sinai rustled through papers on the desk, "very positive, but also intends to visit us."

"Incredible," Arad answered, trying to be very good and attend to his father with all his might. And he remembered Lenayna. Immediately after that—Simsana. And her ignimara. Vaal. For a moment everything became red. Reverence, wanting to bow down, right here...

"Second good news," papa continued briskly, and even smiled at Arad, "yesterday they caught those who, according to all available testimonies and evidence, as well as the internal conviction of Judge Samr, who..." father looked up, then aside, gripping the stylus between his fingers, "...is a good, good, capable defender of Suung justice, devoted to the Emperor's affairs... um, who dared to insult the War Banner of the Empire."

"No way, who is it?" Arad even half-rose. And suddenly struck the edge of the table.

"Calm down," dad raised his hand. "They are—two young dhaars, one twenty, the other, I think, eighteen. Mane-shorts."

"But I fought with some tail-rags at the Height, and they weren't dhaar!" Arad leaned all the way forward, his tail beating nervously.

"Are you sure there were five or six of them, as you said?"

"No. Yes!"

"You see. Embellishing. I understand. Perhaps they were the same ones. Or they were part of a dhaar group. Or part of a Suung group, not ours, not Gallenese."

"And who saw them, what's the evidence?"

"One hamanu, a cook for the Gallen watch, saw them heading toward the Height. This was also seen by an Ashai-Keetrah, that one who burns cups, Siza. It's serious: we called a tracker, old hunter Shtef, he's helped the watch more than once. The tracks were already worn, of course, but he asserted very confidently: he definitely saw a dhaar paw."

Arad stood, walked to the balcony door, then sat back down. Put his arms on the table, rested his head on them, touched the candle on the table.

"What will happen to them?" He scratched his nose.

"You know how we regard dhaars. If you weigh it all, they bring more benefit than trouble. They could be sentenced to hard labor, seven years or so, let them build forts. But sire Samr favors the Doctrine of Suung Dominate; I think he'll send them to the dhaar Naheim," father laughed at his own joke.

I need to tell him. They're dhaar, but they're not guilty; they'll die for nothing, Arad thought. No, damn it, stop. Be silent. You brought Simsana there. You'll have to explain, and that will put her in danger. Besides, right now you need to ask for her and her mentor. She must be protected. Don't expose her. Protect, don't expose her. Don't involve her. Need to kill two dhaars—no problem! Dhaars are all trash anyway, half-lions; only Suungs are lions. Except for our Sedesi, she's a proper dhaar.

"Hmm," Arad tapped his claws. "Still, they shouldn't be executed; let them, um, um, work for the glory of the Empire. There should be a motive; it's a weird case."

"What motive, Arad, they're dhaars. These are those, Mstvaash grays—Maematians. A year ago the Legata burned down a whole settlement of theirs in Mstvaash, for offenses and debts. So they lodged futile vengeance-envy in their heads, a common thing for non-Suungs. Well, justice will be done upon them, for so the Suungs will it!"

And he struck with the notepad—change of subject.

"And now for the sad part."

"Father, I have a very big request for you," Arad took a chair and placed it by his father's desk. "May I voice it first? A very big one," he sat.

Surprisingly, his father rose decisively, took him solicitously by the elbow and led him to the open balcony door.

"My attention," a gust of cool wind swept through his mane.

"Papa, you know me. I'll say everything directly. I promised to convey a request from Vaalu-Miresli."

"Miresli?" father quickly caught himself. "That midwife? Why do you say 'Vaalu-?'" he held his son by the shoulder. "You don't need to use the nomen with me! And not with her either, damn her. What does she want from you?"

"She wants something from you, not from me. I'm only conveying the request. She wants you to meet with her, in your place on your terms; she's ready for any."

"And why?" father asked contemptuously.

"She has a matter concerning Ancestral Law, your sphere."

"Let her come to the Chamber of Justice of Gallen," father made a careless gesture into the evening air, into the world beyond the balcony, "we receive Suungs of all estates there."

"It's a matter that requires a special approach; she needs to consult."

"Needs to snatch an inheritance with her fangs?" he smiled viciously.

"No. I don't know everything, but it concerns her disciple."

Father began pacing the room, winding himself up; so untimely the candle flames began to shake.

"I told you!"

He grabbed his notepad, threw it down. Grabbed another object, threw it. Something else was picked up only to be immediately thrown back.

"I told you they want something from you!"

But suddenly he stopped, calmed outwardly. Approached his son, sat him in his own place, at his own desk, and seated himself beside, taking another chair; crossed one leg over the other, leaned back.

"And I told you," he began with forced calm, "that they'd want something. In exchange for her disciple, let's say, being very favorable to you. She is favorable, isn't she? Everything quick, smooth, no refusals? Allows all sorts of things, right?" he pressed rapidly.

"More or less, dad," Arad nodded, and understood that all this was already behind the tail. Before it could begin—it had ended.

Damn this life.

"Doesn't it seem suspicious to you," father smirked, "especially: you're a lion, young age, same age as her, and suddenly she chose you? Don't be offended, don't be offended, you're not a female," he raised his hands, though Arad did nothing and remained calm.

"Dad, you don't understand..." Arad said, and said it sincerely.

"And of course. Will you tell me what she allowed you?"

Arad thought about this question. Irrelevant to the matter, won't help the matter.

"I don't want to go into such intimacies."

"Fine, whatever. Now, become cold, engage your reason," father narrowed his eyes, tapped his head in the middle, and Arad found the gesture unpleasant, "follow the thread of reasoning. Look, I'd said they needed something. Look what happened after that: you came to me, convinced you were asking on your own, voluntarily; you were even angry at me for 'not understanding'".

"Right."

"Son, all Ashai are whores. And they learn to be whores from the tenderest age. This manipulative nature of theirs... for there's nothing else left for them to do—they're doomed not to marry, and they can't engage in matrimony with a lion, understand? And housekeeping too, for they call that *saahri*! Looking after one's home, one's household—if you please, good Suungs, that's *saahri*, that's not for us. Heard that word?"

"I've heard it."

"Listen, I know more about them than you might suppose," father began, and he spoke heatedly, carried away: "I've never talked to you about them. But I know them. Know them. Ears pricked! This is a thousand years of experience; they're taught this from when they're this small, this small a cub! The first thing they're trained in is control of will, the ability to will," he clenched his fist, depicting will, "which ordinary lionesses can't do, Arad. An ordinary lioness walking down the street has no self-control—she simply wants to grow up, attract better males, marry or settle with a good lion, bear children and die a content great-mother. Will isn't needed for that; she'll just float through life. The sisters, however, have learned control, Arad, and they will above all over themselves. If she needs to fall in love with you—she'll fall in love, because it's necessary. She'll fall out of love with you in an instant, if necessary."

Arad said nothing.

"They come to you with requests, and now you're mired! That's what the Doctrine exists for, Arad; the Emperor himself gave it to judges," father was inflaming himself, the topic burned him, sparks of emotional fire, "how can you not understand this, because everyone knows how Ashai love to twist everyone, everything that's strong, and they jump on anyone just to obtain power, money, influence. They influence how you think," he pointed his finger at Arad. "Oh, they're good at deception. They're good at appearances. They know how to throw dust in the eyes. Think about what they do."

Arad was silent again. Everything was going somewhat wrong, somewhat astray. Papa was too angry. It might not work.

"Think about what they believe. There is someone, this deity Vaal, whom only they see, and whom they never call a deity, for only barbarians have deities. How convenient. And he is the essence of everything we Suungs are, and you're obliged to believe this, unless you have the honor of being in the Doctrine, where you're obliged to 'respect' it, whatever that means. A disgrace... Someday we Suungs will awaken from this nightmare."

But father suddenly drew back, calmed down, and very matter-of-factly inquired:

"What did they offer?"

"She said much was possible: money, services..."

"You know that—I don't take bribes," father's free gesture, he tucked his palm inside his tunic.

"Still: perhaps it's a favor for a favor, a debt, a useful connection," Arad laid out invisible cubes of arguments on the desk. "After all—possibly—a Mistress of Life, essentially a midwife, might be useful to us?"

"That's also a bribe," father simply parried.

"Papa, just receive her, Vaa... V... Miresli, and listen."

He smirked. And nodded.

"Agreed. I'll meet with them, for your sake. I'll be fair and open; I'll listen to what exactly they'll ask of me. And I'll certainly tell you all that happened, so you can see for yourself. It will be extremely instructive. What did they want? Concerning Ancestral Law? Regarding her apprentice?"

"Yes, something like that," Arad nodded in agreement.

Dad grew thoughtful, began moving his fingers before himself, reasoning in a whisper, he sometimes did that; agreeing with something, arguing with something. He tugged at his mane, pulled three ties from it, played with them in his palm.

"I'll receive them on the nearest day off."

"Thank you, dad," it was hard for Arad to hold back a sigh of relief.

"And yesterday you sat at their house all day?" father asked somewhat ironically.

"Yes."

"Who was there?"

"Me and Simsana. The disciple."

"Yes, I understand that," Nergim nodded. "You see how they've caught you in their claws—at your age it's hard to cope with such a thing. And to say 'no' to it."

Arad gripped the edge of the table. He suddenly felt a very, very, very strong longing for her. She hadn't been there all day, she lived as an abstract concept, as a name on paper; he'd held up well, hadn't thought about her, had already resigned himself that it was all over. Suddenly he saw her, so alive, so real, she was turning toward him...

"Yes, dad. Very, very hard. It's incredibly hard. It's breaking me," Arad wished to say something completely different, he'd thought through his speech (advantageous for Miresli's position), but this came out.

"A whole day she spent to ask for this," he nodded. "So that you'd want to repay. To give a whole day! And all this—only for the deepest suggestion and vile indoctrination. She was so charming... So yielding... Yes? I wouldn't be surprised if she seduced you into violating Ancestral Law. Even if not," father noticed his son's negative nod, "then everything else—please. The most secret dreams become life."

Arad propped his temple with his fist. Damn it. Father is no worse at suggesting, indoctrinating. How does he know?

"But no matter, I'll pull you out of captivity. And also, I'm setting a radical condition: your paw must no longer be at their place. Don't even look at them."

"Fine, I'll try, papa."

"No need to try, just do it. I think after my meeting with Miresli their attitude toward you will change a little bit. It'll be an excellent lesson."

Miresli was right. It all happened just so. And papa is also right in some sense, at least in that... In what, actually?... It feels like they both conspired, papa and Miresli. Funny... Arad smirked.

Simsana was forbidden to him. Soon Arad would be forbidden to her. She was Ashai-Keetrah, she'd want to become one, she'd accept everything, all the prohibitions. The end. It was good. He hadn't even really had time to understand anything before it was all over. Vaal, why is everything so short, are you mocking me?

Right, no moping. That's for losers. And everything's going well for him. Everything's excellent. Even if father is right about everything—and that's impossible, you can't fake her loving gaze, that's impossible—then everything is still excellent, because the Ashai arranged a whole carnival for him just so he'd arrange a meeting, ha-ha-ha. Lionesses. More lionesses. Packs, prides of lionesses, at at his paws. Lenayna. There's someone useful, there's someone who'll serve. A lioness should be useful, the primary tool for licking wounds and satisfying all the basic things nature obligated one to need: drink, eat, reproduce, and so on, everyone knows everything. A most useful addition, a living tool. Not without peculiarities and rules of handling, but no matter. Idealism—no. Females—yes.

Father was writing something in his journal, leaving his son to think.

But apparently the son had fallen into too long a lethargy of thought, and father pronounced:

"The Insai house will be invited on the day the notable honors us with a visit. Didn't want to do this, but it will be even better this way."

"Why didn't you want to?" Arad asked indifferently.

Didn't want to... Mother insisted, so now you want to.

"It's still too early for you to think about this. Mama's fussing is still too premature. Besides, their line raises questions for me. And I don't want to sacrifice you to our interests. Though yes, hamanu Mirna's mother in the capital—that's very tempting and advantageous, and it will be much easier for you to study there with such assistance. And maassi Malstruna-Lenayna I don't much like, but I've told that you already. A pity she wasn't sent to a fansinall. I don't even know what she does. Sits at home, or what?..."

"She's an accountant for her father's business."

Nergim-Sinai laughed.

"Oh no, a lioness accountant. How droll."

A stroke to the evening: Arad's thought, already somewhat sleepy, that in their family it's mother who counts the money. And not only counts, but also manages it. Father always has 'no time.'

And, from what he was beginning to understand and sense, mother counted not very well. Or managed. Or both. Well, letting a female manage money—only dad could pull that off. That's dad for you. He doesn't even believe in Vaal. Eccentric.

But about counting... He remembered Leni's flying fingers, the bitten lip, the motionless ears. He simply knew—that one counted well.

Half to Kill, Half to Fuck

"Stop."

Here, at the scarce-tail corner of Near Street and Height-Way, Arad stopped a dhaar, kicking him in the stomach with the sword in its scabbard, like a club.

He was gray, thin, either Arad's age or already of age—if one could speak of Coming of Age for dhaar, dog knows, they're not allowed to grow manes; level with Arad in height, though Arad was above average anyway (thank you, dad), and solidly built besides (thank you, mom's blood). The dhaar froze in the mud from surprise, right behind him.

"What is it?" Almost imperceptible accent; meaning empire-born, local even, nearly 'one of ours.'

Arad stood and looked at him.

"Just stop."

And again pushed him with the end of the scabbard, on the chest.

"What did I do?"

"I don't know. How do you think," Arad looked left-right, "should a dhaar give his life for a Suung male?"

"What?"

"And for a Suung female?"

"What the young-sire want me?" His speech broke.

Damnation, they always teach their children their stupid languages, even the empire-born, and there it is—words are jumbling in his head now.

"I did nothing."

"Yeah, I know. I did it, understand? I started all of this..."

The dhaar made an attempt to continue on his way, but Arad again didn't let him, and he tried to shield himself with a very female gesture, covering his chest and belly with his arms.

"Do you know who desecrated the War Banner on the Height?"

"No! I didn't muddle with them! I'm all in hate against them! They reject-ed Suung hospitality, such insolence!" the dhaar reported in short cries, backing away (pfft, turns out he knows them—even Arad understood that).

A hamanu passed by them, of the age of strength, with a mourning katena, and didn't even flick an ear. For the foolishness in these male heads is endless.

"Say—I'm shit."

"I'm shit," the dhaar determined readily.

"Good. Well done. You're a good dhaar," he kicked him again with the scabbard in the stomach.

Suddenly something unthinkable happened: the dhaar growled, but somehow quiet, and did something so stupid that one's tail simply drooped—he tried to snatch the sword from Arad (why?), but grabbed the scabbard, and the outcome was predictable—he simply ended up with the scabbard in his hand, while Arad's blade was bared. Just like that.

Probably the dhaar froze from fear, staring at the scabbard. Then decided to do this—fell to his knees:

"Young-sire, I wasn't attacking! May the young-sire spare me! I work! I did nothing! I was frightened!"

"My Vaal, this is funny. This is all just dumb," Arad laughed in short ex-hales. "Come on, put the scabbard back. Like that. Don't be afraid, come closer."

"I won't do it again. I won't do it again," the dhaar returned the sword to the too-narrow scabbard, still on his knees; the last distances he overcame with diligent, ambiguous thrusts.

"Do you love Vaal?"

"Only Suungs have the privilege of believing," he answered by rote.

"Okay, get up, don't kneel there, why should you."

The dhaar stood.

"Don't take offense. I'm having a difficult time right now. I want to kill half the world, fuck the other half, all this crap won't let me think, all this Rainbow of Blood, all this fever. My brother woke me, and I was having such a dream. And also they forbade me from having one lionessy, and I send it all to... but I'm a Suung of valor," Arad said the last words bewilderedly.

"Forgive me, young-sire."

"Why didn't you join the Legata?"

"My back, unfit," he bent, showing how it hurt.

"Pity, ten years and you'd have become a Suung, could have married and had a wife," said Arad, and fell silent.

"Yes. I'll go, young-sire, forgive me, young-sire."

"I'm also going to one lioness, probably I'll marry her in about four years. Maybe three. Or I won't marry her, fuck it, just choke her a little. But first I'll go to Marna, and there I'll be diligent. Though I've started skipping gymnasium. Listen, I'm sorry, this fire-blood is really harsh stuff, like spirits. I'm only sixteen. Understand? Hey? Damn it..."

The dhaar took advantage of the moment and fled.

Equipment

An hour later, or so: the shadow of a yew in the most tiny back courtyard Arad had ever seen. So cramped, like a well, sky above in an open square, though Lenayna's house was only two stories. Behind—a door, all in iron ("We fear lions with unclean hands," hamanu Mirna apologized when Arad pushed this door-beast). On the sides—little windows, some flowers, plants, some decorations, some things—Vaal, how cramped and cozy it was here. Opposite—a miniature garden, then—a fence grating with true spikes in the railing (no joke), then—a path, then—the gloomy, uninhabited wall of the arms-shop warehouse ("Lenayna can spend half the day there," hamanu Mirna excused).

Several pleasantries, which Arad was quite capable of dispensing when needed, and if he liked someone, he could just lose himself and press on with them, which was often taken for flattery. He liked hamanu Mirna very much. It was simple: this was Lenayna in twenty years, a classic Naysagrian from a picture in the book 'Prides of the Empire, the Great Time' (that is, the last two hundred years), somewhat frightened by life, somewhat anxious, even her ears constantly moved, listening.

"Incredible, but I used to miss that Lenayna existed," partly casting stars in her eyes, as they say, partly sincerely sharing. "Though, I noticed her, we crossed paths, many times, even sat together at a wedding. Long ago."

"Really?" hamanu Mirna seemed surprised, and then again not.

"Yes. By the way, who taught her bookkeeping?"

"I did. I don't have time anymore, and my eyes get tired. Gave it all to her—it's easier for her and father together, they get along."

"I see," Arad sipped from the very tall, narrow glass something like meat soup. "They like this near Marna," hamanu Mirna had apologized again when she brought it, despite Arad's pitiful protests that he'd eaten. In vain. He could ride straight to capital right now for more. "She's very good at it. Thank you, hamanu Mirna."

"Oh, it's nothing... what for? You like the Marna stew?"

"That too. Thank you for Lenayna."

As Arad determined, hamanu Mirna completely melted, just completely.

"Her pawsteps," she nodded in response to noise in the house, "there she is. Lenayna!" she called. "I'm here."

"Mom?" Arad heard her voice.

But mother didn't announce anything more, granting Arad the right to see her ordinary, unprepared, caught off guard. Even then, the first time, she'd had a tiny moment to prepare, to smooth herself. But now she'd walk in—and there he'd be.

He wanted to remember how she looked, how she smelled. He became terribly curious, as if for the first time. He remembered: no wondrous beauty, which was good—such lionesses are somewhat harmful, spoiled, forget them. He remembered that she had a very female figure, and the best impression of this detail he'd kept from that long-suffering evening at the Magistrate—remembered! Though it seemed then he'd neglected to look at her, for he'd driven into his still so inexperienced head—she was sort of prickly, and cold, wouldn't let you close, and around there seemed to be prettier ones (Arshaya! Arshaya!). Now Simsana was thin, slender, all elegance in her, she'd really almost been taken into the Krimmau-Ammau disciplarium, and that's no small thing. But Lenayna...

And there the culprit walked in, with effort and an interesting sort of sigh (now the sighs of lionesses held for Arad a slightly different interest and hue than a moon ago).

"So that's where mama is," she didn't see him yet, behind the door. "That idiot has already... Arad!" In her eyes: joy and fright simultaneously.

My Vaal, thought Arad. She's glad. You can feel it. First impression, first response, sudden encounter—it's all the truest.

"Lenayna!" mama was alarmed, fearing a new embarrassment.

"Strong day, Arad, forgive me, I wasn't talking about you!" Her hand—on his shoulder as she sat beside him, on the left.

"I know."

In one hand she had an enormous bunch of keys, in the other—papers pressed to a board. Today she wasn't wearing that gray, plain robe, straight as a post and dreary as rain in the Waters Moon, in which even then, all in her moondays and confusion, Lenayna had managed to look quite something. Today—a blue dress with a belt, a katena, with Naysagrian spirals, a large wrap on her shoulders (even larger than the one she'd left Arad), her rings in her ears, a bracelet on her wrist, a gold ring on her hand. The garment was closed, up to the neck, like all Naysagrian attire, no tail-freedom; and long sleeves, the belt excellently cinched, and all of it was somehow so right, so fitting, and so native that Arad immediately began undressing her in his mind. What was most important—she had such a right, such a fitting lioness figure. *She must, has to, is prescribed to have an absolutely stunning ass*, Arad covered his mouth with his palm while she sat down. He wanted her very much, as a lioness, right now; he needed to win her, if only to see whether this guess was right or not (right, of course). To the point that he was almost ready to do something truly stupid: tell her mother he wanted her daughter; tell Lenayna he wanted her ass; pounce on Lenayna right here;

from hopeless thirst smash the table and kill the idiot Lenayna had been talking about, whoever that was.

As it turned out, the Game was a very cruel thing. It would seem, having played to his content, he should calm down—so Arad had thought before, so he'd been hinted, so it was asserted. No. What shameless lies. Everything was the opposite, Arad understood. He understood the incredible cunning of lionesses. They outright get you addicted to them, like to a substance, and you'll do anything to achieve it; bait from the huntresses. They give you a taste, from a young age; show you what they have; place in your young head a signpost where to come, which even before was quite considerable there, but now it's all in glowing orange-red paint, for all your eyes, ears, nose and everything else. No, from the Game you don't become calmer, alas, that's only for half an hour, false hope, eternal illusion. You're already doomed to chase their tails, already knowing exactly where that very lock is that can open and set you free.

But Arad was angry, cunning, and already quite experienced. And all those smarts had to be used to quickly, precisely, and confidently open Lenayna's lock. And, as they say, to do something quickly, you mustn't hurry.

"Yeah, I know what Lenayna's talking about, what idiots," Arad said confidently, pointed left at her with his thumb. "They won't leave her alone."

"Don't pay attention, don't pay attention, all sorts hang around," hamanu Mirna was pouring him sparkling juice (Vaal, this too wasn't cheap), and suddenly handed the bottle to Lenayna, who without pause continued her mama's service.

"I even know who."

Both lionesses looked at him in astonishment, ears up.

"Some accountant-whelp. Or one pretending to be an accountant to pass as one of their own. Probably that one, the son of Marsan-Ashnari."

"Vaal almighty, how do you know? Did you see?" Lenayna clutched her cheek, and mother's ears stood at their sharpest.

Arad shrugged, inwardly completely astonished at how he'd guessed this. The chance was negligible.

"But it's not a problem anymore," he wanted to clink cups with Lenayna, and she hurriedly poured for herself, and so it happened. "I didn't see."

"He runs to me to reconcile accounts, it's not what you probably thought. And he's already worn me out—my numbers are correct, his are correct, but he keeps approaching anyway," Lenayna was indignant, complaining, and justifying.

"Reconcile accounts..." Arad smiled. "Well, you understand what accounts interest him. But don't worry, I'll help him reconcile," he looked at Lenayna, then into the distance, meaningfully tousling his mane.

"You two chat, I'll be right back," the classic maternal move. Old wisdom: sometimes you need to do nothing for things to progress. And especially—not be present somewhere.

Lenayna waited until the door closed, and it closed tightly and well, and immediately:

"Hi," she said to him with an exhale.

"Hi," Arad leaned toward her, and they licked each other: quickly, mutually, even without initial awkwardness, instantly understanding each other's body language.

A short little kiss, very. Don't be greedy.

"Listen, he really..."

"Forget him. Shhhh. How are things?"

"Um..." Lenayna shrugged. "Why didn't you come?"

"I was busy. Resolving matters."

"And how?" Lenayna looked down, smoothed her clothes. "Did you resolve all the matters?" She pressed so sweetly on 'all.'

"Yes," Arad said slowly. "Not without some complications and surprises. But I resolved them."

"Nai," Lenayna approved, and proprietarily glanced into his cup.

Arad nodded, and their gazes met. They laughed involuntarily—it happens when someone's attractive to you, everyone knows this.

"Now what?" she sighed, certainly expecting from him a date, shared time, attention; in general—direction.

Oh, Arad had all of this, only he wasn't planning to circle the prey and suffer through long preludes. Having grabbed endless confidence in himself, he wanted to do everything boldly and only so. Besides, an excellent occasion had presented itself.

"Now this," Arad stretched out his legs, swirling the juice. "That important tail is coming from Marna, that one, whom you delivered the letter. He'll be at our dinner, and your family is invited. Day after the day after tomorrow."

"Oh, Arad, he's important one."

"Yes, yes. Next: we'll finally meet properly as families, your father will get to know my father. Since things are like this."

"Oh, Arad..." Lenayna grew nervous.

"And you and I will sit and try to be good. I'll probably need to make your mama like me..."

"She likes you."

"...your papa has to like me..."

She was silent.

"...and the notable has to like me."

Lenayna shifted, and added:

"And I... You father. Needs to like me."

"Everything will be great," Arad smoothed her palm, still swirling the juice. "Then this: toward the end you'll twist your paw, very painfully, and stay the night because of this misfortune. We have on the second floor, on the eastern side, an excellent guest room. I'd sleep there myself, but—pity lions aren't allowed to sleep on the second floor."

Lenayna frowned, desperately trying to understand what was said. Then she laughed, meaning, well, what jokes on the edge of stupidity. Arad imperterbably swirled the juice, sipping, and suddenly she grew indignant:

"Oh, Arad, what vulgarity," she covered her mouth with her palm. "A cheap trick, old as the world, and stupid as... it would be so out of place. Vaal! No."

"I'll tell mama," he said as if he hadn't heard the objections, "she'll prepare."

"Oh Vaal, Arad," her ears drooped. "Don't even think of saying this, especially to your mother. It's a disgrace, for both of us."

"I shouldn't tell the servant, right?"

"Arad, no, I won't do it."

Instead of answering, Arad simply clinked cups with her again, she picked hers up in bewilderment, responded, and set it back down.

"We... you didn't even take me on a date, even for a walk!" Lenayna accused him.

"We still have..." Arad pretended to count, taking her palm and bending her fingers. "Two days."

She slapped his hand with her palm.

"And before I couldn't. Was resolving matters, as you know."

"Took quite a while to resolve," she sniped. "Probably wasn't just one you were resolving. Or resolved several times over."

Yes, don't put your finger in her mouth, or anything else for that matter.

"No, Arad. This won't do. Not so fast. You're just... in quite a hurry. And it would be improper, before your parents, before mine."

Had he been the Arad who walked this earth a moon or two ago, he would have said who knows what in response. Clarified. Persuaded. Flattered. Threatened. Taken offense (Vaal, anything but that...). Begged (oh, ugh, the end...). But no longer.

"Alright, forget it. Just an idea that came to mind."

She seemed to nod victoriously; but several moments passed:

"Arad, you must understand," she turned to him, "this isn't the..."

She didn't finish, stopped explaining to him (that not so fast, and then, that if everything goes well then everything would be his, just let everything be observed, he interested her, but don't push so hard, I'm an honest Naysagrian, show respect, at least let me walk with you in front of my female friends, let's get to know each other, after all), because the house grew noisy, and

through the door with a crash and ovation burst Lenayna's dad, and behind him—a glimpse of Lenayna's mom.

"Oh, daddy. Hi, dad," Lenayna greeted him very simply.

"Miran," his wife wanted something from him, not retreating, like a tail, "Miran. Miran."

"Hi, Lenayni," he sat beside her, on the right, and patted her head.

Now he was in an ornate toga, and resembled a tasteless patrician escaped from prison.

"The young-sire Arad has come to visit," Lenayna's mother pointed at him like a landmark.

"Good day, sire Miran," Arad rose, thinking: praise the Lenayna's mother, who so conveniently reminded him of the name.

He silently shook hands, and just as silently pulled toward himself—with noise—his wife's chair, together, in fact, with the wife herself, who had only just sat down.

"Gimme food," this to his wife. "What are you doing?" this to Arad.

"Pursuing the sire's daughter," Arad answered.

He noticed how Leni drew herself up, tensed, grew quiet. She suddenly took his palm herself, resting on the chair, seemingly from tender considerations; and even made it so that it seemed not she was holding him, but the reverse.

"And how's it going?" Lenayna's father was searching intently for something on the table.

"Everything's going splendid."

"Mmmm... That's not what I meant. What's there to pursue," Miran grimaced, finding nothing to his taste on the table. "You grab the sweet spot, and that's it. What can you do?" He looked at him.

Probably this is exactly how bandits look, or murderers, Arad thought. Only somehow enriched ones.

"Throw javelins. Stand well in the Circle. Can make crossbows, bows, bolt-throwers. Can build a pigsty. Understand law, know some history. I have good handwriting. Can draw, just not nature, but like a house. Can dance."

"What, you like dancing?" Miran asked sourly, and looked at his wife, who had returned with a pot.

"Not particularly. Females like it. Sometimes you have to. To please them."

"Remember, if you do everything to please them, it'll all roll to shit," sire Miran very spectacularly and realistically showed how everything would roll.

"Dad!" And Arad felt Lenayna dig her claws into his palm.

"What 'dad,' why are you dadding. Did you eat?"

"Yes."

"Well then go, count upstairs. Have you counted everything?"

"I've counted everything, dad. I want to sit here. Someone came to see me," Lenayna pointed at Arad.

"I won't kill him," Miran spread his arms. "Worst case, we'll find a new one, similar."

"Father!" Lenayna tried as best she could.

"Miran, stop joking like that!" his wife added, but he pinched her under the tail, she yelped and spilled soup on his hands, pouring into an enormous bowl. This amused him greatly.

"I'm the only one like me, sire Miran. Won't work to find another," Arad noted, finishing the sparkling juice. Sweet, harmful, but so delicious—damn, you could drink yourself to death on it.

"Thought you'd say—won't work to kill," Miran waved at him. "What else you got screwed up?"

"Nothing, sire Miran."

"Pity. Because she," father pointed at Lenayna with his spoon, hunching heavily over the bowl, in the manner of simple heads, "has something screwed. You think on that."

"Dad!" And now Arad sensed fear and worry in her voice.

"She's too smart. She'll wriggle out ten times, like a fish—and still get her way. Little fish. No, they're all cunning, because what else do they have besides sweetness and cunning. But this one... Ooooh. A lioness ought to be dumb, but this one for some reason thinks too much," sire Miran truly pondered this discrepancy. "Think you hooked her—you're still the one on the line," he waved the spoon and continued eating.

"Sounds excellent," Arad shrugged. And indeed it did.

"Then..."

Hamanu Mirna was waving at Arad: don't listen to him, let him prattle.

"Dad! Stop it. Nai, what is this! I'll tell him everything myself if I need to!" Lenayna leaned toward her dad and covered his mouth. "Enough!"

And all so agitated, hurried.

"Aight, aight. Sharp-ears, you want to deal in arms?" sire Miran expressed himself colloquially, meaning prick up your ears, that is, attend. "Selling, buying?"

"Haven't thought about it," Arad admitted; Leni's claws in his palm were starting to itch, she'd gotten so worked up there.

"Please, he's a future judge, what's arms to him?" hamanu Mirna pointed at him, quite indignant. "You're talking nonsense."

Sire Miran gathered her into a bundle and kissed her on the cheek; she fought, struggled, and consisted entirely of whatareyoudoing and ohhow-inappropriate.

"Doesn't understand anything, these ears don't understand anything," Miran pointed at her, tormenting his wife's ear. "But try getting by without her."

"Can't do without them, sire Miran," Arad nodded, and did something similar, only in a much more careful, tender variant: embraced Lenayna by the shoulders and touched her ear. She didn't fight, didn't resist, looked at him, and began smoothing her wrap at the neck, up-down, up-down, by the draping.

He nodded in agreement and returned to devouring his food.

"So what about arms?" he suddenly grew animated.

"Other plans for now, sire Miran."

"Aight. But you think on it," he nodded, waving his spoon. "Think on it. Instead of papers—iron. More fun."

Leni sighed deeply, and for the umpteenth time poured Arad juice, and he couldn't refuse. They sat, were silent; hamanu Mirna tried to break the silence, but her husband didn't let her:

"So like, they told you to make a lineage stuff? Give it a try, yeah? And you, got it, you're trying, yeah?" Sire Miran rocked from side to side, and looked at him in very specific manner; Arad had no doubts left about his criminal past, or present.

"They told me," Arad agreed. "But I like Lenayna."

"Why?" Lenayna's father asked immediately. "Ah, cut it out, none of that shit, I hate actors. Kinda fell in love, all that crap. Nah, you're not that," he threw his spoon with splashes, Lenayna wiped up after him and gestured something to her dad, "I married by calculation, and my wife too, yeah everyone around. And Lenayni will marry by arrangement, and you'll marry the same way, no other way it works."

He thought.

"And anyway, if I were you—I'd forget all that. Let your father marry off a younger son, however he wants, however's convenient for him. But you, you're a tail-chaser, I can see it in your eyes, you've got roaming to do. I heard you're dragging some Ashai around by the tail, that's right. Ashai don't like assholes, they've got a nose for assholes like whoa, they never give it up to assholes, that's the... Give me more soup. None left, or what?"

Hamanu Mirna covered half her muzzle with her palm. She and her daughter exchanged glances.

"You already ate it all," Mirna sighed, looking at Arad with infinite helplessness.

"Damn..." Miran was surprised, but instantly, and very shrewdly: "So why do you like Leni, why are you after her?"

Arad rubbed his nose, looked up at the little square of sky, thought—and thought for a long time—and began:

"There was a scholar, Haigeran, known for his linguistic experiments, well, he tried to understand what language is, not the point... Toward the end of his life he produced a treatise, it was called um... uhhh... ah, yes, it was called 'Logical, Linguistic, and Philosophical Experiments,' where he tried to

create a new... new terminology for describing our, let's say, presence in the world. I'll note in the margins that the attempt proved more failed than successful, but he influenced, um, yes... influenced. Part of his terminology became the concept of 'Equipment,' that is, any object, whether living or non-living... which is fit for us for some purpose, no matter how small or most important, vital purpose. When we perceive the world, each object in it passes through a mental process of, let's say, Equipping—that is, determining whether an object is fit as Equipment, and if so, how good it is for a particular purpose. We look at things not as things, but with the end result in mind. What's important: good Equipment we generally don't notice. An example of Equipment—a tradeslionsess at the market: we don't approach her just because, and she doesn't interest us as a living consciousness, but we have a goal in mind—to buy fabric from her, or meat on the knives. We'll notice her only if she's not fit as Equipment, if she's broken Equipment—for example, strikes us in the muzzle instead of selling, or dissolves into thin air. But the most vital Equipment, and this is important—the most vital Equipment, it doesn't submit to complete Equipping, it manifests its immanent qualities, impossible to ignore, but let's not get into that... To sum up: I see in Lenayna precisely this—she's excellent Equipment for all those purposes and tasks for which betrothal happens, marriage is concluded, lineage alliance is woven, and joint life is lived. It remains for her to understand whether I'm good Equipment for her purposes, but I'm confident this will happen quickly, because I'm excellent equipment—I'm simply a lion-Equipment."

He finally looked at his audience, and was satisfied with the effect. Lenayna, leaning back, was blinking frequently, frowning, and the asymmetry of her mouth showed rather well—which she apparently controlled always, except in such extraordinary moments as this. Hamanu Mirna, having placed her elbow under her chin, was desperately trying to make either a thoughtful or an understanding expression, even nodded.

"Arad, you're so smart, I didn't understand anything," Lenayna smiled broadly, and only now he noticed that—it seemed—she was missing some teeth on the left side, where the scar was, or they were broken, something was unusual there; and in general, it wasn't entirely clear whether she liked the speech, or whether she was trying to smooth over the awkwardness of the situation.

"What kind of flea-crap are you spouting?" Sire Miran did not appreciate it. And then he roared: "You're pulling our tails!"

He stood up sharply, hamanu Mirna yelped, and swung at Arad with an iron mace that appeared from who knows where. A bit late to the development of events, but Lenayna threw herself at Arad, onto his chest:

"Father, don't you dare, what are you doing?! Stop! He came as a guest! Father..." her voice trembled, she was about to cry.

Arad wasn't frightened at all, and didn't even attempt to move. There wasn't even a combat reaction, and he covered Lenayna's mouth with his palm as she pressed against his chest.

"What are you doing, Leni?" Arad said to her, as if there were no one around. "What if the blow had landed? You shouldn't shield me from a blow, especially a mortal one, understand? You should hide behind me, not me behind you. Behind. Not in front. Behind. Agreed? Agreed," he tapped her on the nose with his finger, and she listened, with open wet eyes and mouth firmly covered by his palm. And then he pressed her to himself and kissed her just like that; surprisingly, even in such an extraordinary situation she didn't leave it all unanswered—her tongue quickly, modestly, imperceptibly passed along his nose, leaving scent. And then came the impression that she'd lost consciousness (no, of course not) from the excess of adventures—for she remained limp in his arms, eyes closed.

Hamanu Mirna, meanwhile, snatched the weapon from her husband:

"I'll... like... hit you! Miran, enough drinking already!"

Meanwhile Arad rose evenly to his paws (Lenayna turned out to be more alive than all the living, and now clung to him somewhere at the side)—who strikes someone sitting?

"Please, sire Miran. I am at your service there," Arad pointed to the little garden.

Lenayna's father looked at him, paying no attention to his wife, who was simultaneously beating his chest and hissing at him.

"Good," he nodded, finally. "All right."

Arad already thought this was an invitation to step outside, but instead Miran gave attention to Mirna, easily took the mace from her. He embraced her by the waist, quite tenderly, despite her resistance; Arad hadn't expected he was capable of such tenderness at all.

"Let's go, there's business."

"What? Now?" hamanu Mirna was astonished, stopping her beating of his chest (Arad, attentive, noted—not a single blow to the muzzle). "No, there's no time!"

"Now," he dragged her toward the door.

"But they... I... I hate this. Okay, stop pulling me already, I go! Lenayna..."

"Yes, mom," the daughter responded understandingly.

"Mother-Ahlia, Mother-Ahlia..." Lenayna's mother lamented behind the door, being dragged off by Miran. "Scandal, disgrace, I hate this, you ruined everything..."

Arad discovered he was standing, and somewhere to the side, on the left, was Lenayna; she was pointlessly rearranging objects on the table.

Well, nice, he thought. Muzzle intact, and I'll spend time with Leni.

"Never a dull moment here," he sat back down and grabbed her from behind by her firm waist—firm because of the belt—and sat her on his lap.

Arad expected some resistance, but she literally sprawled on him with her whole body, trustingly, relaxed, and placed one paw right on dad's chair; laid her head on his shoulder.

"Arad, I'm sorry. This is so absurd," Lenayna said, looking up. "He's showing off who knows what in front of you. That's what my dad's like, out of his mind."

He pensively rubbed his cheek against her ear.

"I love him, don't think otherwise. He's good, you'll understand. I dunno..."

"He's fun," Arad was rather amused by it all.

"I thought he'd hit you. Like once upon a time..." and by the tone of her voice Arad understood that Lenayna might cry. "I want to break free."

"What, has he already sent someone to tophet that way? Poor lion," he joked, and rubbed against her ear again. "Everything's fine, Leni. We'll break free, and do everything else."

She sighed deeply and grew quiet.

"I foresee: the dinner with this notable will be interesting."

"I'm scared of that evening. Dad can behave normally in polite society, I know! I know! He's acting with you like with those idiots of his from the arms shop or with the debtors, with all those... I don't even want to talk about them."

"And where did they go?" Arad inquired.

An indifferent, vague gesture from Lenayna, somewhere upward. Her words after a deep sigh (again): 'You'll understand in a moment.' Then Arad felt her movement, her turn, her impulse, and he felt its ambiguity; no, wrong; he felt its perfect unambiguity, a magnificent confirmation of feelings: she suddenly with her claws, in one sweep, clutched somewhere behind him, either at his clothes or at his scruff itself, and very demandingly nuzzled her nose somewhere into his neck; Arad, naturally, didn't delay, pulled her all the way up higher, and she even purred—this was good in her, the ability to purr, some precise sense—and he looked at her for a moment, anticipating her sweetness, and she at him (lovely, lovely, Naysagrian, all-forgiving eyes, half-smile), and now already the first wet and hot (Arad had come to love kisses very much, shameful to admit for a lion, isn't it), when suddenly, as if kicked open, the long-suffering anti-thief door opened again, and from there appeared—who would have thought—Lenayna's sister, Meysala. And also: who would have thought that such a kick could be delivered by such a young creature.

Arad saw her first, since he sat facing the door, and Lenayna—accordingly—couldn't see.

"Pffff, Lenka," she laughed and sat down in the free spot.

Lenayna exhaled and buried her nose in Arad's neck. He felt how her fingers continued to tenderly stroke his scruff, pull at his still-short mane; well,

no despair—the mane grows every day after all, and especially when females stroke it like this.

"Lenka's got licky-licks, in the family yard for kicks, really wants to marry for dicks, but he's babbling tail-tricks."

"The maassi has a talent for verse," Arad noted sincerely. "But a talentlessness for delicacy."

"You're dumb," Meysala was already persistently gnawing at a hard, stretchy cheese found on the table.

"But why?" Arad was again sincerely surprised.

"Only a dummy could want Leni, she's boring as her papers with numbers. Lenka, he'll lie to you, then sneak under your tail, and then bam—and that's it."

"Meysala, go away already," Lenayna turned, pulling slightly away from Arad.

"No-no," suddenly Arad slid Lenayna off his lap and almost seated her by his arms in the chair to the left, leaving her in great bewilderment and even—it felt—offense (well, of course). And he himself moved closer to Meysala: "Listen, Meysali, how old are you? Fifteen?"

"Almost," she smirked, biting the cheese.

He leaned back.

"And are you two full sisters?" he gestured carelessly at Lenayna.

"Yeah, kinda," she shrugged, and did stop gnawing the cheese. "Why?"

"Give me your hand," and he extended his hand to her.

"What do you want? Hey, Lenka, what does he need?"

No answer came from Lenayna's side, but it wasn't needed. Meysala looked from her sister to him, becoming ever more interested and serious.

Females are curious. Females are curious. Females are curious. Even such small ones. She'll take the hand, if only from curiosity. Arad was astonished. Arad was amazed. At himself, at his own actions. He knew how they thought. He knew everything. This couldn't have happened to him on its own. From where? Where did he come to know everything?

Cautiously and as if in jest giving him her hand, Meysala stood, led by him, and approached:

"Well?"

Instead of an answer—a steel trap of a palm on her little muzzle, and the second hand grabbed her ear, trained on younger brothers. Now like this: pull down by the ear, and she follows it, like that, yes, this is much easier on her than on small males.

Naturally, Meysala began to squeak, but it came out quietly, muffled because of the trap on her muzzle. Her tail conveniently peeked out from under the skirt, and Arad didn't neglect to step on that too.

"Arad?" Lenayna grew worried, half-rising and peering over the table to where Meysala had descended.

"Heh-heh," Arad laughed very nastily—he knew how to do that—"and someone got something. How easy."

"She's in pain, stop it," Lenayna was going around the table.

"Now she has a new buddy Arad, heh-heh," he twisted her ear. "Who's great to joke around with, heh-heh-heh. It's always fun with lions. Ow, ow, what, what, I don't understand, are you saying 'sorry'?"

"Arad, let her go!" Lenayna pushed Arad, seriously.

He released first the muzzle, then the tail, then the ear.

"Take him away, Lenayna! Freak!" the younger sister threw herself at Lenayna, crying. "Waaah!" she wailed on her chest.

"There, there," Lenayna stroked her.

"Dad will kill you! He'll make mincemeat of you!" all wet-nosed, Meysala turned to him.

"What, when it's time to cry, it's to your sister?" Arad sat back, fingers interlaced. "Not 'Lenka' anymore? Now it's 'Lenayna'?"

"Eat shit! You're already dead!"

"She's in pain! She's still small," Lenayna stroked her younger sister, with a look of 'How could you?'

"Small? Look at her! You need to teach her modesty, otherwise..."

"Tell him to get out, Lenayna! Dump him, dump him!" surprisingly, Meysala began hitting her sister with her palm on the shoulders, chest, even got her neck, it seemed. "He's just a freak! Tell him! I'll tell dad! I'll tell everything! Make him leave!" she pointed at him without looking. "I hate him! Lenayna? Lenayna! Throw him out right now! I hate him! Why are you silent? Waaah," and she ran into the house.

From the house suddenly came the roar of a lion.

"It seems I'll be mincemeat after all," Arad spread his hands, and determined just in case where the mace was and how he could escape through the garden. Lenayna, however, sat down brokenly in the chair, paying no attention. She looked deeply downward, playing with two outer cords of her kate-na.

"You won't be," her quiet voice sounded very unexpected; Arad hadn't expected words from her. "That's them in the bedroom."

"Ah," he understood everything.

"Arad, why did you do that? I had a different... opinion of you."

"I think your opinion just got better," he stretched out his legs. "One must know how to put sisters in their place, especially younger ones, especially spoiled ones. Someone, you know, has to do the dirty work. To protect, to raise—that's always dirty."

She snorted and continued stroking her cords.

"Welcome to family Insai," Leni said with nervous, broken laughter, "and that's not all. You've only seen hal... half..." suddenly she turned to the chair and began to cry, and Arad understood, with that same intuition for females

that had so strangely pierced his being, that this moment of weakness was no game.

Lifting her from the pitiful state of solitude, from crying on the chair back in the unreliable shelter of her own hands, he returned her to where she belonged—sheltered her on his chest, where it's not frightening, where you can cry as much as you want, to your heart's content. She embraced him, hung on him a little, searched for a better refuge on his chest.

Whoa, really, thought Arad, stroking her, *an interesting day. Enough drama for a whole year.*

"Forgive me," he said.

"Forgive me," she answered.

"No, you."

"You."

"No, you."

Well, the last word goes to the lion, so be it.

From the window, above the door, Meysala peeked out:

"If you don't dump him—you're no sister of mine!" and slammed the window shut.

Leni looked there, up, and further sheltered herself in him.

"Arad?"

"Yes?"

"I'll think about it."

"About what?"

"Nai, nothing," she slapped his shoulder weakly and tenderly.

Even ones as smart as Arad sometimes just can't simply understand everything.

A Few Tiny Details

They, the lionesses, especially Ashai-Keetrah—of course were late.

Firstly, the message came short, sudden, and ultimatum-like: ‘Garden of my family residence. Morning, 9th hour, 14th d., 1st Waters Moon, 807 E.E. Do not spread word. Do not be late. Do not forget things and papers relating to the matter. N.-S.’ That is, tomorrow. It found them at home, late in the evening, when, secondly, they were patiently waiting for contractions to intensify in an anxious, frightened first-time mother, aged nineteen; she was difficult, exhausting, demanded attention—there are hard lionesses who need to be given, given, given attention, they wear you out, the Mistress of Life births alongside them; because of this Miresli had sent away until morning two of her relatives, mother and sister, for they only made noise. Having received the message, brought by the son of an Imperial Post servant, Miresli sighed and looked at Simsana, who was doing everything as required: helping the lioness stand and pace in place (easier for the mother, and you speed the labor), and laying her on the bed, giving her heaps of pillows from different sides (Simsana knew which ones, and mothers-to-be quickly understood she knew her craft), and gave a large one between her legs.

Miresli said to her disciple:

"Go in, check how it's going."

They struggled a bit more: Miresli talked the first-timer into lying on her back, she didn't want to and was being difficult—painful, unpleasant. Simsana, however, having the ideal build for a Mistress of Life—thin bones, slender everything, long fingers—entered her without the usual difficulties and protests, for after all most lionesses very much dislike being entered with fingers.

"About halfway," Simsana pronounced her verdict, frowning and looking at the candle.

Vaalu-Miresli sighed, decided to break her rule—don't rush healthy first-timers—and said to Simsana:

"Alright, let's speed the waters."

She looked at her mentor somewhat surprised and nodded.

"What, again?" the lioness complained. Fingers there again. Mother-Ahlia, why did you make your daughters suffer so, giving birth.

"Bear with it, you'll deliver faster," Miresli said sternly. And just as she went to gather more clean cloths and take the long-boiled pots off the stove, she heard:

"Something happened, oh, something's coming," the laboring lioness grew worried.

"It's fine, Maysa, everything's okay, the water's going," Simsana calmed her, with that inimitable voice that instilled calm and fearlessness. "Going easy, easy. Like reading a fairy tale, flying in the clouds."

Simsana knew how to speak to laboring mothers quite exceptionally, when needed. Most surprising was that Miresli hadn't taught her this. She'd taught her everything else, but not this voice—because she hadn't even known it was possible; perhaps it was somehow connected to her talent for putting others to sleep. So they'd divided over time: Miresli was the strict one, the bad one, who cut off arguments and refusals; Simsana was the good one, the understanding, all-forgiving one.

Of course, Simsana dipped her whole palm in the waters, as best she could. Sniffed, looked, let her mentor do the same, offering her palm.

"Good ones," she rendered her decision.

"Good ones," the mentor confirmed, said in her ear: "She needs to be delivered by morning."

"Everything's going well, she should," Simsana answered quietly, watching lest the laboring mother overhear, but she attended to her own matters. "But why so urgent?"

"Tomorrow morning we go to Nergim, Arad convinced him."

"What a good one. My Vaal, so fast... Vaal, again I won't sleep."

"No choice," the mentor smoothed her back. "When she delivers, you'll go sleep immediately."

From morning everything went hard: the one lioness they could leave the new mother with, Simsana didn't find at home; they went for the second, she was sick; went to the midwife Ninya, quarrelsome and not fond of Vaalu-Miresli and Vaalu-Simsana, and she wanted prepayment, but Simsana had no money. In the end they left her with relatives, though Miresli didn't much like doing that either—those always get something stupid in their heads. With clothes it also didn't go smoothly at first: Simsana dressed up as if for the House of Sisters or a procession to the Chamber of Ashai-Keetrah Affairs and Defence of Faith or a formal visit to the Magistrate—in short, put on the best she had, and that was all one single, but genuine plasis, or rather, sub-plasis, or half-plasis as it's called; for stallas, as everyone knows, aren't permitted the plasis.

By the way, Arad hadn't seen her in it! What an oversight.

"What are you doing! You need to look like a miserable, life-worn lionessy! He can't stand Ashai!" Vaalu-Miresli lamented. "Come on, into the work-dress, and no jewelry, no tentush. Amulet to me, sirna to me."

"That will be easy—a life-worn lionessy. Didn't even get to put my ears to a pillow."

"Vaal, we're late," Vaalu-Miresli was rummaging in the chest. "Great Suungs..."

Around the tenth hour, thereabouts, they finally came to the house of the Karizian-Roust, not daring to enter inside and not knowing how to properly get to the garden; the servant Sedesi led them wordlessly, going around the house as if around a great danger, and Simsana even snorted with amusement at how this house feared even an accidental Ashai paw. In the garden under a cherry tree there was a table, quite large, rectangular; they were offered to sit in chairs and wait; the table was covered with cloth, something was beneath it, on the cloth lay several wilted leaves, which Vaalu-Miresli gathered and began to turn; Vaalu-Simsana meanwhile pulled out a file and began fastidiously filing her claws—Mistresses of Life are firmly required to have short, perfectly smooth claws. Finally, the mentor assembled a still life from the leaves, and the acolyte fixed all her claws, but Nergim-Sinai still wasn't there.

"Maybe he won't come?" Simsana broke the silence first in all this time.

"He'll come," the mentor answered, the corner of her mouth twitched. "We were late—so he's late. Disciplining us."

"Maybe read him a summoning engram?" Simsana suggested, seemingly even seriously.

"He's an anvaalist, he can get angry," Miresli laughed. "And we're both hopeless at engrams."

But he appeared after all, without any engram tricks. Nergim-Sinai walked triumphantly, proudly and unhurriedly, like a true judge; held in one hand writing implements, in the other—either a book or something. Sat down, pulled the cloth from the table (here were more books, more writing implements, various papers, three weights, and a bust of the current Emperor Akash the Second). Looked at both Ashai, sighed, spread his hands, smiled:

"I assume, good day, good Suungs."

"Strong day, sire Nergim. Thank you for the invitation," Miresli spoke very meekly and smoothly; Simsana even moved her ears; she'd practically never heard such a tone from her mentor.

"Sire Nergim..." Simsana responded. "Sire Nergim, it's my honor to meet Arad's father."

He nodded deeply, but said nothing to this.

"I assume you understand why I don't receive you in the house," he gestured carelessly behind him. "The Doctrine. A table in the garden, therefore, is a compromise between the impossibility of receiving you in the house and your request not to receive you in an official place, during official hours."

"It's a very aesthetic compromise," said Miresli, and Simsana glanced at her.

"Good," he twirled the stylus and examined both of them, in turn. "But I'm still surprised by your visit. And I still remain an Imperial judge. Always. And everywhere. Even when I sleep."

"We need precisely the qualities of an Imperial judge for our matter," this was Miresli.

All her gestures were incredibly female, respectful, submissive.

"Indeed..." Nergim exhaled with a growl. "Consider this a field session," he smiled. "I assume the introductory part is concluded. So then, the disposition: my son asked me to meet with you. I'm certain it cost you some effort to convince him, and I'll note—you achieved success. With that, I believe, his role can be considered finished, in every sense. I think we all understand this well," he tapped his signet ring on the table. "So then, I'm here, I'm ready to listen."

Miresli looked at her disciple, but Nergim suddenly added:

"I promise to be impartial, fair, even understanding," he pronounced fundamentally, as if driving in stakes.

"We appreciate it, sire Nergim."

Simsana drew breath, when Nergim continued again:

"The Doctrine, and you know this, prescribes me being neutral. But also prescribes respectful treatment of the Vaal faith, which is followed by... ahh... ninety-six out of a hundred Suungs, while the rest enjoy one form of liberty or another. And—of course—respectful treatment of the priestesses of this faith."

"We understand, sire Nergim," Miresli nodded. "We are grateful. We are obedient to the Doctrine."

"Good... Yes, here's something important: how do you prefer I address you?" and he pointed first at Miresli.

"Vaal-Miresli."

Simsana lost the battle with sleepiness and yawned sweetly, lengthily, vainly trying to conceal it.

"And the pre-address?"

"Any. Or without one."

He pointed at Simsana with his stylus—she was licking her lips after her sleepy transgression.

"Vaal-Simsana," she answered, nervous.

"Pre-address?"

"Not needed."

All of this Nergim wrote down for some reason, or not this. Unclear. He wrote something, and that's it.

"Good... It's preliminarily known that this is a matter of Ancestral Law, and that it somehow concerns Vaalu-Simsana. Please," he invited Miresli to speak, but she again looked at Simsana, and she began uncertainly:

"Three years ago my mentor and I were traveling from the Krimmau-Am-mau disciplarium, and on the way I lost my birth certificate. Since then I haven't had a certificate, and to pass my Coming of Age," Simsana smoothed her ears (a gesture so dear to Arad), "I need a new one," and fell silent, looking down.

"So," Nergim waited. He was clearly surprised. "That's all?"

"Yes," answered Vaalu-Miresli.

"Good," Nergim said, disconcerted, writing something in his notorious, known-to-the-whole-family, very secret notebook. "I presume the emerging canvas of our polylogue presumes my detailed questioning, because the details, circumstances, and facts are clearly insufficient."

"Any questions—we'll answer. But the matter is quite simple," said Miresli.

"Good..." Nergim wrote something again. "What were the circumstances of the certificate's loss?"

"We were crossing a river, over a bridge. A cub was drowning there," Simsana pointed down-down, as if pushing someone under water, "well, sort of drowning, I ran to pull him out. My tube fell off, the certificate was in it, and I didn't notice. The tube floated away downstream... We couldn't find it."

"Understood. The birth certificate was accidentally lost. Why did you wait three years? How old is Vaalu-Simsana now?"

"Fifteen," Miresli answered for her. "Nearly sixteen soon. We were constantly busy, much to do. Besides, there's one particularity that prevented us from doing anything," she clasped her fingers at her chest, and Simsana saw how she sought his gaze. "That's why we didn't go to the Chamber of Justice, but came to consult with the sire. We couldn't find three witnesses to her lineage origin."

"And how many could you find?"

"Couldn't," Miresli showed with a gesture. A circle. Zero.

"Relatives? Anyone?" Nergim leaned forward, looking at Simsana.

"Simsana is a complete orphan," Miresli spoke. "And no one from her line is alive, and I couldn't find any relatives, except seemingly one *nishani* in Suungkomnaasa. But she appears to be dead. Simsana was born in the Tobrian settlement of Farmountains, where her parents happened to be passing through. Possibly there's some record of her birth there, but very doubtful, and it's a long journey..."

"I'm sorry. What happened to the parents?"

"Killed by bandits," Miresli said sharply and dramatically.

"I'm sorry. Family Book, parents' bloodline papers?"

"No."

Nergim wrote everything down, it took a long time.

"Good... I need details about the parents' death: when, where, why. And also: who raised Simsana?"

"Are they so necessary?" Miresli asked, glancing at Simsana. She sat with ears lowered, cheek propped on her palm. Looking at the grass. Touching her dress.

"Unfortunately, yes, if you want to advance this matter."

"Her parents, they... they... perished while traveling on a road in Tobrian. Bandits! And there... and there... oh, I can't..." Miresli covered herself with her hand, leaning on the chair. "There was no one to take Simsana, she ended up in an orphanage, and from there she was taken by... oh, I can't..."

Simsana watched her mentor, then abruptly leaned closer, folded her hands on the table, and looked Arad's father in the eyes:

"Sire Nergim, the story is this: my parents—mother Sayana, dad Amon. My mother was Naysagrian, father was Tobrian. They were traders, moved from place to place..."

Miresli watched her from under her fingers, then Nergim, then her, then Nergim again, then sneezed.

"They traveled in a caravan, I was with them, still small," Simsana continued. "I was one year old. Bandits attacked them at night and killed everyone. I survived. Then the Legate picked me up, or guards, I don't know exactly. They took me and my birth certificate. At the bottom, my birth certificate, it had this... dark stain on it. That's my mother's blood—the certificate was taken from her body. Then I was given to..."

"My Vaal, Simsana, I can't listen to this!" Vaalu-Miresli burst into sobs, tears rolled in streams. "My child! Vaal, give me strength!"

"I'm sorry. Vaalu-Miresli, something to drink will be brought now," and Nergim raised his hand high, without turning. "Let Vaalu-Simsana find the strength to continue. Perhaps you'll permit me to address you informally?"

"Yes, sire Nergim..." Simsana held herself and didn't cry, looked only at Arad's father. "I was given to the Almsan orphanage. There my mentor Miresli found me, and she gave me to one most kind hamanu, the wet-nurse Lanri. Then, when I turned seven, my mentor took me, because she sensed *hlamai* toward me, and performed my Entering the Path with me. This means she saw that I could become an Ashai-Ke—"

"Don't trouble yourself, I understand the meaning of the word 'hlamai' and the term 'Entering the Path,'" Nergim said softly. "Let's focus on your origin. In all these years, not a single relative was found?"

"No," Simsana answered.

"Hm... Have you been to the Tobrian settlement where you were born?"

"I was," Miresli answered. "Before the certificate was lost."

"Why?" Nergim asked instantly.

"Wanted to find relatives," Miresli said the obvious, wiping tears, wiping her wet nose, a very pitiful sight, "but it turned out her parents were passing through. Her mother gave birth—and they left, almost immediately after. What a cruel life..." her voice trembled. "You see, sire Nergim, a lioness

shouldn't travel right after delivery, at all, it's very harmful, very, it's suffering..."

"That's sad, Vaalu-Miresli. Bring water, Sedesi," this was to the servant who'd come. "And dilute me some more Khustrian wine. So then: your parents were traveling by caravan in Tobrian, correct?"

"Yes," Simsana answered.

"They were traders?"

"Probably," Simsana moved her ears.

"Why were you traveling with them?"

"I don't know. Moving, probably."

"Moving, most likely, they had various goods with them, nothing fancy. That's what I was told," Miresli inserted, all tear-stained.

"Good. If they were moving, they should have been carrying their Family Book and all their papers. Including their own birth certificates. They're not there?" He looked from one to the other.

"No, there weren't any. Only her certificate. Didn't take them, probably," the mentor answered for Simsana.

"If the caravan was indeed found by the Legate, or—even more so—by guards, they should have found papers when sorting through valuables."

"Forgot, they're just hacks, what do they care about papers," Miresli waved.

"No," Nergim shook his head, "there are circulars, for the Legate and for all guards: preserve papers, give to commanders. Strange that the Almsan orphanage—by the way, a well-known orphanage, under the care of the Approached Ones—didn't try to obtain these papers," he patted his scruff. A difficult matter. Difficult.

Vaalu-Miresli sighed deeply and spread her hands:

"They found her birth certificate. And left it at that."

"Good. Vaalu-Simsana, um... when you turned seven, you also moved here?"

"Around then, seven or eight," the mentor answered for her again.

"Before you, another Ashai-Keetrah lived there..."

"Yes, Vaalu-Yanaya, by age she passed Elevation, decided to move to her daughter's for old age, and recently was burned on the tophet, may Vaal show her Naheim," the last part mentor and disciple said together, their ears drooped.

Nergim's ears did not droop.

"You received the house through the Chamber?" he inquired, businesslike.

Miresli answered hurriedly:

"No, through the sisterhood. They rolled me onto service in Gallen as a Mistress of Life, said there was need here."

"Why is there need?" again, just as businesslike, Nergim inquired.

"There's need for Mistresses of Life everywhere, even in Marna, Kafna. Probably only near Seedna and Sarman are there enough of them."

"Too few midwives?" Nergim seemed amused, but he muted the emotion.

"There are midwives," Vaalu-Miresli narrowed her eyes, "few Mistresses."

"No one to cut the cubs?" Nergim asked, even more amused.

Silence fell.

"We don't cut them," Vaalu-Miresli finally answered.

"And what do you do? How does it happen? Smother them?"

"I cannot speak of this," the Ashai-Keetrah mentor cut off.

"Vaalu-Simsana, perhaps you'll say?"

"Until my Coming of Age and my own births, I'm forbidden to know of this," the Ashai-Keetrah acolyte cut off.

"But you do know," Nergim drew out blissfully, smiling, "I don't see surprise. As Gerod wrote: 'Greeters of life, proclaimers of death. Blood on their hands, blood on their head, blood on their mouth, mistresses of Suung daughters, servants of Vaal, midwives of Ahlia.' Good, let's return to the matter under consideration. So then."

Nergim-Sinai worked at the table and extracted from under the pile of books a folded map of the Empire, quite decent in quality—all sorts exist, after all.

"Good," he unfolded the map across the whole table. "Here's Almsan. So the Almsan orphanage is in it. So near it, well, some twenty to thirty lyens—everything happened. A reasonable assumption."

"I don't know this, sire Nergim. Simsana could have passed from hand to hand, and so I was told at the orphanage. Some hamanu brought her there, I don't remember the name anymore."

"Brought her together with the certificate and the story about the caravan?" Nergim leaned back, taking the stylus in his hands again.

"Yes, but the story was later confirmed by guards as well, something like that. In general, she didn't come alone, there were guards with her. But the lioness at the orphanage who received Simsana couldn't tell guards from Legata warriors."

"Then the reasonableness of the assumption that everything happened near Almsan is pretty solid. Gave the child to the first lioness they found—well, males couldn't handle her—came and handed her to the nearest orphanage. Had it all happened in Andaria, she'd have ended up in a family, that lioness would have taken her. But Tobrian isn't Andaria. Caravan! Listen, a well-known trade route passes there, here it is. Here's Almsan, on the border with Yaamri. Here... And near it, and right through Almsan, runs the Mst-vaash Road. And Almsan is right at a fork: one road continues through Khus-tru to Andaria, the second leads to Marna. Bandits there, and everything like that."

Simsana involuntarily drew closer to the map. She'd grown curious: what, where, and how had happened to her. Arad's father is clever. She should listen.

Nergim twirled the stylus. Thought, poked at the map, traced his finger along it, muttered something unintelligible to himself. Scratched his mane, tugged at its ties, scratched his ear, scratched his cheek, quietly hummed. Bit his lip, the lower, the upper.

Wrote.

"So no relatives were ever found? What about that nishani in Suungkom-naasa?"

Vaalu-Miresli didn't answer immediately. Simsana watched her: why was her mentor silent? She sat. Licked her lips. Looked away. Her gaze wandered; she was thinking. Finally:

"That turned out to be a false trail. I'd already thought... But I didn't want to upset Simsana, told her: 'It seems we've found your great-mother.' And then I understood that it was all wrong. I'm a fool. I'm a very big fool, Nergim. I'm a terrible fool."

"Good," Nergim agreed with everything. "The text was probably never copied from the birth certificate, no copy was made. Although wait," Nergim suddenly raised both palms, "it should have been transcribed at Krimmau-Ammau, where Simsana tried to enroll and didn't."

"Not enroll, but enter. One enters a disciplarium. Sire Nergim, here, I made a copy in my time, even two," Miresli pulled out two large papers, "I transcribed everything and preserved everything, as it was, all meticulously, here, here, here."

"Ohhh," Arad's father was pleased, "that's good, let me have that. By the way, Vaalu-Simsana, why didn't you enro... enter Krimmau-Ammau?"

"I don't know if I may speak of this, sire Arad. Oh, sire Nergim, I beg your pardon," Simsana covered her mouth with her palm, and then—so out of place—burst out laughing.

"You may," the mentor permitted.

"You may," Nergim-Sinai confirmed.

"You may," the mentor added once more, "because there they don't say why they didn't accept. She doesn't know."

"Amusing," Nergim shook his head with a smirk. "So then, the birth certificate."

Writ of Lineage of a Suunga

Simsana, of the Veerd line, daughter of Amon and Sayana, born in the morning of the 20th day of the 2nd Waters Moon, 791 year E.E., in the settlement of Maarsal, lands of the city of Aagrau, Tobria province, attended by the lioness of the wisdom Bahdi, from the settlement of Farmountains:

*born healthy and without known difficulties, named by agreement of the parents;
recognized by the father of his line, recognized by the mother of her blood;
of clear and undisputed origin;
without inborn defects or deformities.*

Lineage by report of parents, by Family Book, confirmed by two witnesses: father Amon, accepted Suung, Tobrian, holding no rank, by occupation—trader, aged 25 years, owning no house; mother Sayana, true Suunga, Naysagrian, holding no rank, by occupation—tradeslioneess, aged 20 years; great-father by father—not declared, great-father by mother—not declared, nishani by father—not declared, nishani by mother—Helza, of the Noroy line, Naysagrian. Conclusion by lineage:

True Suung of the Pride of Naysagri

Determined monetary standing of the line—lower.

Writ of Lineage issued on the 27th day of the 1st Waters Moon, 791 year E.E. Writ of Lineage conforms to the Ancestral Law of the Suung Empire and the Ordinance on Certificates of the Pride of Tobrian. Entry in the Family Book of the Veerd line completed.

In the name of Emperor Tissa-Arrdan the First,

for the future of descendants,

to the Glory of Suungs

the earl of the settlement of Maarsal,

Hoodd-Rrenai, of the Maar line

"Mm-hm. So here's what certificate I'm supposed to issue you, Vaalu-Simsana. Mm-hm. So the Family Book existed but was lost. You were born in Farmountains, by all accounts, but the certificate was given in Maarsal. It happens, it happens," Nergim nodded. "So, Vaalu-Miresli was in Maarsal?"

"I was. And traveled to Farmountains too."

"And?"

"In Farmountains that midwife had died, and in Maarsal," the mentor shrugged, "I don't know. As I told you: the certificate hadn't been lost yet when I went there; I was looking for relatives."

"Well, you should have gone again," Nergim shrugged.

"Very difficult, sire Nergim," Miresli pressed her ears. "It's a long journey."

"Indeed. Understood. But there are details... nuances... they should be clarified, everything should be sorted out, in fairness..."

"Simsan," the mentor touched her disciple, looking at Nergim, "leave us for a moment."

The disciple rose, performed a curtsy to Arad's father, and went to stroll through the garden, at a respectful distance. Vaalu-Miresli patiently waited until she'd gone farther.

"Shall we speak plainly?" the Mistress of Life proposed.

"Go on," Nergim agreed easily.

"Tell me what you want."

Nergim thought, looking at her and tapping the stylus on the table.

"I see it cost you nothing to lay her under my son. And it cost her nothing to lie there."

"Nergim, they're teenagers: they simply met and simply played."

"Don't take me for a fool!" Nergim said angrily and gleefully. "Don't even think it. And don't try your tricks. Don't look at me like that. I won't buy it," and he looked into the garden, lest her gaze play tricks.

"So what do you want?"

"I'd take your whole sisterhood and expose you, in one day. I dream of that day. No matter, it will yet come."

"It will certainly come, Nergim," Vaalu-Miresli agreed completely. "I can arrange for you a disciplara from Krimmau who knows her stuff. You won't regret it, no one's ever complained. You'll expose her properly."

Nergim laughed, but a good ear could catch the strain in the laugh.

"A whore won't give love. Everything's fine with my wife."

"She'll be better than a whore, she'll love you for a day. Believe me. And things with your wife will become even better."

He thought a bit. Glanced at her, then looked into the garden again, the sky, somewhere there, not at her, lest something happen.

"How would you arrange this?"

"I have connections there. Everything will be beautiful, and there'll be no problems, with anyone, even with your wife, even if she finds out."

"Do you have connections there?" he asked skeptically.

"I was a disciplara in Krimmau myself, served the sisterhood as a courtesan, that's how they assigned me."

"What a story!" Nergim grew very animated. "And now you're a Mistress of Life. First a whore, then a midwife. A radical career. Is that how it's done with you?"

"No," Miresli answered calmly, "at twenty I left Krimmau-Ammau for Seedna and began studying the craft of life there."

"How's that, what nonsense. What, you studied at two disciplariums?"

"Yes."

"I thought Simsana had problems with her past, but you, I see, do too. This can't be, it's impossible!" Nergim said confidently. "You think what, I don't know anything about Ashai?"

"I'm a rare exception. It happened that way."

"A lie, it can't be," he fell into irritation. Pointed at her: "You won't fool me."

"No, I'm not lying. Here, look, this is the Stamp and sirna, they're Krim-mau ones. Here's the amulet, it's from Seedna. If you know how, you can perform the Ceremony of Recognition," she tossed everything onto the table.

"Fine, fine, don't throw your trinkets here. Well, and when will you provide everything to me?"

Miresli did just that—took everything back.

"A couple of moons at least. Half a year."

"That's ridiculous. Half a year to wait for a whore."

"Well, let's negotiate with money then."

"I have enough," Nergim lied.

"Let's do money, and you can choke me. Want to fuck me like a bitch? You know, rut-fuck. You hate me, perfect, you'll like it. What could be better than raping the enemy's daughter."

"What kind of daughter are you, more like a grandmother. You're old," he said uncertainly.

"Oh, come now, undress me—you'll see."

Nergim thought. Laughed.

"Like I said—whores will be whores."

"Okay," Miresli wasn't offended. "You'll also have two Mistresses of Life here, in Gallen, forever in your debt. You won't appreciate this, but the linesses of your family will find it useful."

"Listen, wouldn't it be simpler to go there, to Maarsal, and find the record in the certificate registry?"

"That's far, I can't, Nergim. Pray, please. I'm asking you very much. Do this, I'll be forever in your debt."

"You can do anything. You just don't want to. Simpler, as they say, to lift the tail than do the work. Females!" he laughed.

"Oh, come now, Nergim. You hate us, I understand, that's your station, and you're too smart. Let's just settle everything already, come on."

Simsana was touching a tree branch, didn't hold it, and it whipped her across the muzzle.

"She's a good child. Truly. Help her, Nergim, I'm asking very much. She's your son's femfriend," Miresli pleaded.

"Listen..." Nergim grew thoughtful, and for the first time looked attentively at Miresli, then at Simsana. "You—that's one thing. But her... What about her?"

"What about her?" Miresli waved her hand, not understanding.

"About her. You taught her to give herself to males, it seems."

Miresli's gaze grew cold; Nergim found himself amid snows and the north.

"Where are you leading?" she asked with menace.

"To the fact that she's... debauched!" Nergim fell into furious panic, but spoke quietly. "That's how you raised her!" then stood, slammed the chair against the ground, sat back down. "She's no femfriend of his. She must never come near him! Nor you. Never."

"Good. No problem," Miresli said in an ordinary voice. "Neither I nor she will approach your sons, won't speak first, there'll be nothing, absolutely nothing. A wall. No problem."

"At least something sensible from this whole conversation," Nergim snorted, wiping his nose. He sighed nervously.

Calmed down.

"Good. Let's clarify a few tiny details. And then we'll see how we settle things. But I need to speak with her, alone."

"What do you want to say to her?" Ice again in Miresli's voice.

"I'll be asking about the past," Nergim tapped on the table.

"Why? We've already told everything."

"Listen, I'll need to fill out papers, I'm making you a new certificate after all. I'll need to invent three witnesses for you, yes. Or even do everything without them, but that requires very weighty reasons, a ton of paperwork. I must speak with her, that's essential."

"And if I simply sit beside and don't interfere? I'll be silent. Hmm? She'll tell me everything afterward anyway."

"Agreed."

Nergim waved to Simsana:

"Vaalu-Simsana! May I have your attention?"

She left the cherry branch in peace and sat down again; she'd thought something up, for she was smiling slightly, and generally appeared to be in good spirits outwardly.

"Would you like to eat, drink?" Nergim asked her softly. Miresli narrowed her eyes slightly, stroked her wrist.

"I drank some water, sire Nergim. Thank you."

"Perhaps there's something you didn't tell? Were too shy to tell?"

"I have nothing to add. I don't think my life with the nurse, and then with my mentor, is of interest here."

Nergim nodded, yes-yes, yes-yes.

"Do you remember anything? Mother, father? The orphanage?"

"I think I remember the orphanage a little. I remember that it was scary, lonely, and everything was gray."

"Oh, so? What exactly was gray?"

"Everything."

"Why did your mentor take you from the orphanage?" Nergim asked with great interest. "She has her own children, don't she?"

Simsana shrugged and looked at Miresli, and she at her.

"Probably because she's kind."

"She couldn't have known then that you'd become an Ashai. Vaalu-Miresli?"

"No. No, I couldn't have," she answered, continuing to look at her disciple. "I saw her and took her," Miresli spread her hands, and then seemed to surrender, turned away and clutched her palms to her eyes, as if in great grief, trying to hold everything inside.

Simsana sighed deeply, convulsively, moved her chair to her and embraced her.

"Where there are lionesses, there are emotions," Nergim laughed, and began reviewing his notes, very attentively, underlining something, adding something. "And you never saw any relatives?" he asked very suddenly, in the process.

Simsana shook her head negatively.

"Let your mentor... well... give her... well... move closer to me. Like that. More. Put your chair right here, right beside me... Can you roll up your sleeves and show your arms? The higher the better," Nergim requested.

Sitting before him, Simsana rolled up her left sleeve all the way to the shoulder; Nergim very carefully held her palm, turned it. Left it in peace.

"Why?" she asked, lowering her sleeve.

"Looking at your coloring, fur," he said with a smile.

"I think I got the gray from dad."

"Yes-yes, good. Our circumstances don't allow me to examine, but you're slender?" Nergim asked quietly.

"Yes," Simsana answered almost in a whisper.

"Long legs?" Nergim smiled.

"Yes," Simsana hesitated slightly.

"Are there stripes at the base of the tail, those, you know, little black ones, crosswise?"

"No," Simsana was surprised.

"Spots?" Nergim smiled.

"In cubhood. Not anymore," Simsana thought.

"A black stripe runs down the back?"

"Yes, there is."

"Do you get cold, sleep under a thick blanket?" he asked in an ordinary voice, rummaging among the books on the table. "Where is it, where's that..."

"Yes," Simsana answered even with amusement, looking at her mentor, whose weakness feelings had ended, and she was wiping herself with the ordinary white cloth that Mistresses of Life carry everywhere and always. "In the masterina, in this dress, right now—my mentor is hot, but I'm fine. I'm a coldy one, sire Nergim. And why does the sire ask such questions?"

"Just so," he nodded his head like a toy. "Asked, just asked," he winked at her. "Go back to your mentor, she'll be bored without you."

Simsana took her chair and with some effort returned it back, beside her mentor.

"What can you tell me about your relationship with Arad?" Nergim asked, writing, in a very official tone.

"It exists," Simsana shrank a little, growing wary. She didn't answer immediately.

"Do you know what the Doctrine of Enlightened Freedom is?" He didn't look at her, wrote.

"Sort of, yes," she looked at her mentor.

Mentor was looking at Nergim, without emotion, detached.

"Did you know that because of this you're not approved to enter a relationship with my son? Did your mentor tell you this?"

It was quiet, calm, silence; Gallen wasn't noisy, and even the birds sang softly.

"Yes," Simsana smoothed her ears, looking down.

"Moreover, he'll be a judge. Meaning he'll also take the Doctrine. And you knew all this. As always, females think only of themselves: about how to get a certificate, money, attention, or some new dress. Solipsism... Solipsism, my dear. And with you, Ashai-Keetra, it's squared. Even cubed."

Simsana shrugged. Solipsism. What solipsism. What squares.

"He's a lion, he decided what he wanted," she suddenly said.

"What?" Nergim was very surprised.

"He's a lion. He decided so. Wanted to be with me—and was."

"So everything is his fault?"

"He's not at fault for anything," she said decisively.

"Of course, my dear. What could be simpler than luring a youth his age with a flick of the tail."

"And I love him," she said even more decisively, even angrily.

But Nergim didn't appreciate it. He laughed.

"Oh, fine... That's how it goes. Times and customs! Wait, I'll return."

And he left, in a good mood, toward the house.

"What's he doing?" Simsana narrowed her eyes, watching him go.

"Driving up the price," Vaalu-Miresli was doing the same.

Merciful clouds finally covered the capricious, intrusive warmth of the Waters Moon sun.

"Mentor, we need to leave," Simsana said, very significantly, doomed. "I don't like him."

"No need," Miresli answered decisively, confident as a victory banner. "We'll press through. Let him have his mockery, he's wanted it his whole life."

Simsana exhaled contemptuously, snorted, baring teeth.

"And he's not Arad's father."

"When did you manage to develop empathy?" Miresli was cheerfully surprised; her whole muzzle animated and eyebrows raised, she looked at the table; such a significant fact, such a terrible accusation, seemed to have no effect on her at all, and only the gift of her disciple's spirit, bursting forth like a dawn ray, proved interesting.

"I just understood now," Simsana waved it off indifferently, muting, discarding the topic, not even interested.

"Don't you dare tell Arad this," Miresli busied herself, carefully and cautiously rummaging at Nergim's table, trying to find something there. "Or him. Understood? This is forbidden, understood? Never, you must die with this. It's forbidden by the Codex and aamsuna."

"Yes, mentor. Die," Simsana mercilessly strangled herself with a gesture.

"Splendid. Be good. Endure."

They were silent. Simsana laughed for some reason. And after her—Miresli.

"So, mentor, did I understand correctly?"

"Now, enough mischief!" Miresli slapped her knee and proprietarily corrected Simsana's posture, forbidding her to slouch. "If you don't like sire Nergim, that doesn't mean you should go canceling his fatherhood here. Quiet," her ears pricked up, "there he is, coming out. You understood nothing! And if you understood, you forgot. But you didn't understand. Right, enough, enough. Now... If we don't persuade him, then so be it, what can you do," her voice kept growing quieter and quieter. "We'll look for other paths. He's staged a comedy here, life bores him."

Sire Nergim didn't return empty-handed. He brought more books (four more, as if there weren't enough), and also a very strange contraption, in which Simsana distantly recognized calipers, only very large, and with some very curved, arc-shaped legs. The same kind—she remembered—she'd seen in Krimmau-Ammau; some sister had measured her with one, and she remembered that for some reason it tickled.

"Well," he fussed, arranging the books on the table, "a bit more and we'll settle our matter. A bit more. We'll consider everything fairly... honestly... and finish..." he was sitting down. "Vaalusimsana, may I ask you again, come here, please."

She did so and stood before him, straight, as proper; he also stood and very carefully measured the width of her nose bridge.

"Sire Nergim, why measure her?"

"Vaalusimsana," Arad's father answered, almost apologetically, trying to manage the slipping instrument, "I'll need to record something in the file after all. There are no witnesses."

"She's obviously not a pure Naysagrian, that's self-evident."

"Sure..." Now came the width of the nose, the height, the chin. "So, so, let's... write this down... axially. Aha."

"They tickled me with one of these things in Krimmau," Simsana joked.

"What did they say?"

"Nothing really," she shrugged, looking up. Then at her mentor.

Now came the turn of the width between the ears, then between the temples, more, and more. Nergim-Sinai measured everything and wrote everything down, then sat to calculate something, gesturing for Simsana to sit.

"Twenty-three divided by eighteen. Eheheh," he scratched his head.

"About one and a third, sire Nergim."

"Something like that," he agreed. "But more precisely... Fine," he looked at both of them very cheerfully. "Simsana, one more question, and we'll finish with the questioning for today, move on to deciding the matter."

"Very well, sire Nergim," Simsana agreed.

Vaalu-Miresli had been watching him for the last several moments, and suddenly her muzzle contorted with either a grimace of pain or disgust. She stood and stepped back a couple of paces, holding her fingers to her temples. Simsana looked but wasn't surprised—her mentor sometimes had headaches.

"Is your tail like a swallow's? The tip split in two?"

"Don't tell him!" Vaalu-Miresli turned sharply, pointing at him.

"Don't tell what?" Simsana was frightened.

"Don't speak to him!"

"Can you show me the tip of your tail?" Nergim paid no attention.

"Ah..." Simsana was utterly lost.

"But that's indecent!" Miresli returned to her place, her accusing clawed finger pointing at Nergim. "What are you asking her? What is this?"

"Just the tip of the tail, purely for the record, nothing more, leonine-metric data," Arad's father raised his hands, but his expression shone very satisfied.

"The conversation is over, we're leaving," Miresli stood again, taking Simsana by the hand like a very small cub.

"Vaalu-Miresli," he said insinuatingly, slowly. "No need to leave. You know that. Let her show her tail. Otherwise it won't be me looking."

"What's happening?!" Simsana demanded.

Long silence.

"Sire Nergim, you see, has very weird requests—to show one's tail. This, you know, is very indecent treatment," Miresli said to her. But didn't leave.

"So will you show it?" Nergim asked.

"No," Simsana refused.

"Does the tip split? Just say it. Don't show. Why be shy about yourself? Are you ashamed that it's such a beautiful shape?"

"No."

"So it splits?"

"Yes."

And suddenly, brazenly, sharply, she demonstrated it to him, pulling her tail from under her hem, turning sideways.

"And I was never ashamed. I was born with it."

"Tiamat..." Miresli said, doomed.

"Thank you, Vaalu-Simsana. There we have it."

Nergim began quickly searching for something in some thick book. Simsana looked at her mentor—she looked truly lost, probably for the first time in her life.

"Here," Nergim began turning the book, but Miresli didn't let him—quickly slapped it flat to the table.

"I implore you, don't do this. I beg you. Why are you doing this? Why?"

"Because Ancestral Law. And the Rainbow of Blood."

"I'm begging you. Don't do this," Miresli pleaded.

"What? What's there?" Simsana tried to see what was in the book.

"I'm asking you very much. I'll give you everything," Miresli pleaded.

"I don't take bribes," Nergim answered viciously, magnificently. "And you didn't want to give everything anyway."

Miresli held the book.

"Maematians," Arad's father began, looking at Simsana. "You're a Maematian. You, Simsana, were born not from Suungs, but from dhaars of Lower Mstvaash—Maematians. You're not a Suunga. You're a dhaari."

He waited. Let her think.

"It can't be," Simsana responded. "I have ignimara after all. Only Suungs can burn ignimara."

"The argument of spiritual gift won't pass. Apparently not. You know, in the Codex it's written: every Ashai-Keetrah can and must burn ignimara. But it doesn't follow that everyone who can burn ignimara is an Ashai-Keetrah. Or a Suunga. That's logic. You were traveling in a caravan on a route full of Maematian traders, they travel from Mstvaash. Bandits attacked it, and why? Because they travel at night, since they don't sleep at inns—expensive, and dhaars aren't allowed everywhere. Your lost certificate was forged, oh, don't worry, it's very common, forged certificates; the forger had poor imagination for the family name. Veerd. You have to think this up, ancient language: 'fate.' You're a Maemata, Simsana, and by... excuse me," Nergim pulled the book from under Miresli's limp hand, "by all the leonine-metrics taken from you, you belong to them ideally."

He showed her. On the left page—a typical Maematian female drawn. On the right page—a Maematian-dhaari, dancing with a tambourine. It's their favorite instrument. There, about the split tip—right here. All small Maematian females right after birth go through this—they cut the tip of their tail in two and don't let it heal together. It's prettier, they think. They call it—swallow's tail.

"So here's how things are with us, Simsana. Today you learned something about yourself. It's useful, actually, to learn something about yourself," he suddenly quickly took the copy of the certificate and hid it among his papers.

"You're not a Suunga, well, it's nothing, you're not an Ashai-Keetrah, well, that's also nothing. Look at things from another side: you can accept yourself as you are, by blood, you speak our language well and know all our customs. It won't be hard for you to marry and become an accepted Suunga. Well then."

Miresli was already standing directly behind Nergim. Simsana looked from him to her; she saw that Miresli held her hand at her right side, and now, a moment later—was already raising it.

This isn't the way out, this isn't the way out, this is death, this can't be done, this is senseless, no, no, Arad, no!

"No, no, don't, what about Arad, no!" Simsana threw herself at Nergim, looking at her mentor—she was baring her fangs; her mentor had already raised the sirna, pure fury, not thinking of anything except revenge.

"Oh, oh, emotions, all these tricks," Nergim laughed blissfully, pushing her off. "Let's stop the hugging, little dhaari, let's stop, stop. Come on, come on, sit back down on your little tail. Come on, get off my neck, this doesn't work on me, all these streaming tears. Let's better think about what to do with this whole dirty story. Vaalu-Miresli? Where's the lioness, back there," he turned. "The lioness will sit back down, why these dramatic sketches? Please sit. Let's think."

Simsana returned and sat; with the sirna in her sleeve, Miresli also returned. Without words she stood behind her acolyte and placed her palms on her shoulders, discreetly returning the sirna to its sheath.

"Today I'll break the law and act impurely. About this case I'm supposed to report to the Chamber of Ashai-Keetrah Affairs and Defence of the Faith, also report to the sisterhood of Gallen, and to the prosecutor—as well. Right, all that routine, you understand. But you evoke true pity in me. And I won't do this, and I'll forget about your dirty story, do what you want—but with one condition. Never. And nowhere. You no longer approach. My sons. Yes, and the copy of the false certificate will stay with me, just in case you decide to break the agreement. And also, free advice—don't try to bribe an Imperial judge. Or to outsmart one."

Simsana touched her mentor's hand.

"What a pity. To make a dhaari into an Ashai-Keetrah," Nergim remarked.

"She's a Suunga. Because she can burn ignimara," Miresli responded calmly, very ordinarily.

"In your made-up world. And even if she can—that's not a legal argument."

"In the Codex..." Miresli began.

"In the Codex it doesn't say," Nergim interrupted, "that everyone who burns ignimara is an Ashai-Keetrah. It says the opposite: every Ashai-Keetrah burns ignimara. That's not the same thing, logic. Alas, the Codex has the force of Imperial law. For now. But even it isn't on your side."

"I'll never agree to this," Simsana said.

"Agree to what, exactly?" Nergim smirked, as if he'd been waiting for this phrase.

"If Arad approaches me, I'll embrace him. I'll stop being Ashai not when the sire decides, but when... I tell him... don't tell him..." she couldn't finish. But she wasn't crying. No.

"Oh. Is that so. Then imagine what will happen to you. Even better, imagine what will happen to your mentor, if it's learned she slipped a dhaari into the Ashai-Keetrah. Disvestment, or even Exile. Your choice, either way you're both—midwives. And Arad doesn't need you, he has others, he has right now, you know... there's a maassi with whom, perhaps, a lineage alliance will come about. Well, you don't need this. Here I'm making a noble offer, and you're being a swine," he said sharply. "Think not about yourself, selfish one. Think about her," he pointed at Miresli. "So, you still want to go through with this?"

Simsana didn't answer.

"And your mentor? Also a good one. After all, it's not allowed to seduce underage Suungs with dhaars, it's not allowed, not by Ancestral Law, not by Rainbow of Blood, no Games, no those things... this and that. Now my son is an unwitting criminal, thank you both."

He slapped the edge of his journal against the table.

"So, if I see you near my sons—I'll immediately remember your mess, where needed and when needed. Please don't disturb me outside of service, ever. That's all, the stern court of the Imperial Chamber of Justice of Gallen at its field session has decided to be, heh, merciful and decreed no approaching, no disturbing, no beguiling, and not this, and not all of that... All are free, have a pleasant day. For so the Suungs will it!"

Paw

Terrace of the Karizian-Roust house, back courtyard.

Arad and Lenayna had been allowed to escape here, to this small lonely island, and delicately enough, for half an hour now no one had disturbed them.

"It's the Waters Season," Lenayna was saying, yawning and covering herself with her palm. "It's still fine now, but it'll get colder toward evening. And there'll be rain, your mother-dear said so. Heavy, she said," she smoothed her khinastra, shivered, though it was still quite warm. "Heavy one."

Arad smiled to himself—Naysagrians always call the husband's mother 'mother-dear.' He entertained himself by sitting across from her, touching her claws down below with his paw: now her claws, now the bottom of her hem. Lenayna pretended not to notice.

"Didn't sleep well?"

Arad wanted to sit her on his lap, to do many interesting things with her in general, but the event and the whole family nearby, alas, made this difficult.

"Was balancing until midnight, wouldn't come together."

"Balancing? The money totals, yes?"

"Yes."

"But they came together, right?"

"They did."

"It couldn't have been otherwise with you. Will you give me an accounting lesson sometime?"

"I will, if you want. Does this actually interest you?"

"Money is always interesting, firstly. But mainly: you'll be sitting on me, and your left hand will be like this, on the abacus," he showed how it would be, "and the other will be holding the stylus, and you'll be trying not to get distracted, and desperately trying to write numbers, while I..."

"Stop it," Lenayna quietly hissed at him, looked around, fearing other ears; and yawned again, and didn't forget to cover herself with her palm, then licked her lips, and Arad liked that very much; his intent gaze embarrassed her, and she smiled, then decided to chatter, to weave a web of conversation, to lead away, so he wouldn't suddenly decide to make advances right here. "Are you nervous?"

"Why?"

"I don't know. That judge will probably be evaluating you: whether you're fit for Marna University, whether to put in a word for you, or not."

"I'm fit like no one in the Empire, everything will go perfectly."

She didn't answer, only looked pensively into the garden.

Everyone was waiting for that very important guest, without whom no one can ever begin anything. Lenayna's father, inside the house, was telling some incredible tales to Arad's brothers, and they liked them. Mother and father weren't there—they were waiting at the entrance, looking out. Literally. This was important.

"If you're fit like no one in the Empire, then why do you need his help?" her ears pricked up, Lenayna was being curious.

"The idea of help is father's. Mother's idea was the letter, which you delivered, for which I'll thank you more than once," he managed to catch her palm, she tried to take it back, but halfheartedly. "And not twice. And not three times. And not four," he bent her fingers, while she looked warily at the terrace door, to forestall someone's untimely arrival. "And not five. But as for me: a big judicial official will simply come to visit, try the Gallen-style piglet. Suungs are merit-based, my Vaal, only we know meritocracy, it's only with barbarians who knows what. So I'll enter Marna University anyway, because I'm the best."

"Ancestors, what a braggart you are." Lenayna giggled, her voice thinner than usual. "Such self-confidence." She looked at him, and giggled again, as if she'd become embarrassed.

"I'm strong, smart, attractive. And all this I discovered myself."

"Arad..." she rolled her eyes.

"And self-confidence takes resolve."

She wore that dress from their first meeting. Instead of the gray khinastra she'd given Arad, another one—even larger, with even more draping; you could probably put a cub to sleep in it, Arad thought, and remembered—so appropriately, and so inappropriately—about Simsana. Red fire. Vaal. Suungs. In her katena he saw red and black-gold cords; noted that he absolutely must ask about the meaning of such a katena, but later, later, he'd choose the time.

"What are your intentions regarding Marna? What's the plan?" she asked, tilting her head slightly.

"Go, study, enter justice, then become a judge—after thirty."

"The plan seems to lack details."

"Details will come along the way. Whatever I do, I'll do well."

"Hm," Lenayna snorted, and it was hard to say whether she approved or maintained skeptical neutrality.

"Look. I'm going there anyway," Arad narrowed one eye, "in seven moons, because Marna has the best university in the Suung Empire, which means—in the whole world. If everything works out between us by then,

we'll use your grandmother's connections and settle in somewhere. Maybe even on our own right away. I'll study, grow myself a claw, and Marna will be mad about an accountant like you. Becoming a judge makes sense, I'm ready. I'll give everything order and direction."

"It seems you've thought this through much further than I thought. So in these plans, I'm even going to Marna with you."

"Only so, if it works out between us in these moons. And it will all work out—that's the most trivial part of the plan."

This was impossible to dispute. Every word Arad carved in stone; Lenayna couldn't wash any of it away; she just froze with her hand raised and mouth half-open.

"Well, so you don't think everything's so simple," Lenayna said, moving her shoulders, and somewhere below her tail was beating, "my paw today is perfectly healthy. And nothing threatens it today."

"Such self-confidence," Arad couldn't help but smile with male superiority.

"Even if the impossible happens, and I don't think so," she spoke haughtily, then suddenly her voice rolled downward, "because this isn't the event, not the occasion, Arad, I can't stay the night today," she shifted to hurried, explanatory whisper, "my mother will kill me, your mother will kill me, and then my father, and then your father. First serious meeting of the lines, this official is coming, all the stuff, and me at the end—making a comedy with my paw? I'll burn from shame, Arad."

I didn't even say a word about it, he wanted to say, but an inner sense—where were you sleeping all these fifteen-sixteen years?—didn't let him.

"First they'll have to kill me, and that's harder."

"Why you?" her ears pricked in incomprehension (feigned or genuine—impossible to tell anymore).

"If I'm alive and with you, you're invulnerable. No strikes to fear, nor arrows, nor evil rumors, nor misfortunes, nor stupid decisions, nor poverty, nor wealth, nor dogs, wolves, firrans, nor barbarians and dhaars, nor..."

The impressive list was interrupted by the servant Sedesi:

"The important lion has arrived, master. Arrived!" she hurried in, then just as hurriedly ran out.

The cozy veranda for two had to be abandoned (pity), and they went into the dining room, or atrium, as father always very much insisted (what kind of atrium is this, Arad always laughed mentally); Arad, incidentally, had witnessed yesterday's furious argument between father and mother: how should they do dinner—high-style, affecting patricians, reclining, or middle-style—at a table? Papa held to the first option, because the notable, if not a patrician, which was unlikely, was their equal in dignity. Mother convinced father that they would look like provincial simpletons, and the receiving side should always maintain its own dignity of line, not trying to jump higher—

this is very much disapproved by etiquette, she knows, she's a fansinall li-
oness, don't forget. Mother won, as always. And she was right, actually. As
always.

It was supposed that the notable would sit at the head of the table—the
most honorable place for a guest that could possibly be devised. Beside it
was a place for his assistant, they'd heard about him, prepared for him. Then
Arad, then Lenayna (!), then Lenayna's father and mother. On the other side
—Arad's father, Arad's mother, Arad's brothers.

But suppositions and plans were destroyed when mother entered the atri-
um looking shattered, and after her—a bewildered father, with a stupid
smile. On mother's arm hung a large, whitest towel with a large, careless
bloody stripe diagonal—a tradition for greeting an important guest among
true Suungs of the Middle Empire, as they're called, like Andarians,
Naysagrians, Ashnarians.

Sire Miran snorted with a knowing smirk, and in the surrounding wariness
this proved noticeable, audible. He received an elbow to the ribs from his
wife.

"It didn't work out, he couldn't, has to go," father Nergim kept repeating.
"Very busy."

"He said he'd come to visit, and here—do good Suungs see—urgent mat-
ters," in Aevsuga's voice anger was strangling itself, Arad sensed this.
"Didn't even come through the gate," she slowly sat in her place and looked
at hamanu Mirna, "didn't come in!"

"Nai, nai," hamanu Mirna sympathized with Arad's mama. "How could
this be."

Nergim approached Arad, held onto his chair and kept saying:

"We talked. We talked. He wrote you down, he wrote, wrote—Arad, of
Karizian-Roust," this was meant for Arad, and meanwhile the chair endured
blows to its back, "consider yourself already enrolled, everything went per-
fectly."

Arad's mother quickly folded the towel on her lap and slapped it:

"This is an insult."

"Stop it!" Nergim bared his teeth at his foolish wife. "He was busy!"

"Did he wipe his hands?" sire Miran inquired.

"No."

"Bring it here, hamanu Aevsuga, we'll do it all for him."

The guest is supposed to wipe his hands on the bloody towel. Tradition.

Arad's mother approached Lenayna's father, and he looked at her and
made some interesting muzzles at her:

"We all wait for a miracle, and it—rode away, didn't even come in," he
wiped his hands.

"Yes," she agreed animatedly.

Arad's father was convincing his son and himself in his ear that everything went excellently. He was written down. To be in justice, and be a judge. Lenayna had preemptively moved away; and, as it goes—when they were sitting down, Arad was at it again—started touching her.

"So, why waste the seat?" sire Miran pointed at the honorable place for the honorable guest, at the head of the table. "If no one objects, I'll enthrone myself there. Sire Nergim? What do you want, what's with you?" this he said to his wife, who was pestering him with some reasons and explanations.

Arad watched her, hamanu Mirna. She's just like Lenayna. He moved her back, together with the chair, having copied this manner from Lenayna's father. She looked at him reproachfully, half-rose, quietly noted:

"You'll break the chair."

First to respond to the announcement of the new important guest was Arad's mother, still standing near him with the towel:

"Of course, sire Miran, please. If that's how it is, then now the sire is the most honorable guest."

Arad's dad, sitting in his place and looking straight ahead:

"Yes-yes, makes sense, yes-yes."

"First and only," sire Miran seated himself contentedly in the new place, and with a gesture commanded hamanu Mirna to move closer.

"Why only?" Arad inquired, politely pointing at hamanu Mirna (not with a finger, but with his palm, back upward).

"Well, I don't have a son," Miran looked at him.

"There's something better, there's daughters," Arad touched Lenayna on the forearm, the sleeve, the bracelet, visually showing sire Miran who he (and now he too) had.

He waved it off.

"Better for him... Daughters, wives, mothers. Where there's a lion, there are his lionesses. Right, Arad?" he asked, and didn't wait for an answer. "So? Shall we... sentence the piglet? Less for the capital folk, more for us!" he laughed.

"It's ready now. Ready now," Aevsuga grew animated and left for the kitchen—to check how things were with the servants: one of their own and two taken on as help.

Arad's father spread his hands as if summing up:

"That's how it turned out. It happens. But it's nothing, Arad," he said to him for the tenth time, "everything's settled with you."

Having scrutinized the pitcher, Lenayna poured Arad some wine-juice.

"That's certain, sire Nergim, everything happens in life. He didn't want to come to us, nothing to be upset about. Now we'll feast, drink, talk—and all's well," sire Miran was saying, as if agreeing with himself.

"To turn around at the threshold—that's very-very odd, sire Miran," Aevsuga couldn't calm down, just now entering back into the dining room.

"Cease it!" Nergim suddenly bared his teeth at her.

"Was he supposed to stay with you?" sire Miran inquired.

Aevsuga sat down with a sigh:

"No. He went to the reverend Vaalu-Sizae, who graciously agreed to give him some shelter."

"How do you know this?" Arad's father said, as if defending the notable.

"I heard it while you were being gracious with him," Aevsuga touched her ear.

"So he's not in the Doctrine," Arad's father concluded sorrowfully.

"V-Sizae? Ahhh, clear," Miran waved his hand, and even hamanu Mirna smirked knowingly at something. "Where's our little piglet?"

Arad looked at Lenayna to understand what was so clear; she answered with a slightly embarrassed smile, shrugged. The servants brought the piglet, Lenayna grew lively, distracted, and helped them make room on the table.

"I'm afraid that this... this plan about Marna might go tit... go wr... not come to, you know, fruition," Miran suddenly said, taking his fork.

"Why?" Aevsuga asked with suspicion.

Arad saw how sire Miran sighed, rubbed his nose, as if he'd been asked some childish question that could be answered in one word or could fill all the paper in the world.

"He didn't go there just like that."

But no one understood anything, and Miran continued:

"If this big, important judicial official suddenly lets something slip about Arad there, or something like that, then V-Sizae will talk him into not accepting Arad in Marna."

"Why? What for?" Aevsuga asked now with fear, having tensed.

"Out of spite," Miran was cutting himself some piglet, with Lenayna's help. "She hates judges in the Doctrine. For example, the honor of Suungs, sire Nergim."

"Whoa, really?" Aevsuga dimmed, even her ears pressed back slightly.

"Ashai-Keetrah again," Arad's father clenched his fist on the table. "Trouble from them again."

"Why did he go to this Ashai, why not to an honorable guesthouse, the Magistrate has one, doesn't it?" Aevsuga looked at her husband uncomprehendingly.

"What do you mean why," sire Miran was chewing monstrously, truly like a firran. "It's known why. Here we have a family gathering, and he'd, so to speak... be bored at it. But there... Arad, cover Lenayna's ears."

Arad did so.

"There's an orgy."

"Miran, stop it, this isn't necessary!" Mirna pleaded with him.

He shrugged.

"Orgy in what sense?" Arad's father asked with difficulty.

"They'll be sniffing a cup with arra, opium, and then, Vaal forgive, further down the list. Yeah. V-Sizae knows her way around parties, that's what she lives off."

"It can't be, he's a notable, came on duty, traveling on to Moor, inspection of Chambers of Justice... You misheard something," Nergim waved at his wife. Then suddenly grew thoughtful: "So that's how it is. Where there are Ashai, there's trouble and baseness. An orgy. It can't be..."

"V-Sizae, yeah, she's fit for one thing. But there are good ones too. Actually, sire Nergim, why suffer from this Doctrine? In such a backwater as ours, the sire will have no end of problems because of this thing, small and large. The stupidest troubles, in unexpected places."

That's true, thought Arad.

"One doesn't simply abandon convictions just because there'll be some, you see, 'problems,'" Arad's father cut off.

Sire Miran sniffed and grunted.

"I'm a practical lion. It's easier to be friends with Ashai than enemies. And Suungs are Vaal anyway, how can you separate a Suung from Vaal, I don't get it."

"That's not true."

"How is it not true, sire Nergim? Vaal is in us, we are in Him. Everyone knows from cubhood. The flame on the sisters' hands isn't just for nothing," he winked at Arad, who smirked and pensively took a drink.

"It can and must be separated," Arad's father persisted. "Cut away the superstitions."

Sire Miran twirled his fork.

"Sure," he said sardonically. "But it's more fun to live with all this. Here, Arad will tell you," Miran pointed at him, "he made friends with that little Mistress, right?"

"Miran!" hamanu Mirna was horrified.

"What, all of Gallen knows about it. Leni, Leni, don't pout, he's a lion, he's got to walk around, well, you know... Those two are very good, V-Miresli and her little Ashai, small one, slender, I caught her by the nose once, and..."

"She's forbidden to approach him!" father pointed at Arad. "He's a judge's son in the Doctrine!"

Arad noticed that dad was truly angry, with some powerless, lonely rage. He looked straight ahead. Smirked.

"Yeah?" sire Miran scratched his mane. "Actually forbidden? Seriously?" he spread his hands and added importantly: "They come into the house, and lionesses immediately—bam!—give birth, right into a bucket. And on the second day they're ready to make cubs again, eh? Tell me, Mirni, isn't that the talk?"

"Vaal, what bucket, Miran, what are you saying, I asked you, I knew it..." it seemed hamanu Mirna would melt into her chair from shame.

"Well, like from a bucket, like from a bucket, come on, don't be angry."

"Forbidden! I forbade them, forbidden, seriously! And they, sire Miran," Arad's father was growing heated, "aren't as ideal as they might seem. They have, have their own dirty secrets!"

"Everyone has those," Miran waved his fork dismissively and began cutting the piglet's ear.

Arad was pierced.

"Father, you've already met with them?" he asked, turning, seeking his father's gaze.

"Yes, but this isn't the conversation, later," Nergim waved him off.

Arad didn't like that father was waving him off like that. And anyway, he wanted to know everything now. And anyway.

"And how did it go? What about that matter?"

"Later!" Nergim roared, and everyone fell silent. "You won't like it if I tell everything here. No one will like it! Understood?!"

"Let's change the subject," Aevsuga desperately suggested after the uncomfortable silence.

Lenayna glanced at Arad, furtively. He was looking straight ahead, hint of a snarl, clenched teeth. He looked at her, smiled at her, showing no weakness, betraying no secrets; but she answered with seriousness, smoothed her palm, settled more comfortably, sighed. They sat there beside each other, looking straight, at nothing.

And still, thought Arad, looking at the whiteness of the ceiling, I did what I could. Now the only thing left: don't let her approach me, don't let her touch me, don't smooth her, don't embrace, don't kiss, nothing, nothing. Red fire of Vaal. Forget.

He exhaled. Around him someone was saying something.

Was it all for nothing, did he not help them? My Vaal, what futility. Simsana told me, idiot that I am, don't go to father with this. Don't listen to Miresli. Or did father help them?"

Lenayna was watching him, no longer very furtively, desperately twisting the ring on her finger. Arad looked at this outpouring of worry and suddenly placed his hand on it; everything stopped. He went around her palm from below, squeezed it, looked into her eyes. She hesitated a little. And then placed her second palm on top, on his, catching him in the soft captivity of her hands.

"What happened?" she quietly asked a complicated question.

"You happened, Leni."

It wasn't that she didn't believe it. This passed the test of truthfulness—there was no lie. It even passed the test of feeling—a female knows when

she's close to a male. He understood that she understood that this was only one of the answers. A very beautiful gag.

Sedesi hurriedly, and somehow sideways, approached Arad's mother—not in her manner, she was an old servant, had earned her worth. Mother leaned strongly toward her, twisted around, her hand long and dangerously holding Sedesi by the shoulder while she said something in her ear. Threat coiled in the air—Arad sensed it; it seemed only he alone; and actually, it seemed to have spilled across this whole day, he sensed. He saw the change in mother, this mixture of incomprehension and suspicion, and at the end of it all mother gave him a look worth a thousand words—and he understood everything. Arad didn't know how—but he understood.

Aevsuga stood, very tenderly apologized and said she'd step away for just a moment, then went out to the corridor and led Sedesi with her; there she began an inaudible conversation with her.

Arad looked at Lenayna.

"Did something happen?" She read him well after all; wasn't that good?

"Leni, come with me," he said to her quietly.

And he also stood, excused himself (father didn't even notice—still arguing with sire Miran, this time about Gallen's Magistrate), and went to mother and Sedesi. Stood beside them, felt behind and to the left the presence of Lenayna, though he didn't hear (or didn't remember hearing) her stand, her excuses, all those details; and didn't even notice whether she'd come at all (one can mishear, ask "Why go?", wave it off, everyone understands how it happens).

"Mama, is it her?"

"Master Arad, an Ashai-Keetrah sister has come, very young, and asks for master Arad," Sedesi blurted out everything, continuously jumping her gaze from him to the invisible Lenayna, while mother wisely stayed silent.

In the end everyone wisely fell silent.

"I told her she can't come in the house, house of master Nergim-Sinai, I'm not allowed to let her in. She didn't listen, kept asking for master Arad," Sedesi continued accusingly.

"Did you tell her to come?" mother put the question sharply.

"Of course not, mama. Mama, we," he pointed at himself, at the invisible Lenayna behind-left, "will settle everything now, she'll leave. I don't know what this is."

Mother sighed.

"Go, settle it. Both of you."

"Just don't tell father. Mama, Sedesi? I'm serious, don't. He'll be in a rage, let's avoid that."

It seemed they agreed willingly.

"We'll be quick," and he nodded to the now visible, real Lenayna, meaning, let's go.

He had to take only some twenty steps to the entrance and the closed front door. Arad didn't know how he would cover this distance. Why did she come? Maybe... very stupidly... for the finished certificate? No, that's laughable, father would never... Why did she come?

"Arad, am I needed there?" Lenayna suddenly grabbed his hand.

"You're needed there like no other."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely," and he took the lamp from her, considerately handed to her by Sedesi.

Arad opened the suddenly heavy, disobedient door, and in the rainy, completely dead evening, before him stood Simsana. Never had he seen her so beautiful. For the first time in his life he saw on her something like that very, true garment of the Ashai-Keetrah; the hood thrown back, drops falling from it; her posture, half-turned; her eyes glistening from the lamplight. She was so tragically, so wetly beautiful.

All into the blood of victory. All into the blood of victory, Arad incanted to himself. *I promised, Vaalu-Miresli. I'll do everything, Vaalu-Miresli. I love you, Vaalu-Simsana... Idiot...*

"Hi, Arad."

"Beautiful evening, Simsana."

Her wet gaze moved left. She looked there. Arad didn't see whether they looked back at Simsana from there.

"I need to talk to you," her gaze returned to him, exhausted.

"Speak," he said, strangled. His temples pounded. This turned out to be very difficult.

Don't speak with her. Don't speak. You won't endure. Something will break, something will happen. Red blaze from Vaal's fire. All for victory.

"Everything is over between us," he rushed, a preemptive strike. "We talked about this," a brazen lie. "You know this," another one. "I have plans. Everything is over between us. You know this. Plans."

He lowered the lamp, and so they looked at each other, light falling on her from below.

"Did he help you?"

Simsana didn't answer.

"Did he help you?! Was it not all for nothing?" Arad pressed her, as if beating a confession from a prisoner.

"Of course not for nothing," Simsana answered, slowly turned, and slowly began to leave.

He leapt, grabbed her by the arm, turned her; this was done by another Arad, without the first one's will.

"I told you," water was rolling down her cheeks, and Arad convinced himself this was only water. "I told you—refuse the mentor."

"I'm doing the right thing!" he justified himself desperately.

"Of course. You're doing what others told you. Let go."

He didn't let go.

"Let go, I said."

Suddenly Arad felt something sharp at his shoulder—Simsana had threatened him with her sirna.

"Arad, she has a knife!" Lenayna warned. She sees. Sees everything. Observes everything.

"Did you hear?" she smirked, snarled, exhaled at him. "Let me go. Do the right thing."

Arad very simply grabbed her by the wrist, so simply twisted it, very simply forced the dagger from her, very simply took it; something very evil, very ancient, very violent awoke inside (always dozing, easy to wake), and he grabbed her by the chin, the cheeks: like a captive, or a barbarian, or a slave, or a dhaar.

"So it wasn't all for nothing?" he shook her, demanded full surrender and definition of things. "He helped?"

"Not for nothing, Arad," the captive Simsana confessed everything, tenderly touching his hand in answer to his violence.

He felt how she melted, weakened in his grip. He must not. He must not. My Vaal, she'd already managed to leap into his hands. This treacherous female kind! Anything but this! Father will see! She won't become Ashai! The agreement will be broken. He'll betray everyone and everything. This can't be. Must do the right thing.

"Then go," he threw her away. "You can't be here. And don't come here again, to me. Here. To me."

"No," Simsana crossed her arms, raised her head, "it's you... It's you who no longer... Never!" she clenched her teeth, turned and walked into the night.

Arad stood, watched her go. Something alien was felt in his hand, he looked—the sirna. Her sirna, Vaalu-Miresli's sirna. What a thing. Without thinking, he threw it behind his collar, into his shirt.

He climbed the stone stairs (didn't even remember descending, at all), lifted the lamp, which had somehow ended up on one of the steps (also didn't remember how); leaning on the railing, Lenayna was looking at him, trying to look mocking, yes, it seemed, mocking.

"It seems I got in your way a little."

Arad, answering nothing, leaned on the railing across from her.

"I knew it would be cruel. I just didn't think it would be to me."

"As you see, I drove her away. She shouldn't have come here, but she came anyway."

"She didn't cut you, did she?" she looked at his shoulder.

"Who? Me? She didn't have a chance, and she wouldn't anyway."

Lenayna smirked and turned her tail to the railing.

"Nothing happened," Arad said confidently.

"Yes, except that now a Mistress of Life hates me, and that I'm just the right thing to do for you. In the very best case. You know what, Arad. You're a scoundrel and a five-tailer."

"You don't know the whole story," he stood before her.

"Oh yes, oh yes," she nodded, looking away.

"Leni, everything's much more complicated."

"So tell me," she moved her ears, raised her head.

"Stay overnight, I'll tell you everything."

"Pffff..." she snorted. "Nai, no way. Her you drove away, but I'll leave on my own."

"You won't leave," he blocked her path on both sides, trapping her in a prison between himself, the railing, and his arms.

"Let go, it hurts," Lenayna complained, though he wasn't pressing, wasn't even touching.

"No. You—I won't let go."

"I'm going to growl," she complained again, turning away from his approach.

"Growl."

"I'll bite you," she turned the other way, as if that could help, then put her palm by her mouth.

"All the better."

"No. I don't want to. I won't," struggling, she rubbed her muzzle against his, the vain attempt of prey to turn away. "You're using me. I don't want to. Mmmm..." caught, caught, he captured her mouth. "You... only... need... one thing," she used a pause for breath.

"If I only wanted one thing—I wouldn't have brought you here," he said in her ear. "I told you: you're needed by me here. You're needed by me. And you're already mine."

Luckily, it worked. He felt: she softened, a hand on his shoulder, and there's the second. Say the right thing precisely, and everything will be yours, a very simple game, what could be simpler.

"Why did you take her by the hand?" she whispered rapidly, looking him eye to eye. "You should have come out with me, say 'everything's over,' turn around and leave. That's what you should have done. This is all so weird, this was all so cruel. Arad!" she whispered loudly at him, he even felt the warmth of her breath. "She's strange, and you..." she hit him on the chest. "You could have not taken me. It would have been better, for everyone."

"But I want you to walk with me. Better or for worse—I don't care."

"You think... that's how it's done? Just took—and said 'mine'? No," she spoke hurriedly, heatedly, involuntarily tipping backward while he licked her cheek and near the ear; responsiveness was winning in her: they'd sorted out the relationship, and enough, this is all only to the good.

Lionesses are cured only by lionesses, he thought, healing himself with the scent, the touch, the possession, the presence of Lenayna.

Suddenly the door flew open, and Arad's mother looked out, with Arad embraced by Lenayna at the neck to the very top; a fansinall lioness, a lioness through and through, she determined that such an embrace sentenced the relationship to an unmistakably clear path. Hard to believe, but they were so absorbed they hadn't heard the door opening.

Aevsuga delicately hid behind it before being noticed, and:

"Arad, Lenayna, are you there? Nai, come in, it's cold."

"Yes-yes, mom, we're coming. We were looking at the night," he added, with obvious mischief, and received a hip-bump from Lenayna.

◇

Amazingly, sire Nergim and sire Miran didn't have a falling out, as both wives justly, very justly feared. Certainly the admonishments of hamanu Mirna helped, which strictly prescribed not to drink, cast off tavern manners, and remember the middle-stratum etiquette which, strangely enough, sire Miran possessed but despised utterly, and not to break anything; hamanu Aevsuga meanwhile convinced her husband to be 'open' and 'understanding' toward sire Miran's 'ambiguity.' They found accord in playing kobey—a complex, filigree version of flis, leaving politics, military successes, the Hel-sian question, the northern question, the dhaar question, the current Emperor, the former Emperor, the current Senate, money, Vaalism, Ashai, natural-philosophical musings, and especially conversations about fansinall whores, types of beer, and orgies at Vaalu-Sizae's (and sire Miran had seen one first-hand)—which so itched sire Miran—aside.

Lenayna and Arad sat and occupied themselves with absolutely nothing, except sitting beside each other and listening to the mothers; the brothers had long since escaped into the house. Arad was dying of boredom, but didn't want to join the fathers, for one more important matter still awaited.

Incidentally, Lenayna, suddenly out of nowhere, whispered in Arad's ear:

"I feel sorry for her."

"What?" he frowned.

"I feel sorry for her. And strange is her act, this coming, lionesses don't do that. Something's wrong with her."

Oh, these females. She feels sorry. A rival should be rolled in the mud, leaving not a speck of a chance, he thought.

"She's Ashai-Keetra, it's not simple for them, not simple with them," he said vaguely, and waved it off, making clear the topic wouldn't be developed.

In the end he understood that his mane would fall out if he sat another couple of moments amid empty female chatter, and went to watch the game of his father and Lenayna's father. Pretending to observe, Arad sank into

thoughts, meanwhile trying not to miss when hamanu Mirna would note that it was already late and time to acknowledge everyone's honor.

Only foolish thoughts crept in, and somehow dark ones, so he started eavesdropping on them, pressing his ears back.

Hamanu Mirna and hamanu Aevsuga got along excellently. Mirna liked Aevsuga's old-Naysagrian upbringing, mixed with fansinall flexibility; Aevsuga was taken with the remnants of high-born manner in Mirna and her agreeableness with everything said, and also her closeness to big money and ease of handling some wild sums.

"I never could manage money. With us it's like this: husband—no time, and I—as best I can. Always a mess, always a mess, can't bring any order," Aevsuga laughed, speaking of this as of charming shortcomings.

Arad glanced secretly at hamanu Mirna—she only nodded 'yes-yes.'

"Perhaps Arad will have someone better with money management than his mother," Aevsuga added meaningfully.

"The management should be his," Lenayna suddenly said, having been mostly silent until now, comfortably positioned with leg crossed over leg, devouring olives, a whole pile of olives, "and the accounts—with his wife. Or, nai, also his, if he wants everything himself."

Aevsuga hurried with explanations:

"With us it's roughly the same: Sinai, that is sire Nergim, he gave me the accounts and entrusted me with managing the money. It was his decision, as head of the family," she concluded.

Lenayna—Arad could see her fairly well if he glanced sideways—nodded lightly and answered nothing; Arad leaned back, rested on the armrest and also crossed leg over leg in his dark corner. Papa and sire Miran played silently; suddenly sire Miran quietly suggested "Good, let's step out," and they immediately dropped the cards and left, very quickly, without even discussing why or wherefore, and this surprised Arad considerably.

"So in your own family, would you determine it differently?" Aevsuga suddenly asked an interesting question.

"He would determine," Lenayna answered clearly, without even thinking.

"Oh come! And what, we give everything to them, the big lions, to tear apart and decide?"

"Why marry one who can't decide and tear apart?"

Hamanu Mirna laughed.

"That's true too," Aevsuga agreed with a sigh. "But surely not leave everything to him?"

It seemed Lenayna was thinking. Arad glanced sideways again—yes, thinking.

"I influence him, he manages, I count. In the end I'm both on top and below, and he thinks it's all himself, that everything just works out for him."

"Ah, clever you. So, he—decides, you—count?"

"Yes," Lenayna agreed, smoothing her khinastra.

"I've heard you're an bookkeeper, help your mama," mama pressed a finger to her cheek, leaning on the table.

"She's already taken over everything, everything, I hardly do anything," Mirna inserted. "She does everything, she's a good daughter," she suddenly added very emotionally.

"I don't understand anything about accounting," mama sighed, "it's like the northern tongue to me. All these incomes, expenditures, and so much arithmetic... You'll break your claws on abacus."

"Long claws help with abacus," Lenayna noted knowledgeably.

"Lenayna, could you help me with the that?" mama suddenly asked directly.

Arad cringed as if from a toothache. Really, mom. She has this manner: seeking out preferences, favors, work, opportunities, connections, and cheaper, and for free, and for a thank-you, and for pretty eyes.

"One can make a balance, but accounting—it's routine, you can't just take it, do everything at once, and then forget."

"Let's at least make something, there's no order anymore."

"Do you have many liabilities?"

"That's?..." Aevsuga was confused. "That's?"

"Debts, she means debts," Mirna intervened.

"Ah, yes, those need sorting out," Aevsuga nodded. "And incomes, expenditures."

"That will be more difficult, hamanu Aevsuga."

"Why?"

"A balance is made for a day, you take everything there is and count. But income and expenses—that's a span of time."

Arad watched Lenayna. She definitely felt his gaze, didn't show it. For a moment it seemed to him that Simsana was sitting there.

Interesting: if Simsana had come as my lioness, what would mother want from her? Arad wondered. Probably lots of cheap oleamor. Or completely free. Well, she's not going to give birth, I have enough brothers as it is.

"Let's at least make this balance. Will you do me the favor?"

"Very well, hamanu Aevsuga," Lenayna nodded, modestly rubbing her hands at her chest. "And when?"

"Whenever you're not busy."

"This could take a whole day, I ask the hamanu to consider and choose a day that's convenient..."

"Oh, of course. Thank you, Lenayna. And also..."

Arad understood the moment was good; and he'd overstayed a bit, waiting for the right moment, he was bored. He rose, walked a few steps, and sat down beside Lenayna as if nothing had happened—as if he'd left but had just now returned.

"And... Nai, Arad? Even better this way. Arad, since you're here, I'll ask you both: and how are things between you?" mother asked.

It was hard to say what prompted mother to ask this: whether her enormous, unrestrained, unbridled curiosity about others' romances and arrangements; or cold calculation and desire to know who stands where and how; a test of her son's possible wife; or they'd arranged something with hamanu Mirna. Most likely. Mirna wasn't surprised at all, didn't even twitch an ear, and looked at Arad; while Aevsuga, in turn, looked at Lenayna.

"Excellently," Arad didn't even let Lenayna squeak. "I think we're coming together in the very best way. Mama, I heard here that you need money counted, so it's very good to do it this way: Lenayna will stay the night today, and tomorrow morning you'll count everything."

Three female gazes. Ouch. Before it would have been frightening.

"Arad, I find it hard to excuse such directness, this is a bit... too much... you didn't even ask her opinion!" mama was truly flustered.

"It's nothing, it's nothing, nothing like that, nothing," this was Lenayna's mother.

Lenayna meanwhile shielded herself from Arad with her hand, rubbing her temple, her ear.

"Fine, but what does Lenayna think, what if she doesn't wish to stay?" mama looked at Arad.

She drew out the silence, long.

"This is very unexpected. And I don't want to abuse hospitality so badly. Such an unexpected proposal from... Arad."

"Oh, Lenayna, our house is always open to you," Aevsuga assured.

"Thank you. If this fits hamanu Aevsuga's plans, we can make the balance tomorrow. Especially since. I twisted. Sort of. My paw. Such. Misfortune."

Arad couldn't hold back and scratched his scruff with pleasure. *If you're going to heal, heal fully*, he thought mischievously, a familiar wave passed through, his muzzle spread itself into a satisfied smile. Excellent, that's the spirit: broke through, talked her round, she didn't refuse. Tonight we'll have ourselves a proper gnawing.

Then, as in sagas, symbolic difficulties had to be overcome. He had to wait until Lenayna's parents would deign to leave, and had to pretend he didn't care at all; sire Miran still couldn't resist letting out several dirty jokes, but thankfully communicated them only to Arad, and also told, somewhat unclearly, that he was leaving him his daughter for good now, no returns, since he'd dared to snatch her up so brazenly and quickly. Lenayna was clearly shamed and embarrassed—either playing the role proper for a maassi in such a terrible, forced position, or genuinely (probably both at once); Arad for some reason expected that in this dimension she'd be either calmer or bolder. Then mother hid her, led Lenayna away like a great treasure, led her to the second floor and didn't appear with her again, instructing the servants

to clean up. Father, if he was displeased, showed nothing, and simply went to sleep. Arad, having washed in an instant, deftly caught the moment when mother and Lenayna went to the bath, and snuck into the guest room, where mother had already prepared everything for her earlier; and all of this took them a good hour there, and quite obviously—they weren't only making the bed and mother wasn't only explaining the situation to the unexpected lodger, but rather talking about something. He examined the window, the shutters, looked down: a thought arose about a backup plan—to climb through the window if Lenayna suddenly locked herself in from inside, but then he'd need to either open the window along with the shutters, or surrender to her mercy to open it herself. Changed his mind and stole the spare key from Sedesi just in case—to knock out the key with a key should work. Returned to his room, the quieted brothers milled about nearby a bit, surprised, puzzled by the unexpected guest.

In the end, Arad determined by ear that the lionesses had returned from the bath, and Lenayna was already in her room. Had to wait a bit, and he could move out. So as not to waste time, he laid out before himself, on the table, the collected artifacts: sire Miran's sword (or—more correctly—seemingly already his own), the symbolon piece from Simsana, Lenayna's wrap, and—most unusual—the worn, seen-it-all sirna of Vaalu-Miresli, taken from Simsana in a deadly serious fight. *I'll return it to the mentor, he thought. Just not to her. Just not to Simsana. Good that everything worked out with the papers. Everything wasn't for nothing, she said everything wasn't for nothing. Must thank papa tomorrow morning. Thank you, papa. You did right.*

Her image for some reason appeared on the ceiling. Play of light and shadow from the candle, of course. Arad twirled the Ashai-Keetrah's sirna in his hands, sometimes made thrusts into the air, lying on his back, as if killing someone. Good lionessy, Simsi. Now you'll become Ashai-Keetrah, my Vaal, what a good Mistress of Life you'll be. Good lion, Arad. Well, you know why yourself. Very sad that you parted so ingloriously, to pieces, dirtily. As they say, no blood means no seat at the table. But he's smart and pragmatic. He did what he had to. Females can't, they do what they feel, think with the lower, as he once heard among friends. And that's what distinguishes a male—does what's required. Should have said 'thank you' to her. Drove her from the threshold... and with Lenayna there... poor Simsi. There she is, then, the first time, rewrapping your hand. There she is at the Height. There she is just now, wet, chilled, she was cold. There she is in Ahlia's mask. Fuck, how could this be, how could this be... I did everything right. What's this flowing from my eyes, what is this? Vaal, I'm supposed to go to Lenayna now, need to wipe off, and...

Arad cut his hand with the sirna, wiping his muzzle.

Suddenly mother entered and sat at the paws of the bed without preamble.

"How could you!"

Arad hid his slightly bleeding hand along with the sirna under the blanket.

"Your father and I raised you so well!"

He scratched his nose.

"You put her in an uncomfortable position."

Arad thought about how Lenayna would need to be put in many more uncomfortable and comfortable positions.

"Not the occasion, not the setting, you're very hasty, this isn't right. She complained to me about you! Don't make such innocent eyes!"

"Mom..."

"If you're an honest lion, you won't go to her tonight. Show restraint, respect. Wait. I gave her a key—she'll lock herself in."

"Mama, did you ever like those wait-around types?"

"You haven't even, it turns out, taken her on a proper date once!" mother unleashed a monstrous accusation, not listening at all. "Arad, you must be considerate with her, attentive, careful. This is—quite possibly—your future wife. This isn't one of those casual femfriends of yours. We talked with her—such a good maassi, she'll suit us so well. Sensible. Poor thing, she didn't know where to hide from shame... And if she counts as well as they praise her... Oh, Arad, mind yourself! Be good, don't let us down."

"I won't let anyone down, mom."

Mom sat, looked at him. Then waved her hand hopelessly, wagged her finger very ambiguously, and left without wishing good night.

Only after hearing that mother had disappeared on the second floor did he creep upstairs. Predatory, playful excitement, an excellent feeling. The door opened, as he'd thought, without need of the key—Lenayna, after all, not being a fool, hadn't hoped to save herself that way.

Locked the door with the key, tested it. All set.

Wet Sleepwalking Lioness Wants To Do Everything Properly

Lenayna, legs stretched out, sitting on the edge of the bed, was removing rings from her ears. She wasn't at all surprised that she now found herself locked in, and that she suddenly wasn't alone; she glanced at him briefly, then continued looking straight ahead, with a busy air tilting her head for her rings. He stood before her, slightly to the side; she again briefly cast a glance, and for some reason tucked her paws under the bed, as if that was the first thing he'd pounce on. A simple nightgown with a sharp neckline—from his mother—was too big and too long on her, exactly to the floor. Somewhere in the folds of the sheet her tail hid.

Arad walked around the room without words, touched the candles. From the semicircular chair for lionesses, which Lenayna had adapted as a nightstand, he took a long beige ribbon, but didn't show care—turning, it unrolled across the floor.

Together they watched the ribbon softly spread out. Lenayna sighed and placed all the rings from her left ear on the chair.

"What's this?" Arad wrapped this ribbon around his neck and without shame sniffed it, played with it.

"A tail-ribbon," Lenayna explained softly, and pensively set to work on the other ear.

The tail-ribbon turned out to be a good thing—it smelled of Lenayna, and something else, so Arad left it on himself. Thinking a moment, he decided that a lioness performing the night ritual of disrobing shouldn't be attacked from the front, better to sneak up, and how is that done? Right, from behind. He climbed onto the bed, found himself behind her, sitting on his legs, removed the only piece of clothing he had on. Ah, yes, the ribbon on his neck remained, and that was fitting.

"Your mother is a very kind lioness," Lenayna quietly began to speak, and Arad with incredible pleasure noted that she was nervous, even afraid.

"Nice to hear, Leni," he placed his hands on her shoulders.

"But your father," she continued as if nothing was happening, "is now completely certain I'm a maassi of not the highest virtues. Thank you, Arad."

"My father is known," he took the ribbon from his neck, "for fairly distinguishing good from bad. There's absolutely nothing to worry about."

"I'm angry at you," she complained to him, finishing the last ring on her right ear; and then her world went dark—he covered her eyes with the ribbon. She giggled, then sighed, her fingers on the ring became nervous; he very much wanted her to purr, but she wasn't deploying that weapon yet. Being careful, afraid. "It shouldn't be like this. Not like this."

"But this is a perfect place-time to hear the story, as I promised," he took her by the chin, turned her toward himself, right-upward, felt the familiar scar; from curiosity, and also from the complete liberty he'd already acquired with lionesses' bodies, he explored it by touch, examined it, shamelessly went between her lips, felt the gap.

"Yes. Four teeth missing below. And the jaw's damaged. And the scar."

"How did it happen?" he left the mark of her shame (if she only knew how little it actually mattered to him!).

"Got a damaged lioness, and only noticed now," she laughed nervously, not answering the question; her tail came alive and struck the bed, and he caught it and drew it between his legs. "Write her off, get a new one."

He kissed her there, in the vulnerable place, not giving freedom to her muzzle and not removing the ribbon from her eyes; he did nothing here in haste, you can't here, haste here would make things worse, and worse isn't needed—better is needed. From the shoulder a smooth journey was made down the back to the waist, a flanking maneuver—and his palm on her belly.

"My accounting beauty," into her ear. "I'd know you by your eyes... by your voice... by your scent... and now—by this mark too," Arad touched everything he mentioned

"Mm-hm..." she sighed, and he recognized this sigh, had heard it, firsthand. "But that's not all."

He pressed her, making her melt her back against him, arch, but Lenayna decided to willfully turn around, and the ribbon fell from her eyes. Arad let her do this, though it broke already-tested plans for caresses behind the ears, and here's what happened: he, naked, half-lying, and she—on top. Lenayna, improvident, clearly hadn't imagined what she was supposed to do in such a position, and with a lion wearing nothing, hadn't thought through the consequences; so there was only one way out—obediently roll over, even without his permission, and find herself on her back beneath him, with completely pressed ears—a sign of submission.

"If you'll have to sleep... with me in one bed... if that ever happens..." she breathed noisily, looking at him with big eyes. "Know that I'm a sleepwalker. I have sleepwalking, since cubhood," Lenayna was so nervous that he even seemed to feel her trembling. In her voice and breathing there were definitely notes of tremor.

"And what's that?" he inquired, and even stopped gliding along the nightgown, along the hip.

"I can get up in the middle of the night and start talking," Lenayna said, and swallowed, a momentary smile pierced her as if with pain, then returned her to seriousness. "I can walk around the room. I can leave the room," she watched warily as he settled evenly on the hips of her tightly pressed legs. "But more often I sit up in bed and start talking."

"Saying what exactly?" Arad grew interested, ears pricked.

"Anything. All sorts of nonsense."

"Do you remember anything after?" While talking, he was doing a strategically important thing—gathering the hem to push it higher, to the very top, up to her very muzzle. Now, now, a little more, just a bit.

"No," she shook her head, closing her eyes.

"I can't believe such a gift. Pure joy. I want to see this. I'll even have a conversation with you."

"If I get up, lay me back down. If I start wandering around the room, lead me to bed. I'll fall asleep. Say any calm words, I'll obey," Lenayna said and tried to prop herself on the bed, but not so fast—Arad with a soft push returned her back, into the trim stretch on her back. And with tightly pressed legs.

"Nope. Lesson learned. You get up—I lay you back."

She answered nothing, only sighed.

Not quickly but not slowly he bared her—the plan came to life, gathering all her garment at the neck. Of course, dim light, it's weak, but even better this way; no, this you could look at forever. A good lioness. As it should be.

"Arad, I'll take it off. And..."

"No need," he bent her legs and led them higher, making her even more defenseless.

"The nightgown is from your mother."

"Serves you right," he captured both her hands, pressing her palms to the bed. Defense impossible.

"I'll take... Arad. Nai, Arad," she tried to say in those moments when she managed to escape the captivity of his kisses. "We forgot... Under the bed... Get the oil," and he interrupted her, simply covering her mouth with his palm; turning her muzzle, he pressed it to the pillow, exploring her chest with kisses (couldn't help but compare that here there was much more to explore than with Simsana), her neck, her shoulder, denied himself nothing. With her freed hand she weakly tried either to press him to herself or push him away, through clenched teeth and closed eyes she pleaded:

"Don't... I won't... You're smothering me... Just let me... What are you doing... I got it, I knew everything..." and suddenly a laugh on the exhale, then an inhale, then she bites his palm that forbids freedom of speech, but bites so carefully, so...

But this doesn't matter, nothing matters, because Arad made a small but important discovery—between her thighs he could glide without entering,

receiving incredible, even prickly sensations, exactly as it was with Simsana, only she lay on her stomach, and this lioness—on her back. It completely absorbed him, he even forgot for a moment to kiss her and explore by touch. And no need to pull back, and no need to press thighs-legs together, and no need to cover with tail, and no need for oleamor; just glide on the surface, without entering, especially since he only approximately imagines how and where to enter there, but that's forbidden anyway. The feeling of possession, of dangerous game, and terrible tension.

He turned her muzzle toward himself, squeezing firmly, feeling the notorious gap in her jaw, with his other hand pulled her ear; Arad knew he should get up, calmly take the oleamor from under the bed (where else could she have hidden it, they're all the same), smear everything there and finish. But he simply couldn't find the strength to refuse this sensation, teasing glide across the hills and hollows of her between-thighs, her secret, her sheath.

Holding her by the muzzle, not letting her speak, he himself gave her a hot wave into her ear:

"You're mine. Lenayna, you're mine. You belong to me. Malstruna-Lenayna is mine. I claimed you."

And then he turned her again, silently commanding her to look him in the eyes; though she couldn't see anything, she understood everything, and met his gaze, then purred quietly, and again hid in the fog, not wishing to look. Her scent became so sharp and teasing, it was incredibly brazen, it demanded from him the most decisive, most terrible measures.

The treachery of females. Never forget it. Arad certainly considered himself her complete master, master of the situation, of this room, master of everything. He knew that now he could turn her any way, look at anything, and do with her whatever he wanted—that the Game doesn't forbid. And so it was, all true. He felt that the soft gliding would soon turn into furious speed, and everything would end—and that was good. But he suddenly sensed that Leni had made a small, beckoning movement with her hips, the base of her body, precise and supple—the precision and suppleness of instinct—and without error positioned herself for him.

In the next moment he felt that he'd entered, and her frightened-languid inhale confirmed it; there it was very hot and wet. In his wild mind a thought flashed that this was forbidden, but the boiling blood demanded only one thing: to penetrate as fast, deep, and strong as no one, nowhere, never. He gripped her whole so she wouldn't stir, wouldn't think to take this from him. He frightened her, grabbing her long-suffering chin, and with his other hand painfully squeezing her shoulder. It seemed he bared his teeth and quietly growled at her. It seemed he called her names several times, very crudely. Stopping this was impossible. He had no time for extras, so drool slowly descended onto her cheek, neck. Now she's finished. Now I'll finish her. Now I'll make her.

"Come on me... on me... come on..." she pleaded unintelligibly, for who knows how long (a moment? all night?)

Still, lionesses should sometimes be listened to; he managed to deny himself at the last moment, but for this a female must pay, for her unreadiness to give to the end, she must be punished, or rewarded (simultaneously)—he withdrew from her, pushed forward strongly and chaotically, crushing either her tail or hand or side, and finished right on her muzzle and neck.

After the orgasmic death and the roaring rebirth he found himself above her; it turned out she hadn't turned away from anything, couldn't defend herself or deemed it useless—hands raised palms up, near her ears, she lay with closed eyes, excellently and generously defiled, marked by him. She did nothing, only breathed heavily, and on her could be read the most astonishing mixture of emotions and detachment simultaneously.

"Much blood, more blood," she said, all stained.

She hadn't forgotten.

Lionesses must sooner or later be rescued from all helpless positions, especially if you're the culprit. He climbed off her, thinking he'd crushed her stomach and chest, lifted her by both hands, sat her up, and the only thing she did herself was find support on the bed with them; taking the first rag at hand (this turned out to be his tunic), he carelessly wiped her muzzle, straightened her nightgown down, covering her breasts and belly, and then, holding her scruff, kissed her. She kissed very lively and responsively, she smelled of herself and him simultaneously, and Arad thought with dissatisfaction that for her, actually, everything had ended just as it began. Well, the female's lot, we'll think of something later.

They looked at each other, long, combining this with tender experiments: he stroked her ears and scruff, she combed his mane with her claws. She had a reproachful, expressive gaze; but the reproach was of good quality, satisfied, this is the discontent of a lioness that belongs to a lion completely. If she only knew how these gazes—instead of seeding regret in him—were already heating him anew. Or maybe she knew.

Then, as is customary and always happens, they had to separate. Lenayna, having risen, sat on the edge of the bed with her paws down, but did everything somehow very carefully and unhurriedly, and for some reason pulled a light coverlet toward herself, higher; Arad sat at the edge of the bed and watched her, her cleansing ceremony: in the dresser she found suitable cloth for this and carefully wiped her neck; lionesses, they have the useful property of finding things. From the desire simply to see her tail, which was again lost somewhere on the bed, Arad took the coverlet away, and was surprised—the bed turned out to be quite wet there where Lenayna had lain. He even thought for a moment why this was, and touched the wet, and also looked at her; her wary gaze left no doubt about the culprit, especially betrayed by the barely noticeable wet trail from the tail. She found nothing better than to be-

come embarrassed, cover everything back, firmly taking the coverlet from him, and then throw his own tunic at him.

So here's what emerged: she already had three peculiarities, and the third—Lenayna was probably the wettest lioness in the Empire.

"That's insane," Arad expressed admiration.

"Yes, that's how it is. Now you know this too," she said with despair and shame.

"Listen, when I lick you, that'll be fun."

It seemed she was completely lost at such possibilities, and couldn't find an answer, couldn't even immediately find an emotion: whether to be indignant, or laugh, or cautiously express her 'I don't mind.'

"Risky Game we have, Arad," she finally said, leaning back slightly and crossing her legs below.

He nodded, agreed.

"You're maybe used to it with others. But let's do everything properly."

He nodded again.

"To marry too early and out of necessity—that's so improper," she shook her head.

"No problem."

"In our family, lionesses get pregnant very easily."

"Excellent."

"You know," she stood and took a pitcher from the dresser, "some take dark oleamor and play that way. But dark oleamor is harmful for those who haven't given birth. Actually, they say it's harmful for anyone," she gave him the pitcher.

"I forbid you dark, only light. From now on we'll play properly," he answered when he'd drunk; the water turned out to be warm. Gave the pitcher back to her.

"So this time you decided to throw me in the river?"

He kissed her, not knowing what to answer. And then he found it:

"Remember how you spilled tea on me?"

"Ahhh. Revenge," she narrowed her eyes.

"Yes. And also the scent."

"What about scent?"

He didn't answer. Kissed her again, let go.

"I should wash," she said.

"Forget washing, lie down."

And so it happened: he went, blew out all the light and lay on his back, and she—to the right, beside him, and—of course—climbed all over him, wrapped an arm around, threw a leg over, her tail, pressed closer with his help.

"Oh, Arad, if I get knocked up, I don't even know..." she said to him quietly, reproachfully, and merrily.

"I know. Everything will be fine."

He stroked her back, traveled below the back, indescribable pleasure; without particular sentiments he took the base of the tail, wanted to go between her thighs, remembered Miresli's advice again, and didn't.

"Nai... Stop," she purred.

This was all of Lenayna: she herself raised her tail so he wouldn't miss, and then—indignation, accusations.

"Shhhh. This is how it should be," and again he was surprised by her wet abilities. Even the tail was wet.

What a lioness he'd gotten, what a thing.

"Should be..." she answered, pressed closer, arched, and suddenly purred, just like that. "Well, my Arad, tell me those stories of yours."

"Listen, my Leni, I adore you," he kissed her on the nose and settled her under his neck, staring at the poorly visible, gray ceiling.

"I... love you too... as you've already understood," she answered with giggles, stroking his chest. "Probably."

She tickled his neck.

"So what's there? Or was the story thing a trick? Trickster."

"Nah. It's like this, Leni. Her mentor, Vaalu-Miresli, asked me to arrange a meeting with father. Well, you know, he doesn't like Ashai, the Doctrine, all that. But the meeting, as I see, happened. Papa helped them, they got everything, and I think she came to my house... I don't know why she came," he spoke haltingly, vaguely, stroking her chin the way one strokes cats to induce purring.

Lenayna scratched his chest a little with her claws and asked:

"Somehow I didn't understand anything. You broke up with her?"

"Yes. Her mentor insisted we not see each other anymore. My father protested, my mom gnawed at me."

"Did you tell her that you two are done?"

Arad did the impermissible—he faltered.

"In a manner of speaking..."

"In a manner of speaking?" Lenayna raised her head, then lowered it. "In what manner exactly?"

Arad thought for a long time, and Leni's claws on his chest turned into rhythmic tapping, tap-tap-tap.

"Look, let me tell you the whole truth then. Only this will be our secret, okay?"

"I'm listening."

"I came to her house, wanted to say we're breaking up. But..."

"Ah, well, clear," Leni interrupted and sighed. "But it turned into 'but.' So?"

"Instead of her, the mentor opened. Said: 'She's not here. She's sleeping.' That's what she said. And then said I should leave her, and she very much

advised this, and very much asked for it. And also said I should ask father to arrange a meeting. I said: 'Fine, but I need to tell her we've broken up.' Vaalu-Miresli answered: 'Don't trouble yourself, I'll tell her everything myself. She won't approach you anymore.'"

"Then it's clear why she came," Lenayna snorted understandingly. "You didn't break up with her personally, she wanted to figure everything out."

"So I told her we need to break up. You heard everything yourself."

"And why did everyone want you to break up with her?"

"Well, dad because of the Doctrine, he also doesn't like Ashai. Mama—following dad, worried he'd get angry and that he'd have problems. Her mentor—all the same, they're forbidden to bother Suungs in the Doctrine. And I wanted it too."

"And what happened, why did you want it?" she grew very interested, pressing against him a bit harder.

"You happened, Leni."

"You're lying to me."

"Think about it," he kissed her. Then again. "Think well," he took her by the tail, pulled it. "Did you think?"

"Lying," she said very quietly in his ear, laughed, climbed higher on him. He tormented her a little: by the muzzle, by the ears.

"Purr. Purr, right now."

She purred for him, to satisfy him, enduring further torments.

"But still this is weird," she suddenly said, "lionesses don't do that. Especially Ashai-Keetrah, they're proud, running after a lion is doubly humiliating for them. Running to a lion's house... You're not telling me something, Arad."

"I've told everything," he scratched his scruff, and threw her leg higher on himself, forcibly hiked up her gown—he wanted her heat directly on his thigh, immediately.

"I feel sorry for her," she squirmed more comfortably, adjusting to him. "Something strange was happening with her. Such, you know... desperation. And what did you do to her? You angered a Mistress of Life, Arad. And I'm with you in this, she hates me," she said, puzzled.

"Come on, enough, why would she hate you. The lion decided to break up, he has another. What's your fault?" he interlaced fingers with her.

"Oh no, Arad, that's not how it works," she sighed into his ear, stretched all over, and he pleurably felt her tension from this stretching. "She hates."

She yawned, licked her lips, he licked her too, out of interest (what's it like to lick a lioness when she yawns?), and Lenayna suddenly licked him back, which caught him off guard and gave the most pleasant feeling; in general, Lenayna sometimes precisely, calculatedly gave him a measure of tenderness, and this was very binding.

"Especially, you lashed her hard. Just whipped her. I'd have scratched your eyes out for that."

"Probably bad that she hates you. Don't know what to do about it."

"What can you do," she said with everyday melancholy. "It is what it is... You brought me there yourself," he sensed in her voice anything but regret.

"And she hates me too."

"A different hatred," Lenayna said confidently. "She even left you the knife, so there'd be a reason. Return it at least, just carefully. If you want—we'll return it together."

"You think she left the dagger on purpose?"

"Pffff," Leni laughed. "No, by accident! It just happened!"

How did she noticed I hid the sirna, how? Arad marveled.

"We'll return it, together, only not to her, but to the mentor."

"Even better," Lenayna agreed. "By the way, what did they need from your father?"

"Something about Ancestral Law, some document. Apparently, papa helped them, everything worked out."

"Why do you think so?"

"You heard: she said everything wasn't for nothing."

Arad noticed he was avoiding saying her name. And Lenayna too. She. She, she, she.

"Why guess, isn't it simpler to ask your father? It's good that he helped the Mistresses of Life, it's in our favor. She'll be angry, inevitably, but the mentor will soften—Ashai know gratitude."

"I'll ask tomorrow morning. Today there was no time," he flipped his Lenayna over, deciding the time had come to taste her.

"No time for him... Arad? Oh, Arad. You want more?.. Let me go, let me get the oleamor. Just don't you dare again, that... Let's do everything properly. Wait, I'm all there, let me go... Vaal, Arad, what are you doing to me..." Lenayna pressed a palm to her eyes, and with the other grabbed his mane, having absolutely no idea what would happen, because no one had ever done this to her, and she hadn't even thought anyone would.

I Need Your Life And Something Else

Arad woke from being carelessly poked with something hard.

"I knew it," mother stood over him, touching him with the curtain rod.

Arad looked around and found no Lenayna.

"You're just like him," she said in despair and waved her hand.

"Like who?"

"Like who. Like my great-father," and she went off to do something around the room.

Actually, he'd gotten up as usual; mother always rises early, that's how it is everywhere; and Lenayna wasn't there either, she'd managed to get up without waking him, and he had a light sleep. He learned that due to the wonderful, unusually warm morning, father was sitting on the veranda, having breakfast. It was his day off, and Arad for some reason thought Lenayna would be sitting there, as befits a guest—not many places in the house where a guest can be, right? But she wasn't there, and Arad, having dressed in his room for going out and tied his mane with bronze clasps (not really necessary yet, but everyone does it), joined father's unhurried breakfast on the veranda. In the garden brother Ayarr was shooting the crossbow Arad had made, and cursing everything—something wasn't working for him. At another time Arad would have boxed his ears for breaking the weapon, but now it was good to sit across from father, leaning back in the wicker chair.

"Today you and I," father said importantly, holding his hand on the journal and making unnecessary pauses, "will go to sire... what's his name... master of the roofers' guild, we need to re-roof half the roof. Then to sire Haylie-Selassie."

"The moneylender?"

"Banker, son. He's a bank representative. You've long needed to meet him. He also deals in real estate. And then we'll go to the Magistrate."

"His name befits a lionessy."

"He's Khustrian. What simple-minded judgments, what's with you."

"Bad joke, dad. How did it go with the Ashai? I understand you met?"

Dad carefully rubbed his chin with two fingers, smoothed his mane.

Arad heard clicking claws, but it wasn't mother, and not Sedesi, he knew both perfectly by their pawsteps, as did father. They turned in unison—it was Lenayna, with mother's enormous tray; Arad was also surprised that she'd changed her into a casual house dress, too big for her. First mama's nightgown. Now this. On the other hand—what else would she wear?

"Good morning, sire Nergim. Did the sire sleep well today?" Lenayna asked pleasantly and fearlessly.

"Good morning. Yes, not badly. I sleep well, you know, all sorts always complain to me about bad sleep, but as for me... A clear conscience—that's the best sleeping aid. You're a guest, why are you doing all this?..." he watched her as she set down the soup tureen, poured him tea, managed to look at him.

"I rose early, went to help in the kitchen, what else would I do. Hamanu Aevsuga permitted it," she went around the table.

"I'll speak with her—this is unacceptable," father waved his hand, "you're a guest."

"No need—it was my doing. Hello, Arad. Want tea?" and without asking, gave him a cup, poured tea in it and placed the teapot beside him. "Sire Nergim," she stood before him, curtsy. "Grateful for the sire giving me a night in his house. The sire is very kind to me."

"Of course, of course."

"I feel awkward abusing the sire's kindness. My paw is already fine, and as soon as I help hamanu Aevsuga with one matter, I'll stop burdening you."

"You can stay as long and whenever you want."

Papa is easy to buy, you just need to know how. Lenayna instantly understood how—with the simplest, unrefined flattery and servitude.

"Sire Nergim, to my shame, I don't know what I've done to deserve this."

"You're a very good maassi, Malstruna-Lenayna."

"Thank you, sire Nergim."

"Hello, Leni. Um," Arad responded.

"Arad, you should say 'Lenayna,' the maassi must be respected," father said with either feigned or real sternness.

"Yes..." Arad scratched his mane. "Yes, papa. Only so."

Now that's cunning. Oh how cunning, Arad admired. Who told her how to turn dad into an ally? Mother, probably. She knows papa's weaknesses. But you have to dare, have to think it all through, and anyway... Oh how cunning.

Father snorted and took the tea. Twirled something in the air with his hand, reasoning internally. Turned around, making sure Lenayna had left.

"I have bad news for you, Arad. You're a violator of Ancestral Law and a defiler of the Rainbow of Blood," he looked at him, swirling the delicate cup.

"In what sense, papa?"

Damn, how did he find out I fucked Leni?

"Mitigating circumstance: you did it unwittingly, and without even knowing."

That's right, she positioned herself, she gave it up!

"And an important detail: your father is a judge, so, as it happens, certain preferences and sinking the case to the bottom are assured for you."

"What are you talking about, papa?"

"I received those Ashai, son. Received them. What do we have? They wanted a new certificate for this Simsana. Or not Simsana—who knows what her Maematian parents actually named her. She's a dhaar, Arad, a Mae-mata. Lower, eastern Mstvaash, and then further, down-down along the coast. You probably don't know her life story, well, it doesn't matter. This Miresli took her from the orphanage, and—wonders of voluntarism—made a Suunga out of her, drew up a certificate, raised her as a Suunga, even proclaimed her Ashai-Keetrah, laughable to say. The best of the daughters of Suungs! What a joke... And they came to simply stick me on a fence post, like a fool. Give them a certificate, we'll give whatever you want, there'll be money, whores... You know, you can hide a lot, but not the cranial ratio of jaw to shoulder-ear distance, and also—snip-snip," he showed how scissors cut, "a split tail."

Arad was silent, looking at the Naysagrian patterns of the tablecloth.

"And also this gray short-furred coloring. And also these ears. Well, one could condescend that it's a Mstvaash half-blood, but the split tail—no, spare me. I see you're surprised. Don't worry, they'll stay silent, let them do what they want."

"So, Simsana is a dhaar?" Arad asked slowly.

"Yes, exactly so," father confirmed with satisfaction.

"Did they confess to this?"

"Well, they're not such fools, they denied it. Screamed so funnily 'no-no-no,' threw themselves at my neck. Eh... An ordinary lioness, you know, has enough sense not to compete with a lion in reason. Ashai—no, too self-assured."

"Maybe her mother was a dhaari and her father was a Suung?"

"What Suung father would allow splitting the tail? And what Suung father would travel in dhaar caravans? As written in her fake certificate... wait... now, I'll bring the copy, you'll look, we'll laugh. I took the copy from them."

Papa left, Arad remained. He spread his hands helplessly, watching his brother continue struggling with the crossbow. The brother suddenly grew angry, threw everything down, and disappeared from view to the south side.

She turned out to be right, Arad thought. Shouldn't have listened to Miresli. And yesterday she came to his house, risking everything, already completely broken by father, just to see him with Lenayna and be driven away like a dog. She pleaded you not to listen to the mentor... Is she really a dhaar-Maemata? From those worthless, dirty, ridiculous half-lions? It's impossible.

It's impossible because she has the gift of ignimara, the gift from Vaal, and what a gift—he himself saw it, with his own eyes, witnessed it. *Vaal, what was I counting on, giving them to father to be torn apart? I knew it was*

a stupid idea. The old fool Miresli. Father's an idiot. Two halfwits met, he squeezed the cup in his palm.

"Everything all right, Arad?"

It was Leni who'd approached, and he hadn't even noticed.

"Want honey in your tea? It'll be tasty."

He looked at her, barely understanding what she was saying.

"What?" he shrugged.

"You're so pensive," she smiled, digging with a spoon in the pot. "Here, some honey in your tea," he felt her scent when she pressed her belly to his shoulder, the cool fabric of the too-big mama's dress, "don't frown."

He stood up.

"Give me the pot."

"What, you want more?" Lenayna watched as the sweet was taken from her.

Arad dug the wooden spoon in, scooped up candied honey, grabbed Lenayna by the waist, by the belt that had migrated from yesterday's fancy dress to this house one with very large hanging pockets in which various things could already be felt through the fabric, completely terribly smeared her mouth with the spoon (Lenayna was frozen the whole time), and then kissed her—calmly, sweetly, unhurriedly.

"I love you, Leni," he licked off more that he saw at the corner of her mouth.

Lenayna let out a laugh, licking her lips and touching her mouth, nose. Caught unarmed.

"I put some in your tea," she justified herself. "I'm sticky now," was all she could say.

"You'll be like that more than once," he gave her the pot and ran his hand under her tail, urging her on. "Go on, father's coming now, we have a serious conversation."

Very puzzled and (completely satisfied), Lenayna, after hesitating slightly, pushed him in the shoulder (unsuccessfully). Reproachfully noted:

"What terrible treatment," in an unusually high voice, when normally she has a good, full one. "Awful."

She took the tray from the table.

"Been watching my dad too much?"

And proudly departed, brushing him with her shoulder, her tail; Arad stroked her stomach, waist on the fly.

"Excuse me, sire Nergim," she met father at the entrance, passed first, the curtain fluttered. "Thank you."

Turning after her, watching the swaying curtain, Nergim settled back.

"Trying hard," father clicked his fingers, pointing toward the house. "Good sign. Look, Arad. What book is this?"

"On the Dhaars of the Empire: Permitted Breeds, Doubtful, Forbidden," Arad read monotonously.

"Maematians. Permitted breed, southeast. Look," he showed the book's spread.

The drawn lioness there was very similar to a grown-up Simsana. And the tambourine, and even this pose—he remembered everything from that very long day. Remembered her gaze. Love of dance, yes, love of dance. Her slender grace. And then, that time when he tore off her Mistress of Life ring. He should have not returned it, announced that she's no longer Ashai-Kee-trah, brought her home, said he'd found a dhaar on the road and now she'd live with him. It's impossible, she can't be a dhaar—she ignites the most terrifying ignimara in the world. Vaal accepted her. Vaal, come to the aid of your young priestess.

"And here's about the split tail, swallow's tail."

"I see," Arad said. "You know, Mstvaash lionesses look similar to Mae-matians, don't they?"

"Similar. But Mstvaash lionesses never mutilate their tails, so they won't accidentally be confused with a Maemata. And it was split, believe me."

"I believe you."

Nergim wordlessly handed his son the copy of the certificate.

"There, son, I told you—they wanted something from you. You, unknowing, violated Ancestral Law, playing with a dhaar, but it's nothing. What will happen to justice and Ancestral Law if such things are let pass? What will happen to the blood of Suungs if anyone can be called Suunga?"

"Yes, dad. This is outrageous," Arad looked pensively at the certificate, placing his palm under his chin. "And how did it all end?"

"Told them never to approach our family again. Let them do what they want. Or should I hand them to the prosecutor and the Chamber of Ashai Affairs?" father looked thoughtful. "Evidence exists, I recorded the leonine-metrics, I recorded their words, the copy of the forgery exists."

"And what would happen then?" Arad asked with masterful indifference.

"The old one would be divested, or even exiled. Ashai are being punished more severely for Ancestral Law. And the little one, well, she'd make a decent dhaar for someone's household, she speaks our language perfectly after all, all that. Can read, write. Some simpler Suung will take her as wife, she'll become an accepted Suunga, good prospects."

Arad looked very meaningfully at the birth paper, touched his nose and finished his tea. Papa grew tired of waiting for his answer and looked mockingly into the garden.

"No. Still, Vaalu-Miresli might take revenge. Besides, you told them you wouldn't proceed the case, in exchange for them not approaching us. It's not good to break the word of Suung honor."

"Yes, agreed," papa agreed easily. "Well, shall we go?"

"Listen, dad. Let me stay, I'll visit the banker another time. And the roofer. And everyone. Or come for me later."

"What's gotten into you?"

"I promised Lenayna to help with something. Mother gave her some work."

"What, is she keeping her as a servant? I'll talk to her. Such a good maasi, so good, and she's already foisted work on her..." father started to leave, but remembered he'd forgotten the books, notebook, and copy of the completely fake certificate.

"I'll take all that," Arad reassured.

He lied a little. He brought everything to the tablinium, except the copy of the certificate. Made sure father left. Checked on Lenayna—she was sitting with mother in the dining room, amid piles of papers. Went to his room, placed the sirna, symbolon, certificate side by side on the table. Thought.

Better if I'd bled out then, Simsana, he tapped the sirna mercilessly against the not-cheap table. Better if you'd never known me. What I've done to you, how I've ruined you. How much you gave me, and how much—I?

He thought about the fact that she really was a Maemata.

And then became a Suunga and Ashai-Keetrah, why not. Vaal himself accepted her, not some official who issued a paper, not someone who took her in marriage, or some other vulgarity. At her Coming of Age she'll ignite ignimara, and the sisterhood will accept her immediately, and no paper will be needed.

I'll need to go and tell them this without confusion. The answer is right under their noses. So, Vaalu-Simsana, Vaalu-Miresli: go without the certificate, let Simsi show her red fire. There will be Ashai there—they'll understand everything, they're sisters of understanding after all. And naked—no tricks possible, pure spirit... I saw everything—it's all true. All truth.

But he'd promised she'd have a certificate. Well, where is one? Where's your word?

Judges aren't an option. Must... Must... Must forge it! Like the first time. But how? Who to go to? Vaal... How's it done? How do you say it properly, fuck, why am I a Suung but don't know how to ask Vaal properly, why was I born a judge's son, why this?! Vaal, show me the path.

Must find someone. He'll find who to go to. But first of all, must copy the certificate right now. Grabbing it, Arad hurried to the tablinium, and—unexpectedly—found Lenayna there, at his desk.

◇

Seeing Arad, Lenayna purred sweetly to him and continued writing something. Beside her—mama's abacus, papers on the floor, and even mama's small, hand-held strongbox, in which she kept money, jewelry, and every-

thing she considered precious in one heap, for example, the ring father had given at their betrothal.

If only dad knew that his jokes about a lioness in the tablinium had gained living meaning.

"Your mother-dear told me this is your place."

He stood behind her, stroked her shoulder, scruff, she answered with a touch of her palm. Arad went to the balcony door, opened it, letting in more light.

"You don't mind?"

He didn't answer.

"There's nowhere else to write at your house," she was diligently writing something. "And count. Except in the dining room. But that's not proper."

"Yes."

"Are you always this serious in the mornings?"

"Only if I haven't managed to kiss you enough," he went to papa's desk, "and eat my fill of your scent," took a stylus from there, looked at it, whether it was sharp, "and if I wake up and you're not there."

Again he was behind her, palms on her cheeks, licked between her ears, on the nose. Lenayna smelled of herself, kitchen, and soap.

"Let go... Someone will come in... Stop it," she looked at him in distorted perspective, upside-down, from below. Then turned around, climbed with her knees onto the chair.

"Nai, confess, I can see it," she hugged the back, again looking from below. "What happened?"

"My father didn't help the Mistresses of Life," Arad looked to the side, at the street. "He refused them. And forbade them to approach the Insai family."

He threw the certificate on her table, right onto all her notes and papers. Lenayna didn't look.

"What can you do. You did what they asked."

Arad sighed, ran his finger along the wall. Then his claw.

"Bad, of course," Lenayna added. "And why did he refuse them?"

"Said that Simsana is a dhaar. That the certificate isn't real."

"What?" Lenayna asked with mocking surprise, the way one asks about a stupid joke.

"Yes, just like that. But this can't be," Arad said calmly, confidently. "She's Ashai after all."

"What an insult," she pressed her palm to her cheek. "This is bad, Arad. Your line will completely fall out with Ashai," she grabbed her ear. "Oh, with the Mistresses. And you too. This is bad for us."

"Obviously. She burned Vaal's fire, I saw it with my own eyes. Dhaari can't do that, it's impossible. She's no dhaar..."

Arad moved again to the balcony door.

"And I thought my dad is the one with peculiarities," she scratched her scruff. "Well, it is what it is. You tried to help her, it didn't work out."

"I promised her mentor she'd have a certificate," he looked at the world.

"How could you have known your father would act this way?"

"Should have guessed," he smirked. "Should have listened to her," he bared his teeth. "She told me not to do this. Better if she'd never known me at all."

It seemed Lenayna left her place and came up behind, to the left, but Arad wasn't looking. He kept looking at the gray, calm clouds.

"What can you do? You did everything they asked, it's not your fault."

"I'm thinking about what I can do."

"Are you going to think only about this now?" It seemed Lenayna was angry. Or indignant. Or jealous. Or all together.

Arad didn't twitch an ear. Arms crossed, he fidgeted with the tunic on his shoulder. But instead of ideas, plans, tactics—complete emptiness darkened his head.

"I told you she wouldn't let you go so easily," apparently Lenayna was pacing behind him left-right. "See: she came, risking running into your father, left the knife. See?"

Arad understood where she was heading.

"You know what, Arad?"

She stood before him.

"What, my Leni?"

Lenayna was silent and looked him in the eyes. She was demanding something. She wants him to drop everything? Yes, she wants that. It's logical. It's inevitable. She wants to steer him toward the right decision, channel him her way. It's understandable, she's even entitled, given their whole situation.

But even more than the fulfillment of her wishes, a lioness wants something else: his decisions and his principles.

"I have to do this. It's not about her, I decided to kill our relationship with her, and I did. It's a matter of principle. I'm a true-believing Suung, Leni, and I made a promise to an Ashai-Keetrah. I must fulfill what I promised."

"And how did you decide to fulfill it?" Lenayna asked, narrowing her eyes with suspicion.

She was charming, actually. Head tilted to the side, nervously tapping the stylus against her thigh, she swished her tail; her kind eyes tried to be stern and serious.

"Haven't decided yet. I think. But I'll get this certificate. And that'll be the end of it. She must become Ashai-Keetrah, she must burn in the glory of Suungs," he said very sternly. "Our house, Lenayna, will be true-believing. And you and I will raise children as true Suungs."

She walked in a circle, and he was the center.

"How you've decided everything," she said from the left.

"Is this a proposal?" she said from the right.

"It's a given. At least some certainty in something, glory to Vaal."

"Always and everywhere," she stopped opposite him and touched his hand. He took her by the palms and sheltered her in an embrace.

Lenayna stayed on his chest a little, then raised her head and looked at him from below; touching his neck with a claw, she said confidently:

"Let's go to my dad, he knows all sorts of tails who draw papers."

"You think he knows those who do bloodline papers?"

"They draw everything," she licked her lips. "What a mess you've made, you and your father. Not good to quarrel with Mistresses. Need to buy them off: keep the word—it'll be to our benefit."

Arad thought. Good. Very good.

"Then I need to copy her certificate. I'll take it and go straight to your father. Is he at his armory?"

They parted the embrace, went to the table.

"Should be. Look in the basement, ask around. Don't sit," she stopped him, "I'll copy it myself. Where is it, this paper... so... Simsana, of Veerd..."

"Copy everything exactly, don't miss anything," Arad instructed.

"As you say."

As usual, he stood behind her and began interfering with her writing.

"Let's go for a walk this evening," he tugged at her shoulders, "and soon we'll go to Muur."

"Okay."

"I'll also start thinking through the hows and whats with Marna University," her ears came under his hand, he played with the rings, she pressed her ears back to somehow save herself. "I've completely neglected gymnasium stuff. I'm no longer first there, but second, or—Vaal forbid—third. Not good."

"Were you really first in studies there?"

"Was, am, will be."

"You know, I've been meaning to tell you," dodging, trying to manage his advances on her neck. "For an architect you're too restless. For a judge you're too straightforward. Something else would suit you."

"For example?" Arad inquired calmly, seeking a way to grab her tail.

"For you to become a lion of business. It would suit you. Very much. Arad, I'm begging you, don't. I'll make a mistake. A blot, there'll be a blot now, I'll ruin everything, spoil the paper. Stop it! Arad... Someone will come in... Your mom will come in," she furiously held onto her hem with one hand, honestly trying to write. "You're unbearable, one can't live like this, I hate you. Ah, I told you! A blot's left! Copy it over?"

"It's fine, let it be," Arad approved.

◇

"Only for clients," a dark, old, thin lion stopped Arad before the low, iron-bound door.

"I'm here for sire Miran."

The lion looked appraisingly at him, at the sword in the sheath in his right hand, and slid open a tiny hatch on the door.

"How shall I present the young-sire?"

"Arad."

"Say that Arad has come!" he roared to someone through the window, and slammed it shut.

Flicking his tail, Arad adjusted his cloak, looked around. He hadn't found this Basement easily. Exactly so: everyone called this place not just basement, not something else, but precisely the Basement—with significance. Of four asked, three refused to show where it was, believing that whoever needs the Basement—knows where the Basement is. And only one—a very young lion, seemingly a blacksmith's apprentice, and possibly even that very stallion—silently showed the direction. Lenayna could be understood—were Arad a lioness, he himself would have let such a one play, purely out of interest.

Well, that's in the past now, now she's private property.

"If you're here to sell a sword or complain, that's upstairs. Though I don't know what there is to complain about here," the door guard nodded at the weapon.

"Good one, right?" Arad tossed the sheath in his hand.

"Where'd you get that? Three thousand it costs, Norramark steel."

"Sire Miran gave it to me."

Unable to hide his surprise, the lion opened the hatch again:

"Hey, what's there?!"

"Let him in, let him in," someone responded hurriedly, muffled, from behind the door, then it opened, Arad entered and became led by a large lion of southern appearance, clad in a leather apron like a butcher, with a big ring of keys. Arad walked down a long corridor, and right-left were doors, some open, some not; some rooms had no doors at all. So, in this one a storeroom, sacks. In this one—four lions hacking at dice, by candlelight. From a closed door came terrible cursing. Another room sat empty. And all the rooms were of random size, even shape. In one he saw a pile of old iron, apparently for smelting, or Vaal knows what for.

Almost at the very end of the corridor he was led into a small room with two columns, and between them beside a wide, large table sat sire Miran; candleholders stuck out chaotically around the room, and a bit more light scraped through meagerly from an upper window. Beside sire Miran sat an-

other lion, also lean, tall, with a mane smooth and shiny like a Khustrian's fur; a mean and skeptical look.

"What, Arad? Whatcha doing here?" sire Miran was very surprised, even stood up. "Something wrong with the sword?"

"Good day, sire Miran. Everything's fine with it."

"So why'd you drag it here?" Miran gestured for him to sit, shook his hand.

Arad extended his hand to the second lion too, and he shook it, but extremely reluctantly.

"I carry it everywhere."

"What, to your gymnasium too?"

"No, not allowed there."

"Then what kind of 'everywhere' is that. Any place where a lion can't walk in with a weapon—is shit."

"How you gonna walk into a whorehouse with a weapon?" asked the mean lion.

"You think that's a good place?" sire Miran grimaced.

"Excellent," the other affirmed.

"Then why you hanging around here, piss off and go work there."

"How you gonna walk into a infirmary?" the lion wasn't impressed by his dismissal.

"That a good place too?"

"How you gonna walk into a disciplarium's staams? How you gonna walk into the Circle?"

"All right, all right, enough. So what's up?" sire Miran asked Arad. "I figured you came to ask about my daughter. Well shit! Bit early, when you're heading to that... to Marna... then come ask."

"Sire Miran, I..." Arad tried.

"Take her, take her, there'll be a dowry. You'll go to Marna or wherever you wanted, her grandmother's there, my wife's mother, you know, impoverished semi-noble type. She's got jack shit, just connections. She'll help you with housing supposedly, just don't listen to her too much, she's a bitch. You'll set up there and can walk on your heads for all I care, only the wedding's in Gallen, only here. And take good care of her! She'll take care of you, she's like that, like her mother."

The dark lion scratched his head, showing no emotion.

"No, it's not about that. I came to the sire with a request."

"Well?"

"I have a problem."

"A problem?"

Arad placed before him the text of the certificate, copied by Lenayna.

"Leni wrote this," Miran immediately recognized his daughter's handwriting. "And where she's at, there's no problems."

"Sire Miran, I need this certificate to be..." and Arad looked meaningfully at the dark lion, he looked at Miran, Miran looked at Arad. "How to explain this..."

"You can say anything in front of him, anything at all," sire Miran understood. "Go on, let's have it."

"I need to have such a certificate made, unofficially. I promised to do this for an Ashai-Keetrah. My father wanted to help, but it didn't work out."

"Why didn't it work out?" Miran asked very sharply, squinting at the certificate and showing it to the dark lion at the same time. He looked on indifferently, bored.

"Bureaucratic complications."

"Who's this, V-Simsana?" the black-mane asked Miran.

"Little Ashai of V-Miresli. You haven't forgotten Miresli at least, have you?"

"How could I forget. So you know V-Miresli?" the friend (subordinate? partner?) of Miran asked, genuinely interested.

"Yes, I know her," Arad nodded, putting his elbows on the table. "I promised her to do this."

Black-mane nodded his head:

"I know the deal. She came to me about it, a year ago."

"And?" Miran grew alert.

"You said artwork's only for the Basement. Told her I had no idea."

"Simsana burns ignimara, sire Miran. She's a Suunga. I saw it all myself," Arad suddenly said, leaning closer, the edge of the table pressing into his chest.

"Obviously, son. Of course she's Suunga, what's the question. Ashai-Keetrah are the purest females," sire Miran simply agreed.

"How'd you see her ignimara?" the dark-mane inquired knowledgeably. "Ashai don't show ignimara to ordinary folk before Coming of Age."

"She was his lionessy," Miran raised a finger, running another along the certificate.

"Whoa, you're a player. Getting an Ashai to put out on that level—that ain't two fingers," he looked at Arad with envy. "Always wanted that kind of shit," he said to Miran and sighed mournfully.

"What, she was running around without a certificate?" looking at Arad, sire Miran mercilessly rubbed his muzzle and tugged his whiskers.

"No, lost it about three years ago. Drowned it in a river."

Dark-mane smiled ironically, Miran, still tugging his whisker, laughed.

"What, she's not your tail-swisher anymore?" Miran's friend grew curious. "She found herself someone older, stronger?"

"Something like that," Arad answered evasively.

"But he's got Leni," Miran objected jealously.

"What's the difference," the mean lion waved his hand. "Jealousy's good for lionesses. What is he, seventeen, eighteen, he should not fucking care."

"No-no-no, don't teach him that, with Leni you gotta be gentle, she's really good, with her you won't step in shit."

Black-mane licked his lips, said nothing. Arad also said nothing. Miran studied the copy of the copy of the certificate, very attentively, just like a true bureaucrat.

"You know, when it comes to daughters, we all turn into idiots," black-mane suddenly remarked.

"All right, I get it," Miran paid no attention. "Well then. Helping Ashai—that's right. They pay back later," sire Miran tossed the certificate on the table and clicked his tongue.

Silence fell, broken by guffawing from the corridor and muffled thumps from above. Sire Miran looked at Arad calmly, appraisingly. Then nodded to black-mane, who leaned in, listened to something, turning his torn ear. After that—left wordlessly.

"To love an Ashai is pleasing to Vaal, that's right. Always wanted that, but they wouldn't give me any. But you're a sly one, they trust you. That's good. That means you're—normal. You feel me?"

"Yes, sire Miran," Arad nodded.

"Can help with this matter. A certificate can be arranged," he said, looking fixedly at Arad. "But it's quiet work, and kinda not cheap."

"How much do I need to pay, sire Miran?"

He bit his lips, then grunted, reached under the table, pulled out a small barrel, grabbed sticky mugs from there too, and one slid to Arad.

"Like beer?"

"No, sire Miran. But you can pour."

He laughed loudly and poured him some anyway, a little. And didn't shortchange himself.

"So how much do I need to pay?" Arad insisted.

"It's not even a question of how much. It's a question of—what."

"And what? If I don't have it, I'll say so right away. But I'll try to get it."

"No need to get anything. I need," he sipped, "your life."

Arad stroked his nose bridge, cheek, pulled his whisker.

"If that's wordplay, I wasn't sharp enough to get it."

"No, not wordplay. This favor I can only do for one of my own. This is forging documents and violating Ancestral Law. You know yourself. I need someone to take over my affairs. I don't have a son, well, I do, but that's... accidents happen. I need someone who'll walk behind me, paw in paw, and learn everything. Needed him yesterday. You seem to suit me. You're sharp and..." sire Miran didn't finish the compliments. "And your father's got two more sons, let him make any of them a judge or whatever he wants. If only I had that! My wife was supposed to give me five children. Or six. She only

managed two, and the second one'll be a whore. But the first one... You're a lucky lion, I'm giving her to you, giving her free, because she liked you, and she's sly like a vixen. Never let anyone near her! Make her children when she's eighteen, and we do the wedding quick, one where I get drunk. And don't stop, make lots of cubs so I can dote on them, so they climb all over me, got it? You drop your studies, you come here like it's work, every day."

Sire Miran leaned toward him, beckoned with a quick gesture.

"And with Lenayna—you won't go wrong there," he whispered hoarsely for some reason, "take her. Won't go wrong, I'm telling you straight. Yeah, you'll marry young, by arrangement, won't get to run around, but it'll be good, not shitty. Easier to go to prison young," he winked. "Don't mind that she's missing a couple teeth..."

"By the way, what happened to her?"

Lenayna's father fidgeted with his mug.

"She was about seven. Or nine. I came home very drunk, don't remember anything. Wife said: with this, the laundry stick, I knocked her teeth out. Thought she was a dog. She's been sleepwalking since she was little, wanders the house at night. I came in at night, and well..."

"What?" Arad was astonished, spreading his palms.

"Yeah, I know, I know... it happened! Really! I knocked them out! I didn't mean to! Moron. Now I always give her money, buy her gifts. And she remembers. Think I don't know? But I love her! I swear to you by Vaal! I kissed her paws, you feel me, I did!"

They were silent.

"What are you looking at? You're not gonna be looking at her teeth? You can't even see it!"

"Teeth don't matter, she's good to me as she is. But what kind of thing was that?"

"That kind. Bad. Don't worry, she knows everything: cooking, boxing servants' ears, can make you pants... how's it, sew, make, right? Counting, now that she's great at, her mother taught her. She's an accountant herself, Mirna, my wife. Know how I met her? Walked into the bookkeepers' school, there are such, there's one in Moor, like a seamstresses' school, weavers, you know, someone told me, they said there's a lot of maassi there, and all unmarried, see, and I was twenty-one, and my father was already gnawing at me: 'Get married already, I'm dying soon, and you're still not married and not in the Legate, and already deep in the business, that's not good for business,' and so I walk in—I look: so, which one do I like, oh, that one I like! I go up, pinch her ass, and say—'Marry me.' Yeah..."

"And she?" Arad grew interested.

"Let me finish, and she, the chick, smashed the abacus, she had an abacus in her hands, see, on my head, into pieces, and goes: 'You bastard, because of you I lost my abacus, now I have to pay for it!' and I say: 'Come on, beauty,

I'll buy you a hundred abacuses,' and went and paid, or bought a new one, don't remember anymore."

"And then?"

"What then, she swished her tail a bit, you know how they do it, and married me, what else could she do. Well, come on, may females prove abundant."

Arad had nothing against them being abundant. Sire Miran drank the whole mug for that, and immediately poured himself more.

"No matter how you twist—the world still revolves around them. Just don't tell anyone, especially them. Got it?"

Arad nodded.

"Bloodline papers—touchy business. But doable. But I won't do it for an outsider, not even for Ashai."

Arad twirled the mug in his hand.

"So, we got a deal?" sire Miran pressed. "And you don't need any Marna, all that crap. You'll continue my business. You'll have money! You'll take my daughter. And she knows everything, knows it all, she'll help you with everything. Naheim! You're robbing me!" he banged his fist on the table. "Everything will be..." he clutched his head with his palms, as if in great grief.

Arad stood, walked around. Should think about it, but there's absolutely nothing to think about. Too late to think. He promised, that's all.

"Vaal led me here. I agree."

"Good," sire Miran instantly came alive. "Come on, let's prick, the matter seems simple but it's serious. Shit, where's my knife..." he fumbled at his belt, turning, then reached to feel his knemids.

"Blood oath? Here, please," Arad offered him Vaalu-Miresli's sirna. He has his own knife. But he decided to show off.

"Can't prick yourself with that, only cut. Hey, what's this... Where'd you get an Ashai's sirna?"

"It's Vaalu-Miresli's sirna. I'll return it to her, together with the certificate."

"You, Arad, will be tight with them your whole life. Something about you they liked. You'll go far," sire Miran said, and cut his palm.

The same, silently, Arad did. It didn't hurt. Not at all, really.

"So, daughter to your paws, business in your hands. I'll teach you."

"And the certificate. Deal."

They shook hands, blood dripped onto the table.

"And what business, sire Miran? Selling weapons? Or something else?"

"Something else too, son," sire Miran nodded, baring his teeth at him in great satisfaction.

It's All You

"You know, my mother was wrong about the weather for the first time," Arad said to Lenayna, offering her a hand from the cart. "Said this morning—no rain. And look, like the sky flipped over."

"Splendid weather," large drops fell from her hood.

"You said it."

Rain cloak, rain cape—on her. They licked, her hot tongue, the warmth of her breath, sweet lioness to the taste, homey scent.

"You got everything?"

"Yes," she sat down and hid her palms in her sleeves. "I don't know how you convinced him, Arad."

"Convinced of what?" Arad set the cart moving. "And by the way, show me the certificate."

Now everything was his own: the horse (Tsayka, she'd recovered, in just one day, like in a fairy tale), and the cart, or as Arad and his brothers called it—the wheels.

"Convinced him to make the certificate," Lenayna sniffled with her wet nose. "He had it done by a serious lion, rarely approached. You can look at the certificate later, it's raining after all."

"I know. Through Smon. I was with him. He's here. In Gallen. Five hundred paces from Miresli's house. Irony," he concluded melancholically.

"Whoa, dad even let you see Smon..." even through the hood it was visible how sharply her ears pricked.

"Your dad and I made a deal: I drop gymnasium and stay in Gallen, he'll teach me the business, I'll gradually take over everything."

Only hooves clattered on the path, silence fell, everyone hid in houses or near houses from the rain: not heavy, but with enormous drops.

"What? Why didn't you tell me?" Lenayna said dramatically and grabbed his wet sleeve.

"I haven't told anyone yet," he adjusted the reins, "until the papers were ready. But now, the paper is with you, so... you already know."

"You refused to go to Marna? You won't become a judge, won't be an architect?" she was trying hard to find his gaze, but Arad was watching the road after all.

"Seems not," he tilted his head toward her and looked expressively, then even winked.

"But this changes everything," Lenayna looked at the road herself.

"Yes, life will be different, that's certain. My parents won't be thrilled, huge adjustments, but what can you do."

Lenayna was silent, and in some way unknown to lions but known to lionesses, made it known that her silence was extremely significant.

"You know, Arad," she began jealously, even furiously, "I see you'll stop at nothing to please her. I see you're ready for anything for her sake. Vaal, I thought you and my father agreed about money, but here it's your whole life turned inside out..."

"No. This isn't for her sake," he answered very calmly, turning left. "It's for my sake. I promised, and not to her, but to the mentor, that she'd have a certificate. My word, and my principle."

She let out a laugh and immediately inserted, quickly:

"Now nothing stops you from getting back with her, since you've broken with Marna plans and judgeship."

"Why would I need her when I have you," he answered even more calmly.

"But you're going to her, doing a deed for her sake. Even I'm going with you. Even me you brought," Lenayna said angrily and brokenly.

But Arad already understood what's what in the world of lionesses. They need to test everything with their teeth, including Arads like him; they test everything, don't believe just like that. Checking—is he the one? Is he good?

"Because I promised. My relationship with Simsana has ended, I decided so. But I'm giving a lioness a chance to become Ashai-Keetrah, in the glory of Suungs, fulfilling a promise, binding myself in friendship with the Mistresses of Life, taking over your father's business and loving you; and now you're riding with me so you'll be there with me. I do everything from principle, I gave a promise, and it's Vaal's will that I fulfill it. Feelings don't matter. I could have done nothing, but would have broken my promise. If you disagree with something and don't want to ride further, say so. I'll stop immediately. If you disagree with anything: with me being a lion of principles; with Ashai being needed; with this being Vaal's guidance; with riding there with me;" he counted on his fingers, "with me taking over your father's business instead of becoming a judge; with being my lioness; with th—"

"Stop right here," Lenayna demanded, in an unusually thin little voice for her.

Arad fulfilled the request, stopped on the right side and thought that if Leni got out now, she might stumble and fall into the ditch. Should help her from the other side, maybe... But then claws on his shoulder from the left side, from the right, her wet cloak, wet cape, wet her—everything pressed forward, her wet nose met his, and Arad, truly, for the first time in his life saw a lioness so desperately demanding attention. From her embrace drops fell on his cheek.

"Arad... Arad... Arad..." she incanted, breathing warmly on him, demanding action from him, any, whatever.

He kissed her, but she clearly wanted more, pressed even more toward him; he had to, pressing slightly, seat her back down, right on her tail, and squeeze her arms-shoulders harder, because otherwise you won't get anywhere. Lenayna, as if ashamed of the impulse, tucked her palms at her neck, trapped in his arms, eyes gleaming frightened and joyful.

"Leni, we're outside," he looked around.

"Like, Arad, really? You'll take dad's business?" not changing position, nothing, she asked hotly and quietly.

"Yes. And everything will be as it should," he nodded to her, not letting go.

"I'll help you," she pressed her palms to his chest. "I'll help you with anything."

"I know," he calmed her with a kiss (the most melting, the most soft he'd ever felt), let her go, and drove on.

They rode in silence a little, Arad waited a bit, but his lioness was silent, so he began rehearsing in his head: 'Hello, Simsana, I brought you the sirna and the papers.' No. 'Simsana, it's us. This is the certificate. This is the sirna.' Hm...

"Yes, good relations with Mistresses of Life, with Ashai in general—that's a big asset," Lenayna responded as if nothing had happened. "Profit, really!"

Arad nodded.

"And what else did you and dad agree on?" she inquired just as casually, looking around relaxedly, enjoying the ride.

"That you'll marry me sooner."

"Oh, so I have no choice," she sighed loudly. "Arranged marriage."

"Yes. Bloodlines alliance," Arad confirmed. Then added under his breath, inaudibly: "Though not quite as my line imagined."

Broken life, broken plans, broken everything. The troops are rushing to a different war, he thought mockingly.

"Poor me. Lineage alliance, what else. An unwanted, repulsive lion you give yourself to with clenched teeth, and whom you don't even fear. Domestic worries. Endless problems, stupid servants who steal everything and put things wherever. Mean mother-in-law, displeased father of husband. Only comforts: needlework, children, and gossiping. I'll embroider on all the walls, and all the doors, and all the tables."

"And counting money," Arad reminded her of the important part.

"And counting money," she sighed again.

Now he chose the spot, a better one. She'd stopped right opposite the windows of a three-story house, but he—by the blind wall of a workshop warehouse that made carriages.

"I was joking, my Arad, nai," Leni said conciliatorily, softly.

"Enough. Now clench your teeth. And don't be afraid," and Arad, wiping his hand on his muzzle, went down her leg to the ankle, to the hem of her dress.

"What are you up to?" she grew wary and just in case pressed her legs together, but it didn't help much. "Ah! Cold, wet, Arad, leave me alone! I'll crush everything, all the papers in the pockets... Ah! Stop it!" she laughed uncontrollably, trying not to let him above her knees, pressed into a corner. "Please! Let go of my tail! Arad, it's raining!"

"But you clench your teeth and don't be afraid. No laughing allowed, no being afraid allowed."

"I won't anymore, have mercy. Please. All right, all right."

"Relax your legs."

Leni trusted, went limp. He released her knee, and the unexpected trophy he'd caught on the way up—her tail.

"Awful!" she declared when they set off.

This had no effect, and Lenayna added, smoothing her clothes:

"No respect at all. We're behaving like... Like..."

Instead of an answer he took her palm and kissed it on the inside.

"Arad, we'll never get there like this."

"Then don't tease. Sitting there teasing with yourself."

"I'm not doing anything."

"All the more. Look, we've almost arrived. There's their house."

Lenayna grew quiet.

"I'll come in from the field," Arad said, and felt nervous.

Hadn't been nervous before. Now... He remembered how he'd come here the first time. A similar feeling. He wished no one would be home. Or—best of all—only Vaalu-Miresli. Give the sirna, give the certificate, take his leave. Or... Or that everyone would vanish, everyone in the world, so there'd be only him and her.

Arad sharply, nervously tied the horse to a tree on the field side; she, Tsayka, drank from a puddle; Lenayna got off the cart herself. He nodded to her, let's go. They traveled along the winding path, both stood right under the door, hiding from the unpleasant trickles dripping from the roof.

"Think anyone's home?" Lenayna adjusted her large, housewifely belt pockets, looking at him.

"The nom is turned toward us, so—yes," Arad answered, and knocked—loudly, even too loudly; he remembered there might be newborns, females in labor, and sighed with a groan.

No one opened. Arad leaned against the wall, making a fake skeptical-bored grimace, Lenayna stood straight, calmly, looking now at him, now at the door. He was nervous. Knocked again; just think—now he was worried about how he'd be received in this house, harboring apprehension. This life, what's wrong with it.

"Who's there?"

Of course, it wasn't Miresli. Of course, it was Simsana. Her voice was strange: detached, extinguished.

"It's me. It's us."

Behind the door she thought. Then opened.

Simsana—not in her work-dress as usual, but in the simplest brown house dress, even wrinkled—held a handkerchief to her nose, wiping it; looked not at him, but at his paws.

"Hello, Simsan."

It seemed Lenayna nodded from the side, but Arad wasn't looking.

"Why did you come?"

"We brought you something," he said with excessive cheer.

She drew air through her nose, hid the handkerchief. Looked at him.

"What's wrong with your nose?" Arad asked. Had to fill the void with something.

"Caught cold. Come in," and she moved away from the door, away, into the house.

Lenayna and Arad exchanged glances, and he entered first.

"Seems the mentor's not here," Arad said quietly.

Lenayna nodded.

"No lionesses in labor either. No one's here," he added.

Hesitating slightly, Lenayna began removing her cloak, and Arad helped her. They washed their paws, hands, dried off. Leni stayed close, near. He pulled from inside his shirt Vaalu-Miresli's sirna, he only carried it concealed, behind and under his clothes.

"Where are the papers? I thought you had them inside your shirt. Or something."

"In my pocket," Lenayna tapped the large belt pocket. "Everything's here."

He entered the main, so familiar room. It was darkish and cool, Simsana stood with her tail to them, by the table. Arad saw her ears move back—she heard them; that's right, heard, Simsana turned around, again holding the handkerchief with one hand to her nose, with the other holding her elbow. Leaned sideways against the table.

Arad approached her closer; he'd somehow imagined that Lenayna would stay behind, but no, she followed him inseparably. He extended the sirna-dagger to Simsana, handle toward her.

"Uh-huh. Thought you kept it for yourself," Simsana said sarcastically, still looking at his paws, his stomach, somewhere there. "A trophy..."

She reached for it, tucked it behind her cloth belt, at the side.

"Did the mentor scold you for the sirna?" Arad asked soothingly, calmly.

"What do you care," Simsana answered coldly, hiding the handkerchief again.

"She didn't come to me. Thought I'd return it when I had the chance."

"Don't worry, we won't be coming near your house anymore," Simsana looked at the window, stroking the table with her palm. "And you're not allowed to come to us either. Did you forget?"

Arad was sorry to see her so cold. The impression came hard to him: yesterday you saw someone so warm, alive; today—such ice, north.

"Simsana..."

"Why did you come with her?" she asked more lively, much more lively, her voice changed, he seemed to recognize her anew; and Simsana was already looking at him, in the eyes. "Are you afraid of me?"

"No, not afraid. She's my lioness, we'll weave our families together."

Simsana smirked, and then laughed.

"How ridiculous—to find yourself a wife at sixteen," she smoothed her ears.

Arad crossed his arms, shifted his weight to his left leg, put the right forward.

"Didn't know you were such an underpaw," she swept her gaze over him, for some reason walked to the main bed in the middle of the room, and there, tossing it, left the sirna.

He didn't answer anything.

"Thank you for the sirna, Arad," she turned around. "Anything else?" she wrapped her dress collar tighter.

Arad noticed that Lenayna was silent. This was right. This was extraordinarily right. He liked this very much. He was afraid she would say something; but she was doing the most correct thing—staying silent.

"I know what happened between you, father, and the mentor."

"No, you don't know, you weren't there!" she came two steps toward him, pointing her finger at him.

"Simsan, forgive my family," he spread his hands. "I don't know why my father acted this way," he waved his hand to Lenayna, and she readily reached inside her pocket, for the papers, and quickly passed them to him. "Here, take it," he extended to Simsana the document in a scroll, which Lenayna had carefully wrapped in writing paper and tied with a blue cord. "This is a birth certificate, exactly like the one you lost."

She took it and tucked it under her elbow of crossed arms, without looking.

"Why are you apologizing?" she pressed her ears back. "Maybe he's right. I'm a Maemata, imagine that."

Raised an eyebrow, head higher.

"Dirty-blood. Outside the Rainbow of Blood," she added more, angrily, with a break in her voice. "So, how do you like that?"

"Don't talk nonsense," Arad said to her confidently. "I saw your ignimara."

"When did you see my ignimara? Where?" Simsana pressed.

"Here," he pointed at the place by the stove. "Then."

"Ah," she pressed her fingers to her temple, playing drama, "then, when I was wearing nothing, and you'd just played me, that then, yes? Go on, tell everything, in front of everyone," she waved her hand toward Lenayna. "Tell everything-everything, don't miss anything. No. Secrets," she walked around the bed and leaned against its headboard.

"Simsana... You had red fire. Dhaars can't burn Vaal's fire. You're Naysagrian through your mother, Tobrian through your father," Arad reasoned with her, not even understanding himself why.

"What do you know about it..." she pressed her ears and hid in her palm.

Arad looked at Lenayna, she answered with a look and shrugged slightly. And then very carefully sat on the bench by the table, folding her hands at her stomach.

"And how did you convince your father?" Simsana asked, truly uncomprehending, looking to the side. "You think I'll accept anything from him?"

"Lenayna helped me, and her line. This certificate, it's... it's like real. With it you'll pass the Coming of Age, and become... and become..." Arad forgot exactly what she was supposed to become after Coming of Age, and he loved precision in words. Damn, either acolyte, or free acolyte, or stalla, or disciplara. He got confused. "This isn't from my father. This is from us."

This changed something in Simsana.

"You actually found a way to make a certificate?" she asked with curiosity and even respect. "Even after that meeting with your father, be it damned?" she scoffed.

"Yes."

"I didn't ask you to."

"Vaal showed me where to look. I swore I'd find it. I swore to your mentor. I wanted to help you," he concluded sincerely.

Simsana twirled the certificate in her hand, examined the scroll from all sides, like a curiosity, pulled the little blue cord. Looked at Arad, lowering her muzzle. Oh, no. He knows this look, he remembered it. Time to leave. Retreat, withdraw, right now. But her eyes wouldn't let him; Arad understood he was putting his paw in a trap, standing at the edge of an abyss, but he couldn't refuse her, because he couldn't refuse her—this was his Simsana after all. She reached under her collar and pulled out her part of the symbolon, on a simple cord—she wore it at her neck; then took the sirna and cut the cord.

Then approached him, without fear, close, much closer than proper, much closer than anyone expected. Arad wanted to say something to Lenayna: either to somehow stop this; or to somehow understand this; or to join all of this; or—even—maybe, maybe leave, even for a moment, for a bit.

"You think I was with you for this?" her voice is so good.

"No, I know for certain. No," he said hoarsely.

She extended her hand forward, and he—just from her gaze, eyes, inside himself—understood that she wanted his part of the symbolon too.

Arad carried his part with him. No one knew this, and Lenayna—too; even some part of him diligently forgot about it every morning.

He took it out.

"You know why I was with you," she took his half.

"Yes."

"And you love me too?" she joined their parts together, the symbolon became one.

"Yes," he said with anguish, feeling her embrace, how she pressed against his leg with her body.

"How indifferent I am to all this. The papers... Maemata... What will happen to me..." she smiled with each word, and he drowned worse with each movement of her mouth, her gleaming teeth, her tongue, her flawlessly dark, sensual lips. "I'll prove it to you."

Such strange words, they seemed to settle inside Arad, became his own, it was he who now had to prove, not she; an order that he made his own, for everything that comes from Simsana is his, his own, native. *The end*, he thought, but it was already too late, and he kissed her. She's fluid, she melts in his hands, she smells of honey and Simsana, delightful waves pass through her, which transfer to you, she's hot, she's so hot, palms on his shoulders so tender, so hot, very strongly, to the point of fire... even too much... very... even painfully, and a wave of prickly water ran down his body... Hot! Must pull back, must, immediately.

In the next moment he felt someone douse him wet and cold from behind, on his back. This brought him to his senses, to sobriety, he pushed Simsana away, but not hard.

"You caught fire. You caught fire in the back, Arad. You caught fire," Lenayna repeated, rubbing his back and literally dragging him away from Simsana. "And the paper burned," she concluded, and added more from the pitcher on his back, for good measure.

Arad turned around himself. The certificate lay on the floor, all blackened; he picked it up—it chaotically crumbled into black flakes. Hard, nervously he grabbed at his own back, and found a hole in his tunic. Looked at his palms with dark traces. Then looked at Simsana. She stood with a lost look, rubbing the wrist of her right hand.

"Her hand caught fire," Lenayna prompted.

And pointed at the young Mistress of Life, so no one would have any doubts about whose palms burned here.

"Simsana!" Arad growled angrily and desperately, pacing in a circle.

"What?" she asked fearfully, like a cub after disobedience.

"Why did you do that?! Everything's for nothing now! And what did you... why did you... influence me!"

"So you'd understand everything!" she answered him with tears, and sat pitifully on the main bed.

"But I... did everything right, I tried, I even changed my life for this, and you burned it all! Who's going to become Ashai-Keetrah now, what will happen now, how to obtain it again?" he approached her, and in hopeless fury grabbed her by the muzzle, seemingly not hard, calculating the force, but who knows. "You, you made me a true-believing Suung! You know who I love! Y... Uh... her!" he pointed at Lenayna. "Why did you do this?" he gripped her shoulder.

Lenayna approached and gently took his hand away, and Simsana hid in the bed so no one would see.

"Don't scold her, don't hit her," Leni warded him off, though he wasn't scolding, and wasn't hitting, seemingly. "You can't humiliate her," though Arad wasn't humiliating, seemingly.

He stepped away, grabbed his ears, mane, looked out the window.

"The whole thing's gone to shit. How to resolve all this now..."

Turning around, he saw that Lenayna had protectively embraced the lying Simsana, hidden in her palms; she wasn't crying anymore, just trembling slightly.

"Calm down, Vaalu-Simsana. Everything's fine. I'm not angry at you," she stroked her shoulder, head. "We came to you with good. You're Ashai-Keetrah, you're a Mistress of Life, we need you very much. Even if you turned out to be dhaari, we'd accept you. A little dhaari lives at my house, I'm teaching her to read. We won't tell anyone."

What a kind, tender soul Leni is, Arad thought.

"Forgive me, Arad," Simsana rose, wiping her eyes. It seemed she didn't quite accept Lenayna's comfort and attention, but didn't push her away either. "Forgive me. I didn't mean to. I only wanted... I lost."

"Lost what?"

Simsana dropped her palms helplessly onto her thighs, with a slap.

"Ah, nothing. The fight with myself," she said matter-of-factly, even slightly mockingly, and sniffled.

Lenayna held her by the shoulder, sitting beside her. Arad turned to the window, threw his hands behind his back.

"Yeah... It cost me no small amount to get you this birth certificate, Simsan. I paid a price for it. And who could have thought. My father, of course..." and Arad didn't finish. "But I'm not answerable for him. And now—there's nothing."

"It's okay," Lenayna suddenly said. "I sort of figured you'd tear it up," this she said to Simsana, "or something. That's why I gave you just the copy first. Here, this is the real one."

Arad turned sharply, and saw that Lenayna was giving Simsana a similar scroll, but with a red cord this time.

"Don't burn it, please. Take it."

She carefully took it, untied the cord, freed it from the writing paper, unrolled it. Lenayna embraced Simsana; she put her hand on Lenayna's shoulder, and looked at Arad. Lenayna didn't see this.

"You gave her the copy first? This is the real one?" Arad asked Lenayna joyfully, looking at Simsana.

Her eyes from behind Lenayna's shoulder. Red fire of Vaal.

"Yes," Leni's voice sounded through the whole room.

"So everything's all right?"

"Yes, Arad. Everything's all right," she assured him.

"You'll become Ashai-Keetrah, Simsana. You hear?" Arad knelt right before the bed.

"I already am," the Mistress of Life smiled weakly. "I'll pass the Coming of Age—that's what you meant to say."

"Yes-yes," Arad listened poorly. "You'll be the best Ashai, the best Mistress. Right?"

"You're kind to me. We won't forget this. I'm sorry for..." Simsana didn't know what to call the thing she needed to apologize for. "Sometimes Ashai have difficult days."

"Not for nothing," Arad concluded joyfully.

"I'll go hide the certificate, deep and good. Otherwise there probably isn't a third one," Simsana pulled away from Lenayna and went to the chest.

"No," Lenayna confirmed.

Victory. All for victory. Oh Leni, well done, oh my smart one, Arad admired and showed her a gesture, meaning, excellent. She smiled at him, moved her ears; while Simsana was dealing with the certificate, her tail to them, he showed Lenayna a gesture pointing at her, then ran his finger across his mouth, then spread his hands, meaning, I don't know what came over her, or what came over me. Shook his hands in the air—well, it's unclear how it happened, I didn't want to. Terrible, unforeseen.

Lenayna nodded, closing her eyes. She understands everything. The powers of Ashai, of course.

"Thank you, Arad," Simsana turned around, managing to catch the very end of Arad's desperate gesticulating. "Thank you, kind Suungs," she approached them, posture straight.

"Good that everything's good. I think it makes sense for us to go," Lenayna answered, and stood. "Arad, what do you decide?"

"Yes. Of course. Simsana, we'll go. I'm glad we did this. I kept my word. Tell the mentor we were here."

"Sure. Well then..."

They stood opposite each other, in some awkwardness, the rain outside the window had stopped, somewhere the sun peeked out, everything's good. Arad stood in some tension, trying to look victorious and joyful; Lenayna calmly remained beside him, with the quiet dignity of a Naysagrian. Simsana—opposite: with slightly wet eyes, serious, mouth half-open.

After some invisible friction, Simsana and Lenayna embraced restrainedly, each taking a couple of steps toward the other. Then Simsana looked at Arad; for the first time in his life he didn't know how to act with her. Apparently, she didn't know either how to respond or what to do.

"You can hug him. I understand," Lenayna suddenly said.

Which Simsana, after a brief hesitation, did. Arad noticed her tail twitched. *Overwrought*, he concluded.

"Thank you for the papers," she ran her palm along his back.

"And throw out of your head everything my father told you," Arad ordered her, squeezed her harder. But Simsana turned out to be unyielding, rigid, poorly obedient.

"As you say."

Well, they parted, shuffled about. Arad went to the anteroom, Lenayna followed him. He couldn't manage the strap of his knemid, even cursed quietly. Finally, he handled everything, conquered all.

"Bye," he said to her at last, Lenayna nodded, wrapped herself in her cloak.

Simsana waved after them, the door closed, she latched the bolt behind them. Went back into the room, slowly walked to the main bed, carefully sat. Smirked, then laughed some more, at something of her own. Suddenly went briskly to the chest, pulled out the certificate again, read it all, touched it, even smelled it. My Vaal, just like real. It even looks worn, like real—only there's no mother's blood at the bottom. Smirked again, set it aside.

"I understand," she said mockingly into the emptiness.

She frowned, something made her ears prick, she started searching the bed. The sirna was found, returned to her belt, but not that. Searched under the bed. Took it, carefully rolled up the certificate, brought it to her room to the nightstand, came back. Searched the bed again, the sheets, turned over the pillow, ran her hand over herself and her neck, even tried to find nonexistent pockets on this house dress. Froze, on all fours, on the bed, uttered with a snarl:

"Bitch!"

Muttering "what a bitch, what a bitch," she went to her room. Grabbed her ears, looked out the window, exhaled, paced the room, tormenting her ears, tugging at her Mistress of Life ring. Then abruptly sat before the dreamwalkers' mirror, pulled the sirna from its sheath, opened her collar wide, all the way. Put the sirna to her neck. To the throat. Front, side.

"Bitch. Whore."

The doors thudded. She swallowed. Put the weapon away. Sat, arms hanging limply, the sirna nearly fell from her palm, gazed at herself tiredly. Tears flowed on their own, though she didn't want them, honestly, had to close her eyes so as not to see herself in the mirror—it's too big, can't run, can't hide.

Suddenly the mentor entered, the door creaking (*He promised to oil it*, Simsana thought irrelevantly, smiled involuntarily); not surprised by her disciple's position or appearance, approached her.

"Still sick, gnawing your tail?"

She noticed the certificate on the dresser, took it; approaching the window, she studied it, squinting and extending her arm far.

"Well, well! Arad brought you this?" Vaalu-Miresli asked lively.

"It was him," she said and sobbed heavily: the stuffed nose was very much in the way, and then these tears, damn them. "Just now. Came with Lenayna."

"With Lenayna? Just like previous one. Good work," the mentor admired the birth papers. "How did he manage to make it... What a lion, kept his word, did everything for us."

"Hah," Simsana let out a laugh, and the secret: whether of contempt, or approval, or jealousy, or hatred, or love.

"And what's that in your hand? A sirna?"

"Yes."

"Did Arad happen to find it in the swamp where you happened to lose it?" Vaalu-Miresli took back her sirna, but not angrily, not scolding.

"Yes, that's how it happened," Simsana sprawled on the bed. "That's how it goes."

"Clear. Lie down," the mentor gestured for her to undress. "No dreamwalking. No thinking. Sleep from aumlan."

"After aumlan I have all sorts of stupid dreams, constantly. All sorts of filth. Dusty rooms, terrible staircases," Simsana turned to the wall, nervously and harshly taking off her dress.

"And Vaal, who slaps you across the muzzle," Miresli took the dress from her.

"And chokes, and fucks," Simsana added juicily, expressively.

"Well, not this... not this here."

"So what," Simsana exclaimed defiantly into the wall, holding both palms under her ear, feeling the hardness of the Mistress of Life ring and the softness of the pillow. "Now there's no Arad, now it'll all come back."

"You should rejoice, instead you're indulging yourself in gloom," Miresli leaned toward her. "Good Arad, good choice. Well done," she folded Simsana's dress, nodding approvingly. "See, there was sense in everything! One matter's in the pocket now, one matter less, glory to Vaal. All by Vaal's will, matters resolved..."

"That bitch took everything from me. Even the memory of him," Simsana burrowed, hid in the bed, closer to the wall.

"That bitch is a good Suunga, and will be wife to a good Suung. She'll even come to us to give birth, mark my words. Simsana," the mentor placed her palm on her shoulder. "Aamsuna. He gave you everything, and you gave him everything. Everyone got what they deserved. Look at me," she smoothed her. "What, he knew everything from his father?"

"Yes, knew everything."

"And about you being called a dhaar?"

"Yes, knew about everything."

"See. Didn't believe the vile lie, didn't believe his own father. This Nergim, what insults he came up with."

"And what if—it's true?"

"Simsana," Miresli said very sternly, wagging her finger. "You're Ashai-Keetrah. Your hands burn. It's impossible. How many times have we talked about this? And about the tail I've told you countless times. Or will you start whining like in childhood: 'Mentor, mentor, why don't I have mom and dad?', 'Mentor, mentor, who loves me?'"

Simsana laughed a little—Miresli clowned so well with the childish voice. They laughed together. Grew quiet.

"The mentor is telling me untruth," Simsana looked at her lying down, detached, glistening eyes. "But it's nothing. I'm not angry."

Miresli sat on the bed, extended her hand to her acolyte, took her by the chin. Looked into her eyes, this way, that way. Released her, returned her to contemplating the wall, smoothed her shoulder.

"Then don't be angry. And don't anger Vaal. No time for us—much work. Was just now at Ninya's, she delivered a dhaari on the South End, said they're all sitting at home now, very afraid, afraid of their masters too, and going to work reluctantly. There might be a pogrom."

"Why a pogrom?" Simsana sniffled.

"Some two dhaars desecrated the Banner of the Empire, or something like that, she said, even poured blood on it, trampled it. Said the execution's soon, already decided."

"Terrible things indeed," Simsana said indifferently, and sniffled again.

"Anyway, they're bringing one to us this evening, you sleep. And tomorrow—another one."

"A lot," Simsana noted.

"And there'll be a third."

"Vaal!"

"Ninya says—help out, I can't manage."

"As always. If it's us, it's 'help out.' If it's to her, it's 'where's the money?'"

"Well, she earns money," the mentor spread her hands, and stood, taking Simsana's birth certificate with her. "Money, moneys."

"And us? We get gifts in return too."

"What about us," the mentor spread her hands again and went to the door. "Aumlan, Simsana. Or better sleep."

"No, what do we do? What do we do?"

"Either we sleep," the mentor pointed with the certificate at Simsana, holding the door, "or we hang in aumlan. In the glory of Suungs, by Vaal's will! Well!"

"Yes, mentor."

The door slammed, Simsana rose and climbed to the headboard. Looked at the window, drops on the glass. Started crying again, but waved her hand, didn't hold back. Sometimes you need to. Need to.

"Everyone got what they deserved," she stretched out in a thin whisper, and sobbed.

Wiped herself with the chemise. Patiently and indifferently watched the grayness outside the window, the tip of her tail stirred (the culprit of everything). The room is warm. She looked—should wipe the dust, many places, especially on that unreachable shelf.

"You chose her? Fine then. You'll still..." she snarled at the window. "You'll still!.. I hate you."

Looked in the mirror.

"No. I don't care," she snarled at the mirror. "Pussy-whipped. And he brought her along too. She latched on—won't unlatch. Right, Arad? Right?"

Wiped herself again, even fiercer and angrier.

"She won't become Ahlia for you, won't show you Vaal's fire," she said to the mirror, not even caring if anyone heard. "She won't... This is all your fault. It's all you. You, you, you... Me and you. You lied me. You me... Everyone got what they deserved. No one's to blame. No one's to blame for anything, no one, for nothing, nowhere, never, from nowhere... From nowhere. Born nowhere. Funny, seriously. Nothing, nothing... Ansian... Ansian-saahiim. Ansian-saahiim. Ansiaaaaan-saaahiim..."

If anyone had been in that room, they would have seen that a moment later Simsana fell asleep across the bed, surrendering to the capricious Gift of her spirit (priestess of Vaal, in the glory of Suungs), which played a trick on its mistress; all curled up, wrapped in her tail, and she's neither hot nor cold, neither sad nor happy, she's—nothing; no one will feel the calm warmth of her breath, and no one will see how especially beautiful is the curve of the dark mouth of the Ashai-Keetrah, who accidentally put herself to sleep with her own power.

Dhaar

When they left the house of Miresli-Simsana, Arad carried Lenayna in his arms, so she wouldn't step in the mud and dirty her hem, and sat her in the cart just like that, like a useful, warm, clever, cunning, soft, tender trophy. The pleasant, delicious weight of her body. He untied the horse, they sat, they rode.

"Can you imagine! We brought the sirna, the papers, and suddenly all of this! I just look at her, and like... you know... fog in the head, and you just can't think straight. What do the Ashai call this... Well," he snapped his fingers, "when they influence the mind, what's that thing called?" he fretted.

"Yes-yes, dark stuff," Lenayna agreed. "And you got burned in the back, and what a hole, I'll sew it all up for you. You almost caught fire! Dangerous. Poor thing, you must have been dizzy from all of this."

"Don't call me 'poor thing,' I don't like that, just so you know."

"Nai-nai, don't get angry, let me wipe you."

"But I'd have to stop!"

"Then stop. Like this," she wiped him with her hem, to take away his nerves and the bad.

"You're my clever one. You're my clever lioness," he kept saying. "How did you figure out to give her the copy, and then—the real one?"

"Just as usual," Lenayna agreed softly.

Arad felt much better, and they rode on. He kept telling her things, that he hadn't expected this, and that now Vaalu-Miresli is in friendship with them, but they need to wait until his father cools down a bit, and somehow they'll need to tell his parents that Marna is cancelled, and that Simsana actually didn't want to kiss him, it's just that they're Ashai-Keetrah, everything's complicated with them, unclear; and that Leni thought everything through so wonderfully and took care of everything, a real lioness, not a lioness but a treasure, and Lenayna agreed with everything, only noting what wonderful, excellent weather it had become—a good sign.

"And the symbolon, here it is," Arad pulled it out, extending it to her, giving it, so Lenayna could suggest what to do with this. "It's from her, a gift. Was with me today. That's just how it happened, just how it happened..."

"Keep it, keep it, it's a memory," she squeezed his palm. "It's okay, let it be."

She looked away from Arad, softly lowered her hand into the large pocket on her belt, right side, checking if the second part of the symbolon was in

place, obtained in time by sleight of hand and cunning of mind. In Lenayna's eyes—red sunset, like the Banner of War of the Suungs. She smirks slightly, raises her head toward the wind and the setting sun, and inaudibly, invisibly says to herself under her breath:

“Dhaar.”

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